I.

First shown at New York’s Metro Pictures in 1995 and now in the Whitney Museum’s collection, Mike Kelley’s Educational Complex is a set of architectural models, realized with the help of professional architects, in foam core, fiberglass, and wood; its platform is some sixteen feet long by eight feet across. It’s a work I think is very smart, for reasons I hope will become clear in the following pages, but I will begin with its title, and the way its second word, “complex,” nods to both the psychological, as in Oedipus, and the institutional, as in military-industrial. The models recreate each of the buildings in which Kelley was reared, educated, and disciplined, from his family home in Westland, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit, where he was born in 1954, to the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia (CalArts), where he received his MFA in 1979. The models are something of a record of his coming of age—of his becoming something, at least—but the passage is far from transparent and the terms of its re-creation murky. It is crossed from the outset, rather deliberately, by the failures of memory and the constructions of fiction.

Kelley has talked about the making of Educational Complex and related pieces in numerous statements and interviews. More than once he has explained that its autobiographical thrust was a direct response to his dissatisfaction with the way in which his work of the mid- to late 1980s—the thrift-store afghans, the stuffed animals, and the felt banners—had been misread. He was dismayed with the assumption that the work was quite specifically and sadly about him, about his childhood and some putative trauma or abuse. He complained to Dennis Cooper in an interview in Artforum that “people really started to free-associate...
around those materials”—around that yarn and felt—“and to project all sorts of things onto my own biography.”

It made me really, really unhappy that no matter what I did with those materials, that’s all people could talk about…. I knew that on one level they evoked childhood and all that, but I also thought they were about class aesthetics and formal things that were going on and things about categorization. Over six years, I did a number of different shows that really focused on different aspects of those kinds of materials, and yet the critical reception always tended to be about nostalgia and trauma. I finally got so pissed off about this that I just said, “I’ll give people what they want.” I invented this pseudobiography and started doing “biographical work.” That was Educational Complex.¹

Educational Complex and its related works are, as Kelley says, pseudobiography, but they are also, in ways I hope to present, quite accurate, or as Kelley himself put it: “Despite the fact that my biography might be fabricated, it’s not ahistorical.”²

Kelley had originally intended to construct these models based on plans drawn from memory. But his recollections were too incomplete: the “drawings simply did not provide enough information to build three-dimensional structures.”³ As realized, Educational Complex’s external elevations are fairly accurate; Kelley ended up basing them on photographs and site visits, but the insides remain structured by memory: they record both what he could remember—whether accurate or not—and what had been forgotten. The rooms and hallways, the interiors that Kelley could not remember are not left empty; rather they are represented by solid, inaccessible blocks, as though his inability to remember signified something else, something repressed. As he put it in the title of an essay published in Architecture New York in 1996, “architectural non-memory [is] replaced with psychic reality.”⁴

Kelley took his inability to remember seriously, or it might be more accurate to say, symptomatically. His methodological touchstone was “repressed memory syndrome”—or sometimes “retrieved” or even “false memory” syndrome, a topic of widespread public discussion (and of media-driven hysteria) in the 1980s and 1990s. On the surface, Educational Complex seems far from hysterical, but as Kelley told Cooper, “It doesn’t say on the surface of this work that it’s about repressed-memory syndrome. It doesn’t have to. That’s part of the way everyone looks at everything anyway.”⁵ Certainly, at a certain moment, it seemed to be. In Los Angeles, “repressed

"memory syndrome" figured most infamously in the 1980s in the McMartin Preschool case, where the alleged abuse was situated in a school building, precisely as its architecture was imagined, misconstrued, or misremembered. It is difficult to summarize the McMartin case, and difficult as well to catch its hysteria or its just believability. What began as a single accusation of child abuse in a Los Angeles day-care center in the summer of 1983 would grow by May of 1984 into the indictment of seven adults on 208 charges alleging the abuse of forty child victims. It ended nearly a decade later with the demolishing of the school building, the dismissal of all but two counts, and, finally, after two hung juries, not a single conviction.

Like the Educational Complex, although certainly more horribly, the McMartin site was transformed into imaginary architecture, marked not by what was visible, but by what could not be seen, what could only be remembered or suggested. With the urging and assistance of various parents, prosecutors, and therapists, the McMartin children assembled increasingly detailed stories of sexual abuse, Satanic worship, and animal torture, and equally detailed maps of trapdoors, passages, and secret rooms under the preschool’s concrete slab, as though drawing a model of the unconscious itself, of repressed material seeking its way through the ego’s defenses. In March 1985, a group of fifty McMartin parents attempted to excavate the site in search of
the hidden architecture their children had described; a few days later, an archeological firm hired by the District Attorney’s Office began its own dig. Authorities found no evidence of rooms or tunnels, but one can still find dissidents writing essays on the Web insisting on their existence. What is crucial to them, it seems, and to the researchers and psychologists who interviewed the McMartin children over and over again in the 1980s—and, indeed, to Mike Kelley in his architectural remembrances—is just that lack of evidence: the non-correspondence between exterior elevation and interior life. Against the clarity and transparency of modern educational architecture, and of the reasoned pedagogy it at once figures and informs, they cling to a distinctly antimodernist, even gothic, darkness. But here I need to pull back a bit: the psychologists and researchers were all experts, licensed professionals, trained in just such buildings; and Kelley, for his part, insists that his complex is a fully modern, or at least fully formal, one.

II.

