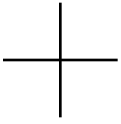




DAVID LEVINE, *PHOTO CUBE GIRL*. 2018, ARCHIVAL PIGMENT PRINT. 30 × 31¼".



SOME OF THE PEOPLE, ALL OF THE TIME

David Levine



I. ISN'T SHE LOVELY

A big white space with objects and images in it. Maybe an art gallery, or an escape room, or a waiting room, or purgatory.

A figure in a white jumpsuit, vox, sits on a bench beside a wooden push broom, looking at a black-and-white image of a woman, lost in thought.

vox She's like the *Mona Lisa*. So mysterious. What could her expression mean? Smart, but not too smart. European, but not too much so. Beguiling, but not—she looks like Natalie Wood. Maybe she *is* Natalie Wood. Or maybe she only *looks* like Natalie Wood, which is the smartest thing of all. Like that bit in *L.A. Confidential* when he's like, "A hooker cut to look like Lana Turner is still a hooker," and Kevin Spacey's like, "That is Lana Turner, you idiot." Who knows, right? Could be anyone. A face in the crowd.

She was the insert in every Lucite photo cube sold in the Seventies. My parents didn't even bother to take her out. I thought she was a relative.

Imagine: she was in tens of thousands of American homes and then *poof!* Vanished. She took her finger out of her mouth, turned around, and walked away. No one ever saw

her again. Like the city just swallowed her up. Unsearchable. The same anonymity that made her the perfect stock-photo relative let her just melt back into the population. Peeled off her skin, left it in the Port Authority, and started a new life.

In *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*—the remake—the discarded bodies dry out like tumbleweeds. They toss them in the back of these red garbage trucks. Which must mean that the sanitation workers are the first to become pod people, right? Like, they *unionized*.

That's actually the moral of the first version. Aliens descend on an idyllic California town and replace the nice, upstanding, conservative citizens with communists: planned economy, coordinated activity, hive mind, the works. Kevin McCarthy is like, "They're threatening our individual liberties . . . They're already here!" But it's too late. And I've gotta say, everything really *works* under the pod-person regime. The aliens really demonstrate a complex grasp of municipal logistics when they're shipping those pods out to the rest of the nation on . . . Greyhound.

But in the remake—the one with the garbage trucks—they set it in San Francisco, and instead of communism it becomes an allegory for the collapse of the left. In one scene, you see a rainbow coalition of onlookers coldly surveilling a hit-and-run victim in the street, and nothing about their gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation provokes in them the slightest bit of empathy. The camera just pans across their faces, blank, impassive, each hiding a terrible secret.

Looks suspiciously at museumgoers.

In these body-snatching movies, the duplicates always come back cold, or deadened. "That's not my wife. She's different somehow . . . Changed." No one ever comes back kinder, gentler, more loving and sophisticated. Shit, I'd swap for a new Me if I was an upgrade. Old Me wouldn't know, right? They'd just melt it, or garbage-truck it, or something.

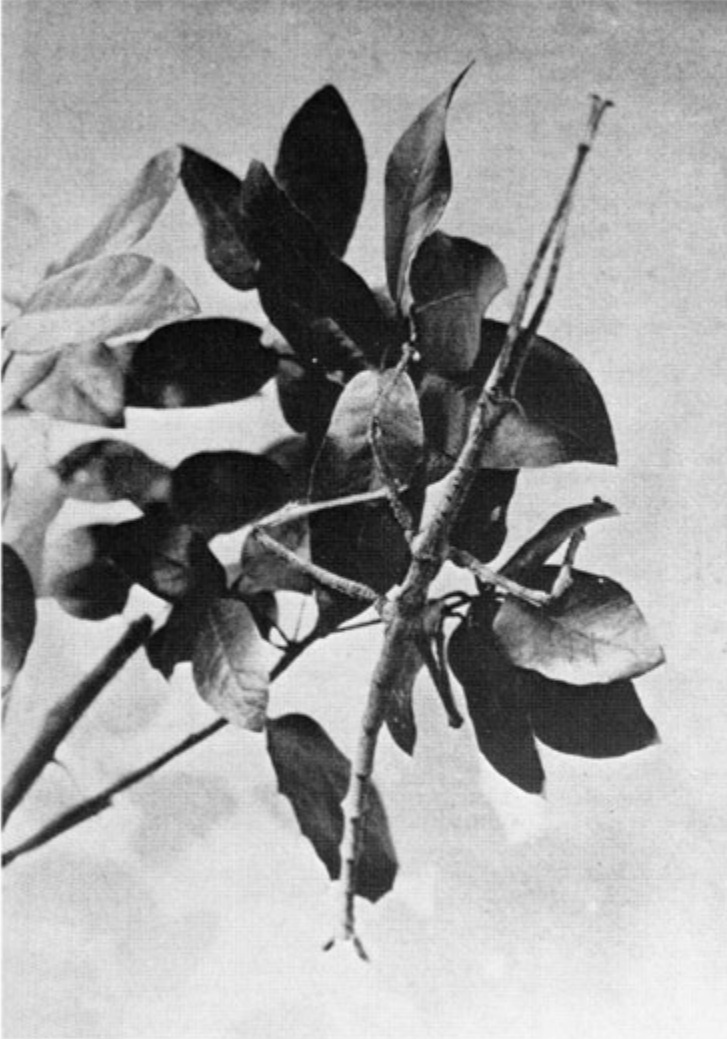
In the next remake the body snatchers will all be funded by the Koch brothers, and the humans will be subsidized by George Soros, and they'll all be like, "Who infiltrated whom? And how can we tell, since we're all just spineless mouth-pieces to begin with?" And then—SURPRISE!—the actors all turn out to be CGI, and they jump out of the screen and eat you, but only because you're tripping on opioids provided by the Sacklers, but you're in their cultural pavilion so you neither notice nor care. It's like no one notices how fucked up a rhino looks in the grasslands and floodplains; you only notice it out of context, against a blank wall, or, you know, a palace. Hence the famous Dürer engraving. It's like the gonzo anthropologist Roger Caillois said: "The fundamental problem is one of distinction. Distinctions between foreground and background, the real and the imaginary. Among distinctions, there is assuredly none more clear-cut than that between the organism and its surroundings; so it is worthwhile both to observe and to consider as pathology all the facts that come under the heading of *mimicry*."

