



Lucas Ajemian and Julien Bismuth: *Les Lettres Tristes*

Foxy Production: November 21, 2008 – January 10, 2009

Combining their individual practices and shared interests in performance and narrative, Lucas Ajemian and Julien Bismuth's collaboration, *Les Lettres Tristes*, was a thoughtful exposition on the art of distraction. Together, the artists wrote experimental texts and situational dialogues—"Sad Letters" penned to play with language and disassociation. Realized through multiple mediums—video, sculpture, and a free newspaper produced each week of the exhibition—Ajemian and Bismuth's production added up to a strangely rewarding exercise in discourse and digression.



Lucas Ajemian and Julien Bismuth, video still, *Les Lettres Tristes*.

Upon entering the gallery, conversations between the artists were immediately discernible from a two-channel video alternating between adjoining walls. Onscreen, Ajemian and Bismuth dramatized a series of studio scenarios, ostensibly as themselves, two artists collaborating on a sculpture. Their characters sat side by side, staring listlessly at the work they made, in comedic contrast to a conventional art documentary's requisite scenes of labor and inspiration. Here, the artists were resigned to inaction—the starts and stops, loss of concentration and late-night exhaustion that constitutes real time in a dedicated studio practice. Their conversations were not profound ruminations on art and meaning, but the fragmented, banal concerns of a too-busy routine. Who had the key to the front door? A destabilized narrative was central to the exhibition, and the artists furthered a strategy of rupture in the videos by changing characters. In a few notable vignettes, the artists acted less like collaborators and more like artist and viewer, stumbling their way through an awkward studio visit. Through small talk, irrelevant statements, silences and a premature exit, the scenes conveyed a real sense of disappointment—in the sculpture sitting in front of them, and in a conversation

that failed to find a point of connection.

Equally precarious was the sculpture in question—a simple, geometric foam-core structure, scored and hinged to fold into multiple configurations. The work was uniformly painted Chroma-key green—a color that allows filmmakers to digitally remove an object from a sequence and replace it with a special effect. In the video projection, the sculpture signified a negative space—a hole in the frame, rather than a work offered for consideration. Neither the work nor the artists' identities were stable or fixed, and as the conversations unfolded in non sequiturs, all aspects of their practice seemed positioned for modification—to be reconsidered, edited or replaced.

The artists' exchanges in their weekly newspaper, *Les Lettres Tristes*, were more extensive and purposefully coherent than in the videos. The papers contained essays, photos, drawings, comic strips, interviews, contributions from colleagues and a section for a "Sad Letter." The artists devised the name *Les Lettres Tristes* in part after the Lettrists—political artists and agitators in mid-20th century Paris. Ajemian and Bismuth's experiments in text and détournement certainly cite Lettrism, though their self-referential methods, confined to the studio, were quite different from Lettrism's urban agenda. A more unexpected influence, which the artists introduce in depth, is Eriksonian psychotherapy. In the 1950s, Milton H. Erickson developed a therapeutic method using disassociation to change negative thought patterns. Achieved with hypnosis, the therapy is uniquely focused on language and discontinuity, a short-term process for altering mood, to presumably cope with *les tristes*. Ajemian and Bismuth's collaborative installation involved several additional components—metal sculptures, an audio piece, a worktable strewn with lists and mock-ups, and a page, repeatedly revised in red pen, of their in-progress screenplay. In all, the most affecting aspect of this intelligent exhibition was the conscious connection between the two artists. Despite the video's continual breaks in focus, the viewer maintained a notion of persistent exchange, and the artists' subdued performances did not hide their mutual respect, concern and interest. In a scene in the studio, one artist asked if the other were feeling tired; in another, one asked to read the other's writing in his journal. The artists have achieved not just the resistance to permanence and the blurring of authorship that they are clearly after, but a model of vulnerability—the letting go of ego, control and privacy, necessary for a successful relationship.