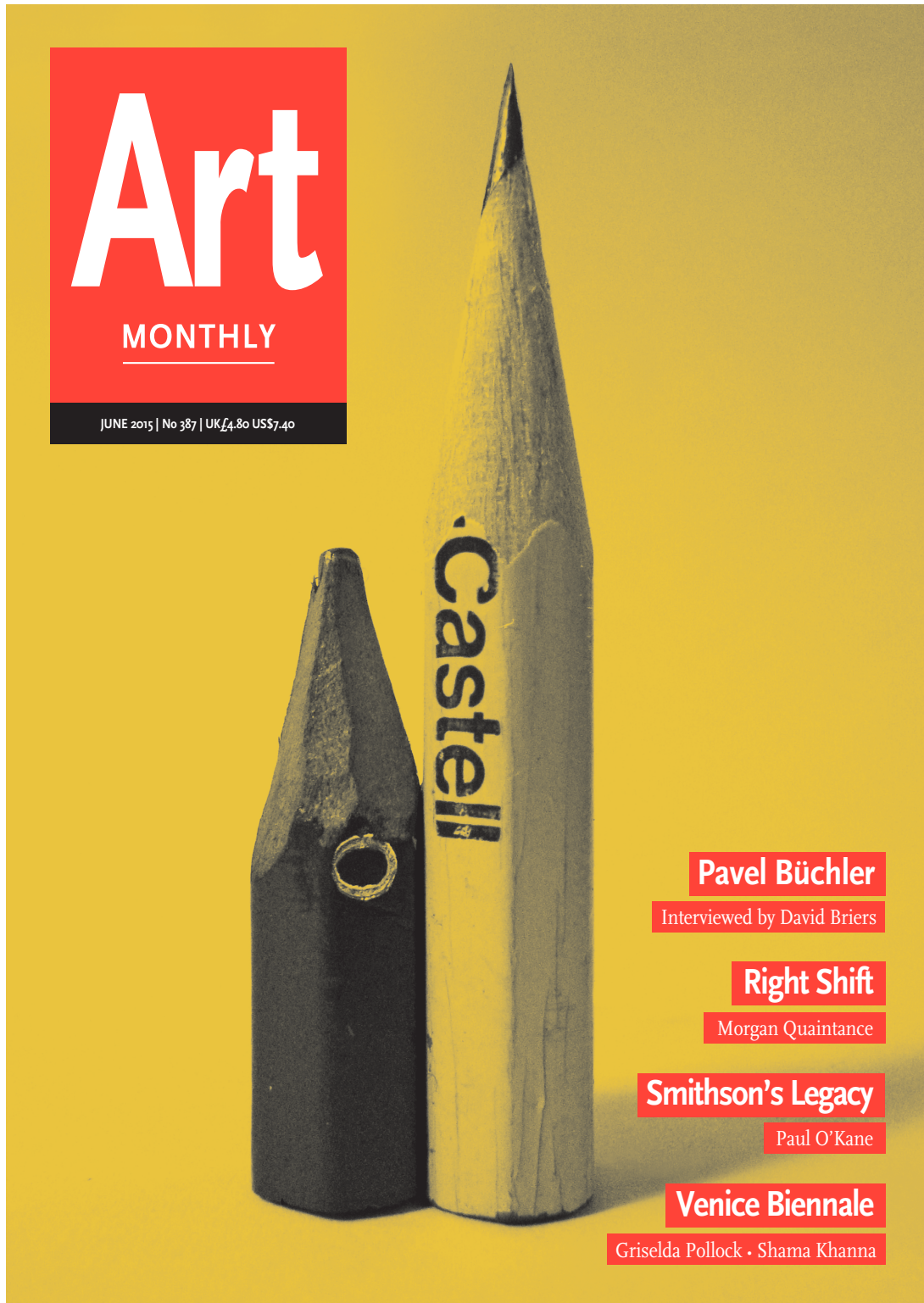


TANYA LEIGHTON



Pavel Büchler interviewed by David Briers

HONEST WORK

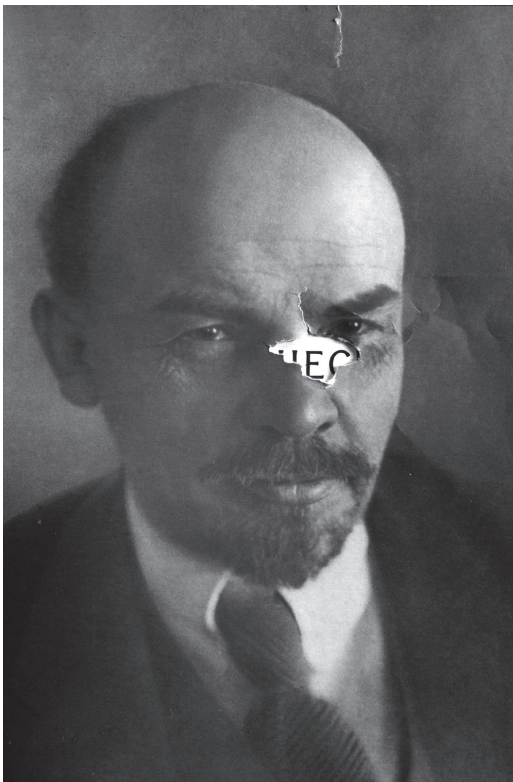
David Briers: *The name of your exhibition at Ikon – your largest exhibition in the UK to date – is ‘(Honest) Work’. How did you arrive at that title?*

