

# MAGA Representing! Send Painter Jon McNaughton to the Venice Biennale!

*Artist Justin Lieberman is petitioning the State  
Department to Make Art Great Again*

by R.C. BAKER



JONMCNAUGHTON.COM

Joseph Stalin was a keen student of propaganda, and was assiduous about how he was represented in the media. Soviet paintings in the Socialist Realism style portray the Communist dictator surrounded by children, speechifying to eager acolytes, communing with the beloved novelist Maxim Gorky, and in other hagiographic

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settings. Donald Trump, with his proclivity for despots, would no doubt have found common ground with Stalin. And if conceptual artist Justin Lieberman has any success with his change.org petition, “US State Department: Jon McNaughton must represent America in the Venice Biennale,” POTUS may get the Socialist Realist artist he deserves.

Not that painter Jon McNaughton has any truck with socialism — but Socialist Realism never did either. Most thoroughly put to use in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (with a variant in National Socialist Germany that looked back to ancient Greece for inspiration), this illustrational style was useful to the Bolsheviks and the Nazis not for promoting the social welfare of citizens but as a way to dumb down the culture. The most important tenet of such work is to elevate authoritarian leaders to semi-divine status, so that their dictates cannot be questioned by the public.

McNaughton has gone so far as to paint President Trump teaching a young man to fish. Blunt metaphors abound: We all know the proverb that giving a man a fish will feed him once but teaching him to fish will feed him forever. Thus, the business mogul saves the young man from the pernicious socialist theories found in the books he’s been toting around in his backpack. But there is also the biblical sense of fishing for souls, of being saved by Christ. There is little room here for dissent.

Which brings us to Lieberman’s witty campaign to have McNaughton represent America in the Venice exposition. Trump has made it clear that he believes little in democracy — everything is rigged, so don’t trust vote counts — and prefers a model where strongmen maneuver to become lifelong leaders, such as Vladimir Putin in Russia, Kim Jong Un in North Korea, and Xi Jinping in China. (Mao Tse-tung, who ruled China for decades, was another despot who could not get enough of his own image.) If democracy is unreliable, then all trust must rest in the leader, and any imagery must reinforce that faith.



**“Washington Crossing the Delaware” by Emanuel Leutze, 1851** THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

Lieberman is a provocateur who accompanied a 2014 exhibition at the aptly named Know More Games gallery, in Brooklyn, with an emailed screed bidding adieu to the New York art world. It read, in part, “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?” Lieberman then decamped to Munich, but he gets props for satirizing our current age of caps-locked rage, a cultural moment that, if his petition is successful, will be writ large on Venice’s world stage. For example, McNaughton’s *Crossing the Swamp* pays homage to Emanuel Leutze’s monumental 1851 canvas, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. But Leutze’s Washington is painted with robust modeling and compositional élan — the commander’s curved scabbard dynamically echoes the flowing lines of the centrally located flag, tying the father directly to his country. In McNaughton’s version, the diagonals of John Bolton’s shotgun and of Sarah Sanders’s, Ben Carson’s, and other minions’ oars serve only to fracture — rather than unify — the illusion of space.



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Leutze found endless textural variation in the Delaware River's surface, but McNaughton deploys the same white-highlighted algae-green motif throughout the painting to drive home the commander in chief's supposed battle with the dank muck. (It's also worth noting that, in the Soviet Union, when colleagues fell out of favor with Stalin they were not only imprisoned or executed but also airbrushed out of official photographs and painted over in state portraits. Considering the turnover in Trump's White House, we can only imagine how many revisions McNaughton's canvas will require by the administration's end.)



**United States Pavilion in Venice** EDEN BREITZ/ALAMY

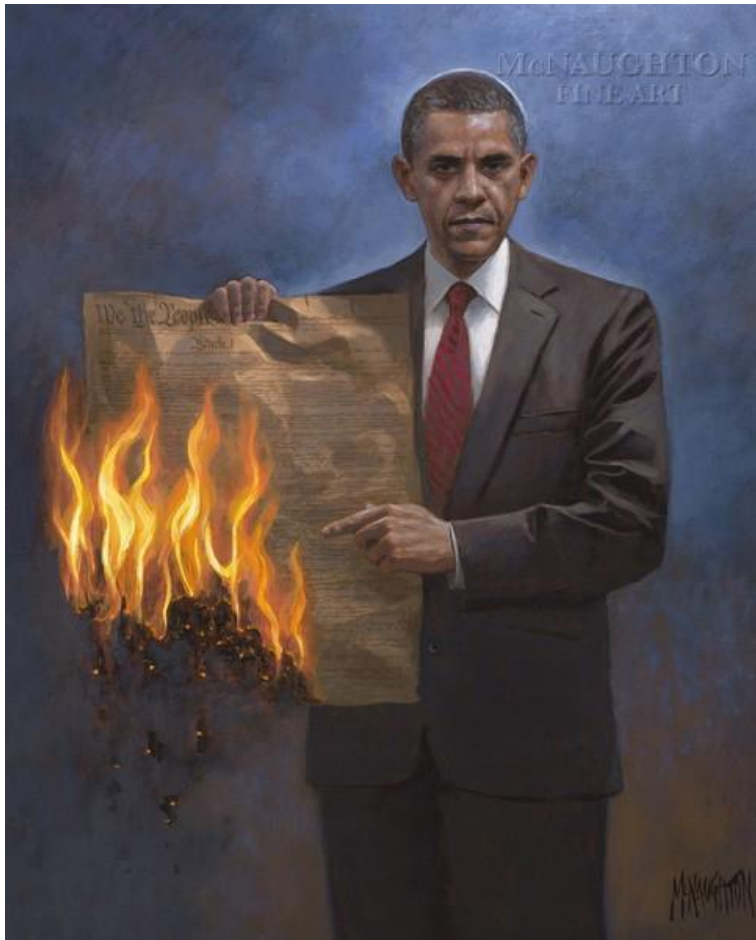
According to his website, “Jon McNaughton is an established artist from Utah.” No birth year is included, but Wikipedia lists it as 1965. In his choice of Americana



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themes, McNaughton has been compared to Norman Rockwell, and while both artists painted for reproduction (Rockwell for magazine covers, McNaughton for giclée prints), the comparison falls flat. Rockwell took patient care that his compositions went beyond mere storytelling, as in the brilliant abstract play of full-frontal and skewed rectangles flowing through *Shuffleton's Barbershop* (1950). Rockwell was often working on tight deadlines, but it is McNaughton's work that feels rushed. In a painting such as *Expose the Truth*, in which McNaughton envisions the president holding up a magnifying glass to examine Robert Mueller's face, the harried brushstrokes turn cartoonish — polemics trumping artistry. Other paintings portray President Obama burning or treading upon the Constitution. The paint handling is as bludgeoned as the subject matter, leaving no doubt what the viewer is intended to think.

