

The Desire to Desire

A Conversation between Sabeth Buchmann and Josephine Pryde

SB: Your work first came to my attention in 1993, when you published your essay *Writing Out of My Armpit* in the first feminist edition of the magazine *Texte zur Kunst*. What I found remarkable back then was the precise and matter-of-fact observation of the role and function that feminist discourse plays or could play in the art market, and that this discourse is fighting at a location where it is not just about identity and representation, but above all about questions of production. More than ten years have passed since then and I would be interested in how far your position regarding feminism has altered since that time?

JP: I think back then I was working on the assumption that if the art market got interested in feminist positions, then that had to be a good thing. But I was also trying to describe in that article what I thought was the stuck place that came along with that relationship. I had an inkling that to assert that bringing all the funny writing about women and the informal fluid sex between them and how it was different, and about “textuality” and things too, and then force it into a gallery in the form (or lack of form) of some artwork was to potentially ignore other conditions and compromise your feminist politics a bit. Of course, there were different sorts of galleries and different ways of introducing discussion topics into them, but my experience in the 1980s and early 1990s was largely art market impregnated and I wanted to write about how I thought being “100% girl” in a gallery was not necessarily the straightforward political statement it might appear to be, and what the advantages as well as the disadvantages of that might be.

SB: At the time the article appeared, you were working as an assistant for a gallery in New York. What was your first performance in the art field? Was it as an assistant in galleries, or was it as an artist, or was it as a writer?

JP: I think it was probably as this girl who was around.

SB: What does that mean?

JP: I was around and I wasn't really producing anything particular, like paintings or stuff, it was very indistinct what I was doing, so I was kind of around and I was quite good at talking a lot.

SB: But wasn't this kind of indistinction typical for the early nineties? I'm thinking of anti-eighties attitudes that were performed at that time, attitudes against straight and rigid notions of art production. It seemed to be more important to participate in certain kinds of atmospheres and discourses, to act as a commentator, as somebody who is more interested in creating contexts and clever ideas about art production. Perhaps this is only my retro-fictitious perspective...

JP: There were attitudes around at the time that were anti-eighties, like being anti-shoulder pads, but I think this moving around that you describe could even be said to have been an attitude against that anti-eighties attitude. It was as irritating to be nailed down as an alternative to the object-producing artists as it was to be called a maker of bibelots, so you had to get out and about a lot to avoid that trap, too.

SB: I think that at that time I was much more idealistic towards the possibilities that feminism offers culturally and socially. Maybe that was to do with the fact that I didn't see myself as so involved in the art business but more in the in-between area between activism, art and theory, between university and political groups. Did your position within the art business influence your commitment towards feminism?

JP: I may have written about the art business but that didn't necessarily mean I was sceptical about feminism and the chance it offered either to alter the art culture or to make radical changes beyond it. As for commitment, well, that was a hard one to work out. The ground for women artists was sort of donated and not donated at the same time. Maybe that was truer for the generation just ahead of me, but still. Being feminist was definitely the default position assigned to women artists, but to occupy it obediently would not have been feminist exactly, so you had to find a way to do something else if you were interested in pushing things a bit. That included seeing your friends and male contemporaries as feminists as well.

SB: Reading your text, I sensed an aversion towards a certain feminist mainstream in the art business, towards Kiki Smith, Janine Antoni etc. Maybe I wanted to read that in there, because I didn't like the affirmative pathologising of the female body.

JP: I certainly didn't like that stuff either. It used to really worry me. Now I see it rather as phenomenally bourgeois, more bourgeois than even I can hope to be, and interesting for that reason. I saw an exhibition by Susan Hiller in the Baltic in Gateshead recently and it contained artworks that were fascinated with the uncanny, or the invisible, things that we can't see every day. I thought that, taken altogether, it was a strikingly unapologetic bourgeois exhibition. Usually you see more apologising. I think there was a little bit of that dynamic in Janine Antoni as well—the argument that eating disorders were “not usually discussed” but that Janine Antoni's art would correct this circumstance. This need to bring out what was assumed to be generally repressed through what was, and is, a very specialist discourse—art. I guess it is a horror, but it is also totally hilarious when you think about it.