Pavel Büchler: Putting the word ‘honest’ in parentheses is meant to act like a kind of question mark for the viewer: what do artists do when they work or what is art when it is ‘work’? As a society we somehow assume that work is honest by definition – honest people doing honest work. So morality, honesty, a sort of trueness or duty are associated with work. But the artist’s function in society is, if you like, to avoid honest work and do things that in an ethical sense don’t need doing. The working mode of art is not honesty but insincerity. Marcel Broodthaers announced his intention to become an artist by saying that he ‘too wanted to do something insincere’, John Baldessari in his film *The Way We Do Art Now* was ‘insincerely offering a cat a carrot’ as a way of doing art and Kierkegaard wrote something to the effect that if sincerity was the point in art, then the most popular artistic medium would be akvavit.

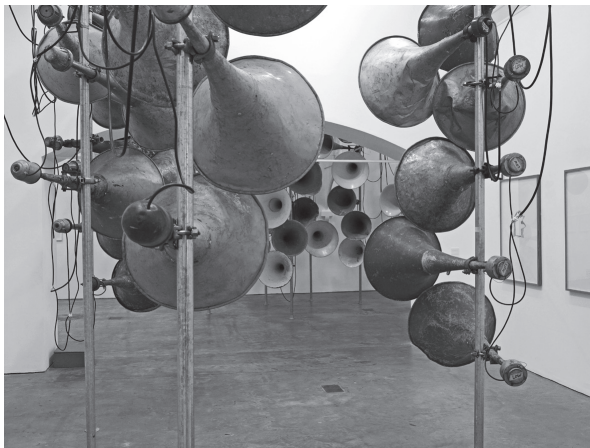
The idea of ‘honest work’ came out of my recent rediscovery of letterpress. I was trained as a typographer, which is a long story that doesn’t need to be told here, except that I could never find any use for typography as an art form and hadn’t given it much thought for 20 years. Then a couple of years ago, I inherited all this letterpress printing equipment from an old man who gave it to me under the condition that the first print I would make would be this little poster commemorating a common friend, a fine typographic designer. So I did that the moment I set it up, but it came out like your first print would and I sent it to him with an apology, saying it will get better. He replied: ‘Don’t worry about it. It’s honest work.’ It was like an epiphany, like a little gem you chance upon. Honest work, absolutely – letterpress is extraordinarily honest.

Self-effacing Object 2009

Report on Damage 2011 detail



| Interview | Pavel Büchler |

*Il Castello* 2007*The Castle* 2005-15

It struck me that unlike any other language technology that we know, from the clay tablets with cuneiform script to word processing, letterpress is the only one which will not enable you to say everything you may eventually want to say, because at any point in time there will only be so many letters A or B in the universe – you will run out of a letter one day. And so that idea that a million monkeys with a million typewriters over a million years will inevitably write all the works of Shakespeare does not apply to letterpress – you cannot do it. And that is where the word honesty comes into it: whatever you do with it, it will always in some way reference the medium, it will always be true to the way it is made and will necessarily acknowledge its own limits and its own limitations.

Last month, as part of its general coverage of pre-election issues regarding employment, the Guardian asked a number of British creative people 'at the top of their field' about their first jobs, their big breaks and their next jobs. David Hockney's reply was, 'I never really had a job. I have always just painted. It's what I'm still doing.' Is what you are exhibiting at Ikon the outcome of your job, or of a number of different jobs, or of no job at all?

That's a very good question. It's all three. We live in a culture of jobholders (and jobseekers) where almost all identity is derived from what you do for a living. Within this culture the ambiguity of artistic practice as a job is what really creates a space for it and what gives the artistic production a meaning as a kind of idle protest against the way things are, including the ways in which our professional and personal identities are formed, seen and understood. And one form of that protest may be the insistence on the recognition of your labour as a 'job'.

The work in the exhibition is also an outcome of a number of different jobs, because in my own case that professional identity is made up of different components. I describe myself as an artist and a teacher and a writer to account for different ways of working with the same basic material, which is visual images, words or texts and so on. These three jobs (and one could certainly identify a few more over my lifetime) don't overlap very much but they do have a bearing on one another. The methods and ways of doing things that you need for teaching and for writing are very different from what goes into the studio practice, where there is no method, but it is precisely that difference that defines the results.

