

NEWARTTHEATRE

Evolutions of the Performance Aesthetic

**John Kelly, Liz Magic Laser, David Levine,
and Alix Pearlstein**
in conversation with Paul David Young

On October 14, 2010, John Kelly, Liz Magic Laser, David Levine, and Alix Pearlstein joined moderator Paul David Young at the apexart gallery space in New York to discuss the engagement in their work with the idea of theatre and the evolution of the performance aesthetic. The use of theatre within the art world raises a host of questions about the identity and body of the performer, the relationship of performance to the written text, the institutional and social conditions of performance, the relevance of the history of theatre and theatre criticism, and the political nature of art. The discussion continued by e-mail after that evening; these later questions and answers are appended at the end of the conversation.

John Kelly is a performance and visual artist, who has received numerous awards including two Obies, two Bessies, and a CalArts Alpert Award. Fellowships and residencies include the American Academy in Rome, Guggenheim Foundation, Radcliffe Institute, Civitella Ranieri, and the Sundance Theatre Lab. His visual art has been exhibited at Alexander Gray Associates, ICA Philadelphia, MIT List Visual Arts Center, and The New Museum for Contemporary Art. He recently starred in *The Clerk's Tale*, directed by James Franco. A revival of his work based on the Viennese Expressionist Egon Schiele, *Pass The Blutwurst, Bitte*, was performed at La MaMa E.T.C. in December 2010. He is currently an Armory Artist in Residence at the Park Avenue Armory.

Liz Magic Laser lives and works in New York City. She attended the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program and the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council (LMCC) Workspace residency program. Her 2010 solo show at Derek Eller Gallery (NYC) was *chase*. Laser's work is currently included in *Greater New York 2010* at MoMA PS1 where her performance *Flight* also debuted. She is continuing to develop *Flight* with the award of a Franklin Furnace Fund for Performance Art grant. Her work has been shown at New York venues including Southfirst, Sue Scott, Smack Mellon, and The Art Production Fund. Laser has also exhibited internationally at NT art gallery (Bologna), Karlin Hall for the Prague Biennale 4, the Center for Contemporary Art Tel Aviv, and the Georgian National Museum for Artisterium 2009 (Tbilisi).



Left to right: Paul David Young, Alix Pearlstein, David Levine, Liz Magic Laser, and John Kelly at apexart, New York, October 14, 2010. Photo: Courtesy apexart.

David Levine's work examines the conditions of spectacle and spectatorship across a range of media. His performance work has been seen at MoMA, Documenta XII, GBE@Passerby, PS 122, the Watermill Center, and HAU2 Berlin, and his non-performance work at Cabinet Magazine's exhibition space, Townhouse Gallery (Cairo), and Galerie Feinkost (Berlin). As a theatre director, he has directed premieres at The Atlantic, The Vineyard, and Primary Stages Theatres, and developed new work at the Sundance Theatre Lab. He lives in New York and Berlin, where he is director of the Studio Programme at the European College of Liberal Arts.

Alix Pearlstein's work in video and performance has been widely exhibited. Selected solo exhibitions include On Stellar Rays (New York), Contemporary Art Museum (St. Louis), The Kitchen (New York), MIT List Visual Arts Center (Cambridge), Salon 94 (New York), Lugar Commun (Lisbon), The Museum of Contemporary Art (Chicago), and Postmasters Gallery, New York. Selected group exhibitions and screenings include MoBY (Tel Aviv), Internationale D'Art De Quebec (Quebec City), EV+A (Limerick), BAM/PFA (Berkeley), SMAK (Ghent), The Whitney Museum of American Art (New York), Biennale de Lyon, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (Washington D.C.), and The Museum of Modern Art (New York). Pearlstein lives and works in New York.

YOUNG: I'd like to thank apexart for agreeing to host tonight's panel and *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, under whose auspices the panel is occurring. The beginning point for this panel was the reference to traditional theatre by visual artists, which in my reading of art history is something that was largely excluded from the idea of performance art since the 1960s. There was Michael Fried's famous condemnation of theatre as the negation or perversion of art, on the one hand, in his discussion of the aesthetics of minimalism, and on the other hand you had performance artists like people at the Judson Memorial Church who were developing a kind of aesthetic that was in opposition to traditional theatre as a rehearsed performance that involved a written text, the so-called literary theatre, as it's often disparaged. I saw visual artists who, despite these condemnations and resistances within the art world, were engaging with theatre, and I found that very strange. Theatre is often regarded as a dead art form, one that can be excruciating. I was reading Steve Dixon's *Digital Performance* which summarized the reaction of many people to traditional theatre. He wrote: "We have all experienced nights of crushing, excruciating boredom at the theatre where despite the live presence of a dozen gesticulating bodies on stage, we discern no interesting presence at all and pray for the thing to end." Contrary to that, I think that the work that is being produced by the artists I've assembled here tonight is a fascinating use of theatre.

