UMĚNÍ 2 ART

PŘEDNÍ STRANA OBÁLKY:
Pavel Büchler, Malé peklo, 2012
rytina, zapalovač Zippo, 5,5 × 3,6 × 1 cm
Foto: © Pavel Büchler

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Compression and Riddlecraft
On Pavel Büchler's 'Small Sculptures'

Il Castello

Pavel Büchler's *Il Castello* (2007) is comprised of two small pencil stubs standing upright side-by-side.[1] [1] One squat, the other tapered, they arrive like a diminutive comedy duo. Once they had been tools, but now they have been lifted from their functional roles and re-designated as an artwork. To the left is the worn remainder of a blue pencil discarded by a builder who was carrying out work on the artist's house in 2002. Five years later, Büchler sharpened the tip of a yellow Faber-Castell pencil to a perfect conical point. He placed it beside the first, establishing the relationships that will come to determine the work's title and meaningfulness. Standing vertical, the two pencils spell the Italian definite article, *'il'*, with the lettering on each one's lacquer forming the word *'Castello'*: *The Castle*. In a playful mimetic switch, the two conical points now become miniature towers and turrets, with the shaven lacquer ridges reimagined as triangular crenellations.[2]

By the time *Il Castello* was made, Büchler had already produced a number of works drawing specifically on Kafka's eponymous unfinished novel, *Das Schloss*, which was first published in 1926, two years after the author's death.[3] The most prominent of these is *The Castle*, a large-scale installation first presented in its full form at the Istanbul Biennial in 2005 and since re-made in a site-specific way at various venues. [2] This work, Büchler's largest and perhaps most celebrated, comprises dozens of Marconi public address loudspeakers — themselves first publicly presented in 1926 — from which issue a voice produced using first-generation text-to-speech software. The computerised voice reads passages from Kafka's novel in English and German, monologues that interpenetrate in a cacophony punctuated by loud volleys of politically charged orchestral music.[4] While *The Castle* spills through the exhibition space, both physically and sonically, *Il Castello* — Büchler's smallest work — might barely be noticed, were it not for the substantial vitrine in which it stands, and ostentatiously fails to fill, when exhibited.

Büchler makes the connection with Kafka's novel explicit in an adjacent postcard work, used as a New Year's greeting, which bears the following short text: *"A builder who once worked on our house left behind a blue pencil worn to nothing. Five years later, I sharpened a yellow one to add a tower for you: 'an earthly building — what else can men build? — but with a loftier goal than the humble dwelling houses and a clearer meaning than the muddle of everyday life'."*[5] Büchler's quotation is taken from an early passage in Kafka's *The Castle* where K., a land surveyor in a strange region, approaches the castle complex and is disappointed by what he finds. The buildings are not nearly as grand as they had seemed from afar and K. compares them unfavourably with a memory of his home town. Unlike this dubious structure, *'with battlements that were irregular, broken, fumbling, as if designed by the trembling or careless hand of a child'*, his own church tower was *'firm in line, soaring unfalteringly to its tapering point, topped with red tiles and broad in the roof, an earthly building…'*[6]

This specific literary reference — in which the familiar and the foreign, the perceived and the remembered, and the secular and the religious, are compared — might imply a hierarchical relationship between Büchler's two terms. The squat stub of the builder's pencil, roughly hewn by a Stanley knife, would become the poor relation of its perfectly crafted companion, which rises artfully above as if to embody its Platonic ideal. Yet the relationship is perhaps better described as paratactical than hierarchical, 'parataxis'

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1 / **Pavel Büchler, Il Castello**, 2007
found pencils, 4.5 × 1 × 0.5 cm
Photo: Courtesy of the artist

meaning 'to place beside' and involving equality between units of language which are arranged together with only the most basic connectives (such as 'and') or with no connectives or conjunctions at all.[7] In the case of *Il Castello*, upon reflection the apparently hierarchical relationship cedes to something more ambivalent. After all, the blue stub is both the origin and the end of the work; its white lacquer 'o' signals this, being both the zero of beginnings (emphasised by Büchler's phrase 'worn to nothing') and the 'o' that completes the word *castello*. This found object originates from the extra-artistic life-world and carries with it the authority of productive labour: the shape that is now contemplated in aesthetic terms was sculpted over time, albeit inadvertently, by its role as an instrument.

Tellingly, perhaps, it is precisely the idea of instrumental labour that is removed by Büchler's own work here: while their combination of blue and yellow recalls, to a British viewer at least, the colours of labourers' workwear, upending the pencils has withdrawn them from their useful service, a move familiar from the various critical strategies developed by the historical avant-gardes in the 1910s and '20s: collage, the readymade, the *objet trouvé*. In particular, the pencils of *Il Castello* share something of the functional primacy of Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* (1913), the first readymade: one being a basic graphic instrument, the other the proverbial emblem of human invention.[8] [3] Duchamp's upturned wheel was allowed to spin without purchase or purpose, allegorising the idea of disinterested aesthetics; Büchler also extracts his little tools from everyday life and puts them to work for the mind and the imagination. Indeed, here the word 'Faber' is recalled by having been removed in the act of sharpening. Part of the pencil's brand name, the word is most commonly associated with the Latin *homo faber*. This

term designates the idea of man as capable of controlling his environment by the use of tools, the implications of which were influentially elaborated by Hannah Arendt.[9]

In the wake of the challenges of the readymade and of conceptual strategies to any necessary connection between art, manual skill, and visual beauty, Büchler follows in the tradition of 'de-skilling' (except, here, for a kind of gratuitous and pointless effort to produce the perfect point). Artistic de-skilling was never an abandonment of skill *tout court*, however, but rather a move to foreground the exercise of different kinds of skill, and often those associated with what John Roberts has called *'immaterial production'* — selection, placement, re-designation, recombination, reimagining.[10]

Encouraged by its Italian title, and by the fact of the pencil's inevitable connection with drawing, *Il Castello* nevertheless evokes the most technically and philosophically ambitious of artistic discourses: that concerning *disegno* in early modern Italy. A concept developed in the first academies in Florence and Rome through the sixteenth century, under the sign of Aristotelian and Neo-Platonic principles, the idea of *disegno* was itself poised between mental design and the making of manual marks. In its foundational role as 'father' of the other arts, this theory of drawing involved both the perfecting of the forms of nature in the mind of the artist and the embodiment of those forms in lines made on a material surface.[11] Something of this division between hand and mind, and between the so-called 'mechanical' and 'liberal' arts, is remembered in Büchler's apparently slight gesture, one which itself — absurdly, perhaps, yet in alignment with the grand connotations of its title — took the artist five years to complete. By very compressed means, then, *Il Castello* sets up a series of

2 / **Pavel Büchler, The Castle**, 2004–2015
horn loudspeakers, PA system, synthesized
speech, dimensions and numbers of speakers
variable
Installation photo at Istanbul Biennial, 2005
Photo: Courtesy of the artist

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3 / **Marcel Duchamp, Bicycle Wheel**, 1913 (1964 replica, edition of 8)
wheel, painted wood, 128.3 × 63.5 × 31.8 cm
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of Galleria Schwarz, 1964, 1964-175-1
Photo © Marcel Duchamp, ARS/OOA-S, 2021

'day's residues' by the dream-work, with psychoanalysis devoting attention to what Freud called *'the dregs of the world of appearances'*: parapraxes, dreams, neurotic symptoms.[15] Büchler's work relies equally upon such everyday 'dregs' and remainders, and here too any hope of arriving at a stable interpretive solution is hampered not by a paucity of possibilities, but by a superfluity of relevant connections. As we move across the chains of association, the pressing question becomes more that of when to close the interpretation rather than of arriving at the *'protection of a specific solution'*, to use Susan Howe's phrase.[16]

Or, shifting emphasis and following the insights of Jaroslav Anděl, we might say that the work shares an affinity with a joke: it involves wit and play, relies on indirectness or implicitness, and at the same time is killed by literal explanations.[17] However sharp, nimble and learned the ideas implied, *Il Castello* retains an importantly dumb or clownish aspect, both in its tininess and in the kind of infantile mimesis that first supplies its logic. And, unlike dreams, jokes and riddles are aimed *socially*, not privately or intra-subjectively; like artworks, they are addressed to others.[18]

Büchler's Infra-Ordinary

This article focuses upon a group of such 'small sculptures' made between 2006 and 2012 by the Czech-born, Manchester-based artist Pavel Büchler.[19] All involve the salvaging of everyday objects and their subsequent modification, recombination and re-designation, and all are physically inscribed with language: complete words and single letters, monograms and proper names, diverse alphabets and neologisms. As demonstrated by *Il Castello,* these works employ very modest means to gather in great scope, doing a lot with very little.[20] In this, they offer an implicit critique of the reliance of much contemporary art upon high production values and spectacular effects, as impressive visual and technological means attempt to compensate for the withdrawal of art's more subtle and reverberative powers.