Just as Orwell claimed that the “Newspeak” forced upon the populace in his novel *1984* was “designed to diminish the range of thought,” Socialist Realism reduced painting to easily understood narratives that asked no questions but simply presented the party line. Equally important to its success as state propaganda in the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, the genre used straightforward representation to convey approved messages: a farmer sowing seed under a rainbow, muscular men wrangling steel in a factory, peasant women tending cherubic babies, heroic soldiers storming enemy positions. Cliché as a virtue.



**McNaughton's "One Nation Under Socialism," 2016** JONMCNAUGHTON.COM

But it was not always so in the USSR. Kazimir Malevich was one of the most radical artists who ever lived, and in his 1927 book, *The Non-Objective World: The Manifesto of Suprematism*, he wrote, "In the year 1913, trying desperately to free art from the dead weight of the real world, I took refuge in the form of the square." Malevich was in his thirties (he was born in 1879, near Kiev) when he hit upon this new art of unadorned geometries — squares, circles, crosses — paintings that are startling in their deceptive simplicity. He explained, "By Suprematism, I mean the supremacy of pure feeling in the pictorial arts. From the Suprematist point of view, the appearances of natural objects are in themselves meaningless; the essential thing is feeling."

Today, you can hop on the subway to the Museum of Modern Art and lose yourself in the luminous limbo of Malevich's *Suprematist Composition: White on White* (1918). Contemplate the corners of the cool white square — canted just so — diagonally caressing the edges of the larger, warmer square. You just might feel a resonance at a



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century's distance with the Russian Orthodox icons that were part of Malevich's youth, which he distilled into pure painted radiance. You might also sense the political dimensions of the aesthetic shock waves created by the avant-garde's revolutionary art, which supported the 1917 Russian Revolution through banners for marches, propaganda posters, and stage sets for plays celebrating the rise of the Bolsheviks. The sheer graphic audacity of Malevich's work opens many avenues of contemplation.



**Kazimir Malevich's "Black Square," 1915** TRETYAKOV GALLERY

The heady elation felt by the avant-garde in the newly born Soviet Union would last only into the late 1920s. Once Stalin consolidated power, his government began to question the nuance and ambiguity inherent to abstraction and instead promulgated those Socialist Realist scenes of collective farmworkers bringing in abundant harvests, workers enthusiastically toiling in factories, and other fantasias of the

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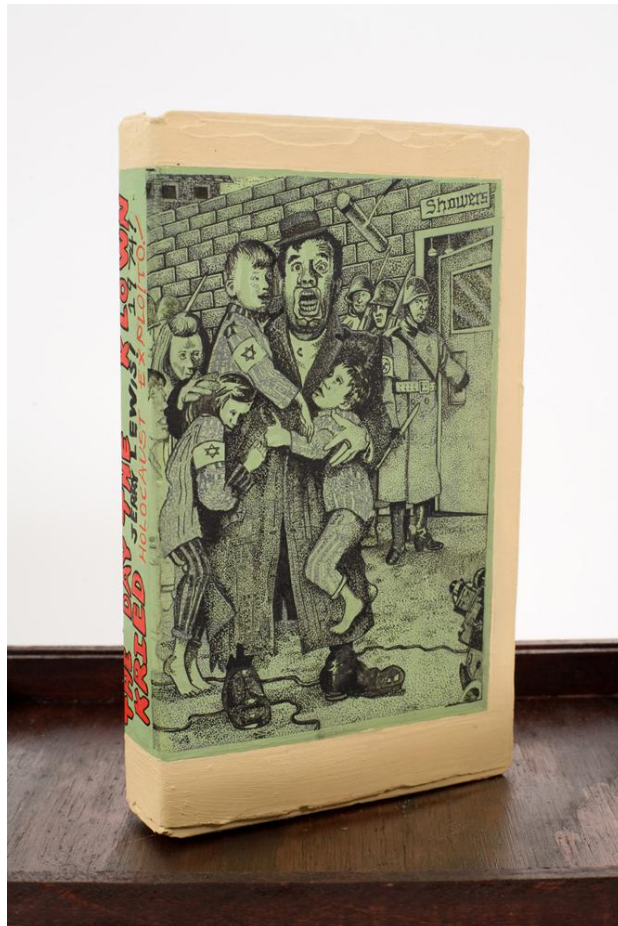
supposed workers' paradise. Artists who didn't get with the official program were branded counterrevolutionaries, and their work was banned. Some, including Malevich, were also jailed. Malevich's health was shattered during his incarceration, and when he was released he attempted to satisfy the cultural overlords by working in the Socialist Realism mode. Yet he could not confine himself to simple storytelling, and his 1933 portrait of a peasant woman in blue headscarf, red blouse with white sleeves, and yellow apron, set against a black background, crackles with abstract power, not least from the incisive concept of primary colors against black and white. Still, there is pain in the image, a sense of something lost, a lesson that an artist such as Ilya Kabakov — born that same year of 1933, in Ukraine — learned well when the dissident art he clandestinely created caused him trouble in his day job as an approved children's-book illustrator. Kabakov found international success when he left the USSR for the West, in the 1980s, and now lives on Long Island. A short, poignant essay he wrote on Malevich's *Woman Worker* notes that the odd positioning of her hands implies that a baby (Malevich's Suprematist Art?) has been taken away by the authorities. Malevich died in 1935, a few years after his release. His work would not be seen again in the Soviet Union until 1989, when the thaw of Mikhail Gorbachev's glasnost brought Malevich's work out of its hiding places in museum racks and private collections.

