



SIGNAL OF ALARM
[Laurent Jeanpierre]

Francis Galton was a cousin of Darwin and, like Darwin, an English scientist. Scientific history remembers him principally for his contribution to psychology and statistical methodology; yet he was above remarkable in everything in which he dabbled, equally versed in geography and meteorology. He attempted to apply the idea of natural selection to the question of intelligence. To this end he developed a theory of hereditary mental faculties, in particular genius, practiced anthropometry and developed projects of eugenics, with the aim of producing a new English elite. Charming man. His scientific procedures led him to invent the notion and calculation of statistical correlation, the future benefits of which were substantial. Galton also toyed with several techniques and unusual machines: composite photography, for example, the origin of modern day morphing, special dice for calculating probabilities, and a famous vertical table that bears his name. Also called “a bean machine,” Galton’s table enables the experimentation and physical representation of what in probability theory is called the law of normal distribution.

Fabrice Pichat has included here an historical illustration of Galton’s table. It accompanies the making of his works *Trêve 1* and *Trêve 2*: Pichat’s tables. Laid out on the first of these tables are several common objects which the artist has “modified”: light bulbs, rolls of various kinds of adhesive tape, small spoons, beer bottles, metal capsules, etc. Pichat placed a rotating fan on his metal table top. When it is operated, the objects are set in motion, they oscillate – yet none of them fall, and nor will they fall. Behind their inhibited fall, and their apparently unforeseeable movement, nothing is, however, left to chance. The artist has patiently developed a science for the placement of his objects. Galton’s table consists of a board of equally distributed nails. When a series of balls is set off at the center of the board, the nails divert the balls at each stage of their progress, with an equal chance that the balls will turn either left or right. At the bottom of the table, the series forms a Gauss curve: the majority of the balls end up at the center of the table, with only a few at either

extremity. There where intuition would lead one to think that Galton's table would simply obey the laws of chance, the movement of its objects, like Pichat's own tables, thus follows a regular law. Following the most elementary scientific procedures, in a similar fashion to that of Galton and his table, Pichat produces devices that lead to questioning – and sometimes exceeding – an initial perception (which he calls “instinctive logic”).

One of the principal methods the artist uses to this end consists in stimulating two or more senses and provoking a shift in attention from one to the other, failing which the work becomes ungraspable. With *Apocalypse maintenant* [Apocalypse Now], one has to raise one's head in order to see the source of a furtive sound that one has hitherto heard murmuring from above. In contrast with synesthesia, Pichat thus plays with the space between different modes of perception. Such works as *Apocalypse maintenant* and *A Single Word In This Land*, for example, translate movement into sounds. Conversely, *Hurt* is a device that translates sound into movement by replacing the vibration that the membrane of a speaker makes with the beating of a steel point on a table. The bottles placed on the floor of the installation *Il y a* [There Is] provoke various effects of movement and light: a dance of illuminated bottles animated by a string of stroboscopic lights and a brutal lighting apparently created by a detector cell that reacts to the movement of the audience. The spectator who enters the space of the installation assumes that he or she has instigated the action. Yet here as elsewhere, Pichat is not aiming to encourage interactivity, the retroactive effect of the spectators' responses to the minimal machinery he uses in his works. Interactivity, according to the artist, is of little interest and, under the guise of inviting the visitor to intervene in the creative process, reverts to standard forms of perception: interactivity often conceals an interpassivity. In *Réflexion faite* [On Reflection], the spectator is nevertheless impelled to manipulate the work: a jammed glass office door, open between two rubber door jams. Try it and you will see; you will change nothing of the work. You will, however, discover a forgotten property of light...

Pichat's art is not deceptive, even less is it eruptive; rather, it is disruptive. It opens and closes the circuits of perception, requires attentiveness and aims at constraining perception – if not holding it captive. It requires more time than the spectator of contemporary art is generally willing to give works of art. Exacting in its effects,

deliberately indifferent towards its goals, Pichat's art is not easy to archive, photograph or reproduce in a catalogue. It resists being pinned down. In this monograph, chronological order is largely privileged: the reader may freely attempt to make links and associations from one work to another, just as the spectator of Pichat's installations must learn to imaginatively project his senses into invisible spaces (see, for example, *Laserlaser*) to reorient and coordinate them.

One must "endure the stubbornness of forms," as the young artist writes in his notes. Pichat thus speaks of "forms in movement": certain forms vibrate, others crawl (*Migration*) – their speed is always a crucial element. In the case of slowness, on the one hand, in flirting with the imperceptible, the artist thus forces observation; in the case of speed, as in *Réflexion faite 2* [On Reflection 2], on the other hand, the spectator discovers a new language with its sounds and written form, yet at too fast a speed to apprehend its principles. In order to arouse the spectator, Pichat relies on illusionism, as with the perpetual whirlpool he has invented (*Sur le fond* [On the Bottom]). He thus hides the source of movement of his forms – no longer his moving objects, but his motors, the machines about which he is most passionate.

This aspect of his research is aimed at going beyond the museum or the gallery in order to blend into the landscape of daily life: "everywhere where there are walls (*Migration*), ceilings (*Apocalypse maintenant*), parking lots and puddles (*Sur le fond*)" as the artist suggests; he also speaks of "inclusions" in architectural spaces. Whether it is a question of intervening in the mode of the spectator's perception or in non-artistic spaces, the logic is always the same – a logic aimed at re-enchanting art.

