

## **Juvenal Merst: Distortions**

Works (1993-2002)

The present exhibition offers, for the first time, a comprehensive overview of the work of Juvenal Merst (1967-2002). Over the last few years, Merst's work has become increasingly more relevant, and it seems evident to many of us working in art today that his various projects established directions that several artists of his generation — as well as younger ones— would soon follow. It is with this interest that this project joins the collective task of bringing this artist back to the public realm after a relative period of critical inattention. In this important moment in the art world, where we seek to re-examine our values in response to the shifting social, political and economic environment that already seems to characterize the end of this decade, we reexamine the visionary work of Merst.

My first encounter with Merst's art was in the early 90s, as an art student and an intern in a museum in Chicago. At the time he had presented one of his first works and there was a great controversial debate in the press around this event. I rejected his work almost immediately, thinking of it as overly conceited and aggressive. Yet, over the years I was unable to forget the memorable images he had created, and came around to fully understand and embrace the issues that he at that time had so well identified through his work. From that point on, Merst produced a remarkably focused series of works that place him as one of the most creatively restrained artists in recent history who nonetheless remains as one of the most relevant. Merst's work has the remarkable ability to channel the voices of many artists: as if he had been the construction of a collectivity of voices, as if he, himself, had been an entire fabrication, an urban legend of art history.

Ever since his appearance in the art scene, and continuing today after his death, I believe, the art world has tried to keep up with him, and it is a testament to his vision and genius that his work continues to question us today as it did when it was made.

I hope that this exhibition gives justice to the importance of this artist in art history, and that it may mark the beginning of a better understanding of his work, in all its power and complexity.

Pablo Helguera  
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# Juvenal Merst: The Inverted Compass

*Sonja Stillman*

The life story of Juvenal Merst is as opaque as the motivations and background of his artworks. Fiercely protective of his working process, Merst was equally controlling of his life story, going to the lengths of burning exhibition catalogues which included his biographical material. During an interview, he once mentioned that he did not want future audiences to know anything personal about him. On another occasion, in an email correspondence, he wrote: “it is just so unfortunate that one has to show his work amongst his contemporaries. I am allergic to the time I live in, and I wish I could be alive just to see my work many years after I die. Good art is not meant to be understood by the people who live in the time when it is made, so what is the point to even showing it?” This lies at the core of Juvenal’s troubled relationship with his own time, and further explains some of the most puzzling issues about his work amongst art historians, such as the fact that he was extremely reluctant to show his work in public institutions like museums or commercial galleries. This sole fact should be material enough to write an essay about him, as such a rejection of the traditional venues to display and communicate is so unusual for most of us. Furthering the riddle of his work is that he was not, as it would seem to some, a decidedly outsider artist like, say, Henry Darger, who silently produced his work without anyone’s knowledge until after his death.

Merst was an artist deeply engaged with the artworld around him. He followed its every step, and maintained an intense relationship with many of his contemporaries. An avid student of the tendencies of the day, he engaged deeply with issues around land art, Minimalism, social issues, and performance. It is thus hard to describe the incredulity, and later shock, that those close to him felt one day when he sent out an announcement claiming that he would no longer exhibit his work publicly again. Juvenal was distrustful of the power that institutions exerted on an artist’s work, and his conceptual gesture was a radical way to get back in control of his image and the direction of his art career. Although he had been already extremely successful, exhibiting in international biennials and top-tier museums, Juvenal anticipated the process by which artists lose sight of their goals and vision, corrupted by the forces of the art market. This brilliant gesture alone, which at the time may have seemed incomprehensible, shows Juvenal’s genius in understanding the ironies of the artworld, and his remarkable talent in constantly redrawing the rules of the game over and over again.

It is against this background that I now undertake the daunting task to contextualize Juvenal Merst’s work for the contemporary reader.

Joshua Emmanuel Merst was born in Wilmington, Delaware, on September 8, 1967, amidst a well-off family of prominent chemists, who worked at the DuPont laboratories in Wilmington. His father was Robert Merst, a Jewish scientist from Brooklyn, and his

mother Emma Johnson, a Kindergarten teacher from Watertown, Wisconsin. His mother died of cancer when he was five years old, and his father remarried one year later. The young Joshua never had a positive relationship with his stepmother, a topic that emerged continuously in his work.

