

MOCA FOCUS

**STERLING RUBY  
SUPERMAX 2008**

Organized by

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**The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles**

STERLING RUBY:  
ANALYTICAL EXPRESSIONISMS  
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## LIFE AND BLOOD

Upside down and pulling a shotgun tightly toward herself, a bare-breasted Wendy O. Williams stares lasciviously from her place on a commercial poster hung bottoms-up; nearby, on an exhibition poster featuring a work by Hermann Nitsch, blood appears to stream up towards the ceiling. Tacked to the wall of Sterling Ruby's studio, high above the heads of the artist and his numerous assistants, this arrangement recalls the portraits of dictators that hang over entrances to government buildings, as well as the commercial posters and calendars that adorn auto repair shops. The relationship of these two visualizations of the corporeal—their random encounter on the dusty studio wall and the fact that both the upside-down woman and the blood are no longer subject to the law of gravity—lifts them into a symbolic sphere, though the pairing was not conceived as art.

The dialectical yet constellatory arrangement of these posters may be viewed as a kind of leitmotif that runs through nearly all of Ruby's extremely diverse production, which ranges from performative, narrative, and non-performative videos to ceramics, sculptures, installations, drawings, collages, and photographs. The totality of his oeuvre forms a cosmos that spans the poles of expression and repression.<sup>1</sup> This apparent dichotomy distantly recalls the production of Mike Kelley, Ruby's mentor at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, whose work has notably been described as an "art of repression."<sup>2</sup> However, instead of investing in repression as a psychoanalytic or philosophical entity *per se*, Ruby chooses to locate it in relation to the notion of expression. Unlike late-modernist binaries, which were ultimately based on aesthetic formalist criteria, Ruby's "dialectical constellations" are underscored by a sense that one always has to do with the other: blood with the body, fluids with sexuality, and death with life.

As a wide variety of media and processes have overlapped in his work from the outset, so this text will follow—in analogy to the 2007 poster he designed in the Situationist manner that declares "Finish Architecture, Kill Minimalism, Long Live the Amorphous Law"—the progression of entropy.

## MINIMAL COMPULSIONS

Ruby has sought to distance himself from the ideology of Minimal art while referencing it semiotically. His radically gestural work borrows from Minimalism in its chromatic scheme, the qualities of its materials, and its geometry, serialization, and highly ordered structures as a way to articulate an

### Notes

1. Holly Myers, "Sterling Ruby: Shape Shifter," *ArtReview*, no. 6 (December 2006): 54.

2. John C. Welchman, "The Mike Kelleys," in *Mike Kelley* (London: Phaidon, 1999), 57.

aesthetic of compulsion. The repudiation of Minimalist ideology has its own rich tradition. Following the post-Minimalist turn to process, for example, Vito Acconci's neon light objects of the early 1990s moved the connection between interior design and art to the foreground, while Christian Philipp Müller, as well as Louise Lawler and Allan McCollum (in their collaboration *For Presentation and Display: Ideal Settings* [1984]), referenced commodity culture and commercial display. At the same time, Cady Noland, Tom Burr, and Charles Ray were exploring the dark side of Minimal art in works that are (respectively) latently violent, sexually charged, and anthropomorphically unlikely. Although these works were produced during the last two decades or so, it is fair to say that Minimal art scarcely functions anymore as a paradigmatic movement. Instead, for Ruby it is a metonym for an identifiable, didactic, and authoritarian system; Minimal art stands symbolically for a discourse of power based on inclusion and exclusion.

In his work, Ruby has rarely cited plywood and aluminum, the quintessential materials of Minimal art, and his already extensive oeuvre only features cubes (the ultimate Minimal form) as pedestals, made to show off soldered joints rather than present a seamless surface (discussed later in this essay). But by miming the rhetoric of Minimalism, Ruby inevitably points to specific historical precursors, especially the material iconography of Richard Artschwager, whose sculptures oscillate between being useful objects (such as pieces of furniture) and autonomous artworks. Ruby's repetitive Formica structures, for example, are debased to function as benches, recalling the anonymous and tasteless furnishings of many public spaces.

For his dual 2007 exhibitions in New York at Foxy Production and Metro Pictures, Ruby created two architectural installations, the white Formica triumphal arch *SUPEROVERPASS* and the spray-painted cenotaph *Recondite*. From a conceptual perspective, these are a pair; each has a distinct monumentality that seems to correspond to Ruby's "overproduction." As Robert Morris observed, the latitude for the scale of three-dimensional art objects can be measured on a continuum between the monument and the ornament, whereby a work's quality of publicness grows to the same degree that size relative to us increases.<sup>3</sup> The monumentality Ruby employs reflects self-confidence while evoking the uncanny side of Minimalism; yet at the same time, it exposes Minimalism's oft-cited theatricality, since the militaristic rhetoric of the triumphal arch and the hero's grave cannot disguise the fact that they are simply oversized wooden models.

