

A conversation between Julian Fickler, Johannes Wald, and Katharina Wendler

Studio Johannes Wald, Berlin, May 2018

KW: The two of you studied together in Karlsruhe, you've known each other for years and you're good friends, and now you're having a joint exhibition for the first time. How did this come about?

JW: We've always followed each other's work and for quite some time now I had the idea of curating an exhibition of Julian's. So I just asked him if we wanted to do the exhibition at V8 together.

KW: Julian, what are you working on at the moment?

JF: Over the last year my formats have been becoming smaller and smaller. This has to do with me but also with the space I work in. In front of a small-scale picture this enormous physical moment one experiences with large formats is missing, and I like the challenge of that. Although the new works are so small, about 30 x 24 cm, they need enough room; the space around the pictures plays an important role. These small formats are a challenge for me because it's actually quite difficult to paint a small picture. A few months ago I started to mix paints in order to emulate the shades of textiles, or rather to approach the colours of textiles. So initially it was about imitating something but it becomes twisted during the next step when the pictures are viewed in sequences (that's because I mistrust the single image and always need to view it in juxtaposition to others). Strictly speaking, for a decade I've been hanging pictures next to each other. This is my main occupation because I am interested in the dialogue between things, between the pictures. What happens in the pictures, but also, what happens in the gap, what happens in the room? I like that the pictures are not only engaging in a dialogue with each other but also with themselves. At best there is also the dialogue with the viewer. But the pictures are first of all concerned with themselves. I like that.

KW: In these works you also combine different materials: canvas, cloth, paint, wood.

JF: I'm not really doing it deliberately, rather intuitively. Sometimes I combine things straight on the wall, install things together and see if it fits. It certainly has to do with building a bridge toward familiar, everyday materials, to find or recognise something in a material that can have poetic or at least painterly qualities. What interests me about this for example is that you can discover something in these works that can be applied to different things happening in the world, even without an academic education. That there are progressions, like there is a morning and an evening, that there is rhythm, as in everyday life, change, something that moves forward.

JW: Each of these pictures also says something about the others. These current works are maybe the most open series that I've seen by you in a long time. In exhibitions, however, you have the tendency to focus on a theme and I would somehow like to break this up one day.

KW: In what way?

JW: I made the observation that Julian often, or actually always, falls into series and in the end holds on to them and never to the individual work. As we recently visited his studio again, I asked him whether we could conduct a little experiment: I asked him to select the best image from every series from the last six months and to hang all of them next to each other on the wall. And then something happened that in my view is hard to apprehend in a single specific series, because one is always on the lookout for the concrete problem, for what's being processed in the series. But when one picks out the best pictures of each and every series, one actually finds in each single picture a very specific quality released from the superordinate series. In every good picture one sees Julian's precision. This has to do with subtleties and always with the genuine talent, to very precisely get to the heart of something essential. There hang a wooden board, a painted manhole cover, a monochrome canvas and another differently painted canvas; and suddenly it's clear to me in this new combination what it's really about: namely this sensibility which I just mentioned. And this is what then becomes paramount and no longer the series. Through the reduction to a single artwork and particularly in the combination of these single works other qualities suddenly emerge that Julian, I think, often forgets, because he is so occupied with painting. In any case, I found it very appealing and that's also why I said that I would really like to curate an exhibition with his works. The recent visit to your studio was definitely an 'aha' moment. I'd long suspected that this was the case because I've seen it again and again in your works but rarely in your exhibitions. And I think that comes from you being the kind of person for whom the latest series is the most important, and you sometimes forget the viewer a bit, including me as a colleague.

JF: I know what you are getting at, Johannes, but I'm already bothered by the term 'series'. For example I wouldn't describe the new works as a series at all. Rather, they are visualized thought processes I go through in my absurd research and which address a particular issue, which are at least in my perception concerned at best with life or the world beyond painting – without me wanting to stick my neck out too far. In the end it is always about the communication between the objects or the single parts, between my work and your work and, in the best-case scenario, that something like a poetic quality occurs in the room. It's said that humans as social beings can recognise themselves only through others. Only in a group can one see: how am I different from the others? If you were alone, you wouldn't have the comparison. It is similar in my work: the objects that I produce I have to compare again and again. The question of quality, for example – which is the better picture? – is annoying for many people and sometimes I can't even answer it myself. But I think that the reason I produce series, even if the term is not ideal, is that I have to continually make comparisons. If I only had one picture, then I wouldn't be able to make these comparisons and references, and that wouldn't satisfy me.