The buildings in *Educational Complex* are not arranged in chronological or biographical order; rather, as Kelley has explained in multiple places, the work is really a formal thing, a compositional exercise. This seems a little disingenuous, given not only “the way everyone looks at everything anyway,” but also the volatility of his sources. Still, it is the same assertion he made about the stuffed animals and felt banners, when he spoke of his disappointment with how they were received. They, you will recall, referenced “class aesthetics and formal things that were going on and things about categorization.” Perhaps what “formal” meant—at least in that case—is something closer to “semiotic,” that is, that his thrift-store objects carry and produce fully social meanings, that they function culturally, rather than magically or personally: they open out ideologically to the way everyone looks at everything. Elsewhere he will insist that that is how he has always used symbols, how he has composed the objects and images he has appropriated since college . . . which is, to bring things back to cases, where he learned the means by which he has composed—has balanced and enframed—the edifices here. According to Kelley, the buildings in *Educational Complex* are arranged in homage to Hans Hofmann, according to the master’s “theory of push-pull.” It is composed, that is, in relation to the dynamic of the rectangle, at once situated in and constructing an improvisationally
gridded order. “In the model, I see the blocks of ‘repressed space’ as formally analogous to the rectangular blocks of paint in some of Hofmann’s paintings. In such paintings, ‘unstructured’ organic paint application is balanced by the superimposition of geometric forms.”

It is not just in its representations that Educational Complex is about Kelley’s schooling, but in its method and its form.

Kelley speaks about art school in two distinctly different ways. On one level, he is informatively mundane, and sometimes he is quite generous. He was an undergraduate art student at the University of Michigan from 1972 to 1976, where he recalls his training as quite academic with generous doses of color theory [taught according to “an Albers-based formal approach”], life and still life drawing and painting, and even exercises in such archaic techniques as egg tempera painting and hand calligraphy. The typical student painting was a gestural abstract formalist composition in the Hans Hofmann manner.

As dry as that sounds, Kelley writes warmly of a few of his old Ann Arbor teachers: Gerome Kamrowski, Al Mullen, and Jacqueline Rice. A ceramic sculptor, Rice was only briefly at Michigan; she received her MFA in 1970 from the University of Washington (where the first MFA degree was awarded in 1924), and left Ann Arbor for the Rhode Island School of Design just after Kelley graduated. Given the degree, her West Coast MFA, and, not coincidentally, her gender, Rice stands for a different kind of history than Kamrowski’s and Mullen’s—a newer, more American one. Their
story is more familiarly embedded in a history of European modernism, and through
them, as Timothy Martin has pointed out, Kelley’s artistic upbringing can be linked
to “the three European émigrés who most influenced American postwar art educa-
tion—Josef Albers, Hans Hofmann, and László Moholy-Nagy.”

Kamrowski, in the 1920s, at the University of Minnesota, had been a student of
Cameron Booth, one of Hofmann’s earliest American followers, and he went on to
study with Hofmann in New York and Provincetown, as well as with Moholy-Nagy in
Chicago, at the New Bauhaus. Before leaving New York for Ann Arbor in 1946,
Kamrowski was also part of a circle of artists around the Surrealist Roberto Matta,
painting experimental canvases with Jackson Pollock
and William Baziotes in 1940 and 1941. Mullen had
studied with Fernand Léger in Paris just after World
War II, and then with Hofmann in New York, where
he experienced a brief moment of recognition as an
Abstract Impressionist in the early 1950s, showing on
and off into the 1960s. He taught at Michigan from
1956 until his death in 1983.

Thus, Kelley’s link to the European masters is, at
least on paper, continuous, a matter of one degree
of separation, but it’s not at all clear what that
means, or, more to the point, what that meant to
him then. How good was the reception in Ann
Arbor? Here is a curious piece of evidence: the
1974 University of Michigan School of Art bulletin
notes that both Kamrowski and Mullen were stu-
dents of Hofmann, but Hofmann is spelled
incorrectly in both of the short bios—two fs and one n—as if it named an imposter,
or someone who mattered a long time ago.

Introducing a series of paintings dated 1974–95, works such as Cottage Cheese,
first finished in Ann Arbor and then, as Kelley says, reconsidered, he writes of his
teachers rather differently: “I attempted to relearn to paint in the manner of my col-
lege years, and [have] presented the results as a form of ‘art therapy’ meant to
confront the ‘institutional abuse’ of my academic formalist painting training.”

His accusation is quite pointed, as Martin notes: “The cult leader or abuser in question is
not merely the faceless institution of Kelley’s art education, but the patriarch of the
specific method behind his undergraduate instruction in painting: the venerable
pedagogue Hans Hofmann.” Kelley himself implicates the master; he names
Hofmann directly, legally, as the “involved party,” filling in the blanks of a “Suspected
Child Abuse Report.” “Explain known history of similar incident(s) for this child,”
prompts the form: “repeatedly, continually, over and over . . . now living in a frozen,

ed. José Lebrero Stals (Barcelona: Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 1997), p. 84.
11. Martin, “Abuse and Composition,” p. 84.
perpetual stasis. Time is uniform, classical, free of history,” replies Kelly. He might be
describing a certain formalism, but here it is one that belongs not to the surface of
painting but to the timeless repetitions of his teachers, guys who had been teaching
at Michigan since the war, telling their old war stories of the art world, not only to
Kelley, but to legions of students, maybe even to the conceptual artist Douglas
Huebler, Kelley’s graduate school mentor at CalArts in the late 1970s, who had had
the same teachers as an undergraduate at Michigan some twenty years earlier.
“Present location of the child,” asks the form; Kelley’s answer: he is dwelling in “the
past: painful and secure.”

Hofmann had denied all such charges, so to speak, nearly two years before
Kelley was born: “I consider it part of my artistic responsibility to help, support,
and encourage always all that is young, vital, progressive, and honest.” That is
certainly the claim of a charismatic teacher, one involved in the lives of his stu-
dents insofar as they are—or are mistaken for—the life of art. Perhaps he has
helped too much. Kelley’s charge is that he has exercised undue influence, that he
has bent his students in particular ways, that he continues to haunt them.