There is little known about his early years, other than his attendance at the local schools and his early interest in art. Merst had a keen interest in ancient Rome, as a result of a school visit to the Greek and Roman galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York when he was 11. This incident became engrained in Merst's memory and he would refer to it repeatedly throughout his life. It also led to him becoming interested in the literature of the time, and to his discovery of the forefathers of the satire—Quintilian, Horace, and Juvenal. It is the latter to which Merst became particularly attached. Decimus Junius Juvenalis, who lived in the first century AD, is a Roman satirist who savagely attacked the vices and follies of Roman society during the reign of Domitian. Juvenal's aggressive and yet highly satiric tone was of deep impact to the young Merst. When he turned 18, Joshua officially changed his name to the one of Juvenal, which became also, as a result, his artistic name.

One of the most striking aspects of Merst's work is its methodical quality, and the way in which, it would appear, it became a seamless and organized project from the very beginning. We know that Merst produced a number of works during his undergraduate years which were shown at a variety of galleries, but somehow he managed, around 1990, to get his hands on the entirety of his oeuvre thus far and destroy any evidence of it, from the originals to any existing reproductions. It was at that time when he sketched out what would become his true life's work, and the one that now we have the luxury to see in person.

Merst left Delaware in 1985 to attend the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and obtained his BFA. There is nothing left of his student work, and we only have the recollections of some of his fellow students at the time. According to one of them, Ralph Doty, "Juvenal Merst was always thirsty for information. He wanted to know who had done what and how. He memorized the works of famous artists like trivia. He was the best at art history. But in the studio he was always distracted and I don't recall him doing any artworks there. He didn't seem interested in making art actually. Yet, he would always show up with astonishingly good paintings. He claimed that he could only work when he was alone. Then one of those days, a T.A. discovered that Merst had been hiring another artist to paint his works. Merst was given an F, but that did not deter him. He was always trying to find ways to outsmart the system."

Around that time, Juvenal Merst met artist Elmer Schafroth, who became an important interlocutor and support. Together they started a small artist-run space in the Wicker Park area of Chicago entitled Ennui, which quickly became a hangout for young artists and musicians. Merst and Schafroth organized screenings and small shows at the space.



Ennui Gallery in Chicago's Wicker Park, circa 1993

Merst's first work on record is the film *Artmaking*, from 1990, also known as *Work Number 1*. It is a work influenced by the Italian cinema of Antonioni, with two women characters holding a monologue about their relationship to an artist, and a variety of scenes of ambiguous, yet likely political nature. The work, with a strong "meta" structure, is charged with irony and becomes a reflection on the very nature of artmaking and its role in the larger context of society. There are strong references to the social movements of the 1960s and the political utopias that these movements embraced. It also becomes, as the first work of this artist, a statement of purpose of sorts for him, and foreshadows the direction toward which his work will evolve.

*Artmaking*, which was shown at the Chopin Theater of Chicago Filmmakers, was an instant success in the local circuit. I myself gratefully played a small part in the selection of the work for an international festival in Linz, Austria, which in turn led to its selection by Whitney Museum curator John Hanhardt for the biennial. As the opera prima of a young artist, *Artmaking* propelled Merst into the limelight in an immediate way. This very early exposure in his career was something that, in examining his writings and in the conversations that I held with him, led him to a period of creative paralysis, feeling anxiety and pressure due to the expectations toward his "second work".

