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Games People Play: Justin Lieberman Bids New York Adieu With His Middle Finger as His Dealers Tussle

BY **M. H. MILLER**

On a Friday in late July, the artist Justin Lieberman sent out a curious e-mail to some of his friends about his **latest show** at the Brooklyn gallery Know More Games. “This will be my last exhibition in NY for at least a decade,” he wrote in the body of the e-mail. “Please join me in celebrating this momentous occasion.” The announcement below displayed an application for asylum bearing the mark of the German embassy up top. Under a section that said, “Please describe the nature of your request (why you seek asylum)” is a dense block of all-caps text that reads:

...TO BE HONEST, YOU WOULD HAVE TO BE A COMPLETE DIPSHIT TO STICK AROUND THIS SOUL-SUCKING CITY. GIVE IT ANOTHER FIVE YEARS AND YOU’LL ALL BE LIVING IN MUD HUTS AND FAVELAS, COMPLAINING ABOUT HOW NEW YORK IS JUST A POOR MAN’S VERSION OF DUBAI. I COULDN’T GIVE TWO SHITS ABOUT HAVING MY WORK IN YOUR CRAPPY GALLERIES, OR LANDLORD GOO GOO’S HOUSE NEXT TO HIS COLLECTION OF RUSTY PROUVE CHAIRS. IT’S PRETTY OBVIOUS TO ANYONE WHO PAID ANY ATTENTION THAT I SET THE TERMS FOR WHAT ALL OF YOU ARE CASHING IN ON THESE DAYS, WITH YOUR CUTE LITTLE RECTANGLES AND MAGAZINE PAGES. AFTER ALL, WEREN’T THEY THE ‘ANTIDOTE’ TO THE MESS I MADE? I CAN TELL YOU THIS MUCH—WITHOUT WHAT I DID TO STAND ON, YOUR CUTE CRAP WOULD BE WALLPAPER...

And so forth. The show is called “Thanks for Nothing.”

I met Lieberman at the gallery the following week. He was standing outside smoking cigarettes with Miles Huston, co-proprietor of Know More Games. Lieberman, bald and bearded with one prosthetic eye, resembles Allen Ginsberg in his later years. Huston, by contrast, is young and preppy. The gallery sits across the street from a Dunkin’ Donuts in the shadow of a Brooklyn-Queens Expressway overpass on the edge of Carroll Gardens and feels very far removed from the rest of the art world. Huston was explaining how the building used to belong to an “unlicensed veterinarian from Haiti,” who simply packed up and left one day without notice, leaving behind all his medical equipment and



Justin Lieberman, *Lexapro*, 2006.

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a suspicious wooden urn, the contents of which went unexplored by the building's new tenants. Upstairs was an apartment that emitted a putrid smell, later revealed to be coming from the pet pig that belonged to the "woman for hire" (Huston's words) living on the top floor. Huston went up to investigate one day and found a scene that he compared to the music video for Marilyn Manson's "Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This)." The pig, Huston said, freely defecated on the floor in the kitchen.

Huston and his business partners—Brian Faucette and Jacques Louis Vidal—are all connected with Lieberman in a way that is more intimate than a simple artist/dealer relationship. Huston and Faucette were both students of his at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, better known as the Museum School; Vidal was Lieberman's assistant for about four years. The show was Lieberman's way of saying goodbye to all that—in a few weeks, he told me, he would move to Munich with his wife, who was hired as a curator at a museum there (hence the German asylum). But it was also a new direction for Know More Games, which until recently had been supported financially by the Chelsea art dealer Zach Feuer, who is Lieberman's former dealer (the two had also been students together at the Museum School).

