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All Tomorrow's Parties

DAVID JOSELIT ON "MIKE'S WORLD" AND "AIR KISSING"

Michael Smith, *Down in the Rec Room*, 1979/1981. Performance view, Castelli Graphics, New York, 1980.

Why is Michael Smith's artistic shift in register significant? Precisely because it identifies the formal structures of video's avant-garde within the debased rhetoric of middlebrow entertainment, which still plays a fundamental role in shaping our social lives.

ANDY WARHOL went to a lot of parties. In *Andy Warhol's Party Book*, posthumously published in 1988, he gives a good explanation why: "Sex and parties are the two things that you still have to actually be there for—things that involve you and other people." This assertion occurred to me while visiting "Mike's World: Michael Smith & Joshua White (and other collaborators)," a retrospective that was recently on view at the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, Texas (and travels to the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, in April). During the late 1970s and early '80s, Michael Smith—an artist known for his performance, video, and installation works—developed a deadpan character called Mike, who, while Warhol's art seemed to degenerate into partygoing, was waiting, usually in vain, for a party to happen. In the performance and video *Down in the Rec Room*, 1979/1981, for instance, Mike, initially dressed in his signature boxer shorts, looks forward to a gathering that never gets off the ground. Instead, Smith's character interacts with various media personalities—some heard on the audio track and others viewed on a television screen. Mike, whose charismatic blankness does for middle-class straight men what Warhol's mirroring of high society does for queerness, is denied not only the glamorous privatized public sphere that Warhol frequented—exemplified by such legendary New York clubs as Studio 54 and Nell's—but even the more modest proposition of a rec-room get-together. In the '80s, while Andy was out, Mike was usually home alone with his television.

This comparison is not arbitrary. If Warhol is right that sex and parties are the only social events that still require physical attendance, then *every other interpersonal activity* can in theory be phoned in or, in the mode of our present moment, conducted online, via "social networks" such as Facebook and MySpace. Even before the advent of virtual twenty-four-hour-a-day sociality, Warhol and Smith both recognized that parties (and perhaps sex, too, though on this subject both are reticent) sustain a public sphere on life support—one suffocated by the mediation that characterizes most ordinary interactions. Parties are what remain

of face-to-face and body-to-body communication, and consequently, they establish the limitation of virtual social networks. As Warhol's *Screen Tests*—in which subjects were often uncomfortably, even excruciatingly, pinned in front of the camera without direction—demonstrate, he clearly understood the antagonistic relationship between real life and mechanical reproduction early on. And by bringing along his tape recorder and Polaroid camera when he went out, he could represent a party's internal limit—its own potential transformation, especially when celebrities were around, into a kind of virtuality. Addressing the same issues, and reaching a similar conclusion by different means, Mike typically finds his audience—his party manqué, as it were—through the simulated presences of the television or the sound track.

In the face of such slippage between the virtual and the real, the project of world making—in which a charismatic character, or constellation of characters, invokes an entire aesthetic cosmology—would seem a

compelling one for artists. And in fact, many contemporary practitioners, ranging from Sarah Lucas and Jason Rhoades to Matthew Barney and Andrea Fraser, have taken as their medium not objects (or even networks) but such charisma-driven worlds. In this regard, the title of the Blanton retrospective, "Mike's World," was apt: Smith and White's installation was self-consciously organized as a world unto itself, complete with an orientation video in the initial gallery, a space modeled, according to the artists and to curator Annette DiMeo Carlozzi, on the orientation centers found in presidential libraries—the museological type devoted to the hagiography of a single political figure. In "Mike's World," works dating from 1976 to last year are brought together in an immersive environment—a carnivalesque convocation of Mike's alternate personifications over thirty years (ranging from basement everyman to enthusiastic entrepreneur), each of which is represented as emerging from a facet of one of Mike's signature disco balls in the introductory video. Indeed,

Clockwise from top: **Michael Smith**, *Mike's House*, **1982**, mixed media. Installation view, Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, TX, 2007. **Michael Smith and Mark Fischer**, *It Starts at Home*, **1982**, still from a color video, 25 minutes 35 seconds. **Michael Smith and Mark Fischer**, *It Starts at Home*, **1982**, still from a color video, 25 minutes 35 seconds.

