

WILLIAM E. JONES  
**THE GENERAL SECRETARY IS  
 TRAPPED IN A SNOW GLOBE**  
 (2013)

*Note: This letter is a work of fiction. Certain liberties have been taken, but as far as can be ascertained, biographical information regarding Peter Roehr (1944-1968) and his friends Paul Maenz (1939-) and Charlotte Posenenske (1930-1985) is correct.*

Frankfurt am Main  
 December 20, 1966

Dear Paul,

I won't have you believing the current state of my health has made me succumb to conventional sentiment. My position on Christmas is as contrary as ever, maybe even more so, what with my mother decorating the house with all sorts of pseudo-religious kitsch. She knows that I will be moving in with you once you return to Germany. She reckons this is the last holiday she will spend with her son, and she is going all out. You are probably thinking, what a mama's boy, but I can tell you that I look forward to escaping her well-meaning attentions as soon as humanly possible. We will form another sort of household together, and it can't help but be less oppressive than the nuclear family studied by sociologists.

And speaking of oppression, how is life in the consciousness industry these days? We both know you weren't cut out for a career in advertising. Young and Rubicam has enabled you to see the world—well, Paris and New York, more than I have ever seen—and provided you with the means to rent a decent apartment for us. Without the firm's unknowing participation, I never would have been able to make all those works based upon advertising films. Does anyone at the office realize the use to which those "liberated" Breck Shampoo and Gulf Oil commercials have been put? The legal department might take an interest in this, but you can tell them from me that the whole endeavor is the best possible publicity, making a claim on posterity for ephemeral garbage that otherwise no one would remember next year, or even next month. I suppose they aren't really thinking about posterity, any more than the staff of the *New York Herald Tribune* frets about yesterday's edition. The future is where the action is. Well, as someone whose future is radically limited, I can say I disagree.

If anyone takes an interest in my works after my death, I will leave it to you to oversee their circulation in the world. You may also disseminate the statements I have written about my works, though not this letter. It is between us. I have been looking over the statements, and one specifically about the films is troubling, because it invites distortion or misinterpretation: "What interested me was not the literary content of the scenes." The problem is that my films don't quite fit with the rest of the works; there is more to them than I have let on. You can't just will the subject matter of photographic images out of existence. Well, you can, and you end up with abstract photography, which is banal in the worst possible way. But what is a good way of embracing banality? From an aesthetic point of view, I have opened Pandora's box. I should clarify my position at some point. If only I weren't so busy making these hundreds of works that no one wants! No matter what happens, German art critics with their absurd literal-mindedness will undoubtedly take my statements at face value. I can't really blame the knowledge merchants for repressing details that stand in the way of a totalizing interpretation, or whatever the current philosophical fashion is. That reminds me, could you pick up a copy of *Against Interpretation* to bring back with you? I know you have a lot of things to pack, but the bookstores here are hopeless, even more so than the art galleries, when it comes to fathoming what is going on in New York.

How I wish I were there! Whenever I have news from you, I feel like the poor bumpkin from the DDR. My mother left for the West to find greater opportunities, but where did she take us? Not Cologne, but Frankfurt. Did she think she would make a banker out of me? You will protest, if this guy hadn't been living in Frankfurt, he never would have gotten that summer job in the mail room, and we never would have met. It's true, the place has had its compensations.

For my part, I'll take credit for rescuing you from the friends whose condescension you suffered because there was no one else on the scene. You were on your way to becoming a bitter old auntie until I came along and shook things up. Does a single one of those piss elegant queens know who Sol LeWitt is, or even Rauschenberg? (Did you when I met you?) They assume I am your protégé, being guided into a career of sterile snobbery by his elder. You have shown me a few tricks, and I will be forever grateful that you showed an interest when no one else would, but the idea that I am your "creation" just because I was only 19 when we met is completely preposterous.

By the way, I have reflected on it, and I have come to the conclusion that your idea of opening a gallery in Germany is sound. I know you only mentioned it in an offhand way, but I



Peter Roehr, *Untitled (TY-55)*, 1964.  
 Courtesy: Galerie Mehdi Chouakri, Berlin.  
 Photo: the Estate of Peter Roehr



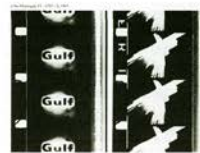
Peter Roehr, "Die schwarzen Tafeln", installation view at Paul Maenz Gallery, Cologne, 1981.  
 Courtesy: Galerie Mehdi Chouakri, Berlin.  
 Photo: the Estate of Peter Roehr



Peter Roehr, *Charlotte Posenenske*, 1967.  
 Courtesy: the Estate of Charlotte Posenenske, Frankfurt on the Main



Peter Roehr, *Film-Montagen 1-3 (Haare)*, 1965.  
 Courtesy: Galerie Mehdi Chouakri, Berlin.  
 Photo: the Estate of Peter Roehr



Peter Roehr, *Untitled (FI-1)*, 1965.  
 Courtesy: Galerie Mehdi Chouakri, Berlin.  
 Photo: the Estate of Peter Roehr

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think that is because you have an ambition you may not be able to acknowledge even to yourself. The type of art you have seen in New York is not a passing fashion, and I suspect it will conquer the benighted Federal Republic eventually.

