Presumed Innocence

Published in 1998 by the Anderson Gallery, School of the Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, on the occasion of the exhibition *Presumed Innocence,* January 17 - March 1, 1998 at the Anderson Gallery, Richmond, and at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, April 4 June 14, 1998.

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Printer
Cadmus Communications Corporation

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Youthful HYSTERIA AND Wild-eyed DELIRIUM Youth Culture FIGHTS BACK
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Youth's Purgatory: Presumptions of Innocence and Other Childhood Roles
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ISBN 0-295-97718-3

Distributed by the University of Washington Press
P.O. Box 50096, Seattle, WA 98145

Youthful HYSTERIA AND Wild-eyed DELIRIUM
Youth Culture FIGHTS BACK

Kathryn Hixson

Ah, youth! Wide-eyed trusting stares twinkle in clear faces with beaming smiles. Untainted by life's vicissitudes, children have the freedom to express themselves openly, they experience pure joy in discovery, as they revel in the uninhibited play of the body. Experimenting with simple pleasures, theirs is an unmediated life of pure feeling, honest, guilt free, fun loving, candid, spontaneous, and direct.

Ah, youth! Plying their evil seductive power, little girls and boys bat their eyelashes at poor overburdened adults, lulling away any attempt at healthy discipline. Presenting their world of seemingly mythical innocence, youth plays on the adult nostalgia for more innocent times, coyly manipulating parents, teachers, grandparents, and babysitters to allow more freedom, more pizza, more candy, more toys. They are so cute, what harm would it do to let them stay up just a little later? With their winning smiles, smooth skin, and svelte bodies they knowingly tempt unsuspecting adults to debase themselves with unwanted, unwittingly nasty fantasies.

Ah, youth! In the grip of terrific nightmares of monsters and dragons, where ugly witches cast evil spells, children express real fears of abandonment and neglect, or adapt to real experiences of sexual abuse. Bandied about by illogical outbursts of adults, insanely weighty layers of guilt build up, one atop the other until the burden completely shapes the child's life. Never able to please the adult world, it seems, neither are children able to adequately comfort themselves to create an autonomous safe existence. Youth is forever caught in that double bind of demanding freedom but never actually wanting it, always dependent on the adult world. But there is rarely enough adequate attention or direction, never enough encouragement, or praise. Weaving and bobbing in an attempt to please everyone, and never, ever, succeeding, the best thing is to lapse into an internal world of fantasy, maybe dysfunctional, but serviceable as a buffer for self-protection.

Ah, youth! The contemporary version of youth in the United States began in the nineteenth century as fathers went to factories and offices, and women of the burgeoning middle class stayed home to take care of the children. The concept of the child was transformed from that of an inefficient but potentially worthy small adult to that of a new class of being - helpless, needing special education, special clothes, special attention. After World War II, Youth Culture - in which a majority of popular culture centers on

the wants and needs of children, adolescents, and young adults - grew to monstrous proportions, with a vengeance: gradually turned into the defining obsession of the maturing baby boomer generation. The "normative" nuclear families of the 1950s and 1960s had three to five kids, who in turn produced the next generation in the 70s and 80s. "Youth" became the vibrating center of manufacturing and service markets, and now, 30 years later, Youth Culture has evolved, mutated, and perfected itself into a continually self-replicating vastly lucrative billion dollar industry. In the 1950s, urban myth has it, gender-coded clothes - blue for boy babies and pink for girls - were invented in order to encourage parents to buy different wardrobes for successive children of different sex, eliminating the savings of hand-me-downs. This simple idea has ballooned into the mega industry of a universe of interrelated toys, clothes, media, entertainment, and food from Mickey and Minnie, to Barbie and GI Joe, to Nikes and Ninja Turtles, to Barney and Batman, the capitalist machine has marketed its fantasy commodities so effectively that children now consider it not just their *desire*, but their *right* to consume its products.

Ah, Youth! All of the old people want to be young, even as they are changing the definition of youth to encompass middle age, menopause, and new surgically uplifted faces. The constant recycling of youth-oriented products and images promises to keep adult consumers connected to the innocence and freedom of "youth" through associative consumption and voyeuristically through their children or children of relatives and friends.

Ah, youth! Third graders smoke pot. Teenagers are covered with tattoos and piercings and brandings and body cuttings. Girls starve themselves to look sexy. Gangs recruit eight-year-olds to run drugs. Teenage boys seek out preadolescent girls to have sex, to lessen the chance of getting AIDS. Prostitutes are younger and younger, and parents sell their children in order to survive. Girls have babies at younger and younger ages. Children are born into a world full of crack babies, drive-by shootings, AIDS, horrible pollution, congestion, fierce competition, no jobs, no hope, no guarantees, no future.

"What does it mean to be young in a society founded on a cult of youth?"

