

## Lot's Wife, Anabaptists, and Farm Animals. Mike Kelley's Petting Zoo in Münster 2007

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Over and over, modernists return to the figure of Lot's wife to imagine an aesthetic event that might have the power to undo its spectator. Or they ponder how an artwork might have the power of the historical event that destroys the spectator who looks at it. In *Forgetting Lot's Wife: On Destructive Spectatorship*, I discussed a sequence of mostly twentieth-century artworks that ask whether aesthetic experience can destroy its spectator. Or, more precisely, the book ponders why, in the century now behind us, artists returned to the Genesis story of Lot's wife's destruction to imagine such an extreme potential for theater, film, and painting. The Genesis account is laconic: 'As Lot's wife glanced back, she turned into a pillar of salt' (9.16). She sees the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah; she becomes a pillar of salt. *Forgetting Lot's Wife* analyzes how this story of spectatorial damage at the sight of mass death resonates in the aftermath of world wars: in interwar France, Antonin Artaud desires an audience of Lot's wives, destroyed by his spectacles; in Hollywood, postwar film noir returns to the figure of Lot's wife as a figure for dangerous cinematic spectatorship; in contemporary Germany, Anselm Kiefer brings his concern with the dangers of sight to the fore with a complex and massive painting called <sup>[1]</sup>*Lot's Wife*.<sup>[1]</sup>

*Forgetting Lot's Wife* does not claim that this fantasy of destructive aesthetic experience is the quintessential modern experience of the aesthetic. Indeed, it was important to me not to claim that one paradigm of one kind of engulfing visual experience, actual or imagined, should pose as simply paradigmatic. The story of Lot's wife narrates a terrible compulsion in the face of traumatic experience. One way to understand the story – and many have pictured it this way – is to imagine that she had no choice to look back and therefore had to be subject to divine punishment: she had to look. That compulsion, however, is not the model of any contemporary compulsion: traumatic visual experience does not produce one response. To repeat a quotation from Thomas Keenan that appears in the book: 'The responsibility of the viewer is coextensive with the lack of self-evidence of the image: it dictates nothing, compels nothing' (Keenan, 114). Whatever it may mean to claim responsibility in relation to an image, that responsibility does not stem immediately from the image or its power. The idea of such immediate response and immediate responsibility, however, continues to inform discussion of looking and of visual culture. Here, I am especially interested in the idea of the face-to-face encounter as a basis of ethics and politics. The experience of the face of the other should, in this model, lead to a commitment that transcends the particular encounter.

This paper begins, then, with a contrast: on the one hand, the Bible's scene of prohibition and punishment; on the other, an exchange of looks that produces an ethical or political response that transcends it. What these contrasting scenes have in common is a performative notion of

sight: seeing necessarily does something. The sight (of destruction, of the other) changes the viewer irrevocably. Some distance from *Forgetting Lot's Wife* has prompted me to ask some questions about why modernism became so invested in this scene of destructive spectatorship. To what extent has our canon of modernism been structured around a set of prohibitions? The continuity between a religious ban on graven images and modernist aesthetic practices, a link which I had followed others in exploring in my book, seemed to me increasingly odd, odd in part because of its suggestion that high modernism was not fundamentally secular and because it seemed so poorly to fit an era in which absolutely everything, or almost, had been folded into the regime of images. There was more to ponder in the ethical or political claim implicit in this continuity. Who or what decides which images are subject to the *Bilderverbot*? What might an aesthetic practice structured around the freedom to look and the pleasure of being looked at look like? In the midst of finishing and, more forcefully, after completing this project, works of art engaging the story of Lot's wife while resisting the apocalyptic tone of the ones I had focused on in my book began to claim my attention. These works were remarkable for their humor, for their engagement with the everyday, and, not least, for their deadpan and yet provocative insistence on the role of animals in the story of Lot's wife.

## 1. Face to Face

Nicholas Mirzoeff wants 'to claim the right to look' – a claim 'for a right to the real,' a claim that, as he stresses, seems untimely in the shadow of calamities ranging from 'the falling of the towers, to the drowning of cities, and to violence without end.' This right to look is, as Mirzoeff develops it, essentially a political concept: 'The right to look claims autonomy, not individualism or voyeurism, but the claim to political subjectivity and collectivity . . .' (Mirzoeff, 1). It is a claim to the right to see what the police – in the widest possible understanding of that term – would have us not see. It resists "'visuality," that authority to tell us to move on, that exclusive claim to be able to look' (Mirzoeff, 2). Mirzoeff's is an important rethinking of looking: if looking has long been suspect as a tool of mastery, Mirzoeff rethinks it as a central part of a resistant and anti-hegemonic politics.