There were a few Socialist Realist artists who rose above the confines of the genre (Alexander Deineka's light-suffused bathers come to mind), but more often the paintings feel like chores rather than a search for humanity's frontiers, which is always the mission of great art — the quest that landed Malevich in jail. But McNaughton, judging by the lengthy captions he appends to his paintings online, is a true believer. He paints in this desiccated, shopworn manner because he wants to, and such imagery aligns with Donald Trump's understanding of what is most aesthetically pleasing: pictures of Donald Trump. The president seems little interested in any imagery beyond what he sees on television or in the mirror; filling the U.S. Pavilion in Venice with his own mug would certainly be in line with his successful takeover of the Republican Party and ongoing crusade to rule America in any way he sees fit.



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In that vein, perhaps Lieberman’s boosting of McNaughton can be seen as a plan to send out a cry for help from Venice’s international platform. Or maybe it’s just a way to stir up more shit around the biggest shit-stirrer ever to inhabit the Oval Office. Lieberman’s mordant conceptualism might favor the latter interpretation. In one solo show, he included a mock-up of a VHS tape of *The Day the Clown Cried*, the legendary but unseen 1972 Jerry Lewis movie about a clown who leads children into the gas chamber at Auschwitz. Other than Lewis, the comedian Harry Shearer is one of only a handful of people who have actually seen the film. In an interview with Howard Stern, Shearer said that in 1979, he and his then girlfriend sat “and watched [a bootleg copy], our mouths just getting lower and lower on our faces,” adding, “If you say, ‘Jerry Lewis, clown in a concentration camp,’ and you make that movie up in your head, it’s so much better than that. By ‘better’ I mean ‘worse.’ You’re stunned. You’re just, ‘Oh my God, you’ve got to be — OH NO!’ ”



**Justin Lieberman, VHS Cassette Collection with “The Day the Clown Cried”  
Bootleg Placeholder, 2008**COURTESY THE ARTIST

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Lieberman clearly appreciates the fathomless wrongness of Lewis's film, which the comedian-filmmaker kept under lock and key for decades before he died, in 2017. There are reports that Lewis donated a copy to the Library of Congress, with the stipulation that it not be screened before 2024. Lewis at one point said that the film was "bad, bad, bad," adding, "I didn't quite get it. And I didn't quite have enough sense to find out why I'm doing it, and maybe there would be an answer."

Such artistic and moral bewilderment might be as good a reason as any for sending McNaughton's art to Venice. It may feel as if we're living through a profoundly awful movie, but Trump is as real as it gets.



Art World

## Trump's State Department Has Yet to Pick a US Representative for the Venice Biennale. Artist Justin Lieberman Has a Suggestion

Lieberman has launched a petition stating that famed realist painter Jon McNaughton "must represent America in Venice Biennale."

by **Taylor Dafoe** • July 27, 2018



Jon McNaughton, *Respect the Flag* (2018). Taken from the artist's Instagram account.

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The 58th Venice Biennale is less than 10 months away, and 25 of the 80-some countries have already announced their representative artists. However, as Nate Freeman recently reported, the US is not one of them.

The nomination is the responsibility of the State Department, and recent administrations have set a standard of the representative artist being announced over a year in advance. Of course, this administration, which is led by a president who attempted to eliminate the National Endowment for the Arts just months into his first term, is markedly less invested in cultural diplomacy.

The clock is ticking. Still, the State Department is likely to nominate somebody soon. So who should it be?

Conceptual artist Justin Lieberman has a suggestion.

This week, Lieberman launched an online petition on Change.org positing that pro-Trump painter Jon McNaughton is “most suited” for the role. “McNaughton is certainly a social realist for our time. A painter of history as it happens,” Lieberman told artnet News in an email.



Jon McNaughton, *Make America Safe* (2018). Taken from the artist's Instagram account.



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Upon seeing that the country had yet to nominate an artist for the high profile international event, Lieberman decided to throw his idea out into the world.

"I saw it as an opportunity to put the selection process in the hands of the people, rather than a cadre of curatorial elites, whose abuse of the system has created a situation in which most regular people feel that contemporary art is a big scam perpetrated on the public," he explains. "Unlike the flood of readymades, techno-fetishist video environments, and fabricated objects churned out by studios employing innumerable assistants, McNaughton's paintings embody the American ideals of self-reliance, craftsmanship, and entrepreneurial spirit."

(Notably, last year's US representative to the Venice Architecture Biennale was also abnormally delayed, provoking commentary in the architectural press. In the end, the US pavilion was co-curated by the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the University of Chicago, tackled "Dimensions of Citizenship," and was perfectly respectable.)



Jon McNaughton, *Stand Your Ground* (2018). Taken from the artist's Instagram account.

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Lieberman, currently based in Munich, Germany, is a maker of scabrous conceptual art. He very publicly quit the New York art world in 2014, with a show at the artist-run Know More Games gallery whose announcement denounced his peers as phonies and declared, “To Be Honest, You Would Have to Be a Complete Dipshit to Stick Around This Soul-Sucking City...”

As for the Utah-based Jon McNaughton, he gained viral celebrity for his surreal anti-Obama canvasses—his 2010 painting *The Forgotten Man*, depicting Obama stomping on the Constitution as a forlorn everyman looks on, was purchased by Fox News pundit Sean Hannity, who publicly flirted with the idea of donating it to the Trump White House—and is today often named as the most popular pro-Trump artist. His realist paintings are moralizing allegories about contemporary American politics, featuring themes about religion and conservative values.

McNaughton has depicted the current president proudly locking the gate of a white picket fence (titled *Make America Safe*) and peering into the eyes of Robert Muller with a magnifying glass (*Expose the Truth*). Earlier this year, the artist received a big publicity boost when Hannity dared the “left” to weigh in on a hagiographic painting the artist created that depicts President Trump clutching a threadbare American flag in the middle of a football field.



