New Bodies: Pieter Schoolwerth by Andrew Cappetta

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Pieter Schoolwerth, *Portrait of "The Cheat with the Ace of Diamonds" (after de La Tour)*, Acrylic, oil, giclée print ink and chalk on canvas, 54 × 81 inches, 2012. All images courtesy of the artist. All images courtesy of the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery.

Pieter Schoolwerth straddles two worlds. As a painter, he creates work that merges abstraction and figuration; his most notable series, the recent *Portraits of Paintings*, looks to classic Early Modern works of art for inspiration but rearranges their form and meaning to speak to the contemporary world. Alongside his career as an artist, Schoolwerth runs the independent music label Wierd Records and organizes a weekly party at Lower East Side establishment Home Sweet Home which features regular and rotating live acts and DJs. While the music veers towards the dark, noisy, and industrial, the atmosphere at Wierd is other-wordly and liberating; Schoolwerth's goal is to forge a real, live community in an age of the increasing abstraction of social interaction. What follows is the first of a two-part conversation in which Pieter and I draw some connections between his two distinct but imbricated practices.

Andrew Cappetta Your paintings are figurative but also strongly emphasize the brushstroke, and when I first saw your work, I thought of Neo-Expressionism, but you refute that association. How is the way in which you fuse figuration and the expressive brushstroke distinct from Neo-Expressionism? How can you, as a painter, work with these older stylistic references without retreating into pastiche?

Pieter Schoolwerth I've never been particularly interested in expressing myself through painting whatever that might mean in 2012, nor in *critiquing* or *subverting* previous traditions, but rather I prefer to use paintings from the past as the raw material upon which to ground my entire practice. I see the *Portraits of Paintings* series I have been working on the past few years as being primarily allegorical in nature: each work deliberately stages the act of painting and depiction itself. A big concern of mine, and it exists in my musical interests as well, is to try and understand what is happening to the body, *the figure* you could call it, in the contemporary world. I feel that the body is becoming very unstable in the sense that it is becoming more and more difficult to tell where it is located. We are present to others on a series of screens that are surrounding everyone, whether it is your Facebook profile, your YouTube or Skype presence, your e-mail and text correspondence, your physical presence, your voice on the phone, any kind of reproduced trace of your *self* really. There are different ways of forming an idea of who you are, and today that has less to do with you being present in person right here in front of me where I can reach out and grab you, but rather how I imagine you as an amalgam of all the ways you exist to me combined together in my mind. Needless to say, one's physical presence is becoming something that is very rare in the world.

And I am not sure physical presence has the same importance as it once did to some people. And if it's not so important that it's right here to hang on to, where the hell is the body today? Maybe there's a new kind of body that's forming as a result of the way that our pulverized existence is dispersed throughout the world, through these different registers of ourselves to each other. I have very mixed feelings about this new abstracted body floating around out there in the ether and I'm always trying to negotiate them. I often resist this new body by helping to build new physical communities that bring people together for the fleshly enjoyment of each other offline in the night.

Something that I don't like about being a visual artist, particularly about being a painter, is that you're literally alone all day, and this is very complicit with the isolating forces of the Internet. I often feel like sitting here painting all day is just doing what the big other of the world wants me to do now. Even though I am using my hands in a very direct unmediated way in scraping organic matter onto a rectangle, most of the time I inherently want to resist that and get out of here. I really struggle with this as a humanist, it makes me want to be out there in the street trying to rally people together and saying, "Look, doesn't this looming isolationism bother you?"

AC Then how do see your painting practice as connected to this humanist tendency, even though you realize it prevents you from being social and keeps you alienated?

PS Well I'd like to think the isolationism is valuable when someone is (hopefully) affected by my work hanging on the wall, where they may be alone to look at it as well. One thing you have to accept about being a painter is that it's not a performative art, in the sense that you don't put your physical body up on a stage. You're inherently removed because of the nature of the medium from the way in which the final work is viewed. You're by necessity not *in* it, in the same way you are if you play in a band up in front of people as part of the work. I've always simply accepted that, and I still also believe that though I'm not inside the frame there's a lot that can go on inside there to affect people still in 2012.

