ARTFORUM

In the Weave of Reason

TONY OURSLER AND MIKE HELLEY ON DAVID ASKEYOLD (1940-2008)

TONY OURSLER

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In the Weave of Reason

TONY OURSLER AND MIKE KELLEY ON DAVID ASKEVOLD (1940-2008)

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MY PERSONAL COSMOLOGY of Conceptualism starts with snakes: David Askevold's Kepler's Music of the Spheres Played by Six Snakes, 1971-74, to be exact. As a student at CalArts in 1977, a time when the art department was known for its Conceptual slant-in retrospect, this could have been the last gasp of the last American "ism"-I heard Askevold lecture on the work. Even when conveyed only in slides and audio, Kepler's Music of the Spheres struck me as a stunning installation; it mixes elements of performance, music, and homemade apparatus, featuring suspended live snakes that play a number of specially tuned string instruments with ball bearings. The work's struggle between ideas and physicality, slithering back and forth, is a vivid example of Conceptualism and seemed at the time to present its possible future. It's a Rube Goldberg. contraption that aims to shed light on the larger system of the universe, evoking both transcendence and disturbance, a combination that I would come to recognize in many of Askevold's works.

Askevold was born in Montana in 1940 and studied anthropology and art at the state university before moving to New York to attend the Brooklyn Museum Art School. There he was introduced to the work of Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, and Cy Twombly, as well as an idea about artmaking that was going around at the time: "It didn't matter how it was made," Askevold would say later, "if you liked the concept behind it." It was at the Kansas City Art Institute in 1967 that Askeyold met artist Gerald Ferguson, and the following year they both joined the faculty of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax, Askevold was at the center of NSCAD's legendary transformation into an innovative, bridge-burning art school. Although hired to teach sculpture, he became well known for his Projects class, in which he invited artists-Dan Graham, Robert Smithson, Lawrence Weiner, and Lucy Lippard, among others-to submit ideas that would be created collaboratively by students. (Graham, Vito Acconci, and Dennis Oppenheim took over his class while Askevold traveled around Europe for exhibitions.) In 1975, he was drawn into the sun-drenched vortex of Los Angeles when he was invited to teach at

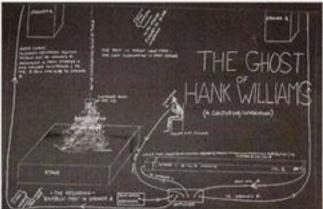
the University of California, Irvine, to take the place of Bas Jan Ader, who had been lost at sea.

Askevold stayed in Los Angeles for five years, and he became an important figure in the Conceptual scene of Southern California, exhibiting and teaching at various schools. I first met him during his yearlong residency at CalArts, when I enrolled in one of his classes. Each week he would give written assignments that, as I remember, were more poems than instructions. My first collaboration with Askevold was musical. At the time, I was in a band/ performance group, the Poetics, with Mike Kelley and John Miller, among others. Knowing of our project, Askevold asked me to sing a song he had written called "Searing Gum," which had something to do with a catastrophic event emanating from the sky: "Searing gum, hits village, why our town? / Shoot all, shoot all, shoot all the dogs in town!" We played music together, recorded a number of sessions, and became good friends, keeping in touch as we both migrated east-he eventually back to Halifax and I to

Another early work of Askevold's that haunted me was The Ghost

of Hank Williams, 1979. In the Conceptual tradition of art production, such as that of Bruce Nauman or LeWitt, the piece was sketched and dated, an idea on paper to be fabricated at a future date. Williams had died in 1953 at age twenty-nine, a burned-out, drugaddicted star—his last single, "I'll Never Get Out of This World Alive," went to number one on the charts posthumously—and Askevold was fascinated by the singer's lilting voice and band of Dritting Cowboys.





From top: Devid Askeyold in his genties, Dertwouth, Neva Scotia, 2007. Photo: Norma Reads. David Askeyold, The Ghost of Hank Williams, 1979, oil crayon on paper, 30 x 65*.

David Askevold's position in art history is mercurial, hard to pin down, but he is a missing link: a Conceptualist whose approach to light and language connects him to the previous generation.

The installation piece would feature an interlacement of looping systems: Infrared video cameras, microphones, speakers, and motorized still cameras would sweep the room, and dry ice would hang from the ceiling, pouring a mist onto a stagelike platform, while "Ramblin' Man" played on a sound system and a "caller" repeated "Hank, Hank, Hank...." Here and elsewhere, Askevold used everyday subject matter, materials, and media, and transformed them into