

INTERVIEW

NONO YEAHYEAH

MICHALIS PICHLER IN CONVERSATION WITH JOHN STEZAKER

CONFRONTING A SORT OF ABSENCE

JS Yeah, one of the questions I wanted to ask you, actually... two of your most famous series of work, the *migration* series, and the *Airplanes & Sky*, or *Clouds & Sky* feature flying things. And in a way, flying things are most difficult to pin down, they are so transient, like the clouds behind them. And with the birds one's very aware of the impossibility of delineating these tiny forms, the cuts become like wounds, holes within the picture, violent holes. And they become murmurations of these holes/wounds, and I was curious to know, what made you highlight flying things as a central image, do you have any thoughts on that?

MP It probably was not a conscious decision. I started cutting out things in the winter of 2002–03, when I just had moved to New York in terms of an academic exchange program. At the time I was more consciously working on American flags, which I was both finding and collecting on the streets, and I had also started counting their appearance in newspapers, cutting them out, and eventually also creating blank newspaper dummies that featured only the flags and nothing else, but...

JS Ok, flags fly, dont they? [laughs]

MP ... right...

JS Another flying object.

MP Yeah, you can look at it like that.. and, they certainly were kind of flying on the page, because I removed them from their original context and put them on a blank page – or rather, into a blank page, because the procedure was rather like surgery, cutting them out of something, and cutting them into something else. And in a similar approach to those



April 19 2003 (2:09pm), 300 Lincoln Place (Brooklyn),
from stars & stripes

Newspaper flag profiles I also cut out, or you could say took out things from the urban context: when I found objects that would meet my searching criteria, I would photograph them on the street, take them with me, and I would also photograph what was left behind – and later, I figured, that the absence of the piece was for me more interesting than the object, which I initially had collected to make an installation with (with the mass of objects), and I figured that this focus could constitute an evidence that could be termed *objet perdu*. So while those projects were going on, I started doodling around in a book on animal migration, and that was never really a planned project.

JS Hmm!

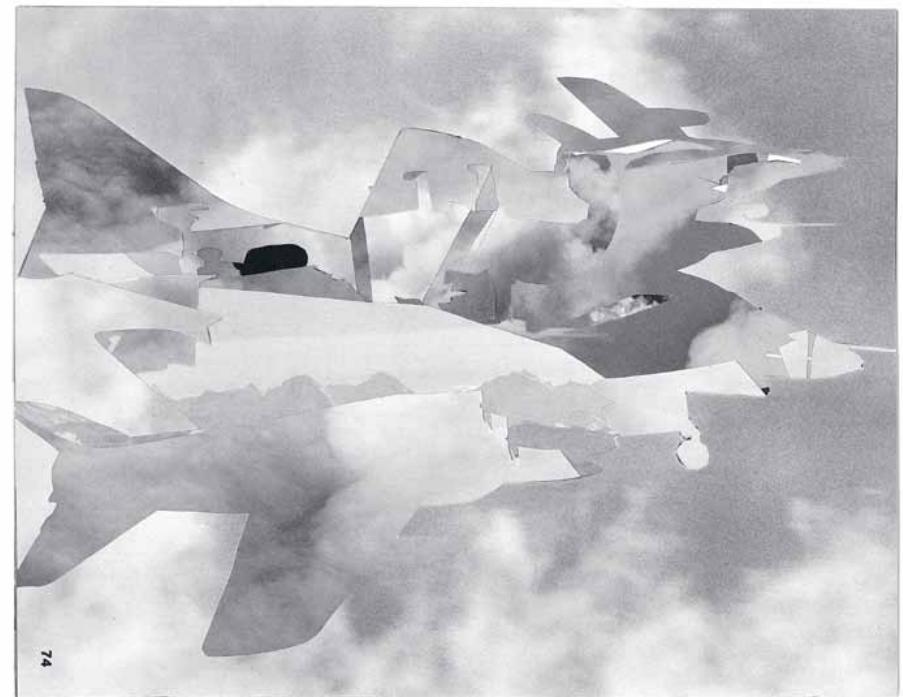
MP But over the years it turned out that I quite enjoyed doing these cutouts. In the beginning I cut out the birds, also other animals, and had put a blank page under the page I was cutting them from – so, the first series of collages with these materials were the cutout animals on a blank page with the cutting marks of the knife, and then, as they fell, I would fix them with scotch tape. Only later, I would start using the surrounding material, where I had cut them out, which eventually became the *migration* series.

JS Yeah. It occurred to me though, as you were talking there, that you have got an idea about why flight is so important: Because you referred to what's left behind – that moment of revelation where you were collecting the objects that you cut out for a newspaper, or whatever, and then you realized that what was more interesting was the remains, the residue, what's left behind. And in a way, that is very much, for me, the realization of collage.