Such a critique relates both to the atmosphere of Büchler's early work in Prague in the 1970s, then in the grip of hardening state policy following the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 (the period of so-called 'normalisation'), and to his reactions to the very different kind of visual culture he found in England, having arrived there in 1981 at the age of twenty-nine. In Prague, Büchler had been a printer apprentice in the late 1960s, before enrolling at the State School of Graphic Arts in 1970, specialising in typography.[21] Aside from the official Czech education establishment, Büchler became

dialectical relationships: between the found and the made, use and uselessness, perfection and imperfection, the significant and the insignificant.

The connotative force of Büchler's little castle is all out of proportion with its physical dimensions: a proper anti-monument, the tallest of the two pencils is only 4.5 cm high.[12] A small and quizzically humorous thing, it takes on much larger dimensions in the imagination as it sustains attention, exacerbating the disjunction between its material and technical simplicity on the one hand, and its potential significance on the other. As the referential connotations spin outwards, it becomes more apparent that a large part of the *work* of this piece is to pose the problem of interpretation itself. Not unlike Kafka's novel, in which, as Theodor Adorno argued, *'Each sentence says "interpret me", and none will permit it,'* Il Castello has an enigmatic quality, calling for interpretation but deferring its conclusion.[13] Being so keenly wrought but serving no obvious ends it stands as a visual riddle or rebus.

Sigmund Freud famously compared the dream image to a rebus. While his was a standpoint of interpretive confidence, he nevertheless accepted that there was no logical or necessary end to the stream of associations that might be precipitated from the condensed images under the analyst's gaze.[14] These images are fashioned from the

4 / **Pavel Büchler, Lime Tree**, 1980
photographic print, 24 × 40 cm, edition of 5
Photo: Courtesy of the artist

involved with experimental and performative practices, inspired by the work and writings of Vladimír Boudník and by the actions of Milan Knížák, for example, and later by the model of Polish alternative theatre embodied by the activities of Tadeusz Kantor.[22] Indeed, Boudník's augmentation of chance blots and his insistence upon the importance of everyday experience articulated in his 'Explosionalism' manifestos (1949/1956) inspired Büchler's first piece of published writing, 'The Art of Everyday', which appeared in a student magazine in circa 1972 (now lost).[23]

Following his time at the State School of Graphic Arts, Büchler studied at the Institute of Applied Arts from 1974 to 1976. At that time, his practice shifted towards actions, book-works and mail art: small-scale, semi-private activities conceived under the influence of conceptual art and broader forms of *samizdat* (or 'self-publishing') culture. In this, Büchler's production departed from Boudník's pictorial model, which remained redolent of post-war *informel* art. Works such as *Material Facts* (1975–79), *Ceremony for the Absent Ones* (1976), and the poignant *Lime Tree* (1980, 4), with its own castle in the background, attest to the importance of models of art making based upon the creation of simple yet charged actions, gestures, and situations.[24] Looking back in

a recent interview, Büchler remarked that, *'The art had a modest scale, modest aspirations and minimal visibility,'* and that on arriving in England in 1981, he was *'unprepared for what seemed to me the sheer vanity of it all.'*[25] In a 2008 interview, he explained: *'I had this moment of absolute shock: I was astonished by how visually aggressive Western Culture was… there just didn't seem to be any need for making art and adding to this visual pollution.'*[26]

This relatively early impression of the so-called 'free West' lasted for several years and continues to inform Büchler's preference for what he calls a *'technical economy'*, explaining that, *'I like to keep things light and simple, without any surplus or extra weight, not because less is more but because just enough is plenty.'*[27] While I explicitly do not invoke this early Czech context in order to suggest direct and specific lines of influence upon the much later 'small sculptures', of all Büchler's works, it is arguably these that assert this enduring preference most emphatically. Furthermore, although pointedly small, they maintain high visibility within the public presentation of the artist's work in general: their photographs are frequently and prominently reproduced in books, exhibition catalogues and art magazines, as well as circulating online. Indeed, the role of photography in establishing a particular point of view in relation to the works, enabling access to a heightened level of detail and surface texture, and isolating and emphasising particular aspects of the objects, is of crucial importance to the reception of these works.[28]

Büchler refers to the way his work functions to *'make nothing happen'*, explaining that, *'I try to make you notice those small and neglected things in the world that you would have otherwise passed by without noticing.'*[29] This approach has much in common with Georges Perec's idea of the 'infra-ordinary', that fabric of quotidian objects, events and routines that have become so familiar as to escape notice.[30] In a short essay from 1973, 'Approaches to What?', Perec famously urged the reader to attend less to the headline-grabbing, extraordinary event, and more to the everyday experiences in which we are immersed and which most often fall beneath the threshold of our attention. *'In our haste to measure the historic, significant and revelatory,'* Perec wrote, *'let's not leave aside the essential: the truly intolerable, the truly inadmissible. What is scandalous isn't the pit explosion, it's working in coal mines.'*[31] He continued,

'What's really going on, what we're experiencing, the rest, all the rest, where is it? How should we take account of, question, describe what happens every day and recurs every day: the banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual? To question the habitual. But that's just it, we're habituated to it. We don't question it, it doesn't question us, it doesn't seem to pose a problem, we live it without thinking, as if it carried within it neither questions nor answers, as if

it weren't the bearer of any information. What we need to question is bricks, concrete, glass, our table manners, our utensils, our tools, the way we spend our time, our rhythms… Make an inventory of your pockets, of your bag. Ask yourself about the provenance, the use, what will become of each of the objects you take out…'[32]

The small, every day, unspectacular objects from which Büchler makes his works — coins, books, lighters, cigarette packets, stationery, fragments of text — constitute exactly the kind of modest and portable miscellany that one might find at the bottom of one's bag or pocket, or the back of a desk drawer. These are mostly objects that appeal to a kind of turning over by the hand, a manual rumination, selected because they have stubbornly hung around rather than in any more deliberate or directed way. Ideas of contingency and of everyday experience came together early on when a 1974 exhibition in a semi-official gallery in the theatre Divadlo v Nerudovce in Prague was cancelled at the last minute. Büchler issued a notice for those who turned up anyway, which read:

DNES NAPOSLED!	TODAY FOR THE LAST TIME!
Bláto z ulice	mud from the street
Obsah vašich kapes	the contents of your pockets
Náhodná setkání	accidental encounters
Vernisáž 29/1/74 v 18 hod.	opening 29/1/74, 6pm. [5]

Büchler remembers that he was 'probably thinking of this as a poem and it would have been perceived as such since the first line alludes to Jaroslav Seifert'.[33] Indeed, Büchler is consistent in his reliance upon found and discarded materials, taking advantage of chance finds and of the largely neglected stuff of his everyday world, rather than, for example, more actively and deliberately sourcing objects in shops or online.

Büchler is particularly drawn to objects whose histories and past uses remain in some way legible on their surfaces, often via inscriptions, lettering, or other

5 / **Pavel Büchler, exhibition notice, Prague**, 1974
Photo: Courtesy of the artist
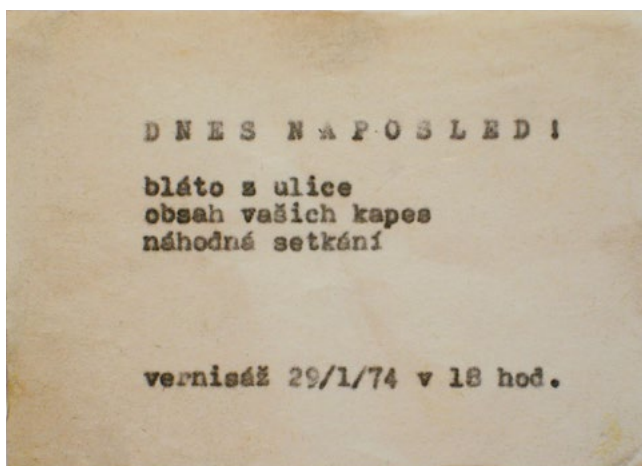
indications.[34] These social and historical sedimentations are then reactivated by their recovery and precise reimagining by the artist. The objects are never simply extracted from the world and re-presented in a gallery: they are always somehow recombined, retitled, supplemented, modified. Indeed, the work of attending again to the everyday world is not the same as the work of making art from it. While the former involves recognising and displacing the form of life embedded in our habits and routines, the making of artworks demands a different kind of economy, precision and decisiveness, and a different kind of reckoning with historical conventions.

