

## On the Beyond

**John C. Welchman**

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Il volume *On the Beyond* raccoglie un'ampia conversazione tra due dei più noti artisti attivi a Los Angeles, Mike Kelley e Jim Shaw, e lo storico d'arte John C. Welchman. Passando in rassegna temi come la religione, i sogni, le droghe, le allucinazioni, gli UFO e altre forme di trascendenza empirica o speculativa, i tre interlocutori parlano del paesaggio americano, delle architetture sublimi, utopiche o memoriali e della straordinaria capacità dell'arte di "andare oltre". Di volta in volta appassionato e umoristico, anticonformista e inconsueto, il dialogo non presuppone nessuna fede o speranza nell'"oltre" preso in sé. Elenca invece alcune delle straordinarie modalità in cui stati paranormali e "soprannaturali" vengono scoperti o inventati, desiderati o pervertiti in così tanti registri della cultura americana, come pure dei generi e delle forme di autorialità sociale in cui si trovano iscritti. Kelley va dritto al cuore del problema quando sottolinea il suo gusto per quanto Welchman descrive come "perversità, finzione, fantasia e proiezione"; "l'arte - suggerisce - è forse tutti gli aspetti del trascendente meno il trascendentale".

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### Preface

This idea for this book arose during a conversation with Cristina Bechtler in Los Angeles a year or so ago, and I am most grateful for her support of the project from then until now. Thanks also to Dora Imhof and more recently Michael Hiltbrunner at Ink Tree in Zurich.

My largest debt is of course to my friends Mike Kelley and Jim Shaw who gave generously of their time not only to conduct this discussion but to review and extend it with their usual savvy and creative flair. Mary Clare Stevens and Ahrum Hong at the Kelley studio and Sachiyo Yoshimoto at the Shaw studio kindly assisted with the illustrations.

Because many of the references made in this conversation, especially to aspects of American popular culture, might not be familiar to European readers, I decided to add endnotes — even though this provision might make the discussion appear more studied than it really was. Hopefully these will be of use to some readers, while others can enjoy our exchange without them.

*John C. Welchman, Los Angeles, Fall 2010*

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**JCW** The most obvious place to begin this conversation is with the extensive use you both make of religion, religious imagery and allusions to various religious systems, which lie close to the heart of the question before us here: “on the beyond”.

Mike, you have tended to appropriate particular rituals and images, mostly associated with the Catholic Church, a process that reached a kind of climax in *Day is Done* (2005) in which you made a whole range of elaborate references to religion — calendar rituals like the “Candle Lighting Ceremony”, religious episodes transformed into latter-day popularity contests (“Picking a Mary”), and deeply researched segments like “Joseph Supplicates”, for which you went back to the Apocrypha to find “authentic’ dialogue.”[\[1\]](#) Starting with this project and maybe working backwards can you talk about how and why these deeply embedded structures are so important to you?

Jim, you have worked somewhat the other way round by inventing and fantasizing around religious systems of your own syncretic devising. How did this begin and where has it gone most recently?

**MK** Yes, what you say is true for certain scenes in *Day is Done*, but that is a byproduct of the found photographs that were my point of departure. The bulk of the imagery in *Day is Done* was taken from my “Goth” file not from the “Religion” file. So there’s a lot of vampire-related iconography.

**JCW** Can you talk a little about how your process worked here? I mean, over the years you have collected these files of thematically organized newspaper and yearbook photographs which constitute a kind of data-base or repertoire of images. Now, when you select one — say three people at a table on a raised platform or stage with a third seeming to appear before them like some kind of petitioner — what happens next? How do you go about “recreating” or “filling-in” what’s presented or implied in the photograph? I mean you have to make decisions about what is or might be transpiring in this scene, right?

**MK** Exactly...

**JCW** I don’t know if these images ever had captions or if they did whether you kept them or even read them in the first place, but did you ever use captions to organize your own interpretation?

**MK** Oh, no. I never do that.

**JCW** So it’s always a product of your fantasy...

**MK** In many cases it’s obvious what the image is. One of the candle-lighting photos, for example, is clearly a Catholic ceremony because the young woman is

wearing a school uniform. The other photo I chose to present as a Jewish ceremony, though that might not have been the original reference. It could be some kind of club ceremony or one of those general lighting-the-Candle-of-Knowledge-type ceremonies that one sees presented at schools. In any case, it's some sort of allegorical ritual. That's what I tend to look for. My readings of such images are, of course, determined by my own knowledge and background.

**JCW** The use of the Apocrypha in "Joseph Supplicates" is one of the most elaborate scenes in *Day is Done*. It's interesting to me that you base the exchange not on authorized biblical texts but on writings that were never formally sanctioned by the church. Did you create a phantasmagorical back story from the original found photograph which somehow led to research in the Apocrypha?