I like the dialectic between painting and music because I can deal with negotiating the forces of abstraction in the world in two entirely different ways: one in painting, which is very much me here alone in my studio creating these objects that are put in a public space and effect people where I am absent—and then another way of working which is leaving the studio to help create these communities and disperse music into the social which in a way can have double the effect.

The starting point for the *Portraits of Paintings*, is to go back to a pre-Modern, pre-Abstraction period, long before photography or the digital occurred, before the web occurred, to a time when we could say, with a good degree of certainty, that the body was stable and something closer to *whole*. Humans had a much more one-to-one relationship with each other and the social was perhaps more clearly articulated. If I could a find a point in history where the body was under control I could use this as a constant in the scientific sense, a ground of sorts, to go back to in order to negotiate the new body today that is unstable. So I started making these paintings where I superimpose and compress together bodies from paintings of the past. I start from a multi-figure painting from pre-Modern history, each of the individual figures are traced and isolated, then superimposed on top of each other. Compression occurs when I start to paint on top of this tangled scaffolding that is the drawing and crush all the figures together. As I'm painting I try to find this new body that slowly emerges out of the pulverized network of lines. There is no one body that this portrait represents; this represents a fluctuating ghostly memory, or memorial to, a body that once was whole. I see it as a sort of reverse-cubism—Picasso or Braque painted a single figure from several points of view whereas I paint several figures from one point of view. This is a portrait of a body in flux, in conflict with itself. This idea of superimposition and compression is something that also exists in music.

AC Completely. The idea of compression is very key way to connect visual art and sound.

PS Digital media and the Internet use compression in order to transmit all information. The MP3 and the JPEG, the essence of how we transmit sound and images involves the compression of files, whether it is a file from a camera, a file from a computer that records sound, those are the two things that are very important that bring my two worlds together. What happens with compression of a file is you have by necessity a degree of loss of the physical, whether it is music or a visual image—you have a visceral body that has been abstracted out of this world. This loss is very predominant in our time, the sense that this thing we once had is slowly disappearing.

AC It's really clear how that is expressed in the paintings. There is this ability for the painting to transmit a particular experience of the physical world. The layering removes us from the visualization of the physical experience of the world.

PS ln all I do I am trying to keep this body together, who knows if it's working but I'm trying.

AC And is this the role your brushstroke serves, the vice that is trying to keep it all connected?

PS Yes, maybe in a way it is the connecting tissue that builds a new imaginary body not unlike plastic surgery. The figure is still present, in the sense it is a superimposed, compressed layering of different media. The process is something like this: say you have an original painting in the Louvre. Someone took the photo of that, that gets put online on the Louvre website or printed in a catalogue where I found it. I download it and print it out on a piece of paper, tracing each of the figures separately and superimposing them. Next I import the superimposition into Photoshop and print fragments of different figures out from the original file with an inkjet printer onto a piece of canvas and stretch it onto a frame. Then around these fragments I make a monochrome, a predominant mode of Modernist painting or what we could name as *art*, that will serve as a ground for finding the new body. I transfer the drawing of all four figures back on top of the monochrome and printed fragments. Then I start painting. All of these different layers that have occurred again echo the layering or the superimposition of an MP3, as well as our multi-screen presence to others in the world.

The pleasure in this process for me is that the body slowly reveals itself in the intuitive process of working once the stage is set by the drawing. The new destabilized body of today, of no one, or of whoever you are, appears and looks back. You interact with people via e-mail and on Facebook on the glowing screens of your world, and they are often completely different in person. That cryptic uncertainty is what interests and often disturbs me and it's what I'm looking for deep in the canvas ether.

AC You published a manifesto in a compilation authored by Wierd Records in 2008: The Analogue Synthesizer as a Folk Instrument of Humanist Resistance. What is the basic argument, and how is this concept reflected in your painting practice?

