



Chris  
~~Duchamp~~ with his hair shaved,  
Paris, 1921.

## Waxing Durr

- Justin Lieberman and Chris Sharp -

Chris Sharp holds the dubious distinction of coining the term “retard art.” Beginning with a review of Joe Bradley’s fall 2008 *Schmagoo Paintings* exhibition at CANADA, New York, and then continuing with “The Idiots,” a nuanced, historicized diatribe in the spring 2009 pages of *ArtReview*, Sharp traced an emerging “compulsory Dada” in the run-amok market of the aughts.<sup>1</sup> Tagging the work of Bradley, Dan Colen, Matt Johnson and Josh Smith as endemic, Sharp characterizes the phenomenon as (white) male New Yorkers producing a willful “durr factor,” or hyperbolic *Jackass*-ed idiocy. With a counterintuitive obviousness beyond (or stuck well before) questions of subject matter, sincerity and irony, retard art opens a critical “black hole” in which

“any possible reaction...has been foreseen and theoretically integrated.”<sup>2</sup> The viewer, guffawing approval or dismissively scoffing, invariably plays a complicit fool to the work’s ongoing “appreciation.” Posed as an act of passive market resistance, this recent slackerdom ultimately occupies a position of privilege and luxury, highlighting the market’s ready recuperation of any production, even the most retarded.

Since being posted online, Sharp’s words—not always popular, certainly not PC, but acutely provocative—have elicited their share of comments-section “spazzing,” and the occasional cogent response, far and away by artist Justin Lieberman, who is implicated but acquitted in “The Idiots.” Lieberman reclaims the humor of *durr* as a positive critical force, while challenging Sharp on the trend’s causes and effects: often a tired rehashing of Pop art, though in the case of Bradley and Smith, a newish formalism framed by its labor. As he argues, “the ‘durr factor’...does not in fact shut down criticism. It merely forces us to look elsewhere for criteria.” Sharp accedes in part, repurposing this idea of deferral as consummate strategy: an ungenerous act of barely passing continuously. To their mutual point, is the “air [sucked] out of the room”? Or does this debate, like all endgame pretensions, still have plenty of hot air to dispel?

— Kurt Mueller, Associate Editor

**Justin Lieberman** This issue of stupidity is one we’ve spoken a bit about, after your piece “The Idiots” was published. I’d like to think that neither of us is too solidly positioned in a camp about the subject. I thought this might be an interesting way to restart the conversation. The last time we spoke, you referred to a particular dynamic of consummate strategy in relation to certain artists. One in which a deliberately “stupid” gesture becomes endgame protocol for creative production, and I’m going to quote you here, “all the air gets sucked out of the room.” I thought about this “shutting down” of language, and it seems to me that this is something that has to do with a work’s particular relationship to language, which may or may not be strategic. This was my little response to that. It is a sculpture entitled *Hypoxic Event*. It is a car-board.



**Chris Sharp** You're right to point out that I don't necessarily feel a need to defend my position in this "discourse"—a position I have even come to regret a little by virtue of its moralistic, and therefore parochial, overtones—but then again, one of the easiest ways to counter criticism is by dismissing it as reactionary or conservative, especially when it is critical of cutting-edge art. At this point in what seems to be our ongoing discussion, I am more interested in trying to map or define the etiology of a recent impulse toward willful idiocy. That said, I entirely agree that the alleged "shutting down" is generated by a given work's relationship to language, which may or may not be strategic. I would hazard to say that in most cases when it is consummately strategic, it's goal is wholly self-serving: to merely perpetuate itself by suspending critical animation so that it may enjoy a kind of blessed immunity and freely circulate in the marketplace. Whereas there is another kind of strategy—or, rather, an approach—liable to arrest the flow of language, and at the risk of sounding naive or idealistic, is more linked to breaking ground and therefore of a more productive nature, happening not in order to create a vacuum but because it's doing things for which no language yet exists. Duchamp's readymade being probably the best example of the latter.

It's interesting that most consummately strategic art—or at least most of the art I have taken to task in the past—is painting. There is something fundamentally safe about painting. Although it is



quite literally the most historically saturated medium, and is therefore the least open to innovation (and also the most difficult to write about), no matter how bad, idiotic or offensive it is (i.e., Merlin Carpenter), it's still eminently marketable as an object. (Who would want to buy a two-by-four with a bunch of decals of cars on it? Now that's truly retarded.)



