



# Artists Lucas Ajemian and Julien Bismuth Think It's Time You Redecorated Your Kitchen

By Willa Paskin

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Sit down to speak with artists Lucas Ajemian and Julien Bismuth, and you feel like you've landed yourself in the middle of a conversation-- one that started well before you opened your mouth and will go on long after you close it. Conversation-- and thrashing out, tossing out, playing with, laughing about and realizing the ideas borne out of it-- is an essential part of the duo's collaboration, which has resulted in an idea rich, intentionally engaging, occasionally intentionally mystifying, always playful body of work. "[Our collaboration is] a conversation in which the product is less important than how it allows us to engage with all these different things," says Bismuth. But when the "product" includes self-published newspapers, paper-mâché furniture, sculptural letters to Emerson and the guy on the subway, a complex relationship with Lettrism, a French avant garde of the 1940s dedicated to freeing the letter A, and big plans for a movie project you can likely participate in, it's more than enough to hold your interest. Much of this work (the two share a studio, but also pursue their own, individual practices) goes on display tonight, through March 28, at [Invisible-Exports](#), a gallery on the Lower East Side. Over coffee, melon and brioche, we talked about the virtues of being ridiculous, the benefits of confusion and all the meaning packed into *Les Tristes*, the title of their show.

**Before we get all theoretical—I walk into your show. What do I see?**

**Lucas Ajemian:** They'll be some furniture pieces that are made of paper-mâché.

**Julien Bismuth:** The whole show is like a dialogue. Even though we're working together all the time in the studio, we're

molding and bouncing the ideas together. A lot of the things we do stem from things we did in the past. For the last show we did in New York in December of 2008 we printed a newspaper [pictured below] –five issues for each week of the show– but we printed 3,000 copies. So, we had a lot of newspaper leftover. Lucas was like, “Whatever we do next, I want to use this newspaper.” So, we made this furniture. They’re not meant to be art objects. They’re really meant to function as furniture.



#### **You can sit on them?**

**LA:** Well, there aren't any seats made. There's a chest of drawers that has opening drawers [Pictured below]. There's a kind of bar table. This surplus of newspapers just became material for us-- conceptual material but also material-material. We create these foils for doing these things, so I was like, “We made too many newspapers. We have to make paper-mâché art now.” The interest in paper-mâché art, for us, is a little bit nominal. So I came up with this-- We won't make paper-mâché sculptures as much as we'll make paper-mâché furniture.

**JB:** We started also designing a series of paintings that have paper-mâché letters on the linen. Then I came in with these objects that are quick sort of sculptural sketches that are designed to be illustrations of letters, inspired by, like, the essays of Emerson or all of the different things I had seen on the subway on one particular day.

**LA:** In both of our individual practices, as well as our collective practice, these are things that are just to the right of what we might do. I don't make paintings. Julian doesn't make paintings. We had to remind ourselves how to stretch canvas. Neither of us designs furniture either.



**Why take that step “to the right” of what you might do? What about that step appeals to you?**

**JB:** I think one of the nice things about our collaboration is that you change – you go from your own identity to a collaborative identity. Everyone has things that they would like to do, but maybe they’re afraid of doing it, or they think that if they were to do it, it wouldn’t really gel with what they’ve done in the past. They don’t think they could really pull it off. In collaboration, because there is a dialogue, because there is this other identity, I think it’s easier to let go. Like, “I’m going to make these five minute sculptures.” They’re very simple, direct sculptures. Then, I’m going to make this paper- mâché furniture. Whereas, in our own practices, it would be like, “Why would I do that?”

**You’re also going to be filming scenes for a movie at the gallery?**

**LA:** Yeah, we’ll be shooting scenes. We’ll have some performances happen throughout the show, hopefully on weekly basis. We’ll be filming things and if you’re in the gallery maybe you’ll be asked to walk down the sidewalk three times.

