

MARTOS GALLERY

TEXTE ZUR KUNST

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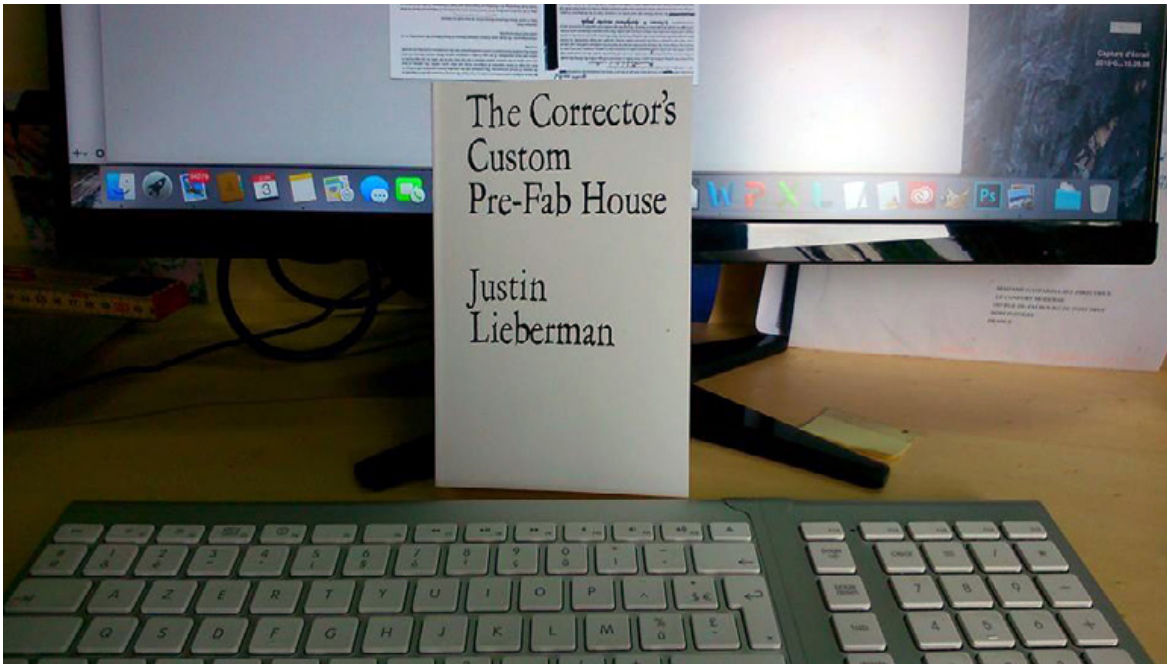
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TEXTE ZUR KUNST

POETRY

LESS IS MORE?

John Miller on Justin Lieberman's "The Corrector's Custom Pre-Fab House"



Justin Lieberman, "The Corrector's Custom Pre-Fab House," 2015

Long time *New Yorker*, Justin Lieberman disappeared in 2014. Really, he has since been showing and working outside of the US. But his apparent absence, given his recent work, nevertheless set off a fantasy that just maybe he had been swallowed-up by the hoarded objects amassed for his 2009 exhibitions "The Corrector's Custom Pre-Fab House" and "The Corrector in the High Castle." Last fall, he re-emerged (in part) with a book a neat black-and-white affair, borrowing its title from the former show that systematically catalogs a collectively owned amalgamation of Western junk.

Known for his own engagement with Western consumerism, his turning of shit to gold, *per se*, artist John Miller, here, reviews Lieberman's book, which presents an American dream via 312 pages of so many useless/useful objects drolly defined.

This book, by self-described "malcontent artist" Justin Lieberman, is essentially a catalogue of refuse; or to put it more charitably, of "second-hand goods." Titled "The Corrector's Custom Pre-Fab House," it represents a heterogeneous mass of stuff, with entries organized alphabetically from "A-1 Bottle" to "Wooden Cabinet," a description and a matter-of-fact black-and-white thumbnail representing each item. The best way to read it is to skip around, jumping, say, from "Intercom Speaker" to "Cooler." Such a method would at least echo the systemic chaos that this project – and Lieberman's oeuvre as a whole – implies. That kind of readerly montage also creates a certain textual frisson. The writing itself is engaging, taking up a polyvocal style spanning autobiographical musings, flights of (stoner) fancy, ad copy lifted straight from pack-



Justin Lieberman, "The Corrector's Custom Pre-Fab House," 2015

aging and eBay posts, art criticism, conspiracy theory, and philosophical speculation. Through this commentary, Lieberman emerges as a quasi-Talmudic scholar of junk.

Even as Lieberman loves the stuff he apparently hoards, a cynical if nuanced humor runs throughout:

McDonald's Playset: As soon as I spied this McDonald's playset outside of the Pro-Life center I knew I had to have it at any price. An odd impulse for me, because I regard anything having to do with McDonald's as being completely evacuated of meaning by endless successive layers of appropriation by culture-jammers and the like. To me, McDonald's has become like nature. That is to say, it has become a traditional and conservative subject matter for artworks like birds, flowers, skulls, etc. [...]