Let me begin with Alix Pearlstein. I'm sure many of you know Alix's work. She's a video artist. She had a recent rave-reviewed show at The Kitchen and an equally ecstatically received show at the Lower East Side gallery On Stellar Rays. Her work, insofar as it's being presented here tonight, engages with theatre but it's being presented as art video. It engages, however, with a model of performance that looks like theatre and seems to have a sort of script involved. Alix uses what I would call real actors

or trained actors. I found her work to be a very beautiful and smart adaptation of the idea of theatre. In the most recent work there is a double or triple reference to the idea of theatre, in that she has adapted in part the idea from the film *A Chorus Line*, which is in turn an adaptation of the stage version, which is in turn a reference to theatrical practices that one may see every day in the theatre. “Theatrical ephemera,” is the way I would describe it. I’m not going to impute those words to you but it’s the way that it occurs to me. And I don’t mean to diminish it in any way. I think it’s astonishing the way you’ve taken these quiet moments that are not normally considered integral to the theatre experience and created another kind of art out of them. Alix, could you begin by talking about why you chose to engage in theatre in a number of works over the past several years?

PEARLSTEIN: For me it comes more from working with actors in an art context than from thinking about theatre *per se*. I started making sculpture and installation and then I, like many artists, started working with video using myself as a performer. I have some background in dance so that I came to performance from the point of view of choreography. And after a while I started incorporating some friends who also perform in my work, and along the way came some friends who happen to be professional actors. I recognized something so different in the way that they approached performance in the context of what I was doing, so it marked a big shift in how I worked, and I started working exclusively with professional actors. For me that’s been more the thing that has drawn me to some references to things that are related to theatre. The difference between what performance is and what acting is—that’s more where my engagement is in questions about theatre.

YOUNG: Could I just follow up quickly and ask you what you mean by that distinction?

PEARLSTEIN: When I say acting, I mean that there is sort of a motivation and a back story or a psychology beyond the actor that you see. Performance—you were referring earlier to Judson Dance Theater—by that I would mean that there is a sense that the performer is not pretending, that the performer or the artist is themselves doing a task. I’m interested really in both but particularly a strange place between them and what happens when you actually have a professional actor navigating the bell curve between those two poles.

YOUNG: Let me introduce the other members of the panel. David Levine, whose work has also dealt with what I would term “theatrical ephemera,” has a piece called *Hopeful* that has to do with the tragic landscape created by the actor’s headshot and the kind of longing that is expressed through that. In your *Bauerntheater* or “Farmer’s Play,” based on the Heiner Müller play, *Die Umsiedlerin*, the play itself has been eliminated from the performance. Could you tell us why you’re engaged in theatre? You come from a theatre background and have directed plays in professional theatres.

LEVINE: I was a professional theatre director for about five or six years in New York, and over the course of that I realized what I was much more interested in, especially with American realism being what it is, was in the ways that people try to turn themselves into somebody else. I got more and more interested in theatre and the ephemera of theatre as tracking that. So I became less interested in theatre as something to do than theatre as a way of tracking or talking about these ideas of self-transformation. But you can't talk about those questions in an auditorium. It would be like trying to ride a wheelbarrow when you're sitting in it. If you want to focus on this, you have to look at it in a different context. That's pretty much how that all shifted for me, except that I still really loved rehearsing but I hated going to theatre, so I liked making it but I hated going. I sort of had to work that one out. The performance-based work let me do both. It let me do traditional theatre rehearsal without having to set foot in an actual theatre but I got to do all the rest of it. [In *Bauerntheater*] we basically rehearsed this play with the actor and then I shipped him out to a little land art center where the play is based and I asked him to be in character for ten hours a day for a month, five days a week, which basically entailed just planting potatoes by hand but doing this manual labor as somebody else. He could stop working but he couldn't stop acting.

YOUNG: That has a tie to one of your other pieces which is called *Actors at Work*, I believe.

LEVINE: This is another piece of theatrical ephemera. There's this union called Actors' Equity that actors all belong to, and you have to belong to it. It supposedly protects you but most actors don't make enough money, they have to get day jobs. I filed Equity contracts for actors to just go to their day jobs, so legally their work space became theatre and legally their work became a performance. Then I sent someone over to shoot production stills while the contract was in force, and so legally they were in plays with titles like *Word Processor* or *Free Lance Editor 2*.

YOUNG: I recall that for *Bauerntheater* the rehearsals took place in New York and you filled a room with dirt.

