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Pavel Büchler: Signs of Life

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Cover image:

# Pavel Büchler: Signs of Life

by Greg Thomas • 07.02.2024

If this survey exhibition of the ludic, post-conceptual artist Pavel Büchler (b.1952) represents a homecoming of sorts, it is surely a vexed one. Born in Prague, in what was then the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, Büchler spent a year in custody for attempting to flee the country. In 1976 he was thrown out of art college on the orders of the state police, and in 1981 he arrived in the United Kingdom, where he has remained since. It is not surprising then that Büchler's pre-emigration practice explores such themes as visual erasure and disappearance. For example, in the series *Blind Circles (Under Surveillance)*  [FIG.1](#), each photograph documents the artist attempting to draw a circle over the course of an hour while blindfolded. With the shutter left open for sixty minutes, the camera captured only ghostly traces of human form, as though the artist's body had spontaneously combusted or been forcibly eradicated.

Büchler's work from this period also suggests an early development of his belief that 'the purpose and meaning of art lies precisely in its intentional uselessness, unjustifiability and irresponsibility' (p.315).<sup>1</sup> This approach was, he suggests, 'something like a reflex or instinctive reaction to what used to be called in my youth "socially beneficial work". "Work ennobled man" [...] provided it served some predetermined ideological goal' (p.113). The artist's engagement in his youth with conceptualism – which was instigated, suggests Nick Thurston, by 'grainy black-and-white reproductions in international art magazines' (p.14) – can be interpreted partly in light of such remarks. Here was a way of dismantling the tools of traditional media – seen as complicit in the ideological project of state communism – and of forging ties of imagined kinship beyond the Iron Curtain.<sup>2</sup> Land art was also an early touchstone for Büchler, and the creative possibilities of both genres underpin some of the more striking works on display in this career-spanning retrospective. The exhibition is organised thematically rather than chronologically, allowing formal and conceptual connections to be drawn between different stages of the artist's practice.



**Fig. 1** *Blind Circles (Under Surveillance)*, by Pavel Bůchler. 1978. Black-and-white photographs, 7 parts, each 20.5 by 25.5 cm. (Courtesy Moravská galerie, Brno; exh. Moravská galerie, Brno).

*Material Facts* (1975–79) is a case in point.<sup>3</sup> First titled *A day out, walking in circles, thinking inwards* (1975), it initially consisted of an aerial photograph showing a star shape in a snow-covered field made by seven people, each of whom had dug a shallow trench from a different point on the circumference of a circle, heading inwards to meet in the middle. If there was some subversive potential in this gesture – in its deliberate uselessness – this was made explicit in the second iteration of the work, wherein the photograph was displayed immediately above an aerial image of Bory Prison, the plan of which is in the form of a star, and where Bůchler spent time in captivity. The images echo one another, suggesting the different meanings that forms can embody depending on their visual and informational cues: the terms by which they are transformed into symbols.