PS A few of my friends and I collectively published this text authored by Wierd Records—namely Sean McBride (of Martial Canterel/Xeno & Oaklander) and Josh Strawn (of Vaura/Religious to Damn/Blacklist). This was many years ago now and is a bit much to go into here. But the basic argument started from the fact that a group of us started this weekly party at a divebar under the Williamsburg bridge in 2003, it became a bunker, a meeting place, outside of what we felt was going on in contemporary music. We felt very alone with no place to go and we were listening to underground music from previous, long-lost eras. We felt no affinity for contemporary music and especially electronic music in the early naughts—it all felt very disembodied and empty, the body had been abstracted. This essay drew a line in the sand, and repositioned analogue synthesis anew as a resistance to this loss that had occurred. The bigger issue was how this echoed the idea of "community" and bringing people together offline in physical space, as a way of maintaining the social body in an era when it's totally disappearing. In the '70s and '80s the analogue synthesizer was charged with a certain idea of progress and was seen as a tool of future-making.

Today, most electronic music is made with VST software (Virtual Synthesizer Technology) synthesizers in which you click on an image of a synthesizer on a computer screen. There is a sense of mediation and abstraction, both in the music (the compressed file, in which the fidelity of the sound has been compromised) and in the means of production, the clicked image. So the analogue synthesizer to us possessed the immediacy of a folk

instrument not unlike the acoustic guitar. When you push a key, there is a triggering of electricity that is closer to a one-to-one relationship to the world than the abstraction inherent in clicking on a computer screen. My concerns with the label and party are different now, and synth music has been alive and well for the greater part of a decade. But in 2006-7 when we began writing down our ideas, this felt like a necessary resistance to the destabilized, evacuated body put forth in electronic music.

AC I am very interested in experimental music, and I didn't have this same reaction to live computer music performance as you did, though I know others that did. I felt that there was this interesting time for computer music beginning in the later 1990s and the early 2000s, on labels such as Mego. I remember hearing those earlier Fennesz records, where it sounded like a computer, and you got a sense of the limitations of the medium. It produced really interesting results, but then the software became too good and too concerned about trying to perfectly model pre-existing things, and the work suffered because of it.

PS I was interested in this kind of sound too but a shift came when the conditions of production of computer music lined up with the conditions of digital distribution of files around 2003 or so—iTunes, MySpace, download torrents—that's when things began to change.

AC But how would that result in less interesting work, or work of a lesser quality?

PS Because it allowed for immediate evacuation, and this soon transformed both new music itself and the conditions it circulated in. When someone makes a song on a guitar or analogue synthesizer, there is a translation that occurs whether it is through amplification or some kind of recording device, similar to when one brushes pigment onto a canvas to congeal into an image, and then it goes into the computer and is dispersed into the ether. If it is made in the computer, there is one less step – it is already in there.

AC So the human presence is erased.

PS No, more like it never existed—there's no imperfection, errors in the sounds or fuck-ups in the performance to allow the fragile human presence to seep through.

What followed in the next few years from the medium, the computer, synching up with dispersal, was suddenly there was such a massive amount of music out there for the taking online. I'm really tired of hearing people complain about the obvious fact of music being free, it just *is* unfortunately for bands and labels, deal with it. What I spend more time thinking about though—something that isn't discussed so much—is that when anything becomes free both its use value and cultural value change. Social media have entirely co-opted the function that music once had to help young people form their identity, and music has become something like another one of many decorative applique elements that inform one's social media presence online. Of course this isn't the case for everyone—I know a lot of die-hard music fans still, but even some of them voraciously consume albums and disperse their knowledge and interests differently. It's very common for people to download 10–15 albums a day, click through a few tracks, blog about and

post a few online and do it all over the following day, soon forgetting those of a just few days or weeks before. This isn't to say its value is less than it once was, though to anyone who grew up in different eras it certainly feels like it is. But it is simply more ephemeral, and the conditions under which it circulates are different.

Portrait of Rest on the Flight into Egypt with Sheet Music (after Caravaggio), Oil on canvas, 68 × 85 inches, 2009.

AC When you were saying that Wierd creates a community, this was true of all musical subcultures. Music was once the glue for youth cultures; but now it is Facebook.

PS Yes, along with creating community it was also the glue in one's body. Before the Internet, as a consumer of music as a kid, you would say, "Who am I? I am young, I am depressed and socially awkward, I like to wear paisley shirts and pointy shoes—so I'll listen to The Smiths." You say, "I am a unified subject, what do I feel?" You needed to go outward into the world to find music that reflected what you were feeling inside your freaky little subject-dom. Once the Internet arrived, you started to see all of this immediate freedom of choice in identity formation. Young people can now say, "Who do I want to be today? I'll be Mod on Monday, a B-boy on Tuesday, and a punk on Wednesday." It makes complete sense to me that many people say they "like everything" nowadays.

