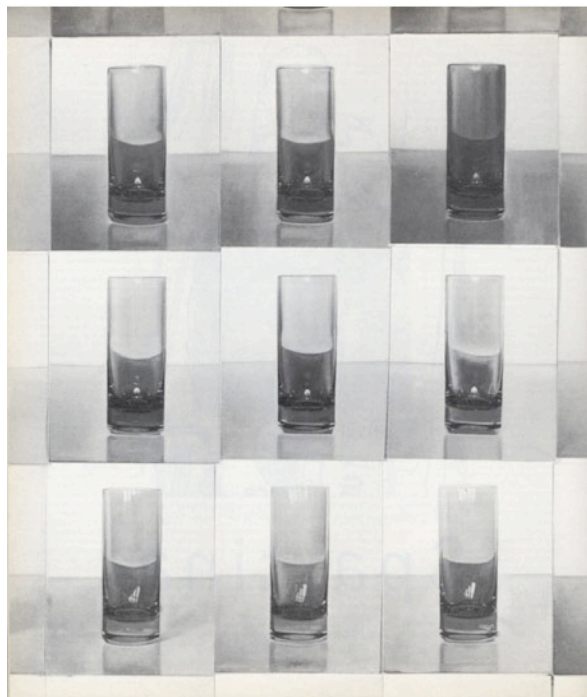


Koenig & Clinton 459 W19th St, NYC 10011 T 212 334 9255 ●

***BOMB* – Artists in Conversation**

Peter Dreher  
by Lynne Tillman



Peter Dreher, detail from installation *Tag Um Tag Ist Guter Tag*, February 1996, oil on canvas, all 8 x 10". Courtesy of Monique Knowlton Gallery.

In 1994, I visited the Museum für Neue Kunst in Freiburg. My host, artist Dirk Gortler, showed me a thick, gray book with page after page of gray-toned reproductions—all paintings of the same water glass. Dirk told me Peter Dreher did the same painting every day—there are now over 2,500 of them—and taught in the art academy there. I bought the book, then asked Dirk to send me two more copies. Recently Dreher was in New York for his opening at the Monique Knowlton Gallery. I went and asked if I could interview him. We talked the next morning at the gallery. When I was leaving, he graciously said, “Even if nothing else happens, it was good to talk with you,” which turned out to be portentous. I walked up Broadway, rewound the tape, and started to play it back. There was nothing on it. “Even if nothing...” I phoned him, told him there was nothing on the tape, made another appointment for later that night—he was leaving New York in a day—and bought a new tape recorder. I was intent upon doing this, obsessed, in a way. There were some differences between the first and second interviews—it’s extremely difficult to have exactly the same conversation twice. I think we laughed more the second time.

**Lynne Tillman** You paint the same object every day. You have since 1974. That fascinates me.

**Peter Dreher** Is this the question?

**LT** Do whatever you want with it.

**PD** It’s difficult to say the second time...

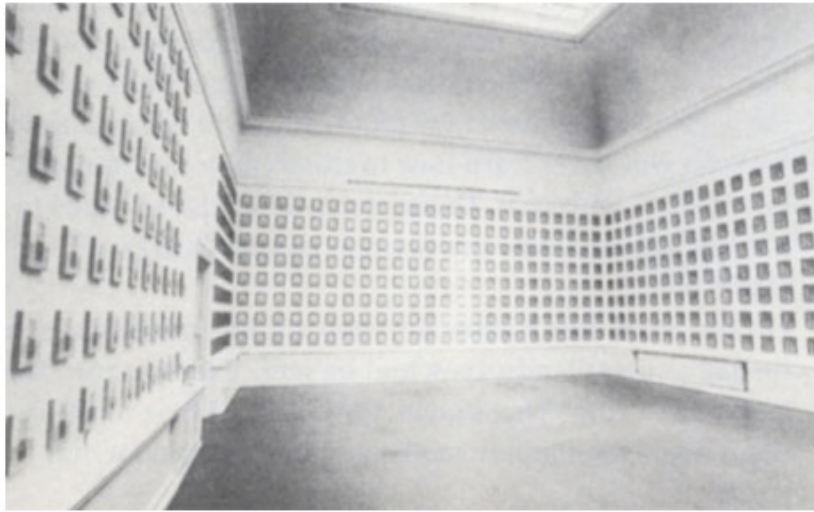
**LT** You paint the same thing every day, this should be easy for you. In fact, if I had planned it...