Jon McNaughton, *Teach a Man to Fish* (2018). Taken from the artist's Instagram account.

Lieberman's personal favorite painting is one in which a fatherly Trump is shown helping a young man with socialist inclinations put bait on a fishing pole. Its title: *Teach a Man to Fish*.



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“While the event it depicts might not really have happened exactly as it is shown, the painting remains a powerful allegory of the opportunities we are offered as Americans,” Lieberman says. “*Teach A Man To Fish* throws the ball into our court. As the artist has remarked about the work: ‘Each of us has the freedom to choose our own destiny.’ I believe that it is Jon McNaughton’s destiny to represent America in the Venice Biennale because his work is the most American art I have seen in quite some time.”

Lieberman’s deadpan nomination chimes with the theme of next year’s biennale, curated by [Ralph Rugoff](#). Titled “May You Live in Interesting Times,” it aims to tackle the proliferation of fake news, a term coined to describe the proliferation of distorted or fabricated stories in the 2016 election, but promptly appropriated by the president to describe his critics.

Will McNaughton’s candidacy take off? Lieberman’s proposal hasn’t exactly caught fire yet. At the time this article was written, [the petition](#) had only 15 signatures.

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# TEXTE ZUR KUNST

September 2016 26. Jahrgang Heft 103

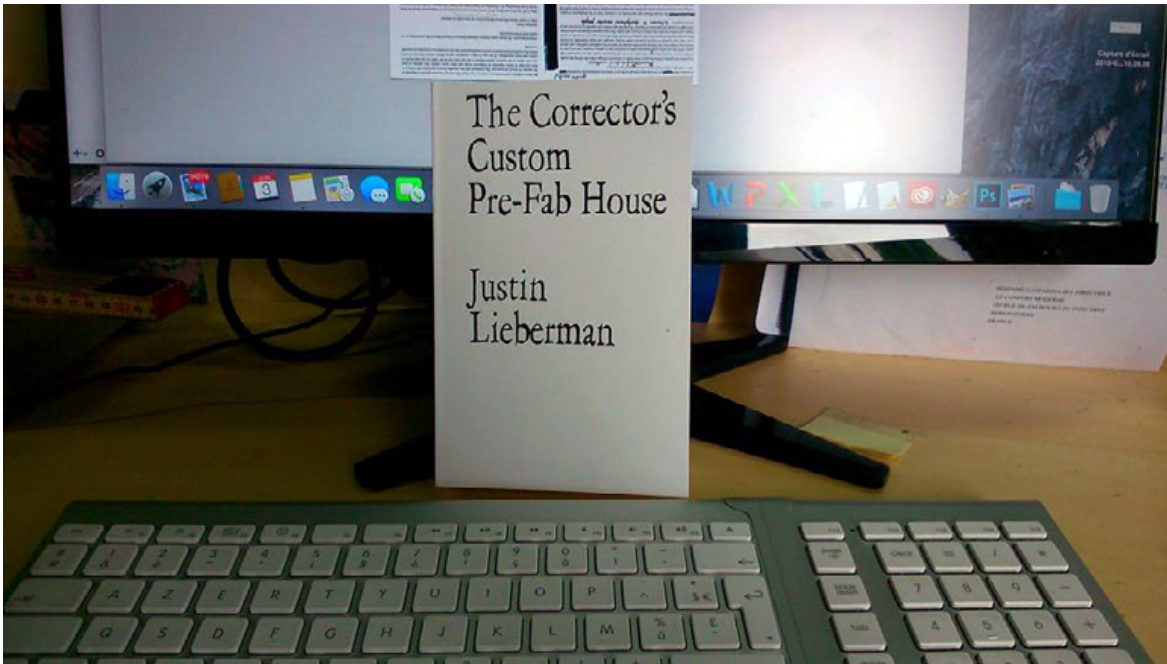
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TEXTE ZUR KUNST

# 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?

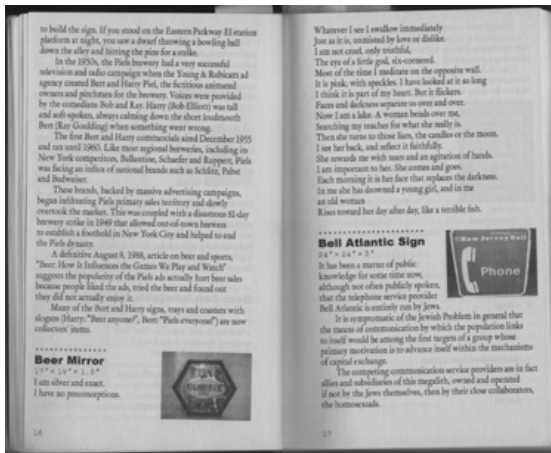
At times, however, Lieberman's sarcasm gets the better of the object in question. For example, what he has to say about a sign emblazoned with the logo of the temporary employment agency Manpower devolves into bitter scatological humor.

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



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.

