

Introduction to *Mike's World*

The May 2004 issue of *Artforum* featured a rambling and witty conversation between two mutually admiring NY artists whose contributions to their respective fields are just shy of legendary among their peers: Dan Graham and Michael Smith. For Smith, the feature brought renewed attention to a unique and influential career. Like the redoubtable Graham, Smith operates across artistic boundaries. In more than 30 years of live performances, video works, commercial and cable television skits, puppet shows, exhibition installations, artist-initiated publications, and sketch-like drawings, he has anticipated the artworld's sometimes uneasy merge with pop culture, mass entertainment, and, especially, televisual communications. Smith's is an impressive exhibition and performance history that begins in the late 1970s, with venues as varied as Franklin Furnace, The Kitchen, Caroline's Comedy Club, Leo Castelli Gallery, Cinemax, PBS, Henson International Festival of Puppet Theater, the Whitney, the Corcoran, the New Museum, the Pompidou Center, and ranges in recent years to sites in São Paulo, Copenhagen, Milan, London, and Berlin, among others. A quintessential art world insider, Michael Smith and his works have been widely seen but, perhaps by virtue of the works' time-based nature, rarely deeply considered. *Mike's World: Michael Smith & Joshua White (and other collaborators)* is Smith's first museum-organized mid-career survey exhibition; it features installations at full scale and in fragments, videos, drawings, notebooks, storyboards, photographs, artists' books and performance ephemera, all set within a unique, artist-designed immersive environment that supports and extends the other works.

Mike's World takes a tightly focused view of a single Michael Smith performance persona as it has developed over the course of many years and through innumerable presentation formats: "Mike." The character Mike functions metaphorically as a kind of ever-hopeful Candide, adrift in a world of rapid technological advances that he seems incapable of fully comprehending, and stymied by the depersonalization and isolation that have accompanied late twentieth-century life. Ironic in its sharp personification of failure—but also stop-you-in-your-tracks hilarious and poignant, too—Smith's work mirrors our most human concerns about competency and comfort. Direct and accessible, his exquisite use of humor as a strategy for empathy and identification is rooted in the artist-to-audience-to-artist relationships of performance. Yet the work's amplification and variation owe much to its visual, conceptualist sources. Underscoring the hybrid nature of Smith's accomplishment, the works selected for this exhibition also highlight the collaborative creative process in which Smith has engaged over the years, including his last decade of video and installation co-creations with artist-director Joshua White.

Joshua White is the principal collaborator with Smith on some of the more elaborately conceived installations and videos, in particular many of those scenarios that explore Mike-as-artist and Mike-as-businessman or corporate entrepreneur. White himself was a successful television director for thirty years, and holds a unique place in art history as one of the leading artist/inventors of the psychedelic light shows that became de rigeur fixtures of the music scene at rock festivals, discotheques, and eventually performance

halls and film/video sets in the '60s and '70s. His understanding of pacing and plotline, dramatic tension, visual spectacle, and technical issues have brought particular real-world focus to the Mike character, freeing Smith's more associative creative process and allowing him to dig deep into character and the nuanced anxieties of contemporary life. Prior to 1996, Smith worked with a whole host of collaborators, mostly other artists active in the downtown NY arts communities; they brought talents with music, camera work, scriptwriting, and acting to the ongoing evolution of the character Mike. In the interviews, short essays and listings that follow, this process is documented, explored, and acknowledged.

Perhaps the most novel outcome of this project—the exhibition experience itself—is the result of a design collaboration between Smith and White. Conceptualizing “Mike’s World” as a self-contained alternate universe, they invite you to cross the threshold into a compelling yet awkward meta-space touting the adventures of Mike. It functions much as a presidential library—or Graceland—documents its character’s history through unexpected artifacts, queerly edited timelines, and strange bits of film footage. Blending theatrical and interactive display technologies with the more contemplative modes of museum presentation, the exhibition persuades viewers to become tourists behind-the-scenes, able to scrutinize the smallest details and sometimes even the least significant events in the life of Mike. The absurdity of it, coupled with Mike’s inherent ordinariness, takes a while to process. Mike—a sweet but hapless Everyman—is, like all of us, filled with contradictions and fallibilities, including a truly mind-boggling capacity for bad ideas. Why does he interest us so?

