

## Benjamin Butler and Bastian Muhr

*In Conversation: May 2020*

BASTIAN MUHR: I wanted to ask you about a project idea that I have been thinking about during the last couple of weeks. I wondered, if you would be interested in showing together at some point? You talked a little bit about wanting to explore the gallery scene in Europe. I always wanted to show in New York. Maybe we can help each other by arranging 2-person shows in Leipzig/Berlin and New York? Maybe this would be a good way to not only exchange ideas, but also introduce our work to new audiences. Would something like that be interesting for you at all? I briefly talked to my gallery about it and they seem to basically like the idea. Do you think your gallery in the US would be interested in an exchange like this?

BENJAMIN BUTLER: I really like your idea of showing together. I'll run the idea by my gallery in NY. It seems like they'd be interested, but it might depend somewhat on their calendar and negotiating when my next solo show would be. Also their space is not one of the biggest in NYC... It might also be possible to propose the show to another space in NYC. I'll see what my gallery says first though. I definitely feel the same about our work being interesting in conversation together. It would be great to meet up while you're in Vienna.

BM: Thank you for the info. Summer sounds good to me. I also think it totally makes sense to keep work in the US from the residency to avoid shipping. It would be wonderful if Sam, Rob and Ingrid could visit me while I am at the Albers Foundation. Can you tell me again how large the gallery space is? I tried to check out the pictures from past exhibitions on the website, but couldn't really put the place together in my mind. I also talked to Jochen about the project again. He still likes the idea and thinks an exchange would be very good for the both of us. He said there might be a chance to do something in summer, too. Having the two shows pretty close together sounds like a nice idea.

BB: I was thinking it would be good for us to begin to make some kind of plan for a show in the Klaus space, but maybe you want to work freely and then I can add to whatever you and Klaus decide works best. We could begin thinking about structuring the show by size of works. Just wanted to start this conversation and maybe it's something Klaus will eventually talk to you about as well. Also wondering if we want the idea of gallery exchange to play into the show somehow, maybe just in the title or press release. 'Part One of Two', 'Ludlow & Leipzig', 'LES & Leipzig', are some quick titles that I thought of. I'm sure you're busy preparing for your travels, but now the ball is rolling, and we can continue this conversation over the next months.

# KLAUS VON NICHTSSAGEND GALLERY

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BM: Sam and Ingrid visited me today at Albers Foundation and we had a nice couple of hours talking about the work and the show. I'm very excited about everything. Ingrid and Sam like the works and they also think that they should be presented in a grid just like I have them in the studio right now. I have a photographer coming in Thursday to take pictures and on Sunday I will leave Albers to spend a week in New York before I fly back to Germany. I love your idea of showing your multi-canvas works and then "adding to them" from work to work and also from show to show. The simulation looks great. I think there might be the chance that in total there is too much work for the small NY space. Jochen will be in Leipzig on the 16th and we can play around with his gallery model. I already have a rough idea for the set-up Leipzig, but I think it's better explained in-situ. Looking forward to showing you the city in March!

BB: I just received an email that part of my trip via train to Leipzig has been cancelled. I have a feeling that this will continue happening and the possibility of being quarantined with everyone else on a train or in my hotel seems pretty risky. I hope you are still able to fly from the US to Germany without being quarantined! I had already cancelled my Berlin part of the trip, but I think I should go ahead and cancel the whole thing. It would suck to get stuck somewhere and not be able to get back to my family. I was looking forward to the trip and to seeing Prague and Leipzig for the first time. I hope we can discuss our plans for the show via Facetime, and maybe a drawing of the space and dimensions at some point will be helpful. I hope your travels home go smoothly!

BM: I got back to Germany on Tuesday and right now I'm sitting in a train to Leipzig. Yeah, the whole situation is kind of messed up. I think it is the right thing to do to cancel your trip to Leipzig for now. Let's hope the Corona situation gets better soon and that you will be able to come to the city a little later. I will send you some pictures of the gallery model next week and we can Facetime and talk about the shows. Last time I talked to Jochen, he was not sure if he will open the gallery branch in Vienna in April, because of the virus. I will keep you updated on that, too. If he is in Vienna in April, you guys should make sure to meet. Stay healthy, I hope this virus doesn't mess up all our plans for the summer!