III.

What does it mean to speak of influence, even in the more—indeed the
most—conventional sense? What sense exactly does it make to say that Kelley was
influenced by Hofmann, or Kamrowski, or Mullen, or for that matter by Huebler?
Kelley’s 1997 appreciation of his CalArts mentor is entitled, in full Oedipal cry,
Shall We Kill Daddy. His charge is exaggerated, traumatized, but it is, I would argue,
situated in the correct register. His map of repressions, of those sites within his art
training that he cannot remember, that he cannot logically situate in the trajec-
tory that the Educational Complex plots, suggests that there is a kind of blank at the
center of artistic training. There is, to make this as obvious as possible, no clear
path that goes from fulfilling assignments to being an artist. There is a point (a
decidedly unpunctual one) where that training switches from the answering of
assignments—color and design exercises out of Albers, perhaps; the standard pro-
cedures of a medium-based art education and the sorts of things that can be
taught, practiced, and corrected against a standard—to the demand, however
buried, that one make one’s own work. This is an increasingly opaque and unmapp-
able transformation insofar as it is no longer obvious what it is necessary for an
artist to know or what skills he or she must have, and whether the display of those
skills is ever, any longer, enough to constitute the work of art.

The scenario inscribes a moment of abandonment, at least perceived, on the
part of the teacher, and, on the side of the student, of aggressivity and identifica-
tion: Kelley’s off-the-rack Oedipus isn’t far off—but it is, in ways I’ll try to make

13.  Hans Hofmann, “What is an Artist?” address given at Forum ’49, July 3, 1949, Provincetown, in
clear, off-the-rack. Unfulfillable, the assignment becomes a demand posed to the student as artist; its question—that is, the question it raises in the student—is: “He is saying this to me but what does he want?” This is Jacques Lacan’s formula for the birth of desire in the child, but it could also describe the scene of professional desire.14 For Lacan, it is the child’s unvoiced question to the parent, and to the “enigma of the adult’s desire,” but it is also, as I have noted elsewhere, the question the young San Francisco painter Ernest Briggs posed to his teacher Clyfford Still in the late 1940s, or, rather, in recollection, about him: “he became a problem to me . . . in terms of, what does it mean? What does he mean?”15 Mean to me, of course: how can I give him what he wants? Not what he asks for, but what he lacks, what he won’t dismiss right off as sheer repetition, the same stuff students showed him ten years ago, or twenty, or more. Thus the scene of teaching is not quite so simple as Kelley has imagined it, or at least as he wrote of it in the liner notes that accompanied a three-CD set of his reunited college band, Destroy All Monsters: “art school, despite its reputation for nonconformity, is just the same as any other academic practice. It breeds people who want to please rather than follow their own interests.”16 At some point, I would argue, what pleases in this exchange, what situates itself in relation to what the teacher wants, is precisely the student’s interests as they stand, at least for the teacher, for—in Hofmann’s words—“all that is young, vital, progressive.” Kelley himself describes the scenario:

I . . . drew from my own knowledge of fringe popular culture: weird second-rate comic books, erotica, adolescent imagery, and my interest in the fringes of the art world and underground culture. For example, I included recognizable images of Patty Hearst, the Symbionese Liberation Army logo, Santo the Mexican masked wrestler, William Burroughs, Rudolph Schwarzkogler, Stravinsky, Sun Ra, etc., in my compositions, alongside more mundane or ridiculous images and various paint handling techniques to push what I considered the limits of equivalency.17

Kelley’s list of images is indeed “vital and progressive.” He was a good student at Michigan, a successful undergraduate among the nearly 400 majors, perhaps because his interests succeeded in producing his youth and his difference as content. They answered to the teacher’s implicit demand: show me something I haven’t seen. Be interesting—in order that I might once have been. “Interesting” is a term that has had significant

16. Mike Kelley, “Destroy All Monsters: Liner Notes for 3CD Box Set (extract), 1994,” in Mike Kelley, p. 120.
play of late, following the possibility opened up in Donald Judd’s famous formula-

tion, “a work of art needs only to be interesting,” and even more in Michael Fried’s

infamous attack on it.\(^{18}\) Defending Judd against Fried’s dismissal, against the

“merely” seemingly implied by “interesting,” various art historians have traced Judd’s

“interest” back to the Pragmatist philosopher Ralph Barton Perry in a way that thick-

ens, and, so to speak, dignifies the term, that gives it an appropriate history. Here I

want to keep it thin, and even thinner than the way Hal Foster has glossed it: “the

neo-avant-garde . . . [marks] an implicit shift from a disciplinary criterion of quality,
judged in relation to artistic standards of the past, to an avant-gardist value of interest,
provoked through a testing of cultural limits in the present.”\(^{19}\) What I am after is

something like the way that Scott Rothkopf used the word a few years ago, in a review

of the 2004 Whitney Biennial: “The lion’s share of this work seems to announce for

its makers, ‘I am interested in this’—with ‘this’ preferably standing for some slightly

outré yet hip cultural signifier like Super Mario Bros. or a disco ballad your parents

once knew.”\(^{20}\) This sort of interest suggests not Judd’s “specific object,” situated in

relation to an audience for art, nor, indeed, any sort of specificity; what it suggests

instead is spread, as it opens out onto other cultural sites and other audiences. It con-

nects us ready-made to a “whole universe of meaning,” as Rothkopf says, especially as

that universe is peculiarly, interestingly different than our own.

IV.

