

'Close Readings: Paul Pfeiffer'. *Mousse Magazine* Online. May 2018

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Paul Pfeiffer and Francesco Tenaglia in Conversation

The work of the American artist, Paul Pfeiffer, arises from a manipulation of materials that entered the collective imagination through the entertainment industry and sports in particular. For example, in *Three Figures in a Room*—where he removed the original sound from the boxing match of the century, between Floyd Mayweather Jr. and Manny Pacquiao, to reveal (on another video channel) the meticulous process of creating and synchronizing the soundtrack by audio technicians. In *Desiderata*—a series based on the well-known, long running show television show, *The Price Is Right*—he removes the exhibits, leaving the competitors to stage desire, enthusiasm, or disappointment. And in *Caryatids*—a series based on boxing matches—one of the wrestlers is canceled, leaving the other as a pure subject of sacrifice and suffering. All these works are present in the exhibition *Deisderata*, at Perrotin Paris, which gives us the opportunity to retrace Pfeiffer's history, interests, and practice.

Francesco Tenaglia: How did you originally get interested in working with and modifying preexisting media material?

Paul Pfeiffer: My undergraduate studies were at the San Francisco Art Institute. I didn't go to film school, and digital video didn't exist yet. The cool programs to be in were painting or new media—there was a huge scene around Tony Labat and others—but somehow I missed it. I was attracted to craft, working in a slow and intimate way with my material. So I studied printmaking. In retrospect it makes a lot of sense in terms of its proximity to photography. Printmaking is more physical than photography, but you still get to play with photographic images. And it has a relationship to the street and to advertising, the bigger context for visual production. Printmaking straddles the

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commercial realm and the more critical or artistic realm. The Institute planted the idea that there is something extremely valuable about engaging in a dialogue, emphasizing ideas, before anything else.

FT: What happened after you graduated?

PF: It was the mid-1990s, and SFAI students at the time felt that the two cool graduate programs to attend were the Dusseldorf Academy, because I think there was some kind of institutional connection, and Hunter College in New York, because it was a city school, so it was cheap, and they supposedly had really great studios in the city. I ended up at Hunter College.

FT: Did you have a particular area of focus?

PP: I didn't continue with printmaking but pursued what they called "combined media," which was totally open. I spent a lot of time at Kinko's, doing color xeroxing on transparent materials. Then around 1994, 1995, the first computers came out. I had a friend in advertising, and I noticed that organizations like Act Up purposely set up rooms with computers so people could go in and make posters. Activist groups were making the technology accessible. The first time I saw it, I thought, this is printmaking on steroids! I was immediately attracted to it.

My first job after graduate school was working for a postproduction house, scanning images. All the photo studios were scanning their assets, so there was huge money to be made just scanning photos. Then shortly after that, Parsons School of Design created their digital foundation curriculum. They were hiring anybody to teach it; they said, "If you can stay one week ahead of the students, then you're hired." Of course they wanted you to have an art school background and understand color theory and all that, but with the technology, it was like, "let's just all learn it together."

Within my first year at Parsons I was teaching Photoshop, and after-hours I'd go to the student lab and experiment with Adobe Premiere. I made my first works in the student lab at Parsons in 1997, 1998: *Fragment of a Crucifixion*, *John 3:16*. It was a magic moment. I was just doing what interested me, but within twelve months people were taking these videos I was making and putting them in the Whitney Biennial. It happened super fast.

FT: So working with preexisting imagery came from all this curriculum, and also from the fact that, as you said before, you were interested in the world of advertising—things that could have an impact outside the visual arts world.

PF: I am very attracted to early figures like Dan Graham and Nancy Holt, because to me they had a similar condition—no context to follow. If anything, the context would be environmental design, or architecture for public space, and that's interesting to me—this idea that one place to start would be moving images, or digital video as an intervention into public space, or public consciousness. Advertising is interesting because it's about fucking with people on an unconscious level.

