

## The Uncanny

by Mike Kelley, with essays by Mike Kelley, John C. Welchman, Christoph Grunenberg, Verlag der Buchandlung Walther König, Cologne, 2004, 263pp., 150 col., 38€, ISBN 3883757985 (paperback)

Catalogue for *The Uncanny*, exhibition at Tate Liverpool, Liverpool, 20 February - 3 May 2004, and Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Vienna, 15 July - 31 October 2004.

This book and exhibition review comes to you via a series of delays and repetitions. *The Uncanny* originated as part of an international exhibition of figurative sculpture for *Sonsbeek 93*, in Arnhem, Holland. Asked to provide an installation, the American artist Mike Kelley instead curated an ambitious display of photographs, objects and sculpture, some he had collected and more he borrowed. His contribution, held in the Gemeentemuseum, revived a 'conservative' form of display which he intended as a post-modern recuperation of the outmoded. He also produced and wrote his own exhibition catalogue which included an essay called 'Playing with Dead Things: On the Uncanny.' The exhibition and the essay generally concerned our perennial fascination with polychrome figurative sculpture, especially of the human body. In the Spring of 2004, Tate Liverpool restaged *The Uncanny* exhibition in collaboration with Kelley, who also selected additional work made since 1993. The Tate show was supposed to be accompanied by the catalogue under review, but sadly it did not appear until months after the exhibition had closed. However, it is a very thought-provoking, profusely illustrated and beautifully produced volume in its own right.

In his 'New Introduction to *The Uncanny*,' Kelley addresses the issue of delay. The 1993 show, he says, 'mirrored contemporary art world concerns.' One proximate context was the influential show curated by Jeffrey Deitch called *Post Human*, 1992, which concerned technological innovation and the body. The original *Uncanny* show was, in part, a critical reply to its technological Utopianism. Over a decade later, the show could not look other than slightly shop-worn, even with the addition of recent work by, for instance, Ron Mueck, Jake and Dinos Chapman, Damian Hirst, Gavin Turk, Sarah Lucas, Charles Ray and Tony Oursler - much of



which was drawn from Tate's permanent collection. In fact, one could plausibly regard the Tate show as providing an international and historical frame for YBA sculpture of the 80s and 90s, which looked back to Sixties Pop and the Super Realism of Duane Hanson and, beyond that, to medical models (some lent by the Science Museum, London, some by a private collection in Los Angeles).

In addition to the sensation of *déjà vu*, I was also struck on entering the exhibition by a certain dissonance between its title and the actual contents. A more appropriate title might have been something along the lines of *The Body in Pieces: Mannequins, Wax Models and Recent Figurative Sculpture*. Kelley's interest in Freud's 1919 essay, 'The "Uncanny"' is confined to one fairly subordinate theme, which is the one he borrowed from Ernst Jentsch, author of 'On the Psychology of the Uncanny' (1906). Jentsch understood the uncanny as bound up with a feeling of uncertainty, particularly regarding whether something is animate or inanimate. He mentions wax figures, life size automata, panopticons and panoramas. But the sensation may equally well be stimulated when we have occasion to doubt that a human being is anything more than an elaborate mechanism. Jentsch's article is of considerable interest, but Freud was completely justified in distancing himself from it. Jentsch insisted that the feeling of the uncanny is particularly strong in primitive peoples, children, women, the uneducated and anyone with a nervous disposition. Freud, however, took the uncanny to be a fully grown-up phenomenon that occurs when ideas and feeling from childhood that we thought we had discarded are triggered by some experience and so reassert themselves in our minds. By definition, only the enlightened adult is susceptible to uncanny sensations. Schelling defined it as something that should have remained hidden but has come to light. In a more Freudian idiom, it is a feeling prompted by the return of the repressed.

