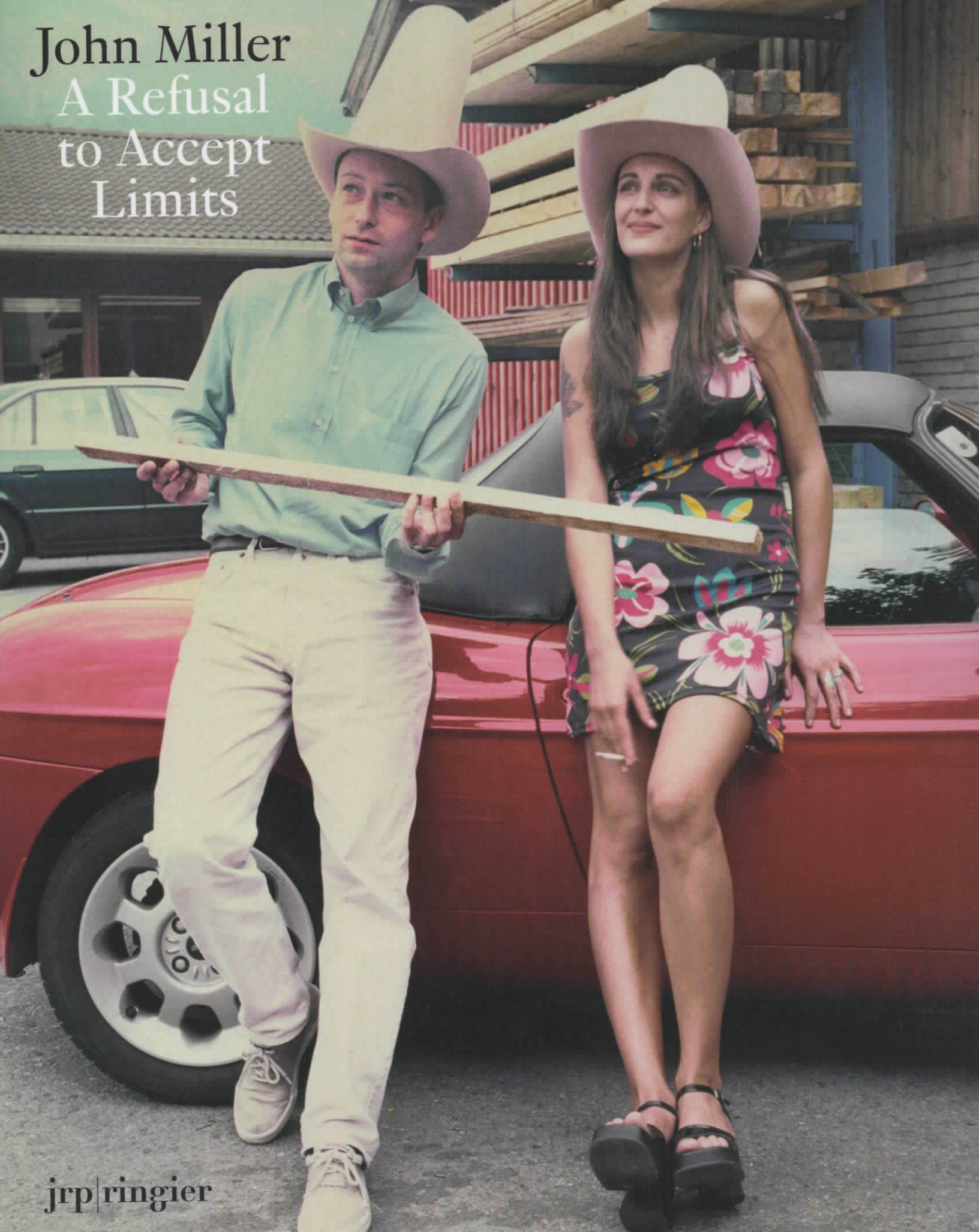
John Miller
A Refusal to Accept Limits



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John Miller in Conversation with Beatrix Ruf

JOHN MILLER — How did you arrive at this particular selection of my work?

BEATRIX RUF — *The idea was to present an overview of your work, and given the limited space we are working with, I think for an œuvre that spans from the early 1980s to now, we managed to have everything "present": the painting series, the daily executed regional works as well as the Southwest paintings, all states of the brown works including the video* Something for Everyone *(2004) you did with Richard Hoeck, the gold series with the new ruin installation, the globes, the game show series, a mannequin, the potato and carpet installation. We also presented series that included many works and that unfolded over a long period such as* The Middle of the Day *(1994–2009) photographs shown as a digital slide show on a flat screen, or the personal ad series you did in collaboration with Takuji Kogo in the form of those wonderful music clips. Operating as a Kunsthalle, and given this selection of works we had been considering from your "history," I am really happy that we decided to mix both media and the chronology in an all-over installation of the show. The perhaps missing "representation" of the strong element of working in series in your practice is transformed here into a dialogue between the various series. For me the serial core in your work gets even stronger, as it is communicated through a range of different media.*

What do you think about this "mixture," and do you feel anything is missing in the show?

Well, we also had the XXX Macarena performance with Jutta Koether and Tony Conrad, and the panel on artists' criticism organized by *Peephole-Sheet*. Since I'm not used to thinking as a curator, the funny thing is that I wasn't concerned so much with how to represent a span of my work, but more with how to put together a sequence of rooms that would activate what we chose in some way. So, for me, it was ad hoc.

When I first started showing my work in the early 1980s, the rule, more-or-less, in New York was that "every artist has one good idea"—to paraphrase Carl Andre. What Andre meant by that was that an artist's œuvre should be consistent. In contrast, I often tried to confront viewers with some sense of rupture, either thematically or formally. This was considered unconventional then, but I wasn't alone. Sherrie Levine's *1917* show at Nature Morte was important for me because she showed appropriations from two seemingly incongruous sources: Egon Schiele and Kazimir Malevich. David Robbins and Jennifer Bolande also worked in this way to some extent. Now this approach has become so widespread it no longer counts as a gesture per se. But, long story short, I only started thinking about how we arrived at the exact selection after the fact. Of course, certain practical considerations like shipping costs also shaped the selection—so the show has a decidedly European slant. But overall I think it succeeds in opening up my work to a broad audience. The only missing material may be the more analytical personal ad work that leans heavily on Pierre Bourdieu's sociology, and some early brush-and-ink drawings.

The show does not necessarily look as if it has been done by one artist—but looking more closely and knowing more about the individual series, I find one aspect very striking, which is that many of your series deal with or come out of everyday practice in a kind of contamination of Conceptual and Minimal legacies: the regional paintings, The Middle of the Day, *even the game show work and personal ads. Can you talk about whether, in your understanding, those very different "looking" series of works come together for you, and how and why they came about?*

I work associatively, and early on I felt that the demand to create a signature style would only yield a superficial integrity. Also, since I don't work programmatically, I was more inclined to let the focus of my work develop topically and organically—which, for me, means across ostensible ruptures. But this "contaminated" approach is not without precedent. The discursiveness of Dan Graham's practice has long been a model for me. Martha Rosler also speaks about working tactically instead of stylistically. This makes sense to me too. One significant difference, however, between them and me is that they did not present themselves as painters or sculptors per se. In the aftermath of the 1970s, Tom Lawson's essay "Last Exit: Painting" captured some of the impatience that my generation—the one right after the *Pictures* artists—felt with so-called alternative media (video, performance, film, artists' books); it seemed these forms were tolerated because they lacked clout and,

then at least, seemed incapable of reaching a broader public. So part of the impetus for me, and others, was to bring the political agenda of alternative media back to painting. Needless to say, it didn't always work, but conversely the alternative media of the 1970s have become the mainstream media of today.

In the late 1980s I cultivated a brown impasto—or excremental—trope as a supposed signature style. Now this is what people think of when they think of my work. I thought of it as a trademark no one wanted, a repugnant trademark. Ultimately, though, it collapsed into being a trademark like any other, so I moved on.

Brown definitely became your trademark. But I am surprised how the audience is particularly responding to the paintings from the early 1980s in the show. They were not "appropriate" to the Pictures *generation you mention above; they are kind of "bad" paintings, and you were painting one every day.*

Well, bad painting was ascribed to some *Pictures* artists too, like Walter Robinson—and I do feel a certain affinity to Walter's work. The *Pictures* artists were tied into the New York punk scene and both had a decidedly Warholian orientation. If you look back at old issues of *ZG* magazine or watch Eric Mitchell's *Underground USA*, this connection becomes obvious. David Robbins once described *Pictures* artists as the children of Warhol and Coca-Cola. I couldn't care less about re-enacting the Factory and I don't like soft drinks. In short, I didn't have the same love/hate relationship with mass media that the *Pictures* artists did. While they typically invoked a media hegemony, I arrived at what I was doing more through linguistics and the decadent tradition in French literature (all of which I read in English). So, in that sense, I wasn't interested in badness in terms of kitsch or bad technique. I thought of it more along the lines of a potentially non-authoritarian discourse. What's attractive about poetry is that anyone can do it, with little or no wherewithal. Of course, there's an official poetry world, a history of poetry, etc., but these are all extraneous to the fundamental poeticizing impulse. I thought of my first small paintings as poems. I could do them, but so could anyone else. I understood poetics as tied to the condition of the viewer's subjectivity. After Dennis Cooper recommended that I read Bataille, I realized that this condition could be construed in terms of political economy.