SB: The art piece or the discussion about it?

JP: That this could be taken so seriously.

SB: But it was taken very seriously.

JP: Yes. But what was it arguing for?

SB: It wasn't a good base from which to erect another structure in the art business. For me, the promise of another structure lay in the connection between artistic and political activities and projects, though the problem there often lay in a mutually functionalistic and reductivist equating of the two. How far did such connections play a role for your work?

JP: Unfortunately, while you were talking just now, I was unable to get the image out of my head of Janine Antoni mopping the floor with her dye-filled hair at the Anthony d'Offay gallery.

SB: The personal is political—what about that as a connection between artistic and political activities, then?

JP: What happened to that slogan? Its original meaning seems pretty well evacuated now. I've talked about this a little with women friends in London. And I saw a talk by Joan Jonas at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Vienna last year. It was just after the Bush and Blair governments were saying that the war in Iraq was over, the war was supposed to be over, and Jonas looked very unhappy about George W. Bush, really terribly unhappy, like she had to apologise to her audience. If I remember rightly, what she said was that this slogan, the personal is political, which we have worked with for so long, she said that she felt it didn't now mean what it had once meant. I think what she was referring to was that the phrase had once been used to point to the ideological infiltration, or occupation, of what you might otherwise have thought was just your personal life, or organisation of life. This ideology could also be identified and fought politically, and one way of fighting that politically or recognising or seeing that that ideology did occupy things like the family and the way family and labour and work were organised, was to start re-asserting the personal, to try to dismantle those invasive forces. But maybe over the years, within populations of Western democracies anyway, this has in major ways mutated into a drained expression of the self, or a statement of "since things happen to me, and since I have an opinion, then that is what's important". This could be called a process of de-politicisation. Maybe you could say a process of the personal being de-politicised.

SB: Do I understand you correctly, that feminist concepts carry a co-responsibility in backlash politics, in the way they are taken on not only by George Bush but also—at least in Germany—by the SPD and Green coalition government, in as much as they no longer put an equality-based politics on the agenda but rather a promotion of the family?

JP: By the New Labour party in Britain, too. Telling people that their opinions matter is a technique used by business that politicians use too—only, your opinion mattering is a very different thing to your realisation of your self as a political subject. But I don't know if you can start dishing out accusations of co-responsibility in these questions—maybe there was somewhere that feminism took a wrong turn, or sold out its slogans, but I don't have a theory yet where that might have been. On the other hand, feminism probably never set out to change the world exactly the way it

has ended up doing. How far could it be credited with a backdated intent that hasn't worked out in any case?

SB: Let's get back to the art world. What does it mean for you as an artist with feminist sensibilities to appear in the male-dominated sphere of the art world? The gallery that you first showed in is also one of those.

JP: Everything! Nothing! My first show was with NEU in Berlin.

SB: In the first phase, NEU was a kind of party space with its own record label. One of the two gallerists, Alexander Schröder, was also an artist and a member of the "Freie Klasse" at the then Hochschule der Künste (now UdK) in Berlin. But soon NEU decided to become a more "serious" gallery space—the kind of gallery where big art deals are made. Did that change have any impact on your work?

JP: That I now had to think about producing for a different time and environment?

SB: Yes, because in the beginning it was more connected to the early 1990s club culture in Berlin, then a little later to the national and international art world.

JP: It was a challenge to work there when conditions were altering in ways you were not necessarily expecting. I suppose you could see these changes in the way NEU runs as loosely thematised in my work with them. My first show I made up the night before just about, and it came with me in my suitcase to Auguststrasse and we had a great party. My second show was in the gallery in Charitéstrasse and Alexander helped me build the sculpture, which was about my life as an art secretary. And my third show was where they are now, in Phillipstrasse, and was basically a selection of commodity "cum shots", done as pretty reflections of soap or milk spills, big lambda prints, in heavy, white, expensive frames.