LEVINE: Yeah, because it was a test of method acting too, which I'm kind of fascinated by. It's a really American thing, I mean this idea that you can become somebody totally different. That is a kind of endurance art. All these legends about method actors come pretty close to the kind of performance work that was being done in the sixties. I got soil samples from Germany and in the studio I built a two-ton dirt field so the actor could really prepare the role. We taught him German. He went basically as far as you could go with method acting with a super minimal task. He had to experience it all. Technically he was doing totally realistic acting. It's just everything around it was gone.

YOUNG: I read that some of the local farmers criticized his farming techniques.

LEVINE: Every farmer has his own idea of how you should do it. I had a dramaturg who was a farming major. [The actor] did it right according to one group of farmers but he fucked up his wrist halfway through and he had to switch to a second equally valid historical approach. But the weird thing was he hadn't rehearsed that one, which shouldn't make any difference because it's just planting potatoes. In the end all the potatoes he planted after the switch barely grew and the ones that he had this really well-rehearsed technique with, the ones that he could be in character with, grew fine. Which is just strange, but, no, we were accurate.

YOUNG: Our next panelist is Liz Magic Laser. She comes out of a photography background. Your recent pieces have a theatrical quality to them and the work you presented this year at Derek Eller Gallery was an enactment of a Brecht play, *Man is Man*, only it was done at various ATMs around New York, and filmed and spliced together. What caused you to take up this play? It closed after six performances and the reviews were terrible. Even Brecht couldn't pull this off.

LASER: It opened at two places at once, Düsseldorf and Darmstadt, and it was a total flop in Düsseldorf but it was a huge success in Darmstadt.

YOUNG: Peter Lorre was roundly criticized for his performance, and that led to Brecht's famous defense of him.

LASER: That was the later performance. It was originally written in 1926 and eventually Brecht was able to produce and direct it himself in 1931, when Brecht came out in defense of Lorre's acting, which was supposedly the first time he proclaimed his alienation technique, what the intention of that was. But just to explain, I cast this play and worked with each actor separately so the entire narrative was stitched back together eventually and a complete version of the narrative plays out in actually two-and-a-half hours.

YOUNG: Why did you do this?

LASER: I'd actually done a series of interventions. I kept coming back to that space of the bank vestibule, around the spring of the two years before. Each spring I would come back and do a smaller kind of intervention. The first one I tried to act in myself and I wrote a short script where I acted out a fraught relationship with the ATM, and that was shelved. The next year I came back and deposited prosciutto in my account and took a photograph of it. It disabled the machine so it was also then shelved. I kept considering this space. Such a variety of people pass through. It's a really diverse community that passes through that space but there is a strict code of privacy where you do not interact. I also started thinking about how the surveillance cameras in that space represent the spread of repercussions, and that I knew bringing my camera into that space was felt as a threat to other people's privacy and sense of security. So it felt like a space where this kind of activity would bring out the social conditions that you gloss over because it's kind of anaesthetized space where you wouldn't normally think of anything. There is elevator music playing and it makes you a little bit of a zombie.

YOUNG: Our last panelist is John Kelly. He's performed in every conceivable venue, including the Belasco Theatre on Broadway. He's danced, he's sung, he's done it all. But he's also very active in the visual art world through drawings and paintings that are related to these performances. John, maybe you'd like to tell us a little about this piece. It's based on the life of Egon Schiele and you're reviving it at La MaMa in December.

KELLY: Yes, Egon Schiele was a Viennese Expressionist painter who died in 1918 at the age of 28. He was imprisoned as a pornographer. It was a kind of benchmark piece for me in my career. I did it initially in 1986 and again in 1995, and it really was a chance for me to merge my training as a dancer and my training as a visual artist, literally. In relation to theatre, especially early on, there was not a single spoken word in any of my work, although I sing and I've used song in my work a lot. But character and role playing may be what I most have in common with theatre. Generally most of my pieces are a character of some sort. It's hard for me to be me on stage, even if I'm singing a song. A song for me is a little play. And I use theatrical techniques and elements. The work is pretty theatrical.

YOUNG: I invited you because you are a marvelous performer but also because you are a refutation in a way of the argument that we're seeing something new here. You're a person who has been engaged in visual art and theatre and you've been doing so since about 1980. There's nothing new about this for you. Is that true?

KELLY: Yes. I quit art school and in the East Village I started performing in clubs. I made my debut at The Anvil lip-synching a Maria Callas recording in punk drag. So it was a way for me to get back on stage. I realized I wanted to perform again. I was doing a lot of self-portraits. But I was kind of itching for my body to be in the world, to be in the work. My school was the clubs, Club 57, Danceteria, and I just formulated a vocabulary. In the '80s the other spaces beckoned, like PS 122 and The Kitchen. I wanted to be in those spaces but I never really aimed to be in traditional theatre. I went kicking and screaming into theatre. I do acting now occasionally. But the thing I least felt comfortable doing was speaking. I'm a storyteller with my body and with visuals. That's really been what I have loved. But now I do speak. That's the last thing that I've added to my arsenal.