JW: But a really good work doesn't need to be compared. It can stand alone.

JF: I think so; but I personally have to do that, within my work.

JW: I just think that in all of your works a Julian-specific quality is present, and because of this it's important occasionally to regard them as individual works and not always in series. Then perhaps one can better understand how your work functions. For in the end, each series is only just an excuse to come up with a good picture. That's understandable. Otherwise you wouldn't make the series or you would carry them on endlessly, but you always take it to the point where you have the feeling that you have achieved something that satisfies you and then you lose interest and devote yourself to the next series. I see it like this: for me the series lead to climaxes and it is exactly these peaks that I

want to see. All the other pictures are stages on the way there, the groundwork. They're not bad, but they're just the way, not the goal.

JF: I know what you mean, but it is exactly this way that interests me, it serves to make something unseen visible, unveiling a world in which the viewers can immerse themselves, which they haven't seen before. When one shows a series, the viewers are surrounded by pictures, which may look the same at first; but they can recognise the fine differences. That doesn't work with an accumulation of pictures from different series. Basically, I proceed in exhibitions as I do in the studio: everything depends on very specific decisions. I can, however, only take these decisions on location and this is where we differ extremely, Johannes, you plan things, build models of exhibition spaces and mostly know long before the opening how your exhibition should look. I'm different, I have to see everything in situ and then decide.

KW: Doesn't the theme of form or formlessness, as often addressed by Johannes, play a role in your new works, Julian?

JF: Totally. One can consider the works in different ways, one can understand them as painting-analyses, but one can regard them also as processes, almost like a movement. You don't know the reading direction, or if there even is one; from what point one is supposed to start viewing. For me that's a nice problem: you do actually hope that these static parts or things contain something that makes them dynamic, that they don't become boring, that something emanates from them. There are many possibilities, but basically it's always puzzling how one manages to make it stay mystical, open and interesting. I can't explain it well, but I know what I'm looking for.

JW: It's so characteristic of you, Julian, that you always paint your talent too, the ways you consider and process universal and general problems within painting in your work. How the paint is brushed on or a cut into the canvas is positioned, I could never do this. I can think it and comprehend it but how it's done, that's where it's at for me when looking at your work. I also understand the allegedly objective truths you are seeking in your work because they are related to my work too. But your eye and your sensibility fascinate me, how you use them.

JF: ;-)

JW: I once had a very interesting conversation, probably one of the most interesting ones during my studies, with Ernst Caramelle, who looked at my student works and said: "Johannes, all of this is idea art. Everyone can do this." I understood then quite quickly that a lot of art is based on needs and questions that already exist anyway and which get picked by the person with the furthest reach. And so, art starts to become exciting once it originates from a subjective perspective and once a subjective way has been found to deal with it.

JF: That's true, that's the freedom. But one mustn't confuse intention with didactics; at least my works aren't intended that way. I could never conceive of that in my work in that way. I also wouldn't say that I work through a theme, the term 'theme' is too cerebral for me and somehow doesn't fit. Actually, it's rather feelings or holistic, biographical or almost esoteric things that drive me. But also problems one exposes oneself to.

Maybe my need for clarity in exhibitions stems from the fact that when visiting other exhibitions I have the feeling of being overwhelmed, downright littered with information. I always want to show something clear.

KW: And it's not contradictory to make a clear calm exhibition, where there's a lot of space for many different chains of thought and theories.

JF: We were just recently talking about how actually the key characteristic of art is exactness. In this, art differs from many other things. I'm flattered, Johannes, that you think of my art as precise but I see myself rather as still on the way there. I try to get close to it. That's why I always start over from scratch and am somehow restless in this regard.

JW: I think I work more pragmatically. In exhibition situations I try to combine works with each other regardless of theme. I don't have the feeling that I can say everything in a single work or a series, that's not interesting enough for me. But the difference is that in the specific style of each work, no matter from which group, there is always an individual quality – that's what I mean by precision. In my works such a thing exists only marginally, as long as they are consistent within a notion, within an ensemble, that's true; but it doesn't matter whether the material changes, the direction of a sculpture, or something like that – for that I have neither talent nor interest. That's where I'm pragmatic.

JF: I'm not so sure about that, Johannes. With you one also senses in each work when the point is reached that something is good how it is. Each work contains a thousand subtle, small, fine decisions, which in the end one might perceive as so self-evident that they don't need to be scrutinised.

