

LUCAS AJEMIAN + JULIEN BISMUTH
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BLOUIN ARTINFO

Lucas Ajemian and Julien Bismuth, “Les Tristes, Invisible–Exports, 14A Orchard Street, through March 28, opening February 26, 6–8 p.m.

Knowledge, as former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld once pointed out, is a tricky thing. In any given situation, there are the things we know we know—in this case, that fledgling pranksters **Julien Bismuth** and Lucas Ajemian, who produced a winning show at **Foxy Production** in 2008, have announced their latest exhibition will involve “objects, performances, and filming” and incorporate “newspaper, glue, water, wire mesh, a mime, newsprint and ink” and a variety of other items. There are also the things we know we don’t know: the plot and the actors for the proposed film, titled *Les Tristes*, which will be shot around **Invisible-Exports’** neighborhood. (Interested parties are invited to contact the gallery to audition to appear in the film.) And, finally, there are the things we don’t know we don’t know, which are, one might say, the realm of art.



The art of communication is not lost on Lucas Ajemian and Julien Bismuth. In fact, the artists and long-time collaborators decided to devote their latest exhibition, *Les Tristes* (opening tonight at [Invisible-Exports](#)) to just that—dialogue.

"As with a lot of our shows, we started off with a conversation or dialogue between us and since we've been sharing a studio for some time, even in our individual work, we're sort of conversation partners for one another's practices," Bismuth explains as to how he and Ajemian developed the concept for *Les Tristes*, adding "with this show in particular we wanted to approach it as a dialogue in which we were communicating with one another and progressing toward something."

Open through Mar. 28 at the Lower East Side gallery, *Les Tristes* is part object series, performance piece and filmed exhibition, which Ajemian and Bismuth say consists of projects one of them started individually, traded and allowed the other to collaborate on.

"There are a lot of correspondence letters you'll see tacked to the wall," Ajemian explains in description of the exhibition. "We've coupled those with these more gestural sculptures using found objects and paper mache and setting them in these physical situations. The continuance of those objects and the way they lean on each other is metaphorical for how we're working together in a weird way."

And the materials used for the show hold their own allusions of communication as well. Ajemian and Bismuth used computers, cell phones, printing machines and newspaper to create pieces for *Les Tristes* because they're all forms of communication themselves.

"There are a couple things that keep coming back not necessarily as themes but rather foils in our work," Bismuth explains. "Often times they're banal things such as the newspaper or the way that information is disseminated through the media or phone or email. Just very common everyday experiences for how very simple things like communication take place now a days."



BlackBook

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

By Willa Paskin | February 26, 2010



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.

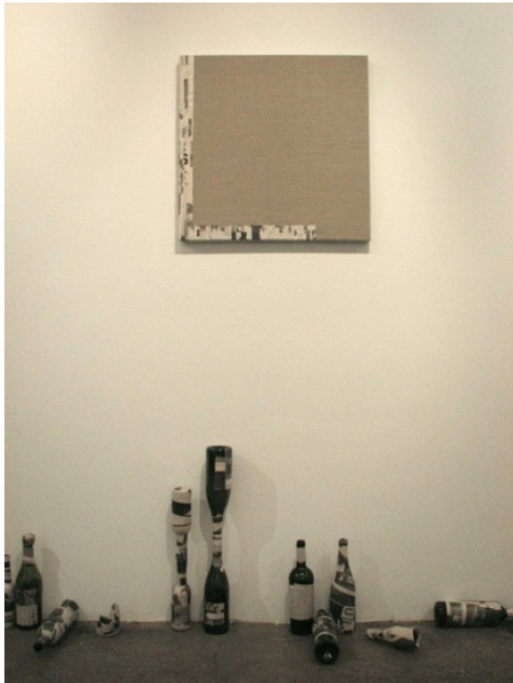
Tell me about the movie. **JB:** The second thing that we made together was for a show in a Frankfurt gallery. We were like, "Oh, we should make a movie!" We had this idea for a movie in which the characters in the movie would be letters. People holding letters and wandering around the city, going to 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 of 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!

Lucas Ajemian and Julien Bismuth: Les Lettres Tristes

by Jen Schwarting

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

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.

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.

