

# METRO PICTURES

Lipkin, Ilya. "Middle of the Day," *Periodico* (December 2017): 42-50.

## PERIODICO

John Miller was interviewed by Ilya Lipkin  
on September 24th, 2017

Ilya Lipkin I don't know to what extent the readers of this magazine are familiar with this particular work of yours, the *Middle of the Day* series...

John Miller Probably not at all.

IL That would be my guess too...

JM It consists of photos I shoot between the hours of 12:00 and 2:00 PM. I started it in 1994.

IL Could we begin our talk by having you flesh out your relationship to photography when you were starting out as an artist, and how that, in turn, led up to the series?

JM When I was in art school I studied video, which was a new medium back then. This was around '78 and at that time Cal Arts had a mentor system, so I was working with John Baldessari. In any case, the earlier generation of video art was pretty much all about the ad-hoc raw footage, but in the short time that I was in grad school, a whole other ethos sprung up centered around post-production, which didn't really interest me. On top of that, post-production was really expensive—you had to go into a studio. Few people could afford the decks and the computer system necessary to do that kind of editing, which in turn meant having to raise money to produce a legitimated video. So I switched to painting and drawing and, of course, used a camera to document my work. In 1992, when I was in Berlin on a DAAD grant, Christoph Tannert at Künstlerhaus Bethanien was organizing a show about the AIDS epidemic with an artist named Dean McNeal. I think they had invited me to take part on the basis of the brown impasto work that I was doing. Those works suggested excrement as a kind of provocation, but I didn't think they were particularly about the AIDS epidemic. Instead, I decided to do something completely different for the show, which was to photograph the locations of various sex clubs in New York.

IL This was the *Clubs for America* series?

JM Yes. That work featured photos of clubs that had closed after the epidemic broke out. That was really the first time I used a camera to make an artwork in its

own right. And it was the precursor to the *Middle of the Day*. My approach was paradoxical: to document what wasn't there; to rub the medium of photography against the grain. But this was also anti-communicative. Berlin had and continues to have a really active gay community, so a lot of people came for the opening and for a subsequent panel discussion, and a lot of activists were involved in the show. In that context my photographs came off as a kind of boring, inscrutable aside because there really wasn't a way into the work unless you had access to the contextualising information.

IL That's exactly what I liked about *Clubs*, that it dealt so directly with the limitations of the photographic medium, specifically its inability to describe anything but surfaces. When I first saw those images of unremarkable buildings and dreary street corners I didn't know what to make of them either.

JM Later, though, those photographs found a retrospective audience; the series has been included in a couple of later shows about AIDS and the gay community in New York. As the piece became better known, a context emerged through which to understand the work, a context that grew as the work got older. Another funny thing happened where, with the passage of time, *Clubs for America* became about a double erasure: the original missing sex clubs that I was referring to and—as I photographed a lot of these places twenty-five years ago—much of what I documented is gone now. Initially, I found the clubs by going through back issues of the *Village Voice* at the library. It was pre-Google. But even so, addresses would disappear. Sometimes there might have been a row of three buildings and a hotel went up in their stead. The addresses got absorbed and three buildings became one, so then I would just photograph the facade or whatever was there.

IL Were you referencing Dan Graham's *Homes for America*?

JM Yes. I wanted to contrast the emphasis on domestic and private space in his work to semi-public space set aside for sexual encounters. And I wanted to butt that up against presumptions of American identity. Pre-9/11, middle America really disavowed New York City as a symbol of moral decadence. Graham examines



August 5, 2007



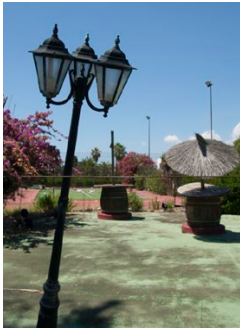
January 25, 2011



February 28, 2003



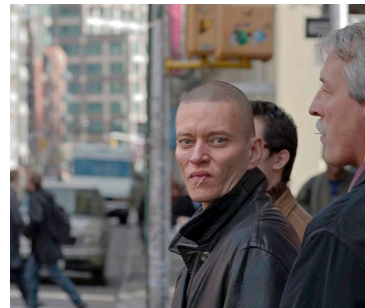
February 26, 2003



July 28, 2010



March 11, 2011



December 8, 2004



March 26, 2004

political distinctions between public and private space throughout his oeuvre. That's what both *Alteration to a Suburban House* and *Performer/Audience/Mirror* are about—as well as his pavilions.

