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Gillick, Liam. "John Miller," *Bomb* (Winter 2012): 48-55.

BOMB

John Miller

by Liam Gillick

John Miller defies any precise generational positioning. For me, his work is resolutely present but at the same time points in many directions. His tasks over nearly 30 years of work have been extensive. He has taken on the role of explicator, redefining the radical potential of art through a large body of written work, while never slipping into pseudo-academicism. He has tested many exhibition models and produced work that does not shy from addressing the grand histories of painting and sculpture—but throughout, there is a deep skepticism when it comes to reinforcing certain modes of representation or apparently correct subjects. Throughout our recent discussion he was questioning how to work and what to work on. Navigating the accretion of social representations, from game shows via the apparent raw emotion of confessional TV to Occupy Wall Street to the daily routines of an artist, John shows equal curiosity for the subjects of art and the artist as subject. His writing and working methodology have been extremely influential upon my own attitude. He is deeply connected to a European Continental context—yet does not slip into parodies of other forms of critical self-consciousness. What is most striking is his desire for artistic autonomy even as he acknowledges the impossibility of escaping the flow of signifiers and multiplicities that contradict any grand narrative.

— LIAM GILLICK



*1-08-96 from Middle of the Day, 1994-2009,
Mac Mini with 875 photos. Courtesy of the artist and
Metro Pictures.*



Everything Is Said #18, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 39 4/10 x 47 2/10 inches. Courtesy of Galerie Praz-Delavallade, Paris.

LIAM GILLICK I'm interested in the connection you drew between Steve Jobs's memorial and the Occupy Wall Street protest. I witnessed both in the last few days. I think it's some of the same people, actually, doing both.

JOHN MILLER You think so?

LG There is certainly a ragged edge. People putting a Post-it note on the Apple store window and then going down to stop Wall Street. Does that have any meaning?

JM Well, to me it was paradoxical. Shouldn't they be tweeting? *(laughter)* The Post-it notes also felt a bit like the makeshift 9/11 memorial that happened right after the attacks.

LG A Post-it note implies doing something at a later date. It is like an infinite deferral. It's a very weak memorial, don't you think?

JM When you drive by the Apple store you may not be able to read each Post-it note, but you can see there are hundreds of them. So conglomeration becomes the corporate form of the mourning.

LG Both efforts have comparatively slight claims, desires, or demands. Since Steve Jobs's death they are both leaderless. Occupy Wall Street refuses to create a leader and be consumed by the media.

JM But the Post-its cast Jobs as a quasi-spiritual leader. Consumers identify with him through their electronic devices. Occupy Wall Street wants to represent the multitude, whose strength lies in its formlessness. The *Bloomberg Businessweek* site was the first to ridicule Occupy Wall Street's supposed lack of an agenda.

LG But it clearly has an agenda.

JM It has an agenda of what it's against. And that question relates closely to aesthetics and aesthetic critique.

LG I was wondering about that. *(laughter)*

JM The power of aesthetics lies in its negativity. The same goes for Occupy Wall Street. The symmetry between it and the Tea Party is curious: populist outrage on both ends of the political spectrum. What distinguishes Occupy Wall Street is the reassertion of the commons as a different property relation unfolding in public space. In this regard, Bloomberg has been criticized for his antidemonstration tactics. His administration responds to protest by corralling demonstrators—this started after 9/11 under the umbrella of a security risk.

LG Technically, they are right. From their perspective it is a security risk. People

want to change a system that is very controlling in an immediate psychological sense. They use a similar technique in England called kettling, which is the term for getting people into an enclosed space and keeping them there. It causes incredible turmoil and stress and anxiety because you are trapped.

JM Years ago, I took part in a demonstration against the Iraq War. The police made us stand in a pen, in the cold, which of course left us with an acute sense of futility and frustration. By setting up an encampment, Occupy Wall Street gets around that by making a community. But it's a symbolic, demonstrable community, not a fully functional, productive one; it's a relational logic, if you will.

LG It becomes a double negative: "You stay here / We want to stay here." I'm going to make a segue to your work, as I'm waiting for you to say, "That's exactly what was exemplified in my exhibition." (laughter)

JM I was actually thinking about one of your pieces in relationship to all of this, a work that I owned for a while, until it broke. It was a shopping bag with a phrase in German, "Another wonderful day in the city."

LG It's "Another fine day in the city," in the original English.

JM It sounds like a deliberately toned-down version of "Today is the first day of the rest of your life." On the face of it, it is very upbeat, but when you start thinking about it, it is almost a condemnation.

