

Miller, John.
"Tom Friedman"
Index.
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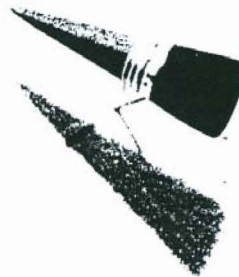
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tom friedman

WITH JOHN MILLER



Untitled, 1995,
plastic, hair, fuzz,
play-doh, wire, paint.



Untitled, 1996,
wood, paint.



Untitled, 1993-94,
aspirin.

JM: Your work sometimes reminds me of a book I grew up with: *Fun With Next To Nothing*. It told you things like how to make an airplane out of popsicle sticks or a wall plaque out of bottle caps.

TF: Well, that's not surprising. I like it to have a sense of being at home.

JM: Why "home?"

TF: I like the connection to everyday materials, things just sitting around the house. For me, home just means "being yourself." You don't have to go outside to know more; you already have everything you need. I don't think of learning as an additive process. Instead, your mind rearranges itself in certain ways. It's interesting to think that all the potential knowledge is already there.

JM: That sounds a little bit like Noam Chomsky's "speech organ," the idea that because language is so complex it couldn't have possibly been a human invention. The speech organ implies that the capacity for language is hard-wired into people and not so much the result of a social process.

TF: I see language as something building on a complex series of reference points. In terms of artwork, no matter what you look at or what you have, the complexity of that experience is the same. Do you know the story about the child who never said anything? Finally, one day when he

was sitting at the dinner table, he said, "Please pass the salt." And his mother said, "How come you haven't talked in all these years, and now you have finally said something?" And he said, "Well, things aren't perfect anymore," or something like that. "Once the need starts to make things easier and better, you know, it never ends.

JM: There's something of that in Doug Heubler's statement that the world is already filled with objects and that, as an artist, he prefers not to add any more. But there's part of me that says that the world is filled with junk and there's no way of getting around it. You just have to wade through it and you can't help adding to it. Even "dematerialized" conceptual pieces ended up generating reams of documentation and commentary. Now, when Heubler talks about his work, someone inevitably will say, "But you said you didn't want to add any more stuff to the world." And he'll say, "I know. I know. I'm sorry I ever said that." [laughter] Anyway, I don't know which is the more realistic approach.

TF: I think it's like anything else; there are a lot of ways of approaching it, and one is through the desire for simplicity; another is through the desire for complexity and chaos. There's something

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Then, of course, there's your speck of shit versus his can.

TF: What I know of his work seems to emanate from thoughts about his self in relation to ... the world, I guess.

JM: Yeah, but also in relation to the readymade. His pedestal claims the earth as a readymade and the canned shit claims the results of an involuntary, physiological process. In your work, everything you start out with remains the same. The spaghetti is still spaghetti, the pins are still pins, the map is still a map ...

TF: I try to establish a logical connection between what a material is, how it is transformed and what it becomes. It retains its identity, but as symbolic material. It becomes symbolic because you are looking at it.

JM: Does the scale and fragility of your work ever create storage or transportation problems? Take your bubblegum piece, for instance.

TF: The bubblegum just goes in a box and that's it.

JM: The one that stretches from floor to ceiling?

TF: Oh, that one. I thought you were talking about the bubblegum. [laughter]. Yes, a very long box!

JM: So you just make it again every time.

TF: Well, I've only shown it twice. Once at Feature, and then once in a show curated by Ivan Moscowitz. And he installed it.

JM: Oh really? He must have had a lot of patience.

TF: I had very specific instructions. They had to be incredibly detailed. Well, not incredibly detailed but ... you know, second by second. The first thing was that I had to figure out a way of making it more predictable. I found this stuff called Friendly Plastic and I mixed a small amount of that into the bubblegum. It made the mixture slightly harder when it was stretched, and so it wouldn't sag - which is something I was concerned about. But the Friendly Plastic actually complicated the installation because you have to boil it, then you have to wait exactly the right amount of time for it to cool off before you stick it on the ceiling and stretch it to the floor. So when it came down to shipping, it all just went into a small box, a slide box. Other things just get thrown away, like the piece I did with laundry detergent. That just got swept up. The toothpaste - I did a piece with toothpaste on a wall - that just gets scraped off and thrown away.

JM: So a collector ends up purchasing instructions?

TF: Yes - and a lifetime supply of bubblegum. [laughter].

JM: If something runs out, do you resupply them?

TF: Right. I have to purchase stuff in bulk because I've had trouble with things going out of stock.

JM: It's funny, you always think generic stuff will be around forever. I've heard that the kind of fluorescent tubes Dan Flavin uses are supposed to be going out of production, so that he's had to purchase crates of them.

TF: That's happened to me in the course of working on a single piece - which sometimes takes several years.

JM: What about things getting damaged in shipment?

TF: I've been lucky. I also have to strategize about the type of crate I'll use and so on.

JM: Louise Lawler should do a photo of one of your pieces in storage. Wouldn't it be great to have your tiny ball of excrement waiting in the wings, unnoticed?

TF: There was a photo sent to me from a gallery where that piece was being shown. They had to put a plastic cup over the shit because a fly was buzzing around it.

JM: I guess it must have still been big enough for a fly to get something out of it [laughter]. It would be great to have a photo of just the fly buzzing over the pedestal.

TF: Well, a fly could take it and fly off with it, I think.

JM: Oh really? [laughter]

TF: Yes.

JM: If you were to construct an interview like one of your pieces, how would you do it?

TF: I would ask ten questions. I would try to find something out about the person I interviewed, but not ask too much.

JM: I'd expected you to boil it down to one exchange:

"How are you?"

"O.K."

TF: I'd considered that but it seemed too obvious. I'd want to get a sense of the person's sense of absurdity ... maybe reasons for living. I don't know. Maybe I would ask them to draw a diagram. Things like that. The written word is always so absolute. It's potentially so defining and limiting.

JM: Writing always becomes absolute. I have to confess it's sometimes a reason I enjoy reading. But it's intriguing that you would want to preserve some sense of sanctity or privacy of the person being interviewed. That runs counter to the usual "telling all."

TF: Yes. That's an absurd sort of endeavor. I just find it dangerous. I don't know.