



Einat Amir by Miri Davidovitz



The Manipulated Manipulator

In her *Ideal Viewer* project, Einat Amir hired professional actors to mythologize her role as the artist figure, thus beginning a series of camouflages that obfuscates fiction and reality. David Everitt Howe sat down with one of those actors, Ryan Andes, who portrays the Interpreter, to discuss acting, ideology and his creator, the artist herself — DAVID EVERITT HOWE

Einat Amir is an Israeli-born video and performance artist. Placing herself in the throes of regional power relations, her early work broached the contested limits of societal gender mores, sexuality and border disputes with uncompromising humor and earnestness. After moving to New York for graduate school in 2007, Amir turned her attention from Israel's identity politics to New York's white cube variety — employing actors, the Internet and an egalitarian aesthetic to deconstruct power relations inherent to the city's esoteric cultural community. This initiative took form as her *Ideal Viewer* project, included in The Kitchen's 2010 summer group exhibition "The Absolutely Other." Curated by Miriam Katz, the exhibition took as its premise artwork made for or about strangers. Amir contributed *Ideal Viewer: Phase Three*, a video installation that compiles footage and ephemera from the first two phases that I curated for Performa 09.

For the two days of performances that constituted *Ideal Viewer's* first phase at Scaramouche in New York, Amir hired three actors from Craigslist to improvise three biographical archetypes pertinent to her identity as the work's artist figure; weeping on the floor in front of a

Images

Einat Amir/*Ideal Viewer: Phase Three*

2010, image from video, 24 min

Courtesy of Scaramouche Gallery, New York

broken flat-screen television, Melia Thomas played the Crying Woman, watching looping footage of herself crying on a small DV player propped on top of the flat screen; Yoav Levin's role was as Amir's Israeli Ex-Boyfriend, who wandered among gallery viewers and discussed his sexual objectification of Amir; lastly, Ryan Andes played the Interpreter, whose role was to analyze the performance for gallery visitors. However, more often than not, he would discuss his work as a theatrical and television actor, and continually played his starring commercials on a wall-mounted television. After the first phase of *Ideal Viewer* concluded in early November 2009, Amir advertised Thomas', Levin's and Andes' services in the gallery and online for the work's second component. Poring through viewers' proposals on how they would like to "use" her actors in various locations, Amir selected three that would become the project's second phase, which occurred citywide in late November 2009. By hiring professional actors to mythologize her role as the artist figure – a figure associated perhaps most strongly with a certain type of straight, expressive male painter – Amir transgressed normative tropes intrinsic to modernism, proposing instead a participatory discourse that destabilized such strong notions of identity. Instead, Amir proposed them as in flux and contingent. She appropriated mass-media modalities and artistic subjectivity only to conflate them; *Ideal Viewer* provocatively suggested that they are intrinsically intertwined in representation – and locked in position. Consequently, she owes more of a debt to Douglas Crimp's pictures generation than to Nicholas Bourriaud's stringently Marxist brand of utopian resistance. To tug at these theoretical seams further, I sat down with the Interpreter – Ryan Andes – to discuss acting, ideology and Amir.



David Everitt Howe: So what did Einat tell you when she first hired you for *Ideal Viewer*?

Ryan Andes: Essentially very little.

DEH: And how did she find you?

RA: She found me on Craigslist. Which is perfect. Or was it through Back Stage? Yeah, she put out an ad in Back Stage. She was looking for an improviser. And so she had me come, and just kind of talk on camera for a while, sort of a screen test. I didn't hear from her for months, but I guess she remembered what I had done and liked it. And that's when she came and asked me to do the performance, which is the first time she and I had ever worked together. But her whole thing was...she had a very distinct idea of what the piece was going to be, and she didn't want me to know what that was.

DEH: That's what the piece requires. It trades on not being able to extricate fact from fiction. Which would mean that

this discussion between you and me is problematic for that very reason. I mean, the piece is always in danger of divulging too much information.

RA: Well...too much fact. And that word of course is very problematic. It's a very nebulous word in this format. And I think that's exactly what it's supposed to be. You know, to be an interpreter is to present your interpretations as fact. So, my job as an actor, my job as an interpreter, is to communicate to you what I believe to be true. And if I'm not doing that, that means I'm failing as an actor.

For me, playing the 'Interpreter' is playing a role. That means my truth is whatever I want

DEH: Einat gave you the character description

RA: She gave me the permission to be that character, to construct that truth. And I'll be honest, it was fascinating to see how people believed it, to see how people got involved in it

DEH: Well, all it takes is someone who believes in what that person is saying, if that person says it very well and with authority. It's like mob mentality. I mean, look at Hitler



it to be. I get to play with the 'truth'.

DEH: But others will think that it's true.