YOUNG: You touched on the idea of the body, which is central to what we are talking about here, whether or not this engagement with theatre affects the performance aesthetic and particularly as it relates to ideas the politics of the body. For you I think it is important that you are the performer and that it is your body on stage and your identification with these characters that you are portraying.

KELLY: Some of the works are solo and some have fourteen people in them. But definitely I usually play the primary: I give myself the best role. That's the luxury of writing a work, so I can do what I want. Only twice have I done work on somebody else's body. I've been choreographing dances on people, taking a piece that I was in initially and doing it with someone else in it. That only happened twice and it was only because I couldn't be in two places at once.

YOUNG: I'd like to have the other panelists address this question. Liz, you're approaching theatre in a very different way from the way John is. Could you respond in relation to your own work?

LASER: This is a really stimulating question to think through for me, the question of why art is appropriating theatre right now, because it made me realize that I came into it because theatre was appropriating video art. A director asked me a few years ago to collaborate on the set for his play. It was a production at HERE Art Center and somehow I found myself in the tech booth, a complete fish out of water. I worked with all the actors in that production, and I developed a relationship with one of them and continued working with her. I think that probably he asked me because of what was already happening in theatre with William Kentridge's work and Ivo van Hove's work and the incorporation of video art into theatre. Also, my mom's a choreographer, and so I grew up around dance, and as her dancers became choreographers I would photograph them. My background is totally in photography, and so this issue of how performance can expand its temporality through photography was present for me, and it precipitated that shift towards working in performance.

YOUNG: You don't normally appear personally in the videos you create.

LASER: I started out that way and then had these experiences of collaborating with dancers and theatre directors and that furthered the shift.

YOUNG: Now you would regard yourself as a director in the production mode?

LASER: No, I definitely consider myself an artist. I'm using theatre in quotes as a material substance.

YOUNG: David, this is kind of a complicated question for you. How would you talk about your personal presence within your work?

LEVINE: Do you want to talk about bodies or personal presence in the work?

YOUNG: Wherever you would like to start.

LEVINE: I was a theatre director who read a lot in art and went to see a lot of art. I was super galled that theatre was constantly getting dissed by the artists of the '60s trying to draw a distinction to performance art. The theatre was too clueless as an institution to even know that it was getting dissed. But if you come from theatre what really bothered me was this sort of cult of authenticity, which is to say that it's really happening because it's happening on your body. If you come from theatre you really don't find that all that persuasive. So when I started working on the farming thing, everyone was like, so you're the one farming, right? I remember having conversations with really established performance artists and they were like, you're the one farming, and I'm like, no, I'm using an actor. One thing I really wanted to do was short-circuit this distinction. The actor is clearly working his ass off. It's clearly authentic. But he's also pretending. And there's some sense if you're

getting cut for a public or you're setting yourself on fire for a public it's really happening, but it's not necessarily authentic. I mean, it's for the sake of spectacle. So for me using actors and not using myself is a way of getting the sentimentality out of it. You've got to reckon with the fact that it's a spectacle. It will no longer derive value from the fact that it's really happening except that a lot of the performance work I do is super durational but it's durational acting so you start thinking about acting as a kind of physical work and not just a really easy means of representation. Obviously, if most of your work is about somebody trying to become a convincing other person then it's going to be biographical to an extent one way or the other. I mean, this was partially about me moving to Berlin and trying to pass as a German in some way.

PEARLSTEIN: The point of authenticity is an important one and integral to this whole conversation about incorporating actors into an art context. When I say that, I tend to mean that it's a conceptual framework. I think the art world has a resistance to a performer when it is not the artist, when it is a conceptual framework, and actually that resistance I find really interesting. I often get asked why I'm not in my work anymore, and it's like I can only do so much. There are certain things I can do but an actor can do all these other things. I've been getting my feet wet a little bit in testing that by casting myself as the director, or as an extra who is the director, or kind of bystander. The sense that there is a subject of authenticity to the artist, that the artist as the performer is more real, and yet the translation to an actor with the same authenticity as a performer who might be negotiating the space between their character and themselves—there's a bit of a wall to that.

YOUNG: You went through a similar transition as Liz did. You appeared in some of your earlier video work, and there is a piece, *Two Women*, where you are off-screen as this director voice giving direction to an actor. After that, you disappear from the screen, is that right?

PEARLSTEIN: Yes, so lately I wonder what happens if I insert myself as these secondary or background personalities. It has been interesting to get responses to that. What I have found is that this issue of authenticity comes up. There is a comfort zone around the artist being present in the work.

