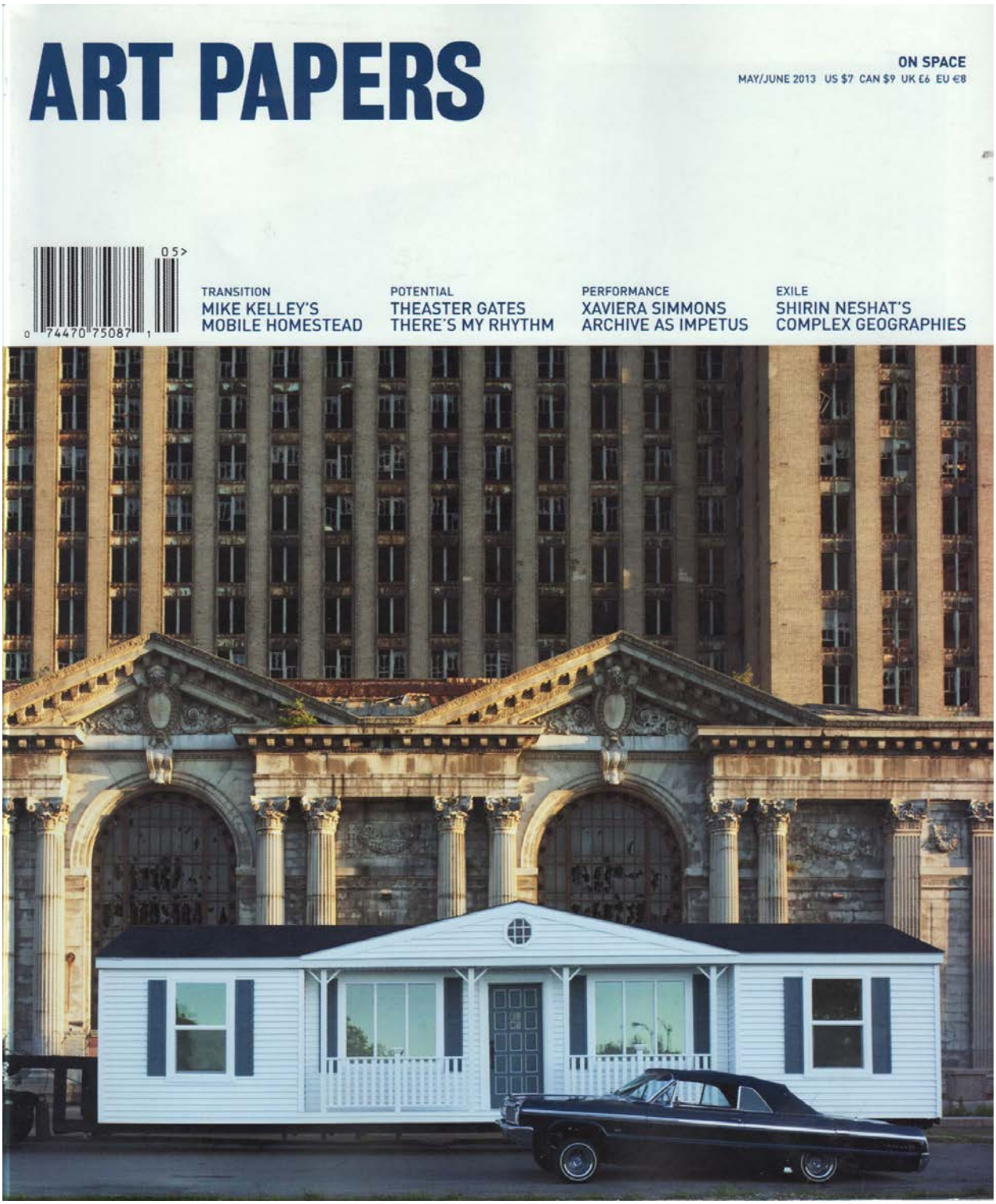

May/June 2013

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Mike Kelley's *Mobile Homestead*: a re-envisioning of space in public sculpture

