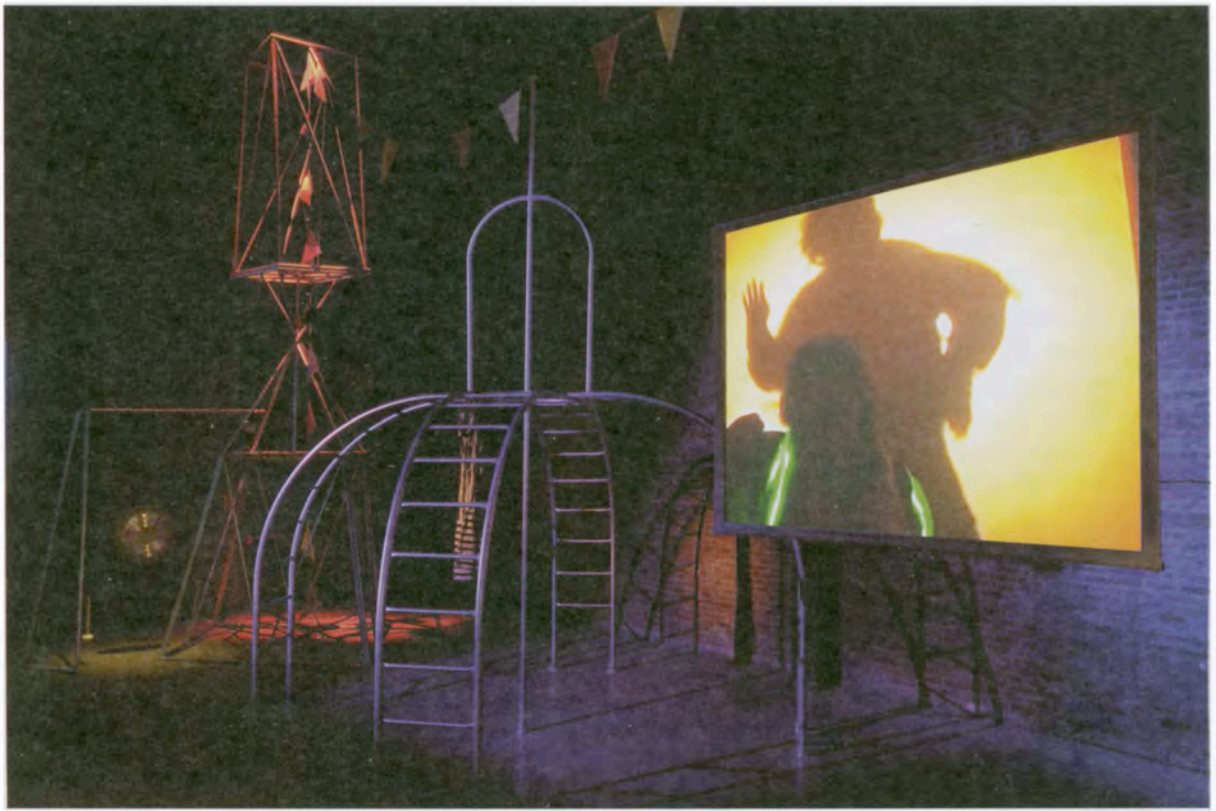


A Voyage of Growth and Discovery, 2009 (installation view). Photo: Jason Mandella. Courtesy the artists and SculptureCenter, Long Island City



Mike Kelley and Michael Smith
A Voyage of Growth and Discovery

SculptureCenter, Long Island City
13 September – 30 November

Almost 50,000 people participated in the 2008 Burning Man festival, the annual event held in the Black Rock Desert of northern Nevada, which is described on the festival's website as a short-term metropolis wholly committed to 'radical self-expression', among nine other principles. Baby IKKI, a prelingual, adult baby character which Michael Smith has been performing for over 30 years, was among the throng of revellers. Teaming up with Mike Kelley, an artist who has adapted many American vernacular traditions into his work, the two midcareer artists have created an all-encompassing environment at SculptureCenter's 3,000-square-foot main space. In the courtyard, among rocks painted Day-Glo yellow, a chair covered with charred stuffed animals inside a burnt-out Volkswagen bus and a row of five Mr John temporary toilets similar to the ones used at Burning Man, only offer the barest hint of IKKI's neopagan journey. The most dominant aspect of Smith and Kelley's installation is a 30-foot-tall scrap metal sculpture of Baby IKKI, relating to the climax of the festival, when a ritual burning of a monumental effigy takes place. A series of six steel sculptures that resemble children's playground equipment, on which visitors are allowed to climb, are visually connected by multicoloured pennant flags. Inside one structure that looks like one half of a geodesic dome, blankets, stuffed animals and a ball line the floor and hark back to Kelley's well-known stuffed-animal sculptures of the 1980s, such as *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid* (1987). A six-channel video of IKKI's existential pilgrimage to Black Rock City, the name for the temporary community at Burning Man created by neohippies, ravers and environmental artists of all descriptions, plays on suspended screens throughout the room. Outfitted in diaper, bonnet, pacifier and sunglasses, IKKI explores the dusty festival in a state of infantile bliss and is an ideal proxy for Kelley's interest in psychology. We see IKKI in his mobile home en route to the desert watching videos where scenes of bare-breasted women, fire and a Popeye cartoon featuring the infant character Swee'Pea foreshadow his experiences at Burning Man. IKKI goes on to play with toilet paper, a lighter and some gooey chocolate snack that he mixes with suntan lotion in a scatological exercise reminiscent of another Kelley collaborator, Paul McCarthy. If this part of the video seems a bit too elementary, the narrative picks up steam as IKKI enters the festival, interacting with numerous festival attendees, such as a trio of erotic female dancers, who seem both enamoured and welcoming of his clueless behaviour. In combination with appropriated audio snippets and music from the Mike Kelley and Scott Benzel CD *Dance Beats for Baby* (2009), the projections encircle the viewer and create a trippy, funhouse setting. Comically, Baby IKKI barely stands out among the many eccentric participants and events at the festival, making one wonder if *A Voyage of Growth and Discovery* is parody or homage. Whether Burning Man is viewed as a significant cultural event or not, there is no doubt that Kelley and Smith have found their ideal source material. *Chris Bors*