

Consolation Prize: Mike Kelley and John Miller

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Introduction

Consolation Prize presents multimedia works by the American artists Mike Kelley and John Miller. They have been friends and collaborators since their student days at California Institute of the Arts. This exhibition is the latest installment in their ongoing dialogue. In spite of television, the Internet, and other forms of global communications, regional differences continue to affect art production. I was drawn to curating this exhibition in large part because it seemed that the art Kelley and Miller were making was distinctly unlike the art being produced in Canada. The reasons for this are many; one could speculate about the difference between a state-funded art scene versus an art scene with a vigorous market, or the relative distance of Canada from the American culture industry, and so on. This exhibition is not proposing to answer any of these questions, but rather to lay some groundwork so those questions might be asked in an informed fashion.

Both Kelley and Miller have won international reputations for making art that is at once visceral and critical. The combination of irreverence and seriousness that marks their work has earned them first notoriety and then respect. Their frequent quoting from popular or subcultural sources has attracted the attention of a younger audience, but should not obscure the fact that Kelley and Miller are second-generation conceptualists who are both teachers. Kelley teaches at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, and Miller at Yale University. What has struck me most in thinking about their art over the past decade is not its iconoclastic or transgressive nature – the qualities that first attracted my attention – but the formal rigour and art-historical perspicacity that these artists bring to their enterprises.

I remember my first encounter with both artists' work as comparable to my shock upon first hearing the Stooges or the Sex Pistols. While I hope that this intensity of experience might be replicated for some viewers, I am aware that my role as curator, and especially author of a catalogue text, might work against it. It would seem that any academic account contributes to an entombing of the work in the art-historical canon. This is something that these artists themselves foresee and accept. As Kelley has stated: "Well, that's just tradition. As things become accepted, they themselves become the rules by which things are made; then your work becomes part of an academy. You have no control over that. That's how culture assimilates conflict." As inevitable as such assimilation is, I'm certain that the works presented here in *Consolation Prize* are an indication of how very far away we are from that eventuality.

*To a woman who had flopped down before an altar with her butt in the air I
remarked in passing that the god was also behind her.*

Diogenes of Sinope¹

The Soiled Shorts

The Lugubrious Game is the title of a 1999 installation by John Miller. It is also the title of a 1929 painting by Salvador Dali. Dali's painting, like much of his work, evokes castration anxiety, anal fixation, and masturbation guilt. It is a very literal depiction of a Freudian, anxious dream. The offending hand appears here as a leaden statue, heavy with guilt. In the centre of the composition a body simultaneously comes apart and ascends toward the sky. The body parts transform

into various suggestive forms, particularly anal and genital figures. In the foreground, the subject stands in soiled undershorts, “escaping emasculation through an ignominious and nauseating posture.”²

The “soiled shorts” became a point of contention for the opposing positions within Surrealism held by André Breton and Georges Bataille. Bataille saw Breton as pathologically “Icarian” and countered Breton’s idealism with his own conception of a base materialism, for which Surrealism was a mere developmental stage, akin to a “childhood disease.”³

Breton, the self-appointed pope of Surrealism, disliked dirty things and ideas. Bataille, Surrealism’s “enemy from within”⁴ and Breton’s arch-rival, had less delicate tastes. He liked Dali’s *The Lugubrious Game* enough to write an essay of the same title as part of a larger work on the inferiority complex. Although Breton was offended by Dali’s scatological art, he wished to keep the virtuoso painter on his team and was more threatened by the prospect of losing Dali to Bataille’s camp of surrealist secessionists. Breton forbade Dali to allow Bataille permission to reproduce the painting as an illustration for his essay. Dali complied with Breton’s order, most probably out of opportunism, for while he had more in common with Bataille philosophically, Breton’s team had the money and connections that Dali craved. Dali’s obsession with shit would eventually evolve into a lust for gold, a lust that would earn him the anagrammatical moniker “Avida Dollars.” Bataille circumvented Dali’s withholding by producing a diagram of *The Lugubrious Game*, which was perhaps even more useful for his analytical purpose.

Withholding

The soiled shorts in Dali’s paintings might be seen as an ur-figure in the art history of John Miller’s practice. In the 1980s, Miller became notorious for his works that liberally employed a shit-brown acrylic paint. The brown paint covered and unified the various objects and materials that constituted his paintings, assemblages, reliefs, and sculptures. So much did the substance come to unify and symbolize his oeuvre that “John Miller Brown” or “J.M.B.” became a trademark of sorts. As Bataille’s *bassesse* countered Breton’s high-flying optimism, so J.M.B. might be understood as a materialist antidote to the I.K.B. or “International Klein Blue” of Yves Klein’s cosmic monochromes.

