

Art Review:

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'The idea of the misusing of things is very important to us - we think this creates a lot of fun' Fischli & Weiss

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Should art be effortless? We assess the Idiots approach to making art

Yarisal & Kublitz Traps and mechanics - maybe it's a Swiss thing

Vienna Smoking, schnitzel, bunkers and art fairs



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OVER THE LAST FEW YEARS,
 THE NEW YORK ARTWORLD
 HAS BEEN OVERWHELMED
 BY A KIND OF ART THAT
 LOOKS LIKE IT WAS INSPIRED
 BY LARS VON TRIER'S **THE
 IDIOTS**. WHO MAKES IT?
 WHY DO THEY DO IT?
 AND WHAT'S THIS NEW
 MOVEMENT ALL ABOUT?

words CHRIS SHARP

ONE OF THE BETTER ARGUMENTS FOR 'RETARD ART', a term I unwholesomely coined in a recent, ongoing debate, has already been made by the Danish director Lars von Trier in the film *The Idiots* (1998). In this Dogme masterpiece, a group of young, nonconformist Danes seek to resist postindustrial bourgeois society by getting in touch with their inner idiot and 'spazzing', thus rendering themselves useless, through a kind of active passivity, to middle-class values. By usurping the status of 'the retard', they accord themselves the luxury of nonparticipation. However, the moment real nonparticipation is at stake – such as spazzing at their jobs and in front of their families, as opposed to in front of strangers and each other – their nonconformist wills break and the romantic nature of their resistance becomes evident. Retard art, which could be read within a similarly luxurious logic of passivity, finds itself confronted by an analogous dilemma, especially now that the current stakes of contemporary art may be changing.

But first of all, what is retard art? Not to be confused with the unschooled ethos of outsider art or the marginalised madness, would-be or otherwise, of art brut, retard art is that which prioritises the *durr* factor to an overwhelming if not exclusive degree. The *durr* factor is the obvious, supposedly inartistic, stupid and downright idiotic impulse behind a given artwork. A pop cultural equivalent is the MTV series *Jackass*, whose driving principle is to indulge in the most outrageously counterintuitive and socially unacceptable behaviour possible. Yet while the unruly origins of *Jackass* can be located in the adolescent antics associated with skateboarding (idle skateboarders monkeying around), retard art has a considerably more colourful pedigree, stretching all the way back to the likes of Alfred Jarry and his idiot Ubu. Other avant-garde highlights would of course include Dadaism, Duchamp and Warhol, to name but the most crucial. Duchamp's contribution to *durr* discourse probably remains the most revolutionary and durable in so far as his radical simplification and complication of artistic agency (pointing) has yet to be fully assimilated, while Warhol's contribution is of a more strategic order, in that he introduces the practice of critical closure by preemptive complicity ('I know I am shallow') so dear to retard art. While this genre of art has since seen more than its fair share of avatars – say, in the obsessive-compulsive theatrics of Paul McCarthy, the blissfully benighted earnestness of Koons, the idiot pseudo-readymades of YBA Gavin Turk or finally even the rudely rudimentary conceptualism of Martin Creed – what makes its current incarnation different is a protocol to impishly demonstrate not so much the artist's formal, conceptual and even psychological impotence as that of art in general (and then, by extension, that of the artist: if a given artist is shooting blanks, it's because art itself is definitively 'knackered'). Signs of this cognitively dissident new wave can be discerned roughly around the time Josh Smith started seriously exhibiting in 2004. Seeking to shut down any debates about content, Smith famously limited himself to painting his own name (in addition to making drawings and doing palette paintings). The resultant paintings, generally of a gestural nature with a muddy wet-upon-wet palette, were less paintings than blasé metapaintings about the impossibility of painting. But Smith's conceptual conceit (his name) did more than shut down debates about content; it rendered him critically invulnerable. Any critical opposition was preempted by the supreme inanity of painting his own name – "Because", as the artist stated in a talk given at the Drawing Center in New York in March 2008, "it doesn't get any more stupid than that". But Smith, of course, had to be outdone. The same year as Smith's debut, LA artist Matt Johnson's *trompe l'oeil Bread Face* (2004)

