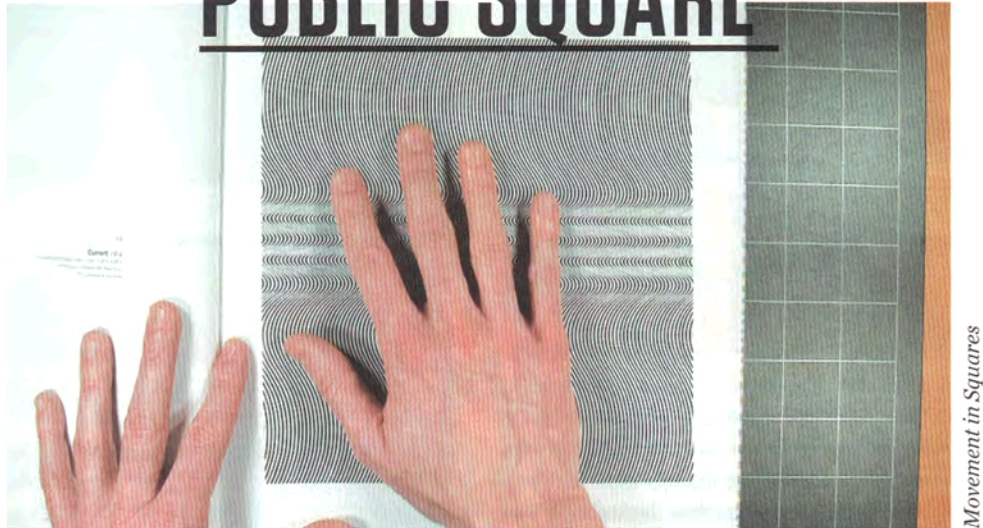


# THE PUBLIC SQUARE



## Three Recent Works by Jean-Paul Kelly

BY MICHAEL SICINSKI

In three recent film works by Canadian artist Jean-Paul Kelly, we can observe a kind of tensional sensibility, an interest in provoking questions about both the use value of art in an age of widespread social dissolution and the relative fecklessness of conventional sign systems for addressing the problems that burden us. On first glance, it's possible to miss what Kelly is doing altogether, because he has a knack for broaching the most substantive philosophical issues using means that appear simplistic or even childlike on their face. Many of Kelly's works, not only in film and video but in drawing, painting, and photography as well, involve appropriated images, and most often these images are created through a skilled but spartan method of tracing found photographs and web images onto paper or Mylar. This turns semi-recognizable scenes into half-cartoon gestures resembling the work of Philip Guston or George Herriman, but with a less assertive style than either. So part of Kelly's effort is the movement of images and scenes that are in public circulation (and that usually have some social or political valence) away from indexical clarity toward a personal form or social realism.

But Kelly's broader aim is to confront these social images with elements of pure abstraction, in order to conduct a kind of closed experiment. Do these seemingly separate spheres have

any real connection for the viewer, or do they simply float atop one another, like Kant's noumenal and phenomenal worlds? Kelly's piece *A Minimal Difference*, which screened in TIFF's Wavelengths program in 2012, grapples with the relationship between the aesthetic and social realms. But this idea slowly emanates from the film over the course of its running time and over several viewings, like the forms on a mobile hanging over a child's crib which create a coherent image only when they drift and sway into a specific configuration. *Minimal Difference* features four object-forms that serve as recursive "players"—a yellow triangle, a blue square, a green circle, and a red, horizontally oriented rectangle. Kelly introduces them at the start of the six-minute film in an overlapping arrangement, a sort of logo formation one might see in a basic design class. Thereafter, Kelly introduces several settings, ink-and-pen backdrops that each display shallow three-dimensionality in a multi-planar, diorama style.

An electronic chord sounds each time the shapes appear, and Kelly alternates between views of the different settings, with or without the shapes (which are dispersed throughout the scenes). On a basic level, the film involves a contrast between abstract and representational signifying systems, both rendered with the same materials. The images onscreen are

all equally flat, but the shapes emphasize their flatness (in the manner of Constructivist or Suprematist painting), whereas the environmental scenes suggest depth as well as an object-based realism. The use of separate planes to create actual foreground movement within these environments (reminiscent of pre-cinematic panoramas, early Méliès films, or even View-Master toys) redoubles the play of suggestion of depth within flatness, as well as referencing Kelly's use of cinema as the primary vehicle for his intellectual experiment. Movement is introduced, even though it all occurs against a flat screen.