Notices a large black-and-white print of a Phasma gigas, an enormous stick insect, partially camouflaged against leaves and stems.



II. MAINTENANCE

vox OK, I'm not really a maintenance worker. I'm an artist. But I interviewed a lot of maintenance workers for this piece! Just kidding; I didn't interview any. I'm just improvising; I took some classes at the Upright Citizens Brigade. Just kidding! I'm not even an artist. I'm actually a reperformer *hired* by an artist for a reenactment of Mierle Laderman Ukeles's *Maintenance Art*. Just kidding. It's not even art. I'm a scab! Nonunion labor cleverly disguised as an art project; "David Levine" is a legal fiction. KIDDING! Actually I *am* art, I'm animatronic and extremely expensive. Actually I'm a hologram; I'm made



Giant phasma.

DAVID LEVINE, *PHASMA*. 2018, ARCHIVAL PIGMENT PRINT. 63 × 41".

of light. Actually I'm made of space. Actually I'm made of worms. Actually I'm an actor, transposed from the theater to "the space of the gallery." I work a lot with *affect*.

I mean I was. Kinda. I trained. In LA. Never got any parts, but I studied a lot! At the Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute in West Hollywood. "Institute"—there's not even a hallway. I know, I know, I got taken for a ride. But Lee Strasberg—"Father of the Method"! Living the role!

It was a total con. No one Method acts anymore. It was like the light from a distant star that only reaches you long after it's dead. I should have been training for motion capture, or voice-over, but it was all like, Brando this and bleed-for-it that. So 20th century.

Meanwhile, I was working part-time at a TV studio in Burbank, trying to keep the audience engaged during live tapings of sitcoms and talk shows. Give out pizza, throw T-shirts, crack jokes; anything to keep 'em entertained. It was exhausting. My employer thought my heart wasn't in it so they made me wear an EKG.

So I get it. There's that whole story with Olivier and Hoffman on the shoot for *Marathon Man* and Hoffman is making himself literally sick with Method acting and Olivier's like, "My dear boy, have you tried ACTING?" And everyone's always like "Hahahaha," but I get it. The Method impulse. The impulse to *show* that you care. To make emotional labor a vocation. I mean, if anyone can "just act," it's not an art. Also, if anyone can just act, everyone might be acting *all the time*, which would be . . . troubling.

The problem was that I could never really *feel* it the way my teachers wanted me to. I mean, shit, I couldn't feel it the way my headshot photographer wanted me to. I know, right? Are there even photographers anymore, really? When you think about it? Aren't there only just . . . *cameras*? Anyway, my last session with him, I wasn't making the right expression, so he kept saying to me, "You're an honest [*man/woman/person*], you're an honest [*man/woman/person*]," and I was like,

“What?” And I figure—he was prominent. He used to shoot everyone. He knew my type. He knew what qualities a face like mine was supposed to represent.

Offers profile.

And he kept being like, “You’re an honest [*man/woman/person*], you’re an honest [*man/woman/person*].” Pushing me to this thing. And I just couldn’t give him what he wanted. I think by the end of it I just looked constipated.

Tries to make an honest face. Fails. Tries again.

