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A RENDEZ-VOUS UNDER THE COUNTER RHEA ANASTAS



David Joselit and Gareth James, *Late Night Legal Formalities*, Elizabeth Dee Gallery, New York, 2006, installation view

On David Joselit and Gareth James at Elizabeth Dee Gallery, New York

"Late Night Legal Formalities", a project jointly authored by the artist Gareth James and the art historian David Joselit, appeared for a short five days in New York last September. Announced by an email invitation and a press release, the collaboration, conceived by James, is best described as an exhibition given its duration and site of display - Elizabeth Dee Gallery, a contemporary art gallery in Chelsea. Though, as we will see, the traditional function of the gallery is complicated by this work due to the expanded role Elizabeth Dee was assigned in its creation: her inclusion as the work's commissioner and patron locates her share in the process as something more than a presenter and somewhat less than an author. The press release explained that Joselit had been invited (and paid) to attend every exhibition at the gallery during the calendar year of 2005 and to produce "a short text over which [Dee] would have no editorial control" and whose subject "would not be determined in advance" - ostensibly a response addressed to the gallery and to what he had encountered there.¹ The exhibition's date was significant as it coincided with the first week of the art season of 2006 and the start of the fifth year in the short history of Dee's gallery.



David Joselit /Gareth James, Late Night Legal Formalities, 2006, Videostills

Was this "mode of attention"² a form of intimate self-reflection, criticism or history? A single calendar year would seem too short a period to comprise a meaningful unit of history. One doesn't yet know whether the exhibitions and practices presented over such a period will amount to anything or whether the gallery will acquire real distinction for its program over time.³ And yet, Joselit's sustained and repeated viewing is by itself compelling. It suggests that James was intending to launch a critical oversight upon his dealer and as well that Joselit's criticism could be transformed into the more generous act of a gift or offering, or both.



David Joselit /Gareth James, Late Night Legal Formalities, 2006, Videostills

Entering Dee's street-level space to view the exhibition, I had the initial impression that the gallery's primary room had been emptied. At the rear of the space, a monitor could be seen from its backside. It had been placed upon two folding chairs which were upturned so that their seats touched the floor and their legs intertwined, locking into a structure (or was it a sculpture?) capable of holding the monitor and DVD player in a level and balanced position without any visible tape or hardware. A second pair of folding chairs, now upright, faced this aggregate of

furniture and equipment, a form that pleased with its intelligent economy of everyday materials. (Knowing readers will recognize this manner of installation from James' excellent co-curated project with Annette Schindler and Florian Zeyfang at the Swiss Institute, "I said I love. That is the promise. The TVideo politics of Jean-Luc Godard", 1999).

The paired chairs offered a metonymy for the two authors and invited the viewer to sit or stand before the film on display. This solicitation was articulated first as a delay or prohibition of the image since the rear view of the monitor was orchestrated as the primary vantage onto the installation. Extending the iconoclastic gesture was the video playing on the monitor: a roughly twelve minute excerpt of "Manderlay" (2005), Lars von Trier's parable of American racial inequity, to which James had appended a running subtitle - the text Joselit had written per invitation. James' analogy between the neo-Brechtian and post-Reconstruction Southern plantation narrative of the film and a present-day art gallery is interpretively wide open, ranging from bleak humor to structural analysis to arbitrary collage. This was not the first time James had positioned his work as a ventriloquism of the Danish filmmaker's œuvre.⁴



David Joselit /Gareth James, Late Night Legal Formalities, 2006, Videostills

It was James' idea to ask Dee to commission the services of an art historian or critic. But it was Dee who chose Joselit, the author of a critical study of Duchamp and the forthcoming "Feedback: Television against Democracy" (MIT Press). Having ceded editorial control to the artist and having agreed to expose her gallery to a year's worth of criticism while paying for it at a \$1.00 a word, Dee sought a writer of significance and substance. Did the essay Joselit wrote "deinstrumentalize" the relationship between commercial galleries and art historians, as the press release suggested? James' invitation insisted on making a distinction between the project's audiences - that is, between the apparently restricted primary audience of the gallery's artists (the "Dear Artists and Staff of Elizabeth Dee Gallery"⁵ of Joselit's epistolary address) and the audience who might view the exhibition presentation. The former is united by shared social stakes in the gallery and can be differentiated from the broader readership of an art magazine (Joselit's "natural" audience) or even the viewers of the exhibition, who, given Joselit's address, became bystanders to an exchange that had in a sense already occurred behind the scenes with the commission and writing of the text. In turn, Joselit's forthrightness of tone (his observations and questions were asked "without irony or malice") may have had everything to do with the fact that in this peculiar triangle, he had the least at stake professionally, since such a project would be of only uncertain or negative value to the academic field. The idea, also found in the press release, that the restricted audience would protect the text from being reduced by its gallery

distribution to functioning as promotional copy, is substantially less clear, though it is supported by the agreement between the parties that the gallery would remain the exclusive "publication" venue for Joselit's text, the critic having restricted his rights to republish the text in a magazine or journal.

