

Dialogues: The David Zwirner Podcast

Jarrett Earnest & Peter Schjeldahl

[SOUNDBITE; PETER SCHJELDAHL: I am Peter Schjeldahl and I write about art.]

JARRETT EARNEST: My name is Jarrett Earnest and I am a trashy sweetheart and I also write about art.]

[MUSIC FADES IN]

LUCAS ZWIRNER: From David Zwirner, this is *Dialogues*—a podcast about creativity and ideas.

[SOUNDBITE; PETER SCHJELDAHL: I think all the great symbols of America are empty: the river, the sea, the open road, the prairie, the whiteness of the whale.]

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LZ: I'm Lucas Zwirner, editorial director of David Zwirner Books. In every episode on the podcast we'll introduce you to a surprising pairing. We're taking the artists we work with at the gallery and putting them in conversation with some of the world's most extraordinary makers and thinkers.

[MUSIC FADES OUT]

LZ: Today's pairing: the art writers Peter Schjeldahl and Jarrett Earnest. Peter Schjeldahl has been a prominent voice in the New York art world since the 1970s, producing some of the most vivid and insightful writing about art of our time. He's also a poet, and his care for language is evident in everything he does. He began writing criticism for ARTnews in the 1960s, moving on to the Village Voice, The New York Times, and Art in America. In 1998, he became a staff writer at The New Yorker before becoming the magazine's art critic, a position he continues to hold.

Jarrett Earnest is a writer and artist living in New York City. He was faculty at the free experimental art school Bruce High Quality Foundation University, and his writing has appeared in The Brooklyn Rail, the Los Angeles Review of Books, and Art in America, among other publications. Jarrett's also a close friend of mine. He and I edited a book recently together, and he's now in the process of editing a book of Peter's writing.

We started the conversation talking about the single moment that sent Peter on his path to writing and thinking about art. He was in his twenties and hitchhiking in Italy, where he met up with a friend, the American poet and artist George Schneeman, who

was living in Tuscany at the time. George took Peter on a special tour of the frescoes of the great Renaissance painter Piero della Francesca.

PETER SCHJELDAHL: He took me on the Piero tour on the back of his Vespa, which is at Arezzo di Sansepolcro. But in between there's this little town called Monterchi, which has—it's in a museum now but then it was in its original location, which is in a cemetery chapel about the size of a toolshed—a fresco of the pregnant Madonna, Madonna del Parto, very unusual subject. It is a vastly pregnant, young girl in a pensive pose in a bell-shaped tent, and two mirror-image angels in purple and green are sweeping aside the leaves of the tent. And the shape of the tent and the shape of her belly, it's sort of like a secret within a secret within a secret. It is very unusual. I mean, it's in this incredibly out-of-the-way, very simple place. I burst into tears. It was a hot August day and I'm dazed and I had an epiphany. I had a religious experience, which I believe they happen, I believe they are very real, I believe they are very consequential. But it was basically, whatever I was going to do my life would have something to do with that and I'm still trying to figure out what that is.

LZ: That feeling or whatever . . .

PS: Well that, it was something, it wasn't a feeling, just more an understanding, more a kind of connection. Words absolutely fail. I mean, it basic—maybe discovering a positive place to be alone.

LZ: Wow.

PS: You know, it's like, loneliness being the great besetting condition of Americans. And it's like one—a place I could be alone and then turn around and come back out. You know, it's like I could come back out, I could come back out with something.

JARRETT EARNEST: But did you feel alone in the presence of the Piero? Because for me, I understand what you mean about almost like this bracket or blinder around experience with a work of art, but I, when I'm really communing with an artwork, I really feel like other consciousness, the consciousness of the person who made it, the other people who have been involved with it.

PS: No. I know what you mean. I work all of that in when I come back out.

LZ: This question of alone—I just want to ask a little more about aloneness. Peter said of the American condition, or . . . ?

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PS: Yeah, yeah.

