

Peter Halley



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PHOTOGRAPHED
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I would like to propose an alternative interview format today, inspired by, or 'borrowed' even, from a friend of mine – a graphic designer from Bordeaux, Michel Aphenbero – and an interview he did with Stuart Bailey of *Dexter Sinister* for an online magazine, *Rosa B*, I used to be involved with a few years ago. I will be showing you a series of pictures, and then giving you the chance to respond to them. So it will be a very visual interview, but also a 'blind test' of sorts. Even if I know that you know all of these pictures by heart – some are taken from your own work, others from other artists who might have been friends of yours, influences for you, models even. Some of them you cite in your work as references, but some you do not. So, in a sense, I have interpreted your work. I also have archival portrait pictures, and documents of situations.

I will start with a picture of you. When I was preparing this interview and, I'm not sure why, when I saw this picture of you in an old catalogue from Bordeaux from the late 1980s – this very nice, and now extremely rare monographic catalogue from the CAPC – it reminded me of a song by Lou Reed and John Cale, written in 1990 when Andy Warhol died: "Work, work, work". "It's work, the most important thing is work". I don't know if you could be said to embody this 'artist as worker' but I have seen shots taken of your studio that are full of works of people working, works in process... How would you describe your way of working? Would you describe yourself as a "middle class hero", as John Lennon once said? Do you consider yourself an artist or a producer? Do you work too much?

Well, first of all, thank you, Yann, for your generous introduction. That is a very interesting question. I think I published that picture because of the telephone. I thought that being connected to an electronic system was kind of interesting. The cliché is that an artist is alone in his studio. If there's one thing that artists are not supposed to do, it is talk on the telephone. I think my relationship to work has changed throughout my life. Five or six years ago, I actually had three jobs: I was publishing index magazine, directing the MFA painting program at Yale University, and making art. Looking back, I'm not quite sure how I did it. When I was a young artist, I did work alone in my studio and made things myself. But even as a student I was interested in communications. One summer I had a job as an audio assistant engineer at a radio station in New York. Basically, I discovered I was too shy to work in that kind of team environment. It reinforced my decision to become an artist and work in an autonomous fashion.

Over the years, I guess I've become more comfortable with people. Certainly both teaching and publishing index magazine were about connecting with other people through work. I think for those of us who are shy but interested in other people, relating to them in a structured environment – on a project, doing a magazine – where there is a sense of shared purpose, is more comfortable.

I'm answering your question with a bit of personal history, because I want to address the students in the audience. When I was young I was quite concerned with trying to figure out the strengths and weaknesses of my own personality. In creative work, I feel it's important to know one's own self very well. By the way, I'm also kind of lazy (laughs). Often I'd rather read a book than work.

A few hours spent looking at magazines and reading a book has always been just as appealing as working. I think it's important to try to balance the desire to be culturally receptive and take things in with the desire to produce.

Politics of Geometry

– I wanted to start at the beginning, which is a 1985 work titled Ideal Home. You wrote about the use of industrial paint in your early works: “I'd seen Roll-a-Tex on suburban walls and was fascinated by it, and Day-Glo had always seemed very spooky and unnatural to me. The material is loaded for me in terms of my investigation of the social”. I was immediately reminded of the kind of work Dan Graham was doing twenty years ago, Homes for America – a conceptual project also dealing with the geometricization of social space through a study of suburban housing in the US as a possible source for Minimalist art. Would you describe your 1980s work as a continuation of this kind of study, but which goes further in terms of materiality? How would you describe the allegorical, social or even political dimension of such a work?

