

JOHN MILLER, *THE DARK AGES*, 1996,  
mixed media, 4 x 2½ x 2½" /  
*DAS MITTELALTER*, 10,2 x 6,4 x 6,4 cm.



# John Miller

LIONEL BOVIER

Among such contemporaries as Mike Kelley and Jim Shaw, but also Tony Oursler and Stephen Prina (all of whom studied at the California Institute for the Arts and, as it is often pointed out, under the aegis of John Baldessari), John Miller embodies a singular position: He articulates the synthesis of an ideologically committed critique of representation with a postconceptual shift towards the "real."<sup>1</sup> Using completely stereotyped genres (figurative painting, travel photography, landscape painting, and so on), Miller (like Sherrie Levine or Richard Prince) has, since the end of the seventies, challenged the function of the author and the concomitant loss of "aura" for the artwork. Yet this critique is only a means of revealing

*LIONEL BOVIER* is a freelance writer and curator, who teaches theory of design at the Ecole cantonale d'art of Lausanne. Together with Yves Aupertillot, he has recently organized the first retrospective of John Miller's work at Le Magasin in Grenoble. This exhibition is on view at the Kunstverein Hamburg in December 1999.

the repressed aspect of the ideological aggregates of day-to-day late-capitalist Western culture.

Miller's close attention to the hidden agendas of representation (especially sexual and social ones) informs his approach to artistic practice both as a writer and as an artist. He asserts for instance, in an early text on Allan McCollum's work ("What You Don't See Is What You Get"), that "if the convulsions of appropriation art have taught us anything, it is historical dialectics: Each cultural artifact can be rewritten indefinitely and, therefore, is always open to contest."<sup>2</sup>

Miller suggests that, according to the psychoanalytical subtext of the *SURROGATES*, "if the picture is the phallus," then with the notion of "surrogate," the artist "... has cast a depreciating gaze on the phallogocentric bias of representation."<sup>3</sup> Likewise, Miller explains that in Kelley's work, it "becomes apparent how the postmodern recapitulation of various representational modes (including modernist abstraction) is driven by feminist inquiry."<sup>4</sup> Thus, he not only

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acknowledges the preeminence of feminist deconstruction in this rewriting process, but also links the SURROGATES with the idea that patriarchy is not necessarily a universal, pan-historical structure. As Miller recalls, in a recent interview:<sup>5)</sup>

*This approach was part of a broad tendency running through art criticism at the time. Andrea Fraser later wrote a more extensive Lacanian analysis of McCollum's work and I also wrote a short text that suggested reframing Douglas Crimp's "Picture Theory" in more explicitly feminist terms.<sup>6)</sup> The SURROGATES offered themselves up as blank slates, inviting any number of potential readings.*

Produced in this specific critical and theoretical context, Miller's first group of brown, "faux" abstract paintings culminated in a small sculpture. As the artist describes, in this phallus/fecal column made from plaster and painted with brown acrylic paint (UNTITLED, 1985), "some various Freudian and Lacanian notions converge: that in the infantile mind, feces appear as a detachable phallus; that the phallus is an impostor and must remain veiled; that upright posture, because it is a signifying posture, is also an 'imposture,' that these meanings are rhetorical, not literal."

In general, the brown paint obviously invites a psychoanalytic reading: As Nancy Spector has put it "... (it embodies) a convergence of both the Freudian and the Marxist understandings of the fetish as a substitute for some fundamental (sexual or economic) lack."<sup>7)</sup> John Miller also called it "... an allegory of Neo-Expressionism: the impasto connoting excrement which in turn connotes money."<sup>8)</sup> The brown paint thus functions both as a sign indexing a theoretical and political reading of the art production and a comment on the artistic context of his own production. Moreover, the works deploy this shit-like paint as a weapon of resistance to aesthetic appropriation. That is the tactical value of their "abjection." Miller notes:

*When I first started the brown impasto work, "abjection" was not yet a key term in art criticism. (...) When I first showed my brown, abstract paintings with the brown phallus, people only talked about deconstruction. The body and transgression never came up. The vocabulary for that wasn't yet available. And I don't mean to suggest that either "body" or "transgression" offer a correct meaning*

*and that deconstruction is wrong. But that suggests how certain readings are more viable than others at different times.*

Even if one could argue that these works still resist aesthetic appropriation, one has to admit that they have been legitimized within the art world by the development of theories connecting art to the unmasking of the repressed, and particularly through the importance of the "abject" as a characterization of the strategies at play in the works of artists such as Robert Gober, Mike Kelley, Cindy Sherman, or Kiki Smith. It is this modification in the context of reception that Miller qualifies as the "contingency of an artistic strategy." And that is why he uses such a wide range of methods, beginning series such as the "Middle of the Day" photographs and the TV game show paintings soon after the "institutional acceptance" of the brown works. Then, one cannot avoid noticing that all these works raise questions about value: How do we decide what something is worth? How does that translate into the value of something else? How do we decide, then, how to use our time?

