



## UNSOLICITED SUBMISSION

DAVID LEVINE

DAVID LEVINE'S WORK ENCOMPASSES PERFORMANCE, THEATER, INSTALLATION, AND VIDEO. HIS PROJECTS HAVE BEEN SEEN AT DOCUMENTA XII (WITH *CABINET* MAGAZINE); GAVIN BROWN'S ENTERPRISE@PASSERBY, PS122 AND THE GOETHE INSTITUT (NEW YORK); GALERIE MAGNUS MUELLER, GALERIE FEINKOST, AND HAU2 (BERLIN); AND THE SUNDANCE THEATER LAB. HIS WORK HAS BEEN FEATURED IN THE *NEW YORK TIMES*, *ARTFORUM*, *BOMB*, *CABINET*, *ART IN AMERICA*, *THEATER DER ZEIT*, *THEATER HEUTE*, *TDR*, *THE VILLAGE VOICE*, *ART REVIEW*, AND *THE BELIEVER*. LEVINE HAS RECEIVED GRANTS FROM THE NEW YORK FOUNDATION FOR THE ARTS, THE KULTURSTIFTUNG DES BUNDES, AND THE ETANTS DONNES/FRENCH FUND FOR PERFORMANCE. HE LIVES AND WORKS IN NEW YORK AND BERLIN.

**ABSTRACT** "Hopeful" is part of David Levine's larger project about unsolicited submissions. As presented in 2009 at Galerie Feinkost in Berlin and Cabinet in New York, it comprises the first phase of a multidisciplinary and multi-year project of gathering, analyzing, and archiving unsolicited submissions in every field of cultural endeavor. After ten years of collecting discarded unsolicited submissions, Levine intends to take the amassed material, compost it into a sculptural entity, and erect it as a public monument to cultural aspiration, preferably in New York or Los Angeles. All images appear courtesy of the artist and Galerie Feinkost, Berlin.

KEYWORDS: unsolicited submission, cultural waste, headshot, cover letter, acting industry

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED].com

Attn: [REDACTED] n  
[REDACTED] Ltd.  
[REDACTED] St  
New York, NY [REDACTED]

Dear [REDACTED]

Desire, Discipline and Dedication.

To me, these are the 3 elements necessary for success. To me, they are the fuels that that open doors and succeed goals. Apart from talent, I can truthfully say that I have the 3 D's above. The piece of the puzzle I am missing today is the best representation necessary to bridge the rest of the story.

I am constantly working to get better and to be prepared for all opportunities. Currently, I am studying with Judy Bowman at TVI Studios and am very excited to start a master class with Drama Desk Award winner Deborah Hedwall. I am also working on an upcoming concert reading of a thought provoking play *God Sex and Blue Water* by NEA-Honoree playwright Linda Faigao-Hall at the Ensemble Studio Theater. I have worked closely with great directors like Nicholas Hytner, Christopher Renshaw and Jack Bender, and opposite great actors like James Gandolfini, Edie Falco and Susan Lucci among others. Working with them added inspiration and further growth to me as an actor.

I had a great success rate and scored many of the auditions I got through my last agent who I was signed exclusively with. I believe that I am ready for a new partnership. I am meeting with a small number of talent firms and I would very much love to consider yours. My goal is to establish a strong and profitable venture with the right agent. Enclosed you will find my resume which summarizes my experience and successes, along with some reviews and samples of my headshots. I would be happy to have full size hard copies delivered to you upon request.

I am looking forward to a friendly meeting with you so please contact me at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,

  
[REDACTED]



➤ The convention of pitching yourself via your work (or is it the other way around?) to a cultural gatekeeper – be it a gallery, a literary agent, or a record label – probably came of age, in its current form, during the 1950s as the “blind,” or “unsolicited” submission. “Blind,” in the sense that the recipient never asked to see your work; you just sent it, in the hopes that they will agree to promote it to the larger world.

I can relate intimately to the many excruciating aspects of this procedure: the humiliation of having to credit your own work, the bluff confidence required in a cover letter, the endless fiddling with the language of that cover letter, unsure what pose to strike because you’re unsure what the cultural gatekeeper on the other end wants from you (which is a way of protecting yourself from the fact that they don’t want *anything* from you); the humiliation of knowing that you don’t know the right people so this probably isn’t going to work; the humiliation of knowing you’re one of those people who doesn’t know the right people, and so has to blind-submit; the humiliation of pretending to believe that maybe it *will* work, even though you know better; and of swallowing your disgust while “making sure you cover every base.” The exhaustion and nervous fatigue occasioned by such forced optimism; the bitter, bitter, steeliness of learning not care that your stuff will probably be thrown out; of regarding your work – *reproductions* of your work – as frontline soldiers in a war of attrition, cannon-fodder, whose sheer numbers will eventually – *hopefully* – overwhelm the opposition and swarm its walls. And there is the awful taste of complicity in acknowledging that it *will* be thrown away, and of trying to *game that*: at the website *Actortips.com* you can order special envelopes with a glassine window, to ensure that casting agents will see your face even as they’re throwing it out.

