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CONVERSATIONS

Madness with a Straight Face: John Miller

July 2017

John Miller Primary Structures, (2017)
Courtesy the artist

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Courtesy the artist and Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin

John Miller in conversation with Laura López Paniagua

About a year ago I met the artist and writer John Miller in Berlin, and we soon embarked on an extended conversation about art in general and his praxis in particular. The following conversation revolves around *Primary Structures* (2017), a PowerPoint work he showed me on his MacBook last spring that is part of his exhibition *The Insanity of Place*, at Galerie Barbara Weiss in Berlin. Miller uses this format to juxtapose words and images in a meditation on mortality.

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Laura López Paniagua: Perhaps you remember that one of our first conversations was about beauty. I watched an interview you gave about your 2015 exhibition *Here in the Real World*, where you said that you always try to make your work beautiful. This surprised me because after reading Mike Kelley's and your writings, beauty had for me come to mean comfort—an uncritical, warm-and-fuzzy feeling of recognition of a socially constructed standard—as opposed to a confrontational notion of aesthetics, capable of shaking you beyond what you are able to conceive. You settled that discussion with the Stendhalian sentence "La beauté n'est que la promesse du bonheur" (beauty is nothing other than the promise of happiness). Could you comment on your notion of beauty regarding *Primary Structures*?

John Miller: I wasn't thinking about beauty per se in *Primary Structures*, that is, nothing beyond my habitual aesthetic approach. But I equate beauty with having a libidinal investment in something, and I don't think my work would be very vibrant without that. I also regard beauty as a trap. Everyone wants to be happy, right? For that reason, it's almost impossible to transcend the desire for beauty, even if you know it's a conservative or conformist impulse. I've never read Stendhal, though; my familiarity with that quote comes from Charles Baudelaire's consideration of fashion and dandyism. Curiously, the dandy deployed (mostly masculine) beauty as a means of aesthetic confrontation. It was a way of beating aristocrats at their own game.

LLP: I consider *Primary Structures* and *Reconstructing a Public Sphere* (2015) your most personal works, and they are both PowerPoints. I can't think of a more banal, office-gray tool than PowerPoint. But in *Primary Structures* you use it to tackle themes such as the futile yet inevitable task of organizing reality conceptually. Or how the fact of aging overflows any rational construct. However, I don't think that the effect of using such a medium is to trivialize the subjects—rather the opposite. I think it's a very humble, very poetic way of approaching such vast topics. I would say that is beautiful.

JM: In that respect, I was going for a kind of inversion of beauty: poetics in a drab form. That approach, namely a less obvious form of beauty, relates to dandyism. My decision to use PowerPoint relates to an artist's book I wrote when I was twenty-three: Cinematic Moments (1977), which was a collection of epiphany-like, yet everyday, realizations. This helped me to return to personal observation as a way of working. The first artist I recall using PowerPoint as a medium is Frances Stark, but I don't remember when it was. More recently Cara Benedetto (who studied with me at Columbia University) made a PowerPoint about dating and personal ads, a piece I included in Bad Conscience, a group show I organized at Metro Pictures in New York in 2014. Cara's work especially made it clear that this could function as a way of short-form filmmaking. Of course, Chris Marker's *La*

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Jetée (1962) influenced me too, because it was a film of still photographs. And Yvonne Rainer's intertitles in her first films.

Before it was overtaken by "postproduction," early video art had a direct, notational quality that I embraced. Production values have more or less destroyed video art, in my opinion. There's nothing I hate more than a super-hi-def video unfolding in slow motion with a low, ominous soundtrack that is supposed to impart gravitas. Just this weekend, when I was making the rounds through Chelsea galleries, I saw two videos like that. In contrast, PowerPoint is dismissable—without any filmic authority. It's made by Microsoft! I think that vulnerability renders it poetic. But it's still precise. You can edit slideshows down to a 1/100 of a second. And you can put a lot of hi-res images into a small file. So, in spite of its dismissibility, it's still effective.

LLP: I also read that your use of PowerPoint was a way of repurposing photographs from your series "The Middle of the Day" (1994–ongoing). I associate this project with Giorgio de Chirico's *Piazza d'Italia* (1913). It's as if the time and space that de Chirico portrays is the same time and space of your photographs—that eerie moment of incongruent central light when reality turns remote. In Primary Structures another quality of de Chirico's work is present as well, something you bring up in your text "The Ruin of Exchange": the mise en abyme. I'm not talking about "paintings within paintings," but to the placing of things in the abyss. Each slide of the PowerPoint seems to resist being swallowed by the vacuum (a metaphor that you use quite literally).

JM: Primary Structures does indeed feature a vacuum cleaner—the subject of a dissatisfied Amazon customer review. I included other product reviews as well. These convey how, in no uncertain terms, the commodity gives up its utopian promise. But I think they carry an additional sense of loss, something more subjective.