IL And *Clubs for America* led into the *Middle of the Day* work?

JM There was an intermediate series which came out of being in Berlin at the time when the Helmut Kohl administration was trying to eradicate East German history, framing it as a deviation from 'real' German history. Street names that commemorated Communist politicians would change overnight and maps of Berlin went out of date very quickly. That got me thinking about places as ideological non-sites, where what made them significant was absent in some way. So I did a second series, about a dozen images, called *Wind from the East*. For this work, I focused on places where what made them nominally ideological had disappeared.

IL Can you give an example?

JM One would be the site of what was the largest sculpture of Lenin in the world, the United Nations Plaza in Berlin. When I shot it, the statue was gone. Only a pedestal remained, maybe a foot high, all marble. It was just a big disc, and on the rim, someone had graffitied: 'Was tun?' I also photographed Alan Sonfist's piece *Time Landscape* on LaGuardia and Houston in Manhattan. Sonfist describes himself as an ecological artist; his idea was to return a patch of land to the status of a pre-colonial forest. It was meant to be an urban montage. But the contrast was never completely pure. Back then, people would toss old tires and other non-pre-colonial stuff into the *Time Landscape*. However, I eventually grew dissatisfied with my series because I felt it depended on secrets or hidden information that I knew and that the viewer did not. It got me thinking about the nature of public space, namely, that every history of any particular space is necessarily contingent and fragmentary. I started to feel like wherever I pointed the camera was an ideological non-site.

IL So were you engaging nature as an ideological non-site?

JM I suppose nature as such is the presumptive absence of ideology, and I was subtly criticizing that. For example, the site of the Lenin statue is now a rock garden with a small fountain. I also photographed Jackson Pollock's grave marker, which is a boulder selected by Lee Krasner. This resonates with Pollock's famous retort to Clement Greenberg who asked if Pollock painted nature: 'I am nature'. One could infer from this that nature is inevitably a social category.

IL Do you see this in relation to concepts of civic space?

JM Absolutely. I've dealt explicitly with notions of the public sphere in my more recent PowerPoint works, especially *Reconstructing a Public Sphere* which is about Battery Park City post-9/11 and *In the Middle* which looks at tourism vis-a-vis immigration in Berlin. But I think these concerns are also implicit in my mid-day photos and this notion of an ideological non-site, which of course is much indebted to Robert Smithson, led up to them. It is a somewhat more open-ended project, and some people might say that with that kind of open-endedness the work could become politically illegible. Maybe I am leaning very hard on the time period, and placing emphasis on the structure of just shooting between the hours of 12 pm and 2 pm...

IL It seems that *Wind From the East* thematizes death and impermanence as well.

JM The series does feature two graves (Pollock's and Jim Morrison's) as well as memorials and Sonfist's *Time Landscape*. Moreover, the idea of disappearance runs throughout.

IL Do you see this terminal aspect of death in relation to On Kawara?

JM Yes, because in some ways his work always alludes to a minimum standard of existence in a very unembellished way. Whenever I look at his work, I feel I am confronted with the brute fact of being alive as well as the tenuousness of that fact.

IL It's interesting to think about the question of the political in relation to the midday photos, because in the catalog to your retrospective at the Kunsthalle Zürich, Nora Alter and Alex Alberro refer to the content of some of your images as 'questionably worthy of being photographed'. I suppose they are addressing the abject nature of your subject matter.

JM That, I suppose is super subjective. A good friend of mine once described my photos as *pictures to commit suicide to*, but I just see them as ordinary. That may be Baldessari's influence.

IL I know that the *Middle of the Day* work tends to be situated in relation to a Flusserian discourse on photography. However, I would be curious to unpack your choice of subject matter from the perspective of class, as well as from the perspective of the history of the medium. Maybe it's just me, but I see so many references here to Winogrand, or Walker Evans—classic street and documentary photography. Could we talk about this tension between a reading of the work that emphasizes the determining role of the photographic apparatus, versus a reading that focuses on the specificity of your subject matter and the presence of your subjectivity in these seemingly 'neutral' or 'objective' images?

JM In terms of the theoretical framework, Flusser has had a huge impact on the way I see things, especially how the camera serves as a precursor for information technology, automation and the roboticization of social relations, but I really knew nothing about him until 2000, when Christopher Williams gave me a copy of *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*. Before that, I hadn't even heard of him. I think if there is a Flusserian approach to my work it enters through the influence of conceptual artists like John Baldessari. One of the practices John was really influenced by was Cage, and he took that approach over to the camera. When asked about composition, he would say 'anywhere you point the camera is a composition'.