Merst in fact remained inactive for at least a full year and a half, without taking any further steps, or at least none in a public space, despite the fact that by that time Merst had been invited by countless biennials and museums to present work. Toward the summer of 1992, Merst finally exhibited a second work, a performance entitled simply *Work Number 2*. From that point forward, he referred to his works in terms of chronological numbers, although in most cases works had a nickname of sorts, and in the case of this work, it was *Against Hypocrisy*. He took it upon himself to hire a private investigator to follow the whereabouts and private life of Roger Vincent, a powerful

collector and trustee of a reputable museum. The work consisted in photographic and printed documentation of Mr. Vincent's frequent travels to Scotland, exposing that he was having an affair with a married woman (Mr. Vincent himself was divorced at the time). The piece was shocking for many who had expected to see a more poetic approach similar to Merst's first work. Instead, they encountered what was then perceived as a very confrontational work. The piece was largely repudiated by critics, and, in addition Juvenal came close to landing in jail for invasion of privacy issues. Nonetheless, while it may have not been publicly expressed at the time, those who lived the controversy may recall that everyone secretly admired Merst's audacity and courage, and if, with his first work he already was becoming a significant figure in his environment, with this second piece he had firmly established himself as an obligatory reference to any artist. At the time, he mentioned to me that recent events had confirmed to him that his "mission in life" was "to expose all which is wrong about art."

Shortly after this incident, in February of 1993, Merst and Schafroth decided to move to New York. They moved to Williamsburg, in Brooklyn, which at the time was the nascent center for bohemian artists in New York City. There, they opened another version of their space *Ennui*, which despite Merst's celebrity did not achieve the success it had in Chicago, partially due to the great competition amongst art spaces in New York and the financial difficulty of keeping it afloat. Merst appeared frustrated with his New York move and struggled at first to adapt to the city. He wrote to a friend: "I hate New York: if you think you are someone special, you arrive here and you find a thousand people exactly like you that you would prefer not to exist. I don't understand why artists like to move here. As I walk penniless down the streets of this city and I see all these signs, advertisements and the display of money and power, I feel a permanent, invisible pressure mounting on my throat that makes me feel as if I am going to asphyxiate."

Merst's limited production made it practically impossible to live off from his art, and he was forced to take odd jobs to support himself, including working at a funeral parlor and a lumber yard in south Brooklyn.

It wouldn't surprise us then that his *Work Number 3*, was also known with the title, *I loved New York*, a series of photographs that juxtapose the worst neighborhoods of the city with a number of images of artworks and quotations about the role of art by several of the "sanctified" artists associated with the Dia Foundation, ranging from Dan Graham, to Richard Serra and Bruce Nauman. Making a direct reference to the tourist motto and famous logo created by Milton Glazer, *I loved New York* is another direct criticism of the way in which, in the view of the artist, the art world isolates itself from social and cultural realities to create its own, self-absorbed theoretical bubble. Merst was fiercely opposed to theorizing about art and took every opportunity to ridicule the way in which art was justified using "art speak." Richard Serra's and Dan Graham's writings become a particularly direct target with Merst. Merst perceived Serra and Graham as extremely pompous artists as well as the embodiment of the institutionally-sanctified canon of the period. His hostility towards these artists becomes an almost unnatural fixation which will appear in some of the next works.

His *Work Number 4*, also known as *Against a Big Fish*, refers to the Roman poet Juvenal's fourth satire—as is the case of most of the artists' works—and it seeks to ridicule the practice of collecting and philanthropy in general as an activity that is more about the narcissism of the collector than about the purported mission of support to the arts. Merst chose a number of collectors and funders who according to him held conservative philosophies, and mailed a number of “bombs” to them.

The “bombs” were not lethal, but they did contain a mild explosive that would make them detonate upon opening. Each package contained a type of shaving cream inside of them, so one would be attacked by a mail-order cream pie of sorts. The work, which according to the artist intended only to irritate, this time caused excitement amongst the collectors who had actually received it. One of them, Rosaura Valparaiso, became interested in the work of Merst and would become a key supporter of his work for the rest of his career.

