



**ADAM MARNIE** Where does NO come from?

**JOHN MILLER** The NO and the other brown letters come from a 1987 series that correlates words and letters with body parts. In these works, I used a brown impasto to suggest excrement. The first NO was a two-part painting (one for each letter) titled *The Horrible Negation*. One impetus to make this work is Sigmund Freud's postulation that infants assert autonomy by refusing toilet training. I like the idea that identity formation derives from refusal.

**AM** In your recent exhibition, *Civic Center* (Maxwell Graham/Essex Street, April 1 – May 21, 2022; all works 2022), NO appeared in *State of Exception*, a painting hung alone on the back wall, at the apex of the view of the entire show one had upon entering. Elsewhere in the show, there were other letter motifs: the letter I was repeated twice, once in the painting *Autonomous Entry into Public Space* and again as a large brown form, produced as a hemmed short nap carpet, directly in the entryway of the gallery. Another large brown carpet piece, O, in the same make as I, was centrally located in the main gallery space. I would say that O framed the exhibition except that by being so flat it easily got out of the visual field of the other work, even though in any wide view it's quite prominent. Plus, one is allowed to walk directly over the carpet work. These carpet works are confrontational, or inviting, take your pick, but in *Civic Center*, if you didn't want to walk on them you really had to choose not to, especially I which was placed diagonally across the entryway.

**JM** That's right. You enter the gallery's basement space from the ground floor. Before the stairway down, you go through a vestibule that is also a balcony. From there, you can see the main exhibition space from above. From this vantage point, the O was dominant, but once you went downstairs, the wall works took over.

**AM** What's up with I and O?

**JM** I think of the I as an upright body, a column, and a first-person pronoun. This upright posture is significant but precarious. Someone once told me that the classical columns of antiquity represented the bound body of sacrificial slaves. The capital is the head; the shaft, the torso and legs; the pediment, the feet.

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**John Miller, *Negative Landscape*, 2022. Glass, water, 3D printed resin, flitter, painted pine, felt, 4 1/2 x 3 3/4 x 3 3/4 inches (11.43 x 9.53 x 9.53 cm). Edition of 25. Courtesy of the artist and F, Houston**





Two books, *The Story of O* and *Story of the Eye*, inspired the O. I think of it, variously, as an eye, an anus, or a vulva. It's a question of inscription.

**AM** “No” is a complete sentence, but always in response to something else. “No” never exists on its own. Maybe “I” is a complete sentence, though most of the time you’d say “Me” not “I.” “O” is not complete, it is dependent, or exists independently but as a part of a list, like as the fourth vowel; O needs more. Unless like you say it’s not a letter at all.

In *Civic Center*, *I* and *O* transform the NO in *State of Exception*. They break that NO down into N and O, making it part of something larger, a word or perhaps a phrase. Through that transformation, in trying to make the letters connect and make sense, the exhibition becomes fragmentary and incomplete. I’m provoked: what is that larger word or phrase? Why are there no other letters?

**John Miller, *I*, 2022.**  
Nylon carpet, 120 x  
60 x 1 inches (304.80  
x 152.40 x 2.54 cm).  
Courtesy of the artist  
and Maxwell Graham/  
Essex Street, New York

**JM** I consider these letters syntactically but not necessarily as building blocks for sentences. One reason may be that, as fragments, they are more open-ended. No, however, could function as a monosyllabic sentence as you say. While N always remains a letter, O and I can morph into images. In any event, I hope that the placement of these three letters can destabilize how they are literally read. Art and Language stressed the difference between viewing and reading; one can't do both at the same time. This idea informs my approach.

**AM** What is the relationship of the carpet works to the works on the wall? The images in the wall works are all of exteriors, photographed outside on the street, in the street, walking around. Being that the gallery is *inside*, there is an inversion, a turning inside out of the exhibition space that the carpet works complete or complicate. Although (again in a fragmentary way) the carpet works lend the gallery a quality of quasi-public interior architecture, like a hotel lobby, banquet hall, or hallway, or as office space. It's not the kind of carpet normally found in a home. Am I reading this outside/inside inversion right? Is what I'm reading intentional?