IL Which is quite accurate...

JM It's in the nature of the thing itself—an image is flattened out, it's cropped, all those things produce a

composition automatically. And I feel this automatic quality really connects to Cage—in my case via Baldessari. And Cage can be read in diametrically opposite ways: either as a kind of Cold War neutrality, i.e., just accepting whatever happens, or as pointing to apparatuses. In any event, for better or worse my subjectivity is still there. If it's not in the shooting phase, as I sometimes literally shoot from the hip and I don't look through the camera, it can re-enter in the editing phase, through the process of selection.

IL If you are working seriously with post-production you're taking time to reflect on which images make the cut...

JM Which I do. I try to go for something normative that goes back to a kind of 'Pictures' aesthetic. Although I wasn't really part of that first-generation 'Pictures' group, I was very much interested in the idea that a picture is a kind of window onto the world. Even when I was making paintings I was thinking of them as pictures-of-pictures and trying to second guess what I thought would be the proverbial 'person-on-the-streets' idea of a normal picture. That informs my taste in a way. It's a complex process because it involves second-guessing what looks normal to me.

IL You've spoken previously about the relationship of your way of shooting to tourist photography...

JM Yes, well, it's a certain kind of deskilled approach. It reminds me of a conversation between Martha Rosler and Benjamin Buchloh, in which he said something to the effect of 'deskilling is actually a very complex proposition'. He was talking about Ruscha's photos, which also had a big impact on me.

IL The gas stations?

JM Yes. And one particular book of his, *Real Estate Opportunities*, in which he photographs vacant lots that are for sale. They end up looking dubious just by virtue of being on the market. I really liked that. There is some kind of suspicious absence going on.

IL That ties back into what we were talking about earlier.

JM Yes, and I suppose, to jump back into the question of politics, maybe what I see as a kind of implied politics in my approach has to do with the concern with time and exchange value. Specifically, how do we value time? In the midday period, work and leisure enter into a possible conflict. Under the Protestant work ethic, resting is seen as indulgent and working is seen as virtuous. Of course, one doesn't make sense without the other. I like that siesta cultures acknowledge this and I like to consider de Chirico's piazza paintings from this point of view.

IL You could also say that photography itself brings this conflict to the fore. On the one hand, the practice encourages a professionalization of leisure time, wherein holidays, travel and social occasions turn into work opportunities; while on the other hand there is a great amount of leisure involved in taking certain kinds of pictures. For example, in your midday work, taking two hours to walk through the city, looking for objects of interest.

JM And Flusser, of course, argues that photography is play rather than work. In terms of travel, sometimes I feel like I take my best photos when I'm in a place that I don't know and I'm seeing it for the first time. It's harder to work with the familiar. It has less to do with exoticism than with not having a habituated kind of orientation. That's one thing, and the other thing in relation to travel photography is that with changes in technology even the so-called deskilled photos that many people take are technically pretty good.

IL I would agree with that. Could we talk about that—the technical aspect—because you started with middle format photography, right? That must have involved a totally different way of working...

JM Yes, I used a Mamiya RZ67. If you would have asked me at the time, I just thought cameras were neutral and it didn't really matter what camera you used. Even so, I wanted the authority of a larger negative and a presumably better print. But at the outset I gave little thought to the fact that this camera needed to be manually focused and metered and that occasionally it needed to be set on a tripod. However, as soon as I switched to a 35mm camera with auto-focus and autoexposure, the content of the pictures

changed completely. And as I was trying new equipment, the social placement of photography was changing as well. When I first started the project in '94, I would stand out in the street because I was someone with a camera. Now it's often hard to get a picture in public without getting somebody else with a camera in your shot. Cameras are just part of the landscape now.

IL And when did the switch to digital come along?

JM I think around 2000 or so. It seems like I've almost always been shooting digital, it's become so entrenched. I got a Canon digital SLR and I started working with that.

IL And now you work with an iPhone as well. I'm interested in this technical shift because it seems to indicate that the way you work is coming closer and closer to the way in which an average person engages with photography. Is that something you think about?

JM Well, I think about it a lot partly because I teach photography. I'm exposed to a lot of much younger people who are producing photographs. One thing I'm aware of is that their relationship to cameras is much more fluid than mine. For them it is very casual, it can be part of a stream of doing things, part of multitasking.

