
 Art : Portfolio

BOMB Specific: Dear David: An Exchange by David Geers & Peter Rostovsky



Peter Rostovsky, *Sleight of Hand* 2013, oil on linen, 32 x 22 inches. Images courtesy of the artist.

Dear David,

Great to see you as always. A few questions came to me, typically after all was said and done. I thought I'd send them over while our very interesting conversation was still fresh in my mind.

1) You've been too quick to absorb the whole art world, whatever that term now means, into the luxury goods model. In your schema, you're missing the many individuals who are working within this sphere and treat it as a mere medium. We all agree that it is a flawed medium; one increasingly run by commercial interests, restricted + Shares, and certain lines of patronage. But it is wrong to reduce it to simply this. At times you seem to suggest that it is *only* a luxury goods market with a baroque ornament of false consciousness giving it a critical flavor. Not only is this reductive picture simplistic; it is already contradicted by the presence of me, you, and many others whom we both respect, who are working in these gilded trenches.

2) You also tend to give painting a bad shake. I know, painters always feel like they have to defend their medium like it's their spouse. But you basically designate a whole range of objects as illegitimate because they

do not conform to your model of a critical practice. You want us to engage the system and to attack or reform the institutional frame, but you forget that these works only derive their subtlety and meaning from the framing. A painting—a Corot, for instance—can only do so much, and performs its magic act on a particular type of stage. Your insistence that we dismantle this platform may be egalitarian in principle, but does it not also deprive the public that you so privilege of this magic? In the end, aren't you advocating a kind of aesthetic impoverishment? To use your old restaurant analogy: you want to get rid of the waiters and the maître d' and offer the bounty of the kitchen directly to the consumer. But doesn't the whole restaurant experience factor into our pleasure and yes, our experience of taste?

Ok, that's it for now. Hope to see you soon.

All best,
Peter

Peter,

Thanks for your thoughts. I'm glad to receive these questions. Permit me to respond quickly.

1) Yes, the model that I develop focuses quite clearly on the market as it has evolved in the last 15 years or so. Let's call it the "institutional art-fair-biennial complex" that comprises today's art-investment field and map of cultural tourism. Though I may be hyperbolic in some of these formulations, I believe they give a more accurate description than the homily of art's enduring critical value that is used to perpetuate this system. In fact, I would argue that mine is a softer assessment of the field than what is actually happening. For instance, as consumers and investors we participate in the economy, while turning a blind eye to how our needs may fuel a system of monstrous inequality and catastrophic ecological plunder. As practitioners and intellectuals we too often use our intellectual investments to hide from the truth of the art market and its connections to broader and less palatable political interests. This is where I think the real task of demystification must assert itself. My formulation of the field as a luxury goods model (plus some kind of false consciousness) is a soft one in this context. If only it were that simple, then we could return to a more authentic craft and a more authentic rhetoric. But I would argue that it is an axiomatic problem in which art as a realm of potential freedom is used to

legitimize oppression everywhere else. I'd rather have a totalitarian art than a false criticality that legitimizes a totalitarian system. At the same time, you are right; we are all caught in this "medium," and like artists under totalitarianism, must form our own samizdat societies. It's unlikely that we can reform this system from within, though. I may be apocalyptic in this belief, but if the people can't organize—we can't seem to or want to do this—the economy is what brings down dictatorships, not isolated discursive shifts.