As youth culture has completely permeated our notions of identity, a generation of artists has grown up on the cusp of its totalitarian grip. These artists are now wrangling with its power in provocative artworks that at first look fresh and innocent: romping toddlers, Pinocchio suits, pastel pictures of nice young girls, little boys playing quietly with themselves, lots of big toys, and cuddly stuffed animals. But closer and second looks reveal a violent undercurrent running through the work which is clear evidence of "what it means to be young in a cult of youth." Youth culture puts great demands on the young to carry the responsibility - through their buying power, their "free" psyches, their fanciful whims - for what the

popular world looks and sounds like. This was all rebellion and free love during the Beatles, Woodstock, and Joni Mitchell days. But then, as mass marketing continued to get more sophisticated, watching the Brady Bunch and listening to Kiss became less directly defiant and more complacent. With Big Bird and Saturday Night Live, youth culture was openly recreating itself for its own self-serving buck, and this generation of artists, coming of age in the 1980s, are reacting with a confusing mixture of complicity and critique that leads to acts of hysteria and delirium, in a world devoid of clear moral directives or rote ethical systems.

The art world has mirrored the rise of youth culture. The eighties brought a death, of the Modernist Father, and the world of good guys in white hats and transcendental imperatives lapsed into a plethora of past styles and new theories. After the surge of critique of postmodernist feminist analysis of commodity culture and gendered symbolism waned in the late eighties (Barbara Kruger, Haim Steinbach, Jeff Koons, Jenny Holzer), a more positive art world notion of multicultural pluralism offered new freedoms. Ever youthful, and now ethnic, gendered, and sexually amorphous identities were promised.

"They move past the old critiques of commodity and media that hinged on the indictment of the moral rectitude of systems, to a more telling critique of the complicity of our own desire."[1]

But then after both the art world's commodity critique *and* multiculturalism were incorporated into mainstream commodification in effect turned into a series of television commercials all at once there is a world of no bad guys and therefore no possibility of revolution. More recently, artists are attempting to stave off or at least problematize assimilation by corporate capitalism through a number of strategies. There is a renewed use of systems of representation many taken directly from media pop culture to try to express and understand how we make "youth," and how "Youth Culture" makes us.

In the guise of irony and humor, many artists are using pop art appropriation of images and techniques from popular culture, employing surreal shifts in scale or odd contradictory juxtapositions (newly associated with the age-old influences of magic and sorcery). There is a continuation of the feminist interest in the domestic the home, the everyday, zeroing in on the baby, the child, the adolescent, the family. Artists continue to use postmodern deconstruction techniques to expose and question hidden ideologies of stereotypes, methods, and assumptions. As youth culture has gotten more sophisticated in its use of media, so have artists, who now routinely refer to film, video, pop music, and print and media advertisements borrowing their tone and pitch from popular media. But the most important, central concern of these artists is the **Body** from the minimalist presence, to the dancing body in the Happening, to the empowered feminist essentialist, to the media-generated fashion model. It is in new representations of the body which challenge both media constructs and art historical

traditions - that artists are pushing and exploring new types of **identities**. Multiethnic cross-gendered identities are melded with computer-generated, robot, comic, surgically manipulated bodies that seem to be high on psychotropic smart drugs.

But media-driven pop youth culture still, at its base, broadcasts the assumption that children are innocent, and what they want, what they desire, reflects, not manipulation, but freedom. This stereotype of innocence is the central notion attacked by the artists in *Presumed Innocence*. Each artist mirrors the mixture of rebellion and rejection of adult culture, and desire for praise and acceptance, that is evinced by youth (and the adult stuck in youth culture). But, because these artists are no longer themselves young, but have been steeped in the "youth culture," their artwork mediates, reveals, or acts out the ambivalence adults feel toward youth. Reflecting on their own "youths," the "youth" that is presented to them as central to the definitions of popular culture, and the "youth" which their children are living, each artist emphasizes a part of youthful experience that profoundly affects the psyche and the bodily identity.

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A succession of reactions to "being a youth in youth culture" is apparent, reflecting both the everyday life of growing up, and the ways in which representations intersect with the meaning of identity.

1) Tune out, go limp, avoid confrontation, retreat into fantasy world.
2) Nervous complicity and anxious assimilation.
3) Hysteria and delirium. Desperation and hopelessness. Playing at life.
4) Rage and revenge against authoritarian discipline.
5) Give them what they want. You want rambunctious neurotic teenagers - WE ARE IT. Teens fight back at media fantasy, taking it by the balls, inhabiting it and tactically unraveling its power.
6) Destroy all prisoners.

These phases of reaction to adult expectation and media hype follow the stereotypes and myths of the different stages of development, from the infant to the toddler to the socializable first grader to the sexy Lolita preteen, to the willingly desocialized senior in high school. As marketers mythologize these phases to sell products, artists in *Presumed Innocence* debunk those stereotypes.

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Cute little toddlers are very beguiling in their powerlessness, as they crawl around discovering the world, receptacles of our projections. They are raw potential, and Kim Dingle's rambunctious children romp around unfettered by societal demand. Dingle pictures the raw ugliness of one of those raw little tykes, taking her first steps - right on the face of a peer - screeching and biting her way through her little rivals

to make a mark for herself.

Julian Trigo's elegant drawings depict small children in seemingly more sophisticated moments. At first his supine lines and gentle curves appear to describe figures of little ones quietly playing amongst themselves. Yet, as one peruses more closely the intertwining bodies, their mutual activity becomes more disturbingly sexual than playful, as they merge and enter one another. Trigo actually depicts that mythical "polymorphous perversity" so oft cited in our attempts to recapture the possibilities of presocialized behavior. That we may recoil in horror when we ascertain how Trigo's figures provocatively merge into each other, suggests our ambivalence toward actually retrieving a completely free-floating sexuality.