At that time I was working as a temp two or three days a week to get by. I had a small apartment on the Lower East Side that was basically a cold-water walk-up. My studio was just a desk. I tried to paint one painting a day. The work was mostly a matter of thinking up images. I never worried about execution. That lasted for about nine months. Because I had worked with video in art school, I initially felt uneasy about drawing and painting, especially the materiality of the media. I remember feeling a distinct sense of shame going into the art supply store, probably because I sensed that this exchange of money for supplies was a step toward legitimation and away from spontaneous poetics. As a temp, I was working as a word processor—a glorified secretary—because that was a cutting-edge technology back then and the pay was relatively good. You didn't use a computer, but instead a "word processing machine." Mine was a Vydec. Exxon made it and it looked like a Star Trek console. When I would arrive on a new job, the client would sometimes announce, "our word processing technician is here." It's funny to recall how different life was in the early 1980s, much less roboticized than now. You could really be alone.

I almost always showed my early paintings in large groups. I tried to come up with images that would be instantly recognizable, but that I could also invest in, poetically. So, in this sense, I was trying to second-guess the proverbial man or woman on the street: to make a picture that I imagined one would regard as normal. In other words, I thought I was making pictures of pictures, i.e., representations of ideology. And this affected the character of these paintings as artworks. Sticking to the surface meant refusing the conventional wisdom that the form of the work held its content like a vessel. I didn't want an inside or a depth. Instead, I wanted these paintings to deflect viewers, rather than draw them in. You could see these paintings quickly, too quickly. The viewing experience was exhausted before the viewer was ready. Even though they were just paintings of butterflies and trains, Chris Williams once told me, "when you first started showing

those, they seemed very mean." That was probably the result of the deflection, which was inspired by Minimalist sculpture and Robbe-Grillet. To me, these installations had a quasi-linguistic sense. The paintings suggested that whatever they might mean was not internal to the work, but instead between works. It was a discursive, field relationship like words in a dictionary in which the meaning of any given word is established by other words. In this sense, these installations proposed a model of reception and a model of art history.

You refer to Sigmund Freud often regarding "brown" and "gold" as opposites, but also in a continuous line of sublimation.

I was indeed reading Freud when I started the brown work. For that reason, it might look like this series was the result of a programmatic decision, but that was not the case. It began as an emotional reaction to my self-imposed mandate to paint a painting every day. At the outset, I was trying to create a feeling of luminosity in my work by painting in transparent layers and by letting patches of white canvas show in the painting. This was partly the influence of William Blake. Since this technique equates paint with light, paint takes on a positive—or uplifting—value. But after a year of this regimen, I started to have antithetical feelings about paint. I started thinking of painting as having to do with repression, as a process of sealing off a canvas with opaque material. In some way, I construed it as a matter of accumulation. So I more or less groped my way into the brown work. At the same time, I discovered certain of Freud's formulations such as "art is a sublimated anal impulse," and "the urge to make art derives from the urge to model feces" that really resonated with where my work was at. However, psychoanalysis generally considers sublimation to be the opposite of repression, whereas my sense is (perhaps via Marcuse) that sublimation is not without a repressive aspect. Even so, it seems that Freud himself hints at this in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Since my brown impasto trope connotes excrement, it suggests either the unsublimated, raw material of art or the desublimation of once aestheticized material.

I was also reading the Grove Press edition of Sade's work right around the same time. I see Sade as an important precursor to Freud because he initiates a non-idealist investigation of human subjectivity. You could even argue that, for this reason, Sade is the first modernist. One of Sade's big conundrums was his desire to violate Nature; he recognized Nature as fundamentally violent—or entropic—so that by attempting to violate nature he was in fact enacting its essential logic. Desublimation is analogous to this. You can never absolutely desublimate an artwork back to its originary contents. Instead, any attempt at desublimation functions as a counter-sublimation. It simply imbues an overarching sublimatory logic with a more flexible, dialectical potency. As for gold: it is typically considered the opposite of shit, but Freud said that they're linked in the unconscious. I think of my gold pieces as having a more intense fecal effect than the comparatively forthright brown works. Of course, the context was much different 25 years ago. The US in particular was much more puritanical. As a result, a desublimatory gesture used to pack a greater political charge and held out a greater avant-gardistic promise. Now I think popular entertainment and advertising have outstripped all of this, while neutralizing any avant-garde potentiality as well. In effecting the most thorough forms of desublimation, perhaps what they do is to show that that potentiality was always an illusion.

If you replace Sade's term "Nature" with "apparatus," you can set the limits of a so-called non-programmatic approach. In fact, what's now clearly driving international politics is the prospect that nothing falls outside global capital.

In the Kunsthalle's central room all these various aspects come together: the "bad" paintings from the 1980s, the "monochrome" brown work, and especially Transylvania Choo-Choo *(1992) and* The Office Party and the Communist Party *(1991), both "colorful" in narratives and materials. Add to that a brown and gold wallpaper, which enhances the "décor" references of the gold installation comprised of architectural fragments like columns, arches, stones, covered not only with gold but also with lots of weapons and cultural detritus. Did you intend to create some sort of theatricality and how do you see this in your work in general and also in terms of critical theory?*

The term "theatrical" derives from Michael Fried's essay "Art and Objecthood," a critique of Minimal sculpture. When I got out of art school in the late 1970s, the dominant mode of installation art was to treat the gallery as a larger canvas. I was part of a tendency that rejected that in favor of installation as rhetorical space. Robert Morgan once wrote an article that analyzed my work in these terms: "Installation as Pleasurable Text." One of the quirky virtues of "Art and Objecthood" is that it managed to articulate everything about Minimal sculpture that would become important for successive generations of artists. Chief among them was "theater." Fried, however, thought that was bad. For him Minimal art was theatrical because it included the viewer. He also said that theater is a condition "between the arts"; in other words, theater is an anti-essentialist aesthetic. By 1980 Minimal sculpture had become an aesthetic armature, not an end in itself. This is obvious in the work of Cady Noland and Felix González-Torres, for example. My first shows of drawings were overtly theatrical. I hung them salon-style. I considered them to be installations because the accumulation of images addressed the subjectivity of the viewer, i.e., it suggested that the viewer's subjectivity may be interpolated through a succession of images, through pictures of the world. This might constitute "a worldview"—or a model of it. At the same time, I was interested in the prop-like aspect of the normative picture. In this vein, you might say the pictures prop up individual subjectivity.

What later became my signature brown impasto trope functioned as a theatrical device too. My first brown works were abstractions painted in acrylic. I alway use acrylic because it's synthetic. But since acrylic dries very flat, these paintings looked best when they were wet. After a week, they were flat and dead. So I beefed up the texture with modeling paste, which doesn't loose its body when it dries. This led to literally constructed brushstrokes. Here, I wasn't concerned so much with painting per se as I was with using painting conventions as a rhetorical platform. In Abstract Expressionism the brushstroke was supposed to be an index of the artist's subjectivity; to build one is perverse. At first I tried to make realistic brushstrokes, but I soon realized it would be more interesting to make cartoons of brushstroke that were, nonetheless, real.

Building up the brushstrokes led to reliefs. The reliefs came in two stages. The first were brown monochromes that were basically abstract, but included a few objects. After a certain point, I started worrying that these monochromes, despite the brown impasto, might read as purist statements. So, to build up a sense of heterogeneity I started adding objects to the reliefs, just partly submerged in an excremental mire. Since the objects could now be easily identified, I started thinking of the reliefs as stupid versions of trompe l'oeil painting; instead of giving you an illusion, they give you the objects themselves

As part of the brown output, I also began making works that I considered gestures: a mannequin dressed in clothes painted brown or a 55-gallon drum of brown paint. Both were literal, in terms of scale and materials. So, just as Fried warned, the space of the work merged with the space of the viewer. Mannequins are obviously designed for store windows. I made my first mannequin, *My Friend* (1980), to displace or preempt the viewer. One might expect to walk into an empty gallery and instead one confronts a figure that's already there, more or less lying in wait. Installed like that, a mannequin might even direct the viewer's gaze, like an over-the-shoulder shot in cinema. Since the clothes on *Mannequin Lover* (2002) (the first work you saw upon entering my Zurich show) change every week, its variable appearance emphasizes that the mannequin is primarily a display rack.

Most of my game show paintings depict stages or sets. This series of paintings involved a double staging: the depicted stage and the gallery space, mediated by the picture plane. Later, the paintings led to two installations where I invented game show sets. The first, *The Lugubrious Game* (1998), revolved around a pile of dirt strewn with money and dildoes. In the second, I replaced the dirt mound with a circular carpet. That was the first time I used carpet as a set device.