So the artwork is an outcome of three different jobs, or perhaps more. Or is it none of them? Yes, it is none of them, because I am not even sure if I have a practice. I cannot really say that I make artworks, all I can say is that they come into being, usually by accident, by chance, and of course whatever happens by chance in the course of just living in the world can hardly be described as a job. It would be very nice if there was a job like that. I would apply for it. Just hanging around and watching.

Nevertheless, your artworks often derive from carrying out repetitive actions methodically. The writings of Samuel Beckett are regularly referred to in your work. The characters he created in his fiction are frequently caught up in repetitive actions from which they cannot escape. Is there some sort of attraction of opposites there?

It's not an opposite. I am maybe like a Beckettian character – trapped, if you like, in daily routine. There is nothing creative in it and yet it is the catalyst of creative production.

I think there is a lot to be said for boredom. Boredom is the most powerful starting point for something creative. We get bored with our everyday life, we get bored with seeing the same things, we somehow try to look again and find something new in them. Without boredom there would be no art. My everyday life is the most banal, boring thing that there is. I am like the Beckettian character who can never get out of this loop. Yes, I think the treadmill of repetitiveness is what drives creativity, indirectly.

Certain words or short phrases are often employed in texts about your work, and some of your own texts about your work, and they might be said to characterise your work. These are things like 'found objects', 'visual puns', 'obsolete technologies', 'repurposed things', 'the text', 'the page', 'appropriated material', 'art historical references', 'absurdist humour', 'understatement', 'economy of means', 'gaps', 'by-products' and 'purposeful uselessness'. They are all there in your work, but you could equally use them in relation to the work of other artists, such as the Fluxus artists and their predecessors, some of the concrete poets and a few of the early conceptualists, for example. But I don't see that what you are doing is simply reiterating what has gone before, though I couldn't work out for myself what it is that distinguishes your work beyond these traits. Am I responding to the craft element present in your work? Say, compared with an artist like Robert Filliou, who was exactly the opposite in this respect, strenuously avoiding the acquisition of any artists' craft skills whatsoever and making a feature of this lack. I think that, very subtly, you do the opposite.

Yes, maybe it is Beckett again – you know, the better failure. I often tell students not to worry about whether someone has done something before. If an artist notices something in the world that is worth doing something about, that doesn't diminish the potential of that thing to be taken up by another artist. It raises the hurdle, it raises the challenge, it becomes even more interesting to look at it again. And so you could think of it in that kind of Beckettian sense of 'fail better'. There is a pleasure and thrill and some degree of pride in noticing little opportunities in places where so many artists have gone before – even though I don't actually go out to look for these gaps. They just present themselves, just as I would think of what you call 'found objects' as objects that have found me.

So that's one thing. Another is to do with keeping things around for a long time. That seems to be the reality of my life. Look around in this studio: every single thing here is old, including the two of us. It's just how I am, I am that kind of a person. Look at my car, look at the jacket I wear, look at my hand-me-down mobile telephone. I am unable to let go of things until they completely fall apart, and in a way the art making is a bit like that. You have something in front of you that is staring you in the face, and it has to reach a point where it collapses, implodes or disappears in a kind of puff. I do have a nostalgic streak in me, but it is not nostalgia that makes me hold on to things that should really be thrown in the bin in order to see whether something that has reached the threshold of obsolescence can yield some last drop of meaning. You quoted the phrase 'purposeful uselessness', which I think is the definition of art's function – art is useless on purpose, its function is to be useless. And so somehow working with these things, with ideas and objects, with technologies or techniques that are of no further use in the practicalities of daily life, gives me a sort of head start. I don't have to do the rather tedious legwork that some artists who start working with a blank sheet of paper or canvas have to do. A blank sheet of paper is a potentially useful thing and so they need to paint on it to put it beyond use outside of art. Nobody paints anything for any practical end – why would they?

As for the craft aspect that you mentioned, that is quite interesting because I do have a whole side to me, a line of work I have recently started, where I work in ways I was trained for – observational drawing, watercolour and so on – just to see how much is left, if I can still do it and whether I can make some use of it in just the same way as I can make use of some practically obsolete machine or a piece of technology. But if the craft is indeed there, it is only there because it is difficult to unlearn. It is like swimming or cycling which you are supposed never to forget once you have learned. Fortunately, I never learned any craft very well and I'm not very good at those things and so, unlike Filliou, I don't feel any need to avoid the traditional artistic skills 'strenuously' and I don't feel that they get in the way. The very idea of a skill is to avoid strain, and if I have any craft then it is probably something to do with knowing how to keep things simple. And that is something that I learned from life. You know, the way we used to live in the old country demanded that kind of skill, of keeping things simple.