Recently, Miller has abstained from painting brown, choosing to explore photography and other media and strategies instead. He has noted in conversation that although his use of brown paint was often met with disapproval or disgust, soon after he abandoned the practice he had to begin deflecting requests for more J.M.B. Those who diagnosed him as an obsessive-expulsive might now be lamenting his self-cure. Miller’s persistence has paid off; we got used to the awful medicine, and now that we really want it, we can’t have it. This exhibition includes a work from Miller’s brown period.

Shit from Shinola

In Miller’s practice, Dali’s shameful stain grows and covers everything. In Bataille’s interpretation, the stain is “both original cause and remedy.” Dali is both patient and doctor. Dali’s stain can be construed as the atavistic origin of Miller’s campaign, but for Miller, the afflicted subject is not the artist but contemporary art, or more correctly, certain contemporary art practices. In his essay *The Fig Leaf Was Brown*,⁵ Miller elucidates the genesis and rationale of his materialist strategy: “...for me it’s not so much a question of ‘scatological references’ as it is one of a relation between excremental material and the art’s underpinnings in libidinal economy and commodity fetishism.”⁶

Miller distances himself from the autobiographical operations of an old-fashioned artist like Dali. His stain is not a confession but an allegorical trope at the service of an institutional critique: “...because an artist’s choice of material and technique — not to mention subject matter — is never just that, it is also the result of predispositions inscribed within particular ideological and institutional frameworks.”⁷ Miller’s “stain” is, like Dali’s, made from paint, but where Dali’s “stain” is meant to be read as a transparent representation, Miller’s is always to be understood as a strategic move within an institutionalized game. There is also a third kind of stain. Miller has commented on how “artworks operating

under the sign of Beauty or the Sublime commit truly fecal indiscretions against which the 'transgressive' artist can't compete."⁸

The Future Is Plastics

Along with those who are repelled or feign repulsion, there are also those who experience disappointment upon first contact with J.M.B. No, it's not real shit, it's not even shit in a can, it's not even real oil paint, it's just odourless, relatively inert acrylic. In the assemblages that combine paint with plastic objects like dolls and buckets, the polymorphous, chameleon nature of plastic is made abundantly and poetically clear. The future *is* in plastics, and no other material more adequately symbolizes contemporary capitalism. That plastic can take so many heterogeneous forms and colours disguises its ubiquity. If all plastic products were produced in one colour only — let's say brown — the world would indeed be a monochrome experience. Perhaps what is most disturbing about Miller's brown period is not the reference to shit but the actuality of the plastic. Between the ecological mess that plastic has brought and its perfect realization of the anality of capitalism — the drive to leave nothing wasted — it is difficult to abstain from demonizing the substance. In an ironic dovetailing of intentions, the recycled plastic clothes proudly worn by the ecologically conscious are perhaps the *ne plus ultra* of anality.

Friends

John Miller's *My Friend* (1989) is a standard adult male mannequin, with a bad wig, in a 1970s wide-lapel suit painted in J.M.B. *My Friend* is a man of action, an international playboy to admire and emulate.

In the 1980s, neo-expressionist art stars like Francesco Clemente and Jean-Michel Basquiat submitted to the creation of a media image of the painter as dandy by posing in their studios, ostensibly at work, in paint-spattered designer suits. Their palette was polychromatic, the paint splatters mere accents designed to draw attention to their expensive threads. Miller takes the gesture further and thoroughly infuses his "friend's" suit with one big deft stroke. His conceptual forerunners had earlier declared a puritan moratorium on painting, only to be trumped by the market card of the neo-expressionists. Miller's negative practice does not pose paint as the enemy. Rather, if handled properly, paint can be an effective tool, and perhaps even a friend, for the critical artist.

