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CONVERSATIONS Mousse 65

The Subject Tells The Story: Bendix Harms

Bendix Harms and Ross Simonini in conversation

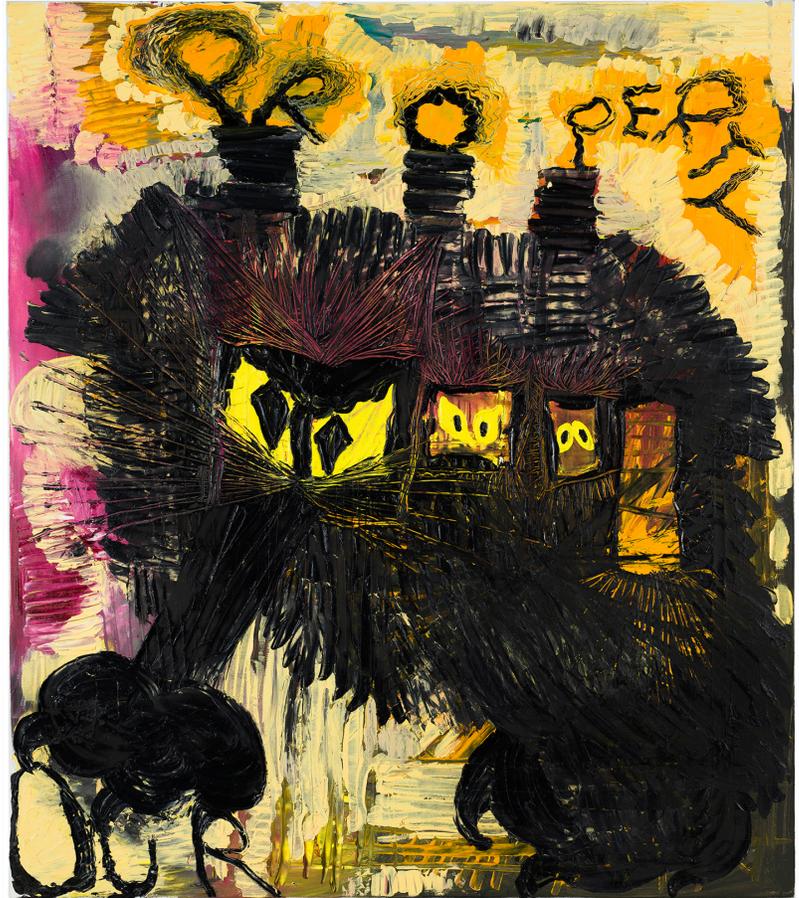
The German painter Bendix Harms has done few interviews, and so far, all of them have been on his own terms: published by his gallery, and conducted with friends and fellow painters. The talks provide an opening into his lexical world, a place where he invents words to better approximate the meaning in his mind, and where he breaks the restriction of directly answering questions. As with his paintings, which are often bedecked with exclamation points, he uses words with the poetic freedom of his ecstatic brushwork. Likewise, his pictures never illustrate: the narratives they depict are irreducible to common sentences.

In the following interview, which was conducted in several rounds over email, Harms is often frustrated by the language I aim at him. Like a careful contrarian, he circumambulates explanations and critiques the phrasing of my questions. All of this gave our dialogue a nice,

satisfying crunch. Here is a fellow artist who embraces the beautiful impossibility of communication, and I am grateful to have spent some time miscommunicating together. excavations of Arshile Gorky—but Matisse's scraped spaces in his 1910s paintings. Berkenblit's refusal to neither thematically nor compositionally seal her pictures allows for many readings, and the pictorial subject matter—horses, tigers, nudes, hands—nods at myth-making. Her work is unironic, unembarrassed, and sincere about both form and content.

ROSS SIMONINI: Why haven't you done any magazine interviews until now?

BENDIX HARMS: In painting, the last decade was occupied by any kind of abstract patterns and quotations of Russian Constructivism—tasty and dumb. It's different today. Perhaps all is possible, but I don't want to be addicted to coincidences—a situation where the wide gap left by Philip Guston



Bendix Harms, *Our Property*, 2018

©Bendix Harms. Courtesy: the artist and Anton Kern Gallery, New York

and Martin Kippenberger, the last narratives without any fearful excuses, seems to be an unexpected gift, a huge field with dark and fertile soil.

RS: Are you as purposeful about your daily life as you are about press?

BH: “Purposeful” sounds straight. But: a painting depends on thousands of decisions, and an artist is always searching for a unique and singular problem that only an artist can solve. All these decisions make it interesting, and the big challenge of each day is not to fail—or to fail 1000%. Each day-life is the complete opposite for me. I am one of the worst decision makers in this world. One single day-life decision can obstruct my brain for days. The real world can be the biggest enemy and the biggest friend at the same time.

RS: Do you work with a schedule?

BH: It feels like my inner schedule tells me what to do every day—what makes sense and what is senseless.

RS: I’ve never seen a picture of you. Would you say that you withhold or restrict your image from the public?

BH: “Restrict” is a word I’d never use. For many years there was one black-and-white photo on the web from an opening in Munich, where I looked thoughtfully at the floor. Now it’s gone, and it feels better.