BB: Started watching a Netflix series called "The Rain". The rain brings a virus. It's a much worse situation than what we're dealing with... talk soon.

BM: What a mess. Europe is completely shut down. I hope you and your family are healthy and keep up good spirits. I also hope life will be back to normal in summer, so that you can visit Leipzig and we can proceed normally with both of the shows. I met with Jochen and made some pictures for you of the gallery model. The gallery has 4 huge triangle-walls that we can move around with a crane. We are basically able to create the exhibition space that we want to show in. I attached some pictures of a setup that I had in mind for some time now. It creates two separate spaces in the gallery, but it also creates a long wall that we could use to combine pieces. What do you think? It is probably a little easier to decide after

you have seen the space. We also still have plenty of time to decide, but since we are all on lockdown, I thought it would make sense to share my thoughts. We could also talk on Facetime anytime. Let's hope everything gets back to normal in summer.

BB: It was good to get some logistics for the Leipzig show sorted out via telephone. I have been thinking about my practice in relationship to minimalism for many years, and more or less labeling myself as a minimalist, which always felt honest, but was also a way to force myself into a specific direction with the work. The idea/practice of repetition and working within a self-imposed set of constraints are two of the main components of minimalism that are also evident in my work since I began exhibiting in 2002. There's also, from the beginning, always been a sampling of different painterly languages, as well, so that probably is confusing to some people and makes my identity as a minimalist more difficult to embrace. I'm fine with that though.

What about you? How do you find yourself relating to minimalism? I can read much of your work, particularly the monochromatic stuff, as minimal, but also there is such a visible evidence of the process involved via brushstrokes and filling of space that it probably also makes your work more difficult for some to figure out. At the same time, I pick up on some possible Symbolist influence...something like Myron Stout's paired down compositions.

BM: Minimalism was always very important to me. I appreciate work with a very reduced vocabulary. The difference between my work and traditional Minimal Art is probably my appreciation for human craftsmanship. A lot of work produced in Minimal Art is very depersonalized in a sense. The final work always had to be close to perfect, like something produced by a machine. But then, I cherish the marks and mistakes of manual craft very much. I'm also very certain that a minimal vocabulary draws focus to manual labour. I'm always looking for fingerprints on a Judd. At the beginning of this year, at Albers Foundation, I was very lucky to see a lot of Anni Albers drawings that she made in preparation for her late prints. The drawings show a pattern consisting of various triangles in different combinations. What fascinated me was, that you could see in the lines how her hand was shaking, while she worked on those drawings. She was 80-something years old when she did them. That is so interesting to me, how a minimal form can transport so much information and emotion. Leipzig is not really the place to be if you are interested in Minimal Art. A lot of the works produced here are very baroque in a sense. Maybe my interest in Minimal was a reaction to what I saw here when I studied. I hope you can come to visit the city soon.

BB: During lockdown, I've started doing some ancestry research to pass the time. I think living in Europe for so long has made me more curious about my European roots. A lot of my ancestors are apparently from Germany. I sometimes wonder how much of an artist's interests and tendencies might be passed down genetically. I definitely think that most artists' perspectives are shaped aesthetically by the first decade of their lives, which would also be affected by their geography at that time. For me,

that would be 1975-1985 in Wamego, Kansas. For you, 1981-1991. Did you tell me that you grew up in Berlin? Was there anything about your family that might have shaped your interest in manual craft and mark making? I remember Brice Marden saying in an interview that his father built stone walls.

BM: I think that generally you are right. Childhood probably has a great impact on what you are interested in later on. I grew up in a small German town called Wolfenbüttel in Lower Saxony. My family moved to Berlin in 89, a couple of months before the Berlin wall came down. I cannot really put a finger on something specifically that shaped my aesthetic interests during my childhood. What I can say for sure is that as a teenager in Berlin I was very much drawn to US-American culture in general. Everything I spent time with was basically rooted in the US culture. Basketball, Comics, Computers, HipHop, Hollywood. Your home country was and still is a place that I feel very connected to because of my teenage years. Another thing that comes to mind, is that I have been very strict, tidy and logical about everything in life since I was a kid. My parents never had to tell me to clean my room, I was always trying to logically sort my surroundings, so that I can understand them better. I guess these attributes still play an important role in my work today. Since you have been living in Vienna for some time now: How do you feel about living in Europe? Did the relocation change facets of your work? Do you think that the European art-scene is very different to the one in New York?