Showroom Dummies

The mannequin's first appearance as a motif in 20th century art was in Dada's protest against the rationalization of life. The mannequin also became a standard motif for photography from Atget to the Bauhaus. Surrealists like Hans Bellmer exploited the uncanniness of the mannequin, and *Pittura Metafisica* artists like de Chirico based the bulk of their melancholic tableau on the lifeless figure. The mannequin resurfaces in Pop Art, but not as a central motif. The spotlight that shone on Warhol or Lichtenstein did not linger on Alan Jones — the mannequin was too disquieting and creepy for Pop's happy agenda. Recently, the mannequin has made a comeback that draws largely on surrealist precedent. Artists such as Cindy Sherman, Charles Ray, and the Chapmans have made it a leitmotif of 1990s art. While most of these artists have explored the mannequin in terms of sexuality and fetishism, Miller's mannequin pieces are grounded in materialist critique. Where other artists have modified their mannequins with Hollywood-quality special effects, Miller has simply dressed them up and accessorized them. What is anxious-making about his mannequins is their abject tawdriness: they are badly dressed melancholic junk. Miller sometimes leaves the price tags on his "friends" clothes to drive home the point that we can't escape from reification and the economy. It will always be a monkey on our backs.

Walter Benjamin, among others, seized on the mannequin as a potent symbol of reification. Fashion "is the dialectical switching station between woman and commodity — desire and dead body."⁹ Fashion as the commodification of the body has become a cliché that nonetheless cannot be willed away as boring or "out of fashion." Nor can it successfully be ironically appropriated by fashion itself.¹⁰ The excitement of the new Prada outfit is always accompanied by the intuitive recognition of Benjamin's dictum that "fashion was never anything but the parody of the gaily decked-out corpse."¹¹

Beware the Holy Whore

At first glance, it seems that *The Lugubrious Game* is modeled on typical television shows like *The Price Is Right*, but we quickly see that everything in *The Lugubrious Game* has been perverted: we are in Bob Barker's nightmare. The vibrating colours are not hysterical or happy but queasy and, well, lugubrious. The shapes of the plinth and the contestants' podiums seem to quote Artschwager and de Chirico rather than quiz-show sets. Miller has said that the work is partly inspired by "Moorish" design. The numbers on the podiums read "6-6-5," which is not quite 666, as Miller has noted.¹² Instead of absolute evil, capitalism is just a banal accident. On a plinth where we would expect to find a microwave oven or a back massager, we find a decorative sphere of green glass and some cheap Moroccan brassware. The artist purchased these items from the immigrant market in Grenoble, where the installation was first realized. Instead of the pie slice that might say "miss a turn" or "wild card" on Miller's wheel of fortune, we find the face of Charles Manson, suggesting that failure might be catastrophic rather than simply unfortunate. Manson represents a rejection of the status quo and might deliver you from the oppression of *konsumterror*, but you might just want to get back to the mall in Kansas instead.

In the centre of things, under the sickly glare of the fluorescent lights, is a pile of dark-brown dirt strewn with dildos, lubricant, tabloid newspapers, and money. Is it a mud-wrestling pit, an arena for gladiatorial battle, an Arte Povera or a Robert Smithson-like installation, or a cornucopia of prizes? The only way to find out is to play the game. But the host is missing, and we're not sure of the rules. No rules, no game.

The Golden Calf

When the planning for this exhibition was under way, a new prime-time program, *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, debuted on American television. Hosted by the appropriately avuncular Regis Philbin, *Millionaire* proved an immediate success. Apocalyptic lighting and dramatic camera zooming are intended to heighten the tension as contestants climb a ladder of questions crowned by a million-dollar prize. At each rung, the choice to quit while ahead or risk all for the big prize must be faced anew. Uncle Regis's spectacle of All-American idolatry was soon followed by a more instructive show called *Greed*.

Instead of the heroic adventure of the lone protagonist in *Millionaire*, *Greed* begins with a team of contestants chosen from the audience. The team starts its quest for gold by working together and pooling resources under the direction of a team leader chosen for his or her superior skill. At a random point, a sound effect called the Terminator signals the opportunity for a team member to challenge the leader and possibly have the leader cast out of the game with nothing.

The game proceeds with internecine conflict until only one player is left. Here the lesson of absolute competition is ritualized with all of the nastiness of the real economy. In spite of the ritual humiliation of daytime TV game shows, they seem like relics of the 1950s — cheerful celebrations of the materialistic utopia that awaited the war-weary parents of the baby-boomers. Miller's art has been imitated by cynical life. The producers of *Millionaire* and *Greed* have the dystopian idea, but need more help with the art direction.

