

Paula McCloskey

In Conversation with Mary Kelly

Whitworth Gallery, Manchester, February 2011

Presented below are extracts from a conversation with the contemporary artist Mary Kelly which took place in February 2011 at the Whitworth Gallery, Manchester, surrounded by a large selection of her work during the *Mary Kelly: Projects, 1973-2010* exhibition.ⁱ Kelly's oeuvre is undoubtedly diverse and progressive, but it is also coherent and interconnected. During our dialogue, Kelly reflected on her approach to art-making; making links between her works, connecting her projects across time and space. What follows is a hybrid text containing extracts of the conversation with Kelly and some observations made after reading the full transcript. The overall piece contemplates the connections across Kelly's work and specifically draws attention to the place of the mother and child in her projects.

The entry point, for me, as for many, to Kelly's oeuvre was *Post-Partum Document (1973-1979)*, a piece that uses the relationship of the mother and child to explore sexual difference. *Post-Partum Document* (herein *PPD*) is a mixed media installation that consists of a six-year exploration of the mother-child relationship. *PPD* consists of a total of 139 individual parts and has been exhibited in edited versions on numerous occasions. In *PPD* Kelly uses a process of documentation to introduce and interrogate the concept of the subject. The 'introduction' of this piece and the six following sections (*Documentation I-VI*) explore the relationship of the mother with her male child. This is perhaps the most well known of Kelly's projects, particularly in Britain. It was a ground-breaking piece full of vitality and arguably as relevant forty years on. Part of its significance is that it sets the scene for Kelly's oeuvre; many of the characteristics and strategies at work in this early piece run through her subsequent projects. It is not that *PPD* defines or acts as a template for later work, but I do think that in her discussion of *PPD* she reveals connecting lines to her later art-making in terms of the creative and critical strategies at work, as well as highlighting the pervading presence of the mother and child in her projects, which have spanned nearly forty years.

PPD is a multi-layered piece; a fusion of different discourses (mother and child, the women's movement, mother-as-artist),ⁱⁱ and different objects (texts, diagrams, artefacts), collected, documented and meticulously pieced together over time. It was created in the early

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1970s when there was a wave of political activism, consciousness-raising and theoretical and artistic innovation, all of which were connected by the complex and often contradictory issues that faced a revolutionary struggle to transform social relations. Mary Kelly was active in the women's movement at this time and had already produced work that was informed by contemporary political debates.ⁱⁱⁱ *PPD* traces the shifting debates and concerns of the women's movement throughout the mid-1970s about the sexual division of labour – debates that moved on to an increasing interest in ideas about sexual difference from a Lacanian psychoanalytic point of view.

Maternity, as part of the lived experience of women, was an important early concern for the women's movement. Feminists in the 1970s explored how the everyday experience of motherhood was not being represented in the wider culture – a culture where the image of maternity was, instead, one that was idealised or denigrated. What distinguishes *PPD* is that it was concerned with more than the issue of domestic labour (which was a preoccupation of early artwork informed by feminism of this time), pushing forward, among other things, the exploration of the psychic investment in the mother-child relationship. This shift in focus is described by Kelly in our conversation as being informed by an encounter with psychoanalysis. It was particularly the thinking of Lacan, and the conceptualisation of the Oedipus complex, that seemed to hold so much promise, and it is a Lacanian reworking that is seen in *PPD*.

I first encountered *PPD* long after the historical moment from where it emerged had passed. I struggled at first to make sense of its psychoanalytic content, its pseudo-scientific feel, and its odd juxtaposition of objects and texts. There are perhaps several reasons for my tentative response. Significantly, I was troubled by the presence of the artist in the piece. It was as if my response to it had been determined from the outset. I became preoccupied with this supposition; I thought that the careful staging of the content, as a sort of framed performance, closed off a particular intensive response to some of the ephemera and other tracings of the mother's lived experience.^{iv} Years on, I think and feel very differently about *PPD*, a shift largely attributable to a protracted period of time spent working to acquire knowledge and understanding of, among other things, psychoanalysis, art informed by feminism, and art encounters. A different understanding of Kelly's work has shifted my relationship with *PPD*, which now stands for me as arguably the most significant art-work (of its time and since) to consider the mother and child relation. Furthermore, with a more illuminated understanding of Kelly's projects, I consider that rather than predetermining a

response to her work, her unique approach to art-making (which made its *début* in *PPD* and features in the extracts below), plausibly opens critical paths towards subjective encounters – if one chooses to take up the challenge.