The structural condition of Joselit's authority as an academic and critic lingers, however, and his professional and social status as such cannot be imagined otherwise, despite the self-doubt his essay frequently exhibits about art, criticism and the writer's own anxieties of purpose. The strength of Joselit's text is how knowing he is on these matters. For he tells us (or the Dee gallery) that an art historian's audience is merely a shadowy collection of subjects, a "vague and undifferentiated imagined readership", whether constituted by the venue of the art magazine, the university press book or exhibition catalogue. The audience of "Late Night Legal Formalities" is positioned sympathetically by Joselit (his address is always "you", "especially for you"), and the critic never offers the anticipated evaluative criticism. With deftness and reflexivity, he narrates other more urgent subjects than writing the gallery artists' attempts "to assail the commodity system by dissolving it into process." "Why do you do it?" he writes, "I mean make art, of course." He pressures assumptions about (the gallery's) artists and their art, among them, a lack of interest in twentieth century art history and the narrowness of scope of their art as if "circumscribed by the problematics of a clever studio class". Showing his hand, he offers a few judgments about the Dee exhibitions nonetheless: "but not all of them felt quite ready to be in public."



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James, for his part, gives Joselit's address a filmic body by adding its 1,241 words to "Manderlay", letting the voice of the art historian's text set the rhythm and pacing to von Trier's imagery. This editing work maintains the integrity of the writer's words even if it substantially darkens the guilelessness of Joselit's tone by tethering it to a polemic intended to savage the rhetoric of neoliberal political correctness. This divided modality of attentions and deliveries frames the problem of audience in tandem with the problems of judgment and value communicated by Joselit. According to the "long tail" theory, a term I borrow from internet economics, James' use of "Manderlay" in an exhibition unites over space and time a discontinuous community of receivers through reception habits.⁷ Joselit's readers join the local audience of the artist James, constitutencies which are then connected to the community of Dee's artists and the comparatively vaster accumulation of interest represented by fans of von Trier's film, and so on. But to paraphrase Bourdieu, the work is made "not twice, but a hundred times" by

commentary on it by others. Perhaps, more importantly, James' *détournement* of receivership through our current age's habits of screen-focused consumption risks diminishing the distinction between art reception and those more generic and ultimately commercial attentions and distractions of the broader culture.⁸

In retrospect, it seems telling that I first received word of this collaboration via rumor. According to the gossip, James had asked Dee to hire Joselit to ghostwrite press releases for the gallery James had recently joined. I'm embarrassed to admit that I didn't question the basic assumptions of the rumor. I recognized James' approach to Dee's young and unarticulated gallery as a performance of critical triage by a self-appointed Robin Hood. It resonated with his "Patent Palace" included in P.S.1's "Greater New York" exhibition of 2000. There he placed a full-scale model of a hospital gurney made of folded paper outside a press office he covered, floor to ceiling in a bandage of (again) white paper. A subsequent project "wRECONSTRUCTION", 2001, at American Fine Arts, Co., the gallery first to represent James in New York, involved closing the gallery to the public so James and Colin de Land could entertain complaints about the state of art in private meetings. Though Joselit holds the position of Professor and Chair of art history at Yale University, I reasoned it was possible that his intellectual services had been sought to perform a similar "corrective" role, a variation of the local tradition of academics writing for gallery exhibition catalogues. (Rosalind Krauss' writing for Pace or Marian Goodman's regular support of Benjamin Buchloh came easily to mind, as did the crossovers to the "other side" of critic Robert Pincus-Witten and editor Louise Neri.)

Montage can reveal the commonality between disparate objects, and the montage of "Late Night Legal Formalities" troubles and is troubling in the way it unshackles hierarchies of gender and race and of economic and social status, attributable not only to "Manderlay"'s own narrative but to the effects of its montage with Joselit's letter to the Dee gallery. I am left wondering why James analogized the gender of his dealer to the film's two women characters of slave master and delusional liberator. Does he wish us to read "Manderlay"'s themes of domination and abjection across America's divided social body against the "finite collection of people" who constitute the gallery? In practice, the traditional roles and authorities of artist, dealer and critic remain intact. After all, Joselit opines in full possession of his particular symbolic capital, while James assigns himself the role of intellectual provocateur as well as the (mechanized) manual labor of refashioning Joselit's intellectual value into aesthetic value as an art exhibition.

Avoiding mantles of authority may be one motivation for James' disavowal of the object's status as a work of art.⁹ Curiously, the gallery describes "Late Night Legal Formalities" as a "Book, including 4 chairs, TV, DVD-player and DVD, Edition of 5". The price (\$ 5,500) reflects the object's status as a luxury good of the sub-field of contemporary art. I should mention here that while James can be counted among an elite type of artist who offers dealers little in the way of saleable work while producing for exhibitions, Dee believes strongly enough in a market for James, and in her and the artist's interest in that market, that she offers her artists a 10% commission on secondary market sales made by the gallery. In the end, the dealer's role is unchanged by the displacements of "Late Night Legal Formalities". She remains the agent who manages the exchange value of this art while the lion's share of recognition goes to the two (male) authors. In conversation for this review, Dee placed her gallery in a tradition of artist-centered galleries (e.g. Paula Cooper, Virginia Dwan) and my sense is that she believes in her artists' ideas and in the possibility of giving permission to those ideas by accommodating her gallery's practice to them.¹⁰ Despite her optimism about what might be accomplished by the gallery, the structural possibility of turning artistic risk into material profit in a market that rewards the rhetoric of innovation and novelty is, however, ever present.