**JM** There's no right or wrong way to read the carpets. However, in this case, I hadn't explicitly considered the idea of spatial inversion before you brought it up. The plush, padded surface of the carpets does indeed contrast with the hard surfaces of buildings that the wall works depict. This hard/soft dichotomy seems to resonate with the opposition between public and private. Funnily enough, I've made so many carpets that I take them as a given. Yet, for me the division between public and private is an ongoing concern. To that end, I use decorative materials such as carpeting, wallpaper—and once an artificial tree. The first carpets I made were for fake game show sets. Games shows suggest staging and theater.

**AM** Further complicating the inversion, there are mirrors in three of the wall works, a "through the looking glass" gesture. A better way to say this might be that the mirrors replicate the inversion, doubling it. The carpet works really ground the viewer physically in the space. This is about the real viewer, not the online viewer or a viewer of this exhibition through exhibition photographs. The viewer who was physically in the space had to navigate the carpet works. The carpet works underline the viewer's experience of being inside, which the mirror elements do as well as they show one's reflection in the works (however, only parts of the body, once again fragmentary).

**JM** Mirrors always complicate everything! Juxtaposing the mirror's virtual space with the flatness of the photo prints on aluminum makes it seem deeper than usual. Reflections in general offer a primordial virtuality that now carries over to the more abstract virtual realities of online media. For this reason, the mirrors confront spectators with contradictions in what it means to be present, to have a body, and so on.

**AM** In another turn of the real, the photographic imagery in the wall works is constructed as trompe l'oeil. It seems at least redundant if not ridiculous to call photography realistic or even photorealistic but yet here we are. The images look unreal—or *super-real*—mannered, and *made*, which makes them somehow all the more lifelike. The light in these images is so even that it looks artificial, and, as it is with your photography, your/the camera's eye is deadpan. Only *State of Exception* frames its subject at an angle while the rest of the works are shot dead on.

**JM** While many straight photographers extol the warmth of film, I go for the coldness of digital. I shot all the images in the show with a medium-format digital camera and used Lightroom's "upright" function to square them off. By systematically optimizing lighting and contrast, the software's auto-exposure mode helped create the hyper-real/artificial effect.

What got me started with trompe l'oeil was the notion of urban experience as a haptic encounter—even one of shock. We tend to experience the built environment apperceptively. Rather than grasping the complex forms of buildings as objective gestalts, we feel our way through and around them. This textural sense of surfaces, which trompe l'oeil underscores, registers the ongoing shock of urban life.

**AM** Details seem to be coming out from the pictures, like the pattern of the wall in *Autonomous Entry into Public Space* or the drywall screws on the brick windowsill in *Still Life*. Discovering the screws was like an epiphany, which linked up a rush of observations, through which I realized you were drawing from a rich variety of schematic painting tropes, playing with one-point perspective and trompe l'oeil devices from 17th century Dutch still lives.

**JM** I didn't notice the drywall screws on the windowsill until Maxwell pointed them out. After he did, I chose the title *Still Life*. All this relates to the optical





unconscious. I overlooked the screws, but they made an impact—meaning that, as an individuated subject, I didn't absorb and fully process all the information that the camera generated, even though I took the picture. I didn't so much orchestrate the schematic painting tropes that emerged; they were embedded in an automated process. I thought I was photographing a broken police barrier, but at the same time, I also shot drywall screws and much more. Ultimately, the photographic information exceeded what I intended it to be.

**AM** What's great is these schematics are simply there, and not with a heavy hand, they are not what the show is about; these devices are to be found (rewarding the joy of looking closely) but they also make the work what it is: a superimposition of certain Enlightenment visual codes onto these very current images of a very specific part of New York City. Are the Enlightenment schematics included in *Civic Center* because they too are a kind of control? Or did you use them to allow the viewer to feel as though they can "step into the work," to therefore provide a sense of freedom or a path for escape?

**JM** Both. Trompe l'oeil, in which the background parallels the picture plane, implies one-point perspective. You feel as though its shallow space is palpable. Conversely, Renaissance perspective offers a universal system in which three coordinates can map each and every existing point, i.e., a means of total identification, location, and control. By eliminating distortion, Lightroom's upright mode made the perspective in these images feel absolute.