KW: Johannes, which works are you showing in the exhibition?

JW: First of all, I'm showing a work made from marble dust, which will be blown into the exhibition space. It has the title *stone with no form (la nebbia malinconica di Carrara)*. I've been occupied with the idea of the formless stone for some time. I like the idea that such a solid object as a stone can also become formless through an imprecision in our language. The dust for this comes from Carrara in northern Italy. I was there last year in order to realise another work from marble. For centuries Carrara has been a Mecca for sculptors and I was very happy to have the opportunity to work there. It was November when I was there and somehow the autumn fog and the omnipresent marble dust mixed strangely and put me in a melancholy mood. Perhaps it was also because of the stonemasons I was allowed to work with. All day they talked about Statuario marble and Michelangelo with shining eyes while hewing all kinds of kitschy figurines, trophies or other things for money. I saw that they are driven by the same desire as I, but that due to the value that a material like marble lends any work by default they are never tempted to question what they are doing. Everything hewn from marble that isn't a washbasin is art. In the end I was torn between my art-snobbery and my own self-doubt. That left me feeling dejected.

JF: Perhaps the melancholy also comes from the fact that the material is limited. You can only get it there, right?

- JW: No, there are a few marble quarries in the world but Carrara is, because of its history, the place that holds the greatest fascination. I noticed that on the one hand you need the material to make a great sculpture, but on the other hand that you also need the inner material, from which the sculpture is then made. Everyone there had the desire but it seemed that no one had found a way for themselves to bring the longing into harmony with the material. I found that depressing. And so it was no surprise that this dust, that covers everything there, is a melancholy one for me.
- KW: Your work is laden with symbolic content, but could not be emptier.
- JW: For me it isn't a metaphor, it's only emotion.
- KW: Apart from that you are showing a polished obsidian panel with the title *stade du miroir*. Is that also a material that you encountered in Italy?
- JW: No, here it is less about the material and more about what I do with it, so basically the polishability and that one can see oneself reflected in it. In this case the stone has about the size of a face.
- JF: That's strange, I always make sure that my pictures are lacklustre, I mean matt. It is going to be interesting to be suddenly confronted by this high-shine surface when walking along the walls. Thematically the works are nevertheless close to each other, for in both it is principally about getting close to the essence.
- JW: Although in my work it is rather about the inner picture. You make works that stand for themselves, which admittedly communicate with each other, but are sufficient in themselves in that moment. Whereas the mirror work doesn't function at all without a viewer, the viewer is a central part of the work. I as author of the work am also part of the work, in that I put my energy and effort into it, into the sanding process, for long enough so that the work shows me, that I am reflected in it. The title *stade du miroir* is a term from developmental psychology, which describes the moment when a child sees themselves in the mirror for the first time and recognizes themselves, developing an 'I'. I came to these works because I often doubt my self-image as a sculptor. And so the idea came to take a stone and to work on it for so long that I could recognize myself in it, so that I would find myself again in the work of my hands. It is sort of like a transformation of my person into the person of a sculptor, who creates their self-image with their own hands.
- JF: That's very loaded in a lot of ways, because one thinks immediately of mythology, of Narcissus mirrored in the water.
- KW: So we have a work in the room which is essentially about physical absence – the marble dust – and at the same time a work which requires the presence of a subject, namely in the reflection.
- JW: Although the work is actually just as empty, first of all it contains nothing. Only in connection with a viewer or an imagined author is it apprehensible as an artwork. Of course it also looks attractive as an object, but that is not important for its function as an artwork.
- KW: But it always generates an image, in contrast to the dust for example, which can exist as stone, and thus form, only in the imagination. Whereas the mirror is never alone, it cannot show nothing. Even when there is no person present, it still shows the space and everything that surrounds it. That one

realises when one tries to photograph it; it is never an isolated object but always depicts its surrounding environment and assumes a shape as soon as someone stands in front of it.

JF: Essentially the work also contains a big metaphor for being and not-being. Because the stone is sanded, something is set free that is contained by the material, but which before was not visible. If one took it even further, if one kept sanding and sanding, the stone would disappear and one would not recognise anything.

