



In New York: John Miller

Daniel Horn, John Miller

In this edition of *Before Drones* we look to the American epicenter of the pandemic: New York City. John Miller staged his first solo exhibition in 1982 at Artists Space and has since been a critical voice in the city's artistic and discursive goings-on within the increasingly commercialized art world of the Reagan era and its politization within the «culture wars» that followed. In his multidisciplinary practice, Miller remodels the spiritual and material highs and lows and very lowest the «American Dream» has on offer, resulting in works where the fetishistic meets with analytical documentation. John Millers exhibition *An Elixir of Immortality* will open at the Schinkel Pavilion in Berlin on June 6 2020.





John Miller, *Middle of the Day*, 2020 (ongoing)

Daniel Horn: As we speak [May 15], I can see that New York City continues to be set «on PAUSE» by the state. This means the city hasn't officially opened yet and I wanted to ask you how this current in-flux situation affects your day to day routines, specifically your ongoing project *Middle of the Day* where you have been imaging public space between the hours of noon and 2 pm for the last two decades. Is this core part of your practice likewise on PAUSE?

John Miller: The pandemic has been critical here in New York City for reasons that become more glaringly obvious by the day. This is less due to the Trump administration's ideological maliciousness than it is the result of general incompetence and intentional understaffing of vital federal agencies. The lack of a social safety net and wide-spread poverty make all this even worse. My «Middle of the Day» series is not so much «on pause» as it is encumbered. I usually shoot these photos with my iPhone, which is harder to use when you have to wear gloves. My phone also has face recognition, which doesn't work if you're wearing a mask. In the first days of the stay-at-home order, so many were sharing desolate city views on Instagram – dramatic shots of suddenly empty streets. Those images appear to have quickly become clichés. People are already sick of seeing them.

DH: The fast turn-around for image circulation and consumption generally has very much persisted then, if not actually even intensified?

JM: Yes, it's intensified. The stereotypes burned out faster than I would have ever expected. A Barnard student of mine had to quarantine in Wuhan. To continue work there, she decided to do an independent study with me. We discussed how this was a historical moment and I suggested that she document it, which she did. But she quickly gave up, not least because her images of masks, gloves, cleaning rituals and so forth turned out to be much the same generic images popping up everywhere else. But maybe these will be of historical interest in the future.

DH: I've never visited mainland China but I would have thought there to be quite a difference to Germany or arguably the US, in the ways one is permitted to shoot in public space, especially in a moment of crisis and thus of even more heightened control exerted by the authorities.

JM: This student was only shooting indoors. But I also had a student from Shanghai who was stigmatized for potentially carrying the virus when she returned from New York. She made a video about the specific forms of control that you mention. Like everyone else, she was assigned a code sent to her phone that she had to show when entering a store or other public spaces. If you had green, you could go in. But she had red for two weeks, even though she never had the virus.

DH: Such factual accounts – while linked to a very different political everyday in China – are of relevance to what's been going on in Berlin and the country the last weeks: the rise of a concerned citizenry protesting in public space, albeit with highly divergent agendas, some which are not just grotesque but depraved. Not least due to different firearm legislations, these demonstrations are however nothing to the bizarre scenes over in the US. There's this image of the Michigan protesters in riot gear consisting of Under Armour athleisure, a Hawaiian print shirt, a Joker-mouth dust mask and a semi-automatic. You couldn't make that stuff up. Yet there's force to the notion that the virus has played right in the hands of sovereign bodies who can now publicly join forces with big tech to realize a state of control.

JM: It's curious how conspiracy theory tends to produce such bizarre imagery. But we shouldn't forget how the «state of exception» following 9/11 enabled big tech to monetize people's private data with the blessings of the U.S. government. Shoshana Zuboff talks about that in her book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019). Since American national security depended so much on big artificial intelligence companies, they got away with a lot, namely harvesting personal data for profit. Just last week, New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo announced he would work with the former head of Google, Eric Schmidt, to combat the virus. I don't think it's a good idea.

DH: It's funny you bring up the Cuomo X Google plot which Naomi Klein discusses in a recent essay. She argues that the danger lies in precisely that kind of corporate utopias, like the one that's just been shelved: Toronto's waterfront «Smart City» built by Google. Specifically their strategy for community-building from the «Internet up,» as Schmidt & Co. envision, in the course of which the much-maligned and corroding governmental structures and services are gradually replaced by companies who can rely on more or less voluntarily submitted data of these constituents – who in turn trade privacy and personhood for performance and variety, I suppose. What's being critiqued here is «digital refeudalization,» the next generation of Habermas's perceived revival of feudalism in modernity. These issues – gentrification, privation – tie into your work *The Reconstruction of a Public Sphere*, a video in the guise of a PowerPoint that largely consists of images taken around Battery Park City in Manhattan. *Reconstruction...* also addresses the history of the format itself, an intrinsically mundane application when it came on the market in 1990 that, nevertheless, continues to be synonymous with cognitarian work environments. When did you make this work actually?

