

In the Weave of Reason

TONY OURSLER AND MIKE HELLEY ON DAVID ASKEVOLD (1940–2008)

TONY OURSLER

MY PERSONAL EDUCATION of Conceptualism starts with teacher David Askevold's (Kaplan's) *Music of the Spheres* played by Sir Starbo, 1971–74, to be exact. As a student at CalArts in 1977, a time when the department was known for its Conceptual class—in retrospect, this could have been the last going of the last "summer" "let"—David Askevold brought to the work. From what conveyed itself in slides and audio, Kaplan's *Music of the Spheres* struck me as a stunning intellectualism, a minor dramatic performance, ironic, and somewhat apparatus, weaving suspended live studies that play a number of specially tuned string instruments with bell-tongues. The work's strength between time and physicality, gliding back and forth, is a real example of Conceptualism and existed at the time to present its possible future. It's a *Black-Golden* construction that aims to deal with the larger systems of the universe, seeking both transcendence and distribution, a combination that I would come to recognize in many of Askevold's works.

Askevold was born in Missouri 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, Ed LeWitt, and Cy Twombly, as well as to other artists working 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 Askevold met artist Gerald Ferguson, and the following year they both joined the faculty of the Nueva Santa College of Art and Design in Halifax. Askevold was at the crest of NSCAD's legendary transformation into an innovative, bridge-burning art school. Although hard to teach sculpture, he became well known for his Projects class, in which he invited artists—Dan Graham, Robert Rauschenberg, Lawrence Weiner, and Lucy Lipsett, among others—as visiting artists that would be created collaboratively by students. (*Graham, Van Alsenick, and Dennis Oppenheim* took over his class, which Askevold regarded around Europe for exhibitions.) In 1971, he was drawn into the non-directorial circle of Los Angeles when he was invited to teach at

the University of California, Irvine, to take the place of Roy Lichtenstein, who had been lost to us.

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 teaching residency at CalArts, when I enrolled at one of his classes. Each week he would give written assignments that, as I remember, were assignments that contained. My first collaboration with Askevold was musical. At the time, I was in a band performance group, the *Postals*, with Mike Kelley and John Miller, among others. Knowing of our project, Askevold asked me to sing a song he had written called "Singing Gums," which had something to do with a catastrophic event emanating from the sky: "Singing gum, his village, why not now? / I hear all, I hear all, I hear all the dogs in town!" We played many together, recorded a number of sessions, and became good friends, keeping in touch as we both migrated east—the eventually back to Halifax and I to New York.

Another early work of Askevold's that haunted me was *The Choir of Hank Williams*, 1978. In the Conceptual tradition of art production, such as that of Bruce Nauman or LeWitt, the piece was described 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, drug-addicted star—but his songs, "17 Years On Day of This World Mine," were to number one on the charts professionally—and Askevold was fascinated by the singer's lilting voice and band of Drifting Cowboys.



Askevold's *Choir of Hank Williams*, 1978. Photo: Tony Oursler. Photo: Mike Helley. The image of Hank Williams, 1953. © Oursler + Helley. 2014.

David Askevold's position in art history is tenuous, 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 intellectual piece would feature an installation of looping systems, filtered video cameras, microphones, speakers, and musical cell phones would wrap the room, and dry air would hang from the ceiling, creating a more than a magical phonetic, while "Kashmir" was played on a sound system and a "little" repeated "Hank, Hank, Hank..." "Five and sixties, Askevold and everyday intimacy music, materials, and media, and transformed them into

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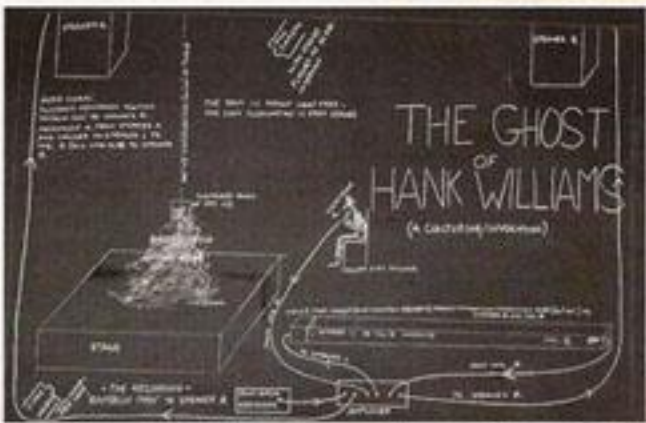
MY PERSONAL COSMOLOGY of Conceptualism starts with snakes: David Askeveld's *Kepler's Music of the Spheres Played by Six Snakes*, 1971–74, to be exact. As a student at CalArts in 1977, a time when the art department was known for its Conceptual slant—in retrospect, this could have been the last gasp of the last American “ism”—I heard Askeveld 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 Askeveld's works.

Askeveld 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,” Askeveld would say later, “if you liked the concept behind it.” It was at the Kansas City Art Institute in 1967 that Askeveld met artist Gerald Ferguson, and the following year they both joined the faculty of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax. Askeveld 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 Askeveld 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.

Askeveld 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 Askeveld 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, Askeveld 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 New York.

Another early work of Askeveld'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, drug-addicted star—his last single, “I'll Never Get Out of This World Alive,” went to number one on the charts posthumously—and Askeveld was fascinated by the singer's lilting voice and band of Drifting Cowboys.



From top: David Askeveld in his garden, Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, 2007. Photo: Norma Reedy. David Askeveld, *The Ghost of Hank Williams*, 1979, oil crayon on paper, 30 x 45".

David Askeveld'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, Askeveld used everyday subject matter, materials, and media, and transformed them into