Fried’s and Foster’s opposing terms, quality and interest, echo for me another,

more parochial and bureaucratic opposition: a debate joined about a decade ago

between the discipline of art history, on the one side, and the metonymically slippery,

intertwined and interdisciplinary fields of visual culture, visual studies, and, some-

times, cultural studies, on the other.\(^{21}\) Posed against the boundaries and hierarchies

of art history, they are characterized by horizontal spread, a thinned promiscuous-

ness of methods and objects—of interests and subject matters. And here is where

Kelley’s interests and mine might coincide: the kinds of interests that Kelley had, or

that distracted Rothkopf at the Whitney, raise the same questions around audience,

appropriation, identification, and subculture that cultural studies has taken up. Let’s

\(^{18}\) Donald Judd, “Specific Objects,” in Donald Judd: Complete Writings 1959–1975 (Halifax: Press of

the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975), p. 184. Fried’s critique is in “Art and Objecthood,” now included


\(^{19}\) Hal Foster, Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT


\(^{20}\) Scott Rothkopf, cited in Mary Leclère, “From Specific Objects to Specific Subjects: Is there

(still) Interest in Pluralism?” Afterall, no. 11 (2005), p. 9. Leclère’s essay is a close reading of the word

“interest” in relation to contemporary practice.

\(^{21}\) On the confusion of these terms and for a discussion of this debate as it appeared in October and

elsewhere, see Marquard Smith, “Visual Studies, or the Ossification of Thought,” Journal of Visual

Culture 4, no. 2 (2005), pp. 237–56. Smith is concerned to clarify these terms; here, I take advantage of

their conflation.
say that Kelley’s multiple undergraduate interests allow us to see that “different audiences communicate within different structures of tradition, linguistic convention, and behavioral forms of interaction,” and that “specificity of audience address and experiences” must be part of the study of culture. I’m quoting from the synopsis of Stuart Hall’s and Raymond Williams’s cultural studies that appears in the methodological introduction to the social history of art in the opening pages of *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Anti-Modernism, Postmodernism*, a survey text authored by Foster with Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin Buchloh, all editors of this journal. (Let me start this turn by saying that I will rely on *Art Since 1900* a few more times in the coming pages, not because of its links to *October*, but because of its links to the classroom and the scene of teaching—links legible in its synoptic methodological introductions, its glossary, and its sidebars; the classroom is, after all, where most of this essay takes place.) The authors conclude their brief on cultural studies by allowing Theodor Adorno to comment on it, or, rather, by imagining what Adorno’s comment would have been, given Hall’s and Williams’s refusal of the hierarchical and hegemonic singularity of culture. Speaking as Adorno, they introduce yet another concept: “Adorno’s counterargument would undoubtedly have been to accuse their project of being one of extending desublimation into the very center of aesthetic experience, its conception and critical evaluation.”

I have wanted to get to desublimation for some time—those familiar with Kelley’s work might think that I have taken a very long way around. I’ve taken this path so that I can go through the question of cultural studies, and put that on the table as well, because I am not sure how the work of desublimation works for Kelley, or for any artist anymore. The glossary in *Art Since 1900* takes a serious stab at “desublimation”—better, clearer, than most sources—pushing the word in a couple of ways: as loss and as strategy. On the one side, what one might call the “conditional,” desublimation points to those “social conditions that foil the subject’s capacity to sublimate libidinal demands and to differentiate experience within increasingly complex forms of social relations, knowledge, and production.” And, on the other, which I would call the intentional, desublimation names the strategic “foreground[ing of] the conflicting impulses within the aesthetic object itself. The social enforcement of sublimation is counteracted in anti-aesthetic gestures, processes or materials that discredit the sublimatory triumphalism made by the work of high art.” As the glossary’s discussion continues, it is clear that “desublimation is played out,” just where Kelley usually plays, “in the dialectics of high art versus mass culture, performed throughout the twentieth century as a counter identification with the iconographies and the technologies of mass culture in order to debase the false autonomy claims with which modernism has propelled its myths.”

In this arrangement, cultural studies could be seen as both an effect of
desublimation, a product of the inability of even our smartest students and peers
to differentiate high from low—their inability to *not see* things like everybody else
sees them, as Kelley had it—and an a priori surrender to it: a surrender to condi-
tional desublimation of the tools of its critical or intentional uses. For its
Adornian detractors, cultural studies gets to “false autonomy” far too easily and
embraces heteronomy far too quickly, remorselessly (and uncritically) emptying
out spaces for otherness or resistance. At certain points in
the last century, one of those spaces was the unconscious, at
least as it was imagined by Symbolism or Surrealism: irra-
tional, irredeemably other, and thus not always already given
up to the rationale of the culture industry or industrial cul-
ture, it could also stand as an analog for the autonomy of the
work of art, and of the artist. Kelley’s project, like that of the
Surrealists, like that of his teacher Kamrowski, is to represent
the unconscious, but his unconscious looks very different,
and is located in a very different place. It is no longer the
watery “inscape” of biomorphs and personages, radically
other than the world; rather, it has been franchised.

Introducing Kelley’s future teacher to a Paris audience in
1950, André Breton wrote that of “all the [American] new-
comers,” Kamrowski “was the only one I found tunneling in
a new direction.” Breton links him to a familiar list of
European moderns—“Picasso, De Chirico, Duchamp,
Kandinsky, Mondrian, Ernst, Miró”—as though forecasting a
lineage that might include Kelley as well. But he concludes
with a rupture that Kelley will only exaggerate: “All that the
latter have bequeathed to Kamrowski is their pickaxe and
lamp.” Like Kamrowski, Kelley is a spelunker (indeed, he has
been one since the 1985 *Plato’s Cave, Rothko’s Chapel, Lincoln’s
Profile*), and he too offers mists and miasma. The title of the 1998 work *Sublevel: Dim
Recollection Illuminated by Multicolored Swamp Gas* seems a good enough description
of Matta or Miró, or Kamrowski, but its conditions of representability, as Freud might
have put it, are quite different. A three-dimensional memory map of the California
Institute of the Arts sub-basement joined to the imaginary tunnels of the McMartin
preschool, *Sublevel* is constructed in particle board and finished with red cast-resin
panels intended to invoke the crystalline interiors of caves and geodes, and the
softer, fleshier interiors of the body. The conflation of the cave and the female body
is a Surrealist standard, of course, but *Sublevel* pushes its reference not toward Greek
mythology or the Surrealist unknown but toward the annals of mass-cultural
publication: “Her darkness has been illuminated with a spotlight so all its glory is

