

This issue was conceived over the course of several wintery days in late January at the VanAbbe Museum in Eindhoven. The editorial group had convened there for our usual contentious debate about contemporary art and its relevance to a larger society. After many artists had been proposed and dismissed it began to become clear to us that, if not yet agreeing, we were at least circling around something, a question really: ‘What, now, did we make of the idea of the lonely artist, struggling with big undefineables such as “meaning” and “authenticity”?’ Central to what remained an undefined idea stood the strangely solitary figure of Patrick Caulfield.

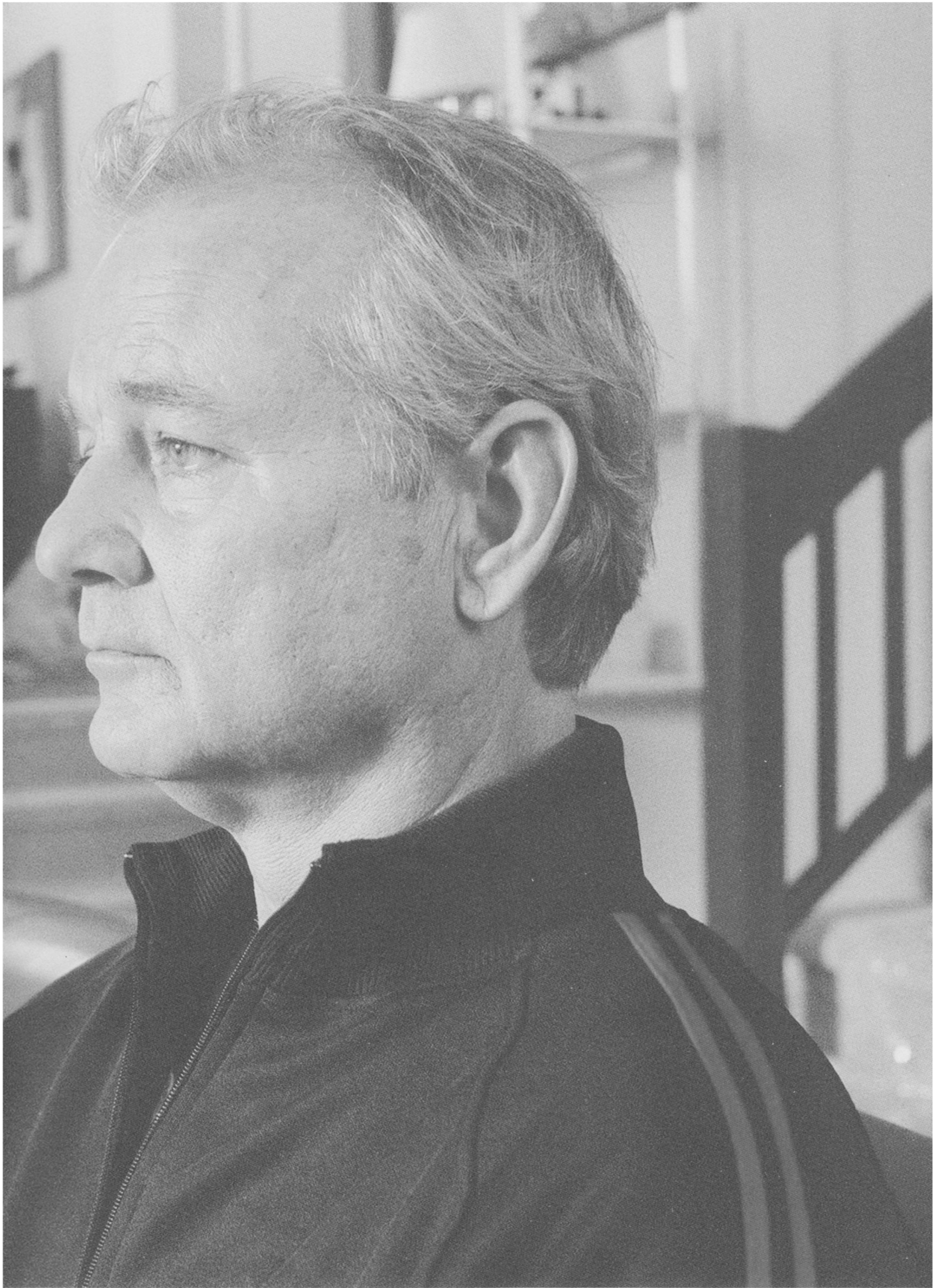
As it happens I had been trying to interest my colleagues in Caulfield’s work for a couple of years since having encountered his stunning *After Lunch* in a gallery at Tate Modern, during what was beginning to seem a forever tour through that dull fog of earth-toned still lifes that make up the British version of modernism. I still remember the grey light from the Thames illuminating rooms of frying pans and sausages, from Braque to Polke. Then came the gloomy restaurant murals that Rothko painted for the Four Seasons in Mies’s Seagram Building, that dark symphony in maroon and black. After this the sensuous uplift of the encounter with Caulfield’s frank embrace of Matisse came as welcome tonic. And so clever — he wrought his critique of the legacy of cubism while happily sticking to those old reliables, food and drink.

