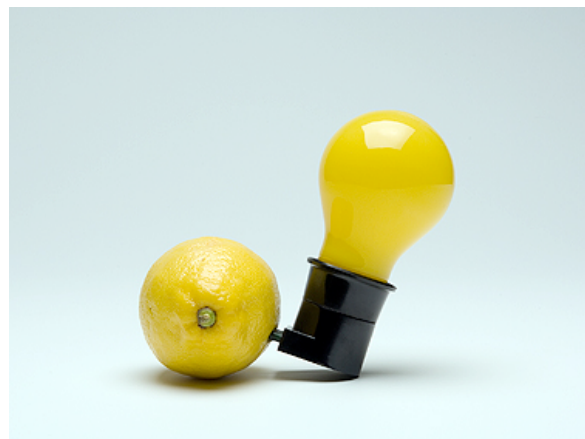


## THE WORLD, (RE-)INTERPRETED

### Peter Eudenbach's Artwork as a Differentiated Product

*This essay by Stefan Rasche, a gallerist in Berlin, was written for a catalog currently in publication to accompany a recent solo show at the Kunstverein in Neuenhaus, Germany*

The facts are quickly stated, the manipulation apparent: It is about a flashlight, the kind you can buy, though the bulb has been replaced with a wax candle. "Torch" is the name Peter Eudenbach has given to his Multiple, which in English means both a flashlight as well as a flaming torch. It is precisely in this dual sense of the word that the artist has changed this little tool, the only difference being that, by changing it, it has relinquished any practical use as a mobile aid for orientation in the dark. The reason is that the candle has been placed behind glass, and even if you could get to it, any gust of wind, any hasty movement would extinguish the light. Obviously, an inventive improvement is not the point here—and yet this hardly practical object is what the Kunstverein Grafschaft Bentheim has chosen to print on its invitation for the first German solo exhibition by the American artist, the eloquent result of a complex shift in meaning. In other words: Eudenbach has created a little hybrid out of customary ingredients, related in function and meaning, but scarcely compatible for a number of reasons. This is how he short-circuits two kinds of light stemming from different epochs and histories of development, but also crosses nature with technology by incorporating an organic substance into this technical apparatus.



It is redolent of the "Capri Battery", one of Joseph Beuys's late works, where a lemon (as a supposed source of energy) has been connected to a light with a yellow bulb. Both the wax and the fruit are storage substances of energy that may be converted into electricity and light. Might we conclude that this is an act of reconciliation with energy? Or is it, on the other hand, an incompatible blend, a pointed play with opposites?

Whatever the case may be with Eudenbach, the play with paradox models of thought prevails, the difference made visible, the aporia or problem between the way a thing looks and the term for it. He undertakes manipulations upon everyday objects and phenomena we basically know and take for granted, unleashing a clearly reflexive potential by raising fundamental questions pertaining to their changed functional mechanisms and conditions for perception. Nothing is what it means, and nothing means what it looks like. Thus, the concern is always one of identity, questioned by the artist if it seems to be too established and rigid. This is how Eudenbach shows us that we may also think, see, and understand in other ways; with the price, however, that we must first of all assign a new meaning to the facts manipulated in such a way, a new ontological status in the structural order familiar to us. His works are not characterized by any hermetically sealed notion of art or autistic self-reflection. Rather, they playfully engage with the world, being interspersed with proven facts and motifs, but also with art historical models, which Eudenbach gleefully summons to the witness stand. In keeping with such a differentiated production, doublings and semantic redundancies play an equally major role in the artist's work.

The fact that he tries these out repeatedly on a thematic complex that lays claim to a metaphorical validity for a certain understanding of art underscores the reflexive character of his works all the more. In short: It is about the artifact as vehicle, about artistic production as a kind of transportation agency, driven by the question of what means of transport – between art and the viewer, between aesthetic practice and social reality – the artist still presides over today. This is why vehicles and moveable containers show up repeatedly in Eudenbach's works, to speak as transmitters on their own behalf. When the artist fills an empty bottle with the model of a Hapag-Lloyd Container, for example, he is creating a container within a container, but in doing so - as with the flashlight – he confronts, within one category of objects, two seemingly contrary levels of meaning and time, intersecting each other.



