



## STAGED

Adrian Fish

## + VOICE OVER

Brian Joseph Davis

*Text by Kim Nguyen*

### Where Did Everybody Go?

*A gasp of breath when opening the curtain;  
The echo of an empty room;  
The moment of anxiety when you are all alone;  
Two hired killers?*

Theatres are spaces that breed anxiety. Perhaps it is the notion of being confined to a space with strangers, or the absurdity of participating in a communal event that has very little socialization beyond making us feel less alone. Although entertaining on a sensory and psychological level the cinematic experience is completely illogical on a social one. Adrian Fish draws upon these social anxieties in a remarkably obvious way—the empty theatre. The

climbing rows of unoccupied seats in his *Staged* series lay bare the agonizing restlessness of sitting in a theatre, awaiting your friends to join you; the familiar sounds of banal conversation and loud food consumption; the inability to move or speak through the duration of the performance; the moment your elbows graze on a first date; the whispers that lead to laughter that lead to you admitting you have no one to laugh with.

Or perhaps they reference the feeling of being on stage and the realization you are expected to perform for a crowd of strangers that are eager to criticize. Or maybe the fear that no one will attend and you have already failed before you have uttered a word. Is this the moment before it begins or the moment after it ends? Beneath the dizzying bright lights are empty seats and a prolonged silence that indicate either the completion of a show and the departure of the audience, or the excitement and anticipation of an event about to happen. As an exploration of performative spaces, *Staged* challenges our typical experience of the theatre by reversing our usual perspective—as opposed to looking on from our seats, we are the alone and anxious entertainers on stage, acting for an absent audience that may never arrive. As we turn from spectators into exhibitionists our lives are transformed into narratives of failure.

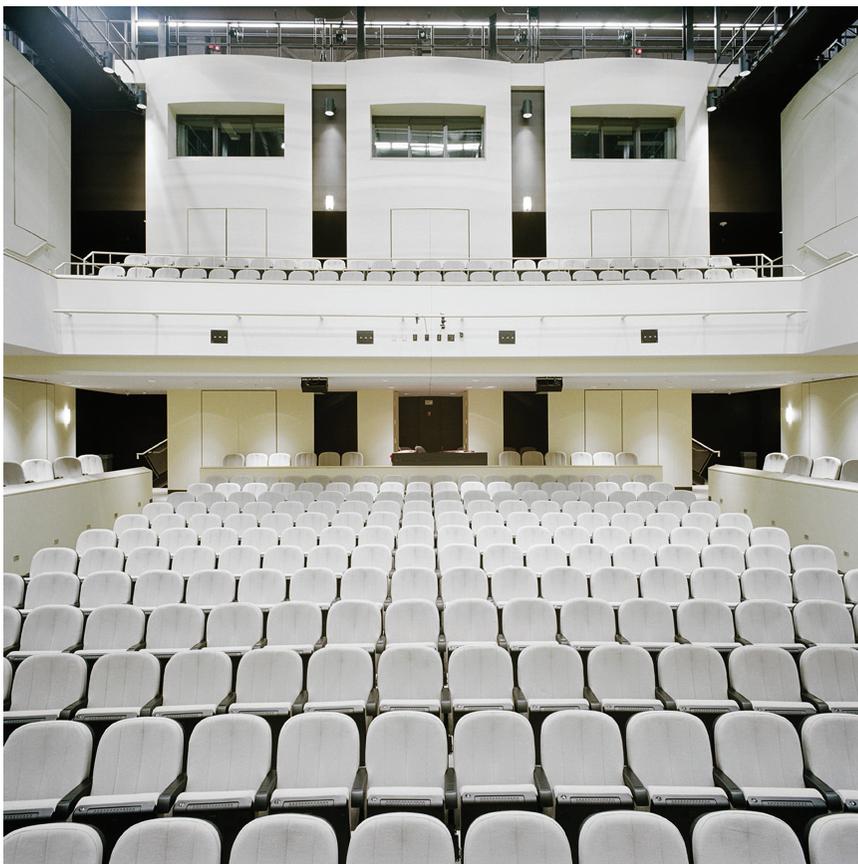
Photographed from a viewpoint similar to his previous series of squash courts and staging rooms, the images in *Staged* depict a number of architecturally impressive theatre designs spanning over ninety years. Fish converts even the most modest of theatres into extraordinary spaces, capturing the magnificence of rooms often shrouded in darkness. However, their idealized representations emphasize the reality that these spaces are completely devoid of a human presence, and they lack the intimacy common in dimly lit theatres. Although the plush seats are saturated with colour, they are awash with a glowing light that is neither warm nor reassuring. In photographs such as *Staged 1-3* (2006), the intoxicating red hues contribute to the overwhelming feeling of claustrophobia, an unusual reaction in a space conventionally used for entertainment. With the exception of one photograph—*Staged 13-1* (2006), in which a few leftover and forgotten

playbills are visible—there are no traces of humans in these uncomfortably clean spaces. The square format preferred by Fish generates a sense of enclosure that accentuates the awkward tension between anticipation and our fears of abandonment and aloneness.

