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Cover image:

# Cities in transition: Mike Kelley and Santiago Sierra in Dundee

by Louisa Lee • 15.11.2018

The recent installation of Santiago Sierra's *Black Flag* and Mike Kelley's *Mobile Homestead* at Dundee Contemporary Arts connects both works to the city's industrial past as well as its burgeoning cultural future. *Black Flag* documents a small group of volunteers planting anarchist flags at the North and South Poles **FIG. 1**, while *Mobile Homestead* (2005–13) – a three-screen feature-length video produced in collaboration with Artangel – forms a portrait of the community who live and work on Michigan Avenue, a highway stretching west of the city of Detroit **FIG. 2**. The link between these two works is at times tenuous, but they may both be read as effective responses to a city in transition. Once known for its manufacture of jute and jam (as well as *The Beano* magazine and Pringle sweaters), Dundee suffered post-industrial decline in the 1980s. Its regeneration over the last few years, however, has firmly designated the city as a cultural destination, marked this year with the opening of the boat-like structure of the V&A Dundee, jutting out onto the city's waterfront.

Sierra has described *Black Flag* as 'the most poetic' of his works: photographs, sound, maps and a reconstruction of flags **FIG. 3** document his selected participants on their missions to the Poles. The gesture of bracketing the earth with black flags – a symbol that represents negation, anger and outrage – is, for Sierra, hopeful rather than provocative, intended to negate the colonial and patriarchal claims of ownership made to both poles on their 'discovery' by more developed nations. Sierra is a controversial figure. His previous work has sought to make visible those people who are otherwise invisible in society – the homeless, sex workers, drug addicts – by offering them paid work as 'participants' and placing them in art galleries. In 2000, for example, he paid four sex workers addicted to heroin the price of a shot to have a line tattooed across their backs, providing a biting critique of the oppositional forces of work and worth, but also exploiting people in desperate situations. Although *Black Flag* does not appear to degrade or gain from the losses of its participants, the appropriation of this anarchist symbol is extremely problematic. Conceived as a conceptual work of art, which is then documented, placed in a museum and attributed to Sierra alone (despite the help of other participants), *Black Flag* contradicts the anarchist ideology of a collective and stateless society by inserting the event into the hierarchical and economically governed site of the gallery

FIG. 4.

Kelley's work, on the other hand, acknowledges that social practice or public art is prone to contradiction and conflict, writing of what was to be his last such work that 'public art is always doomed to failure because of its basic passive/aggressive nature'.<sup>1</sup> *Mobile Homestead*, although presented in Dundee as a video installation, centres around the full-scale recreation of Kelley's childhood home that is permanently installed at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Detroit (MOCAD), where it is used for exhibitions and community projects. The film follows the journey of the façade of the house, which was fixed to a flatbed truck and driven down the highway that connects MOCAD with Kelley's childhood home in the suburbs. The footage of this travelling façade is interspersed with interviews with the proprietors of the small and large businesses, churches and community projects found along this twelve-mile avenue. FIG. 5. In one scene, pole dancers at the Flight Club talk about the difficulty of finding work in Detroit; the next captures dance halls. Between each are long shots of fading motels and boarded-up businesses recalling Chantal Akerman's film *News from Home* (1977).

The three videos – the first two shot during the outbound and return journeys and a third taken during the launch event at MOCAD in September 2010 – are mounted to scaffolding in the main gallery at Dundee. Towards the back of the space is a reconstruction in miniature of Kelley's house FIG. 6, hanging by a chain and internally lit so it glows in a dreamlike-state, recalling Guy Bachelard's statement that the house is the 'first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word. If we look at it intimately, the humblest dwelling has beauty'.<sup>2</sup> The videos tell a narrative of a city in steady decline since the 1950s, when the American automotive industry (Chrysler, General Motors and the Ford Motor Company all had their headquarters in Detroit) began to face pressure from foreign competitors, and responded by moving manufacturing operations abroad in an attempt to reduce spending. Recently, however, there have been signs of growth, both in its art galleries and museums and with the promise of Ford to return and regenerate the city, an oft-repeated part of Trump's campaign promise to 'Make America great again'.

*Mobile Homestead*, in its portrayal of post-war industrial decline and more recent cultural regeneration, is a meaningful choice for the Scottish gallery (Dundee and Detroit have both been awarded UNESCO cities of design). *Black Flag* meanwhile can be connected to Dundee through the City's role in financing Shackleton's polar exploration (paid for by the jute industry). Although these connections are not made immediately obvious, as Dundee becomes a focal point for culture rather than industry, the opportunity these works offer for reflection is both timely and instructive.



**Fig. 6** Installation view of *Mike Kelley: Mobile Homestead* at Dundee Contemporary Arts, 2018.

**Exhibition details** Mike Kelley: Mobile Homestead / Santiago o Sierra: Black Flag  
Dundee Contemporary Arts  
8th September–25th November 2018

## Footnotes

- 1** E. Meyer-Hermann and L.G. Mark, eds.: exh. cat. *Mike Kelley*, Amsterdam (Stedelijk Museum) 2013, p.308.
- 2** G. Bachelard: *The Poetics of Space*, Boston 1957, p.26.

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