Paint by Numbers

Miller has painted figurative works in a variety of quotational styles, which are always ironic appropriations. For artists like Miller, painting is fraught with the most serious reactionary baggage and cannot easily be rehabilitated. With his recent *Game Show* series of paintings (1999), he drops the brush altogether. In 1921, Aleksandr Rodchenko produced a triptych of three monochromes by telephoning a paint shop and supplying precise instructions for the painting of rectangular canvases in red, yellow, and blue. Thus began a tradition of anti-auratic, materialist painting. Miller's brown period evolved as a similarly materialist critique. In his *Game Show* series, Miller has created paintings by entirely mechanical means.

The *Game Show* paintings are made by snatching details of game show set “super graphics” from video, with a computer. The images are then translated into paintings by a computer-controlled ink-jet painting machine. Miller has found another way to paint without “regressing”. This is best understood as photography disguised as painting; it eschews everything associated with the technique of traditional painting — mostly the evidence of the hand — yet still exists as a painting. These works play a game that has been played before and must be played again. The rules of the game, as determined by the market, are so blindly and literally understood that it is still possible to satisfy the demand for painting with almost any object so long as it follows the physical prescription of “paint on canvas.” From Rodchenko to the proto-pop of Duchamp, to the silkscreens and paint-by-numbers of Warhol, avant-garde artists have clobbered away at painting by devising mechanical painting strategies. Painting persists because no physical medium is *inherently* more progressive or reactionary than any other. These strategic attacks have continued to contest any too-easy or unexamined revivals. That Miller chose the hysterical visual noise of the game show is more than appropriate in a time when so many in the art world appear to be oblivious to, or welcoming of, the art institutions’ gradual incorporation into the culture industry.

Let Them Eat Cake

In olden times, the king shared his wealth with even the lowliest peasant through the spectacle of his excessive expenditures. Louis XIV invited the lucky to witness the voiding of his fundament, the ultimate sacrifice of his privacy. The truly wealthy and powerful of today prefer to live anonymously and spend discreetly. There are exceptions, of course, but Donald Trump is not one of them; his vulgarity not so much a matter of his poverty of taste as his poverty of spirit. The British royalty continue to attempt to forestall criticism by spending less instead of more, in spite of the lesson of Princess Diana.

In the potlatch of the west coast First Nations people, Bataille, following Mauss,¹³ found an alternative model to capitalism’s claim to naturalness. Rather than establishing wealth and position through acquisition, the native chiefs cemented their status and celebrated family events through ritualized generosity and sometimes profligate waste. Spectacular expenditure served social cohesion and occasionally replaced actual war. In America today, the rich and powerful, captains of industry and commerce, are anonymous or make a point of appearing discreetly bourgeois. While Bill Gates maintains a modest appearance wearing his Hush Puppies, it falls to the military and entertainment industries to expend spectacularly. Show-biz figures are manufactured to front for the king, who must hide himself. Occasionally, a figure appears who understands his function perfectly. In the case of Elvis, the people recognized his generosity and crowned him with their love and gratitude.

A Modest Proposal

Mike Kelley’s *Surrogates* series of soft sculpture (1998) is introduced by *A Stopgap Measure* (1999), a poster/manifesto in dramatic, agitprop style. The bold typography and design in urgent red, yellow, and black announce Kelley’s disappointment with President Clinton’s failure to institute national health care. Kelley goes on to proclaim that, along with physical health, the emotional health of America needs to be addressed. Zeroing in on sexual frustration as a prime cause of emotional unwellness, he suggests that the culture industry is the major contributor to this problem and should be pressed to help solve it.

“Movie and television actors, porn stars, pop singers, rock musicians, athletes, supermodels and the pampered children of the wealthy”¹⁴ should be forced into prostitution as part of an extended health-care service and finally earn the privilege they have taken for granted. Since these objects of America’s fantasies are so few, Kelley suggests that those who are inclined might be given free plastic surgery to become celebrity doubles who would similarly provide pleasure to the public. Once these measures are taken, the populace will be cured of its repression and attendant mental illnesses, and “within a generation, sexual repression will cease to be a major factor as a cause for mental and physical illness, it

will become as inconsequential as the common cold.”¹⁵ The culture industry will wither and become obsolete as people begin to author their own desire.

Because his program will take time to get running, Kelley has created some handmade celebrity surrogates as an intermediate solution. He invites the “damaged and shy”¹⁶ people to leave their reliance on culturally produced fantasies and fetishism and “move forward into reality, then move on to ecstasy.”¹⁷ Thus Frankfurt school analysis is revived through Swiftian satire and delivered via the Brechtian tactics of avant-garde art and the Reichian sexolution of the 1960s.