TEXT / RANA EDGAR

Mike Kelley's highly anticipated first permanent public sculpture and final project, *Mobile Homestead*, opened in May 2013 at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD).[1] *Mobile Homestead* is a full-scale replica of the 1950s ranch-style home in Westland, Michigan, a metro Detroit suburb, where Kelley was raised. The lot neighboring MOCAD is the permanent home of the installation, which will function as both a public and private space. The project exists in multiple segments; it consists of a mobile home that imitates the façade of Kelley's childhood home and a permanent structure, built on a lot next to the museum, that replicates the floor plan of Kelley's childhood home. Each segment of the project will serve a range of functions. The mobile section of the project will travel within the city and outlying areas of Detroit, providing a transportable space where numerous social services will be offered. A documentary video that Kelley made in the fall of 2010 accompanies the public sculpture and includes footage of the journey taken by the traveling portion of *Mobile Homestead*—from MOCAD's location in downtown Detroit, along Michigan Avenue to the site of Kelley's childhood home, and back to the museum, a pilgrimage of approximately 40 miles round-trip, passing through disparate areas of urban renewal and decay on its way to the blue-collar suburbs of Detroit.[2] When it is not mobile, this segment of the project will remain stationary at MOCAD. The permanent portion of the project houses a community gallery on the main floor, an area that will primarily function as a space for artistic and cultural programming and reflects the interests of the greater Detroit community.[3] The community gallery sits directly above an ambiguous maze of permanent underground rooms that will remain closed to the public, functioning primarily as an enigmatic space available, on occasion, to artists as a site to realize concealed endeavors.[4] As envisioned by Kelley, *Mobile Homestead* will provide a place for Detroit community members and artists to push the boundaries of contemporary art practice and address a broad range of social and political issues. Mary Clare Stevens, executive director of the Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts, notes that the project will function as a living artwork and is enthusiastic about the potential outcomes to be realized in the space.[5]

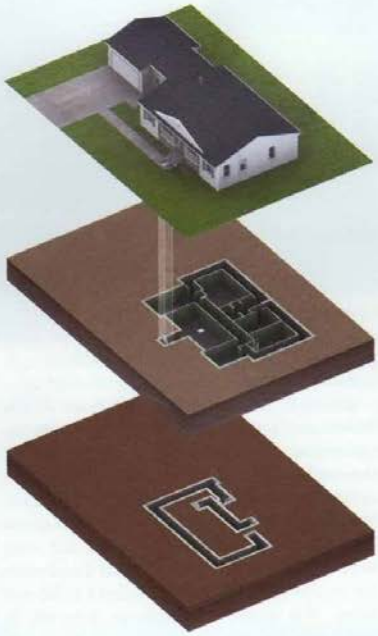
The *Mobile Homestead* project has evolved quite drastically in terms of its spatial concept and context since its inception, as Kelley had initially envisioned it as a personal rather than a public project. His earliest concept required the purchase of the actual home where he grew up, but circumstances beyond his control did not allow this acquisition. In 2005 Kelley was approached by London-based arts

organization Artangel,[6] and from that point the work took a new turn in its journey by transforming into a public project. Once the work had been commissioned, MOCAD came on board to assist in bringing the project to the city of Detroit. Marsha Miro, acting director of MOCAD at the time, regards the project as a means for the community to become involved in a work of art and as a way for an artwork to become part of a community.[7] It is intriguing that Kelley became so engaged with the *Mobile Homestead* project, as he had expressed an unyielding opinion that public works were unsatisfactory, a view he made clear in his essay on *Mobile Homestead*, stating, "Public art is a pleasure that is forced upon a public that, in most cases, finds no pleasure in it."[8] Regardless of Kelley's initial misgivings about the potential success of the work, a significant accomplishment of *Mobile Homestead* is that it buttresses a new social realm in Kelley's often privatized oeuvre.