JW: I honestly don't see it like that. The work rather interests me because each viewer, also in a hundred years when none of us are around anymore, will find in this work their *stade du miroir*, their present, their moment of recognition. The surface will of course never lose its property of reflection. Even more important for me is the aspect that before I worked on this material it had never reflected anyone, so I was the first to see myself in it. My personal moment of recognition is effectively historically inscribed in this mirror; that was the initial motivation to make these polished works.

KW: How long on average do you polish these mirrors?

JW: It's a question of patience and technique. Up to now I've made four such mirrors, and the polishing time was anywhere between 35 and 140 hours. It is an exercise in patience; you start off with a coarse grain and work with successively finer grains. What was interesting during this process was that I noticed what condition I was currently in, what emotional state I was in. There were moments when I noticed that I was hesitant and hardly made any progress, and moments in which I applied myself much more energetically with more self-confidence and resolution and so reached my goal much faster.

JF: I find your description of the sanding process interesting. I also find this process totally loaded in that it is an activity for which one must be present but at the same time restrain oneself. What's more is the rising impatience of desperately wanting to see something. This kind of blind flight reminds me of the moment when I mix colours. Theoretically I could do it so that I produce thousands of samples so that at the end I could be very sure of getting the right tone. But I deliberately stop at a certain point, because the often different materialities make it somewhat impossible...

JW: ... and also because you would get bored as soon as you got the right shade. Actually, you too are always on the lookout for this tension found in continually being off by a nuance. But it must be perfect! It must be so precise that it develops its own tone. It is not the mistake that is paramount, instead everything about this difference is redeemed as an aesthetic promise.

JF: Exactly, essentially it's always about the approach and the impossibility. And you work your way towards it too, I definitely see affinity here between our work, even if we journey completely different ways.

Julian Fickler (b. 1982 in Memmingen, Germany) studied Painting with Prof. Helmut Dorner at the Art Academy Karlsruhe 2008-2014. Exhibitions include Vitamin C Berlin, Badischer Kunstverein Karlsruhe, Åplus Berlin, Galerie Sofie van der Velde Antwerp, Daniel Marzona Galerie Berlin, Spinnerei Leipzig, Gallery Christian Andersen Copenhagen, Exile Berlin, Kunstverein Pforzheim, Konrad Fischer Galerie Berlin, V8 Plattform für neue Kunst Karlsruhe, Ringstube Mainz. From 2009 to 2014 he was a stipend of Cusanuswerk Bonn. Julian Fickler lives and works in Berlin.

Johannes Wald (b. 1980 in Sindelfingen, Germany) studied Sculpture with Prof. Harald Klingelhöller at the Art Academy Karlsruhe. Solo exhibitions include Kunsthalle Bielefeld (with Esther Kläs), Museum Kurhaus Kleve, Albertinum Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Daniel Marzona Galerie Berlin, Greta Meert Galerie Brussels, Galeria Rolando Anselmi Rome, Konrad Fischer Galerie Düsseldorf and Berlin. Group exhibitions include KIT Düsseldorf, Kunsthalle Wilhelmshaven, KölnSkulptur#6 and #7, Kunsthalle Bielefeld, Kunsthalle Mannheim, Städtische Galerie Sindelfingen, Temporäre Kunsthalle Berlin, Silkeborg Art Center, Denmark. Johannes Wald lives and works in Berlin.

Katharina Wendler (b. 1988 in Hamburg, Germany) is an art historian and exhibition maker. At the moment she works as Head of Studio for Karin Sander as well as a freelance curator and writer in Berlin. She studied Cultural Sciences, Art Management, and Psychology at Leuphana Universität Lüneburg and Art History at the University of Iceland and Humboldt Universität zu Berlin. From 2013 to 2017 she directed the project space Safn Berlin/Reykjavik. Since 2014 she initiated and coordinated numerous exhibitions, publications, and other projects together with German as well as international artists.

In early 2018 she initiated the exhibition format *__in conversation with__* which aims at bringing people together through conversation and subsequent collaboration. Artists are invited to engage in dialogue with curators, authors, other artists, art historians, journalists or scientists and to develop an exhibition from it. The conversations are documented in writing, serving as text material accompanying the exhibition. They enable visitors to develop a deeper understanding of the artists' methods and of the artworks.

__in conversation with__ is based on the premise that it is the artists themselves who can best provide information about their works, their methods, their ideas and inspirations. One simply needs to ask.

Exhibition

Julian Fickler / Johannes Wald
June 16–19, 2018
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V8 Plattform für Neue Kunst
Viktoriastrasse 8
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