It may be difficult to get an idea of the direction of my work in the mid-1980s from just one image. But what was really important for me was to understand the networks of space which surround us, whether it's the physical space of streets, and highways, or the communications space of telephones, television, and ultimately the internet. It was so interesting to have the opportunity to experience the beginnings of the digital era in the 1980s. I guess I am what you might call a 'techno skeptic.' I believe that with industrialization and then digitalization, living in a computer-dominated society, the paths we travel are more and more determined by massive, powerful networks over which we have no control but that very much take away our own choices. It always intrigued me that the American image of freedom was being in a car on the “open road.” Back around 1985, I was thinking: “Well, there's nothing much more restrictive that you could possibly do than drive a car on a highway where your body movements are limited to a few centimeters, where you have to vigilantly stay in your assigned lane or risk serious harm or death.” That is total restriction. Yet it had become an image of freedom. The way all these networks come to seem so attractive – rather than restrictive – is something I'm still interested in.

— So this is why you speak about cells and prisons in relation to your early works, such as this one?

Can we look at this with the next image? This is a prison, the one before is a cell. This is 1985, and the white one is 1981. I come from a generation that was influenced by the tail end of Existentialism and interested in questions of human isolation and alienation. From the 1940s to the 1960s, a lot of people believed that advanced capitalism and industrialized society had put us into alienating boxes, that this society had produced a way of life that was by-and-large miserable. Growing up in New York and moving back there in 1980, I was really always in touch with the idea of this Existential misery and the isolation produced by living in an impersonal industrialized city. For me, the way to represent my experience of that kind of environment was through this repeated allegorical symbol, the prison. Later on, as in the other picture, the prison became the cell – which is a square without a window or bars on it. The prison or the cell could be an apartment, an automobile, or, nowadays, sitting in front of your computer terminal – all these situations of physical isolation which, I think, so much dominate the way we live.

However, I soon realized that 1980 was not the same as 1950 and began to think about how these isolated spaces are connected. In this painting and the earlier one, those black lines on the bottom are what I call “conduits.” Here’s how this painting came about. I was sitting in my studio in the East Village. I was living alone and thinking: “Well, I’m so isolated, but at the same time the telephone is ringing... and there’s the radio, TV, the lights are on because I’m connected to the electric grid.” I became obsessed with the idea that the space we live in was characterized simultaneously by physical isolation and connection through technological pathways.

— *I’ve always been fascinated by the discrepancy between the very geometric, silent, austere and almost empty dimension of your paintings and, on the other hand, the very full-of-references dimension of your texts, which are more playful and dense in terms of the quantity of cultural references. Would you say that your work cannot be understood without reading the texts? Is it something like a device the spectator has to experiment with? Or...*

I think they can be accessed, but maybe not readily. Some people do so quite easily, some people don’t. I also have to say, Yann, that I also think my paintings are humorous. The idea of painting a white square with this textured commercial paint, called Roll-a-Tex, putting it on top of another panel with black lines going up into the square which I’m calling a prison, and saying that it represents electricity or internet cables going into a home, is pretty funny – and if not humorous, at least childish or childlike. I’ve always been interested in the clumsy, almost primitive level of syntax in my own works.

The other thing I want to point out about these painting is that I was also responding to Minimalism, and to the whole history of geometric abstraction in the twentieth century. I was trying to figure out why, after many, many centuries, abstract geometric art had resurfaced in Western culture. As best as I could understand, it was because the spaces in which we live and move had become so dominated by geometric structures. Looking back at artists like Mondrian, Barnett Newman, or Donald Judd – it occurred to me that these works served the function of justifying or even celebrating the control and limitations that came about as a result of these externally imposed, controlling geometrical structures.

The Nervous System

— *You quote Michel Foucault in many of your texts, and you were speaking just now about the humorous dimension of your work, which creates a perfect link for my next question: I was wondering how you perceive your own position in the debate, which has taken place across French-speaking countries, on the appropriation of French thought in the US, and its re-appropriation in France... For instance, the very way I have become interested in Foucault through your own writing... So, it’s another circular conduit of sorts: the way it travels from France to the US, and then back again to the US from France. Did you take part in this debate on appropriations or, sometimes, ‘mis-appropriations’ even?*

For a long time, people gave me a really hard time about my interest in Baudrillard and his concept of Simulation, saying that my works were illustrations of his ideas. It was discouraging. There were also a number of other figures who were important to me in the 80s – including Roland Barthes and Paul Virilio – but I especially want to talk about Guy Debord and his book, *The Society of the Spectacle*. This, for me, was a key text, and it is still applicable to a lot of art production going on today. In fact, I believe that perhaps the most important subject the visual arts over the last twenty years is the Spectacle, with artists responding to this phenomenon in different ways.

