

## Conversation with Ashley Bickerton

by Fredi Fischli and Niels Olsen

Fredi Fischli and Niels Olsen: We discovered your work through Albert Oehlen, who curated the show *Malerei der 80er Jahre* at Sprüth Magers in Berlin two years ago. We knew and admired the work of all the other artists in the show (namely Richard Artschwager, Malcolm Morley, Albert Oehlen and Andreas Schulze), but your Susie works were completely new to us. How much 'Malerei' is in these works? Because – if we understand correctly – you started with one programmatic Susie painting when you arrived in New York in the early 80's which then lead to the ongoing Susie series.

Ashley Bickerton: The original Susie painting was just a painting. It was loosely based on Sherrie Levine's women in advertising images cut out in the shape of ex U.S. presidents' heads, (form defines content, content defines form). I was playing with the word Susie, because it was a casual and more lyrical slippage from the more formal Susan. Susan itself is a female first name and thus outside of the patrilineal ordering of formal genealogies. I wanted to push a wedge as far as possible between the form and the content. So, the 'plastic' type face became more "silly" and unnecessarily decorous, while the 'word' slipped more toward a phonetically simple 'utterance'. This was the precursor and bore the Mother lode of all the information of what was to be my early word paintings. So, when a year or so later I started making the box pieces, I was looking for some kind of 'artist signature/name brand' to stick on them all. Susie immediately came to mind, particularly because it was a female first name in casual form (the precise opposite of 'Picasso' or 'Matisse' in several important ways).

F / N: Was this use of language influenced by the work of your father, the linguist Derek Bickerton?

Bickerton: We never really spent more than two years in one place - except for Guyana in South America – until we moved to Hawaii, when I was twelve or thirteen. I spend my entire childhood moving around, specifically from one place where they spoke funny English to another place where they spoke funny English. So I ended up speaking in five dialects of English, all of them completely incomprehensible to one another, yet still the mother tongue

English. So that gives a key of the pretty bizarre perspective of the elasticity of language. Sometimes when I had a conversation with my brother, we spoke Hawaiian pinyin or some kind of West African creole. It's all English but one can't comprehend another. So from there I started with my earliest wood-pieces and my first work was Susie.

Fischli/Olsen: Was this the first painting you did when you came to New York?

Bickerton: Yeah, in 1982. It was a black and white Susie. From the beginning of art school there was a battle inside me between the expressionist and the conceptualist. But when I went to CalArts (California Institute of the Arts), the expressionist was stronger.

Fischli/Olsen: What works did you make at CalArts before the groundbreaking Susie?

Bickerton: I did crazy films based on Jack Smith and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* by Robert Wiene. My films were expressive, very weird and twisted. I was influenced by John Baldessari, but genetically I'm more attached to Tony Oursler, Mike Kelley, Jim Shaw and these types of artists. Jim Shaw, John Miller and Tony Oursler were all in a band together «The Poetics» so they were always around. At the time I got to CalArts Baldessari was fading out, and then he left. In the end, the central influence became Michael Asher.

Fischli/Olsen: Was there a reason why you went to Los Angeles to study with Asher or Baldessari, or was it just by chance?

Bickerton: I grew up in Hawaii and California was the big world for me. I didn't really think of New York at that point. I wanted to go to Art Center because they taught you how to paint good and become a commercial artist, but it was too strict and weird - It just didn't work for me. And CalArts was the one in that everything flowed better. I realized that it had a lot to do with my nature. I wasn't geared to be someone in this rigorous field. I needed to be a visual artist free-associating, making things up myself. So CalArts was the right choice. But it was almost accidental.

Fischli/Olsen: And why did your interest change from film to painting?

Bickerton: I moved to the West Coast like a lot of stupid kids smoking marijuana and thought Salvador Dali was the living end of everything. In my first year of art school, I put on very loud Jethro Tull on my headphones, read Dali books and cried.

Fischli/Olsen: Why did you go to New York after CalArts?