LZ: Is that something you feel? I mean, I think a lot about the kind of isolation one feels even among people or among stimulus in America.

PS: I think all the great symbols of America are empty: the river, the sea, the open road, the prairie, the whiteness of the whale. It's about the light across the water in Gatsby. I mean, it's all about the feeling of sublime or horrendous or fatal aloneness.

JE: I mean, I have a really different relationship to what Peter is talking about, and part of the fact is that Peter had a very particular and eccentric childhood, and I, in a very different way, had an extremely idiosyncratic childhood which was I grew up pretty isolated. I grew up in rural South Florida, so wrap your mind around what that means. And on a ranch with orange groves and, you know, a very, very tight nuclear family, and all of the land around where I lived was extended family—my grandparents, my aunts and uncles, so I didn't have a conception of a social world. I would go to school and then I would come home and the things were never, they never touched each other, and that never seemed weird to me.

So I spent hours and hours of my childhood without playmates, with like my little brother. But walking around in the wilderness. I think that that is very useful because it teaches you . . . Well, it develops imagination, which I think is a really important thing. It's something I'm very interested in and find mysterious. But also it gives you a kind of fortification about being alone. And I think what Peter is describing is an absolutely foundational aspect to art and to making into being alive, which is the confrontation of you by yourself in relationship to.

PS: Well, for me, aloneness is accompanied by anxiety to the degree, to the verge of panic.

LZ: It's actually the same for me. I mean, that's why I was going to ask that because you seem actually pretty resilient.

JE: I love being alone. Well, I think the other thing is my religious background is very different in that Peter's branch of Protestantism, which was a kind of Norwegian Lutheranism, is very harsh. And I, my parents were evangelical Pentecostal Christians, and that's the same thing. It's like you to God and like there are no interference.

PS: Yeah, but a lot of fun.

JE: And it's a lot of fun. It's singing and yeah.

PS: I think of the Protestant soul as you close your eyes and picture a very cold, very clean porcelain sink—a bathroom appliance. I mean, there is just no comfort, none.

JE: And to me, it's static. It's like, you're alone but it's ecstasy.

LZ: But then I have to ask: how did you combat? I mean, you have a job that requires lots of aloneness. So, what are the coping mechanisms?

PS: Writing is very spooky to me. It takes me a long time to get started. Sometimes it takes me three days to write a first sentence. And then I'm writing. I'm sort of really not there, you know. And then, of course, there's rewriting. But actually that's kind of pleasurable—taking a sick sentence and making it well. You can sort of be present for doing that.

JE: Well, it feels to me like what we do is mediate the alone and the world dynamic and as a balance. I love being alone and I love being with other people and I really need them to be separate.

PS: I have trouble in both directions, actually. No, I think I'm socially awkward and desperately lonely. You can send your contribution to the following address.

JE: One of my solutions to my version of this is why interviews have become such an important thing for me, and why I like them is that it's like you draw a little magic circle around something you do every day, which is talk to people that you are interested in, but in the space of doing interview, you're completely committed to the rules of being present and listening and talking to them.

PS: You're remarkable, Jarrett. You're the best. That's when I met you, you interviewed me, and I think the first question you asked was, When did you first regard language as a material? And I thought, boy, that is such a wonderful question. And then we were off, and I mean, the proof is in your interviews with other people.

LZ: Let's talk about that for a second. You're kind of developing now, Jarrett, a new form of criticism I would say, or at least you're pushing toward a form of criticism that incorporates someone else's voice or at least allows you to incorporate someone else's voice as you approach the artwork or the critic. I mean, are you sort of conscious of how the interview form has sort of led to this critical form, whatever that becomes—that doesn't need to be a dramatic break or anything like that—but certainly it seems like something that you're really exploring.

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JE: Well, I'm painfully conscious of it, but I would say—but maybe sometimes pain is a good thing. I think maybe every critic is supposed to figure out a form for themselves, and that form is the product of things that they're good at and things they're not good at.