LG Absolutely. My works point toward something, rather than the work itself being the thing. This pointing toward something was exactly the feeling I had when standing with my son outside the Apple store, looking at the Post-it notes. For all intents and purposes, that area around the meat market in New York was another fine day in the city. People were doing the right thing, they were all wearing unique clothes from similar places and participating in newly pedestrianized zones. It is a kind of wanting and just stating the way it is.

JM It has to do with the notion of seriality. One wonderful day after the next would be ominous. Then, either it will play out the same way ad infinitum or there will be an un-fine day when

something markedly bad happens. And your plastic shopping bag corresponds to the idea of phantasmagoria, the dreaming state of the masses and the capital's need to reproduce itself in space. The city is the primary locus for that. So what does a fine day really mean outside of individual subjectivity? It means reproducing symbolic violence, reproducing what goes into reproducing the social order that constitutes the fine day.

LG I've always been interested in this word, *fine*. I often find myself accidentally saying, Well, I'm a fine artist, which sounds so arcane and so perverse, but I still can't say *contemporary artist*. It's not a term to describe yourself. It's everyone else but you who is, somehow, an exception to contemporary art. I've always been fascinated by your use of enduring artistic forms, if we accept that a painting is an artistic form. It is ironic that a form that should be so readable, in your hands becomes contingent and incomplete. It is difficult to grasp.

JM There are generational reasons for that. My most important teachers were all first-generation conceptualists: Yvonne Rainer, Michael Asher, John Baldessari, and Doug Huebler. At CalArts, my classmates Jim Shaw, Tony Oursler, Mike Kelly, and I tried to upend our teachers' conceptualist program. This wasn't an explicit decision; it was simply a shared sensibility. But Chris Williams, Steve Prina, and Mark Stahl, who were a couple of years younger, thought otherwise. Now, 25 years later, the two positions don't seem that different. Thomas Lawson's essay "Last Exit: Painting" goes into some of this—

LG Does that text still have resonance for you? When I first read it, as a teenager, it seemed like overstating the obvious in a very complicated way.

JM At first, I underestimated its impact on me. Tom implied a model of subversion that seemed melodramatic. Despite that, he managed to articulate a space where work could be done on a topical level. When I graduated from art school, the youngest artists shown in the art galleries were the first-generation conceptualists: my teachers. There weren't any galleries focused on younger artists until Mary Boone and Metro Pictures opened.

LG There was a similar lag in Europe. It was as if galleries had reached an end point.

JM At the time, so-called '70s practices—artist films, artist books, video, performance—were seen as alternative practices. Tom suggested these had become self-marginalizing.

LG There was some disdain for those alternative practices, because they involved grant applications or could be seen as instrumentalized work that would somehow produce a positive effect.

JM In the US, so-called alternative spaces sprang up in every major city. They promised an alternative to the established system, but as time went on, they functioned more as a feeder system for commercial galleries. Then, in the early '90s, the formerly marginalized practices entered the mainstream as valorized, prestige forms. Ironically, those who embraced them then wanted to pretend it was still 1976.

LG Yeah, by the time I got involved with the board of Artists Space (before its recent transitional period) that was expressly what they claimed they had wanted to do and were doing—creating feeder systems for people whose work hadn't been seen. I got involved in a group that was trying to shake this up because it just seemed loony. Some of these places, while self-institutionalizing, became mini-versions of MoMA, structurally the same as any mainstream institution.

JM But getting back to "Last Exit," Tom wanted to repurpose painting, to make it perform in a dissident way. He went further in articulating this aspiration than anyone else and, because of that, I certainly felt part of the Real Life group. But this position was equivocal nonetheless. When I was in school, I worked in video. When I started making paintings and drawings again, I remember feeling this sense of shame about going into art-supply stores. Once, when I was standing in line at Pearl Paint, I started feeling this very slight irritation in my ear. When I looked around, Michael Asher had a rolled-up piece of paper and was tormenting me from behind.

LG I can imagine.

JM He was in the same line as me, but mocking my buying "art supplies." (laughter)

LG How have you managed to retain a kind of instability in the work? I can

Most of my imagery has a stodgy aspect, and plays with that as a theatrical trope. It's a pedantic posture. Instead of subversion, I would assign the value of dysfunction to painting.

usually recognize your work. I mean, artists are naturally good at this because it's what we do. I can even date things when I see them. But when I see *your* work, I have this occasional doubt. Is it intentional to obscure the work's identity? Tom's text seemed to imply that there was a way to paint again, or to produce painted imagery in a way that could be useful and functional. But it would be doomed to a lack of resolution. Do you see what I mean?