**AM** Before we get too far afield, or maybe as a way to go afield, I want to introduce *Negative Landscape* (2022). It was not included in *Civic Center* but it was produced at the same time as a complimentary (nearly essential) element, as something of a total symbolic remainder of that exhibition. It functions as a lens to reexamine this body of work. *Negative Landscape* is a snow globe; inside is a snow-covered hill, two pine trees, and a large brown NO. The NO and the trees have snow on them, and when you shake the globe, snow swirls like a blizzard.

For me, where I get with *Civic Center*, you want me to look, to really *look* at the increasing surveillance and police presence in the make up of New York City's government center, which includes City Hall, One Police Plaza, the

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Installation view of  
John Miller, *Civic Center*,  
Maxwell Graham/Essex  
Street, April 1 – May  
21, 2022. Left to right:  
*State of Exception*,  
2022, *Reflective*, 2022,  
*Confession*, 2022. On  
floor: *O*, 2022. Courtesy  
of the artist and Maxwell  
Graham/Essex Street,  
New York







Metropolitan Correctional Center, the United States and New York County Courthouses, etc; this is also where you live, your apartment is right there. Now, I know that what you are having me look at is not exclusive to New York. This is just one part of the puzzle, this is happening across the US, and beyond the US. And you know something about the rest of the country, being from Ohio, where your mother still lives. *Negative Landscape* brings your critique to the central US, although critique is not quite right, I'd rather say *plea*, your plea that we look and really see this militaristic transformation of our public lives and the eradication of a public space.

**JM** While the works in the show address the public, *Negative Landscape* is a knickknack. It's a snow globe that depicts a pine forest in which the NO could be a public sculpture or a monument, yet these elements are, in fact, miniatures.

The NO might be in Ohio—or elsewhere. A so-called snow belt once ran from Cleveland to Buffalo, but it doesn't snow as much there as it used to. And the imposition of such a monument onto a landscape calls up memories of what was a local monument. I grew up in a small town not far from Kent, Ohio where the Kent State Massacre occurred. There, the National Guard shot and killed four student anti-war protestors. If you look at photographs of that fateful confrontation, you'll see that the guardsmen carry rifles *with bayonets*. Coincidentally, a few months before, Robert Smithson executed *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970), an apocalyptic anti-monument, on the grounds of Kent State University.

**AM** We have not addressed the various construction of *Civic Center's* wall works. There are three different processes. One work, *Still Life*, is a vinyl graphic adhered directly to the wall. Two works, *Autonomous Entry into Public Space* and *State of Exception*, are acrylic and inkjet prints on canvas. Three works, *Blip*, *Reflective*, and *Confession*, are made in parts, with dye sublimation prints on aluminum, and mirror and acrylic on birch, and these parts are mounted together on wooden panels. There is a ratcheting progression of complexity from one process to the next, as well as each process has its own implied meaning, i.e., *Still Life* uses the gallery architecture as its support; the brown letters in *Autonomous Entry* and *State of Exception* are painted with acrylic over the inkjet photographs but are integrated into the images as objects with cast shadows in a trompe l'oeil play; *Blip*, *Reflective*, and *Confession*, with their separate parts butted

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**John Miller, *Autonomous Entry into Public Space*, 2022. Acrylic and inkjet print on Hahnemühle canvas, 55 1/8 x 68 3/4 inches (140.02 x 174.63 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Maxwell Graham/Essex Street, New York**



against each other, in particular carry this notion of the fragmentary that I keep returning to.

**JM** *Still Life* approximates a modest stage backdrop. It's about 3/4 scale. It's mostly an image of a brick wall that in turn is affixed to drywall in a gallery. In the picture, a broken police barrier leans against the brick wall, aimlessly barring your way to a dead end. The inkjet and acrylic paintings re-imagine some of my older works as public sculpture. It's a faux grandiosity, indebted to Oldenburg's proposed monuments. The superimposed brown elements subject the representation of social space to a formalist syntax. The relief works montage both images and materials. Yet everything is levelled on the same picture plane, which promises to resolve the material and pictorial fragmentation.

**AM** Brown is everywhere, another connecting tissue. You've painted thick brown impasto interventions onto many of the wall works, as letters in *Autonomous Entry* and *State of Exception* and as geometric shapes in *Blip*, *Reflective*, and *Confession*. The NO in *Negative Landscape* and the carpet works are made with a matching brown. The only two works that don't have brown in them are *Still Life* and the PowerPoint video *Civic Center*. Why didn't you add brown to these too?