Case Study

From the centre of *A Stopgap Measure*, a drawing of an anthropomorphized juvenile dinosaur smiles out at us as we contemplate Doctor Kelley’s diagnosis and cure. This image relates directly to the text on the verso of the poster, a case study of the illness in question. Apparently compiled from different news-service reports, the text recounts the stalking of film director Steven Spielberg by a “Homosexual ex-con”¹⁸ who fantasized about sodomizing the creator of *Jurassic Park* in front of Spielberg’s wife.

Johnathan F. Norman tried on several occasions to gain access to Spielberg’s home. When arrested, he was found in possession of duct tape, razors, handcuffs, and a diary with the names of Spielberg’s friends and family, including children. A notebook in Norman’s possession also referred to “eye masks, nipple clips, dog collars and chloroform,”¹⁹ which he intended to obtain for use in his fantasy meeting with Spielberg.

Norman’s lover, Charles Markovich, later recounted Norman’s methamphetamine flavoured delusions of being a baby *Tyrannosaurus rex* in Spielberg’s *The Lost World*. In Norman’s “lost world” nuclear family, the mommy and daddy dinos were Spielberg and, David Geffen. The baby-dino stalker believed that “Spielberg *wanted* to be raped by him” (my italics).²⁰ A black book found in Norman’s possession contained a collage of a naked young man on which had been pasted Spielberg’s head.

By providing different accounts of the incidents that led up to the stalker’s imprisonment for 25 to 40 years, Kelley invites a critical reading of the story. While it seems certain that Norman was up to nothing good, the special treatment that Spielberg received from the police and courts warrants scrutiny. An unusual degree of secrecy attended the case and the media questioned the privilege of anonymity that was initially afforded to Spielberg. While Norman was without doubt a sick man, he never actually managed to commit any assaults or make direct threats. His defense lawyer suggested psychiatric treatment was more appropriate than a life sentence in prison and questioned whether strange thoughts alone were a crime.

A sidebar on the back of Kelley’s poster contains an article from the *Sunday Telegraph* discussing the invasion of celebrity privacy by “stalkarazzi” and the move to control them through legislation. Movie stars want to enter our fantasies, but they don’t want us to share them; they would prefer that we keep them to ourselves. In *The Secret* (1999), the connection between Norman’s secret world and Kelley’s proposal is made clear by the inclusion of the poster for the saccharine animated feature *The Land Before Time VI* alongside the front and back of *A Stopgap Measure*. Are our identifications with stars really any different or any less delusional than Norman’s dino-family fantasy?

Action Figures

The surrogates Kelley has constructed for our pleasure are built from a combination of readymade and found items. Each starts with one, two, or three posters, usually for second-rate films, from which the faces have been displaced by soft pillow-like elements. “Boom boxes” play repeating snippets of sound or dialogue from the film. Each surrogate responds to a genre or related genre of film. The narrative of these films becomes secondary to the identification

between fan and star; each work is tailored for a different demographic. What was formerly enmeshed in an unfolding sequence of supposedly purposeful cause and effect is distilled down to the static or repetitive forms of totem and chant. Kelley's surrogates recall his "arenas" in which stuffed animals "interacted" on used blankets. They also invoke the *mises en scène* of the Viennese Actionists, whom Kelley has acknowledged as inspirational to his practice in general.

In *'69 Action Heroes* (1998), Jean-Claude Van Damme and Dolph Lundgren are refigured as fuck toys of quasi-Mondrian design. Padded red batons are provided for safe play fighting or insertion into the knitted orifices of the pillows or possibly into an orifice provided by the viewer/patient. Foley-art punches and hard breathing excerpted from the soundtracks of *Sudden Death* and *Men of War* rhythmically repeat their accompaniment for whatever one chooses to do.

'69 Action Heroes appears tailored for the tribe of heterosexual men who identify with Van Damme and Lundgren. While the ensemble is formally complex and harmonious, the clash of signifiers is nothing less than perverse: the hard modernism of De Stijl is invoked as "Nordic masculine," only to be emasculated by the prissy or grandmotherly knitting and *heimisch* qualities of the neatly ordered pillows. Kelley appears to follow the common wisdom that this tribe's problem is their repressed homosexual feelings. The title, the knitted orifices fitted to the mouths of Lundgren and Van Damme, and the bifurcated structure of the piece, all point to the obvious remedy — a therapeutic regression to suckling, or just plain sucking, with that best friend who understands like no woman can.