Mobile Homestead represents both an important transition and fulfilling culmination of Kelley's work, which for more than 35 years traversed drawing, painting, sculpture, installation, video, and performance. His range of media was varied, yet the implications of Kelley's personal experiences with coming of age in a working-class family in Detroit resonate deeply and darkly throughout his portfolio. Works such as the architectural model *Educational Complex* (1995) and the film drama *Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction #1 (Domestic Scene)* (2000), included in Kelley's retrospective at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, are prime examples of his investigations into chilhood memories and issues of identity. The exhibition encapsulates Kelley's visual explorations with issues of family, class struggle, and the inner workings of the psyche, which seem to culminate in *Mobile Homestead*, and, like much of his work, challenges viewers to look beyond the popular culture paraphernalia presented and to put aside the feelings of sentimentality typically associated with the innocence of youth, to consider the effects of repression, suffering, and loss that are intimately tied to childhood and adolescence. Kelley's works resonate universally with one's own secret inner childhood dreams, nightmares, and desires by presenting the familiar in unexpected ways and by articulating the hauntingly veiled visual cues of suppressed memories.

Although Kelley never intended for *Mobile Homestead* to act in any way as a shrine to his upbringing, family, or life, nor to have a resonating sentiment attached to it, one almost can't avoid experiencing feelings of nostalgia upon viewing this work. Perhaps *Mobile Homestead* would yield different reactions if the fact were not offered as public knowledge that it re-creates the façade and floor plan of Kelley's childhood home. This knowledge forces us, however, to investigate the work through a set of preconceived notions of what home means to us and ultimately to Kelley, as the specificity of the decision to replicate this particular home suggests a direct correlation between his life and work. *Mobile Homestead* oscillates between familiarity and function to re-envision a site of public and private purpose. Unlike homes featured in living history museums—particularly Greenfield Village at The Henry Ford, a metro Detroit attraction[9]—we are not given a view of what life was like for Kelley through display of objects or historical context. Instead we are presented with

INSIDE FRONT COVER: **Mike Kelley,** *Mobile Homestead*, 2010–ongoing, mixed media, 13 1/2 x 44 1/2 x 8 feet (courtesy of Kelley Studio and MOCAD, Detroit) / OPPOSITE, LEFT TO RIGHT: **Mike Kelley,** video still from *Mobile Homestead: Going East on Michigan Avenue from Westland to Downtown Detroit*, 2010–2011, three videos running time approx. 3.5 hours total; video still from *Mobile Homestead: Going West on Michigan Avenue from Downtown Detroit to Westland*, 2010-2011, three videos running time approx. 3.5 hours total / ABOVE: **Mike Kelley,** *Mobile Homestead* parked in front of the original Kelley home on Palmer Road, Westland, Michigan, 2010 (photo: Corine Vermuelen; courtesy of MOCAD)



empty rooms that imitate the footprint of the Kelley home, and while not meant to function as a homage to the artist, in a unique way the artwork does.

Mobile Homestead contributes significantly to discussions in contemporary art that examine the roles, relationships, and proximity of public art to notions of public and private space. In most instances public sculptures are located on the grounds of a museum or other highly trafficked areas in city centers and function as accessible institutional or civic extensions of these spaces. This is not the case with *Mobile Homestead*. Instead visitors are seeing only part of the larger whole—below the main gallery is a subterranean, multileveled space where select artists will work on projects in secret.[10] This element of mystery is very much in the spirit of Walter De Maria's *The Vertical Earth Kilometer* (1977), where viewer's only see the circular top of a brass rod that lies flush with the earth, and although the work implies that a full kilometer length of the rod continues straight down into the earth, we can't be certain unless we try to dig it up. This element of the unknown perpetuates a mystique similar to Kelley's inclusion of unsettling and unknown domains below the ground in *Mobile Homestead*. Kelley's secret space reveals a sense of the uncanny in that this work invigorates the disparate concepts of a private sphere concealed within a public site. The labyrinth hidden deep below the earth metaphorically takes on the role of the inner psyche; it is an underground area containing various chamberlike structures carved out solely for the purpose of realizing the inner mind's workings and hidden desires. These quarters below the surface may in time, like a basement, contain the remnants of memories and materials stored or left behind by those who once inhabited them. By carefully planning and executing the space himself, Kelley inserted his own psychology, as in many of his works, at the core of this public sculpture.

This monumental installation introduces a new public space specific to Detroit, and significant to Kelley's practice. Ultimately, it prompts a reinvestigation of Kelley's oeuvre and may provide alternative perspectives on the otherwise private discourse that his work conjures.