But let us pause over the genealogy of this right:

This right to look is not about seeing. It begins at a personal level with the look into someone's eyes to express friendship, solidarity, or love. That look must be mutual, each person inventing the other, or it fails. As such, it is unrepresentable. (Mirzoeff, 1)

The right to look begins with a look that transcends 'seeing': merely to see, it seems, would claim nothing. Seeing as such cannot be the basis of the political claims for looking that Mirzoeff wants to forward. But is there also a certain suspicion about sight as such here? Is there an implication that 'merely seeing' almost inevitably shades into 'individualism or voyeurism,' into regressive forms of withdrawal from community or fantasies of possession? In the story of origin Mirzoeff offers above, 'the look' is already something other than sight. To look, to use Mirzoeff's term, is 'about' something: it has content. This look has, from the start, the status of a communication, of a desire for or commitment to an *expression* of 'friendship, solidarity, or love.' Further, the look 'must be mutual': that desire for expression simply fails if the look does not encounter reciprocation in the eyes of the other. Further, this reciprocal looking is 'unrepresentable,' but it is not clear why: Because it is mutual? Because it involves

the invention of the other? Because no representation could capture the embodied experience of such an intersubjective encounter? Visuality, Mirzoeff insists – and this is one of the crucial contributions of his book – ‘is not a trendy theory-word meaning the totality of all visual images and devices, but it is in fact an early-nineteenth-century term, meaning the visualization of history’: ‘This practice must be imaginary, rather than perceptual, because what is being visualized is too substantial for any one person to see and is created from information, images, and ideas’ (Mirzoeff, 2). The appeal to the unrepresentable at the origin of the ‘right to look,’ then, contrasts with visuality, which is a project dedicated to overcoming the unrepresentable. Visuality makes visible, even if not, strictly speaking, perceptible, what resists representation (because of, for instance, its large scale).

I have so far skirted the major debt that Mirzoeff acknowledges in the midst of this discussion. Mirzoeff re-translates the final line of Jacques Derrida and Marie-Francoise Plissart’s *Right of Inspection*, as the English translation renders the title of their *Droit de regards*: ‘the right to look. The invention of the other’ (Mirzoeff, 1). The ideal of the invention of the other through an exchange of looks stem from Derrida’s concerns with looking and, in particular, with the face-to-face encounter. The genealogy of this passage in Mirzoeff, then, leads from Derrida to Levinas, and eventually to a set of Biblical passages including 1 Corinthians 13:12, with its promise of seeing ‘face to face,’ and further to the second commandment: as Julia Lupton and Kenneth Reinhard have stressed, God forbids taking other gods before the *face* of God (Lupton and Reinhard, 77).<sup>1</sup> The passage from Paul, in the resonant King James translation, promises a radical transparency: ‘For now we see through a glass, darkly, but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.’ Mirzoeff secularizes the utopian promise of this passage: the requirement that the exchange of looks be mutual provides the basis for the political and erotic projects he describes. But this secular exchange shares with Paul’s apocalyptic setting of full knowledge a block against representation. Full knowledge, in Paul, will happen at some other time ‘when that which is perfect is come,’ replacing ‘that which is in part’: we can have a riddling inkling of the possibility of knowledge, but not that knowledge, not yet, not in a space occupied by language or the image. Mirzoeff suggests that we *can* have this knowledge of another – of the Other? – and we must have such knowledge in order for the exchange of glances to form the basis of a politics of love that transcends it. Mirzoeff does not describe the exchange as a situation involving knowledge, but surely the guarantee of mutuality includes some promise of knowledge: this is a model of seeing that seems to have no room for the possibility of misrecognition. Or, put otherwise, it puts a lot of faith in the high probability of *recognition*. But whether because of its mutuality or because it involves the invention of selves, this exchange is ‘unrepresentable.’