Early in childhood development, stuffed animals serve as stand-ins for the warm touch of mom, dad, or nanny. In Mike Kelley's seminal works of embodied neurosis, worn and dirty teddy bears seem to have a life of their own inside the crib. In his pathetic, tortured tableaux of cute little stuffed bears and kitties, Kelley seems to refuse to forgive that earliest tricky switcheroo: that lie that the nipple of the bottle can actually stand in for the breast. Freudian transference aside, how *can* that inanimate stuffed rag be considered creature comfort?

Similarly, Annette Messager has "dissected" those cuddly objects of transference, splaying them open to reveal their lifeless innards. Like Kelley, she employs a pseudoscientific analysis of the toys, mirroring the adult fascination with understanding the childhood psyche.

Tony Oursler's ragamuffin dolls serve as actual sites for "psychic" projection. His benign blank cloth heads receive tiny video projections which actually talk: about being misfit and dysfunctional. They strike deep in their appeals as helpless, formless creatures; then they strike back in their disturbingly adult commentary on their very helplessness. Oursler's dolls are like the Gingerbread Man come alive, running faster and faster into the very core of adult fears (of responsibility).

Dolls present options for possible identities for the developing child: Doctor, butcher, banker, candlestick maker.... Daniel Oates mimics classic toy stereotypes in his sculptures of *Cops*. These oafish three-dimensional cartoons present authority figures as benevolent, benign, friendly types. By blowing up the scale of these Hummel-like figures, Oates challenges their playfulness with a more adult reality: policemen kill people. Social order is always maintained with an implicit threat of violence. Oates' big gun embodies this threat explicitly, even as it reveals the gargantuan size of the child's fantasy of violent aggression against the tyrannical adult world.

The abstraction of toys has been translated into animated cartoons with the development of film technology. In cartoons, ancient myths are transformed into cute contemporary tales of good and evil. Mickey Mouse, Goofy, Bugs Bunny and the like have so permeated our pop culture as to attain truly mythic presence in their own right. And now, with the evolution of the Walt Disney empire into a mass marketing of their fantasy lifestyle, the cartoon characters have become symbolic of the strangling ability

of corporate consumer culture to affect every aspect of contemporary life, including the making of art.

Joyce Pensato fuses the energy of abstract expressionist action painting with pop iconography in her huge drippy renditions of *Porky* pig and *Donald* duck. The familiar faces are transformed into scary monsters, like nightmares in which adults actually turn into evil looming brutes. Todd Gray's looming photographs of *Goofy* and Tweety Bird become shadowy ghosts terrorizing the sanctity of a child's supposedly safe cloister. Janet Biggs's blowups of cartoon night-lights also switch a benevolent presence into a demonized threat.

Paul McCarthy has emerged as a kind of master of turning the cute world of cartoon myth on its head. In his Pinnocchio installation he demands that viewers physically enter the fabled fantasy by donning the cumbersome costumes which mimic the classic puppet's costume. His scary fun house of video monitors features similarly clothed actors staining the purity of Disney's snappy scenario with fake excrement (chocolate syrup) and blood (ketchup), suffused with repetitive movements that are not, but suggest, perverse sexual behavior. McCarthy's self-immolating antics truly depict the dark side of Disney - the repression, submission, and fascistic social order are exploded into regressive, spewing chaos.

Television sitcoms and epic popular music - two mainstays of decades of youth culture entertainment - are subjects explored by artists as sites for identity maintenance. Todd Haynes' video *Dottie Gets Spanked* presents a young boy's fascination with the female lead of an "I Love Lucy"-like television series. The boy's affinity for the campy spectacle of zany female antics is frowned upon by his gender-stereotyped family, and his TV fantasy has to be buried. Alix Pearlstein montages simple symbolic portrayals of birth, adolescence, sex, and death in her *Bam-Bam-Bam....* In a style akin to cheesy local advertising, she presents the relentlessness of youth culture's pressure to mythicize one's life - to make it ripe for TV drama. In a comical evolutionary sequence, Pearlstein juxtaposes Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven" with images of a naked crawling human-thing becoming a regular sophisticated woman ready for the future.

If the success of youth culture has been to present "youth" as simultaneously innocent and experienced, many artists have taken the challenge to give the culture what it wants: If the media have created a hypersexualized youngster capable of superhuman consumption and seduction, then this fantasy goddess/monster image is what artists are giving back to the culture. This contemporary morphing of pop culture back onto itself in the fine arts is similar to how disenfranchised groups use dominant culture to their own ends. French philosopher Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* observed that "the tactics of consumption, the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong,... lend a political dimension to everyday practices."[2] If earlier generations took hold of the streets or the newspapers, occupying the college campuses to assert power, or taking to the open highway systems for escape, the younger generations are taking hold of the power of representation of the body

and the self offered up by commodity culture. Sally Mann has photographed her own children in candid scenarios that heighten their innate sexuality (in instances of polymorphous perversity some would rather censor). She's allowing the participation of her children in their own self-representation, perhaps refusing a complete commodification.