Like words, Büchler's objects are readymades and, while not poems in any strict sense, these works are so saturated in language that it makes sense to talk about them in relation to the devices of poetry. (As an aside, Büchler has himself produced a book of poetry, tellingly entitled *Collected Poems*, comprised of fragments excised from found sources usually considered outside the realm of poetry.[35]) For example, as already intimated, one useful way of thinking about Büchler's 'small sculptures' is in terms of their formal 'compression', a term again more familiar to literary analysis than to art criticism. Here we might think of Ezra Pound's famous dictum, '*dichten = condensare,*' or Lorine Niedecker's description of the work of poetry as her '*condensery*'.[36]

In the context of a discussion of Emily Dickinson, Cristanne Miller offers the following definition of 'compression': '[Compression] denominates whatever creates density or compactness of meaning in language. It may stem from ellipsis of function words, dense use of metaphor, highly associative vocabulary, abstract vocabulary in complex syntax, or any other language use that reduces the ratio of what is stated to what is implied.'[37]

While today the word 'compression' is perhaps most familiar within the context of digital data storage, etymologically the word derives from the Latin *comprimere*, meaning to 'press together', implying the action of physical forces between materials. This connotation is particularly emphasised by another common usage of the word in relation to ignition engines, whereby mechanical compression causes the temperature of the air in the cylinder to rise, thus igniting the fuel and producing sudden explosions of force. Such radical shifts in magnitude are at work here too, albeit within an imaginative register. And while in the context of digital technology 'lossy' compression involves the use of algorithms to store data more efficiently, the strange kind of density at stake here has more to do with the products of symbolic activity permeated by unconscious energies and freighted with historical sedimentations, as, again, in the resonant punning and condensation involved in dreams and jokes.[38]

Bengal Rose

Like *Il Castello*, *Bengal Rose* (2006) also involves the salvaging of a small and exhausted object, an object powerfully related to the conventions of art. [6] And, again, from this unprepossessing fragment issues a telling but elliptical constellation of cultural, philosophical and historical figures. In November 2005, Büchler rescued a discarded tube of Winsor and Newton gouache paint from an art school studio and stood it upright on its flat white cap like a sculpture. The bottom of the tube has been ripped open, presumably so that the very last dash of usable pigment could be hungrily extracted before the object was tossed aside. The jagged metal 'petals' of this mangled rose are opened out to display a striking coating of rich, artificial, metallic pink paint on its inner surface.

In his accompanying 'extended title' for this work. Büchler writes, *'A rose is a rose. This one, found in an art school studio on 28 November 2005, is a replacement for the last rose cut in the garden on the last sunny day of the autumn. But for you, it can replace any other rose or no particular rose or roses in general. A rose is a rose is a rose.'*[39] This text allows the work to bear upon a series of related discursive problems: the relationship between natural beauty and art beauty; the nature of the transactions between image, object and sign (presented in terms that strongly recall early conceptual art); and the stakes of the famous line from Gertrude Stein's poem 'Sacred Emily' (1913), much (mis)quoted since: *'A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose'*.[40] The very constitution of *Bengal Rose* also necessarily implies a relationship with Duchamp, both in terms of the mode of the readymade in general — a mode, as already noted, that was initiated

6 / **Pavel Büchler, Bengal Rose**, 2006
found paint tube, 5 × 4 × 4 cm
Private Collection, Manchester
Photo: Courtesy of the artist

in 1913 and brought into more-or-less explicit dialogue with painting in 1917 when Alfred Stieglitz photographed *Fountain* before Marsden Hartley's *The Warriors* (also 1913) — and in terms of Duchamp's adoption of the feminine alter ego Rrose Sélavy in 1919.

The ravaged little tube is itself inscribed with language, now to be read upside down: 'Bengal Rose', the monogram 'W/N' (with 'N' reversible), and the word 'DESIGNERS', a little torn but just visible beneath the largest 'petal' that overshadows it. By standing the paint tube on its head, Büchler points to the dual meaning of the word 'rose', this being now a 'risen' object. The gesture of upending also makes contact with similar reversals: with the artist's comic self-portrait *Looking for Hegel in Marx on Art* (1997/2014), in which he was photographed reading a volume of Marx's writings on art held upside down; with

Duchamp's upturned readymades, such as *Fountain* and *Bicycle Wheel*, as discussed; and with the kind of 'absurdist metaphysics' of Piero Manzoni's *Base of the World: Homage to Galileo*, 1961, which somewhat voraciously transformed the whole world into an artwork simply by upending a plinth.[41]

The year 2006 saw Büchler make several works involving roses specifically. His *Gästebuch*, for example, set a vase containing both fresh and artificial red roses alongside twenty-seven printed sheets from the visitors' book to an exhibition, *Conversations with Kafka*, which toured various regional Czech galleries in 2004. [7] For *The Body of the Message*, Büchler presented the computer source code for an image of a rose, code that was gleaned from a corrupted email attachment. This otherwise nonsensical text was first transcribed by the artist and

7 / **Pavel Büchler, Gästebuch**, 2006
inkjet on paper, 27 sheets, each 30 × 20 cm,
fresh and artificial roses
Private Collection, Bern
Photo: Courtesy of the artist

then by a professional typist, both versions including minor errors and discrepancies from the original. The two typed sheets are drained of meaning, an evacuation that bears — sceptically — upon the idea of art as the conveyor of information and upon the status of the rose as a viable cultural symbol. The Rose: that emblematic flower so loaded with cultural meanings that it can never be perceived divested of symbolic and cultural determinations. As a sign it has long since been drained of its potency, becoming instead a clichéd symbol of beauty, romantic love, etc. We might say that the signifier 'rose' is as exhausted as this tube of paint.

Büchler's textual caption might evoke the rose's emblematic status in the discourse on philosophical aesthetics. In his *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), Immanuel Kant used the flower to exemplify the non-conceptual nature of judgments of taste, which have to do with the apperception of singular qualities as opposed to being derivable from general categories. For Kant, one can say that *this* rose is beautiful, but to say that roses in general are beautiful is to make a logical and not an aesthetic judgment: *'In regard to logical quantity all judgments of taste are singular judgments. For since I must immediately hold the object up to my feeling of pleasure or displeasure, and yet not through concepts, it cannot have the quantity of an objectively generally valid judgment... By contrast, the judgment that arises from the comparison of many singular ones, that roses in general are beautiful, is no longer pronounced merely as an aesthetic judgment, but as an aesthetically grounded logical judgment.'*[42]

Having been freshly plucked from a painter's studio, according to Büchler, the *Bengal Rose,* whose own claim to being beautiful is not apparently at issue, *'can replace any other rose or no particular rose or roses in general'*. These remarks recall Joseph Kosuth's famous early propositions, such as *One and Three Hammers* (1965), which work against the association of the general concept of 'art' with aesthetic judgments.[43] Instead, they propose a definition of art based upon the model of analytic propositions, exploring the relationship between object, image and concept by simultaneously presenting a singular physical example of a class of thing, its mimetic visual representation, and the linguistic definition of its object-type. This tripartite structure is remembered in Büchler's work by his (admittedly much more dispersed) format of small object, photograph, and 'extended title'. However, while Büchler is certainly interested in hermetic and tautological forms, as well as in the problem of art's definition, he is critical of the confinement of art to analytic propositions and the relegation of art's aesthetic moment to a position of little consequence.[44] In a short text from 2016, for example, Büchler writes:

From the perspective on the philosophical left, the aesthetic deficit of 'merely interesting' art is the product of alienation, which prevents true aesthetic experience... It is an art that incites curiosity and stimulates the pleasure of affirmation but only to entertain us by playing games with what we know and recognize; it attracts attention 'merely' by reproducing the distraction of the culture industry. If art is to do more than this, if it is to make us reconsider our assumptions about the world, then cognitive interest is not enough. It has to take us beyond the reach of rational analysis and engage us in a poetic exchange, which takes place not on the canvas but reconciles, dialectically, the dimensions of sensibility and thought in individual lives and social situations where works of art inform the expression, interpretation and transcendence of lived experience and the imagination of other possible ways of living.'[45]

Central to Büchler's continuing negotiation of the category of the aesthetic is his insistence upon the material specificity and sensuous particularity of the modest objects that he re-inscribes within the circuits of art, offering them up to new levels of attention and scrutiny. While *Bengal Rose* may not have been 'composed' in the usual sense, its small scale, its uprightness, its mangled body, the jaggedness of its splayed metallic 'petals', the specific qualities of the pink hue, and the letters and words it bears: all these elements are central to the encounter with the thing in front of us, and — perhaps even more significantly — to the memory of it to be recalled later.