**JM** *Still Life* purports to be a slice of life. And, with its staccato images of police barriers, I meant *Civic Center* to be a critical representation of *what is* rather than a reimagination of what could be. So, I chose not to interrupt the images in these with brown elements.

**AM** I've spent a lot of time with your PowerPoint video work *Reconstructing a Public Sphere* (2017), which I showed in the *Real Estate* exhibition in Houston, and as excerpted stills printed in that exhibition's corresponding issue of F Magazine, issue 10: REAL ESTATE; we also ran an excerpt from *Reconstructing a Public Sphere* in F issue 5: LANDSCAPE. I love that work. There's so much of you and Aura in it, and Carmen is in it too. It is one of your most autobiographical works, and in it your autobiography provides a framework for you to talk about the transformation of lower Manhattan's public space, both through real estate and the aftermath and redevelopment following 9/11. It also includes poignant ruminations on photography and memory. It's possible that the bits on photography, memory, real estate and public space are actually the frameworks that allow you to talk

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Installation view of  
John Miller, *Civic Center*,  
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Street, April 1 – May  
21, 2022. Left to right:  
*Civic Center*, 2022, *Still  
Life*, 2022, *Blip*, 2022,  
*Autonomous Entry into  
Public Space*, 2022. On  
floor: *O*, 2022. Courtesy  
of the artist and Maxwell  
Graham/Essex Street,  
New York



autobiographically. The interior/autobiographical and the exterior/observational fold in on each other, much as you've done in *Civic Center*, though of course *Civic Center* (and its PowerPoint video work by the same title) is obliquely personal. Although *Civic Center* is made with material that is very "close to home," you've boiled out any autobiographical reference, leaving it, dare I say, as purely political. Still, I don't think you would have made *Civic Center* if you hadn't made *Reconstructing a Public Sphere*.

**JM** *Reconstructing...* recounts my attempts to retrieve my cat, Lenny, from our destroyed apartment in the wake of 9/11. I used this personal episode to tell a larger story on more intimate terms. The first police barriers and checkpoints sprung up in Lower Manhattan shortly after the attack. I came to consider these as an unconscious form of public sculpture and contrasted it with the profusion of conventional public sculpture in Battery Park City. I wanted to show how these barriers shape our experience of public space—and, by extension, our sense of reality. This certainly was the case with me. The police barriers and checkpoints metastasized after the Black Lives Matter demonstrations in Spring 2020—and served as the point of departure for the *Civic Center* PowerPoint. In that work, I quote a line from the Chambers Brothers' song, "Time Has Come Today": "The rules have changed today/ I've got no place to stay." Later, the PowerPoint alternates between images of barriers and text panels that read, "the real world." These cuts accelerate toward the end.

**AM** *Negative Landscape* is a geographic remainder for *Civic Center* (bringing the Midwest to the coast) but I also see it as an emotional remainder, carrying your own childhood and upbringing, and with that a sense of tenderness and loss, and humor too. The kitschy vernacular of its form is so specific, so on point: a snow globe is the embodiment of sentimentalism. And yet, smack in the middle of *Negative Landscape* is the NO. What is it rejecting? What does it negate?

**JM** The NO doesn't reject anything in particular, nor is its content fixed. Even though NO enters my work via personal experience, it is contextual—uttered, as you said, in response to something else. After exploring this motif for quite a while, I discovered Boris Lurie's work. Lurie co-founded the NO!Art movement. It surprised me to find that I had constructed my brown letters almost the same way he had done his many years before. As a child, Lurie had been imprisoned in three concentration camps, includ-

ing Buchenwald. By juxtaposing harrowing images from the camps with pinups, Lurie's collages anticipate punk, especially the work of Jamie Reid. In that way, they point backward and forward in time. One could see *Negative Landscape* in terms of historical processes, especially repression. NO marks a fissure in an otherwise homogenous reality. It could be a negation that implies a liberatory de-negation. At the very least, NO activates the unforeseen.

**John Miller** (b. 1954, Cleveland, OH) is an artist, writer, and musician based in New York and Berlin.

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***Negative Landscape***  
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