

# Peter Wächtler

"avant / après"

Curated by Stéphanie Moisdon

Acknowledgements: dépendance, Brussels; Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York, Los Angeles; Lars Friedrich, Berlin; Ringier Collection, Zurich; MHKA, Antwerp; Maison de Rhénanie-Palatinat, Centre franco-allemand en Bourgogne-Franche-Comté.

Exhibition from October 25, 2024 to March 23, 2025

**Consortium Museum**

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No single mood, method or medium defines the motley of characters that populate Peter Wächtler's narrative studies. They scatter in all directions, often appearing in gangs, series or groups and, like the objects and forbidden places they are set against, or installed within, they materialise in everchanging forms. As sculptures made in bronze, ceramic, clay or paper-mâché; as paintings on celluloid, limestone and wood; in live-action films and stop-animations and through a raft of short stories, poems, epistolaries and diary entries. For all the shapeshifting, you'd be forgiven for thinking this was the work of a cabal of disappearing and reappearing authors, each as unreliable as the former.

What unites this motley is our feeling that we know them already - vaguely. They've dragged in the spectre of all the fables, fantasies, films and popular stories they once animated—and the cliché emotions they've already performed—and cast them into our reality. It creates a mire of memories for us and a problem of purpose for them. As their raison-d'être bottoms out, an existential "what was that all about?" emerges. Questions about communication and meaning fill the void. Like, if the narrative models that they used to rationalise their place in the world were also the force behind the phantasy that no real meaning can ever be produced by, or exchanged within them. Pondering such they further detach.

When a gang of jaunty, loosely sketched characters appeared on a series of knee-high plywood boxes in the Chicago winter of 2016, you could tell they were half out the door, all too aware they were modelling, yet again, another sentimental narrative.<sup>1</sup> Once icons of a post-war, working class English subculture, these 'Teddy Boys' had, back then, epitomised cool with a not-so-unique style: drape coats, waistcoats, pocket combs and coif haircuts. They had found in the fashion of early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Edwardian aristocrats a model for better living that could be, if not attained, at least cosplayed. Even if by the late 1950s Teddy Boys were a waning fad, their spirit somehow endured. It travelled to the United States and beyond, morphed into Americana variations (Elvis, James Dean) and provided the identity template for generic 'post-war-social-crisis' narratives like *West Side Story* (where working class stereotypes were, ironically, worked over again), and by 2016, could still be felt in any given metropolitan cafe, bike shop or bar where moustachioed, rockabilly types were sure to stand, either side of the counter.

Sketched on the interior and exterior of Wächtler's boxes, these Teddy Boy's posed in shuffled, half-remembered scenes that conflated two films: the 1961 film adaptation of *West Side Story* and the 1970 film adaptation of *Love Story*, another film that gratuitously amplifies class stereotypes with dreams of escape.<sup>2</sup> The result was a quartet



↑ Peter Wächtler, *Lupo*, 2019.  
Courtesy the artist and dépendance, Brussels.

of deconstructed highlight reels of generic 'best scenes': spying on the rival gang from the rafters, a funeral, the kiss, lying in bed, a check up. But in certain scenes, the appearance of an everyday character, like a doctor, as Teddy Boy, suggested this was an inescapable system. Everything was Teddy Boy. An innocent, hyper-stylized detour on the road to self-realisation has led to a cul-de-sac of indifference. Boxed in on all sides, the Teddys seem to be called home by four bronze 50s-style social housing blocks on the horizon, reminding them, through their formidable mass, that leaving isn't so easy.<sup>3</sup>

The Teddy Boy's over-production of style has since rippled into fiction and reality ad infinitum, and the various cultural products that recycle these characters invariably replicated their behaviour. The *West Side Story* film, for example, glazed itself with a veneer of intellectualism when appointing esteemed directors and composers. Posing as a film by-and-for the educated, it could be consumed not just as a sentimental tale to pity the poor, but a critical tool with which to anthropologise them.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps a similar pattern is today reenacted by Wächtler's boxes and their context: characters of a fiction are heated up and brought to life through the attention and style of an artist, only to be thawed by the chill of 'contemporary art' and gallery, before being totally frozen in a critical analysis.

