

OSMOS

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Love and Bottle Rockets: Brooke Alderson and Peter Schjeldahl

Public opening: Saturday, July 1, 2023, 6 to 9 pm
Bring a dish to pass (in keeping with tradition)

Exhibition on view until July 17, 2023

For more than 25 years, **Brooke Alderson** and **Peter Schjeldahl** welcomed friends, colleagues, and enthusiasts of all ages from near and far at their forested mountainside property in the Western Catskills for Fourth of July communal feasting and fireworks.

Love and Bottle Rockets is an exhibition curated by **Cay-Sophie Rabinowitz** and designed by Christian Rattemeyer with support from Scott Hill at OSMOS Station in Stamford to commemorate what Brooke and Peter did for the community year after year. The exhibition includes sketches, ephemera, filmed documentation, photographs, props, and relics from 26 years of Fourth of July gatherings. *Love and Bottle Rockets* pays tribute to Brooke as Delaware County's most generous host while remembering Peter, who is revered globally for his art writing and remembered locally for his narrative firework performances.

A few months before his passing, I got up the nerve to talk to Peter about showing this material, and I was relieved that he didn't dismiss my suggestion that the fireworks were his way of "making one artwork a year." It was especially cool that he laughed at my calling it "more Gesamtkunstwerk than jingoism."

Brooke's answer to the question about how all this got started makes very clear two things: the gathering was always tied to its location and about sharing: "It started out as ten friends who came up to the property in Bovina, where Peter and I were living in a trailer while trying to figure out the site where we would build a house. For that we had to clear a lot of trees and make a bonfire. Peter had bottle rockets, which he joyously threw into the fire, while we all drank whiskey and shared food."

I found Peter's recollections on some rumpled pages in an old wooden box:

It started with participatory firecrackers and bottle rockets. That would never change. (Our age standard for kids was the ability to work a Bic lighter.) Within a couple of years, the addition of larger rockets and of fire-fountains, mortar tubes, and, especially, "cakes" (bundled mortars) suggested doing a show. Everybody seemed to enjoy that, and then to look forward to it. There ensued a long and eventful, trial-and-error-error-and-error, at times-learning experience.

I didn't know what I was doing until, bit by bit, it was done. But I had terrific collaborators, far too many to list but notably including, for longevity and all sorts of support, Gerry Marzorati; for technical advances and finesse, Seamus Gerraghty; and, for blooming partnership, Scott Hill.

Also, from the start, I had rules. Each year's show would be bigger than the last and as little like a conventional fireworks display as possible. I wanted surprise and intensity. (Beauty I ignored. Fireworks can't help but be beautiful.) This led to shooting stuff sideways, and back and forth, as well as up. Depth, between very near and far, became my chief concern. Normal displays are just sky-painting. I went for sculpture.

The show's co-author was the lay of Brooke's and my land: tiers descending from the house to a strip of lawn and then a stream (the Little Delaware River), a meadow, and a forested mountain. By sheer luck, these zones share a sort of natural proscenium at our place. I always composed the show to address the midpoint of the house. This was arbitrary when larger audiences spilled out to the sides, but it helped me think.

Nearest, on the lawn, came the crewed firing line, which varied in length until settling on seven stations, with as many friends setting off small cakes, masses of tiny shrieking rockets called Saturns (adored by everyone), and big mortar tubes, all as fast as they could light the fuses. (Any dead time between fireworks palls. We strove to be continuous.) In later years the line was supplemented, in the meadow, by recruits who started the show by releasing paper lantern balloons, while Tom Grove led us in the National Anthem, and then banged away with loadable mortar tubes.

For some years I experimented with the stream—using rafts and, after several miserable failures, managing to shoot things from underwater—but no one much noticed the results. So I gave up on it except as a reflecting surface for fountains along the far bank. (I liked pretty effects as filigree for the more important ultraviolence.)

The meadow served us well. Stuff hidden in the high grass seemed to erupt, volcano-fashion. I'm proudest of the trick of bundling hundreds of Roman candles and having them fire at low angles from all sides. This looked like war. I like to say that fireworks should be all the good parts of warfare, with none of the bad parts.

I got the idea of loading ordnance in trees from seeing, on TV, the Eiffel Tower spurt fire on New Year's Eve, 1999. (Thank you, France.) The most laborious, and fallible, preparation for the show became duct-taping of cakes to branches on the mountain. City folks often feared that we would start a forest fire. I came to value and then to cultivate fear, which, when nothing bad happens, tends to topple into ecstasy. My watchwords: never mind ooh and ahh, think scream and sob.

People naturally wonder about the cost. One year, a competition of guesses ranged into several tens of thousands of dollars. The actual figure then was between two and three thousand. We topped out, in 2015, at five-thousand-something. Never underestimate Chinese economies of scale and productivity. (I remember when we got fireworks that were made in Missouri and North Dakota. That ended.)

Where and how did we get the stuff? What were the legalities? Those are interesting questions, no doubt. I will answer them just as soon as certain statutes of limitation expire or Hell freezes over, whichever happens first.

OSMOS invites you to join us for this exhibition, and if you wish to come to the July 1 event, bring food and your recollections about Brooke and Peter's Fourth of July gatherings. There will be space for all around the bonfire.