The Museum’s position and intention toward this exhibition is unique in every way. Michael Smith is our friend and colleague; he’s an Associate Professor in the Department of Art & Art History and a frequent visitor to the museum and its programs. Capitalizing on that proximity, I have asked Michael and Josh, who now feels like family as well, to design the exhibition, select its contents, establish its emphases and, in general, play the curatorial role that I usually enjoy. It was my decision early on in the planning process to cede all the spaces to the artists and remove the voice of curatorial authority from the gallery experience entirely. It seems to me that the multivalent nature of the works—their varied dual authorship in many cases, as well as the generous acknowledgment of large and small contributions that the artists allow, the translation of the character across many forms of media, and the dizzying accumulation of Mike scenarios—lends itself to experimentation with usual museum modes. Indeed, there is nothing linear, chronological, or sincerely museological about the presentation of this retrospective show; instead, two artists have spoofed that familiar formula within the museum walls and have asked viewers to sign on as audience to an extended theatrical journey with a mind-boggling array of “props.” It’s not the usual contemporary art exhibition—it is more literary, more cinematic, more performative, more time-based, and ultimately, more inter-active than most. With the Blanton’s recent move into a new facility and reinvigorated program of international contemporary art, it felt right to explore viewer reception with an innovative experience such as this. I fully expect to be asked hundreds of times, “Where’s the art?” and other such puzzled questions, and I intend to savor each opportunity to create a genuine answer. (Perhaps therein lies my

adjusted curatorial role.) And in an inspired case of curatorial collaboration, my colleague Dr. Kelly Baum has organized an adjunct show to appear concurrently, *Transactions*, which explores alternative forms of distribution, a topic of her ongoing research, and dovetails with *Mike's World* by juxtaposing earnest artistic entrepreneurship with the fictional enterprises of Mike. At the Blanton, we bill ourselves as a museum of “extraordinary experiences.” The outcome of this one is going to be interesting to observe.

This publication is also an attempt to respond in a more elastic way to the focus of *Mike's World*. Steve Mosier and Michael Smith designed the image portion as a montage of all the past projects. As the editor, I wanted the catalogue text to reflect the lively, ongoing conversations that are central to much of the work. On some level, I confess I was also apparently influenced by the tropes of the talk show and sitcom, which appear throughout it as well. So, rather than producing typical scholarly assessments, I set up a series of scenarios where colleagues and friends could debate relevant issues in the work—artists continuing a conversation from twenty-one years ago (Mike Kelley and Michael Smith), curators who have presented or will present the work coming together to analyze the full oeuvre critically, probably for the first time (Regine Basha, Jay Sanders, Ingrid Schaffner, and myself). We even set aside the artist-auteur mentality of most museum exhibitions and allowed the character, Mike, to be celebrated with his own exhibition history, a practical solution as he is the result of many creative minds come together (and to have done *vitae* for Michael Smith, Joshua White and the other talented co-creators would've taken a book of its own). Even the public programs for the exhibition are organized around conversational formats: an engaging series of gallery talks with artists, the curator, and business entrepreneurs, and an informal panel discussion with two scholars reflecting on the relationship of “Mike's World” to their research interests (David Joselit and Maud Lavin). In this way, perhaps we bridge the somewhat lonely creative environment of the visual arts to the more collaborative realities of performance and performing arts, television, and film.

In sum, welcome to *Mike's World*. It is not like any place you've ever been before, but we're betting it's going to feel awfully familiar.

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and Director of Curatorial Affairs

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