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NOTES

1. *Mobile Homestead* was commissioned by Artangel and spearheaded by James Lingwood, in association with MOCAD, LUMA Foundation, and the Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts with the support of the Artangel International Circle. *Mobile Homestead* is the first project produced by Artangel in the United States. The project was overseen by Kelley's studio and the Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts. The public project opened at MOCAD on Saturday, May 11, 2013.
2. Kelley's *Mobile Homestead* documentary was included in the 2012 Whitney Biennial. The documentary is to be shown at MOCAD May 11–July 31, 2013.
3. Kelley addressed his wish for the community gallery in his essay "Mobile Homestead." Kelley envisioned the space to operate independently, not as an extension of MOCAD galleries, and to function as a place where the community would dictate and facilitate the activities.
4. Kelley's original intentions were to use this space as a personal studio and occasionally allow other artists and groups to use the private area for secret projects.
5. Mary Clare Stevens (executive director of the Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts), in discussion with the author, March 27, 2013.
6. This project was realized with support and contributions from Artangel.
7. Marsha Miro (president of MOCAD board of directors), in discussion with the author, March 27, 2013.
8. Mike Kelley, "Mobile Homestead," 2011, www.mocadetroit.org/Mobile-HomesteadEssay.html
9. Henry Ford's Greenfield Village is a living museum located in Dearborn, Michigan, consisting of 83 historical homes and structures that housed important figures from American history. In his 2011 essay "Mobile Homestead," Kelley described his structure as having a "parasitic relationship with Henry Ford's collection."
10. The first artists to have access to the underground level will be Jim Shaw and Cary Loren, friends and former Destroy All Monsters bandmates of Kelley's. Shaw, Loren, Kelley, and Niagara formed the proto-punk band in Michigan in 1973. Shaw recently had his first retrospective at the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art (BALTIC).

ABOVE: Digital renderings of Mike Kelley's *Mobile Homestead* at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, Michigan; TOP: Mobile unit with ground level plan; BOTTOM: Ground level and underground sections (images courtesy of Kelley Studio/Escher GuneWardena Architecture)

a discussion on "regionalism"

The term "regionalism" is about site-specificity—it emphasizes the role of place, the specific qualities of particular geographical environments, and the significance of socially embedded or artistic practices. According to an important 1982 essay by Kenneth Frampton, "regionalism" has often been positioned as a response to contemporary art or a presumed "contemporary art world" that privileges a global language free from the idiosyncrasies of a specific geosocial vernacular.

For this discussion, our distinguished contributors have gathered to continue a conversation on this topic that started in March 2013 during a panel at The Armory Show in New York. By posing a few broad questions to the contributors I hope we may continue to examine, critique, clarify, and perhaps shed a bit more light on the seemingly elusive concept of "regionalism" by engaging and debating a myriad of ideas about the definitions, validity, and perceptions of this topic, with specific reference to the United States, and the diverse contexts that exist across the country in relation to contemporary artistic practice.

I welcome these esteemed arts professionals, who represent several institutions around the United States: Stuart Horodner, artistic director of the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, Atlanta, Georgia; Sandra Jackson-Dumont, deputy director of Education and Public Programs/adjunct curator, Modern and Contemporary Art Department, Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, Washington; and Dominic Molon, chief curator at the Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis, Missouri.

ISOLDE BRIELMAIER: First, I wondered if each of you might touch on how you have come to know/appreciate/resist/challenge the regions that each of you work in (since many of you move around and inherit various traditions and histories upon arrival), keeping in mind your respective institutions and practices as they engage both your local vision and audience.