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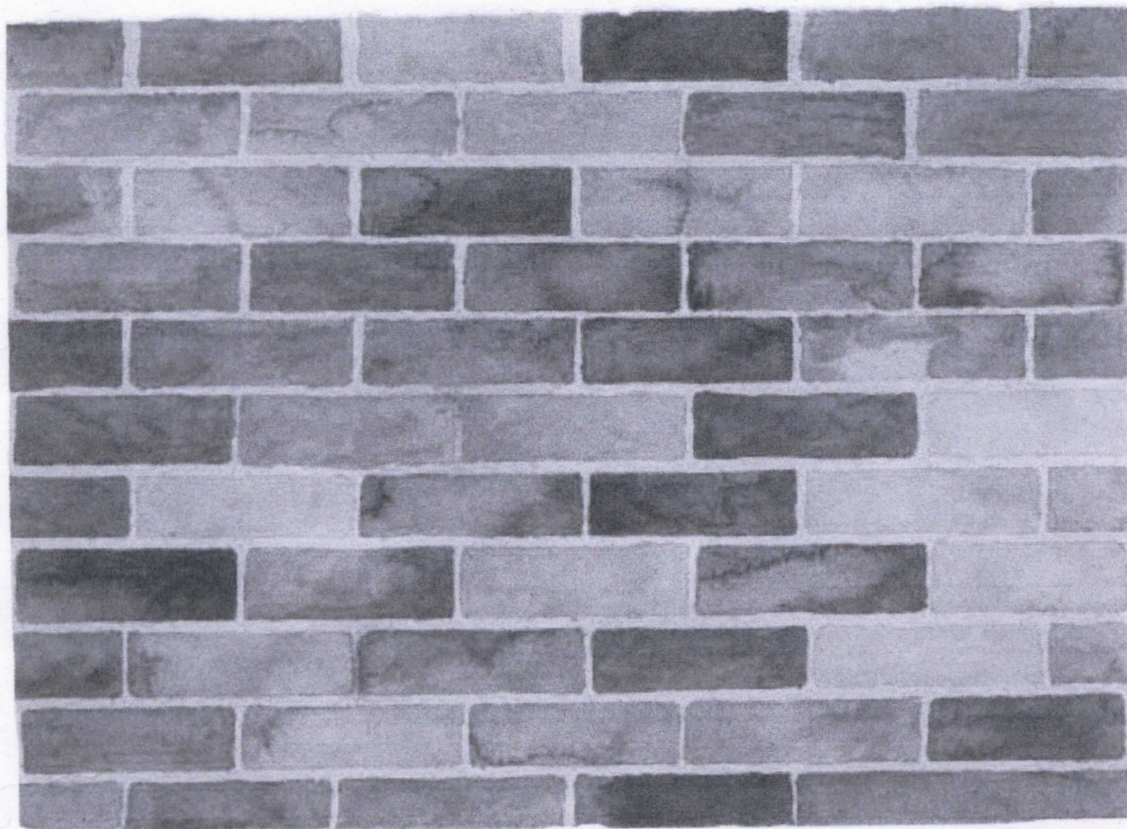
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**NÄCHSTE AUSGABE / UPCOMING ISSUE**

**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.

August 20, 2014

# 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.

©JUSTIN LIEBERMAN



## MARTOS GALLERY

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—

## MARTOS GALLERY

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

## MARTOS GALLERY

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?"

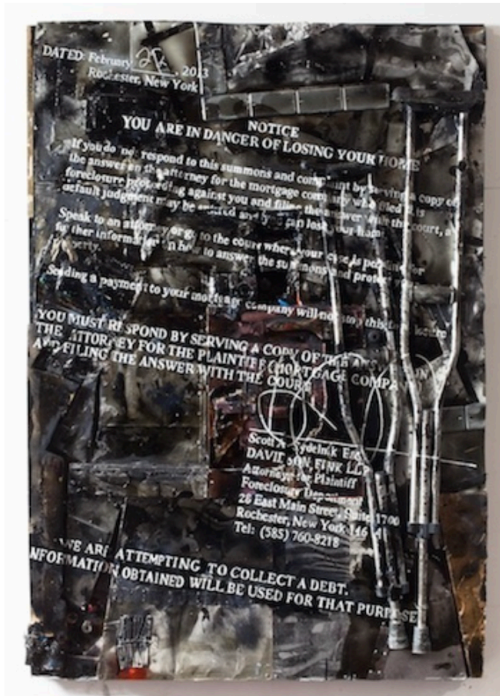
("That text is so indicative of our relationship," Feuer told me. "Like Justin had a right to be an artist and to work in a studio and that it was my job and the world's job to provide him with that. Of course, he told me that the text was a joke.")

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."



## CRITICS' PICKS



Justin Lieberman, *The Judas Cradle*, 2014, mixed media, 60 x 40".

their original meaning has been co-opted by their worthlessness—at least by market standards. A stray wire hanger, a mannequin, bowls, and handicap signs all stick out desperately from the canvas' surface. Most of the works' titles come from archaic torture devices—*Brazen Bull* (an ancient Greek roasting), *Leng tch'e* (Chinese slow slicing), *Peine forte et dure* (stones placed on the chest until confession or death). Warped, white painted text, however, communicates past-due bills, an eviction notice, termination of service, and bad poetry (is there a difference?). In *The Judas Cradle* a slanted text begins, “You are in danger of losing your home,” its stylish skewedness somehow making the message less grave. Similar admonitions of “You must respond . . .” or “You are in violation . . .” mask the dregs of older works in the crowded frame. These newer, more aggressive amalgams compete for dominance with the ghosts of underlying narratives.

Two sculptures accompany the hanging works, including *Arbeitsbeschaffungsmaßnahme* (job-creating measure), a glass vitrine packed with art of friends, letters to collectors, fliers, exhibition cards, and some of the artist's own work. The tight and anxious display mocks the frenzy of creating and supporting, and, in doing so, makes another work. Everything eventually becomes a part of another paycheck, as collected art-world ephemera become works, and old works get compressed into the new. In all these pieces, art has been reduced and reduced again until it's something opposite: It's a bill.

NEW YORK

## Justin Lieberman

MARTOS GALLERY | NEW YORK  
41 Elizabeth Street  
February 20–March 29, 2014

Here's what the frenetic pace of a price-tagged art world has wrought: Justin Lieberman's “Squeezed Reliefs” recycle unsold sculptures tacked onto canvases, topped off with paint that recounts the artist's financial ruin. The artist makes clear in a statement that the black-and-white chicness of these eight works (all 2014) is meant to be a capitulation to what's in style. One wonders if to enjoy these paintings is to also take part in the unforgiving cycles that led the artist here.

Pieces of sculptures drown under the paint,

— *Ali Pechman*



## Justin Lieberman by Nic Guagnini

This is a two-part Artists on Artists. Lieberman responds to Nic Guagnini in the second half of this article.