The carpet and the potato piece derive from the game show sets. But they were also inspired by an SPD (Social Democratic Party) event at Cafe Bravo, which Dan Graham designed for Kunst-Werke in Berlin. The SPD rented the café. The event planners ran a red carpet from the street right into the café—which, in itself, was an odd idea: carpeting cobblestones. There are two rocks on either side

of the entrance to the café and one blocked the last stretch of carpet. But that could have been remedied by simply adjusting the angle of the carpet. Instead, they cut out a scallop to accommodate the rock. I liked that childish idea of refusing to change the trajectory. There's a fatalism in that.

My gold reliefs are a kind or reprise of the earlier brown ones, but they differ in that they feature a more aggressive accumulation of objects. On one hand, they more explicitly suggest decay, destruction, or entropic breakdown; on the other, they're more passive-aggressively decorative. Like you said before, they feature a lot of weapons—perhaps because they're emblematic of destruction—as well as fish and nautical gear. The latter suggest the sea or wreckage washed up on shore. Almost all the objects I use are plastic and almost all of them are replicas. The imitation gold leafing enacts a sense of reification.

I also made an ensemble of gold architectural fragments, columns, arches, stones, especially for the show and titled it *A Refusal to Accept Limits* (2009). Much of it was covered with debris. It shifts the terms of staging a bit. Earlier works, like *Topology for a Museum* (1994), invoked an ersatz classicism, but as a scale model. The ruin, however, is more or less life-size and puts the viewer in the midst of the kind of relationships I initiated in *Topology for a Museum*. It also conflates interior and exterior space. This confusion raises questions about artifice and what is natural. For example, Walter Benjamin argued that arcades offered the commodity a natural habitat. With this work I'm trying to rub that logic against the grain. Of course, as allegory, the ruin is utterly overdetermined. Some even say it's meta-allegorical because it emblematizes the return of the man-made world to a state of nature.

This seems to be a theme throughout your work—all aspects of the ruins of reality and civilization, consumerism, politics, psychology, especially enhanced in the topic of the private and public spheres. You wrote an article in 1988 titled "The Consumption of Everyday Life." Can you talk more about the conceptual approaches in works referring to these themes: game shows, personal ads, The Bachelor Stripped Bare *(1987), and especially the* Middle of the Day *series, as well as its predecessors in the use of photography,* Clubs for America *(1992) and* Wind from the East *(1994)? All of them seem to be full of references, associations, decay of the "original" idea, but again hiding the "content" of a possible everyday life.*

I think you're right about that—and it's a facet of my practice that the Kunsthalle show really brings to the fore.

First, "The Consumption of Everyday Life" analyzed Haim Steinbach's work, which typically juxtaposes different objects or products on wedge-shaped shelves. Hal Foster once dismissed this gesture as "running the readymade paradigm straight into the ground." For me, whether it does this or not is less important than what I see as the suggestion of a nascent situation through the arrangement of things. The situation is closed—or alienated—but for that very reason incites a longing for openness. Instead of arriving at a generic, readymade experience, Haim produces something utterly specific. Recently Haim pointed out that *Art Since 1910: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (edited by Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin Buchloh) misidentified the objects and materials in his work reproduced in the book. It's ironic that ostensibly materialist criticism would reduce such specific objects to an abstract principle, especially because, like Carl Andre, Haim uses gravity to stress what's actually there before the viewer. I think Haim's arrangements have affinities to ikebana (Japanese flower arranging)—as well as to retail display. The concreteness of the arrangement pertains to a sense of situation and how the beholder construes him- or herself in that context.

As for how I wrote the text and the sources I drew from, "The Consumption of Everyday Life" is my attempt to come to terms with Situationist critique and Walter Benjamin's writing. Both have a romantic aspect, so I suppose the ruin as a leitmotif derives from them. I recently saw Godard's *Pierrot le fou* again and this statement stood out: "Ruins beget the language of poetry." Godard probably took that from someone else, but I think he meant the film to portray mass culture as a ruin. This is a concern he shared with the Situationists, even though Debord hated Godard. If romanticism revolts against industrialism by invoking a dormant past, this makes the ruin its prime trope. The Situationists sought a radical de-negation of poetry, a realization of the poetic as lived experience. The

practice of *dérive*, i.e., moving through an urban environment without purpose, promised a glimpse of this. It presumed that, if one could observe the city without habitual or routine attachments, the richness of everyday life would be manifest. In this framework, the city becomes a living ruin from which one might excavate the richness of something so familiar as to be ordinarily unrecognizable. Benjamin's notion of *Jetztzeit* similarly involves redeeming a dormant image of the past in the present. I think that the model for both is the Proustian ephiphany.

The phrasing of the title is significant as well. It refers to *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. It also asserts that everyday life is not only produced, but also consumed.

In terms of writing method, *The Consumption of Everyday Life* is a cross reading of several related sources. This is an "objective-allegorical" technique derived from Benjamin, but it would be years before the *Passagenwerk* or *Arcades Study* became available in translation. Benjamin juxtaposed citations to expose their historical tendency rather than to convey what they literally said. This, in turn, relates to an observation of Sade: that a man should not be judged on what he presents in public, but on what he conceals.

So do these concerns derive from literature?

Yes, to a certain extent. In *The Romantic Agony*, Mario Praz connects romanticism to individual subjectivity insofar as it expresses "the hidden impulses of the soul." This also suggests excavation as a dominant metaphor. The book is a study of erotic and decadent literature, with the most significant chapter devoted to Sade. Praz is a bit like Michael Fried in that he articulates what he condemns with great insight—but he nonetheless arrives at the wrong conclusion. Even though Praz argues that Sade is a poor writer, he's curiously fixated on this work. Moreover, he refuses any kind of Freudian resolution of Sadean questions, even though that's exactly where his observations lead.

Does all this carry over into the works I brought up before?

The Bachelor Stripped Bare is the earliest in the sequence of work you mention. As the title indicates, it does have a link to Duchamp and the readymade, even though *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* (1915–1923) was not a readymade. *The Bachelor Stripped Bare* juxtaposes two personal ads. I reproduced them as two signs: vinyl letters on white Plexiglas panels. These I attached to an oblong piece of lattice that leaned against the wall. They were upside-down in relation to each other, like mirror reflections. A man who described himself as a wealthy CEO took out the first ad in *New York Magazine*. In it, he invokes his financial and cultural capital, i.e., a love of "the arts," to attract a younger woman who would "share life's voyage." A second man took out an ad in Al Goldstein's *Screw*. (At the time I was unaware that *Screw* was a quasi-art-oriented porn magazine; Goldstein made it a point to work with cartoonists and illustrators at a time when photographers were steadily replacing them.) The *Screw* ad simply described the genitalia of the woman he sought. On one hand, I was concerned with aesthetization as sublimation vis-à-vis a differential in social class. On the other, how one's subjective interiority—which is what personal ads at least promise to convey—might assume a readymade aspect. After doing this piece, I didn't use personals again for the next 15 years.

In 1992 Dean McNeil and Christophe Tannert invited me to take part in a show about the AIDS epidemic, probably on the basis of my brown impasto work. But I didn't think that that work was an adequate response to the given theme. Instead, I decided to photograph the sites of New York City sex clubs that closed or had been closed after the onset of the epidemic. I titled the series *Clubs for America* after Dan Graham's *Homes for America* (1966). No additional information accompanied the photos. I wanted to put the viewer in the position of someone who might chance upon these sites without knowing their significance. I wanted a sense of history as loss, so for that reason it was an utterly opaque work. This was my first photographic work. Just as I had finished a 15-month residency in Berlin, the Helmut Kohl administration began to purge all traces of East Germany's communist past from the streets of Berlin. Street signs would change overnight. You'd see an old sign "X-ed out" by orange reflective tape and another one with a new name below. I miss this period, not so much because the East—such as it was—should be

preserved, but instead because the implied violence of the changes exposed an arbitrary aspect of social reality, otherwise taken for granted. *Wind from the East* began as a response to this. I decided to photograph what I dubbed "ideological non-sites"—i.e., places whose significance is not visually apparent. Ultimately, I concluded that, because no one possesses a complete command of history, anywhere you point your camera is an ideological non-site.

In 1994 I started *The Middle of the Day*. Since my sense of the ideological non-site had become so open-ended, I decided to define the project according to time—again, something not photographable per se. Initially, I chose this period because it's my least favorite time of day. At first I planned to shoot exactly at 12:00 pm, but this was too restrictive, so I expanded it to 12:00–2:00 pm. Little did I know that traditional photographers consider this to be the worst time to work outdoors because the sun is directly overhead. Later, I began to realize I disliked this time of day because of a conflict between the desire to rest and the demand to work. The lack of an ostensible, i.e., visual, subject reflected on contradictory notions of the everyday running from Freud to Surrealism to Situationism. In vernacular speech, the word "everyday" can mean "insignificant." If viewers engage a group of images, they might begin to notice the absence of night scenes, golden hour lighting, etc. Midday as a subject isn't absolutely non-visual, but rather mostly negatively determined.