JM My stance differs from Tom's a bit. Most of my imagery has a stodgy aspect, and plays with that as a theatrical trope. It's a pedantic posture. Instead of subversion, I would assign the value of dysfunction to painting.

LG I recently read an extremely good article by Adam Curtis, a documentary filmmaker whose BBC blog traces the history of neoliberalism and globalization. He wrote about the increasing prevalence of emotional displays in mainstream media, linking this to Rupert Murdoch's rise from the late '60s onward. At first Curtis's arguments seemed too outrageous to be true, but he backs everything up with clips and evidence. On one episode of *This Is Your Life* from 1962, a woman who was being honored burst into tears. Curtis examines the ensuing media response, namely that of tabloids and newspapers. These unanimously dismissed the show as a manipulative sham, an appalling abuse of the viewer—not an abuse of the program's subject. Murdoch, for his part, claimed to operate outside the systems. For this, he needed a raw public who hugs and cries and prepares to become the subject of a deconstructed society that's not really offering a better life or a fine day in the city. He could capitalize on that, by turning everyone into this neurotic, upset, and sobbing subject.

JM Absolutely. My most recent paintings, which are all titled *Everything Is Said*, show people crying on reality TV. Crying suggests the breakdown of subjectivity. It points to an apparatuslike quality where the subjectivity doesn't count for much.

LG Curtis also contrasted all this with clips from pre-1970 TV where people are

talking about fairly horrific things and do not break down at all. He ends with a 1985 interview with Jean Genet. Even these fairly highbrow journalists want to push Genet to the point where he would break down, but he wouldn't; you can already see Genet's awareness of the whole dynamic.

JM This makes me think of the coverage of the Hindenburg disaster. There is a famous clip where the announcer breaks down in tears.

LG I remember; it used to make my mother cry, when I was young, which was very distressing.

JM That announcer considered his outburst to be a professional failure. He resigned. Now, it would be milked.

LG To me, some of your work seems literally resistant to decoding, to the logic of didactic art analysis. But these reality TV paintings seem to point the other way. They open up a whole terrain of associations and social commentary. It's like you're a realist. (*laughter*)

JM Maybe this, too, goes back to Tom Lawson. Do you remember his painting *Don't Hit Her Again*? It came from a tabloid story about child abuse: an image of a little girl crying, with a black eye. In contrast, my "realist" images depict the media's ability to enact perhaps *fake* trauma for consumers.

LG That's a lot to answer for. Now, your paintings suggest that you spend a lot of time watching TV.

JM Truth be told, I don't. (*laughter*) But that doesn't matter. TV was central for baby boomers, Americans especially. I spend about a quarter of the year in Berlin and it's always embarrassing to start talking about some show with another American at a dinner party. The Germans' eyes just glaze over.

LG In the film *Painters Painting*, Chuck Close is working on a big canvas, and he's got a portable TV on at the same time. I remember seeing that scene as a kid and



Thomas Lawson, *Don't Hit Her Again*, 1981, oil on canvas, 48 x 48 x 3 inches. Courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky Gallery.

thinking, What a culture! This is American art, you can watch TV and paint at the same time? It seemed so extraordinary, the way of working more than the work itself. You're quite prolific, which seems to imply that you work a lot in your studio. But then you're also teaching and writing and doing all these other things. It sounds like a journalist's question, but I've never asked you about this before.

JM I work a fair amount, and lately what's been vying for my attention, and at the edges of being work or maybe not, is music. Of course, music does trickle into my practice in certain ways, but in the last seven or eight years I've gotten involved in a noise band, a virtual electronic band, and a country band. The latter is more of a hobby. Of course, *hobby* is a horrible word and sometimes I take my hobby more seriously than my ostensible work. At any rate, recently I'm prone to spending an inordinate amount of time practicing guitar scales.

LG I don't know if the term is *cultural consciousness*, looking for sources or looking for material—which way around does it work with your series of reality TV paintings of people crying?

JM These may be more about the apparatus, which, in a way, is the opposite of consciousness. The idea for the series' format came first. I had done a bunch of game show paintings that are its direct precursors. Reality TV ultimately construes reality as a game, so this involves the reality of game theory. At first I thought I would just photograph random scenes from broadcast TV—a kind of Baldessarian technique. But, after talking this over with Nic Guagnini, he said, "Oh,

people crying—that’s the *reality* of the reality show.” This brought it all to a head. However, this also made it hard to get the right shots. My daughter said, “I can Google you ten times as many images in a tenth of the time you’re spending doing this.” That became the most practical way to do it. But this way led to a sense of guilt on my part—I was making fun of popular culture without really knowing it, but still holding it up as an example. I do feel bad about that, but I’m not sure that actually watching the shows would make my work better. The iconic image of someone crying is what is key.