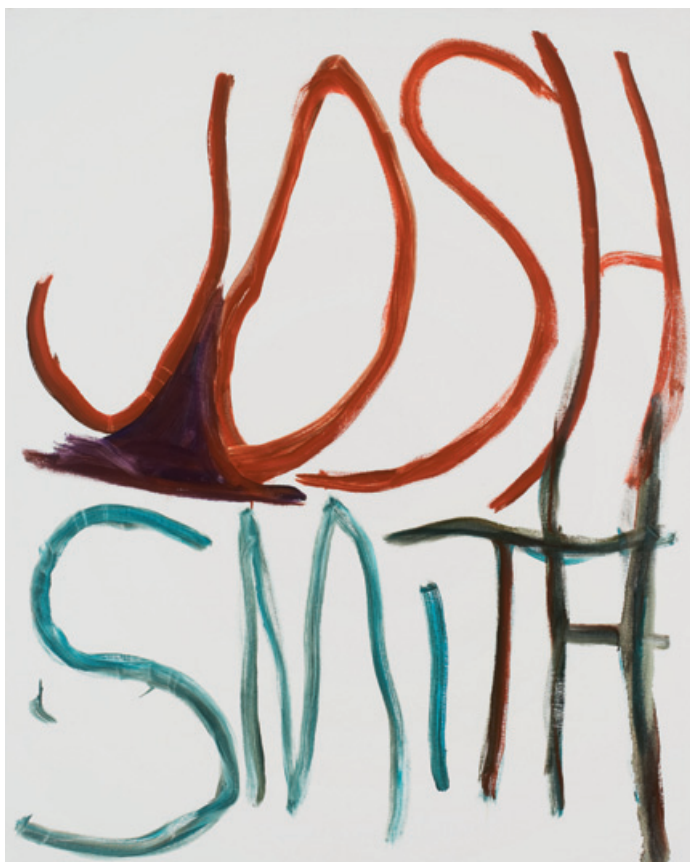




Seriousness is gauged by how cavalier the disregard for discourse: the less the work seems to care, the more seriously we are supposed to take it. And what could be more disengaged than manufactured idiocy?



captured New York's imagination. A painted plastic cast of a piece of bread with three holes in it, primitively representing a face, combines an expert sense of craft with the most idiotic instance of representation – both aspects of which reciprocally debase and redeem each other; in the artworld, displays of genuine skill are excusable if they depict nonserious or idiotic things, while for the general public, the depiction of nonserious or idiotic things ('That's art?') are excusable if executed with great *trompe l'oeil* skill – thus formalising and reducing any representational impulses into a splendid durr. Dan Colen's spraypaint paintings, such as *Rama Lama Ding Dong* (2006), which consist of enamel spraypaint and moulding paste on a piece of wood, wielded the added bonus – or demerit, depending on how you look at it – of revolutionary punk pretensions, possibly seeking to incite a pseudo-retard riot. Curiously, the seriousness of Colen's, and to a certain degree Johnson's, capers is gauged by how cavalier their disregard for any real discourse might be: the less this work seems to care, the more seriously we are supposed to take it. And what could be more disengaged than manufactured idiocy? Joe Bradley's autumn 2008 exhibition at New York's Canada gallery, entitled *Schmagoo Paintings*, which consisted of grease pencil drawings of stick figures on unprimed canvas, may have pushed the envelope beyond the stock 'my three-year-old could do that' reaction to, 'Did my three-year-old do that?' Justin Lieberman is something of a pioneer in these matters, engaging a number of issues ranging from the politics of cultural formation to recuperation, mythologies of artistic agency and folk art. But although it deploys a bona fide durr factor, Lieberman's work cannot merely be reduced to durr. Not only is it too complex – durr factor being but a component of a more multifaceted practice – it allows itself to be vulnerable to criticism by virtue of its nerdiness and apparent criticality. It is crucial that real retard art shut down any negative criticism by



‘Schmagoo Paintings’ may have pushed the envelope beyond ‘My three-year-old could do that’ to ‘Did my three-year-old do that?’

preemptively incorporating it into its very structure (*Rama Lama Ding Dong!*) and, in doing so, render all who come near it, both haters and lovers, complicit with its continued existence.

If this text is New York-centric, it's because retard art, in addition to being male-dominated (like *Jackass*), is largely a New York phenomenon. And this is as it should be, for the simple reason that retard art is probably an organic response to a market-saturated art context, of which the most extreme example is New York – a tendency exacerbated by the city's Dionysian character. Akin to von Trier's idiots, when faced with the hegemony of capitalism, retard art seems to have gone slack in a kind of defiant nonparticipation with passive-critical trappings. Any urgency art might have had is ceded to a passive form of resistance of brains deliberately dribbling into boots. But retard art was never anything less than collusive; such romantic highjinks merely serve to validate the market by illustrating its magnanimous accommodation of any opposition, even if only symbolic, and retard art knew it. However, now that the economy, and with it the art market, have ground to a halt (thus attenuating any need for 'oppositional' validation), one wonders what place retard art will have. Perhaps it's naive to think that the stakes are destined to change (assuming they haven't already), and that in lieu of the knuckle-dragging durr of the would-be retard, a genuine sense of urgency will be afoot. This is not necessarily to say, 'Sorry boys, the party's over.' Maybe it's only about to begin. ☹

WORKS
(IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Matt Johnson, *Breadface*, 2004, cast plastic, oil paint, 10 x 9 x 3 cm.
Courtesy the artist, Taxter & Spengemann, New York, and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles

Joe Bradley, *Superman #2*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 188 x 127 cm. Courtesy Canada, New York

Joe Bradley, *Kurgan Waves*, 2006 (installation view). Courtesy Canada, New York

Justin Lieberman, *Motivational Poster*, 2006, c-print, 99 x 69 cm.
Courtesy Zach Feuer Gallery, New York

Dan Colen, *Rama Lama Ding Dong*, 2006, foamcore on panel, enamel, acrylic paint, 81 x 101 cm.
Courtesy Peres Projects, Berlin & Los Angeles

Josh Smith, *Untitled*, 2007, oil on canvas, 152 x 122 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Luhning Augustine, New York

Josh Smith, *Untitled*, 2006, oil on canvas, 152 x 122 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Luhning Augustine, New York