**PD** Did you plan it?

**LT** No. But if I had, I’d have been more Machiavellian than I ever thought myself.

**PD** Many ideas came together. When I was sitting in a bathtub—I love to sit in hot bathtubs, I have all my ideas there—I had the idea to paint the most simple thing I could imagine. Before that I painted large, gray paintings which showed a sort of optical illusion. I thought they were something very simple. But you could identify them as pieces of art only in a museum or gallery. Outside, in the streets, nobody would recognize them as art. I thought it should be more simple than just painting a wall white like Yves Klein did. And what is more simple than to take something usual, like a glass—I mean, something invisible—and place it on a white table before white walls, a white, white glass. Something you could see everywhere, everybody’s used it. It’s something like Hitchcock’s idea of hiding a diamond in a chandelier, which is more simple in the mind than in the form. That was one idea, and I thought the next step would be to do this simple thing, with its simple motive, again and again and again. I had the idea to paint it five or six times. I did one, two, three, then five, then seven, then 10, then 100. I couldn’t stop, and it became fascinating. I think the whole history of art—no, let’s say the history of the problems in painting—came to me in the last 22 years.

**LT** As you were doing this.



Peter Dreher, detail from installation *Tag Um Tag Ist Guter Tag*, February 1996, oil on canvas, all 8 x 10". Courtesy of Monique Knowlton Gallery.

PD Yes.

LT It's interesting you mention Hitchcock. The viewer can see a little window in the glass. When you look closely at your paintings, you see minute details, minute changes. The window is made with just a few, tiny strokes of different colors. And you—the painter—are in the window. Hitchcock made *Rear Window*; and in your paintings, the window's at the rear of the glass. You said you wanted something that could be recognized as a piece of art not only in a gallery...

PD Yes, everywhere.

LT I wonder what that means to you.

PD I think painting should be open or recognizable to everybody. Everybody. These little paintings of a glass, everybody can understand. You see a glass, you say, "It's a glass, it's a nice painting, it's realistic." You don't feel that you didn't understand it. But if you want to learn more about it, you can. If you begin to deal with this concept, I think a whole world opens to you.

LT Many artists, since Duchamp, have been very concerned with: why is this art?

PD Yes.

LT You started from a different premise: this is art.

PD I thought, first, I'm an artist, I like painting. Maybe my paintings are art, or they aren't, but this is not something I can force. I cannot make art just by my will. I can only say, "I feel I'm an artist, and I want to put as much energy, sensibility into my paintings as I can." What I wanted to do was to show that I have a great desire to paint. I wanted the most simple way to show that. Without any other ideas in my paintings than just this desire, this addiction.

LT Does it make your life easier or simpler to have chosen one object to paint and to know that you'll always

paint it? Do you think you'll ever not paint it? Can you imagine...

**PD** I ask myself every day if it still has sense to do this. The day I must say to myself, "No, it's not necessary, there's no more sense in it, "I'll stop it. But now, it's 22 years, and I'll do it as long as I can, as long as I can paint. As long as I live.

**LT** We were talking earlier about when you were teaching in 1968 and '69, of the effect of that time and its politics on your work and thought.

**PD** I was 35, a young teacher, and I was interested in the ideas of my students. At first we appeared to be on different sides. After some time, my students learned that we had some of the same interests. Their idea was that painting wasn't necessary anymore, at least not as long as the revolution and the development of society didn't succeed. As long as that struggle was going on, you had to do that work—revolution—and not paint. When revolution fulfilled its aims, its goals, you could paint again, make art again; but then, it wouldn't be necessary anymore because people wouldn't have any frustrations.

**LT** Could you ever imagine an absence of all frustration?

**PD** At that time I didn't really believe it, but I thought it was a nice idea, it was a good idea. A human idea. We have lots of human ideas that never come to reality. But it's necessary to have ideas. I respected their ideas. I tried not to paint anymore, but I couldn't.

**LT** How long did you try not to paint?

**PD** I realized I couldn't stop painting, that my desire was too big. I tried to find a way to show that I must paint, that there are people in the world who have this desire and cannot deny it.

**LT** So you're making a continuous statement by painting this glass. No matter what the social conditions are, someone might just have to paint? Even if other people think it's no longer necessary, some will still need to do it? It's interesting that you've chosen to paint an object that's considered a necessity.

