

What's the funniest joke in the world?
Written for Mike Kelley & Marlie Mul
By LAURENZ and SHIMMER

This text is a collaboration about Mike Kelley, Marlie Mul, and their work in the exhibition *Mike Kelley and Marlie Mul*, curated by Laurenz in Vienna and Shimmer in Rotterdam. The four of us—Aaron, Eloise, Jason, and Monika—share the feeling that there is never enough time for art. Making it, curating it, seeing it. Something always gets in the way: emails, installation, hosting press, scrubbing floors, preparing equipment. The whole carousel of tasks that swing us as far away from the artwork as possible.

So we decided to do the opposite: make time to talk about the work at length. This text is what came of that. Most of the audience has understood our silence as reflection. A few thought it meant we had nothing to say: *I squeak—I don't speak. Not responsible for the interpretation*, says The Banana Man.

But actually, the best part of exhibition-making is talking about the work—with the artist, with the audience, with each other. So this is how we've written: each of us writing, sometimes interrupted by another voice slipping in over the shoulder. We don't always make clear who's who, because the text itself is a collective voice. That's the experiment, that's what makes independent spaces experimental.

So let us begin.

He tells us he cannot walk—while walking. He tells us he cannot talk—while talking.

Who does this? The Banana Man himself, of course, Mike Kelley.

Back in 1982, Kelley, then teaching at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, worked with his students to make *The Banana Man*, his first solo video. The piece grew from scraps of childhood memory: friends describing a strange vaudeville act on *Captain Kangaroo*. Kelley barely remembered the details—the squeal, the endless bananas pulled from pockets—but built from that a psychological portrait both funny and unsettling. In a way, we're doing something similar here: writing from memory, piecing fragments together, then going back and looking again, and again, and again.

Then there is Mul's *Unnamed Charm* series. Imagine silicone sheets—black, silver, yellow, red—folded and curled into tough little jewels held with bolts. Small enough to hold in your hand, yet alive with personality. Some sprout wiry hair, others pierce themselves with pins or conceal tiny bones. They scatter through the space like eccentric beings, each with its own question mark.

For us, in this exhibition, the materials carry the conversation: silicone, plastic, synthetic hair, candles, potatoes, a sailor's suit with too many pockets. Set against the patina of Laurenz, their artificiality becomes sharper. Laurenz sits in a horse stable, a Hinterhaus hidden behind a grand bourgeois apartment. Once the domain of servants, horses, and button makers, it is the place meant to remain unseen by the art-loving classes of the 18th and 19th centuries. Installing work here feels like meeting people: a shy hello, the slow process of making someone comfortable. Works have their own group dynamics, active and passive characters. This exhibition moves between presences and absences, pulling us back in time even as it keeps us suspended in the present.

Both artists slip personas into their works: Kelley through theatrical reconstruction, Mul through sharp, unsettling humour. Their art makes us laugh, makes us wince, makes us feel complicit in the joke.



1

And then there's Freud—always hovering in Vienna. Kelley admitted he kept returning to Freud for the beauty of his writing, for the way he linked theory back to family, objects, daily life. Looking at Mul's Charms, brushing their strange hair with the comb she provides, we find ourselves pulled into the same territory: intimacy laced with unease, care that both preserves and suffocates.

What ties Kelley and Mul is their tension between labour and detachment. Kelley washes potatoes—the miscarried children of Justice—in murky water. Mul powders and combs her *Unnamed Charms* with meticulous care. These acts of maintenance are gestures of necessity, stripped of romance. And yet, in both, something tender persists.

The Banana Man ends folded on the floor, his yellow costume shaped into a question mark. Mul's folds trace the same symbol. Both works are riddled with questions, sharp and absurd:

Is there no justice?

Can there be growth without movement?

What's the funniest joke in the world?

Why are Mul's Charms unnamed?



2

Their humour is inseparable from pain. The Banana Man is crushed by responsibility, prostituting his abilities, desperate for recognition, always searching through his pockets. He is carried until he collapses, pathetic and wise, a sad clown with a poet's monologue. Mul's *Unnamed Charms*, meanwhile, seduce and repel: candy-bright, hairy, pierced, candy with a warning.

