

I'm taking this opportunity to feel some holes in addition to filling them

on Raymond Pettibon

Taken from the center of our conversation, this first fragment acts as a lodestone of sorts. Practically impossible to understand, the question testifies to the stupefying vastness of the œuvre of Raymond Pettibon as it gropes for the essence of reading.

Frances Stark: I have this sense that sometimes when I look at the work or even with your videos, or something like that, or even just like when we were making *The Holes you feel* (in a way maybe this is more where I got this from), there is a sense of so many books being open at once or something, it's as if you like to have, like, uh, sort of God!, I don't know how to describe it but just to say like all books open, like so many things all open at once and that idea – to me – it's like the difference between – what I always would talk about when people were asking *me* questions about *my work* – I'd say well at some point I had to figure out what this was (hands held before me, horizontal like a book), and what, like, this was (hand held away like a painting on a wall) – you know the sort of difference between reading and looking. And so interiority or whatever is one of the main issues (cough) about reading and and not just like oh, *well it happens in your head*, I mean interiority in terms of a lot of different things and and um and...

Raymond Pettibon: I'm not an interiority kind of artist at all, but the only exteriority, if you want to put it that way, the only, uh, part that I draw from is the printed page. It's not the outside world, it's not everyday life, it's not television, it's not the media, it's uh, not my experience, or sensibility, you know, none of it, uh yeah those do leaven, OK, those come into play in some way or another probably, right? That's a part of your personality or sensibility but what I draw from specifically is the written word period. Yeah, it is from reading.

[Here our spoken words written epitomize the Swiss cheesy quality of meaning exchange among two people who would probably rather have pieces of paper coming out of their mouths instead of sounds. It is generally understood that any taped talk eventually has to be smoothed – blank

spaces removed. Lapses in certainty, stammers, silences, all ask to be paved over like multiplying potholes chewing away the narrow Tarmac on which we expect to taxi easily and evenly from not knowing to knowing. If for no other reason than that I played Yoko, caresser of emptiness, in Raymond's last film I'm taking this opportunity to feel some holes in addition to filling them.

Keats once wrote to Shelley: 'Load every rift with ore.' Because of their differing approaches to a so-called 'interiority' I asked Raymond if he was aware of any animosity between Virginia Woolf and James Joyce – but Joyce and Woolf are two writers I haven't exactly read. I could just sum up Joyce as Revolution Number Nine and describe Woolf as one who would eschew cacophony in favor of an elongated moment precisely unfolded, modest paraphrasing from many conversations with a Woolf fanatic who prompted me to pose the question to Raymond. It was a good question but we had to let it slide. Ray's read all of Joyce, I got to page three of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*... That's some kind of hole...]

FS: One aspect of the printed page is that you can mark it up and always go back to it like this (showing Raymond a book from my table)... I marked this page, (flip, flip) and I've underlined this section. You can always navigate back to these highlighted parts of this really long, really super massive-in-scope piece of work. I've made a lot of work with this underline in mind, it being a rhythm, a motion, a trace, a fragment, etc.

RP: I love to see those books. Most of the books I buy are used, and they have underlines. It's like someone is over your shoulder or you are over their shoulder reading with them. My favorites are when they're all underlined in yellow, every line, that's ideal, because every line is important, every word. You don't see that too often and in fact it doesn't happen with me too often. Although if I read and reread and read again it would eventually fill in, there's no question, in one way or another it would all get covered. Today I was reading this Marlowe poetry and this one was underlined in pencil and so I had to do my own underlining in pen.

[I forgot to tell Ray that I have this great copy of *Portrait of the Artist* in which all of the o's on the first page are filled in blue ink. I should've given it to him.]

FS: I imagine that a lot of the writing in the drawings come from text which has made it out of the book by way of your underlines.

RP: Not all the texts in my drawings are lifted from books, probably about a third, I don't know the exact amount. A couple of years ago I didn't have the patience to bother with doing it that way. Most of my writing is on my own but of course I borrow a lot.

FS: But I was trying to figure out this business of underlining, because there's something I love so much about being able to touch the work, you know I often think 'What would Robert Musil think about the sentences I've underlined?'

RP: It's a dialogue with the dead, with other writers, that's what it is and anyone who has any background in literary history understands that. One of my models, Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* is more a work of editing than it is of original writing, it's both actually. This idea of original writing, as if it's coming directly from your own private muse, would be absurd to just about any serious writer – Alexander Pope, or Thomas Gray, Thomas Brown, anyone down to Shakespeare, you know the greatest writer in the English language, no one can figure out who he was or if he wrote what we think he wrote. You know the old cliché 'The great writers steal, the other ones borrow?' That goes without saying.

FS: Do you think there's an equivalent to underlining that happens when you're in a gallery looking at a piece of contemporary art ... do you ever have that feeling as strong, because, to be honest, I'm not sure I do.