De Chirico has been an important reference point for me for quite a while, and one I've written about. In the early 1980s I found a big coffee-table book of his work, which included his then-derided neoclassical paintings, in a used bookstore in Cleveland. After that I read Hebdomeros (1929) and his memoirs, which are kind of different versions of the same narrative. His characteristic mixture of humor and melancholy appeals to me. I also agree with you about the mise en abyme quality, but I'm not sure where to locate it in my own work. De Chirico's piazza paintings seem to identify absence in the center of town at what might be midday, although that's ambiguous. At any rate, I took a cue from this in my midday photos.

In Primary Structures this sense might derive from ideological re-picturing, or from the fundamentally abysmal condition of photography or even from the inevitability

of death. This potential also makes me think of how Robert Smithson once mocked Michael Fried's reference to an "infinite abyss": "his experience of the abyss is low, a weak metaphor." The title Primary Structures references Smithson indirectly. It comes from the landmark exhibition of minimal sculpture that Kynaston McShine curated at the Jewish Museum in New York in 1966. In Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere (2003), Ann Reynolds wrote how she found a copy of Life magazine in Smithson's archives. On the cover, which showed a black child lying facedown in the street during a race riot in Newark, he had written "Primary Structures" with a marker. At first Reynolds thought this was social commentary, but it turned out that that issue featured a review of McShine's show, and Smithson evidently marked it as such for his files.

LLP: Yes, I see how much you play with this idea in *Primary Structures*: things are not (or not only) what they seem: for instance, the drawings of dots and lines. What you see at first glance is one thing, but then the text makes you see it another way, and this second glance is taken with your mind rather than your eyes. Didn't you tell me that you took inspiration from Douglas Huebler's drawings?

JM: The dot and line drawings are indeed versions of Huebler pieces. I just redrew them in PowerPoint or Photoshop and changed the language, where necessary, to fit the flow of the piece. I was more concerned with invoking Huebler's frame of reference (as I see it) than with doing an exact appropriation of his work. I wouldn't want to claim these as "my" works; they are approximations of what Huebler did, not appropriations. I wanted to link the ambiguity of contextualization that Huebler raises to the problems of Alzheimer's, dementia, and memory loss. It's also possible to conceive of Huebler's drawings as repressed psychedelia.

LLP: Mike Kelley spoke of psychedelia as creating a sublime experience because it generates the falling apart of one's worldview. I suppose the same effect is caused by memory problems such as Alzheimer's or dementia: intellectual uncertainty and the familiar context turning foreign. Aging and death are definitely haunting the whole piece. But there's also the opposing force, there's also eros, like a promesse du bonheur, perhaps.

JM: That kind of eros might correspond to Freud's description of oceanic feelings. Then the question becomes whether this sense of liberation is delusional. The threat of delusion runs throughout psychedelia. Along with that comes the prospect that some may not particularly care whether they are deluded or not, provided that they can achieve oceanic gratification. That comes up in Kelley's work as well.

LLP: I see what you mean. However, I was thinking more in the (also Freudian) terms of the tension between Eros and Thanatos. The presence of death is coupled with a very delicate longing for sensuality (as in "is it spring yet?"). And possibly, the

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appearance of the enigmatic old man who had died twice is also an expression of Eros. That character marks a departure from the usual flaneur attitude of your other works. In series like "The Middle of the Day," you portray the cities in a raw, everyday state, even if that's sometimes poetic. But in Primary Structures, the flaneur seems to have changed genre, almost like a David Lynch movie. I see that change as an erotic effect of death.

JM: Coincidence played a big part in how all that came together. In New York I live close to a small district of Chinese funeral parlors, and I once mistook a display of ritual funeral goods as toys. That's what sparked the piece. Then over New Year's my wife, Aura Rosenberg, and I stayed at B. Wurtz and Ann Bobco's house in Southold, Long Island. Early on New Year's Day, I received the news that Barbara Weiss had died, so mortality was very much on my mind. Later that morning we took a walk to the beach and the old man whom I describe in the PowerPoint picked us up on the way back. Later we learned that, locally, this man is known for doing that. None of this is invented. The following day we made the same walk and I photographed where everything happened, including a senior complex called Founder's Village.

People mostly appear as a generic demographic in my midday photos, meaning, as "the public." When I'm shooting those, I never talk to anyone I photograph. Whatever sense you get of anyone as a particular individual has to be gleaned from literally superficial information. My encounter with the old man was entirely different. If he had appeared as eccentric as he really is, I would have never taken a ride with him. His fantasy of dying multiple times implies the ability to survive death, and I think this fantasy ultimately derives from a fear of death. So that's a point of commonality that I—and probably many other people—would have with him.

LLP: I was reading yesterday an interview with J. G. Ballard where he said, "There's a tremendous strain of idealism in Americans . . . that demands that there is always an acceptable explanation for behavior." Of course, there's a lot of coincidence and randomness in how everything comes together, or not at all; it depends on how you want to look at it. In this particular work, I find it interesting to think in terms of "meaningful coincidences," in the direction of Carl Jung's concept of synchronicity. That's definitely far from a rational, Cartesian interpretation, but one can get more jouissance out of it, or at least I can as a viewer.