SB: In your exhibition *Brains & Chains*, you refer to Eva Hesse, amongst other things. If I have understood you correctly, what you're concerned with here is the "model swot", above all the one embodied by women artists who could be, or who are, established in the art business.

JP: Yes. I got interested in working with my own embarrassment.

SB: In what way?

JP: Well, then I would really have to say some really very embarrassing things.

SB: There is no embarrassment that we can't handle here.

JP: Yes, I think there is.

SB: When I first saw a picture of “Chains”, I thought it was a certain critique on specific feminist readings of Hesse’s work: A critique on its identification with the so-called fluid and eccentric. I felt a little uncomfortable with the idea that you could have quoted a well-known work only in order to deconstruct its reception by recoding it in an ironic manner. Or did you adopt *Untitled* because of identification, because you feel affected by it?

JP: Identification is a complicated process, because you might think you identify with something and you like that. But then you start to dislike it. But then you actually quite like the fact that you dislike it, too. When you see the pictures of Eva Hesse at her opening in the Kunstverein in Düsseldorf, and she looks really pleased and she has a little beehive and a glass in her hand and you think, this is her first solo show and she has tried really hard and this is... the idea is touching. My heart goes out to her, bobbing around in the art world. It reminds me of the affecting part in Andrea Fraser’s *Official Welcome* speech, where she cries. Where I cried when I saw the video. Where she remembers how her mother didn’t... the things that her mother had wanted and didn’t achieve. I think that’s the part of the speech, when she cries?

SB: Yes, but I take that as a non-ironic comment on the pressure and constraints especially women artists in the art world have to face. But the fact that she cries in her late performances has already become part of her performance as professional persona. If we think of female pop stars, the production of emotions is due to the politics of attention within modern media culture.

JP: Perhaps. But it’s somehow just there that my idealism about the world comes flooding back.

SB: Does the repetition of certain models of the woman artist have a direct impact on your procedures and imagery? Are they at the same time about becoming readable by the art market?

JP: It’s true that there is an interrelationship there. When I worked on a show called *Metalltanz* that I did together with Michael Krebber, I started out by thinking about adopting the female hysteric as a role to work in, in part to counter the figure of the male dandy that I knew featured in his art at that time, but in the end I dropped that idea once I made the actual photos for show.

SB: Is the performance as an hysteric more about over-determined repetitions of already gendered roles?

JP: Yes, maybe, like a tick. Like the ticks hysterics are clinically said to have developed. But eventually you come to a point where I think you have to renounce anything progressive in adopting a hysteric role. Hysteria is a dead end in a sense, because the hysteric always has this special secret treasured in her unconscious that is only lethal as long as it remains vague. I found that being able to drop something as a dead end was nonetheless useful for getting in the mood for this show. Because

part of the reason to think of a counterpart in the first place was to work with that big glaring open space, which was: OK, here is what Krebber is doing, he is a more established artist than I am, he is more well known, and the open question is: What is the woman who is doing this show with him at the same time going to do?

SB: I'm curious.

JP: So, you then try to inject something into that real situation which isn't even viable, and that is a much more interesting way for me to work than thinking of a proper, viable model that can go on and on and that I can talk about forever.

SB: Your work in that show, like in the shows *Marooned* and *Serena*, consisted of photographs, which it occurred to me were done in a very professional manner of style and hanging.

JP: Getting the pictures framed was one way of signifying that I was making art, and that this time, I meant it.

SB: Looking at the photographs one senses a certain kind of connoisseurship—somebody who loves to evoke auratic effects.

JP: When I got interested in working seriously, around 2001, I got interested in those things too. And that meant looking around at how other people were working. I also became interested in what seemed like an out-of-date literal approach to the job. One that really focused on objects in the image. Like catalogue photography. I mean, you could interpret Gursky as working literally, because he photographs Prada stores and stock exchanges, or the masses on the beach. Literally photographing what, though? It's quite vague, Gursky, when you think about it. Is it really about globalisation? How "we" live now? What is that? I wanted to work literally too, but against someone like Gursky.

SB: Was that the reason why you've decided to use photography? Was it the medium you preferred in order to establish a recognisable aesthetic language?