The Society of the Spectacle was published in the 1960s, and it's incredibly prescient about what was going to happen in media society ever since. Debord is sort of a Marxist figure. He writes about our daily lives as worker-drones in a capitalist society as being so dull, completely predictable, and without meaning. As a result, this entire mechanism of the Spectacle comes into being – movies, advertising, the fashion industry, shopping malls, and, today, all kinds of computer-created special effects – that creates these seductive dramas in which we invest our emotional lives, that give our world a kind of mythic significance that we wouldn't have without them.

I think that art really begins to embrace the Spectacle around 1980. In painting, with somebody like Anselm Kiefer, there's a sense of even trying to compete with Spectacle. His paintings are so theatrical, with such over-the-top, modernism-derived special effects. They want to have a kind of immediate emotional impact not unlike going to a Steven Spielberg movie. And then, today, in the area of installation art, there are artists like Maurizio Cattelan or Takashi Murakami, whose grand, theatrical works are a kind of re-writing of the Spectacle. What interests me is that we could talk about a whole range of artists whose work would contain a whole range of responses to the Spectacle – from total endorsement, to appropriation, to personalization of the Spectacle.

If you went back to the 1960s or the 70s, to the first generation of Minimal or Conceptual artists, they would have said: "The Spectacle is evil. Art is supposed to be about the rejection of the Spectacle, about the rejection of this kind of illusionism, and about an embrace of material truth – things that were real and not illusionary." Those artists were committed to things that were grounded in their physical production, not in the creation of seductive imagery. I urge all of you to look at Debord's work. I emphatically believe that it is the crucial touchstone for contemporary art today.

Reconsidering Postmodernism

— *You wrote a very important, long essay about the debates on postmodernism in the 1980s in the US. But you also exhibited with somebody I consider the essence of postmodernism in the 'visual object' field: Ettore Sottsass, and the work he did for Memphis. I wonder how you envisioned this question, or contradiction even? I would like to be more precise: in your texts you compare postmodernism in the visual arts field and modernism. Or the way modernity haunts popular culture, and especially music in the 1980s in the US. You speak about the music of the Talking Heads or David Byrne, while saying that finally, in the 1980s, modernity or modernism moved from visual arts to popular music. How did this idea come about? Would you say that David Byrne is more modern than Ettore Sottsass?*

Well, I don't think that I would reject Sottsass in those terms. But hearing the Talking Heads around the 1980s was really extraordinary for me, because I thought it really came right out of Warhol and Pop Art. There were songs about buildings and songs about being a normal person walking around a city. In his lyrics, David Byrne positions himself as a kind of everyman. Even more importantly, David Byrne, Cindy Sherman, Warhol, and other artists I admire, seem to imagine themselves in their work at the nexus of social forces. They imagine themselves experiencing the same physical and social environment that you and I experience everyday — and they are trying to grapple with that. In 1981 or 1982, this role for the artist wasn't really acknowledged yet. The new movement in the art world was Neo-Expressionism. I guess one could call Neo-Expressionism a kind of latter-day Romanticism. It so much emphasized the artist's personal experience, prodigious unique talent, and psychological individuality. The artists were intent on communicating their own private, fantastical dream worlds. That didn't seem very politically productive to me. I believe that it's more productive, interesting, and much more useful for works of art to talk about this social network that we are all engaged with.