RS: Do you think your image affects the perception of your paintings?

BH: YES. An image has the energy. It has a big impact because everything has a meaning and is connected. You can’t separate your physiognomy from your work—how you live, what you eat, how you think, and how you work are always readable. It’s like a visible fingerprint, steered by lifelong experiences.

RS: You mentioned Guston and Kippenberger. Do you think about your work in relation to art history?

BH: Art history seems like an endless film loop playing in the darkness of my brain. Sometimes a light is burning to look at it, and sometimes not. The darkness, in the meantime, is important to be thrown back into one’s labyrinth of thinking. Having the opportunity to find your own exit through these millions of paintings and attitudes.

RS: Is German painting important to you?

BH: German Expressionism is always on my mind like a trinity: thick paint, colorful paint, and fast painted. That’s okay, and some of those paintings are interesting, but they forgot to treat different subjects in a different way. Guston had the same problem: unique and fantastic narrative paintings, but always painted in the same way, with tons of white as a background and his red and black tones wet-on-wet. Always looks good and works 100%. I miss coincidences, accidents and—again—different treatments of different subjects. But anyway: Guston was the most sovereign narrative painter of all, a hero of the last century.

RS: You recently moved from Hamburg. What's your new studio like in Denmark?

BH: Currently it's a mix: an outdoor studio during the summer in the yard, including a garage for when it rains or when it's too hot. Running around in this yard with paint on my palette knife, sometimes singing, sometimes shouting, and sometimes—when a finished painting feels like a victory over the whole of art history—stretching my right fist toward the god of paint—who obviously doesn't exist—it could feel like hitting a totally chromed Freedom. There is also a winter studio on another farm because we still don't have a master plan for a new and heatable building on our grounds. A huge real-world decision.

RS: Language is important to your work in a way that it isn't for many painters. Do your paintings have a verbal narrative behind them?

BH: Language is a kind of concrete—it's the main material for the foundation of Contentism. Without its own terminology, all will become a big nothingness. A lot of my titles, sentences, and words are the result of a daily battle with my Danish wife, Mari, who is also a painter and has many antennas for the German language. All word-creators are welcome, like John Bock's son Linnart, who gave me titles like *Mit Töten* (With Killing), or *Pfreiheit* (a new word for freedom: Pfreedom), or Martin Kippenberger's *The whitest white woman I've ever met* (his comment when he met Mrs. Thea Westreich for the first time), which becomes *The whitest white cat I've ever met*. But: EVERYTHING can become a source: doorman videos, books, beach life. Any kind of experience: a forest that begins to talk, or a bird that starts to whistle. The main thing is always the same: what it has to do with me and my view of the art (world) and how could it influence me. This is the tipping point where it works or not. Are you really affected? Is there really an atomic and expandable relationship to the subject, or is it just this kind of attitude: I have to do something because I'm an artist? In that case you will die a long and unnoticed mush-death, and this is lifelong torture.

RS: What do you mean by "Contentism"?

BH: CONTENT DETERMINES THE HOW.

RS: Do you ever tell yourself stories with words while you're painting?

BH: No. Because my subject is the determiner, and I can't paint without its precise orders. The subject tells me the story.

RS: That sounds mystical. Are you a mystic?

BH: No. Actually I'm more a victim of the real world. In a positive way. Like walking around in the woods with my adored orange chainsaw in order to saw and saw and saw. This kind of monotony allows you to lose yourself and to be far away from the real world while staying within it—a circumstance that can be very similar to the vacuum of a painting session.

RS: Does your relationship to language come out of reading and writing?

BH: My personal holy bible for many, many years was *At Swim-Two-Birds* by Flann O'Brien, a book that is completely addicted to Surrealism and from which I took many titles. My one and only self-written book was titled *Tülp* (1997)—very thin, only short stories, and very, very absurd. A big influencer at that time was my former teacher Werner Büttner at the academy in Hamburg, a pale,

book-devouring man with splendid book recommendations. When it came to talking about painting he was a dumb white sculpture with big, melancholic eyes. Art is his big enemy and words are his huge passion. A very special mix. From that time on, Mari and I always battled about “the best sentence” or “the best title”, chronically creating new words for our own language that is different compared to the university-based-ordinary-art-language. Since 2004 I have been working with Anton Kern Gallery, where the level of emailing was and is almost always on a poetry level, which kicked me, too.

RS: How did it kick you?

BH: It's always the same: it feels like a counterpart where I can smell a certain claim for writing. This sparks the word-machine in my head. And the second reason is: they don't write and talk like car dealers. I've never got an email containing the truism: “... yes—I confirm.”

RS: Did you publish your short stories?

BH: I didn't. Maybe because of my awareness that pure absurdity couldn't be the summit of writing.

RS: Does language as visual art interest you?

BH: Language as art never touched me. Basquiat is interesting, but his written words are often interchangeable. There is one sentence from Jenny Holzer in my mind: “Protect me from what I want.” A brain burner, with pathos, partly psycho a perfect contradiction... Great!