**MK** I wanted everything spoken in that scene to be taken directly from biblical sources. But as there is very little speech credited to Mary and Joseph in the bible I had to go to the Apocrypha.



**JCW** What about the suggestion I started with — that you, Mike, tend to work with the appropriation of imagery and episodes, while you, Jim, tend to invent phantom, but vestigially plausible, religious structures?

**JS** I've done both. If I had time I'd love to make a story board or comic book version of the Book of Revelations. But I don't, and anyway Robert Crumb (b. 1943) already did that for the Book of Genesis ... so it would seem like I was copying him or something.[\[2\]](#) But I'd like just to get my head around the actual succession of events in Revelations and separate out what's from Daniel and what's from somewhere else ... it all gets mixed together, and this is how it's used in the Christian religion. It's such amazing source material for imagery.

I did use material from Revelations in several of the backdrops from the series “Left Behind,” such as *Dream Object (I dreamt of an image of a yellow walled city with a yellow kid sticking his finger in the outer wall)* (2004) and *The Woman in the Wilderness* (2005); and there are several pieces in the “Selected Christian reference materials” in my current exhibition in Bordeaux that also relate to the last book of the bible, including half a dozen ink drawings from Basil Wolverton’s [1909-78] *Apocalypse* series (1953-59).[\[3\]](#)

I have also done things with the Apocrypha, such as a piece I did in the early 1980s about Jesus’s life as a boy for which I wrote in the parts that were missing.

**JCW** What form did it take?

**JS** *Jesus’s Life as a Boy* (1986) was four pages of the bible with an illustration of Jesus as a kind of smarty pants, the richest kind in town, with a smirk on his face. He’s twelve or so, during the “lost” years. I also did a piece called *The Adam and Eve Show* (1986) which used the apocryphal story of Adam and Eve and reads a bit like a sit com. I rendered it in the form of a *Mad* magazine page in the style of Mort Drucker (b. 1929). It was a musical parody with Rob and Laura Petrie as Adam and Eve.[\[4\]](#)

**JCW** What do you think is the relation between works that appropriate and those that produce phantasmatic religions?

**JS** Well, my phantasmatic religion pretends to have existed in America in the mid-1800s. So the bible and the Apocrypha are pretty much the prime sources. This is obviously before a lot of Eastern materials became known, as the process of their absorption was begun by the theosophists in the later years of the century. I’ve also been doing giant paintings based on the insane Christianization of politics in the Bush era. The title of the series, which I began in 2004, is “Left Behind”.[\[5\]](#)



**JCW** Can you talk about some of the works in the series?

**JS** One of the central pieces is *The Miracle of Compound Interest* (2006), a mural based on a found theatrical backdrop of a mountain gas station painted over with Masonic symbols. The gas station itself is named after the one that appears in the film noir classic *Out of the Past* (1947, dir. Jacques Tourneur). In my interpretation, the deaf-mute character in the film echoes the Masonic threat to cut out the tongue — he is making a Masonic hand signal. I also refer to Robert Mitchum's (1917-97) speech to a gambler's thug or hit man. I meant it as an explanation...

**JCW** ...an allegory?

**JS** No more like an “explanation”... of the virtues of small town capitalism. I felt all of these characteristics had been lost and the thugs have taken over. The post-New Deal version of capitalism had been tossed out. Mitchum's speech seemed to exemplify the tipping point. I webbed-over the surface of the backdrop with a spider's web, which was originally intended to take the form of names — all the “begattings” in the bible, from the Old Testament to the New, then through the Middle Ages until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I was interested in blood lines — not only those of Jesus and later Christian kings, but also genealogies based on the books of Zecharia Stichin<sup>[6]</sup> (b. 1920) and others. Stichin claimed to have made “translations” of ancient Babylonian cuneiform tablets, purporting to tell the creation story of Genesis as an alien conspiracy fomented by seemingly immortal aliens from the 10th planet Niburon, which is invisible during most of its 3500 year elliptical orbit of the sun.

I actually wanted to make a spiral of heads including George Bush Sr. and Jr., the British royal family, the North Korean leaders Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, and Saddam Hussein and his sons Uday and Qusay. It would have been an endless DNA spiral going back in time. But it never got done.