Fortunately, these boxes come insulated with a sentimentality so exaggerated that they are impervious to any institutional chill. For one, they aren't just boxes but chests. The type of container where sentimentality is stored. Maybe the Teddy Boys were unconsciously reenacting some childhood 'cleaning up' chores when streamlining their identities, not just looking back historically, but within and through a generic teddy-filled object which, if this isn't already too much, is named in both British English (chest) and American English (trunk), by the body part that stores the heart. That turn within—the perennial quest of Wächtler's characters—is stylised here as a noirish fiction: on the lower right corner of one box, a silhouetted Teddy Boy protagonist peers into a cavernous container-building to spy in on 'rivals', fulfilling our own desire to lift the lid and look in.

The animals in Wächtler's work also glance to the past and into themselves. They are tenuously connected to their animation histories, which linger like half repressed memories.<sup>5</sup> There is nothing to identify them with specific animations per se, but they have the general semblance of some, and carry the fatigue of bodies that have been wholly exhausted. One of the most tossed around, the pre-industrial sailor bear *Orso*, (2019), appears to be still figuring out if he's a descendent of Winnie, Yogi or Paddington, or a state representative for Berlin or California.

They are a working class syndicate with a broken relationship to labour, entertainment and representation, having been worked over, not just in animation, but in the everyday reality of the human world. Bloodhounds, before sinking here in swampy marshes or collapsing in leathery folds (*Untitled (dogs)* 2015, *Untitled*, 2017), were traditionally used to sniff out humans (a fitting allegory for animation<sup>6</sup>), while the logging otter is a standalone emblem for the blue collar labourer. To say nothing of those that have been skinned and furred. Some have resigned looks, others hide away.

The moles are on the verge of retiring into the cracks of their armchairs while the bat takes shelter inside itself with a swoop just performative enough to fulfil any last work obligations. Others mime gestures of apology and withdrawal. Fitting that the stem for both animation and animals, anima—to breathe life into—should be the basis for the so deflated. But—ah! Here comes the doctor—any artist, director or storyteller ready to resuscitate and defibrillate for one final, sentimental squeeze.

It is not all defeat, there is resistance. If the Otter was once a college mascot hired to carry the team home, he is now a battleship of refusal. His costume no longer matches his gaze, which is far gone, and he appears to be mulling over the rhetorical question sagging off the back of his Ivy League sweater: Y ? His spirit has returned recently, in a series of propped stage walls, like *Auditorium* (2024).

Both are well buttressed from behind and pack an expressive outer. Confident, even. The surfaces of the walls are thickly applied, a bit like fur, but more like how a landlord repaints a kitchen: on top of all previous layers of paint, over the black moss, the dust, the bulging air pockets, the cables and sockets, over the structural cracks of decades past. This and the fingermarks add to its resilience.

Against the vanity of an art world that would rather have things sanded and serious, especially walls, the imprint of childish fingers offers a playful proximity to the work and a sense of redemption for both the artist, mascot of culture, and viewer, captive of a system that infantilizes anyway.

The internal and external communication-problems of two hermit-figures open up (and close down) in two silent films, *Untitled (clouds)* (2018), and *Untitled (Vampire)* (2019). In the former, a digital stop animation, a solitary dragon on a high perch overlooks a village in an otherwise barren wasteland. He laments his exclusion from the village news—no one told him about the fall of Thunderdome (the club? an empire?)—but he nevertheless practises their cryptic code talk, "the dog is in the doghouse", never quite getting the hang of it, "the sardines are on the table".