JM: I'm not familiar with Jung's synchronicity, so it's hard to respond directly to that. But my coincidental encounter with the old man only becomes significant to someone else in the form of an artwork. The specific technique is montage, which is a way of shaping otherwise chance material. Here, I think of Sergei Eisenstein's example of surprising an actor by shooting a gun behind him to create a facial reaction that can be used to convey extreme grief.

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LLP: What about the exhibition where you'll be showing this piece for the first time, The Insanity of Place? Can you tell me about it, and about how Primary Structures relates to the general ideas of the show?

JM: I lifted the title of the show from Erving Goffman's book *Relations in Public* (1971). Goffman was a Canadian American sociologist, an empiricist whose writing I find incredibly poetic. There's something in his attempt at complete rationalization and detachment that produces this effect. He influenced a whole generation of American artists, including Allan Kaprow, Vito Acconci, and Adrian Piper. I've used phrases from Goffman as titles for specific works as well: "I experience everyday life in the state of being wide-awake," or "The reality of everyday life further presents itself to me as an intersubjective world, a world that I share with others."

The PowerPoint and the other works, which are photomontages presented as LED lightboxes, might not share any obvious connection. The background images for the lightboxes are street scenes from my "The Middle of the Day" photo series. Over these I've superimposed monochromatic brown shapes, mostly geometric, at 80 percent opacity. The shapes derive from early brown works I showed with Colin de Land, a series that alluded to stature and body parts via these minimal or abstracted forms. The referenced works are generally small, but the superimposed shapes appear to be monumental vis-à-vis the backgrounds. For me, they have the feel of "delusions of grandeur" or something like Claes Oldenburg's proposed monuments. I'm playing with a sense of something being both there and not there, something imaginary but perhaps remembered. So maybe the link is via the monument versus a disappeared past.

LLP: That is an unsettling tension that brings me back again to "The Middle of the Day". "Shooting Log," your 2008 text about the series, finishes as follows: "There is no final chapter in the book. As such, if it were a detective novel, all the loose ends would be tied together to complete a well-rounded, completely realized project. Photography, however, is not fiction. I will leave no memories." I found this last sentence uncanny. Perhaps all forms of art are a way of fighting against disappearance. Your work seems to acknowledge that this is a lost battle, but that that should not prevent you from doing what you are doing, as if documenting the vanishing time were a kind of ritual, or something inevitable, despite the outcome. On the other hand, I see your appreciation for Goffman's total rationalization and detachment as in line with your American idealism, as I said before. I suppose that plays an important role in your success in Germany, the motherland of idealism.

JM: Goffman is complicated. His aspiration to completely account for complex social patterns is idealistic, maybe even Hegelian. But his understanding of social reality is totally non-transcendent. I'd consider that anti-Hegelian. The poetics of his

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writing reminds me of Dan Graham's *Performer, Audience, Mirror* (1975), which is an important reference point for me. In that work Graham describes himself and others via this quasi-autistic or automatic mode of articulation—just reading off his own surface behavior and that of those around him. There's a deliberate absurdity in that and, in fact, Graham has claimed that all of his work is "about stand-up comedy." I think Goffman is similarly attentive to the absurdity of routine inter-social exchanges. Both he and Graham allude to moments of abysmal madness. Would that approach German Romanticism?

LLP: No, it could be Romantic ad absurdum. You're pushing it to such extreme that it becomes something different. This level of absurdity distilled from everyday life, this point where the "normal" cracks open into madness, is probably something that runs throughout your whole oeuvre.

JM: Right, madness with a straight face.

John Miller is an artist, writer and musician based in New York and Berlin. In 2011 he received the Wolfgang Hahn Prize from the Society for Contemporary Art at the Museum Ludwig in Cologne. Miller's books include *Mike Kelley: Educational Complex* published by Afterall Books, in addition to *The Ruin of Exchange: Selected Writings* and *The Price Club: Selected Writings (1977-1998),* both published by JRP-Ringier and the Consortium as part of their Positions series*.* La Magasin in Grenoble, at the Kunstverein in Hamburg and at the Kunsthalle Zurich have held solo exhibitions of his artwork. In 2016 the ICA Miami featured "I Stand, I Fall," his first comprehensive survey in the United States. Miller is a Professor of Professional Practice in Barnard College's Art History Department.

Laura López Paniagua completed her doctoral studies between the Universidad Complutense de Madrid and the Freie Universität, Berlin with the dissertation *Memory in the Work of Mike Kelley* (2015), the first PhD study worldwide dedicated to this artist. López Paniagua teaches on the subjects of contemporary art and memory both at the Department of Cultural Studies and at the Department of Educational Science of the Leuphana University, Lüneburg (Germany). López Paniagua lectures internationally, with recent interventions at institutions such as Bard College, NYU, MOCAD and 21er Haus.