Miller once criticized the disenchanting idealism of Baudrillard's "simulacrum" by saying that the "art world is a place as good as any to begin to take action,"<sup>9)</sup> thus maintaining the necessity of a radical critique of culture within culture. The constant shifting throughout his work might be an effective way to maintain the potential of this critique. At the same time, Miller has never engaged in an instrumentalized version of art. Nor does he fail to recognize that it is "never a question of building a bridge between art and other discourses, like politics or science, because that would already presume an autonomy of art. If anything, it would be an additive process: this plus that plus..."<sup>10)</sup> The problem of value is never evoked in relation to art alone but because it concerns society in its entirety.

In Miller's work, the question of attributing a (symbolic) value to things, of translating this quality into another system of value, and of producing such "things" is connected to another axis: time. In a series of paintings from the eighties, he decided to start and finish one work within the same day. In the "Middle of the Day" series, he takes photographs

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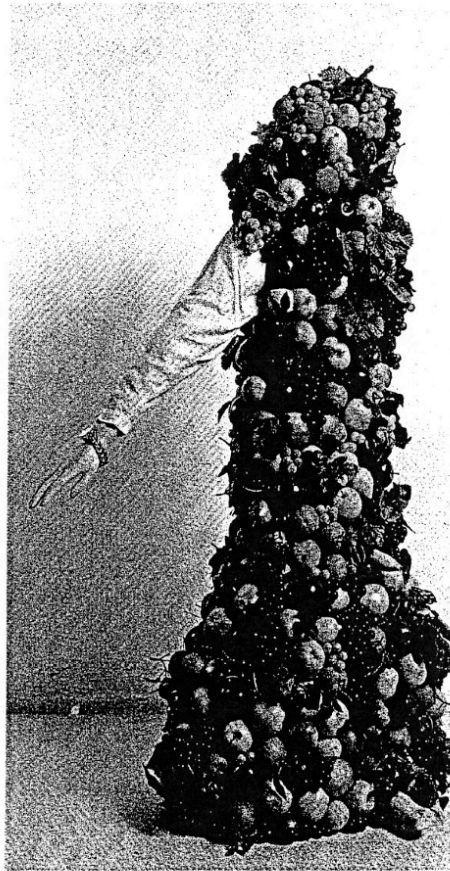
between noon and two p.m., a time that is considered bad both from a photographer's point of view (because of lighting conditions) and devoid of events from a social perspective (because of the division between labor time, leisure time, and resting time). In the game show paintings, he freezes a specific moment within the narrative of the show by taking a picture (first a photo, then a painting) of it. He then reveals the social functions of these rituals and underlines their main ideological aspects. Through all these changes of artistic strategies at play, a permanent interrogation is attached to the temporal dimensions (classically considered as less "artistic" than spatial ones) in order to reassess the fabrication of value as a constructed time-frame within the political economy of Western society. He explains:

*When people say, "Time is money," of course, that's oppressive. It's axiomatic to the wage/labor equation. Money signifies value. Or, a better way of putting it is that money mobilizes value through exchange. All that's predicated on rationalizing and standardizing time as an abstraction and as a constant. Without this understanding of time, you can't have wages. I'm concerned with what money fails to represent and with the kinds of experience that cannot be rationalized that way. I'm not even sure that what I have characterized as "a rationalization" is that at all; it may be only a presumption of rationality. Nor do I claim that my work ever gets outside of this structure, but it does, at least, make it seem less automatic—or, maybe, more automatic. Time really can never be separated from space (that's part of the way it's abstracted) but, by focusing on the time/value nexus, I try to construe artworks more sociologically than formally. Traditionally, an artwork is supposed to exemplify a transcendent value, a sublime value or, at least, what is best about culture. Often, this coincides with an unreflected appeal to timelessness or universality.*