IL When I think of someone like Douglas Huebler and his photographic projects with their implicit de-skilling, I recognise that at one point this was a radical way to think about making pictures. Do you feel like there is a relationship between the legacy of that particular line of conceptual art photography and the way in which the average smartphone owner deals with producing and consuming images today? I noticed that your *Middle of the Day* project has migrated to Instagram...

JM Absolutely, and not just conceptual art photography. When I talk to students about On Kawara's work, sometimes I say, rightly or wrongly, that he was the first blogger. For example, think of his postcard series 'I got up'. However, maybe one difference between conceptualists and the people who are using existing social media platforms is that the conceptualists were concerned with the structure of automated production vis-a-vis biopower and with thinking up a format





February 10, 2006



July 12, 2003



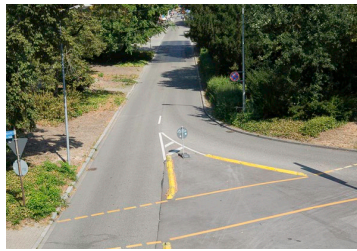
February 26, 2003



August 10, 2004



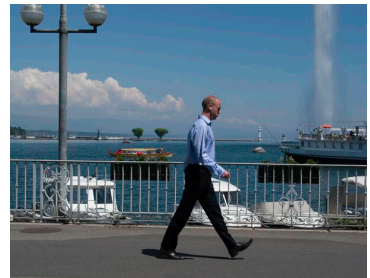
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September 10, 2016



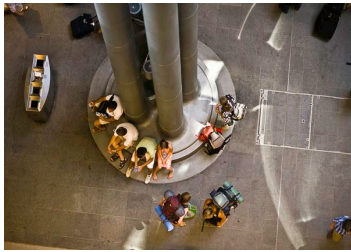
March 1, 2003



June 15, 2013



September 10, 2017



July 20, 2006



February 17, 2003



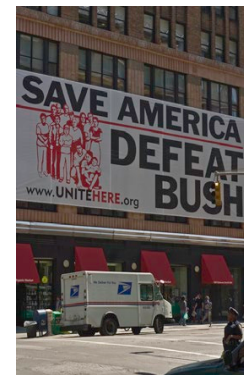
May 30, 2002



May 17, 2005



April 27, 2005



September 1, 2004



November 19, 2004



November 6, 2002

through which to circulate their work. Isabelle Graw, for instance, has considered Warhol's screen tests from this perspective. Now we have many available default platforms, and unfortunately, many take these for granted. I would wager that a majority of the users of Instagram are concerned almost exclusively with the content of what they post and hardly at all with how this platform functions formally or structurally.

IL The corporate nature of Instagram inflects whatever content may be posted on it...

JM I think that's fundamental to network technologies. Armand Mattelart once wrote that although we may think of networks as democratic, ever since the first Roman roads, they have served to consolidate power. The telephone, the telegraph: one can look at different technologies in different historical periods, and their relationship to consolidation and monopolization is striking. Right now we are in one of the greatest periods of monopolization ever and part of that, namely income inequality, is spurring populist reactions around the world.

IL Could we talk about the question of accumulation in relation to networks? I think one of the most interesting aspects of the *Middle of the Day* work is how it becomes legible through accumulation.

JM I think that through an archive or an accumulation of images, a photographer acquires an identity as an auteur. Huebler's proposal 'to photograph everyone in the world' pushes this to an extreme. He made this proposal in a deliberately quixotic manner, but now with networked image aggregation that prospect has come close to full realization. I think you can take a single photographic image and slip it into the stream of someone else's photographic practice and it would enter unnoticed. A single picture, without context, is extremely malleable. In other words, we view photos in a systemic way. Douglas Crimp addresses exactly that in his text *On the Museum's Ruins* in which he notes how early photographs were identified by subject and then, after a certain point in the development of the medium, photographers were recognized as auteurs and the categorization was reorganized by who shot the photograph.

IL Accumulation also makes me think of what you said once in an interview with Liam Gillick about the Post-it notes on the Apple store after Steve Jobs died...

JM Yes, after Steve Jobs died people left a sea of Post-it notes and flowers at the store on 57th Street. At the time I made a snide joke about how it was ironic that Steve Jobs' followers were leaving Post-it notes and not Tweeting. Tweeting was a novelty then, but now, of course, it's entered political discourse. In Bret Easton Ellis' *Less Than Zero*, the big put-down line in that book, which was supposed to capture the yuppie ethos of the 1980's was 'I'll fax you an apology'...

IL ...and now it's 'I'll tweet you an apology'.