---

Kelley. Sublevel detail (top) and installation view. 1998.
revealed,” Kelley writes in the accompanying catalog, as though of the insides of geodes, but he continues rather differently: “In pornography, the split beaver shot is a fairly recent development. I do not think it existed before the 1970s.”25 Perhaps, in the passage from one sentence to the next, we are supposed to hear what critic John Welchman described as “the whiz of counter-repressive emergence,” the adolescent guffaw for having lowered Surrealism’s sights, and Freud’s insights, to the level of Hustler magazine.26 But it seems to me, and to Herbert Marcuse writing in 1964 in the pages of One-Dimensional Man, the desublimatory tumble took place long before Kelley, at least the adult Kelley, ever got there. Something has fallen, a distinction has been lost, Marcuse complained, when you can find “Plato and Hegel, Shelley and Baudelaire, Freud and Marx in the drugstore.”27 That imaginary spinner rack holds Marcuse’s reading list, too, of course, but his problem is not with the reading: it is with the drugstore, and those readers like Kelley who would take their Freud with or from Hustler.

V.

It is not only the drugstore that stands against Marcuse; what he termed “repressive desublimation” operates across a number of architectural sites. Among them, I would argue, are the institutions that Kelley has assembled as Educational Complex. Marcuse didn’t name the college art department or the studio graduate-school modeled on the research university, as an “aesthetic think tank”;28 what he did say was this: “Artistic alienation is sublimation.”29 His argument here is a familiarly Frankfurtian one: alienation produces works of art that are “irreconcilable with the established Reality Principle but which, as cultural images, become tolerable, even edifying and useful.” Or at least alienation once did. “Now this imagery is invalidated,” not only by its appearance in the drugstore, but also by “its incorporation into the kitchen, the office, the shop; its commercial release for business and fun is, in a sense, desublimation.” Marcuse’s statement on the relationship between alienation and sublimation takes the form of an equation: not only is it reversible (sublimation is tantamount to artistic alienation, both cause and effect), but, as his corollary makes clear, the inverse is also true: dis-alienation, or for the time being let me say “incorporation,” is, “in a sense, desublimation.” And incorporation was the project of American art education across the first half of the twentieth century, across the history that Educational Complex offers.

29. Marcuse, One-Dimensional Man, p. 72.
If we compose the buildings in *Educational Complex* not according to Hofmann, but in lived order, from Kelley’s kindergarten and elementary days at St. Mary’s School in Wayne, to Adlai Stevenson Junior High and John Glenn High School, to the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor and CalArts, we get something like a historical map of American art education, and the attempts across a century and a half to promulgate citizen-artists and “art in everyday life.” Michigan’s art program, like the studio departments in many public universities, began in a department of architecture in a school of engineering, as drawing and surface design for architects; “art and design” was carved out as a major in conjunction with the School of Education, with the addition of courses in watercolor and drawing for “supervisors, art instructors, grade teachers, and school principals.”

At the turn of the last century, most American art students were in such teacher-training programs, bound with their displays and projects and banners for kindergarten or grade school classrooms, like those of St. Mary’s; or in architecture or design schools and bound, in ways that cut along class and gender lines, to offices and high school drafting rooms. Art was taught to young men and women as a set of useful and marketable skills in relation to pliable and acceptable trades. For campus administrators and American commentators on art, the training of artists—at least of the kind of artist that a young Marcuse had written of in his 1922 Freiburg dissertation on the German *Künstlerroman*—took place elsewhere, in Europe and in the past. The artist’s professional arrival on campus was still in the future—The University of Michigan awarded its first MFA in art in 1960—along with the promise of a different sort of artistic identity. Art at Michigan gained its full departmental autonomy more slowly than most; separate departments of art and architecture were created in the College of Architecture and Design in 1954, but a separate school of art and design wasn’t formed until 1974, Kelley’s last year on campus.

The goals of those who championed teaching art in the university, rather than in ateliers and academies, had been not only to rationalize and streamline the teaching of artists—“in no other profession,” wrote the president of the nascent College Art Association in 1917, “is there such a woeful waste of the raw material of human life as exists in certain phases of art education”31—but also, in doing so, to cure the artist of his physical and psychical isolation. Marcuse had written of this isolation, of a distinctly modern division between *Künstlertum* and *Menschentum*, early on; it was the very subject of his dissertation: “the dissolution and tearing asunder of a unitary life-form, the opposition of art and life, the separation of the artist from the surrounding world, is the presupposition of the *Künstlerroman*, and its problem is the suffering and longing of the artist, his struggle for a new

But the administrative pragmatism of commentators such as Carnegie Foundation’s R. L. Duffus, surveying American art education in the late 1920s, sits most uneasily with Marcuse’s critical historical understanding. In his brief for a professionalized university-based training, Duffus lampooned artistic “struggle,” and the training that has left the artist “shut up in a little art universe all by himself, away from the swirl and flow of life, like a Trappist . . . offer[ing] up perfunctory prayers for the artistic salvation of a public which he despises.” As though by fiat, or, perhaps, by curriculum design, “the work of the artist ought to be just as necessary, just as understandable and in a way just as commonplace as that of the farmer, carpenter, and tailor. He ought to be friendly and human first, then artistic.”