JM: I made the piece about three to four years ago and followed it up last year with an artist's book that I did with Alex Kitnik and Benedikt Reichenbach. Funnily enough, PowerPoint revolutionized art history departments. No more hauling around of slide trays and projectors. At Columbia University's slide library you had to fill out a form for each slide you took out. And you had to return them the following day. Even though every slide had a «DO NOT COPY» label on it, I got a slide copier attachment for my camera and copied everything I checked out. I didn't want to spend most of my week filling out forms. In the wake of PowerPoint, the art historian Pamela M. Lee even wrote an Artforum piece mourning the «demise of slide projectors.» (2004).

DH: In fact, the one subject rarely discussed in connection with your work is technology as such, it seems to me?

JM: Well, I've jumped around a lot with media over the years: from video and photography to extended phases of painting, drawing, and sculpture. For almost twenty years I've collaborated with Takuji Kogo in a virtual band called Robot. We started by turning personal ads into songs using a text-to-singing app. There, in some sense, the personal ad was our medium, but the result was a music video clip. Using synths and samplers, we did everything electronically. One of our goals was to recreate a sense of intimate experience synthetically.

In art school I majored in video, which then was a brand-new medium. It's hard to convey how mind-blowing it seemed to some at the time. Many were befuddled by the fact that an opaque videotape could hold images. Then, to be able to immediately view what you had just shot. It profoundly reshaped the thinking about images, the technology subtending them and the shift in relations this engendered.

On top of that there was this almost revolutionary, left-wing expectation attached to video. In school we all read *The Video Primer* (1974), which was basically a technical manual but it also covered ideology and community values. For example, in 1972 Abbie Hoffman gave the

collective Videofreex a TV transmitter to broadcast pirate TV in Manhattan, which would have seriously violated FCC regulations. Moreover, Hoffman who had helped found the Yippies (or Youth International Party, an anti-war movement that applied Dada techniques to mass media during the Vietnam War) had gone underground at the time. So he was risking arrest and imprisonment. However, Videofreex couldn't get a signal through Lower Manhattan's skyscrapers, so instead they ended up broadcasting in the Catskills. At any rate, the gesture was more symbolic, not so much a matter of creating a functioning network. Today, the proposition of people being able to pretty much broadcast anything all the time on social media now is entirely different.

DH: Is Robot still happening by the way?

JM: It is, yeah, but it's been subjected to its own technological discourse, I guess. We have everything on a Robot YouTube channel. But we stopped drawing on personal ads as much because they've been wholly absorbed into a generalized social media sphere. Instead we've started using other kinds of texts, mostly political, theoretical or artistic, as our starting point. We began with a profile that Vogue published on Marina Abramovich in the genre of a «how you spend your day» interview. The article included a photograph where she stands on a balcony in a triangular dress, captioned with «A Moment of Zen,» which I knew would piss Takuji off. (laughs) So we just took what she said verbatim and turned it into a song. We've done artist animations based on Dan Graham's *Performance/Audience/Mirror* (1977) or Andrea Fraser's *Museum Highlights*. Ironically, the best text-to-singing software we have worked with over the years is Vocalwriter, one of the first.

DH: I, in fact, have ten different voice-to-text apps running as we speak, because I haven't figured out which one really does the job! But let's bring in your exhibition *An Elixir of Immortality*, scheduled to open June 6 at the Schinkel Pavillon in Berlin. You had mentioned to me prior to this interview that you will revisit certain works in this show correct? Specifically *A Refusal to Accept Limits*, an installation presented at Kunsthalle Zürich a decade ago by now. I wanted to bring back this aphoristic-meets-stream-of-consciousness text of the same year, *The Ruin of Exchange* (2009). A line there reads «Technological advances leave the public sphere a ruin.» We've been talking about gentrification and the obsolescence of technology as much as of ideas of resistance but also about progress and optimization so I've been wondering how to read a line like this, in the context of then versus the context of now. Is it a nostalgic voice pure and simple, but as pastiche? Slogan-like criticism?



