

Art & Photography

Hans Ulrich Obrist in Conversation About Inventing New Languages

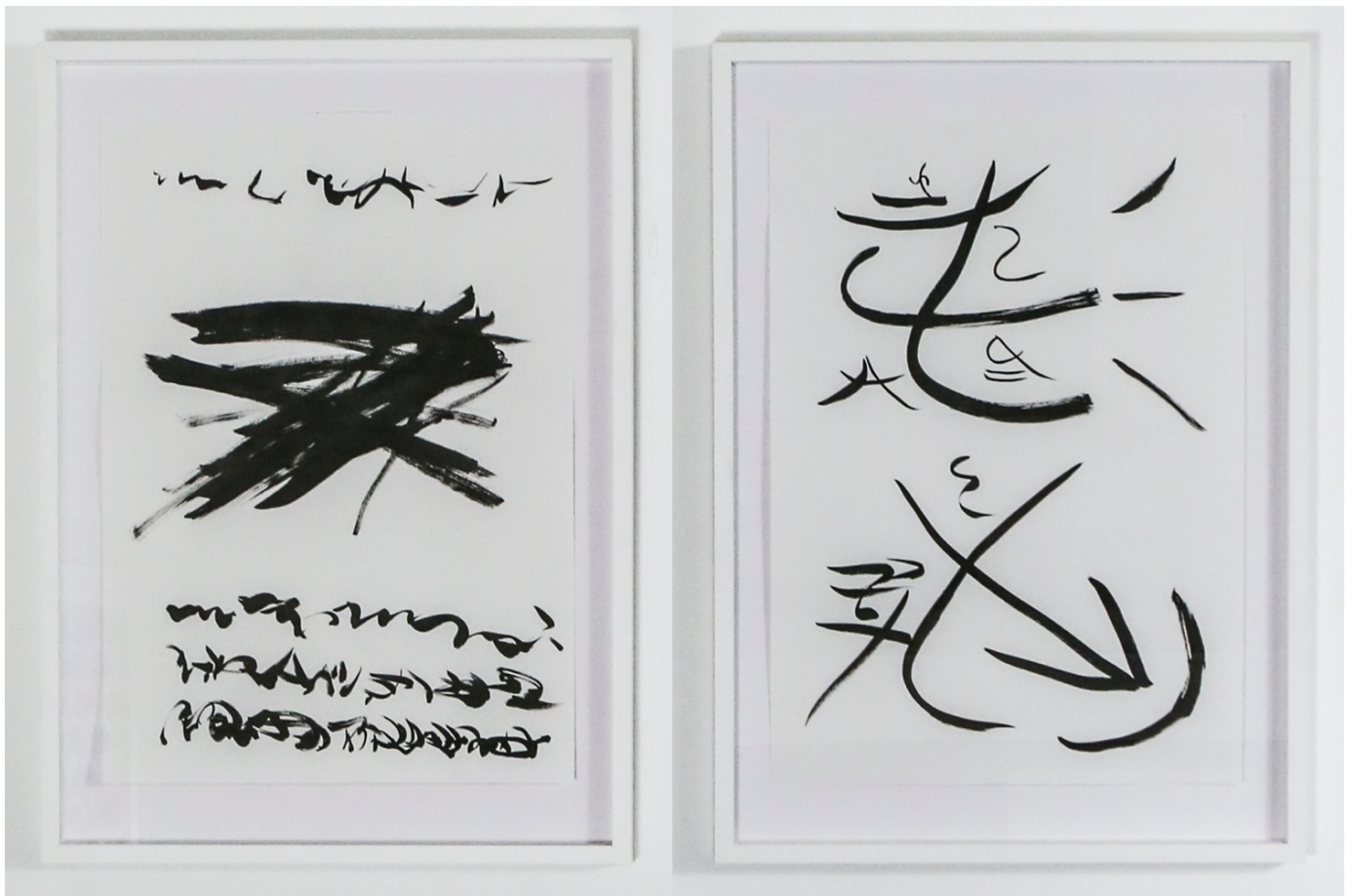
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Hans Ulrich Obrist ***talks to artists Vivien Zhang and Travis Jeppesen and curator Àngels Miralda about the making of *South of Meaning*, an exhibition that looks at new forms of language; currently on show at House of Egorn gallery in Berlin.***