RS: You seem to have a contentious relationship with language. You like to play with meaning, and yet you also refuse certain kinds of specificity around your work and life, as you've done in this interview a few times. I find this kind of resistance to be true of most artists. Often, it seems like an avoidance to be pinned down, to fight off reducibility, to preserve freedom in the work. Is any of this true for you?

BH: It feels like you can smell the answer: No. It's the opposite, because my Contentism works 100% contrary and I love to be pinned down. That's the oxygen of Contentism: to name things. Or in German: Die Hosen runterlassen, like, “let the trousers fall.” Some examples for naming: it's not “a” cat, it's Rufus the black cat of the farm; it's not “a” bird, it's the Red Cardinal of Manhattan; it's not “a” woman, it's my wife, Mari; it's not “a” farm, it's Østerfælden, the name of the farm; and it's not “a” man, it's Mr. Schuette, the owner of the red-brick farmhouse in Lower Saxony, or it's me, the German painter with hanging eyes and a big nose. All are painted, all are named. The biggest advantage in naming a subject is the closeness to the subject and therefore being much more criticizable. Often it feels totally naked, but at the same time it sharpens my arguments.

RS: The animal scientist Temple Grandin has said that animals think in pictures, not words. You paint a lot of animals. What's your relationship to them?

BH: It's always the same procedure: when I reach a certain level in a relationship to a subject, then I conquer the boiling point—which is very similar to falling in love—then the big WHAT and the big WHY lose their meaning. Then it runs on automatica. The subject is the determiner. It happened in the same way with my newest subject—THE RED CARDINAL—in New York. At four o'clock in the morning an incredible sound began in the street: didididi-DUDUDUDUDU! My first thought: new sound system of the police or ambulance. Or a signal to help blind people cross the road. BUT: too early and too loud. So I got up and stared through the window, and after a while I found a very small

red dot on an antenna, singing at full throttle and with such energy and pressure. An American bird I'd never seen or heard in Europe: pure beauty and atomic power melted together—a new friend—a new subject!

RS: Who is Rufus?

BH: Rufus the black cat was a special case because he lived for many years on the farm of Mari's parents in the northern part of Denmark before we bought it. So he was the owner of the property and the decision maker who decided that we had to buy the farm. This eighteen-year-old black dot in the green fields was such a strong counterpart. Now he is dead. He died at the end of 2017, and I dedicated two solo exhibitions to him: *Deathless Rufus—Defend Østerfælden* in Los Angeles and *Sankt Rufus* in New York. It's a little bit difficult to continue to paint this summer because I've never had such a steely relationship to such an animal before. Rufus! Where you are?

RS: What about scenes of people and ships and cars? Are these also subjects with which you have fallen in love?

BH: I wrote "... is similar to falling in love" ... not "I fall in love"—it's a big difference to me. It depends on the steely and over-boiling relationship where the question "what should I paint?" becomes redundant. That's the main point, and I don't distinguish between animals, people, and things. As painted subjects they are all equal. Actually, all kinds of Contentism started because of a red-brick farm building in Bleckede, a town in Lower Saxony, Germany, where Mari lived at the time. I was in Hamburg, and we wrote many letters with drawings to each other—drawing-letters. On the first one was the farmhouse with Mari as a landlord. This became my first content painting for the professional art world. Mari has continued to be my main subject until today: the headquarters of content.

RS: Can you fall in love with your own work?

BH: No. But sometimes a painting is so close to me that it feels like a part of me. A painting of Rufus could be my knee. It's impossible to send it to the art universe without pain. BUT: that's the price I pay for Contentism based on my own experiences. Maybe it would be easier to send paintings with rectangles and dots on to the galleries without any pain. But to me, pain is a barter trade, a currency that makes me electric. And the idea that paintings with Mari in them are hanging in New York, paintings with Rufus in them are hanging in Los Angeles, and paintings with my testicles in them are hanging in Munich and New York—that makes me even more electric.

Bendix Harms (1967 Münster, Germany) lives and works in Denmark. Recent exhibition include: *SANKT RUFUS* (Anton Kern Gallery, New York, 2018); *Deathless Rufus: Defend Østerfælden* (Morán Morán, Los Angeles, 2018); *ÄMEN* (Anton Kern Gallery, New York, 2017); *Hope and Hazard: A Comedy of Eros* (Hall Art Collection, Reading, VT, 2017); *Implosion 20* (Anton Kern Gallery, New York, 2016); *Don't call me when you are rich or famous. Call me only if you are in the gutter* (Grice Bench, Los Angeles, 2016); *The Great Figure Two* (The Journal Gallery, Brooklyn, NY, 2016); *Shout for Tomorrow* (Hirschl & Adler Modern, New York, 2016); *Colliding Alien Bodies* (Marlborough Chelsea, New York, 2016); *Independent Art Fair* (Anton Kern Gallery, New York, 2016); *Love: The First of the 7 Virtues* (Hudson Valley Center of Contemporary Art, Peekskill, NY, 2015); *SELF: Portraits of Artists in their Absence* (National Academy Museum & School, New York, 2015).

Ross Simonini is an artist, writer, musician, dialogist, producer, recorder, teacher, editor and generalist. He splits his time between New York and the California redwoods.