As does an awareness of history:

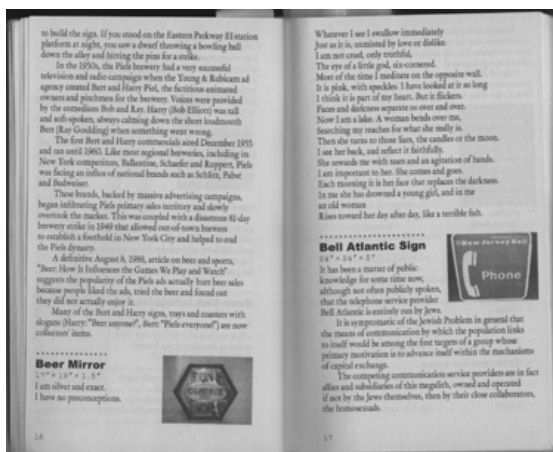
Harley Eagle: The obvious thing to do here would be to go into some kind of history of the Hell's Angels and the way in which their "bad behavior" represents freedom and an American ideal. 30 years ago Hunter S. Thompson did it. And a magazine like Vice would probably do it even today. Why? Why does the legacy of anti-social transgression linger?

At times, however, Lieberman's sarcasm gets the better of the object in question. For example, what he has to say about a sign emblazoned with the logo of the temporary employment agency Manpower devolves into bitter scatological humor.

Of course the Manpower sign, even as a dated artifact, is bound up with the routine exploitation of labor, but Lieberman's invocation of "toilet licking, butt wiping, shit sifting [...] and [...] turd analysis" comes off as editorial overkill. In contrast, when he sometimes holds back, the result is hilariously deadpan:

Totem Pole: A vertical stack of wooden heads of representations of various animals.

In "Corrected Proof," an essay that follows the various listings, Lieberman explains how the book resulted from two New York gallery shows he made in 2009 about collecting: "The Corrector in the High Castle" and the eponymic "The Corrector's Custom Pre-Fab House." "Corrector" turns out to be a stereotypically Japanese mispronunciation of the word "collector" – with particular reference here to the Phillip K. Dick character Nobosuke Tagomi, who collects pre-WWII American artifacts. (Tagomi appears in Dick's 1963 book "The Man in the High Castle," which takes as its premise a world in which the United States has lost the Second World War to the Germans and Japanese; here, Tagomi's collecting suggests apocalyptic defeat.) The first show simulated a domestic interior that the second "turned inside out" via a twenty-five-foot-high igloo comprised of steel boxes. Lieberman stuffed these igloo boxes with his "collections" and filled the gaps



with polyurethane foam. He cites two Dan Graham models as inspiration for this inside/outside dichotomy: “Alteration to a Suburban House” and “Proposal for Video Projection of Activities Inside a Suburban House” (both 1978). Like Graham, Lieberman is concerned with articulations of public and private space. Whereas Graham, however, links popular culture to styles of media consumption and representation, Lieberman embraces the degradation of material artifacts. If Graham is post-Minimalist, Lieberman is a maximalist. Especially pertinent here are Graham’s observations (in his 1983 essay “Theater, Cinema, Power”) on Giulio Camillo’s “memory theater,” which links memory to symbolic images and objects. What memories might be attached to the items in Lieberman’s collections?

Lieberman begins “Corrected Proof” with a citation from Jean Baudrillard: “[...] he who does not collect can never shake off an air of impoverishment and depleted humanity.” The artist, however, notes in this project how quickly his aim shifted from collecting to hoarding: “The collections were not true collections, any more than the gallery was a true apartment.” Instead of selectively picking individual items, Lieberman ordered items categorically on eBay. Often, these were things that held little to no interest for him, collectibles such as stamps or baseball cards. This attitude, paradoxically, approximates the sensibility of today’s “flipper” art collector. Everything is

fungible; nothing needs to be held onto for very long. Notably, in these simulated collections, it is the objects themselves – and not those disinclined to acquire them – that now paradoxically yield “an air of impoverishment and depleted humanity.” Perhaps it is for this reason that Lieberman decided to write a text for each of the things he had amassed. But given their large number, he immediately realized he could not, in fact, write “truly thoughtful” texts for everything, so he lifted descriptions from the Internet – product review sites especially, because “those seemed to have a particular combination of sincerity and triviality that already qualified as a kind of parody.” Though these concerns may be trivial, their aesthetic cry for attention is a matter of symbolic life or death. Lieberman also enlisted the aid of friends and relatives, “amping [the product reviews] up to a certain degree, trying to raise the level of hysteria to the point where deficiencies in sense or proper use of language might go unnoticed.”