**PD** The object, the glass, is a simple, simple thing. An abstract painting is something much more difficult to understand. You have to have a certain education to understand it.

**LT** If it were just one glass, I'd agree with you. But when you produce and show hundreds of them, it does become abstract and conceptual. It raises many issues. You can think about the glass as a kind of container of ideas, you can think about the glass being half full or half empty, a kind of philosophical statement. The project's also about art history—painters have been painting still lifes for a very long time.

**PD** Yes.

**LT** There's the way you demonstrate your desire for painting, and there's also an emphasis on the artisanal quality of painting, because you have to be able to know how to paint glass; that's not easy.

**PD** It's easy. That's not the problem.

**LT** It's not a problem?

**PD** It's just to look at it, to paint what you see.

**LT** Do you think anybody could do that?

**PD** Yes. I think so.

**LT** Have you ever taught a class how...

**PD** How to paint a glass? No. They can do it if they want, but they don't. They see it as a project which is so special they don't imitate it. I'm really lucky to have this project...

**LT** Because nobody else wants to do it.

**PD** Right. When I began the project, Berswort, who is a famous gallerist in Germany, saw it. He's a very intelligent man. He said, "Beware of somebody who steals your idea, maybe he does it more intelligently or better." I thought, yes, maybe he's right. But nobody tries to imitate me. The glass—if you do it once, everybody says, "OK, how nice, what is he doing?" But if you do it a lot of times—do you know the game, saying "table, table, table" a hundred times?

**LT** The word becomes garbage.

**PD** Yes, it becomes something else, it's no longer the word. I think that's the same with the glass. Again, if you're trying to do something very simply only to show that you love to paint, it's good if the glass after a time goes out of the painting; then its meanings and its philosophy, and so on, become apparent...

**LT** Do you think that if you look at it long enough, the painting becomes empty?

**PD** If you do it a hundred times, people will ask themselves, "If he does it a hundred times, it cannot be to portray the glass. It must be something else. And what is it?" It's just what I see, and I don't see a glass, I see a painting. I see the work of a painter.

**LT** In our first, lost conversation, we discussed seriality; Warhol, Pop Art. Was that an influence on your thinking? Were you thinking about Walter Benjamin's ideas about photography?

**PD** When I started, in the '50s and the beginning of the '60s, the Abstract Expressionists, Jackson Pollock, reigned over the whole art world. You were asked, "What do you paint?" If you said, "I'm a realistic painter," they went away.

**LT:** Nobody was interested.

**PD** You were not an artist anymore if you painted realistically. Then in Venice in 1964, at the Biennale, I saw Pop Art for the first time, and I was happy, you can't imagine. It was quite late. I didn't know the work before—

and I loved Jasper Johns, Oldenburg. Great, great experience. But it had come from America, which I adored since I was a child. They were great things that Warhol did. I think he was a great artist. Then, on the other hand, there's On Kawara and Opalka. Some people compare me with them. Opalka writes millions of numbers. It's something else because On Kawara and Opalka are working with signs. I'm working with reality. My idea was only to paint something in the way painters did 35,000 years ago, say they painted elephants. Then, when the work was finished, it was forgotten. They had to do the painting again and again and again. So it was one, then five, then a thousand. But the idea was not a series. The idea was just a lifetime, doing something in your lifetime, doing it with concentration, and showing that it's not necessary to change the reason, the motive.

**LT** I remember you said, not changing the object, your desire in doing that, related to your history. Having been 12 when World War II ended, you felt uprooted, unstable. Your father was dead, shot at the Russian front. You were in your mid-forties when you decided to paint a glass forever. Before that you felt you were wandering around in your work.

**PD** Maybe I couldn't think so simply as to get to this point. After a while I figured out this idea about floating and building a home, not by building a certain place, which I did. When I was 29 I built a little house by myself.

**LT** Where?

**PD** Near Hamburg. In the countryside. It was cheaper then to do that. I spent one year of my life at it. I learned this was not the way to get home or to get a home.

**LT** It wasn't the physical place.

**PD** Right. I came to the conclusion that you have to build it by something you do or think, or something you paint. When I was a boy, after my father died, his house was destroyed. I had to leave Mannheim, my hometown. I told you I felt uprooted. But maybe, more important, is a feeling that perhaps I was born with, that everybody is born with: that one is somehow floating between thoughts, between literature, speaking, continents, races, and so on. I think, more or less, each of us today, maybe more than a hundred years ago, has this feeling.