RA: But that's their job. I present my integrity as a character, not as Ryan Andes. That would be different. I would say that I'm Ryan Andes, but to me, as the way I've constructed it in my mind, with quotes, I was 'Ryan Andes.' I made 'Ryan Andes' into a character.

DEH: But it was through Einat. Einat gave you the character description.

RA: She gave me the permission to be that character, to construct that truth. And I'll be honest, it was fascinating to see how people believed it, to see how people got involved in it.

DEH: Well, all it takes is someone who believes in what that person is saying... if that person says it very well and with authority. It's like mob mentality. I mean, look at Hitler [laughs].

RA: Exactly. Look at our government today. People believe things so readily.

DEH: And Hitler, actually, brings in a really interesting thread to fascism, and to this idea of spectacle. Of course we have spectacle now: media spectacle, television shows, etc. But the fascists were one of the first authorities to use the masses as a spectacle. The masses were distracted by their own manipulation – it was rendered aesthetic. So that was a tactic. And I think that's pertinent to what Einat's doing – not to compare Einat to fascists [laughs]. But she is manipulating...you, Ryan, and, at the same time, pointing to how easily we can be convinced by someone who has an air of authority – and, perhaps more importantly, who has a convincing air of authority.

I find it very interesting – this whole construction, and what or who is behind it. Brecht worked with this, obviously. But his point was very political. It exposed how our identities are ideologically formed. And I think that Einat's piece also works on that same level, showing how

her identity is formed. And you know, is it fictional? Is it real? You don't really know what's going on, and you're almost interpreting her identity for her, which is strange.

RA: Absolutely. But it's the job of the actor, or of the singer: It's to interpret, always – especially for someone who didn't do the writing. The actor is always the tool of the artist. It comes down to communicating your own truth through the perspective of the artist. You get a certain amount of information from that art, from the music, the writing. You take that, you process it yourself, and you communicate that art through your own medium, your body, your voice. It's exactly the same in this [*Ideal Viewer*]. When I'm interpreting, I'm presented with a certain amount of information...

But also with a play. The playwright gives you a certain amount of information. You can't go to the playwright and ask him what he meant by certain things.

Images

Einat Amir/Ideal Viewer: Phase Three
2010, installation view from The Kitchen, New York
Courtesy of Scaramouche Gallery, New York



DEH: But do you ever question the playwright's intentions? Every playwright has an agenda. It may be political, it may not be political, but when you're going through a role...

RA: But I don't think that's the performer's role.

DEH: But for instance, with Brecht's distanciation, there are points in his plays where the actor will remove himself from what's going on theatrically. To say that, yes, I am a performer, a creation of someone else. Do you ever get wary of your role as an actor, or 'interpreter'? I ask because I think Einat's work brings up these sorts of – to drop in a catch-all critical term – postmodern issues. We're all, to a degree at least, constructed by someone else. Or I guess to be more specific, by capitalism. Who we are as people, our subjectivities, are constructed for us: by images, advertisements, the media, etc. Brecht

thought you could distance yourself from this mediation, and expose the 'machine' at work. But at this point, that distance is impossible because we're so ingrained in what's going on [capitalism]. And so Einat's work feeds into that, because it's about herself obviously, but who is Einat really? Her identity is translated through technology: Craigslist and Performa's blog, in particular. So *Ideal Viewer* reiterates how we're mediated as individuals. And in essence, she's being mediated by you, the Interpreter. But then also you've done a lot of commercials yourself, and in *Ideal Viewer* you see yourself represented in a commercial...

RA: ...and how does that represent the real me...

DEH: Is there a real me?

RA: After you've removed all the layers of being an artist, being a commercial, being an actor, being an opera singer... true, I wonder that myself sometimes.

DEH: Okay, but on a more pragmatic level, when you see your commercial, the ideological relationship is very explicit. You see yourself selling a candy bar.

RA: Absolutely. It's not something that I personally had anything to do with. I didn't make that candy bar myself...

DEH: It's interesting because, you know, we're all a commodity to some degree, at least if you look at it bio-politically. But in your case, it's so apparent.

RA: Well, it's very surface. But I think that's what almost allows me to create more of a separation from it.

DEH: Really?

RA: Yeah, well, because it's so identifiable.

I can put my finger on it. And I know that because it's so apparent, and because it's such an extreme deviation from who I really am, I think also – and I think this is circumstantial, and dependent on an individual level – I take all this commercial stuff with a grain of salt. It's not real artistry; it's what I do to maintain being an artist. I find this all kind of silly. I find a lot of humor in it.

DEH: So when Einat cast you in this position of interpreting her work, and then showing your own work, did this make you think of these sorts of issues?

RA: Oh yeah. I was thinking about all of it. I was very interested in this project because of this stuff. Because I have a very vested interest in this separation.

DEH: What separation?

RA: The separation of these realities. Allowing people to see the truth of things, in a Brechtian way. To remove oneself from the process, to see all the moving parts. →

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