In this sense, the invocation of Gertrude Stein becomes telling. Stein's repetition of 'rose' calls attention to the material properties of the word itself, stalling the usual automatic recognition so as to prolong sensory engagement with the look and sound and feel of the word itself, and how those properties might intersect with the imaginative idea of the flower to which it refers. Rather than draining affect, here repetition serves to heighten, give density and make complex — as if only the simplest rhythmical and bodily strategies can rock the clichéd word out of its calcified setting. In 1927, the poet and writer Mina Loy wrote of Stein that *'She does not use words to present a subject, but uses a fluid subject to float her words on.'*[46] Three years earlier, in a poem combining metaphors from chemistry and shipping, Loy celebrated Stein's work:

'Curie
of the laboratory
of vocabulary
    she crushed
the tonnage
of consciousness
congealed to phrases
    to extract
a radium of the word'[47]

Indeed, when Stein's rose is brought into the ambit of American minimalism and shorn of all but its most rudimentary and literal being, it still retains its semantic and sensory strangeness. In a letter from 4th November 1962, written to his friend Hollis Frampton, the poet and sculptor Carl Andre took Stein's famous line and divested it of all but the noun, now repeated forty times

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8 / **Pavel Büchler, Loose Tongue**, 2010
brass mouthpiece, coin, 8 × 4 × 4 cm
Photo: Courtesy of the artist

in a regular textual block determined by the action of his Remington typewriter:

roseroseroseroserose
roseroseroseroserose
roseroseroseroserose
roseroseroseroserose
roseroseroseroserose
roseroseroseroserose
roseroseroseroserose
roseroseroseroserose[48]

As well as drawing our attention to the homonymic relationship between the words 'rose' and 'rows', these eight lines of unspaced text render language fluid: a rose is a rose, but here it requires only a minor displacement to allow other verbal elements to emerge from the chain: 'eros', for example, to continue the Duchampian punning, or *oser*, 'to dare' in French, sparking new connotations about love and about avant-garde practices, perhaps (a fourth option, 'sero' might be a phonetic transcription of 'zero', in the manner of Jacques Derrida's *différance*.)[49]

Büchler's rose also tempts the viewer to follow the unruly threads of language, beyond any mute facticity or closed circuitry.[50] Firstly, to invoke again the field of chemistry, the name 'Bengal Rose', while designating a hue

in Winsor and Newton's 'Designers Gouache' range, is also an inversion of the more familiar stain, Rose Bengal, a sodium salt most commonly used for eye drops in the treatment of damaged conjunctival and corneal cells, and thereby identified with damage and repair to the eye. If Duchamp's readymade was aimed against 'retinal' art, this readymade rose bears upon the restoration of vision.

Indeed, the aesthetic and associative properties of the *Bengal Rose* are certainly not without importance. The colour, for example, is seductive, at once evocative of Indian silks and, more prosaically, the wrappers of the British confectionery, Turkish Delight. It combines the manifest artificiality of Pop with a kind of cheaply ravishing orientalist pastiche. The word Bengal will evoke the Empire and the Raj, against which Bengal did indeed rise, most famously in what became the 1857 Indian Rebellion, which began just outside what was then Calcutta in West Bengal. The maker's monogram, visible here and composed of 'W' and 'N', introduces two new terms: Winsor, which in this context cannot help but recall the British royal family, who changed their name from Saxe-Coburg and Gotha to Windsor in 1917, and Newton, invoking most obviously Isaac Newton, whose *Optiks* changed our understanding of the properties of light by exploring its refraction and diffraction via the use of lenses. The rose, then, an emblem of disinterested aesthetics and of romantic love, is suddenly linked with the history of Empire — an inflection that renders the violence wrought upon the paint tube newly resonant, if not exactly poignant — and with the science of vision, the long history of which marks all attempts to produce a philosophy of aesthetics.

Loose Tongue

The nature of aesthetic experience is again of primary concern in *Loose Tongue* (2010), yet here it is music and poetry rather than visual art that contribute the main field of associations. [8] A compact and enigmatic work, *Loose Tongue* is composed of two small metal objects of similar chemical composition: a fifty-drachma coin, introduced in Greece in 1986, five years after the country's entry into the European Union and brought out of circulation with its ill-fated adoption of the euro in 2002; and the brass mouthpiece of a Salvation Army tuba or Sousaphone. As with both *Il Castello* and *Bengal Rose,* Büchler's object-materials are bearers of language: the coin displays the profile of Homer, designated by the Greek name legible to the side, and the generous mouthpiece is inscribed with both the name of the organisation to which it once belonged and the marker, "EESI-LYP". The precise conjunction of these modest found objects produces

conjunction with the artwork's title, the unusual phonetic transcription, "EESI-LYP", recalls the famous wartime slogan, 'Loose lips sink ships', a demotic modern rhyme that stands in contrast to Homer's venerated poetry. Incidentally, perhaps, on the back of this kind of drachma coin, remaining invisible here, is often found the image of an ancient vessel, presumably that of Odysseus, the long-suffering but crafty hero who himself lost all his ships during his long journey home to the Greek island of Ithaca.
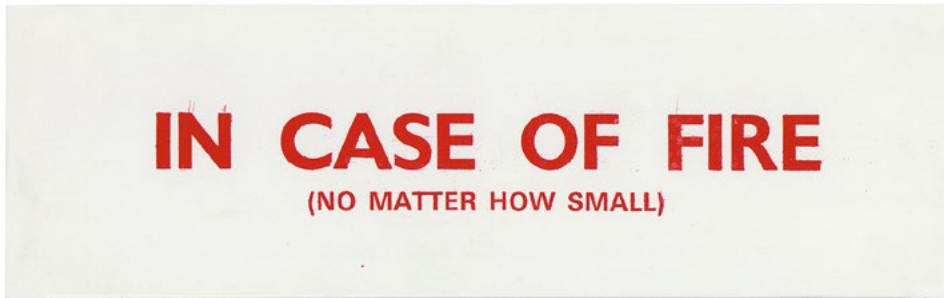
Odysseus is Homer's silver-tongued hero, attributed with the morally ambiguous rhetorical ability to turn minds to his will. Büchler's neatly set coin recalls both the ancient idea of 'Charon's obol', the coin placed in the mouth of the dead to pay the mythical ferryman of the underworld, and the way in which Odysseus himself famously stopped up the ears of his oarsmen with wax as they passed by the Sirens, preventing them from hearing their bewitching song. At the same time, Odysseus himself was lashed to the mast of his ship so as not to succumb to the temptation.

In the 1940s, Adorno and Horkheimer famously characterised the Greek hero as the prototypical bourgeois — calculating, self-restraining, venturesome –[51] and saw in the Sirens episode an archaic emblem of the logic of bourgeois aesthetics. As Rebecca Comay has elegantly summarised, in terms that recall the dialectical tendency of *Il Castello*: '*Expressed in the physical distance between Odysseus above (inert but "sensitive") and the sailors below (deaf but active) is the founding opposition between intellectual and manual labor on which class society as such depends. The sailors with their plugged ears are like factory workers of the modern age: busy hands, strong arms, senses dulled by the brutalizing boredom of wage labour. Odysseus strapped to the mast in solitary delectation would be the bourgeois as modern concertgoer, taking cautious pleasure in "art" as an idle luxury to be enjoyed at safe remove.*'[52] Given the powerful influence of Adorno's and Horkheimer's account, Büchler's work seems to want to draw aesthetic theory into its ambit, albeit obliquely and speculatively.

Against the backdrop of the Greek financial crisis, however, the encounter of northern European protestant 'salvation' with classical Mediterranean culture, indicated by the obsolete Greek currency, again takes on new purchase, if not clarity exactly. The first EU 'bailout' loan arrived in 2010, the year that *Loose Tongue* was made. Syriza's Alexis Tsipras, in government from 2011–2019, had laced his 'Oxi' (No!) campaign against the bailouts with

sparks that again fly between two poles while refusing to hold to either: between the classical and the modern, high poetry and everyday language, art and commerce, sound and silence.

Homer is, of course, the quasi-mythical blind poet to whom two of the founding epics of the European classical tradition, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, are attributed. The polytheism of that ancient time rubs up against the Christian monotheism of the Salvation Army, a Methodist movement founded in 1865 by William Booth in a sermon delivered in the Blind Beggar Tavern in Whitechapel, London. The Salvation Army famously gives its clergy the titles of military rank and practices a kind of 'redemption through song', its brass bands being a national institution on British high streets at Christmas time. Especially in

ED KRČMA
COMPRESSION AND RIDDLECRAFT

11 / **Pavel Büchler, The Case of Ed Ruscha**, 1992
found safety notice, trimmed, 22 × 6 cm
Photo: Courtesy of the artist

references to longstanding anti-German sentiment (the *troika* loans were dominated by the interests of French and German banks). Indeed, on 20th August 2018, Tsipras delivered a speech from the island of Ithaca to celebrate the end of the third 'bailout' period, which took as its *leitmotif* the story of Odysseus's return from Troy.[53] The repeated refrains regarding the futility of resistance to the European financial elites become the tempting but deadly song of the Sirens; France and Germany become the man-eating Laestrygonians and Cyclops; and the threat of forgetting of these years of suffering equivalent to the lure of the Lotus Eaters.

