

MEETING NO.4

AN
INTERVIEW
WITH

RAYMOND PETTIBON

ANOTHER EDITED
FICTION

BY
KATYA TYLEVICH



Previous spread:
Part of *Fractional Systems. Garage Project II*
© MAK Center
Mimi Teller

Below:
Portrait: Grant Delin,
Courtesy David Zwirner
New York

Opposite:
No Title (She must know...)
Pen, ink and gouache on paper
76.8 x 56.5 cm
2010
Courtesy David Zwirner, New York



I MEET RAYMOND PETTIBON at an opening in Los Angeles, this summer. He is among the artists participating in the event, so our run-in is only a one-sided coincidence. I mean, I knew he'd be there. And, truth be told, I had been trying to schedule a proper interview with him for months prior to that point – and getting nowhere.

But this meeting isn't some ambush, or sting operation, on my part. I had been planning to attend the opening, anyway. I also respect that Pettibon is hard to get. Hell, I wouldn't want to be interviewed either. Besides, once the opportunity actually presented itself — there he was, and nobody was harassing him for the moment — I hesitated before approaching Pettibon. One reason being, paradoxically, that his works have a strong effect on me. When collections of his writings, drawings and paintings, for example, wink and beckon from bookshelves, I think twice before paging through them, knowing that when I do, I will feel my shoulders drop, my chest tighten, a knot form in my throat. Pettibon's compositions evoke in me the feeling of coming face to face with an uncomfortable memory, or the ache of melting into perverse nostalgia for a past undeserving of it; sometimes they simply evoke an ache. A pause, a laugh that lasts for one beat only. Pettibon's works are not without a murky humour, after all. Trains, baseball players, wars, soldiers, sadists, and surfers, Gumby, bedroom acts, stark violence and petty aggression, and those accompanying words, like punch lines delivered by your mortician.

So I had cold feet. I never like the possibility of confusing art with artist, writing with writer. Also, having read other interviews with Pettibon, I kind of figured he liked to fuck with journalists — sometimes, at least. For example, six years ago, when Pettibon told *The Believer* that he raised pit bulls for dog-fights. Later, Jeff Penalty — documentary filmmaker and former replacement singer for The Dead Kennedys — spoke with Pettibon

for *Swindle Magazine*, and the artist told him he raised the dogs so that at-risk youth could train them for fights, a form of charity. Pettibon was kidding. He said as much to Jeff Penalty, eventually. I think sometimes it's hard to tell when Pettibon is kidding, but what do I know about Pettibon?

I finally go up to him, and the artist is kind to me. We exchange a few sentences, mostly muttered. I try to find words that sound more sincere than, 'I love your work' (ugh.) Our conversation is cut short by other people. Pointing to me, Pettibon advises

them to, 'Watch what you say. She's a writer.'

Later, in a circle of strangers, I stand next to a woman describing how Pettibon's dog (with him at the event) nipped her hand. She says it was her own fault; she'd pet the animal without asking. 'It's just that I love dogs,' she offers. 'So, I thought...'

'Not everything you love, loves you back.' I say. I laugh quickly, before my comment has a chance to totally kill the conversation. The woman doesn't laugh back. Instead, she answers, rather sadly: 'Right?'

Several months later, I finally catch Pettibon by phone. We have a longer conversation, this time. For almost two hours, he speaks from his studio in Venice, California, and I speak from an apartment in the same zip code. In that time, we address at least two things *always* brought up in interviews with him (you'll know when you get to them); but we don't address others, like: how Pettibon got his 'start' in the late seventies making flyers and album covers for punk bands like Black Flag, which was founded by Pettibon's older brother Greg Ginn. We also don't address Pettibon's relationship to Gumby, or baseball, really. But we do talk at length about the futility or fallibility of talks like this. At one point, Pettibon says to me: 'You can turn a camera or a tape recorder onto real life, but of course, real life is still affected by the camera.'

Right?



Below:
Here's Your Irony Back (The Big Picture)
 Installation view at David Zwirner
 September - October 2007
 Courtesy David Zwirner, New York



KATYA TYLEVICH: *I understand you wanted to be a writer.*

RAYMOND PETTIBON: Well, 'wanted to be.' More realistically, it's something you grow into, or just *do* rather than something you put on your New Year's Resolution list. I would have liked to play baseball for Casey Stengel. Not everything is realistic. But what I do is writing as much as it is anything else. There isn't any split between being an artist of my sort and a writer.