DOMINIC MOLON: I am very much "of" the American Midwest, and my professional career has been centered in this region for nearly two decades. The region has always seemed to possess a weird dichotomy between a strong sense of identification with values of straightforwardness, practicality, and (religious, read as primarily Christian) faith and a deep-seated inferiority complex and defensiveness in cultural matters—particularly in the visual arts. Though many are proud to claim their Midwestern heritage, strongly associating themselves with the heartland's qualities of earnestness and "authenticity," it remains a place that many feel a need to escape from—either physically or culturally. As a curator born, raised, educated, and employed within the Midwest, I have increasingly grown to appreciate the regional particularities of the work being made here—both on its own terms but also in the larger context of visual arts practice and discourse. Yet I have also felt an urgent necessity to advocate for and present work from abroad that registers as strikingly "other" in order to expand perspectives and inspire critical dialogue. It is [as] important for the Midwest curator to bring in discordant art and culture as it is to export or redefine the regional and local within a larger national and global context.

featuring
Stuart Horodner,
Sandra Jackson-Dumont
& Dominic Molon
moderated by
Isolde Brielmaier

STUART HORODNER: Yes, I think that it is a question of how we understand our jobs—who are we working for and what needs doing? Curators often move from one region to another, from one institution to another, each with ... unique burdens and blessings. We all establish trust with constituents and colleagues, and try to assert some kind of rationale for what we are going to present. I did not know much about the context of the South, or Atlanta specifically, before I moved here. Once I became aware of exhibition histories and artistic legacies in the area, and the specific goals of the center where I curate, I formed a plan. And it is always evolving. The Atlanta Contemporary Art Center is a 40-year-old noncollecting institution, and, like many grassroots organizations that began in the early 1970s, it grew over time to become more engaged in networks and dialogues beyond the local. I try to generate opportunities for artists and audiences, by choosing people and works that I think are significant—from different generations, expressing a range of philosophical or material sensibilities, and examining various subjects and sites. Often these are practitioners who have not had sufficient exposure in the South, but who are being shown at what I consider to be our peers in the field—The Kitchen, Yerba Buena [Center for the Arts], LAX [LAXART], Mass MoCA, MCA Chicago, ICA Boston, The New Museum, and so on. We've done solo and thematic group exhibitions and commissioned projects with artists from Atlanta and beyond, including Jennie C. Jones, Laura Poitras, Corin Hewitt, Alix Pearlstein, Paul Shambroom, Craig Drennen, Scott Ingram, Jessica Jackson Hutchins, Dave McKenzie, Judy Linn, Amanda Ross-Ho, and Jack Whitten, to name a few.

SANDRA JACKSON-DUMONT: With the experience of moving to Seattle/Pacific Rim/Left Coast from New York City (the perceived center of the art world / universe), I have come to believe that every place has an inherent interest in creating a "moment/movement," irrespective of location. I have also come to understand that while the gravitational pull of NYC is tremendous, the center is a moving target. My curatorial practice looks at the tension that erupts when a set of requirements dressed up as local flavor dictates how one should accept the inheritance of various traditions and histories without question. This is where one comes to know/appreciate/resist/challenge the regions we work in. "What is local?" and "How do we highlight local artists?" are two questions that seem to be ever-present. The Seattle Art Museum (SAM) is one museum with three uniquely different sites—Seattle Art Museum Downtown (international in scope), Seattle Asian Art Museum, and the Olympic Sculpture Park (a 9.5-acre outdoor facility focusing on modern and contemporary art). While many artistic associations with Seattle have been shaped by Northwest Coast Native American art and noted Northwest artists [such as] Mark Tobey and Morris Graves, the contemporary artist community is constantly evolving with the push and pull of being simultaneously local and global. SAM strives to engage, explore, and support the local art scene in all aspects of the museum's practice while placing it in a broader, more global dialogue.

IB What do you think constitute definitions of place; the relationships between the local, [the] regional, and the global; ideas around "critical regionalism"; and connections between the regional and the flows of creativity and capital in contemporary art?

DM I think a regional association—like any other association—is a bit of a double-edged sword. On the one hand, there is a great desire to allow a region to define a particular cultural practice for the sake of visibility and association—the way that certain artists' names may individually draw a pause, but saying "Chicago imagism" immediately conjures an image or identification with that specific style and sensibility. Yet those same regional associations have historically and counterproductively constrained recognition of the broader impact of many artists whose wider influence is only realized later. This tendency seems to be changing. The increasing number of institutions focusing on contemporary art in a broader range of regions in the United States has provided greater opportunity for artists' work to be validated alongside that of their international peers. The expanding role of art fairs and the Internet in offering wider commercial potential and visibility for regionally based artists and galleries has been significant in this regard as well. Finally, the growing number of residencies for artists has redistributed talented individuals outside ... what are typically considered the cultural centers, further complicating conventional notions of regional associations.

