

# *Bystanders*

## A Conversation with David Levine

American artist David Levine bridges the worlds of contemporary theatre, performance and visual art with works that explore the conditions of spectacle, spectatorship, and performance in art and in life. He works across a range of media including performance, installation, and video.

Within a trajectory of Gallery TPW programs looking at the relationship between liveness and images, Levine's new exhibition *Bystanders* picks up threads from the American 70s, an era in which mainstream films, social politics, and conceptual art worried the twin beads of disappearance and infiltration. A parade of period actors either examined or enacted this problem, from Lynn Hershman Leeson to Adrian Piper to Vito Acconci, from John Carpenter to Ira Levin to the Weather Underground, from body-snatching narratives to robot substitutes to undercover surveillance by Hoover's FBI. You blend in so you can watch; spectatorship is your performance. In excavating and modifying this particularly paranoid aesthetic style in the 21st century, Levine looks at how this vision of infiltration by an alien subjectivity is relevant today.

Levine examines the consequences of this vision through and on the performer's body. The centrepiece of *Bystanders* is a new monologue that leaps among a rotating and diverse cast of professional actors for the duration of the exhibition, inhabiting each before releasing them back into the Toronto population. Asking what it means to be "an artificial human," the monologue, alongside new video and photographic work, examines the psychology of acting realistic and the zone between surveillance and disappearance, the biological and the synthetic, the observer and the observed.

The following text is a conversation between David Levine and curator Kim Simon on the occasion of Levine's exhibition, *Bystanders*, at Gallery TPW.

KIM SIMON **Working on this project with you I often find myself thinking about something I've heard you repeat in a few different ways, basically positing theatre as a space of collective belief and the gallery as a space of collective criticism. If you're suggesting that different institutions create different kinds of spectators, does that explain your move from working in theatre to working in the visual arts?**

DAVID LEVINE I wouldn't exactly say "criticism" – "scepticism", maybe? Or better still, let's say individual, or atomized, belief, takes place in a gallery. And yeah, I think it does explain my shift from one kind of exhibition space to another, but I only just realized this a year or so ago, when I was on a panel where the topic was "Why Isn't Experimental Theatre More Experimental?" I was saying what I often say, which is that if you don't change the spectatorial protocols of a given form, then everyone's always seeing everything in the same way they always have. It doesn't matter *what* they're actually seeing, because the frame itself never changes. You can't actually have a boundary-breaking piece of theatre if you always go to theatre the same way. If you always buy a ticket, if you always show up at 7:30 ... etc. It's the same in galleries. The idea of a boundary-breaking gallery show, or a boundary-breaking work in the Venice Biennial is ridiculous. The fact that it still sits comfortably in the Biennial, or in the theatre, means that it's not actually boundary-breaking. Whether or not things *need* to be boundary-breaking is another question.

And the thing I realized on this panel is that it's not like people are dumb. It's not like people who make theatre don't know what they'd have to do to break those boundaries. It's just that if they did that, it wouldn't be theatre anymore, and something about it

being theatre means something. The limit, the point at which it stops being theatre, is when you stop having a bunch of people gathered together to experience the same thing at once (and that can be a durational performance, that can be a site-specific performance, that could be anything in which, no matter how the spectators are arranged, they're experiencing having an experience as a unit.) As soon as you get rid of that collective experience it defaults out of theatre, and that's the thing that theatre-goers and theatre makers don't want to get rid of, because the thing that theatre believes in, the thing that theatre reaffirms, is a collective experience.

