

TANYA LEIGHTON



Pavel Büchler Manchester

Artist, teacher and mentor to many, **Pavel Büchler** has been based in Manchester for some fifteen years. Over this time his own career has flourished, with regular solo shows throughout Europe and beyond, but he's also continued to enthusiastically support fellow artists and to campaign for a high-standard of art throughout the city.

Interview Pavel Büchler
Interviewer Mark Doyle
Portrait Photography Stephen Iles

What's your professional background?

I studied in Prague in the 1970s when being an artist was a matter of defending a meaningful concept of personal freedom. When I left, I could not quite see the purpose of working as an artist in the liberal democratic world. It seemed that there was too much art already. A few years later I got involved with a photography gallery in Cambridge, Cambridge Darkroom, and discovered that the advocacy of the place of art was just as necessary in this society as in any other. I started writing and teaching and in the early 1990s, I became Head of School of Fine Art in Glasgow. There is a lot of mythology surrounding the rise of the Glasgow art scene into international prominence around that time. The School deserves a credit for providing a base and standing up for serious contemporary art against the more conservative elements of the local cultural establishment, but the simple fact is that it was the work of the artists that made it happen and that some of it was just very good.

What brought you to the region?

A job.

What were your impressions of the art scene in city when you arrived?

I first came to Manchester for a residency at Chetham's Library in 1996, and then settled here a year later. Almost the first person I met here, by chance, was the artist Vito Acconci having a beer at the Cornerhouse bar with a couple of young local artists. Almost the next thing I came across was a text work by Lawrence Weiner on one of the railway

bridge pillars in the Castlefield Basin. It turned out to be a residue from an outdoor exhibition organised by a young law student, Daniel McClean, with big-name artists such as Gabriel Orozco, Jannis Kounellis and Christian Boltanski. I was introduced to a small but energetic group of artists (some of whom were also rather good writers) around what was then The Annual Programme and later became The International 3. They were archetypal self-organisers; doing projects in one another's houses, setting up temporary galleries and forming various alliances within and outside the region. There was the far-too-good-to-be-an-art-band Die Kunst, with David Mackintosh, Martin Vincent and Richard Hylton; Graham Parker's galleries From Space and Floating IP, the former with Mackintosh, the latter with Dave Beech; Nick Crowe and Ian Rawlinson who organised *arttranspennine03*, a follow up from the 1998 £3,000,000 public art extravaganza but with a budget of £530; and there was the Manchester Pavilion at the *Venice Biennale*, a re-branded bar with no works of art in it.

Although these and other initiatives represented a fiercely non- or even anti-institutional attitude, the young artists had arm's-length but proactive relationships with the city's institutions, the art school, Cornerhouse, the Council and a distinctive presence in the city. They gave the local art scene a sense of identity, collective purpose and possibility, and for a while the place seemed very much artist-led. It is quite characteristic of 'The Annual Programme' moment that the publication which in 2001 summed up the history of the project should be titled *Life Is Good In Manchester*.

How has this changed in the time you've been here?

Most of them left, the Lawrence Weiner has been painted over by Council workers, but you can still run into someone like Marina Abramovi in a restaurant sometime.

What is your current role?

I am Research Professor at the Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU). It is an academic post and, as such, it is a little removed from the reality of life. But it gives me a good base, a lot of freedom and the occasional opportunity to use that freedom to some worthwhile end. *The Tuesday Talks* series that I have been organising for the past nine years, currently in collaboration with The Whitworth, is one example of that. By now, the series has become something of an institution in its own right and its regulars have had the chance to hear some of the most interesting artists, critics and curators working today.

The MMU describes itself as a 'university for world-class professionals'. This goes quite well with the essentially vocational nature of art and design education, but the great diversity of subjects and disciplinary cultures in the Faculty of Art and Design demands a diversity of interpretations of what this may mean. It also gives the Faculty a variety of potential roles in the world outside, and all of them, in turn, depend on the extent to which we recognise and respect that there is no one homogeneous 'creative field', 'industry' or 'economy' out there.

What are you most proud of having achieved in this role?

I am proud of the achievements of our students.

