

Kaspar Müller
Why Always Me?

Kaspar just called me to say that while he was printing a draft of this text to edit, one of his students asked what he was doing. He explained and she replied, "Photography makes me sick."

The genres within photography have fragmented into tiny shards, of which we are acutely aware even if we don't name them. We have developed a nuanced ability to read images, one that runs parallel to aesthetics. It considers what an image is trying to communicate, through what strategies, and assesses its overall success in situ. The photograph has made itself too available to us. We take them for granted and are entirely dependent on them. At the same time, we have let ourselves become so immersed in this sea of images that we begin to mistake them – their volume in particular – for a means of understanding.

In an earlier text on Müller's work I wrote that he "undermines the conventions of the reception of art as it has come to be today: a hydra of communication, promotion, advertising and social posturing. He still exists within this system – it's more or less inescapable – but many of his actions as an artist try to peel the curtains back a bit." The photographs shown here, taken over the past decade, offer up an illustration of the system as it has become intertwined with an individual's life. They open a window into Müller's travels (many of which were sponsored by those supporting his work as an artist), his experimentations in the studio, his exhibitions and participation in art fairs, and his personal life – including portraits of his son and his family's cat. From the description, one could just as easily be talking about his Instagram account. Their collective title – "Why Always Me?" – is like a twinned admission of the self-involvement of being an artist and an attempt at absolution.

Photography in the context of an art exhibition exists outside of photography as we normally experience it in our day-to-day lives. It's an anachronistic return, a suspension of reality, where we as an audience are given the privilege of contemplating an image for a little longer than usual and with a different type of attention than scrolling through photos on social media. The gallery as a secular and insulated place of contemplation is a nice little truism we act out.

Müller's photographs push this privilege fallacy over the line. Some are suspiciously aestheticized; others embody advertising clichés too happily. There are views of neatly tilled fields, oranges dangling from a tree dappled in sunlight, a child wearing a classic rain ensemble stomping in puddles, and a timid calf. They are images that beg to be 'liked.' These types of photos are punctuated by documentation of Müller's artworks, which rupture the serene fabric of sunlit charm with fluorescent directness. Many of the artworks pictured are utilitarian things turned absurd, and therefore less useful: a shelf covered in feathers, a ham-fistedly painted chair, and (in a lush crossover) dozens of novelty light bulbs have been cobbled into ceiling fixtures and installed in an ornate room with views of palm trees from the windows. It is not uncommon for artists to populate their Instagram accounts with photos of their work; it is uncommon to elevate documentation of old artworks into artworks themselves and install them in a gallery. And so both factions in this group of images skew closer to the technologically dependent, voluminous, contemporary way of consuming photographs – even down to the square format of some – forcing us to grapple with this distribution/consumption phenomenon along with the more familiar questions that come with evaluating an artwork.

Perhaps this is why Müller has sat on some of these photos for seven or eight years. Shown at another time or in a different context they would not have effected the same response. Müller's work often functions best when it's at the cusp of dissolving into innocuousness. These images show an array of the type of photos that accumulate around a person and purport to amount to a kind of behind the scenes of a creative life. It is only recently that artists (and, of course, pretty much everyone else with a cell phone) began curating pictures into a publicly shared exhibition-persona. The prevalence of the photo diary is – one would assume – at an all time high. The space of everyday life is supersaturated with images, and as more and more 'content creators' crop up, certain ideals about artists are beginning to bristle up against normal, everyday existence. People spend hours per week wading through this content, most of it meaningless. I personally am so addicted to looking at

other peoples' photos that I had to enable a feature on my phone that locks me out of the apps after a specified amount of time each day. I never really thought of this activity as art viewing.

By masquerading as the omnipresent, Müller handicaps himself. He seems to defang his work, asking it to chase familiarity and digestibility. In doing so he reveals how these endearing qualities can often mislead us. We know that photographs can be manipulated, but we frequently ignore the ways in which photographs manipulate us. They are a source of anxiety and, paradoxically, a panacea. In connecting us to the world, they allow us to reassure ourselves that we understand it. It's easy to get the impression that we know a person or a place by looking at pictures. Somehow it has become easier to forget the fact that whoever is pressing the shutter button can easily leave something outside of the frame.

Nearly all of Müller's photos leave something out, and somehow this is the point. When talking about his earlier series of photos of Lake Zürich, *Schätze der Erinnerung*, Müller said, "It was as important to hide some subjects as it was to point some out." The resulting pictures – taken over the course of a year using different cameras – ape the style of postcards while retaining a degree of amateurism. They achieve the sort of blankness that one can project into. Doing this required Müller to keep a lot out of the frame. With the singular focus of an advertisement, the only subject Müller pointed out was Lake Zürich. It took a willing audience to parse through all of that subject's complex meanings: environmentalism, politics, abundance and scarcity, capitalism and worth, and not least of all, leisure. The same can be said of these photographs. Despite a diversity of subjects, Müller has nonetheless whittled things down. His chosen subjects generally sit at the center of the frame. They idealize and document idealization. Many focus on the relationship between humanity and nature, illustrating our desire to cultivate, domesticate, name and take ownership. Like the Lake Zürich photos, there is something unsettling about how nice they all are – the hidden subjects begin to creep in from the edges. Some depict the impulse to build, be it a simple lean-to or a hollow, faux Greek colonnade; others picture the waste that trails in our wake. A collection of eviscerated baguettes left to fester on a fence pylon begins to feel like a candy-hued update on Dutch still life. Then, I remember that vanitas paintings are all packed with symbols of fleeting pleasure and the eventuality of death. This sentiment permeates and I begin to wonder, is anxiety our most common emotion?