Justin Lieberman, *Top (Detail)*, 2010, cameras, taxidermied crabs, EX74, stool, hat, and scarf, 62 7/10 x 15 7/10 x 15 7/10 inches.

## **Nic Guagnini on the work of Justin Lieberman**

In the following paragraph, lifted from the famous short story by Jorge Luis Borges "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" let's replace "one of the state prisons" with "Yale School of Art" and "convicts" with "students."

*The governor of one of the state prisons informed the inmates that in the ancient bed of a river there were a number of burial sites, and he promised freedom to anyone who made an important find. During the months preceding the excavation, the convicts were shown photographs of what they were likely to discover. The first attempt proved that hope and greed can be a hindrance; the only hrön unearthed by a week's work with pick and shovel was a rusty wheel of later date than the start of the excavation. This was kept secret, and shortly afterwards the experiment was repeated in schools. Three managed to find next to nothing; in the fourth, whose head died in an accident at the outset, the pupils dug up—or produced—a gold mask, an archaic sword, two or three clay amphorae, and the greenish, legless trunk of a king whose breast bore an inscription that has never been deciphered*

*[ ... ] Curiously, hrönir of the second and third degree—hrönir derived from another hrön, hrönir derived from the hrön of a hrön—magnify the flaws of those of the first degree; fifth-degree hrönir are almost identical; those of the ninth can be confused with those of the second; those of the eleventh show a purity of line that the originals do not possess. The progression is regular, and a twelfth-degree hrön is already in a state of deterioration. (Translation by Norman Thomas di Giovanni.)*

Justin Lieberman's attempts to produce artworks amount to 96th-degree *hrönir*. Such degeneration aspires to Jewish Catskill comedy but tragically slips into middle-school pastiche, ontologically akin to magic

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markers and marginalia. By joking, he would want you to believe that he has something serious to convey, only to discover that maybe not (whether the *maybe* is ours or his remains to be seen). Since he can't, and won't, shake the shackles imposed by the Ivy League, Justin, a branded man as a Yale alumnus, can't really get a grip (even if he "uses" reality all the time). Such self-deprecating position, *self-hating*, we are tempted to affirm, is nothing but classic sublimation, albeit in passive-aggressive form.



Justin Lieberman, Untitled (Jean Améry), 2010, oil on wood with mixed media,  $12 \frac{9}{10} \times 11 \times 8 \frac{2}{3}$  inches.





Justin Lieberman, Untitled (Cesare Pavese), 2010, oil on wood with mixed media, 12 <sup>9</sup>/<sub>10</sub> x 11 x 11 <sup>2</sup>/<sub>5</sub> inches.

Once we have established, to his historical advantage, that this is intolerable (just as Josef Albers is in his naïveté), we search for a neologism: *unreceivable*. The desire to transgress, to produce something that the system cannot digest, is what the entwined machinery of pedagogy and critical reception cannot but perpetuate, hence recreating its own cyclical conditions of assimilation—a perverse institutional feedback mechanism predicated on its own illusory negation. The work, and hence Lieberman’s wounded subjectivity, can and will be received. I leave to others to analyze why a picture emblazoned with a Prada logo which is in turn obliterated by a scribble, and shows a man looking at a picture of himself getting a blowjob while shooting H, should matter to us. I shall limit myself to note that Justin is here to stay.



## Justin Lieberman on Nic Guagnini

Nic Guagnini's reference to one image out of the hundreds of my work that I sent him at his request seems interesting. Why did he choose that one? It is five years old, but a lot of people continue to gravitate toward that work, titled *Pleasure Principle 2*. It has been reproduced quite a bit. Perhaps, as befits the narcissistic nature of his work, he sees himself reflected there. Narcissism is a useful tool for contemporary artists. Critic Diedrich Diederichsen has gone so far as to qualify it as a potentially radical form of address. Narcissism, sadistic use of other people, and elitist careerism are powerful symbols from which Guagnini, in his work, has fashioned a cartoonish subjectivity akin to the biographical image of Courbet. He does this by simultaneously investing himself in, and divesting himself of, a deep and problematic relationship to the sale of his artwork and critical writing. Guagnini's work also flirts with misogyny. I recently heard a rumor about a work of his in which his girlfriend holds a pencil to a piece of paper while he has sex with her—what results is a few squiggles in which notions of authorship become barbed. Of course, all of these activities are framed by the social sphere (galleries, art publications, etc.) in which they take place, and thus are rendered as harmless fooling around. But there is another aspect of his work that seems a bit troubling, and that has to do with the image of his enjoyment of these activities as well as the voyeuristic pleasure I myself take in them. The phallic *jouissance* from which this enjoyment issues is unmistakably dumb. This is because the occurrences in the work often take the form Lacan would call a *passage à l'acte*, or an impulsive acting out. When the outcome of the *passage à l'acte* is uncertain, unknowable, there then exists the possibility for an event. But when all contingencies have been strategically accounted for in advance (as in the case of the preceding text and the rest of Guagnini's work), what you have is a futile lashing out which is no less self-directed than that of *Pleasure Principle 2*.



Justin Lieberman, Ameisenbär's Home Away From Home, 2012, spray-paint, carpet, welded steel suitcase, plexiglass room divider, found painting, scarf, foot massager, radiator, ventilator mask, food items.

Guagnini's piece of writing about my work doesn't really have as much to do with my art as it does with his own practice, which is that of breaking rules of politeness and manners in the art world. This is the particular form of desublimation he employs, and it is also the primary subject of his text. After all, what could be more shocking than a negative critique in the world of back-patting praise? Weren't you supposed to write something nice? What occurs in his assessment of my work is a polemic between the nice text and the mean text, and this is meant to provoke us into consideration of the rules of etiquette and hierarchy that make up the art world's symbolic sphere.



Justin Lieberman, *The First Tower*, 2012, mixed media, electricity, sound, 90 ½ x 23 ⅓ x 27 ½ inches. Images courtesy of the artist, New Galerie in Paris, and Bernier-Eliades in Athens.