The mention of ambition would fill dear Charlotte with righteous anger, I'm sure. She quite correctly decries art's "professionalization," to use a word fit for a sociologist. Since you have been gone, she talks more and more about quitting art altogether. At first, I was annoyed, but I have come to see the logic of her position. When there is no money and no fame at stake, you can devise any number of solutions to the problem of art, in total freedom. Unfortunately, even the most economical art requires a bit of money to produce, and when there is almost nowhere to show it and no critical response, you begin to wonder, what's the point? Are my artistic ambitions as ridiculous as my mother would have me believe? Charlotte sees the whole endeavor as irredeemably compromised as soon as money changes hands. She has managed to remove herself from the fray by selling her works for the cost of production. I believe I am representing her ideas correctly, but I must say that sometimes I have trouble determining where my thoughts end and hers begin.

The aspect of her position I cannot quite grasp relates to art's social usefulness. Charlotte wants to change the world, if only in a small way. Modular works constructed of poor materials and installed however a site will accommodate them can be accessible to a popular audience. A proletarian district can have its own Charlotte Posenenske sculpture, and when the residents are tired of looking at it, the whole thing can be disassembled and put away or installed elsewhere. At least that is the theory. I personally suspect that idealized realistic painting, not that far from the canon upheld by the National Socialists, would please this audience more. And if you do manage to educate the masses so they can accept advanced art, what then? Does it really make their lives better? Charlotte is absolutely committed to the task of improving the lot of the poor and downtrodden. She realizes art does little to further this cause, so she has decided to pursue direct social action. She is still pondering exactly what to do; the only thing she knows with certainty is that it isn't art. And all of this is happening inside her, a conviction is forming, at the very moment when the world is beginning to pay attention to her work.

Charlotte and I were marked by history in different ways. She was an infant when Hitler came to power, and as a girl and a bastard child, she was treated as a second-class citizen at school. I was an infant when it all came crashing down. I suppose the difference in our ages accounts for how our political convictions diverge. I am entirely in sympathy with her art, but I remain skeptical of its power to affect consciousness.

If I had stayed in the East and practiced art, I would have been subject to the recommendations of the Bitterfeld Conference, which "drew workers and peasants into the process of artistic creativity"—this description from a Soviet encyclopedia. Workers became artists, artists represented workers, and the policy was all very sound, at least in principle. In practice, it resulted in one aesthetic nullity after another, and this was obvious from a cursory glance at the paintings on display in official exhibitions. It seemed that everyone was aware of the failure of the Bitterfeld Way except the boss, Walter Ulbricht, General Secretary of the Socialist Unity Party. The man really had no sense of aesthetics at all, in his appreciation of culture or in his personal appearance. He appeared in public wearing ill-fitting suits, each one more hideous than the last. When I saw him in movies, I would wonder if the voluminous folds and unkempt collars were hiding some physical deformity. Perhaps there was a hunchback to go with the great bald head and shrill speaking voice. He looked like a garden gnome, and unlike truly great leaders, he provided those under his authority with no masturbatory fantasies at all.

Still, Ulbricht exerted a different fascination over me. I saw a documentary called *Builder of Socialism* when I was nine or ten years old. One scene showed his exile in the Soviet Union. The producers of the film placed him at the Battle of Stalingrad. They found a possibly authentic still photograph of Ulbricht with two soldiers in a snowdrift, then animated it with a zoom into his face and superimposed an effect of falling snow. The sequence consisted of a map of Stalingrad, a shot of a battlefield in a blizzard, this animated shot, and a return to the battlefield. The trick was unconvincing to me even as a child, but I loved it. I imagined that in the midst of the decisive battle of the Great Patriotic War, Walter Ulbricht had gotten trapped inside a snow globe. I obsessively thought of these shots playing over and over again, to my intense amusement.