Freud did, however, discuss the uncanniness of the life-like automaton, Olympia, that figures in Hoffmann's tale, 'The Sandman.' The disturbed protagonist, Nathaniel, is taken in by the doll and falls in love with her. Freud explained that since children do not strictly distinguish between the



animate and the inanimate, they are inclined to think their dolls or stuffed animals are alive. As adults, then, the sight of a life-like automaton or automatic human behavior reactivates the infantile belief that we thought we had surmounted. Nevertheless, Freud argued, it is not Olympia that makes Hoffmann's tale so uncanny, but rather the frightening figure of the Sandman who, young Nathaniel is told, throws sand in naughty children's eyes so that they jump out of their heads. The fear of losing one's eyes is associated with the fear of castration so the story unconsciously, obscurely, reactivates that anxiety.

How does one get from the high romantic atmosphere of 'The Sandman' to, say, Jake and Dinos Chapman's polychrome bronze sex dolls? The short answer is surrealism. (See Simon Baker's interview with Jake Chapman on the subject of Bataille in *Papers of Surrealism*, issue 1.) Making that link, the show included a Bellmer doll and photographs of it. Kelley also refers approvingly to the surrealists' fascination with mannequins and Dalí's hyper-realist painting. Nevertheless the in-your-face explicitness of much of the work on display was, to my mind, anything but uncanny. They were rather more shocking, transgressive, even grotesque. The uncanny requires a sort of subterranean tremor that catches one unawares. My visit to Tate Liverpool some years ago to see the Rachel Whiteread show had this quality, as does much by Mona Hatoum's work, both of whose work has been interpreted in these terms.

Is this disagreement a quibble, or does it touch on something important? In my view, Kelley is quite consciously 'updating' the uncanny for our times, and his way of doing that is to marry it with the simulacrum via the idea of the realistic art that doubles the human body. Freud psychoanalytically accounted for the uncanniness of the double: in infancy, we create a double as an insurance against the destruction of the ego, which, once repressed, can later return and reverse its aspect becoming 'an uncanny harbinger of death.' Mirror reflections and shadows are, of course, another sort of double and have the same ambivalence. Kelley is interested in this psychoanalytic dimension, but perhaps even more concerned with a technologically driven form of double. As Baudrillard argued, doubling, serial repetition, undermines the authenticity of an



object since it is no longer either original or copy. As Kelley remarks about Duchamp's readymades, 'they become their own *doppelgänger*' (p. 31). John Welchman raises this issue in his catalogue essay, 'On the Uncanny in Visual Culture.' He wonders if the contemporary pervasiveness of simulation doesn't actually preclude the uncanny 'which is dependent for many of its effects on the relations between bodies, recall and repression' (p. 49). Nothing, it seems, could be further from the uncanny than Allen Jones, or Pop more generally. Yet he also adduces other thinkers, Adorno in particular, who associate something like the uncanny with 'technological phantasmagoria.' For Adorno, the literal copy is at the opposite pole of autonomous art. This is the nub of the matter. Kelley's project is a slap in the face of good taste. His beloved polychrome realist work is just not considered art by the sophisticated modernist/minimalist/conceptual/installation crowd. In short, as Kelley himself declares, it is regarded as kitsch: 'a cheap and fake version of the true, made for and consumed by the underclass' (pp. 30-31). Kelley associates himself with that class and so embraces it as a form of protest, but he also rightly realizes that we are no longer in the age of Greenberg's 'Avant-garde and Kitsch.' Cindy Sherman, for example, can produce sham self-portraits as clichés but without distance, superiority or condescension (p.37).

For Kelley, literalism is a subversive return of the repressed that unsettles our generally etiolated art world. My view is rather different, although I would agree that the simulacrum and the uncanny can only be understood in relation to one another. The scene for the emergence of uncanny strangeness is, after all, the familiar, conventional or banal. This is so because the 'familiar' is constituted by the repression of childhood traumatic experience or the real of unconscious fantasy. The familiar must inevitably have a simulacral quality because the real has been expelled. David Lynch beautifully demonstrates this mutual dependence in his film, *Blue Velvet* (1986). The white picket-fenced world of Lumberton shown in the opening sequence has such stereotypical clarity that one's gaze slides right off the image, unable to get any purchase. Lynch makes it clear that the bourgeois residential area has this two-dimensional simulacral quality precisely because reality (here a criminal underclass and the unconscious) has been



marginalized, banished to the other side of the tracks. For me, the uncanny is not the simulacrum itself, but that which agitates its shiny surface.

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