

ADAM MCEWEN IN CONVERSATION WITH MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER

Marc-Olivier Wahler — **What was the last book you read?**

Adam McEwen — Right now I'm reading *The Inverted World* by Christopher Priest, a sci-fi novel from the mid-70s. Its central plot device is that a city called Earth, post- some kind of apocalypse, must be hauled by ropes along tracks in order to keep as close as possible to the "Optimum," a moving point which turns out to be a kind of analogy for the Present. It's a very good metaphor for the way the present endlessly rolls over into the past, and the way we surf the roll.

Marc-Olivier Wahler — **In this book, the gravity specific to the past and the future visually change the elements (the past compresses forms, the future stretches them). I've always thought that one of the differences between an artwork and a common object lies in the difference of gravity. When you see a pallet by Fischli and Weiss for example, it looks like an ordinary object but you can easily feel that the gravity is totally different. How does this story of *The Inverted World* affect you as an artist? How do you look at the past, could the past be affected by an artist's gaze?**

Adam McEwen — There is a density to great art works that seems to take them out of time, to make them look as if they've been around forever when they're brand new and vice versa. It's as if they're able to hold a position of stillness. The visual conceit in *The Inverted World*, of the past physically compressing its inhabitants, is staggering when you first read it. The most affecting part of the book for me, though, is the sense of the city's having to be in constant motion, of it endlessly having to pursue the future and escape the past, or face annihilation. That relates to art in the sense that art can be about pursuing a goal which is constantly moving. It's uncatchable, which forces this relentless motion. But in terms of thinking about the past, for artists it's exactly the opposite of that book's compression: all of history is simultaneously present and available, and in some sense equal. There is no time. History is the interior of a sphere, and for each artist sitting there thinking or daydreaming, their head is in the centre of that sphere.

Marc-Olivier Wahler — **It reminds me of this famous quote from Picabia: "Our heads are round so that our thinking can change directions." How does that sphere take form in your exhibition "Fresh Hell"? How do you resolve this paradox of having artworks that seem to levitate out of time, and our daily life that seems to be swallowed by gravity?**

Adam McEwen — Any work that explicitly refers to levitating also acknowledges the possibility or likelihood of failure. The sense of ecstasy in a late-Medieval religious work is a foil to the limitations of the earthly body, just as a Modernist work yearns to be free of language. The terms are different, but the tension is the same. I'm usually more struck by the similarities between different forms or eras of art than by the differences. If works operate at the same frequency, from whatever era they come, then they can resonate very precisely with each other. The idea underlying the exhibition is something to do with the attempt to levitate, to escape gravity, this dream of making an object that floats. The task appears to be not only impossible, but also soul-destroying. Hence the title, "Fresh Hell," which comes from Dorothy Parker but is apparently frequently misattributed to

Shakespeare. It was suggested by an interview with Bruce Nauman from the early 1970s, in which he refers to the depressing notion that even when you feel you've achieved a successful work, when you return to the studio you find you have to start afresh, from zero, and this process repeats itself. (Several years later he describes the situation a little more optimistically.) But in trying to do this, to move forward, you take from time and history—the landscape of history in your head—indiscriminately, according to completely organic and nonlinear connections, looking for points of resonance. At the same time, history is a brick wall, which demands to be blown up again and again in order for the next step to happen. It's disheartening. A lot of the work in the exhibition carries with it the scars of past failures. The Guston drawings have this quality. They levitate, but they know about gravity. Michael Landy's *Market* has it also. It asks the melancholy question, "Where, in 1990, is Minimalism's holy aura? How do you proceed once that aura has dissipated and been debased?" The aura promised freedom, but (of course) the promise wasn't fulfilled, so you have to start all over again.

Marc-Olivier Wahler — **I like the term "frequency" you are using. In a group show, the aura of each work disseminates around the space and get transformed when it comes closer to its neighbours...**

Adam McEwen — Yes. It's good when one work is allowed to generate friction with another, and better when you then add a third and the possible meanings start to become unpredictable. They heat up and a sense of chaos begins to seep out. Lines of communication are opened up, generated by the works alone, and it's not clear where they're leading. The structure is possibly anarchic, but it's the artworks that are in control, not the curator. Works occupy the volumes around their sculptural footprint, and tune themselves according to what's nearby. For instance, Martin Kippenberger's inflated black rubber skip, *Memorial of the Good Old Time*, could easily hold a large room on its own. It's a black hole into which all celebratory good vibes must be consigned, so in this case it seems to make sense to place other works, that also talk about history, in its orbit, on their way to being sucked in.

Marc-Olivier Wahler — **This sounds like an area where the negative and the positive are equally important.**

Adam McEwen — There seems to be a powerful latent energy hidden within the act of refusal. I think that's what the show is about: the apparent paradox that in the act of understanding that expression is impossible—that things are stuck—lies the motor that allows things to move, even if infinitesimally. Hofmannsthal's *Lord Chandos Letter* points out that there's a disconnect between language and the world but that it's still only through language that the issue can be addressed. Which is paralyzing. For some people it results in an activity that finds momentum in tiny repeated movements back and forth between Yes and No, privileging neither. It produces a kind of enraged ambivalence. I'm thinking of a Thomas Bernhard narrator, hurling abuse at a city he despises even as he races back to it, in love with it. In this situation, a third option and a way forward might be the pleasure of the stupid act—the dumb, the childish, the radically simple. The show maybe hopes to diagram this, how and why such a bleak prospect can end up being exciting, or compelling.