The aliens in Stichin's account were a technologically advanced extraterrestrial race (the Anunnaki in Sumerian mythology) from the undiscovered planet of Nibiru, whom he believed to be the "Nephilim," antediluvian beings mentioned twice in the Hebrew Bible,[\[7\]](#) who left earth when the deluge destroyed everything except the ark. Using Recombinant DNA techniques the aliens created hybrid ape slaves to mine gold and other minerals for their planet some 450,000 years ago, and then created Adam and Eve. They have somehow controlled human actions by infiltrating royal families and leading individuals through some nefarious alien DNA bloodline superiority, which makes its way into the *Da Vinci Code*.[\[8\]](#) All of it seems to place blame on royalty/shape-shifting reptilians/Rothschilds/Masons etc., in one mega conspiracy that at the same time grants these evil oppressors seemingly superhuman powers — hence ceding them a subconscious superiority, the divine right of Kings.

In the end I couldn't get around to the names on the big canvas, so I did a small spider-web drawing that included many of them. The alternative title of the painting is *Weaving Spiders Come Not Here*, the motto of the Bohemian Club (founded in 1872) posted at the entrance to the Bohemian Grove, the club's exclusive retreat near Monte Rio in Sonoma, California, used by Henry Kissinger, Richard Nixon and others from the political, industrial and media elites. The Grove became the redwoods HQ of conspiracy theory.[\[9\]](#) No women allowed, flowing togas, outdoor entertainments, fraternal peeing in the bushes, and so on.

Inside the gas station there's a doorway — already cut out of the original backdrop — with a curtain which leads to an area with a black and white checkerboard floor, done in perspective. There's a backdrop in the form of a kind of cavern of hell, set with crystals glowing with black light. At one end, three dwarves take the positions of the traditional wise men in a perverted nativity scene. The dwarves are praying to a thing in a manger, which turns out to be a dollar sign made of kryptonite. I'm referring here to the so-called gnomes of Zurich, the bankers who run everything in Switzerland ... and the tradition of associating gnomes and dwarves with buried treasure and caves. There's an anti-Semitic subtext in the dwarf treasure iconography. Ever since I was a kid, I've been reading all this John Birch Society, extreme right-wing stuff about the fiat money banking system (that followed on from the gold standard) and how it's nothing more than a house of cards. When Richard Nixon (1913-94) took the US off the gold standard in 1971 (the "Nixon Shock") inflation went crazy. Instead of being tied to the value of gold, the US dollar, and eventually other currencies around the world, were allowed to "float" — their worth being defined largely by projected future values — hence the rise of risk-hedging financial instruments,

derivatives and so on. The recent crash would back up some of this ... maybe. Hence the “miracle of compound interest.”

Anyway, this is what prompted me to go back to Revelations and sort out the different strands of origination for various apocalyptic and prophetic images.

**JCW** Mike, your Catholic background is clearly of profound importance to your work. Catholic imagery has appeared pretty consistently from the performance pieces of the mid-1980s until now, and, of course, the title of your first retrospective in 1994 was “Catholic Tastes.”[\[10\]](#) Whereas, Jim, I don’t even know what your religion — or your family’s religion — was when you were raised in the mid-West, though I would guess it was Protestant.

**JS** Church of England!

**JCW** Oh...

**JS** ...which is like a neutered version of Catholicism without all the crazy stuff. So I was always jealous of Mike and all my other Catholic friends because of all the weird shit they read and were exposed to.

**JCW** Mike, how conscious are you of attending to the deeper problematics rather than the seductive surface appearance of Catholicism? Or to put the question another way, how much of what you have done with religion and religiosity is based, programmatically, on the Catholic church and its rituals?

**MK** I’ve made works that explicitly address Catholic iconographies, but often times the religious imageries I utilize are so common that they are of little importance. In *Day is Done* I worked with a number of image files in order to produce dramatic action. In the candle-lighting scene I wanted a clash between two different types of candle-lighters. Their disagreement had to stem from something. The fact that one woman is Catholic and the other Jewish gave me a

thematic focus in order to write dialogue. I was raised Catholic so I am familiar with such language. But I don't really have any investment in such arguments.

In *Day is Done* there are scenes with no religious connotations at all, like the "Singles Mixer". In that scene a diverse group of women argue about their various conceptions of an ideal man. I was trying to create a world made up of different stereotypical interactions, which fail to read stereotypically. I suppose you could say my approach was somewhat Brechtian.

All of the photographs I use are of rituals, but I don't distinguish between religious and non-religious ones. My interest in them is solely based on my desire to produce my own, more formalized, rituals.

**JCW** In order to offer a commentary of some kind on the nature of rituals, how they operate? Especially contemporary rituals, which are deformed and debased, usually commercialized and dumbed down, repeated and hollowed out?