Tsipras' mobilisation of Homer's great narrative for political purposes only goes to demonstrate the distance of this kind of public rhetoric from that of Büchler's work, however. Rather than harness the significance of a complex present and recent past to a familiar story ripe for recognisable allegorising, Büchler's work takes the apparently unremarkable stuff of habit and makes of it a charged riddle. However tempting and engaging the play of associations that it sparks, *Loose Tongue* retains an enigmatic thing-like quality. Not exhausted by the referential excitability that it provokes, the object does not resolve into a neat solution and recede from view. Rather,
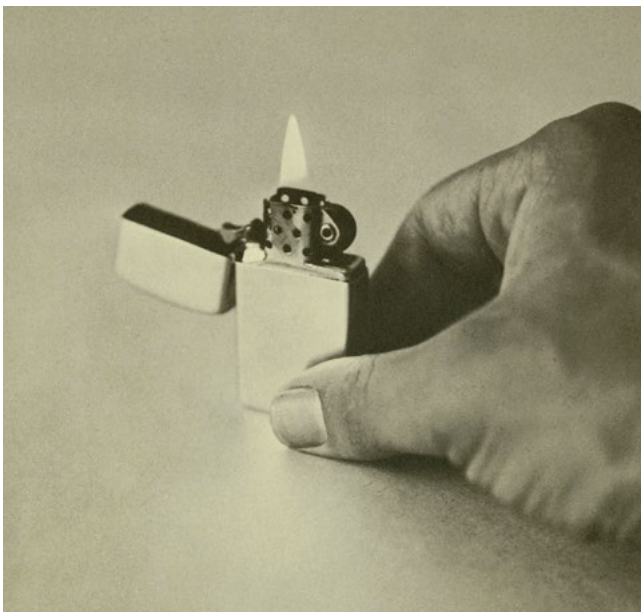
however energetically language is drawn from this heavy, rounded, and softly reflective little font, it will sit there in its literal thingliness and hold its peace.

Small Inferno

Another of Büchler's small, inscribed metal objects brings the fraught relationship between aesthetics and politics into sharper focus. *Small Inferno* (2012) consists of a 1963 Vietnam Zippo lighter inscribed with the word 'Inferno' in a typeface borrowed from the eponymous 1989 painting by American artist Ed Ruscha. [9] The logic of Büchler's gesture is again dependent upon recognition of the saturation of his materials in history and language.[54] In a 2015 interview, he explained the significance of the Zippo in the following way: '*Zippo lighters were a standard issue for the US infantry in Vietnam. Since they are heavy and windproof, they could be used as hand-thrown missiles in raids known as "Zippo missions" to set fire to crops or houses. The soldiers had their lighters engraved by local craftsmen with personal messages and slogans. "It don't mean nothin'" is one of the best known. Genuine early-1960s Zippos with no engravings are now hard to find because many were also engraved later for the collectors' market and I rather like it that I have contributed one of these fakes.*'[55]

Here, then, the Zippo functions as a metonym for the traumas of the Vietnam War and, with considerably reduced stakes, for the dynamics of the present-day collectibles market. The historical origins of this object encourage the association of its small flame with the dark shadow of the casual and ubiquitous violence of such 'Zippo missions' — Morley Safer's footage of which was aired in the U.S. on 3rd August 1965, to shocking effect for its mass audience — and with the American military's catastrophic use of Napalm in Vietnam.[56] The latter connection was established explicitly by Jeff Schlanger's 1967 poster, *Would You Burn a Child?*, for example. Implicated, too, are the fires connected with the culture of protest against the Vietnam conflict: from the terrifying self-immolation of Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Đức in Saigon in June 1963, the very year in which this Zippo was

12 / **Ed Ruscha: Various Small Fires**, 1964
Artist's book, 17.9 × 14 × 2.1 cm
Photo: © Ed Ruscha. Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian
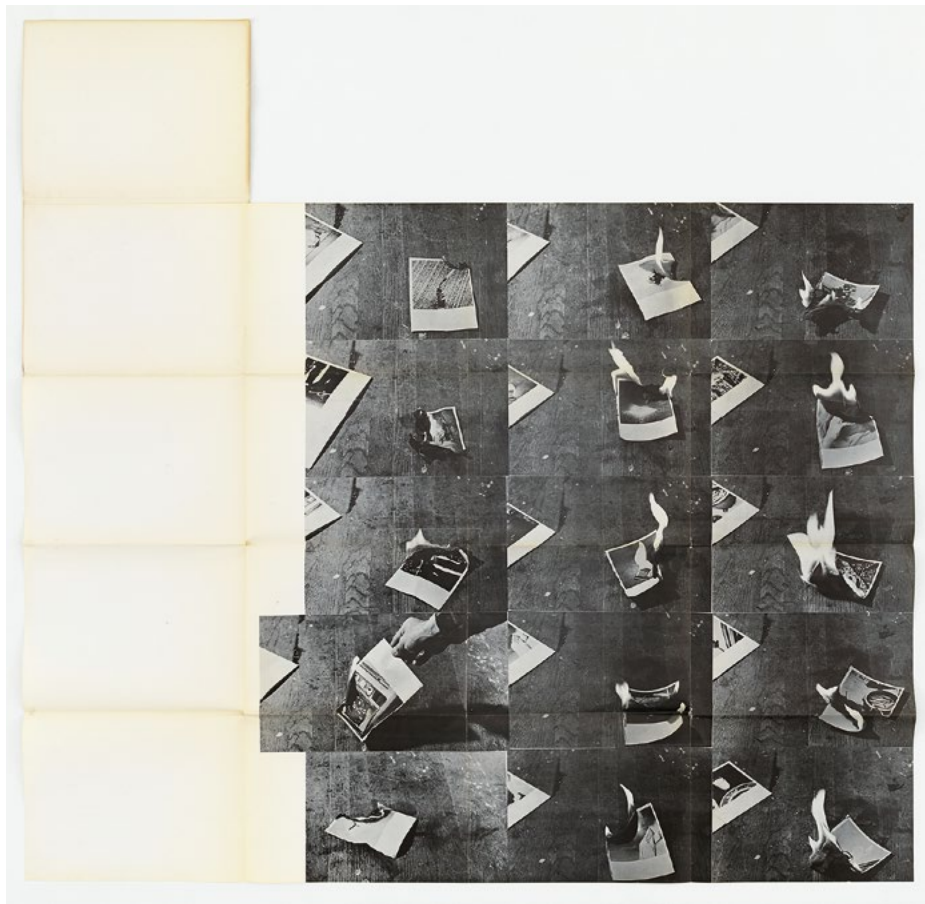
13 / **Bruce Nauman, Burning Small Fires**, 1968
Artist's book, folded offset lithograph on one sheet, Cover (closed) 32.0 × 24.4 cm; unfolded 94.4 × 124.5 cm
Photo: © Bruce Naumann / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

made, to the practice of burning draft cards, which began in 1964.[57]

Alongside such historical associations, the word 'inferno' also recalls the first book of Dante's *Comedy*, the great fourteenth-century epic that traces the journey of the everyman Pilgrim down into the nine circles of Hell, up through the terraces of Purgatory, and beyond into the heavenly spheres, where the journey ends with a salvific encounter with the Divine. In particular, in the third Round of the seventh Circle of Hell, the blasphemers, sodomites, and usurers — for Dante, the Violent Against God, Nature and Art, respectively — are punished by being strewn across the Plain of Burning Sand. Onto this barren scene, a rain of fire falls endlessly, scolding the skin of the afflicted sinners, in dark correspondence with the horrors of Napalm: *'the sand was kindled by it like tinder under the flint, to redouble the pain. There was no pause in the dance of the wretched hands, now here, now there, beating off from them the fresh burning.'*[58]

By the mid-1960s, the connection between Dante's Hell and contemporary politics had become something of a leitmotif in post-war American literary and artistic culture. Ezra Pound's *Cantos* continued to exert a powerful influence upon poets such as Charles Olson and LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka), the latter publishing his extraordinary autobiographical novel *The System of Dante's Hell* between

1959 and 1965. In 1958, the year that Pound was released from psychiatric care at St. Elizabeth's Hospital, where he had been incarcerated since 1945, Robert Rauschenberg began his celebrated *Inferno* illustrations (1958–1960). These thirty-four drawings were produced using the innovative method of solvent transfer, which involved soaking newspaper fragments in cigarette lighter fluid and scoring them on their backs with an old ballpoint pen to press the stuff of the daily news into the drawn sheets.[59] Included there were buildings such as the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Capitol Building, and politicians such as Patrice Lumumba, John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon.

Büchler's selection of typeface for his inscription is itself loaded, both in terms of his choice of Ed Ruscha (whom Jeff Wall referred to as an 'American Everyman') and the date of the specific source painting, *Inferno* (1989).[60] [10] If 1963 was a Cold War flashpoint, 1989 heralded its end. That was the year in which the Soviet Union began to decisively crumble, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Velvet Revolution in Prague, the Romanian Revolution, and the Tiananmen Square protests in Beijing. Ruscha's painting is itself small, 18 × 24 inches. The word INFERNO is painted in white capital letters in a square font across a brooding, indefinite grey-blue ground. Here the massive implications of the title rub up against its diminutive scale, an aspect of its appeal for Büchler.