To spectator:

You try it. Try to look honest.

Awaits result.

See?

I was like, “Fuck this.” I went back to the Strasberg institute all prepared to be like, “What am I acting for if you can’t make me honest?” And the professor was fielding two calls. I’ll never forget this. On one ear, she’s talking to a cryonics institute. *Cryonics*. She’s going to have her head cut off and frozen because she can’t afford the full-body preservation. But on the other, she’s talking to a sesquicentennial art exhibition about *licensing her consciousness* so they can download it into an animatronic portrait bust of the curator’s domestic partner for their next survey in 2033.

Yeah, I’d be a better actor too if I could just *zoop!* from body to body . . .

vox notices various antique busts on plinths arrayed around the room. They’re all in pretty bad shape. Examines one whose features have worn down.



ROMAN, *NERO* (?). 30 B.C.E.—50 C.E., MARBLE. $10\frac{5}{8} \times 6\frac{13}{16} \times 7\frac{1}{8}$ ". BROOKLYN MUSEUM, GIFT OF JULIUS J. IVANITSKY IN MEMORY OF HIS PARENTS, JACOB AND IDA IVANITSKY, 79.119.1.

She's gonna end up looking like that.

Pause.

So pale, so vague. Like the details are fading into the background.

Looks at title card.

Nero question mark. "*Nero (?)*" Or maybe it's just some kid. We just don't know. From "Nero" to "Unknown Boy," and then someday it'll just be a rock, and then anything. Urchins become wheels, jellyfish become crystals, gourds become breasts, brains become stones, sycamores grow arms . . .

Notices a large framed print of a turn-of-the-century postcard: a photo of a man turning into a tree, face covered over with thistles, arms morphing into enormous branches. vox stares.

Turns to another bust.

Look at her nose. Iconoclasm. Like, they just chopped it off, they just chopped it off, they figured a god lived in it and if you chopped off the nose or trepanned it or cut off its ears it wouldn't smell you, it wouldn't hear you, it wouldn't think, and then it would be dead and gone. Someone literally hacked her profile.

That look in its eyes. Accusatory. Like it's trying to warn you, communicate the last thing it saw before it turned to stone, before they chopped off its head. Like *optography*. Like it took a picture with its eye, and if you could only figure out how to develop it, how to print it you'd *know*, you'd avoid your fate. But right now it's just looking at you like, "You're next."

Notices, on another plinth, a mount without a head on it.

Um, I'm actually supposed to meet some people here. Are you . . . ?

Looks at audience member. Whispers:

Getpeople?

Pause. Sniffs the air. Nothing. Shifts to another artwork, a diptych of frontispieces.

Oh, this one's interesting! Dale Carnegie. *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. My parents used to have this one, too. Supposedly about how to succeed, but really about how to conform. Be less of a misfit. Sand off your rough edges.

Looks at the antique busts with dawning recognition:

Like those guys! Okaaay! Oh-kay! *Production Distribution Circulation Production Distribution Circulation*. An escape room cleverly disguised as an art gallery!

And if I figure out what the artworks mean I get to leave?

Stares hard at another object or image in the room. Pause.

These things are way more fun with a group.

Returns to the "How to Win Friends and Influence People" diptych. One image is the frontispiece to the 1936 edition and reads "Twelve things this book will help you achieve." The other, the frontispiece to a later edition, reads "Eight things this book will help you achieve."

OK. They lost four things but gained . . . ten million readers. They cut:

—*Enable you to win new clients, new customers*

—*Increase your earning power*

—*Make you a better salesman, a better executive*

So all the business stuff. Makes sense; you want to expand your audience beyond just salarymen . . .

**TWELVE THINGS THIS BOOK WILL
HELP YOU ACHIEVE**

- 1.** Get out of a mental rut, think new thoughts, acquire new visions, new ambitions.
- 2.** Make friends quickly and easily.
- 3.** Increase your popularity.
- 4.** Win people to your way of thinking.
- 5.** Increase your influence, your prestige, your ability to get things done.
- 6.** Win new clients, new customers.
- 7.** Increase your earning power.
- 8.** Make you a better salesman, a better executive.
- 9.** Handle complaints, avoid arguments, keep your human contacts smooth and pleasant.
- 10.** Become a better speaker, a more entertaining conversationalist.
- 11.** Make the principles of psychology easy for you to apply in your daily contacts.
- 12.** Arouse enthusiasm among your associates.

This book has done all these things for countless thousands of readers in twenty-eight different languages.

EIGHT THINGS THIS BOOK WILL HELP YOU ACHIEVE

1. Get out of a mental rut, think new thoughts, acquire new visions, discover new ambitions.
2. Make friends quickly and easily.
3. Increase your popularity.
4. Win people to your way of thinking.
5. Increase your influence, your prestige, your ability to get things done.
6. Handle complaints, avoid arguments, keep your human contacts smooth and pleasant.
7. Become a better speaker, a more entertaining conversationalist.
8. Arouse enthusiasm among your associates.

