THE PROOF, THE ARTIST AND THE MATHEMATICIAN:

A Commentary On David Colosi's Reconstructions Of The Laboratories of Jensen Gillers.

By Anderson Singh

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David Colosi's latest work of three-dimensional literature, *The Proof*, is based on the story of the mathematician Dr. Jensen Gillers, his extraordinary proof, and his mysterious disappearance. Prior to 2008, Dr. Gillers had been working in secrecy for several years to prove the world's most controversial and stubborn puzzle: the non-existence of God. Only months before his work would have been complete, word about his project and his location leaked, Dr. Gillers disappeared, and thieves, paparazzi, and curious onlookers broke into his laboratory. It was not known at the time whether Dr. Gillers was murdered, if he committed suicide, or if he fled before his laboratory was ransacked. Many questions lingered. Was he killed by or did he flee after receiving threats from religious fanatics, like those Muslims, Christians, Jews, or believers in Quetzalcoatl or Pwyll who had so much to lose? Or were the chemists after him because he trampled on the noble gasses? Was it jealous mathematicians who wanted a piece of his work? Or is he still out there, with his notes, working again in a new

hidden laboratory? In 2009 the latter turned out to be the case when he resurfaced. Once again, his laboratory was discovered and ransacked, this time more violently. Dr. Gillers disappeared again and has not been heard from since. The same questions of the year before returned with greater urgency. Since his second disappearance, not only have the police been put to task, but so too have amateur and professional mathematicians, theologians, scientists, and philosophers intent on finishing or sabotaging his proof for their own profit. Now that his laboratory has been opened to the public twice and his discoveries have, though briefly, been exposed in the press, everyone is trying to scoop the prize. Dr. Gillers, who believed that too many spectators ruin the process of research, if still alive, now has equal intensified pressure to produce and remain hidden until his work is certifiably complete.

Inspired by David Colosi's presentation of Dr. Gillers' story and work, I have built a documentary project to consolidate not only Gillers' story and work but also Colosi's. My story of Dr. Gillers is told through photographs, chalkboard transcripts, newspaper articles, letters, police evidence, and fictional dialog notes that Gillers wrote in conversation with himself (not all included here). As Dr. Gillers' actual laboratories, papers, and diagrams are currently restricted from access "pending litigation and federal inspection," my attempts to access these sources have been repeatedly denied. Since Colosi's inspiration for this artistic work was to expose Dr. Gillers' work to the public once again, as an act of political defiance against its current censorship, his research was dedicated to acute reconstruction rather than subjective interpretation. From his first hand accounts of these laboratories and documents before they were seized, he limited himself to a disciplined program of

accurate transcription of the blackboards and meticulous reconstruction of the laboratories. If at times it appears that I mingle my discussion of the mathematician with my discussion of the artist, or present the evidence of the artist's labor as that of the mathematician's, it is because there is no better strategy available to me at present. Under normal reportage ethics this practice would be unacceptable. But in this particular case, and in this one only, I justify this compromise on two grounds. The first is that the original source material is legally, and many argue illegally, inaccessible, so without Colosi's work it could not be discussed. The second, which buttresses the first, relies on the sheer selfless rigor with which the artist dedicated himself to accurate reproductions of the mathematician's work. So for all intents and purposes, and for the moment only, I hope my audience, with only slight discomfort, will, in a collective effort to get the story told, both forgive me for and join me in interchanging the products of Colosi's work with those of Gillers'. In saying this, I should add a note of caution. We should be careful not to extend our conclusion to interchange their motives. The motives of the artist and the mathematician are acutely different even though their products may be identical. And so it is under these guidelines that I present the following discussion of *The Proof*.

THE PROOF

The Proof takes as its premise the work of the mathematician Dr. Jensen Gillers who set out to prove the following complex equation: I[m(Flc+Wphj)]=Ghm [Implications[marginalia (Fermat's Last Conjecture + Wittgenstein's Philosophical Joke Conjecture)] = God is human-

made]. Drawing inspiration from theories of paradox and the comic, as well as Kurt Gödel's meta-mathematical proofs and Andrew Wiles' intra- and interdisciplinary strategy for solving Fermat's Last Theorem, Colosi has reconstructed Dr. Gillers' work environment as a complex satire of religious attempts at using mathematical proof to defend faith-based beliefs.