This might seem too unserious and too peculiarly journalistic to respond effectively to Marcuse’s ideal of artistic alienation, but there are weightier names than Duffus’s who have pushed the social healthfulness and psychological cleanliness of art as a means of pushing it onto campuses. Making art a part of every student’s general education and insisting that those who would be artists be broadly and philosophically educated were intended, hand in hand, to give a rational healthy artist to a society able to embrace him. “Any healthy man can become a musician, painter, sculptor, or architect,” insisted Moholy-Nagy from the New Bauhaus; and any healthy man is precisely not the consumptive, begarreted, neurotic genius of an older European model.34 By the 1960s, becoming an artist in the university could be, as Dan Flavin once put it in the pages of Artforum, a “mature decision for intelligent individuals with a prerequisite of sound personally construed education”—perhaps an education like Kelley’s, with its stepped courses in drawing and composition, two- and three-dimensional design, and a required class entitled “Contemporary Art, Its Origins,” which took as its subject “the place of the artist and designer in contemporary society and the resulting art contributions.”36 It is difficult to imagine what place Kelley’s work might occupy within such a course, what it might contribute, or how it could sustain the glowingly professional image that Moholy-Nagy or Flavin offer. But it seems that art schools can desublimate, “incorporate” anything, producing for “business and fun” and tuition dollars even that work that would claim a more transgressive and critical desublimation.

Art Center College of Design, where Kelley taught until 2006, recently offered a “Transdisciplinary Studio” entitled “Loving Ugly: Art Drawn to the Offensive, Repugnant, and Dark Side of Life.” This seems the very definition of

“repressive desublimation,” produced by the commercial and ideological machinery of an affluent society “from a ‘position of strength’ on the part of society, which can afford to grant more than before because its interests have become the innermost drives of its citizens.”

While in the high art of the past, “the refusal to behave” may well have marked the critical “appearance of the realm of freedom,” it is not at all clear that such a course amounts to any sort of refusal; rather, in the classroom, it is precisely a kind of behaving. To return one last time to Marcuse’s equation, this desublimation is dis-alienation or, at the very least, dis-“artistic alienation.” The artist that such a course imagines is aggregated to a subculture (an identity, perhaps) affirmed and made whole as member or aficionado. It is the promise of community, albeit not quite the community imagined by the artists of Marcuse’s *Künstlerroman*. Even for artists, the adjective “artistic” might not be an effective characterization of that site at which alienation is lived, if it is at all, nor of that place from which it is redeemed.

In a certain light, one could argue that Kelley had begun to work with Marcuse’s desublimation long before *Educational Complex*, that his play goes back at least as far as his undergraduate paintings and the secondhand lessons of Hofmann. There is a kind of rhyme that Kelley played, that he intuited, perhaps, between Marcuse’s description of the conditions of desublimation—the flattening out of critical historical categories—and the German master’s teaching on the organization of flatness. “The conquest and unification of opposites, which finds its ideological glory in the transformation of higher into popular culture, takes place on a material ground of increased satisfaction. This is also the ground which allows a sweeping desublimation.” If the conquest and unification of opposites can be taken as something of a redescriptions of desublimation, it might also be taken as an oddly learned, or misrecognized, version of Hofmann’s push-pull. Marcuse’s phrase rhymes nicely with a definition of push-pull that Irving Sandler offered in the catalog for the Whitney Museum’s 1990 Hofmann retrospective: it is “an improvisational orchestration of areas of vivid colors conceived of as opposing forces, each force answered by a counter-force . . . so as to achieve an equilibrium and all-over intensity.”

By the time push-and-pull got to Kelley at Michigan, where, after all, Hofmann had come misspelled, color had dropped out of the equation—the question of what was to be put in tension had shifted in the face of Pop art’s representations and the centered images and expansive fields of color field painting. What Kelley learned to set in opposition, to use as force and counterforce atop a gestural ground, were not blocks of color but banks of images and bits of styles. His project, at least in retrospect, was to push and pull associations in a frame that had switched from the formal or visual to the cultural and ideological, where the tension was to be, could only be, between high and low, or inside

---

38. Ibid., p. 71.
and out, fringes and centers. “I thought such surfaces could be used to great advantage in combination with various kinds of more loaded images, images that didn’t lend themselves so easily to abstract equivalency.”

Kelley’s student works are filled with awkward, flattened juxtapositions, as are his revisited versions of them, but it’s not at all clear that he intended these images to hold together in the end, “to achieve an equilibrium or all-over intensity,” or a “conquest and unity of opposites,” or even how that was to be valued and in what register it might take place. “I was always wondering,” he told an interviewer, “whether these collisions of style had any particular meaning, whether there was an ideological clash being represented, or whether the fact that it was paint just neutralized the conflict.” One way to read Kelley’s comment is that, according to the intentional calculus of desublimation, painting as the very image of high art always wins, always sublimates in the end. But one could read it in reverse as well, that even then, in Kelley’s school years, painting no longer provided a privileged ground on which to work; that it could no longer be “debas[ed] with all means of deskilling” or with “abject or low-cultural iconography” as it had been “throughout modernity” (my words here are borrowed once again from the same *Art Since 1900* text). Kelley’s problem with painting was that it would no longer take the fall. The hydraulics of the Freudian social subject—and the aesthetic dimension as its double—had long since been flattened out; or, more simply, the effects of deskilling and debasement had already been discounted, were already part of the teaching. In 1974, Kelley’s painting was legible and gradable; it fulfilled his assignments, both explicit and implicit.

VI.