This book has done all these things for more than ten million readers in thirty-six languages.

Looks carefully.

— . . . *keep your human contacts smooth and pleasant . . . ???*

Pause.

OK so after Hollywood I went to New York. It was like the establishing shot of every working-girl movie of the Eighties: the tumultuous sea of human heads filled me with a delicious novelty of emotion. A body, like capital, wants to be free.

I didn't know anyone. Thank God for Craigslist! I heard about this art opening; tiny studio in Murray Hill with a cot in the corner. The exhibition was in the freezer. The curator—tenant?—talked about going back to blending in. "The New World Order of Blankness." New *normal*. Took me aside when I was leaving and said, "She'll get back to you." Swear to God. "She'll get back to you—with extras." And I thought he meant cheese. Or a pickle on the side. And he meant honest-to-god *extras*. Like movie extras.

That night, on the subway back home, I saw a dude who was totally deflated. Like poured skin. I got closer. It was an inflatable. Like they used for crowd scenes in movies before they learned to do it with digital. I was like, "Who left their inflatable person on the Coney Island-bound F? And what are they trying to tell me?"

The next morning Gina called.



III. GINA

vox She had a WeWork downtown where she took meetings. Her own, other people's. She literally took other people's meetings. She'd stand there and wait for people to get off the elevator and she'd look at them like, "??" and they'd be like,

“!!!” And she’d sit them down and give them free cucumber water and they’d sign everything over before they knew what’s what. Getpeople.org. Background casting. The crowd extras in movies. What a scam.

She had a stable of like five hundred people, and they’d just shift costumes from shoot to shoot: people on their way to work in the Fifties, draft-card burners in the Sixties, club-goers in the Seventies, people on their way to work in the Eighties, prisoners, prisoners, prisoners . . . Always the same people, just in different clothes. “A Secret Dramaturgy,” Gina called it, “A Dramaturgy of the Apparatus.”

I loved it. So much freer than acting. Being, but in a *guise*. I had these tiny earbuds and I’d listen to audio books while the camera passed over me. My body became a shield to hide behind.

It reminded me of when I was a little kid. I had this imaginary friend named Bonbo, and I’d always place him in front of me, obscuring my presence. My parents would ask where I was and I’d say (“*Shining*” voice), “He’s behind me.” Freaked them out. But it made me feel so safe.

Gina would send us out for all kinds of stuff, not just movie crowd scenes but product launches, live events. Marketing teams would hire her to pack the house and cheer at movie premieres. Like a *claque*. Sometimes two of us would be sitting next to each other and we’d hold hands. Even if we didn’t know each other. Even if we didn’t like each other. We felt nothing, but it was more reassuring than the alternative.

Sorry—you know about the *claque*?



IV. CLAUQUE

vox It’s a 19th-century term, but it has its origins in antiquity. It started with Nero . . .

Startled, looks at bust of “Nero (?)”

. . . who trained five thousand of his soldiers to applaud for him after his harp recitals and dramatic performances. The Augustiani, they were called. And of course, once they clapped, everyone else would start clapping, too. Applause, like laughter, is infectious. Also, people don't like to be crucified; who wants to be the first person to stop clapping for Nero? Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn tells the story of a round of applause for Stalin that lasted *eleven minutes*. People would fake seizures to get carried out.

But think about it in a market context: in Paris, capital of the 19th century, theater is Netflix, theater is the movies. Applause is the equivalent of a “like” button, a metric that can make or break you. Not only can producers, writers, and actors buy applause; they *have* to—from roving gangs of hooligans who are like, “Nice premiere you got there. Shame if a cascade of boos were to happen to it.” These gangs of roving applauders are called *clagues*, after the verb *cliquer*—to clap.

Sometimes there's a conflict. Sometimes one actress has hired a *claque* to cheer for her while her rival has hired a different *claque* to boo her. Fisticuffs break out in the pit. The *claque* is so unruly, their responses so obviously canned, that *unpaid* audiences stop responding altogether, like when you refuse to react to your friend's favorite song because they're sitting there staring at you like, “????” The actual audiences, the paying audiences, become more and more alienated from this spectacle of call-and-response and stop showing up altogether.

Cornered, the theaters do the only thing they can: they start their own, proprietary *clagues*, which at least they control. Under the watchful eye of a *chef de claque*, tactics become subtler, the *claquers* harder to spot. “Actors in the audience.”

Specializations emerge. There are *rieurs*, who excel at laughing, *pleurers*, who are virtuosi of crying, and the classic applauders, who can work in at least three different clapping styles.