Lisa Yuskavage paints little girls in Rubenesque bodies misshapen by projections of desire. Small adolescent bodies sport huge perky breasts and giant protruding buttocks. The artist's saccharin palate of acrid greens, pastel pinks, yellows, and oranges prettifies the female forms which seem to conform to pedophilic interests in the guise of voyeuristic youth culture. But these glaring Lolita images reflect back a physical possibility of that lust, perhaps monstrous, perhaps glorious.

Aura Rosenberg worked on a project which paired adults (many are artists) with willing children to make up their faces, using all sorts of colors and patterns. The photographs which document the results reveal the curious collaborations which developed between the adults' and the children's desires to describe and alter projections of identity.

Youth culture manufactures Lolitas at a dime a dozen. Inez van Lamsweerde's photographs of prenubile youths glorify their power to titillate. Capturing and mutating the adolescent desire to fully embrace fame and fortune via outrageous body manipulation and wild activity, Lamsweerde also gives back to the culture the desires it projects on the consumer.

Media culture, however, has evolved into such a science of self-continuation that the freedoms from it offered by Mann, Yuskavage, or Lamsweerde are being quickly appropriated into its milieux and retooled into commodities. The continual attempts of young people to rebel and remake themselves are in turn now continually spied upon. A marketing group called "Sputnik" offers corporate marketers and manufacturers periodic reports on trends in the youth "underground" so that they can anticipate the next craze which will make it to the mainstream. "We uncover the belief systems and translate how their [the fringe, the underground, youth] thoughts and actions will eventually influence mainstream youth lifestyle....We track the movements among these progressive mindsets and interpret them into actionable opportunities for marketing, new product development, brand management and advertising."[3]

Under this inordinate amount of scrutiny, extreme reactions seem to be quite appropriate. Karen Kilimnik has completely embraced the fantasy of the fashion industry, adoring the super models, drawing them and commenting on the reports of their lives - as a perfect, exemplary teenage girl awash in her own recreation of the hype. Keith Cottingham has bypassed the limitations of any real, fleshy body, by completely manufacturing a traditionally handsome boy/man via an elaborate computer process. "Cloning" this perfect homoerotic fantasy into a coy threesome, Cottingham offers his boys back to the youth culture as its perfect subject.

Jake and Dinos Chapman also present the perfect subject of youthful consumption. but their little-girl mannequins with multiple heads and limbs set with multiple genital and anal orifices beg more

the pleasure of abuse than the abuse of pleasure. The Chapmans' work is the most effective representation of the horrific nature of youth culture - and that - in the midst of hopes of fertility - it has an underlying death wish, no matter how masked in its cartoon excess.

Taro Chiezo presents the demise of the human body in the cartoonish - but not so impossible - merging of the human with the technological. His allusions to superhuman heroes evolved into robots present a futuristic way to continue to rejuvenate youth culture beyond the limits of the flesh.

With all of the new fantasies of technological mutations, body surgery, mind-altering drugs, the actual experience of growing up must always return to the everyday experience of the individual body. Part of the incessant work required in this culture is to continually separate the constructed from the real. Paul McCarthy has stated that a driving force in his work is a fear that he might lose the capacity to tell the fake from the real.

Larry Clark's movie *Kids* and Tracey Moffatt's photographic reproductions of kids' experiences present two sides of this fake/real coin: In his sexy movie following high-school skateboarders around New York, Clark recreates a youthful experience that remains in the service of his own adult agenda, even if it is his desire to be a kid again himself. There is a romantic positioning of the young person vis-à-vis freedom in the world from adult responsibility.

On the flip side, Moffatt has young people recreate moments in their lives when they are overwhelmed by a responsibility of the adult world thrust upon them when they were not developmentally prepared to tackle it. The youthful freedom is not romanticized but exposed as frustrating, sometimes hopeless and painful, and always tied to emotional or financial dependence.

In their re-creations and re-presentations of youthful fact and fiction, Clark and Moffatt join the rest of the artists in *Presumed Innocence* to explore the vast terrain - part deadly battlefield and part safe teenage bedroom - in which the demands and expectations of youth culture wrestle and cuddle with the realities and power of the ever-youthful individual. A generation of artists interested in representation and social identity have opted to take the power, inhabit the stereotype, and mutate it to establish their own authority.