His *Work Number 5: Against the Public*, which he described as his ultimate work and “the ultimate work of every artist,” was also in his view a representation of the sense of exclusivity that contemporary art has. It was exhibited at Ennui, the artist's space in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. The exhibition basically consisted of creating an Ames room, a space that, when seen from a fixed point, creates the optical illusion of having people or objects appear much larger or smaller than in real life in relation to one another. In this case, the Ames room on view at Ennui would lock from the inside and release nitrous oxide, also known as laughing gas. Merst was obsessed with Ames rooms, according to his own account of an experience that he once had in a carnival as a child. He was locked inside the funhouse by mistake, and it took several hours for people to realize it. Inside the space, Merst encountered a labyrinth of Ames rooms and distorted mirrors and developed a particular obsession towards the notion of perspective. Similarly, his interest in laughing gas was connected to the notion of perverse entertainment that he underwent in that early childhood experience.

*Work Number 5* was interpreted as a parody on Dan Graham's pavilions and their claims of subverting the viewer.<sup>1</sup>

The exhibition of this work did not go well. Jewish groups in Brooklyn protested, arguing that the piece made light of the Holocaust. With a warrant of the Department of Health, the exhibition was shut down. Once again, Merst found himself in legal trouble as the non-medical use of Nitrous Oxide was (and continues to be) illegal.

Shortly after this event, however, Merst appeared to be on a roll and this time took on feminism, with *Work Number 6*, precisely subtitled *Against Feminism*. Merst claimed that he was tired of feeling like the culprit for all of society's woes as a man. He opened a temporary gallery that supposedly featured feminist art, where he exhibited a number of poorly executed paintings and objects with all sorts of commonplace feminist symbols,

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<sup>1</sup> Of this project, only a scale model of the room and a preparatory collage survive, both which are on view in this exhibition.

supposedly signed by the then famous feminist artists and with an exhibition essays by the leading feminist scholars of that time. The main work of that exhibition, on display here, is a pink vanity table with a funhouse mirror, making obvious references to the process of self-introspection and self-representation that characterized the feminist discourse of that period.

*Work Number 7* and *Work Number 8* were paintings, marking a period in which Merst became suddenly interested in the medium. There is a debate regarding the creation of these works, with some arguing that Merst was never involved in their conception or creation; however this is an unjustified accusation that has never been proven. *Work Number 7* is a work that parodies patrons and auction houses, while *Work Number 8*, subtitled *True Nobility*, depicts what appears to be a famous artist. Both works function as portraits and a diptych of supposed artworld “nobility”, one being a collector and another an artist but depicted as sad clowns in the style of garage-sale paintings. There is a clear affinity here with the work of Martin Kippenberger, an artist who Juvenal Merst repeatedly mentioned and toward whom he expressed his admiration. In these works, Merst appears to mount a critique that is also a self-critique, ridiculing the emphasis of individuality in the art world and the simultaneous and reciprocal canonization process by artists of patrons and by patrons of artists.

Toward 2000, Merst was in the middle of a personal crisis. This is the context for *Work Number 10*, also known as *The Young Like it Hot*, which displays a bed together with an original print of the 1983 porn film of the same name, directed by Bob Chinn and starring Hyapatia Lee. The 1983 porn, now considered a classic, was a film that Merst had seen as a high school senior at a theater in Wilmington and toward which he had developed some sort of fascination. The film is about a group of phone company workers who turn to phone sex—and then physical sex—to prove the human advantages over computers. It became a sort of metaphor of contemporary social alienation for Merst, who at the time felt compelled to make a work about his alleged relationship with Elmer Schafroth. Made in dialogue with Robert Rauschenberg’s *Bed* from 1955, *Work Number 10* is connected to notions of self-eroticism, inter-personal relationships and the isolating role of media in our physical desires. It is interesting to note that the 10<sup>th</sup> of the Roman poet Juvenal’s satires is commonly translated from the Latin as *Wrong Desire is the Source of Suffering*<sup>2</sup>.

Due to its exploitive pornographic subject, *The Young Like it Hot* generated even more controversy than previously—albeit certainly compounded by the criticism that he had generated with *Work Number 6 (Against Feminism)*. This time, however, Merst was attacked by a variety of prominent feminist critics in a variety of publications, particularly in *October* magazine, the famous art theory publication.