LG When Europeans reveal their underclass it is, strangely, more shocking—a guy from Duisburg, Germany, in baggy shorts and a Chicago Bulls shirt and a mullet, crying on TV because he’s been told that his girlfriend has been sleeping with five of his best friends. There’s a moral or pseudo-ethical component to shaming him in public—you’re a non-repressed person, you’re a freak.

JM I mostly watch such shows in Berlin from a treadmill. There, the primary format seems to be the courtroom.

LG Yes, it’s a confrontation, which implies that there is a hierarchy with an objective good and you’re not living up to it.

JM They treat the cases like real cases, but they must be scripted.



Liam Gillick, Another Fine Day in the City (prototype), 2009. Courtesy of Kunsthalle Zürich.



2-11-2006 from Middle of the Day, 1994-2009, Mac Mini with 875 photos. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures.

LG No, I think some of them are real, believe it or not. They are an alternative to small-claims court. Some are pure confession and punishment.

JM It’s only the proletarians who are judged. There’s probably financial incentive to submit to it—

LG Have these media forms become a way of holding up a mirror to a certain class? Maybe, for the first time, these people see themselves? I mean, I’m skeptical about that idea—

JM It’s Walter Benjamin’s theory of the media awakening these primitive impulses, or the camera being a device for learning to *feel* again, even though the whole setup is artificial. I think that’s what’s going on. It’s funny for me to say all this because for the moment, I’ve hit an impasse with my *Middle of the Day* photos.

LG These are the pictures you shoot from noon until two in the afternoon?

JM Yes. In contrast to the reality TV paintings, these images are diffuse and anti-iconic. Last summer, tourism in Berlin went up by about ten percent. That meant that cameras were ever more in profusion. I felt that the tourists were taking the same photos that I would take, more or less.

LG And that’s distressing?

JM It problematizes the assumption of realism. It makes me think, What do I want to do next with these? And it’s not so much that someone else is doing it, but

that it’s driving home more forcefully that what I present as my work is a slice of what has become spontaneous and totally automatic social activity. When I started this project, in ‘94, I’d be out on the street with a camera and people would look at me weird because of that. Now I go out on the street and it’s hard to keep other people with cameras out of my shots.

LG I’ve been in situations where you’re suspicious because you *don’t* have a camera when it is normal to have one—it’s a part of being a tourist. You absolutely stand out if you’re simply examining the way the corner of a hospital is built, or the way signage is fixed to a railing. But surely part of *your* dilemma is—and isn’t this the same for all artists?—a doubt about your place in relation to all these other people. You make things that can be read or experienced by people who do not necessarily have a deep knowledge of art.

JM To put it bluntly, the artistic activity of the masses is on the upswing. This approximates the so-called work of the professionalized artist with increasingly less effort ...

LG So then what are the implications for an artist? Surely we should all become pseudo-academic, context-heavy people making educational structures instead.

JM (*laughter*) That sounds nightmarish.

LG People used to think that conceptual art was about nothing or was about destroying the market, but there was also a democratizing process to it. It was

supposed to break down barriers, because it seemed as if it could be done by anyone, do-it-yourself and whatnot. So of course now people are doing it themselves. Maybe not because of conceptual art, but you can see its legacy; it's actually sympathetic to capitalism, in a way, or to forms of personal liberation. It's not a radical break.

JM Sympathetic to a more recent phase of capitalism?

LG Yeah.

JM More specifically, Alex Alberro argues that the informational status of conceptual art corresponded not to dematerialization, but to the then-emergent forms of advanced capital. But, even if you don't believe in capitalism or in the critique of capitalism, it's hard, even impossible, to extricate yourself from its contradictions. You're still stuck. I think we're in a dynamic period right now. The old model was that the avant-garde distilled art and democratized it, but then the public hated that because they wanted to see masterpieces and genius. To some extent it still does, but now there's another relationship where the public—and by that I mean museum-going nonexperts and nonprofessionals—looks at artworks and says, "Well, this is just like what we're doing anyway, and we like it too." I, of course, don't embrace the old position of mastery; but now that seems to be a moot point. If the public is in agreement with you—

LG The fact that everyone has joined you with their cameras should be a good thing, but we know it's not. But why isn't it a good thing?

JM It's the photographic abyss or the technological sublime. Sometimes you have good days, sometimes bad. But how do I frame my activity in relationship to that?

LG But is that the question you're always asking in your work? How do I frame my activity in relationship to X or to painting or to a gallery space or to the history of art or to ...?

