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Keeping the Hope

by [kari rittenbach](#) 07/08/09

Imagine stumbling into a room suffused with faces -- winking, chins held erect or cocked to one side, a stray lock of hair tucked behind an ear, eyebrows neatly groomed or akimbo, laughter piercing pursed lips, a measured hazel gaze. All are disembodied, clamoring flirtatiously for your attention. Without averting their eyes, the visages plead with you (or sigh, or say: "come hither") a kaleidoscope of fixed stares awkward enough to make anyone with a keen memory for faces envy the prosopagnosiac.

This is no nightmare. These portraits-actors' headshots, actually-are part of artist David Levine's latest project, "Hopeful", which remains on view at Feinkost gallery in Berlin through August 23. Levine maintains a complicated relationship with the genre of head shot photography: As a theater director in New York and Berlin, he encounters these peculiarly supplicant portraits on a regular basis, in a way that leaves him feeling unsettled. In 2005, he began collecting the unsolicited photos for his own research into the waste of the "culture industry," sorting the discarded, blind submissions (which he acquired from the garbage bins of New York's various casting agencies) into a haphazard catalogue.



In *Cabinet* magazine, which published a small number of images from his archive in the fall of last year, Levine described his fascination with the headshot-as-object: "A better way to analyze headshots might be to consider what is there," writes Levine. "A smile, a look, a lack of self-sufficiency you very rarely see in conventional portraiture. It is neither the smile of a celebrity sharing beatitude nor the steady gaze of the burgher or aristocrat. Instead, it is a smile that beseeches your understanding, a look that solicits your complicity, and almost always suggests, unlike a conventional portrait, that the experience is incomplete without you. By appropriating this ancillary actor's economy as fine art, Levine locates an after-life for the veritable detritus of the theater inside the white cube. This conceptual spectacle of earnesty -- "Hopeful" is an apt title -- forces the viewer to occupy the arbitrarily judgmental role of agent or casting director.

On display is an overwhelming collage of ephemeral material amassed over the last four years, arranged in mostly chronological order. The sea of diverse faces wears a surprisingly uniform expression of creative ambition, at once deeply personal and impersonal -- in other words, entirely adaptable to any number of roles. Supporting documents seem to enhance the presentation, yet are of little substance: poetic compositions on sheets of stationary, handwritten notes, certificates of various sorts, and manila envelopes marked "time-sensitive" create an oddly vacuous, diverted narrative. Because



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Martin Kippenberger

The Happy End of Franz Kafka's "Amerika" at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, 1994
Mixed media, dime

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[Untitled, from William Eggleston's Graceland](#)

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the traditional actor's portfolio has not (yet) been reduced to CD-R or url as it has in other creative industries -- such materials amount to what Levine approximates at 5 tons of disposed paper per year in Manhattan alone -- only a few brave the Internet's immateriality: "What with the economy / environment at this time, please visit my website for further information. Let me know if you would like a headshot."

Whether such compromises are any more or less effective as a means of achieving fame is certainly debatable, and Levine promises that virtual reality won't make that challenge any easier: "people will always [instrumentalize] themselves and their artworks when they're left with no other option."



David Levine

This statement is a sweetly tragic one, not least because very few (if any) of these actors know they have finally been cast into the most Brechtian of supporting roles. In these affected images, Levine has located a parallel between the struggle to articulate an ambiguous individual ego into an industry-approved "I", and the self-promotional nature of the art world. Ultimately, the viewer (cast here as cultural critic) is forced to face the prospect that she, too, may be known to wear a similar expression.

["Hopeful" installation view courtesy Feinkost Gallery; David Levine's head shot courtesy the artist and Feinkost gallery.]

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