South of Meaning

is an encounter between the works of the Zhang, a painter, and Jeppesen, a writer and artist. The exhibition experiments with new forms of writing to create new meanings and even languages, while looking at the philosophical and aesthetic elements of communication. Here they discuss with Hans Ulrich Obrist new writing, handwriting Instagram and expanded notions of art. Hans Ulrich Obrist: You were both in the same year at the Royal College of Art? Travis Jeppesen: Vivien was in the MA programme and I was doing my Ph.D. HUO: And what is the Ph.D. about? TJ: It's called *Towards a 21st Century Expressionist Art Criticism*. It's a summation of the work that I've been doing for the past 5 years. It culminates in this idea of Object-Oriented Writing. What I'm interested in is writing as an operative force, or writing "in the expanded field." Especially with this new calligraphic work, what I'm interested in is producing a writing of the body rather than of the mind. It's a writing that consists of pure gesture, similar to asemic writing, which is a big thing in the experimental poetry world. But I also find the term 'asemic' to be somewhat problematic, as it seems to infer a writing with no meaning, and what I'm interested in is putting forth this idea of 'new writing' or new meanings.

"A big part of writing is not-writing" - Travis Jeppesen



HUO: When you talk about object-oriented writing, is there a link to speculative realism?

TJ: This is interesting because when I coined this term 'object oriented writing,' I wasn't aware that object-oriented ontology was going on. I found out after I started to announce or propagate this idea.

HUO: And how did the idea pop up? We have this situation, morphogenetic fields, where in different fields, different people have similar ideas. They are somehow in the air. How did you have the epiphany of object-oriented writing?

TJ: This came from my own inner conflict that I had, coming out of this tradition of poets or fiction writers who also write art criticism. I was quite young when my first novel was published, it came out in 2003 when I was 23. HUO: That's *Victims*, right? TJ: Yeah, *Victims*. Around that time I also started writing about art because I loved art. I was completely self-taught, as I don't have a background in art history. Angels Miralda: Yesterday you were also talking about the expanded field. I think that's also an interesting part. TJ: That's what it comes out of, this idea of writing in the expanded field. I was always looking for ways to combine this schizo side of my practice, my 'so-called' creative work on one side and my 'so-called' critical work on the other. I was always dreaming of ways of bringing these two sides together, and the solution to that was object-oriented writing. This is my own way of writing by inhabiting art objects, similar to the way that nature poets approach nature. This is me doing the exact same thing only treating the art object almost as a phenomenon of nature.

HUO: And the expanded field? Joseph Beuys talked about an expanded notion of art. How do you see these notions when you quote the expanded field in terms of literature? TJ:

How it operates for me is quite simple. When I talk about writing in the expanded field or writing as an operative force, what it means is that the medium does not matter because

writing can proliferate in many ways. For example, my first big object-oriented writing project was *16 Sculptures*. It took the form of a book publication and a sound installation in a gallery. Now I have been working on this body of calligraphic work for the last 2 years. But these are both forms of writing – a sound installation or these collected notebooks – and in many ways I just think of these exhibitions as other forms of publication. HUO: And who are some of your inspirations? TJ: Well, for this particular body of work, one of the inspirations comes from, well five or six years ago I started going to China quite often. And I became obsessed with China. HUO: Have you exhibited there? TJ: Not yet. I became obsessed with Chinese and Japanese calligraphy – the great calligraphic tradition. In China, to be a poet was also to be a calligrapher. I've also always been a big notebook-keeper. I've always written all my texts by hand, and I remember at one point I showed these to Amanda Wilkinson before she started showing me. Her response was "Wow, you should do this in a bigger format." It was that encouragement and my obsession with Chinese calligraphy that eventually led to the idea to explode the notebook, so to speak.