**MK** Those are the symptoms of capitalism. The rituals associated with it are not unimportant and are worth examining. The main reason I chose to work with the Goth file for *Day is Done* is that many of the photos were of people in Halloween costumes. Despite the fact that it is a very popular American ritual event, Halloween is slightly unusual in that it focuses on negative values. That interests me. In my mind it puts Halloween rituals in proximity to avant garde art practice — there is an implied social critique. Of course, popular entertainment forms like heavy metal concerts and horror films also focus on negative values. But in Halloween rituals people perform these roles themselves rather than observe them passively. In *Day is Done* I wanted to present a world in which vampires (or people dressed as vampires) were as common — and normative — as office workers in order to play against the carnivalesque negativity of such iconography. Remember, *Day is Done* was produced before the recent trend in teen vampire films. After the success of *Twilight*, (dir. Catherine Hardwicke, 2008) and the HBO series *True Blood*, the vampire has become a completely normative figure in popular drama. This was not the case when I made *Day is Done*. Having vampires situated in an office environment looked odd.

I've always thought of art as secular ritual, as material ritual. For me, art sometimes functions as social critique or social analysis, but at other times I'm simply playing with the forms of ritual as pure form. They are tropes to be worked

with just for the pleasure of creating new formal combinations.

**JCW** Let's press this a bit further. If art is a secular ritual and shares certain structures with other rituals, like religious rituals, then I'm wondering how the "beyondness" in art answers to that so clearly solicited in religion — the afterlife, the promise of a better future and all that?

**MK** Well, that takes us to the notion of "the beyond" itself. I am not interested in the beyond in any religious sense; I am an atheist. I've never dwelled much on things that I know are beyond my comprehension. What's the point of that? But I am interested in notions of the beyond in so far as they reveal something about our social and psychic frameworks. Beyondness is very interesting to me in relation to psychic effects as well.

**JCW** I don't disagree. What interests me in this project is not some commitment to or investment in the beyond by you, or Jim, or any artist, for that matter. I guess we could name our conversation a little differently, and more accurately, as "Passages to ... or through ... the Beyond". I'm interested, and I think you both are too, in the ways and means by which people fantasize about — and invest in — things that are beyond their heres and nows. In a way I'm less interested in what the beyond actually is, than in the persistently extraordinary ways that people have sought it out, lived their lives for it in religious and spiritual, even in economic and aesthetic ways.

**JS** What about when Cary Loren<sup>[11]</sup> used to spray-paint pieces of paper in his room in the mid-70s, in arcs until he passed out? He was making a zine called *Destroy All Monsters* at the time. The pages would be laid on top of each other randomly, and then he would spray using commercial fluorescent colors. Then the pages were stapled into the zine. It was a combination of accident, fumes and frenzy. He was trying to emulate a kind of "pulp" stream of consciousness. To me that's a pretty "beyond art" ritual.

**MK** Cary also made art works under the influence of LSD.

To go back ... biographically, as I said, I was raised Catholic and the focus on ritual and ecstatic effects in that religion had a profound influence on my consciousness. I was indoctrinated, but never a believer, and secular versions of the impulse toward, or desire for, ritual effects soon replaced those of Catholicism. The first of these was drug culture: psychedelia. I was extremely attracted to the immersive aesthetics of psychedelia. This was a movement that was heavily invested in metaphysics, but I was not really interested in that myself. I was, however, interested in discovering incredible psychic effects, of course. It was psychedelia that led me to fine art.

**JS** I'm just guessing that you never took LSD at the time?

**MK** I took a couple of light doses when I was a teenager ... but I wasn't well-suited for it. I was too repressed, too much of a control freak to enjoy such experiences.

**JS** I took it once in those early years... when I was 22 or 23. But I was always wanting that beyondness from the music I was listening to ... Sun Ra, Beefheart, Terry Riley, Amon Duul, Arthur Brown — who did some way out psychedelic prog stuff. I never had headphones, so I would sit with the stereo speakers blasting on either side of my head. I had the idea of “going beyond”... trying to get to that state. I was smoking pot — that was as far as I had gotten — and I didn't like that. I would listen to short wave radio as well and that would sometimes take me there, or so I thought.

**MK** I was listening to this stuff too.

My initial teen-age drug experiences were just about fun. I smoked pot socially for laughs. I was, however, interested in altered states of consciousness. This was, primarily, politically motivated. I thought, as many did in the late 60s, that our culture needed to be shocked out of its complacent notions of reality and that, perhaps, drugs were one way to accomplish this. I whole-heartedly supported drug use, even though I was not very druggy myself. I had read Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception* in high school.[\[12\]](#) I was familiar with Timothy

Leary's (1920-96) ideas and the general hippie notion of the use of drugs for "mind expanding" purposes. But, as I said, I was not psychically well-suited for it.