Talking about Raymond Queneau's work in the Oulipo and his own, Jacques Roubaud said, "*To be a mathematician, first one must be a reader of mathematics: its games; its history; its anecdotes; its madmen. Such readings stimulate the imagination.*" David Colosi's latest work is the product of just such a stimulated imagination.

Inspired by the story of Dr. Gillers, in *The Proof* Colosi has constructed a labyrinthine space which doubles as the interior of a mathematical equation and the laboratory used for its generation. Andrew Wiles, the mathematician who solved one of the most tenacious of mathematical puzzles in 1994, Fermat's Last Theorum, described his experience of doing mathematics in terms of entering a dark mansion. "*One goes into the first room, and it's dark, completely dark. One stumbles around bumping into the furniture. Gradually you learn where each piece of furniture is, and finally after six months or so, you find a light switch. You turn it on, and suddenly it's all illuminated. You can see exactly where you were.*" This aptly describes Dr. Gillers' work environment as Colosi has reconstructed it.

In *The Proof, First Laboratory*, based on Dr. Gillers' study as it was discovered in 2008, evidence of the labor of the mathematician fills the room: chalkboards scribbled with notes carve the space like a house of giant cards as scientific equipment animates this abandoned laboratory.

The first sign the viewer encounters – replacing the traditional Welcome Mat or the "Yes, We're Open" sign – reads: "Let (the viewer) = X". As the viewer puzzles through this environment, several questions come to mind: who occupied this space; why was it abandoned; what, exactly, is being proven; and is the proof complete?

The chalkboards offer clues. The first states the trigger of the labor, "Set out to prove the following: Implications[Fermat's Last Theorem + Wittgenstein's Joke Conjecture = God is human-made]." From this starting point, all of the boards proceed with calculations of names, citations, theories, and narratives of mathematicians like Evariste Galois, Leonard Euler, Leopold Kronecker, Andrew Wiles, Blaise Pascal, David Hilbert, and Kurt Gödel; literary figures like Jacques Diderot, E.B. White, Primo Levi, and Jacques Roubaud; Christian theorists like St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Augustine, and St. Anselm; atheists like Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett; artists like Joseph Beuys, Gary Simmons, and Ilya Kabakov; and philosophers like Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, Frederick Nietzsche, Thomas Hobbes, Henri Bergson, Umberto Eco, Emmanuel Kant, Sigmund Freud, and Rene Descartes. Gillers' work, as Colosi's, is thoroughly researched.

In Dr. Gillers' second laboratory, discovered in 2009, here again reconstructed by Colosi as *The Proof, Second Laboratory*, chalkboards are hinged to the walls like pages of a notebook. Gillers must have found it more efficient to access both sides this way. This time the machines are missing (one can imagine the cost of accumulating that kind of equipment again once your laboratory is ransacked). The second laboratory hosts a more modest work area. As before, the mathematician is mysteriously absent.

The questions of the year before return: did he finish or is he still alive and working? Here his work area is more violently demolished. Did those chemists, physicists, mathematicians, or devout religious believers threatened by the result he was approaching sabotage it, or did the throngs of desperate hopefuls looking for the solution trample it in their impatience? As before, the only way to know the outcome of the proof is to read the blackboards.* Its result in Colosi's reconstruction is produced only by way of its performance. One line does not say it all. Nobody rides for free.

Colosi has also faithfully reproduced the floor of Dr. Gillers' workspace. The floor acts as a foundation for the equation that stands on it. It is scribed with a black grid. Inside each box written in chalk is a prime number in one corner, an element from the periodic table in the other, and the name of a God in the center. The names are taken from H.L. Mencken's *Memorial Service*, which is a eulogy to dead Gods. These Gods have been dead for centuries, but at one time they were worshipped and feared as intensely as those that people believe in today. To us these names represent fictional characters, valuable only for their allegories. Gone are the days when our ancestors worshiped Zeus or Tialoc. Reading these squares aloud as one walks through the space gives the impression of reciting an incantation to the secular higher powers that monitor the intersection where science meets fiction. Walking through the space our feet erase the white chalk marks that announce these names reminding us how ephemeral our cultural narratives are. One imagines Gillers building his equation on this foundation as a reminder of what his work sought to accomplish. Integrated with these names are those of Gods that people believe in today. These are written in the difficult-to-reach