FT: Are you into sports as well?

PF: Yes.

FT: I was watching a football game without audio, and I realized, it's too formal for me. It seems to me that nothing happens narrative-wise in football, and it goes on forever, yet it is the most important entertainment industry in the world. Of course you can appreciate its technical aspects, the gestures, but if you take away—as with the cancellations in your practice—the cultural and geographical connotations (the fact that you're from Milan, or from Rome, and rooting for your team) it's somehow a very formal avant-garde spectacle.

PF: Well, okay, I'll confess then. When someone asks if I'm into sports, my tendency is to just say yes, because I've come to realize that even art-world people take it seriously. Not on an artistic level, but personally. I've had experiences where people who supported projects of mine developed suspicions toward me, or even felt that I betrayed them, because at a certain point they realized my interest in sports was not that of a fan.

FT: Really?

PF: I'm interested that other people are interested in sports, but I don't have a connection, myself.

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FT: It's the magnitude of the attention for the phenomenon.

PF: I find it difficult to watch games of any kind. There's no connection, so it feels like a waste of time.

FT: But you can suck interesting material and images out of it.

PF: Yes.

FT: So, when computers appeared, you were suddenly attracted to the opportunities that they presented. Whole new genres of media came into being because of the technical possibilities that the computer gave to professionals. But they were very expensive at first. How has your thinking about all this changed now that modifying images has become so ubiquitous? Now that I can take a selfie and Photoshop it and put it on Instagram.

PF: To me it's apocalyptic.

FT: In what sense?

PF: One of the writers about film and media who I find super interesting is Tom Gunning, a professor at the University of Chicago. He is famous for a concept called "cinema of attractions." He explains that the digital is not opposed to the pre-digital, but a continuation of it in the sense that technology is not an object independent from the human, but a way of directing the perception and the consciousness of the human eye or mind. He describes it as like a pointing finger. Usually when the finger points, you look at what it's directing you to look at. You don't look at the finger. Whereas it's interesting to me to focus on the finger, the mechanism, the interface between the consciousness of an individual and their manipulability from outside. Consciousness and psychology are extremely permeable membranes, and my process of erasure has to do with playing with the perception of foreground and background spaces.

In fact, that's the connection to printmaking. In printmaking, everything is broken down into layers, and you have to think hard about their order. The first time I saw Photoshop and QuarkXPress, I thought, this is exactly the language

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of printmaking, just souped up. I think something similar about today's increasing integration of media and technology with reality, or perception of reality.

FT: Our presentation of ourselves and other people.

PF: We're entering into a new kind of consciousness, different from the consciousness of classical geometry where objects are discrete and we move them around. My understanding of what being an artist is is very connected to editing. In editing you are anticipating the reception of things in the mind of your viewer. You're playing on a psychological level with manipulating perception.

FT: This reminds me of a writer who once told me that for him, the most important event of the digital age was the introduction of the cut-and-paste function in Microsoft Word. It made him start to conceptualize texts in a different way.

PF: Historically, editing was a pretty esoteric thing to do. Almost alchemical or shamanistic, the possibility to create perception for other people without them realizing it's happening. Now that these processes are becoming so accessible, everyone has access to the tools of the shaman or the tools of the magician to create manipulations on oneself and others. We are entering a time when there are many witches, where the esoteric dimension has been thrust into the most accessible, populist environment. It's insane in a way. That's why I say "apocalyptic."

FT: You use iconic moments in history, for example fights or NBA games, that had meaning for lots of people. Now consumer technology is going in a direction in which the moments are not iconic, but the formats. Like those pictorial or video memes where you can put yourself in a shared set of past actions or backgrounds.

PF: That's so interesting. Because more than once people have said to me, "Your work is about television, that's so interesting." They are perceiving something in the sensibility of my work that comes from a previous time.