But perhaps the theatre is not as lonely as we thought. Through the corridor resonates an exuberant voice with impeccable enunciation. Has our anxiousness led to the hallucination of someone else being there with us? Cutting through the frames of Fish's photographs are the animated sounds of Brian Joseph Davis' work *Voice Over*, a project originally commissioned for the Art Gallery of York University's website. The distinctive and exaggerated tone of professional film voiceover artist Scott Taylor punctuates Fish's photographs with peculiarity and humour, and for a brief moment we are whisked away to a ridiculous world of heartbreak, hired killers, and pajama parties. Composed of over 5000 film taglines, the outlandish narrative is read with unrelenting enthusiasm by Taylor, whose delivery is reminiscent of a 1950s radio announcer peddling laundry detergent.

Toronto artist and writer Davis fuses his interests in pop culture and music to create deceptive and clever sound and print projects. Humour is a major component to Davis' practice, and he is perhaps best known for his works *Minima Moralia* (2004)—in which he converted the text of Marxist theorist Theodor Adorno into a punk 7inch—and *Yesterduh* (2006)—an overlaid recording of multiple strangers singing, from memory and without rehearsal, *Yesterday* by The Beatles, a work reminiscent of the endearing Langley Schools Music Project. Davis defies the rules of a proper narrative or a formal composition, and his audio pieces are the awkward and less charming cousins of the mash-ups we frequently hear in nightclubs and popular compilations. Although gently satirical, they retain a curious sense of earnestness.

In *Voice Over*, Taylor reads six pages of a twenty-three-page script compiled by Davis that weaves an illogical tale of individuals in a series of unusual predicaments, resulting in an epic film of immodest proportions. The almost continuous sequence



of taglines leaves us to wonder where Davis made his edits—is it possible that some of these bizarre phrases were actually used in movie trailers? *Voice Over* is an amalgamation of every film we have seen, or may possibly see, in one spectacular cinematic marathon. Comparable to the photographs of Fish, there is a remarkable absence of humans in Davis' audio piece. The narrative is as equally amusing as it is empty, as Taylor tells the story of individuals that do not exist, and the work itself promises an event that will never occur.

Perhaps the theatre is a space of anxiety. But it is also one for speculation and wonderment, and

moments of reflection and escapism. For a brief amount of time we enter into the lives of others, and both Fish and Davis guide us through stories that are possibly much more tragic than our own. So here we remain, all alone in a theatre waiting for a show that may never happen. Maybe we should wait just a few more minutes.

[ Kim Nguyen ]

**Adrian Fish** is a Toronto and Halifax based artist and teacher working in photography. He holds an MFA from York University, as well as accreditation from the Ontario College of Art & Design and Sheridan College. He has exhibited in a number of public institutions, artist-run centres and commercial galleries in such Canadian cities as Toronto, Ottawa and Halifax, and internationally in New York City and Tokyo. Fish is currently Assistant Professor at NSCAD University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. <[www.afish.ca](http://www.afish.ca)>

**Brian Joseph Davis** is a sound artist and writer based in Toronto. He's primarily interested in the packaging and un-packaging of sound relationships—such as box sets, banned and burned albums and cultural memory of songs. Four years of Davis' work was recently collected on the Blocks Recording Club release *The Definitive Host*. Davis writes a column for *Arthur Magazine* and is the author of *Portable Altamont* (Coach House, 2005) and *I,Tania* (ECW 2008). <[www.brianjosephdavis.com](http://www.brianjosephdavis.com)>

**Dr. Jeanne Randolph** is a Winnipeg-based thinker. Her recent exploration of psychoanalytic theory, contemporary art and culture—*Ethics of Luxury: Materialism and Imagination* was co-published by YYY Books + Plug In Editions in 2007.

**Kim Nguyen** is Masters of Arts Candidate in Critical and Curatorial Studies at the University of British Columbia. Her research focuses upon the construction of post-memory in relation to cultural identity. She currently resides in Vancouver where she enjoys the consumption and production of baked goods and makes empty promises to learn French.

#### EXHIBITION

Friday, 11 July – Friday, 22 August 2008

#### RECEPTION

7 PM, Thursday, 10 July 2008

#### ARTIST TALK

Adrian Fish

2 PM, Saturday, 12 July 2008

#### PERFORMANCE LECTURE

*The Critical Object* [digital redux]

by Jeanne Randolph

8 PM, Friday, 8 August 2008

#### WORKS EXHIBITED

##### ADRIAN FISH

*Staged*, 2006. C-prints, 40" x 40" ea.

##### BRIAN JOSEPH DAVIS

*Voice Over*, 2006. Audio loop, 12:15.

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121-100 Arthur Street (Artspace), Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3B 1H3 | 204.942.8183 FAX 204.942.1555  
[info@platformgallery.org](mailto:info@platformgallery.org) [www.platformgallery.org](http://www.platformgallery.org)