Merlin Carpenter, *I'm Bored*,

2006; wood and pencil; 26¾ x 16½ x ¾; courtesy the artist and Mitterrand + Sanz, Zürich

Another thing worth considering is the word “strategy” itself, because it is anything but innocent. Originally a militaristic term, it was taken over by marketing (which accounts for its primary meaning now) and was eventually imported into art. I’m not sure if it would be possible to verify this claim, but I suspect that the word entered artspeak under a political star and was gradually ushered into a more market-oriented constellation, so that now you hear dubious, aggressive-sounding catchphrases like “strategies of visibility,” as if something other than higher auction prices were at stake. It is also curious to note that consummately strategic art seems to perfectly replicate this philological journey.

**JL** In regard to origins, I think that most artists engaged in deliberate idiocy are probably not interested. They are more concerned with immediate effects, which in itself is not a bad thing. If the work is good, this can be its own particular approach to history—one in which the artist is positing themselves as a subject rather than a detached objective observer. I actually think problems arise when there is an unacknowledged attitude of disenfranchisement; particularly when the work's meaning is staked on it. I think there are a lot of artists out there who make angry, aggressive art not out of a desire to shock people but out of anger that not enough people are paying attention to them. This is ego-driven rather than strategic. There is also work that is willfully anti-ideological without recognizing that this, too, is an ideology. It is a kind of rampant individualism. Artists have always been attached to this attitude because it is romantic. But when you see the way this individualism has become the rule of the culture, perpetuated by power in the name of exchange, it starts to look a little naive. Most of my friends disagree, but I actually think Merlin Carpenter's work has a funny sort of humility to it. Yes, it is aggressive and occasionally offensive. But it also reveals the futility and absurdity of its own pithy gestures. It is a million miles from Dan Colen, whose work—to me—is simply nihilistic. We have seen time and again how quickly nihilism, anti-ideology and anti-aesthetics can be instrumentalized. I am not opposed to strategy. I just think it needs to be employed in a constructive way, and for the right reasons. Stephen Prina is an artist whose work I love. His installations are funny and strategic. They have a lightness as well—not a sledgehammer blow like Carpenter's. Work that actively engages the political is always going to have enemies as well as friends, because it makes those very distinctions.

**CS** You make a number of excellent points, and in particular, I think you're entirely right to counter my either/or tendency to flatten the subject with a description of the more nuanced hydra-headed affair that idiocy is. However, I don't know that the current perpetrators of idiocy are as insouciant with regard to origins as you suggest. I say this because the idiotic in art seems to me to be fundamentally reactive. Of course, this is a hard distinction to make, because any historically aware art is to a certain extent reactive, otherwise it's outsider art. But while this reactivity seems to be but one part—one ingredient that drives artistic practice—it seems to play a thoroughly dominant role in the idiotic, which is to say, it's all reaction, or even, as I have already claimed elsewhere, preemptive reaction. Even though I'm not so sure such a gesture, by virtue of being so self-consciously pseudo-subversive, falls within the benighted ambit of idiocy. But when Carpenter paints "Die collector scum!" on a canvas, he is openly engaging in an onanistic act of impotence (which I agree is full of a kind of humility) that is predicated on a lack of agency. But perhaps Josh Smith is a better, if not purer, example. Because in a sense his work obeys an essential internal impulse to make art, to produce, while at the same time—given that his subject matter never really changes (or at least didn't for a few years)—demonstrating that it is useless to produce, indeed that nothing really groundbreaking or revolutionary will come of it.

Josh Smith, *Untitled*, 2007;

oil on canvas; 60 x 48 inches; courtesy the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, and Galerie Catherine Bastide, Brussels

But more importantly, when I say reactive with regard to my interest in origins, I mean socially and culturally. Smith's work is obviously responding to a quasi-pathological sociocultural pressure to produce. That said, I think it's safe to wonder, at this point, if idiocy isn't a kind of dandyism. And when I say that, I mean in the most historical sense of the phenomenon, in that these are both cultivated postures meant to flaunt indifference and dissimulate anxiety in the face of serious market pressures. Predictably, perhaps, Benjamin locates the origins of dandyism in the London Stock Exchange of the nineteenth century. After all, the progenitor of "durr," Marcel Duchamp, could hardly have been more of a dandy, and what economic pressure would he have been responding to, the economy of frenetic progress that animated the avant-garde? Which brings the whole issue back to strategy and, in this case, a strategy of resistance, but resisting what, exactly? The pressure to produce? By doing what, out-producing? So it is better to simply concede? What about Diesel's new ad campaign? "Be stupid." An arch-diabolical tautology, it adds whole new layers and dimensions to the notion of recuperation, effectively leaving retard art in the dust.