As she talks through the process of making *PPD*, her project-approach emerges. *Projects* is the name given to the exhibition at the Whitworth, as reflected upon by Kelly:

MK: I wanted to get across the project nature of the work — that it's done over time, the way research functions. [T]here's also another sense of 'project' — what you might think of as something beyond the mini-Utopias of the everyday, which is the relational aesthetics approach, to something that is continuing the aspirations for a civil society, the sort of thing that Badiou refers to when he says 'without a project, however flawed that might be, we have only one motive which is profit'. So I think I share this with a lot of younger artists who are committed to making work that they call project based in this sense.

Kelly discusses how she starts by asking a question; in the case of *PPD* the question was one of sexuality and how do you get at something like ideology at the moment? These are questions posed, and significantly, not necessarily answered:

MK: I recognised that if an artist has a brief, it's to ask the question – so that's where I began in my work. It's not about the answers, and that's how our research is very different and probably what attracts you to it. I have felt recently that I understand where this came from in my work, why I was driven by the questions and why I call it the discursive site.

As a *discursive site* *PPD* draws on sociology, psychoanalysis, anthropology, and feminism to ask its questions, this interdisciplinarity being a new departure in the 1970s, and a strategy that Kelly has used since:

MK: I don't think that I would just say that the question of maternal femininity comes only from experience. When you brought that up [earlier], I immediately thought: what's the difference between a kind of academic notion of interdisciplinarity and a political one? It took me back to the events of '68 and the social movements of that time and you remember one of the famous slogans in Paris was 'No right to speak without questions'. I think that was actually a different notion of the question, which was – first you have the problem and then you go where you need to [go] to solve it. So there was a kind of intense cross-disciplinary activity in the breakdown of the sacred domains of academia. Then something like psychoanalysis, for instance, did not come out of the academic world, it came from a political context.

The fluidity embraced using the *inter* or *cross-disciplinary* approach inaugurated in *PPD*, which characterises all Kelly's projects, speaks of the non-fixity of disciplinary boundaries as a feminist practice. Psychoanalysis is important here since, as well as implying the unconscious

foundation of the subject, it supports a non-unitary concept of subjectivity that seems to be embodied in Kelly's approach to art-making. In referring to psychoanalysis' vital role in the undertaking of *PPD* Kelly recalls the reading group she attended:^v

MK: It was really through the interrogation of Althusser's notion of ideology that we tracked down his reference to Lacan, and in one of our reading groups we focused on Freud and Lacan partly because we were trying to think of a way to make this issue of sexuality pass into the grand narrative of political change, because it was demeaned in the beginning as a digression from the main struggle and from the Marxist left point of view.

PPD grapples with the issue of femininity through a reworking of Lacan. It focuses on the subjective moment of the mother-child relationship using, in particular, Lacan's mirror stage to emphasise how the mother's negative placing within this process is reproduced in patriarchal relations seen at the level of ideology and the social practices of child care. The work plotted a shift from the early debates in the women's movement about the sexual division of labour, to the territory of sexual difference, which at that time was less explored. In an intersubjective turn, Kelly portrays the mother's emergence as a subject in a patriarchal society alongside the experience of an other's emergence into the symbolic, her male child. The point at which her child enters into language, seen in *Documentation VI*, is the point that the mother realises or 'recognises' castration – her own negative entry into the symbolic and into culture. Kelly discusses how out of her encounters and experiences of motherhood, feminism and psychoanalysis, she started to develop a project that would become *PPD*:

MK: I never intended to make a 'happy solution' but simply to shake up the idea that you had masculinity and theory on one hand, and you had experience and femininity on the other. So that's, at a very obvious level, a kind of confrontational approach, but then there's another more fortuitous aspect of the work which was my age. I was having a child and I was also asking these questions along with other women about the social, sexual division of labour, what was underlying its persistence, why it was more than just giving women remuneration for housework. We had to look at the woman's intense desire to have the child, which is where Freud came in. So when I was working on the other projects (*Women & Work* and *Nightcleaners*), I really observed the women's intense preoccupation with what was going on at home. So when I was having a child I thought I'm going to get down to really documenting what this is, feeding and changing the child. I think I started out much more with a kind of sociological approach, but almost instantly I realised how significant the psychic structure was, and how the entry into language and culture constructed both a difference, and necessarily through that, a desire. Following that trajectory I started to see more in relation to the woman's potential fetishisation of the child, which was where the memorabilia comes in, and I just took my cue from a little aside that Lacan makes when he talks about the objet a, how this exists for the subject in the position, shall we say, of the man.

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But he said ‘never mind, the woman gets on with hers’. I thought, that’s the child, that’s the kind of relationship that she enters into. It’s also rather terrifying, because it’s about control to a certain extent and I thought it was important to see how relegating a woman to only one socially acceptable way of being could over-determine the pathology of the relationship with the child.

Having asked such questions, Kelly’s approach to responding to them continued to be informed by her engagement with the domains of feminism, psychoanalysis and the experience of mothering. The project that emerged would see her developing critical artistic strategies that were to become characterising aspects of her practice:

MK: It’s about what you won’t do, if you’re talking about the ethics of production. I wanted to uncover something about what was beyond the figurative image, and I wanted to say something about the psychic structure of sexual difference, so it seemed like what I did was the only choice. A few things that I could say, that had to do with the history of that period, is that everyone thought film was the really progressive medium, and I was involved in film making and I obviously saw lots of films at that time - particularly experimental film-makers like Straub and Huillet. I was very interested in the long take, but I had studied painting initially and really did like the still image. When I started *Post-Partum Document*, I wanted to do something comparable to the long take in the exhibition. A lot of conceptual artists were interested in duration, but I wanted to deal with a sort of *diegetic* space, where you pull the viewer into it and something unfolds over time. It’s not a gestalt thing. You accumulate the image as a kind of after effect. So that was the strategy that I started to call the narrativisation of space, not being simply about the narratives.

The creation of a *diegetic* space and the *narrativisation of space* emerge from a complex of interconnected strategies in Kelly’s work that cannot be reduced to any linear statements. Kelly’s projects, individually and collectively, are sites of multiplicity with different and diverse images of the voice being central. Throughout her work voices tell stories, that in turn set up dialogues (with the artist and the viewer), that in turn generate further dialogues in conversations about the work, and in the many written texts, by Kelly and by others, that contemplate the work. In *PPD*, the use of *voice* is one that stems from Kelly’s experience, with the mother’s voice given a form which contests the phallogocentric silencing of the maternal-feminine. The use of the voice is also a device that is related to Bertolt Brecht’s theory of distanciation: Amelia Jones describes the use of this theory by the feminist art scene as functioning to ‘displace and provoke the spectator, making her or him aware of the process of experiencing the text and precluding the spectator’s identification with the illusionary and ideological functions of representation’.^{vi} Kelly is able to work with the discourse of the

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mother and child without using the literal image of the mother, an image that has been appropriated by patriarchal culture; she negotiates this not only by her use of text-as-image but also by her use of other objects. The latter, the everyday objects of mothering memorabilia, include stained liners, and the typed first words of her son, which function not only as a displacement of the fetishisation of the child to the art-work, but also ‘question the fetishistic nature of representation itself.’^{vii} The framing of these everyday artefacts allows Kelly to capture something of the significance of objects that exist outside of language.