FT: I don't see your work as related to TV per se, but more to this idea that there are constructed representations of stardom and celebrity or pieces of history that are shifting around, producing actual perception or reality or memories.

PF: They possess us. I think that to invoke the TV age in this way is very binaristic. It's an attempt to propose that we've gone from one media regime to another, namely the internet. A lot of people want to make this distinction: "How did you change in relation to the internet?" To associate something with TV is simply to say it's associated with a time that is distinct from the time of the internet. And that's cool, but it's too simplistic to imagine that we simply cross over and then we're in a new place. There's just as much continuity.

FT: Tell me more about your ideas surrounding The Price Is Right based new piece Desiderata.

PP: So, there's a pipeline in Los Angeles around the show and others like it in the game show industry, a system that hundreds of people volunteer to go through. Through Craigslist I could easily get access to these people, who might participate in my crazy project and talk to me, and I could use The Price Is Right as a threshold for movement in and out of a virtual environment. To me the history of figuration and image making is absolutely implicated in this reality, which has to do with surveillance and with all kinds of levels of imposition and control via image making.

I feel like there's a little bit of ironic play in choosing to do a series around Desiderata, because of its reference to the history of consumerism and commodification. Literally I'm removing the objects or the commodities from images to focus attention on the behavior of people in relation to them. I want to be able to attend to the commercial environment, which takes up so much space now. I hope in the bigger picture I'm contributing to dialogues in general, in a way that might seem contradictory, but at the same time is super exciting. To me that's more important than a simpler kind of media critique. The problem with media critique is that it assumes a critically distant position. That doesn't hold water for me.

I would argue that my attraction to a text or an image like the American TV game show The Price Is Right is an intuitive response to certain textures and so forth associated with the 1970s, such that it becomes graspable as a way to mark time or to make certain kinds of distinctions in our thinking. It's all very slippery, but I would argue that what's interesting about using obsolete formats, or images from the past, is that there's a degree of their being alien from us now, defamiliarized, which can be very productive. They become interesting objects to play with because we can use them to create distinctions. Whereas the way people play with images of themselves is so facile now that we don't even know it's happening. There's no way to create distinctions around it because we're so immersed in it.

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FT: Your work pertains to, let's call it Barthesian, history of attention to the production and circulation of images. Watching an image is like unveiling something hidden in it. What manifests for you in an image?

PF: I've been thinking a lot about media critique, because as much as I think it's important to think critically about the media, how we participate critically, or respond critically, or think critically about the media has been domesticated. The radical potential of engagement has turned into an institutional gesture, or commodified as a certain kind of style. But the roots of these important historical moments trace back to when they weren't yet named. The conceptualist approach was not known as such. And it was effective because it wasn't known.

Every day the political process is moving toward the use of new media and social media such that people become more and more passive consumers. There's a real danger of reducing sophisticated political distinctions, philosophical distinctions, poetic distinctions, to a very limited pragmatic language, without people realizing it's even happening. Even within my own family, I'm shocked at how reactionary forms of nationalist thinking are setting in, and making conversations impossible. It's scary. I want to participate in keeping a certain kind of vanguard platform open around language, and around the higher forms of communication and exchange. They are so precious. In my lifetime I want to orient myself toward the deepest possibilities I can experience before I die. I hope to connect and build networks around people who think like me, and seek the most sophisticated and deepest possible exchange of ideas about what's happening.

At the start of this year, I was working on two very different projects. One was the Desiderata series of works for the show in Paris, and another was a film, which I shot over the month of January in the Philippines, then showed in February at the Dhaka Art Summit in Bangladesh as part of a group show called A Beast, a God, and a Line curated by Cosmin Costinas, the director and curator of Para-Site, the oldest nonprofit space in Hong Kong. A second iteration of that same group show just opened last night at Para-Site. So it's been extremely rich and intense past few weeks, bringing together this body of work and the film. I only had about four days to edit the footage I shot over one month in the Philippines. I told them from the beginning, "What you're gonna see is a very rough draft!"

