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Mary Reid Kelley, *The Queen's English*, 2008, still from a black-and-white video, 4 minutes 20 seconds.

OPENINGS

Mary Reid Kelley

STEVEN HENRY MADOFF

AS AMERICA'S MISADVENTURES in Iraq and Afghanistan continue, with Iran boiling on the horizon, war fills our minds. A growing number of artworks and films focus on our current crises, but what makes Mary Reid Kelley's videos particularly fascinating is that they send us backward in time to the grimly instructive universe of World War I. The Great War hovers above all narratives of armed conflict in modern memory, with its shattering speed of destruction, its multiple fronts blistering and spreading, the world order collapsing in its path. Broken unities gave way to the iconoclasm of a new culture's anomie and social upheaval. That is the background against which Kelley unfolds her recent works, *Sadie, the Saddest Sadist*, 2009, and *The Queen's English*, 2008, which fuse performance, poetry, and painting and focus on two women in the war effort, caught up as subalterns in the labors of industry, death, and sex.

The works had their premiere this past September in Kelley's first solo exhibition in New York (at Fredericks & Freiser), but her fascination with war long precedes them. Three years after graduating from St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, she was invited to take part in a 2004 group show on the school's

campus, where she presented photographs of two small scenes with paper figures, one staging the famous hoisting of the flag at Iwo Jima and the other a woman mourning her son's death in World War II. This second image was of special significance to Kelley's art: The news of the loss came in the form of a letter, a traditional narrative form that tied directly to her burgeoning interest in "the continual shaping of historical war narrative at all points in culture," as she puts it. The language of loss and the loss of meaning in language—both playful and mournful, deployed publicly and privately—became her subjects. When she returned to school in 2007 to get an MFA in painting at Yale, she found herself drawn to the university's memorial to alumni killed in the Great War, with its cenotaph and battle names carved into the entablature of its Corinthian colonnade. She began to research the men memorialized there, traveling to Europe after her first year to visit their graves and poring over the popular songs and poetry of the time.

What she saw in these poems—the work of Wilfred Owen, for example, who famously wrote, "Red lips are not so red / As the stained stones kissed by the English dead"—was a narrative structure whose rules of rhyme and repetition



This and opposite page: Mary Reid Kelley, *Sadie, the Saddest Sadist*, 2009, stills from a black-and-white video, 7 minutes 23 seconds.

created a self-enclosed logic that intensified expression—a “saturation,” as Kelley calls it, that she wanted for her own work. She admired contemporary women artists who were wielding language politically, too, Adrian Piper and Jenny Holzer among them. And when she saw Young-hae Chang Heavy Industries’ text animations during that first year at Yale, she says, “I started to realize that to make my text time-based was a structural way of increasing saturation.” She brought these interests to bear in *The Queen’s English*, which fixes on the character of a nurse at a dying soldier’s side who can’t confront what she sees and resorts to the deflections of euphemism. This loss of directness of meaning mirrors a body drained of vitality in the face of death. The King’s English—as it would have been at the time—and the King’s service merge, testing all those who labor under his rule, language and life ruthlessly entwined.

Kelley saw the nurse as the carrier of a figurative breakdown, her euphemistic speech an infection within language, and when she turned to her next project, *Sadie*, she thought about actual infection and another linguistic tool to redirect meaning, the pun. Inspired by Angela Woollacott’s *On Her Their Lives Depend* (1994), a book about female English munitions workers during the Great War, Kelley here tells the story of Sadie and her exploitative swain, Jack, a sailor on leave, who take up the disruptions of war and social order in a narrative of infatuation and infection: a brief sexual encounter that climaxes in Sadie’s contraction of, she bluntly states, “the clap.” Every moment in *Sadie*, which runs just over seven swift, densely packed minutes, is infused with Kelley’s ludic pyrotechnics of pun and rhyme, both visual and literary. Her characters (she plays both factory worker and sailor) are live cartoon figures in a cartoon world. With a

nod to George Herriman, the great early-twentieth-century cartoonist who brought us *Krazy Kat*, everything we see is painted black-and-white like stick figures in a landscape: a room; a cup of tea, a spoon, and sugar cubes; even Sadie and Jack, whose eyes are vertical black ovoids against parched white skin.

