



## Did You Really Mean That?

by Peter Eeley

With Darren Bader the sewing machine and the umbrella meet again on a dissecting table, now joined by

some guacamole, a French horn, pizza and a dishwasher. The artist sets up poetically absurd encounters, lovingly, like a matchmaker. Other images skimmed off the web are granted a second chance. But you can also run into three cats made of human flesh, ready for adoption. By donating 100 dollars to the SaveKitty Foundation, you can be the proud owner of a work that will warm your feet on dark and stormy nights. Is Bader's art simply nominalism? Peter Eleey tries to find out.

Peter Eleey: What is your art about?

Darren Bader: My art is about what I think art might be about. By this I think I mean that there's this quantity/entity that people consider to be art, and my wish to (make) art involves trying to figure out the locus of this quantity/entity. And maybe that's all my art is about—where this “art” quantity and entity lie together, so to speak. Lie/lie. In any case, I guess my art is about metaphysics and the world we live in. The world we live in? I don't know, I think it's a matter of what the word “world” connotes for me. It's still a grand thing in my mind. The world is still the globe-as-defined-by-the-canopy-of-the-firmament and it's also the exotic. Ultimately it's the Romantic.

PE: Pretty meta. What is real in your work?

DB: That's not real enough?

PE: Maybe I should have put it differently. Does pizza from a dishwasher taste any different? When is a cat not a cat?

DB: A-ha. A cat is never not a cat, but sometimes a cat is a different kind of cat. Sometimes it could become a rubber tree; other times an accordion. Accordingly, pizzas could taste like anything, I guess, but when they hang out with a dishwasher they are speaking tongues I can't taste with.

PE: Which is a bit different than surplus value. The cat doesn't become something special or extra in your hands, you just change it into something else for a bit? Like an actor on stage, as opposed to at the afterparty?

DB: The afterparty is what's out there in the Romantic. As far as surplus value, I've never read Marx (or his more conspicuous acolytes), so I don't quite understand its meaning, but value is always value, that's how I see it: immanent-transcendent, sacred-profane, local-universal, all that ebb-flow stuff. The actor acts, of course, and there's always a stage, so to speak, but there's no other information except yours, etc... In other words, Brecht is no different from Tarkovsky.

PE: Is the romantic part that we can't taste the vodka and water? And is the water profaning the vodka, or vice-versa?

DB: Haha! Well, that was supposed to be our little secret.

PE: Sorry to ruin the romance.

DB: It's usually me who does that, so it's a relief.

PE: Who are your heroes?

DB: Romantics! Um, I like people in my life a lot. But on the global/cosmic level, I'd say Athena, Tarkovsky, Hitchcock, PROUST for sure, Robert Barry for that brief moment, David Gilmour guitar hero, animals, oh Bronzino. Oh,

and our friend Bruce Hainley!

PE: Can you say more about why, at least in a few cases?

DB: Because they make me believe in the power of poetics and make me want to believe in the reality of that poetics (or the poetics of reality, inversely).

PE: Do you ever worry that people don't take you seriously?

DB: Of course.

PE: Is it better or worse if people take you too seriously?

DB: Too seriously?

PE: Is Darren Bader your real name?

DB: As far as names go, yeah.

PE: What else is in a name?

DB: Oh, everything!

PE: When you present work by other artists, when is it a collaboration — with your name appearing alongside theirs — as opposed to a nameless expropriation?

DB: Well, they're really the same thing. Here's a good way to elucidate/confuse things further... When their names appear, it's when the artwork is no longer "on display." While displayed by me — this Darren Bader person — the works are meant to function anonymously (i.e. omnisciently?). When the artwork isn't on display by me, it's transferred context (and hence content?). So if a collector buys a work of mine that happens to be a(n art)work made by an artist who happens to make art for the sake of sharing his/her signature (like me, for instance), then I present the collector with a certificate attaching my name to all the information the signatory artist has provided me — I sign above his or her signature. But once this artwork that I've "nominated" as my own is transferred from post-display to post-post-display, it may no longer be an artwork by me, i.e. Darren Bader, even if I'm pretty sure that's my name.

PE: Would you say that nominating is your primary dance move?

DB: Oh definitely not. Naming/nominating gives me anxiety. I'm only a Romantic when I'm not asked to name things; sensory matter is much easier to cope with when there isn't the "action" of choice. And in my work, choosing is nominating, and choosing is always high anxiety. If I'm lucky, something will fall into my lap, but there's usually not enough time or stuff to make serendipity a practice. So, I imagine that watching me dance inside my head would be a little more like reading a Kafka novel. And I really don't enjoy reading Kafka novels. I tend to like things that eschew naming, which means I should like reading Kafka. But I don't. Hmmm, I must be a horrible dancer.