A musician? I just interviewed Money Mark a few months ago [Elephant 3], and he spoke a bit about making music with

you, along with John Wicks and Mike Watt. [Pettibon is a vocalist for their band, Los Punkinhedz.]

Yeah, those are my words. I did some sessions. We're supposed to do some more, sometime. It's like the Beatles, stepping off the plane in New York and right into a recording session, rather than being with their adoring fans. It's done without rehearsal, without hearing what the beats are, on my part. Whether or not it's worth doing is not only my call, it's that of the people involved, and probably by extension of that, the fans, although that hasn't really stopped me and bothered me

in what I've done in music. I don't know if I've sold two records in my lifetime, but it's still worth doing for whatever reason.

Music is such a collaborative process, but from what I've read about you, I understand you like to be quite alone when working.

It's not that I have to go out into the wilderness and be completely alone with my thoughts; I'm not easily distracted. But for the nature of the work itself, yeah, you can't really have somebody holding your hand when you're writing something. I am alone within my room or studio while I'm working, but in a larger sense, I'm also with the works of the living and the

Below:
No Title (A look. A...)
 Pen, ink and gouache on paper
 48.3 x 61 cm
 2010
 Courtesy David Zwirner, New York

dead. It's not as if any word from A to Z drops down from above, like I'm a pure source of language and writing. No, of course not. One is affected by books or poetry or films, by music, by conversations, just living life. In that sense, the work is a social enterprise.

That in mind, do you consider your works autobiographical?

Of course there are autobiographical elements, but that term is so malleable; it can be washed of its meaning when you widen the scope, or when you focus in too narrowly. Oneself tends to be a primary actor in autobiography or fiction, but I wouldn't say my work is set down as explicitly about me, or for that matter, as journalistic, real-life or realism. That sort of thing is a conceit. I'm not being provocative or making any systemic or philosophical claims. But anyone who's been in the position where they are witness to claims of realism or autobiography, know there are huge disparities between the claims of the observer and the, whatever, the sidekick. Between Batman and Robin; or Jim Olsen and Clark Kent, okay? They would tell different stories, which would be presented as journalistic truth. Just the facts. But you pick up the motherfucking paper every morning and you accept that kind of tacitly. It can bring you in like some fantastical film.

But does your artwork report on what's happening at the time you're making it?

No, because of what we were just talking about. You can turn a camera or a tape recorder onto real life, but of course, real life is still affected by the camera. When people have a camera pointed at them, they start mugging, or they start drawing back, or acting, or withdrawing.

I don't know to what extent a camera can even be surreptitious anymore, because it's almost like one assumes the camera is on all the time. I'm not against documentary or journalism or anything; I'm not outing it as some terrible thing, but it is what it is.

You mean an edited fiction?

Well, yeah, and when people don't understand that, it's because they're living

There isn't any split between being an artist of my sort and a writer





From when I started to where I am now, the audience has always been an amorphous holy ghost, or disembodied

with the suspension of disbelief, which is sometimes wilful and voluntarily; people going like sheep to the slaughter. But you asked a question and that's my take on it. That's not to say I'm asking everyone to be so rigorously self-wary of all that, because there's more to life than that, but that doesn't mean —no, for Christ sakes, I'm not a fan of journalists any more than I am of political agents. They're complicit and they can all be rounded up and shot as far as I'm concerned. [I laugh, involuntarily.]

That's making more out of it than I want to. They represent, okay? They represent the 'as reality', you know? All of these are in quotation marks, but it's a slight of hand, some motherfucking magic act.

Do you feel your work, or personality, is being misrepresented somehow?

I take all that in stride in the context of what it is, and I'm describing it that way with more of a sense of humour. I'm not held up to the bright lights and the tortures and threats of going to the camps, or 'if you don't answer this.' I don't have any personal grievances. I'm not bitter about anything. People have been kind for whatever reasons. I like hearing people's opinions, and I kind of wish there was more of that in art. I don't have a yes-man complex of needing to be validated and approved by everyone around me. If it sounds defensive you can always work in those kind of reductionisms, anyone can make it out as that, but honestly, I don't think it is.

No, I don't think it sounds defensive. I wonder, has your approach to your work changed now that you have an audience, as opposed to when there was no guarantee anyone would see your pieces?

From when I started to where I am now, the audience has always been an amorphous holy ghost, or disembodied. It is not a give and take based on a personal basis, which usually involves a patron or a client, like in commercial art. Whenever I'm in the position of having someone to do the work for — which is rare — it stymies me. Not because I resent the relationship, it's rather that I start thinking of what they want rather than what I'm good at. When I start thinking of trying to make someone else happy, it throws me off. I dread being in a position to work that way.