The game show paintings came next—although the midday project remains ongoing. I started painting game show images as the obverse of southwest American landscapes. As an ersatz tourist painting, the landscapes pertain to an idealized national image: pioneer spirit, rugged individualism, God's country, the sublime. In turn, game shows exemplify values most would disavow: disillusion, passive consumption, conformity, and degradation. Here, the accent falls more on the decay of an original idea than anything else.

This takes us up to 2001 when you returned to the personal ads. Why?

That's when I made *Double Date*. At this point, *The Bachelor Stripped Bare* seemed too hierarchical and reductive to me. Considering personal ads as a corpus, it even seemed to inadvertently impose a patriarchal imperative on a set of practices that is diverse and relatively heterogeneous. So I analyzed 220 ads from the May 1, 2001, issue of *The Village Voice* according to eight sets of criteria. I drew the categories from the ads themselves, assuming that the demand to represent oneself, even in a dating market, is inherently repressive. For example, in most American ads race is always one of the first criteria even though the overwhelming majority could not be characterized as racist per se. Within this framework, like it or not, dating always means negotiating a social hierarchy. Aging, for instance, amounts to devaluation but typically can be offset by wealth. It's sobering to consider these factors. I don't think this question of value concerns just those who use the personals; rather, the ads make explicit what others ordinarily leave unsaid.

Later, my personals work mutated into a collaboration with Takuji Kogo. It was Takuji who came up with the idea of using personal ads as lyrics for songs. The first thing we did was to compose a medley of four different ads as a novelty song. As soon as that was done, it struck me that it would be better to write something closer to real songs, the more believable, the better. All of our songs are electronic, even if they don't obviously sound like it. We use a text-to-singing software, Vocalwriter, for the vocals. We try to automate as much of the music as possible, either by generating arrangements with another software called Band-in-a-Box or by reworking MIDI files of, say, a Bach composition or a Dr. John song. Without getting too specific, our goal is to use technology to give "body" to what otherwise would be a semi-abstract text. I think this is what people who respond to ads have to do anyway; they have to envision the person behind the words. We published a CD with six songs with North Drive Press, but since the vocals were electronic, it was hard to follow all the words. Instead, we found the best format was flash animations that fall somewhere between karaoke clips and music videos. With the lyrics running below the image, most people don't realize they might not understand the song without them. I suppose these songs take you both very close to, yet very far from the content of a possible everyday life.

Normal Pictures

Branden W. Joseph

In 1982, John Miller was included in the second *Selections* group exhibition at Artists Space in New York. Given or, perhaps, relegated to, a seemingly marginal corridor punctuated with wooden doors, Miller lined the walls with some 50 simply and uniformly framed drawings. At the corridor's far—dead—end, Miller mounted two much more ornately framed mirrors, one above the other, each of which featured a painted self-portrait. According to Miller, he initially thought he could simply trace his countenance from its reflection, in what would have been a highly practical, even efficient, operation. Ultimately, however, Miller found the process "somewhat self-defeating," in part because he had failed to account for parallax.[1] Although he persisted in fashioning his likenesses, what he produced (not entirely unexpectedly, one suspects) was less an iconic ideal than an emblematic occlusion, an impediment to reflection and imaginary self-mastery, a stain.[2] Miller's pigment stood between him and the reflection that would have rendered him with more precision than even the most meticulously realistic painting—which Miller's decidedly were not. Rather than reenact the primal scene of ego formation, famously described in Jacques Lacan's essay on the "Mirror Stage," Miller's self-portraits instantiated (once again, one suspects, not entirely by chance) the psychoanalyst's discussion "of the stain and of the gaze" as "that which governs the gaze most secretly and that which always escapes from the grasp of that form of vision that is satisfied with itself in imagining itself as consciousness."[3] In this, we encounter one of the fundamental and driving insights behind all of Miller's work: his investigation of what always escapes mastery, always resists reproduction or systematization, always fails to be taken fully into account. To explore some aspects of this insight as manifest in Miller's early production and elsewhere will be the aim of what follows.

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If Miller's mirror self-portraits are remembered today, it is likely less for their play with representation and reflection, plenitude and defeat, surface and stain, than for their color. Each was painted in a strict brown monochrome. Miller used burnt umber for the first effort, burnt sienna for the second, both issued straight from the tube. The latter marked Miller's first use of a hue that would reappear throughout his career, coating, encrusting, or otherwise covering everything from dolls to signs to architectural models to largely inchoate mounds. Whereas Yves Klein has blue, Miller's associate Mike Kelley has observed, Miller has brown—a color that critics and historians, whether supporters or detractors, invariably characterize as fecal in what is by far the most sustained line of critical writing on Miller's art.[4] In 1982, however, a decade before abjection became an art-critical catchword, the most notable part of Miller's Artists Space installation would likely have been the drawings. Salon hung, their glass-fronted frames reflecting one another across the hallway, they produced a subtle mise en abyme that both related them to the mirrors and threatened to render them blanks, mere stand-ins for pictures, not unlike Allan McCollum's plaster *Surrogate Paintings* (1978–). In a sense, they *were* surrogates. Uniformly unassuming, the drawings were executed primarily in unmodulated black and white, many so schematically rendered as to function in a manner Miller likens to a haiku. The "strategy," Miller recalls, was "making pictures that looked normative, that looked like pictures of pictures."[5]

The set of drawings was not stylistically uniform. Although the bulk were executed in pen and ink, others were done with graphite or pencil, shaded and crosshatched in a more descriptive manner. Others verged on cartoonish and employed transfer shading, removing evidence of the artist's hand to the same degree as the graphite drawings foregrounded it.[6] A few included backgrounds in colored marker. Stylistic diversity was matched by iconographic range. The pen and ink drawings included, among other subjects: a Greek column on a seaside cliff, a lonely dinosaur peering across a riverbank, a slack-eyed baker holding a loaf of bread, a factory, a Coney Island rollercoaster, an aerial view of oil rigs, a building with what appears to be toxic runoff behind it, a young girl hanging laundry, a Spanish bullfight, a bar scene with swordfish mounted on the wall, a go-go dancer, and a candelabra. More schematic drawings included a jellyfish, another factory (or perhaps

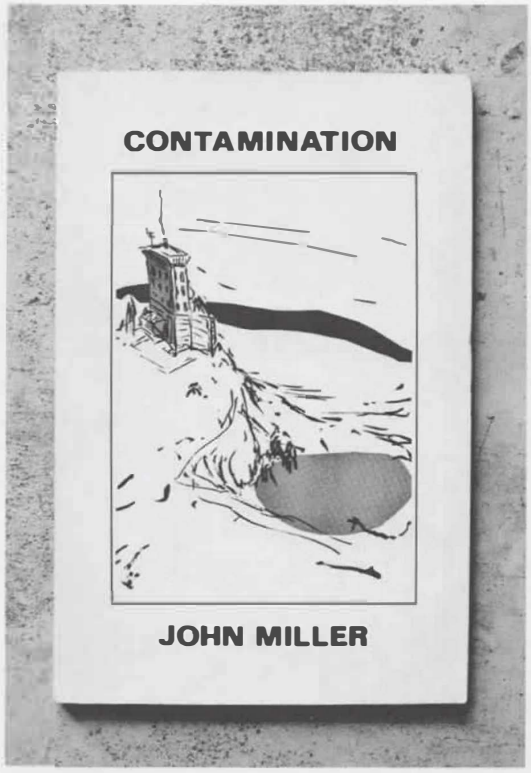
1 — John Miller, e-mail to author, May 22, 2009.
2 — Indeed, Miller's *The Real Thing* (1987) would consist of nothing other than mirrors marked by a brown paint smudges.
3 — Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan, Norton, New York 1977, p. 74. See Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Écrits: A Selection*, W. W. Norton, New York 1977, p. 1–7.
4 — Mike Kelley, "Go West," in *John Miller: Parallel Economies*, exh. cat., Le Magasin, Grenoble 1999, p. 38. That the excremental was not the only possible reading of the color brown was pointed out by Miller to Robert Nickas: "Viewers are inevitably reminded of shit, but that differs from the work's actual appearance. A lot of people think about chocolate and, accordingly, Dieter Rot. I think about dirt and mud and, accordingly, Smithson." Robert Nickas, "John Miller: Shit Happens" [interview], *Flash Art*, Milan, vol. 26, no. 173, November–December 1993, p. 95.
5 — John Miller, interviewed by the author, Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (MuMoK), Vienna, November 21, 2009. All otherwise unattributed quotes derive from this interview. Further information was given to the author in a follow-up interview in New York, May 11, 2008.
6 — It was these more schematic drawings, by and large, that Miller, in a strategy of self-appropriation, reproduced in the more vulgarly commercial palette of day-glo paint for his second Metro Pictures gallery exhibit in 1985.

