

Emotions for Hire: David Levine at the Brooklyn Museum

David Levine's exhibition "Some of the People, All of the Time," on view at the Brooklyn Museum through July 8, features a timely, anxiety-inducing Brechtian meta-performance that risks being too clever. A rotating cast of actors deliver monologues in a gallery that also includes an installation of works Levine has selected from the museum's collection, as well as his own photographs. The artist takes up the age-old yet newly heightened suspicion that public opinion can be manipulated by crowds performing ideology for a price. Accusations that protestors are being paid to advocate positions across the political spectrum, conspiracies surrounding "crisis actors" employed as victims for political leverage, electoral fraud, and fake followers are all subjects Levine addresses in a paranoid and critical work that turns the gallery into a stage set.

Levine has a multifaceted practice with roots in theater. He often draws on social history and popular culture, using found objects as props when necessary. He directed *WOW* (2014), an opera with a libretto by Christian Hawkey and a score by Joe Diebes about the infamous lip-syncing duo Milli Vanilli. His installation *Hopeful* (2009-10) involves plastering gallery walls with cover letters and headshots he recovered from the recycling bins of talent agencies around New York. Artifice and the hidden mechanics of both performance and spectatorship are his perennial subjects.

On opening night of “Some of the People, All of the Time,” before entering the exhibition, I attended a lecture by the artist held in the Brooklyn Museum’s third-floor auditorium. Levine explained the theory, history, and practice of the fake crowd, wearing a black jumpsuit and reading from his phone in an animated and jovial manner. At one point, he expressed serious concern about how the infectious nature of applause encourages conformity. When he finished the lecture, sincere yet obligatory clapping began. Numerous people rose to give a standing ovation. At first, I assumed that they must be close friends of the artist, but soon realized that, of course, they were actors. They sustained their applause for an absurd amount of time. After about ten minutes I heard Levine yell, “Cut!” Though it seemed like an obvious trick, this demonstration of the lecture’s topic catalyzed an eerie mood that stuck with me for the rest of the night. I truly did feel destabilized. I kept wondering who among the guests were there for their own interest and who were paid participants.

The exhibition begins in a narrow corridor leading to the gallery. Images by Levine and others depict crowds in various settings. The works include the watercolor and graphite *Scene of Crowded Exhibition Gallery* (n.d.) by Thomas Fogarty (1873-1938), Ed Ruscha’s screen print *Swarm of Red Ants* from the portfolio “Insects” (1972), and Robert Sefcik’s photograph *New York City (Atrium of Trump Tower, 5th Avenue)*, 1984. One of Levine’s own photos in this grouping is a snapshot of a woman at an unidentified rally. There are also two face-sized lenses embedded in the walls that let viewers peer into the main gallery. But the lenses are cloudy, and it’s hard to see

anything through their fuzzy distortions. I later noticed that from inside the gallery the gazing faces in the corridor are plainly visible.

In the gallery hang Levine's pigment prints (primarily enlarged photographs of text and images found in books). Ancient Roman marble heads stand in pedestal vitrines, as does a twentieth-century head mount. Props such as a sledgehammer and a deflated extra dummy—a fake body used to film crowd scenes—rest on a low, wide plinth. There are four benches, one near each wall; a broom rests against one, with the inscription JOB SITE on its head. But the main attraction occurs from Thursday to Sunday, when actors in white jumpsuits take turns performing a mercurial forty-five-minute monologue using the static works as points of reference and occasionally speaking directly to viewers.

The monologue explores the economic precarity and existential dread that workers in today's gig economy can experience. Acting itself is named as another source of crisis. The identity of the character played by the actor is never certain; the performer claims to be David Levine, a maintenance worker, a fashionista who is there to see the David Bowie exhibition, an extra, an animatronic robot, and an artist reenacting a work by Mierle Laderman Ukeles. "A body, like capital, wants to be free!" the performer enthuses. "I'm not an artwork!" comes a rebuke to curious onlookers.

At one point, the performer interacts with Levine's *Carnegies* (2018), a large print of two lists published in Dale Carnegie's best seller, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (on the left are "Twelve Things This Book Will Do for You" from the 1936 original; on the right is the list from the 1981 edition, where it has been reduced to eight points). The performer comments that while this famous self-improvement and corporate training book may be marketed as a way to succeed, it actually gives directions on how to conform. Approaching a bust of Nero, the performer tells us that the Roman emperor once trained five thousand soldiers to cheer for him.

Network technologies make it easier to create a falsified world. Crowds-for-hire, consulting firms that create incognito promotional schemes, and influencer marketing are all on the rise. And people are all too eager to take part. In these times of economic desperation, perhaps making a buck matters more than sincerity. This muddles the democratic process and affects one's perception of truth. Doesn't an Instagram post with a lot of likes, automated or not, seem to carry more weight? In the clever complexity of "Some of the People, All of the Time," Levine makes these worries resonate, and reminds us to always remain skeptical of the crowd in our post-authentic condition.