Installation View, Vivien Zhang, Interrobang and Travis Jeppesen, Wall Piece No 2

HUO: Can you tell me more about *16 Sculptures*? TJ: What I did in that project was to recreate 16 sculptures by different artists from the history of art, going back to the Venus of Willendorf through to Isa Genzken, in the medium of language. In the book only the texts exist, there are no reproductions of the sculptures. In the gallery, we worked with a sound artist and we produced recordings of each of the 16 texts. The voice was manipulated according to the physical qualities of the sculptures as well as the texts. You put on headphones and sunglasses that black out your vision and you recreate the sculptures in your mind based on my recreation of them through the medium of language. HUO: So there is a text component and an audio component, and you read the text? TJ: Some of them are me and some of them are done with actors; it's a combination. It's the kind of writing that resists ekphrasis and traditional modes of art critique. People describe it as a cross between metaphysics and poetry. In regards to object-oriented writing, people say well, it's quite subjective because it definitely has this voice to it, which is clearly my own. HUO: I want to go back to this object-oriented idea. TJ: I think what it did is that it opened up the field a lot for me. It made me realize that now I have the ambition to do object-oriented writing not just with works of art, but with, say, natural phenomena. For the last year I have been planning a big project with glaciers and icicles. It's a big issue, because the ice is all melting of course and we're all gradually going to be submerged in water. HUO: So hyper-objects! It goes into Timothy Morton, in a way. In terms of curating, there is the object, quasi-object, non-object, and then you have him with the hyper-object. The weather would be a hyper-object. TJ: In many ways, I think of object-oriented writing as a parallel practice to what object-oriented ontology is doing in theory. It's tough to say. I actually haven't met any of those guys or spoken to them, though I try to read as much of their work as I can. AMT: We didn't speak about this before, but I always thought that it had to do with the levelling out of the hierarchies. You are speaking about these pre-suppositions about writing that don't exist in the visual field, so a levelling of those categorisations. TJ: Exactly. One idea that I really do like in Graham Harman is the self as object, the subject as object. I wrote one text that attempts to visceralize this process, called "Becoming Subject."

"Corporate entities are becoming their own countries. They certainly wield more power than most politicians." - Travis Jeppesen

HUO: So you have used the exhibition at Exile to bring in calligraphy and drawings. I saw a very big drawing at Wilkinson together with Matt Copson – *The Green Ray Scroll*. And in the most recent exhibition there are the small calligraphies. TJ: Like I said, I'm going to continue with this idea of the medium of writing, which means that it can take many forms. It can appear on canvas, it can inhabit the cinematic for instance. For the exhibition at House of Egorn, I want to make a series of tablets or texts in aluminium. AMT: We were talking about disorientations. Finding this level of imbalance. TJ: And for me it's just another form of publication. Maybe it's better to say "publication in the expanded field" rather than "writing in the expanded field"? HUO: Expanded publication, it's an expanded book?

AMT: That's what ties it together, I was thinking from the curatorial angle. The space tells a story, and the works punctuate each other. TJ: The way the pieces are installed in the Exile show, you can see in the installation shots. It's not just this boring, one image mounted after the other, rather they are scattered all over the space. Sometimes, they start to form their own grammar and syntax. I wanted the installation to mimic the gesturality that you see in the pieces themselves. We are thinking of using the language of the works to distort and alter the architecture of the space. HUO: So doing now all this calligraphic writing, expanded writing, expanded publishing, are you also working on new books? TJ: I started working on a new novel this past summer. HUO: I read an interview where you said that lately you've been interested in nature and real life more than any other particular medium or artist. That you are actually writing this new book on your best friend. Is that the book? TJ: I kind of wrote that but then I put it aside. Maybe I'll go back to it at some point, maybe not. It's unpublished, which is how I work quite often. I'll have 9 or 10 books in my head that exist in note form and I jump back and forth, until some immediacy arises, more or less, and compels me to finish one. This is one that I started last summer that is about islands, essentially. HUO: Archipelagos? TJ: This one is about an extremely wealthy guy who decides - as extremely wealthy people often do - that he wants to buy his own private island. He decides that he is going to declare sovereignty and effectively start his own country. So that's the departure point for all of these catastrophic things that unfurl from there. HUO: It sounds like a Silicon Valley Dream. TJ: Of course yeah, corporate entities are becoming their own countries. They certainly wield more power than most politicians. A good example is the United States.