Pichat has given a lucid image of his fantasy of the ideal spectator of art in *Écho du cri* [The Echo of the Scream] – doubtless a passing homage to Munch. Look carefully at the photos. Look at them carefully. They are not anonymous portraits, but ways of looking. They are not ways of seeing, but ways of being surprised. Eyes. New eyes. Numerous and different. Non-aligned. In order to see and capture them, Pichat screamed in public spaces – on subway platforms – at the same time that he photographed the reactions that his screaming provoked. The results resemble the facial effect produced by signals of alarm, with one crucial exception: the alarm in this instance does

not entirely ring true. Pichat's scream has only a limited performativity – that of startling and frightening subway passengers.

In general, a signal of alarm has two functions. One is to alert – which goes without saying. In order to provoke surprise, the artist had to produce and circumscribe an event, such as the length of time several lit matches remain illuminated before being thrown in the air in the work *Contrôle Chaos Conforme 1*. The artist also constructs enigmas or aims at inciting disquiet, such as the seductive aluminum table whose legs form sharp needles (*Sous influence* [Under Influence]) – a “point more rapidly pointed,” rather than a simple cone, as he explains. *Cyclones*, the title of a series of otherwise inoffensive drawings produced by rotating rubber stamps of small naïve figures while pressing them on paper, evokes an atmosphere of a possible calamity – a relation to time to which the artist is particularly attentive. And then the calamity is sometimes slowed down; time is drawn out. The fall (of objects) is avoided; the calamity is deferred: a moment's respite. Souls at rest. Senses at peace: the ataraxy before the next alarm sounds. The alert has passed. It has not lasted.

But a signal of alarm not only alerts. It also functions by way of a singular signal, recognizable among others. It must have an immediate effect. Beyond Pichat's scream, a signal of alarm is always performative: everything stops in the instance it sounds; emergency procedures are then set in motion. Pichat works with signals in their various forms: sound, vibration, reflected light, wind, pressure, impression, the cry of alarm, etc. How is a signal transmitted? How does it pass from one sensory register to another? How does it circulate in materials whose properties differ? What are its perceptual limits? The level beyond which there is merely noise and the signal becomes unintelligible?

If the artist is interested in signals, it is also because he is wary of signs. Pichat finds it more interesting, more conducive – especially to the ambitions of art – to aspire to a broadening of perception, rather than the play of interpretation. No symbols, or very few; no enunciations, or almost none; no concepts, unlike those of conceptual art. Does contemporary art suffer from an inflation of signs and a deflation of meaning? Incidentally, I met with Fabrice Pichat when he was finishing his *Toys*, an edition of one-euro coins transpierced by a needle and transformed into spinning tops –

economically devalued but artistically revalued. In *Contrôle Chaos Conforme 2* Pichat continues his assault on the semio-centrism of contemporary culture and art. Standard magazine images or travel brochures are stapled across an entire wall then violently ripped down – the creation of chaos in a controlled way. From “the stock chaos” of the pop image and its mosaic of clichés, nothing remains but a series of fragments of stapled paper, smaller than a stamp, almost indecipherable. Here, Pichat invents a new pointillism, through which the critical reaction of 1950s French *affichistes* towards the world of commodities and advertising reappears.

To deflate the sign, to resist its legibility and defer “the description of experience”, all the while effecting “rapid connections” among each of them, renders Pichat’s approach risky. Some of his works allow this fragility and the state of mind that accompanies it to become perceptible. A few months ago, the artist discovered the material properties of rodent glue traps – it never dries. Using rodent glue, he made a sculpture (*Transport*) and notably experimented with a number of manipulations. One of them became the subject of a series of photographs (*Emprise ou la jouissance de la maîtrise*): two open hands grasp, in a thick and dense web of glue, a multitude of miniature objects among which are a number of scraps of food. The composition is rather frightening. “The pleasure of mastery” [*La jouissance de la maîtrise*], as the artist writes in his notes, is that whose “habit should be broken in every way.” The invitation is doubtlessly addressed first and foremost to the spectator, since the artist strives to destabilize the spectator’s ordinary schemas of perception. And what if the artist, in event of his success, were placed, without necessarily attempting to do so, in a position of exercising his “influence” [*emprise*] not unlike the series of photographs that bears the word *Emprise* as its title? Is there not in this instance a risk, in struggling against the automatism and indifference of the spectator, of becoming a prophet who utters predictions and injunctions with his mouth covered (see the portrait *Ainsi parlait* [Thus Spoke]), or treating the spectator as a guinea-pig in need of domestication?

“To break the habit of the pleasure of mastery”: Pichat’s maxim is addressed as much to a contemporary art audience as it is to both himself and artists in general. How to sound his own signal of alarm, that which suspends the desire to anticipate and control the effects of his artistic gestures? Likewise, this is the problem that is courageously raised in the research that is presented in this

monograph. We are now in a position to understand why the artist's signals of alarm, like his scream on subway platforms, are necessarily discordant and ephemeral. For they convey an urgency. They do not seek out the effects; they convoke surprise rather than panic.

Galton has not only furnished Pichat with the occasional example of an intuitive approach to research, analogous to his own. The English aristocrat is a foil, the representative of an experimental attitude entirely organized around the fantasy of mastery and power. Galton's table, as it is illustrated here, is thus turned upside down: the balls lie at its legs in the disorder in which they lay before the experiment of launching them had begun. Galton was interested in the measurements of skulls – we'll put him back on his feet. Pichat reveals that he is conscious of the aporia of an art that, in order to both react to the newly acquired power of the public and control a waning attention span due to the inflation in the number of artworks, would restore a demiurgic and modernist figure of artistic creation. The signal is clear, the alert has been given: there is no use in aiming to surprise others if one does not know how to surprise oneself – and to be surprised to surprise.

