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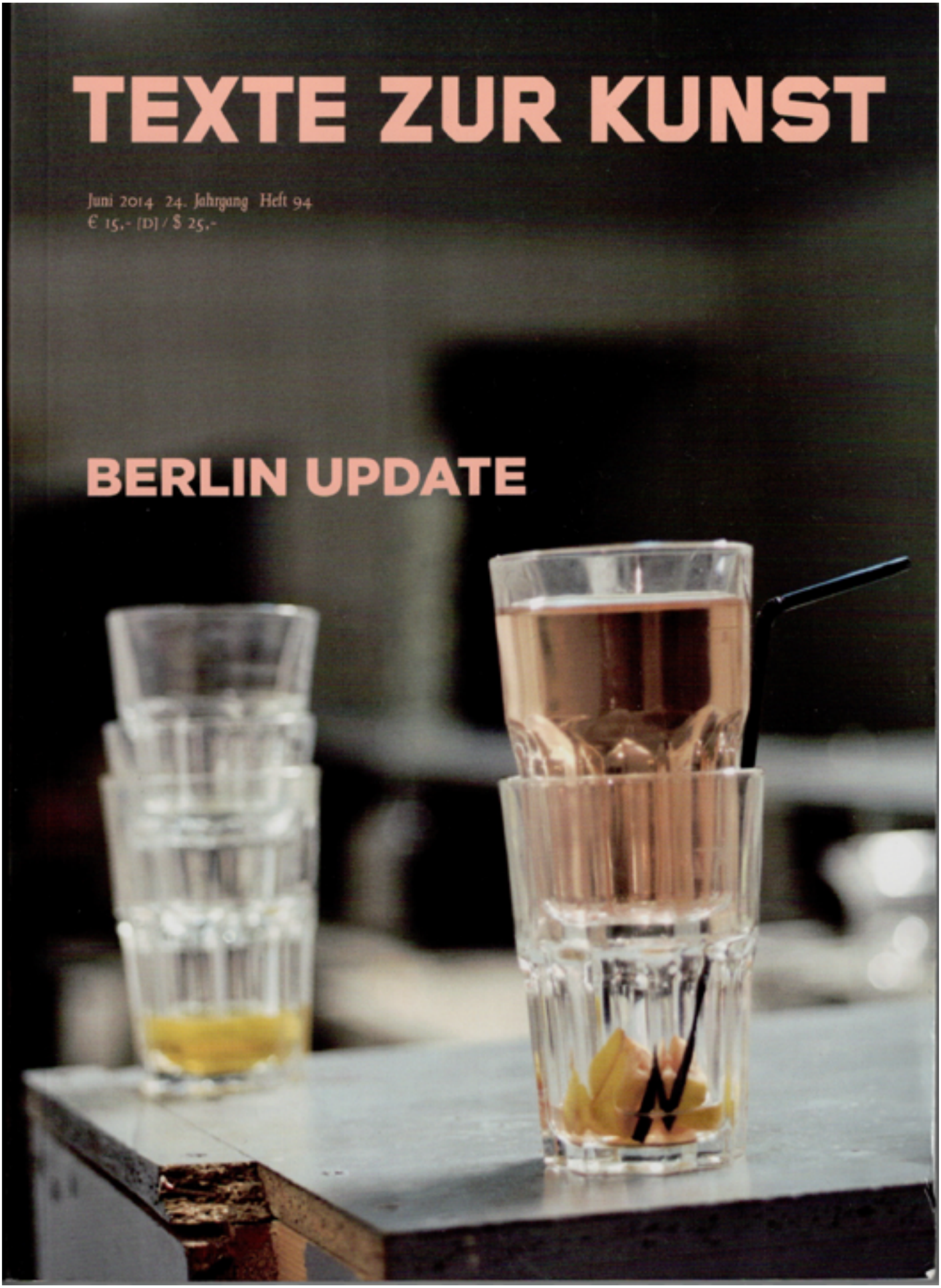

THE COSTLINESS OF OUR ATTACHMENTS

On "Bad Conscience" at Metro Pictures, New York

"Bad Conscience", Metro Pictures, New York, 2014, installation view

Our usual targets for identification are not guilt, shame and other affects provoked when the social reprimands the subject. But what if this is what the art on view calls for? And how do these affects relate to the great policing machine that the representational apparatus in art and its institutions might amount to, from the individual works to the entire palette of exclusionary mechanisms, from the historical salon to today's gallery exhibitions?