HUO: I read this interview you gave where you talk about this book on your friend and that you were travelling so intensely. TJ: Part of the mourning process, I think, was having to put the book aside. You go into these things thinking that it's going to help you get through, I was devastated, I was traumatised for a year and a half or two years. I realised at a certain point while working on this book that now this is making it much worse for me. I'm digging myself into a hole that I'm never going to get out of. I don't think it was good for the work, either, to be honest, I think it was just becoming repetitive and monotonous. I had to put it aside and I'll probably go back to it someday. You know, a big part of writing is not-writing. This is something that a lot of non-writers don't understand, they have this idea of writers just scribbling at work all the time. But a big part of writing is just being out in the world and experiencing things.



Vivien Zhang, Line of Flight, 2016

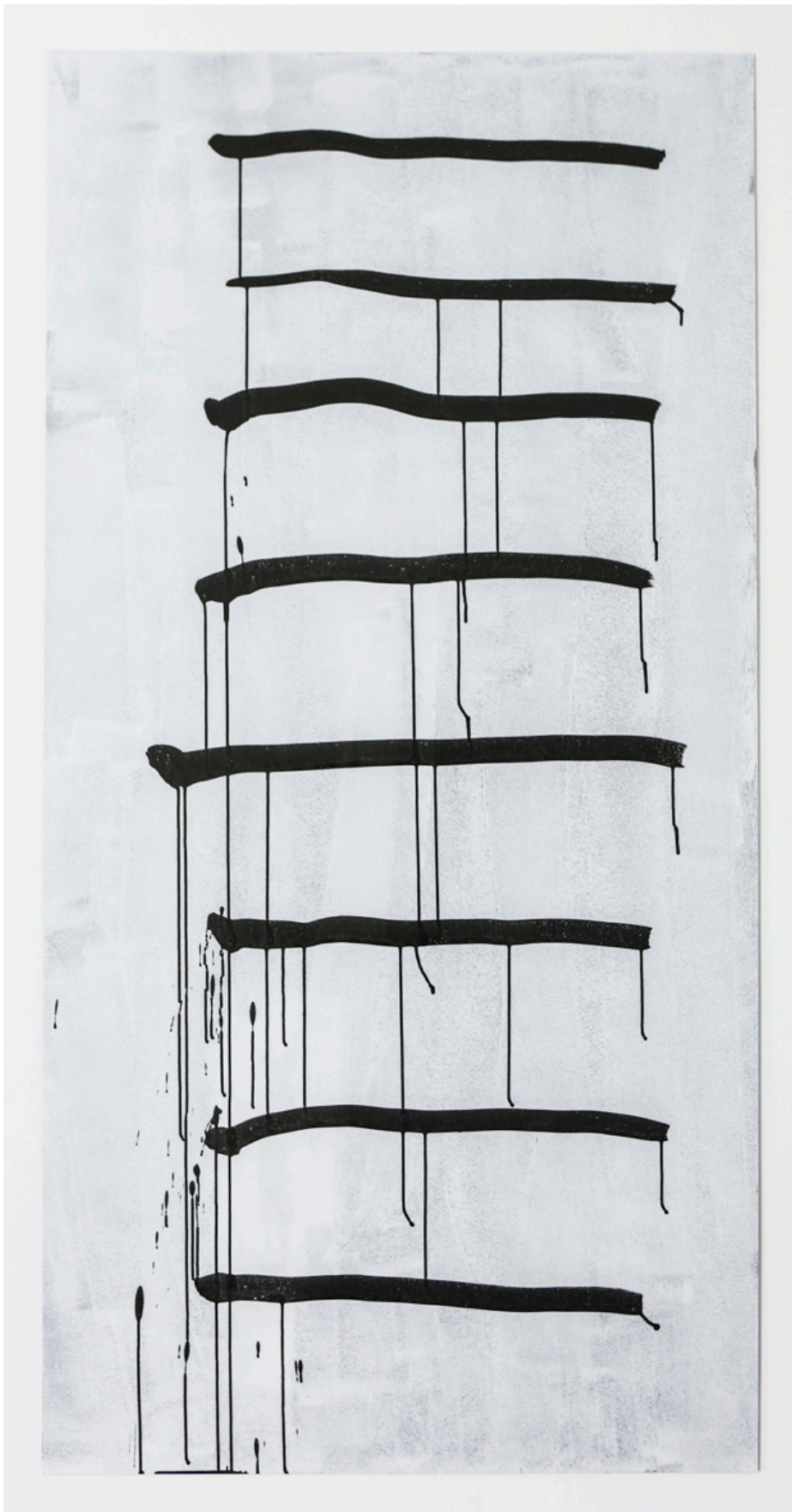
HUO: A big part of writing is not-writing. That's a really great sentence. Is that true for painting? A big part of painting is not-painting? VZ: There are two things: you're not painting because a lot of the time it's just dropping down small ideas and notes and they never come to form a painting, and then there's the "exercise of painting", where you are constantly doing something, and all of this activity becomes the work, but you're not starting