Right:
No Title (For getting a...)
 Pen, ink and gouache on paper
 76.2 x 56.5 cm
 2010
 Courtesy David Zwirner, New York



Is there a reason why you choose to work in Los Angeles?

It's where I more or less grew up, and not in a jet-set family. I mean, we were poor with limited means so it wasn't really a choice. I could move somewhere else now, but I don't know, to me Los Angeles is fine. I'm not an ambassador to the city, singing its praises. I'm sure there are other places that would be just as well. I can work out of a briefcase, pretty much.

I was in Long Beach for maybe five years, and then Venice the last four years or so. I was in Hermosa, since I was about five. Before that, Wasco, CA, which is near Bakersfield and I don't really remember Arizona, but I had my first few years there.

I bring up Los Angeles because you're often described as 'a Los Angeles artist' and I want to hear your opinion about that label. That's just a shorthand journalistic classification that I'm not going to spend time fighting. A lot of the Los Angeles artists come from elsewhere and I'd hardly say Wasco or my formative years have much to do with Los Angeles, because once you get out of the city, the immediate environs can be like the deep south or someplace much different than the journalistic cliché of Los Angeles.

The local knowledge or allusions and references in my work rarely need explanation or footnoting to a more general audience. But there's such a defensiveness against Los Angeles, against Hollywood. The rest of the states, the rest of the world,

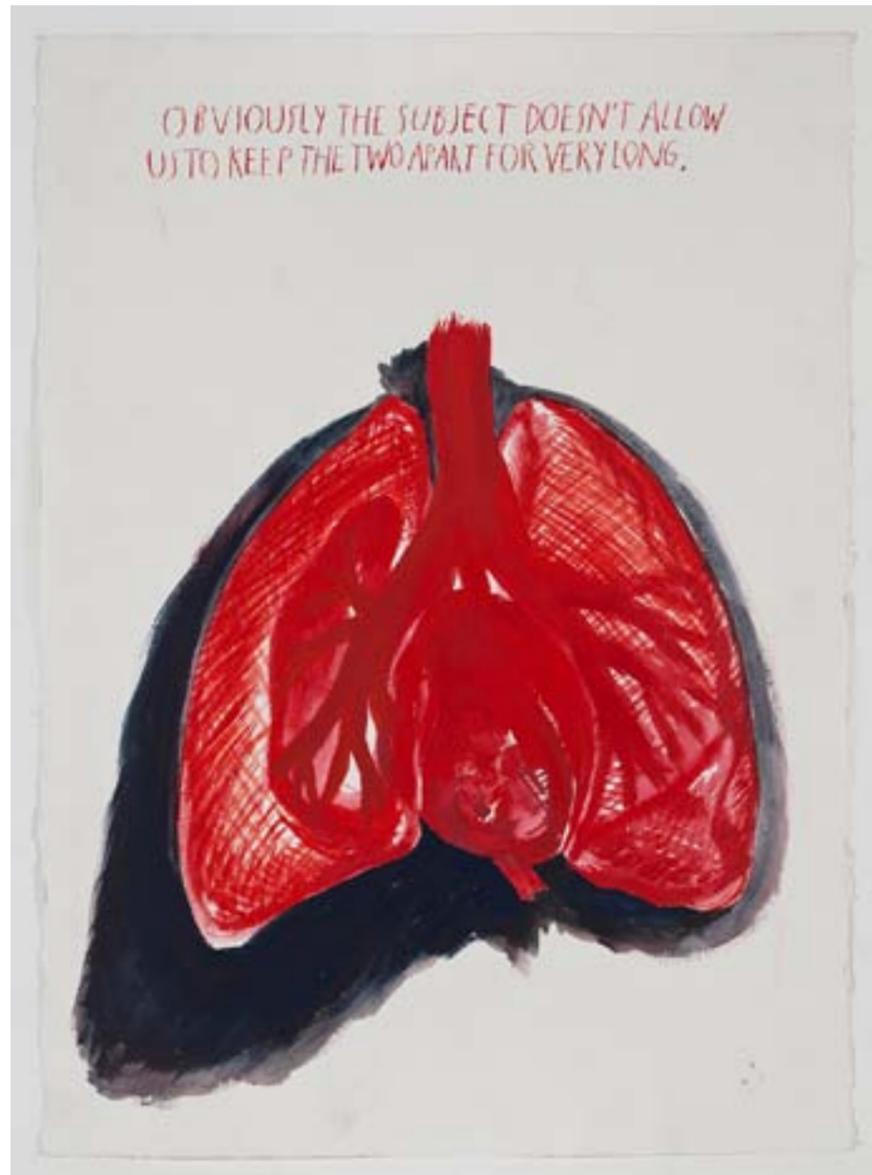
define their own existence as how far they are from Los Angeles. Los Angeles doesn't have much power; who the fuck cares in the first place, you know? It's like when I go clubbing with Kevin Federline — who knows him as a person? He's a great guy. The myth is — or some of it is envy — the rest of the world wants to go clubbing with us or wants to live in the sun of Venice Beach, go shopping on Rodeo Drive... to what purpose?