Piper Marshall traces the affective, institutional and aesthetic strategies put to work in a show curated by John Miller.

The salon is the last monarchic form: An exclusionary apparatus that addresses bourgeois subjects through representation, the pivot point by which the academy, a mechanism of the state, bequeathed its power to the gallery as a distributor of art. Harrison and Cynthia White have argued in their seminal sociological study that this is the transformation whereby the institution became individualized – privileging not canvases but the individual careers of artists, dealers, and critics, an argument in this day and age that we could broaden to curators of exhibitions.[1] When speculation (and oil profits, with or without canvas) most certainly drive the market and its politics, it is appropriate to revisit the *Salon des Refusés*,

and the moment when the monarchy shifted toward a democratic and capitalist model that would eventually yield to the culture industry.

For his exhibition "Bad Conscience", John Miller deployed the mode of the salon, the power and social dynamics between individual and group, and applied it as curatorial form and conceit. Miller's show addressed the difficult process of representation and likened it to the disturbing feeling that comes as the result of poor behavior. The analogy implied by Miller returns us to the Impressionist maxim "no jury, no recompense"; poor behavior prompting both the demand for reparation as well as eventual discomfort, perhaps even shame. "Bad Conscience" seemed to unpack the surveillance order of such punishment and in doing so teased out the posturing of conscience, a dictum of civilization against the bad, the residue of human barbarism, as revealed and obfuscated by representation.

"Bad Conscience" was installed at Metro Pictures, a gallery founded in 1980 by Janelle Reiring and Helene Winer. The partnership matched the private, market sector with public institutional

Leigh Ledare, "Clementine", 2013

training. Reiring was groomed at Leo Castelli Gallery (1975–1980), while Winer served as director of Artists Space (1975–1980) and director/curator at Pomona College Arts Gallery (1970–1972). These proprietors' experience and personality is reflected in the gallery roster, which bridges the East and West coasts and offers a platform both to the Pictures Generation (Louise Lawler, Cindy Sherman, and Robert Longo) as well as to the progeny of CalArts (Mike Kelley, John Miller, Jim Shaw). Metro Pictures grew alongside its artists and came to perform as a metonymy, affiliated with and even coming to represent particular theoretical concerns: Namely the self-consciousness of a group of artists who liberated themselves from Conceptual Art's moratorium on images in order to address the spectacle in their own terms. They became an institution, filling in the gaps that the academy, like CalArts, had exposed.[2] In recent years, Reiring and Winer satisfied the demand to keep up with the times, allocating it to the summer group show organized by either an outside curator or younger gallery staff; however, most recently they extended the responsibility to gallery artist John Miller, and did so at the peak of winter, in advance of the art-market calendar's high spring season.

Miller is a polymath: An artist, critic, professor, and musician. Through these activities he is in regular dialogue with both younger and older artists. Through his important capacity as an academic professor – practicing and teaching art criticism, mentoring emerging artists and art historians – he has generated a genealogy, a group of colleagues that cut across age groups and who form a particular community, of which I have been a member by virtue of being a student of Miller at Barnard College and later as a colleague. Inherent to our conversation is the problem of representation, not necessarily what the image or object presented reveals, but the social implications and obligations of exchange – emotional, social, and hierarchical – suggested and often concealed by the representational artwork. What arises is an inherent paradox within representational work, which Craig Owens suggests is unearthed by the philosophical questioning of Michel Foucault and Louis Marin. Owens suggests Foucault and Marin as thinkers who "investigate representation not simply as a process of differentiation, exclusion, incorporation, and rule" but also "work to expose the ways in which domination and subjugation are inscribed within the representational systems of the West."[3] "Bad Conscience" continues this line of thought demonstrating the potential for the representational artwork to obfuscate the conditions of social and hierarchical representation. The exhibition legitimizes the conversation by privileging the social implications and entanglements of exchange.