Instead of gathering them in one spot, the *chef de clique* distributes them around the theater. They watch for his signals, an invisible orchestra. At his cue they emit a muffled sob here, an amused guffaw there, and the response spreads through the audience like plague. The *chef* cues the clique, the clique cues the crowd: a model for civic engagement is born.

V. GRASSROOTS FOR HIRE

vox Gina got asked to do a political rally. Some foreign government wanted positive buzz for a barely elected human-rights abuser during the UN General Assembly. The whole thing was arranged through front companies. Very lucrative. So Gina sent a “diverse” bunch of us over there with signs and T-shirts: “We love so-and-so!” “Finally, so-and-so!” I didn’t even know his name. I was listening to Paula Hawkins’s *Girl on the Train*. Really engaging.

A week later, she got called to do a protest. We went out to a suburb to picket a business owned by a child molester. At least, our signs said he was a child molester. We were hired by his competitor, so . . . (*Shrugs.*)

I actually don’t remember being at that one, but the photographic evidence says I was. And that was the main point. A lot of the time the protest was just a pretext, a photo op; we were there to be captured by the news cameras. The real action happened in images the next day.

You learn so much about yourself from photographs. I remember the first time I saw a surveillance photo of myself, I was like, “I was in Grand Central?” I remember passing through Grand Central, but I don’t remember being *in* it. It was like, in spite of my solipsism, I was part of society after all.

VI. JUBELPERSER

vox There was a moment. It didn't last long; there was—*just a moment!* I was . . . it was summer. It was summer. It was dusk. The chestnut trees were fragrant in the early evening breeze. Around seven-thirty. It stays light forever in Berlin. West Berlin, 1967. Protesters lining the Bismarckstrasse. Students mostly. Shah pulls up. Shah of Iran. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Motorcade. Big sequence. Chanting, chanting. Guest of the West German government. State visit. The opera house. Protest because why wouldn't you? The government's only twenty years removed from Nazism—it's *your* parents—cars pull up, Shah and his wife get out. The *Jubelperser* are cheering. Well-dressed Iranians, suit-and-tie. Obviously part of Pahlavi's entourage, but why not, right? Gotta have some counterprotest. *Something* supportive for the cameras. Cheers go up, *whee!*, protesters shout, protesters shout, Shah goes in. More protest, more cheers, more shouts.

Pause.

The Iranians start swinging. They take their signs and just start battering people with them. Cops on horseback? Nothing. Do nothing. *Jubelperser? Prügelperser*, am I right?

Turns into a full-blown riot. Not just the Iranians; the *cops* are actually beating the students. And at some point a student protester named Benno Ohnesorg—*ohne Sorge*, without a care; isn't that sad?—Ohnesorg gets shot. By a cop. In the back of the head. And that sets the stage for twenty-odd years of rioting, domestic terrorism, kidnapping, student protests, the student left. RAF. Baader-Meinhof. 2. Juni.

But here's the thing. Those well-meaning Iranians were part of the Shah's secret service. And the cop who shot Ohnesorg? An East German spy. I'm not saying it's a conspiracy. I'm saying it's *multiple, uncoordinated* conspiracies. That's what

makes history. Cops who aren't cops. Iranians not Iranians. Boys becoming men. Men becoming wolves. Who knows how many interests were represented in that crowd?

It's like in Edgar Allan Poe's "Man of the Crowd." The guy, our narrator, is recovering from a long illness. Hanging out in London in a coffeehouse, doing whatever—creating the public sphere, looking out a window. Sees a guy. Can't figure him out. Like, can't *type* him. Clerk? Businessman? Cardsharp?

So he takes initiative and goes outside, spots the guy and starts to follow him through rush hour on the high street. Then he follows him through these insanely packed side streets and then the guy takes a turn and . . . the crowd peters out. Suddenly, Poe says, he gets nervous, tentative: "He walked more slowly and with less object than before—more hesitatingly. He crossed and re-crossed the way repeatedly, without apparent aim."

But then the guy sees a crowd again and the description's like orgasm: "His chin fell upon his breast, while his eyes rolled wildly from under his knit brows, in every direction, upon those who hemmed him in." They do this *all night*: guy chases crowds, guy loses crowds, narrator follows him all over London all night long until they're right back where they started: coffeehouse, 7 AM, morning rush hour. The little guy's all revved, but our narrator gives up: This man, he says, "is the type and genius of deep crime. He refuses to be alone. He is the man of the crowd."

And my point is, you're the guy who followed him around all night. So what does that make you?



VII. BROADWAY DANNY ROSE

vox "Wherever there's a person of interest, there's a person who's interested." That's what Gina said. After she got wrapped up

in the political stuff shit got weird. For one thing, she moved her office to Midtown.