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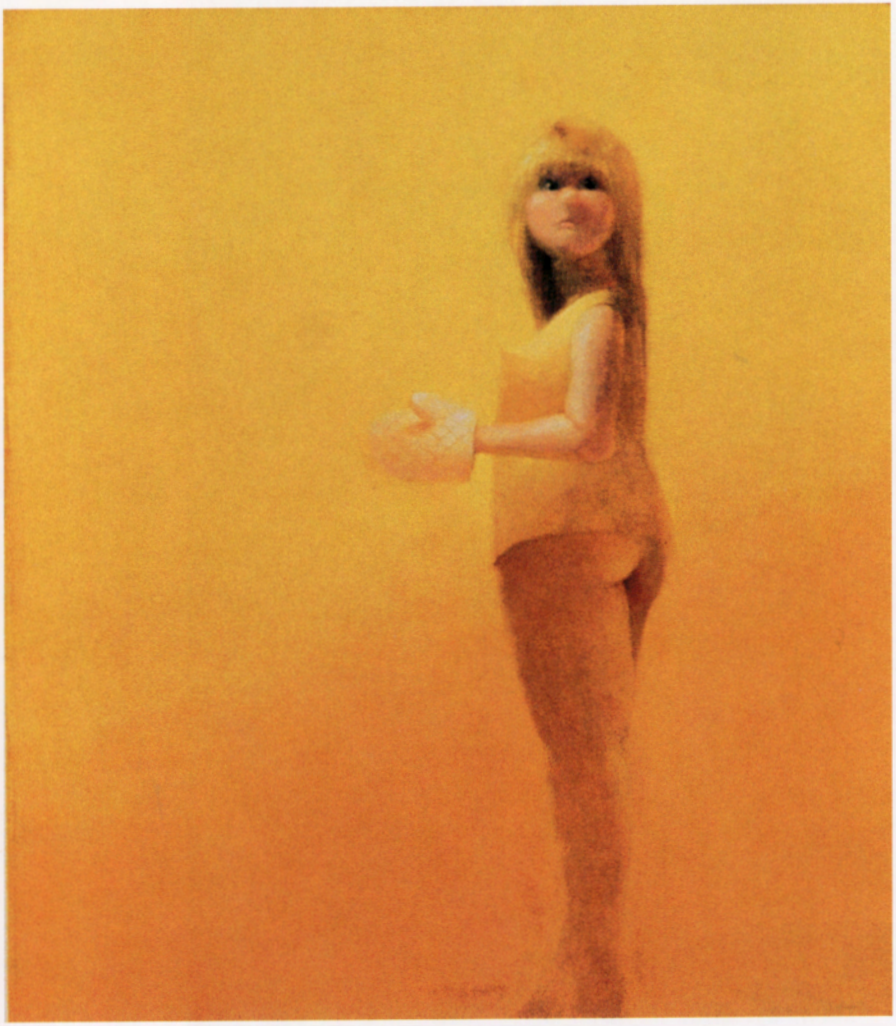
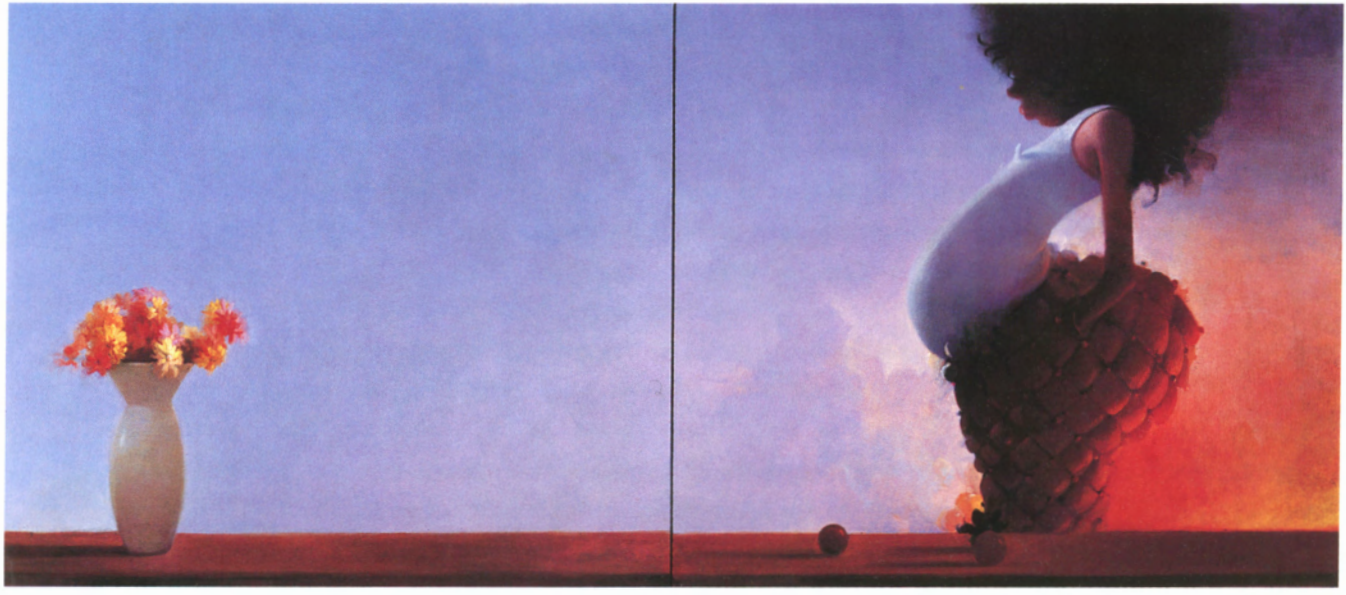
1. Al Harris and Karen Emenheiser, *Faith in Doubt* (New York: University at Buffalo Art Gallery, 1994).

2. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p xvii.

3. Janine Lopiano-Misdom and Joanne De Luca, *Street Trends: How Today's Alternative Youth Cultures Are Creating Tomorrow's Mainstream Markets* (New York: HarperBusiness, 1997), p xi-xii.



