



e lays his body on the disbelieving ground; does not scream, does not

# About a Boy

*Inspired by the press account of an Albanian child displaced during the Balkan war, Mary Kelly's newest installation considers the roots of nationalism, the origin of gender identity and the power of the word.*

**BY ERNEST LARSEN**

The ambitious new work by Mary Kelly which premiered last December at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, *The Ballad of Kastriot Rexhepi*, powerfully engages everyday domestic waste in a meditation on the epochal waste of war. In the process, the artist more fully exploits the ingenious working method developed for her previous installation, *Mea Culpa* (1999). For both projects, Kelly attached vinyl letters in Helvetica typeface to the filter of the clothes dryer in her garage. While drying thousands of pounds of black and white cotton clothing, she slowly monoprined texts on the lint trapped against the screen. *Mea Culpa* lit-

erally united Kelly's own texts to the fragile, makeshift fabric in order to examine, albeit elliptically, wrenching moments of brutal conflict in Sarajevo, Beirut, Johannesburg and Phnom Penh. In the *Ballad* she astutely focuses the conceptual and emotional potential of this approach to articulate the implications of just one such story.

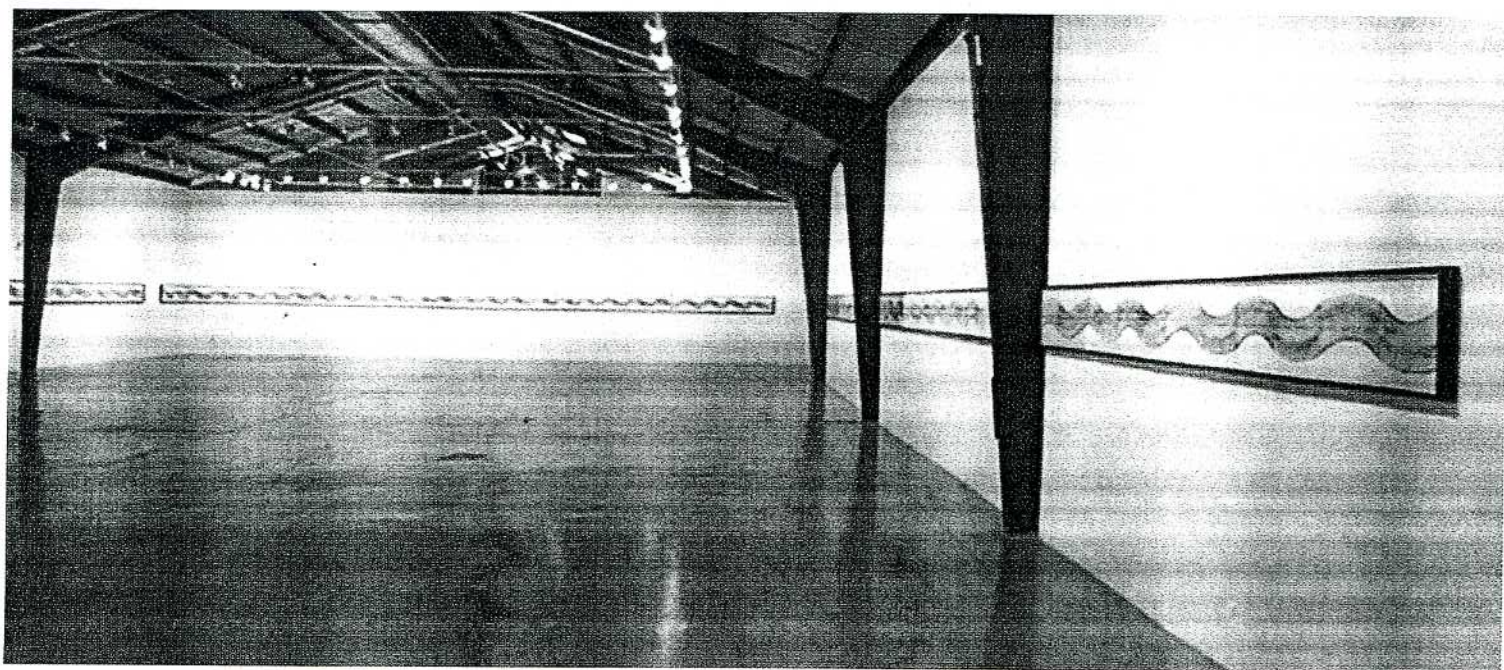
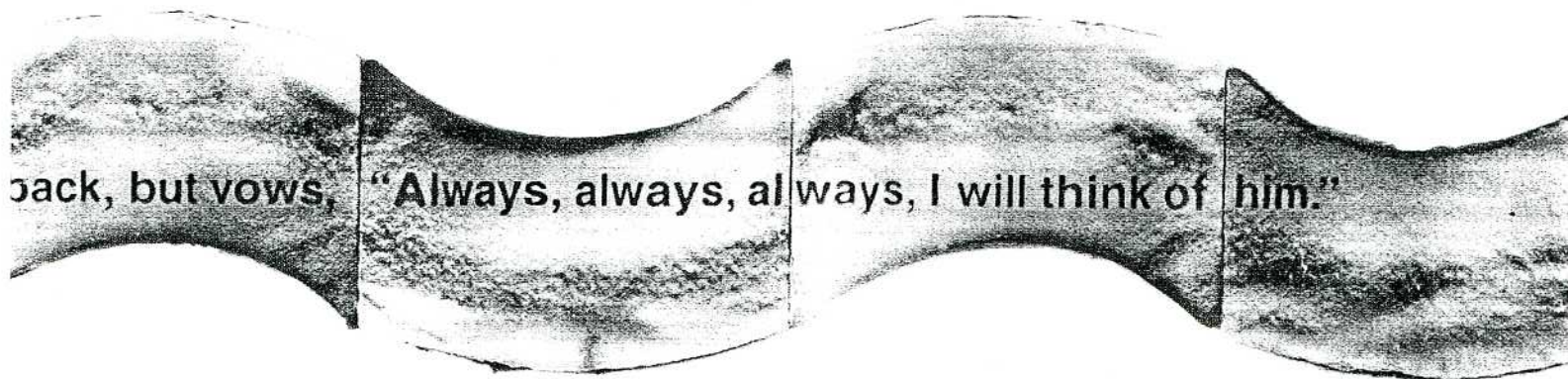
On July 31, 1999, during the NATO occupation of Kosovo, Kelly read a *Los Angeles Times* article headed, "War Orphan Regains Name and Family." Four months earlier, a starving toddler, to all appearances no longer breathing, had been left for dead by his panic-stricken

