

# The New York Review of Books

## Corpus Meets Corpse

Elvia Wilk  
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The intricate and densely referential video work of Mary Reid Kelley and Patrick Kelley confronts standard history with the fact of the body

### Reviewed:

#### Mary Reid Kelley and Patrick Kelley: Blood Moon

an exhibition at the Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, September 24, 2021–April 3, 2022  
Catalog of the exhibition edited by Karen Patterson  
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Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia/Mary Reid Kelley and Patrick Kelley

Seeing a video made by the artists Mary Reid Kelley and Patrick Kelley for the first time can feel like encountering a newly invented language. How best to take it in? Should you sit? Stand? Close your eyes and listen? Take notes? In each of their black-and-white videos, usually about ten minutes long, a handful of characters, most of them acted by Mary, tell a story in rhyming verse full of off-kilter wordplay, double entendres, and semantic switcheroos. The density of the puns and the breakneck pace of their delivery, combined with the visual cacophony of the set design, might compel you to watch it on loop.

My first encounter with their work was at the SITE Santa Fe Biennial in 2010, which included their fifteen-minute *You Make Me Iliad*. In what has become the duo's signature visual style, all props, scenography, and costumes are intricately designed, thickly painted, and ornately decorated: no surface is left untouched. Animations and digital effects are often added. The many layers of artifice create a cascade of optical illusions and visual puns. Is that object casting a

shadow, or is the shadow a painting of a shadow? Is that wood grain, or wood painted with grain? Not only the sets and props but the characters are painted; in *You Make Me Iliad*, the hollows of their cheeks and nostrils and nasolabial folds are carved out with black paint, false eyes protruding from their faces like golf balls with black vertical stripes for pupils. The whole visual field is made to resemble an animation, and the appearance of a simulated flat plane—a drawing is usually meant to be seen from only one angle—moving and shifting is continually disconcerting. How many dimensions are the characters inhabiting?

*You Make Me Iliad* takes place toward the end of World War I, in German-occupied Belgium, as a German soldier (played by Mary) is attempting to write a Homeric epic. He remarks that with the war waning he has experienced “a sad deflation of my three dimensions”—not only an indicator of his emotional state but an apt description of the aesthetic universe he inhabits: a spooky silhouetted scenography that would not be out of place in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*.

The self-aggrandizing author-soldier, believing he has “reproduced the archetypes of drama,” nonetheless suspects that something is lacking in his “heroic tale.” Then it comes to him: “I’m missing women!” So, in search of a heroine he ventures to a brothel, where he is greeted by a medical officer, a stout, helmeted man played by Mary’s sister Alice Praisner. After offering a smelly tincture to ward off venereal disease, the officer blames the loss of the Trojan War on a paucity of sex workers, suggesting that the current conflict may yet be won thanks to the strength of Belgium’s sex trade.

The soldier then meets a sex worker (played by Mary) who is no stranger to classical literature—nor to the violence of war. She may not be on the front lines, but her own home was “sacked” and she’s been worn to “the nub” by men. She argues that the soldier’s use of her life story in his historical drama would be no better than a man’s taking sexual advantage of her: “You scribes just utilize a different orifice./So stick it in your ear!” The woman is topless in the scene, yet her nakedness is clothed in paint—her breasts are overlaid with drawings of breasts, a body overlaid on her body—and both her lips and her teeth are blacked out, her speech emanating from a peculiar kind of void.

*You Make Me Iliad* is the last in a series of four videos by the Kelleys set during World War I. The series began with *Camel Toe* (2008)—their first collaborative moving-image work—a short film in which a bug-eyed, stubbled British aviator narrates the story of his two loves: his aircraft (a Sopwith Camel biplane) and his woman (“A charming ballet dancer,/I call her Camel Toe”). Alas, he reports, his beloved Camel Toe has disappeared into a bathroom with an airplane-shaped vibrator and hasn’t returned. In *The Queen’s English* (2008), a nurse stationed on the western front delivers a twenty-one-stanza soliloquy

about the inadequacy of formal written language to describe the carnage of war: “While a hand’s for writing letters,/What exactly do you use/To put an eggshell back together?” And *Sadie, the Saddest Sadist* (2009) centers on a munitions-factory worker with black coins for eyes and another lipsticked hole for a mouth, who dreams of shucking her “bondage” and becoming a “Modern Girl”—but ends up getting “the clap” from a sailor.