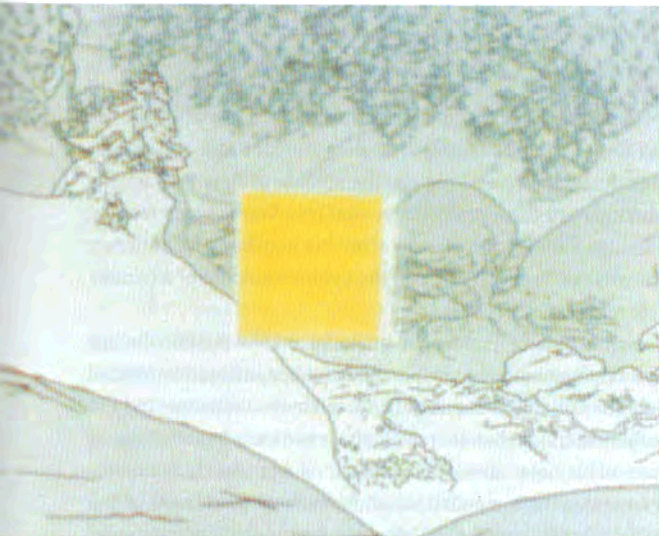
The theatrical scenes Kelly presents are not neutral, although it takes some time to notice this. The first scenes are ambiguous enough. A pile of drifting logs, for example, signifies next to nothing out of context. Same with the clouds: are we looking out the window of a plane, enjoying a peaceful view? It is only with settings three through five, which by this point we could plausibly call "scenarios," that we realize that Kelly is provoking a particular dichotomy. The third scenario (tires and sandbags) seems to be a manmade bulwark against flooding, or some sort of makeshift shelter following a natural disaster. The fourth scenario (a massive garbage dump) is an all-too-familiar scene in many parts of the world. The fifth scenario (furniture and appliances on the curb of a snowy street) looks like the result of a winter eviction. The sixth (the remains of a destroyed building) could be the result of any number of broad forces: a tornado, a bomb, or a developer's wrecking ball.

How do these later spaces recode the first two scenarios? Ultimately there is no way to tell. Kelly could be moving us from benign to problematic spaces, or simply introducing the film with far more ambivalent scenarios than those with which he concludes. However, the greater tension that finally animates *A*

*Minimal Difference* pertains once more to the relationship between the shapes and the scenes, which are mini-prosceniums for a kind of social drama. What do abstract forms have to contribute to crises of mass pollution, or the economic disparities that result in homelessness? It's not just that Kelly drops the four shapes into these scenes. Their presence is irreconcilable with figuration, particularly the sort that is typically used to examine social and political problems in art.

Whereas in *A Minimal Difference* Kelly allows pure geometry to populate various landscapes of concern—a kind of shotgun wedding between the Griersonian universe and the Hans Richter/Oskar Fischinger mode of objective animation—the artist uses a dual-screen technique in *Movement in Squares* (2013). Here, the tension between artistic vision and pragmatic needs is staged like a head-to-head competition, although Kelly is careful to allow neither side to gain the upper hand. The film takes its title from a painting by '70s Op artist Bridget Riley, and it's her work that occupies the right side of the diptych. On the left, we see a series of banal but ultimately revealing camcorder runs through repossessed houses, videos presumably shot for insurance purposes. On the soundtrack, we hear a discussion of Riley's work by David Thompson from 1979, with occasional interjections by the artist herself.

The above description provides only a general sense of the showdown that Kelly has instigated. First of all, we never receive total, unmediated access to Riley's work. Rather, Kelly returns us to the copy stand; he is taking us through an exhibition catalogue, painting by painting. This produces certain physical effects. We see the hand turning the pages and holding them steady. Kelly's presentation of Riley in this manner produces relatively faithful facsimiles of their optical effects. They are



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Figure-ground  
*A Minimal Difference*





no less present for being shot from reproductions. (One could argue that the minor feedback caused by digital video even enhances the experience to some extent.)

So these paintings are themselves suspended in a kind of ambivalence. Kelly's choice of Bridget Riley is significant. Not only are her paintings "universalist" in some sense, their sole content being the generation of physiological responses that would be virtually the same for any opto-typical human. They seem to "do their work" on canvas or in photos (or in photos in a film) equally well. Riley represents a paradoxical ground zero for the aesthetic experience, wherein almost no one can escape the pull of the paintings, and yet their medium-specificity is practically nil. This paradox hardly endeared Op art to the critical establishment in the long run. The fact that this movement was a one-trick flash in the pan, and that its most prominent practitioner was a woman, is by no means wasted on Kelly. He has chosen to highlight a style of art that for all intents and purposes evaporated on contact with its public.

