CONTEMPORARY FINE ARTS

WALTER PICHLER

BY CYPRIEN GAILLARD

DIE BLECHE UND ICH GEHEN HEIM

We met Walter Pichler, along with his wife and artistic collaborator Elfi Tripamer and their daughter Anna, in 1994 during a several-week stay at the estate of Michel and Catharina Würthle on Syros. After many conversations with Walter – euphoric and clearly not lacking in self-confidence – we invited him to hold an exhibition at our newly founded gallery. He thanked us politely, not displeased, and casually remarked that our New York colleague Barbara Gladstone had had to wait seventeen years for her first exhibition with him. Patience, it seemed, was advisable.

Knowing that Pichler himself had requested a postponement when invited to represent the Austrian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1972, one does not misinterpret such a request for patience as a mere affectation.

Time is essential in Pichler's practice. Just a year before the Biennale invitation, Pichler had acquired a three-winged farm in St. Martin in Burgenland – and with his move to the farm, he expanded his materials to include precisely this element: the factor of time. "To incorporate time as a material," he explained in a conversation with Klaus Gallwitz, "– this means that the long creation process of the sculptures determines their form."

After making a name for himself in the 1960s with works that appeared futuristic and dystopian, made from then-new materials such as PVC, fiberglass, and other synthetic, industrial substances, Pichler underwent a radical transformation with his move to St. Martin. Clay, plaster, wood, straw, and metals – in short, materials largely provided by nature and the surrounding environment – became his preferred new media, alongside the "material of time,"

These sculptures, created over years and even decades with disciplined precision, were no longer offered for sale. This decision coincided with – or was conditioned by – his move to St. Martin. Pichler planned instead to build a dedicated housing structure on the farm for each sculpture.

The first buildings were integrated within the existing farm complex, including the *House for the carriages and the House for the Movable Figure*, completed in the early 1980s.

Hans Hollein, at the time curator of the Austrian Pavilion, then extended the invitation to Venice again – this time, Pichler accepted. In 1982, the *Movable Figure* was exhibited along with the roof structure of "its" house in St. Martin. Also shown – besides drawings and the *Three Birds,* freestanding in the pavilion courtyard – were the now-iconic *Torso* and *Skull Caps* in a pavilion gallery.

For these two latter works, the first freestanding house was built in St. Martin. It was important to Pichler that this house, as well as the subsequent individual buildings, should not differ aesthetically and in the choice of materials from the agricultural structures common to the area.

From 1972 until Pichler's death in 2012, seven such sculpture houses were built, attached to and around the farm – a unique ensemble that Rudi Fuchs, during the artist's exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam in 1997, referred to as "Pichler's modest Acropolis."

This allegory resonates with what Hans Hollein wrote about his first encounter with Pichler after a lecture in 1962 titled "Back to Architecture":

"I said, among other things:

'The origin of architecture is sacred.
Man's need to build first manifests in the creation of structures with sacred, magical, or sacral-sexual significance.

The first stake, a pile of stones, a rock-hewn sacrificial block are the earliest human-made structures with spiritual purpose – they are architecture. Their function is purely spiritual, magical. They have no material function. They are pure architecture, without purpose.'"

Pichler approached Hollein after the lecture and explained that he thought in similar terms. This first meeting marked the beginning of a lifelong friendship and collaboration between the two.

Later, in the course of building the sculpture houses, Pichler did not completely abandon this position. Yet in 1987, in a conversation with Klaus Gallwitz, he stated: "I am against ideas. After all, this is also about secularizing the sculptures."

Pichler's artistic thinking and approach can thus be understood as a continual balancing act. His works should neither be overly spiritual nor was he attempting to create a tactile, sculpture event environment. I allow myself to read his sculptures *Ridge* – a very narrow one, and *Chasm* – perhaps representing a self-imposed artistic fall height – metaphorically in this context.

He also recognized that the idyllic countryside could pose a threat to artistic creation. His resistance to being seduced by this idyll – or allowing it to infiltrate his work – was likely reinforced by his own far-from-idyllic upbringing in rural Tyrol. Likewise, his continual exchanges with the local St. Martin community and the learning of traditional craft techniques from them may have helped ensure that his work never became picturesque.

As cautious as this term must be used, the designation "Acropolis" employed by Fuchs is nonetheless welcome as a bridge to the work of the exceptional artist Cyprien Gaillard, whom we were able to engage as curator for this exhibition.