Laura Mulvey notes a shift in the voices used in Kelly’s work from those mostly connected to the artist’s direct experience in the 1970s and 1980s to those where she has no personal experience.^{viii} The shift is to historical events, emblematic stories for which Mulvey suggests Kelly becomes a ‘gleaner’.^{ix} The significance of the voice remains, however, and in our dialogue Kelly emphasises its increasing presence and importance in her art-making. Kelly reflects on the voice in *PPD* before moving on to the *Interim Series (1984-85)*:

MK: What becomes more and more important is the voice and the spoken word as a material, as a found object. Someone pointed out to me that I don’t start speaking until Documentation III, which is interesting. It verifies the idea that there is a kind of imaginary capture, resembling psychosis, in the first few months of that relationship. But I think once the voice emerged, my voice as well as his – I tried to give it a sort of material presence– setting it out in three-dimensional type for Documentation II, or giving it a graphic form like the hieroglyphics of the Rosetta Stone in Documentation VI. There’s an obvious send-up of museological discourse there, and that actually gets taken up in the ‘80s, by artists like Mark Dion and Renée Green. I think it has a lot to do with how the questions of identity propel us into the post-medium condition which is another consequence of the inter or transdisciplinary (as I would call it) approach to the problem. When I moved on to the *Interim* project, it was all about women’s voices. What I remembered them telling me, how they said it had a palpable presence for me. So I tried to configure this, materially, in *Corpus*, by using my hand-writing and the first person indicative, and then there’s the vulnerability of the screen print and the laminates exposed on the surface – it’s much more about how you see a texture of writing and speaking, then you might read it later. For *Interim*, I didn’t interview people – only for one of them, for *Historia*. I just keep a notebook with me all the time. I write things down, but alongside of it, I might make drawings, and I might add some theoretical notes or ideas.

Kelly’s collection of voices is a feminist practice in itself, or a practice of femininity implying multiplicity, difference and diversity throughout her art-making. The multivocality that permeates her projects is a recognition of differentiated and situated perspectives. Her use of voices from different times is another allusion to the mother and child as the imaged voices connect generations across time, space and place, as seen in *Love Songs (2005)*, *Multi-Story*

House (with Ray Barrie, 2007) and in her most recent work *Habitus* (with Ray Barrie, 2010). As part of a continued engagement with historical moments and their lasting legacies, in *Habitus*, Kelly uses voices to contemplate a different primal scene – the repressed political primal scene of the Second World War and the trauma thereafter.

At first glance *Habitus* is a beautiful and simple stainless steel structure that echoes the form of and which is on the scale of an Anderson shelter. This evocative artefact is perforated with voices-as-text that performs eight short narratives. The carvings are reflections on the lived experience of war from Kelly's contemporaries. The inscribed narratives are short and represent memories of those born during or just after the war, referencing violent events such as the Holocaust, Vietnam, and ethnic conflict in Serbia. Kelly's approach to art making in *PPD*, the project-based process that uses multiple voices, found or existent objects to create a discursive site, can be seen at work in *Habitus*. In talking about the relation between *Habitus* and its placing in the same space as *Circa 1968* (2004), *Gloria Patri* (1992) and the *Vox Manet* (2006-8) in the exhibition at the Whitworth, Kelly reflects on the political nature of her work, exposing further connections to the primordial scene in *PPD* of the mother and child:

MK: *Gloria Partri*, the work that I did during the first Gulf War in '92, is in the same space with my most recent work, *Habitus*, from 2010 and the *Circa 1968*, made in 2004 and the *Vox Manet* series, 2005-06. For me, it has been useful to look at it in this way. For instance, there's an unexpected reflection of *Circa 1968* in the mirrored floor of the *Habitus* structure, which is based on the Anderson shelter – the bomb shelter they used here in Britain during the Second World War. The image for *Circa 1968* is based on Jean-Pierre Rey's photograph of May '68 on the day before the General Strike with this emblematic figure of a young woman holding a flag above the crowd. I retrieved the photo from my archive because women your age were asking me about that time – they had this very, what I would call, intuitive knowledge of what it was about, perhaps, because they were born then. I started to think of this as Freud describes the primal scene, that everybody is interested in where they came from, but I wondered if I could stretch this beyond the sexual scenario to what I would call the 'political primal scene' – not just the family saga, but the wider historical narrative that is carried with it. So as I looked again at this picture from my archive, and decided to cast it in compressed lint, a process that carries on my interest in duration. And then, by projecting light noise onto the image, I made the installation look like the grainy cinematic of that moment. But what struck me is that I didn't identify with the woman; I wanted to be the photographer outside the frame taking the picture.