Mirzoeff borrows this axiomatic unrepresentability from Derrida. This is not the place for a full discussion of Derrida’s text: it will have to suffice to consider part of Derrida’s discussion of three possible permutations of the phrase *elles se regardent*, or ‘They look at one another.’ Derrida rehearses these three possible meanings, quickly sketching two in the first two sentences before meditating on the third and most relevant meaning here:

One of the ‘parties’ is always under the gaze of the other, whether the gaze is shown *by* the photograph or not, whether it is imposed *on* or posed *for* the photograph. Another of the ‘parties’ watches itself in the mirror. But you will never see the look of the one looking – right in the eyes – at the look of the other, nor for that matter at your own. Such an impossibility is seen to be exhibited by the work,

which is itself exposed in the title *Droit de regards*. It is seen to be analyzed as a limit of photography, and of objectifying representation in general. The face-to-face of two gazes escapes representation as it escapes understanding. (Derrida 1998, xxviii)

Derrida insists on a spatial and temporal problem: one cannot occupy both positions in an exchange of gazes in the same instant. The camera cannot face two opposite directions at once, and so the apparatus cannot represent this exchange. But Derrida links this representational impossibility, in turn, to a necessary limit to understanding: the 'face-to-face of two gazes' is a zone outside representation and understanding. The simplest objection to this axiom of escaping representation and understanding might be to point out that 'objectifying representation' has devised a very effective method of representing the face-to-face: cinema's structure of the shot/reverse shot, a convention designed precisely to represent such encounters. Evidently this technique is so far from the utopian horizon of the truly face-to-face that it is not worth mention. For their very different reasons, Derrida and Mirzoeff insist on a point beyond which the face-to-face remains mysterious, unknowable, unrepresentable.<sup>2</sup>

Is the claim to the 'unrepresentable,' and not only in this instance, not in some way a mark of some almost secularized *Bilderverbot*? The face-to-face is massively represented, as the classical technique of Hollywood cinema suggests. Mirzoeff insists on an ineffable core to the face-to-face that no representation can capture: the standards of representation appear to be so high – the lived experience of both sides of such an encounter, a mimesis of two subjectivities at once? – that no mere image or sequence of images could 'represent' it. But what if the stakes for representation are set so high that nothing, not even an artwork could satisfy its requirements?

## 2. Paul Kos' Cows



fig. 1. Paul Kos, *Lot's Wife*. Medium: Salt Blocks and Jersey Cattle. Collection: diRosa Art Reserve, Napa, California.

Paul Kos provided the caption for the photograph: 'Paul Kos, *Lot's Wife* (fig. 1). In the introduction to *Forgetting Lot's Wife*, I connected this to the long and maddening tradition of scholarly and pseudo-scholarly attempts to locate the true remains of Lot's wife in one or

another salt effigy in the Middle East. To quote a footnote:

My favorite response to this pop-archeological search for the remains of Lot's wife remains that reported to me by Paud Roche: An American farmer, visiting Jordan and shown a geographical feature reputed to be Lot's wife, exclaimed, 'That can't be her! The cows would have licked her down to nothing by now!' I wonder whether Paul Kos, the American conceptual artist, had heard a similar anecdote; in any case, his wonderful *Lot's Wife*, a pillar of salt cubes in a cow pasture (fig. 1), strikes me as a beautifully comic meditation on the story. Perhaps Roche's source and Kos both knew the legend, reported in the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, that 'oxen used to consume every day the pillar of salt by licking it down to the toes, but it was restored by the morning' (entry for 'Lot' in *Jewish Encyclopedia* online). (117n5)

Kos' installation may be 'beautifully comic' – it is, I feel sure, certainly comic – and it may even in some way be legible as a meditation, but my footnote opens up several questions it does not begin to answer. In attempting a fuller reading of the work here, I should first confess that I cannot see Kos' piece without reference to the long history of treatments of the Lot story in visual art, and I will then assume that it belongs to this tradition even as it revises it in its canny way. Second, I should acknowledge the many complications that arise from discussing an installation on the basis of photographs. These photographs *are* the basis of my experience of the piece, and there is no question that I would have found myself thinking very differently about it had I known, say, only other photographs (figs. 2 and 3).



fig.2. Paul Kos, *Lot's Wife*. Medium: Salt Blocks and Jersey Cattle. Collection: diRosa Art Reserve, Napa, California



fig.3. Paul Kos, *Lot's Wife*. Medium: Salt Blocks and Jersey Cattle. Collection: diRosa Art Reserve, Napa, California.

The photograph with cows brazenly addressing the spectator has fundamentally altered my understanding of Kos' piece (fig. 1). In that photograph, the gaze of the cows is inescapable. And that gaze revises the story of Lot's wife.

Let us consider two paintings of Lot and his daughters. First, a painting long attributed to Lucas van Leyden that is central to *Forgetting Lot's Wife*, and the point of origin for the first chapter of my book (fig. 4).



fig.4. Lucas van Leyden (1494-1538) (attributed to), *Lot and His Daughters*. Louvre, Paris, France.