FT: You worked, like, around the clock.

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PF: It's terrible, I know, but Cosmin is super cool and it was a great context to be able to do this, and I got a lot of support. The film is called Incarnator, which is English for the Spanish word incarnador, meaning the person who creates the Catholic saints.

FT: Like impersonators?

PF: No, no, the incarnador is the artist who paints the skin onto the wooden statue to give it carne, or flesh. I filmed wood carvers in the Philippines who come from the tradition of making Catholic saints and commissioned them to make images of Justin Bieber. In the last six months he's become a born-again Christian.

FT: Really?

PF: Yes. So he's one of the first global pop stars who's also an Evangelist, literally a Christian Evangelist.

FT: He's doing shows in which he preaches? Stuff like that?

PF: Yes. He met and came under the wing of a guy named Carl Lentz, who is the senior minister of Hillsong Church, a megachurch that specifically formats its message toward creative people. Justin Bieber has become the most visible spokesperson of Hillsong Church. I love the idea that as an image maker I get to be in the globalized environment with everybody else experimenting in radically different contexts.

FT: Let's talk about your relationship with older artists and the figuration of the human body. For example in your work there's pain, stretching, expectation, pure physicality, and betrayal.

PF: It wasn't by accident the first titles I arrived at for my works came from Francis Bacon, because he was extremely engaged in the contemporary environment, for instance one of the first painters to sample images from television. He was digesting a whole history of image production in relation to figuration. There's something specific about the figure in his universe. Reading David Sylvester's interviews with Francis Bacon at a young age was transformative for me. A lot of what they're talking about, to me, is related to editing.

For instance let's take the boxing videos, because they are so much about the figure. They provoke, even more than I anticipated, a kind of empathetic somatic reaction. When you remove one boxer, the viewer's attention turns to the sheer spectacle of the impact of physical violence on a human body. You see it more clearly when the thing that's hitting is removed. It takes away the narrative and all you see is impact. People react emotionally and also bodily to those images.

FT: Because they are painful to see?

PF: It makes me think about what empathy is. I think there's an emphasis on emotional communication in our political lives today that relates to the emergence of populism as a dominant mode of address. People don't have the time, the space, for a close reading of things—plus it is actively discouraged—and a more immediate emotional response and way of speaking is taking over. Just thinking about my experiments with photography in relation to the human body, it's an extremely exciting time—meaning, the empathy effect and the technological reality of where we're going. The relationship of the evolution of high-resolution image making to sports and the human body. The importance of figuration today is that it has a certain immediacy and therefore can be potentially productively connected to interventions in a very populist visual arena.

FT: Why is the boxing piece titled Caryatid?

PP: At a certain point I became obsessed with the history of classical architecture. Vitruvius explains the caryatids from the Parthenon in a very specific way, as connected with an incident in which one of the Peloponnesian city-states rose up against Athens, and Athens defeated them. But because they were allies up to that point, this was considered the worst treason, and so the losers were extremely severely punished. All the men were killed, and the women were punished by association—forced to march through the streets as slaves. The Athenians created sculptures of the generals' wives and put them on the Parthenon to hold the weight of the temple as slaves for eternity. The caryatid is the only classical column that takes a figurative form. Every other column type is abstract. Thus there's an association between figuration and slavery at the heart of Western aesthetics. What does that mean in image making today, where, circulating on the internet, there are images from police cameras capturing ordinary

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citizens being shot just because they're black? What is slavery in the digital age now? And what is its association to figuration?

There's another, related reference that has always intrigued me. The writer Frantz Fanon describes colonialism as a condition of learning how to live as an image for other people. This to me describes the inner politics of image making. It operates on a different level than the institutionalized, acceptable ways to speak about politics or race. I'm interested in using images as a way to short-circuit the institutionalized, politically correct ways to talk about these things, which I consider domesticated and simplistic, and having no actual radical potential.

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