YOUNG: Within the art world.

PEARLSTEIN: Within the art world. I'm still trying to understand that. That's something I'm thinking about lately.

LEVINE: Now you can use outsourced performance.

PEARLSTEIN: Or real people.

LEVINE: What fascinates me is, it cannot be narrative. It cannot be realistic. There's a sense that maybe you can use really good video tech, maybe it can look really awesome, like a Stan Douglas piece, but for god's sake, it can't be narrative,

you've got to frame it. There's this thing, and most other visual art has got beyond it: it's got to have a signature on it. It's got to be made somehow. It can't just pass through. There's a sense that really good conventional theatre with a narrative and an arc and emotional manipulations and all those things professionally done just wouldn't fly because it's too corporate, there's too much of a sheen on it. It would be like a minimalist object, a pop object, like, there's no signature, there's no gap, there's no flaw. It's too persuasive. It's not Brechtian enough.

YOUNG: You mentioned narrative, which relates to the question of your relationship to the written text and the literary theatre. I believe it's true for all of you in your current work that you for the most part reject the written text. There isn't a performance of the play, as it were. You mentioned, John, that you didn't really speak in performance until 1992, and haven't really spoken that much since. In Liz's piece, although the text is used it seems to take a very secondary position to the other elements that are appearing. David, in the *Bauerntheater* piece you've gotten rid of the written text. You have the actor performing and there's nothing left of the text. Alix, your pieces are largely silent. Please feel free to disagree, but I think it's an element that joins all of you in certain ways.

LASER: I feel pretty concerned with scripts and often that is the starting point. I often feel like I'm trying to loosen a script from the context that it's meant to be in and apply it to another context, in this case the bank, where it can operate on that space in a way that will expose how things are being structured there. I've done some other pieces that look at the scripts for home security alarm systems. Types of language are usually pretty central for me.

YOUNG: Right, but for the *Man is Man* piece, you used the text for purposes that are?

LASER: It was not about allegiance to the text, but I was trying to use each line in a twofold manner such that it could both convey its general meaning, its original meaning, but also make sense in the immediate context of the bank. For instance, one of the key narrative devices in that play (it's about a British soldier stationed in colonial India) is a pay book, basically the soldier's identity document, his debit card. There is a lot of direct reference to money, cash, and greed, so much of the language had direct implications in that context.

YOUNG: Alix, I'd like to hear you talk about this. There's very little dialogue in your videos.

PEARLSTEIN: It's funny because for me the dialogue is really important. It is just intermittent. Most of it is scripted, even if it is just a word, sometimes there are parameters around how an actor can work with things they might say. Sometimes the dialogue is overlapping so it is more about the texture that there is a dialogue going on. But it never comes from a text. It comes from other elements.

YOUNG: Do you develop the text that you use through improvisation with the actors, or is it something that you write in advance? As performed, it has an air of improvisation about it. The substance of the video is related to improvisation.

PEARLSTEIN: It is usually written in advance and it changes through some rehearsal. With the piece that you may be referring to, there is some dialogue that is scripted and some that is improvised around a set of parameters that are particular choices of things they might say and some direction about tone.

YOUNG: Why are you so sparing with language?

PEARLSTEIN: Yes, that's the better question. I definitely get more in pieces and it just gets cut down because it seems unnecessary. It's something I want to use more. It's been an ongoing interest to incorporate more language. But I'm also not a writer in that sense. Maybe I will become one.

LASER: It seems like there is an intense gestural script in your work though. I know that that veers away from the use of words.

PEARLSTEIN: Yes, that's more what I know, and so I'm interested in using words more, but in a particular way.

KELLY: In theatre a script is words. I've done storyboards. I've done stick figures. I just sang John Cage stuff. We would go with these squiggles. A score is a map for something that is going to be done once or more than once. There is a big argument in the art world about a word that I have a big problem with. It's not a graceful word—"reperforming" or "reperformer." I think it's a really awkward word. For some people in the art world, a performance should be done only once, and never again. That's one idea. There are other ideas, equally valid. There are so many things in my head right now. In theatre, there can be such focus on the play's the thing, and everything else is secondary, such as the production values. I see it all as options. I see sound as an option, whether it is words or noise or song. The visuals are going to be there whether you like it or not. Why not have some control or say in how they are going to register. Movement, unless someone is completely still, but even that person is going to breathe and his eyes are going to blink, so movement will invariably occur. I like David's use of the word spectacle instead of performance. I use spectacle, I use performance, I use event, dance theatre, whatever: it's all the same thing. It is a thing that occurs with maybe one other body in whatever room. A combination of these things, the visual, the kinetic, the aural, the textural, winds up having some kind of effect. How much do you want to have control over that effect? There are different ways of doing it. There are traditional techniques. There's chance, there's happenstance, and if it's going to be done more than once, there maybe has to be some kind of map or sense of how to arrive at those things in a replicable way, and a way that is grounded in something other than just the menacing energy of a room in a given moment.