I think all this is still a little bit relevant today. In 1981, I wrote the essay you refer to, called *Against Post-modernism*, because in the United States, in the visual arts, modernism was so much associated with an art critic named Clement Greenberg. He was a proponent of Abstract Expressionism, Color Field painting, and he was really pushing for the idea that the modernist destiny of painting was to be flatter and flatter and less and less illusionistic. In Europe, on the other hand, I think modernism is more associated with the idea of Utopian society. For example, in the 1920s, what happened at the Bauhaus and elsewhere was basically a Utopian vision for the future. Even Surrealism was a kind of Utopian vision for what human consciousness could be. So when Sottsass says he's postmodern, I think he means it in this European way. As an architect, he is rejecting all those aspirations of Utopianism and embracing, instead, a dystopic, anti-Utopian idea. In that way, I have always associated Sottsass with Rem Koolhaas, whom I think is so adamantly, and often hilariously, dystopian.

Entropy

— *What would you say about your intellectual relationship with Robert Smithson?*

Well, I first learnt about Smithson's work just as I was beginning to be acquainted with contemporary art. I think he died in 1973, at which time I would have been about 20 years old. His writing had a powerful appeal to me. It was funny, absurdist, erudite about everything from B-movies to geology to contemporary poetry, and it was completely committed to intertextuality – the mixing of disciplines and genres.

For me, as a young person, my whole education had been oriented towards a humanist vision of progress in the West – a liberal vision of a democratic, technological society that is getting better and better. Somebody like Smithson was so skeptical of that, just as Foucault was. In his writings, Smithson really set out to attack all the institutions and values of humanism, and he does it so stylishly, with such a self-assured irony towards the genres of writing he is appropriating. For him, the span of history was not the Renaissance to the present. It was the age of the dinosaurs to the present. He wanted to define history not as a human enterprise but something much broader. His writings were enormously ambitious. For me, they provided a kind of road map about what kind of concerns an artist can have.

— *When I was preparing this interview, I went through these old Smithson catalogues, and I always link his writing with yours because of the way you interact through your writings with this way of thinking. I found this work by Smithson from 1965, *Quick Millions*, which is absolutely gorgeous, but also extremely close to your own paintings. And I wondered if it was something you had already seen before you started doing your own work, or something you may have discovered later?*

I hadn't seen this work – at least in color – before tonight. But I was aware of similar works. In the mid-1960s, Smithson was engaged in doing a kind of parody of Minimalism. In a piece like this, Smithson was making fun of the serious use of industrial materials that the Minimalists were involved with. If I'm correct, this work would be covered with some kind of glitter material, and in the center is translucent blue fiber-glass. You know, these were cheap materials. He was using them to create more of a science-fiction icon, really parodying the classicism and balance of a Donald Judd or Agnes Martin.

Technologies of the Self

— *Let's mention, at least, how you have always dealt with technology in your work and writing. Technological revolutions, and how they transform our way of seeing. Maybe you can respond to this image, this computer designed by Sottsass in 1959 for Olivetti? How does your work relate to the notion of computing? Some writers have written about these works as allegories of microprocessors, connectivity, and systems...*

Well, I feel really lucky to have lived through the beginnings of the digital revolution. If you think about my paintings from the 1980s that we saw a few minutes ago, they were pretty austere. They represented a world in which a single conduit went to a single destination. Now, in this painting from the late 1990s or 2000s, the connections between the cells, prisons, and conduits have proliferated wildly, they are completely out of control. I would say that the landscape of my work went from that of cable television and the landline telephone in 1980 to that of the World Wide Web by the end of the 1990s. By that time, I was thinking about a world in which the connections had become absurdly overabundant. I really feel that I was in some sense my work was expressing that difference.

At the same time, I really am a digital skeptic. Knowledge becomes degraded when it is encoded as information in the computer, and the idea of nuance is lost. Furthermore, I do see the Internet and Facebook, and everything else, as simply the latest incarnation of the tendency in Western culture, starting in the nineteenth century, to push us to become more and more physically isolated from one another, and to seek refuge in more and more disembodied social settings.