The mash-up that is Kelley’s three-dimensional world dressed up as two is a pun for the eye that parallels what the ear hears as her characters recite a poem whose racing engine of rhymes recalls the doggerel lyrics of English music halls, lubricated by the sheer fluidity of her words’ meanings. So, for example, when she discovers that Jack has infected her, Sadie cries out:

I have nothing left to give you but this horizontal sermon,
I’m at the mercy of these symptoms, and my foreman, and the Germans!
I don’t want *Deutschland über alles*, because I’m an Anglophile,
But my Francophone is broken, it won’t be ringing for a while.

To which he replies:

Sadie, if you’re a sadist, you’re the saddest that I’ve seen,
For I’ve seen a Lot in Sodom, and what a jolly scene!
You can call my acts illegal, but the law was made for fools.
I get away with murder “because Britannia waived the rules.”

At the heart of Kelley’s clever linguistic production in both videos is the word (and the world) as ramshackle Logos, continually unstable and historically contingent. Her puns loosen the corset of definitions, replacing it with the fertility



of phonetic resemblances (her broken “Francophone”), just as her euphemisms subvert frankness yet offer in its place an alternative richness of figurative imagery—the nurse’s dying soldier is “white as flour,” yet “what he needed wasn’t bread.” We are made to pay attention to the otter’s body of language: sinuous, filled with animal energy, swimming with meanings that wobble and reel; its pelt glossy in the light of our rising awareness, amusement, and alarm.

Doubleness permeates Kelley’s language, and the way she embodies such duality literally, in her appearance as both Sadie and Jack, yields another mode of saturation. Her characters live in homage to Duchamp’s twofold body of Marcel and Rose Sélavy, playing on erotic ambition, punning on gender, plying their prods and holes. It isn’t Sadie alone who teems with infection, but both Kelley’s alter-selves, who stand in as pathogenic metaphors for the old order and the new in all the implications of structural vulnerability and limping survival. The nurse in *The Queen’s English* isn’t quite as evolved or ambitious a symbol of cultural disruption as Sadie and Jack, yet it’s true as well that neither factory girl nor sailor is granted an epiphanic flare of enlightenment; neither is allowed a final transformation. They remain cogs in the empire’s machine, surrogates in the materialist pageant of economic powers, whose dance is a mechanical lockstep. Sadie attempts emancipation and is rebuked, inseminated by viral repression, which she carries forward.

Still, World War I changed the larger body of the civic order. The projection of Sadie and Jack as riotous punsters is Kelley’s foretelling of a burrowing, convulsive instability sweeping everything behind it. Puns here are stone breakers, wedges between monoliths of rigidified social praxis. They upend the task of

historical anecdote and its intended continuity of knowledge and replace it with historical reverie, which can reverse order and suggest ideological shifts. So much of what we consider the character of contemporary personhood is augured in Kelley’s swoon of conventions and meanings, of social bodies and private bodies undone and redone again and again. And there is something weirdly resonant about her monologues in rhyme; an oral poetry about social station and culture, sex and death, that lies somewhere along a continuum from English music halls

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through Brecht’s vaudeville of class to hip-hop. (After all, Jack sings his rhymes.) Kelley’s next video, commissioned for SITE Santa Fe in 2010, will go deeper into this territory, leaving behind the closed quarters of the hospital ward and the factory for the strange stillness and mayhem of the Great War’s front lines. What I find so compelling about her work is not simply its reminder of the stasis of our predatory nature, which makes all discourse on war revert finally to the fact of our essential barbarism. More than this, Kelley wittily, even savagely, makes clear that language itself is a mirror both of our humanity and of the divisions and contradictions turbulently warring underneath it. □

STEVEN HENRY MADOFF IS A FREQUENT CONTRIBUTOR TO ARTFORUM.