Given the centrality of sight and looking to the story of Lot – the men of Sodom who threaten to rape Lot's wife are blinded; Lot's wife is punished for looking back; Abraham safely looks down on the smoking ruins of the Cities on the Plain – it is always important to ask who is looking at what or looking at whom in representations of the scene. Consider Lot and his daughters in the foreground, a foreground that also represents the last of the temporal moments in this painting's collapsing of times. One daughter is immersed in pouring out wine for her already drunken father. The glances of Lot and his other daughter are harder to read (fig. 5):



fig.5. Lucas van Leyden (1494-1538) (attributed to), *Lot and His Daughters*. Louvre, Paris, France, detail.

he, it seems, is as immersed in the body of his daughter as his other daughter is in the wine she pours. The daughter in his arms, meanwhile, seems to look out, almost at us. And yet there is a notable blankness to that look, as though she were looking in our direction without seeing. If, to use Michael Fried's distinction, her father and her sister are absorbed in desire and wine, her look paradoxically passes beyond the scene without seeming to focus on anything beyond its frame. Compare another of the iconic images of Lot and his daughters. In Altdorfer's version (fig. 6),



fig.6. Albrecht Altdorfer (1480-1538), *Lot and His Daughters*. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria.

the incestuous father and daughter are at the center of the canvas: their absorption in the scene is absolute (fig. 7);



fig.7. Albrecht Altdorfer (1480-1538), *Lot and His Daughters*. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria, detail.

there is no trace of apprehension about the city that continues to burn behind them (fig. 8).



fig.8. Albrecht Altdorfer (1480-1538), *Lot and His Daughters*. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria, detail.

Indeed, here that absorption embodies their willful dismissal of any eye that might judge their conduct. Such scenes of absorption are typical of the long history of the representation of Lot's wife in painting: the figures caught in this drama of destructive spectatorship, desire, and catastrophe generally do not exchange looks with those who look at the paintings that contain them.

Which brings us back to Kos's cattle. In the photograph that has most concerned me, the look of the cow at the center is simply inescapable. How can one not feel addressed by that eye (fig. 9)?



fig.9. Paul Kos, *Lot's Wife*. Medium: Salt Blocks and Jersey Cattle. Collection: diRosa Art Reserve, Napa, California, detail.

Many problems of representation follow from this question. First, one might reasonably object that the spectator is no more or less seen by the cow's eye that we would be had Altdorfer chosen to turn the face of Lot's daughter to us. Following Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, we might emphasize the historical divide that separates us even from that Jersey cow from forty years ago: history, Barthes insists, 'is constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it – and in order to look at it, we must be excluded from it' (65).<sup>3</sup> The illusion that we are seen by the subject of the image, a painting or a photograph, is perhaps one of the most telling devices we have contrived to challenge the pathos of this absence – a pathos which, readers of Barthes will recall, he installs at the heart of every photograph. The direct address of the represented eye, that is, seems designed to overcome our difference from the history from which we have no choice but to be absent.

I have for the moment elided the difference between human subject and animal because for the moment the essential problem of their not being able to see us strikes me as substantially the same in each case. 'Why Look at Animals?,' John Berger asked in a provocative article of 1977. His essay also asks why animals might look at us, and he has telling comments on photographs of animals. 'Baby owls or giraffes, the camera fixes them in a domain which, although entirely visible to the camera, will never be entered by the spectator' (14). Berger stresses photographic technologies that capture aspects of animal life otherwise invisible, and writes further:

In the accompanying ideology, animals are always the observed. The fact that they can observe us has lost all significance. They are the objects of our ever-extending

power. What we know about them is an index of our power, and thus an index of what separates us from them. The more we know, the further away they are. (14)

The simplest thing we can say about the photograph of Kos' work is that it restores the fact that animals can observe us to significance. That it does this via the medium of the photograph, as we have seen, raises problems and causes complexities. That it does this via the story of Lot's wife raises yet more.