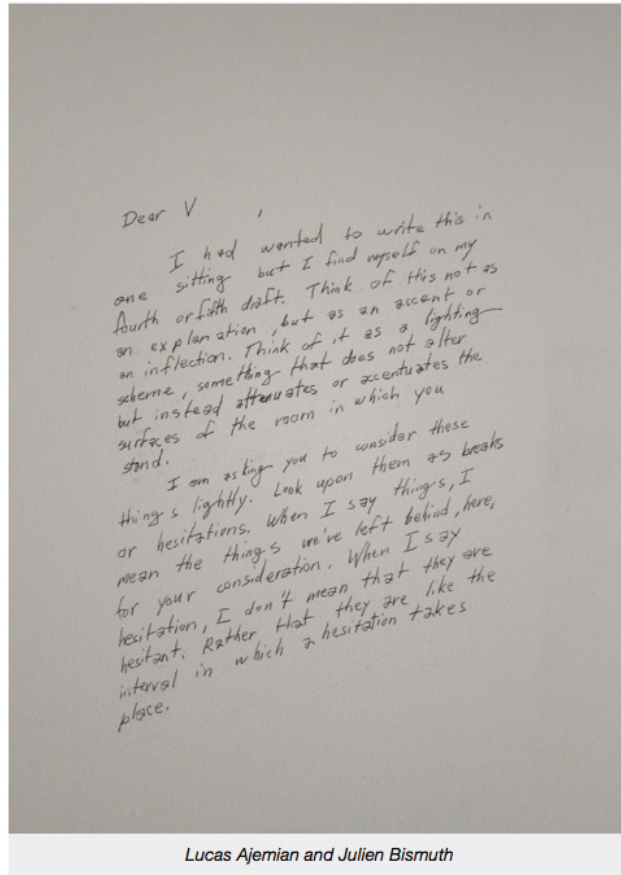


Lucas Ajemian and Julien Bismuth, video still, *Les Lettres Tristes*.

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.



Lucas Ajemian and Julien Bismuth, Walks & Talks, March 15th – April 21st
Invisible Exports, 14A Orchard Street

What's on view: Folded up tables and chairs, a video of a group of people folding black triangles, and poetry on paper and walls

Whitney: I thought this was brilliant, but maybe just because there's a clear puzzle to be solved in all of the paradoxical poems, and that makes me feel smart. People's names are replaced with letters, and the poems describe simple exchanges that have to do with the passage of time, often talking about doing something and then realizing you've already begun. For example:

J: There is no point in starting.

K: This is a point.

J: That's a start.

Another:

“There are occasions for hesitations, hesitations so innumerable, that I hesitate to enumerate them here.”

The allusions to fold-up tables, origami, and lanterns made me think of how projects are never really finished, and ideas and art movements just sort of ebb and flow based on when you need to pull them out again.

Corinna: One of my favorite stops on our “We Went to...” tour this week, but only ‘cause of the poems. The videos and chairs didn’t add much to setting a scene, and honestly, the amount of detail in the poetry prints—nice typeface, paper, and scale—contrasted too heavily with the casually scattered chairs and tables. The poems reminded me of e.e. cummings or Wallace Stevens on a more restrained day (Whitney chose a great one above); like both of those guys, Lucas Ajemian and Julien Bismuth, are really great at creating rhythms from everyday language.

I really like this short quip about the show from the press release: “The collaborative duo Lucas Ajemian and Julien Bismuth can’t stop talking to each other.” That might not mean all too much, but I do believe, like a handful of critics I know, that talking and writing with each other is vastly more fruitful—and interesting—than working alone.

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~LUCAS AJEMIAN & JULIEN BISMUTH/OPENING PIX



next week – is the last week – to catch !!

LUCAS AJEMIAN and JULIEN BISMUTH – 'LES LETTRES TRISTES'

NOV 21, 2008 – JAN 10, 2009

FOXY PRODUCTION – 623 W. 27th ST. – CHELSEA – NYC

note: the gallery is closed DEC 25 – JAN 5, 2009 – inclusively for holidays !!

FOXY PRODUCTION

. . . if you, literally, like your art with a capital A – form, function, design and meaning? – you should make a point of catching this show – before it closes.

PHOTOS FROM THE OPENING – FRIDAY NOV 21, 2008



the first thing one sees on entering the gallery – are Lucas and Julien's handmade newspapers – a weekly discourse highlighting their project, and incorporating the words and images of invited guests – free for the taking.



LUCAS AJEMIAN and JULIEN BISMUTH – 4 different 'set pieces' – each comprised of a floor sculpture of green powder coated steel, and including – a 2 channel video loop with audio. Dimensions variable.
(series of 8 + 2 AP)

LUCAS AJEMIAN and JULIEN BISMUTH – 'Les Lettres Triste' – love letters to Capital A – art ?

from the press release: "Les Lettres Tristes (The Sad Letters) refers to the Lettristes, the members of the avant-garde group, established in mid-century Paris, who used letters, hieroglyphics and other graphic symbols to create wildly experimental films, poetry, and art-works."

PHOTOS: NANCY SMITH

~LUCAS AJEMIAN & JULIEN BISMUTH/OPENING PIX | Posted in [The Bomb](#) | By Nancy Smith | December 30th, 2008, 12:02pm