Mutilation, disease, and death pervade this suite of videos, but the gruesome material is punnified and neatened into metered language, then given an almost singsong quality by Mary’s unpretentious and sometimes melodic delivery. Each tale confronts standard history and historiography with the fact of the body: the corpus meets the corpse. Whether the dead body is the butchered soldier about whom the Queen’s English has nothing genuine to say, or an exhausted sex or factory worker whose unrecognized labor supports the violence of war, in the Kelleys’ videos we see and hear the people most dramatic renderings, even tragedies, omit. Where is the front line, really? And where are the “front lines”—the outlines—of the body itself?

The soldier in *You Make Me Iliad* remarks on the sex worker’s “technique of keeping Oral tradition” alive. He’s making a comparison between her speech acts and sex acts (just as she equates his writing with sexual violation), but the subtext is that oral practices—in all senses—have a long tradition, and that many unrecorded stories are no less important to history for not having been written down. “I’m Alpha Female, and I’m Alpha Betting,” the sex worker retorts, “that you can author, but can’t spell, disaster.” In this work it’s only through misspellings, slips of the tongue, denials of single meanings, and a certain *wrongness* of language that the human toll of the disaster comes into focus.

The films set in World War I were followed by a trilogy rooted in classical mythology, starting with the truly maximalist *Priapus Agonistes* (2013), which intersperses scenes from the Minotaur’s labyrinth with a contemporary church volleyball game (Priapus, god of fertility, defeats the Presbyterian team), and ending with *The Thong of Dionysus* (2015), which features a brilliant prop collection of op-art updates on Minoan pottery; a Dionysus with drawn-on abs and a goofy, floppy stuffed penis; and a chorus of merkin-wearing maenads.

Considering her self-made drag, Mary’s acting could be compared to the self-portraiture of Cindy Sherman. The pathos of both their performance styles comes with a dose of mordant hilarity—it is the hyperbole of the pantomime that is both charming and disarming. But the Kelleys are gonzo historians, and their art-historical references are far-reaching. Among their inspirations the artists have cited George Herriman’s *Krazy Kat* comic strips, Samuel Beckett, and tombstone epitaphs. The curator and critic Robert Storr calls their style an “amalgam of Fernand Leger–like Cubism, Robert Crumb–like

caricature, and Mack Sennett and Jean Cocteau–like *mise-en-scène*.” For a show at Kunsthalle Bremen in 2016–2017 called “A Marquee Piece of Sod,” Mary selected works by artists including Max Beckmann, Otto Dix, and Käthe Kollwitz from the museum collection to display alongside their World War I–set videos, making clear their allusions to the collapsing picture planes and stark portraiture of early-twentieth-century objectivism and expressionism.

But the Kelleys’ work is fundamentally language-based in a way that most visual and even performance art is not. Each film begins with the text. The pair, who are married, began collaborating in 2008, when Mary was enrolled in Yale’s MFA program. Their working process is essentially this: Mary compiles source texts (she has called this process a self-initiated “poetry school”), everything from Greek epics to nineteenth-century verse to inscriptions found on military monuments. She then starts to stretch the text, tangle it, throw it in the air—to play.

Sometimes source material is borrowed wholesale and recombined, as with the 2017 video *In the Body of the Sturgeon*, whose script is a cento composed entirely of words from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s *Song of Hiawatha*. In other cases, the material becomes a jumping-off point for improvisation. In general, the scripts are neither completely borrowed nor completely novel, neither estranged from history nor beholden to it. After the script is composed, Mary and Patrick begin to storyboard and design the costumes, props, and sets together. Mary constructs and paints all the costumes and sets, then performs for the camera, and Patrick shoots the footage, which he digitally manipulates to some degree in postproduction.

Initially, artistic authorship was attributed to Mary, until their 2011 *The Syphilis of Sisyphus* (syphilitic sex worker strolls 1852 Parisian streets, gets arrested by “the Morals Police”), which was credited to “Mary Reid Kelley with Patrick Kelley.” In 2016, after Mary won a MacArthur fellowship, the conjunction “with” was replaced with “and”—and past works were reattributed as such. Given their work’s fascination with the names history forgets, it is curious to note that this type of career evolution, in which one artist is given credit and accolades for what institutions later acknowledge to be a collaborative practice, typically proceeds along different gender lines. The curator Jenelle Porter writes:

This rectification has challenged galleries and museums, whose markets and histories extol solo virtuosity and have not, generally, adopted nonhierarchical frameworks for creative collaborations—especially ones that are artistic *and* romantic.