Bickerton: It was more complicated than that. I wanted to be more like Dali but I was growing up with Miro prints all around my parent's house, which I loved. And sometimes things form you without knowing it. I applied to the Whitney program right after CalArts and got rejected. I was told that I was rejected because I had too many people writing me letters, too many really good people. And they felt, this guy is a hustler, he doesn't need us, he wants to just add another. I think Barbara Kruger and Sherrie Levine were on that list of people writing letters. Everybody thought that I was the one in my graduate class that would get in for sure. And then I didn't and a friend of mine did. He did abstract paintings and I think they were trying to make a point: We don't go for the obvious. It was very political there. So I didn't get in and I made a decision: A lot of my friends stayed for grad school. I thought, it would be easy to stay if you have already successfully done an undergraduate program there. But I decided that it would be wasting time doing two years of the same thing because the program doesn't really get more rigorous. You did the same thing. Why would I do that in a valley north of Los Angeles long before Los Angeles was any kind of a major art scene? When I could go to New York and do real art with real artists in real time?

Fischli/Olsen: Very soon upon your arrival in New York your career started immediately. Already in 1984 you had solo exhibitions at White Columns and Artist Space. In this publication we focus on your rich body of early works that you did in your twenties.

Bickerton: I was pretty hungry. When Jack Goldstein came to CalArts to talk, I wrote him right afterwards and told him that I could do his paintings better than whoever was doing them. He seemed amused and I told him I was moving to New York. I didn't think he would even remember me but when I came to New York I gave him a call. His assistant was going on a three-day vacation and he gave me five photographs and pointed at an eleven feet long canvas and said: paint this on this. Then I reapplied to the Whitney program and friends of mine who were younger than me – namely Mark Dion – were already in the program and they got me in. It was a kind of weird backdoor-internal-politics by people who were actually younger. But by the time I got in I had already shows at White Columns and Artist Space. So, I was only going out of revenge.

Fischli/Olsen: So, Jack Goldstein was an entry point to the New York art world for you.

Bickerton: I hit the ground running in New York. I was ambitious, I was very driven and suddenly I was doing Jack Goldstein's paintings. He liked my work and we got along. It was a wild period. Suddenly I was embroiled in all these dramas in the middle of the art world. It was very heavy, suddenly going to the dinner at Helene Winer's house, meeting all these people, these big artists. I remember saying: I am going to hold my nose down to the grindstone and not looking up until the scenery has changed. I just worked and worked and worked, because I didn't want to waste any time. I was pretty driven.

Fischli/Olsen: The Susie works seem to be an expression of your driven attitude at the time. They are very complex in the way they're manufactured and play with a certain kind of subculture craft.

Bickerton: Again, there was an epic battle racing inside me between the expressionist and the conceptualist. I'm not happy in either. And I came through Goldstein and all his friends like Jim Willing and his group into the international art world. Schnabel was the king. To a lesser extent Basquiat and Haring and back then the whole scene was in the East Village. When I look back now and see the battle lines that have been drawn, I shake my head and realize that I didn't even like the guys I was with. And I preferred some of the guys I was supposed to be against. I preferred a lot of the work that was supposedly bad. But yeah, that's how the things were, you know. It's really not about what people say that it's about. It's about power. I actually prefer George Condo over Peter Halley but Condo was on the other side. Halley and I were in the trench together shooting Condo.

Fischli/Olsen: What other artists were a reference for the Susie series?

Bickerton: The first work came quite simply out of Sherrie Levine's photographs of women holding a household products for advertisements. They were cut in the shape of an American President. For me, it said Frank Stella. Form defines content, content defines form. It exaggerates the image from the shape of the image. That's what the first Susie came out of. When I did the first Susie, it was supposed to be Anti-Schnabel, Anti-Basquiat. I'm not as cold and hard as some artists, so I had to take the goofy type face. Then it got sillier and sillier. I love the expressionist in me that just needs to drip paint and to create things. I love Howard Hodgkin, I love Julian Schnabel. But Judd was the epicenter of our thinking. Now it puzzles me because this is a kind of magical thinking where we can find god in a metal box.

Fischli/Olsen: Referring to Judd, was Minimal Art important for you?

Bickerton: It wasn't so much Minimal Art. Minimal Art as an idea of making things minimal – that seems to be en vogue now. For us, it had something to do with the cultural aspect of material and the finish of an object. That was why I started to get the Judd point inside out and bloating it. Blowing it up because he tried to place god in his objects and I tried to bring it back to what it was: a high-grade commodity, a status symbol that was bought and traded. I basically tried to make Judd back to what it really was. For a good run of time Judd's sculpture was imbued with a vast array of spiritual properties and dimensions by a great many people. That God in its contemporary incarnation existed in these stripped down boxes was a widely accepted orthodoxy. I wanted to bring these boxes back to what they were, branded plastic chips at play on a circuit of money and meaning.