### 3. Mike Kelley's *Petting Zoo*

Installed in an anonymous courtyard near Münster's train station flanked on one side by a parking garage, *Petting Zoo* was one of thirty-three works of sculpture installed across the city as part of *Skulptur Projekte Münster* in 2007. The visitor entered *Petting Zoo* through a wide door into the courtyard, encountering first a small simple white hut with large glass windows on the right. Straw covered the floor's hut; the ceiling featured a colorful disco ball.<sup>4</sup> The path into the installation led further to the petting zoo itself, past a concession stand that, during my visits, was never open. A sign listing several rules greeted the visitor: no smoking; dogs forbidden; adults look after your children; and finally:

Füttern            [Feeding (animals)

verboten         forbidden]

A simple circular wooden fence surrounded the octagonal barn, the door of which was open. The barn contained chickens, which ranged freely inside and outside the fence, and, inside the fence, pairs of small farm animals: ponies, goats, cows, and sheep. A small number of visitors at a time were allowed to join the animals inside the fence and into the barn. At the center of the installation stood a salt statue of Lot's wife. Three large video monitors above the floor of the barn and to the sides of the statue showed loops of films of three places where geographical features are identified with Lot's wife: on the Dead Sea in Jordan; in the Jenolan Caves in New South Wales, Australia; and on the island of Saint Helena. A soundtrack played percussive and plaintive music from Jordan and Australia. Directly below each screen was a bucket of straw. The animals were free to wander inside the fence. The humans were free to pet them, but not, as we have seen, to feed them. And by the time I reached Münster in August, 2007, a new rule had been established though not posted on a sign. A single-page green flyer distributed to visitors to the exhibition notified them of a 'Petting pause at Mike Kelley's 'Petting Zoo': To keep the animals relaxed at the artist's zoo there's a daily 20-minute break where they should not be petted' (*Newsletter*).<sup>5</sup>

Like many of the works in the sprawling show, *Petting Zoo* referred at once to the tumultuous history of the city and to the shorter but not insignificant (and not entirely placid) history of the series of sculpture projects itself. Kelley's published artist's statement slyly disavows and acknowledges such reference:

The zoo will function as a traditional diversion for children. A keeper will be on site to tend to the animals' needs and a concession stand will offer snacks and drinks for visitors. The Lot's wife salt lick is intended as an amusing detail within the park, though the alteration of the statue by the licking of the animals is a sculptural

process and could be understood as the point of the project. The 'darker' side of the work that makes reference to the sinfulness of Sodom and Gomorrah (and, by extension, to local notions of morality in Münster) is completely hidden. (Kelley in Franzen et al., 127)<sup>6</sup>

Completely hidden? Probably my own immersion in the Lot story means that I am perversely alert to any invocation of it. Nevertheless, Kelley's naïve statement, with its opposition of intention and a possible understanding, opens up the very questions it seems to foreclose or hide. These questions include how this installation establishes its relationship to the various histories that surround it, how it revises the problem of looking at animals and being looked at by animals, and how these questions return us to the figure of Lot's wife.

Can a 'Lot's wife salt lick,' whatever the artist's intentions, in fact function as an 'amusing detail' in a work of art? Kelley's intentions suggest something like the quintessence of postmodern works of art according to the canonical description of Fredric Jameson: depthless, affectless, in short, in the paraphrase of Sven-Erik Rose, 'unmoored, fetishistically severed from their socio-historical totality' (116-17). Such a reading of *Petting Zoo* is possible, and one of the few readings I have found indeed discusses the piece is in terms indebted to Jameson. In what follows I will then be vulnerable to the accusation that I have anachronistically imported the hermeneutic tools appropriate to the analysis of earlier works of art to a piece that breaks these tools at every turn. From this point of view, it might be precisely the power of *Petting Zoo* that it decisively neutralizes certain kinds of hermeneutic reading even as its invocation of the Bible seems to invite them: 'the Lot's wife salt lick.' (Lot's wife, an amusing detail at last!) The deadpan dead-end of reference would be one way, to paraphrase Artaud, to have done with the judgment of God.

To describe the 'socio-historical totality' surrounding *Petting Zoo* would be a ferociously tall order, not to mention a lengthy task, and I cannot pretend to provide any such description. (One of the problems of the Jamesonian prescriptions, I would say, is that the bar is set so high that an artwork that either registers totality or is suddenly hollow and empty.) The socio-historical contexts that seem to me most pressing are, however, large enough, and I know that I can only begin to do justice to them here. First, there is the question of animals in the story of Lot. Why is the story so often understood as one that includes animals? Second, *Petting Zoo*, precisely because of its location in Münster, invokes the Lot story as an allegory of modern mass death. Münster was heavily bombed by the Allies during World War II. Finally, Kelley's relatively benign fence and barn invoke what are arguably the city's most famous sculptures, the replicas of the cages in which the bodies of Anabaptist leaders were displayed after the millennial revolt that occupied Münster in 1534 and 1535. These cages hang on the church of St. Lambert on the city's central market square.