places, under the equipment in the first laboratory, and under the desk in the second. If one looked hard enough, she could find the names of Jesus, Jahveh, Allah, Satan, and Buddha. These are the very gods Dr. Gillers was working on before he was interrupted. For both Gillers and Colosi, putting the names of current gods in these difficult-to-reach places was not a gesture of preferential treatment. Instead it served as a gesture of inspiration for the ultimate goal. As these gods have not yet been erased in our culture, it would have been inaccurate if not only premature for Gillers and Colosi to make them immediately erasable. Presumably, given more time and work, by Gillers, Colosi, Gillers' saboteurs, and viewers like us, all of the names will eventually be erased and fiction will once again be restored. Though this idea may seem to us idealistic, knowing that new names will always replace old ones, if Gillers had not been interrupted and he had completed his proof, the realization of this utopian dream would have been his result. These are the consequences at stake. No wonder people fear and admire him.

In Colosi's reconstructions of Gillers' work areas, one component sticks out as being suspiciously the work of the artist and not that of the mathematician. Interspersed among Gillers' blackboards, sculptural math symbols have seemingly leapt from their equations escaping their context. To anyone familiar with Colosi's artwork, this inclusion seems suspect. But the reason for their inclusion in Gillers' actual laboratory, as Colosi insists was the case, is even more insightful to their relationship. It is here where we find out why Colosi has been so dedicated to faithful reenactments of Gillers' work and how he became the authority on his research. As Colosi tells it, Gillers had seen an exhibition of his where he had fabricated arrows, punctuation marks, and

math symbols into sculptures. Colosi had called these works Syntactic Objects, and they caught Gillers' attention. Gillers purchased the lot of the math symbols and asked Colosi to install them in his laboratory. Gillers rarely invited anyone into his lab unless he was sure of their sympathy for his work. In this way, Colosi got firsthand exposure. The mathematician and the artist bonded immediately. Gillers explained to the artist his love for the sculptures in this way: just as Colosi transforms these abstract symbols into physical beings, so too do religious people make leaps of faith that construct beings out of abstractions. Gillers wanted a constant reminder of this. In fact, for us, the presence of these objects is puzzling as we walk through the space. We don't know what to do with them. Released from the chalkboards and made physical, these symbols lose their referents. There is nothing that informs us of which items exactly are being added, subtracted, or divided to or from which others. Colosi's original inspiration for making syntactic objects, he says, came from seeing traffic signs in junk stores where their communicative powers were at rest. They only function when we create a context for them; without us, he explained, they are meaningless. If Gillers sought to prove that god, too, is human-made, it is no leap to see his appreciation for Colosi's syntactic objects and to see Colosi's appreciation for Gillers' research.

As the viewer finally exits Colosi's installation of Gillers' laboratory she is confronted again with the sign that greeted her at the entrance: "Let (the Viewer) = X." We are reminded that *The Proof*, both Colosi's and Gillers', like any mathematical calculation, requires our participation for it to succeed. So if we want to know Dr. Jensen Gillers' mathematical proof that god is human-made, we must, for now, experience it through a careful consideration

of David Colosi's reconstructions. Mathematicians say that a good mathematical problem is defined by the mathematics it generates rather than the problem itself. *The Proof*, as Colosi's work of art and as Gillers' mathematical odyssey will be judged by this same standard. May they both generate more art and more mathematics. With this, I invite you to read the blackboards in their entirety to understand the full import of these two minds at work.

Anderson Singh is an international freelance journalist and documentary filmmaker.

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*(*This essay is intended for a larger future publication, so all blackboard texts are not included here or there).*

The Proof: First Laboratory was exhibited at LMCC (Lower Manhattan Cultural Council) Swing Space Program at 125 Maiden Lane, NYC in October 2008; *The Proof: Second Laboratory* was exhibited at Cueto Project in NYC from October 2009-January 2010 as part of *Imaginary Numbers and Other Calculated Fictions*.