Smith's work marks an important and still relatively unacknowledged shift around 1980 to a *character*-based art, whose adherents are as various as Matt Mullican, Cindy Sherman, Tony Oursler, and Laurie Anderson.

The nature of this shift is well exemplified by *It Starts at Home*, a single-channel videotape Smith made in 1982 in collaboration with Mark Fischer for an installation titled *Mike's House*, which was first exhibited that year at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. The plotline of *It Starts at Home* is simple and prefigures the whole tradition of reality shows, from *The Truman Show* to *Big Brother*. After having cable installed in his decidedly ordinary apartment, Mike eventually discovers that rather than bringing entertainment into his home, a video link is carrying his image out into the world, broadcasting it everywhere from the neighborhood bar to a chic apartment (apparently the home of art collectors) where a maid watches as she works. At first unaware of this displacement of viewing by being viewed, Mike receives only a test pattern on his home screen while the world tunes in to his hapless fumbling around the apartment. When at last he sees what others see (i.e., his own life broadcast on television), he does a fascinated dumb show in front of the monitor-as-mirror in a parody of the notorious "narcissism" of early video. This supplantation of spectator by actor is framed in *It Starts at Home* within a story line of commercialization and sellout, in which Bob, a stereotypical television producer who is perpetually on the phone and consists of nothing but a hairpiece that somehow manages to smoke a cigar and talk, attempts to aggres-

sively promote *The Mike Show* as Mike himself enacts fantasies of the alluring televisual characters he might become. Ultimately—after considering pulling the plug on the whole enterprise in order to remain his ordinary self (as in so many television allegories of ambition or, more accurately, its sacrifice)—Mike is persuaded to move ahead with a program that, as Bob puts it, "makes the Loud family look like a whisper."

It Starts at Home is, for me, a watershed work in the history of video art since it transposes two of the fundamental formal issues of 1970s practice—the viewer's "capture" within a feedback loop of closed-circuit camera and monitor, and the effort to represent the monitor's internal physical space (or the space of electronic communication *tout court*)—in the terms of a television sitcom. In place of post-Minimalist phenomenology, one finds the rhetoric of entertainment. Instead of Dan Graham's dispossession of his spectators by introducing delay in the relay from camera to monitor, there is Mike's slapstick disorientation at not seeing what everyone else sees on TV in the neighborhood bar. And in place of Joan Jonas's famous limning of the monitor's architecture in *Vertical Roll*, 1972, there is Mike's enchanted dumb show before and behind the screen. Why is this shift in register significant? Precisely because it identifies the formal structures of video's avant-garde within the debased rhetoric of middlebrow entertainment, which still plays a fundamental role in shaping our social lives. Smith's work represents an attempt to fight spectacle with spectacle by reinventing avant-garde practices in fictional worlds in a manner converse to the thorough colonization of everyday life by entertainment industries.

As Bob's advocacy in *It Starts at Home* suggests, this is a double-edged endeavor, which can easily lead to the crassest form of commercialization. But it can also afford a different kind of agency for artists, whose work may thereby circulate in new venues and address new audiences—Mike, for example, appeared in comedy clubs and on cable television as well as in galleries and museums. Even so, Smith has sometimes been criticized as an art-world insider whose work has little relevance beyond that specialized precinct. But what if art's current promise is precisely in *making worlds*—even *art* worlds? This was the question addressed in a quirky show titled "Air Kissing: An Exhibition of Contemporary Art About the Art World," organized by Sasha Archibald for Momenta Art in Brooklyn this past fall. What struck me most in this exhibition (to