The Anabaptist occupation of Münster is the subject of the final chapter of Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, his survey of revolutionary millennial movements of the later Middle Ages. In his account of the latter days of that astonishing period, animals appear with awful regularity. In April, 1535, famine had hit the besieged town: 'Every animal – dog, cat, mouse, rat, hedgehog –,' writes Cohn, 'was killed and eaten and people began to consume grass and moss, old shoes and the whitewash on the walls, the bodies of the dead' (278). A month later, when 'women and old men and children' were released from the city, the Bishop leading the besieging army did not allow them past his lines of soldiers: 'These people therefore lingered on for five long weeks in the no-man's-land before the town walls, begging the mercenaries to kill them, crawling about and eating grass like animals and dying in such

numbers that the ground was littered with corpses' (278). The self-proclaimed king of Münster, Bockelson or John of Leyden, was taken prisoner in late June: 'at the Bishop's command he was for some time led about on a chain and exhibited like a performing bear' (279). The famous Münster cages, then, are the final display in a process by which millennial aspiration and revolutionary fervor leads not to the peaceable kingdom of millennial expectation, where the lion lays down with the lamb, but to a confusion of human and animal. The cages survive as reminders of a punishment meant not so much to stress the restoration of the Church over all its subjects, ever the most wayward, as to declare the Church's power to relegate its enemies to the zone of the animal.

To insist on the relevance of this history to Kelley's piece will perhaps seem to strain the question of the 'socio-historical totality' surrounding the installation. I might mention, then, that Martha Rosler, another artist included in the 2007 show, placed replicas of the cages in front of the town's central library. Her contribution was, it's true, called *Unsettling the Fragments* and was dedicated to reminding viewers of Münster's history.<sup>[7]</sup> Yet, every visitor to Münster knows about the cages: they make for a discomfiting spectacle; they also appear on postcards. Kos and Kelley remind one of how often animals shadow the Genesis story. Genesis 19 mentions no non-human animals, but painters have provided several to accompany Lot and his family on their flight from the cities on the Plain. That great anonymous painting in the Louvre, for instance, has its mule on the bridge, bearing the baggage the family brought with them (baggage that may not match what they are about to collect). And that mule re-appears as a skeleton, or so I suggest in *Forgetting Lot's Wife* (Harries, 25): Is that skeleton the remains of a scapegoat? The unthrifty and incestuous survivors of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, like the besieged revolutionaries of Münster, eat their companion species. The skeleton in the foreground belongs to a triangle in the lower right of the composition with the salt remains of Lot's wife on the pier (fig. 10).



fig.10. Lucas van Leyden (1494-1538) (attributed to), *Lot and His Daughters*. Louvre, Paris, France, detail.

Kos and Kelley, then, are at the very least reversing that scenario where the human survivor of catastrophe devours the remaining animals. We might note, for instance, that the crumbled pieces of salt blocks in Kos' photo resemble the skeletal remains in the Louvre painting. But those crumbled pieces are debris created by the cow's licking, which, to borrow Kelley's words, has become 'a sculptural process and could be understood as the point of the project.' The aleatory desires of the animals become sculptural. Kelley's description begs questions. If the licking of farm animals has become sculptural, what kind of sculpture is this? <sup>[2]</sup> Would any intentionless process of erosion then count as 'sculpture'? Kos' and Kelley's pieces alike set up an experimental scene where it's clear what the animals will do but it's not at all clear how they will do what they do or what its effects will be. When I saw *Petting Zoo* fairly late in the summer, the only visible sign of alteration to the statue was a small, regular, concave

indentation slightly above the sculpture's midsection. More important than this particular shape, however, is the relationship between this chance effect of the licking of animals and the sculpture they alter by licking. In carrying Lot's wife over into sculpture as a subject *for* sculpture, Kos and Kelley perform a variation on a Biblical figure whose transformation into a salt column is from the start arguably a kind of sculptural process.

Lot's wife disobeys a commandment against looking and as a result becomes a monument to that transgression and, arguably, also a monument to the dead of Sodom and Gomorrah for whom, or so many commentators have guessed, she mourns. Kos and Kelley, then, commission (so to speak) farm animals to undo a simulation of this monument to transgression and mass death. Hal Foster, in a discussion of recent art that includes mention of some of Kelley's earlier work, argues that much of this art seeks to expose the real, a term he uses very much in its Lacanian sense. On the one hand, writes Foster, these artists want 'to possess the obscene vitality of the wound and, on the other, to occupy the radical nihility of the corpse' (122). One might read the uncertain status of Lot's wife as an embodiment of this 'radical nihility,' but it seems to me that Kos and Kelley put the figure to very different work. The real in Foster's scheme suggests something like the forbidden image banned by the second commandment: precisely because it is so desired, it must be forbidden, it must be impossible to see. Lot's wife, witness to the forbidden real, has the sublime experience of looking that art sometimes longs for but cannot provide.