We kept circling back to the dog in *The Banana Man*: convinced she's pregnant, gathering squeaky toys as pups, crushing them under her care. A parable not of motherhood but of the desire to care itself—the way good intentions suffocate. Like the horse at the Spanish Riding School, endlessly trained for elegance, discipline masking hours of repetition. Dressage as responsibility. *The Banana Man* as a training video—though the lesson is unclear. Maybe what not to do. Maybe how to endure.

What connects *Unnamed Charms* and *The Banana Man* is the intensity of labour—the detail, the patience, the persistence. Both are collective. Mul's works may appear as individuals, unnamed rather than untitled, but they always arrive together, echoing her wider practice of curating and hosting. Kelley's film is equally collective, made with his students, held by their chorus. Both remind us that art is never solitary.

And so we return to the pond in the film—stagnant on the surface, yet alive with duckweed, lilies, snails, frogs, and toads. Life held in stillness.

This is the terrain we share. Four individuals forming two collectives, tending to what grows in our ponds and stables. Like *The Banana Man*, we stay—funny and sad, wise and stubborn—but always moving when others move with us. He startles us into recognition, into laughter, into scribbling notes to self.

And yet, the work is also this: Hinterhauses to fly-over zones, the periphery, or perhaps the very deep, deep spaces we prefer not to discuss—the places where the shit happens, where it bubbles up in the suburbs, where a clean horse leaves the stables for the Master to ride without ever seeing the labour. The fucker on our shoulders, the steaming pile scraped away, the unseen work of what “magically appears.” Someone once told me: you better love what you're doing if you're painting walls at 3 a.m. That is the stable of our industry.

In Kelley's persistence, in Mul's laser focus, and in our own endless tending, there is not just endurance but the possibility of growth. In these gestures of precision, and in the unseen labour that underpins them, the future takes root.

LAURENZ

The projects we realize under Laurenz are often concerned with expanding the classical understanding of exhibition making and look for inspiration in different disciplines. Hosting and working with the existing conditions, often thematizing them and allowing them to take the main role rather than just being a context, is an important part of our collective practice and the way we communicate with artists and cultural practitioners. By focusing on a more discourse-based collective work, we seek to create new and nurture existing relationships within the cultural field. Laurenz, founded in 2020 by Aaron Amar Bhamra & Monika Georgieva

SHIMMER

Located in the Port of Rotterdam, noted for its beautiful sunsets, caused by industrial pollution, SHIMMER is a curatorial studio set within the contradiction of oil-riggers and wind-turbine installing ships. The contradiction of a changing industrial environment informs our adaptive and transformative outlook. Our curatorial style coalesces, collaborates and redefines the methods of making, showing, and disseminating contemporary art. From exhibitions to events, and playlists to publications, we create an intimate space that operates with a 'studio-like mentality' where knowledge surfaces from participation and experimentation. We see art as inherently shared, public, and social, and so too are structures like Shimmer, allowing for research and conversations to spark the beginnings (and endings) of artworks and exhibitions. Established in 2018, Shimmer was founded by Eloise Sweetman and Jason Hendrik Hansma.

1, Detail of *fig20*, installation view, Mike Kelley & Marlie Mul, Laurenz & Shimmer, Vienna; Mike Kelley, *The Banana Man*, 1983, 28:15 min, color, sound; Courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York and the Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts, Los Angeles

2, Detail of *fig6*, Marlie Mul, *Unnamed Charm*, 2024, Silicone, synthetic hair, stainless steel hardware Unique. 8 x 7.5 x 3.5 inches

3, Detail of *fig33*, installation view, Mike Kelley & Marlie Mul, Laurenz & Shimmer, Vienna; Mike Kelley, *The Banana Man*, 1983, 28:15 min, color, sound; Courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York and the Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts, Los Angeles

Mike Kelley & Marlie Mul

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