SH It is always a challenge to try [to] define what is happening locally or regionally while being a part of it, or for that matter, to clearly assess one's place within conditions of creativity and capital that are happening around the globe. There is often an envy of elsewhere, imagining that whatever we seek—freedom, respect, validation, audience, funding, community—is better in other places. You deal with what you have and what you care about. I think the best question is, "What am I doing to make it better?"

SJD These days, defining what constitutes or defines place is challenging, given the impact of the web, social media, travel, etc., on bodies of work, discourses, collecting trends, and the economy at large. I am always grappling with the connections between the regional and one's artistic/curatorial practice because they tend to be, at once, mythical, fictional, real, and constructed. As a result, the flow of creativity is often shaped by a host of issues that tend to make people critique and/or celebrate their local scene through filters of other places like NYC, Berlin, LA, Chicago, that are also desiring other locales given their myths and realities.

IB While noting that ideas of "regionalism" may be separate from the realm of what is deemed "local," I would like to discuss whether the concept of "regionalism" poses an alternative or whether today it may seem to be an ever-evolving branch of "global" or broader practices/perspectives. Essentially, by continuing to use this term, are we presuming a geographical "center" against which contemporary art and culture is being measured and/or conceived in relation to contemporary artistic practice, presentation, and audience? Or is the notion of a "center" also a part of a regionalist space, practice, orientation, etc.?

DM The LA post-punk band Minutemen has a great song title: "Do You Want New Wave or Do You Want the Truth?" .... I think that as much as many would like to wish away New York's sustained position as the center of the contemporary art world, it still in truth functions as such, at least critically and commercially (although Berlin seems to possess an increasing critical mass of artists who are leading the discourse). I'm not convinced that it's an either/or question but rather arguments for how regional practices, again, balance the establishment of a dialogue between that region and the larger world. Regardless, one must [keep] sight of the immediate local context, if not demonstrate how the local relates to the larger global on a level playing field. It's counterproductive to "circle the wagons" and disproportionally valorize regionally produced work as some sort of "alternative" to a perceived modishness of the centers, but it's equally problematic to disavow regional or locally developed sensibilities as irrelevant or trivial in relationship to a more centralized discourse. One of the seeming drawbacks of a more accessible and widely distributed culture is a growing homogeneousness of that culture, and a very great virtue of the regions is the maintenance of certain styles and sensibilities that remain impervious to shifts in the larger art world. The challenge would seem to be resisting either a fetishization of those tendencies or allowing them to be relegated to representing a sort of "quirkiness" or "eccentricity" of what happens in the provinces and instead to recognize their sophistication and ingenuity.

SH The "center" is a concept of hierarchical agreement, right? A short list of museums, dealers, curators, critics, schools, art magazines, auctions, art fairs, and biennials that are deemed crucial to careerist life on the planet. But these persons and venues, as consequential as they are (And they are!), do not represent the total picture, now or at any time in the past. The top 100 lists of whatever are always partial and can't do justice to the important efforts taking place in unfocused regions/institutions/places. But we all believe in the butterfly effect, right?

SJD The center is a psychological, financial, and power narrative. It's slightly colonial in perspective, given the tremendous desire to discover, locate, and convene resources from unknown territory to create a critical mass in another. I would posit that regionalism and the global are ever-evolving extensions of each other, creating good tension and, hopefully, accountability. One question I often ask is, is the center a necessary place of convenience, hierarchy, and power display, or would diffusion of the center ignite and invigorate creative production while fostering varied capital interests? Again, is the center where and when you make it? I really think that this is the key question.

This conversation evolved out of a panel discussion on "regionalism" presented at The 2013 Armory Show in New York. The discussion featured the above contributors as well as Ruba Katrib of SculptureCenter, Long Island City, New York, and was moderated by Isolde Brielmaier, PhD.