*Sometimes* longs for: I say this advisedly. Kos, who constructed his Lot's wife in Napa almost forty years before Kelley's *Petting Zoo* opened in Münster, seems a genial pioneer of an art pointedly designed not to invoke Biblical or aesthetic sublimity, an art, that is, that disowns the desires that circle around what I have called destructive spectatorship. That cow's gaze precisely does not invite apocalyptic reading. Kelley's installation, too, suggests something different from these sublime desires for a voluptuous and destructive experience of the real. In this octagonal barn, the commandment – don't look back – does not apply to animals. Perhaps the Biblical account need not mention them because they are not subject to the prohibition, and prohibitions are what the story is about. They can look all they want. But they don't, or didn't, anyway, that summer in Münster: I saw no animal in Kelley's installation take any interest at all in the video loops showing the geological formations named after Lot's wife. The animals were at their troughs below the screens frequently. These animals, that is, seemed to be exempt from the entire complex of rules and taboos, practices and conventions, fantasies and prohibitions regarding sight – exempt, too, from all the historical wreckage one might choose to look at in that city, from the cages where the corpses of the Anabaptists rotted to the Allied bombing of World War II. That exemption, I would say, is the point of this strangely lapidary installation.

And yet in the absence of Biblical commandments another set of rules – so everyday that the words 'commandments' and 'secular' seem too grand – enters in: no smoking; dogs forbidden; adults look after your children; no feeding the animals. Because I disregarded it, this last rule especially intrigues me: A path ran around the circumference of the octagonal barn, and I followed that path a couple of times. On my final circuit during my last visit, a small black goat was grazing on what remained of the grass on its side of the fence that divided the barn from more grass (fig. 11).<sup>8</sup>



fig.11. Mike Kelley, *Petting Zoo*, Installation, *Sculpture Projects Münster 07*, photo by Cathrine Einarsson.

The grass the goat could reach was sparse after some months of grazing. I paused to watch it munch and, as one might do in a petting zoo, considered petting it. As I was idly thinking of what I might do, the animal was too, only not so idly: it unmistakably gestured with its eyes toward the richer grass it could not reach and begged me to give it some. I had noticed the signs and their rules; I could not not notice them. But I also could not not give this goat what it wanted, so, having glanced around to be assured that I was not being watched, I ripped off a handful of the lush grass I could reach and the goat could not, and set it down before the goat. The goat ate the grass; I moved on.

My account is vulnerable to all the accusations that dog encounters with animals, anthropomorphization and sentimentality chief among them.<sup>9</sup> I take these possibilities seriously, but I don't want to dwell on them here. Even if I have been deluded into believing that I understood the goat's eyes and gesture, that delusion has its interest, or so I hope. A message from the eyes of a creature exempt from the burden of commandments regarding vision: this is what *Petting Zoo* made possible. *Petting Zoo* evokes the tragic scenarios of destructive spectatorship to which modernism was so dedicated, or so I argue in the book – and changes the subject.

Can an animal exhibit itself? At the 'traditional diversion' of the petting zoo, the activities are mildly spectacular and hesitantly tactile: the children come with their parents to see and to pet the animals; the parents come to watch the children seeing and petting the animals (or so they tell themselves). The contexts for Kelley's petting zoo inspire another question. Do we also come to the petting zoo to be looked at by animals? I am thinking of Jacques Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, with its insistent return to the scene of the naked philosopher looked at by his cat. Derrida makes epochal claims for the importance of the failure of philosophers to acknowledge that animals 'could *look* at them, and *address* them from down there, from a wholly other origin' (13). Philosophers, Derrida further claims, 'made of the animal a *theorem*, something seen and not seeing' (14). 'Petting Zoo' inspires me to add another question: Do animals want to be looked at? The challenge and pleasure of *Petting Zoo* pulls us away from some of the ethical assumptions surrounding discourses of sight, discourses for which Lot's wife stands as a kind of icon. That is, what seems to me so compelling about Kelley's piece is that the desire to be looked at does not get so quickly translated into an ethical concept. Being looked at is not superseded by, for instance, acknowledgment, or by recognition of the other: a superior, putatively deeper understanding of a *relation* with, or to, an other does not transcend the encounter with the appearance of an other. The face-to-face is, first of all, an encounter with a face, with the surface of another.