In fact, Büchler had already responded to Ruscha's work specifically as early as 1992, when he made *The Case of Ed Ruscha*, a found multiple that is technically an 'assisted readymade'. [11] The editions are made from safety notices found in a cupboard at the Glasgow School of Art — itself now twice consumed by fire — which were trimmed to leave the words, IN CASE OF FIRE, printed in large red capitalised letters, and, smaller and in parentheses below, NO MATTER HOW SMALL. Separated by twenty years, both works point to Ruscha's early book-work, *Various Small Fires and Milk*, which was made in 1964. This was the second of Ruscha's influential series of such works, the first book, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, arriving in 1963. Strangely both indifferent to and intoxicated by the everyday world of Los Angeles, these books were crucial to the development of conceptual art through the mid-1960s, becoming paradigmatic. Büchler's *Small Inferno* returns pointedly to *Various Small Fires*, which included the photograph of a hand holding a lit Zippo as one of its eponymous blazes. [12]

What does it mean for Büchler to bring the traumas of Vietnam together with the apparent neutrality of Ruscha's contemporaneous practice? This could perhaps be the start of a polemic against the self-sequestering and refusal of extra-artistic meaning by proponents of early conceptual art. In interviews and statements, Ruscha adopted a persona of studied nonchalance and self-conscious neutrality. The beginnings of such a critique might be suggested by Bruce Nauman's 1968 intervention, *Burning Small Fires*, as Taylor Walsh has suggestively argued in a recent article.[61] [13] Nauman's work is an offset lithograph, which, when unfolded from its modest closed dimensions of 32 × 24.4 cm, becomes poster-sized and displays fifteen black and white photographic images, each one showing a page of Ruscha's book set on fire. Photographing fires that use photographs of fires for fuel, Walsh argues that Nauman *'enacts a ruinous rehearsal of Ruscha's own method'*.[62] She contrasts Ruscha's *'apolitical flames'* and *'benign combustions'*, with Nauman's evocation of images of burning draft cards, which had been widely circulated in the American media since 1964, restoring to fire the sense of ritual power it held in the culture of protest in the late 1960s.[63] Ruscha's *'relentless banality'*, according to Walsh, thus gives way to the *'volatile forces'* of social and political disturbance.[64]

While she is careful not to rebrand Nauman's work as a *'pacifist manifesto'*, it may be that Walsh nevertheless maintains too sharp an opposition between Ruscha's *'low-stakes fires'* and Nauman's more critically engaged reprisal.[65] While the deployment of the historically specific political valency of Nauman's work is illuminating, it is nevertheless problematic to insist upon a complete absence of such significance in Ruscha's own. As Büchler himself notes, *'it is worth pointing out that the subjects of [Ruscha's first book] is gasoline stations. Already in the early 60s oil — a combustible stuff — was politics.'*[66] Ruscha's immersion in the everyday world of

Los Angeles necessarily implies a relationship with the social, political, economic, and cultural formations that structure that form of life. The subjects of Ruscha's books are 'infra-ordinary' in Perec's sense, eschewing the drama of the headlines for the sake of burrowing into habitual experience: our language, products, architecture, ways of moving. Indeed, Ruscha refers to his own way of working as a kind of 'waste-retrieval method', explaining that 'I retrieve and renew things that have been forgotten or wasted.'[67] The nature of such overlooked spaces, objects and routines, are hardly 'low stakes' in that they bear upon the very structure and fabric of everyday life.

Yet what troubles Walsh, and what she regards Nauman to be critiquing, is an absence of clear critical tendency articulated in Ruscha's work: a lack of judgement regarding contemporary conditions and the forms of violence, inequality and injustice that subtend them. Büchler's *Small Inferno* brings infra-ordinary aesthetic practices into a tense relationship with an awareness of geo-political conflicts in a more pressing and pointed way; yet he too refrains from articulating a clear position regarding that relationship just as, in his own way, does Nauman. Instead, his compact rebuses, giving new life to the obsolete, serve to embody a disposition towards the world and to formulate the question in a mode that is both open and precise.

Aesthetics and (Anti-)Politics

There could nevertheless be an impatience felt here with regard to the difficulty of determining where Büchler stands on the wider social, political and philosophical problems engaged by his work: is *Small Inferno* suggesting that Ruscha should have been more explicitly partisan in political terms, or not? Is *Il Castello* presenting artistic labour as more valuable than that of Büchler's builder, or not? Does *Loose Tongue* constitute a critique of the *troika's* treatment of Greece during the debt crisis, or not?

In interviews and other statements, Büchler is clear on this point: *'Art is political,'* he asserts, *'but the moment you start using art as an instrument of politics you lose the art and you gain — no, you don't gain anything, you find yourself holding a very blunt instrument.'*[68] And, more provocatively perhaps, he asserts, *'Art is not going to cure the problems of global capitalism. It is entangled in it. The most art can do is assert the autonomy of the artwork itself (and its promiscuity, and its irresponsibility) and resist any pressure on artworks to be enlisted for ideological ends... Art can articulate alternatives but it is not in art's power to renew any meaningful forms of social consensus and communal bond.'*[69] In this, there is a deliberate resistance to the kind of instrumental logic that determines the agendas of most UK governmental policy regarding the arts and of arts funding bodies, which often seek to re-establish art's precarious reason to exist on the basis of its powers of revenue generation, community enhancement, or technological demonstration.[70]

This is not to say that as a pedagogue and public intellectual Büchler does not take aim at specific political questions, as well as at the instrumentalisation, privatisation and trivialisation of public discourse on art and culture.[71] Regarding the work that the artwork itself might perform, however, Büchler aligns with the variously wry, laconic and impassive models provided by the likes of contemporaneous Czechoslovak artists such as Júlis Koller and Jiří Kovanda; by earlier western European artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Marcel Broodthaers; and by early American conceptual artists such as Douglas Huebler and Ed Ruscha. Such artists tended to voice scepticism about art's potential as a bearer of univocal political meanings and to insist upon an at-best oblique address to immediate socio-political subject matters. Rather than becoming an instrument of political rhetoric, in which the artwork is in danger of being fully used up in the performance of the task, or of simply being crushed by the weight, scale and urgency of the problems, Büchler proposes art as an occasion for a different kind of thinking and a different kind of metabolism of the everyday world.

Büchler's resistance to pressing art into the service of specific ideological struggles was arguably shaped, at least in its broad contours and emphases, by his formation in Prague in the 1970s. In her discussion of what she calls the 'antipolitics' of Central European art in the 1960s and '70s, Klara Kemp-Welch has drawn attention to the importance of what Václav Havel termed the 'reticence' of dissident artists and intellectuals working in the former Soviet Bloc.[72] In a situation in which the dominant injunction was to dutifully rehearse official Party rhetoric, repeating what was in any case already fully expected and understood, even the word 'peace', *'much like the words "socialism", "homeland" and "the people"'*, Havel wrote, *'had*

been reduced to 'serving both as one rung on the ladder up which clever individuals clamber and as a stick for beating down those who stand aloof.'[73]

For Büchler, the artwork, released from instrumental functions, might instead give expression to alternative habits of mind, to a new alertness to the poetic resources of the everyday world, and to an invigorated sense of what it means to share space — physical, cultural, historical.[74] Such aspects of social experience are amongst the most threatened by neoliberal capitalism's faith in the Scilla and Charybdis of self-interest as motivation and quantification as mode of apprehension. Büchler's approach suggests that art is valuable precisely because it is not governed by instrumental reason and because its effects are not measurable; it has no fixed outcomes, is not didactic, and is profoundly responsive to chance and accident. His works are nevertheless still fastened to the social world, as the foregoing examples have demonstrated: by their readymade materials, and by the ways in which they are activated through a recognition of their address to a shared culture and history. In this, Büchler's work presupposes a certain kind of curious viewer, one both alive to the forms of life sedimented in everyday objects and aware of specific histories and cultural traditions that serve to support collective consciousness.[75]

Importantly, though, the object is not exhausted by whatever circuits of reference it might set in train. Part of the artist's skill is to compose these compressed material riddles with both enough purposiveness to retain coherence and also the kind of resonant ambiguity to sustain imaginative engagement. Finally, Büchler's most successful work holds the small magic of a little made thing: opaque, silent and inconspicuous until it opens its eyes under the gaze of the attentive viewer.

NOTES

1 This article is dedicated to the memory of my father, John Krčma (1949–2019). I am very grateful to Pavel Büchler for all the time and generous attention he has given to my research.

2 In several respects, I am indebted to Nick Thurston's account of this work. See Nick Thurston, 'Il Castello, 2007', in Tommy Simoens (ed.), *Pavel Büchler — In Amongst the Ashes*, Antwerp 2016, p. 182.