In contrast, the left side panel is propulsive, the camera clearly an appendage to a working, moving body. These are indexical images. We see trashed houses that tenants have left in all manner of disrepair: thrashed furniture abandoned on site, graffiti on the interior walls, various sorts of structural damage. But if you watch closely, you can observe not only certain glitches in the editing—organizations and descriptions of space that do not exactly correspond to a person merely moving around a house with a handheld camcorder—but also a tendency to emphasize those parts of homes which are jarringly unclean: filth-covered carpets, shit-covered toilets, empty beer cans.

So, in *Movement in Squares*, Kelly does not present a transparent, purely functional image of video as a tool of labour. And even though each of these houses represents a foreclosure (Kelly appropriated the video from a housing broker in Florida who was managing repossessions), and by extension some person or group of people who underwent hard times, Kelly's editing and presentation of the footage works against any simplistic reading. The social/political is indeed traversed by formal/aesthetic rifts. Similarly, the presentation of Bridget Riley paintings points to Riley's failure to secure a firm place in the canon of great modern painters, as well as her focus on vision as a shared rather than a private experience.

*Figure-ground*, also from 2013, is a work that is directly related to both *A Minimal Difference* and *Movement in Squares*, although it also finds Kelly adjusting the balance between pure abstraction as a signifying system, on the one hand, and representational material from the larger world that is brought into the frame's decisive purview. Certain formal elements are repeated from *A Minimal Difference*. Kelly employs a series of electronic tones as transitional noise, each one climbing the diatonic scale from a high C. And he returns to the coloured shape on white background, in this case a procession of multi-coloured squares.

The colours first appear as full frames; then they are isolated squares on the white backgrounds. However, Kelly then uses the shape and size of the square to block out a central portion of a drawn image that follows. These images represent scenes (a

wooded glen, a suburban interior, a courtyard in an apartment block, a cramped office, etc.) where deaths took place. Kelly is using the squares to blot out the portion of the image where the dead body appears. In between the painted cels of the scenes of the murders or suicides and their abstract replacement-images, Kelly intercuts actual photographs of objects that were collected into evidence. The first, a needlepoint of some butterflies, is utterly innocuous; the last, a reagent bottle of sodium cyanide, points unmistakably to someone's undoing.

Using a multi-plane camera, Kelly zooms in and out of these crime scenes, as well as the isolated square images. This action, of course, demonstrates a qualitative difference in the two image categories. We can penetrate the representational scenes to try to investigate their contents. However, we cannot "zoom in" to the flat squares, because they really have no spatial referent. They simply become larger or smaller, and the constant tones that Kelly deposits in our ears at these moments in the film simply emphasize that overall two-dimensional impression. So one may ask, what is at stake in replacing the dead with purely geometrical information?

As in *Minimal Difference* and *Movement in Squares*, Kelly does seem to be once again exploring the conundrum of aesthetic signification and its engagement/non-engagement with real-world matters, whether the two realms do in fact have meaningful contact or are destined to remain Kantian asymptotes. But only in *Figure-ground* does Kelly attempt an actual substitution of one for the other. This poses certain questions. Are certain kinds of death unrepresentable? Does our culture tend to turn away from violent death, regarding it as a rupture that would expose systematic inequity? Do we see the death of others as fundamentally abstract, and does media representation inculcate this tendency?

But these are only the most basic problems raised by *Figure-ground*. Kelly has noted that each of the deaths included in the film is related, directly or indirectly, to the 2008 economic crisis, and thus he has employed a political criterion for selecting and organizing a set of murders and suicides. They are, according to Kelly: "the gruesome drug-debt murder of a child in an economically depressed region; the suicide of Bernie Madoff's son; an untreated, mentally distressed Iraq War veteran freezes to death in a mountain stream after his manhunt for murder; the murder of Treyvon Martin; the cyanide suicide of a former Wall Street trader in court."

The question of the world financial crisis of 2008 brings Kelly's ongoing concerns into a different but intimately related realm. The collapse was not only caused by, but represented the exposure of, a fact that economic theorists have been telling us for centuries now: money is symbolic, if not utterly fictitious. It is an abstraction, a substitution for objects (and lives) in the material world. The deaths Kelly interrogates in *Figure-ground* were caused by the very real impact of this abstraction, and the film blots them out with a flat, non-representational colour field. The aesthetic and the social world may not intersect as often as we might like, but Kelly's art shows us that aesthetic discourse may be a control group for gaining a deeper understanding of the pernicious abstractions that govern our lives.