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Panel: Crime, Deviance and Institutions of Social Control

“The white cube ejected Heidi for getting ornamented”: Ornament as Gendered Deviance from Modernism in Mike Kelly and Paul McCarthy’s Heidi Project.

This paper addresses Mike Kelly and Paul McCarthy’s use of ornament as a trope that signals transgression, particularly in reference to gender, the body and discipline, in two works from the 1990s. The first is *Heidi: Midlife Crisis Trauma Centre and Negative Media-Engram Abreaction Release Zone* (1992), an installation that includes a two-story structure, paintings, several tape loops and ephemeral material. The structure is a hybrid house that annexes two opposing architectural styles and two kinds of décor: an archetypal Swiss chalet and a modernist room based on Khuner Villa, designed by Adolf Loos in 1930. The installation is supplemented with a video, *Heidi* (1992), which recorded several performances by Kelly and McCarthy that took place in the installation.

The installation and video function in tandem as didactic tools that demonstrate the “sickness” of ornament, referring repeatedly to Loos’ 1908 essay “Ornament and Crime.” Loos believed that modern life demanded modern architecture and design, which meant practical objects and spaces, devoid of any unnecessary decoration. Kelly and McCarthy play with Loos’ ideology, inverting it, attacking it and revealing its rigidity. Through the bad-girl character of Heidi, who lives in a highly ornamented house and ornaments her body with a tattoo, ornament becomes both female and transgressive. Heidi refuses Loos’ modernism, refuses her education and refuses to become a nice, modern girl. The character, the hybrid structure she lives in and the debauched scenes that take place in it reveal modernist assumptions about décor and ornamentation, as well as the historical relationship between masculine architecture and feminine decoration. In the end, Kelly and McCarthy show us that Loos’ anti-ornament aesthetic is an aesthetic of morality, a morality they stain with their disruption of Loos’ text. Thus, they perform the ultimate criticism, attaching a Loos-designed bedroom to Heidi’s kitschy house.

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