3 Franz Kafka, *The Castle* (1926), translated by Willa and Edwin Muir, New York 1974. Works by Büchler explicitly relating to Kafka include *Amerika (after Franz Kafka)*, 2004; *The Trial and Judgement of Franz K*, 2005; *Gästbuche*, 2006; and *Head over heels and away* (with Nick Thurston), 2006. Büchler has made numerous works using found pencils, the first of which was *Short Stories (Central Library, Cambridge)*, 1996.

4 See Nick Thurston, 'The Castle, 2004–2015', in Simoens (note 2), p. 144.

5 Regarding the status of these postcards, Büchler writes, *'I do think of them as minor "works" in their own right but at the same time they are just postcards. The texts on them belong therefore to these 'photo' versions of the*

sculptures rather than to the originals themselves. I sometimes use the texts as extended captions to accompany the reproduction of the works in magazines, catalogues, etc., depending on the context, but I do not use them when the sculptures are shown in exhibitions.' Email to the author, 11th March 2020.

6 Kafka (note 3), p. 12.

7 Parataxis can be contrasted with 'hypotaxis', meaning to place or arrange beneath. In the context of verbal language, the latter indicates a hierarchical structure, with main and subordinate clauses serving to deliver explicitly elaborated chains of conceptual development. Exploring the paratactical nature of Marianne Moore's prose writings, Helen Thaventhiran describes that mode's *'leaping, suspended quality'*, which Moore used to bypass what she called the 'tawdriness' of explanation. Helen Thaventhiran, *Radical Empiricists: Five Modernist Close Readers*, Oxford 2015, pp. 198 and 184.

8 It is worth noting that a major exhibition of Duchamp's work was presented at Jindřich Chalupecký's recently established Václav Špála

Gallery in Prague, March-April 1969. See Klara Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc: Experimental Art in Eastern Europe, 1965–1981*, Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London 2018, p. 26.

9 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1958), Chicago 1998, pp. 139ff.

10 John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art after the Readymade*, London 2007, p. 3.

11 See Karen-edis Barzman, 'Perception, Knowledge, and the Theory of *Disegno* in Sixteenth-Century Florence', in Larry J. Feinberg (ed), *From Studio to Studiolo — Florentine Draftsmanship Under the First Medici Grand Dukes*, Seattle and London 1991, pp. 37–48.

12 Here I am borrowing from Briony Fer, who writes of Louise Bourgeois' small latex works from the 1960s, '*There is a lack of distance determined by the object's relatively small scale, which causes the object, viewed from close-up, to take on magnified proportions in the imagination, quite disproportionate to its actual size.*' See Briony Fer, *The Infinite Line — Re-making Art after Modernism*, New Haven and London 2004, p. 110.

13 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka', in idem, *Prisms*, translated by Samuel and Shierry Weber, Cambridge (Massachusetts) 1976, p. 246.

14 See Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), translated by Joyce Crick, Oxford 1999, p. 212: '*We have already had to note that actually one is never certain of having interpreted a dream in its entirety; even when the solution seems satisfying and complete, it is always possible for a further meaning to announce its presence through the same dream. The quota of condensation is thus, strictly speaking, indeterminable.*' (emphasis in original)

15 Freud quoted by Adorno, 'Notes' (note 13), p. 251. Adorno continues, '*Kafka sins against an ancient rule of the game by constructing art out of nothing but the refuse of reality.*'

16 Susan Howe, *My Emily Dickinson*, New York 2007, p. 35.

17 Anděl is one of several commentators to have highlighted the importance of humour in Büchler's work. Aligning him with Kafka in this respect, Anděl describes Büchler's sense of humour as '*a reflection on the absurdity of norms and normalities dictated by officialdom, such as we encounter in our daily lives.*' See Jaroslav Anděl, 'Mr Büchler wrote to me', in idem (ed.), *Marná práce / Labour in Vain* (exh. cat.), Praha 2010, p. 17. Freud also made the connection between jokes and unconscious processes. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), translated by James Strachey, New York 1960.

18 According to Adorno, '*The collusion of children with clowns is a collusion with art, which adults drive out of them just as they drive out their own collusion with animals… [T]he constellation animal/fool/clown is a fundamental layer of art.*' Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor, London and New York 1997, p. 119. In his 1985 essay, 'An Anatomy of Reticence', and in a passage again discussing Kafka, Václav Havel observed that '*in our Central European context what is most earnest has a way of blending in a particularly tense manner with what is most comic. It seems it is precisely the dimension of distance, of rising above oneself and making light of oneself, which lends to our concerns and actions the right amount of shattering seriousness.*' Havel quoted by Klara Kemp-Welch, *Antipolitics in Central European Art — Reticence as Dissidence under Post-Totalitarian Rule 1956–1989*, London and New York 2014, p. 11. On the relationship between lyric obscurity, riddlecraft and sociality, see Daniel Tiffany, *Infidel Poetics — Riddles, Nightlife, Substance*, Chicago and London 2009.

19 Other relevant examples of 'small sculptures' include *Odd Pair* (2006), *Problem of God* (2007), *In Amongst the Ashes* (2009), *Delivery* (2011), *Cannon* (2014), and *Once again* — (2015).

20 As Anděl puts it, Büchler 'achieves maximum effect with a minimum of means.' See Anděl, 'Mr Büchler' (note 17), p. 15.

21 For a sustained reflection upon Büchler's work with typography, see Nick Thurston, 'Inmediate Writing: Pavel Büchler and the Logic of Letterpress', in Caroline Archer and James Mussell (eds), *Letterpress Printing: Past, Present, Future*, Oxford, forthcoming.

22 See Desa Philippi, 'Pavel Büchler: Sunday February 30', *Afterall*, pilot issue, 1998–1999, pp. 27–35. See also the useful 'Chronology' in Simeons (note 2), pp. 311–317.

23 Boudník's artistic persona was powerfully dramatised in Bohumil Hrabal's *The Gentle Barbarian*, first published in Czech in 1974. Hrabal's text, alongside writings by Boudník, has recently been translated into English: Bohumil Hrabal, *The Tender Barbarian. Pedagogic Texts, Artwork and Explosionalist Texts by Vladimír Boudník*, translated by Jed Slast, Prague 2019.

24 While not a question of direct influence, there are parallels here too with the Slovak group HAPPSOC, whose manifesto, written in 1965, promoted actions '*stimulating the receptiveness and multifaceted enjoyment of reality, released from the stream of everyday existence… For those who share this concept* [of reality], *the immediate environment does not merely reveal itself as a thing, but, in addition, includes as well all the relationships and chains of events that grow out of such cognition.*' See Stano Filko, Zita Kostrová, and Alex Mlynárčik, 'Manifest "HAPPSOC"' (1965), in *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*, edited by Laura Hoptman and Tomáš Pospiszyl, New York, 2002, p. 87. It should be noted that, while the artist him or herself is not always the authority on how their work and sensibility might be situated, Büchler himself remains sceptical of attempts to locate his artistic formation in terms of Czech national cultural identity specifically. Recent correspondence is worth quoting at length: '*I suppose that my early encounters with the work of Alex Mlynárčik, HAPPSOC etc. and that of some other Czech, Slovak and Eastern European artists of that generation had inevitably some formative effect on me. But the Eastern European provenance of such influences is almost irrelevant — or at least not directly [relevant] — because my generation came across such things as part of the events of 1968 when we could briefly identify with the contemporary dynamics in the rest of Europe (or/and the West) and which stimulated a kind of a European [consciousness] and a sense of affinity in our confused teenage minds. The allusions in my work to the European cultural legacy are probably a latent residue of this early self-identification with Europe as a cultural initiative rather than a given geo-political entity. And if there seem to be also some 'Czechoslovak traits' in the work, it may be because I discovered Europe in Prague much in the sense in which Gilda Williams wrote about Warhol that he discovered the real America in the kitchen of his Slovak immigrant mother in Pittsburgh.*' Pavel Büchler, email to the author, 14th September 2020.

25 Nick Thurston, 'Words Mean Nothing — Interview with Pavel Büchler', in idem (ed.), *Somebody's Got to Do It — Selected Writings by Pavel Büchler since 1987*, London 2017, p. 210.

26 Büchler quoted by Nick Thurston, 'Work — From Noun to Verb to Noun to Verb etc.', in ibidem, p. 12.

27 Thurston, 'Words' (note 25), p. 203.

28 Büchler addressed the role of photography in relation to his sculptures in the exhibition *Small Sculptures*, Street Level Photoworks, Glasgow, 2009. Despite its title, the exhibition was comprised of large-scale prints of Büchler's 'small sculpture' postcards and other photographic works. The exhibition pamphlet included a short but useful untitled essay by David Bellingham. The relationship between photography of sculpture

is usefully addressed in Karel Thein, 'Tactility, Detail, and Scale in the Photography of Sculpture', *Umění* LXVI, 2018, pp. 350-367.