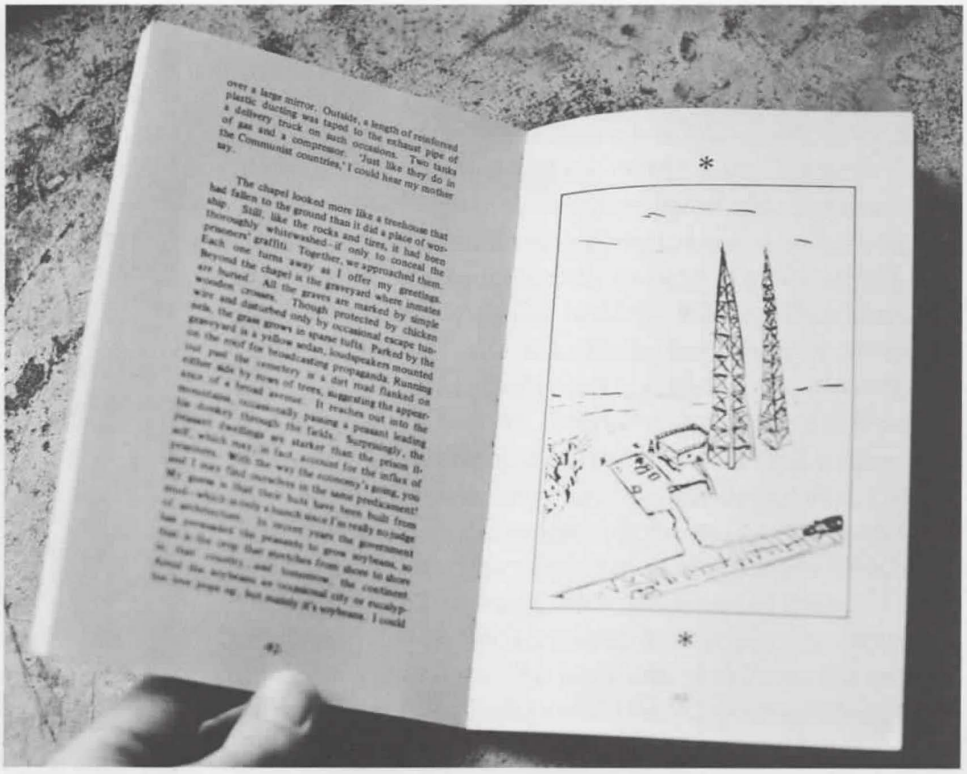
Untitled, 1984

prison) seen through a chain-link fence, a Thanksgiving dinner, a forlorn signpost, and a pile of letters and postcards. Graphite drawings added another oil rig and a man raising a ladder.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the mixture of subjects, the pictures called out to one another. Dinosaurs and oil rigs, for instance, evoke a theme of fossil fuel, one plausibly extending to the runoff behind the nondescript institutional building and, potentially, the factory. Any such line of association, however, would be stymied by the bullfight, the candelabra, the rollercoaster, or the scene of the girl hanging out her washing. The factory might connect to the baker along an axis of industrialization; the rollercoaster, stripper, and possibly bar scene could fall under the rubric of seedy entertainment; the stripper and the baker, if the latter really is related to the factory, might align according to a theme of reification (a not unimportant one within Miller's œuvre), but it would seem a stretch to get from there to the bar or rollercoaster, despite the relationship of both to the commodification of bodily intoxications. Formally, but only formally, the Greek column and the factory connect. Although each drawing points to another, or several others, no line of succession ever encompasses the whole. Chains of association break off as soon as they get going or point in irreconcilable directions after two or three "terms." Rather than a cohesive set or coherent narrative, the drawings form a matrix of similarity and difference played out according to several variables: style, medium, content, association, form. Although most of the drawings had originally been produced to illustrate Miller's book *Contamination* (1982), readers would not find the key there. *Contamination* was itself composed of only loosely correlated passages with the images functioning as independent "narrative units," following the precedent of Henri Achille Zo's drawings for Raymond Roussel's *New Impressions of Africa* (1932).

Two years later, Miller pursued much the same strategy in a more ambitious set of acrylic paintings for his first





Contamination (novella), Cave Canem Books, New York 1982

one-person exhibition at Metro Pictures. Equally iconographically diverse, the paintings (executed, incidentally, in a predominantly brown palette) seemed more expressly to invoke conventional illustrational genres: children's books (a train), Jules Verne novels (a shipwreck caused by a giant octopus), scientific texts (a butterfly, molecular models), courtroom illustrations (the swearing of a witness), genre scenes (a subway, a shoe salesman), comic books (a Batman image to which we shall return), and so on. At issue was still an operation of troping. "I would make a painting a day," explained Miller. "I was trying to make what I thought of as the 'normal' picture in what I thought of as the proverbial man- or woman-on-the-street's imagination." Living at the time in a cramped, two-room East Village apartment, Miller transported his paintings to the gallery in batches of ten as they were completed. He did not see the entire set for the first time until its installation, at which he was startled to find an inadvertent stylistic unity (to his mind they all resemble a vaguely "regionalist" style of his parents' generation)—a realization, he recalls, that promptly gave him a headache. Despite any such cohesion, Miller's paintings maintained their generic character; their style did not specifically appear as "his." At the opening, Kim Gordon innocently asked if the exhibition wasn't made up of thrift-store purchases—a strategy that Jim Shaw would take up some years later.

To a certain extent, Miller's concerns resonated with those Douglas Crimp discussed in the catalogue to the landmark exhibition *Pictures*, held at Artists Space in 1977. Writing about the work of Jack Goldstein, Robert Longo, Sherrie Levine, Troy Brauntuch, and Philip Smith (and later extended to Cindy Sherman), Crimp diagnosed the capacity of seemingly "banal pictures" appropriated from various sources to induce a "scenario" or what he termed "[n]arrativity in the absence of a specific narrative."[7] Although handmade rather than photographic, Miller's

7 — Douglas Crimp, *Pictures*, exh. cat., Artists Space, New York 1977, p. 16. Crimp extended his discussion to include the work of Cindy Sherman in the significantly revised version of his catalogue essay published as "Pictures," *October*, New York, no. 8, Spring 1979, p. 75–88. By the time of his first Artists Space exhibition, Miller had already encountered and been impressed by Sherman's work.

drawings and paintings similarly trafficked in the rhetorical connotations of mass cultural images and questioned traditionally expressive artistic formulas.[8] "I wanted to make pictures that looked so ordinary that they seemed to have no depth to them," explains Miller. "I wanted to reject the idea that meaning lies within the artwork. I was rejecting the idea of form and content, that the content is inside the artwork like a vessel." By contrast, Miller's drawings operated allegorically, their signification, to quote Crimp, "seems to be about nothing that is contained within the pictures, but instead all that is outside of them."[9] This outside, the externality from which they derive their signifying resonance, is that of a larger cultural imaginary as it functioned through and was structured as a semiotic field, what Crimp took great pains to explain through the structural linguistic ideas of syntagmatic contiguity and paradigmatic substitution (syntagm being all of those pictorial elements, like words in a sentence, that come together to make up a scene; paradigm all of the various possible elements with which any one element could plausibly be substituted, such as a tumbling gymnast for a flipping diver).[10] As Miller notes quite specifically about his early images, "I was thinking of the model of words in a dictionary, where it's a field relationship; the meaning of one word is a differential relationship compared to other words. It was important to see these works in a group."[11]

The Artists Space exhibition would not be Miller's first engagement with such a matrix of relations. As we shall see, various systems—linguistic, cultural, commercial—played a significant roll in Miller's first artist's book, *Cinematic Moments* (1979). Nor would it be his last. Meditations on the systematic recur throughout Miller's many projects on personal ads and internet dating (e.g., *A Mutually Beneficial Encounter* [2003]), his engagement with game shows (e.g., *The Lugubrious Game* [1998]), the self-imposed limitation of taking his *Middle of the Day* photographs from noon to two in the afternoon, and, indeed, the "textual" model of his installations in general.[12] Yet, in the Artists Space and Metro Pictures exhibitions (as in all of Miller's work), the normative and systematic would prove to be only half of his concern. For all of Miller's striving toward a certain anonymity, the approximation or emulation of a normative, "ordinary" status, something about the early paintings and drawings resonates with uncanniness. In discussing the *Pictures* artists, Crimp had pointed to the ability of decontextualized visual signifiers to induce a feeling of foreboding—"a sense of impending disaster ... detached from the subjects that might suggest them"—as well as desire: "the picture," he explained of one of Brauntuch's pieces, "opaque as it is to signification, becomes for that reason the object of desire ... Frustration operates here not in relation to the subject of the picture, but in relation to the absence of signification. It is not because this is a particular [woman], but because this is *no* particular woman, that the picture becomes a fetish."[13] Miller's drawings, in their reductive pictorial manner and removal of context and caption, were similarly unmoored. However, both they and the paintings exude a different order of particularity, one ill-described merely as semiotic ambiguity. Indeed, Miller characterizes his project of the time as two-fold. "I had a kind of double agenda," he explains. "I wanted something that was already overly familiar, but that also could sustain some kind of poetic investment on my part. I wasn't painting these in a totally detached way."