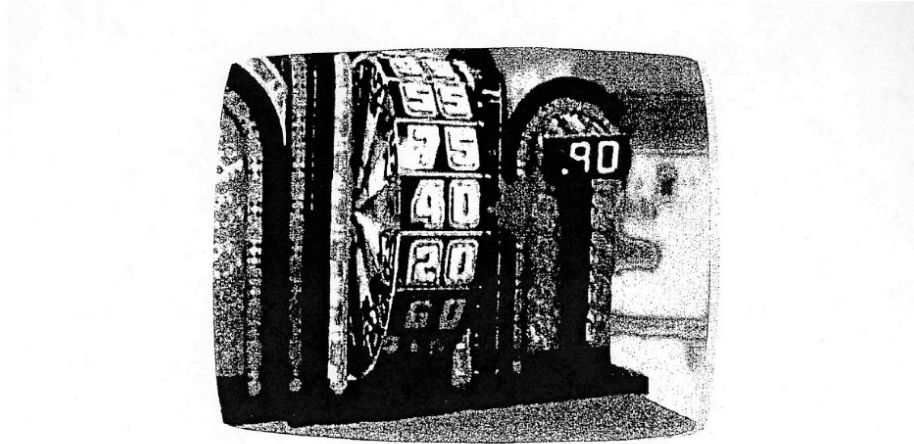
Miller's recently constructed game show set entitled *THE LUGUBRIOUS GAME* (1999) represents one way of assembling these different signifying elements. Viewers see only the arena for the game—an apparatus that includes furniture and architectural elements, as well as a pile of dirt, newspapers, dildos, and money—not the show itself.

*The (...) game show allows for the symbolic circulation of goods within a family that is not a family; it creates a surrogate family out of an arbitrary set of contestants, the*

JOHN MILLER, *GLAD HAND, 1998 / FROHE HAND.*



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JOHN MILLER, WELCOME TO MY WORLD, 1999, acrylic on canvas with sound, 50 x 70" /  
WILLKOMMEN IN MEINER WELT, Acryl auf Leinwand mit Sound, 127 x 178 cm.

studio audience and the (vicarious) broadcast audiences. It is nominally about normative acquisition and accumulation, but it functions instead as a kind of potlatch of not only the material goods, but also emotions ... Driving this spectacle is the animism of the commodity fetish, the irrational core of an otherwise overdetermined political economy. The rules of the games tear accumulation loose from its habitual moorings in the wage/labor equation and deliver it up to chance.<sup>11)</sup>

The set thus combines the shit references of the brown impasto works with issues developed in the game show paintings. It conflates the audience of art with that of the TV studios. Moreover, the problematics of time and value are implicated in the game itself. And, by focusing on such ritualized media events, one can therefore wonder if Miller is not finding here a key metaphor for the systemic function of the artwork.

1) In the sense that theoreticians such as Hal Foster have characterized it lately.

2) John Miller, "What You Don't See Is What You Get: Allan McCollum's Surrogates, Perpetual Photos and Perfect Vehicles," in *Artscribe*, no. 61, January/February 1987, pp. 32-36.

3) *Ibid.*

4) John Miller, "The Mortification of the Sign. Mike Kelley's Felt Banners," *Mike Kelley*, ex. cat. (Chicago: The Renaissance Society, 1988), pp. 16-23.

5) All quotations not specified are from an interview conducted by the author during the preparation of the exhibition and published in the first issue of *MAG* (Grenoble: Centre National d'Art Contemporain, 1999).

6) The artist refers here to his essay "Suture and Picture Theory," in: *Suture—Phantasmen der Vollkommenheit (Fantasies of Total-*

*ity*), ed. by P. Adams and S. Eiblmayr (Salzburg: Salzburger Kunstverein 1995), pp. 25-31.

7) Nancy Spector, "More Shitty Art," in: *John Miller. Economies parallèles/Parallel Economies*, ex. cat. (Grenoble: Le Magasin, Centre National d'Art Contemporain, 1999), pp. 31-32.

8) John Miller, "The Commodity as a Country Music Theme," in: *Journal*, vol. 5, no. 41 (Los Angeles: LAIGA, Spring 1985), pp. 26-30.

9) John Miller, "Baudrillard and His Discontents," *Artscribe*, no. 63, May 1987, pp. 49-51.

10) Carsten Höller in *Artforum* (vol. XXXVII, no. 7, March 1999), quoted by John Miller in the discussion mentioned above (note 5).

11) John Miller, "Playing the Game," in: *John Miller. Economies parallèles/Parallel Economies*, op. cit., pp. 26-28.