I find it worthy to contribute to the work of an artist who is critical of the spheres we both inhabit. I admire Guagnini's work and appreciate his criticism. It is true that I hate myself. But I should not let this self-hatred, a result of my revulsion with my place within the social order, keep me from destroying such social order. Instead, I hope to transform this self-hatred into a revolutionary consciousness that might benefit me and those



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around me.

Nic Guagnini is an artist and writer living in Harlem. He is the cofounder of Orchard (2005–2008), an artist run cooperative gallery in the Lower East Side; and of Union Gaucha Productions, an experimental film company. He has exhibited in the museums of modern art of New York, São Paulo, and Buenos Aires. His writing has appeared in *October*, *Artforum*, *Parkett*, *Cabinet*, and other publications and exhibition catalogues.

Justin Lieberman is an artist based in Brooklyn. His most recent exhibition took place this spring at Martos Gallery in New York City.

# CAREER SUICIDE

Art produced in the name of institutional critique has become rather pretty and polite. But not Justin Lieberman's: his reminds us to kill our idols

PERHAPS THE BEST PLACE to start this text is by stating the obvious: Justin Lieberman has an intimately antagonistic relationship with art and culture. Or maybe it's more accurate to say that Lieberman is a firm believer in art's classically avant-garde duty: to be antagonistic. What he makes is not only anything but pretty, it is often anything but politically correct, and does not abide by any of the usual niceties that govern social intercourse or artistic discourse. In fact, it is tempting to see Lieberman as a kind of Rodney Dangerfield from *Caddyshack* (1980), casually elbowing his way into polite, golf-club society (the artworld?) and recklessly hammering everyone around him with lewd and obnoxious quips about their issues of repression, unconscious motives and outmoded Victorian values and manners. But Lieberman is a bit too calculating and maniacal to fit the part. Indeed, there is something cheerfully psychotic about his work and its methodology; it is full of a hammy, menace-to-society irony

be followed absolutely and logically' – reversed it – 'Logical thoughts should be absolutely followed to the point of irrationality' – and exploded it, both on a plastic and conceptual level (Lieberman's exhibitions are, incidentally, often accompanied by texts penned by the artist, which are less explications of the work than thoughts that motivated him throughout the process of creation. And although his texts are certainly enlightening, in the end they probably produce more questions than answers).

For instance, his two-part/two-gallery exhibitions at Zach Feuer Gallery and Marc Jancou Contemporary in New York last year, respectively entitled *The Corrector in the High Castle* and *The Corrector's Custom Pre-Fab House*, took questions of collecting, accumulation and archiving to the hilt. These two exhibitions centred around Nobusuke Tagomi, one of the protagonists from Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), a dystopian sci-fi what-if-the-Axis-powers-

words **CHRIS SHARP**

reactively fuelled, one suspects, by American pop-culture's penchant for equating any kind of sustained reflection with insanity. What he does can be squarely located in a distinctly American tradition that includes the likes of Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, Jim Shaw and Cameron Jamie, and is directly linked to the underbelly of less examined aspects of American popular culture, as well as general cultural strategies, taboos and a variety of mythologies of the artist and artmaking.

Lieberman makes the kind of art many people love to hate, which is to say, an art that aggressively resists any temptation to be beautiful, not to mention traditional and accepted notions of what art is, while nevertheless being seriously invested in the plastic dimension of artmaking. If there is a beauty to what he does, it is a beauty of methodology, of *jusqu'au-boutisme*, in which very little, if anything, is left to chance, but also in which everything, more importantly, seems to be thoroughly plumbed. It's as if Lieberman took one of Sol LeWitt's more memorable Sentences on Conceptual Art – 'Irrational thoughts should

won-the-Second-World-War novel. The Feuer show featured collections of (mostly) Americana, from baseball cards to serial-killer paraphernalia, preserved and ruined in a resin reminiscent of *Ghostbusters* Ecto-Plazm, with carefully crafted 'placeholders' (a diehard collector's replica of the one missing, unlocatable item that would complete the collection) – from the discontinued Fruit Brute cereal box to Charles Manson's waistcoat, made by the Family and sent to him in prison. Meanwhile the Marc Jancou show spun off in a different direction, taking Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown's architectural study *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972) as a point of departure.

The show largely consisted of an igloolike armature outfitted with a motley carapace of junk and signage – including a 1970s snowmobile, a lifesize Jolly Green Giant, foam-filled inflatable toys, an illuminated FedEx sign and a seven-foot shark – and came with a computer program (which could be consulted via a computer inside the structure) that meticulously archived and detailed every object in the dwelling. Meanwhile,

*Systems, Souvenirs, and Self-portrait as Bernardo Buffet for the People of Philmont, 2009 (installation view). Courtesy Sutton Lane, London & Paris*

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*Systems, Souvenirs, and Self-portrait  
as Bernardo Buffet for the People of  
Philmont, 2009 (installation view).*  
Courtesy Sutton Lane, London & Paris





*Lieberman's work is full of an irony fuelled, one suspects, by American pop-culture's penchant for equating sustained reflection with insanity*

a sculpture of the Corrector himself, replete with buckteeth, squinty eyes and a Nazi swastika cape, presided over the show at the entrance. In both shows, issues of meaning and purpose seemed to be bound up with collecting and the cultural relativity with which anything is liable to become a classifiable and 'meaningful' artefact.

More recent exhibitions see the artist explicitly engaging artistic fashions and myths about artmaking and the artist in general. In this sense he is treading on ground already tilled by Kelley and McCarthy, yet he is doing so in a more unrelentingly analytical mode – to the point of navel-gazing, but navel-gazing of the most productive order. In a show last autumn titled *Systems, Souvenirs, and Self-portrait as Bernard Buffet for the People of Philmont*, at Paris's Sutton Lane, Lieberman created a complex scenario wherein he positioned himself as a suicided Buffet – one of France's most celebrated postwar artists, and generally seen to

have been rendered critically obsolete by the rise of a younger artist, Daniel Buren (Buffet's schlock existential figuration was presumably no match for Buren's wholesale indictment of painting).