John Miller, *The Refusal to Accept Limits*, Installation view Kunsthalle Zurich, 2009, © Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography

JM: It's a while ago since I last looked at this piece of writing. I was primarily concerned with ruins as an allegorical paradigm. Also, I used *The Ruin of Exchange* as the text for my first PowerPoint work. I suppose I meant the line you quoted as poetic critique back then. But, curiously, allegory and poetics are always reversible; another textual layer can always be superimposed on a preceding one. I presented this piece for an artist's talk in Chicago. I remember that Hamza Walker, the curator of the Art Institute, said my pronouncements didn't make any sense to him, at least as a coherent text. I had to agree. My approach was more like a montage that relies more on suggestion than exposition.

DH: Like what I imagine neo-Situationist graffiti to read and look like.

JM: I've been quite affected by Situationist poetics for sure. I've often used Situationist phrases and texts directly. I once organized a show at Galerie Barbara Weiss called *No games inside the labyrinth*. The title comes straight from Debord. More recently, I did a public art project in Düsseldorf with Markus Ambach where I applied a citation from *Theory of the Derive* onto a former Deutsche Post building opposite the main train station. As for the exhibition at the Schinkel Pavillon, the central piece will be a new gold ruin.

DH: Since the 2009 Zurich gold ruin will return in 2020 Berlin, albeit as a reconceived sculpture, what is the passage from *A Refusal to Accept Limits*, with its built-in negation, to the auspicious *Elixir of Immortality*?

JM: *Elixir...* comes from alchemy while *Refusal...* comes from allegory. The basic layout of the show will be gold works on the upper level and my brown impasto works below. I wanted the title to suggest the transmutation of base matter into gold. There's also an intermediary version of the ruin, *The Bridge to Tradition*, that has never been shown since it was retained by the people who produced the work. The titles for the first two come from Google searches for the term allegory, specifically about the ruin as a paradigm of allegory. So *A Refusal to Accept Limits* links to hubris. I think ruins derive their allegorical power as temporal indices. They remind us of civilization's limits. *Bridge to Tradition* relates to writings by the Nazi architect Albert Speer, to what encapsulated the wish for the architecture of the Third Reich to retain its grandiosity in a thousand years ahead, whereas his contempt for the Bauhaus aesthetic of steel and glass was based not least on him thinking that these materials would make for shitty ruins. Conversely, Robert Smithson's phrase «suburbia rising into ruin» (in his 1967 *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey*) inspired me to make a ruin as a kind of stage set. And I do think it has a sense of suburban decor. I also thought of this legend of the Roman consul Scipio Aemilianus who, while his troops burned the city of Carthage, wept as he envisioned a similar fate for Rome, the «eternal city.» The ruin as the gloss of civilization.

DH: Yet the ruin in the Zurich version is quite specific as regards history, unless I'm being too orthodox here in this kind of semiotic reasoning. Not only are there classic Greek columns, but also an obelisk with all the multi-layered imperialist connotations this object holds. And I believe I made out a communist sickle ennobled in gold leaf? I'm curious if these components are interchangeable or are tied to that moment and will therefore be replaced and updated in some way?

JM: Nina Pohl, the director of the Schinkel Pavillon, was really into having the gold ruin as the centerpiece. However, we couldn't get *A Refusal to Accept Limits* which is currently on display at the Rubell Family Foundation in Miami. So we had to find an alternative.

DH: Were you happy about that as an opportunity to rethink this piece or, on the contrary, unenthusiastic about having to revisit it, about having to make it from scratch but different?

JM: I was glad to rethink the work. It was Nina's plan was to show the gold work above and the brown work below in the Schinkel Klaus. That alludes to sublimation, but it also alchemy, so in that sense the title *An Elixir of Immortality* carries a fatalistic resonance. This became more charged after the pandemic. Nina asked me to consider doing a site-specific work. I thought that if I do this, it should be part of the ruin, so I came up with the idea of an additional component, what looks like a broken-off fragment of the large granite bowl in the Lustgarten, which is just around the corner from the Schinkel Pavillon. This granite bowl, in turn, was based on Nero's so-called Golden Bowl in Rome. Since the Schinkel Pavillon is GDR architecture, it of course was not designed by Schinkel, as was the Altes Museum, which stands behind the bowl.

So the idea of this simulated ruin in close proximity to its present original has this charge, this paradoxical temporality – where causal anticipates effect – that Speer was obsessed with. As for details like the sickle, I hadn't specifically considered it as a Communist icon and I'm not sure whether the new work will include one. However, when I started work on the gold-leafed reliefs it became immediately apparent that only a few categories of objects registered clearly as monochromes: weapons, tools, fruit, and fish. The person who made the ruin then held on to the extra elements – which I call «debris» – that didn't find their way into the first works. So now we have a surplus that will finally get its turn. But I also wanted this ruinscape to have this look of waste left behind after a teen beer party at that site, not so much a as mindless littering.