His response to the criticisms marked his next work, *Work Number 11: Against the Critics*. The work consists of an issue of *October* magazine perforated from the center,

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<sup>2</sup> See *The Satires of Juvenal*, translated by Rolfe Humphries, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1958

from which a mysterious gas is flowing. In the context of Merst's work, we can only imagine it is laughing gas, one of his signature symbols. Merst usually spoke in highly pejorative terms of art theory, sometimes referring to it as "theoretical flatulence". October magazine in his mind was the most accurate embodiment of that notion, which perhaps led him to the production of this work. *Work Number 11* has since become one of the most iconic examples of Merst's work.

The next pieces that followed had a particular self-destructive quality, which is hard to understand other than through the lens of the progressive alcoholism that Merst was falling into at this time period. *Work Number 12, Against Friends*, consisted of Merst's action of ending a number of friendships in his life, for no apparent reason, banning a number of close acquaintances from speaking to him ever again. In a similar fashion, *Work Number 13, Against an Arts Career*, essentially involved creating a document when he proclaimed that his artwork would consist in destroying his own art career, starting with the announcement that he would stop exhibiting his works publicly. Despite the incredulity that such announcement provoked, Merst remained true to that statement until the end of his life.

Over the last few years of his life, Merst had let himself fall into alcoholic addiction and had become fairly isolated socially, not least because of the highly confrontational nature of his work. It is in this final period of general isolation, when he had stopped exhibiting publicly, that he produced his final set of works, also developing his final and most conclusive work.

*Work Number 14 : Concerning Avarice*, and *Work Number 15, On Compassion*, are both film works. It is not clear why Merst was attracted to creating films toward the end of his career. The lyricism of some of these works contrast with the roughness of his personal life at the time, almost as if these works had been created by a different artist. But it is precisely this chameleon-like ability of Merst that shows the complex vocabulary that he was capable of developing, reinventing himself work after work. *Work Number 15*, on view in this exhibition, includes archival footage of bombings and violent war acts, juxtaposed with 1950s footage of the American suburbia, erotic dance and enigmatic nature scenes. The references to Buñuel and Dali's *Un Chien Andalou* are evident, along with the enigmatic use of images in the style of D.W. Griffith and the political and social critique of artists like Martha Rosler.

*Work Number 16*, cryptically subtitled as *For those above the law*, was described by Merst as a "yet unfinished work" as well as the work that would illuminate the viewer to all the aspects of the previous works. The work consists of a sealed letter that is to be read seven years after Merst's death, and which the artist promised it would reveal the truth about his work and bring all to light. For the reading of this piece, the artist stipulated that a reunion of some of his closest acquaintances would have to gather in a public forum to discuss his work and culminate with the reading of the letter. In a similar fashion to Andy Warhol's time capsules, Merst's letter becomes a ghost-like, posthumous message to a not yet existing future audience that the artist considered as his ideal interlocutors.



Like many of the great artists of the XXth century, Juvenal Merst remains an enigma. Hard to grasp by his contemporaries, elusive to art historians, and openly challenging to the subsequent generations, there are even those who, critical of Merst's ambiguity in both life and work, doubt the very "existence" of the artist himself—thinking about him as a construction in the minds of a collective milieu, a ploy by fantasizing theorists, a fairy tale for young artists. But such criticisms miss the idea that art, like life, transcends every threshold of ambiguity and fiction. Every now and then, at a given time and place in history, an individual materializes embodying all the hopes and desires of a society with such an overwhelming and affirmative fashion that its very reality is questioned. This is true of the great religious figures. While we do not have scientific proof that Jesus or Muhammad actually existed as human beings, what is undeniable is the impact that these names and their stories had in the world. Juvenal Merst knew this, and he wanted to belong to the category of the truly mythical, not to the mere footnotes of art history, and through the architecture of the myth that he constructed, become real, and thus be truly born to us. Through his work Merst carefully worked himself out of his social and political cocoon, tearing down every link he had with the world around him, which explains his fierce contrariness and his rejection to anything that would connect him to humankind. This process of liberation of history, of identity, and of fixed context is Juvenal's true genius, and the substance of his message to both his contemporaries and to those to come.

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