Children can have problems too, and so the ever-helpful Doctor Kelley has created *Odd Man Out* (1998) especially for them. Child stars the Olsen twins and a lesser-known boy thespian are reconstituted here as stuffed sleepover pals. The twins' movie, *How the West Was Fun*, provides the cue for the stylistic texture of this pleasure station: denim, straw cowgirl hats, and lacy frills. Just so that childhood sexuality isn't presented as too uncomplicated, the artist has "checked in" Hollywood's Dunston the Chimpanzee as a catalyst for further transgression.

"Dunsty" is parked on an appended section of fabric, his otherness resolutely problematized. The soundtrack paints him as the instigator of naughty fun. Dunston's smacking kisses and eruptive aspirant fricatives or farting "raspberries" incite the boy to moan and plead, "Stop it! Stop it!" while the girls giggle, "It would be naughty, it would be wrong, let's go for it!" and "Poo-poo, we're sorry." Children and animals are nature to adulthood's repressive culture. Their very existence is an affront to the rationalizations of the adult world. Kelley's project has always involved a strategy of willful regression to a transgressive infantilism. He has proudly recounted his adolescent interest in knitting and collecting stuffed animals as a response to his father's request that he take up a "manly" hobby.²¹

Some of the repressive forces that Kelley's infantilist strategy is aimed at are literally present in *Untitled (Priest/Yankee Zulu)* (1998). Relatively minimal in construction, the work also references minimalism with its bold and simple pairing of two posters and two blankets, one black and one white. The poster on the left depicts a beam of light shining down through stained glass on an anguished priest/actor "torn between keeping the faith and exposing the truth." The poster is for a 1994 film, entitled *Priest*, about homosexuality in the church, and Kelley has paired it with a poster for the apartheid comedy *Yankee Zulu*. The faces have been excised from only the *Yankee Zulu* poster and have not been reincorporated into the sculptural component. Four blank white Styrofoam balls placed on the white blanket instead echo the four white spots left on the poster. The balls on the white blanket threaten to form the features of a mask or face, but of an unindividuated type. In the centre of both blankets are audio speakers; while the speaker on the white blanket plays white noise, the speaker on the black blanket repeatedly sounds an excerpt of moaning and dialogue from *Priest*: "...grinning sickening evil ...faith just runs away in terror ...give it to me, big boy." Inside the gallery wall, beside the posters, a speaker emits the soundtrack from *Yankee Zulu*, which we are meant to experience as though eavesdropping on a muffled confession.

The dynamic between church, imperialism, homosexuality, and race has been played out around the globe for centuries. Here in Canada, recent cases concerning abuse in native residential schools have provided a regional version of this problematic. While Kelley is surely referencing these worldly issues, it is also possible to read the work as an allegory about modernist or formalist art praxis. Trained as a painter in the Hans Hofmann school of “push-pull” abstraction, Kelley has mythologized formalist art as a patriarchal figure in several of his works. Like the priest in the poster, he faced the choice of “keeping the faith” or “exposing the truth,” and like many artists of his generation, he chose the latter. The strategy of filling up “empty” formalist forms with social content is a hallmark of his generation of artists. Kelley’s oeuvre doesn’t derive its energy from a simple celebration of the repressed as much as the dynamic of repression itself.

Most of the surrogates include pillow forms to hug or to grope, or orifices to explore. In *Priest/Yankee Zulu*, there is only an ascetic arena for solitary activity. *Party Girl* (1998) is the only other surrogate without something to hug. It is derived from posters for the comedy *Party Girl*, featuring Parker Posey, and *Bordello of Blood*, emceed by the undead cryptkeeper. The sculptural component hangs from the ceiling, and this disposition permits the motorized construction to turn two eclipsing elements: a double-headed doll-fetish of Parker/Cryptkeeper and a disc emblazoned with an old pictorial gag. The gag describes how after six drinks the old hag transforms into a beautiful princess. This ungainly suspended machine is impossible to cuddle, and it is difficult to understand how it could function as a surrogate: are we to surmise that it is not a functioning surrogate but rather a related sculpture? It is also possible that Kelley created *Party Girl* as a surrogate for those who prefer an aloof or hard-to-get object of desire. But this would be promoting precisely the dynamics of unfulfilled desire that Kelley’s manifesto decries and his surrogates propose to remedy. Here a literal reading of Kelley’s program breaks down into perverse irony.

