

METRO PICTURES

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John Miller: *Untitled (01-22-15)*, from the series "The Middle of the Day," color photograph, 6½ by 9 inches.

On a recent trip, I picked Nancy Meyers's new film *The Intern* as my in-flight movie. It includes a scene that's become an obligatory trope for feel-good stories about seniors learning to cope with their diminished role in the social order: a millennial shows an aging boomer how to use Facebook. We in the audience are supposed to cheer, "Great! Now you'll be with it! Problem solved!" I thought to myself, "The opposite is true."

Don't get me wrong. I'm not a Luddite. Rather, it's because I'm so irrevocably immersed in various electronic technologies that I reject them—at least as a symbolic gesture. I know this is only a small, hypocritical protest, just like that of friends who refuse to use Microsoft products or to carry the latest smartphone. Now, the tyranny of gadgets always wins. But to put it in other, more positive terms, what inspires me is the continuity of time or, more precisely, the experience of this continuity. And, as various metrics increasingly dominate everyday life, the shared understanding of unbroken time is diminishing.

I grew up in a small village in Ohio, one with an unusual name: Chagrin Falls. (It turns out that it's an anglicization of the Native American place name Shaguin, meaning "clear water.") For much of my childhood, our family, headed by a single mother, had very little money. We spent several years on "relief," which would later be called welfare. But my brother and I never felt deprived. Instead, because our mother had to work outside the home, most days we were left to our own devices. This was an incomparable opportunity. Back then, large parts of our township had not yet been developed. We were free to roam, not only the streets and backyards but also the woods and fields, completely untrammelled.



Miller, right, with his brother David, in their backyard in Chagrin Falls, Ohio, ca. 1959.

Mornings typically began with us heading down to the Triangle—which was the town square—to watch the village come to life. A day might be spent walking up the Chagrin River (on the lookout for water moccasins, of course) or building a structure out of branches and rocks, scrounging for forgotten change in parking meters and telephone booths or hunting for arrowheads (still to be found) or salamanders. Playing with sticks and mud gave me a good sense of “materials.” In fact, this was my first—and most influential—lesson in sculpture. Most important, however, was the unhindered expanse of time and space that lay before us.

During the summer I experienced this most intensely. As soon as school was out, I discarded my shoes for two or three months. It took about a week or two for my feet to toughen up for going barefoot. With the Fourth of July came trepidation. Summer was already half gone! My most hated school assignment ever was the insect collection due the first day of school. I hated killing bugs in jars with lighter fluid–soaked cotton balls. I hated sticking them on pins and labeling them. Most of all, I hated that the demand to do these pointless things (why not look at *live* bugs under a tree instead?) encroached on *my* summer.

As the years passed, the magnitude of summer became relative. Deadlines began to loom. I was required to manage things and realized that others were required to manage me. I found ways to compensate. I finished all of my graduation requirements before my senior year in high school. That way, I could spend most of my time in the art room. When the assistant principal noticed, sensing a scam, he called my mother immediately. Luckily, she backed me up. No rules were broken, so there was nothing Wade G. Roby could do about it. At the same time, I was reading the Yippie Jerry Rubin’s book *Do It!* “We know what freedom is when we hear the bell dismissing school. ‘School’s out, I’m free at last!’” Now I’m a teacher.

The summer before I entered college, I worked on the Chagrin Falls Township road crew. The monotony was overwhelming. It was my first encounter with dead time. I had had other jobs, like a paper route—where I could do as I pleased—but here I was stuck, eight hours a day, under the watchful eye of a foreman. My next summer job was working in a plant that produced injection-molded plastic parts, mostly for Mr. Coffees. I circled a row of machines, all operated by women, climbing ladders and pouring plastic pellets into hoppers on one side and sealing the parts into boxes stacked on pallets on the other. The interior of the factory was gray cinderblock. I would glance longingly out the open door in the back at the hazy bushes slowly swaying in the August heat.

Going to art school represented another attempt to reclaim time on my own terms. I entered the Rhode Island School of Design in the fall of 1972. No one cared about grades. Financial aid was plentiful. A merciful dysfunction prevailed. Artistic training was a kind of mummery. I decided to major in video art. I worked with a Sony Portapak on half-inch, open-reel videotape. But my medium was time. Like everyone else then, I made “real time” videos. I started wearing a watch and regularly encoded “time” onto magnetic tape. Thus, I became complicit in my own repression. My point, I suppose, is that technology inevitably overtakes experience, and there’s no going back. Perhaps the clock, by seeming to cut time into interchangeable units, was the first device to do this.

Upon graduating with an MFA from the California Institute of the Arts in 1979, I quickly discovered I had no marketable job skills. So I taught myself to type and parlayed that into what was then a brand new skill: word processing. I registered with a temp agency that sent me to law offices, advertising firms, and banks. The machine I used was called a Vydec, produced by the Exxon Corporation: a Star Trekian console that threw off considerable heat. It was also the first system to use magnetic floppy disks, produced by IBM, to store data. Companies typically call in temps when their work flow is jeopardized: “Our word processing technician has arrived!” If temp work served as a way to convert time into money, at least I didn’t have to do it full-time.

In 1994 I started a series of photographs that is ongoing: “The Middle of the Day.” I shoot these between noon and 2 p.m., which is my least favorite time of day. These pictures can depict anything, but the subject is time, an *apictorial* abstraction. But they don’t capture time; they are husks, the shed-off skin of time. Concerning photography, the camera, and apparatuses, Czech philosopher Vilém Flusser wrote, “Nothing can resist the force of this current of technical images—there is no artistic, scientific or political activity which is not aimed at it, there is no everyday activity which does not aspire to be photographed, filmed, videotaped.”¹ The photo, the camera, the apparatus, etc., destroy time—or at least the experience of its continuity.

The first smartphones went to market in 1994. Such phones gradate time into ever finer interstices. They are constant. They are cybernetic devices par excellence. Yet if the mobile phone once appeared as a status symbol, as in Oliver Stone’s 1987 *Wall Street* (where Gordon Gekko, played by Michael Douglas, carries one the size of a quart of milk), the ubiquitous smartphone now seems a bit proletarian. Everyone uses one. They’ve also reconfigured a whole genre of critical discourse: that of the cyborg.

I see three phases in this discourse. In the first, typified by Dada and sci-fi images, the cyborg is a violent hybrid, produced under an Orwellian regime. The image of grafting skin onto metal captures the shock of this. In the second phase, typified by Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto” (1985), this incipient violence is reclaimed under the banner of liberation. Only the mutant is truly free. In *The Cyborg Handbook* (1995), for example, academics of all persuasions proudly lay claim to the honorific title of cyborg. Here, the expectation is that technological mutation will transcend gender, and thus sexual repression. In the third phase, characterized by handheld devices, the term, along with any recognizable mutation, disappears. Instead, the masses enter a cybernetic relationship to the world without even being aware of it. Desire is automatic, as are the effects of the sought-after technology. It is no longer necessary to transform the subject’s body to produce this cybernetic relationship; it is only necessary to insert that subject into a functional network. For this reason, we repeat the phrase “in search of lost time” ever more poignantly. Sticks and clay. Go for it!