out like “I’m going to do a piece of Work” with a capital W.. HUO: So you also came from the Royal College of Art. With whom did you study painting? Vivien Zhang: First with Douglas Allsop and then John Strutton. I went to the Slade before so then it was Andrew Stahl, Neil Jeffries. TJ: I saw one of Vivien’s paintings when we didn’t know each other because I’m in Critical Writing and she was in Painting. I saw one of her paintings in the final show and I actually tracked her down to contact her. I am not a collector at all but it was the first time in my life where I said “God, I really want that and I need to have it!” HUO: Which painting was it? TJ: A beautiful large-scale painting. I don’t think it’s in this book. VZ: It was actually in the work-in-progress show so it was a mid-year exhibition. It’s 2 meters high by 180 centimetres. HUO: And who are some of your heroes or heroines in painting? VZ: It used to be people like, Julie Mehretu, Allan McCollum, both from America. Back then I was engrossed in this idea of monumentality. And now I’m more into German artists. I think they are so different from what I do and I aspire to them. I can never get myself to do the stuff that they do, like Kippenberger, Polke, it’s clever and less rigid. I guess my work is more precise. Julie Mehretu and Allan McCollum were my heroes because I was deeply occupied with the ideas of monumentality and the excessive. The first real-life Mehretu I saw was at Pinault’s Venice Collection. I was overtaken by its sheer scale and the force that came with it – the lines and the movement of her brushmarks within systematic cityscapes. It was so projectile as well. I aspire to artists who paint or make work in singular intensities, Allan McCollum’s approach to his mass-produced projects is exemplar. When you can really feel the intensity of an artist’s practice, that makes me jolt. Also Katharina Grosse, Tala Madani, Tauba Auerbach, Timur Si-Qin... There’s an element of the digital in these artists as well.

HUO: How does the process happen? Is it planned or is there improvisation? VZ: It’s both. I always have a set of motifs that I use in my work. In this work I thought about space a lot, I thought about dividing the canvas into three spatial parts, so this one is called

Partition, Three

. After then the motifs came in. In our show as we are thinking about objects as writing or writing as objects, I thought about how I destroy the narrative around objects I use in my own work. Usually they do have a very robust narrative behind them, such as where they come from or a certain mathematical formula describes them. I take the objects apart and assemble them in a new space, assign them new contexts. Painting is not the place where you describe something and narrate a story anymore, but it’s a place where objects come and congregate together and they create a new uncertainty. Maybe this is because of my own background, where I come from. I am Chinese and I lived in Kenya and in Thailand, and then moved to the UK, so a lot of different visual things have been coming together



Travis Jeppesen, *Comedy Nowhere*, 2016

and forming new meanings and new narratives. How, people like ourselves, live in such an international context and we encounter new things all the time – How do we encounter and learn new culture and how do we exploit or, not exploit, but use and understand them.