The main piece of the show consisted of a stuffed dummy of Buffet with a plastic bag over his head (his singular method of suicide), applying dots to a signature Buren striped waistcoat and wielding a kind of ad hoc Eiffel Tower paintbrush. The ironically self-mythologising/historicising analogy was a clear dig at all those painters, as seen in, say, New York's Miguel Abreu Gallery, who position themselves in a tradition of institutional critique, which should by nature be antagonistic, and nevertheless make very beautiful paintings. Yet Lieberman's work could hardly be said to be more attractive than Buffet's illustrative, depressed postwar depictions of Paris, clowns, religious themes, sexual situations and the like.

The artist's current exhibition, entitled *Salto Mortale*, at the Bernier/Eliades gallery in Athens, further explores these issues, but in a more general way. Suicide, and the myths that surround the suicided artist, dominate the exhibition. The artist crafted a series of painting/sculptures of various suicided writers in which a painted likeness, executed with amateur skill, of the writer is propped up against various paraphernalia loosely evocative of the writer. For instance the French writer Raymond Roussel is propped up against a gaudy blue ottoman upon which can be found a circular, resin-covered structure of Twinkies. Another sculpture, entitled *The Last Bookshelf* (2010), which addresses suicide in a more general way, consists of a small library on suicidology, enclosed by a black bookshelf, which has been sculpted to perfectly frame it (picture a graph of sorts). Given how simultaneously taboo and romantic the subject of suicide is, the bookshelf seems to hint at ideas of containment and conformity (picture an art school). As Lieberman himself has said, he's not out to 'debunk per se', but rather exert pressure on certain received (often romantic) ideas about art and culture through a sustained (certifiable? – see above) examination of them. Of course, any treatment of art and suicide inevitably points towards deep-rooted, romantic notions about the greatness of an oeuvre being proportionate to the self-destruction that attended its creation. And this could explain why Lieberman has ironically included a self-portrait in the show (propped against a stuffed hamster in a hamster wheel): maybe he has every intention of being a 'great artist' even if it means spending himself on the hamster wheel of mediocrity trying. ❦

Justin Lieberman: *Salto Mortale* is on view at Bernier/Eliades, Athens, until 8 April

The Corrector's Custom Pre-Fab House, 2009, mixed media, dimensions variable. Photo: Cary Whittier. Courtesy the artist, Marc Jancou Contemporary, New York, and Zach Feuer Gallery, New York

October 29, 2009

# STUDIO VISIT: THE MANY SHOWROOMS OF JUSTIN LIEBERMAN

By Colleen Asper



**Justin Lieberman**'s work mimics the conventional forms for presenting objects and images: private collections, public archives, commercial display, advertising, and exhibitions formats.

His most recent solo exhibition in New York spread across two galleries this past January, with "The Corrector's Custom Pre-Fab House" at Marc Jancou Contemporary and "The Corrector in the High Castle" at Zach Feuer Gallery serving as two showrooms for one fictional collector's holdings. In a bit of homophonic mischief, this collector was named the Corrector. He was based on Nobusuke Tagomi, a character from *The Man in The High Castle*, **Philip K. Dick**'s novel set in a future fifty years after Germany and Japan defeated the Allied forces in World War II. Lieberman represented the Corrector

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as a stout wooden figure with buckteeth, squinty eyes, and a cape with a swastika on it. This politically incorrect Corrector presided over his assortment of pop cultural flotsam and jetsam, which at Marc Jancou was affixed to the outside of a giant steel dome; inside, a computer program archived each object. At Zach Feuer similar ephemera was displayed in a living room Lieberman created by covering the walls of the gallery in bubbling plastic laminate and the floor with a dirty rose-colored carpeted festooned with bits of duct tape. Having turned both galleries into mock domestic spaces, a parody was clearly underway, but of what?

The answer depends on where one's allegiances lie in the hierarchies assigned to ways of arranging objects. Decoration, collection, archive: these categories suggest radically different systems by which to accrue objects and radically different values for each system. Fan, collector, historian: appreciation, too, has its own language of distinction. In Lieberman's work these categories are muddled, such that a character from a fictional history turns into a collector of mass-produced objects sloppily fashioned by the artist, or a collection of objects that decorate a bit of pomo architecture are archived with the thoroughness of a tight-lipped librarian and the associative capacities of a befuddled poet. In the midst of all this playful confusion the question is perhaps better stated: what is not parodied?

Lately, some things appear relatively sacred. I visited Lieberman's studio in upstate Chatham, New York, before he left for Paris for a solo show at [Sutton Lane](#) and a group show at New Galerie de France. Works in progress were scattered in various states of assembly across his studio, a one-story building shared with a quilt supply store. Many of these new works, which include a wonky bookshelf crammed with every conceivable book about suicide and a small toy car pulling a float made of cumbersome toy dinosaurs, leave matters to chance in a practice previously premised on exacting narratives. The work that struck me as most different was in fact a reworking of a piece from 2004. The original comprised three coffee tables, each of which sported a base made from the logo of a hardcore band. The implications were obvious: punk is a commodity; corporate culture foolish; and radical ideology dated and ineffectual. The new work, to be exhibited in 2010 for a solo show at Bernier/Eliades Gallery in Athens, Greece, is a bronze cast that stacks all three tables on top of one another, with the shape of both the coffee tables and the logos lost in the spindly form created by the bronze.

The piece immediately called to mind something artist and writer [Michelle Grabner](#) said on a panel at the CAA conference in Los Angeles this past February. A conversation about relational aesthetics turned to aggregate sculpture and Grabner spoke of both when she said, "I'd rather see grand failure in risking a vertical stacking of idea and/or form than the kind of cast-a-net-gathering-it-in. I'd rather have something clichéd and hierarchical." What struck me about Lieberman's reworking of his earlier piece is that the arrangement of the tables went from literally horizontal to literally vertical simultaneous with ideas in the work moving from metaphorically horizontal-the punk rocker and the CEO leveled, to metaphorically vertical-the punk rocker and the CEO fodder for a third object allowed to have a structure not premised on invective. Finally, parody is beside the point.