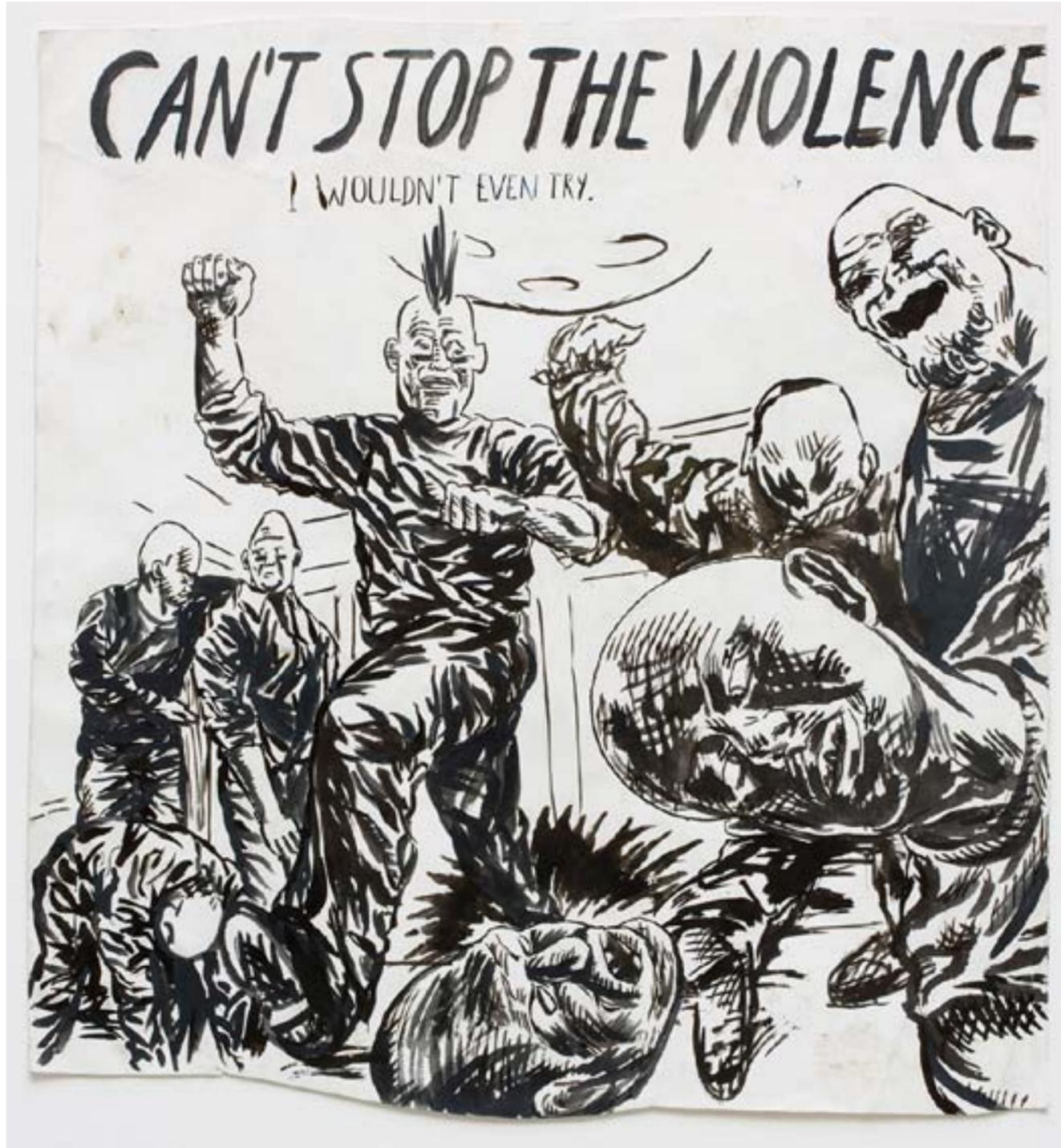
Personally, I don't give a fuck, okay? I can survive all that. As an artist who happens to work in Los Angeles, I have to have the full burden of representing Los Angeles and explaining and apologizing for it, which is a little fucking ridiculous. You know, Helter Skelter [The 1992 seminal exhibit at the L.A. Museum