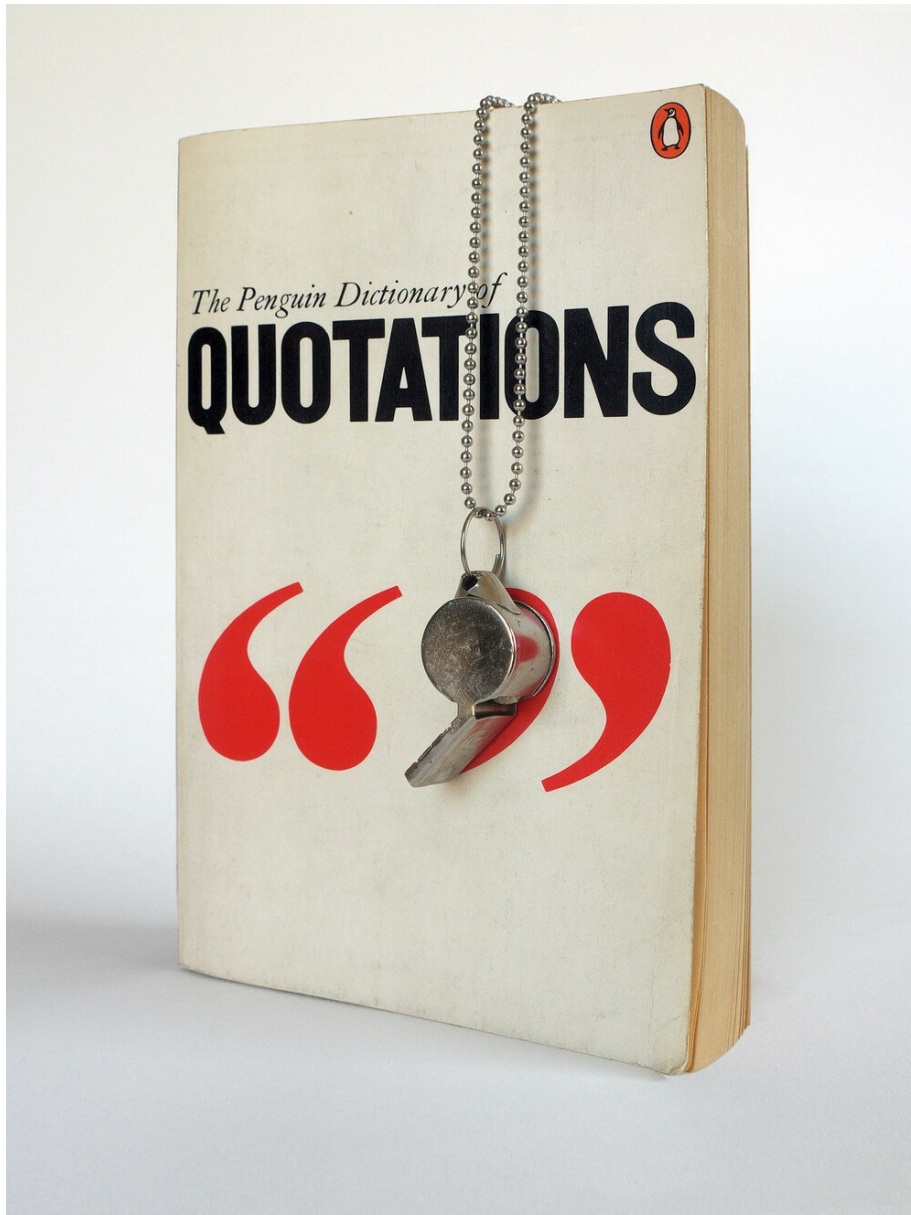
This kind of play at the thresholds of meaning has become a more pronounced concern since the artist’s relocation to the United Kingdom. Often it involves repurposing found materials, objects and technologies in a way that undermines or radically alters their functional value. For example, one gallery includes a series of vitrines that house a set of gracefully aged Penguin paperbacks, which have been subjected to playful interventions using found objects **FIG.2**: a 1960s edition of A.W. Palmer’s *A Dictionary of a Modern History* has a large letter ‘H’ inserted inside it and *The Dictionary of Art and Artists* is propped open with canvas stretcher wedges. In *Reference* **FIG.3**, a referee whistle is hung upside down over the front of a dictionary of quotations, exactly the same size and shape as the quotation mark it obscures. As in *Material Facts*, the similar visual forms in *Reference* animate themselves in different ways: one symbol denoting authority or

profundity of language, another, timekeeping and control. Although the political edge is subtle, it is nonetheless sharp.



Fig. 2 Installation view of *Pavel Bůchler: Signs of Life* at Moravská galerie, Brno, 2023–24. (Courtesy Moravská galerie, Brno).

Similarly, in his postcard and magazine collages, Bůchler overlays matching shapes from disparate images, simultaneously creating a continuity of forms and a clash between the different worlds they evoke. In the series *Clowns, Acrobats, and Others* FIG.4, a comb held in a clown's hand merges into the tip of a tribal staff in another photograph. In *Dear Sarenco* FIG.5, a curved log in a summer meadow mirrors the bodies of leaping dolphins. The images are presented alongside two letters in which Bůchler corresponds with the mail artist Sarenco (b.1945) regarding his inclusion in a group exhibition, the contents of the missives themselves becoming an aspect of the piece. The rhyming of objects suggests different versions of reality encroaching on each other, while all are somehow undermined – made to seem invalid or impossible – in the process. The gesture expresses a quiet sense of revolt that is perhaps informed by the artist's 'outsider' status in both the capitalist west and communist east of Europe.



**Fig. 3** *Reference*, by Pavel Büchler. 2017. Book and referee whistle, 13 by 19.5 by 4.5 cm. (Courtesy the artist and annex14, Zurich; exh. Moravská galerie, Brno).

This type of experiment takes on a different tenor when it incorporates functional objects. *Bloom Stool, 1973* **FIG. 6** comprises a battered loudspeaker jutting out from the underside of a paint-spattered artist's stool. Through its concavity one hears the barely audible and vastly distorted sound of Büchler's flushing toilet, recorded onto an old-fashioned magnetic tape player. This is partly an homage to Leopold Bloom, the protagonist of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1920), one of the most memorable scenes of which unfolds in a privy. The flower-like shape of the speaker positions it as a 'bloom' of faecal stench or plumbing noise, while the 'stool' – placed between the source and output of noise – carries additional scatological connotations. But the loudspeaker and obsolete tape recorder – the latter a machine of the kind used by the Stasi and Czechoslovak secret police – are also loaded symbols of political

indoctrination and surveillance. Their repurposing as avant-garde assemblage, involving correlations between such shapes as loudspeaker and flower, again seems to reject the sociopolitical reality in which the objects initially acquired their value.