But Caulfield shows us an empty restaurant, there is no food on the table. Instead the machinery of the painting takes us elsewhere, anywhere but the dreary present. His is an art of solitary longing, a search for meaning in individual endeavour. This kind of Romanticism, framed by a deep knowledge of history and a recognition of limits, became the hook on which we could hang an issue. With that in place we soon identified the wistful searches for continuity and narrative fidelity in T.J. Wilcox’s ever-growing collection of short films. Then came the multi-layered installations of Cathy Wilkes, with their invocations of many histories, personal and public. After some further discussion we agreed that Trisha Donnelly’s melancholy attempts to tell tales in both installations and performances made a perfect foil. We then rounded out the issue with the work of Boris Mikhailov, whose photographs come at the problem of truth and meaning from the other side, from the outside in.

Earlier in the summer I had planned to use Jim Jarmusch’s film *Broken Flowers* as a key to the issue. It seemed to me that the filmmaker’s abrupt, shaggy-dog story style of working, all starts and stops, provided a nice illustration of what we had meant in our discussions. In this revisiting of the Don Juan story, resolution is always deferred, and Bill Murray brilliantly captures the main character’s stunned inability to understand, or even recognise, his own desires. In some way he seems emblematic of the age, representative of a population that consistently acts against its own best interest.

overleaf
Jim Jarmusch,
Broken Flowers,
35mm, colour,
107min, 2005





But I am writing this in late August, in the days after Hurricane Katrina has drowned the city of New Orleans. We have now witnessed the unimaginable collapse of the social order within what we had always been told was the richest and most powerful country on earth, the extreme poverty of so many citizens of this so-called advanced civilisation shockingly exposed to view. Mikhailov's photographs no longer seem strange dispatches from a distant elsewhere ruled by corrupt incompetents. Now our televisions have shown us images equally disturbing, documenting the total lack of regard those in power have for the dispossessed. From the vantage point offered by this irrefutable insight the various investigations of history proposed by Donnelly, Wilcox and Wilkes now seem to offer complex commentaries on the astringent, almost modernist rejectionism practiced by George W. Bush (the disregard for scientific fact, the disdain for alternate views, the obliteration of opponents).

Magali Arriola's discussion of contemporary ruins takes on a prescient glow, and must be read as the fulcrum of the issue. Her speculations have become reportage, just as Walker Percy's 1971 fiction *Love in the Ruins* becomes factual prediction. In the aftermath of the hurricane, with nearly all houses destroyed or submerged, rooftops become rescue pads and signs begging help. Highway overpasses and onramps become refuges and shelters. Most notoriously, the convention centre and sports arena become unsafe and unsanitary collection points for the dispossessed, holding pens for refugees abandoned by their own government.

The Louisiana Superdome was designed in the early 70s by Nathaniel Curtis and Arthur Q. Davis, an architectural team dedicated to 'serving function memorably'. This huge column-free interior space, once known as the biggest room in America, was conceived as a modernist reworking of the Pantheon on the scale of the Coliseum. Built to accommodate 72,000 football fans (in the aftermath of the flood it housed 25,000 evacuees), it was used in 1988 for the Republican Convention that elected George H.W. Bush the party candidate — it was the site of his infamous 'thousand points of light' speech, in which he eloquently shifted the responsibility for caring for the dispossessed from the collective shoulders of representative government to private, and mostly religious, charity.

The Superdome was planned to deliver grandeur and perfect climate control, visually isolated from the surrounding streets with their messy, miscegenated population, truly apart from the humid reality of outdoors. The building has long been verging on obsolescence, its prime tenants wanting out. Now, with its roof torn asunder, sunlight breaks through on a throng seeking a miracle; bread and water, and decent sanitation. The hurricane revealed the banal cruelty of a society distracted by mega-entertainment and shopping, but as the Bush White House is discovering, spectacle and diversion only work when the audience is already feeling comfortable and well-fed.

While there is reason to hope that the hurricane and the failed response to its aftermath may have altered the political landscape — it is now at least clear what taxes pay for, and in their absence what cannot be provided for — we cannot yet speculate what it might mean for art-making. Describing the impossibility of adequately representing real-life tragedy, the Baton Rouge-based writer Andrei Codrescu told the *New York Times*, 'the best way to deal with it is to fry eggs for refugees'. Which I think brings us back to Patrick Caulfield.¹

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'Questions for Andrei Codrescu', *New York Times Magazine*, 11 September 2005, p.19.