**JS** There was that brownie episode ...

**MK** Yes, when I was in my last year of undergraduate school I ate a spiked brownie and had an intense hallucinogenic experience.

**JS** It wasn't a pleasant one.

**MK** No, it was horrible. I hallucinated for days; I could not tell the difference between thought and reality. I was time-traveling, space shifting, age shifting, persona shifting. I couldn't experience myself as a coherent being. There were constant jumps in POV. This experience changed my life. I have not trusted the concept of "reality" since that time. Art is my replacement for this type of drug-induced, or religion-induced, search for expanded consciousness. Art is not so loaded with importance to me. It is a safe zone to explore the meaningless and the ecstatic. I like the fact that it has no social value. At least, it didn't used to. I have little tolerance for "metaphysics" any more.

**JS** In a sense I'm getting closer and closer to all this in my attempts to make a false religion.

**JCW** In your conversation with Mike in *Here Comes Everybody* (1998),[\[13\]](#) you go through the history of this and related projects, discussing the *My Mirage* series (1986-91) and its protagonist, Billy, your alter ego as a born-again Christian; the handout booklet in the style of the Jehovah Witness magazine, *Awake*; as well as the fake religion project, which you wanted to launch before the year 2000. So I guess we don't need to rehash all of that. But maybe you can say something about what's happened to this project in the last decade or so? How has it moved forward?

**JS** Very, very slowly. I keep doing the research, but I can only retain about 10% of what I read. I read and read and read, it's like I'm in my grad school

research phase right now. I'm reading about altered states and people in contact with angels and other beings from the beyond. This is what I need to do, where I need to go, if I am really going to create this religion... to be in that DMT[\[14\]](#) zone. I realize that I'm in that zone at times.

We got rid of our TV a couple of years ago, so reading is pretty much all I do. I want to know more about William Blake (1757-1827) or Carl Jung (1975-1961) or Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) — though there isn't much about Steiner that's not written by Steiner acolytes.

**JCW** But the big project that you have is to make an actual, functioning, storefront church, right?

**JS** Yes, to create a religion. I'm still working on it, but as I said, doing the research has become a form of postponement. I keep on having other giant and demanding projects come in front of it, which slows me down even more. But I have taken *ayahuasca*[\[15\]](#) recently, which is very interesting because it really does put you into another dimension, akin to a religious experience. It's not a party drug. But there are aspects to it that are odd ... people who take it in this group setting become acolytes, but what do they do with that?

**JCW** So you've been taking it as a part of your research?

**JS** Yes, it's a form of research ... I did it once, but the effect lingers for several days. You get hallucinations and visions. It's not dissimilar to dreams, but obviously these are things that happen while you're awake. I've never been able to control any of this stuff, which would be awfully useful ... I guess you can, but I haven't got that far. But I did manage to reconnect with the DMT effect by listening to a Holosync device that puts you in alpha then beta meditative states ... but without having to spend years "learning" meditation techniques. I don't know whether it's appropriate, even moral, to use *ayahuasca* for my work, because the vine, the ritual and the "taking" are considered sacred.

**JCW** We've been talking about churches and the like, so I want to shift this question to the conditions and experiences of architecture and its relation to spirituality and to art. Could I ask you both to speak to the different ways in which your work has taken on the relation between architecture and the beyond?

Mike, I know you have a longstanding interest in both visionary or "spiritualist" architectures from Steiner to 1960s and other forms of architectural utopianism. Architecture reaches for a kind of beyond in a reverse direction in your work, by acting as a symbolic screening device for selective memories, partial recall and the blackness of forgetting — a process that you link, in part, with trauma and abuse.

**JS** I have difficulty connecting architecture and the beyond because in the main architecture is so "here and now" — even though church architecture is meant to instill some kind of uprising of the spirit. But architecture is still very grounded I think.

**JCW** Mike, you have taken on spaces and places where the architectural is designed to solicit various forms of beyondness, or at least becomes a kind of tipping point that inclines in this direction, right? Spiritualist architectures obviously take it upon themselves to produce through the materials of their structures a certain trajectory directed to the transcendent; while utopian architectures want to lead from a particular architectural present to a better social future.

**MK** These impulses can exist at the same time—in Steiner's planned community, for example. Steiner is a utopian.

**JS** So was Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959), to some extent ...

**MK** The grand Church architectures of Catholicism are extensions of earlier ritual structures, like temples, and they're clearly symbolic. They are designed to induce a devotional state of mind. In Gothic architecture there is a clear

correlation between the lofty heights of the interiors and religious uplift. In the late 70s I made a Gothic-style bird house to shift focus from symbolic religious uplift to the literal air-born quality of birds. I'm far more interested in such fantasy architectures than functional ones.

