



JOE GIBBONS + JOE ZANE BOSTON

Adding to the bite of an already frosty Boston winter, *JOE*, a so-called collaborative exhibition, is nothing of the sort [Allston Skirt Gallery; December 7—29, 2007]. Joe Gibbons, a film and video maker, and Joe Zane, a self-proclaimed “sleight-of-hand” practitioner—both of whom teach at MIT’s Center for Advanced Visual Studies—toy with the expectations elicited by the notion of collaboration. While the exhibition is certainly a common project, and all the objects are supposedly co-produced, Gibbons and Zane aim for something completely different. Inspired by the French symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud, the Joes try to realize the contradictory—and ultimately impossible—state of existence encapsulated by his famous adage, “Je est un autre” [I is another]. The nexus of the exhibition, this desire to dissolve personal boundaries, is explored through a tongue-in-cheek contestation of avant-garde notions of self-identity.

In the most general way, the exhibition’s overall organization articulates this aspiration. While unique objects are dispersed throughout the space and engaged in dialogue with one another, none is titled, suggesting that they are all part of the greater “JOE” experience. Scattered and diffused, these pieces of Joe, so to speak, imply that identity is not only fragmented, but can worm its way into, and be constructed by, various substances (a sculpture made of vials of prescription pills taken by Gibbons), fantasies (a video of both artists receiving standing ovations by an adoring public), and mass-media items (a handmade replica of *Parkett* magazine consecrated to Gibbons and Zane). If the quintessential avant-garde artist—say, Tristan Tzara or Hugo Ball—positioned himself against mass-culture, Gibbons and Zane point to a new breed who simultaneously yearns for and is rendered psychotic by the glow of spectacle.

A similar transformation of avant-garde models is at play in one of the most striking visual ensembles on view: a white lab coat, with both Joes’ nametags, an

amateurish black and red banner with the capitalized word “RESEARCH,” and a large desk scattered with artist-cum-researcher’s paraphernalia. Alluding to their intuitively-sanctioned double identities as artists and scientists at MIT, Gibbons and Zane also evoke the Russian avant-garde’s utopian aspirations to construct a new Soviet subject. All that remains of this laboratory for a new collective, however, are lifeless props and a heavy, somewhat self-indulgent, helping of irony. The desk, for instance, is overwhelmed by a readymade toolkit for the aspiring avant-garde artist: German beer and spring water, test-tubes, screwdrivers, framed photographs of the artists’ cats, and, of course, a tome of art historian Benjamin Buchloh’s essential writings on the neo-avant-garde and culture industry.

The wit of this *mise-en-scène* needs to be taken quite seriously if one is to understand the point the Joes are making. This is suggested by a clue they leave behind, namely the inclusion of Freud’s seminal text, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*. By poking fun at the notion of the artist as genius or revolutionary, and attempting to surpass its model of autonomous individuality, Gibbons and Zane reveal the distance traveled since the height of modernism. They also, unconsciously, make visible the most profoundly repressed desires of their psyche, or perhaps of contemporary art’s “artistic unconscious.” A strict Freudian might surmise that the social function of their joke is a collective discharge of aggression against the historical avant-garde. In setting the stakes for aesthetic practice and social praxis so high, this avant-garde rendered it virtually impossible for contemporary artists to ever live up to its example. This forbidden anxiety rears its head in every part of *JOE*, temporarily releasing both artists from the ghost of modernism and allowing art practice to carry on under different terms.

—Nuit Banai