

CHISENHALE INTERVIEWS: PETER WÄCHTLER

Peter Wächtler

Far Out

16 September – 11 December 2016

Ellen Greig: *For this exhibition you have written and composed a song, which provides a soundtrack to the animation. Many of your previous works include writing and prose poetry. Could you talk about how you developed the lyrical arrangement in your song?*

Peter Wächtler: I started by writing, and then I began to sing, which made all my previous, complicated attempts look very bad and useless. I tried to write in rhymes. These rhymes refer to the idea of a wedding celebration where an unloved uncle gives an overly long speech in rhyme form. The speech becomes a hybrid of prose and song, which illustrates an assimilation of skills. Hobby writers tend to write in this way, forcing these poor little words to rhyme. For example, an aging man who I used to know had an obsessive idea of himself as a genius and he would write this type of poetry. There is an inability to grasp the writing process, or the professional activity of writing and a total misunderstanding of one's own position in relation to it. The writing is misled and obsessive, based on self-observation.

The issue between all this and me is not certain. Rhymes are a vehicle for this approach to writing, they provide proof for that person that they are indeed a writer and they have the necessary skillset. Rhyming is a skill-driven activity that is opposed to the general uncertainty of poetry. For someone who does not know what he is doing this logic is good guidance. It is a small piece of solid ground. There is an amateur, dilettante tradition that relates to rhyme. I am not sure where this comes from but it also comes with a certain amount of advice and false knowledge. This is also true of the formula of rock and roll music. I see this as a bracket that I can work within.

EG: *What kinds of music were you listening to, or referencing, while you were writing the song?*

PW: I am not actually listening to very much music at the moment. When I do listen to music, I am more drawn to the lyrics than the music itself. The words are somehow freed by the song. Early rock and roll music, for instance, is very close to entertainment. Within rock and roll there are these islands of nonsense and there is energy of meaninglessness.

The boogie and rock piano music in the song became another bracket or space to work within. This genre of music comes with this light-hearted yet self-destructive or entertaining element. But within this bracket there is room for me to move and I very much like the energetic emptiness of this space. It gives you an area to bin some meaning into. But I do not particularly like the music of the fifties. Its dustiness and stylish renderings are more attractive to me. There is a quality in the music of Jerry Lee Lewis that reminds me of Haiku poetry. I am very interested in this intersection. And from there we move to steampunk, retro and a general graphic designer's way of life.

EG: *Could you talk about the correlations between the hand-drawn animation technique and the process of composing the song? Disconnection, reduction and restriction seem to be important elements of these processes.*

PW: With regard to the cel animation, for this film there are just 35 character drawings in this clip and that's it. This brings it closer to the format of a screen saver.

I don't know how the writing and the animation are linked. For me, the writing and the song feel very disconnected and separate. At the beginning the idea was for the central character to be more steampunk but he became quite a traditional, fairy tale figure, almost infantile.

The background animation acts as a closed universe. It is hermetic. It is very coherently set up as some

misty moonshine, castle on a rock theme. I tried to work out different techniques of how to enter this landscape whilst the 'camera' remains at a distance to the character's back. However these tests did not really work and looked bad. The background I have used is a zoom into a scene of four or five separate drawings. The character is basically moving into a watercolour.

EG: The act of repetition seems to be an important element in the work.

PW: The animation centres on the protagonist's walk. Animating a walk is one of the most basic processes in animation. As the main movement in this animation is the zoom, the character's walk feels closer to a constant reset than a loop.

As for the repetition in the rhyming, this is driven by the chorus, "I no longer want to stay." This creates a lyrical pattern in the beginning of the film, which is disrupted and softened by the end of the film and by the extra layer of sub-titled text.

EG: The identity of the central character in your animation is almost completely obscured. What is he walking away from? Where is he going?

PW: There aren't necessarily any answers to those questions. The film could also be modelled on the idea of a party in which visuals are streamed onto a screen whilst an unrelated song is playing somewhere in the background. This idea of alienation is what divides the song from the film, and also what divides the character from any useful plot.

EG: To pick up on the idea of alienation and the positive and negative act of leaving; the character can be read as giving it all up, but also as pursuing self-improvement.

PW: This relates to the constant questioning of one's own position. Which can be a geographical questioning, asking yourself whether you're in the right city. Also asking if you're in the right mood, whether you have the right friends. In this sense there is a constant negotiation with a secondary, outward perspective. Leaving has almost become professionalised. By staying you are not actually doing anything, and neither are you doing anything by leaving. The system is bipolar.

EG: You've installed a large central wall in the gallery with your video projected onto one side. Does this relate to the ideas of disconnection and division between the song and animation?

PW: There were other ideas earlier on. I thought of using a split screen, a lighthouse-type structure or a column to project onto. However, when it was clear that there would not be other works in the show, I wanted to create a viewing space that would not stage this one film too much. I wanted to show it in a more vulnerable position that did not block the whole space. That is why the screen in *Far Out* is quite minimal and static. It is a constructed element spanning the width of the roof beams and taking up half of the space.

I also like the way that we now have a bit of a foyer area in the gallery space and it prompts viewers to walk in and turn in order to see the film. They are not trapped in a specific screening situation. The installation also creates a concentrated area for the sound.

EG: Is the way that you've approached the installation in the gallery space similar to the way that you approached the animation and the song? In each you're not giving everything away?

PW: Yes. The song could be read as very personal, an obituary, a song about leaving. But the film disrupts that reading. The film could be read as a romantic, moonlit walk. But this reading would also be incorrect. I am testing these ideas in a relatively vulnerable way, which I don't think is hermetic or penny pinching. Generosity is important. It is at risk. It would not be a generous work if I had some very good sculptures hidden at home that I was refusing to bring to the space – I can assure you that I don't.

EG: The exhibition is titled Far Out. Why did you choose this title?

PW: I like the expression in relation to the invitation card – the image of the Viking boat and the people on board rowing a bit too far out. Too far to come back. Too far away to be understood as what they are. The title also refers to boasting, social ranking or comparison. The Vikings have this dragon boat that has a living dragon boat head.

EG: *To return to the animation, we've spoken about whether narrative is or isn't important in your work. Can you say something about the role of narration in this exhibition?*

PW: The narrative is my attempt to make the film and to make the song.

For the length of four minutes and twenty four seconds the work provides an experience. This is why I don't skip the film. I don't care what the film is. I just need some people to stay in the room. Don't move too much. Stay right where they should be, in the middle of those four speakers. Only then can I finally start singing my song.

Peter Wächtler interviewed by Ellen Greig, Exhibitions and Events, Curator, Chisenhale Gallery on Friday 9 September at Chisenhale Gallery, London.

Chisenhale Interviews, series editor, Polly Staple, Director, Chisenhale Gallery.