Gallery spectatorship is atomised spectatorship to the extent that you don't experience *together*. You go in the way you want. You adopt your own physical perspective on it. Usually you can walk around, it's ambulatory. All that minimalist-phenomenological stuff. Now, that experience of atomisation is itself a collective convention, but go with me on this one for a minute: non-aligned belief, or non-aligned spectatorial behaviour, is the convention that contemporary art affirms. So it tends to affirm skepticism and guardedness as ideals, because it affirms individual encounter rather than group encounter. That's not necessarily better or worse, it's just the reason why, ultimately, at the end of the day, when visual artists make performance, they tend to make performances that undermine the possibility of collective belief, either because you have a lot of alienation of the apparatus of production, or because the performance is deliberately non-compelling, or because no-one's tried to gather individual, chatty spectators into a reverent, silent audience. It's meant to make sure that everybody stays an individual, as opposed to theatrical

production which, even if it happens in a gallery, is generally meant to make sure that everyone experiences things together. I'm much more comfortable being left to my own devices as a spectator – and I think this influenced my shift of context.

**KS Thinking about the collective experience in theatre relative to the collective experience in cinema, of course liveness is the key distinction. What changes for you in the collective experience of representation that's live from the collective experience of representation that's recorded?**

DL What you're watching isn't making demands of you in the same way. When you see a character on screen, they're really just a character. You don't have to worry about offending the person playing the character if you walk out of the cinema. Whereas if you're watching someone in a theatre, they're a person *and* a character, and that exerts extra affective pressure, extra human *need* on you. And the film plays five times a day, so you know that, even if they *were* live actors, it wouldn't matter much to them if you left, because there's no illusion of a make-or-break, unique event. They're just going to do it again anyhow. I'm more comfortable watching a movie, than a piece of theatre. I feel like watching looped live performance, which is how I usually work, is somewhere between watching theatre and watching a movie.

**KS Let's talk about your take on the status of the object in the contemporary art gallery, a concern which seems central to the way you're thinking about your new work and gets expressed in part through this exhibition's performed monologue, *Edition of 8*, and its relation to other images in the room.**

DL As an artist, I have a very tortured relationship to objects and although I make them, I'm relatively insecure about my competence to work with any material other than actors and words.

But as a spectator, I have an equally tortured relationship to the visual rhetoric of contemporary exhibition-making. Because everyone's making this conceptually very complex work, very research-saturated, very suspicious of the idea of autonomous artwork, and yet at the end of the day we have to shoehorn our work into these spaces and protocols that were designed to celebrate or confer autonomy. So the entire artwork winds up being represented by its most sensory layer, which is itself reduced to standing as a token for the rest of it. It's dumb, and it's misleading. And we have to implicitly write this attenuation off as "the cost of doing business."

But then the question is, can artworks be exhibited more... accurately? And a lot of this boils down to how language is allowed to exist in an exhibition, which itself relates to spectatorial protocols of gallery attendance, which *also* evolved to celebrate or confer autonomy. And, like the display protocols, these haven't kept pace with the evolution of artwork itself. The spectatorial cues of exhibition are still predominantly about silent contemplation, even if you have a recorded sound piece, or a Tino Seghal performance. Install shots still perpetuate the idea – still one or two guests, *contemplating*. But maybe we should be taking our cues from the photography in ArtForum's *Scene and Herd* column instead.

So, we've got artwork that's totally gone beyond this mid-century rhetoric of

autonomy, but exhibition practices that cannot leave them behind without defaulting out of being contemporary art, which is exactly the same problem the theatre has, but in reverse. The objects can't speak, and yet the objects want to.

**KS So does bringing in gestures from theatre and performance like liveness, duration and in particular with *Edition of 8*, direct address, resolve or further complicate your questions about how art communicates?**

DL I thought one thing you can do with performance, relative to this problem, is to create an artwork that *can* speak for itself, and stay somewhat nimble in this immobilizing situation. And considered *as* artworks, performing bodies are amazing: burning with affect; full of secrets; insanely bristly and hard to pin down; possessed of a technology that, relative to the gallery, is practically alien in its complexity.

On the other hand, simply by discussing the rest of the show explicitly, the monologue in *Edition of 8* appropriates the other work in the room as stage props. Like, they're art until another artwork incorporates them – like phagocytosis; like *The Thing*. And when the monologue wanes, they wax back to being maybe art – but art that's prey to that customary silence regarding conceptual agendas. So then this weird relationship starts to develop between the works, which probably is a way of expressing my own ambivalence about objects and discourse.