PS: And then, of course, there's publications and editors. **JE:** Oh, right. Well, that's a big problem too.

PS: Well, it's not a problem. It's a condition. It's why, it's what makes it a vocation. I needed discipline. I had a wild imagination and musical sense of language. I like to say that, you know, when I was working on small-city daily papers in my early twenties, it was the old copy editors, these fat burned-out drunk, you know, copy editors around the city desk with chomping cigars. I learned more in a day from those guys than the Iowa Writers' Workshop could've taught me. And it was exactly what I needed: grammar, syntax, clarity.

JE: I think one of the things I've picked up from what Peter has done and that—how I understand what I am working toward differently—is that Peter's criticism are like little gem-like meditations on consciousness. It's the story, the narration of a consciousness rubbing against this object in the world, and how it unfolds sequentially. And for him, it's always only between the object and himself or the character that's the thing.

PS: That was a consequence of being an autodidact. Suddenly, I was writing art criticism starting in 1965 for ARTnews because all the poets were doing it, and people liked how I did it. You know, I think I discovered immediately that the only thing in the world in which I was the world's leading expert was my experience, okay.

JE: Well, I think that my, what I'm talking about is a reaction to the same thing, but with a different personality which is: I'm interested in the artwork and I'm interested in the voice in the artist, the figure of the person who made it, and triangulating between those things. That's the same impulse of autodidacticism where you're like, All right, you made this thing, I can talk to you and I can look at that and I want to modulate them.

PS: No, it basically—I think it always involves a projection. That's why it seems like a story. I mean, I want to be inside the artist. I want to know, I want to know why this thing is the way it is.

LZ: When you are doing this the idea of speaking to the artist in the process of looking at the object is not what you're after. The projection is coming from you.

PS: I want to be the artist. I don't care about the artist, you know. I'm writing for the reader.

LZ: But you're kind of taking the voice and bringing it into your exploration of the work. Sometimes, not all time.

JE: So, I talked about the way that I grew up in which I was formed as a whole little being in this isolated world with extreme interest and fascination and curiosity about what other people might be like, but not having access to them. I am really interested in psychoanalysis. And so, if I wanted to, I could make an entire aesthetic and conceptual map of my worldview based on things that I saw before I was five years old. You know, whether it's Grace Jones coming out of a box on Pee-wee's Playhouse or whether it's Disney's Little Mermaid. The thing about The Little Mermaid is that in her song "Part of Your World," she's like, I want to be where the people are. You know, I want to ask them my questions and get some answers. And that was really something as a little gay boy in southern Florida was like my *raison*. You know, I'm going to do that. Part of it had to do with this fantasy of going to a place where people were interesting and wanting to know what they were like.

LZ: But it also sounds like, Peter, you're coming from language first, like you discovered an affinity for visual objects and for art, but that really came after your initial interest in language.

PS: I stumbled upon a career, yeah.

LZ: [To Jarrett Earnest] And you, in a way, it seems like your early experiences, those are visual experiences, a sort of intense relationship to something that you're seeing.

JE: Visual and tactile. You know, my parents, my dad says that he didn't say this, but growing up I always heard that I was going to have lost one of my hands by the time I was 30 because I touched too many things. And I'm just past that mark, you know, I have both of my hands. It was my thirtieth birthday, I called my dad and was like, Hey, by the way, have both my hands! And he's like, What are you talking about? But it was always sensual, very intense, haptic, and visual, and I followed that, you know, because it was what I felt was alive. And then the language thing, I mean, I always was a big reader because—and always read incessantly—but I really have been kind of dragging myself up into the temple of language much after the fact.

LZ: I guess, though, Peter, you are also very sensory, can't really forget that. I mean, I'm reminded of

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reading your account of *Las Meninas*, the painting by Velázquez at the Prado. We don't have the picture here, but it's a seventeenth-century court painting of members of the royal court and their servants. You really describe in detail the kind of play of eyes, the intensity of looking at that painting and the feelings it produced in you.