In the first room hung Lyle Ashton Harris's "Untitled (Yellow Grid)" (2014) a work of pigment on linen that depicts an uncrumpled and torn Post-it note listing do's and don'ts: No unsafe sex, no public sex, no sex for the first time, as well as the command for "more yoga" written in smaller letters, and the restriction on sex clubs decidedly stricken through; cursory formal analyses reveal the artist's moral leanings or lack thereof. Marilyn Minter's oil on canvas of plywood against a linoleum floor hung near Aura Rosenberg's photograph of a painter's palette replete with grey muted pigments. Opposite this were palliatives, paintings by Walter Robinson of liquor bottles lined up as in "Johnny" (2013); an early work painting by Greg Parma Smith of an aloe

vera plant "Second Chance 2" (2008); as well as Leigh Ledare's photographs documenting a room jam-packed with clothing that had been hoarded by his mother Tina Peterson ("Living Room # 1, 2, and 3", 2004). Built as an impediment to the entryway of the next room was a freestanding wall on which Wangechi Mutu's video "Shoe Shoe" (2010) was projected. The work shows a woman who repeatedly throws footwear at the camera lens. This homage to the reporter who tossed one at former president George W. Bush in 2008 at a Baghdad press conference both invoked and enforced social remorse and public punishment. As did Matthew Watson's "Letters to Ezmerelda" (2012), a pamphlet that culled together correspondence with a former female patron. The bound booklet detailed her woes and demands for attention and was presented for the public to read on top of a Josef Hoffmann coffee table. Watson borrowed this makeshift pedestal from another patron; a gesture that demonstrates just how value can be secured (proximity) and is linked to social process (favor).

Miller's opening presented depictions of virtue alongside vice: Painter's pigments with alcohol, bunny rabbits across from a clotheshorse's closet. Anything but naïve, the juxtaposition alludes to a push and pull, the strain and struggle of the demand for labor as suggested by the technical materials of production on the one hand, and the palliatives that momentarily alleviate such stress on the other. One could say the codes and support are those actions that cycle between the perceived divide of civilization and barbarism and are induced by the self and played out within the exhibition, whereby the socially punitive action is anticipated, expected, and even welcomed in advance by the artist. Miller's presentation, however, cleaves vice from the creative act, leaving any potential sublimation hanging in the balance.

While the room induced an emotional and physical hangover and I left it feeling panic, emptiness, guilt, and a temporary body ache that I feared could end in the eventual cardiac arrest; I ended up instead in a chronic uneasiness and with a question that remained unanswered: If "Bad Conscience" is both socially prescribed and self-induced, why do we anticipate and even command such pain? The question is perhaps best answered in the recent work of Lauren Berlant, whose text "Cruel Optimism" theorizes our attachment to things before possessing them, how our desire extends to the larger cluster of promises calcified in that particular thing, be it person, object, institution, or even idea. Miller masterfully plays out this logic with the chosen artworks and demonstrates the mechanism of how, in Berlant's words: "One makes affective bargains about the costliness of one's attachments, usually unconscious ones, most of which keep one in proximity to the scene of desire or attrition."[6]

While the first room of the exhibition argued for the complexities of self-abuse and our endurance with and attraction toward objects as a tool to induce it, the second room demonstrated the loss and dissolution of the body under the pressure of capital and production. Here the body was on loan: Prostituted, pimped, and almost always pornographic, as in a photographic portrait of a lingerie-clad and splayed-legged Tina Peterson ("Clementine", 2013). Her son Leigh Ledare had taken the photo and instructed children to draw on its surface. This hung next to a photographic portrait of Carmen Miller, whose mustached face, pose, and provocation had been styled by Ledare and snapped by Miller's mother Aura