If painting could not do the work of negation, of “protest[ing] against that which is,” such was the explicit project of at least some of the images Kelley included in them. Those images would claim not only the negative work of irreconcilability, but offered an imagination of the “new needs and new satisfactions” that Marcuse linked to Eros and a real rather than repressive desublimation. Writing in 1967, he credited that imagination specifically to communities of hippies and diggers, where “sexual, moral, and political rebellion are somehow united”; their “aggressive nonaggressiveness” offered, “at least potentially, the demonstration of qualitatively different values, a transvaluation of values.” I don’t know that Kelley read Marcuse, though he easily could have picked up *One-Dimensional Man* or *Eros and Civilization* in any used bookstore in Ann Arbor.

Here let me offer a more immediate source for both the conjoining of sexual and political rebellion and for images as privileged site of ideological contestation: John Sinclair’s White Panther Party, founded in Ann Arbor in November of 1968. Like the Black Panthers with whom they hoped to align, the White Panthers had a ten-point program, calling for a “total assault on the culture by any means necessary, including rock n’ roll, dope and fucking in the streets,” and in full aesthetico-utopian cry, “Free time and space for all humans—dissolve all unnatural boundaries.” Those boundaries would include art school walls, or the precisely unnatural boundaries of the aesthetic dimension: “We take our program with us everywhere we go.” “Our culture, our art, the music, newspapers, books, posters, our clothing, our homes, the way we walk and talk, the way our hair grows, the way we smoke dope and fuck and eat and sleep—it is all one message, and the message is FREEDOM!”

This might be the real desublimation Marcuse envisioned, but, on the other hand, maybe not: after German university students occupied his offices of the Institute for Social Research in early 1969, Adorno wrote to Marcuse, “I find it difficult to imagine that you had this type of desublimation in mind.”

According to Elisabeth Sussman, who curated Kelley’s 1993 Whitney retrospective, Kelley was “fleetingly involved” with the White Panthers at John Glenn High School, but by the time he left for the University of Michigan in the fall of 1972, he “found the basic utopianism of the White Panthers an embarrassment. This does not imply,” she argues, “... that he could or wanted to give up the heroes of hip street culture and politics or to suppress the enormous appeal and interest this culture held for him. Rather, at Michigan, he was introduced to the rich variety of twentieth-century avant-garde experimentation in art and literature, and the creative potential of this legacy soon coexisted with his street lore and class attitudes.” Sussman’s language could scarcely be more determined; “art,” “literature,” “avant-garde experimentation,” and, perhaps most of all, “legacy” are clearly marshaled to trump hero-worship, lore, attitudes, and (on this side most of all) utopianism. The university marks the triumph of a tradition within which all of that other experience, other interest, is reduced precisely to interests, to subject matter for the project of art. Almost all the names Sussman drops from that point on—and there are many, from Joseph Beuys and Øyvind Fahlstrøm to LaMonte Young and Raymond Roussel—are real artists, part of the legacy. Sussman (and, maybe, for that matter, Kelley) needs to prop up the tradition, to reassert a list of names that might just be all that is left of what Adorno or Marcuse thought of as the “aesthetic dimension,” in order for...
it to be deflated again, in order to play out the ups and downs of abjection, of critical desublimation.

Sinclair’s White Panther appears only once in Kelley’s work that I know of, in a piece entitled *Entry Way (Genealogical Chart)* that was exhibited alongside *Educational Complex* at Metro Pictures in 1995. Kelley’s chart is a rerouted version of those signs at the entrances to towns and cities that announce civic organizations and welcome visitors and newcomers; it’s an adult system, and, conventionally, a synchronic one. In Kelley’s revision, however, in its title, its particular gridding, and in those pink and blue circles that recall genetic markers, the chart moves along the diachronic axis, from fathers to sons, from Elks, Lions, and Optimists, through the White Panther Party and the crossed rifle and electric guitar of Sinclair’s later Guitar Army, down to Ding-Dong School. Let me take Kelley at his word that this is a genealogical chart, and to pause at least briefly to note its distant family resemblance to Alfred Barr’s famous genealogy of Cubism and abstract art. Kelley’s *Entry Way* doesn’t get us to or from Hofmann, rather, it charts a very different legacy, another set of influences. Kelley has written that the composition “was determined by a genealogical chart of my immediate family,”47 and one could easily imagine such a slide from the civic to the rebellious circa 1970, but *Entry Way* takes place most clearly, indeed absolutely, outside the immediacy of the family, as that family acts out—or spins out—what Marcuse, writing in the 1960s, termed the “obsolescence of the Freudian concept of man.”48 For Marcuse, it mattered that Freud’s late-nineteenth-century subject was formed deep within the family, a crucible whose hierarchical structure left a fundamental dividing mark on the subject, setting in motion the “multidimensional dynamic by which the individual attained and maintained his own balance between autonomy and heteronomy, freedom and repression, pleasure and pain.”

By the 1960s, whatever interiority might have belonged to the subject formed in the family seemed to Marcuse to have been fully unfolded in the social. The reality principle now spoke not through the father to the individual child in the family unit, but through “the daily and nightly media which coordinate one privacy with that of all others, but also through the kids, the peer groups, the colleagues . . . the playmates, their neighbors, the leader of the gang, the sport, the screen”: these are the “authorities on appropriate mental and physical behavior.”49 These are new families, meanings, communities, desires. But to see the social fragmented and divided this way, and the subject in a sense undivided—or at least no longer divided only in two, split along the axis of subjectivity, but rather unraveled, strung along a series of initiations and memberships, situated and interpellated—is to switch subjects, and maybe that

49. Ibid., p. 239.
is what Kelley’s project has been about throughout . . . at least this is what I have been arguing throughout. His subject is not the deep subject of traditional psychoanalysis or for that matter of art history, but the flatter subject of cultural studies. From its title on, *Entry Way* takes place in—indeed it maps rather precisely—what Rosalind Krauss has described as cultural studies’ domain: “interpellation—or in its more psychological guise, ‘identification’—is the very subject-field of a whole new discipline that began to develop in the university . . . . This discipline, Cultural Studies, has set itself to systematize our understanding of the constitution of human subjects as so many identities that are not so much produced by their accession to a set of social conditions as they are reproduced through a process of (unconscious) identification with preexisting sources of authority and legitimation, whether these sources be people, institutions, or texts.”