Gaillard, as he recounted to me, had years ago come into possession of two Pichler catalogues published by CFA, through his former roommate and our previous colleague Paul Hance. He was fascinated. The artist acquired two Pichler drawings at auction and held discussions about Pichler's work with his New York gallerist Barbara Gladstone, who also represented Pichler.

By chance, during the COVID period, Gaillard was alerted by a friend while walking through Vienna that they had just passed the late artist's studio apartment. The friend knew Anna Tripamer, Pichler's daughter and estate manager; they rang the bell on a whim, and access was granted.

After this spontaneous studio visit that I had not been aware of, it required little persuasion on my part to excite Gaillard about curating an exhibition of Pichler's works. His long-desired visit to St. Martin, which we undertook together in November last year, sealed the plan for this collaboration.

It was fascinating to observe Gaillard as he viewed the sculptures and explored the houses in St. Martin. I had perhaps expected to see him euphoric, like a child at Christmas' gift-giving, yet his reaction, despite repeated expressions of admiration for the craftsmanship and careful material handling, seemed rather calm, contemplative, and marked by both deep appreciation and understanding.

Artists generally have an intuitive approach to the work of their peers, if they respect it. This was true for Gaillard with Pichler as well. What was however particularly interesting in subsequent conversations was seeing how – at the same time – analytically Gaillard approached and considered the colleague's work – and his own fascination with it.

My own search for references had led me to Gaillard's interest in ruins, architectural decay, demolition, preservation, and reconstruction – keyword: Acropolis. Pichler's sculptures, namely the *Small Torso, Double Head,* and the *Red Rod,* possess an almost archetypal presence. Gaillard agreed, emphasizing the archaic quality of Pichler's sculptures.

Even if the monumental postmodern sculpture *Le Défenseur du Temps* by Jacques Monestier, restored and rebuilt by Gaillard for his solo exhibition *Humpty \ Dumpty* at Lafayette Anticipation in 2022, arose from different motivations, its title reminds me of another shared focus in Pichler's and Gaillard's work: the significance of time.

We already know how essential it was to Pichler's practice.

Gaillard's *Humpty \ Dumpty* was introduced by the Palais de Tokyo with the statement, among others: "With this project, he offers a reflection on time – its traces, its effects, and the relationships that people build with it."

My insistence on this shared preoccupation with the factor of time not least points to the artist's preferred medium: the time-based – known in pre-digital days simply as film. In his latest, *Retinal Rivalry,* Gaillard presents a fascinating immersive experience showing how the condition and history of a nation are inscribed in its buildings and monuments, its ruins and landscapes, doing so in a deliberately slow and disorienting manner, inducing a near-trance state in the viewer.

Gaillard also emphasizes how impressed he is that Pichler could impart rigor and a certain darkness to his work without tipping into what nowadays might be called "Gothic." He admires how Pichler was at once formalist and almost anarchic.

Perhaps parallels between the two should however not be overstretched. As Gaillard notes, sometimes one is simply fascinated by an artist's work because it has something one's own lacks.

It may have been this antipodal attraction that fuelled Gaillard's enthusiasm for Pichler's drawings – works created in seclusion. Gaillard is moved by their fragility; they appear ephemeral, transient. This is particularly true of the drawings he selected for the Basel exhibition. It is hence unsurprising that, despite his admiration for Pichler's architectural projects and related drawings, he chose works on paper that sketch more anecdotal, autobiographical, and universally human themes.

Pichler was not granted enough time to realize all the planned houses for his sculptures. Planned since 1996 the *House for the Three Rods* would have housed the *Red Rod,* alongside the *Floating Rod* and the sculpture *Three Rods* – yet he was unable to complete it. Similarly, the small house for the *Small Torso,* planned to be located east of the *House for the Torso* and *Skull Caps,* was never realized. A housing for the *Double Head* was not even in the planning.

We hope Pichler would have approved of placing these three "homeless" sculptures in the temporary care of Cyprien Gaillard, a fellow artist, one of the leading figures of his generation, working in entirely different media yet possessing a profound understanding of the late colleague's work.

And that these works now reside in a house, thanks to its construction dating back to 1345, built by human hands and on a human scale, would most likely have delighted Walter Pichler.

Nicole Hackert