**KS Speaking of *The Thing*, there are a lot of references to American, science-fiction films of the 70s and 80s in *Bystanders*. Alien imposters, robot look-a-likes, body snatchers.**

**A central gesture in the exhibition is your video work *They Aren't Labeled, Chum*, a looping, feature-length glitched version of John Carpenter's 1982, sci-fi classic, *The Thing*, where scientists in the Antarctic face off against an alien that takes on the appearance of its victims, hiding in plain sight. What is it about American science-fiction of a certain era that interests you most and why is popular film an important vehicle for you?**

DL I dunno. I think that's partially biographical. You're always fascinated by the atmosphere your parents breathed when you were a kid – and this was what was around when they were raising me – but thrillers back then were very much about this intersubjective paranoia; about worrying that everyone around you was secretly acting. At the same time, these commercial films were populated by actors who had made a cult of finding “the truth” at the Actor's Studio. So it's a pretty fascinating moment for someone with my interests. As to popular film – I don't know. I have the interests of a conceptual artist but the instincts of a hack director. I keep trying to reconcile them. It's like bringing theatre into the gallery. There's this sense that we have to frame all our non-formalist or non-political impulses somehow; scarequote our affection for this stuff with discourses around camp or media. And even if we didn't do that, the exhibition rhetoric we were talking about before turns everything into a specimen of itself anyway. But I feel like talking about movies is a really efficient way of talking about feelings, people, societies, everything.

The thing is, *acting* is a big thing for me. And I have this basic confusion, which is I think behind the whole show, about what acting actually *is*. And the funny thing about the late 60s/early 70s in America is that, on the

one hand, it saw an explosion of paranoid conspiracy movies – either based in sci-fi or horror – and on the other hand, it saw an explosion of a new, hyper-naturalistic, Method-based acting style in movies like *Five Easy Pieces*, or *Easy Rider*. And what winds up happening is you've got insanely well-trained actors in commercial thrillers playing robots or aliens or demons *who are playing* humans. Which seems like an allegory for acting, but also seems to be using acting as an allegory for something else – and it's that “something else” that I was trying to figure out.

So I watched a lot of movies including John Carpenter's *The Thing*, which is, like, a very very late formulation of this problem (1982), where the mechanism of imposture seems to anticipate AIDS, and/or represent a nascent neoliberal subject: an alien that gets in your bloodstream, hops from host to host, takes over cells, continually absorbs elements into this nasty, heterodox pile that doesn't respect organic boundaries or even roles. Rob Bottin's special effects for the movie are legendary even now, partially because they're so insane, partially because they're so insane *and they're analog*. But this is a digital version ripped from who knows what source, tormented by who knows whom, and then converted to a format that Apple's default player has a hard time digesting. It can play it, but just barely: panning shots show pixels travelling from one face to another like germs. Cuts transform into weird, accretive piles – shot-countershot sequences of two people talking end up in faces growing out of each other until the entire entire thing looks like multicolored digital cauliflower: gross but abstract and kind of pretty. Basically doing to the body of the film what the Thing does to the characters, but leaving the actor's voices more or less intact.

**KS Can you delve a bit more into your interest in the Actors Studio and the mythologies around the Method that are represented in the exhibition?**

DL “Method acting” is generally understood as a technique for total self-transformation; that's not exactly what it is, but it's a very American way of thinking about the self in relation to commercial success, and it's an idea I return to a lot in my work. What Method Acting actually is is much, much weirder. It's rooted in an idea from Russian theatre director Stanislavski – that the best performances are the ones that seem most natural – which seems obvious to us now, but it's an idea that's really only 100 or so years old. The goal of Stanislavski's technique is to distract you from the fact that you're onstage, acting... so that you can act natural. You come up with all these ways of focusing on the reality you're in onstage, and not getting distracted by the details out there; the audience, the missing wall, etc.

