

## **Interview with Becket Bowes and Cathleen Chaffee**

### **Failure Canon**

Cathleen Chaffee: I'm going to sit on the failed couch.

Becket Bowes: Yeah, good.

C: I'm trying to figure out the color bars and other printer's marks in these paintings. I mean, the paintings are otherwise black-and-white, so they're not functional for color correcting. There's this emphasis on the printing of the book and printerly/painterly ink-smear factor. Have you seen the Broodthaers print *Tractatus Logico – Catalogicus*? He turned the un-folded, un-cut printer's page for a 1972 catalogue into a print edition, and keeps all of the printer's crop lines... But you added all of that information in?

B: Yes. That's all false. The printer's marks were basically an excuse for using color, and, in that way, having it read how a painting is read instead of how a text is read. I mean, the text is just aesthetically beautiful and fascinating to me. I would need to take a year of courses before I could really entirely comprehend the whole paper, but I love the fact that this text exists as an abstraction whether or not I can understand it.

C: There's this certain aestheticization of obscurity that's taking place here. I'm wondering if this text is any more beautiful than any other text that—given the context—is unknowable to the reader?

B: No, I think there are a hundred other texts that could be used.

C: But unknowability is relative. There are people who would know how to come in and read this, but I don't think the gallery is going to bring in a lot of, um...logicians. At what point is it permissible to just throw up your hands? And then, why does that become aesthetic, in the form of abstract art? It seems to be a way of saying 'I don't know how to read this in its own language; I have to read it through my own language.'

B: Right, I mean there are signifiers you can read: the name of the text; that it was written by these authors. There's something fundamental in allowing something to make sense without understanding it.

C: Well, we understand that any given phrase in the text satisfies the conditions for a sentence. But the rest of it is a breakdown of meaning between speaker and listener. In general, there will

be a similar experience of illegibility among most people who come see the exhibition.

B: Yeah, I would be surprised if anyone who came to see the show could read Kripke Semantics.

C: Well, it's a highly formal logical system that reads to the untrained as an abstraction.

B: It's all abstract. Usually the lyrical content of a song is the access point of understanding, and the music, the abstract aspect, is the beat that keeps you there. The problem with writing about math or logic instead of love is that people just don't care enough to understand for the most part. So you have to make the beat super catchy to get the content in. You have to acknowledge the really eternal and tragic folly inherent in the human pursuit of a logical understanding in general, because that's where the poetry, the beat and the content all are. In terms of symbols and diagrams, I'm going to start reading the Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic instead of October. I think it's a much healthier text.

C: The problem with, say, a Greimas rectangle in October is also the level of legibility because you understand too much of it. What you're doing here in 'failing,' is surrendering yourself to unknowability as a pleasurable experience, as the sublime. You're the man in front of the sea.

B: They're little peaks, little mountain peaks.

C: Because of the dry language that populates a lot of 1970s work, it's hard for people to agree that many conceptual artists interested in logical positivism were also interested in that moment of illegibility. Something I think is distinctive to you, Becket, is not necessarily your attraction to logical systems, but the particular moment when you quit, where systems fail you.

B: For a long time if I started to explain what was going on content-wise in my work, people didn't care. I feel like this is the point where I come to: You're not going to understand this, your eyes already glazed over, let's see what we can do with those glazed over eyes. So because people probably just don't care about the math or the logic, they can look at the painting. But at the same time I think that if you like this painting, then maybe there's an interest there. I like knowing that there are people out there who do this kind of logics.

C: Like believing in good fairies?

B: It's like a book on a bookshelf. You know that somebody has spent time with these ideas, and there's something beautiful about that. It's all about failure.

C: But it isn't really. I know you're saying that this is about failure, but I mean, in terms of your work, the fact that you could pin down where the failure takes place is already a win.

B: Which is exactly what this paper is doing. It's trying to pin down using really complicated logic where exactly different logical systems fail. I think when I started doing all this I was pretty grim about everything. And I still, you know, I'm 33 and I don't have a savings account or a...but then as far as the art goes, I don't know. This is my first solo show and we'll see how it goes.

C: It'll be a nice pithy thing for people to say if it does well: "Not so much of a failure now."

B: ....

C: How did you arrive at this hanging apparatus that you're using?

B: Just using one screw? Well, I had a text on paper that was just pinned up on that wall and I liked it.

C: It reminds me of a screed nailed on the wall. Everybody's going to look like a strange kind of bird in front of these paintings, sort of leaning to one side on one foot trying to read them. The paintings put your body in relationship to the ground in a way that...it's like when you wave at somebody and then you have to fix your hair because they didn't see you. As they lean over to read, people will realize that there's a breakdown between the language that they know as English and what is taking place on the page. The form of address is also altered, and this lets you off the hook a little because it already says 'you're not supposed to understand this or else I wouldn't have hung it this way.' Which might be a little over-determined, but I like the playfulness of it. I think that if it was a text that someone could almost understand, these paintings would read like a physical representation of the loss of sense-making that takes place as you battle with a difficult, but still legible text. Here, though, you can't make sense of it from the word go, but it still slowly slips out of focus and off the page.

B: Well, I really am interested in creating an experience for the viewer of something that is somewhat intangible and somewhat sublime but grounded in reason and function. Essentially, I love the content of this text on logics, even though I can't entirely understand it. I'm not a stupid person, but there are things outside of my canon. I want other people to have that experience. Canons didn't used to be field specific. There used to be one canon – the scholarly canon. That was then split into a church canon and an academic canon. Then god died and

modal logic got its own language and Oprah made a book club and by hook or crook we land in a specialized field that has its own canon that changes by the day. I feel like I got shafted with the art canon, but I like incorporating not-art into it. I've been making art to do with math and logic and syntax for a while and watching people's eyes glaze over as I explain it to them. I just want them to be excited; they don't have to understand it. So I picked a paper that was utterly beyond my ken to see if that failure of understanding was prohibitive to my fascination, and it wasn't. So, yes, I do love the paper, and the failure between the paper and me. That's why I allow the slippage in registration, and the play with color bars. I mean, Abstract and Concept can never be synonymous in the same way within our canon, but perhaps there is a conversation between them in these self-consciously reflexive and pun-laden forays, these attempts to abstractly paint a logical abstract...

C: Who would you say does that for you—creates an abstract experience that's not about the painting, or the sculpture itself?

B: Cavemanman did that for me. I think Urs Fisher's pit did that... Most of the pieces that did that for me, in recent memory, are installation pieces. But then I would say that of Mondrian, I would say that of Malevich or the telephone paintings....Even in the art world, it feels like a lot of people don't know how to handle that failure of understanding is at the crux of abstraction. Our job as artists is to keep a step ahead of you art historians in creating new experiences that defy understanding. That when art, in whatever form it takes, succeeds, it does so either by touching an unfamiliar nerve or a familiar nerve in an unfamiliar way.

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