The art world is more or less structured in a way to ensure that it resembles a high school cafeteria, with semi-loyal cliques all hoarding different tables of varying degrees of popularity and wealth, all trying to move up the chain to something better. Every show that appears in a New York gallery is wrapped up in several layers of dirty laundry. With this show, Lieberman and Know More Games—both newly independent from, as Huston put it, "primetime"—were putting everything out in the open. Lieberman was using his work to turn his back on the very industry that had made him successful. The artist-run Know More Games was using Lieberman to recover from the failed experiment of working with a business savvy gallery owner. When looked at closely, the show tells the story of an artist burned out by his own career. It tells the story of an idealistic gallery—all three of its owners noted with some pride that they have never been paid a salary in their business—trying to stay afloat in an environment that values salespeople over romantic notions of any kind. Most of all it tells the story of how small a subculture the art world really is.

Hanging in the window of Know More Games was a silkscreened painting of a scowling face alongside a text in French by René Magritte. Lieberman explained that the work had been included in a show he had earlier this year at Martos Gallery in Chelsea. "Another dealer thought that this painting referred to him directly, and threatened to sue Martos Gallery," Lieberman said, standing on the sidewalk, surveying the canvas. "OK? So the painting had to get taken down after one day. It was only hung for a day." (Jose Martos said the painting was taken down after another dealer in Chelsea sent him a cease and desist letter, though he remembers it being up for a couple days at least; Martos explained that he had no interest in getting into a legal battle with this particular dealer, so he removed the work from the show.) Lieberman declined to name the dealer to me, but according to others with knowledge of the situation, it is Marc Jancou, whose gallery Lieberman joined after leaving Zach Feuer. Above the text is the word *J'Ancule*, a play on *j'encule*, French for "anally fuck."

"The original title of this text was *L'anculure*, which means "The Ass Fucker," Lieberman said. He translated for me, revealing a series of lecherous remarks about a lustful gentleman who—

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metaphorically at least—consumes his own feces, among other scatological acts. When asked over e-mail for comment about the work and its removal from Martos Gallery, Jancou replied, simply, “Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.”



Installation view of Lieberman's show.

COURTESY KNOW MORE GAMES

INSIDE THE GALLERY, Lieberman described his show as “like a prop drama.”

“And there are players in this drama,” he said. “So Miles, Brian, Jacques, me are all players here. When it’s a teacher and a student, there’s a certain discourse there that’s related to power, just as there’s one with an artist and a dealer. Who has the power? Who has the agency?”

As if answering his own question, Lieberman motioned to a sculptural work that **featured** a painting each by Huston and Faucette, through which Lieberman had cut a hole and then attached to one another like two dead fish speared together. “This piece,” Lieberman said, “is *Two Student Paintings with Damage and Reconstructed Hymen.*”

Across the room, Huston guffawed.

“One thing that’s really important to me with this show is that it’s a show in which all the people involved in making the show have a stake and a role in the drama,” Lieberman said. “It doesn’t just have to be a bunch of products that conceal all the labor and libidinal investments that go into the creation of the stuff. People, what they want and how they want to see themselves—of course, Miles and Brian and Jacques are all conflicted about their role as art dealers. They’re artists. And they see how far apart those professions are becoming. More and more now. So this is something that like plays on how people are invested in this whole game.”

The major supporting players in Lieberman’s drama are Zach Feuer and Marc Jancou. When Feuer opened his eponymous gallery in 2004, it was, for Vidal, similar to what he and Huston and Faucette have been striving for with Know More Games, which they opened in 2011.

“When I was graduating in 2004,” Vidal told me, “Zach’s gallery was a primary point where I could start a conversation with the art world. Because of my interest in the gallery, and because I had become a fan of Justin’s work without knowing him, I actively sought Justin out. I wanted to be part of that community that Zach was building at that time.”

Vidal would go on to work with Lieberman, who was one of the first artists on Feuer’s roster to have seen any significant financial success. As is often the case, Lieberman’s ambitions grew along with his pocketbook, and he was interested in making what Vidal described as an “epic piece,” called *The Corrector’s Custom Prefab House*, which was literally the size of a house and had a production cost around \$100,000, Feuer said.

“And I just wasn’t going to pay for it to get made,” Feuer told me. “So Marc Jancou showed up and

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offered to pay for it.”