It's the unconscious thing, you consciously try to do one thing, but your unconscious prompts a fascination in what remains, you could say, this is part of the condition of imagery in our culture, there is an element of imagery in our culture that circulates, that flies around the world, it is totally mobile, and there is another side of image that is what's left behind, and we deal, I think we as collageists, or whatever, or artists perhaps, deal with that residue. In a sense, what flies is unrepresentable. It reminds me of Milan Kundera in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, in the beginning he said there were two ways that art manifests itself, one is through weight, or gravitas, like Beethoven's sonatas, he analogizes it with potatoes stored in the cellar. They are weighty, heavy, and there is art that flies free of the gravitational pull of the real, and maybe our culture emphasizes that pulling apart of the image. Perhaps (part of) what you are doing is one element which is flying away, and there is the other, which is returning and remaining.

MP It is not only about an abstract absence, it is also the very physicality of the traces, of the left-behinds, like there was some humidity under it, or in general, once you remove something you see something else that was behind it, either the pavement under a pizza box, or the text behind a cut-out animal from a book.

JS That's how, yeah, the tiny fragment of Marlboro there [points at Floribundarosen]... as a remnant, it just does something with



Clouds & Sky #74, 2005

that colour! I mean we are talking about a particular collage here, but the...

MP There are also the windows and frames, and looking through something onto something else which was maybe already there but...

JS ... but in the end maybe confronting a sort of absence. Funny, this is an idea that actually predates modernity, and it has nothing to do with the circulating image. There is a poem by Rumi I discovered, who is a 13th century poet...

MP ... a mysticist...

JS Well, yes, he was... He wrote a poem about people who dive for fish from the harbour wall. They dive, and yet it is just a meditation on their piles of clothes that are left by the fishermen. He addresses this pile of clothes. For him, the rest is unrepresentable; the movements of the fish and the naked fisherman. As a poet, he is able only to meditate on the remains, not on the vectors of the event. I think, it's been around a long time, this attachment to what remains, to the residue, the material world that resists the vectors of the images that we live within. And somehow, Rumi is saying the reality of the fisherman is un-representable, but what we can look at is what he leaves behind. I mean that's the feeling I get from your collages. The reason I love your collages.

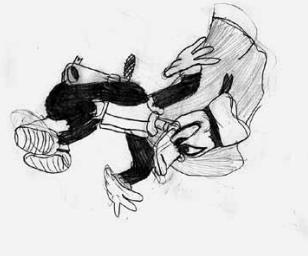
The thing that is most embedded in my consciousness from your work are the *migration* series. One particular *migration*

piece, I think it is number 31, happens to be the one that I saw at a certain point, and it meant such a lot to me. Related to the absolute impossibility of cutting out those tiny birds so that in the end the cutting out becomes so crude, it's like a wound, you know, it's an annihilation of the subtlety of a bird, and yet in its multiplicity, the repetition of these wounds, they become like notes in music, or they become like perforations, like those in mechanical piano rolls. The series of punctuations of the paper seem to reveal something that's quite difficult to put into words, something of the unknowable. And the mystery of the original thing, when we looked at the flockings and murmurations of birds through the centuries, it is a mystery how they move in unity like this.

UNTITLING

MP You happened to see this, because, although I was not exhibiting the *migration* collage series for many years, at one point I made a postcard out of one. And that was this one, and only when I made the postcard I did cut out the collage from the book, but it occurred to me, that the pagination had to stay with it, because it somehow resonated with the text you were looking at behind it. In a way it is quite absurd to have a singular page on its own without the book, with pagination, but that also gives a hint to where it comes from, and it becomes part of the title. I have started titling all the *migration* collages according to the page number the material came from.

JS Oh I see. Just to be clear, there aren't 31 *migration* collages leading up to *migration* #31, it is just that number 31 is the page where they are coming from...



Donald Duck as Phantomas, 1982

though we collectively decided to ignore him like the elephant in the room. I sometimes think that figures like Picasso can influence you more peripherally than if you spend a lot of time looking at them. In my opinion Walt Disney and Picasso are the two most important influences on visual art in the 20th century.

Things you take in, as you said, not being fully aware, but you are influenced by them, as they are probably much more important. I often used to say this to students when I was teaching. If you have an influence, if there is an influence on your work, and if you are in denial about it; then that influence would become more powerful, the only way you can contain that influence, and master it, is by confronting it, and being honest about it. And the person, who was most honest about this I think, was Picasso himself who was unashamed about stealing. It is as simple as that, if you see something in an artist's work you like, you just use it.

MP I think nowadays we steal much more openly... and in a much more refined way, in that regard. I am quite embracing, as far as influence is concerned, even to a degree, that I redo other people's work, just with slight changes, and I think it is perfectly valid, to claim that as your own work.

JS Absolutely.

INFLUENCES

MP It reminds me a bit of the work of Gordon Matta-Clark, whose work I love.