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Rosenberg; juxtaposed with Rosenberg's photograph of Lena Dunham dressed by her mom, Laurie Simmons, as a puppet; and Dan Graham's uncharacteristically cruel "Woman in Antwerp Zoo" (2001/2003), an androgynous and obese figure clutching a soft drink. Collectively the artworks unfolded a series of artistic relationships, and the link to self-representation – how body and desire are almost always constructed through instrumentalization and abuse. This continued with Matthew Watson's painted portrayal of his professor Nicolás Guagnini lording in front of a painting by Jutta Koether (a frequent collaborator of Miller's, former lecturer at Columbia, and frequent contributor and advisory board member to *Texte zur Kunst*). And extended to how those very professors contend with the body in concurrent disparate groups of work, as is the case with Guagnini, whose work is accounted for by five discrete projects in the exhibition, yet whose name is omitted from the press release. Of the Guagnini works, most disturbing were photographs of sociopathic Romanesque busts without noses ("Heads 2" and "Heads 4"), which were presented next to his ceramics; figures comprised of all body and no face, constructed solely of

noses held together by twisted dicks, crafted by hand, baked and glazed in black. Titled "Aby" and "Meyer", Guagnini's sculptures give in to Miller's game and pull it backwards, referencing the *cause célèbre* of the Department of Art History and Archeology at Columbia University, professor Meyer Schapiro, and his overseas colleague Aby Warburg.

Labor time and leisure time result not only in alienation but in the subject rendered as pure effect in spectacular conditions. Ledare's photographs and alterations of them cash in and potentially bankrupt his mother's desire; Rosenberg's in turn are the predecessor; works that offer up children as a potential site of parental transgression. This culminates in Guagnini's speculation about the physiognomic growth and atrophy in his "anthropological" photographic series "Mothers and Daughters". The artworks brought together here are brutal, relentless in their appeal to the ruin, gainfully neglecting the logic of progress and transcendence. Rather, the exhibition casts doubt and induces anxiety. No longer can we locate the subject on the body in question. The body ceases to function as the subject's natural locus, and it is substituted with clothing, alcohol, history, the mother. Here the body, like all the works on view, is on consignment. This quality is imbued in the viewer. We too are on loan and doomed to shit.

Mirroring this sentiment, the third room's entrance and walls were painted a familiar fecal brown, a color synonymous with Miller's sculptural work. The loss of the body and the return of the artist-cum-curator's signature color invoked the writings of Kathy Acker, who articulates the complications of critique within a patriarchal order, specifically as it is compromised by Cartesian Dualism and the perceived mind/body divide. In "Critical Language", Acker gets to the core of "Bad Conscience": "In a labyrinth, reason is useless, lost. In the labyrinth, remember Borges's labyrinths, the self becomes lost. In the labyrinth, paths, ways of knowing, seem subject to chance … When the colon or the labyrinth is center, our center, we, human, learn how little, if anything, we know and can know. Since the law presupposes knowledge, we learn to distrust the law. A colon's end is shit. Not transcendence, but waste."[5]

PIPER MARSHALL

"Bad Conscience", organized by John Miller, Metro Pictures, New York, January 16–February 22, 2014.

Notes

1 Harrison C. White/Cynthia A. White, "A New System Emerges", in: Canvases and Careers. Institutional Change in the French Painting World, Chicago 1993, pp. 98–99.

2 This is the same exact phrasing White and White use when discussing the "dealer-critic" system, in: Canvases and Careers. Institutional Change in the French Painting World, Chicago 1993, pp. 157–158.

3 Craig Owens, "Representation, Appropriation, and Power", in: Beyond Recognition Representation, Power, and Culture, ed. by Scott Bryson/Barbara Kruger/Lynne Tillman/Jane Weinstock, Los Angeles 1994, p. 91.

4 Lauren Berlant, "Cruel Optimism", in: The Affect Theory Reader, ed. by Melissa Gregg/Gregory J. Seigworth, Durham 2010, p. 96.

5 Kathy Acker, "Critical Language", in: Bodies of Work, London 1997, p. 91.