Fischli/Olsen: In our exhibition at STUDIOLO in Zurich, we also showed your wall pieces. Where did your interest in mannered walls come from?

Bickerton: I got the idea for those by traveling in Mexico. I looked out a bus window outside of Acapulco coming in from the south and I passed this hideous, purple and pink wall. It was a visual monstrosity - so in your face. I was absolutely taken by it, repulsed but taken, and then it just hit me. If you try to make «nothing», something really ridiculous, then it is a piece of wall for a wall. A wall that is full of obscene camp. But for me it's also a trading chip on the circuit of art. That's why the mark (Susie, season 86/87) is on the side. Later Susie became a signature because I saw all artwork was being valued by the time and place it was made, like Picasso 1914, Andre Masson 1922. And there was a lot of talking about feminism and the patriarchal name of the father, which is Picasso, Matisse and Masson. So I thought why not just take a casual female first name? Susie worked for me as a painting once and then I employed it as a signature for pieces, and I started to put season 86/87 on it. So it became Susie Season 86/87. We started calling things what they were.

Fischli/Olsen: With the branding of the name Susie and by highlighting the season of production, you applied the rhetoric of product packaging. It was a way of reflecting market strategies. How important was the art market for you? Did you sell a lot of works during that time?

Bickerton: We didn't go into it. When I was graduating from art school, I was making a deal with my brother, that he would support me because I was going into a field that I was not expecting any valuable support from. When I got to New York, I realized that it probably was not the case because people were selling their art around us. There was a viable structure. I remember the first time I was in a group show in Metro Pictures: I had one of my wall pieces in it. I think you guys showed it at STUDIOLO, a little black one with silver and gold rocks. That's one of my favorite ones. That was in that show and I think Robert Longo who had never seen my work was just like, "What the hell is that? Designer art?" And I was like, "Yeah, actually, that's the whole point!" It was all about taking the mick out of these New York Expressionists.

Fischli/Olsen: Today many people refer to your branding strategy for Susie. We don't know of another example from that time that worked so straightforwardly with the concept of branding.

Bickerton: I kind of got the idea from Matt Mullican - another one of Goldstein's contemporaries. Mullican sort of boiled things down to symbols. When I look at his work now, I realize that it's completely different. But as artists we get ideas from misunderstanding the work of others. I see something I like and I purposely don't understand it, but I see what I want and I take it. Artists always do that.

Fischli/Olsen: In 1986 the legendary Neo-Geo show took place with Halley, Koons and Vaisman at Sonnabend Gallery. Is it a distortion of history that people always write about the importance of that show? Today there is a myth about the fantastic four.

Bickerton: I just heard an anecdote about that show from Allan McCollum that I actually don't remember, but apparently some old guy got so irate that he ripped one of the toilet seats off one of Meyer Vaisman's floor paintings. Apparently Allan says, he was impressed because I just physically accosted him and threw him down the stairs. I don't remember anything, but it's a nice story. The East Village was where the battle lines were drawn. On one side you had the Fun Gallery and their ilk: Haring and Basquiat. Schnabel was the big guy then. Now, when you look at auction houses, Basquiat has eclipsed Schnabel, but back then it was Schnabel. On the other side you had galleries like International With Monument or Nature Morte showing more the conceptually focused work. And somewhere in the middle you had people like Pat Hearn which showed George Condo and Peter Schuff. There were clearly battle lines.

Fischli/Olsen: And Sonnabend Gallery stood for another time? It was already an established gallery.

Bickerton: We all showed at one of those galleries. I showed with International With Monument. In fact, Jeff Koons and Peter Halley also showed there and the gallery was actually run by Meyer Vaisman. He used to say things like: We are going to take over the art world.

Fischli/Olsen: And you showed as well at Cable Gallery?

Bickerton: That was before. The Cable Gallery is the brainchild of two players, whom you know quite well. These two people have probably the best eyes in the business. Unfortunately both of them are fucking disasters in running a gallery. You look at the roster of that gallery. It was Christopher Wool, Haim Steinbach and many others... And a nice little tribute to the 80's: When I was going in or out of the gallery, I would see guys who had their recording studio in that same building. Three black guys with big hats and big glasses and chains: It was Run-D.M.C.! It was normal then but now looking back it's wow! Let's follow the chronology: Cable, then the

East Village and when things started to blow up to a certain level, the established galleries in Soho started to take a look.