Miller's sense of "poetic investment" is difficult to pin down. (Indeed, it is potentially because it is so elusive that the more sensational scatological aspects of his production have received so much critical attention.) It is perhaps easiest to approach via the extremes, as in his painting of Batman, which, while it clearly invokes the familiar genre of comic book illustration, just as clearly transgresses it both in the hero's hybridization with Satan (complete with pitchfork and infernal terrain) and in the taboo-shattering exposure of his penis.[14] Although much less peculiar, Miller's painting of a shoe salesman—sighted from the floor so that the female customer's legs are centered and the viewer can just glimpse her right thigh underneath her skirt—verges on the fetishistic (somewhat reminiscent of the illustrations of Eric Stanton) and is not dissimilar from the vaguely prurient impression surrounding his drawing of the young girl hanging out her laundry. Such scenes, which seem to illustrate "investment" as a certain kind of erotics (what is fetishism if not a highly particular and untransposable

8 — Although recalled mostly for its photographic work, the *Pictures* exhibition included hand-drawn and painted work by Philip Smith and Robert Longo.
9 — Crimp, *Pictures*, p. 18. The notion of allegory had recently been expanded upon by Craig Owens in: "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," *October*, New York, no. 22, Spring 1980, p. 67–86; and "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism, Part 2," *October*, New York, no. 13, Summer 1980, p. 58–80.
10 — Crimp, *Pictures*, p. 6–8.
11 — Linguistics and structuralism had a significant impact on Miller's thinking (Miller in John Miller and Maria Eichhorn, *Between Artists*, A.R.T. Press, New York 2008, p. 62); and discussions of language would appear as early as 1979 in Miller's book, *Cinematic Moments*, self-published, New York 1979.
12 — Robert C. Morgan characterized Miller's work as "installations-as-texts" in "Anti-style, or the Installation as a Pleasurable Text," *Arts Magazine*, New York, June 1988, p. 48.
13 — Crimp, *Pictures*, p. 10, 14.
14 — In the same year, Dan Graham's video *Rock My Religion* (1982–1984) would highlight the transgressive repercussions of rock hero Jim Morrison's public exposure of his penis in a concert in Miami in 1969.

psychic attachment?), are, however, relatively rare. More frequently encountered is a vague feeling, as imprecise and subjective as what Roland Barthes described as the photographic "punctum," issuing forth from a much less conspicuous detail—as in the inordinate level of air pollution in the otherwise storybook depiction of a train, the overly large swordfish in the bar, the sad eyes of the baker, or the look of malaise on the faces of the strip-club crowd—or an otherwise innocuous point of view—such as the compressed perspective in the painting of the tornado, the combination of profile and aerial view in the drawing of the rollercoaster, or the close-up radiance of the candelabra, which bespeaks some degree of importance.[15]

In the year of his first Metro Pictures exhibition, Miller explicitly addressed his notion of the poetic in the article "Morality and the Poetic," published in *Real Life* magazine. To some extent, as he explained, it related to the unconscious, which, following Lacan, was structured according to the same type of syntagmatic and paradigmatic linguistic relations emulated by Miller's sets of images. "Poetic language is close to unconscious language," wrote Miller, citing Lacan; "metaphor and metonymy structure both. If meaning is not interiorized, it must repose in chains of association."[16] Like the unconscious, the poetic, he added, was "driven by desire," desire understood in Lacanian fashion (as Crimp also understood it) as inextricably tied to or produced by insufficiency, lack, and the impossibility of full self-presence (which is why poetry could not be reduced to the artist's creation of "an idle fantasy world").[17] Nevertheless, as important as Lacan was (and is) for Miller's thinking, his primary frame of reference was given by Georges Bataille. The central opposition, as Miller sketched it, between "morality" and the "poetic" was at base a Bataillian one, mappable according to the distinction between a "restricted" and a "general" economy, the former designating the realm defined by the sphere of work and productive relations, the latter, all that would exceed or transgress it.[18] "God is linked to productivity," wrote Miller,

> evil to waste. Georges Bataille (in *Lascaux of the Birth of Art*) offers an account of morality based on the idea that work usurps the register of nature by introducing organized, recurrent relations between men and objects, and between men themselves. Through work man gains ascendancy over other animals. Only sexuality (birth) and death disrupt work's rhythm. Permanently opposed to work, these unruly animal vestiges are cloaked by prohibitions which ostensibly regulate them.[19]

Like evil, poetry (because of the "inefficiency" of its linguistic play) represents a force with the potential to transgress the restrictive realm of productive work and take the side of excess, waste, and expenditure without reserve. Although for Bataille, in actual fact, poetry most often betrayed its transgressive promise by attempting to affirm its importance (even if that was based on a lack of meaning) or otherwise subsuming itself to lofty metaphysical goals, the poetic nonetheless held out the possibility of opening beyond a restricted linguistic utility.[20] "Poetry," wrote Bataille, "expresses great squanderings of energy through word order; poetry is the power of words to evoke effusion, through the excessive expenditure of its own forces."[21] In this guise, poetry aligned itself with eroticism, sacrifice, and, above all, infinite, discordant laughter, which were not only useless but, as "muscular movements of little importance" that nonetheless "consume energy," transgressed the realm of production and served as an affront not only to morality, but to that which regulates it, God.[22] "*One says of the content of the word* God *that it exceeds the limits of thought*," declared Bataille, "*but no! It admits a point, a definition, limits. This narrow aspect is even more striking: God condemns the shame of the child (if the guardian angel sees him in the wardrobe); he condemns the limitless right to silliness and to infinite, discordant laughter*."[23]

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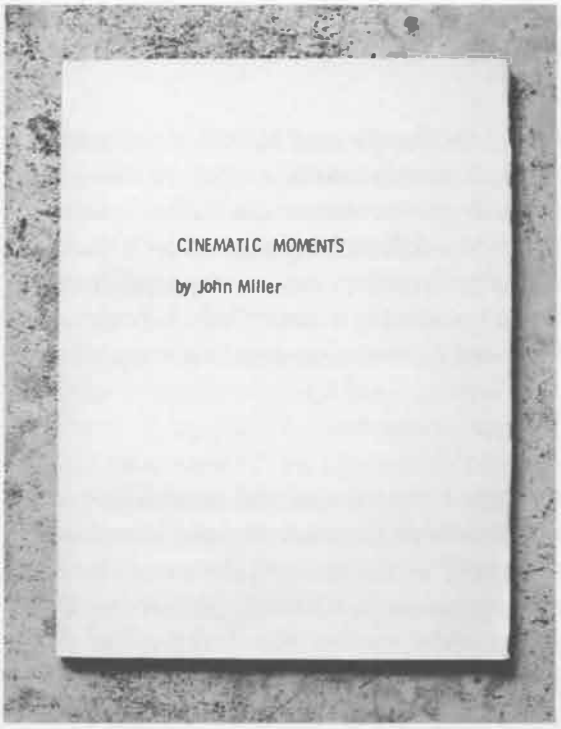
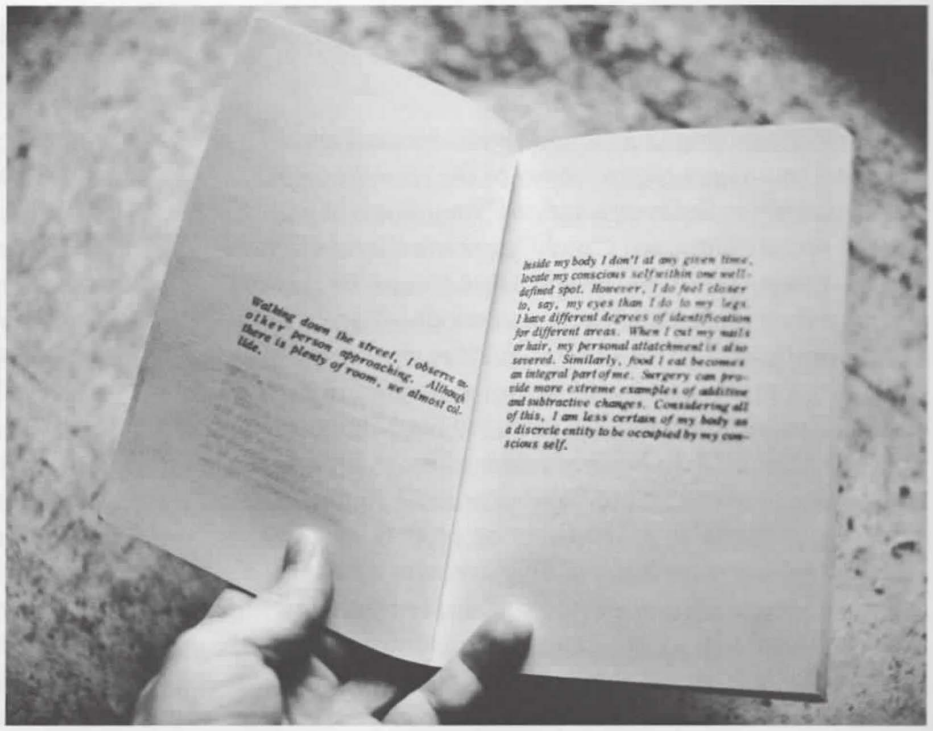
Five years before Miller's article appeared, his book *Cinematic Moments* had described a scene of such transgressive laughter:

> I am attending a worship service in an outdoor sanctuary at church camp ... Some of my fellow campers have written a sermon which takes the form of a dialogue between the minister and "God," a camper hidden [in] the nearby bushes. "God's" proclamations amuse me, but I know that laughter is taboo. Consequently, everything seems even funnier. Finally,

15 — Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 1981. Another relevant comparison would be to the "obtuse meaning" discussed by Barthes in "The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Several Eisenstein Stills," in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1985, p. 41–62.
16 — John Miller, "Morality and the Poetic," in *Real Life Magazine: Selected Writings and Projects 1979–1994*, ed. Miriam Katzell, Thomas Lawson, and Susan Morgan, Primary Information, New York 2006, p. 177.
17 — Ibid, p. 177.
18 — See Georges Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1985, p. 116–129. Expenditure is discussed most fully in Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley, Zone Books, New York 1988. The discussion that follows will not limit itself to only those of Bataille's writings that Miller actually read at the time.
19 — Miller, "Morality and the Poetic," p. 176.
20 — See Bataille's criticisms of poetry in, for instance, "The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade (An Open Letter to My Current Comrades)," in *Visions of Excess*, p. 91–102.
21 — Georges Bataille, *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, ed. Stuart Kendall, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis 2001, p. 95.
22 — Ibid, p. 94.
23 — Ibid., p. 87.





Cinematic Moments, self-published, New York 1979

> I can no longer control myself. I fall into convulsive hysterics, at the same time dreading their terrible social repercussions.[24]

Cinematic Moments is made up of more than 50 short texts, sometimes repeated, appearing one per page. Like the drawings and paintings exhibited in 1982 and 1984, the passages seem to communicate with one another (either through subject matter or form of expression), while never fully resolving into narrative continuity or thematic consistency. Miller's model was, in part, the disjunctive editing found in the films of Alain Robbe-Grillet, Yvonne Rainer, and others, an analogy that helped inspire the title. On its own, the passage about church camp is misleading, not unlike Miller's painting of Batman, for the vast majority of the passages relate to much more subtle and quotidian epiphanies: "I write a word. It looks funny. I check to see if it's misspelled, but it's correct."

Cinematic Moments alternates between such personal reminiscences—conceived as minimal or post-Conceptual counterparts to Proust's remembrances—and more general declarations drawn from the writings of, among others, Jean Baudrillard, Ferdinand de Saussure, Sigmund Freud, and Walter Benjamin, all of whom remain critical touchstones for Miller. In this, Miller aimed to conflate or confuse the registers of individual insight and received knowledge, all passages being narrated in the first person. "In this writing," declared Miller in the preface (itself repeated later in the book), "I don't distinguish between the personal account and the general truth because perception and understanding are not innately personal or general … By choosing to ignore it in my work, I hope, among other things, to contrast the normative conception of history with my undifferentiated body of description."[25] As Miller would explain in 1984, at stake was the poetic: "History must reduce the totality of experience which poetic expression implies. That it becomes synonymous with this reduction is perhaps its most nightmarish aspect. It imposes a working, if not permanent, closure on the poetic text."[26]

24 — Miller, *Cinematic Moments*.
25 — On the topic of normative history, Miller would write further in *Cinematic Moments*, "When I'm thinking, the process is completely continuous. The segmentation of this flow into discrete thoughts is not consciousness but self-consciousness, a means of classification and articulation, an imposed schema. In individuals I think that the breaking up of uninterrupted mental activity marks the fundamental transition from experience to history."
26 — Miller, "Morality and the Poetic," p. 177.

The contrast driving *Cinematic Moments'* method also informed its subject matter. Many of the texts juxtapose, either directly or indirectly, various "imposed schema" with as yet unassimilated ("undifferentiated") experience. One two-page spread, for instance, contrasts a brief comment on the otherness of the unconscious—"Apart from the things I consider are the things I don't consider. My expressions may reflect both"—with a meditation on the manner in which otherness is excluded from intentional communication: "As it becomes clear to me what I am after, what I write becomes more homogeneous. Unique bits of information diminish as the choosing process solidifies. The same thing is repeated in different ways." Miller's use of the term "homogeneous" signals his affinity with Bataille's thinking, in this case with the notion of heterology as "[t]he science of what is completely other."[27] As Bataille wrote in a section entitled "The Heterological Theory of Knowledge" in his essay "The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade," "heterology is opposed to any homogeneous representation of the world, in other words, to any philosophical system. The goal of such representations is always the deprivation of our universe's sources of excitation and the development of a servile human species, fit only for the fabrication, rational consumption, and conservation of products."[28]

Throughout *Cinematic Moments*, normative history, language, commercialism, productivity, design, religion, and social taboos are all presented as such homogeneous systems. And although the story of taboo-breaking hysterical laughter in the face of Miller's fellow campers brings forth the heterological outside of such systematizations in particularly Bataillian fashion, what *Cinematic Moments* proposed much more consistently were merely uncodified subjective experiences as such. Thus, what figures most profoundly as heterological within Miller's work is less the excremental (the art world discourse surrounding which has had the paradoxical effect of raising it to an ideal) than the subjective, which cannot appear as such within any normative system or even (as Miller's mirror self-portraits implied) to the individual him- or herself, since the subject is always riven by inassimilable forces such as desire and the unconscious. Such a realization serves as the basis of a class-based politics, another facet of Miller's production that the discussion of excrement often serves to obscure. The "failure to signify—or to control one's own significations," notes Miller in a different context, "recalls Marx's contention that the proletariat is not an empirical given, but rather a nascent possibility that can only fully come into existence through its own class consciousness."[29]

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For Miller, the contrast of particular and general, poetic and systematized, on which *Cinematic Moments* comments, was further instantiated by the genre of the artist's book itself. Important precedents for *Cinematic Moments* were the many books of Ed Ruscha, such as *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963), *Some Los Angeles Apartments* (1965), and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), and, particularly, Jenny Holzer's *Diagrams: A Collection of Diagrams from Many Sources* (1977). Miller wrote presciently about this last in the year of its release. According to him, *Diagrams* operated on at least two levels. First, it acted as critical appropriation. Reproducing a set of diagrams in the absence of caption or commentary served to "describe our understanding of a diagrammatic logic" and thereby effected "a critique of accepted means of conceptualization": "She attempts no innovation in the formal language of art ... [I]nstead she pursues the logic of these accepted means until their contradictions become apparent."[30] Miller would describe the aims of *Cinematic Moments* in a similar manner: "Here, culture is interpreted as a system of constructs and art serves as a model for reducing these constructs. A critique is implied in this relationship. It works as a form of histrionics where methodology is applied and abandoned for effect; contradictions inhere in the process." Second, Holzer's book—like those of Ruscha and post-conceptual publications generally—signaled an important inversion of the "nearly all-pervasive" legacy of Marcel Duchamp's readymade.[31] Rather than attempting to continue an aesthetic of shock predicated on the ever-waning incongruity of an industrially manufactured commodity such as a snow shovel or urinal within the aesthetic cordon of the museum or gallery, a low-cost, commercially manufactured

27 — Bataille, "The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade," p. 102, note 2. Although Miller's ideas of homogeneity, laughter, and taboos as explored in *Cinematic Moments* prove so close to those of Bataille, he did not actually read Bataille until 1984, on the recommendation of Dennis Cooper, though it is possible, he avers, that some of Bataille's ideas were filtering through to him indirectly from other reading. Miller, e-mail to author, June 3, 2009.
28 — Ibid, p. 97.