I wanted my mother to take me to see *Builder of Socialism* again, but she refused. She knew nothing about my fantasy life, and must have been dismayed by what she took to be my patriotic feelings for a country she was preparing to leave. The film was released on June 17, 1953, during the biggest popular uprising in the DDR's history. I wonder if anyone crossed the path of a Soviet tank to attend the premiere. The events inspired Bertolt Brecht's poem, *The Solution*, written "for the desk drawer" and celebrated posthumously:

After the uprising of the 17th of June  
The Secretary of the Writers Union  
Had leaflets distributed in the Stalinallee  
Stating that the people  
Had forfeited the confidence of the government  
And could win it back only  
By redoubled efforts. Would it not be easier  
In that case for the government  
To dissolve the people



Peter Roehr, Wiesbaden, Germany, 1962.  
Courtesy: Galerie Mehdi Chouakri, Berlin.  
Photo: the Estate of Peter Roehr



Paul Maenz and Peter Roehr during the preparations for the *Dies alles Herzchen wird einmal Dir gehören* event, Frankfurt on the Main, Germany, 1967.  
Courtesy: Galerie Mehdi Chouakri, Berlin.  
Photo: the Estate of Peter Roehr



Peter Roehr, *Film-Montagen 1-3 (Ringer)*, 1965.  
Courtesy: Galerie Mehdi Chouakri, Berlin.  
Photo: the Estate of Peter Roehr



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And elect another?

All this started to come back to me when you took me to see *Citizen Kane*. There is a snow globe in the first scene, isn't there? Walter Ulbricht and Charles Foster Kane: the hard-line communist and the rapacious capitalist, two grotesque father figures united in my mind because of their association with a child's toy. Well, that lends itself to a nice, neat psychological explanation for the origins of my art. Cheap symbolism and good visuals, as in a Hollywood movie, or better yet, seductive advertising. Perhaps you can use this for one of your campaigns before you leave New York.

I can't say I am overjoyed to be living in a colony of the USA, in the shadow of its largest European military base. Armed Forces Radio comes in loud and clear. But where else am I to live, on the moon? In Leipzig I would have had to deal with cultural bureaucrats; in Frankfurt, we deal with the demands of the market. I appropriate its noise and cant and detritus, and I re-present it in all its numbing brutality.

I have rejected my education in art, yet I am a product of it at the same time. I have little sense of craftsmanship, aside from what a commercial artist would employ. (Perhaps my apprenticeship as a sign painter really did prove useful after all.) Do you remember poor old Schmela telling me at his gallery that my montages were "promising" and that he looked forward to "further developments"? What developments? I had one idea, the strict repetition of mechanically reproduced elements. There is nothing to develop. I am considering leaving the field at the moment of my choosing, as Charlotte will. She has more strength of character than I, but then I don't really need it, because the treachery of my body will make reversing this final decision impossible. In the meantime, I will repeat myself until I am done with repetition.

At the point when I believe I have systematized my art in a way that is decisive and consistent and above reproach, the whole enterprise threatens to slip out of my grasp. The films continue to trouble me. I wonder if I should suppress them, even though they are a logical development from my sound montages. The truck plunging over and over into water and the wrestlers throwing themselves around ten times seem to indicate another path to take. I have applied the principles of sound poetry to the constituent elements of film narrative. What are the consequences of this? I am curious, but I must accept that I will probably never find out.

Dear Paul, I am happy that I found you, my friend and my audience. I thought of you while I was watching a B-movie on television recently. One of the characters said to another, "All this, my darling, will one day be yours." It is a line I can repeat to you, if you are willing to accept my body of work, a gift that you never expected, but one that you deserve. Destroy this letter if you want, or glance at it and put it away. What you do with it hardly matters. What matters is my writing it.

With all love and respect,  
Peter

This letter is part of the script of an artist's talk William E. Jones gave at Tate Modern in 2013 and at MOCA in 2014.



34 Peter Roehr beim Aufbau seiner ersten Ausstellung, Adam Seide, Frankfurt am Main, Oktober 1965

Peter Roehr, installing his first exhibition, Adam Seide, Frankfurt am Main, October 1965

Peter Roehr installing his first exhibition "Abendausstellung II" at Adam Seide, Frankfurt on the Main, October 1965. Courtesy: Galerie Mehdi Chouakri, Berlin. Photo: the Estate of Peter Roehr



35 Peter Roehr im Studio des Hessischen Rundfunks bei der Herstellung der Film-Montagen, Frankfurt am Main, April 1966

Peter Roehr in the studio of the Hessian Radio during the creation of the film montages, Frankfurt am Main, April 1966

Peter Roehr in the Hessian Radio during the creation of the film montages, Frankfurt on the Main, Germany, April 1966. Courtesy: Galerie Mehdi Chouakri, Berlin. Photo: the Estate of Peter Roehr