Fischli/Olsen: And at that point you started working with Sonnabend?

Bickerton: They began to be interested. That was when Meyer said that we are going to take over the art world. I really didn't believe him, but clearly he was speaking to Jeff. Metro Pictures put on a couple of group shows. And then there was the "Hot Four" show at Sonnabend. A lot of people were trying to get that show and Meyer was the one doing all the face to face negotiations. He was the operator, the gallery dealer, the rest of us were merely artists. Mary Boone, one of the biggest galleries of the day, wanted the show very badly, but it would have been a very different show at her gallery. It wouldn't have included Meyer in it and she would have added Philip Taaffe and Ross Bleckner to the equation. It would have looked slightly different.

Fischli/Olsen: But Mary Boone also showed the Expressionists?

Bickerton: Yeah, and so did Ileana. She showed A. R. Penke, Georg Baselitz, Anselm Kiefer, all of them, before anybody. But German Expressionists weren't regarded in the same way as the American Expressionists. They were seen as more intellectual - that was the appearance, I don't know if it is a fact. Meyer was negotiating when it came down to Sonnabend and I think Haim Steinbach was a possibility but - and this is gossip - Jeff Koons did not like Haim Steinbach because the stuff was too close to him or something. He said, "If you want me in the show, you will not have him." There was always some of that crap. Haim wasn't mixed for the show. I think Haim would have been a great addition to the show. In fact, better than Halley or Vaisman?

Fischli/Olsen: Were you actually fond of Koons and Halley at the time?

Bickerton: I was fond of them. Halley is just another animal to me; he is not a bad guy. He is just all that intellectual .... and people would keep buying. The artist's eye was most important for Steinbach, and Jeff and I felt we were doing something slightly different, which was commodity art. There were slight variations, I mean, you drift another way and then you got Taaffe and Bleckner.

Fischli/Olsen: You once mentioned that Steinbach has a too rigid approach in your opinion?

Bickerton: It can be surprising to learn that Haim is actually older than Joseph Kosuth and yet a full twenty years separate the moments when each crystallized in the public consciousness. If you think about that: Haim spent twenty years getting to that point. And when we moved on, Haim couldn't adapt. Koons and I have done a million different things since then. We moved on. My problem with Halley was that I loved the work when I first saw it. I got it immediately, it was the Zeitgeist – but I felt conceptual artists were going through emotions and that there would come other emotions, ideas but there weren't. He was a formal painter and I got bored. And the same with Haim in a sense. It has something wonderful about it, but then after a while you are realizing that he is a formalist shopper. His pieces are not constructing a discourse of visual language. They are really just a sentence.

Fischli/Olsen: This is something that interests us in particular with your work. It's characterized by an overload of vocabulary. It's never about a single clear sentence or message; they are always complex and multi-layered.

Bickerton: I made money in this game, but I also did not play the market very well. But one thing is this: People want something simple, people want something that is kind of airy and gives them a sense of space where they can project themselves into. And I am not really able to do that. I tend to overload things, make them claustrophobic.

Fischli/Olsen: But if we compare you to Koons, his works communicate simple messages in a straightforward way. They are something you can project your own ideas into. But your work is the opposite – it's almost dripping of content.

Bickerton: I'm flattered you guys were looking close. A friend of mine has organized a show at an auction house in London with Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke. It was to readdress the market that has gone almost exclusively to Richter. Many would say that Polke is the superior artist. Historically, artistically, I think so. But it's so much more complex, it's hard to put a focus on it, if you compared it to Richter. People on the market like these spots on Richter, because oligarchs recognize it immediately. Polke doesn't do that.

Fischli/Olsen: We were visiting Albert Oehlen recently in his studio, and with him it's similar. He has the same genetics as Christopher Wool, but Wool plays much more with the notion of the "cool." His work uses a strategy of the iconic avant-garde art. Oehlen's painting is much more diverse and his oeuvre shows a path of always trying something out. With him there's both achievement and failure.



Bickerton: I was saying that there is an epic battle rising inside me between the expressionist and the conceptualist and I actually thought, that is what Albert Oehlen brought to my work. We both have that. He is both: an expressionist painter and a conceptual thinker who is putting the painting apart sometimes. He wants to create these fabulous narratives of movements and stances and this Beethoven-like...