Clockwise from top: **Michael Smith**, *Mike's House*, **1982**, mixed media. Installation view, Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, TX, 2007. **Andrea Fraser**, *May I Help You?*, **1991/2005**. Performance view, Orchard Gallery, New York, 2005. **Mira Schor**, *There's No Time to Make Art IV (Blue)*, **2000**, ink and gesso on linen, 20 x 20". From the series "There's No Time to Make Art," 2000–2001.

which I can't do justice here) was how the circulation of artists *as characters* became a central source of signification in many of the works on exhibit. It is true that this was art about art, but it was also art about avatars—how certain social types come to accrue value, almost independently of the individuals who personify them. While the works here took the artist as their pretext, the same sort of analysis would hold true for any other widely visible type, from the doctor to the politician. In Andrea Fraser and Jeff Preiss's wonderful film of Fraser's schizo live performance *May I Help You?*, 1991/2005, for example, both avatar and audience are rendered discontinuous. Fraser's monologue is structurally unstable, as she switches between voices belonging to different classes of art-world insiders and outsiders, but it is completely unbroken and continuous in its delivery, while the film is edited so that her auditors suddenly and frequently

change in the course of the piece, as though her single polished monologue had crossed seamlessly through several distinct social iterations. This device precisely represents the structure and power of stereotypes— personified images that remain fixed regardless of the conditions of their specific instantiation.

William Powhida's *Ganek Acquires Powhida*, 2007, also in "Air Kissing," similarly imagines the circulation of character in a work that inserts one medium of communication into another. It is a painting consisting of a handwritten article in a simulated front- and back-page spread of the Arts section of the *New York Times*. Titled "When the Art Really Lives with You," the piece describes the purchase of Powhida by hedge-fund-billionaire David Ganek and his wife, Danielle, who is the author of a pandering art-world novel, *Lulu Meets God and Doubts Him*. The rakish and very much alive Powhida is "installed"

alongside other works of art in their apartment, but when his indulgence in sex and partying chez Ganek scandalizes other residents in the collectors' white-glove Park Avenue building, Powhida is consigned to storage (i.e., a luxury suite in the Maritime Hotel, much frequented by the art world) to await resale at auction. In other words, Powhida's transit from live artist to objectified artwork is stymied by precisely those occasions Warhol designated the last truly social activities: sex and parties. On the one hand, this kind of bad-boy persona is as old as the avant-garde, but on the other, Powhida has captured the infinite regress of fiction and document, and object versus subject, which fuels not only the world of art but image worlds in general.

It is interesting and significant that, unlike Michael Smith, Powhida makes such points with painting as opposed to performance and video. As the art-world commodity par excellence, painting's *détournement* would seem to carry special force at the present moment. Some of the best works in "Air Kissing" were in fact paintings—among them five canvases from Mira Schor's series "There's No Time to Make Art," 2000–2001. In each, the title phrase is scrawled by hand on a milky white ground and repeated out of register in a manner resembling the refraction of writing on a mirror between the glass surface and its reflective backing. Somehow the clouded narcissism of these "opaque mirrors," imprinted with a statement that alternately suggests the acceleration of contemporary life and the untimeliness of art—as well as its promise of taking us out of time—captures for me the dilemma artists currently face, in this period of rampant professionalization and careerist profiteering. The scenario is not unlike Mike's cheerful prognostication in *Do It: How to Curate Your Own Group Exhibition*, 1996: "As the information superhighway continues to expand, artists will barely have enough time to sleep, as they become the content providers for the future." Or perhaps it's much simpler than that. As Warhol might have complained, there's no time to make art because there are just too many parties. And parties, even in their limited and private arena, replace objects with actions. The real challenge would then be to use these nascent, private, and fictional worlds to seed a wider public sphere—to seize on entertainment as a viable arena for social struggle. □

DAVID JOSELIT IS THE AUTHOR OF *FEEDBACK: TELEVISION AGAINST DEMOCRACY* (MIT PRESS, 2007).