Timmy the Tooth (1998) hybridizes a children’s film by the same name and the sci-fi/horror flick *Tremors*. *Tremors* is about strangely befanged giant worms that hunt down and devour people. This station plays on anxiety about decay and fear of the body’s insides. Timmy has been removed from his poster and is perched on top of a crimson-trimmed white tent. He sports a red beret, signifier of things French and romantic. The entrance to the tent is through a red-rimmed hole. The hole has been made to be as perfectly hole-like as possible.

Inside, all warm and red, plush pillows and a kitschy “Mediterranean” lamp provide the atmosphere of an oriental harem. The soundtrack plays Timmy saying “Look at the size of that hole... the hole doesn’t want to rot ... let’s fill it with something else.” The chthonic vibrations of the *Tremors* worms emanate from a speaker that has been covered with a poster detail of a worm’s gaping pie hole, chock-full of razor-sharp teeth. The *vagina dentata* has become a staple monster for movies aimed at an adolescent male demographic. Castration anxiety is big box office: the artist H.R. Giger and director David Cronenberg have made fortunes from skinning the body, turning it inside out, dismembering it, or penetrating it in the wrong places.

Boys who love *Aliens* would love Timmy’s sexy/scary cavity. The reference to Mario Merz’s Arte Povera igloos might draw in art lovers as well. Kelley again takes the form of a canonical art style and subverts it by filling it with content that it wasn’t designed to hold. At the same time as it made a deliberate show of employing low materials, Arte Povera’s historical materialism also neglected to acknowledge low culture. Where it once appeared startling and rough edged, today Arte Povera’s tasteful Franciscan poetic appears almost aristocratic or sacral. Kelley, of course, has no fear of low culture and has stated that he avoids thinking in terms of a high/low scheme because it supports a static structure. He is instead interested in repression and the active tension it causes.

Academic

Kelley and Miller are readily referred to as avant-garde or neo-avant-garde artists. To be sure, their work is provocative: it is designed to provoke a reaction rather than reproduce comfortable beliefs. However, if we want to identify their work as avant-garde, we need a definition of the term. The only reasonably articulated definition available is the one formulated by Peter Bürger in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.²² Bürger proposes that the aim of the classic avant-garde was nothing less than the destruction of the separation of art and life. Early 20th century avant-garde idealistically and seriously pursued this goal. Working in sync or at least in context with an actual revolution, the Russian productivists actually succeeded. The role of art as an autonomous activity was effectively eliminated, and artists became worker/soldiers for the revolution — whether they had second thoughts or not.

The Dadaists and Surrealists also called for the destruction of autonomous art but could not achieve it outside the context of a total revolution. It has become apparent that to do so is probably impossible, just as it has become apparent that localized revolutions have little or no chance of succeeding within a larger world that is still unchanged. Artists in the capitalist world have instead come to realize that the merging of art and life may come to them through the absorption of art into the “entertainment and information” industry. Clement Greenberg foresaw this situation in 1939 when he wrote, “Here as in every other question today, it becomes necessary to quote Marx word for word. Today we no longer look toward socialism for a new culture – as inevitably one will appear, once we do have socialism. Today we look to socialism *simply* for the preservation of whatever living culture we have right now.”²³

To be avant-garde in Bürger’s sense would make no sense today. If in the 19th century the academy was the force of reaction, today it is the preserve of the progressive. Contemporary artists usually identified as avant-garde are in actual fact part of a new, *critical* academy. Here it might be pertinent to remember that both Kelley and Miller are teachers in real academies. That the academy is no longer identified with the legitimation of power and the social order is due to the fact that the real politics of capitalism long ago passed by the academy as unnecessary or obsolete for its purposes.

Insolent Dogs

Between the two of them, Kelley and Miller have incurred a host of colourful adjectives and labels by which we might name their position and practice. Kelley’s thespian talents in particular have generated various misfit characters that make his anti-hierarchical intentions clear. By comparison, Miller’s intentionally flat-footed Protestant aesthetic economy and less visible persona haven’t earned him the same number of tags. Yet the law of association allows us to tar them with the same brush, and along with several other artists they have become the representatives of “abject art.”

