

## Sometimes, Making "Nothing" Is an Artist's Greatest Challenge | The Creators Project

Alyssa Buffenstein — Jul 10 2016



From a utilitarian perspective, art can be hard to defend—and that’s an issue Czech artist [Pavel Büchler](#) tackles head-on in his current show *Geometry, Physics and the Science of Life* at Tanya Leighton Gallery in Berlin. The artist scrapes paint off old paintings, draws circles with his eyes closed, and deflates soccer balls for the sake of conceptual art. So, what’s the point of it all? Nothing.

Büchler describes his practice as “making nothing happen,” and the artist is preoccupied with a Sisyphean idea of work. The five paintings in the show look like TV static, felt, or asphalt, initially giving the impression that they are textiles. But the uniform flecks of color are actually old paintings reworked. Once figurative paintings by artist friends who deemed their own work “failed,” Büchler scraped the dry paint off each canvas, ground it with a mortar and pestle, and reapplied it to the canvas. The labor of de- and re-constructing the paintings, from the subjects *Brides*, *Sad Young Man*, and *Portrait in Profile*, into fuzzy monochromes, was painstaking and took weeks, but the simple nature of the final products obfuscates that fact, and shines an existential light on the idea of working on a painting.



The oldest works in the show, dating from 1978, are a series of long-exposure photographs capturing the artist, blindfolded, drawing large circles for hours at a time. The gestures emphasize the ability, unique to the profession of “artist” to turn meaningless actions into artworks, in the same vein as John Baldessari’s [I Am Making Art](#), a video where the artist makes small bodily gestures and repeats the titular phrase for two minutes.

Other works take otherwise “useful” objects and render them useless, like *Waiting to Happen*, a sculpture made of camera tripods that lurks in the center of the gallery like a giant, spindly, spider. One tripod can facilitate photography, but three or four stuck together like this lose their intended function. The sculpture makes the viewer uncomfortable, in part because of its precarious positioning—it looks like it could topple over at any time—but also because of its absurdity as an object. Only as art can such inability to function become appealing. Otherwise, the object might be viewed as trash.

Similarly, three deflated soccer balls, with puncture wounds filled with smaller, primary-colored foam balls, are examples of the artist’s intervention into an object that could once be used, but is made to be “nothing.” Like the tripod sculpture, an over-accumulation of useful objects turns renders them useless, provoking an intense anxiety from a viewer faced with the absurd questions of what gives something value. Is a soccer ball more “useful” when it can be kicked, or when it can kickstart a series of existential questions?

Admittedly, conceptual art of this strand, which began its probing inquiries in the 1960s, does little more than ask the question, “what is art?” A question that feels, in 2016, somewhat outdated. Büchler, born in 1952, does in fact belong to an older generation of artists—thus, to criticize this amusing show for not being up to speed on the latest art trends would be, well, useless.