That goat with straw in its hair wanted grass, yes, but – did it also want me to see it?

The fantasies of spectatorship that surround the story of Lot's wife embody desires for apocalyptic transparency: as the horrible work of the divine becomes visible to the witness, that scene catastrophically remakes the witness. However, as Lauren Berlant stresses in her recent *Cruel Optimism*, we need to rethink our understanding of trauma by acknowledging that the potentially traumatic event does not traumatize everyone: 'Crisis is not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what's overwhelming' (Berlant 10). This has implications for witnessing and watching. The revisions of the story of Lot's wife in the work of Kos and Kelley suggest one of the consistent projects of the postwar American avant-garde: the aesthetic registration of what Berlant calls 'crisis ordinariness' (Berlant 10). The resolute dedication to the sites, and even the materials, of the ordinary and everyday that distinguishes Kelley's work as a whole – the stuffed animals, the institutional spaces – should be seen not as an evasion of crisis but as parts of a steady project dedicated, to the end, to the registration of its ordinariness.<sup>10</sup> Ordinarily, we see things that are impossible to see – and.<sup>11</sup>

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1. For an especially relevant reading of the relationship between Levinas and Derrida, see Taylor. Watson's discussion of the encounter with the face in 'Reason and the Face of the Other' complements Taylor's discussion.
  2. The ambivalences and ambiguities that so powerfully mark Derrida's text disappear in Mirzoeff's use of it.
  3. This is not the place for a fuller account of the reception of Barthes' *Camera Lucida*.
  4. For a photo of the disco ball, see [here](#) [3].
  5. There is an especially fine sequence of photos of the installation beginning [here](#) [4]. See also [here](#) [5]. and, for a panoramic view of the installation in its courtyard [6].
  6. The statement may also be found at [the superb web site for the series](#) [7].
  7. Rosler's excellent contribution to the project catalogue has stimulated my awareness of the role of Münster as a setting (Franzen et al., 202-213).
  8. For another wonderful photo of a goat inhabitant of Kelley's zoo, [look here](#). [8]
  9. In her work and in conversation, Una Chaudhuri has fundamentally re-oriented my thinking about animals, and especially animals in performance. See her 'Animal Geographies: Zooësis and the Space of Modern Drama' and her introduction to a special journal issue on animals and performance, '(De)Facing the Animals: Zooësis and Performance'.
  10. For a fine survey of Kelley's work to the end of the 1990s, see Welchman; Anthony Vidler's 'Mike Kelley's Educational Complex' (included in that volume) is especially relevant. Kelley's engagement with the history of Detroit offers a particularly vivid site for further investigation. Consider, for example, the late project, 'Mobile Homestead' ('Mike Kelley: Screening').
  11. This article retains traces of its origin as a talk. I first gave a version as part of the 2009 Ropes Lecture Series in the Department of English at the University of Cincinnati; I am very grateful to Jay Twomey for the invitation and for his enthusiastic engagement, and also to graduate students in that program who attended a lively colloquium. Also in 2009, I delivered the paper as part of the conference, 'Tickle Your Catastrophe,' at Vooruit Arts Centre, Ghent, Belgium; I am especially grateful to Frederik Le Roy for his part in the invitation. Finally, the talk's third iteration occurred at Bo?aziçi University in Istanbul in the spring of 2011; my gratitude to Edward Mitchell for his hospitality on that occasion is immense.

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**Links:**

[1] <http://anselmkiefer2.blogspot.nl/2009/11/lots-wife-1989.html>

[2] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FGldX66tFzE>

- [3] [http://www.flickr.com/photos/en\\_moto\\_2/967920018](http://www.flickr.com/photos/en_moto_2/967920018)
- [4] <http://www.flickr.com/photos/mitue/1250859692/in/photostream>
- [5] <http://www.flickr.com/photos/lutzmann/1275965058/in/photostream>
- [6] [http://www.artforworldexpo.com/InitialProject/works\\_37\\_MikeKelley.html](http://www.artforworldexpo.com/InitialProject/works_37_MikeKelley.html)
- [7] <http://www.skulptur-projekte.de/kuenstler/kelley/>
- [8] <http://www.flickr.com/photos/maggiemayay/2178412053/in/photostream>