Over recent decades, Bůchler's letterpress work has grown into a distinct channel of activity: not so much concerned with the play of signs as with the deliberative interrogation of constrained compositional formulae, very much in the spirit of Concrete art or poetry. It is probably from the latter, perhaps from the Czech pioneer Jiří Valoch (b.1946), who was an early mentor, that Bůchler's typographic work inherits its openness to visual beauty and linguistic lyricism; certainly, this did not come from high conceptualism. Trained as a typographer in Czechoslovakia, Bůchler inherited a proofing press from the designer Edward Wright (1912–88), but without type. Years later, he discovered several incomplete sets of large wooden letters from the same kit, which Wright had initially bequeathed to another acquaintance. These have become the primary tools of Bůchler's work in this genre, the distinctive, slender sans-serif letterforms granting a certain quality of aesthetic continuity.<sup>4</sup>



**Fig. 4** *Clowns, Acrobats and Others*, by Pavel Bůchler. 1986. Collage, 4 parts, each 40.5 by 50.5 cm. (Courtesy Moravská galerie, Brno; exh. Moravská galerie, Brno).

Pieces such as *Honest Work (Red Red)* **FIG.7** give a sense of what Bůchler's constricted compositional programme makes possible. The words 'RED / YELLOW / BLUE' are printed on three separate sheets of paper, each in their named colour. On three further sheets are the same words, printed in the tones created when one combines the original primary colours: orange, green and purple. The sequence appeals almost as a kinetic poem, or a colour experiment with a Mondrian palette. *Revolution of the Nineteenth Century* (2012) relies on a similar approach, only on a grander

scale. Two consecutive sentences from Karl Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852) – 'There, the phrase exceeded the content. Here, the content exceeds the phrase' – are printed using only the letter blocks available from the stock inherited from Wright. Due to insufficient Es, contractions start to appear, such as 'THE PHRASE EXCEEDED TH CONTNT'. The unused letters from each pressing appear on adjacent sheets, like clues for solving a compositional riddle. Elsewhere, the letterpress is put to use to create a minimalist manifesto for Büchler's aesthetics of reuse in *No New Work* (2012).

There is much more one could say about Büchler's practice, for example the way he pays homage to and subverts the work of various modernist and avant-garde predecessors. Such gestures speak to one of the overarching themes of the exhibition: that of 'making echoes matter' (p.12). What might initially seem to be simple, bricolage-esque association between arbitrary shapes, scenes and contexts is in fact a deeply politically and sociologically engaged approach to artmaking, in which Büchler explores the competing systems of knowledge, mythologies and ethics that have governed much of society in the last century. Then again, multiple routes can be plotted through this show; it reveals a charming, complex and diversely rewarding oeuvre.



**Fig. 5** Detail of *Dear Sarenco*, by Pavel Büchler. 1996. Letters and collage, 5 parts. (Courtesy Moravská galerie, Brno; exh. Moravská galerie, Brno).





**Fig. 6** *Bloom Stool*, 1973, by Pavel Büchler. 2009. Reflex horn loudspeaker, wooden stool and tape recorder, dimensions variable. (Courtesy the artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlin and Los Angeles; exh. Moravská galerie, Brno).



**Fig. 7** Installation view of *Pavel Büchler: Signs of Life* at Moravská galerie, Brno, 2023–24, showing *Honest Work (Red Red)*, by Pavel Büchler. 2011. Letterpress on paper, 6 parts, each 34 by 50 cm. (Courtesy Moravská galerie, Brno).

## Exhibition details

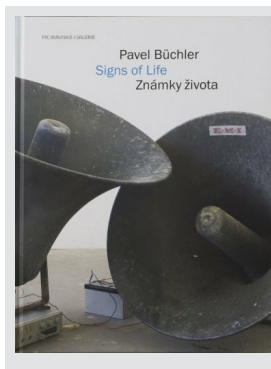
### **Pavel Büchler: Signs of Life**

Moravská galerie, Brno

22nd September 2023–25th February

2024

## About this book



### **Známky života / Signs of Life**

By Pavel Büchler with contributions by Richard Couzins, Vít Havránek, Ondřej Chrobák, Ed Krčma, Nick Thurston and Jonathan Watkins

Moravská galerie, Brno, 2023

ISBN 978-80-7027-363-0

## Footnotes

- 1** Catalogue: *Pavel Büchler: Známky života / Signs of Life*. By Pavel Büchler, with contributions by Richard Couzins, Vít Havránek, Ondřej Chrobák, Ed Krčma, Nick Thurston and Jonathan Watkins. 352 pp. incl. numerous col. + b. & w. ills. (Moravská galerie, Brno, 2023), 790 Kč. ISBN 978-80-7027-363-0.
- 2** Jan Press, the Director of Moravská galerie, notes in his preface that this retrospective, appropriately titled *Signs of Life*, partly denotes a wider attempt to cast fresh light on the creative cultures that survived behind the Iron Curtain after the crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968, in spite of heavy surveillance and censorship.
- 3** This work is reproduced and discussed in the catalogue but is not included in the exhibition.
- 4** Slimvolume has recently published a selection of Büchler's letterpress works that includes many of the works on show, see P. Büchler and A. Hunt, eds: *Variable Pieces: Letterpress prints 2011-2023*, London 2023.

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