Albanian parents as they escaped a sustained Serbian attack. Found, still alive, on the battlefield, he was given a new Serbian name, Zoran; left behind in a hospital as the Serbs retreated, he was now assumed to be Albanian and renamed once again: Lirim.

The media routinely single out such human-interest stories as thumbnail compressions of the large-scale movements of history: little Kastriot, innocent victim of the horrors of war, survives against all odds. Transforming the press account, Kelly's own narrative further compresses Kastriot's story of miraculous survival into three stanzas and a shorter envoi which are intended to evoke the traditional folk ballad.

She begins with a dismissal of the comforting illusion of innocence: "Unnatural spring: / metal seedpods germinating bloody flora, / anticipating the 'expulsions.'" Still, there is no escape from the facile affirmation of the media: "Summer, 1999, / happy ending in the *Times*," she writes. In Kelly's reworking of Kastriot's fate, the media offer a simplistic redemption even more false than that of the folk ballad—the "media" of yesteryear—which once served to nurture ethnocentric feeling with mythic evocations of nationalist sentiment.

Embossed in compressed lint, Kelly's ballad advances within a repeated wave form determined by the curved shape of the dryer's filter. These elegant and continuous waves suggest the pulse of the heart, the pull of the ocean, the audio pattern of a recurring sound—all natural forces that intensify the narrative's iconic form. At the Santa Monica Museum of Art, the spare text stretched in a



Installation view of Mary Kelly's *The Ballad of Kastriot Rexhepi*, 2001, compressed lint, 49 panels, 17 by 48 by 2 inches each, 206 feet long overall; at the Santa Monica Museum of Art. Top, detail of Stanza II. All photos this article courtesy the artist.

206-foot line of rhythmic prose that ran across 49 panels to encircle the perimeter of the space. The installation's scale allowed the embedded text of the *Ballad* to resonate at once as word and image, according it the visual sweep of an epic, like a 360-degree shot in a wide-screen war movie. The tension between the narrative's individual incident and its extravagant presentation (more than 200 feet to tell the story of a two-foot toddler) engaged reader-viewers in the contradictions between the private and the public.

Interviewed for the exhibition's small catalogue, Kelly explains that she was particularly attracted by the press's preoccupation with Kastriot's first word upon being reunited with his family, and specifically by the coincidence between "patronym" and "patria" as the child simultaneously claims language, family and nation. Hitherto silent, the boy's momentous passage into speech is witnessed and, as Kelly writes, "by reporters / the tender armistice is staged. / *Mater, pater et familia.* / For the camera, they kiss his coral cheek / and Kastriot,

young patriot, says 'Bab'" (Albanian for "Dad").

Drawing on political and psychoanalytic theory, Kelly portrays Kastriot's entry into the social world of speech as an inscription of national, familial and sexual identities. By accumulating the variants "pater," "patriot" and "Bab," she proposes to isolate the decisive moment in which a toddler becomes a nationalist, which later in life may well provide the indispensable psychological legitimation for acts of uninhibited violence such as those undertaken by the Serbs against Kastriot's own