It might then appear ironic to invoke a classical reference like Diogenes in speaking of Kelley and Miller, but, following Hal Foster, I believe it to be most appropriate and useful.²⁴ Kelley himself has invoked the image of a “naughty doggy,” but I think both Kelley and Miller are far closer to the sort of insolent dog that the Greeks had in mind when they called Diogenes “The Dog — a Socrates gone mad.”

In his *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Peter Sloterdijk identifies Diogenes as the origin of the *kynical* impulse.²⁵ This he opposes to contemporary cynicism:

*Cynicism is enlightened false consciousness. It is that modernized unhappy consciousness, on which enlightenment has laboured both successfully and in vain. It has learned its lessons in enlightenment, but it has not, and probably was not able to, put them into practice. Well-off and miserable at the same time, this consciousness no longer feels affected by any critique of ideology; its falseness is already reflexively buffered.*²⁶

In contrast, cynicism is a “lost cheekiness” that Sloterdijk spends half his book articulating and tracing through history. Cynicism’s enemy is the idealism that supports hierarchical order and power:

Ancient cynicism begins the process of “naked arguments” from the opposition, carried by the power that comes from below. The cynic farts, shits, pisses, and masturbates on the street, before the eyes of the Athenian market. He shows contempt for fame, ridicules the architecture, refuses respect, parodies the stories of gods and heroes, eats raw meat and vegetables, lies in the sun, fools around with the whores and says to Alexander the Great that he should get out of his sun.²⁷

Sloterdijk asserts that Diogenes’ base theatrics are directed against Socrates’ dialectic. Diogenes cannot enter into a dialogue with Socrates because conversation itself “presupposes something like an idealist agreement.”²⁸

The idealistic rhetoric of traditional political ideologies is likewise useless to Kelley and Miller, not because it doesn’t contain any truth, but because of how it is said. Today we are well aware that a few good jokes on a late-night talk show can do more to hurt a political candidate’s prospects than a large demonstration or organized political campaign. Likewise, a popular song can affect public consciousness more powerfully than a masterpiece of literature or philosophy. Such popular media are out of reach for artists, and the compromises involved in accessing them are not worthwhile. The expressions of Kelley and Miller certainly have political content, but this content is for now best expressed in the remarkable, cheeky, hybrid forms they have developed.

While Kelley invokes the rhetoric of revolution in his pseudo-activist poster, he only reasserts the obsolescence of that type of rhetoric. From a certain, idealistic political position, art can be seen as placation, a distracting bone or consolation prize tossed down from above. If this is so, then Kelley and Miller have decided not to despair but to make the most of the situation. As Kelley has stated,

It’s always a bit embarrassing to be a professional artist and to do sort of confrontational work and to know you’re basically like a neutered doggy. Everything you do is fine and dandy. But at the same time, because I believe art is a symbolic act, it still has an effect on an ideological level. And that’s why I’m not totally depressed about art production. In fact, I think it’s important that it operates in the intellectual sphere. It isn’t just about brute force and slitting each other’s throat. That’s what politics are.²⁹

Footnotes

1. Guy Davenport, *Herakleitos and Diogenes*, Translated from the Greek by Guy Davenport (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1976), p. 56.
2. Georges Bataille, "The Lugubrious Game," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927–1939*, ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 27.
3. Georges Bataille, "The 'Old Mole' and the Prefix Sur in the Words Surhomme [Superman] and Surrealism," *ibid.*, p. 32.
4. Dawn Ades, *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978), p. 229.
5. John Miller, "The Fig Leaf Was Brown," *Economies Parallèles/ Parallel Economies* (Grenoble: Le Magasin-Centre d'Art Contemporain, 1999), p. 9.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
9. Walter Benjamin, cited in Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), p. 101.
10. The fashion business's attempt to appropriate the anti-fashion of street "Grunge" in the early 1990s backfired terribly or wonderfully. Designers recuperated from their miscalculation with a "return to glamour."
11. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
13. See Marcel Mauss, *The Gift* (New York: Norton Library, 1967).
14. Mike Kelley, *A Stopgap Measure* (poster), (Santa Monica: Patrick Painter Inc., 1999).
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. Mike Kelley, "Some Aesthetic High Points," in Mike Kelley (New York: Art Resources Transfer, 1992), p. 54.
22. See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
23. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review*, Vol. 6, No. 5 (New York, 1939).
24. See Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996).
25. See Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
26. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
29. Mike Kelley and Thomas Kellein, *A Conversation* (Stuttgart: Cantz Verlag, 1994), p. 39.

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