Science Fiction

— *Let's talk about Science Fiction, the exhibition you curated at John Weber Gallery in New York in 1983. It has always haunted me because... maybe because there were very few science fiction works in it. It's an intriguing project because it included works by Minimalist artists such as Donald Judd, and also artists from your generation such as Ross Bleckner, Richard Prince, and Jeff Koons, among others. But it is a show that deals with 'science fiction after science fiction', in a way, through a sort of Ballardian, dark, almost abstract way. I read that you decided to cover the walls in black, why did you do that?*

Well, because it was the opposite of white (laughs). I think people today tend to imagine the 1980s as a kind of optimistic or ebullient decade. But it began in the United States with Ronald Reagan becoming President! There was a huge recession, rampant inflation, and lots of unemployment in the United States. There were medium-range nuclear weapons in Europe. Having a Hollywood actor for President felt like... Jean Baudrillard's worst nightmare comes true. I can't remember the chronology of movies like Total Recall, Blade Runner, or The Terminator – but even in those movies, science fiction had become dystopian and predictive of a miserable, chaotic, disastrous future. I think, looking back, the theme of science fiction was a little bit like the postmodernism I was describing in Sottsass: the Utopian ideals of modernism replaced by a vision of the future that was a political, ecological, and human disaster zone.

— *You wrote that this show was also an attempt to create a sort of "dreamt space", something separate from reality... an attempt to fictionalize or hallucinate it. I've only seen pictures of the exhibitions, which were very beautiful, so it was a very photogenic show — but how was the show articulated? How did you create the ambiance of the show? Was it totally silent, or did you have music? What kind of atmosphere did you want to create?*

Well, that Robert Smithson piece in the background has a child's music box as part of it. It played throughout the show. These are interesting questions. Part of the reason for doing this show was because it was the era of Neo-Expressionism, and the most celebrated artists in New York or in Europe were people like Julian Schnabel, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Francesco Clemente. None of the artists in Science Fiction, including Bleckner, Koons, or Prince, had any degree of recognition or even representation by a gallery at that point. Science Fiction was in part meant as a manifesto against Neo-Expressionism. And, as you remind me with my own words at the time, I can see that an evocation of the Spectacle, the idea that the gallery might become a dream-like unreal space, was present in my own thinking. Transforming the Modernist, unassuming white space of the art gallery into a theatrical, dark, cavernous space was something that was on my mind.

— I chose this work because it was titled Total Recall. Let's move on to something else now. I found this image of one of your shows, and I was interested in it because it was the first work I've seen which articulates your work as a painter with actual material coming from popular culture. Before, I got the sense there was some kind of separation between your interest in popular culture (articulated through the magazine and your texts) and your painting, i.e., that they were somehow discrete zones in your work that interact with one another without really meshing or joining up in the actual space of the exhibition. Could you tell us more about this collaboration with Frank Kozik at Wooster Gardens in 1997?

It's very interesting that you show this. I've always been very interested in graphic arts in addition to painting. I'm interested especially in comic books. I believe this has influenced a lot of my work – my printmaking more than my paintings. The show was organized by the curator, Bob Nickas, who was fanatical about the work of Frank Kozik. It is hard to tell from the picture, but in fact Kozik's color sense is not that different from mine – a lot of Day-Glo and, shall we say, evocative bright color. The show went up in 1997, the same year that Bob Nickas and I co-founded index magazine. I think the moral of the story is that, well; it's always interesting to collaborate with your friends.

However, I must disagree with you that there is no material coming from popular culture in my paintings. In fact, The Roll-a-Tex surface and Day-Glo paint are both emphatically commercial materials! The popular reference is in the materials of the paintings, not in the imagery.

Altered Images: Pop and Beyond

— So let's talk about the magazine. Of course, I've always seen it as a homage to Interview. Would you say so?

... Yes, to some extent. Frank Leibowitz once said that it wasn't really like Interview because Interview was so dark and cynical and index had quite a positive tone. The other thing about Interview was that, when it started out in the early 1970s – I have some early issues so you can take my word for it – Interview was unbelievably bad. Really boring. The type was so small you couldn't read it, the people who were in it, you never heard of ever again. It was pretty awful. It got better after that, though. One thing I learned from that is, by the 1990s, when I was doing index, it had become much harder to do something bad. The technology of publishing and distribution had become so much more accessible that there were a million bad things out there, so you had to do something better. But when Warhol did Interview, there really wasn't much else out there. So, the simple gesture of publishing the magazine was almost enough in a way.