With Gina time was always passing in reverse: the more history moved in one direction—downtown, gig economy, freelancing—the more she moved in the other—Midtown, five-year lease, and suddenly we were all on salary. With benefits. It was like she was pulling us through the century with a dolly zoom. The office was like something out of the Fifties: dingy linoleum, window overlooking an air shaft, frosted glass door with her name stenciled on it. Above the Carnegie Deli.

Pause.

Maybe she was right. Maybe it *was* less conspicuous than downtown. I don't know. At any rate it worked, and it was easier for us to fan out into the city from there.

We were everywhere. Political rallies. Political protests. Smaller, weirder shit: city council meetings, gallery openings, high school reunions . . . disaster prep.

Half the time we didn't know who we were working for. Gina'd sign these NDAs, or sometimes she'd be subcontracted by a PR firm when their client wanted to hide the expense.

But the weirdest thing was the lectures. Once we got uptown, Gina started reading us chapters from her PhD thesis. She'd either dropped out of art school to do a PhD, or dropped out of a PhD to do art school. Something. We'd have to sit there at these secondhand school desks, surrounded by actors' headshots staring down at us like ghosts. "Zelig as Tardeian Subject." I didn't understand a word of it. None of us did. It was like an AA meeting in there. She said it was an Ethics, a Discipline. No one asked if we wanted to devote our lives to a Discipline because we were on salary and health insurance. That *is* the discipline. Like, "Sure, I'll join your cult. Beats the exhilarating freedom and autonomy of TaskRabbit."

(I had this idea once for “The Manchurian TaskRabbit.” You see her carrying dry cleaning across the street, and you think she’s working on someone else’s behalf, but she’s actually *doing her own errands!*)

Gina would go on and on. In a lecture entitled “Street Photography and Conceptual Performance,” she talked about how the camera brought out everyone’s inner performer. Not in the sense of mugging for the camera, and not in that Warhol sense either. Gina said the camera was actually a magnifying loupe, passing over the things of this world. And as it passed over *people* it drew demons out of them like a magnet. For a moment the camera pulled these qualities forward and made them dance. It *bent* you, like the Eye of God. And when it passed on, you snapped back into shape and resumed your rounds.

“The Person of Interest in these photos isn’t the subject,” Gina said. “The subject is simply the one being made to dance, by dint of being in the camera’s eye. “The Person of Interest is the photographer, because they’re unseen, and therefore unaccountable.”

And then to prove a point she sent me out into Grand Central wearing Google Glass, a Fitbit, a police-issue body cam, and a shoe phone and told me to be inconspicuous. “Vanish,” she’d say. “*Be* the medium through which the world passes.” OK. And then when she aggregated the data the only blank spot on the map was me. It was beautiful. It was . . . sublime.

The rest of the time she’d send us out to that strip around 53rd and Fifth, the one all the street photographers covered in the ‘60s, and have us drift through people’s B-roll and tourist selfies and do the most discreet and subtle photo-bombing. “We’re making a story,” Gina would say. “And this story will be inlaid, entwined, and established over decades. And someday, some enterprising researcher will ask, ‘How? How is this guy in this person’s photo at three in the afternoon here, but in the background of this unrelated woman’s photo at seven in the evening there?’ And they will be overtaken by a sense of dread, and ask, ‘Am I the only person

who's noticed this?' *And thus will we bind their perceptions to our mastery of chance.*"

A hatch swings open, startling vox. In a hidden alcove, at eye level, sits another sculpture, modern this time. With trepidation, vox goes over to inspect. Reads the wall label.

"Laura Ziegler. American."

"Ceramic, glaze, wood stain."

Beat.

"Seated sculpture of David Levine."

"1974??"

Runs over to a sledgehammer sitting upright on a low pedestal, intending either to liberate the sculpture or smash it. Pulls. Sledgehammer doesn't budge. Pulls again.

Notices label text next to the sledgehammer.

"Steel, fiberglass, 2018."

To no one in particular:

It's still a sledgehammer!



VIII. ETHEREUM

vox "From the mid-19th through the 20th century," Gina said, "the crowd was considered irrational, unruly, a force whose rage was to be tamed, channeled, and feared. Mass movements, fascism, strikes, and riots. 'To the crowd in its nakedness,' wrote Canetti, 'everything seems a Bastille.'"



Laura Ziegler (American, born 1927), *David Levine*. 1974, ceramic, glaze, wood stain. $11\frac{1}{2} \times 6\frac{1}{2} \times 7$ ".
Brooklyn Museum, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Solomon K. Gross, 74.209. © Laura Ziegler

“But today, we celebrate this horde: we speak of ‘the wisdom of crowds,’ ‘multitudes,’ ‘crowdsourcing.’ Blockbuster exhibitions, blockbuster protests. Everyone wants in! The only thing to spoil their sheeplike fun . . . is you.