Lisa Yuskavage, *Blonde with Oven Mitt*, 1994



Lisa Yuskavage, *Good Evening Hamass*, 1997

YOUTH'S PURGATORY: PRESUMPTIONS OF INNOCENCE AND OTHER CHILDHOOD ROLES

Robert Hobbs

Although childhood in the past has been presumed to be a time of extended innocence, as the title of this exhibition and catalogue ironically suggests, innocence is only one of many roles that children have played in their obstacle-ridden journey to adulthood. Complex societies necessitate an ever increasing reliance on specialized languages predicated on shorthand typifications (roles) that have assumed the objectivity of reality.[1] In order for society to function efficiently, adults as well as children need to ratify some roles as the norm. As with other publicly sanctioned parts, childhood innocence is a social and historical development, not a natural state. Its continued embracement in the twentieth century may stem from its important ideological function of solidifying and stabilizing society's need to believe in its innate goodness and ability to renew itself with each forthcoming generation. Rarely, however, has this ideology been recognized for what it is: a widespread endorsement of a highly artificial philosophical system traceable to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile* (1762). In this treatise on the education of a young boy, Rousseau equates Émile's goodness with his ability to realize his natural potential, thus romanticizing and legitimizing nature.

This ideology has pervaded the work of even so-called documentary artists such as Lewis Hine, who, almost a century and a half after Rousseau, made gritty photographs of working children. His images of young, helpless factory workers appear to counteract the myth of humanity's intrinsic goodness, even though they are in fact predicated on it. Hine's photographs served a social activist goal that ultimately resulted in child labor laws, but they also portrayed the same insistent belief in innocence as painter John George Brown's homeless, yet ingratiatingly wholesome boys. Brown's scrubbed waifs personified early stages of the Horatio Alger "rags-to-riches" myth that seems to have exonerated Gilded Age entrepreneurs of possible guilt feelings about the dire living conditions suffered by great numbers of street children.

Only in the 1950s when teens were recognized as a distinct market was the myth of childhood innocence partially dismantled. And even then, in some of the most celebrated films of the time, such as *East of Eden* (1955) and *Rebel without a Cause* (also 1955), the characters played by the decade's proclaimed renegade, James Dean, were viewed as misunderstood rather than malevolent.[2]

In successive decades, the myth of presumed innocence has been challenged by other social constructs. In the 1960s, the youth of this country were rebelling against both the Vietnam War and the rampant consumerism resulting from the peak period of American prosperity (roughly 1954-1964) that

social critic Thomas Hine has named "populuxe."[3] Hollywood projected, on this formerly inculpable screen, images proclaiming the existence of untrammeled evil. Films such as *Children of the Damned* (1964), which is a sequel to the 1960 film *Village of the Damned*, and *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) played with the tensions between society's former assumptions of children's natural goodness and its realization that a lack of guile could mask undeniable evil. These contending roles dramatized in shocking and elaborate, yet ultimately nonrealistic narratives, the mass culture's growing need to cope with youth's mounting independence as a distinct and particularly vociferous subculture.

In ensuing decades the myths for describing youth have changed dramatically as adults began to lose their unflagging belief in childhood as an idyllic, almost sacred realm and accepted it as an unsettling purgatory enunciated by increased violence and substance abuse. Both perpetrators of crime and its victims, youth has become the site of a number of power struggles in which society acts out its fears and aggressions. These conflicting and overlapping discourses have gained momentum from a number of striking statistics such as these from a 1995 survey:

> 70 percent of 12- to 13-year-olds know someone their age who smokes; drinks: 44 percent; does drugs: 33 percent; has a gun: 29 percent; has been to jail: 27 percent; has a child or is pregnant: 20 percent; has been forced to have sex: 12 percent....[4]

In hopeful contrast to their familiarity with the pitfalls of contemporary life, a majority of children in the same survey said that their number one future goal was to marry and have a good family; and their second was to establish a closeness to God.[5]

The general loss of idealism about childhood is symptomatic of unsettling questions people have asked themselves in recent decades. Do we have an essential identity or are we merely role playing? Does reality exist, or is it merely the unexamined face of innumerable simulacra - models of reality for which there is no substantive basis? Are people only blank slates on which society inscribes its rules and roles? Is individuality, as classic Marxists have pointed out for more than a century, a necessary adjustment to product differentiation, whereby individuals are rated by their consumer likes and dislikes? Are we being trivialized by our economy and so mediated by our technology that our thoughts, attitudes, and desires are merely a set of programmed and predictable permutations? These and many more questions have been plaguing greater numbers of people in recent years, who in turn have been projecting their insecurities onto children.

But instead of allaying their parents' apprehensions, many of these offspring have escaped both parental authority and a concomitant crisis of belief through an uncritical acceptance of technology's quick fixes. Taking the form of television and video games in recent years, these mass-media art forms have too often provided both illusorily simple and extremely violent solutions to problems by transmogrifying them into easily sanctioned enemies.