BB: To me, New York's art scene is as much of an international scene as it is an American scene. That's also how I prefer to think of the art world, as something global. The internet has, of course, made this easier to realize and it gives me the feeling that it's possible and important for artists to be able to live anywhere. Definitely when I moved to Vienna 8 years ago, I noticed many differences, but it also didn't seem exactly fair to compare Vienna to New York City. I think because of the government/state support that exists for institutions and artists in Europe, it creates an overall different mood. Exhibitions in Vienna and much of Europe tend to exist as singular events, whereas in NYC and Los Angeles, exhibitions in both museums and galleries feel more impactful in terms of the energy and conversations that occur as a result. I think it might be more difficult for many artists to create much momentum with their careers in Europe, as compared to the US, but it might also, sometimes, result in more deeply developed art practices. There were some shifts with my work in the last 8 years. I definitely became more concerned about how the decorative qualities of my work were being understood, but maybe that would have happened even if I had stayed in New York. Probably in the US, though, decorativeness is more commonly used to be subversive or even ironic, and in Europe it still 'seriously' references Ornamentalism, so it might be more easily dismissed as such. I found myself painting on natural linen rather than white gesso backgrounds, as a simple way to mute color and probably also because linen seemed much cheaper and more readily available than in the US. In the past year, I've found myself returning comfortably again to white-gessoed backgrounds. I suppose I've found the balance between the decorative and conceptual results that I was searching for.

When you mentioned your American influences, I was reminded of your solo exhibition in Vienna,

'Form Cowboy'. There was one small drawing that was in the shape of a cowboy wearing a hat. It informed the other more ambiguous works in an interesting way. I never asked you if the cowboy motif also had a direct impact on the compositions and forms of the other works. Did it come before or after the denser works in the show? Can you maybe talk a little about how your pictures develop and where the shapes/form/content comes from. Is it somewhat dictated by your working process?

BM: It is very interesting how you compare Vienna (Europe) and New York City. I had similar experiences, that art shows in New York encourage a lot more discussion and reflection from the general public. I guess with this city being the center of the art world, you just have a lot of people really being interested in what the artists do. The general public in Europe might see artists more like people that work outside of society in a classical sense. Being an artist seems to be more normal in New York, with all of its advantages and disadvantages.

Series of my works normally develop out of a phase of a lot of formal experimentation. I think about how to use my materials a lot. When I come to a point where I think that something has the potential to be looked at more closely, I start a series. The small drawing "Form Cowboy" emerged from experimentation with form, I was not planning to draw a cowboy. But I was very happy to give it a place in the Vienna show. It is important to me that the forms that I produce still could be "something". That they have the potential to engage with the viewer's projections. When an interpretation is very obvious to me, I sometimes give it a name. That doesn't happen very often, though.

I cannot really say, where my shapes/forms come from exactly. There is no literal idea that I want to communicate/illustrate. The shapes develop out of visual desires. I want to see something, that's why I try to make it. One work always informs the next. When I'm satisfied with a certain form, there are always slightly different visual ideas embedded in it, which I try to focus on in the next work. When I feel like I have exhausted the potential of what I work with, I finish the series. Observing myself over the years showed me that I always focus on similar characteristics of form. What I do always has something to do with repetition, reduction, detail, minimalism, folk-art. But this is not something that I set up for myself, it just happened.

You said that you work within a set of self-imposed constraints. Do you ever think about breaking these constraints and working on something totally different? I think I already know the answer to this, but it is still interesting to hear your thoughts about it. In the sense of these self-imposed constraints, our work is very different. Maybe that is why I was drawn to your paintings in the beginning: Because I was so surprised how one can fetch so many different approaches out of a rather simple theme: Trees.