Somewhere in the 40s and 50s, Lee Strasberg, who ran the Actor's Studio, both supercharges and de-systematizes Stanislavski's ideas, and refocuses this total absorption in the reality of the stage to a total absorption in the reality of the self – let's just call it total self-absorption: you get so wrapped up in your sense memories, your past experiences, that you forget you're onstage. I'm paraphrasing here, but only because Strasberg's Method is itself so contradictory and incoherent. It's basically about Strasberg: screaming, cajoling, mystifying a bunch of really credulous but talented people – and a cult develops around him and the Studio. It's a very, very extreme approach to acting – an almost religious act of dedication and self-transformation – and it becomes, another “primal” American postwar export – just like Action Painting.

But the funny thing about Method training is that everyone doing it is trying to break into TV and Film. So you've got this mystical technique of "The Truth in Acting," but you're using it to land a laxative commercial. and because the Method demands the that you disable your critical intellect in order to get in touch with these primal urges, you wind up with a lot of really sinister situations around teachers and pupils, age and youth, parents and children – both in life and these 70s films, which keep coming back to the idea of the infiltrator as actor – an imposter set free from hell, or the lab, or the ice, who is now impossible to contain.

But the main thing is, all the paradoxes of self-transformation, all the things about North American acting we take for granted – they're all only about 50-60 years old. And they all originated there. At the Actor's Studio.

**KS Your work has always had an investment in the traditions of theatrical realism both as subject and methodology. How are you thinking about realism in relation to your work for *Bystanders*?**

DL I have an expansive definition of realism, but I find the idea of psychological realism, or realism as an acting technique, fascinating – because it always implies a prevailing psychology. Your answer to the question, "how do I go about replicating a person?" depends on a million calculations and assumptions regarding personhood, biology, identity, authenticity, development, socialization, and so on. But it also – and this becomes an issue for this show – becomes a question of technology.

"Psychological realism" still seems to be the standard when evaluating robots or AIs.

Which seems totally strange, because the former seems so antiquated and the latter so forward-looking. But it's especially odd because robotics and artificial intelligence can do such amazing things, and they're at their least impressive when they try to be human. In the movies, the nightmare is always that it'll be seamless. But robot experiments like Bina 48 look awful. The android Philip K Dick looks awful. Their machine learning is totally unconvincing. All those DARPA [Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency] videos where the ATLAS robot prototypes try to do human-like things and fall over? Totally reassuring narrative, right? Score one for the humans! But the technology that goes into making these failed humans is usually applied to doing things no human in the world could dream of. Machines that don't even bother moving like humans; machine vision that's thousands of times more efficient than the user interface we're offered *as a courtesy*. Machines don't need these visual interfaces to function, any more than they need palms or thighs. We all know this is a last convulsion of anthropocentric whatever, but we still measure machines by this strange standard of realism: how well can they *act*?

**David Levine**

David Levine divides his time between New York and Berlin. His performance and exhibition work have been presented by Creative Time, MoMA, Documenta XII, Mass MoCA, PS122, the Luminato Festival, the Watermill Center, The Luma Foundation (Arles), Tanya Leighton Gallery (Berlin), Blum and Poe (Los Angeles), and Untitled (New York) among others. He was a 2012-13 Radcliffe Fellow in Visual Arts at Harvard University, and is Professor of Art at Bard College Berlin, where he is the Director of Visual and Performing Arts. His work has been featured in Artforum, Frieze, and the New York Times, and his writing has appeared in Parkett, Mousse, Cabinet and Triple Canopy. He recently spoke about Bruce Nauman's work for the DIA Foundation's Artists on Artists lecture series, and will participate in the exhibition Hotel Theory at REDCAT this October.

**Kim Simon**

Kim Simon is the curator at Gallery TPW.

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