Another significant precedent is Martha Rosler’s “Monumental Garage Sale” (1973), both a performance and an actual sale that allegorized Rosler’s status as a single mother living on a shoestring. For this, Rosler’s offerings included the books and clothing typical of flea markets, swap meets, and garage sales; and she combined these with personal items such as letters, baby shoes, and even used diaphragms. While she cast the



"Justin Lieberman: The Corrector's Custom Pre-Fab House," Marc Jancou, New York, 2009, installation view

garage sale as “an art form of contemporary society,” her work during graduate school (at the University of California San Diego) drew fire from the circle around Herbert Marcuse (who taught at UCSD at the time) because it seemingly not only instrumentalized the artwork, but also portrayed it as something that could be used up. Generationally, both Rosler and Graham mapped artistic tropes onto a broad sociological field; Lieberman, meanwhile, seems to seek refuge from a repressive political economy in the base heterogeneity of junk. In this respect, Rosler’s role as a woman trying to re-capitalize her possessions is the exact opposite of Lieberman as hoarder, funding his accumulation with promised gallery advances. In any event, eBay’s global systemization of second-hand goods has eclipsed the vernacular of the garage sale entirely.

Regardless of whether they are lawn chairs, Frisbees, croquet sets, or copper plates, the objects Lieberman presents in this book exude a particular melancholia that derives from the “just past,” the interval that Walter Benjamin identified as out of fashion, but not yet historical. These are commodities that have relinquished their utopian promise. Like the large-scale sculptures of many other artists, Lieberman’s magnum opus, his monument, the twenty-five-foot-high igloo built from such commodities, wound up on the scrap heap because it could not find a buyer. And it’s at this juncture, the moment of the desperate re-capitalization, that Lieberman, as a seller and not a buyer, approaches Rosler’s allegorical figure. Here, the artist admits how he became implicated in the very conditions he critiques: “*The Corrector’s Custom Pre-Fab House* was a symbolic parody of apocalyptic proportions, a critical representation of the shitty reality of the American Dream. But,

by an interesting twist of fate, it was more than that as well, because even as I mocked that dream, I followed it. I bought a house in the country and stocked it with my objects.”

While Lieberman laments a system that would reject “a complex sculpture weighing more than three tons,” I have to admit that I myself feel better off with just the book – and without the piles of VHS tapes immortalized in resin or any of the other stuff. And I would be happier with an e-book, if that were an option. But in spite of all that, the book is best because it is the artist’s clearest distillation of ideological interpellation, what he describes as “the ambition that the structure I inhabited had created for me” – namely his own genealogy as a subject.

Justin Lieberman, *The Corrector’s Custom Pre-Fab House*, ed. by J. Lieberman/Jill Gasparina, Poitiers: Le Confort Moderne / Les Presses Du Reel, 2015.

CREDITS

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(208, 209); Thea Djordjadze, Sprüth Magers, Foto: Timo Ohler (211, 212, 213); Marc Kokopeli, Lomex, NY (214, 216); Fredrik Værsløv, Bergen Kunsthall, Foto: Vegard Kleven (218, 219); ProLitteris, Zürich, Foto: Caroline Minjolle (220); Friedrich Christian Flick Collection (223); Kravis Collection, Foto: Marian Goodman Gallery (224); Museum of Modern Art, NY, Foto: Martin Seck (224); Collection S.M.A.K., Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent, Foto: Martin Seck (229); VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Foto: Rheinisches Bildarchiv Köln/Britta Schlier (230); VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Palais de la découverte, Universcience, Paris (232); VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Foto: Mathias Voelzke (235, 236); VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn (237); Lukas Duwenhögger, Artists Space, Collection Charles Asprey, London, Foto: Jean Vong (238, 239, 240); Foto: Frederick Eberstadt (242); Vimeo, @Gianmarco Del Re, Cafe Oto (245); Jay Sanders (246)

NÄCHSTE AUSGABE / UPCOMING ISSUE

Heft / No. 104: DAS INDIVIDUUM / THE INDIVIDUAL



21 JUSTIN LIEBERMAN

BORN 1977, MIAMI
LIVES IN BOSTON

UNTITLED (BRICK WALL), 2001

WATERCOLOUR ON PAPER

55 x 75 cm (22 x 30 inches)

Signed and dated on the reverse

ESTIMATE: US\$800-US\$1,000

AUS\$1,500-AUS\$1,800

PROVENANCE

LFL Gallery, New York

Lieberman is a young American artist who dropped out of high school at age 16 then studied film theory with Jean-Luc Godard in Milan and later graduated magna cum laude from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Perhaps the multiplicity of his biography is reflected in the variety of mediums he works in. He has exhibited sculptures, painting and video at the Bernard Toale, Allston Skirt, and LFL galleries in 2001. In the same year he received a grant from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and was featured in the edgy show "Futuremaybe" at Oni Exhibitions in Boston. Lieberman's pieces are frequently humorous and sometimes disturbing. However, the works *Untitled (Flag)* and *Untitled (Brick Wall)* reflect a particularly sedate Lieberman, an artist more concerned with formal questions than with shocking or unsettling the viewer. These paintings are both similar in their lateral, flat and literal presentation of symbols, possibly reflecting the influence of Godard in Lieberman's work.