JM Now people break up via e-mail! When it comes to photographs, I remember not so long ago a student who would submit iPhone pictures in class was considered to be lazy or cheating somehow.

IL Now everyone is doing it?

JM It would be absurd to restrict it. To put this into context, 12 years ago the idea of setting up a photo course at Barnard College, where I teach, had to go through the Committee on Academic Instruction. Earlier, students had set up their own darkroom, and Barnard had a photo club, but there were no photography courses and the fact that photography should be taught was something that had to be argued for. When the course first started, there was a huge amount of interest and so the first day of class was always the worst for me because I could take about 15 to 18 students and 50 or 60 would show up. But then, with the introduction of the iPhone, there was a slump. It was rather dramatic, from 50 or 60 students showing up, followed by a couple of years where only ten students would want to register. This is of course pure speculation on my part, but I think at that point students felt like photography is something anyone can do—which is, of course, true—and furthermore, they felt they already have the equipment they need, so why should they take a course? The interest has gone up again in the last couple of years and I feel this



is linked to students realizing that while they can get a decent image on their iPhone, they may want to have tools at their disposal to make that image better in some way.

IL Isn't there a notion among your students that now that everyone can take a good photograph, what is interesting or important to think about is the semiotics of the image: how it functions and how it is interpreted, as well as how images circulate? Is that something you try to discuss in your classes?

JM My emphasis is on a critique structure. My class is all about 'now that you've made a photograph, what do you want it to mean, what do other people think it means, and what do you want to do with it?' I think most students come into the class thinking about making photographs as a kind of art, but not always. I have my share of students who study urban planning or photojournalism, who want to simply use the camera as a tool for those particular discourses. But when I teach I really engage with the John Dewey notion of the artwork, specifically in that there is the art object and then there is the artwork, and that includes the social process of reception. Having a class critique, for example, is a kind of a model of reception.

IL Coming back to social media, could we talk about the work you did based on contemporary social media's outmoded predecessor, the personal ad?

JM I did a series of works based on Craigslist personals and for that project I asked Tamara Sussman, a former assistant of mine, who lived in LA at the time, to shoot some images. I was interested in different kinds of social space and so I gave her a list of different places to photograph. She went around LA, shot the locations and then I matched the images to the ads. For example, one image was a hot tub, another was a pedestrian overpass, one was a pool table in a bar, and we did one panoramic shot on a lonely road with a six pack of Coronas sitting off the side. That one ended up having an array of little phrases superimposed on it, a pantheistic array of different phrases from different ads.

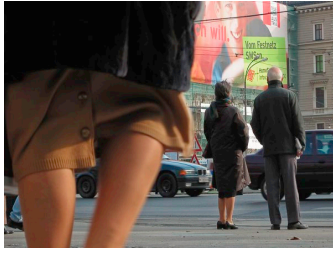
IL It's interesting to think about how quickly the personal ad became outmoded when handheld digital

technology arrived on the scene. I don't think I know many people who would try to meet someone through a personal ad today...

JM No, it's more like you would meet someone through your Facebook profile, which might indicate you're single, but that would not be the primary function of the profile, it would present a variety of social interests and information—the single status would just be mixed in. But I wrote a text in conjunction with the personal ad work, it's on my website and you can get it as a PDF. It's called 'The Work of Art, the Self Made Man'. I looked at conceptual practices where artists represented themselves as a political act, works mostly from the '60s and '70s, focusing on how what once was seen as an intervention has now become a kind of obligation for everyone. That could be another way in which certain aspects of conceptual practice have become co-opted.

IL Your photos resist this kind of self-presentation. While there are some *Middle of the Day* photos of what appears to be personal space, they are always so neutralized that one can never read into them with certainty. Even with the images of people, while there are some intimate and candid portraits, none of these give off the impression that you have any relation to the person whose likeness you are capturing.

JM That's a fantasy aspect of the work, a fantasy of objectivity. A fantasy that I am the invisible photographer. And I think it becomes clear that it's fantasy when one sees the pictures of people glaring angrily into the camera.



November 6, 2002



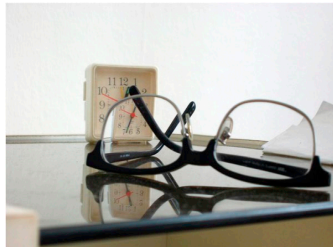
May 26, 2002



February 26, 2003



October 16, 2008



May 17, 2002



October 21, 2010



April 23, 2013