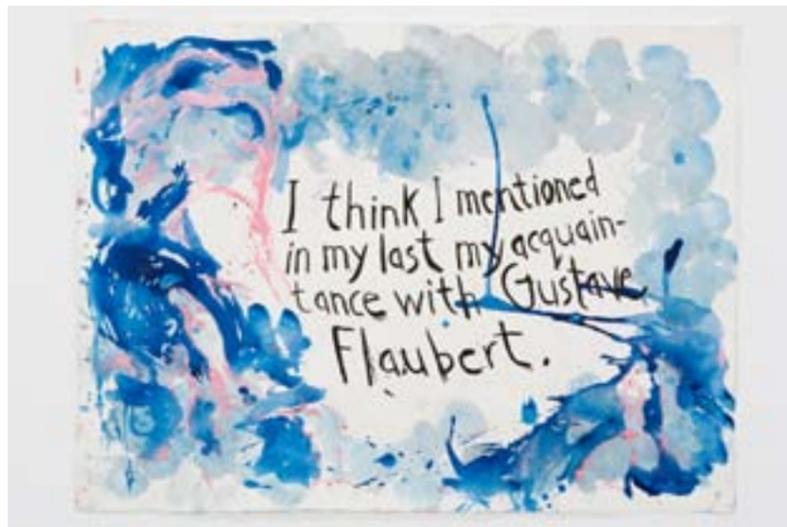
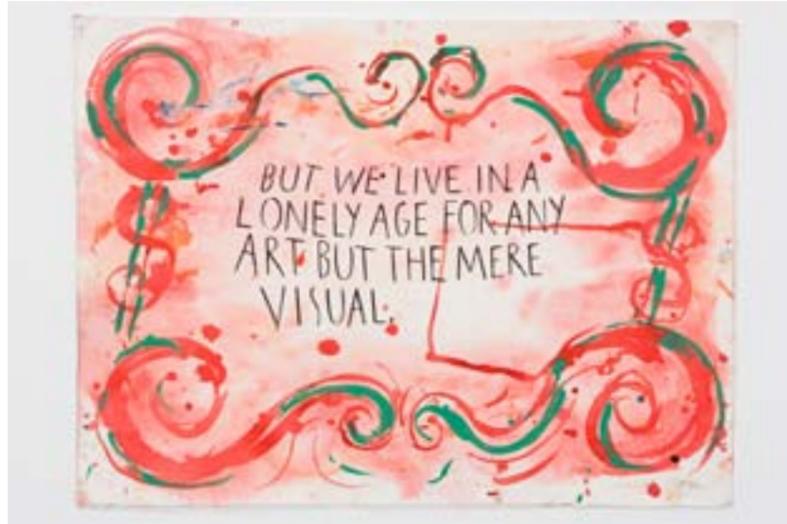
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of Contemporary Art that featured sixteen L.A. artists, including Pettibon]: the press on that should have been anticipated. All the bloodletting, the Helter Skelter thing, and a lot of it is geographical and territory marking — I'm not in a competition with anyone, I'm not. To me, the world is not zero-sum, okay? In other words, whatever I did, is not taking away from anyone. I don't want to be in charge. Other peoples' unhappiness, it affects me. It's, like, call me Kevin Federline, I mean, America's most hated. Okay. That's giving me more credit than I deserve. I wouldn't know that it's even an issue, but it's always brought up and it's not going away—

What's always brought up? Los Angeles?
It's really not worth the attention given to it, because to be in a state of defence not of oneself but of a motherfucking city that is considered this, you know, hegemony over everything? I mean, for Christ sakes, the power balance should shift to another part of the world and it probably has already, it's just that the media hasn't caught up with it. The artists who represent Los Angeles are just a collection of people, many from different parts of the country and they're just in their studios. We're not plotting. We don't even get together much, because Los Angeles is geographically dispersed. It's not like you have a concentration of power. Like Adam Smith said about whatever the equivalent of Business CEOs in the eighteenth century were — that whenever they get together, they plot restraints against trade, or they plot monopoly or oligopoly. No one has that much power here. I mean, it's a popular media construct that stuck because it's what people want to believe.