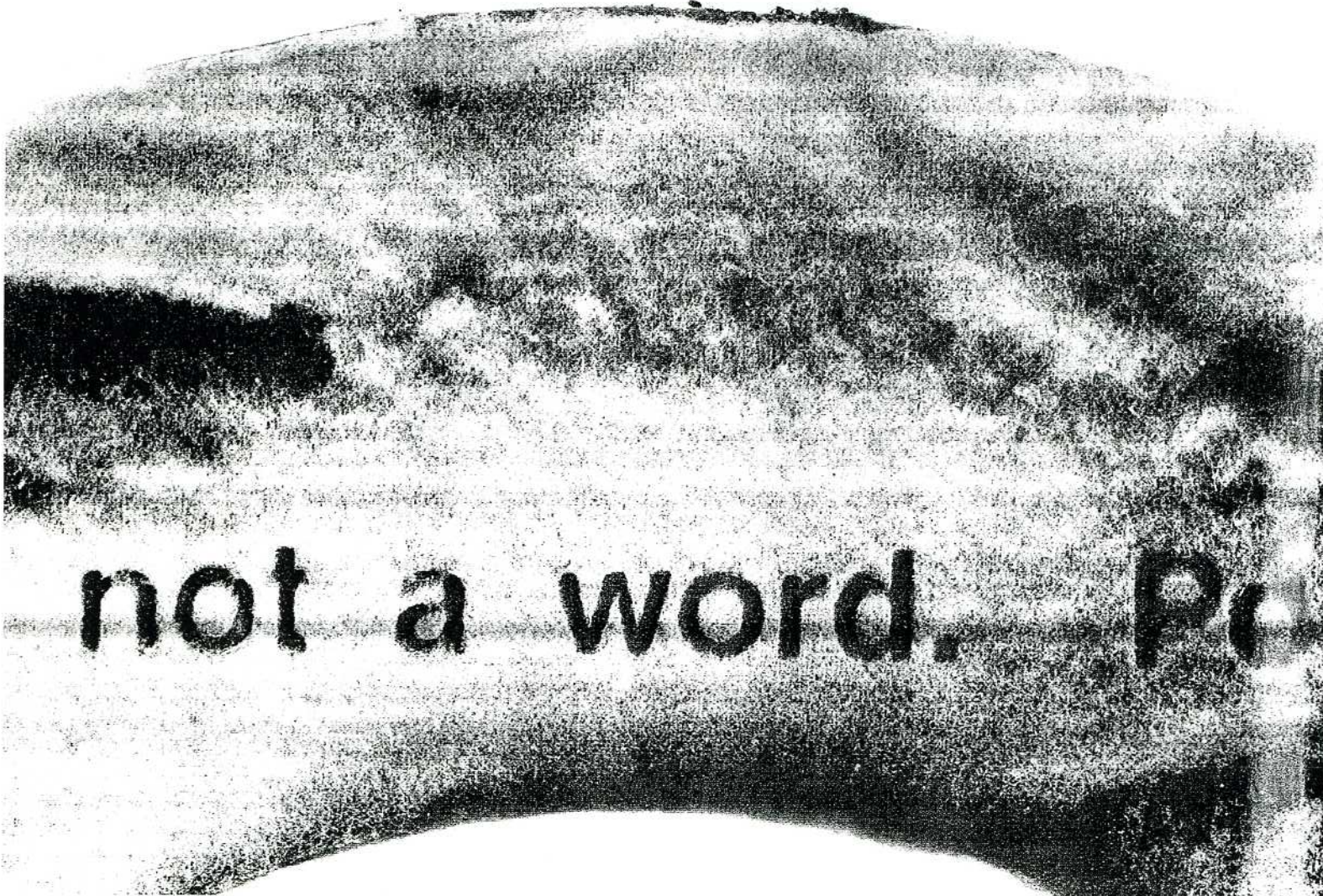
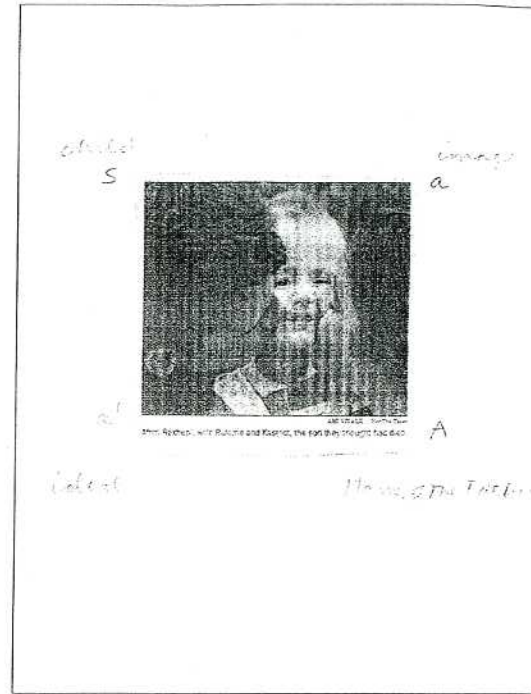
**Encircling the space,  
the installation  
allowed the embedded  
text of the *Ballad*  
to resonate at once  
as word and image,  
according it the  
visual sweep of an epic.**

people. With carefully modulated irony, she indicates that even within little Kastriot's family unit, the sinister potential for xenophobic righteousness is constructed and consecrated in infancy.

Kelly's conceptual achievement is that the procedures of filtration and compression implemented by both the media source and her ballad are echoed in the installation's material form. She uses a common domestic labor-saving device, her dryer, as a labor-

intensive printing press. Such an engagement with everyday objects and processes has characterized her art since the autobiographical *Post-Partum Document* (1973), a landmark work bridging Conceptualism and feminism.