Vidal characterized Jancou as one of Lieberman’s most loyal collectors. He had run a gallery in New York with his then-wife Tanya Bonakdar. She took his name off the door after they split up. Jancou went on to represent artists at his own gallery. When he paid to produce Lieberman’s piece, Jancou offered to co-represent Lieberman with Feuer. Vidal described this relationship as “sort of doomed from the start.” Lieberman eventually stopped working with both galleries.

“I think part of it was a flawed increase in production and part of it was just getting wrapped up in the market craziness,” Feuer told me about parting ways with Lieberman.

Feuer ended up breaking with eight of his artists in 2009, telling Bloomberg at the time that he “didn’t want to be big in this economy.” Vidal would also join Jancou’s gallery as an artist in 2009, before parting ways with the gallery himself after his second show in 2011. Vidal said the experience was “awesome” at first, but “there was a kind of degradation over time for whatever reason.” He left it at that, but an email from Jancou to Vidal from December, 2013, which is printed out and taped to the back of Lieberman’s *L’anculure* canvas (and is also displayed on the gallery’s web site), helps explain matters. In it, Jancou demands that Vidal “[settle] the production balance you owe the gallery.” He continues [sic throughout]: “Unfortunately for you, and for the gallery at the present your story seems an all too common one- young artist full of potential has a successful first show and then tries to do far too much and ask far too much of the gallery in the second show and fails both commercially and critically. Great artists continue on, and find success again, this seems unlikely for you at this point.”

Several people close to Lieberman explained that he experienced financial setbacks in the last few years, including his house going into foreclosure, and that he blamed Jancou for this. Asked about his relationship with Lieberman and why they stopped working together, Jancou e-mailed, “He is a

also a madman!”) Asked to elaborate further about Lieberman, Jancou wrote, “A picture is worth 1,000 words” and pasted an image of a work by Lieberman, called *Lexapro* (2006), in the body of an e-mail. It is a faux-advertisement for the antidepressant, and depicts a derelict Lieberman slouched in a wheel chair and sitting on a train track as a train approaches in the distance. In big letters across the top are the words, “DON’T LET IT COME TO THIS.”

However acrimonious the split was between Lieberman, Vidal, and Jancou, Feuer remained a sympathetic presence. When Vidal went on to help found Know More Games with Faucette and Huston, they spent a lot of time talking with Feuer, mostly about ideology—how an artist-run space should function, how to work with emerging artists, and whether it was possible to have a gallery that didn’t represent artists, one that could conceivably work with anyone. Eventually, Feuer gave Know More Games a \$20,000 investment and would give the precocious Brooklyn gallery an in with his more established collector base. Around this same time, Feuer opened a gallery in upstate New York called Retrospective, which focuses on work by emerging artists, a market many dealers—and collectors—want to tap into, either to cultivate careers, or simply as an investment. Feuer has a reputation for working with young talent, and at Retrospective he started showing pieces by some of

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the artists that also had exhibitions at Know More Games. Huston said the gallery felt like they were being used, and it soon became clear that Feuer, a dealer with a long history in the art world, and Know More Games, a somewhat starry eyed business that is more interested in showing work than selling it, didn't see eye to eye. "None of us are averse to making money," Vidal said, "but our gallery is just not structured that way. It doesn't have a typical business model. I wouldn't say it has a business model, I guess."

Within a matter of months, the relationship had soured further. In May, Know More Games did a show with the artist Wyatt Niehaus. While it was still on view, Huston said, Feuer announced plans on his web site for his own show with Niehaus at Retrospective. (Feuer said the show had been in the works for several months before the Know More Games exhibition; Feuer forwarded an email exchange with Niehaus showing that plans to do a show at Retrospective were agreed upon on February 7.) On May 25, Huston sent Feuer an e-mail calling this "a conflict of interest," and expressing frustration that he had not been told about this overlap sooner, especially since there were works by Niehaus at Know More Games that were still unsold.

"Are you purposefully not telling your collectors about [our] show because you are about to have a show with Wyatt?" Huston wrote in the e-mail.