PE: Aren't you nominating a cat to be something else, or extra, like a George Brecht event?

DB: I guess I did nominate a cat. But I had a hard time choosing which nomination to nominate the cat once the cat showed up.



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PE: Or is the point that you are trying to make something a little bit less than its name? That a pizza and dishwasher get together in a pre-commercial condition? What makes that mash-up funny is the suggestion that either could exist “namelessly” as such, and then funny in a different way when we see them as themselves, with the image of a cheezy, sudsy mess. I think a lot about that Guston line about trying to forget what you know. Maybe you mean that you are a Romantic when you are trying to unname things.

DB: Well, I would imagine/think that I’m trying to make some(-)thing “more” than its name. Return it to its “virgin” state. Animisms of sorts. But in deliberately acknowledging the fact that any given “thing” has a name, I do reduce/subject all animism to the insuperability of the quantification that corresponds to naming—everything is a thing insofar as it can be named, has been named, is poised to be named, made quantifiable, itemized, etc. Oh boy, there’s that dance again. I mean, I obviously understand that things nominated as dishwashers coupled with things nominated as pizzas are funnier than things nominated as sweaters coupled with things nominated as phonebooks, but I’m bent on finding elusive/spurious/absurd/inane relations between things that have/been named. I guess it’s a way of coping with this thing called “metaphysics” (even if I may not use that word/name in the way a philosophy professor might). And so the Romantic wants to know the origins of all things magical, wants to live and breathe the way-that-things-are, rather than being restricted by language. But as a neurotic (which would be a funny obverse to the Romantic), I am keenly aware of the functions of language and so, you know...

PE: Returning something to an earlier condition, ok... so then what about time? Stuff appears variously quick and dead in your work, on a continuum, say, from an Ad Reinhardt painting to a work by a living artist, to something by “you-as-Darren-Bader,” to some vegetables that were living recently, to some animals or reptiles who are living presently, to some people who might be lounging around somewhere. (Which, crucially, is never a performance for any number of reasons.) We become more aware of our own aliveness against a heroin-infused dead fish, or a pair of moldering burritos. I’m not sure how else to explain the ecstatic vandalism that plagued that burrito piece in our show. That you showed it with the looped audio of Bob Dylan’s stone rolling into being over and over surely set that temporal tone.

DB: Time is just that thing we live in, isn’t it. Is there time elsewhere? I don’t know. I don’t understand astrophysics or particle physics, but I imagine this thing we call time isn’t anything outside ourselves at all (but then again, what is). So I guess it’s comfy that you’re using the word “continuum.” However important history is to our understanding of art—and of course ourselves—Reinhardt is just another (un)nameable thing in a continuum of things, so who cares if he’s dead or alive. Who cares about time? We all do. Burritos meat [sic] their maker, so to speak. And that’s clearly about this time stuff. But before they “meet their maker,” they are these things, these named things, called “burrito(s)” and much like a person who is lounging not as a “performance,” but as a “sculpture,” as a quiddity, these burritos are no longer or shorter than any other thing. The thing is burritos are more likely to decompose than a bronze sculpture. The thing is, who cares? (I imagine some people do and

that's who cares.) That Dylan loop is clearly about time, since you and I and lots of other people know that track and can identify "over and over" with our ears, but as a sculpture—because that's what I would designate the work as—it's an audio file, or it's a song. Much like a burrito, a song occupies a space. That's the logic, however fanciful it may seem. Audio files can be cognized as something more static. Heroin is another story, but a non-temporal one as well.

PE: About those burritos... Maybe people were just angry and wanted to take it out on something by throwing your work around (or eating it, rather ill-advisedly). A surprising number of people hate your work, and seem to think you are getting away with something. Which you are, I think, like most good artists. It seems hard for people to understand the generosity (or at least honesty) that you bring to your work.

DB: Well, yeah. With the exception of a couple of cynical works in group shows over the years (due to deadlines I couldn't handle), most of what I do comes from a very generous place. The burritos are in no way "ha-ha" or a "fuck you," they are, "chicken burrito, beef burrito"—whatever that may mean to someone else. I might hate my work too if it wasn't mine; I very rarely love it. But coming from the purview I come from—cinematic/romantic/deconstructionist/neurotic/ludic/absurd—I only know how to explore the world and the word/tissue/pathos/ethos of "art" in the way that feels germane to me. There is a polemical aspect to my project, but the innards are ever-so-rarely mean-spirited. I'm very much about re-gifting. The beauty of a "forgery" does not a fake work of art make.

PE: What's the difference between a good and a bad piece of yours?