For while the message in a bottle (with no specific address and dubious chances for success) was once the hope of the shipwrecked, the container stands as a means of transportation for modern logistics on a global scale. In addition, there is the fact that Eudenbach has imitated the common practice of hobbyists for his photographed object, building miniature models in a bottle under difficult circumstances, only here we do not see a delicate “ship in a bottle”, but merely the less-demanding 40-foot container of a widely-known shipping company.

Also comparable with the principle of messages in a bottle is Eudenbach’s project “Zu Fluss”(river-bound), which he created especially for his first solo exhibition abroad. For this project he attached a small cloth sail to a traditional red wooden clog, which bears the artist’s logo as its destination. When the exhibition ends, the hybrid vessel is to be launched in the local river, the Vechte, in order to make its way back to America. The journey’s doubtful success notwithstanding, the clog ship / the ship clog thus becomes the protagonist of a future adventure story – and what is more, it goes easy on the Kunstverein’s transport funds.



By contrast, in Eudenbach’s video loop “Palindrome” of 2008 the concern is for a modern vehicle of mass transportation. Due to the vertical mirroring of the film along the center axis, a self-generating picture movement comes about in the form of a seemingly unending freight train thundering out of the picture’s center to both sides at high speed. Or conversely, does it race into the picture and disappear in its center? This interpretation is possible as well, since a palindrome is defined as a chain of signs

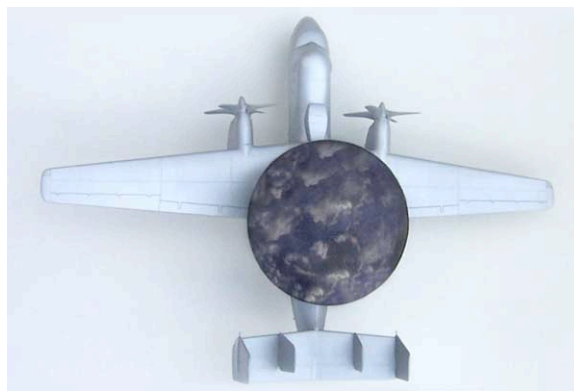
(composed of words, images, or sounds), which remains the same whether we read it forwards or backwards. We are already acquainted with this optical phenomenon of the reversal of movement, for example, from spoked wheels that appear to repeatedly change the directions in which they operate. In accordance with this is the fact that in 1913, Marcel Duchamp had mounted a “bicycle wheel” upside down upon a kitchen stool, a kinetic hybrid-object, which had been inspired by film effects. It is also possible perhaps to interpret his early readymade as a subversive commentary upon the Futurists’ euphoric urge for movement, which Duchamp, working as a painter, had previously so painfully grappled with.

Just how closely technology, media and art history are bound to one another in their own time may be illustrated precisely with a view to the railroad. Because of the railroad “space is killed”, Heinrich Heine wrote in 1843. Around 50 years later, the Lumière Brothers made their first short documentary film “L’arrivée d’un train en gare de La Ciotat”, an early work in cinema history that no longer conveys indignation with, but fascination for mass transit by rail. In 1938 René Magritte, the great doubter of reality and master of iconic paradox, devoted a painting called “La Durée poignardée” to this very beast of prey in steel devouring time and space. We see a fireplace, and from its tunnel-like opening a steam engine races forward into the living room, while on the mantelpiece a clock is reflected in a large mirror.