YOUNG: I'd like to address that energy in the room question by asking you to comment on what I would call the social conditions of performance. It's a big question I'm asking. I'm talking about the way in which we perceive your art, not only the venue but also the physical circumstances, the economics that are attendant upon that, not only the participation or entrance of the audience, but also the artists, including the actors and technicians that may be involved in your work. Would you like to comment on that issue?

LEVINE: This goes with the script question as well. I like scripts. In *Bauerntheater*, the character had to be generated off of the script. We translated it. It was the first translation ever. We adapted it within an inch of its life. Because of the way this approach works, you have to generate the character from the script. So in order to really test it, we couldn't change a word. For the piece I'm doing next, I actually commissioned a realistic play that is set in a ranch house. Two guys, one woman, love, money, drugs, gun play, buried secret in the past, betrayal. Utterly standard, not pastichey, but it is set in a ranch house. I'm building a functioning ranch house, and they are going to perform it on a loop all day long, so it is rehearsed as theatre with all the theatrical script analysis stuff. But it is not staged, so that their needs as people start to overlap with their needs as characters, their boredom as actors. So if they're hungry they eat, if they're dirty they wash, if they want to play Nintendo they can play Nintendo, if they want to run off to the next room they can run off to the next room. But they cannot change the script. The way it is set up is that spectators can walk around the outside of the house and look in the windows but they can't get in. It's a real house. If Alix and I were playing a scene and we had a big fight and I decide I want to run off to the bedroom this time, if you want to see what I'm doing in the bedroom, you've got to run around the outside and look in the bedroom, in the window.

That idea came from trying to find out what would happen if you subjected theatre to the viewing conditions of an art gallery, which is to say, like, the conditions of a video loop. So, you don't pay admission, it only happens during the day, there is no schedule around any of it. It is a sculptural object that is just available to you all day long, because I think for me the big question is really ninety-five percent of what makes theatre theatre and what makes art art are determined by the institutional conventions of the spectatorship. A lot of these things that I do are just experiments with what happens if you transpose it in one direction or the other. Does it automatically become art if it loops and it's sculptural? Or is it still theatre because they are sticking to a script? The thing I hate about theatre is I hate the architecture. I get sleepy as soon as I buy a ticket. It is just once a night. It's so sort of enervating. There's so much pressure on you to enjoy it, whereas the nice thing about a gallery is it just completely leaves you alone. You come in and you leave. What the fuck ever. It is really relaxing, whereas theatre you might as well not go, you're sort of so burdened by it before you even get there. For me the special context makes a lot of difference even in what the object is.

YOUNG: Alix?

PEARLSTEIN: If I'm in a theatre, I'm immediately uncomfortable, if it's a theatre for live performance. Let me make that distinction: not a movie theatre. I always feel so aware of the walls and no matter what has been done to try to subvert the conventions of conventional theatre, if I am in that space, I feel really restless, really fidgety. So that has been a real impetus behind my work in the last few years, and I think particularly the piece I did at The Kitchen, which I filmed in the black box theatre. Just thinking about the black box as a shooting location brought the whole burden of the history of the experimental theatre space to bear, and I was thinking about theatre in the round, and so through a very complicated camera choreography I tried to invert the conditions of theatre in the round. So for me it is about working with cinematic approaches. I am trying to get the thing I do like about live performance, coming more from an interest in performance art and some experimental theatre, which is the contingency, just the sense that it is never quite the same and that it is never perfect. Bringing the illusion of a cinematic experience to bear on that and then to a context that you can enter and leave. I think David's work really pressures the context in a really severe way and I'm getting interested in pressuring the viewer. I hate to even say this word but I'm thinking about participation in some ways that may not be so horrendous as that might sound.

YOUNG: The dreaded participatory theatre. Liz?

LASER: Well, going back to your question about the social conditions of performance, as I started to say before, working with this director James Dacre was really pivotal for me in seeing a theatre director operate and seeing the collaborative nature of that endeavor. I feel like it influenced me intensely. It provided a model that is much more interactive and provided the stage, the platform, rather, for intense interaction and not only that, but antagonistic interaction. There was this almost social contract to agreeing to this endeavor together, everyone involved, the actors, everyone involved in the performance. There was also this expectation that it be a mutually generative experience for everyone.

YOUNG: John, you've performed in all kinds of settings. I recall you performing on top of the bar at the Pyramid Club.