The latter is a live-action film following a vampire who, like the dragon, looks over a city from afar and cannot—but would like to—die. The monotony of his day includes sleeping in the crypt, meeting the monk for a chat and writing letters unaware that they never find their recipient. The impenetrable silence of these films reaffirms their communicative block, as does the suffocation of all gestures of speech: incoming news to the dragon is classified, a story told to the monk is muted, the vampire's letters never arrive, a mouth is blocked by a kiss. Their paranoia reaches new heights. The dragon fears that people have overheard his cringey sleep talk and are laughing behind his back, the Vampire suspects his doctor told the entire village about his precious leopard blanket.

But in both films the façade of closed-communication is broken by aesthetic decisions which open doors to the viewer. In each film, the analogue 'special' effects used are not at all illusory but more like a stage backdrop.<sup>7</sup> The live-action film, meanwhile, doesn't hide its theatrical rigidity: the artist places himself in the frame as a first time lead actor, with a friend-drawn cast that is wooden but forgivable. Both the suspension of illusion and the instance on a transparent and even flawed dramaturgy are recurrent throughout Wächtler's practice. In the rendering of the images, the patina and finish of the sculptures, in frank, first-person immediacy of the texts and in the very thematics of vulnerability, codependence and the desire for acceptance that pervade the works unabashedly.

Wächtler's practice swings from one extreme of artistic autonomy (as a type of art that is radically independent from, and perhaps looks askance at, the conventions of avant-garde contemporary art) to another that, not wanting to abandon all viewers, or abstract into oblivion, works with common clichés and generic tropes and leans into relatable emotions—shame, desire, fear, alienation and longing—through which the works also convey their dependence on the viewer and a need for their engagement. This sentiment is repeated again and again through the work's expressive extremes.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Wächtler's exhibitions, where multiple facets of the practice coalesce. In these moments, all parts are all on the table. The cast come together—perhaps more in the spirit of cooperation than camaraderie—with their historically-long shadows and their baggage for the future; with their systems of containment and their expressive gestures of outbreak. The works make a dramaturgy of the viewer. At one end, a volcanic eruption impends, at the other a storm threatens to blow open. But everyone is in their house. The actors bow, the first rose is thrown, and a massive children's mobile of giant circling pens offers a somnolent escape.

— Matthew Hanson



† Peter Wächtler, *Winter Morning*, 2017. Jurh Häller Collection, Zurich.

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1. They first appeared in Peter Wächtler; *Secrets of a Trumpet*, The Renaissance Society, Chicago, 7.2.—3.4.2016.

2. Both are adapted from other forms, a Broadway musical and a novel, and both are adaptations of the Romeo and Juliet story. Wächtler's boxes carry the torch of this infinite echo of adaptations.

3. These housing blocks, a product of another style, 'International Style', are like flower pots for the arrangement of rooftop ventilation units and elevator infrastructures. Their height encourages a view onto the 'finishing touches' of a modernist ideal for housing 2000+ low income people in/as an economy of units.

4. *West Side Story* was directed by multi-award winning director Robert Wise and scored by Louis Bernstein, considered one of the most esteemed and successful musicians in America at the time.

5. With the foundation of both Disney and Warner Bros in 1923 and animation's propensity for 'physical comedy', anthropomorphic animal characters entered a new realm of physical extremes.

6. In their 1981 classic *The Illusion of Life*, Disney animators Ollie Johnston and Frank Thomas outline the principles and strategies for extracting maximum engagement and empathic response from the viewer. The '12 principles of animation', included techniques—like 'squash and stretch'—for animating a body's speed, density and pliability. Strategies which are redoubled, sometimes to the point of abstraction, in Wächtler's work.

7. The blooming clouds in the background of the dragon's wasteland and the vampire's horizon are made by the analogue 'cloud tank' technique: vials of colour (in this case milk and cream) are injected into a tank filled with water and saltwater which sit in two layers forming a horizon over which the colours unfurl.



† Peter Wächtler, *Untitled (Vampire)*, 2019.  
Courtesy the artist, dépendance, Reena Spaulings Fine Arts and Lars Friedrich.