In sculptural homage to this work by the Belgian Meta-Painter, Peter Eudenbach has created a work called “Time Transfixed”, whereby he has excluded the central motif, the locomotive, and decisively changed another detail. In Eudenbach’s work, the constructed ensemble consists of a closed fireplace and a smaller mirror showing the face of the clock laterally reversed – as if it were not the back, but the clock’s front that had been turned towards the mirror and reflected by it. This in turn points to a yet another painting by Magritte, “La reproduction interdite” of 1937, where a man is gazing into a mirror and recognizes in it – a shocking loss of identity, a view of himself from the back. Here as well as there, the mirror (as a classic pictorial metaphor) has thus undergone a decisive transformation; it is no longer the medium for the slavish reproduction of reality, but marks a crack in the mimetic structure of the artifact, which is to say, it opens up the space “behind the mirrors” that, just like in “Alice in Wonderland”, has its own disturbing laws. Such entwined paths are also pursued by Eudenbach, not lastly because he is pictorially tracking the dual meaning of reflection – in its physical and philosophical dimensions. His subtle play with art historical quotations leads here to a

network full of references, in which two very outwardly different works such as “Palindrome” and “Time Transfixed” come surprisingly close to each other via motif-related detours. This alternating tension is heightened by the fact that the artist, in staging the set-up in Neuenhaus, allows for both works to enter into direct, spatial dialogue with each other.

By land, by water and finally, by air: we also encounter an airplane in the work of Peter Eudenbach, a model of a military “Hawkeye” surveillance aircraft, whose function the artist has changed for artistic purposes. Thus, on its back, instead of the radar dish, he has mounted a so-called “Claude-glass” reflecting a deep-blue cloudy sky.

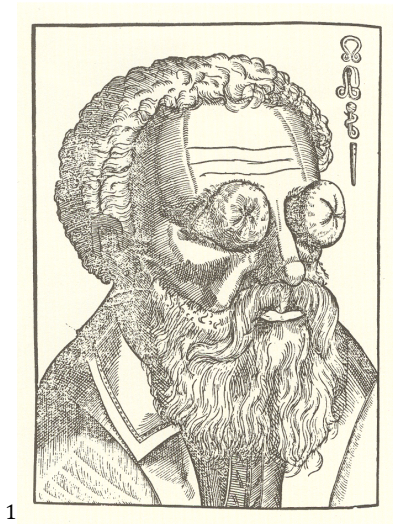


Here Eudenbach has taken recourse to an aid for viewing nature aesthetically that – named after Claude Lorrain - was widely used by painters in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This is a framed mirror that can be underlaid with colored sheeting, making it a “viewfinder” for locating the most picturesque landscape details according to the artistic ideals of its namesake. Mounted on the airplane, the reflector becomes an oversized eye on an artistic mission, which expands the view and directs it towards the sky. For this as well, we may find a pictorial reference in Magritte’s work: “The False Mirror” of 1928, a portrayal of a human eye, in which a sky of clouds is reflected. By the way, this reflection is “false” for Magritte in as much as it only conveys the appearance, a flat, unreflected reality without posing any gain in knowledge.

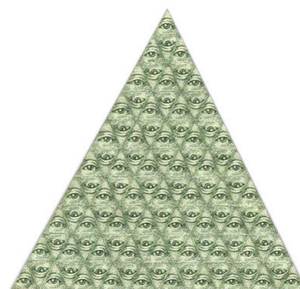
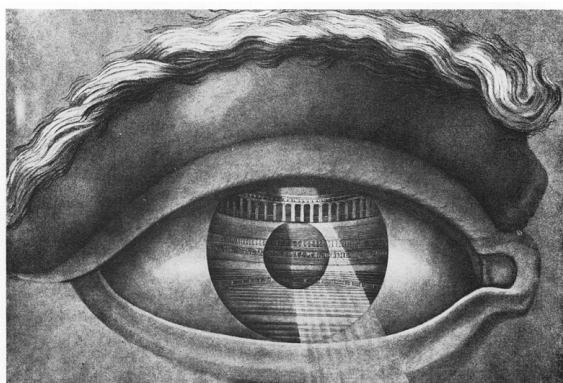
Contrary to this, Eudenbach pursues an opposite, as it were, retrospective or backwards path with another work. He made castings of human eye sockets, and mounted them on the wall to face the viewer. This means two hollow spaces now materialize to look at us, in the shape of bizarrely formed fitting parts which, in this respect, cause an uneven reflection along the narrow line between physical limitation and mentally going beyond it by directing our gaze towards the inside and allowing through its depth an objective



perception. Space as a skull and the skull as space – from this visualized “Allegory of the Cave” as well, we may derive a dialectic game of deception that circles around fundamental concepts of interior and exterior views, and the perception of ourselves and the world.



