To Arrive Where We Started

A

CURATORIAL PROJECT

BY

Peter Eudenbach

Redwood Library & Athenæum

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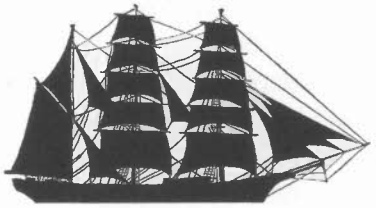
Reading Room

by

Mary Cappello



WHAT DO 19TH CENTURY AMERICAN NOVELIST, Henry James, and 21st century artist, Peter Eudenbach have in common?

They both frequented Newport's Redwood Library and Athenæum as adolescents.

For Peter, the tension of a remembered soundscape lingers to this day: he and his brother blushed inside hushed giggles while being shushed by their mother. It was the statue of a naked woman in the Terry Reading Room that got them going, long before learning the difference between "naked" and "nude." Where Henry was concerned, whether he traveled there with his sister, and brother, their father, or tutor in tow, whether he sat at a single chair beneath a window, or more sprawlingly, hunkered over a book at the end of a long sleek table, he must have found some atmospheric mortar there to build what would later become the distinctively furtive architecture of his prose style's rooms.

He must have been listening.

There's a difference between saying that a library is without sound — silent — and understanding it as a place where one is enjoined to experience a particular form of quiet. In a recent visit to the Redwood Library this past Spring, I certainly heard things — an air conditioning system, or maybe a generator, made the sound of a vault-encased breeze; a newspaper rumpled; a voice rose and fell to speak of book binding to a small group gathered there; fingers clicked on a keyboard while the xylophonic ring of a cellphone made a spray of hybrid yellow-orange tulips and poppies vibrate more vibrantly than they would on their own. Inside the stacks, the titles of books made the sound of a found poem:

The Go-Between
A Perfect Woman
The Liar
In a Dark Wood Wandering
Nobody's Child
Heaven's Net is Wide

June at First Light
Snow in August

Libraries are not about emptying the world of sound; they aim to restore quiescence to the idea of quiet. They make available a calm, inside of which one can begin to hear the voices inside of books. This type of listening that libraries lend enables us to drift, to float. It's the concept of a floating island that Peter Eudenbach's installations, *To Arrive Where We Started*, hope to remind us of, and to incite.

Peter Eudenbach works on several planes in reinterpreting the Redwood Library's surround: terrestrial, celestial, and oceanic. If the allée leading to the library's adjacent Summer House (originally built for founder, Abraham Redwood's 18th century country estate in Portsmouth) had been restored in 2010, Peter Eudenbach restores the lane again, this time having us arrive at a life boat whose shape rhymes both with the shape of the outdoor gazebo into which he has set it, and the shape of the indoor clerestory above the library's Reading Room. If we dare to climb into Eudenbach's raft (where arrows point with the words "board"), we might experience an Alice-in-Wonderland free fall down a chute and through a tunnel attached to a periscope that could spit us out into another, interior room. How did the raft arrive here? How do we arrive? From where do we come?

Since the 1990's, Peter Eudenbach has been creating site-specific installations that reinterpret space, time, and inhabitance. What is the shape of the world and how do I fit into it? Always there's a degree of cunning in Eudenbach's work, as though he's sitting alongside us in a place we all recognize but asking us to hear or see something other than what ordinarily draws our attention which he then puts to new use. In the process, he transforms our sense of being in the world. Take his *Musical Hat* (1998), in which he places a music box inside of an industrial aluminum hard hat, making the hat rotate while the music resonates from within. The melody was "arranged," Eudenbach explains, by filing away most of the tiny protruding knobs on the cylinder of the music box. Eudenbach is an inventor (see his

two-sided clock that enables time to run forward and backwards, or his lawn mower made up of 45 RPM records in lieu of cylindrical blades for cutting grass); and, Eudenbach is an engineer (see his *Coffee Table*, a table topped with twelve glass knobs that percolate when coffee is being brewed inside the table).

Part of the beauty of his work is the speed at which his created objects move, and, if still, the speed at which he places them: always, he moves deliberately and yet on tiptoe as though not wishing to disturb the quiet; he moves in time to the long broad notes of sacred music. All of his work, I want to say, begins in (a space that is akin to) a library.

"Architecture is frozen music," Peter Eudenbach reminds me, following Goethe. His re-interpretation of the triangular pediment that defines the Redwood's west façade is a case in point. Today I think I see a Constable painting in the place where the architect might have featured a relief carving there, or below that, a frieze, but, no, it's a reflection in the mirror that Eudenbach has thought to place there, showing us what's always available but out of view. If Peter Eudenbach were to design a frieze, it would be a frieze that doesn't freeze things; it would function as this mirror does inside the library's pediment; it would do things mute marble cannot do, changing as the seasons change, and with it, the light on our library books' pages, shifting as summer recedes into fall.