Was art a part of your life growing up? No, my father taught and he wrote; and my mother was — well, everything she was, was interrupted because of the war. She was a refugee. Where from? She's from Estonia, but her and her family, they were refugees. And my father, at that age, was also interrupted by the war, he flew B-17s for the air force. So I don't come from a family where I was groomed for what I do. Everything I said about Los Angeles could be extended to art in the U.S., you know. For something

that has so little power, it's taken as such an evil. No I wasn't groomed, there's no nepotism involved. No, I was wondering more whether you were exposed to artists or looking at any art in particular when you were young? We went on field trips and stuff, but we tended to get mired in the La Brea Tar Pits before we really got to the L.A. County Museum of Art. But I wasn't artistic as a kid, I was more autistic, A-U-T-I-S-T-I-C. I mean, seriously. I know the question has to do with 'How do you trace back through one's past? How do you end up at one place

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from another?' I don't know. One finds the way by accident, by influence, by pushes and shoves and cajoling sometimes, or by opportunity; and maybe genes and upbringing play into that to an extent, but it's hard to say exactly why one arrives at what one is doing, or even how. It's interesting, you were a math teacher along the way, weren't you? Well, I taught a couple of years, but that wasn't an aptitude or something that I aspired to. It was great doing it, it was hard doing it, for many reasons. You had no strong affinity for it?

Below:
No Title (The news put...)
Pen, ink, gouache, and acrylic on paper
48.3 x 61 cm
2010
Courtesy David Zwirner, New York



No. I studied economics at college, but my interests had already receded by the time I was far enough along to commit to it at a higher level. Is using a pen name [Pettibon's given last name is Ginn] a way to have a different identity while you work? Is it liberating for you somehow? No. One would think it would be so, except for the fact that it's always brought up, so it has the opposite effect, in fact. Not that I have anything to hide; it was a nickname I had anyway. In retrospect I wouldn't have done it that way. Signing one's name.

I mean, for what, in the first place? As if there was some audience or hushed crowd of people waiting to hear from the great Pettibon. That's the one thing, almost without exception... You can go back and trace the records of whatever's been written about me, which is easy enough to do — it would be numb-numbing if you read them all; you don't really have to, anyway, because they all just repeat themselves. But that's always the one thing that comes up. You know what I mean? There was no deceit involved. Most of the people I know in

show biz, and I know a lot, okay, because those are the people I hang out with, or I know: they have pen names for whatever they do. Most aren't writers, they're more like movie stars or pop stars, but they're not going by the names that were given to them. Look, I have enough of a sense of humour or tolerance. It's neither amusing, nor a thorn in my side — like who the fuck cares? This is what investigatory journalism has come to nowadays: whether Obama was born in this country, or my pen-name. Pettibon: I mean



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my father called me that to irritate me or whatever, so fine, that's who I am in print. Jesus, people know John Wayne was Marion Morrison, it wasn't some hidden secret, but everything is always prefaced by the name thing. There's just some psychology to it that is abhorrent. But I'm giving it too much credit.

It seems different when you can put a face to a pen name, like with an actor; rather than with a writer or artist... [personal note: my question is coming out completely wrong, here. I want to ask Pettibon whether a writer/artist still has more chance at some anonymity because an artist or writer isn't necessarily 'seen' by his audience, only his works are. It doesn't come out right at all.]

Do you know how many writers have pen

names? A lot more than actors. And artists, too. Hell, my life is an open book, if there's any interest in it, go ahead and delve into it, but the whole world knows incessantly and insistently my given name, which was Ginn, and another generation back, it was McGinn. It's a non-issue. Whatever I say is not going to make a difference, it's going to continue. In fact, this is how journalism works: the first motherfucking piece that is done on someone is going to be repeated ad nauseum for the rest of time and I don't give a fuck, okay? I don't have anger in my voice, my voice has no weary tired tone, because I'm answering the questions and I'm being here for you. I mean seriously, if you look back to everything that's been written about me,

it's always brought up for some reason, because it was brought up the first time... and all journalists do — print journalists of the sort that review things — all they do is rewrite. I'm not calling them out on this, but they print what the first one did, no matter what, until your obituary. And it will be in the obituary, too, believe me. Whatever. I'm not on my soap box here.

Is there a question you wish I had asked you?

Oh, no. The questions were very good, including the last one. I'm not upset by it. No, I'm not at all.

I want to thank you for talking to me. I mean it.

Okay, thanks. I liked talking about everything, too. I mean that ●