JS You are right, very similar, feeling of layers, yes. There is another artist, who did the same thing ten years earlier, he is closer in age to Jiri Kolář, and that is John Latham. He was my introduction to avant-garde art in England, in London. Before Latham, I was much more interested in Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud; they were my heroes, at that time.

MP Well they are still the heroes of the auction houses today [both laugh], aren't they?

JS They certainly are.

MP But maybe not necessarily the first ones you would refer to when talking about your work.

JS I don't know – I was in conversation recently with somebody – he was actually talking about the influence of Bacon on my work, and that was the first time I've ever been asked that, but that was very interesting, because they had intuited that there was some sort of influence. Well, when I was young, Bacon probably more than anybody else made me into an artist. My first paintings were very influenced by Bacon.

MP Yes, I think also – and that may sound ridiculous – but I think you don't need to really like someone's work to be influenced by it. And just as you did imitations of Francis Bacon, when you were very young, I did a lot of imitations of Walt Disney...

JS [laughs]

MP ... in my childhood, and I think, that that is quite a valid influence.

JS Yeah, yeah, actually a very good point. I had a push and pull, a bit like you, I was heading for university to study science at some point, and the pull was Bacon, for me... It was through Bacon that I discovered Picasso. However, Picasso made me feel it was pointlessness doing anything. He had done everything beforehand. I thought there was no point. Picasso remained there like a shadow, cast over the whole of 20th century art. But it is as

READING AND SEEING

JS That's the next thing I wanted to ask you. There is a strong connection, historically, between the emergence of collage, or images being merged and speculated upon, and poetry. The connections between Mallarmé and the origins of collage, effecter, is clearly an important connection in your work, see the two connecting?

MP One thing, I found myself more and more working on both sides of the imaginary border between visual art and literature, and I like to think that to insist on the existence of this border is rather reactionary... it is not necessary for me. I like to explore the materiality of language and of text.

JS Well on a concrete or physical level I suppose there is a difference in procedure of pursuing a drawing or painting as a representation of something else, and the procedures – or even how you orchestrate a painting, an abstract work, from writing. With collage, you do get closer to the process of writing, because in writing you are selecting preexisting components and bringing them together, which is similar to the process of collage. I mean, that's one very strong connection, but always, if you look at the origins of what we sometimes call concrete poetry, there is – say, in Apollinaire, or Mallarmé – a strong disconnection between the overall visual phenomenon, the *gestalt*, the visual unity which you take in at once, and some things which you read sequentially. And a lot of this work seems to play on the disparity, the gap, in a way, between the linear reading, the legibility of something and its overall *gestalt*.

MP Legibility is something, a very good term, and also strategic illegibility.

JS That's right. Take for example Simon Popper who did the *Ulysses* in alphabetical order. Conceptual poetry, so to speak, I mean, that seems to me to be a gesture of opposition to legibility. And it seems to expose the gap in a way, the gulf between literature, or between a kind of linear legible reading, and sort of accumulations that occur through the process of collecting, which is why I find that work quite interesting.

MP Yeah, there is a lot of people who re-read masterpieces in alphabetical order, or in chance order or filter through a text or employ other ordering criteria or translation or rewriting criteria. If I'd employ such a very formalist strategy to existing material, I would always also look for a clue of why I would employ these ordering criteria. Like with *Der Einzige und sein Eigenum*, where I filtered down Max Stirner's book of the same title to first person pronouns only, it was a formalist exercise to reprint the whole book with all the words on exactly the same page number on exactly the same position, but there was also a semantic connection, because this book of Stirner is often referred to as the bible of egotism. So to isolate the *I, me, myself and mine* and print them on the page on the same position is also resonating with the supposed egocentrism of Stirner and revealing it in a very blunt way, maybe humorous way also. But it had to do with the content of the original text, it wasn't just a formalist thing. And like to say, that everybody who has my book and reads it out loud, that constitutes his or her self-portrait.

JS [laughs] Yes, No, it's a lovely piece. The resonance for me is also about the relation with the third person – or the denial of the third person. And I think it was Kafka who said, that he became a writer when he moved from using the first person to using the third person. When he stopped writing letters and

started writing stories, he shifted from the first person to the third person. But of course there are a lot of people within literature in the late 20th and early 21st century especially, who have made the discovery the other way round, and they moved from the third, the convention of using the third person, to deliberately using the first person, to give it that confessional immediacy.