My current architectural interest is in buildings that do not actually exist. Hence my work in relation to False Memory Syndrome in which people recall imagined structures or spaces. This is hallucinogenic architecture. My interest is primarily socio-political. A certain psychological theory, which foregrounds victimization as the cause of mental illness, has become a kind of religion. Patients indoctrinated in this psychological theory invent memories that suit its tenets—in the same way that Christians hallucinate the tenets of Christianity. The structures of such belief systems, including the physical spaces designed for them, reveal the primary structures of contemporary consciousness.

Related to my interest in “falsely remembered” space is forgotten space. My sculpture *Educational Complex* (1995) consists of models of many of the buildings associated with my past—including the primarily schools I attended and the home in which I was raised. All of the sections I cannot remember have been left out, and they make up the bulk of the structure. My series of Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction videos are designed to fill-in this “repressed” space with fantasy recollection.



**JCW** You also have a tradition of bringing architecture back to ground, if I can put it like this, rather than buying into any of its implicit claims that it leads to a beyond. The Frank Gehry (b. 1933) project (“Proposal for *The Decoration of an Island of Conference Rooms (with Copy Room) for an Advertising Agency Designed by Frank Gehry,*” 1990)[\[16\]](#) is an example of this. You insinuate banal cartoons and office jokes into the postmodern architectural context ...

**MK** This was a project for the Chiat/Day advertising firm. Gehry designed the building in his “deconstructive” period, before he began creating the kind of flamboyant, “baroque” buildings he is known for today – like the Guggenheim

Bilbao or the Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles. Frank asked me, and several other artists, to come up with intrusive projects for the building. His work at the time often featured deconstructionist elements such as cuts that revealed the internal structure of the architecture. I wanted to use such devices to reveal the social structures inscribed in the building. So I cut windows and holes in the walls that separated upper-level board offices and meeting rooms from employee-related rooms—such as the coffee room or office supply room. I also wanted to replace the “official” works of fine art in the building with super-graphics derived from the cartoons and jokes that workers faxed to each other in their spare time. These were real cartoons found in various work environments; I did not invent them. I was trying to expand Gehry’s deconstructionist focus and he was very supportive of my project. Unfortunately, it was never built; but I did construct a version of it for the *Helter Skelter* exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 1992.[\[17\]](#)

**JCW** I suppose the theory of deconstruction operative in the 1980s and early 90s worked in such a way that the language of the thing constructed, whether words or stone, was turned rather remorselessly against itself. Maybe this furnished an ironic “proof” for the very metaphysics this methodology set out to overturn. Perhaps this phase of postmodern practice, in architecture, at least, was even more metaphysical than the formally scintillating language that came later—in Gehry’s case the computerized curves and titanium surfaces. So what you set out to do in the advertising agency project gives a signal twist to this logic by using the language of deconstruction as a kind of negative reversal, a reality check if you like, that exposes its own projects of exposure; and grounds and forcibly—but also humorously—lowers the rather complacent self-referentiality that underwrote this method in the first place.

I think there are other examples of this grounding mechanism. For example, you talked a moment ago about the Gothic cathedral with its aspirations to sublimity funded by light and height. But there was always something very “Kelleyan” in many of those edifices—the secular, sometimes scatological, iconography of the misericords carved under the choir stalls or the repertoire of hybrid beasts and demons on various out-of-the-way capitals. Some of these figures are sacrilegious and completely extraordinary.

I’m wondering if you can talk about other ways that you’ve reckoned with the architectural. We touched on one caught up in the idea of “missing space,” your interest in the gaps and absences associated with or read into buildings. I’m

thinking in particular of the architectures of social power — churches, schools, institutions of various kinds — especially when encountered and processed by children or adolescents. Your interests here fed into *Educational Complex* and related projects.



**MK** In my estimation, architecture is one of the lowest art forms because it's so utterly bound by taste, functionality, and the necessity to represent—in an extremely overt way—the power of the organizations that pay for it. Architecture is *the* official public art form. A tremendous amount of money is spent to produce pompous, generally aesthetically empty, structures. And what are these buildings? Often they're associated with those organizations that control and mold your life: churches, schools, government buildings, corporate offices. The decision by al-Qaeda terrorists to destroy the World Trade Center reveals the incredible symbolic meaning attached to such buildings.