PS: I was absolutely fixated. I became obsessed with looking at these people faster than they could look at me. I don't know how that was supposed to work. You know, but I was delirious.

LZ: Meaning your eyes would sort of flit back and forth.

PS: I tried to rewind three-eighths of a second or something, you know. I'm just reporting what I remember. At which point I had an aural, an overheard hallucination. The maids in these big dresses turning, and I heard a rustle of crinolines. Now, you know.

LZ: Time to go to sleep, right?

PS: Yeah, well, exactly. I had two thoughts, one of which was, Oh, that's what that sounds like, and the other was, Get your ass to the hotel now. And *Las Meninas* I refer to a lot because it's so intense, it's so great, that things that happened normally with other artworks, and by the way, with other things in life, the aesthetic is not bordered. There's not a border, the aesthetic is ambient, it's everywhere. But saying this because it affected me so deeply. I have told myself, retold myself, a story, thought about it, and it becomes more and more my painting and less and less Velázquez's. So suddenly, it's back to being a dirty piece of cloth. As soon as I'm out, my experience starts to deflect from the reality. And which happens, by the way, I think in absolutely everything in life. I mean, memory is utterly fallible. In this case, it is just dramatized by the intensity of that work.

JE: I love that story. One of the things that I think we talk about a lot and are both interested in is paying attention to all of the reactions and feelings and the way that they shift through time. Some of the most interesting art experiences that I've had happened with an immediate feeling of absolute physical revulsion. I thought, This is terrible.

PS: I think that is physiologically inevitable and healthy. I mean, if somebody who sees something new and immediately likes it is lying.

JE: I definitely remember when I was in high school I was painting every day, like hours and hours every day, and I had a book on contemporary art. I

remember going through it and seeing a picture of a Paul McCarthy installation and wanting to throw up, like, just being horrified.

PS: And I would be there with Paul McCarthy right now, actually.

JE: And you don't even have to be Freud, like I took a gold spray paint can and spray-painted it out of my book because for sublimation. But then I became obsessed. I thought about it a lot. And I think the perversion of it, the darkness of it, really I felt identified.

PS: Everything else—you read a book, you see a play, you see a movie, you see a dance, listen to music. It all requires time. And you have to remember, you have to piece it together from memory. You do that with art, but you go back and look. I mean, you can check it, bring it more and more in sync with what is actually there.

JE: I mean, one of the experiences that I had like that that was really important to me, that opened up, it kind of contracted and expanded time, was I became obsessed with color and the problems of color. Largely because it seemed like a foundational philosophical and experiential thing that no one was in control of so that I couldn't, you could get to the top of the discourse pretty fast because there's not very much—you only get so far. And so, a friend of mine, Lisa Yuskavage, the painter, is color obsessed and the history of color and how it works.

I was talking with her a lot and I was like, I want you to teach me everything you know about color. And Lisa was like, You want a challenge, we'll go there. You have to go look at these paintings and just look at them until you figure something out about the color. So, one of those paintings was a Van Gogh painting in the Lehman Collection of a baby. The first impression of that painting is like, What the fuck. This is a little ugly alien. Why? Why? There's a lot of why, where I was like, Ugh. And I looked at it and looked at it. The colors on the face are so strange.

They're kind of muddy greens and ochres and pink, and the background is this insane yellow. And you think, What is this? And the more you look at it, there becomes a moment—okay, you look at how he made it, you look at how the colors are relating to each other. And then I had a moment where suddenly, it snapped into the correct light relationships that created a color that created a feeling but that was all utterly plausible. It almost felt like naturalism in a way that I would never have expected on approaching it.

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PS: Well, that's incredible about Van Gogh. I mean, it's like no matter how thick and swirly the paint, it just feels like a picture of something.