— I was very interested in index when I discovered it in the 1990s, and how this project embodied the curatorial culture that was taking shape at the time. I think it was the first magazine I read where everything was selected so precisely... the choice of figures portrayed... For people who don't know index, it is a series of interviews with people who are considered creative...

Of course there was the choice of the cover – the people who were interviewed – but you would ask writers, sometimes fiction writers, to conduct the interviews, so you connected people who did not necessarily know each other, and you would ask specific photographers to take portrait shots of artists. It was sort of an exhibition of what was happening in New York, very connected to what was actually at work in the cultural field, extremely interdisciplinary, very open to the live underground situation in New York. For me, it's actually very different from Interview, in this regard. It's very much more about connecting things together than doing a magazine in order to appear in a social sphere.

Well, I thank you for your perception of the magazine. The one thing that was really important about Interview for me was that it was all interviews. I have always felt that when a journalist does a profile of a creative person, the journalist's point of view is at least as much a part of the piece as what the person has to say. For example, a journalist might want to write a piece about me and Jean Baudrillard's work. But if it were an interview with me, I might only choose to talk about that subject for two sentences. At index, we went back to the long interview format that Interview pioneered, so we could let creative people speak in their own voices about whatever they wanted to talk about. The other thing is – guided by Wolfgang Tillmans, who was our cover photographer for the first year – we didn't do any studio photography; the photos were all people shot in their own environments. Believe it or not, that was quite unusual in 1996. I do believe that index, with Wolfgang and other photographers like him, really changed that around and contributed to a new kind of documentary magazine photography.

Also, I was never the editor. I was the publisher. Bob Nickas was the first editor, followed by two others. If you read about being in a band at a certain period of time — prototypically, the Beatles in the 1960s — certain things just fall into place. It's magical. Through our editors, and the people we interviewed who would then interview other interesting people, what we ended up covering — which was really vital in the late 1990s — is what we called 'indie culture,' people who were working in popular forms but outside the mainstream. Their projects were based on self-financing, or low-cost financing. For example, an indie filmmaker is doing the same thing that somebody who is making an expensive movie is doing, but they are seizing the means of production and have control of the message they wish to communicate. In a sense, we covered a whole generation of people who are about 10 years younger than I am. I'm thinking of people such as Marc Jacobs, Bjork, or even Juergen Teller, who represented that kind of indie 1990s sensibility.

Transmission

— I would like to hear you on education: I think it is very connected to what you just said, but let's take it to another level — an historical level. This is a portrait by Josef Albers. I have always thought that your painting was somehow connected to Albers. Maybe the link is a very formal one, simply because the work looks like Albers in some way, but transformed and deconstructed and maybe turned into something more... amusing. But Albers was also very important, of course, as a teacher; first at the Bauhaus and then in the US. Would you say that your work continues his project in some way? And how do you relate to this story, this history?

Well, it is an interesting story. I am appreciative that you make this connection. I actually first read Albers' *Interaction of Color* when I was a teenager. I highly recommend it. It's an incredibly poetic book. It's less about color than it is about perception, how perception changes depending on the context you are in. What stuck with me from Albers' work is seeing color as involved with game theory. A lot of the color in my work is based on plays between complementary colors, or between warm and cool, or light and dark — almost like moves on a chessboard. In one part of a painting, I might play with complementary colors, and in another, a contrast of warm and cool colors. There are different playful strategies at work.

I just learned that Albers didn't start painting until he was 50. Before that he worked in different forms of graphics, printmaking, and glass. The great thing about Albers is that Albers — as a Utopian modernist and as a German Romantic — was truly intoxicated by nature. When he described his paintings, he would often conjure the relationship between what he painted and phenomena in the natural world. You could somehow see my work as intentionally anti-Albers, insofar as I take some of the same thematic, but with an almost equally emphatic rejection of nature.