ARTFORUM

WORKING WEEKEND: THE ART OF DAVE MULLER

By Ralph Rugoff
Print Edition May 2001

AVANT-GARDISTS USED TO HOLD THEIR AUDIENCES in contempt, but today times are friendlier. Over the last decade, a growing number of contemporary artists have assumed the well-meaning demeanor of attentive service providers. Instead of trying to offend the public, they build funhouse slides and playgrounds in museums and hold late-night DJ events. They cook meals for their once despised spectators and transform inhospitably austere gallery spaces into welcoming lounge areas. In a climate of diminished cultural expectations, these artists seem to insist that, if nothing else, art should at least offer a good time.

Los Angeles-based artist Dave Muller has often been lumped in with this feel-good crew on account of his "Three Day Weekends"—convivial exhibition-events, generally held over holiday weekends, which he began organizing in 1994 in his downtown loft (he has since held "Three Day Weekends" in Tokyo, Berlin, Vienna, London, Houston, and even at the Gagosian Gallery in Beverly Hills). For those in search of a kinder, gentler art world, the novelty of an artist whose self-effacing practice includes providing exhibition opportunities for his colleagues is no doubt appealing. Muller's affable public profile is further enhanced by his parallel activity of producing drawings and watercolors that look like homemade posters for shows of his peers' work. His entire enterprise—or so it seems at first glance-revolves around a selfless admiration for art created by others (even to the extent of his providing drawings, for one group show, depicting the work of each participating artist).

But Muller's project is far more curious and provocative than those pursued by contemporary art's service sector. It rises above its own altruistic impulses, as it were, and raises questions about the complex relationship between artmaking and generosity. Laced with sly reversals and slippery humor, his work engages the myriad ways in which artistic identity is mediated by the rhetoric of publicity, a process that involves enough territorial trespassing and code scrambling to keep us in a state of critical bemusement. Muller, for instance, could be ungenerously accused of using the promotion of others as a vehicle for his own career.

With slogans borrowed from *Beavis and Butt-Head* ("This show sucks!" "Yeah, change it!"), Muller's "Three Day Weekends" exude a postpunk DIY attitude. They also embody a style of exhibition-making formulated around goodwill and empathy: Muller typically teams up with friends and colleagues who he feels are willing to take risks in response to offbeat curatorial parameters. For "Software '99," held at The Suburban in Oak Park, Illinois, he invited contributors to describe pieces for him to fabricate, including a wind chime for Mungo Thompson and a table, in John Wesley pink, for Muller's own LA gallery, Blum & Poe. For "Thanks," a 1994 show in his loft that looked at relationships between collectors and artists, he asked participants such as Sam Durant and Jory Felice to list coveted items—e.g., Pavement's oeuvre on vinyl—for which they would trade their exhibited works.

Muller's boundary-surfing enterprise generates such questions as a matter of course. This is a characteristic not only of his "Three Day Weekends," but also of his peculiarly engaging works on paper. Stylishly composed and visually alluring, these poster-size drawings often feature details of another artist's work—a chandelier from an Andrea Bowers installation, for instance—as well as practical information about related exhibitions, down to the specific dates, addresses, and showroom phone numbers. Unlike, say, Simon Linke's late '80s paintings of *Artforum* gallery announcements, Muller's works could serve as actual advertisements; indeed, he used to truck them around to galleries in LA, and, with permission, pin them on doors and desks, alerting dealers that they could also be considered objects for sale in their own right.

While their functionality jeopardizes their status as art, the drawings' homemade appearance—their uneven washes of color and sinuously drawn texts—effectively denatures the machine-made look of gallery advertising. The resulting identity confusion—are they ads that look like artworks or vice versa?—intriguingly destabilizes the status of Muller's endeavor. This note of uncertainty is echoed in

the drawings' hybrid aesthetic. They are executed in combinations of pencil, ink, watercolor, and acrylics in the styles of technical drawings, astronomy charts, and natural-history illustrations from the '50s—modes of rendering, in other words, that suggest something copied from photographs yet remain just distant enough from mechanical reproduction to evoke a space between fact and fiction.

Muller's drawings also seemingly conflate identifiable periods of art history, particularly when he uses nostalgic images (like Norman Rockwell cheerleaders) in works advertising contemporary shows. And like unofficial commemorative stamps, each of these drawings poignantly marks the passing of time by preserving a slice of the endless promotional flotsam that flows through the mail each month, destined for the trash can.

Rather than simply depict examples of existing artwork, a few recent drawings feature what appear to be extensions of another artist's ongoing project. (Paired illustrations of Lynyrd Skynyrd-brand cigarette packs, for instance, could easily be unrealized pieces by Muller's friend Durant.) This is not to suggest that Muller is practicing a preemptive form of appropriation art; instead, his approach seems to grow out of his sense of our culture's visual operating systems as being a kind of shareware. Nourished, perhaps, by his "Three Day Weekend" experiments, his artwork reflects a sense that the sphere of influence of ideas and images cannot, finally, be delimited by copyright.