If we remain with the historical motif of the eye, then (in addition to Magritte) particular tribute must also be paid to Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, the architect of the French Revolution – with an etching from his theoretical compendium of 1804, where a giant eye, as if it were part of a stone statue, reflects one of Ledoux’s major works, the Theater of Besançon. All the while a ray of light from the building emerges to the outside from the retina, a triumphant staging of greatness, power, and intelligence.



And yet another popular motif must be reckoned to this canon of motifs: the Divine Eye of Providence that – inserted into a triangle and embedded in a halo of rays of light – is something we mainly encounter in 17<sup>th</sup>-century religious illustrations. Even today it graces the back of the American one-dollar note as a strong symbol. This in turn

<sup>1</sup> Image from Georg Bartisch, *Ophthalmodouleia*, 1583

inspired Eudenbach to an object called “Illuminati”, for which he cut out the Eye of God from 100 one-dollar notes and arranged them behind glass to form a new triangle inside a round copper frame: it is a multiplied organ of control, a vigilant mass-medium, which, due to its multiplication of form, reminds us of the multi-faceted eye of a housefly. The title also brings the Order of the Illuminati into the game, about which conspiracy theorists are fond of claiming that it asserts its secret, but influential existence by means of certain symbols – among other things the omniscient eye – making it visible to those who are in the know.

The desire to see with other eyes, i.e., to exchange one’s own view with that of nature, is something that is ultimately taken up in “Odocoileus Virginianus”, named after the Latin term for Virginia deer, Eudenbach’s native landscape. For this object the artist has inserted two small monitors into the eyes of a stuffed deer head, in which a video of a hike through woods and fields may be seen. Like a storage medium from the memory of the dead deer that now only exists as a hunting trophy, the film aims for us to comprehend what the deer might have seen and experienced during its lifetime. But the work is more than merely the attempt at a time-lagged reproduction of an animal’s perception (of which we ultimately know nothing). The concern is rather for an identity with (foreign) existence and seeing, maybe even for the painful desire for a way of perceiving without concepts. Is a poetic excursion permitted in this case? If so, then something Rainer Maria Rilke said about the dead poet applies to the stuffed deer:

*Those who saw him alive, did not know  
how much he was One with all of this  
for This: these depths, these meadows  
and these waters were his face.*  
(Translation E.V.)

A wondrous feature of the art of Peter Eudenbach is that his motifs and strategic figures of thought may be connected and spread out in nearly all directions. And yet this condensed, highly-cultivated field poses many pitfalls and dead-ends. May we refer to “animal time” in the case of his “Vogel-Uhr” (Bird Clock), another project made specifically for Neuenhaus? If so, then it would be a hinge, located in the synaptic interim space between the deer head and the other clock works of the artist. What we see is a regionally colored “clockwork orange”.



On the warm yellow façade of the Kunstverein, Eudenbach has attached a sundial in the style of the one on the nearby church tower, with the difference that in his version, the numbers consist of the silhouettes of native birds, while a birdhouse in the center and painted the colors of the local city coat-of-arms supports the gnomon for the shadow of the dial. *Carpe diem*, rise with the birds: That would be a possible message we might derive from this, by silent contrast to the cuckoo clock's speaking chronometer. More profoundly fitting here – and as it were, programmatic, because it captures the gist of Peter Eudenbach's works – is another quote by Rilke, taken from his 1<sup>st</sup> Duino Elegy:

*...and already the knowing animals are aware  
that we are not really at home  
in our interpreted world.*

Precisely such knowledge is something the artist has taken on in his playfully probing manner in order to derive from it – for us – his complex pictures of thought.

**Stefan Rasche**

*Translated from the German by Elizabeth Volk*