RP: I don't have it as much because I'm more word inclined than picture inclined ... but otherwise yes I do, I borrow images all the time, there's a historical precedent for that obviously.

FS: But not just for borrowing. Say you walk

into a Jason Rhoades installation is there a way to underscore a section of it that is the most lucid section to you at that moment or am I being ridiculous?

RP: I've talked before about not being prompted by real life or television or other media, it's just the printed page. It depends on what I'm reading – I'm not prompted by the *Los Angeles Times* – but I put myself in this certain mind-set, you know the old cliché about creative reading: 'When you read, you're writing as much as you're reading.'

If you go back to that pothole metaphor it will lead to a pavement metaphor and pavement can be seen in at least two ways: either as a filling in, just for the sake of making smooth or even... or as a filling in, as *the feeling in*, a kind of *load every rift with ore approach...*

[Did I mention preferring paper coming out of mouths ... that is also to say pens in hand or: Not the outside world. There's a sanctuary in writing sentences. They can fashion either the emptiness or fullness of the real world into intricate syntactical wonders – solid little trains that choo choo to an unworldly destination sometimes right past their readers who wait anxiously for a cargo of reflections. Read this one: 'THEIR WORDS HAVE MADE A WORLD THAT TRANSCENDS THE WORLD AND A LIFE LIVABLE IN THAT TRANSCENDENCE.']

FS: There's this term 'misprision' – meaning misreading – that I learned from Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* that we talked about a little bit before...

RP: I didn't really care for that book too much. I like his other writing better, with this book he's really stretching to make his point, he just seems to really be forcing the facts to fit the thesis he started with.

FS: I started reading it and it's not all that interesting to me right now but the one thing, after the title of course, that seduced me into buying it, knowing you and I would be getting together soon to discuss your work, was this passage here:

'influence' is a metaphor, one that implicates a matrix of relationships – imagistic, temporal, spiritual, psychological – all of them ultimately defensive in their nature. What matters most (and it is the central point in this book) is that the anxiety of influence comes out of a complex act of strong misreading, a creative interpretation that I call 'poetic misprision'. What writers may experience as anxiety, and what their works are compelled to manifest, are the consequences of poetic misprision, rather than the cause of it. The strong misreading comes first; there must be a profound act of reading that is a kind of falling in love with a literary work. That reading is likely to be idiosyncratic.¹
...so that is what drew me in ... and that term was interesting to me...

RP: Did he create that term?

FS: I don't know, it's in the dictionary as misreading ... I was thinking about the falling in love with the literary work, the way we were talking about annotations on the phone the other night, and the beauty of that trace, the fragment decontextualized... I think of that scene at the close of your Beatles movie *The Holes you feel* where you're reading the Frye text on Blake. Here's Frye and he's got himself around this text, he's opening it up, then you're opening it up into this other place (the '60s) that you've just put forth in the film and it's this weird constellation that's blowing my mind because it is a misreading but a giving, generous and/or over-reading.

RP: Oh yeah, sure...

Blake makes first mention of Yoko in "The Marriage of Heaven & Hell" where he prophesies that eventually the bound One will be set free and destroy the present world, meaning the Beatles in a consummation which means both burning up and the climax of a marriage. Consummation – joining the band and marriage to John. The marriage is accomplished by an "improvement of sensual enjoyment". The world of Form and Reason – Yoko's sexual spell and her art be possessed by energy and desire and will be there "outward bound or circumference" the

'White Album' and the Plastic Ono band. (flip, flip)²

[If you talk about books 'in general you are perhaps getting into trouble with Raymond, who I sense is tired of being referred to as well-read, erudite, bookish, etc. But it's not only his literary excerpts or his sometimes 19th century syntax which brings a certain aspect of Literature to mind, it's his movies about The Beatles, Charles Manson, various hippies, radicals and punk rockers that, in their epic scope broach the bigness of The Literary but still meander within the surprisingly big littleness of the excerpt.]

FS: I hoped we could use the videos as a way of talking about certain ideas in your practice. As a viewer I was super conscious of the reading, you can be totally sucked into the scene but you can see the characters' eyes going towards the unseen text. Reading is such a critical aspect of engaging the viewer, and since reading is such a big part of the work that hangs on the wall, I just thought...

RP: That's not intentional, sometimes there's usually one part in my movies where the cue cards are visible I'm not doing it purposely or being coy, or playing with this Brechtian relationship between the audience and the text – letting the audience in on the artificiality of the text – letting the audience in on the artificiality of the context – that's not the intention. I work with cue cards because that's the working situation I'm in.