DH: If the ruin is varying now, does this apply also to your conceptualization over the years of something as laden a category as allegory, the contemporary iteration of which might verge on a meme? Actually, I was wondering the same about your use of mannequins which I didn't know you had been using very early already in your work and which become increasingly aggressed? As when they are harmed and killed off in this video you made in 2016 with the artist Richard Hoeck, *Mannequin Death?* [<https://vimeo.com/130993666>]

JM: In recent days, mannequins have become memes more than ever while allegory doesn't lend itself to memes in quite the same way. Allegory is something I will probably never completely grasp. The ruins and the mannequins are similar in the way I've been adapting them for different contexts, as primary structures or devices to add on and accordingly modify.

My sense of sublimation and desublimation, say, goes back to my growing up in the sixties, and how Herbert Marcuse's thought inflected the counterculture. This is evident in Alan Ginsberg's notion of political protest as a celebration complete with gratification rather than simply self-sacrifice. Richard's and my *Mannequin Death* concerns a kind of Kantian model of the sublime: the awe inspired by a steep precipice. A sense of threat, namely falling over the edge, is what distinguishes the «masculinized» sublime from the «merely feminine» beautiful. But we concluded that if that threat is somehow realized, the sublime devolves into the grotesque. Before this, all of my brown impasto works were meant to be symbolic, desublimatory gestures. In some way, I considered actual desublimation to be impossible. Also, based on my 60s-style sense of Marcuse, I equated desublimation with liberation. This would change with the arrival of reality TV shows. Shows like *Hoarders*, where you had scenarios such as someone living alone and cramming their house full of rat-infested junk. The one episode I saw featured a woman who stored so much in her bathroom that she could no longer use it. So then she started defecating in her bedroom which structurally compromised the house itself. The «Hoarders team» intervened and had her committed to an institution. She might be better off, but this was hardly a liberating outcome. So this stuff was vastly more desublimated than I'd ever be able to gesture to symbolically – and now offered as mainstream entertainment!

DH: Since you brought up Marcuse it struck me that this early painting of yours picturing Angela Davis seems to be returning in your recent photographs where the mannequins are styled and staged to evoke some white-collar corporate setting, like an ad agency or consulting firm. There's this character in this cast that could just about be anyone but whose hair and make-up alone reference Davis's trademark look – which is likely also a racialized perception on my part. Then there's the male mannequin which is similarly familiar yet in the end a surrogate without a clear source image. White yet not American in style, more Euro but in a «wrong» kind of mode. I guess my question is also if and how are you casting these mannequins?



John Miller, *The Tip of the Iceberg*, inkjet print on Ilford smooth paper, 2019



John Miller, *Deus ex Machina*, video still, 2018

JM: This «casting» is very much contingent on the supply out there, on what retail wants. It's been funny to see the evolution of this product, with the realistic mannequin gradually becoming increasingly the icon of downmarket clothing stores, whereas higher fashion stores would come to prefer abstracted mannequins or do away with them altogether. Go figure. The default mannequin in any case remains white, so if there is a perceptible racism in this, it is first of all a racism that is built into the categories of mannequin production itself. The black mannequin can specifically be ordered as an «ethnic mannequin» which by the way not only sells for more but is usually better made than the white one. I tend to go for the cheapest mannequins and the cheapest clothing that aims to look «normal» which also results in this odd stylization that you hint at. The male white mannequin is one of the most widely used – and I suspect it's produced in China. Last summer, Alexanderplatz had an African market that included one stall where a man was selling Kente cloth outfits. He used the exact same white mannequins that I did and for the same reason: because it was the cheapest one. I think of the mannequins I use as readymades, a quality that extends to the representation of race and class in marketing.

DH: Has the resultant discussion of these works that group mannequins in these «charged» settings, as you say, changed in view of associable discourses shifting from postmodernism to the transhuman to re-emphasizing «identity politics»?

JM: Probably the surrealist uncanny remains the dominant framework for mannequin iconography. The idea of a default identity, as white and male, is of course hegemonic. So there's a politics of representation, but anything that's represented by a mannequin will end up as a caricature.

The pandemic has resulted in a rather strange deployment of these figures in the globally disrupted public everyday, as it is gradually opening up again. Baseball stadiums in Taiwan are peopled by mannequins as spectators. Friends keep sending me these images of a restaurant outside D.C. that has a group of mannequins sitting around a table so as to make hesitant customers more comfortable to go out for lunch together again. While I doubt that they have that effect, what I find hilarious is that they are dressed in this weird Great Gatsby style of clothing. Social distancing really brought mannequins out of the woodwork!

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