What you might call some of your sculptural works are often very small. They require the sort of attention with which you would study a postcard, or peer at a small object you have noticed on the pavement. And you don't only make work for gallery spaces. Am I correct in sensing that there is no hierarchy within whatever forms you may choose to use? A small booklet would be as important to you as a display in a gallery the size of Ikon?

Yes, absolutely. There is no hierarchy of materials or forms or media. Ultimately, every material or every procedure has its own criteria, and different things fall into place in different ways. In the Ikon exhibition there are some works which are on a huge scale. *The Castle*, for example, the biggest ever version of it, is an enormous thing with over 150 loudspeakers, each one almost the size of a person – huge things. Or *Idle Thoughts*, the overwritten diaries that I have been writing almost every day since 2003, or *Work*, my photographs of 1,200 cigarette breaks that I have taken in recent years when installing exhibitions. But there are also works that were produced in an instant, that came together as a result of some fortuitous encounter with readymade things in everyday life: a diamond in an ashtray, for instance, a copy of *Art Monthly* with its masthead cut off by a bookshop assistant, or an old slide projector with nothing in it – you can't even say that I made that. I didn't, it was just there and it left me nothing to do. And I hope that somehow I can let these different things show what they can do together when I leave them to their own devices. So there is no hierarchy of any sort, just as there is no key work or indeed a central motif or a common theme.

What is important in all art, I think, is what the work does, not what it is. A text work of three words cannot have the complexity of a novel or a feature film. It would be difficult to stand in front of it and stare at it as if it were a painting by Jackson Pollock. But then again, three words can do things that a novel, film or Pollock can't do and they can have the capacity to hold your attention long after the object is out of sight.

*How important is it to you where you place your work in the world, literally? You have shown *The Castle* at different times on different continents. Does it remain the same work?*

Our encounters with art – with what used to be called the visual and plastic arts – don't take place strictly speaking in the world at large. They take place in environments which are more often than not specifically devised, maintained and equipped for that purpose – typically galleries, museums, art fairs and so on – and to that extent every work of art is as much autonomous as it is context-specific.

| Interview | Pavel Büchler |



Honest Work (Five) 2012

On the one hand, *The Castle* is the same piece now as it was when I showed the first modest version of it in an obscure group exhibition in London in 2004. The work is based on a fragment of Franz Kafka's text which is put through the treadmill of a synthetic text-to-speech computer programme. This alienating contemporary technology is married awkwardly to antiquated technology from Kafka's day: loudspeakers that were patented by Marconi in 1926, the year of the first publication of Kafka's novel. The tension between the two is at the heart of the work and holds it together no matter how the work has grown in scale and developed through its various adaptations or where it has been shown over the years.

On the other hand, the effect of using the public-address speakers was quite different in a gallery remodelled from a former gas works in Sweden, the cradle of social democracy, and then in a ramshackle kind of space – an old tobacco warehouse – in Istanbul, and it was different again a year later in Kunsthalle Bern. All these places are galleries, but like the loudspeakers they have their own histories and offer different opportunities. When I took the work to Greece I changed the soundtrack, adding some 1970s Greek film music. When I took it to Prague, I did part of it in Czech and in Shanghai I tried to do it in Mandarin. Prague is the place where Kafka wrote *The Castle* and where it in some sense belongs, but it equally belongs to China since, quite interestingly, *The Castle* was apparently the first western novel ever translated into Chinese. In Birmingham, in the context of a survey exhibition, the work is probably going to do something else once again – I hope so, anyway – and it will be interesting for me to see what it does as much as how it resists the specifically local context.

Do you ever feel marginalised from the contemporary art mainstream? You have lived in the UK since 1981, but always outside London. In 2009 you won the Northern Art Prize, which you deserved to win, but there is something rather curious about having that particular appellation conferred upon you.

I am not sure where or what the contemporary art mainstream is. The geography of the art world and the geography of what is interesting in art at one time or another are not the same. Right now we are doing an interview in Manchester for a magazine published in London that, much to its credit, seems to ignore and often question the London-centric idea of contemporary art in the UK. The interview is about my exhibition at Ikon, a gallery in Birmingham whose programme places it among the great European kunsthalls. It is true that there is something provincial and even provincialist about such tokens of recognition as the Northern Art Prize, but a paranoid distrust of the local and a deference towards anything international are equally the traits of provincialism. In the end, I feel just as uneasy about being described as the Northern Art Prize-winner as about being labelled an international artist. What makes me feel comfortable in Manchester, the suburb of the art world as it may be, is that the city seems to have enough self-confidence not to care too much about such distinctions. ■

Pavel Büchler is at Ikon, Birmingham, until 12 July.

DAVID BRIERS is an independent writer and curator based in West Yorkshire.