BB: For many years I was somewhat uncomfortable with the continuity of my subject matter (trees). I tried to talk myself out of painting another tree many times, or rather talk myself into painting something else. After a certain amount of time, I was concerned that by switching subjects it would (perhaps ironically) place too much importance on the 'subject' of the tree. There was a neutrality to the subject of landscape/trees/forests that was not unlike someone dealing with 'the grid'. This was important to me in

terms of how I wanted to define my painting practice. I have to admit that painting landscapes also satisfied the romantic aspects of paintings that I was still interested in exploring. The delicate balance of the neutrality and more romantic/painterly qualities of painting was quite challenging to maintain. I also had the feeling that what I was actually making were abstract paintings that were disguised as landscape paintings. That said, I came close to switching subjects many times. This mental anxiety/process, instead of leading me away from my chosen subject, would eventually lead me back into it, but with a refreshed approach. Something as small as a shift in palette or a new process would be enough to make the project fresh and interesting to me again. My most recent 'forest' paintings that are made by joining together multiple monochrome canvases have been reinvigorating for me. Perhaps I am most happy to be constructing 'forests' without actually painting any trees at all. This is the kind of reset of my practice that I'm constantly searching for.

Are there any new directions with your work that you're currently excited about? I'm also curious to learn more about the gigantic floor pieces that you've been working on. How do you see them in relationship to your more traditional paintings and drawings that hang on the wall? It seems like the floor pieces are more pattern-based.

BM: Right after I came back from the Albers Foundation residency, I started to look into working with textiles again. I'm doing a lot of experiments with embroidery right now. I don't really know if this will become a series, though. Too early to tell.

The floor-pieces developed out of pencil-drawings, that I did from 2011-2016. As I finished these drawings, I couldn't decide on an orientation for them. How to hang them... I worked on them sitting on a table and kept turning them while I worked. They don't really have a top, bottom, left or right for me. I understand them more as plane surfaces that can be viewed from any side. Much like a carpet. I finally decided to present them in vitrines, so that the viewer can walk around them and look at them from any direction. Thinking about the presentation of these drawings made me become interested in drawing on the floor. I wanted to produce large surfaces that people could walk around and which in a sense occupy the exhibition-space and press the visitors against the wall. I was able to do the first large floor-drawing in my solo show at Museum Wiesbaden in 2016 and have been commissioned to do new ones ever since. The floor-pieces are very much pattern based. I want to have an easy to follow pattern that still leaves enough room for the execution to be imperfect. As with other works I want them to be minimal, but handcrafted. I'm fascinated in what forms develop out of very easy, repetitional manual work.

I was just talking to Sam about maybe visiting New York in late July so that I will be able to see our show in person, before it ends. I guess, it is too early to tell if it will be safe to travel to the city by then. I'm really sad that we will probably not be able to be there and install our works together. I think this crisis will have a big impact on the art world in general. But, to tell you the truth, I'm slowly starting to appreciate parts of it. I feel like I have more time in the studio and I'm able to focus on the things that matter the most to me. What about you? How do you think this time will influence the arts and your work specifically?

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BB: I had already begun a time of contemplation and transition after the opening of my exhibition in Tokyo in early February. I was incredibly lucky to be able to travel for that show, and I'm really grateful to Tomio Koyama Gallery as well as the collectors who purchased my work and helped to support me during this awkward time. This pandemic also overlapped with my 45th birthday in April. Now that I'm halfway to 90, I've felt some internal pressure to reconsider my own practice and where I want my work to go. For most of the past two decades, I've gone to the studio to work out many of my ideas through making the paintings. Stepping away from the studio and slowing down during quarantine has definitely given me some much needed clarity. I'm beginning to see that clarity reflected in my work as well as in plans for future paintings. It would be great if you're able to travel to New York for the show. At this point, I can't really imagine myself making the trip, so having at least one of us there for the installation would be good. I think Sam, Ingrid, and Rob would also appreciate having a little bit of Leipzig on Ludlow Street:-) I've been thinking more about what to make for the Leipzig half of our show. Because the space is much bigger, it's an exciting opportunity for me to scale up some of my ideas. It will be great to finally meet Jochen as well. It's a shame that my trip to Leipzig, as well as his travels to Vienna had to be postponed. I'm really glad that both galleries have made the decision to move forward with our exhibitions as planned.