JM That demands a shift in skills, from craft to tactics. Occasionally, I'll do a project that's more directed, but not so often.

LG But why not? You must be asked all the time. I'm sure people want to instrumentalize you as though they've got a good idea for you, surely.



Everything Is Said #6, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60 inches, Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin.



Everything Is Said #7, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60 inches, Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin.

JM I'm not asked all that often. It's easier to instrumentalize my writing. It comes cheaper. *(laughter)*

LG I was quite struck by those crying paintings. Even a cynic like myself has a little spark and wonders what's going on. Other artists might go straight past certain questions in their work because the answers seem to be quite straightforward, but you stop and ask questions of things that appear to have a simple solution.

JM I work associatively and I grope around a bit until I settle into some sort of procedure. At that point I try putting it into some conceptual framework.

LG I get nervous about starting to work, like I should find it more difficult or I should agonize more over things. What appears to be an ongoing practice has these ruptures.

JM The fundamental problem with being an artist is trying to figure out how to use

your time and what to do with yourself. In that, it differs significantly from other vocations. And that's the quality that is being lost in our art schools and in schools in general; there's no more floundering around. If everything has to be optimized at every stage, that's a real loss: another fine day in fine-arts education! That could be linked to neoliberal economics—students are paying more for tuition, they want to see results, they evaluate their teachers, and so on.

LG I'd like to imagine that it's all completely different in Europe, but of course it's not and often you get the same neurosis. I think it's not just the students who have changed; it's also the staff. When I was in art school there was a guy who didn't seem to do anything, he mainly hung around the bar playing pool. I wasn't aware that he was one of the professors until the day I left. For many it seemed ludicrous, but I actually thought it was a sign that I was in art school. To me it was the sign of advanced study. (*laughter*)

JM I first heard Doug Huebler speak at the Rhode Island School of Design in 1973. It was a very conservative school at the time. Still, a small contingent of students were trying to connect to conceptual art. So an air of expectancy surrounded his talk. But the lecture was downbeat, if not defeatist. Huebler said that dematerialization was a pipe dream. Someone asked, "What are you doing now?" and he replied, "Not much. I mostly play tennis."

LG Not that long ago, Lawrence Weiner brought up the same thing: around 1974 he was getting really irritated about being invited to be in exhibitions about nothing and that were full of objects. These shows about nothing with lots of things in them just seemed perverse.

JM I admired Huebler's candor and his admission of a sense of failure. People left his talk with dashed expectations. But as time passed I realized that that's what was good about it.

LG So where does Dan Graham fit in there? Is he someone you would have been aware of?

JM I was very aware of him. He appeared as a visiting artist at every school I studied at. Every time he came, he broke some piece of equipment or his own work. He was screening a film at the Whitney Independent Study Program,



Everything Is Said #8, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60 inches, Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin.

and the film got caught in the projector gate and caught fire.

LG He seems to be a person who would pick something up from the next generation.

JM He was willing to see almost everything, and he still may. In that respect, he was much more out there than I ever was. In terms of conceptualism, Dan Graham counts as a younger figure, but he's actually a senior figure.

LG I always felt that too. He is extremely influential upon my work and thinking and approach. But for some strange reason I've never written about him. Have you?

JM I wrote a long piece on the relationship of his work to music: "Now Even the Pigs are Groovin.'" I didn't so much go into *Rock My Religion*, but instead examined *Alteration to a Suburban House* and how its fundamental interactivity and interactivity correspond to rock and punk performance. In works like *Performance/Audience/Mirror*, I love the way the feedback functions with no machinery other than a big mirror and language. In this vein, Paul Ryan was a huge influence on Dan Graham, and as a result there's a revival of interest in Ryan's work.

LG That's the third day this week I've thought about Paul Ryan. I must be picking it up somewhere, or else it is buzzing in my head.

JM He's definitely reentered the discourse. Some of his projects are precursors to what Dan would do but with a therapeutic instrumentality that limits them as artworks. Dan took a much cooler approach.

LG Your work, funnily enough, is not cool in that way. It's quite implicated. You're kind of stuck with things, or that's how it feels sometimes. But there must have been points when you thought, Okay, it's time to reveal structure or process more. Do you have a feeling about which direction your work is going?

JM I think you're right. The question of structure and process relates to craft versus tactics. Nobody in his right mind wants to return to craft, but, on the other hand, aspiring to be the consummate tactician takes us back to the context-heavy nightmare. The unconscious, however, is still unaccounted for—and if there is an outside to the apparatus, that would be it. But I have to admit I don't have any strong sense of where things are going in my work. I never know until afterward.

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