Though generally boosterish in tone, Muller's work is not without a critical edge. "Supergraphic," 1999, which consists of ten colorful drawings (two of which depict *Artforum* and *Wallpaper* logos, respectively, while another features a psychedelic VW Bug), gently indicts the '90s revival of Color Field painting as a nostalgic exercise by linking it to consumerist passions for all things retro. Another's caption—"Have two pieces by Jorge Pardo from 1995, will trade for work by André Cadere"—mischievously calls for a critical devaulation of Pardo's much-hyped work.

Cadere, the Romanian conceptualist who gained notoriety in the '70s for carrying his signature sculptures—bars of wood—into shows by other artists and unofficially displaying them, is a Muller artistic hero (and a partial subject of one of his recent exhibitions). Cadere was exposing the official definition of what counts as an exhibition. Muller likewise mixes up the tribal hand signs and insider signals of the art world with a lightness that invites us to surrender our grip on what we already know. And as his work enlarges its field of reference, its zigzagging logic forges an

expanding universe of unexpected connections. His recent show “Spatial,” for example, included a diagram of Kepler’s laws of motion and a drawing reproducing Jimmy Carter’s account of a UFO sighting.

As a college radio DJ, Muller sometimes played two records simultaneously. His current multitasking enterprise asks us to do something similar: to glimpse what the world might be like if we could regularly entertain two thoughts about a single subject. In that way we might be able to see that while every successful work of art is an advertisement for an individual’s skills and ideas, it is also an act of generosity, a sharing of the artist’s self in a form that is useful or enjoyable to others. And as Muller’s amorphous practice suggests, contemporary art can enable one not only to connect to a community but to reimagine our ideas about what community can be. Seen in the convex mirror of Muller’s wayward vision, even the art world looks like it could turn out to be a pretty big place.

—Ralph Rugoff is director of the CCAC Institute in Oakland, CA.


THE ART OF DAVE MULLER
This page: "Five x Five (x Five) (With Margins): A Three Day Weekend Event," installation view, Gagosian Gallery, Los Angeles, 1999. Left to right: works by David Hughes, Elizabeth Saveri, Joy Feece, Robert Grosser, Edward Ruscha, Chris Burden, and Kristen Calabrese. Opposite page: Dave Muller, Trade7, 2000, acrylic on paper, 40" x 32".
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RALPH RUGOFF

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Muller's role in these short-lived exhibitions inevitably stirs the murky waters of authorial-designation debates. Is he acting as hands-on curator or as artist collaborating with other artists? Is he a low-key Situationist host, orchestrating ephemeral Happenings, or a part-time dealer? (Muller does, after all, sometimes receive a small commission for works that sell at his shows.)

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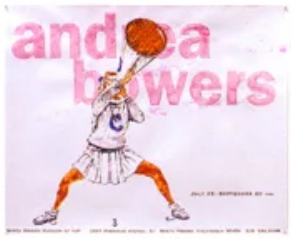

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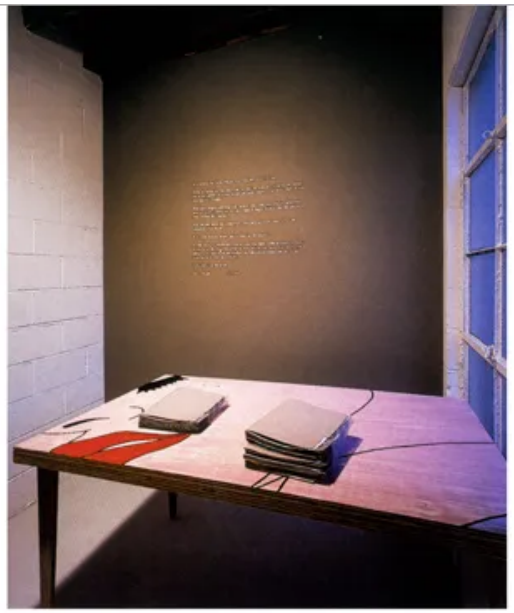

Opposite page, left to right: **Dave Muller, *Sports Illustrated (After Rockwell)*, 1998,** number three of eight drawings, pencil and acrylic on paper, 32 x 40". **Dave Muller, *Stamps of the '70s*, 1999,** pencil and acrylic on paper, 32 x 40". This page, clockwise from top left: **Dave Muller, *Supergraphic*, 1999,** pencil and acrylic on ten sheets of paper, each 32 x 40" or 40 x 32". **"Software '99."** Installation view, The Suburban, Oak Park, Illinois, 1999. Work by Sam Durant and Gaylen Gerber with catalogues in foreground. **Dave Muller, *Spatial*, 2000,** acrylic on paper, dimensions variable. Installation view, Murray Guy Gallery, New York, 2000. **Dave Muller, *Monochrome #3*, 1998,** pencil and acrylic on paper, 50 x 38".