JP: Pretty much.

SB: What about Louise Lawler, for example? Your works reminds me more of hers. That has to do with the notion of the allegory that came up with the so-called Picture Generation and appropriation art in the early eighties.

JP: How does that work?

SB: Lawler is an artist who again and again passes the projections that were and are directed at her from the side of critical discourses back to the reception: her fan-like Warhol reception is an example of that. I find that in her works, the desire for a critical position within the art business becomes legible as a component of a distinct image

production. I don't know if the impression is correct that you too try precisely that, if in your texts and art works style politics becomes a motivation?

JP: I think there's a lot less intent involved in my approach than that question implies. But I like style politics because they can exclude a certain contrived naïveté from the discussion. I think at one point writing articles for art magazines meant getting something down in black and white, but that my perspective on that may be changing a bit. It has also in the past been something I've done for no better reason than that I am a nasty little show-off.

SB: But the question remains, in an art business where things are sold, where it is really to do with art deals—then who wants to hear about a critical position? To whom is this criticism addressed?

JP: Let's say that in the visual real estate world of a certain kind of exhibition production, the offer to the artist is: here are the big empty white-walled rooms where you can now criticise something. The subtext is always "we know it is very unlikely that you will explicitly affirm e.g. capitalism here" and this is incorporated into the offer. And the assumption that the criticism could have a successful object also underwrites the offer to make a critical exhibition. As if capitalism, for example, were discrete enough to be criticised anyway. So this more glamorous side of the criticism—supported by a kind of insurance blanket based on the visual real estate's ongoing value to the elites interested in investing in it—is definitely connected with a kind of achievement—an altruistic substitution of personal artistic achievement for an achievement of a goal, via the images and texts, and the criticism built up with them. It is like you say, a kind of production of desire.... But the desire to desire is also a desire. And you could then also say: The desire to desire to criticise capitalism is also a desire.

SB: ... a desire that is mostly as illegible in the gestures of the assertive evidence and self-legitimation claims of critical exhibitions and projects as it is in claims of "quality" and "important critical artists". Immaterial critical discourses allow themselves to be fetishised just like a material product. However, what does it mean for an artistic stance that does not want to abandon the critical point of view; that takes up a dispute with the hierarchical value system of the art business and the increasing acceptance of capitalistic logic? Can something like that allow itself to be translated through its own desire? Are collectors interested in the formulation of such questions?

JP: If no one is interested, including collectors, then am I a better loser than if they ARE interested? Is no one interested because I am just muttering in the background, and is muttering in the background only something that can be evaluated as any kind of valid refusal by friendly cultural people on the left in any case?

This word "critical" is made to work very hard in art. My new theory is that a lot of the art that says it is critical is actually more like failed journalism. Journalism with the

actuality or force of the story taken out, shipped around the world and treated as art. When you say critical... what do you mean?

SB: Critical is more general than political. It means to operate within or inside a system and at the same time to keep a visible distance towards the art market—a position that was claimed explicitly by the avant-gardes of the 1960s, for example the minimal artists. But I wonder, however heroic, pathetic and corrupted those positions might be, have they really become irrelevant today?

JP: I had a personal experience of minimal art that made me wonder about its claims to aesthetic autonomy. I had a job where, when I got out of the train at Liverpool Street Station, and walked through the Broadgate Arena on the way to the office, I'd walk straight into a huge Richard Serra sculpture. That sculpture used to engender in me a sense of a strange importance about the work that I was going to, even though it was really one of the shittiest jobs I ever had, working in a small company selling computer network systems to other companies in the mid 1990s. They were called Resolution Systems, and I worked as a receptionist in their basement office. I would walk past this sculpture every day, after stumbling half asleep out of the crowded commuter train. I thought it functioned as a kind of employee re-aligner, it seemed to be saying, "yes, it's important we keep working, we keep using time" and I'd feel to myself an echo coming off the steel: "yes, it's important that I'm here every day, I'm here at 8 o'clock, I'm on time for my job, I start at 8.30 and I finish at 6 p.m". That huge Richard Serra piece *Fulcrum* seemed to be marking and absorbing that time for me and for the masses of people streaming by it with me. I quite liked it, in a way, feeling noble about my job for a few minutes, but I'm not sure if that is the sort of resistance that the art theory would have had me feeling.