David Joselit /Gareth James, Late Night Legal Formalities, 2006, Videostills

"Late Night Legal Formalities" holds the promise of a small rebellion (hence its title?) between gallery patron, artist and critic, an idea which turns on exchanges of labor and new positionings of work, text and audience within the expenditure of a minor contractual sum (\$ 1,241) - all invited by James. But the project's moves and countermoves are marked by a notable lack of accountability to their audiences, who were repositioned as recipients of actions that had already occurred behind closed doors. I relate this observation to one Isabelle Graw expressed in issue Nr. 63 of *Texte zur Kunst*: "Today, on the other hand, it is easy to avoid one another - not least because the art world is fragmented into individual social sectors that share few points of contact, and form parallel universes. The chances of running into someone with whom one has â€œa bone to pickâ€™ are comparatively slim. Yet that entails also decreased chances for individual intervention to change given social coordinates and assigned positions." (p. 128) The concealed after-hours "triage" of James' operations suggests a homology with the fragmented spheres of the art world and risks reproducing the structure of a professional universe divided by self-interested niches. It is in this context, and in the longer gaze of the historical record, that the uneasy coexistence of James' marginality in a market driven by object-making and his not-so-marginalized activities as a writer, editor and collaborator may ultimately matter. He would wish to defend the autonomy of his practice and of that intimate space cohered by the "finite collection of people" of the gallery (or studio or classroom or collective space of production) from the economically-determined relations of representation and distribution of the galleries with which he associates, relations no artist alone is able to overtake. Perhaps it is not evaluative judgments such as Joselit could provide that are so lacking today but the visceral energy of aesthetic and intellectual accountability to each other in the art world and other publics. Call it transparency or belief or even caring. Finally, I should mention that at the moment of writing this "Late Night Legal Formalities" is still unsold.

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David Joselit and Gareth James, "Late Night Legal Formalities", Elizabeth Dee Gallery, New York, September 9 - 16, 2006.

Notes

¹ Cited from the press release (written by James), "David Joselit and Gareth James: Late Night Legal Formalities", September 2006, Elizabeth Dee Gallery, New York, no pagination. See

www.elizabethdeegallery.com.

² Press release, Elizabeth Dee Gallery.

³ Let me disclose that I'm an art historian, that James and I are among the co-founders of the gallery project Orchard, and that we are friends of eight years.

⁴ "Lars von Trier" was co-authored by James and Gardar Eide Einarsson and presented at American Fine Arts, Co., New York in 2002.

⁵ Press release, Elizabeth Dee Gallery.

⁶ David Joselit, untitled manuscript, January 2006, Elizabeth Dee Gallery, New York. This quote and those to Joselit's text hereafter are taken from the subtitles as they appear in the DVD by Joselit and James, "Late Night Legal Formalities", 2006. James transcribed the 1,241-word essay Joselit submitted to Dee exactly without editing or excerpting.

⁷ The term is business journalist Chris Anderson's from a 2004 article in *Wired* and his book, "The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More" (New York: Hyperion, 2006). Its common sense allows me to relate Bourdieu's restricted audiences in the cultural field to small cultural communities and subcultures and how their "readings" constitute consumption habits and markets. The idea of the author-receiver has a longer and higher-brow cultural pedigree, and one source is James' engagement with Godard. See the interview by James with Kaja Silverman, also related to the lecture Silverman gave during James' exhibition, "The Author as Receiver": Gareth James, "Son image: Interview with Kaja Silverman", in "I said I love. That is the promise. The TVideo politics of Jean-Luc Godard", eds. Gareth James and Florian Zeyfang (Berlin: oe + b_books, 2003), p. 211-243.

⁸ I refer the reader to James' interest in recent British recuperations of philistinism and pleasure in popular culture. In the same volume as cited above one can find Dave Beech's, "Is Godard a Philistine?", p. 31-57.

⁹ The press release supports the inference that "Late Night Legal Formalities" is a work of criticism by giving importance to the commission concept and the DVD-text over the five-day exhibition as merely a format of distribution. Additionally, Joselit's name appears before James' in the object description.

¹⁰ While Dee's expression of belief in her artists (and in artistic autonomy) is laudable, I can't help but compare her approach to that of James' former dealer and artist, Colin de Land, whose belief and embodiment of artistic autonomy was so radical that he was known to openly disagree with his artists over his opinion on the success or failure (to perform criticality) of their work, a position which departed from the unequivocal and thus functionally promotional discourse of most dealers. One example of this is the conversation James and de Land invited between myself, George Baker and de Land about institutional critique during "wRECONSTRUCTION", February 3, 2001, documented on videotape.