**JL** Yes, exactly! It is a form of dandyism. But you left out Picabia! Picabia seems like a more proper progenitor (through Kippenberger) to Smith and Carpenter than Duchamp. And even a more proper dandy. Duchamp's work is incredibly studied. I get the feeling from Duchamp that

beneath the light gesture there is always a mountain of immaterial labor. He masks the labor, but the work still has a certain heaviness to it. I would say the same of Manzoni. The heaviness seems to stem from the fact that the work is finite. The pieces have a beginning, middle and an end. And their projects as a whole, their individual life's work, are also limited. One can produce only so many such ruptures. This is very different from the creative engine developed by Picabia. It is, in its way, limitless. Were he to live forever, he could go on reacting to stimuli in his way, forever. It is difficult to tell a good Picabia from a bad one. Of course you can say this about Josh Smith as well. And while his work fits very neatly into the mold of a strategic response to the pressure to produce, I doubt that this has much to do with his quasi-pathological behavior. I say this because artists make art. That is what they do. Josh Smith's weird over-production is a million miles away from any kind of a real "concession." That is the territory of artists like Murakami and Hirst. Smith's concession exists only on a stage of his own making. I myself am also an over-producer. I make much more art than I can show. And a million things that I wish were art but somehow don't turn out to be. The Diesel ad campaign is indeed diabolical. I am not usually bothered by advertising, but after I saw this I was depressed all day. At first, I thought it was just another version of the constant pressure exerted to be having fun all the time, a platitude analogous to "Don't Worry." Then I realized there was something else going on. The level at which the "Be Stupid" functions is really horrible. Not only is it not clever, it is completely lacking in both spectacle and irony, things we have come to expect from advertising. The actions by the models have a quotidian feel that is boring and annoying. They look like stock photos. The slogan, too, is stock. It is specifically NOT self-reflexive. It is like an unmitigated command, which we are meant to obey. And it is unrepentant about this fact. It seems to say, "This is my role as an ad, so I will assume it." It has a belligerent quality. I can see why you would equate the ads with Smith's work. All of this makes me feel old. I cannot help but wonder if people eight or nine years younger than I would have an intuitive understanding of these ads that I was only able to reach through reflection.



Francis Picabia, *Villejuif*,

1951; oil on canvas; 24 x 19  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches; courtesy Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York, and Galerie Michel Vidal, Paris

Once, I had a conversation with a guy working on a Diesel campaign that involved a fist-shaped bottle of cologne. Their intention was to distribute giant plastic fists to graffiti artists who would write on them and then photograph the fists in public places. This was to be followed by an exhibition of the photography in which an even larger fist would be displayed in the center of the gallery. They were going have a troop of guys doing **parkour**, jumping off of the fist at the opening. This is so supremely stupid, I just might have liked it. It would have been an enormous spectacle in the worst possible taste. It would have been a disaster, I'm sure. Maybe that is why Diesel rejected it.

CS Picabia, indeed. He also embodies the more romantic, self-destructive side of a certain kind of rock-star dandyism (which was a torch that Kippenberger bore to the bitter end). As for what you say about Josh Smith—I am afraid I am going to have to disagree. First of all, I see a big difference between your compulsion to produce and his. While there is something unbalanced about what you do—and possibly why you do it—it has nothing to do with pure production. As for Murakami and Hirst, well, they are two different beasts altogether. Hirst made a few good works with classical, high-stakes ideas in the nineties, and he has basically been repeating himself ever since. His status as a producer came later—but he had an idea. Murakami, let's say, also had



an idea (even if it wasn't "original") about Japanese anime culture, cribbed from pop art, etc., and only later entered a state of pure production. Smith's work, however, is predicated upon not having an idea. No idea, no subject matter, but his own name which is meant to bracket the issue of subject matter, the absence of idea (am I quoting you from somewhere?), while obeying a blind will to produce, which cannot be merely justified by the fact that artists make art, although that certainly plays a role in it. However sanctimonious it may sound, Smith is conceding to an injunction to produce, to overproduce—even if he is only doing so in appearance, speciously. In his recent review of *Besides, With, Against, and Yet: Abstraction and the Ready-Made Gesture* at the Kitchen, Morgan Falconer shrewdly characterizes the anxiety around painting over the past forty years in Beckettian terms: "I can't go, I'll go on."<sup>3</sup> That is a quite trenchant and succinct formulation of the matter, reflecting a quandary that the work of Josh Smith encapsulates with flatulent precision, to the point of totally parodying it.