SB: If you thematise the function that art has for capitalist logic, then I would like to talk about the function that fashion has for you and your work. Is it just that you are interested in fashion? I have heard people say that we cannot think about art without thinking about the fashion industry, because the modes of reception, of styles, of taste that are established there are more significant for contemporary culture than the market conditions of the art industry.

JP: If I think about fashion, which I don't all the time, then I don't want to think about it so that I can say it's all just about fashion anyway. As you have mentioned, fashion is in-built not to criticise itself, it's a very, very affirmative realm. When I started printing in a darkroom where fashion photographers were also sometimes working, I was attracted to the kind of freedom with which they approached some story that they were going to use to make their fashion photographs—the good ones anyway, who were trying something out. Like, I've got Eva Herzigova here, and there's some deer, and it reminds me of when my grandmother did this and there's an old castle over there and she's wearing this dress and it's dawn and this is the story, isn't it fantastic. That kind of blithe, ingenuous positivity and way of moving forward, that critique-free zone, becomes interesting. Why though? Is it just the chance to be happy and unafraid? Rather than trying to say art is very good and clever and can achieve its

critique, the fascination with fashion modes is about not achieving that critique—it's about not achieving the object of the criticism in an obvious way.

On the other hand, to put it more simply, all this fantastic image stuff and style and the consumer world can leave me very confused and over-excited, and making my own photographs is quite a good way for me to try to stay calm.

SB: Doesn't *Serena* touch on the historical implications of commercial photography within high art-photography, although it's executed in a hobbyist manner?

JP: I thought that show looked quite professional, actually, but basically, yes. I was sick of the opposition between commercial and art photography that was being used in discussions about art, whilst at the same time it was perfectly obvious that at that point in the late 1990s in London, artists were being implemented in new ways by the developing lifestyle industries. Friends of mine in London at that time were really crucial in pointing that out to me.

SB: How far is it to do with the medium of photography for you? In *Serena* and *Marooned*, I rather had the impression that you were developing historical narratives in which technical media issues were discussed, but which were more reminiscent of an argument between painting and photography.

JP: I don't want to talk about painting. You can see the tired old claims being made about painting being grafted onto discussions about photography at the moment too, it's boring. Dead, alive, dead, alive. However, when such a claim is applied to photography instead of to painting, it looks so feeble that its true status as a generally convenient form of publicity release for other interests at least becomes more obvious.

SB: What about Rosalind Krauss' concept of the "obsolete medium", which also plays an important role in Benjamin? With reference to Marcel Broodthaers, James Coleman and William Kentridge, she argues for the discovery of new media through the use of traditional media that are in decline. Krauss is of the opinion that media specificity, the abandonment of which she blames above all on historical conceptual art and international installation art, could be a premise for the assertion of a realm of aesthetic experience divorced from the products of the culture industry. It is again a kind of very idealistic maintenance.

JP: Yes, idealistic maintenance—it's like a maintenance job to maintain art as idealistic. If you can still talk about the art business as a whole, then one thing that you can say about it is that it incorporates the idea of idealism as a way to keep trading, which is essentially a cynical approach. I like this expression, "international installation art". Sounds like the Radisson chain or something. The way that book about the obsolete medium looks, though, that Rosalind Krauss book—I haven't read it, I've seen it, it really looks like a reason to bomb the Tate Modern bookshop, the way it's packaged. It looks like something that could really infuriate you.

SB: Nevertheless, I believe that your way of working has a lot to do with allegorical procedures, whose re-evaluation in the 1980s was due to Walter Benjamin. By that, I mean also the dialectics of aestheticisation and de-aestheticisation, sublimation and desublimation, auraticisation and de-auraticisation of the imagery you use. If one compares it with common modes of photography like the Becher school and Wolfgang Tillmans, one wouldn't be able to categorise it in terms of post-conceptual, neo-pop and/or journalistic photography. Also, the way you do the hanging of the works seems to quote more modernist conventions.