Mary and Patrick are highly skilled, crafty, ingenious. They have added a few technological enhancements to their process over the years, but their approach is remarkably consistent. Some critics have said that

their projects have a “handmade” look, and it’s true that they tend to make only what can be produced together on-site. (For a while, a green screen was set up in their living room.) But they both emphasize that a DIY or ad hoc vibe is not the goal. Mary has said that this is “not an aesthetic that we’re choosing among the vast range of available ways of solving problems.” Their work relies on the agility and intimacy of using the tools at hand. The cracks in what might otherwise be a totalizing experience (bits of tape peeking out, not-quite-perfect perspectival lines) in turn create an intimacy with the viewer. While watching, I find myself trying to reverse-engineer what they’ve done.

The couple’s most recent work, commissioned by the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia, represents a slight departure, in that others were included in the production process. The Kelleys originally intended to do a residency there, but the pandemic turned this into a long-distance effort. Workers at the museum made many of the costumes and props based on drawings or 3D computer models from the Kelleys, which were then mailed to them for further tweaking. The resulting show, called “Blood Moon,” is a two-floor installation that includes two new videos, several wall projections, and a series of totemic sculptural assemblages that look as if they were composed of props from the videos. The sculptures also contain video monitors that show flickering videos of the moon, importing the moving image into static objects.

The Fabric Workshop has published the first substantial monograph on the Kelleys’ work; the richness of the accompanying essays, including those by Storr and Porter, matches the abundance and complexity of the material at hand.<sup>1</sup> Equally valuable, though, is the comprehensive section at the end: every work by the Kelleys since 2008 has an entry with detailed description, imagery, and script. For the first time, I had all the texts before me at once; I read them one after another, finding jokes inside jokes inside jokes, and many connections I never would have been able to make otherwise. Reading the scripts by themselves felt almost like cheating.

In *Blood Moon* (2021), shown on the ground floor of the Fabric Workshop, we find two pumpkin-headed lovers, Lenny and Betty, seated on haybales in an otherwise empty white space, the lack of an elaborate set representing another departure in method. Lenny is, at first, a floppy dummy with a featureless pumpkin head; Betty is played by Mary and her pumpkin has a carved-out space for her nose and mouth. From Betty’s polka-dotted shirtwaist dress and Lenny’s worker overalls and dirtied boots, we might gather that they’re on a Depression-era farm. And Lenny shares the name of John Steinbeck’s character Lennie from *Of Mice and Men*, a poor and mentally disabled itinerant farmhand who repeatedly commits unintentional acts of violence. Betty ostensibly stands in for the unnamed wife of the lead

farmhand in the novel, who, in the climactic scene, falls victim to Lennie's misguided force. (Her name may also allude to the childish-but-sexy, huge-headed Betty Boop of the same era.)

After punning on the great masters ("It was Manet and Monet a moon ago,/We were close as two coats of warm paint"), Betty expresses a desire to create her own living masterpiece: she slathers paint on Lenny's pumpkin head ("Oh Pumpkinhead boy, let me trompe your l'oeil,/Let me draw on my own expertise!") and then carves out his face like a demented jack-o'-lantern. At this point Lenny becomes animate. Mary plays both characters, who converse about the colonialism and exploitation upon which North America was founded. "There's Minnie and Mickey a curse on the land," Lenny declares. "I hit Plymouth rock with a powerful shock," he confesses to Betty; "I made all my stacks laying whips onto backs,/...And I spent it on project Manhattan."

Lenny and Betty joke about their status as pumpkins, the fact that they are, like the economic underclasses, used and exploited as resources. At the end Betty dismembers herself into a stew—or rather a stock, as in the stock market, the current "larder" for wealth far abstracted from goods like gourds grown from the soil. As Betty boils, Lenny exults: finally "we can live off our own liquid assets!" His pumpkin head escapes his body and floats across a black screen, becoming the titular blood moon, the enduring witness of the curse over the land (perhaps also a reference to Georges Méliès's *Le voyage dans la lune*).

At its most literal, this is a spooky Halloween tale about the violence of treating people as raw material, like the land, for exploitation and extraction. The video is preoccupied with the distinctions between the human, organic, and inert, as well as the structures of power that distinguish them. As Lenny says, "I've been sucking my meals through a straw in my heels/Since God planted my feet on the ground."

