

# To Not Fall Asleep

art blog by Lutz Eitel about Rudolf Reibers Caromboat

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[To drown and never be heard of again](#)



This is the first post in a small series where I invite artists I know and like to send me an image of something they've done without much information except the technical data. I will then proceed to wrack my poor brains and see how far I get. The above image will in any case be the easiest of the run, since I'm probably the world's leading expert on Rudolf Reiber. Ha! So much so that while I had not seen his Caromboat (2010) before he mailed me the photo, it already felt familiar, because he once had told me over a beer: "I'm taking a boat next and will be putting a billiard tabletop in it." I immediately retorted with what every sane person would think, as long as they'd be anchored to the real world by a beer: "What in the hell would you want to do that for?" And like most of the good artists I know, Rudolf didn't launch into a lecture about boats and billiards and their inherent meaning, but just said: "Wait. It's gonna be good, you'll see."

I probably should have spoiler-tagged the image above. Because, let's stay with the artist's declaration of intent for the moment: it can actually prove a ballast pretty hard to throw overboard—and has been for me. I sort of had to reacquaint myself with the reality of a project that had seemed sort of exhausted once I had turned Rudolf's description of it over in my mind for a couple of times. While it's very easy to translate this piece (like many of Rudolf's) into immediate words, I certainly wouldn't choose the Caromboat to explain what he's up to to anyone, it just doesn't sound good enough in words. I'd rather mention the work where he put an alarm system on an empty gallery wall, or the one where he blotted out all the stars in the sky of a Thomas Ruff artprint. These two seem much better when you translate them into words, because they're more meta, they relate to Yves Klein exhibiting a void, or Rauschenberg erasing de Kooning, and all of that is mothered not by Cage's silent piece itself, but by Cage saying that the audience didn't have to experience the work personally, it would be enough to know it existed. That is to say, we're on safe ground.

Anyway, I simply couldn't help judging Rudolf's piece before actually seeing it. And it didn't make for a good story. While this is art you sometimes can easily put into words, these words can top the work like a bad haircut.



To continue in the same mold, I should probably have written about it blindfolded. Rudolf sowing the references, me reaping the connotations. The boat is almost too easy, German romanticism, Böcklin, but also Dante, Homer (Winslow as well as the Odyssey dude), Jerome K. Jerome, Hitchcock, you name it: a boat is a vessel to carry meaning. And then billiards . . . well, actually I have to seriously mention one table there, because else you wouldn't trust me anymore, and that is from Gabriel Orozco. The artist made it elliptical and constructed a setting where the red ball sort of bombs the other two from above. Elliptical table of course stands for the world; apart from that the work seems about the game itself to a surprising degree, it's like the revenge of the red ball, that's the one you usually don't play, is it?

While now I could go on and list the similarities and differences between the two works, it would get me nowhere, because the objects modified in these pieces that can be translated into simple sentences do not really seem susceptible to classical iconography, they're still too much the things they were before they ever dreamed about becoming art when they'd grow up. They represent reality that's been willfully screwed with (and I'm sure the beer still figures in here somewhere).



[Interlude: When my brother and I became old enough to spend our afternoons in front of the tv screen, as is proper, our family suddenly had a sort of spare playroom. It wasn't sufficiently large for table tennis, so they decided to get a smallish pool table. While that soon became no more than another powerless tool to try and kill time with, the table always kept a certain media-supported glamour (The Hustler!), something of an elementary coolness (plus on the few occasions when later in life I was in a situation to play, I proved myself rather more adept than most of my unsuspecting playing partners). Though the thing standing there through my early teen years means I of course will never again have a desire to play again, I still remember its green surface with fondness, it speaks to me of the profound luxury of boredom, that is the privilege of youth. (Both of which I'll never enjoy again.)]

So now, instead of having everything figured out beforehand, I will actually have to think about the thing, because I have a photo. Look above. (I haven't seen the darn canoe in the flesh, by the way, and I don't intend to, and anyone who tells you that you can't talk about art which you haven't seen in the original is a capitalist dead bent to destroy the frigging ozone layer. I'm serious.)

Part of what immediately endears me to the boat is that I know how they do the so-called Gartenschau, the landscape park on parade, here in Germany. Carefully groomed recreational areas within city limits—touched up not to provide little pockets of nature with prescribed viewing points like in English gardening, and not to rape nature just to prove the superiority of reason like in French gardening, but to furnish the green, make it inoffensive, habitable, and mildly useful. Within that, the boat is really an outpost of art in public space in general, which is usually about power structures—and you could argue that the best examples of that sad genre are probably the most reprehensible in their gender policies, but that's for another post.

So rather, let's walk the knoll like Diderot used to walk the academy into a painting, looking not for motif and meaning, but for psychology. The Caromboat is like a creature, maybe restricted in the sort of sense it makes, or rather, a mutation maybe senseless in itself (like all good mutations are before evolution harnesses them), and one that will not reproduce—there will be no billiard boats throughout the history of art like there are ferries into the nether lands. But there it is, and it has a vibe.

The boat houses three billiard balls that have an inclination to react against the elements together, they huddle more than they smack each other, they wouldn't want any outright confrontation, that would be more drama than they could take. (The lake they live in might be small by objective standards, but it is completely sufficient for a billiard ball to drown in and never be heard of again.) So the balls seem to depend on each other. They stay close, following each other's movements; there's nothing they can do against their situation, but they can gain some solace from a solidarity which stands in opposition to the game they were originally created to serve.

Any object with sufficient mass creates gravity that longs for company from any other object.

But Rudolf, what if it rains?