FS: I didn't think of it as calling attention to itself as a device, I brought it up because it made me think about reading in a certain way, especially the scene where Mitchell (George Harrison) is doing that monologue. Regardless of whether or not in your mind it would be great for someone to memorize it and deliver it perfectly, to me that scene does so much. In certain parts I can tell it's supposed to rhyme but it doesn't get out there exactly right, then he'll let out a breath of exasperation or screw it up and each time you stop the camera and then start over where he left off. After riffing out of control with your text he would get tired and then I start to think about the idea of being confronted with a really immense amount of text, and thinking about

1 Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, Second Edition, Oxford University Press, NY, 1973, 1989

2 Taken from Raymond Pettibon's video *The Holes you feel*, 1993

how much can one stand. Then even you as the director/editor, you end up fast forwarding through portions of his monologue, which I think is nice to see.

RP: Well the original is probably three to four times the length of that scene that Mitchell read. The reason I work in video, one advantage it has over film, is that you're not asking people to sit in a dark theatre and see it in one sitting. There's a way people typically watch video and it becomes part of the aesthetic of making it. There isn't a dramatic form that limits you the way there is in film. You understand that people can look at it in more than one sitting, fast forward it even, et cetera. I don't remember exactly why I did fast forward, that was a long scene but it wasn't meant to play out as being reading, if it did that would be a fault.

FS: The way the actors or players are engaging in the text is a pretty interesting aspect if you think about it above and beyond this single film. It may be a limitation as you say, but, after all, you have continued to work that way. It is remarkable how intensely it can convey something without being art directed or acted, without being seamless... to me it makes total sense. It's too casual to be a device, as you were saying – a critique or coy maneuver – but it does make sense in the scheme of things, the way you work. It doesn't seem to matter if the scenes play out in a certain order, or maybe there's 500 pages of text and only 100 get read...

RP: Sure, in this film in particular, and in most of my films, the order of scenes doesn't really matter much but that's usually because they're more a collection of anecdotes or somewhere between a typical Hollywood film with beginning, middle, end and let's say a new wave film. What was it that Goddard said – 'the beginning, middle and end, but not in that order.' At the worst, it does become an issue of the sequence of the narrative with someone like Alan Resnais or Nicolas Roeg. There are good things about their films but in general it tends to be some of my least favorite directing when they're messing with the narrative, with an intent to break it up, randomly splicing. In the case of the videos I make, there usually

isn't a straight forward narrative, the storyline isn't really an issue, you can start at the beginning or the middle or end. There really isn't any storyline.

[Reading is something that necessitates the exclusion of other things. It is a demanding activity: one's head is pretty much fixed in the direction of the text. With the videos, as with the drawings, the images and text resist a cinematic seamlessness without resorting to pretentious or deliberate unseamlessness. They manage to bore into you with the precision of the shortest Emily Dickinson poem yet intoxicate you with their epic expanse.]

RP: I don't usually have much use for editing... Most of that stuff, actually all of that, I wrote directly onto cue cards, and I guess that was a case where I edited my work during the actual editing of the video.

FS: I've watched it a couple times now, but not all the way through... *Sir Drone*, now that I've watched several times from start to finish.

RP: That could've been a film or theatre piece.

FS: Yeah that was pretty specific the way the story unfolded, but with the Beatles movie, the more I watched it the more I got excited and totally into it, at first I thought it was so difficult, but then having the remote control in my hand definitely made a difference. My friend liked the scene where I'm doing the crazy Yoko improvs.

RP: I love those parts because it was you improvising, that's what made it work for Yoko because I'd be hard pressed to write a Yoko film because it would come off contrived or like a parody. I don't think that was the case with what you came up with I think it worked a lot better.

FS: We also loved the opening scene with the dialogue when Yoko is saying 'Listen: the new album!' when it's silent because the equipment is broken and can't play the tape, then she orders Ham & Swiss for Paul, yelling that he needs to fill up on the holes. I may be doing the super oversensitive misreading thing but I wonder

about Yoko, if you would talk a little bit about her pretentiousness, you know: 'Oh this is empty, this is important.'

RP: The difference between what you added to it and the writing I did about Yoko is that yours was a 'film within a film' very self-involved as if Yoko made it. Mine was Yoko as an actor.

FS: What about Yoko, over-all, in the film?

RP: It's a commentary on '60s art, not just Yoko's art and not just the conceptual art of the time or Fluxus, but she's a spokesperson of sorts. Unfortunately I was kind of half-watching with you the other night [he was reading, I'm not even kidding, with a pencil in his hand]. It's not really fresh in my mind – most of my videos I don't necessarily watch.

Now in the book of Urizen Blake mentions Fluxus for the first time – as he talks about Yoko...

I have sought for a joy without pain,

For a solid without fluctuation

Why will you die, O Eternals?

Why live in unquenchable burnings?

One command, one joy, one desire

One curse, one weight, one measure,

One king, one God,

one Law

One Ono (flip)

...six days they shrunk up from existence

and on the seventh day they rested

and they put on a record

...then left a noisome body

To the jaws of devouring darkness.³

The conversation took place in
Los Angeles in July 1997

³ Taken from Raymond Pettibon's video
The Holes you feel, 1993