

# Stephen Mueller

## **Please Don't Go** *by Travis Murphy*

Stephen Mueller's *Please Don't Go* resumes and reformulates an earlier performance (*The Ways In Which We Keep On Dying*, 2005), and ultimately confirms the artist's work, through its ritual, custom-made iconography and promise of adherence to a symbolic scripture, denying all that is futile in mortality.

In the most recent rendering of this endeavour, the artist performs a seemingly grueling task of writing an elegant, if not neurotic, repetitive text in the confines of a laboratory-style workstation, designed specifically to accommodate his body. A two-way mirror allows the viewer in the gallery to clearly observe him, while he cannot see beyond the internal reflection. The imposition of infinity on the replicating self in the interior workspace, places the subject at the locus of the event, constrained to the quietude of the claustrophobic structure. The minimalist aesthetic, from the acrylic plexi-architecture to the surgical instruments and Stender dish data containers, showcases Mueller's ardent consideration of every facet of the installation and performance. The austerity of the aesthetic serves as a kind of cold veneer for the heart-wrenching act unfolding in the confined space. Being in the gallery while the artist accumulates data, then assimilates and catalogs it, leaves one feeling disquieted and consumed by the kind of reverence one might have for a beautiful machine at work.

The artist serenely plies a unique trade: an obsessive pleading with his loved ones to not leave. He utilizes a braille slate and stylus to impress the shape of inscribed characters onto a strip of paper, only to obsessively cut out each raised marking with surgical acuity moments afterward. The words *I Miss You* are dissected from the paper as Mueller excises each braille character from the script, resulting in twenty-four indistinguishable specimen groups in separate glass medicinal-looking containers. A strip of time is engulfed in the duration, falling as expired white data and coiling the way paper's weave forces it, downward in gravity, becoming a tangle of ribbon on the container's mirrored floor. The ribbon, in the course of the performance, is more and more complete, while *they* are closer still to *going*. The neurotic calculation evidenced on the page embodies a formulation of scripture.

Mueller has acknowledged that fear of death is the driver for his work, citing Terror Management Theory (TMT), which postulates that anxiety of physical annihilation is a determining factor for human behaviour at both micro and macro levels. TMT contends that a fear of death is suppressed through cognitive dissonance, and individuals exhibit symbolic rituals and actions that adhere to a manufactured system that covers over this suppressed societal terror. Against this backdrop, Mueller develops his strategy for art production.

Through master themes of infinity, death, ritual and scripture, the narrative of a newfound faith plays out in real time, with those the artist holds dear to him as stakeholders in the ultimate writ for Mueller's evolving system. Infinity and death at two poles, navigate a

physical labour that stands in for a transgression of tenured cultural belief systems. A brazen, obsessive enterprise verges on the advent of personalized religion that contends openly with the suppressed fear of annihilation. The ritualized act subsumes its futility in an injunction that flirts with an ultimate redemption. Mortality salience (acknowledgement of one's imminent death) becomes fully the unfinished project for which all symbolic structure and arduous feats of remembrance enlist repetition and ritual. The living icons that represent Mueller's closest relations and familial ties, also vie for the prospect of a realized iconography, and potentially, an exacting, calculating belief to transcend the assurance of death as an end to all things.

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Travis Murphy is an artist and writer living in Toronto, Ontario.