This particular maneuver, among all the last-gasp attempts to get people to notice – SEEKING NEW REPRESENTATION! BY REQUEST! scrawled on the outside of the envelope – breaks my heart more than



Don't commercialize Christmas,  
unless I 'm in the commercial.  
*Season's Greetings!*

anything else, like watching someone reach wildly for a handhold while falling into a canyon of not-fame. And just as Wile E. Coyote's spirit rises from his mangled body on the canyon floor, so too does the headshot stare up at us from the depths of the recycling bin – still soliciting, still smiling, still resolute. It will never stop *hoping* at you.

You can relate to this. While the headshots may be the most overt and expressive form of unsolicited submission, because they are faces, we have all been here. This is about an economy. This is about an aspirational and possibly exploitative economy, and the Culture Industry's industrial waste. Like other industries, you can measure its strength by the amount of waste it generates. But in this case, the equation also runs backwards – the industry is strong *because* it generates waste. Because this waste – this exclusion – is what defines it as a meritocracy.

And what about the people who have to receive this stuff? They are usually entry-level, whether they work at a gallery, a record label, a literary agency, or a magazine. They are usually very young and very idealistic (or so one would hope). But the Culture Industry

isn't monolithic: literary assistants tend to be much more idealistic and hopeful, say, than art gallery assistants; or perhaps, the gallery assistant's idealism and hope are invested ... elsewhere. Generally, one can observe an inverse proportion between the income stream of a given cultural industry and the moral generosity of its front desk.

The literary assistant, or the assistant to the music executive, probably receives at least five blind submissions a day addressed to their boss, who bounces them back down the ladder. At an art gallery, at least once a day someone emails a link to their portfolio, or multiple jpeg attachments, or else walks in with an exhibition catalogue. The assistant has to tell them either that they **don't take unsolicited submissions** – which is hard to do to their face – or has to smile and say they'll make sure that Mr. Gagolian has a look.

At first, the idealistic assistant – let's make them a literary assistant – resolves to read each and every unsolicited manuscript they receive, and to reply personally. I don't know how many times I've heard this story: the resolve lasts maybe three months before said assistant feels so overwhelmed that they *have* to stop because they've got to work on projects that are actually in production, or because, paradoxically, the unsolicited submission requires *more* attention – a different, more unformatted *kind* of attention. And because the flow of cultural waste is so overwhelming, they get steely – in the visual arts, assistants get steely very quickly (“I mean, Jesus, don't these people understand our program? Why don't they do a little research first?”). Sooner or later, they have to start inuring themselves.

Somewhere in that process of self-hardening comes the “Wall of Shame,” a spontaneous bureaucratic excrescence that occurs in almost every for-profit cultural office. A file, or a binder, or perhaps even an actual wall, of the most inappropriate submissions the gallery or agency receives, maintained, and occasionally perused, with a toxic mixture of contempt, schadenfreude, and ... shame. Shame at being



David Levine: *HOPEFUL*,  
installation view.  
Photograph: Claire  
Laude, Galerie Feinkost,  
Berlin.

the recipient of so much expectation, contempt as a way of punishing those who would so burden you.

This is a complicated and unique response. It is someone's work after all; undealt-with, it sits on your desk like an unexploded bomb. Once opened, the cover letter can blind with its sheer hopeful force, and one feels so ashamed, one simply has to look away. This experience is repeated perhaps daily, over and over again, to the point where it comes as a relief to see the "professionally-written" letter: just two or three lines.

But just as it's wrong to view this hopefulness as somehow alien – who doesn't *want* in that way? – it is also a mistake to praise too highly the "proficient" cover letter, because in most cases it is born of resignation. Sooner or later, the unsolicited submitter realizes that the industry doesn't *care* how much you love making art, it doesn't *care* how much you love this agency, gallery, or record label. It doesn't *care at all*, and therefore you resign yourself to expending the minimum effort submitting, since, in any event, you must submit. This is what we say, or what we mean, when we praise "proficiency," and this clear-eyed artistic complicity represents exactly the tragedy of passing from teenagehood to adulthood – yes, you become more realistic; but you lose something *operatic* in the process. You lose hope. And you thus become part of the workforce. Likewise, the person behind the desk can't keep rejecting over and over every day, can't keep throwing out expensive reproductions. They can't take this endless *wanting*. And so they, too, shut down.

It's this complex of pressures that give unsolicited submissions their talismanic, sacrificial force; this horrible sense that, unchecked, the entire affair of for-profit culture could wind up like Carrie's classmates on prom night, where everyone suffers for our wretched mishandling of the simple human impulse of hope. And the artist – or maybe their rejected artwork will stride through the burning gym; unblinking, triumphant, and covered in gore.

But what if all this angst is just based on a misapprehension? If, as an artist, actor, writer, rocker, you don't have any connections, then you don't have any choice but to take the institution's promises at face value. It's not that people don't know better; it's that they have no choice but to *pretend* that they don't know better. This is certainly true in the entertainment industry, which places such a high premium on *showing how bad you want it* that, invariably, the thirst for fame itself becomes a performance.

And thus there's a complicated relationship between the cover letter and the unsolicited submission, where the letter of acts as shepherd to the artwork's sheep. In the end, perhaps, making the art is nothing next to the difficulty of crafting the cover letter, of guessing at what people whom you don't know might want from you, of leading the artwork by the hand to the altar. Hence the often tortured, tension-filled syntax. If the notion of a sincere cover letter is disturbing, the possibility that it *isn't* sincere is downright chilling, and does even less to reaffirm our faith in the survival of both art and basic human feeling.



