The New York Times

April 17, 2013

Randy Kennedy

This Ranch in Detroit Is Not for Sale. It's Art.

MICHAEL F. McELROY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

"Mobile Homestead," a work of public art, will have multiple uses when it opens at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit in May.

By RANDY KENNEDY

DETROIT — The sight of an empty house on a barren lot is far too familiar in parts of this struggling city, which was recently placed under the control of an emergency manager to try to head off bankruptcy.

Even so, when a plain, white uninhabited ranch house appeared over the winter on a dirt patch in a neighborhood near downtown, across from a veterans' hospital, people were at a loss as to its purpose. Some wondered if it was a souped-up version of a FEMA trailer, with a little porch and teal shutters. Others thought it might be a model house for some real estate scheme to remake urban Detroit in the form of a suburban subdivision.

A model of Mike Kelley's childhood home is his finale.

The other day, when a hatch opened on the packed ground in front of the house, and a man emerged from it, like a miner coming out of the hole, a woman walking by stopped to stare. Clearly, this was no ordinary house. But neither did it look much like what it really was: a work of public art, which will go down as one of the most provocative and unclassifiable in America when it is opened by the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit on May 11.

The house is a faithful replica of the suburban Detroit childhood home of the artist Mike Kelley, who shepherded the details of its creation up to the final days of his life in January 2012, when he committed suicide at his home in South Pasadena, Calif. Kelley was one of the most influential artists of the last several decades. And though he made his name in the Los Angeles art world, much of the look and feel of his art came from his working-class, Irish Catholic upbringing here, in a city whose affliction he seemed to embody.

The structure, titled "Mobile Homestead," will

Continued on Page 9

This Ranch Home in Detroit Is Not on the Market. It's Art.

From First Arts Page

have a mobile part: a trailer, making up much the front of the house, which was completed during Kelley's life and can be "docked" with the house or hitched to a truck to travel the city. But the rest of the house is permanently installed on a lot across from the museum, which built it with the London-based art philanthropy Artangel and additional financial support from the Luma Foundation, a nonprofit based in Switzerland. (The museum has not disclosed the cost.)

In accordance with Kelley's wishes, the house will serve not as a gallery of his work or that of any other artists showing at the museum. Instead it will function as a kind of free-form community center, a place where people will be able to hold a concert in the garage, for example, or run a benefit or show their own art. The interior, which has a vague hospital feel, with linoleum flooring, rubber baseboards and bright white walls, will not be furnished like a residential house but will be left in flux, to accommodate projects that the museum and the community come up with.

As one of the first projects at the house, Jon Brumit, the museum's curator of public engagement, and Katie McGowan, its curator of education, plan to set up a free lending library and use the mobile part of the home to take books around the city. In its humanitarian aims, the house is one of the stranger entries in an art movement that has come to be known as social practice: work that blurs the lines separating sculpture, performance, activism and community organizing and fits uneasily into the gallery and museum world. But there is another part of the Kelley project that will not benefit — or even be accessible to — the public: a two-level basement intended as a place only for artists to work, reached through a hatch in the one of the bedrooms or another hatch outside, near the front door.

In a 2011 interview with Jim Shaw, a fellow artist, and John C. Welchman, the founding director of the Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts, Kelley described this windowless subterranean space as being "reserved for secret rites of an ammoniac nature," the flip side of the "supernyx" functions of the house above ground. And on a recent visit to the house and the basement, a climb down below certainly felt like a descent into the subconscious: the bare Sheetrocked rooms in the first level of the basement have no doors, and the only way to go room to room is to climb down a ladder to the subbasement, whose connecting corridors have ladders leading back up. "I worry about what's going to happen if anyone ever does psychedelics down here," said Ms. McGowan, only half jokingly.

In its split personality, the homestead is an oddly fitting kind of public art for a tough but deeply wounded city like Detroit. How it will be received — a permanent work of anti-sculpture by one of the most famous artists ever to emerge from the city — is an open question. But it makes sense for an artist like Kelley, who more or less hated public art, calling it, memorably, "a pleasure that is forced upon a public that, in most cases, finds no pleasure in it."

MICHAEL F. MCELROY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

A room in Mike Kelley's "Mobile Homestead" at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit. Reflection from an outside wall gives it a blue hue.

His work, the subject of a retrospective that closed this month at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, lays out a deeply unsentimental, often dark vision of American life in videos, sculpture and installations. His first idea was not to make the homestead public at all and not to recreate his childhood home but simply to reclaim it from its present owner and use it as a kind of readymade"for my own perverse amusement," as he wrote.

"I was with him once when he walked right up to the door with a checkbook, but the guy didn't want to sell," said the Detroit filmmaker and artist Cary Loren, a longtime friend of Kelley's and a former band mate in Destroy All Monsters, the proto-punk band that Kelley and others formed in Michigan in 1973. "I think Mike wanted a headquarters here, a kind of base." (On a recent drive out to the house, in the neatly kept suburb of Westland, the only visible difference between the real homestead and the art homestead was that the shutters of the real one had been painted a slightly different shade of greenish blue, and an American flag flew next to the front door.)

Mr. Loren, who will be one of the first artists to work in the homestead's basement, said he had not yet figured out what he would do down there but was interested in establishing a "chill-out room," with beanbag chairs and maybe some black-light posters. "I want to give it a little bit of soul, a kind of psychic kernel," he explained.

Perhaps characteristically, Kelley started out with little optimism about the social good that "Mobile Homestead" might bring to Detroit. "The project, in its initial conception," he wrote in a 2011 essay, "expressed my true feelings about the milieu in which I was raised, and my belief that one always has to hide one's true desires and beliefs behind a facade of socially acceptable lies." He added, "The work could become just another ruin in a city full of ruins."

But he seemed to care so deeply about how the work would look and function that it is now hard to take him completely at his word.

"He kept saying to me, 'This is never going to happen — it's a joke,' because that's the way he was," said Marsha Miro, the founding director of the contemporary museum. "But he also said he thought it would be one of the most important things he ever did, partly because it would keep on being a living piece."