**Tell me about the movie.**

**JB:** The second thing that we made together was for a show in a Frankfurt gallery. We were like, “Oh, we should make a movie!” We had this idea for a movie in which the characters in the movie would be letters. People holding letters and wandering around the city, going to work, running around in the park. And so we really thought we were going to make that movie for the show in Frankfurt. But then the more we talked about the movie the bigger the idea for the movie became and we ended up just making a storyboard, which was a really beautiful object. It’s 5x15 feet. It’s huge. While we worked on the storyboard, we were like, “Okay. This storyboard should also have a historical part – things that influenced us.” That’s when we started engaging with other artists who had worked with letters and texts. We got interested in Lettrism. I’m related to one of the founders of the Lettrist movement so we got in touch with him. I just found out by accident that I’m related to him because he changed his name. Anyway, our future is this movie, which is also the sort-of horizon line. For this show at IE, it’s like, “We’re doing all this, but really what we’re working on...”

**So who are the Lettrists?**

**JB:** The Lettrists... they wanted to free letters from language. It was really about systems and writing.

**LA:** They’re like the Mystics.

**JB:** They're really like a crappy bunch of artists. They're whole thing is, "We're going to free the letter A."

**LA:** It kind of is like this kind of primordial kind of thing.

**JB:** Then, they started alphabets. There's a whole thing. There are Lettrists books on economics, on sex, on sociology, on educating your child...

**It seems like they amuse you.**

**LA:** A lot of going out onto a limb and trying to come up with a new epistemology for yourself is kind of ridiculous. But it also speaks to this really potent desire to be in search of something – to change your paradigm. I think that's a very serious pursuit. It would be very easy, and in some respects tempting, to make a parody of the Lettrists.

**JB:** You can look at these avant-garde movements as ridiculous, but there's also an ambition there, which is really noble and which, in many cases, produces, if not results, then at least statements and perspectives or propositions that still resonate. If they don't resonate with a lot of people, it's because we have this thin barrier of cynicism that is often times a kind of ignorance. You're not really reading their mission statement all the way through. It's like, "Yeah. The rhetoric is a little grand and this work is like photocopied images with letters posted on them. But what they're trying to say is true."

**LA:** I think there is a little bit of a hokeyness to the way that we call everything Lettrists. It is about the kind of phonetic sound of Lettrists, or like letterists for a comic book, and les triste, the sad ones, and the notion of melancholic ones from cinema. All those things tie into it so it makes for a really invested pun.

**It's like you made your own brand.**

**LA:** Yeah, we created one, because we created this kind of rubric, which everything goes under. But the fact that it's everything makes it like it's no brand. There was this artist Yves Kline who did this piece called "Theater of the Void." It was just a whole day. Everything that happened in the world that day was the performance. He made a newspaper for the day. [Laughing] That's the model. He let so much slip through the cracks.

**Do you think artists are overly concerned with being ridiculous these days?**

**JB:** I think in general, if you look at a lot of work that's being made today, a lot of artists are comfortable appropriating certain stylistic devices from say Bauhaus or Fluxus or whatever '70s minimalism...