2) You are right: you painters do treat painting like your spouse. You married early on, and now you have to stand by it in sickness and in health. Well, what can I say? My position on this, I know, has been fairly inflexible, but I insist that the problem is not in the object, but in the system of distribution that fetishizes the singularity and auratic nature of the work—the limited-edition mentality. I am Benjaminian in this regard, and believe that the responsibility of the artwork is to harness the technological means available to it during its day while representing the most sophisticated version of the form. The problem is that what you consider painting is so often tied to the medium of paint and its antiquated exhibition apparatus; both belong to a different time and social structure. Consider opera, for instance, a form that reached its peak in the 19th century but still has its place today. It is fairly marginal, expensive, and tied to a particular type of clientele, not to mention a corresponding institutional framework. How can it possibly compete with film, YouTube, video games, social media, you name it? I would argue that the traditional art object—and painting most centrally—is in the same predicament as opera. It is a *formerly* critical art, an *ex-art*. So, yes, I would agree with you that taste and connoisseurship are bound up with, and indeed produced by, the framing apparatus that can still opulently stage a so-called quality experience. Yet how cogent is this experience beyond its rarefied frame and how can it compete with other forms of aesthetic consumption today? Today's fairly artisanal, singular objects have to reconcile themselves to a different world of distribution in order to command their former relevance and critical purchase. If you painters figure that out, let me know. So far we (myself included) are trapped in the opera house longing for the public of the movie-theater—while *that* industry is following the video game that has already migrated to the cellphone. I repeat my equation: as goes distribution, so must go the internal character of the work. The distribution channels are changing, perhaps irrevocably: art must follow. Your painted political allegories of drawn curtains and empty hands don't change much in this equation. As for the restaurant analogy: if the people hear of a good

hamburger—minus the razzle-dazzle—they will come.

David



Peter Rostovsky, *The Passage*, 2012, Photoshop, painting done on Wacom tablet, 4998 x 3467 pixels, unlimited editions. Full-resolution file available for free download at peterrostovsky.com.

Dear David,

Pleasure, as always, to engage with you.

I feel compelled to keep defending my spouse. She picked me and, well, we age together. However, I take your point that:

1) The system and its economic underpinnings are nastier than even you may paint them to be, and the function of analysis may be to shelter us from what's *really* going on. Where does this leave the artwork, though? How much can one object accomplish? Like me, you go to openings, visit museums on your days off, and partake in something very delicate which is still offered to the public. Your demands of art are simply unrealistic and I've seen such ultimatums, whether posed in terms of ethics or political propriety, delegitimize entire swaths, even schools, of artwork. Painting is very good at doing something very specific that's not directly translatable to activism. Maybe it is a question of scale, or of temporality. Too often, though, what is at issue is pleasure—and we all forget that pleasure is the thing that got us into this in the first place. So I say enjoy a nice piece of “decadent” art today, because—I hate to sound so grim—pleasure is all we may have in this life. If an object gives you some joy, stop fact-checking it, and just take it! Stop turning a garden into a theater of war. People come to the garden to relax and look at flowers sometimes. Some artists only paint

flowers, and I would not begrudge them if they made fine flower paintings. (Remember Fantin Latour?) As for the cultural tourism part, maybe it's time to accept that we've just entered into a different paradigm. One of my most formative experiences was seeing the Fragonard show at the Met, and he was a kept man. Artists are artists, and you can't turn every craftsman into a revolutionary, especially when the craftsman's livelihood still comes from the palace. Maybe the fault is ours for denying this fact, for not developing other market structures—or even worse, for identifying with our patrons rather than our equals—but here we are. We make pictures and objects out of love, not obligation. Must we sacrifice what we love to pay our taxes to politics, or can we practice our politics *in* what we love? We are all servants at the palace, David, even you, but maybe our work will outlive and in some ways outshine it.

2) Painting and opera: quaint analogy. You may be right on a technical level—they both belong to an antiquated life-world. But you also reduce painting to an object and assume that the viewership that painting enjoys is limited to its traditional exhibition system. You, of all people, have to acknowledge that it is a broader public that now engages contemporary art. Like the king's body in the Middle Ages, art has two bodies: the mortal coil that may get entombed in expensive houses, and its public, *discursive* body that remains free and, now, thanks to the Internet, eternal. Today, as this ethereal body, Painting may be more relevant than ever. Though I agree that we must find new ways of making "artisanal" works more affordable and available to more publics, I would not limit this public to the one that physically visits galleries or art fairs only.

Finally—this is an argument I hate to make—in your restaurant analogy, is your model of producer and audience, kitchen and consumer, only possible as a startup? Or is it something that can only precede its own success before inevitably falling into incorporation? Isn't this just a cycle of nostalgically mourning some lost object for you, whether it's some idealized avant-garde or some smaller art system?