THE SIGNATURE

JS Jasper Johns, he wanted to get away from abstract expressionist painting with the stench of the artist's ego, the bad smell of the artist's ego, really, which has defaced the "I". I mean, it can be read as concrete poetry, and I am very much a defender of the opinion, that everybody should always read things the way he or she likes and can attribute any meaning to it, but first of all, if it's composed rather conceptually in the way it was generated. And also, the concrete poets never used the first person. A friend of mine, Annette, who is one of the editors of the catalogue, has showed *Der Einzige und sein Eigenum* to Eugen Gomringer, and he said, what a wonderful statement Marcel Brodhaers once made. "It appears to me, that the signature of the author, be it an artist, a poet, or poet, seems to be the beginning of the system of lies, that all poets, all artists try to establish, to defend themselves, I do not know exactly against what."

MP And my book looks like concrete poetry, but it probably isn't. I mean, it can be read as concrete poetry, and I am very much a defender of the opinion, that everybody should always read things the way he or she likes and can attribute any meaning to it, but first of all, if it's composed rather conceptually in the way it was generated. And also, the concrete poets never used the first person. A friend of mine, Annette, who is one of the editors of the catalogue, has showed *Der Einzige und sein Eigenum* to Eugen Gomringer, and he said, what a wonderful piece, and it reminds me of my *Stundenbuch*, just the "I" is quite annoying. [both laugh]



MP The newspaper features a couple thousand handwritten signatures and was later posted around in the streets, which makes me probably the first "street artist", who is using his real signature in real size even. Another project is *Pichler/Pichler*, an ongoing long-term series, where I ask people to sign a print in my name, but in their hand.

Also I redid other peoples' signature pieces, like Richter's Blauecke, which is more or less a facsimile of his piece, newly dated, numbered and signed. And instead of the fragmented "cipher" as he has it, you have the signature "cipher". So there is this one-line missing, which also makes it readable as erasure poetry. Or *Une Seconde d'Eternité*, a Broodthaers 35mm film, one second of 24 frames, which make his initials, transferred to 8mm. By the media transfer one second becomes 18 frames, instead of 24, and 18 frames is exactly my initials, in his writing though.

JS Oh, that's rather nice, yeah. So, it's an arrested Broodthaers.

MP An arrested Broodthaers, or an assisted Broodthaers. Or again, erasure poetry, or a sculpture in the classical sense, where the MB is like a block from which the MP is carved out of, by omitting 6 frames.

JS Oh yeah! I have some thoughts about the signature, too. I do sign my work on the back. I have from the very beginning always felt very uncomfortable about signing work, but in a way I have gone along – it becomes so complicated. If you don't sign it, you end up signing a certificate...

MP Exactly, yeah.

JS ...of the authenticity. And so it becomes a kind of circular thing, in the end, the signature, I have given in on this. But at least, I hate it being visible, I can't bear the signature being visible.

MP Unless, it is really about the signature.

JS I've never been interested. I had actually more of a kind of physical aversion to the signature than perhaps you do, but to me, that's what started me in appropriation. I had become interested in found images, even when I was young, as a source for my drawings and paintings. But when I arrived at the Slade School of Arts, I think through the teaching and influence of Ewan Uglow, I gradually started to get an extreme aversion to the visual look of my hand-style of drawing, which became an almost pathological dislike of my own mark-making. And the signature, I suppose, is the embodiment of that automatic gesture. The found object was a way of avoiding that and I think perhaps the reason a signature sits so uncomfortably on works that are appropriations is because of that effacement of the self that's required in terms of being open to what's out there in the world, the preexisting image. I always found it really uncomfortable, when I look at a Rauschenberg for example, with the signature.

MP Yeah!

JS The funniest for me, are the Barnett Newman ones. You have these completely empty canvases [laughs] and this huge great gesture of the signature in the corner. It seems to me to deny the whole experience of their material presence.

MP Certainly, I have a similar feeling about editions of the Mallarmé which are paginated.

JS Are you talking about the original Mallarmé, or your own?

MP I am talking about the many manifestation it has taken in the meantime. Most of the times an *Un coup de dés* is printed in an anthology or somewhere, it is paginated and... it becomes really a different piece through that. It also keeps it alive in a way, that there are different manifestations... but it changes the balances on the page.

To get back to what you said about using other people's images, I had that also from pretty early on, and I even liked to use other people's texts, also in pursuit of laziness. I thought it would be cooler using someone else's words instead of making up new ones, and that was also a form of being lazy. But it turned out, that to find the really right words of other people, was actually more work.

JS Much more work, yeah. Walter Benjamin talks about that, doesn't he. His idea of creating an essay out of the quotes from another person.

MP Yeah.

JS The only person I know who ever tried to do that, was Norman O. Brown in *Love's Body*.

MP Guy Debord did that, too.

JS Yeah, but not as... he used them, yes, but he didn't actually make essays out of the quotations that I am aware of.

MP Heinrich Böll's Doktor Murke comes to mind, who created a soundpiece out of other people's silences in *Doktors Murkes gesammeltes Schweigen/Doctor Murke's Collected Silences*.

The conversation took place on November 23rd 2014 in London.

SELECTED WRITINGS BY MICHALIS PICHLER