29 Thurston, 'Words' (note 25), p. 198.

30 Perec was himself both obsessed by Kafka and in the habit of losing his pencils. See David Bellos, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words*, London, 2010, esp. p. 100. My thanks to Rye Dag Holmboe for this reference.

31 Georges Perec, 'Approaches to What?' (1973), in idem, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, translated by John Sturrock, London 1997, p. 209.

32 Ibidem, pp. 209-210.

33 Büchler, email to the author, 15th July 2019.

34 See Isabelle Malz, 'Pavel Büchler in conversation with Isabelle Malz', in eadem (ed), *The Problem of God* (exh. cat.), Kunstsammlung Nordhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf 2015, p. 399.

35 Pavel Büchler, *Collected Poems*, Edinburgh 2001.

36 Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading*, London 1951, p. 36; and Lorine Niedecker, 'Poet's Work' (1962), in eadem, *Collected Works*, edited by Jenny Penberthy, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London 2002, p. 194.

37 Cristanne Miller, *Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar*, Cambridge (Massachusetts) 1989, p. 24.

38 The conventional English translation of Freud's word *Verdichtung* is 'condensation', but the term also means 'compression'. '[T]*he intensity of an entire train of thought can finally be concentrated in a single one of its elements. This is the fact of* compression *or* condensation [Kompression oder Verdichtung] *which we got to know in the course of the dream-work. It is condensation that is mainly to blame for the disconcerting impression made by dreams, for we are quite unfamiliar with anything analogous to it in our normal inner life accessible to consciousness.*' See Freud (note 14), p. 391 (emphasis in original).

39 This text appeared on the *Bengal Rose* postcard, 2006. See note 5.

40 Gertrude Stein, 'Sacred Emily' (1913), in eadem, *Geography and Plays*, Boston 1922, p. 187.

41 I borrow the term 'absurdist metaphysics' from Fer (note 12), p. 45.

42 See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, edited Paul Guyer, translated by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, Cambridge 2000, p. 100. Regarding the relationship between general and specific, and between the readymade and modernist aesthetics, see Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*, Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London 1996.

43 '*The validity of artistic propositions is not dependent on any empirical, much less any aesthetic, presupposition about the nature of things.*' See Joseph Kosuth, 'Art After Philosophy' (1969), in *Conceptual Art — A Critical Anthology*, edited by Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimpson, Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London 2000, p. 166.

44 Büchler's engagement with what he has called the 'shock' of conceptual art and his elaboration of tautological and hermetic strategies — often strategies which, like those of Marcel Broodthaers, for example, emphasise the materiality of the medium in which they arrive — is demonstrated by works such as *After Joseph Kosuth, after Douglas Huebler, after Lawrence Weiner... Artforum, Vol. 36, No. 3, p. 16, 1997* (2007–2009), *Hot Air (Projet pour une idée)* (2007), and, most recently, his works in Letterpress, such as the *Honest Work* series (2011–2016). See Thurston (note 21).

45 Pavel Büchler, 'The Show' (2016), in Thurston, *Somebody's Got to Do It* (note 25), pp. 195–196.

46 Mina Loy, 'Gertrude Stein' (1927) in eadem, *Stories and Essays of Mina Loy*, edited by Sara Crangle, Champaign, Dublin and London 2011, p. 233.

47 Mina Loy, 'Gertrude Stein' (1924), in eadem, *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, edited by Roger Conover, Manchester 1997, p. 94.

48 Carl Andre and Hollis Frampton, 'On Painting and Consecutive Matters', in iidem, *Twelve Dialogues 1962–1963*, edited by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Halifax and New York 1980, p. 38. See Linzi Stauvers, 'Forty Permutations of a Rose — Carl Andre types Gertrude Stein's Poetics', *Object* IX, 2006, pp. 71–85; and Marjorie Perloff, 'The Palpable Word: The one hundred sonnets', in Yasmil Raymond, Philippe Vergne et al., *Carl Andre: Sculpture as Place, 1958–2010* (exh. cat.), New Haven and London 2013, p. 295 (Perloff quotes Andre): '*words do have palpable tactile qualities that we feel when we speak them, when we write them, or when we hear them, and that is the real subject of my poetry.*'

49 See Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and other essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, translated by David B. Allison, Evanston 1973.

50 Büchler himself refers to the way in which his work functions in terms of a 'short circuit', which occurs when an excessive amount of current is allowed to flow along an unintended pathway that provides little or no resistance. See, for example, Thurston, 'Words' (note 25), p. 202.

51 Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), translated by John Cumming, London and New York 1972, pp. 43–80.

52 Rebecca Comay, 'Adorno's Siren Song', *New German Critique*, No. 81, Autumn 2000, p. 22.

53 See 'Tsipras Speech from Ithaca', *Greek City Times*, 22nd August 2018, https://greekcitytimes.com/2018/08/22/tsipras-speech-from-ithaca-greeces-modern-day-odyssey-is-over/, 21. 7. 2019.

54 When *Small Inferno* was first shown at Max Wigram Gallery (*Pavel Büchler: Acid & Nicotine*, 16th January — 2nd March 2013), it was lit as in the postcard photograph, though it then went out within half an hour. There is no standard way of showing it: sometimes it is left open, sometimes shut. Büchler, email to the author, 30th May 2019.

55 Büchler, email to the author, 30th May 2019.

56 Taylor Walsh, 'Small Fires Burning: Bruce Nauman and the Activation of Conceptual Art', *October*, No. 163, Winter 2018, pp. 44, 46.

57 Malcolm Browne's photograph of the self-immolation was named World Press Photo of the Year in 1964. This extreme act was emulated by two American antiwar activists in 1965, and by the Czech student Jan Palach in January 1969, protesting the Soviet invasion following the Prague Spring.

58 Dante Alighieri, *Inferno* XIV (lines 38–42), translated by John D. Sinclair, New York 1961, p. 183.

59 See Ed Krčma, *Rauschenberg / Dante — Drawing a Modern Inferno*, New Haven and London 2017.

60 Jeff Wall, '"Marks of Indifference": Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art' (1995), in *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography, 1960–1982* (exh. cat.), edited by Douglas Fogle, Minneapolis, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis 2003, p. 43.

61 Walsh (note 56).

62 Ibidem, p. 44.

63 Ibidem, pp. 33, 31.

64 Ibidem, p. 27.

65 Ibidem, pp. 38–39.

66 Büchler, email to the author, 25th June 2019.

67 Ed Ruscha quoted in Yve-Alain Bois, 'Thermometers Should Last Forever', *October*, No. 111, Winter 2005, p. 63.

68 See 'Product of Chance — Conversation between Lisa Le Feuvre and Pavel Büchler', in Simoens (note 2), p. 24.

69 See Thurston, 'Words' (note 25), p. 224.

70 See, for example, Arts Council of England, *Great Art and Culture for Everyone. 10-Year Strategic Framework, 2010–2020* (2nd Edition), London 2013.

71 Büchler was Head of Fine Art at Glasgow School of Art in the early-mid 1990s, years of great dynamism for the School and for the city's art scene more broadly. Though this relationship ended in a clash with the institutional authorities, the weekly Friday Events he organised in the city — a series of public talks involving artists, writers and theorists, collected in two published volumes — were crucial in offering a physical space for thinkers and makers to come together, for example. Likewise, for his public project, *Manchester Pavilion*, Büchler repurposed an unassuming Venetian bar during the biennales of 2001, 2003 and 2005, providing a convivial alternative to the commercial and nationalist priorities of the rest of the festival.

72 Kemp-Welch (note 18). See also Václav Havel, 'An Anatomy of Reticence' (1985), translated by Erazim Kohák, in idem, *Living in Truth*, edited by Jan Vladislav, London and Boston 1986, pp. 164–195.

73 Havel quoted by Kemp-Welch (note 18), p. 7.

74 Such an alertness and an ability to defamiliarise quotidian existence are arguably not unrelated to Büchler's emigration from his home country at the age of twenty-nine. Indeed, Anděl regards the experience of emigration as crucial to Büchler's plays with language, conventions, and social norms. See Anděl, 'Mr Büchler' (note 17), pp. 15ff. For a more sustained meditation on the problem of exile in relation to the Czech (and Russian) contexts — one that also draws extensively upon the resonances of Kafka's work — see Hana Píchová, *The Art of Memory in Exile: Vladimir Nabokov and Milan Kundera*, Carbondale and Edwardsville, Illinois 2002.

75 When asked about the problems associated with the work's activation requiring familiarity with a specific range of artworks, ideas and historical events, Büchler speculated that, *'It may be that "spectatorial competence" is the question of the level of confidence it takes for the viewer to free the work from its dependence on specific information or willingly losing sight of it, wherever the confidence may come from or whatever it may lead to. In other words, it is not whether the reference escapes the viewer but whether the viewer can escape the reference.'* Email to the author, 26th July 2019.