The crucial thing is that all of Ruby's quasi-Minimalist works have been inscribed by their means of production. If in one sculpture the soldering

3. Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Part 2" *Artforum* (October 1966): 21.

joints are visible, elsewhere immaculate white surfaces reveal traces of human labor. The Conceptualist desire to conceal the artist's hand had the effect of fetishizing industrial production, but it also fostered a sometimes-naïve faith that subjectivity could be suppressed in the production of a work of art, even though it is present in the work's conception. Ruby's cubes, which in the tradition of Minimal art are not produced by the artist himself, bear the sweat of anonymous production. Thus, on the one hand the artist refers yet again to Morris, whose proto-Minimalist *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* (1961) contains its own production, while on the other hand Ruby renders the notion of authorship problematic by revealing traces of the hands that made his cubes. Minimalist and Conceptual works were intended to appear as if they were created anonymously in order to become—through a miraculous transformation—a work of art, an oblique intellectual expression of their creator. In contrast, Ruby collectivizes his practice (through the use of fabricators and assistants) without having to dissociate himself from his position as author. His work remains his work, even if the aesthetics of production are brought into play with social reality when labor is legible. One is aware of the irony that the one person whose physical trace cannot be seen on the work is the person who ultimately claims authorship; yet one is also made aware of those whose identities are hinted at through visible smudges and fingerprints. When Ruby's quasi-Minimalist sculptures are exhibited, traces of production become intermingled with the traces of use as viewers interact with them. (The question of whether his sculptures are in fact items of practical use is something one well-dressed man at last year's Frieze Art Fair may have been asking himself as I watched him lean against and place his brown leather bag on a top of a work.)

Ruby's sculptures are "disinterested" (in the philosophical sense) in participation; rather, they declare themselves as public. In addition, the artist defaces his cubes with tags collected from photographs he has made in and around Los Angeles that he transfers onto their smooth surfaces like tattoos. Tags and graffiti are the territorial markings of street gangs; they are one component of a private cosmology of symbols, codes, vocabulary, and rules—just as the Minimalists had their own credo.

Tags and fingerprints are also associated with violation of the law and law enforcement and appear in Ruby's works as a kind of self-inflicted vandalism, a rebellion against the aesthetics of compulsion—an expression of repression in the literal sense. In two early collages, Ruby incorporated a photograph of a prison cell into a childlike colorful freehand drawing reminiscent of an arabesque. Yet the rigid, geometric modernist grid suggested by the prison bars resembles, in its symmetry, a Rorschach test. And, despite the abstract composition, traces of

blood are visible in the photograph, juxtaposing the compulsiveness of modernist formalism with violence.

"MOCA Focus: Sterling Ruby, SUPERMAX 2008" concludes Ruby's trilogy of SUPERMAX exhibitions.<sup>4</sup> "SUPERMAX" refers to the super-maximum-security prison, the paragon of authoritarian institutions. The 2006 SUPERMAX exhibition at Galerie Christian Nagel in Cologne, Germany, featured an eponymous four-part glass wall (recalling Marcel Duchamp's *The Large Glass* (1915–23), Dan Graham's Pavilions, and Gerhard Richter's early glass sculptures) that appeared to have been vandalized, lending the work a narrative aspect. As a wall, the sculpture distinguishes inside and outside and excludes one from the other—but on which side are we the viewers standing, and on which side is the artist? Ruby's Foucauldian discourse of institutional power (enforced through discipline and punishment) seems to relate to the institution of art, asking whether or not the rules of the White Cube are as unavoidable and rigid as a closed facility to whose authority one must yield helplessly.

## GESTURE AND LIBERATION

Ruby's oversized vertical accumulations recall both the utopian formal idiom of Expressionist architecture and the fleshiness of a Paul Thek "meat" sculpture. Resembling both stalactites and stalagmites, these sculptures are created in a process wherein urethane and paint are allowed to accumulate in flows and drips, in the middle of which they are frozen and flipped upside down. Suggesting abject phalluses whose colors evoke bodily fluids, they are above all monumentalizations of gesture—indeed, by inverting the drip, Ruby foregrounds it as a gesture in search of a subject. But these sublime biomorphic formations are defined by their process of becoming, buttressed by unpretentious support structures on which text has been inscribed, including portions of Joan Didion's prototypically Californian collection of stories *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968). The luminous handwritten script on the sculptural forms evokes missiles being prepared for war by being covered with messages. Ruby's practice of including written text, both here in marker and elsewhere as vandalistic tagging, refers to a specific aesthetic of adolescence, born of a zeal and obsessiveness that usurps objects indiscriminately.

The issue of expression contained in the vertical accumulations remains crucial as well in Ruby's recent spray-paint paintings. These large-format illusionistic abstractions were never touched by a brush, and the diffuse splatters and drips of the spray can offer a kind of visible white noise evincing the artist's hand and suggesting he did not attempt to tidy any mistakes. Instead,

4. The previous SUPERMAX exhibitions were "SUPERMAX 2005," Marc Fox Gallery, Los Angeles, and "SUPERMAX 2006," Galerie Christian Nagel, Cologne, Germany.