Vivien Zhang, Insulator oil on canvas, 2016

HUO: And when you met each other at the Royal College of Art, what did you talk about? Was there an exchange? TJ: It was brief because I was moving around while I was overtaken with this enthusiasm. But we were talking and she asked me to do an exhibition with her. VZ: It was one year ago. I was thinking about fragmentation and fragility so I thought of his works which act as fragments of texts or thoughts. There's a piece of writing at the back of this catalogue where I started to put together my own fragmented thoughts. In my works it's a lot about having all these fragments coming together. What might they mean? HUO: Can you talk about fragmentation in your work? Because that's interesting. TJ: For me it comes rather naturally, especially in *The Suiciders*. I think it's a reflection of the state that a lot of us live in now which is one of distraction. I think fragmentation makes a lot of sense, and I'm coming out of this whole modernist tradition of fragmentation in poetry. In the novel I feel very grounded in that tradition. I don't think that Modernism ever died. I think it's a spirit that continues to live on.

HUO: When Bruno Latour talks about recent modernity and this idea that fragments and everything has been broken, he thinks that now it's more about bringing fragments together and repairing things. To quote Latour himself: 'Compositionists believe that there are enough ruins and that everything has to be reassembled piece by piece.' Do you agree with that? VZ: Maybe it's the opposite, because when thinking about fragmenting the usual assumption is an active destroying of something, an act of breaking. Instead maybe things never existed as a coherent whole to start with. Now we are just letting them be together. For instance the setup of the show would let the pieces just be together. How we read, how we process information and seek information, is not looking to repair something to its original state. TJ: To answer your question, I would say that I am against unity. It's not something that can be upheld. You can't hold the fragments together for that long; eventually you will get tired and everything falls apart again. I think it could be a nice utopian aspiration, but I don't think it's one that can necessarily be supported. I like the dirt and the filth of the fragment. HUO: Do you agree with that? VZ: The dirt? HUO: The dirt of the fragment. TJ: Would you say that fragmentation is going on in your paintings? VZ: Fragmentation but also assemblage. This shape at the back here, it is one facet of a mathematical shape called the Gömböc. It's a shape that only has one point of stable equilibrium, like a Russian doll that always goes back to one point. I took apart the gömböc at the start of the painting. I distort the shape digitally and put different renderings of the shape together in one space. So it's about assembling something. AMT: There is something about the objects that you pick specifically. In the last exhibition that I did with Vivien we were speaking about fragmented memories. It incorporates these objects that you pick up from around the world and follow you wherever you go. HUO: Is painting a memory work? VZ: I don't

think it's memory but more like filtration. Trying to think of a hierarchy, or what authority you hold over your memory. What

can

you pick out, what

can

you accentuate, what

can

you highlight in everything you have in you. And maybe memory does play a part, the most significant thing to you subjectively, is what sticks out and what you use eventually in the work. But it's not about recalling something. Maybe it's about having a second understanding of something you are so used to – a second look. For example, in this recent work...