Equal to, or surpassing, the symbolic power of official architecture is that of domestic space, which I also tend to find reprehensible. I recall that when I read Gaston Bachelard's (1884-1962) *The Poetics of Space* I was shocked by his interpretation of the poetics of domestic space — his reading of the secret cubbyholes of the home as positively intimate.[\[18\]](#) How different this is to the contemporary trend to see all secret niches as symbolic of hidden trauma. His book struck me as incredibly nostalgic. It is beautifully written but, still, it seemed like a sophisticated version of a *Reader's Digest* story. I grew up in an environment in which such literature — the propagandistic stories of hearth and home found in *Reader's Digest* and the magazines geared toward geriatric readers at the doctor's office — was omnipresent. Such stories revel in depictions of a phony country domesticity that never was. And, even stranger, it is a past that the reader could not have actually lived because it was before their time. It was a false nostalgia.

Home décor was utilized in the production of this façade as well. My parents' house was decorated in a fake early-American style. I grew up, basically, in a stage set that symbolized some invented pre-modern idyllic time. I am working right now on a public project in Detroit in which a mobile section of the house I

grew up in will travel from the museum area of downtown to the suburbs, where my childhood home still stands, and then back in a circular route. This *Mobile Homestead* (as the project is called) is intended to perform various types of “social services” along the way — to function as a blood mobile for example. The remaining section of reconstructed house will sit on a vacant lot next to MOCAD [Museum of Contemporary Art, Detroit] and function as a community gallery.[\[19\]](#) In contrast to the architectural “super ego” functions of these structures there will be a hidden maze-like version of the house constructed underground — below it. This space is reserved for secret rites of an anti-social nature.



## **Bios**

**Mike Kelley's** work has been shown in numerous solo exhibitions including, *Horizontal Tracking Shots*, Gagosian Gallery, NY (2009); *Mike Kelley: Educational Complex Onwards: 1995-2008*, WIELS, Brussels (2008); *Mike Kelley: Kandors*, Jablonka Galerie, Berlin (2007); *Profondeurs Vertes*, Musée du Louvre (2006); *Day Is Done*, Gagosian Gallery, NY (2005); *The Uncanny*, Tate Liverpool and Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, Vienna (2004); and a retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art (2003). He has also exhibited at Documenta X (1997) and in five editions of the Whitney Biennial. Kelley's writings and interviews are collected in three volumes edited by John C. Welchman: *Foul Perfection: Essays and Criticism* (2002); *Minor Histories: Statements, Conversations, Proposals* (2004), and *Mike Kelley: Interviews, Conversations and Chit-Chat* (2005).

**Jim Shaw** was born in Midland, Michigan in 1952 and lives and works in Los Angeles. Solo exhibitions of Shaw's work have been presented at

CAPC Musée d'art Contemporain, Bordeaux (2010); P.S.1 MoMA, New York (2007); MAGASIN Centre National d'Art Contemporain, Grenoble (2003); Kusthaus Glarus, Glarus (2003); and The Swiss Institute, NY (2002). His work and performances have been featured in group shows including *Artissima: Blinding the Ears*, Teatro Carignano, Turin (2009); *Le Printemps de Septembre*, Les Abattoirs, Toulouse, (2009); *Into the Vacuum: An Evening of Oist Sacred Music*, Billy Wilder Theater, The Hammer Museum, LA (2007); SITE Santa Fe Biennial, Santa Fe (2004, 2008); *(The World May Be) Fantastic*, Biennale of Sydney (2002); and The Whitney Biennial (1991, 2002).

**John C. Welchman** is Professor of art history at the University of California, San Diego. His books include *Modernism Relocated* (1995), *Invisible Colours: A Visual History of Titles* (1997) and *Art After Appropriation* (2001). He is co-author of the *Dada and Surrealist Word-Image* (1987) and *Mike Kelley* (1999); and editor of *Rethinking Borders* (1996); *Recent Pasts: Art in Southern California from the 90s to Now* (2005); *Institutional Critique and After* (2006); *The Aesthetics of Risk* (2008); and *Black Sphinx: On the Comedic in Modern Art* (2010). His collected essays on contemporary European art will appear in Spanish and German editions in 2011.

[\[1\]](#) For more on *Day is Done*, including notes on the music, librettos, scene notes and an essay by John C. Welchman, see Mike Kelley, *Day is Done* (New York: Gagosian Gallery/Yale University Press, 2006).

[\[2\]](#) See, *The Book of Genesis Illustrated by R. Crumb* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009).

[3] These works were seen together for the first time in *Jim Shaw: Left Behind*, CAPC musée d'art contemporain Bordeaux, curated by Charlotte Laubard, 7 May to 19 September 2010.

[4] Rob and Laura Petrie, played by Dick Van Dyke and Mary Tyler Moore, were the lead characters on *The Dick Van Dyke Show* created and produced by Carl Reiner which first aired on CBS from October 3, 1961 until June 1, 1966.