29 — John Miller, "The Poet as Janitor," in *The Price Club: Selected Writings (1977–1998)*, JRP|Ringier/Les presses du réel, Zürich/Dijon 2000, p. 61. Miller's discussion of art criticism is perhaps even more germane: "Insofar as [art criticism] submits the material heterogeneity of the art object to the determinations of language, it inexorably serves to reconcile that object to capital's logic of total commensurability ... The pretense to critical autonomy notwithstanding, the contradictions facing the critic differ little from those facing other workers. If, instead of maintaining an embarrassed silence we would at least own up to this, we might begin to make common cause with those forced to crank out Mr. Coffee's or computer chips or McBLT's." John Miller, "The Mnemonic Book: Ed Ruscha's Fugitive Publications," in *The Price Club*, p. 39.
30 — John Miller, "Drawings that Question Diagrams," in *The Price Club*, p. 15.
31 — Ibid.

and distributed artist's book situated the aesthetic object within the larger context of commercial culture.[32] In a "this will kill that" moment involving not the cathedral but easel painting, Miller describes the book as supplanting the unique, transcendent artwork with an object that doubles, but operates no differently from, any other within an all-pervasive capitalist market:

> This reduction exemplifies a gradual shift that has been taking place in avant-garde support structures for quite some time: a shift from canvas and stretchers to the market. The result is a literalist esthetic. As artworks become more commodified, they find more basis in socio-economic values than in symbolic ones. The artwork becomes a commodity in a special sense, in the attempt to integrate it with people's lives. The objects seem "free to be themselves," which means free to be interpreted through the comparatively more universal socio-economic standards created by our culture. Thus the notion of software comes into play, whereby the art coefficient is expressed not by the unique object, but by a cultural system.[33]

Whereas *Cinematic Moments* explored the fundamental dichotomy that underlay Miller's understanding of the poetic, *Contamination*, the book from which most of his Artists Space exhibition was drawn, pursued poetry in a more explicit manner. Partially inspired by the Comte de Lautréamont (whose discussion of plagiarism Miller has always found more profound than Duchamp's idea of the readymade), *Contamination* exhibited a conspicuously flowery, even decadent writing style. Whereas a typical passage might open with reference to contemporary appropriational aesthetics—"I am the perennial procrastinator. Finally driven to action, I must simulate others' ideas, somehow making them my own"—it would soon veer into a realm closer to des Esseintes than Sherman or Levine:

> When I'm not working, I'm hounded by a guilt which takes an excessive toll. I retrench—develop a complex relationship to my material. It digs deep into my psyche. Those who believe in themselves always perpetrate the worst offenses. I spurn contentment. My expression is never euphoric … My readers must nurture love for the pretentious and awkward. If I go no further than to declare disdain for others, at least I have sallied forth. If beauty lies in the eye of the beholder, then the ideal beholder is he who can embrace the most diverse and ugly things.[34]

On a formal register, Miller's recourse to the poetic, in its guise as the excessively literary, sought to counter the potential of a too rapid and superficial reception which he saw as a potential weakness of Holzer's book and analogized to late modern Color Field painting.[35] More profoundly, however, it set itself against the surreptitiously utilitarian thrust of modernist aesthetics, which, according to Clement Greenberg, dictated that each artistic medium exclude all that was not proper to it, which had led Leo Steinberg to liken Greenberg's view of modernism to streamlined car styling.[36] "What occurs when one encounters an object of aesthetics? Is this experience possible without recourse to notions of utility?" asked Miller. "In the climate of the avant-garde, what is traditionally literary appears to be suspect, useless and extravagant—in a word, archaic."[37]

At the moment of publication, *Contamination* would have been received against the horizon of conceptual art, which, for an artist like Joseph Kosuth, had followed the modernist imperative of critical self-reflexivity to its end-point in definitional tautology, investigating the function or definition of art to the exclusion of all else.[38] In this way, conceptual art came to function, as Benjamin Buchloh has argued, not as subversion or opposition, but inadvertent emulation of the linguistic constructs of an increasingly reified and administered culture.[39] As Miller himself has put it, "Orthodox" conceptualism reveals "a fatal addiction to the bureaucratic protocols of capitalist institutions." ("Second-generation Conceptual art," on the other hand, reveals "an addiction to stationery.")[40] It was against this art-historical backdrop that Miller's embrace of those poetic and archaic attributes that opposed orthodox modernism—the recourse to representation, to the media of painting and drawing, to the subjective (strictly distinct, in Miller's work, from the traditionally expressive), and, particularly, to the literary—demands to be read. Much like Raymond Pettibon (whose work is not far from Miller's Batman), Miller's recourse to such "antimodern" strategies

32 — "As is the case with other artists working in this format, with Holzer the actual selling of the book is a compromise to pay for the printing costs. So her work ends up taking its place right alongside its models, on the bookrack." Ibid, p. 15.

33 — Ibid, p. 14. "This will kill that. The book will kill the edifice" was pronounced at the beginning of the second chapter of book five of Victor Hugo's novel *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1831) and concerns the effects of the printing press on religion and, in particular, the cultural place and role of the cathedral.

34 — John Miller, *Contamination*, Cave Canem Books, New York 1982, p. 26–27. Des Esseintes is the main character in Joris-Karl Huysman's great "decadent" novel *A Rebours* (*Against Nature*) (1884).

35 — Miller, "Drawings that Question Diagrams, p. 16–17.

36 — See Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, ed. John O'Brian, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1993, p. 85–94; and Leo Steinberg, "Reflections on the State of Criticism," in *Robert Rauschenberg*, ed. Branden W. Joseph, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2002, p. 23.

37 — Miller, "Morality and the Poetic," p. 176.

38 — See, for instance, Joseph Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy," in *Art after Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966–1990*, ed. Gabriele Guercia, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1991, p. 13–32. Miller's second artist's book, *Text* (1980), was in dialogue with the work of Kosuth (e-mail to author, May 20, 2009).

39 — Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October*, New York, no. 55, Winter 1990, p. 105–143.

40 — Miller, "Esthetics from Acorns," in *The Price Club*, p. 95.

questioned and opposed conceptualism's hypostatization of modernism's affinities with techno-scientific rationalization and linguistic administration.[41]

Yet, if Miller's work ran counter to the prevailing tenets of orthodox modernism, violating the taboos erected by Greenberg and strictly enforced by artists such as Kosuth, it did so in order to reconnect with the modernist project all the more profoundly. For if the drive toward formalist autonomy—whether in the abstract canvases of late-modern painting or the "dematerialized" products of conceptual art—can be understood as striving for the type of essentialism that Charles Baudelaire had described in "The Painter of Modern Life" as "eternal" but that, alone, was "tasteless, unadapted, and inappropriate to human nature," Miller pursued the other half of Baudelaire's dialectic: the transposition (without subsumption to universal or eternal values) of the subjective, fleeting, contingent, and, in that, never fully self-present detail of quotidian existence.[42] What Miller has written about Kelley's "poetic agenda" proves equally true of his own: "it necessarily renounces grandiose statements about 'the human condition' and stubbornly adheres to particular and concrete observation."[43]

From this perspective, the most emblematic works of Miller's career prove to be not the "scatological" brown paintings and sculptures, but the ever-growing archive of *The Middle of the Day* photographs shot during the period characterized not only by the fact that the sun is highest (thereby aligning with Bataille's notion of the "rotten sun"), but by being traditionally assigned to the lunch break, that anomic period between, but not really outside, the socially coded times of work and leisure ("leisure," in a society of enforced consumption, being nothing other than work in a different guise).[44] Heirs to the sense of poetic investment Miller sought in his earliest series of paintings and drawings, the *Middle of the Day* photographs update the Baudelairian project of "being able," in Miller's terms, "to extract an aesthetic experience from something unexpected or something that would normally be considered unaesthetic."

With a relative modesty of presentation and market value that matches their subject matter, Miller's photographs can be seen as the diametrical (and dialectical) opposite to Jeff Wall's increasingly monumental, staged, and digitally manipulated photographic tableaux (also developed in response to conceptualism), which avowedly attempt to reconnect with the 19th-century tradition of grand history painting via the work of Édouard Manet. If Miller, too, seeks to be an artist "of modern life," he does so by observing the type of fleeting quotidian details that led Baudelaire to laud the work of Constantin Guys, "looking," as Miller has said about his own work, "for concrete or idiosyncratic elements, instead of anonymity and standardization."[45] That even in their pursuit of a heterological poetics, Miller's photographs do not escape the overarching, commercial system by which all images in a capitalist economy are circulated is precisely to the point.[46] Inserted into the interlocking semiotic and commercial registers of everyday life in much the same manner as were Miller's (and Holzer's) artist's books, they function like "normal pictures." In this, they fulfill the same task that Bataille assigned to poetry—for "*[i]nserted*," as Bataille explained, "is not exactly *subordinated*: laughter, drunkenness, sacrifice, or poetry, eroticism even, subsist in a reserve, autonomous, *inserted* in the sphere of activity, *like children in a house*."[47]

41 — Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Raymond Pettibon: Return to Disorder and Disfiguration," in *Raymond Pettibon: A Reader*, ed. Ann Temkin and Hamza Walker, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia 1998, p. 225–233.
42 — Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," in *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, Penguin, London 1972, p. 392; Miller, "The Mnemonic Book," p. 38–39.
43 — Miller, "The Poet as Janitor," p. 60–61.
44 — Georges Bataille, "Rotten Sun," in *Visions of Excess*, p. 57–58. Miller made a painting entitled *The Rotten Sun* in 1987. See Maria Eichhorn's comments on Miller's *The Middle of the Day* photographs in Eichhorn and Miller, *Between Artists*, p. 45.
45 — Miller, in Eichhorn and Miller, *Between Artists*, p. 69.
46 — See Miller's comments about the distribution and market value of his photographs in Eichhorn and Miller, *Between Artists*, p. 72–74.
47 — Bataille, *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, p. 96.