These are kilims from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. I lived in Africa for a long time with my mother and she brought these with us after we left, so she has these now in our house in Hong Kong which is really cosmopolitan. And she has these other really ethnic objects and furniture. I grew up with them, taking them for granted and only now could I go back and re-think them – what are these? What does it mean for us to bring them outside of their original context? This work is for a project to support UNICEF, the Syrian Children's Emergency Appeal. I chose kilims here because they're so interesting, they never name the patterns according to the tribe, but rather to geography. I picked this because I thought it was relevant now in this context, not to think about national borders or nationality or any of these political things. Rather to think about geography and how in this time of crisis we should look beyond boundaries. Motifs and designs in kilims are added to the pattern and passed on from generation to generation. Yet the individual total is less important than the social total when it comes to identifying and designating kilim patterns. The painting also draws references to digital tools, such as scroll bars in on a computer display and browser windows. HUO: You said that you have always been in between spaces as a United Nations kid. Did your parents work for the United Nations? VZ: My mum did. If you go into the UN, it is fascinating. It is like an in-between space, almost like an airport. It is really utopian. I went back last summer to the Vienna headquarters and there everybody is just so friendly and cordial with each other. There are all these diplomats in this incredibly international environment without political boundaries. I also went to international school. TJ: It's a "safe space." VZ: Yeah, it's a place where you learn to appreciate other people's culture and assimilate. And then we become third-culture kids. HUO: That is an incredible painting! What is the title? VZ: It is "

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AMT: I also wanted to come back to this painting because you told me something really fascinating last year. There was this kilim pattern in one of the paintings that you showed at House of Egorn one year ago, and you talked about how they weave stories into the fabric. VZ: Oh yeah, the different motifs would evolve over time. It is different generations that come up with new stories and put inside the kilim design. Stories and traditions would be passed on this way. HUO: And you were born in 1990 so you are part of the first generation who grew up with the internet. I was interested in asking you what that means and to what extent as a painter you use the internet and to which extent it influences the work. VZ: The most apparent problem for me is that I think we are a generation of “how to,” not “what to”. For instance, we know how to get information but maybe we don’t keep that information anymore, we have a much bigger capacity to navigate and find and to search. Because we know so readily how to access information we don’t need to store it. The device acts like a secondary brain. HUO: Memory decreases. But, do you use the internet for research? In a painting like this is there a digital component? VZ: I was editing the photo of this painting for a catalogue and I took a screen shot. I felt like the painting was the same as the screen, so I feel like I am subconsciously very much influenced by digital interfaces. Going through this process of information, I feel that since Apple has invented all this swiping with two fingers or three fingers, how we read information has changed. Angels was mentioning scrolling – so there’s also a space above that might be hidden but it’s actually always there. TJ: I was born in ’79. Right before I went to college for my undergrad we got internet at home and it was dial-up. I remember all throughout college going to the computer lab to use the internet because it was very unusual to have it at home. When I teach these object-oriented-writing workshops, people are often shocked. There’s always this discussion of “So we go out into the galleries to write, but we’re not allowed to bring our computers? We’re supposed to write by hand?” People from this younger generation just automatically think of writing as something done on a computer or on a keyboard. This is another reason why I am interested in this calligraphic impulse and how the tradition plays out in the East, because it seems to be becoming almost obsolete. HUO: Which is why I started my [handwriting] Instagram in order to help save doodling and handwriting. TJ: One of my favourite artists is Cy Twombly. It’s all about the scrawl. I just saw Wang Dongling – the great Chinese calligrapher. He is melding the tradition of cursive script in Chinese calligraphy with this Western Abstract Expressionist impulse. His work looks like a fusion of traditional cursive Chinese calligraphy with Franz Kline or Joan Mitchell, it’s really beautiful work. But it’s all writing! Just to go back to something you were saying earlier about Ryan Trecartin, it’s interesting because even though I am not of that generation, I really love his work. I have a different relationship to it because obviously when I watch it it’s not that I have seen myself reflected on the screen. I wrote a piece on his work