The pop stars of the pre-Internet/pre-Abstraction era were very different from people walking around in the street—it was like looking through a window out onto these otherworldly, charismatic beings from a distant galaxy, entirely unlike the fans, and they were attractive precisely because they were so different. Today most pop stars look like the plumber or dude who works in the deli. Fans don't look to find something different in a pop star, rather with the rise of the web and digital media the window became a mirror where the fan now sees himself. This is how it connects to painting. I see what has happened to popular music in the last decade as very similar to what is often argued Manet initiated in the 1860s, the window closed down on the picture plane and the entire game has changed as a result. Maybe the classic Cheap Trick song should now be appended to chime "I Want You to Want You."

AC So now you want to hear about the *American Idol* star, or hear about how Justin Bieber was discovered on YouTube.

PS I think you could say in a way now perhaps everyone is trying to get themselves back. When the body has been destabilized and abstracted, unconsciously the immediate response is to reclaim it by consuming it digitally through compressed files. I think the Internet reversed the flow of desire implicit in identity formation and turned the window into a mirror, and that's when you had the birth of inwardly directed irony which was the ethos of indie rock, cool hunting, trend marketing, and focus groups. The focus group was a symptom of what abstraction did to consumption. They asked, "What do you guys want?" and the focus group responded, "I want someone like me, because that is what I like."

AC So it is no longer about offering a dream image, but rather something *real*?

PS No, more like offering an *image* of something "real". The question is how did that shift occur? I don't mean it to sound apocalyptic, I just mean it to sound literal—I often really think people want to have themselves back. The complicated thing often is that it is a self some were never aware they had, or were even interested in the fact they may have felt at one point. I think this relates to a relatively new phenomena of people being nostalgic for experiences they never had that is often made possible by what YouTube and the like on the web are doing to cultural memory—there's a complete revisionism of history occurring across the board. You can now know everything about what live shows by any bands, or any historical events of any kind looked like, anything except for what it was like to *have your body there.* I meet kids at the weekly party all the time born in the late '80s or early '90s who talk about how they "miss the '80s." I guess literally they did miss it, so they're quite correct. What is interesting in this assertion is that it makes complete sense that an unstable, vaporous body may be more prone to *missing* things, as it doesn't always know where *it* is.

I invited Genesis Breyer P-Orridge to perform at the party as Psychic TV last summer, and this event brought up many of these issues and was a very emotional experience for me. In particular I asked her if she would be interested in performing songs from a series of PTV albums from the early '80s which had never been performed live, so there is no existing image of her singing them. Yet these songs, almost more than any others, trigger nostalgia

for myself and many fans. Her body has changed but her voice is identical, and as soon as s/he began singing I really felt the emotional confusion of *missing* something I had never experienced, and no one had ever seen, it was indeed Wierd. In a way I think I was nostalgic for the reproduction, the recording, *through* the original, a body which has been lost, replaced by Genesis's newly destabilized body which has been sculpturally abstracted by her own hand.

AC Having maintained a life in both art and popular music, while keeping them separate, do you see any difference in the effectiveness of either as a tool for this humanist resistance?

PS It is hard to compare contemporary art with my musical activities in the social because it exists in such a different realm. The art world is very small, inaccessible and forever safely protected from *the popular*, unlike music. The 1% are the ones that have my paintings, or anyone's paintings for that matter. Once in a while I have this opportunity to invite the people who come to Wierd to attend one of my art shows, but there isn't any social dimension in the art world like there is in popular or underground music. To that degree, how the images I make and the sounds I produce circulate entirely differently.

AC Do you see art as the realm where you theorize this condition of how we live today, and music—and what you do with Wierd—as a way of creating actual tools for living? Is that why you keep them separate?

PS They work very nicely together by fulfilling different things but are basically the same. What I've always maintained is that having a great party is an art form very much like making a painting. It's about composition, color, gathering different effects at different intensities. Having a social gathering is not much different from organizing colors and shapes on a canvas. It's just that you're dealing with bodies and their accordant personalities. That is why I have always called my pigment a body. The pigment on the canvas is an allegory for the body in the club.