DB: I'm not trying to be glib here, but these are two of the most honest answers I have:

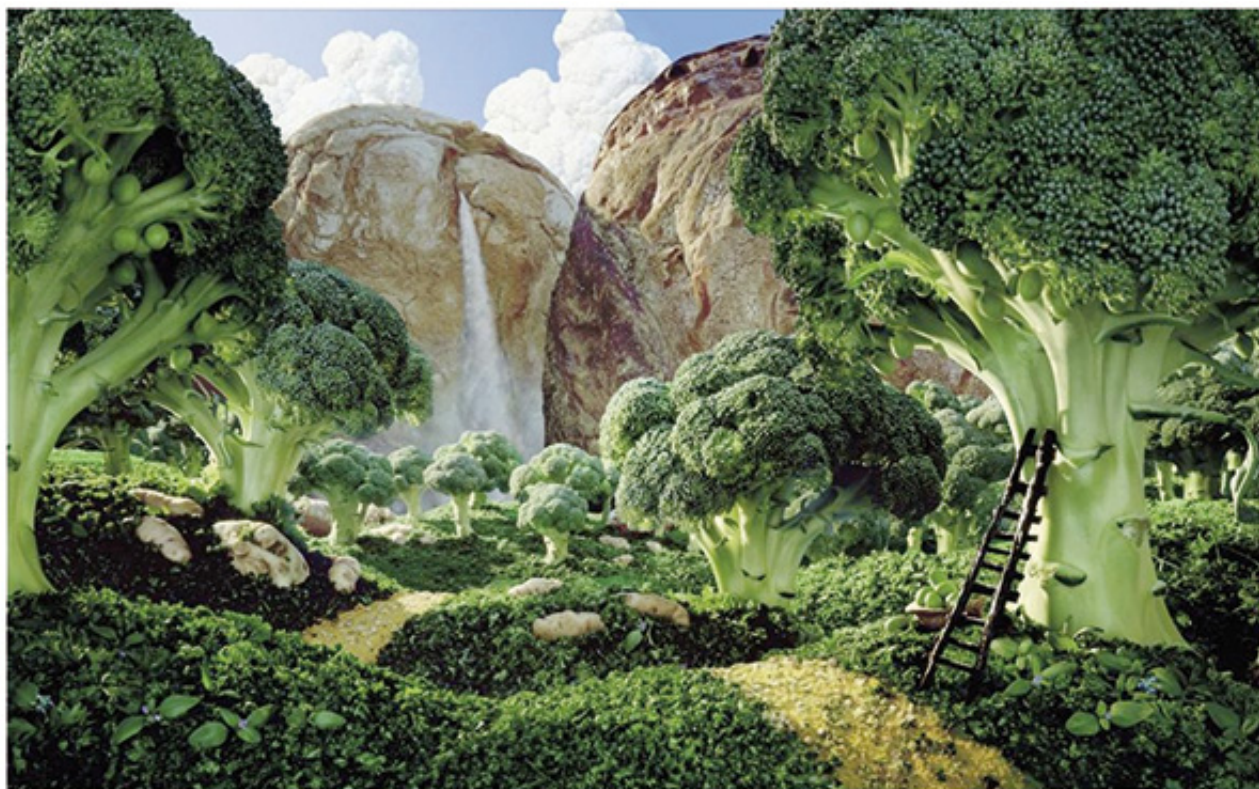
1. depends on my mood
  2. depends on the mood of the person looking at a piece by me
- Another take on this:
3. it shouldn't(/can't) matter

Man you're getting me all pre-psychotic inside. Getting back to the (too) seriously: a lot of people find my work to be funny; very little of it is conceived to function as such.

PE: I was talking about you last night with a few folks, who agreed that your show that we did at MoMA PS1 was among the funniest they had seen. I know that's not the goal, but I took it as a high compliment.

DB: Don't get me wrong. That's almost always high praise. I guess after my first book I was surprised to find out that everybody seemingly appreciated it for its comic value rather than its sincerity. It's always a weird weave of both. I was being a little coy in saying "very little of it"... I mean, the show I'm working on now has plenty of humor woven into it. But I also think an Xlerator hand dryer is some serious shit. No funny there. And the show we did, well it was def an example of the weave. Love making people laugh though. Ain't like I'm destined to be a theologian.

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**The Forest of Dean or the Forest of Greens? The road is paved with cumin, peas hang from broccoli trees and cauliflower clouds adorn the sky with bread for mountains.**

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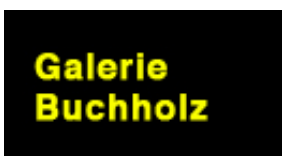
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**SUNDAY**

Mousse Magazine and Publishing  
Via De Amicis 53,  
20123, Milano, Italy  
T: +39 02 8356631  
F: +39 02 49531400  
E: [info@moussemagazine.it](mailto:info@moussemagazine.it)  
P.IVA 05234930963