JE: And so suddenly I was sitting there and really overwhelmed with the emotion of this man confronting this baby. And you just know that he's thinking this baby doesn't know what the fuck it's in for in this world. It just came into this world, and there's beautiful things and there is horror. And it doesn't even know! It was such a deep feeling of communication that I was having through looking at color and just what was there. It became a really important painting for me also because it seems on first glance so unimportant.

LZ: But something that both of you have done now—you did it with *Las Meninas* and you just did it with the Van Gogh—is construct a narrative around a static object. Right, and so one thing that I think people don't think about when they think about criticism or when they think about great artwork is that it actually, part of what defines it as good is that it opens itself up to the possibility of constructing a narrative around it.

PS: Bad art has a very short track. I mean, really in a way, as a critic, I walk in, I'm trying to exhaust and deconstruct and dismiss the artwork, and most artwork makes that very easy.

LZ: Have there been, have you undergone a change that has radically refigured how you've looked at an artwork? Meaning you saw it and reacted one way and you changed so much that in fact when you saw it again, it had a completely different effect on you.

PS: Well, sure. My constant case is Philip Guston, when he started doing the cartoony paintings. You know, in the sixties, I absolutely revered him for this super refined, anxious abstraction, which just seemed to me it was at the absolute peak of sensibility that I can imagine for myself. And suddenly there's a Ku Klux Klan, and I was horrified. I hated it. I maintained that for quite a while, for a decade even as painter friends of mine said, You're crazy, these are great. And finally I think one night, maybe in my sleep, I woke up and said duh.

JE: I think I've noticed shifts in the things that I want to look at. There is a period where I would just breeze by still lifes, where I was like, Stuff? Stuff on a table? I don't want to look at stuff on a table! And then there became a period where I found a kind of atmosphere emotionally and a space for thinking in still life painting that became very important to me. And it helped me understand something foundational about what painting is. Really what a painting is. I'm not

talking about looking at Cézanne still lifes. I'm talking about Chardin, Zurbarán, down the line what it means, or Morandi, what it means to—

PS: Yeah. Well, Morandi is fabulous. I mean, it's like he never gets it. He knows, he knows what it is. He's not trying to paint what's there. He knows that. He wants to paint where it is. Metaphysically cannot be done, but the intensity of it and the consistency of it would just about break your heart.

LZ: If you guys each had a piece of advice to give to someone who wanted to write today, maybe a young person, what would that be? What advice would you give to, say, a young art critic today?

JE: So, I started writing because I had a teacher in art school that was a poet named Bill Berkson, and I was being a total brat. And he kind of liked it, you know, and he would just give me books to read. Oh, here's some, Auden's *The Dyer's Hand*, casually just picked this up for you. One thing that he told me when I started writing was something that he said that the editor and critic Thomas B. Hess said to him when he started writing at the same age which was: Just write it like you're telling a really smart friend who has no time for your nonsense. And I thought—

PS: Thomas B. Hess actually told me—my first thing I heard before I was an art critic, you know, in '65 I was back in New York on the Lower East Side, and all the poets writing art criticism, and I needed to write so I called ARTnews, which everybody wrote for then—and I got him on the line and tried to, sort of stammered about why I needed a job, and he said, Listen, never mind all that. Just tell me what makes you think you're qualified to walk into a gallery where some poor bastard has his paintings and to tell them they're no good. I had tremendous good luck in mentors when I started.

JE: Well, what I would say to anyone who wants to start writing about art is come play with me. I mean, I want people to play with and I want it to be fun and I want it to be smart and I want it to be rigorous. And so write something that will make someone want to play with you!

PS: That's good.

LZ: I think on that note, that's as good a place to end it as ever.

PS: All right.

LZ: Jarrett and Peter, thank you so much. That was really, really fun.

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JE: Thank you, Lucas.

PS: Thank you.

[END CREDITS]

LZ: *Dialogues* is produced by David Zwirner. You can find out more about the artists in this series by going to davidzwirner.com/dialogues.

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I'm Lucas Zwirner, and thanks so much for listening. I hope you'll join us next time.

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