Street view of Diesel "Be

Stupid" campaign, 2010

As for the Diesel ad—yes, it is most maddening. Anytime I saw it in a recent trip to New York, I was consumed with a kind of outrage and humiliation. Why is that? I think it was because it made me feel quite powerless. Because it, as a marketing strategy, seemed so invulnerable and straightjacketing. But what made it so invulnerable and straightjacketing? A diabolical, understated awareness that it is telling “us” to do something “we” are already doing (taking it for granted that “we,” whoever “we” are, are all willfully and gleefully on the short bus, thereby creating this scenario of bogus complicity); moreover, we were doing it because it was supposedly the last form of resistance available to us (i.e., Josh Smith), and now Diesel has colonized even that corner of the room (normally reserved for, yes, the dunce), depriving us of that last precious modicum of imbecility. And what’s worse, Diesel knows it—knows that this is being taken away and that this knowledge, which functions as ersatz irony, supposedly makes it okay and absolves them of the act.

**JL** The thing about the stupidity of Josh Smith is that it has been discussed only in terms of its critique of political economy, almost to the exclusion of everything else. What if we were to think of it in a different way? Maybe in terms of *objet petit a*, the thing that drives the artist’s work but which he cannot fully access. It may be that for Smith and his *gesamtkunstwerk* of endless production, there will come a time when he gets too close to the sun and gets burned (the transformation of the *objet petit a* into the *a priori*). He would know exactly what his own work means, and then he would no longer have a reason to make it—or he will think he knows. But I don’t think his work has reached that point. I believe there is the possibility for it to develop in time. It already has. He has changed subjects, he paints fish and animals, he varies his techniques, his modes of display, etc., etc. The popular interpretation of these paintings does not ultimately account for their material presence. It seems to fit neatly at the moment and so we think of it in terms of a zeitgeist. But if we look at Picabia’s work now, the particular battles it fought are mostly long forgotten. It is quite mysterious. I believe this possibility exists for Smith. When context shifts around the unchanging work of art, what was once heavy can again become light. This is the way in which works of art are ultimately NOT subject to definition. It is also the way in which work frames its context, rather than the other way around. If we recognize the abstraction inherent in all representation, we see what a powerful force it can become. This is why I would make a simplistic statement like “artists make art.”

As for the Diesel ad, you’ve perfectly summed it up.

**CS** I have such a hard time imagining Josh Smith’s work outside of the current moment—or its moment, its apex, which in some ways seems to have already passed. But then again, I think there’s something fundamentally unassimilable about the work, something that will always disgruntle—even infuriate—and as such, ultimately resist being shuffled away into some intractable category.

I think you also make a good point about work framing its context. Even this conversation, to a certain degree, has been framed by Josh Smith, while we think—or at least I think—I am responding to a context, to the factors of a historical moment, which happens to be ours.

On a completely different note, something else to consider is the sense of endgame inherent in “retard art.” Or maybe the sense of endgame is particular to all postwar art, and “retard art” or the retarded element in art, which is certainly engaged in a hyperbolic one-upmanship, is merely a hypertrophied version of the endgame?

The other day I was reading a discussion between William Anastasi and Thomas McEvelley from

1989, and the frequency with which they referred to and admired Anastasi's work as "dumb" was impressive. At one point they talk about a photographic *mise en abyme* entitled *Terminus* by Anastasi, and the repartee around the work is heartbreakingly and, I daresay, mindblowingly Beckettian:

**McEvilley** [...] And *Terminus* as a title suggests something like the end of the line.

**Anastasi** We keep trying to make the very last work of art.

**McEvilley** Hoping.

**Anastasi** That art would just pack up after this piece.

**JL**



**CS** I LOVE San Pellegrino!

1. See Chris Sharp, "The Idiots," *ArtReview* 32 (May 2009): 80–84, and the comments following

its online posting, <http://www.artreview.com/profiles/blogs/the-idiots#>.

2. Chris Sharp, "Joe Bradley, CANADA, New York, USA," *Frieze.com* (February 11, 2008).

3. See Morgan Falconer, "Besides, With, Against, and Yet, The Kitchen, New York, USA," *Frieze* 129 (March 2010): 123.

[« return to table of contents](#)