“You are the backstops, the anchors,” she’d say. “Pylons in the sea. Secret individuals. While the rest of them watch the tennis match, heads swinging this way and that, *you* stare straight ahead, nodes of tactical insincerity, temporary autonomy, strategic tears in the fabric of society. Bulwarks against fascism.”

Pause.

I don’t think she gave a shit about fascism. I don’t think she was interested in crowds at all. Crowds were a pretext. What she wanted was to populate the world with people like her, people with a void inside. A world of detectives and corrupted Agent Smiths. It wasn’t megalomania, or not only . . . I think she felt safe knowing there were beings out there who wouldn’t make demands of her; who *couldn’t* make demands, because they weren’t programmed to. “Who doesn’t want privacy?” she asked me once. “Who doesn’t want to remain unmoved?”

She was fragile, in a way.

Returns to photo.

You know that’s her, right? In the picture? I was shitting you about the photo cube. I mean, I wasn’t shitting you: she *was* the photo-cube model, that’s how she got her start.

That’s where she developed her . . . taste for anonymity.

Whatever. She’s dead. Or immaterial. Maybe she got her wish.

We were everywhere—we were doing *children’s funerals*—but it wasn’t enough. “Our bodies,” Gina said, “our *bodies* are slowing us down. We should be saturating the world. Like

information.” It was like looking at porn with a magnifying glass; how much detail do you need?

I said—I really surprised myself—I said, “Gina, we’ve changed laws. We’ve made and wrecked businesses. We’ve altered lives. What more do you want?”

And she looked at me with this funny expression and said, “Sublimation.”

She stopped leaving the office, stopped going out, stopped taking gigs. Delegated everything to her assistant, André. Paced around the office in a filthy nightshirt, Kleenex boxes on her feet, mumbling about “precipitation cycles” and “the aether”; “the Great Centrifuge.” She’d send André out to the public library for old books, leather-bound things . . . I mean, I *hope* they were leather.

“Gina,” I asked, “are you OK?”

She looked up from one of these volumes like she’d never seen me before. Like she couldn’t see me. “You’re the most anonymous person here,” she said. “You’re going to be the one.”

Pause.

I had become a metonym for a person.

There’s a passage in Marx where he talks about the shift from material to immaterial value. There was a time, he writes, when ten gold coins actually represented their weight in gold. That is, if you put a ten-gram block of gold on one side of the scale, and ten one-gram gold coins on the other, the scale balances. Each individual coin is genuinely one tenth the value of a block of gold. You with me?

But then that coin goes out into the world. It passes from me to you to you, representing, in each transaction, its customary value. But the longer a coin circulates, the less it weighs; friction, nicks, and scratches make it weigh less than one gram; the scales wouldn’t balance anymore. But it still

operates as one gram of gold. That is still its *worth*. “What remains,” Marx writes, “is *magni nominis umbra*; the body of the coin is now merely a shadow. The coin becomes increasingly ideal as a result of practice, its golden substance being reduced to a mere pseudo-existence, a pseudo-sovereign.”

That’s me, the pseudo-sovereign. The village bicycle.

Looks back at the busts.

You circulate too much, you lose all your . . .



IX. TOWER

vox She didn’t come out of her office for weeks, but the light was always on. We’d hear weird scratching sounds from behind the frosted glass. A stray chuckle, or a foul odor creeping out from under the door. We just sat around the front room, listening to audiobooks and defacing headshots.

When the door finally opened I expected her to look like Medusa but she looked beautiful. Fresh. But different somehow . . . Changed.

She gave us an address and said to meet her there.

It was an atrium. Public-private space. A rally. I’d never seen this many extras. Hundreds, thousands of us. Where did she even get them? Gina buzzed among us, nervously shuffling us around to reflect American diversity. Young/Old; Short/Tall; Black/Yellow/Brown.

“Like America,” she said. “Where everyone hangs out and communicates.”

She gave us signs and branded T-shirts to wear and instructed us to cheer when this person appeared. Until then, she said we were to perform “breathless anticipation.”

André walked up to me and slapped me hard. “No earbuds,” he barked. “This one’s real.”

A swarm of photographers arrived; we gave them the usual hearty thumbs-up. But then the activity slowed. Like the air pressure was dropping. The air turned green and my ears popped. Gina started a chant, but this one had a strange cadence, it was difficult to phone in. She came up to me and hissed, “You’re holding the sign upside down. He won’t like that.”

I started to correct it, but Gina’s eyes rolled back in her head. “Make some noise!” she moaned. “HE’S ALREADY HERE!!!” A fake cheer went up, and as it passed through me it became a real cheer. My eyes rolled wildly from under my brows, in every direction, upon those who hemmed me in. I was *in* the teenage girl beside me, *in* the South Asian widower to my left, *in* the trio of white bros across the atrium.