So that was something that suggested the next work, *Love Songs* (2005-07), that I should look at what was the transformative moment for me – the women's movement, and what you could think of as a kind of inter-generational dialogue about feminism. It was not that I was trying to valorise

the past, it was more a curiosity about the way it reappeared in the present moment, and the strangeness of realizing that you can't be in both places. This is why *Multi-Story House* has an inside and an outside. You can't read the narratives at the same time. Women from my generation in the movement of the 70s say 'It was like a lightning bolt', or 'Wow a women's group. A women's anything!'. But the voices of your generation are more tentative, more fragmented and very multi-cultural, if you can call it that, or diverse in terms of the places people come from, but I didn't look for that, it was just there. One woman says she found out about feminism in an art class in Egypt, while another says she didn't find out anything at all in Saudi Arabia, and another says she was too busy dodging bullets in Angola. But one claims she was brought up by a feminist mother and read *Our Bodies Ourselves* when she was 8. So that kind of confrontation between the two showed me that there was something that I would describe as generational, not the anthropological notion, but historical events that frame an age or era... it does ring true what Walter Benjamin says about there being a secret agreement between the past generation and the present one in the sense that there's something in the past that weighs on the present, this kind of burden. He described it as a missed possibility and the burden is how to redeem it or how to effect change. But giving this idea a psychoanalytic twist — you know, like Lacan talking about the way children don't listen much to what their parents say, but ask the question 'why are you telling me this?' — made something else fall into place. When the younger women were asking me about the past, were they really listening to what I was saying, or wondering why I was telling them this. What do you feel that you're obliged to carry on in terms of the legacy. I think this is the importance of understanding the imaginary dimension of the political primal scene.

The place of the mother and child that was so ground-breaking in *PPD* may not be foregrounded in later works but its presence can still be felt:

MK: The mother and child recurs, not because I'm trying to essentialise that in any way in relation to the construction of femininity, but because I'm trying to acknowledge my subjective investment in the work, acknowledge where I am in the work. So it's not as though war is only victimising for the woman, it's that the voice of the woman talking about her son was what captured me and how I started with that. This is the case with the work that's called *Vox Manet*, the voice remains. In 2005 one of the Klu-Klux-Klan that had been responsible for organising the murders of three civil rights workers in 1964 was finally indicted after the diligence of some lawyers who tracked it [the case] for forty years. When I was reading about it, I discovered that Andrew Goodman had sent his mother a postcard just before he was killed (she herself was an activists who died only a few years ago) and I imagined her writing back to him saying, 'finally, we have some justice'. I researched it a lot so the words are quite close to things I feel have been said by the survivors, but I vectorise my own handwriting for the lint process so that you can tell it's filtered through another voice.

But again, that's acknowledging the starting point, then there's a kind of displacement. In *Love Songs* especially, I'd have to acknowledge there's a

transference or displacement from my own son to the students and artists of his generation that I worked with. For instance when we were restaging the Flashing Nipple street theatre event that was originally here in London outside the Albert Hall in 1971, we would talk about this intergenerational identification a lot. Casting someone for the shoot was not just because they looked right, it was because we formed a community of common interest. Then the location – I always say was not a place, but it was about finding an emotional point between the past and the present where we would come together, and so when I was doing this I recognised how much that investment in the mother-child relationship was played out there in its kind of historical dimension. But another thing we discussed had to do with what actually remained of the past. I tried to ask them the question ‘well, what’s left after the specific demand is gone?’ And it was answered in the process of making the work. I would say this: what remains is pleasure. For me it has been the remembering of the pleasure, initially in the 70s, that I felt in the company of other women. But I was surprised to see it happen for the women who took part in the restaging. There’s a certain kind of euphoria, and of course in a more important way you see this with events in Egypt now, just a glimpse of what’s possible when you assume a collective presence, can produce that.