KELLY: Well, yeah, initially it was the ballet and modern dance, which is the rectangle, and then it went to the bar of the Pyramid Club, and the floor of the Pyramid Club, going through the crowd and really infiltrating and warping space. But eventually it went back into the rectangle, so to speak, and I do conceive things that way. Maybe I share that with Robert Wilson to a degree in that I see pictures in my head or in my heart. I like production values. I like having control over the visuals, and that's something that production values tethered to a specific space can provide, although I also do like warping the space. I was just at Marfa and that beautiful Donald Judd army barracks; it was incredible. I just had to start singing and the acoustic was also really good, and all the guards were like, "Whoah! What's that?" I would love to do a piece just kind of walking through there, making noise. It'd be beautiful. I like the rectangle as well, and within that I try to warp, but it is shackled with a lot of history and a lot of baggage and a lot of "You are stuck in the seat."

LEVINE: Alix was saying, it doesn't matter how you tart it up, I mean, you can do it environmentally, you can do it outside, you can have a million video monitors in the background, but somehow as soon as it is organized as theatre, as soon as you have to show up at a certain time, it's happening once a night, you know, there is this kind of repeatable spectacle, you always carry the theatre in your head with you. No matter where you are, you watch it the same way.

KELLY: I'd like to think the work trumps that. I hope that can happen, but it can be tough.

PEARLSTEIN: I always go back to this one William Forsythe piece, *Kammer/Kammer*. I don't know if any of you know that piece. It's the best use I'd seen of video in theatre, and then again it was more theatre than dance, but he's really a choreographer. I thought he really got it right. I saw something by Jay Scheib [*Bellona, Destroyer of Cities*] recently at The Kitchen that I thought got it pretty right, too. He was doing something interesting with sound. They weren't "talking to the audience." You could barely hear it and yet it was really audible, so it was like people having a conversation amongst themselves, and it created an actual intimacy that I think is often attempted but . . .

LASER: I don't think theatre is dead at all. I've seen some things in the last month. I saw *Orlando* last night. I saw the Anne Bogart *Macbeth*, a production called *Underneath My Bed* [by Florenzia Lozano] and all of those had an element of being in a traditional theatre setting or black box setting.

LEVINE: I totally think it's dead.

LASER: I think we want to be apocalyptic.

PEARLSTEIN: I think I just want to see it in another place. I don't know if it's dead, but I don't like it.

YOUNG: I have half a theory that the reputed mortality of theatre may be one reason that it is being taken up by visual artists because it is this art form that has fallen into disuse. It's so archaic that it can be grasped and reused. It is open to reuse because it's dead or vilified.

LASER: It doesn't have the social reach it once had, so I guess that's what we're saying. Is that what we're saying?

LEVINE: Back when they were inventing performance and happenings, you know, also back when Fried was writing, it was a real threat to all kinds of things, and I think now that the dog is super old and has lost its teeth, you don't have to distinguish yourself from it, and then you can start pulling elements back because it's not a threat to your own self-definition.

YOUNG: I wonder if your use of theatre in your conception of it is something that you would consider political or an intervention of some kind, that there's a reason that you're using theatre, because it is a social medium and has always been a social medium. Does that have any validity for any of you?

LEVINE: Only to the extent that if you feel you have to make aesthetic points, you feel in some sense that they're ethical points as well. For me, no, no politics.

YOUNG: Liz?

LASER: I suppose that's what we were just getting at. I'd like to think that there's some urge right now to grasp at the historical avant-garde's use of theatre and agitational propaganda, that there is potentially a useful nostalgia for, harkening back or grasping for a time when that kind of direct effect or unabashed political engagement was possible.

LEVINE: What's useful about second-order political engagement? What's useful about nostalgia?

LASER: The nostalgia is not that useful but what it started to make me think of was how the use of photomontage has been theorized, and it's not just nostalgic. When I mentioned my interest in agit-prop strategies I was mistaken in using the word "nostalgia." I think some of us are looking back to Soviet theatre's capacity to express social struggles and influence emancipatory movements. However, I am not advocating a nostalgic retreat to an outmoded model of activism. Theatre's prior ability to influence and provoke people seems relevant right now and I think theatrical methods are now being taken up and expressed differently. I'm looking for the scenarios in which I can bring social conditions into high relief by applying a new script. The bank is a site that brings up a number of fears and anxieties, classed behavior, and concerns about what you do or do not have to protect. I try to use performance as an instrument that can disrupt these everyday situations that coordinate our complicity with the systems that regulate us. We used Brecht's script to treat bank clients as if they were interlopers in our space, implicating them in our intervention. So yes, my use of theatre is intended to have a decidedly political dimension.

YOUNG: Alix, is theatre something political for you?