Space devoured me, pursued me, encircled me, digested me in a gigantic phagocytosis. It *replaced* me. I became a living photograph, a reproduction of three-dimensional space, complete with solids and voids. I looked down and couldn’t see me. I became *similar*. Not similar *to* anything, just . . . similar. *I was dark space, where things cannot be put.*

I looked down at the podium. The speaker had the head of an enormous bird of prey. It turned 360 degrees, opened its mouth, and light came pouring out. It knocked me to the opposite side of my senses. The light tore me apart. I was a kaleidoscope equipped with consciousness. The Thing pointed at us extras, and gave us names:

DAVID DENNISON, MELVINREDDICK₄₂, CATHERINE FULTON₀₀₇.

Plants became stones, rocks became brains, stalactites became breasts, the marble walls a tapestry, adorned with figures from medieval times.

ALICE_DONOVAN, ANLEE, RACHELUSEDOM.

Like the *Phyllia* we extras foraged among ourselves, chewing idly on each other's arms, mistaking each other for food.

MATTSKIBER_97, SHUDU, LILIQUELA.

The speaker's head sprouted crab legs from its ears and stalks for eyes. With every name he grew larger and Gina diminished, a sorcerer caught in her own trap, until she just hung there in the air like a drop of water, tiny, like the sibyl at Cumae. "Kill me," she wheezed. "Please kill me."

ADRIANA_GAVRILO, JOHN BARRON.

It pointed at me.

The Thing bursts out of you like a grown-up, and you're dead.

Long pause.

It was dusk. In the city. Summer. It was warm. Empty. Must have been a weekend. Quiet. I wandered up Fifth Avenue. Past where Winogrand took that picture, then past where Friedlander took that picture, past the window Holly Golightly stared into.

The avenue was empty. It was summer, everyone was on vacation. Lone persons would approach from the other direction, casting long shadows as the sun set, and as they'd pass me they'd raise their hats, and I was like, "Hats? It's the 21st century." It was gaslighting, I'm sure of it. Someone hired those people.

In a derelict phone booth on 59th and Fifth I saw a casting notice for a show called *Imposters*: "The series follows Maddie, a con artist, who gets involved in relationships with men—and women!—before leaving them used and robbed of everything—including their hearts. Seeking background of all types. Must bring wardrobe. Nonunion."

I made my way to the corner and turned into Central Park to hide among the trees. I thought I was a tree. It felt nice. It felt safe.

I don't know what happened to the others. Sublimated, I guess.

This wasn't my body.

X. GOODBYE

vox There's this line in *Easy Rider*, the Dennis Hopper movie, and everyone thinks the line is when Captain America is like, "We blew it," and the audience is like, "Blew what?? Blew what??" and the unspoken answer's like, "America!" But the line is actually when they visit the commune to see what those crazy youth are up to and Dennis Hopper's character wanders up to a bunch of weed smokers like, *Hey, man . . . I came to rap with you a little*. And without looking up one of them asks: "Who sent you?" THAT'S THE LINE. Someone *sent* him. He's an agent. Of the *Man*. And he doesn't even know. He belongs to *someone*, so he can't belong.

Who sent me?

Pause.

I'm not artwork. You can't look at me like that. I'm not smarter than you. I'm not here to *elucidate* anything.

I came from the aether. I traveled on mist and rumor and condensed here, in this white cube.

And now, I'm ready to attend the Bowie exhibition.

Looks down at self.

A maintenance person? Maybe. A fashionista? Perhaps. "The Jumpsuit: suitable for Hard Hat riots or a riotously good time." And what could be more appropriate to the Bowie show? So stylish. He could become *anyone!* "The Chameleon."

It's funny we celebrate Bowie for being able to turn into anyone, but among like, basic people, that's always a prompt to intense mistrust. It's like, "Al over there. Always changing personalities. Probably drowns cats." But with Bowie we're like, "*Awesome!*"

But isn't that just a question of style?

Or maybe we just confuse chameleons with peacocks. I mean, they're both forms of camouflage, right? But where the peacock either obscures its tender little potbelly with all that dazzling plumage, or makes itself look enormous and terrifying and covered with eyes . . . the chameleon just blends in.

Looks again at the image of the Phasma gigas.

You can trust a peacock. You always know where they are. A phasma, though . . . (*Gestures at self.*) Suitable for any occasion, right?

I'm gonna go to that Bowie show. I'm gonna stand right next to you and you're not even going to remember I was there.

vox 2 *appears in an identical jumpsuit. They face each other.*

vox 2 Gina. It's sold out.

Pause.

vox (*Sloughing off skin, leaving.*) Not a problem. +



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