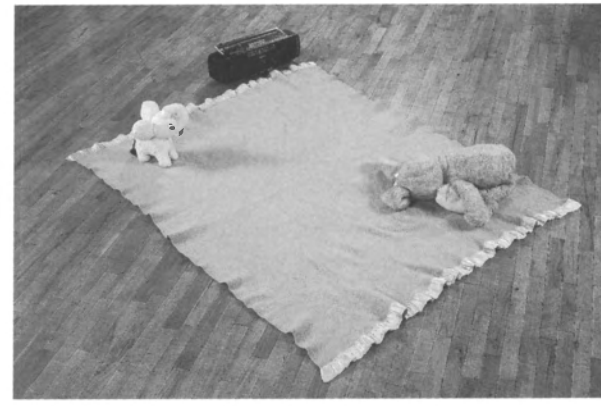
Since the late 1980s a number of artists have responded to this crisis of identity by mirroring societal projections on the seemingly blank screen of childhood. Rather than using art as a propagandistic tool to proselytize a given definition of childhood or adjudicate among competing roles, they have taken the far tougher route of reframing dominant constructs and lining up society's supposed culprits. Not wishing to make decisions for viewers, artists in this exhibition have enticed them through the distancing and compelling lens of art to consider the ways that children and their playthings have furnished both late twentieth-century society and its new technologies with a number of intriguing masks. Although these artists might have chosen to assuage their viewers with comforting, even nostalgic images, they have chosen to deal with some of the most complex and difficult personae currently assuming the face of reality in the daily news. The partially deconstructed masks appearing in this art are necessarily ambiguous: children are neither good nor evil, neither entirely blank screens nor fully formed individuals. They are often caught between competing role models as evidenced by Janet Biggs' preternaturally tall preschool children in *When Five Year Olds Are Ten Feet Tall* (1993), Sally Mann's photographs of her daughter *Jessie as Jessie* and *Jessie as Madonna* (1990), and Karen Kilimnick's teenage girl protagonists whose dreams assume the form of mass-media clichéd representations of sophistication, even though their juvenile handwriting and stereotypical drawing styles give them away. In addition Lisa Yuskavage's prepubescent females' very real problems with newly discovered sexuality and pregnancy are at odds with the sickly sweet purity of the dime-store art genre in which they are rendered. Between the polarities of good and evil, a number of artists in *Presumed Innocence* have created important spaces whereby models of reality can be dissected and analyzed if viewers wish. An extreme case of role-playing is Tony Oursler's *Spectral Disorder* (1995), which consists of a limp rag doll on whose blank face are screened via a small video projector fifteen different personality disorders.[6]

Created earlier than Oursler's is the work of his friend Mike Kelley, a California artist from a Catholic mid-western working-class family, who began in the late 1980s deconstructing truisms of childhood. He explains:

> The modernist cult of the child is generally a very naive and antipsychological one, like the idea of the "noble savage." After Freud we all know that children have sexual drives and all that. So it's funny to me that a lot of the art-world discussion of childhood imagery still centers on the child as innocent instead of talking about the reasons for maintaining that myth. My work is about showing these ideas as adult constructs - the construction of a false innocence, the denying of children their identity, and the projection on top of that of the romantic idea of the artist as a regressive personality.[7]

In his art Kelley finds ways to make inroads into the ideology of innocence by pointing up its absurdity. In *Dialogue #2 (Transparent White Glass/Transparent Black Glass)* (1992), stuffed animals poised on a child's blanket, together with a cassette playing a barely audible philosophical discussion, heighten the

contradictoriness of two adult versions of reality: a mandated innocence represented by the toys and the realm of abstract thinking that the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget believes to be acquired by children beginning around age twelve.[8] Piaget's genetic epistemology based on suppositions about nature's hypothesized timetable is destabilized but not denied in Kelley's work. Related to his *Half a Man* series that he initiated in 1987, *Dialogue #2* presents two views of adolescence: the first is symbolized by the metonym of well-used childhood toys to which an adolescent might still cling, while the second refers to the acquisition of the ability to deal with concepts, represented by the barely audible philosophical ideas played on the cassette.



Mike Kelley, *Dialogue #2 (Transparent White Glass/Transparent Black Glass)*, 1992. Mixed media, 74 x 49 x 11" Collection of Susan and Lewis Manilow.

Kelley's *Ahh... Youth!* (1991), used as the cover for the Sonic Youth's 1992 CD *Dirty*, plays on this adult way of musing about children's ineptitudes while condoning them.[9] The piece presents an adolescent photograph of the artist as an acne-ridden supernerd, which is one mugshot among a series of stuffed toys (both manufactured and homemade) that might have been legacies of Kelley's own childhood. This work implies that while our society might congratulate itself on its widespread efforts to recycle its waste metals, plastics, and paper, it continues to discard its most important resource, its youth, once the initial lustre of innocence has begun to show signs of wear. But, despite their cavalier attitude toward teenagers, adults continue to maintain an unwavering belief in the inculpability of preadolescents as the title *Ahh... Youth!* indicates.