**LT** Of floating.

**PD** Of being homeless somehow. Everybody has to find out how to deal with this, how to get around it.

**LT** When you're painting the glass each day, do you feel in a place? Or do you feel like you're floating with it?

**PD** It's very funny to say, it's the only place and the only hours in my life when I really feel quiet. Maybe I don't make the impression of being unquiet, but I am.

**LT** You're anxiety-ridden?

**PD** Yes.

**LT** You've had many shows in Germany, and since '74, this is what you've exhibited. What's the response been?

**PD** At the first show, I saw people come in, and they looked around for half-a-minute, and said, “Oh, it’s all the same.” I remember a story the director of the Baden Baden Kunsthalle told me about a very famous German art critic, who came in and said to him, “Do you want to cheat me? Make fun of me?” That was 1975. But, at the same time, half of the people came and stayed three hours, looking at the work. When they left, they said, “I have to return tomorrow.” These are the two reactions. And from art critics—I really never had bad criticism. I don’t know why. Germans understand it somehow if they are familiar with art, opera, philosophy, ideas, and so on.

**LT** You’re going against the grain of what other painters of your generation do and have done. How does that feel, to you?

**PD** To me? It makes me happy.

**LT** You don’t feel the need for their approval?

**PD** No, but I have it from some. At my opening here, for instance. Wolfgang Laib came. He’s a very good artist. I was very happy he was here, because he’s the person who’s possibly closest to my ideas. He’s doing something else, though. By doing what I do, I have the distance to be friends with lots of artists, because we don’t touch each other. I really like seeing the work of other painters, other artists, my students, discussing, learning what they’re thinking about art. I’m very happy because I’m like a frog to them.

**LT** A frog?

**PD** A frog, or a dog, or something...

**LT** Just a sort of odd creature to them.

**PD** I saw a film of a Zen Buddhist master. The interviewer asked him, “What is your task?” He said, “To become a dog.” I think that’s a great idea. Because a dog has no intention of influencing anybody. I think you know what I mean.

**LT** Yes, I do. There’s a joke going around: “In cyberspace, nobody knows if you’re a dog.”

**PD** Today I told Lucio Pozzi a story of “the frog who fell into the milk.” The frog was afraid to drown. He was working with his feet, very fast, to keep his head above the milk. So he made butter and then he had an island he could sit on. That’s what we, I, do.

**LT** I’m still fascinated by the idea that you paint the glass everyday.

**PD** 14 days after I began the glass, I got in contact with a woman who was very familiar with Zen Buddhism. She lived in a Zen cloister in Japan for three years. She told me that a tape I’d recorded off the radio was a Zen Buddhist ceremony. She told me exactly what it meant, and what she told me—it was like coming home. I’m not a Buddhist. I’m a Christian. But these ideas made me very happy—I learned that there are thoughts in the world which try to express what I try to express with the painting of the glass.

**LT** The idea of doing a simple thing that shows you're in the world, doing something every day, not more, not less?

**PD** The Buddhists say everything has the same value. The grass and the king. I say, "That's right. I feel that too." But also, if you do it again and again and again, it's worth the same, and the thing is new every day. It's as worthwhile as anything else, but—it's difficult for me to express—it's also worthwhile to look at it again and again and again. The glass is the glass is the glass is the glass. Gertrude Stein!

**LT** Why don't you consider yourself a Buddhist?

**PD** I'm European. I'd like to be a Buddhist, but it's not my culture, it's not my heritage. When I lived in New York in 1980, I thought I'd find the sources of Pop Art, and on every corner would be Pop Artists; I'd meet Warhol, which I could have, but I didn't. When I was here, I realized I'm a European. I can do what I want to, but I will never be a New Yorker. I will never learn how to think like a New Yorker. I have to deal with that. There's something else I wanted to tell you. Do you know the German painter Otto Dix?

**LT** Yes, I do.

**PD** The Nazis didn't allow him to paint his social satires, so he had to paint landscapes, and he said, "I look to the landscape like a cow." That's good. I would say, "I look to the cat like a dog." I try. I'm not good enough to really do it, but I try.

Tillman, Lynne. "Peter Dreher." *BOMB*, Nr. 57, Fall, 1996.