In the interview, Kelly speaks of "filtering out the figurative elements and working with the emotional or affective residue of the event." Lint, of course, is not only the residue of the process of filtering; it is residue as waste product. Insofar as the critical subjectivity of her text is wholly inextricable from the waste within which it appears, Kelly implicitly reiterates the claim, well established in the modernist canon that runs from Dada and early assemblage through process art and Conceptualism, that artistic production can subvert the customary structure of value. Moreover, this particular subversion's association with cleansing chillingly conjures the verbally and physically degraded turn of phrase signified by the term "ethnic cleansing."



II

mp Above the main room they hide,  
six days, six nights,  
pressed to the floorboards,  
cautious as the ash around them,  
pp below them, soldiers stomping  
mf to the blunt beat of perfect solutions.  
f In the distance, explosions. *particular - muted - no words*

f Fighting intensifies.  
f Their panic mounts.  
No food or water  
and Kastriot grows weak.  
Minutes pass, perhaps more, Bukurle is not sure,  
not sure when his breathing stops, why it stops,  
how to start it - striking, calling, caressing him -  
nothing;

ff pleading,  
still nothing. *entirely silent, no words*

mp She lays his body on the disbelieving ground;  
does not scream, does not look back, but vows  
"Always, always, always, I will think of him."  
mp His downy crop, his coral men,  
p oblivious.

*area ascribed*  
*feels (but not smiles)*

THE BALLAD OF KASTRIOT REXHEPI

By Michael Nyman and Sarah Leonard

Left to right, untitled photograph from the Los Angeles Times, July 31, 1999, with notes by Mary Kelly; text from Stanza II with notes; first page of the score by Michael Nyman.

Opposite bottom, close-up of Stanza III.

Below, video still from a performance of the Ballad at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, Dec. 11, 2001.

Kelly came of age as an artist in London during the early '70s, in the heady intellectual atmosphere of British Minimalism and Conceptualism (prominently Art and Language) and the feminist development of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. Her mature work positions the viewer as a reader, and each successive project has offered a new response to the challenges that mark the uneasy relationship between image and text. The depth of her solutions was indicated by what amounted to a mini-retrospective at Rosamund Felsen Gallery, which coincided with the Santa Monica Museum installation. This gallery show also indicated that Kelly's major artistic projects—from *Post-Partum Document* through *Interim* (1984-85) to *Gloria Patri* (1992)—in one way or another investigate the processes by which the subject intersects with a wider history. In the autobiographical *Post-Partum Document*, there are the dual subjects of mother and son; in *Interim*, the claims and contradictions of the no-longer-young generation of women who came of age in the watershed year 1968; in *Gloria Patri*, the social construction of masculinity in the context of the Gulf War.

With the *Ballad* Kelly recasts the individual's "entry" into language and society as a physical journey. Instead of standing in one place and reading a more or less self-contained text before moving on to the next element, the viewer-reader must continually move along as the uninterrupted line of text extends around the space. This discreetly theatricalized both the story and the space of the museum, a quality



that was further heightened by the role granted to performance within the installation.

On the night of the opening, the *Ballad* was sung to music composed by the minimalist Michael Nyman. The program featured his string quintet and the soprano Sarah Leonard. Unspectacular and intimate, the event nevertheless fully animated the complex themes of the installation. By placing her audience within a context of music and rhetoric, balladry and legend, Kelly symbolically inserted them in the larger construction of nationalism promoted elsewhere by the media. Hers is a pertinent tactic at this moment in history, when extreme

patriotic fervor in our own country continues to attend what has been billed as only the first phase of a permanent war on terrorism. □

The Ballad of Kastriot Rexhepi is on view in New York at the Cooper Union's Houghton Gallery [Nov. 21-Dec. 21], where the performance was reprised at the opening reception. The installation and performance premiered at the Santa Monica Museum of Art [Dec. 11, 2001-Jan. 20, 2002], where they were accompanied by a small catalogue which includes Michael Nyman's score for the ballad. The show will travel to the Museo Universitario de Ciencias y Arte in Mexico City [Oct. 18-Dec. 12, 2003].

Author: Ernest Larsen is an artist and writer based in New York. His book *The Usual Suspects* was published this year by the British Film Institute.