Kelley's reclamation of discarded toys in this work has a basis in his childhood when he saw a puppet on a children's TV program "who was supposed to be on an endless stairway and falls off into nothingness."[10] Recalling this plunge into an abyss as "the most frightening media thing I can remember from my childhood," Kelley appears in this and other works to be resurrecting both this lost puppet and his adolescence. Rather than regarding adolescence as a natural category, Kelley judges it a case of simple economic expediency:

> Though biologically adults, adolescents are legally children. Adolescence is a by-product of industrialization. Because these people aren't wanted in the work force, since there are too many workers, you extend the notion of childhood past the point of biological adulthood.[11]

A social construct naturalized as an extension of childhood, adolescence is an ideology that is as absurd and as haunting as the lineup of human and surrogate human suspects populating *Ahh... Youth!*

While Kelley's fascination with childhood no doubt stems from his own acknowledged dysfunctional upbringing, it also resonates with the sensibility of abjection defined in Julia Kristeva's book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*[12] (published in French in 1980 and in English translation in 1982) which appears to have inspired a range of 1980s work, such as early Kiki Smith sculptures and Andres Serrano photographs, both of which emphasize the role of body fluids including blood, sweat, saliva, semen, and urine in defining the postmodern and no longer autonomous self.

In this book Kristeva builds on Jacques Lacan's elucidation of the mirror stage of infant development in which a child learns that its reflected image is both itself and not itself since the mirrored image's completeness makes the child painfully aware of the inadequacies of its own body. Building on the theory of the mirror stage, Lacan conjectures that the imaginary basis of the ego represents an impossible standard first for children and then later for adults to attain.

In Kristeva's system, the division of the self signaled by Lacan's mirror stage is dramatized as self-rejection: infants, who have regarded their mothers as inherent parts of themselves, now abnegate this mother-self. Kristeva's updated and insidious oedipal narrative characterizes a recurrent growth pattern in which one rejects aspects of oneself (Kristeva's "preconscious semiotic") in order to come to terms with the symbolic name-of-the-father, i.e., the biological father who is known indirectly through signs. Julian Trigo's painting of a mother together with the proliferated fragments of her look-alike child addresses the child's identification with its mother.

Writing in a poetic and evocative manner that has proven appealing to a number of artists since the publication of *The Powers of Horror*, Kristeva explains how abjection might begin with a loathing for a particular food such as milk - no doubt a reference to mother's milk:

> When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk - harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring - I experience a gagging sensation.... Along with sight-clouding dizziness, *nausea* makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. "I" want none of that element, sign of their desire; "I" do not want to listen, "I" do not assimilate it, "I" expel it. But since the food is not an "other" for "me," who am only in their desire, I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish *myself*. That detail, perhaps an insignificant one, but one that they ferret out, emphasize, evaluate, that trifle turns me inside out, guts sprawling; it is thus that *they* see that "I" am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death. During that course in which "I" become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit.[13]

In this passage Kristeva places the "I" in quotation marks to emphasize a new sense of self that follows the infant's self-disgust for allowing the desire of one's parents to supplant its own feelings, followed by a rejection of itself including that alien desire. This abjection necessitates a symbolic death

Happy Worker, Tom the Postman, 1993
Wood, enamel paint, ultra-cal, aluminum, acrylic, shellac and oil paint
18 x 20 x 12"
Collection of Jeffrey Deitch, New York

Tony Oursler

Spectral Disorder, 1995
Video projector, VCR, videotape, cloth doll, chair
Irregular dimensions
Collection of Noah Garson and Ron Schwartz, New York

Flower Baby, 1995
Video projector, VCR, videotape, cloth doll
Irregular dimensions
Collection of Paul and Sara Monroe
Photo ©Katherine Wetzel, Richmond, Virginia

Alix Pearlstein

Bam-Bam-Bam..., 1994
Videotape, color and sound, 5.24 min.
Courtesy Postmasters Gallery, New York

Joyce Pensato

Untitled (Porky), 1996
Enamel paint on linen
90 x 72"
Courtesy Max Protetch Gallery

Untitled (Donald), 1997
Enamel paint on linen
90 x 72"
Courtesy Max Protetch Gallery

Aura Rosenberg

Mike Kelley/Carmen Rosenberg-Miller, 1996
C-print
40 x 30"
Edition of 3
Courtesy Suzanne and Howard Feldman

Jim Shaw/Joe Siena, 1996
C-print
40 x 30"
Edition of 3
Courtesy the artist and Richard Telles Fine Art, Los Angeles

Allan McCollum/Joe Ahearn, 1996
C-print
40 x 30"
Edition of 3
Courtesy the artist and Wooster Gardens, New York

Kiki Smith/Carmen Rosenberg-Miller, 1996
C-print
40 x 30"
Edition of 3
Courtesy the artist and Richard Telles Fine Art, Los Angeles

Julian Trigo

Untitled, 1995
Acrylic and charcoal on canvas
78 x 62"
Courtesy Luhring Augustine Gallery, New York

Untitled, 1995
Oil and charcoal on canvas
76 x 58"
Courtesy Luhring Augustine Gallery, New York

Lisa Yuskavage

Blonde with Diapers and Toothpick, 1994
Oil on linen
34 x 30"
Collection of Randolfo Rocha, New York

Sweet Thing, 1994
Oil on linen
34 x 30"
Collection of Randolfo Rocha, New York

Blonde with Oven Mitt, 1994
Oil on linen
34 x 30"
Collection of Randolfo Rocha, New York

Good Evening Hamass, 1997
Oil on linen
42 x 97"
Collection of Vicki and Kent Logan