Feuer, Huston told me, didn't appreciate the accusation, and asked for his investment back. After some back and forth—"He said everything but, 'I'm gonna sue you,'" Vidal said, though Huston says Feuer did threaten to sue—they agreed that Know More Games would return half of his initial investment, according to Vidal. Feuer said he did not threaten legal action. Of the situation, Feuer told me he "helped them out for three or four months" and left them with "enough money to keep operating for six months." ("At no time during the negotiation of me splitting with the gallery did I speak with Miles," he wrote in a later e-mail.)

"**THE MARKET SPECULATION BEHAVIOR** has grown," Huston said back at the gallery with Lieberman. "There's a whole collector base that's completely into this. So we signed up with Zach. Basically what I realized during that was, 'Oh, showing emerging artists means that you're involved in this speculative market.'"

"It doesn't necessarily mean that!" Lieberman said.

"You may have these collectors that really have this foundation or collection, but a lot of people that come through are interested in this idea of buying in early and watching something go up in value within six months to a year. That's just a reality."

The work in Lieberman's show is for sale, but none of it has sold yet, according to Vidal. He said he reached out to the collector Stefan Simchowitz—who has a reputation for flipping works by emerging artists for huge returns—and sent him an image of the work that everyone believes is about Marc Jancou. Vidal had heard that Simchowitz and Jancou had had a falling out. All Simchowitz replied in an email, Vidal said, was, "Love it!" and the conversation ended there.

As Huston discussed his gallery cutting ties with Feuer, describing his own unique motivations for

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mounting this show, Lieberman's face lit up in genuine shock.

"Now you're making me feel like I'm being used," he told Huston.

"You are totally being used."

"I don't understand. How am I a functionary in this?"

"Well that's the veiled drama that you're actually talking about," Huston said. "There's another layer of drama here. But it's complicated. It's not like Zach's a bad guy."

Lieberman and Feuer, in fact, remain close friends. Lieberman made the ketubah for Feuer's wedding, and Feuer is watching Lieberman's cat while he is in Germany. ("It used to be my cat," Feuer said.) The two came up together, for better or worse. Feuer recalled taking Lieberman to Art Basel in Miami in 2005. At the fair, Feuer was making enough money, he said, that he "moved from a crappy hotel to the Ritz, and Justin made this piece kind of mocking my doing that. Then we sold it at the fair for the price of moving Justin into the Ritz."

Now Lieberman says he's getting out of the art world, for a while at least. As for Know More Games, "the plan is to keep going," Vidal said. For the time being, whether anyone buys any of the work in the show, or even sees it (Feuer hasn't, he said), Lieberman's long rant of an announcement will act as a sort of legacy, the moment he broke with his past. In the gallery, Huston told Lieberman he might not have realized it, but he was "speaking for us as well." On a television in the gallery, alongside video Lieberman shot, when he was working as a dishwasher, of kitchen staff pouring all the uneaten food into a trashcan at the end of a night's work, the text of the announcement slowly scrolled across the screen:

...WHO'S IT FOR ANYWAY? THE ASSHOLES OF THE FUTURE? I DON'T NEED SOME FOUR-YEAR-OLD FASCIST FLIPPING THROUGH MY SHIT IN HIS GOOGLE GLASS CYBER-CRYO TANK. IT ALL GETS CUT UP INTO PIECES AND SCATTERED TO THE FOUR WINDS. EVERYBODY TAKES HOME A SOUVENIR...

"It's absurd for me to make this complaint," Lieberman said, watching the video closely and giddily pointing out a particularly "awesome pour" of discarded food. "I'm an incredibly successful artist. I'm very, very successful. I have galleries all over the world. I've held teaching positions at major universities. This is absurd, you know?"

("That text is so indicative of our relationship," Feuer told me. "Like Justin had a right to be an artist and to work in a studio and that it was my job and the world's job to provide him with that. Of course, he told me that the text was a joke.")

Lieberman said he was playing the character of a "malcontent artist."

Watching the video, Huston said, "Sometimes how it is is how it appears to be."