What are the current challenges of both the role and of working in the region? What is lacking or still needed to overcome these?

The biggest problem for any academic and teacher is the industrialisation of higher education, the consumer culture that it promotes and the cultural, political and economic values that come with it. The business models of management and enterprise that now dominate higher education have their parallels in cultural institutions large and small. There is a top-down tendency to design and manage culture that in the name of 'opportunities' ultimately creates obstacles. The valorisation of 'cross art forms' or 'interdisciplinarity', the worship of 'innovation' for its own sake and the technocratic association of innovation with digital technologies, the shibboleth of 'information' and 'interpretation' are all examples of the dominance of managerial thinking. You can just look at the mission statement of almost any cultural organisation around to find plenty more. It sounds obvious, but it needs saying that you cannot have a viable culture of art without respecting what artists actually do, and that institutions cannot produce art. In Berlin or London, Glasgow or Antwerp, the relative critical mass of good art and the serious discourse around it is great enough to resist most of the damage caused by the efforts of managers, but where the critical mass does not exist the managerial thinking tends to fill the vacuum.

When it comes to working here as an artist, the situation across the region is not uniform. Specifically, in Manchester, we have a strongly event-oriented institutional culture that either ignores or doesn't really understand the object-oriented tradition in

the visual and plastic arts, and is probably responsible for the exodus of young artists and art school graduates from the city. You can see it reflected in the programmes, commissions and other initiatives that come out of our nominally visual arts organisations. Even the excellent and ambitious art components at the last two Manchester International Festivals were, in fact, programmes of performance art. On the other hand, the *Alchemy* programme and the residency of Mark Dion at The Manchester Museum some years ago, were good examples of a positive action that created the space for artists to do what they do and left them to it, but symptomatically, they were the products of an imagination concerned with the preservation and study of objects.

We have a job to do if we want Manchester to be once again a place where life is good for artists. We could start by changing the language. No more talk about 'cultural producers', 'creatives', 'cultural enterprise' or 'capital', and so on. We should recognise that artists do not so much 'investigate' or 'examine' or 'research' or 'challenge perceptions', as they quite simply *make*. Purging our language and therefore our thinking of jargon and nonsense would go some way to giving artists a voice in our common affairs, as it were. We need a change of attitude, or at least a shift of emphasis; we need not so much 'opportunities' as role models, and we need the presence of good art as a standard. For a city the size of Manchester, it shouldn't be so difficult to have a gallery of contemporary art with a quality of programme matching the best of what you can see in the major cultural centres of Europe.

It goes without saying that whatever I can do to influence positive developments depends in the greatest measure on the quality and critical endorsement of my own work as an artist.

What would you like to do next in your career?

At the age of sixty?

Who else do you feel has been important in cultural terms for the region both historically and recently?

In terms of your question, it would have to be the likes of the Brontë Sisters, Henry Moore or Mark E Smith. But in the narrower terms of contemporary art in Manchester, Maria Balshaw is a godsend.

What has been your favourite cultural event in the region?

I'd like to think that the best is yet to come.

What are you working on at the moment?

In recent years, some of my work has been haunted by the ghost of Karl Marx. It began with the first work I made here in 1996 when I illuminated the English flag on the spire of the cathedral with a beam of red light projected from the window of Chetham Library where Marx and Engels worked in the 1840s. The red light filtered out the St George's Cross and, for a week, we had a red flag flying over the city. Now I have returned to that inspiration in a series of letterpress prints in which I am experimenting with what I can do with a set of old poster type. The number of the characters available in the set is based on the calculations of letter frequency by Samuel Morse, the inventor of Morse code, who counted the letters in his local newspaper at roughly the time when Marx wrote *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, which is where the words come from. There are not enough letters to print the whole sentence.

I like the idea that the printers of mid-19th century were equipped to print the news but not philosophy. Engels writes in the notes to the third edition of the book that "efforts to reprint the book in an English translation proved unsuccessful". Now we know why.



Left: *Red Flag*, 1997, light projection, Chetham Library, Manchester

Following pages: *Revolution of the Nineteenth Century*, 2012 unique letterpress print, 4 parts, 57x103 cm each



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