[5] “Left Behind” nos. 8, 9, and 10 were shown at Patrick Painter West, Santa Monica (2006); while the whole series of some fifteen monumental paintings along with several sculptures, a giant inflatable, and Shaw’s collection of Christian objects making use of apocalyptic iconography, was presented in the exhibition *Jim Shaw: Left Behind*, curated by Charlotte Laubard, CAPC, musée d'art contemporain Bordeaux, 7 May - 19 September 2010. In the press dossier for this exhibition, Shaw notes that “the title, ‘Left Behind’ refers both to the best selling series of books in history, right wing Christian fantasies about the rapture and coming apocalypse, and the American worker, left behind by globalism, with a weak labor movement and little support from the democrats. Many have turned to born again Christianity in lieu of any other hope for the future.” The first theater backdrop mural, *Dream Object (I dreamt of an image of a yellow walled city with a yellow kid sticking his finger in the outer wall)*, was made in 2004.

[6] Zecharia Stichen was born in Azerbaijan in 1920. He authored *The 12th Planet* (1976) and several sequels in which he set out elaborate theories—based on Mesopotamian iconography and symbology—which attribute human origins to the arrival of extra-terrestrial astronauts. Other writers such as David Vaughan Icke [b. 1952], author of *The Biggest Secret: The Book That Will Change the World* (Bridge of Love Publications, 1999), have extended Stichen’s arguments to generate a

vast conspiracy theory dating back to the dawn of man and embracing what Icke describes as a secret group of reptilian humanoids including the British royal family, the Bushes, Kris Kristofferson and other contemporary figures.

**[7]** The Nephilim are mentioned in Genesis 6:4 and Numbers 13:33.

**[8]** The best-selling English language novel of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003) was made into a movie of the same title by Columbia Pictures (dir. Ron Howard, 2006).

**[9]** See, Mike Hanson, *Bohemian Grove: Cult Of Conspiracy* (iUniverse Inc, 2004); Armand Santilli, *The Boys at Bohemian Grove* (Xlibris Corporation, 2004); and Christopher Hodapp and Alice Von Kannon, *Conspiracy Theories & Secret Societies For Dummies* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2008).

**[10]** Mike Kelley, *Catholic Tastes* was curated by Elizabeth Sussman and first seen at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York in 1994. It traveled to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (1994) and then to the Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany (1995).

**[11]** A founder member of Destroy All Monsters with Kelley and Shaw in 1973, Cary Loren has worked as a photographer, musician, film-maker, conceptual artist, producer, publisher and independent bookstore proprietor.

**[12]** Taking its title from William Blake's poem "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" (and inspiring, in turn, Jim Morrison to name his band The Doors), *The Doors of Perception* (1954) by Aldous Huxley (1894-1963) detailed the author's experiences while experimenting with mescaline.

**[13]** See, "Here Comes Everybody" (1998), in John C. Welchman, ed., *Mike Kelley: Interviews, Conversations, and Chit-Chat (1986-2004)* (Zurich: JRP|Ringier, 2005), pp. 150-185.

**[14]** Dimethyltryptamine or DMT is a naturally occurring psychedelic drug of the tryptamine family.

**[15]** First described in western scientific literature by Harvard ethnobotanist Richard Evans Schultes in the early 1950s, *ayahuasca* ( *ayawaskain* in the Quechua language) refers to a psychoactive infusion or decoction prepared from the *Banisteriopsis* spp. vine, usually mixed with the leaves of dimethyltryptamine-containing species of shrubs from the Psychotria genus.

**[16]** See, "Proposal for *The Decoration of an Island of Conference Rooms (with Copy Room) for an Advertising Agency Designed by Frank Gehry*" (1990), in Mike Kelley, *Minor Histories*, ed. John C. Welchman (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004), pp. 312-15.

**[17]** *Helter Skelter: LA Art in the 1990s*, curated by Paul Schimmel and coordinated by Alma Ruiz, featured sixteen visual artists including

Kelley, and ten writers from the Los Angeles area. It was installed at the Museum of Contemporary Art's Temporary Contemporary space (a former city warehouse and police car garage renovated by Frank Gehry in 1983).

**[18]** Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* [1958] (New York: Beacon Press, 1994). What he terms the "topo-analysis of intimate space" (p. 86) is perhaps the leading refrain in Bachelard's study.

**[19]** *Mobile Homestead* was launched on September 25, 2010. Commissioned by Artangel, London in collaboration with LUMA Foundation and the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD). This is the first installment of a wider project that will be completed in 2011 when the mobile home is attached to an altered reconstruction of Kelley's former home, to function as a community space.

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Art and Architecture in Discussion

# On the Beyond

A Conversation between  
Mike Kelley, Jim Shaw, and  
John C. Welchman



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