50 Whether, to take the case at hand, they be Hofmann, the University of

---

Michigan, or the clarion call of the White Panthers, each of which comes with its texts, its authorities, and its modes of reproduction. Kelley’s subject in Entry Way, and in the various hallways mapped in the bowels of Educational Complex, is “the deposit of a social relationship,” a phrase Foster borrows from Michael Baxandall’s description of a fifteenth-century painting in order to reattach it to the subject of cultural studies. “Here, rather than the art, the subject is the ‘deposit of social relations’: indeed, he is ‘flooded by the social.’ “The shift from art history to visual culture is marked by a shift in principles of coherence,” Foster continues, working his way to a word that Kelley, too, fell upon, “—from a history of style, or an analysis of form, to a genealogy of the subject.”

VII.

Kelley may be using “genealogy” familiarly, to talk family; Foster, it’s clear, is using the term technically. His genealogy is Michel Foucault’s: a way of writing history that can “dispense with the constituent subject,” that can “account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects, etc., without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in empty sameness throughout the course of history.” While this is no doubt comfortably old territory, the argument for a genealogical history should continue to pose a problem for art history. Certainly it troubles both the traditional subject of humanism, and its divided double, the subject of classical psychoanalysis. Beyond that, and here, for me, more importantly, what genealogy questions is the subject of history, or in our case, what the word art stands for in “art history.” Perhaps art needs to be derived, to be constructed in each moment in relation to its institutional and discursive professional practices. Genealogically, autonomy comes to look like professional practice, which suggests, among other things, that genealogy insists on the present, while art history—at least that art history that makes art its continuous subject—tends to elide the present as it moves from the past to a future that its subject demands. This is, again, old news, perhaps, a theoretical position we’ve already discounted, but it does have specific ramifications for terms such as “desublimation” or “deskilling,” which in their shared prefix “de” can only chart a fall from grace, precisely as it instantiates and constitutes its subject; desublimation demands of its readers that we make sublimation the characteristic and, indeed, permanent mechanism of something called art, that has always already been art. The footnotes here are not only to Foucault but to Jean Baudrillard or even Allan Kaprow: desublimation secures art, it inoculates it against its disappearance in the present.

Clearly, cultural studies poses a threat, or did in the pages of October in

52. Michel Foucault, cited in ibid.
1996—now a long time ago, but not too long after Kelley’s *Educational Complex* was installed at Metro Pictures. “The production of the discourse of visual culture entails the liquidation of art as we know it. There is no way within such a discourse for art to sustain a separate existence, not as a practice, not as a phenomenon, not as an experience, not as a discipline.”54 It’s hard to know now how exactly Susan Buck-Morss intended those words to be read, in what tone of voice: in anger, in sadness, maybe in triumph. Like a number of contributors to *October*’s special number on visual culture, she situated visual culture’s practices and effects not abroad in some new and proliferating image world, but fully and insistently in the university, and in its internal forms and politics. What proliferates, it seems, are programs and students: “The producers of the visual culture of tomorrow are the camera-women, film/video editors, city planners, set designers for rock stars, tourism packagers, marketing consultants, political consultants, television producers, commodity designers, layout persons, and cosmetic surgeons . . . . They are the students who sit in our classes today. What is it they need to know? What will be gained, and by whom, in offering them a program in visual studies?”55 Buck-Morss’s list of professions and semi-professions is astonishing, but it is also distressingly familiar; it recites the burgeoning lists of certificate and degree programs of any number of colleges and universities now fully excellent, or fully in ruins, to borrow terms from the late Bill Readings.56 Here, or rather, now, students are no longer formed or *gebildet*, but allowed to realize themselves according to their interests and memberships into slots already made. It is also—like most complaints against the onslaught of cultural studies, or of one-dimensional man—a seemingly endless list.

Mike Kelley’s work mimics the terms and descriptions of cultural studies, specifically as it is described by its harshest critics and caricaturists, by those who see it as political surrender or intellectual weakness—as one more piece of the same decline and fall. But when I write, particularly in these pages, that Kelley’s subject is the subject of cultural studies, what I want to suggest is not his criticality, nor, one more time, his desublimating urge, nor his acquiescence to something some might still see as the terrors of mass culture. Rather, what I want to end up saying is that I take him as its teacher, a professor of cultural studies, in the university with the rest of us—which is, after all, where his research and his work have been thematically for the past decade. Kelley’s project has long been a study of the visual culture of high school and college, and the university art department, but it might also be helpful to understand the stakes for us. Against an art history of the museum, or one that takes the museum and the past that it stands for as the seat of its power, cultural studies’ base is the university, and maybe particularly the classroom that Buck-Morss, like Kelley, evokes so powerfully. It dwells, complained Krauss (and again it is difficult to

catch exactly the tone of voice, or the site from where exactly this is seen), “in that part of the Academy that likes to think of itself as avant-garde.” But the value of Kelley’s work, and of a Foucauldian cultural studies, might be just that focus on our institutions and discourses, on how artists or, for that matter, art historians are formed—or interpellated—and where they, too, perform and police their disciplines. If all the history of art can do here, in relation to the present most of us find ourselves in, is to record again our losses and lacks, or, in nearly the same breath, our acts of brave criticism against a stand-up autonomy, perhaps what we need cultural studies for is to remind us of our institutional entanglements, our memberships and investments.