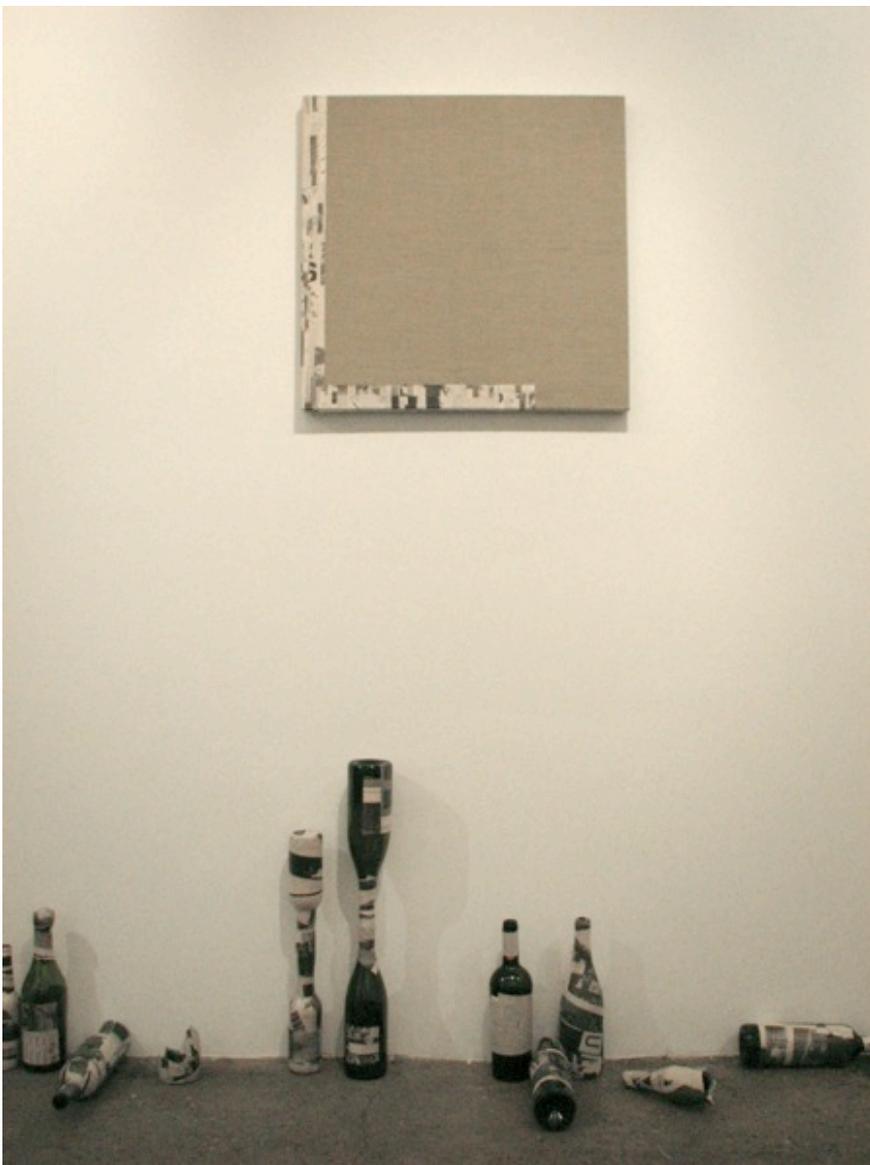
**LA:** That includes us, too.

**JB:** Exactly. It's very easy nowadays to talk about the political or idealistic dimensions of these avant-gardes in a nostalgic way. "Look at what these artists are thinking or trying to do. They were out in the street and making work about that." I think what's harder is for people to be as direct about their intentions, and as ambitious about their intentions, as people were in those early avant-garde days.

**LA:** Lettrism is a pre-philosophical thing. It's not theoretical. Its ambition is to engage in a real way and have something maybe form meaning through action. It's not knowing where it's going to end up. Not knowing where it actually belongs. We tend to know where things are going to end up. Not us, necessarily, but people in general.

**JB:** There's this notion of contemporary or modern art as sort of experimental, which I think has faded or is threatened right now – not because artists are working differently. I think it was one thing to say, I'm Robert Smithson and I want to do a piece in an abandoned mine and just do it and see what happens. Whereas, right now, if you were to do that kind of thing, you'd probably be doing it in relationship to some organization. You'd probably have to file a proposal before. You'd have to explain your project before you'd get the funding. There are all sorts of ways in which you have to define what you're going to do before you actually do it. People have to hedge their bets.

**LA:** You've got to put something in the press release. You have to prime people.



### **How did you start working together?**

**Lucas:** Julian came to a studio that I had in Brooklyn. I had this newspaper clipping that I thought was really cool and Julian thought was really nice. So we decided to restage that in Manhattan. That was the first thing we did. Then we decided to work on these larger projects, which weren't necessarily always feasible. But maybe the conversation is more interesting than the projects anyway? So we embarked on these projects together and eventually, Julian moved into the studio. Then, we just started having this larger hand in each other's work.

### **This kind of collaboration...**

**LA:** I think it's what artists do all the time.

### **But not so willfully.**

**JB:** There are a lot of artists, who share studios and even if you're not sharing studio, there are always two or three people you see regularly who become the foils for your work.

**LA:** Artists tend to constantly be talking about their projects, especially amongst other artists. Speaking to your fellow artists, or someone who has a practice of any kind, be it a writing practicing or whatever, they understand that all of this has happened with a lot ambiguity and trial and error. They're being drawn into the same problems of being stuck on an idea, of having something recur and not really be able to communicate it well. I think that's just what artists do. In our work, you can really see [laughing] that it gets really confusing. I think we decided a long time ago, to set all that down.