AC This is something that I have experienced while at Wierd. I understand that you maintain a certain degree of control over the aesthetic of the party, and you feel it. There is something about the level of fog that I find fascinating. It emphasizes physical presence. The fog itself is a physical presence, so when you enter the room, you feel like you are entering something, but not just an event. It is a sculptural experience. You have to come to terms with this physical presence.

PS Fog has a very complicated relationship to architectural experience. It really changes the way that you perceive space because it impedes. In classical art, say for instance a Baroque painting, you would use a recessional composition to create deep space in which you can see far back into the picture. In a way, fog creates Modernist space—it flattens. I love what happens when people come to Wierd for the first time and bring their flash camera. What you get in the final photograph is essentially a monochrome. It looks like a Gerhard Richter from the '70s. Fog can also create intimacy. And intimacy is very conducive to creating a social body. It is warm, soft, and alive.

AC I don't feel it is an alienating experience, but I feel that one could read it this way.

PS That unfortunately comes from people's misconceptions about the music—especially from the memory of the ever-affected British tradition of New Wave. In a way, fog functions in the same way as the analogue synthesizer. It used to be a signifier of the otherworldly, alienated, and detached. At Wierd we use fog to create the reverse effect, to create a sense of a social body that is connected in a very intimate way. When you have a big empty cold room, you are less comfortable to socialize. In a room where you can only see a few people in the fog, it makes you more comfortable to talk to people. Or you can hide, in the same way you could hide before the Internet. Unlike the pseudo-freedom of the web, the fog creates a sense of real freedom amongst other bodies that is very conducive to producing a community.

AC It has the same function as the brushstrokes which suture the body together in your paintings. The fog connects the bodies that are present.

PS Exactly. With the fog, as time moves on, there is a softening that occurs in the room similar to what happens with a soft-focus filter on a camera, the harshness of the world is diminished. It creates space to breathe that is a relief from the intensity and abstraction outside. There is no freedom anymore because of the Internet, it's like a big wet towel put down on personal private space in which to grow and develop. As Occupy Wall Street often rails, there is less public space where one can feel as free as old triumphantly seedy and dangerous NYC, and I hope Wierd can be one of these safe havens in the night.

AC The Internet has led to the privatization of so many things, even experience. This is why I see a connection between the community at Wierd and Occupy Wall Street because they both share a concern about this privatization of our social world.

PS My perception of the abstraction of the body and the effect this has on the social has changed since we wrote that essay in 2007. I want Wierd to be less a resistant force within the music world and more a place where people can experience freedom in the social, the freedom of people having someplace to go. What is slowly getting lost? What happens when people have nowhere left to go to enjoy themselves? And then—there is the most daunting question—what happens when people stop going to things?

AC Which is what Mark Zuckerberg says about the future of Facebook—that you won't just say you went to something on Facebook but rather you would experience it on Facebook.

PS When did *the experience* get divorced from *going* to things?

AC Exactly, when does the representation of experience substitute for the experience?

PS I see this all the time with bands. "Wow, that was an amazing show last night, man." But then I say, "Wait a minute, you weren't there." They say, "Well, I saw the video." The semiotic sign splits, and *experience* gets detached from *being present.* Maybe that's what happens when "experience" is not about *being there* but about the *image* of being there—

which is similar to the logic of the VST synthesizer—there's a split within the pulverized body, so thought is no longer internal and there is no need to leave your interior space to be "in the social."

AC It is interesting that the social world, the body, and the body's relationship to its environment are all important to your work with Wierd and your painting practice. As you know, social practice is a major presence in the art world. Are you wary of bringing Wierd into the art world and why?

Portrait of "The Supper At Emmaus" (after Caravaggio), Acrylic, oil, giclée print ink and chalk on canvas 48 × 63 3/8 inches, 2012.