PEARLSTEIN: I wouldn't say political, no. There are always people in my work. I am interested in what happens when you have people in art, and I think often in my work there is a question of morality though I'm not imposing some morality. It is more of a concept in my use of narrative, as a way to agitate a narrative. I wouldn't say it is political, more sociological.

LEVINE: I should correct myself a little bit, I mean, to the extent that it's about work, because the contracts and work fascinate me so much, it does become about

like having a job or the ways in which you work would take over your life or become a role or vice versa. Or the ways in which people who represent or do representation for a living, that actually can be really grinding labor, so I'll take it back a little bit. It's mildly political.

YOUNG: How do you think we should evaluate the success of your use of theatre in an art context? Should we apply solely visual arts standards and precedents, or is the history of theatre and its critical reception relevant?¹

LASER: The level of cross-disciplinarity in the arts seems ever increasing, so I'd be hard-pressed to tease out what the current standards are in the visual arts or the theatre. Though I do think the precedents set by the practices of the Soviet avant-garde, Brecht, the Living Theatre, the Wooster Group, and Boal's theatre of the oppressed are relevant to the critical reception of the work I'm doing.

LEVINE: I try to distill things so thoroughly that the same piece signifies differently in different institutional contexts. Looked at from an art perspective, I'm talking about performance art and its relationship to authenticity, narrative, and fiction. Looked at from a theatre perspective, I'm talking about futility, the history of acting, and how much the conventions that surround theatregoing—tickets, the illusion of a unique event, the auditorium—really determine your experience. But as far as I'm concerned, art critics don't need to know the theatre end to evaluate my work properly; and neither do theatre critics need to know the art end.

PEARLSTEIN: I think context determines the reception and criticality. Any other histories that you bring will be very *interesting* to consider, but they may not hold up.

YOUNG: How, if at all, do you think the use of theatre affects the aesthetics of performance as it has developed since the 1960s?

PEARLSTEIN: Dramatically, most often demonstrated as a form of rejection or aberration.

LASER: Theatre aims to represent our social life together and its socially engaged form seems to have crossbred with practices in art and psychology. I'm not as interested in the traditional model of theatre where audience and actors are separated, so I'm more familiar with theatre practices that facilitate confrontation between audience and performers, like Augusto Boal's forum theatre. I've been looking at his work recently and thinking about how it must have affected relational aesthetics models of performance. Though I don't know whether or not the art world practitioners are directly aware of the precedents set by Boal's work.

LEVINE: I don't. I think there is a big wave of *referring* to theatre in contemporary performance; but I don't really think it's had much of an effect. I think you can detect a kind of grim restraint in my work or in Alix's, but for the most part using playscripts, or references to the auditorium doesn't really change anything. Liz's ATM

piece, in all its willed choppiness and willed overacting, could have been something of Eleanor Antin's. "Theatre," in its conventional sense, implies a degree of polish and repeatability (think of Donald Judd's industrial finishes), that performance art continues to avoid in favor of spontaneity and expression (think of AbEx). If anything theatre (think Nature Theatre of Oklahoma, Radiohole, or NTUSA) has been influenced by the aesthetics of performance art.

YOUNG: How does the context in which your art will be received affect your use of theatre?

LASER: I see the art context as the stage for the work I'm producing, so this context has a broad constitutive effect on my representation of theatre as a method for social engagement.

LEVINE: When I'm working in theatres, I try to be as unprepared as possible (e.g., arty). When I'm working in art spaces, I try to be prepared as possible (e.g. theatre). I'm convinced that half your experience of spectacle is determined by institutional conventions of spectatorship. The only way to generate a fresh experience is to short-circuit those conventions. That short-circuiting matters even more than the actual piece you're presenting. In my case, I hope, the short-circuiting *is* the piece.

PEARLSTEIN: The *resistance* between the contexts of contemporary art and theatre *is* what informs my use of theatre and acting. I'm interested in a generative mismatch particularly between minimalism and emotionalism.

NOTE

1. The conversation, in response to the final three questions, continued via e-mail.

A video of the discussion is available at <http://apexart.org/events/newarttheatre.htm>

This conversation is the first in a planned three-part exploration in *PAJ* of artists exploring the increasing crossovers of theatre and visual art in contemporary performance.

PAUL DAVID YOUNG's *Balcony Scene 2010* was performed at MoMA PS1 September 2010, as part of the museum's *Greater New York* exhibition. In 2009, he won the Kennedy Center's Paula Vogel Playwriting Award and was a finalist for the Kendeda Fellowship of the Alliance Theatre of Atlanta. He was a Djerassi resident artist in October/November 2010. In 2008, Young co-curated with Franklin Evans the apexart exhibition *Perverved by Theatre*.