Eudenbach describes his work as "tactile embodiments of intuition leading viewers from a world of objects to a world of metaphor through a process of invention and juxtaposition." Glimpsing a key in the library's skylight, I wonder if the key has fallen from the sky. I imagine its clink on glass like the rattle a charm from a bracelet makes as it falls from its clasp into a grate. Looking down, we can see but not reach the lost thing. "Don't look down for what you've lost," says Eudenbach's key. "Look up for what you might find." We speak of keys to knowledge, and to human hearts; we imagine mysteries as things that can be unlocked. The Redwood Library's key is one

such mystery according to the library's Guide Book, but how does one unlock a key? Following from the years when Newport had been occupied by British forces during the American Revolution, the key to the library had been lost. An advertisement from the Director in 1790 read: "'The key of the Library being missing, supposed to be lent by the former librarian, the person who has it is earnestly requested to deliver it.'"

Will we ever know how the key was recovered? Will the books that went missing during this same period ever come to light?

The Redwood Library's Charter Mission stated that the institution was to have "nothing in view but the good of Mankind." Peter Eudenbach's imaginative, contemporary installation keys us to what we cannot see of the library; what we may never see; and what we're still to find. We can still view Sarah Peters Bowker Bliss' handwritten catalog cards; we can only view the bowling green upon which the library was built in the eye of our historical imagining. By all appearances, we think the library is entirely made of stone; what we can't tell is that its architect, Peter Harrison, employed a technique of feigned "rustication" to make the wood of the original library's façade pass for slabs of soft but stately sandstone. We will probably never know who painted the portrait of John Bunyan that hung on the library's earliest walls, though we may be able to surmise why the movingly youthful, tiredly somber, softly satined, richly neckerchiefed portrait of Washington by Rembrandt Peale on its walls never won the New Republic's view.

In Richard S. Greenough's bust of the drowned Naval Captain, Charles Hunter (1813–1873), Peter Eudenbach sees a man "drowned in a sea of hair." I see a man preserved in a milky fog of marble.

Peter brings the white frothy turbulence of the sculpture into view; I can't keep my eyes off the bust's half-hidden bow tie.

Concealed inside the folds of another sculpture in white marble gracing the library's rooms — Joseph Mozier's *American Schoolboy* (1857) — lurks another famous nineteenth century American writer.

Nathaniel Hawthorne visited Mozier's studio in Rome in the 1850s only to record in his *Italian Notebooks* Mozier's untrustworthy accounts of Margaret Fuller's final days, and Hawthorne's sense that Mozier had not let Italy keep him from being parochial. According to Hawthorne, although Mozier appeared to have white marble at his disposal, he remained a man of clay.

The last time I exited the Redwood Library and Athenæum, I noticed that my shoes made no sound on the pavement outside. Being in the library has trained me temporarily to walk more lightly in the world so as to hear: on that particular day, timed bumps in the road, or something stuck to a tire; the latch to open the door of a wrought iron gate; windmuffs on my bare ears and the passing thrurp of a bicycle's woven basket; first birds of the season: a congregation of chirps.

The last time I was in the library, I was struck by a particular image: it was of a (real) woman breast-feeding an infant inside a windowsill of the Roderick Terry Reading Room. She made me reconceive the library's white marble statuary as milk, and books, our sustenance, first and last.

To Arrive Where We Started is to return to first books and where we read them. The place where we began. Not the womb, nor the bed we were born into, but the library. For me, that would be the Darby Library, described as the "oldest public library in continuous service since 1743." Like Peter Eudenbach, I used to go there with my mother, and, like him, I remember the library's architectural features more than its books — I recall the route that took me to reading: a thinly winding staircase; a roseate window; a photograph of Abraham Lincoln at the top of the stair; a ceiling mount that seemed higher than the sky that I thought was made of paper like the cutouts I was learning to make in school. A doily on the ceiling. Like Redwood, the library was founded by Quakers, among my favorites, the Botanist, John Bartram, who is also buried in the cemetery nearby. Like Redwood, the Darby Library included Milton's *Paradise Lost* and

Paradise Regained among its first books.

Which library, Peter Eudenbach's or mine, is really, truly "the oldest" must be a matter of fine historical distinctions that are beyond my ken. What really matters is that every library is a place where life begins.

Each of us has libraries we have known, that have made us, but what of the libraries we have made? Peter Eudenbach makes a library inside the library of the Redwood Library and Athenæum, and in so doing invites us to re-visit the place where we begin, to arrive again in the rooms of our own making. Let's climb into books there as life rafts on tumultuous seas. Or as still and hollow crafts from which to contemplate quiet waters.