### **The confusion?**

**LA:** Yeah. It's definitely in our last show. We laid down a kind of gauntlet for people. I think it's kind of great. I mean, it's really messy and parts of it are really embarrassing. But that's the key.

### **So the collaboration, the messy conversation, is as much a party of the project as, say, the paper-mâché furniture.**

**JB:** I think a good way to define the whole thing we're trying to do is that it's really a conversation between me and Lucas and it's a conversation in which the product is less important than how it allows us to engage with all these different things.

**LA:** [To Julian] You don't like melon? [Starts to eat Julien's cantaloupe.] The project isn't necessarily to show anything. The

project is to be the guys that kind of strip away. There is no project. Finding the position in it isn't necessarily important to me. That's like the brand of it, which isn't very interesting to us.

### **What would you want people who come to see your show to be thinking about when they leave? What would be the ideal state of mind?**

**JB:** Well, I think kind of forgetting or a remembering all the things you forgot. "What am I doing here?"

**LA:** Or some desire to spend money on paper-mâché furniture.

**JB:** Maybe a desire to redo your kitchen in paper-mâché.

**LA:** I think the best thing to have happen would be for people to come in the space and interact. Not only with the work of reading the letters and allowing that to take them someplace, but also to be in the space and be active, looking and maybe discussing and experiencing something. A lot of times in exhibitions you go in – it's how I end up going through Chelsea, too—you go in and make a round of the gallery and leave. Unless something really strikes me, I'm gone.

**JB:** When I go to a show, I tend to first register who the artist is, then where it's being shown. When I go in and start looking at the aesthetic of the thing and start looking at the placement of it, there are already all these different ways in which I've defined or categorized the work before I even start to look at it. Depending on that, I'll spend thirty seconds or fifteen minutes looking at it.

Often times, my prejudices are getting in the way of looking. I'm already like, "Oh. I get this." You're not letting yourself be surprised by the work

**LA:** I think our stuff can be quite confusing sometimes. Hopefully – the positive aspect of that is— people won't come in and identify what they're seeing before they're even looking at it. Hopefully, they'll either be like, "This is too confusing" and walk out or they'll be like, "What the hell is this?" and then they'll come and start to look. I think if they do start to look, they're going to be asking that same question – "What the hell is this? – the whole time they're looking.

**JB:** [Laughing] But in a much more productive way.

**LA:** And they'll still be asking that question as they walk out of the gallery. To just allow something to be effective in a positive or negative way-- for a moment just to be considerate or thoughtful about the thing-- it's very little to ask, but it's a lot to ask too.

**JB:** One of the best things one of my teachers ever said to me in undergrad was "Everything around us has a similar time frame."

So much of what we see and experience has a kind of sudden impact, is efficient, declares itself and unveils itself to you very quickly. The great thing about art, or a book is that, all of a sudden, you're asking someone to slow down. It's very hard to ask someone to slow down in a gallery right now, but there is something to be said for insisting. If you make a piece of furniture that's fragile because it's made out of paper-mâché, you're asking a lot of you're audience. Maybe, 80% of the people won't respond. Maybe, 10% will be intrigued. Maybe, 5% will be interested and maybe another 5% will get really engaged. If that's your audience, then that's your audience. At least you're having a dialogue with people who can engage with it.

**LA:** You can't really engage with people who aren't really engaged somewhat in the practice of engaging – not making art, but looking at art.

**JB:** One time, when I was teaching I took my class to MOMA. There's a room of minimalist sculptures. Two of the students were kind of violent in their mocking of the objects. But what they were saying, they were actually really getting it. They were like, "What are these? They aren't really anything. They're just cubes." Well, that's exactly what they're trying to do! They're not about anything. They're cubes.

### **It's better to make someone feel something, whatever it is, than nothing.**

**LA:** Confusion is a very productive state of mind.

**JB:** I think a lot of artists of our generation have rediscovered the pleasures of ambiguity and experimentation.

### **Anything else that I should know?**

**LA:** I didn't think you needed to know all that!

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