JP: One reviewer said it looked like August Sander in the Cologne Savings Bank.

SB: Don't you trigger those effects in the name of "surprise" aesthetics? If I think of the arseholes you showed after *Serena* and *Marooned*, it seems to me like an anti-coherence strategy. Or do you try to confront the more allegorical works, which are about the disrupted links between sign and meaning, with more literalist work like the arseholes, or your installation *Brains & Chains*?

JP: If you think a little bit about how quickly images are made, it is a little bit like admitting that I can't keep up with how quickly different images are made, and that it isn't about keeping up anyway. Those works are often developed for different contexts as well, contexts that can be taken literally. It is a little bit like continuing to plunder histories of photography and just to take what I want, when I want it.

SB: That, I think, is too simple a notion of appropriation because it pretends that you can intend and control the adopted material besides its inherent meanings. Can you get rid of the meaning implied by e.g. fashion photography?

JP: Probably not. But then the question is how important is it that some artist knows the modes, or the codes, of fashion photography? It's probably not important at all. I think everybody knows the codes. If we are talking about codes and modes, everyone knows about these, not just artists, and that's why the codes, if you want to call them that, can always be in a state of readiness to be cracked by everybody. Either that, or there are no codes in any case.

What happened was that I realised after that show *Serena* that the best thing that it expressed was a certain kind of melancholy, that it expressed that a bit. But on the other hand, if I thought that this was how a photograph of a fashion model was put together, and that how that photograph was put together had lingering nineteenth century overtones, then why didn't I just go and bloody well photograph a fashion model, instead of putting a funny little china rabbit there instead?

SB: But your work is located on a different playground. It is interesting that you speak at the same time about the expression of a certain kind of melancholy and about the lack of difference between a photograph of a fashion model and of a china rabbit. It's like the melancholic, who tries to empty the world of pre-given meanings...

JP: Emptying of the world? Done by whom?

SB: It is not done by a specific subject, but by the dialectics between the loss of metaphysical meaning and the maintenance of self-referring meaning within modern art. But “emptiness” and “void” by themselves are historically laden topoi with specific significances. Even if I don’t think that this is the point you were making before, I would like to know what you mean exactly by saying your topics and subjects are not significant? Does this imply that you’re more focused on modes of reception than on modes of production?

JP: It isn’t so much that the topics and subjects I use aren’t significant. It is difficult though to weigh that up. At a certain level, if you’ve agreed to do an exhibition, then you are complicit with producing the reception.

SB: Then do you make the standards for the reception of photography into a condition of your production? But that still doesn’t say anything about how and in which way your artistic decisions come into being.

JP: It becomes like a kind of intuitive game with yourself.

SB: I don’t mean to say that I understand the concept of intuition as the expression of a naïve attitude—in that case, intuition would merely imply that artistic decisions were based on gut instinct.

JP: My gut belongs to me! It’s my body!

SB: But intuition can be an exact method, if you think about Bergson’s concept of it, where it’s about the ability of memory concerning the synthetic perception of time as a counter-model to the rationalisation of thought through the advanced industrialisation and mechanisation of the living world. In the sixties, the concept of intuition was turned towards serial, Fordist, production-orientated procedures, which is where I see a link to your exhibition *Brains & Chains* and its reference to the information society. With such references (which have in fact already become slightly clichéd) are you looking to establish a legible objectivity for your artistic positions? In other words: doesn’t the deployment of a social paradigm come along with much more of a replacement function for intention?

JP: A replacement function for intention? I liked the last thing that you said about a replacement function for intention.

SB: The decision to make the factuality of a social paradigm into a premise for a work has something more declamatory than intuitive. I had the impression that the aesthetic surfaces of the information society are your theme. Which representations go through the aesthetic cleaner, through the dirt of the machines and the work of the cleaning-up technologies? How can one work on aestheticisation against aestheticisation?

JP: With a sense of humour. Or very seriously. Or not at all.