Yours as always,
Peter



Peter Rostovsky, *Tango Red*, 2012, Photoshop painting done on Wacom tablet, 4319 x 6000 pixels, unlimited edition. Full-resolution file available for download at peterrostovsky.com.

Peter,

Good questions. We should address some of these in person soon, but until that time:

1) The “Loosen up! It’s only art” advice never worked with me. And the typical myth of one’s work outliving its instrumentality, or of one day rising from slave to slave-owner, is also insufficient. This is the lottery of so-called success and the myth of philanthropy, where you too can rise from exploited, unpaid intern to philanthropic employer. I do ask too much, and not every artist is up to it. Not every craftsman is a revolutionary, especially when they’re too busy arguing over the perfect brushstroke or dovetail joint. But still, these questions have to be posed and reposed, lest all we do is paint flowers and manicure gardens while others are being slaughtered.

2) You may have me on this point perhaps: we do idealize and mourn the

past, then just reset the cycle. The task remains in modeling something unique and exemplary for the future, a system of artistic production and distribution that is highly complex and not simply based on a small cottage industry adapted to a global market. Now, we sanctify the former while disingenuously partaking in the latter. To think through these shifts in distribution, however, still positions us in a more equitable capitalism rather than in a space outside of capital altogether. I romantically cling to this last dream, naïvely perhaps. But even before such radical reconstruction is possible, the rhetoric has to shift from one of exceptionalism to one of inclusion, and how many artists are capable of that? This mentality is also a larger problem, not just an art-world one. The issue today is that in our society of valorized gambling and predation, even in public gardens people still fight over the view and start betting on which flower grows the fastest. If competition is all we know and all we're capable of at this moment, then I'd still advocate competitive gift-giving above competitive acquisition. I'd still choose potlatch over hoarding, though both undeniably still have ego as their basis. As for beauty, it never ceases to amaze me that the entire ornate structure of production, criticism, distribution, and financial investment surrounds something so frail and intangible as art—truly the Holy Roman Church arranged over a fingernail. This is where I'd position your beauty, but I am being Protestant here.

Best,
David

Dear David,

This is the closest we've come to agreeing: you are a Protestant. We should meet at the Metropolitan one weekend so you can see the public enjoying beautiful things produced in times of great struggle and oppression. Even you will admit that freedom may prosper most under duress. We've yet to determine which works will outlive this epoch, just as they outlived all those periods of spectacle and crisis before ours. But let me ask you another question: If you think that we've shifted paradigms and now just function in some vast aesthetic-industrial complex, how do you define an artist's passion for their work at all? How do you see their commitment to it, their sustained personal style?

Peter



Peter Rostovsky, *Night Blossoms*, 2012, Photoshop painting done on Wacom tablet, 3014 x 3600 pixels, unlimited edition. Full-resolution file available for free download at peterrostovsky.com.

Dear Peter,

We could meet at the Met, but let's skip the Fragonards. Style? You know my answer to this: passion and style are often two different things. If you artists are committed to doing something that interests you and that you feel some passion for, go ahead and do it. This alone is already a provocative step in a society that runs the numbers on all people and things. Warhol once said that an artist should be able to be "an Abstract-Expressionist next week, or a Pop artist, or a realist, without feeling [like he's] given up something." This reminds me of Marx's famous passage in the *German Ideology* where a communist society makes it possible for one "to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner... without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic." In both formulations, there's a utopian dimension of freedom that's lost today since we're all too eager to brand ourselves into investment instruments. You remember the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa? He wrote under 70 heteronyms that allowed him to explore a variety of rhetorics and to clash them against each other in the popular

press. When you say style, I just think of signature, and then think of value. We both agree there is too much talk of value these days. I believe in an art world with no signatures or proper names. Some would say it is a world of counterfeits where nothing is valuable. I would say it's exactly the opposite.

David

Peter Rostovsky is an artist who occasionally writes under the heteronym David Geers.

David Geers is a freelance writer who occasionally makes art under the heteronym Peter Rostovsky.

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