In this and many of the Kelleys' videos, bodies are dismembered—hacked apart and repurposed, composted or stewed—just as syntax and grammar are mangled to produce unexpected, novel meanings. *This Is Offal* (2016)—which was also staged in live performances at the Tate Modern, the Berliner Festspiele, and STUK Kunstencentrum & M-Museum—shows a drowned woman lying dead on a slab at the morgue. The attending doctor performs an autopsy and removes her parts and organs, which each speak out loud: the heart, liver, and foot joke, argue, babble, and harangue. The result is not quite body horror, the verisimilitude not great enough for outright repulsion, yet the cartoonishness of the gore is one reason the work is so disconcerting. There's a threat beneath the charade.

Language accompanies violence; language can be violent. In *You Make Me Iliad* the soldier tells us that the “hero” of his epic tale is “punctuated/By shrapnel”—and by line breaks (“every comma,/Pauses”). Only by dismembering and reassembling language, such work suggests, can history be composed anew, be repurposed for the current time. Text lifts off the page, becomes a new form of oral history. In an interview included in the catalog, Mary says, “Rhyme happens in the body. The meaning doesn’t make it rhyme.... Our ears and our body make it rhyme.” Perhaps this is why silently reading the texts feels almost improper.

Throughout the Fabric Workshop exhibition are ten looping wall projections that depict a solitary figure with a misshapen squash-like head covered in Band-Aids. The figure stands or crouches, lonely and odd and isolated under a spotlight in what looks like an underground burrow. Upstairs is another pumpkin-based video, *I’m Jackson Pollock* (2021). A man with a pumpkin head and dressed in a suit loses his clothing piece by piece and gains more pumpkins all over his limbs while reciting rhyming lines that follow a simple pattern: *artist, social phenomenon*. Here are the first four:

*I’m the Jackson Pollock of service to Moloch,  
I’m the Nat King Cole of selling your soul,  
I’m the Maria Tallchief of climate grief,  
I’m the Mae West of the Trinity Test.*

A critique accumulates about how high culture is complicit in systems of power, but it comes across as somewhat generalized moralizing. Flattening a slew of cultural figures into a list obfuscates more than it enlightens, because it suggests that there is no variation in their levels of complicity. Quips like “I’m the Bad Bunny of fiat money” and “I’m the Audre Lorde of chairing the board” just don’t land the same way. That these punch lines fall flat only highlights what is usually so thrilling about the Kelleys’ work: it complicates or estranges language’s meaning rather than reducing it.

In the catalog interview, Patrick points out that “nonsense is not the absence of sense, but a parody of sense.” As I first found in 2010, the effect of all that exuberant nonsense can be vertiginous. One can feel overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of references. “Much will be lost on viewers not steeped in French history,” wrote a critic in *The New York Times* of *The Syphilis of Sisyphus*. This may be true, but a feeling of overload is central to the encounter. As Mary put it in a 2014 interview:

Active interpretation is so exquisite, and so intimate, but also frightening... it can be frightening to encounter something complex, and to know that the onus is on you to interpret it in real time. I know that’s how people feel when they watch my videos, because that’s how I feel when I see or read something complex. It’s a pressure-filled situation.<sup>2</sup>

This pressure-filled situation is, paradoxically, the container for wild playfulness.

No work of art is explainable by its individual components, much less its set of inspirations and reference points or the artist's biography. I know this, and yet in order to write this essay I revisited chapters from Frantz Fanon and Simone Weil, dug out my high school copy of *Of Mice and Men*, brushed up on the plot of the *Iliad*, watched a Marx Brothers film, and read everything I could find about or by the Kelleys. Their work repeatedly prompts me to consider the pleasures of interpretation and reinterpretation—and at the same time to acknowledge the futility of parsing every element. It's more than the sum of its parts. I joyfully did my homework, and then joyfully threw it aside to watch the videos again.

### **Elvia Wilk**

Elvia Wilk is the author of the novel *Oval* and the essay collection *Death by Landscape*, which will be published in July. (April 2022)

1. The monograph includes a script and a discussion of another new work by the Kelleys, *The Rape of Europa*, which was exhibited at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, August 12, 2021–January 2, 2022. ↵
2. *Mary Reid Kelley: Working Objects and Videos*, edited by Daniel Belasco and others (SUNY Press, 2014), p. 56. ↵

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