. He's also an artist who is very important to me because I think that writing actually plays a primary role in his work because it's all scripted. And it's a very gestural form of writing. It's gestural writing, projective writing, projective verse. HUO: There is also something about seriality in your work. Can you talk about that? I was interested in asking you both about that because in both of your work there is music. VZ: Once I had a studio visit from a group of curatorial students and one guy asked me, do you listen to Jazz music? That was when I was making the older paintings. I listened to Jazz a lot. Afterwards I started listening to a lot of techno. HUO: And when you do more of this recent work, what are you listening to there? VZ: Oh this is heavy bass, any kind of music with a heavy bassline rhythm. I think seriality is interesting because I was thinking a lot about what it is to be an artist and how to keep a sustainable practice and build a ground in one's practice. That's why I choose specific objects, manipulate and distort them and use them in different ways in different paintings, like an internal metamorphosis. It's like creating a ground then disrupting that ground, or having a rupture in that ground by introducing a contrasting form. Going back to the show, it'll be like having different voices coming together in the form of different motifs and objects. What new narrative can they make? In other pieces I have been going back to music notation and composition, thinking about them in relation to the painterly field. For example, in classical music, fugues. A fugue starts with a theme – the fundamentals of the piece – and then this is repeated, imitated, reversed and so on... In my recent series based on the gömböc form, I was listening to Bach's fugues and La Vega by the Spanish composer Albéniz. I was absorbed by the technique of imitation and mirroring in music, and wondered how I can use that in my work. I've also gotten quite into manuscripts – from illuminated manuscripts to hand written music scores. And I came across this form of music notation – Klavarskribo, which was invented in the 1930s. Klavar scores are written vertically and the written notation is grounded in the physical position of notes on the keyboard. Sharps and flats have their individual space in the notation, so it's as if the keyboard is flattened out and all the notes are laid out. The Klavar notation reduces the translation work from the sheet music to the instrument. It's almost egalitarian. This is fascinating to me because it is really about accessibility. I think my paintings always deal with accessibility and generosity – how much factual information do I give to my audience, and asking how much it is relevant to the paintings themselves, what am I doing with that information. HUO: And there is also a repetition and difference. In a way, often these elements are not completely identical. They repeat. VZ: Repetition is an anticipation; it's not always the same thing. Repetition is Difference. Repetition essentially builds anticipation by creating an expectation of everything being the same. I want to challenge my audience. If you look closely at this piece it's a push-and-pull between the artist's hand and the mass manufactured. I think perhaps this is related to me being from China, thinking about production and abundance, the idea of the excess, the excessive.

HUO: Travis, can you talk about this, abundance, repetition, but also music, because you said at a certain moment that actually you were trained as a musician. TJ: When I was six years old I started with piano lessons, then it was cello, guitar, and bass. I think musicality enters my writing automatically. It's not something premeditated, it's just something unconscious that enters the work. It is something that I highly value in writing – the inherent musicality of language. In some of my work, for example

The Suiciders

, the writing arguably values the sonority and the musicality of language over meaning. I'm riffing on musicality as a means of creating new meaning and to enable the evolution of new meanings through riffing; but that's not a completely original position. The great American language poets did that as well. Clark Coolidge has a collection called

Sound as Thought

, which is a really beautiful title and a really beautiful idea. That idea has always been a really important part of my writing. This is another reason why writing becomes a

Gesamtkunstwerk,

because it incorporates all of these things. It incorporates a sonorous element, there's a visual fluid element which I am putting forth calligraphically. I am just exploding writing. !!!O: There is one question I must ask you two about unrealised projects. I wanted to ask you both to tell me about some of your unrealised projects. VZ: I want to do this vacuform project! I have an idea that is an object-based project that I have not had the chance to move on to. I want to create this shape that is a little bit like the Gömböc from scratch then vacuform it. I would pick different beads, objects, they would float around in the shape in oil, so it's just making an object-form of my work. I think I will start this in the next two months and find out how to do that. TJ: I think I have already mentioned this project on glaciers and icebergs that I want to do as well as this book on islands. It's not ironic that they are two related subjects. There's also an object-oriented book on cinema that I want to do because I've done a lot of object oriented writing with films. I have the desire the ambition to integrate these into a novel. It's going to be the first object-oriented novel. These are all things that are going to happen over the next couple of years. HUO: Thank you so much, that was amazing. **South of Meaning is currently on show at House of Egorn, Berlin**

By sleek team



Installation View, South of Meaning, Travis Jeppesen, Vivien Zhang, 2016. Photography by Zuzanna Kaluzna