As Kelly reflects upon the more recent recurrence of the mother and child she poses a question about what might be transmitted across a (non-gendered) genealogy, especially in terms of particular historical events whose legacy far outreaches the moment of their happening. This reflection points to the way that Kelly’s projects can be seen to function as multiplicitous meeting points for situated voices (different and diverse), objects (collected and made) and events (historical and present). It is what Kelly describes above as a *subjective investment* that ultimately connects these multiplicities. As part of Kelly’s subjectivity, the mother and child relation necessarily emerges at these meeting points (along with many other complex and potentially contradictory sets of experiences and other variables). Her projects are a place where voices, texts, knowledges, dialogue, existent objects, experiences and discourses are precisely crafted to create convoluted, dynamic, multivalent and interconnected projects that individually as well as collectively function as potential arenas of, and for, subjective encounters. With this in mind, Kelly’s phrase that there is a ‘subjective investment’ in her work could be taken further, so that her work might be seen as a place of subjectification, her own of course, but also as a potential arena where other subjectivities may be beckoned into being.

ⁱ Mary Kelly (born 1941) is an American artist, feminist, writer and educator. Kelly trained as a painter in Florence, Italy, in the sixties but during the 1970s she became interested in the Conceptual Art movement, language, and theories and ideas of 'real time' and durational work, which she used in her installations. For more information on her biography and work see her website: <http://www.marykellyartist.com>

ⁱⁱ As discussed by Mary Kelly in 'Notes on Reading the Post-Partum Document', in *Imaging Desire* (Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 20-25 (originally published in *Control Magazine*, 10, 1977).

ⁱⁱⁱ Kelly was a member of the Berwick Street Film Collective and a founder of the Artists Union. During this time, she collaborated on the film, *Nightcleaners*, 1970-75, and the installation, *Women & Work: A Document on the Division of Labour in Industry*, 1975.

^{iv} Lucy Lippard in the 'Foreward' to the book *Post-Partum Document* writes, years before my first viewing of *PPD*, of her initial responses: 'I was baffled by the content of the Lacanian diagrams, being mostly innocent of linguistic and psychoanalytic theory, but I 'liked', again, the sense of rigorous analysis applied to the intimate memories of the mother-child relationship'. 'Foreward', in Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: London, England: University of California Press, 1999), pp. xi-xvi, p. ix. In her more recent reflections on *PPD*, Rosemary Betterton writes of an affective response to *PPD* being foreclosed: 'What troubled me was the way in which such distancing excluded representation of the ambivalent emotions of love and hate, guilt and loss in relation to the maternal body that shape our psychic lives. I remained impressed by the mark of the child's hand, but shivered under the Lacanian theory that foreclosed my affective responses to it.' This extract is taken from Rosemary Betterton's discussion of *PPD* in 'Maternal Embarrassment: Feminist Art and Maternal Affect', *Studies in the Maternal*, 2 (1), (2010), 1-18, (p. 11).

http://www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk/back_issues/issue_three/documents/betterton.pdf

^v Kelly is referring to the Alcan Women's Study Group active in the 1970s that Kelly was a member of along with Juliet Mitchell and Laura Mulvey. See Siena Wilson, 'From Women's Work to the Umbilical Lens: Mary Kelly's Early Films', *Art History*, 31 (1), (February 2008), 79-102, cited by Rosemary Betterton, 'Maternal Embarrassment'.

^{vi} Amelia Jones, *Body Art/performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 24.

^{vii} Mary Kelly, *Imaging Desire*, p. 74.

^{viii} Laura Mulvey, 'Mary Kelly: An Aesthetic of Temporality', in *Mary Kelly: Projects, 1973-2010*, ed. by Dominique Heyse-Moore (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 91.

^{ix} Laura Mulvey, 'Mary Kelly' p. 91.