PS Having a foot equally in the art world and underground music and doing clubs for two decades now has made me very aware of how the art world relentlessly, by market necessity, usurps and sucks the venomous life force out of subcultural communities and resistance movements, intricate social bodies in which a group of lone individuals have often worked very hard to build a sensitized world that has tremendous private meaning that they believe in wholeheartedly. A community is a fragile thing, it's always changing and can fall apart at any moment if you don't take special care of it, and for this reason I have always protected it. The process that the art world enacts in these situations is very similar to that of my paintings: a group of *outsider* people is invited into the frame, and the social body they have built is abstracted, leaving just an empty shell that is an image of

the group that is then sacrificially offered to the public, hung up on the gallery walls and museum bookstore to rot. The group, if not already dead by this point, usually ceases to exist soon after, never fails.

There is no social dimension to the art world today, it's impossible. Wierd is so important to me because it does provide this; I protect it with my life. It's my friends, it's my family. But in some ways, it's inevitable I suppose that it is seen as part of my art practice as people have long been tiredly telling me for years, it is this *sculptural work* as you called it—yeah, yeah I got it, ok. I simply don't feel the need to take Wierd out of the social and put it into the private space of the art world, where God forbid it could interpreted as yet another sad work of relational aesthetics, which was one of the true low points of art in the last few decades that I found rather depressing. If for the sake of your argument we name Wierd as *art*, then I also like the idea that this (dare I say) *project* (a word very much itself unfortunately symptomatic of a post-abstraction mindset in that it suggests a lack of commitment) could simply unfold in ever-vulnerable public space, and not in the private space of the art world where meaning is entirely controlled and dead on arrival.

In the beginning, relational aesthetics was amusing enough— basically it was the effort of a few somewhat clever and market savvy characters to enact a banal Decontextualization 101—as in, "Ok so hey lets name the gallery as a club, restaurant, bookstore, or fashion runway—brilliant right?" This was fine, whatever, like any average Chelsea art opening they were gratuitously awkward gatherings of aging socialites, ambitious grad students, and a sprinkling of Eurotrash tourists soberly standing around under harsh fluorescent lights at 6pm asking each other what exactly they were doing there as a spray painted 2×4 hung overhead, or someone fumbled around in the corner trying to get the amp to power up or reheated takeout on a hotplate—certainly not my idea of a good time. Unlike the boring lefty critique of relational aesthetics, there was certainly no elitism to the dinner party, god knows these events weren't the most fabulous gatherings of people. I remember the rather desperate cattle calls certain shady gallerists and their directors made in attempts to persuade the young cool kids to show up to artificially construct *meaning* and *authenticity*. The problem for me began when the gallerists and curators then began flying in the French and German theorists to recontextualize these events through abstruse claims that they were in some way skirting the object to transgress the market by summoning *the social*. This was complete bullshit to me. The gallery is a private space and will never be a place conducive to creating a social community, and there was no critique going on. It was another clever inside joke for a couple guys to make some easy cash behind the scenes. It's kind of like when you walk into your local bank branch and they offer you free coffee and donuts in the name of celebrating the suspension of ATM fees. You eat their stale shit and then shuffle home, only to receive your statement a few weeks later with a mysterious additional $19.99 "processing fee" added … My friend Blake is the world's foremost historian on the negative dialectics of free coffee and donuts though so you really should ask him about this. Regardless, many of these poorly orchestrated *parties* sold for upward of six figures. *"Viva la resistance,* awesome—now lets go shopping!"

In general, I was always very skeptical of the broader trend in so much non-object-oriented art and Conceptualism in the '90s and early 2000s that made overtly self-congratulatory market-transgressing claims as occurred in nth generation institutional critique, relational aesthetics, problematizing issues of display *et cetera*: whether it was people giving away candy and detritus you could take home and throw away, objectifying fashion models in the supposed name of full-frontal feminist critique or what have you. Unlike the pioneers of objectless art like Michael Asher or Robert Irwin where there was this amazing attention to craft, this was also lost gradually in the later generations. The way I see it more and more, work that attempts to remove the object and transgress the market is simply the most market-oriented art. *Capital* is the ultimate abstraction par excellence—an imaginary object with no substance. So, making work in a form that is consistent with capital is simply complicit with what the big Grim Reaping *other* of abstraction wants. Like the analogue synth, I think this is a good argument more and more for the importance of painting and craft in general in art and the world—they remove the artwork away from this complicity.

Pieter Schoolwerth shows work at <u>Miguel Abreu Gallery</u>, and runs <u>Wierd Records</u>.