

**REAL
ART WAYS**

56 ARBOR STREET
HARTFORD CT 06106
860 232 1006
REALARTWAYS.ORG

This exhibition is a result of Real Art Ways' "Go" competition in 2007, which requested proposals from emerging artists living in New York or New England. "Go" was juried by Derrick Adams (Artist, Founding Director and Curator at Rush Arts Gallery and Resource Center, New York); Olu Oguibe (Visual Artist, Writer, Scholar, and Curator, Connecticut); Jane Philbrick (Digital Artist, Connecticut).

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Real Art Ways is one of the leading contemporary art organizations in the United States with an emphasis on supporting contemporary artists, fostering the creation of new work, and working in creative ways with community.



On the cover: Hanging Baggage, mixed-media sculpture with two synchronized channels of video, 17' x 10' x 18', 2008.

All images courtesy of Real Art Ways. Staff photographer John Groo.

David Politzer



2008 installation view at Real Art Ways of photo collages and Hanging Baggage (mixed-media sculpture with two synchronized channels of video, 17' x 10' x 18', 2008).

Self-Deprecation 101

By Martha Schwendener

It's four o'clock in the morning and you're spiritually bereft. You've been up all night abusing alcohol or drugs or food—or maybe just beating yourself up psychologically. Your life hasn't turned out the way you planned. Come to think of it, there never was a plan, which may be part of the problem.

Feeling lonely, you turn on the television. A man comes on. He says his name is David Politzer and he seems to know not only what your problem is, but how to fix it. He asks you a few questions. Then he tells you what to do. You need a lifestyle change. You need to make a list of goals. You need to finish what you start. "Complacency can kill you," he warns.

It's hard to say what this David Politzer is. He bills himself as an artist, but he comes across as a combination motivational speaker, spiritual advisor, self-help guru, salesman, huckster, and charlatan.

In the introduction to a compilation of videos made since 2003, Politzer explains that his videos explore what it means to be a man in today's society by describing "feelings of obsession, narcissism, anxiety, and perversity." You're not quite sure if he's joking when he starts speaking in platitudes, saying his videos are "unabashedly candid" and "shot in such a way that the image is fresh and unmanipulated." But he's right. They are disarmingly candid and they do

David Politzer studied at Syracuse University (MFA, 2005), Skidmore College (BS, 1998) and the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture (2004). Recent group exhibitions include Host at the Soap Factory in Minneapolis, Here and Elsewhere at the Bronx Museum of the Arts and Binational at the El Paso Museum of Art and Museo Del Arte in Juarez, Mexico. Politzer recently completed a year's residency at the Roswell Artist in Residence and is currently an Assistant Professor at Youngstown State University in Ohio.

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offer a fresh perspective on what it means to be a man—or, a certain kind of man—in today's society.

In one of his earlier single-channel videos, *Change Your Body, Change Your Mind*, the camera pans in close-up over Politzer's nude body. Meanwhile, in a voiceover, the artist reads what sounds like a textbook monologue intended to raise self-esteem. He affirms and praises his chest, his shoulders, his feet. But no body—magnified, and without the flattering tricks of make-up and lighting—can hold up under such intense scrutiny. So the exercise collapses into tragic-comic futility.

Other videos delve into what might be described as masculine performance anxiety, exploring what it means to function as a man in today's society, thrust into the world without a handbook or instruction manual. In *Urinal*, Politzer analyzes the unwritten codes for men using public toilets: never stand

Study for Hanging Baggage 2, photo collage and ink on paper, 36" x 37", 2008.



next to another man at a urinal; if a urinal with two empty stations next to it isn't free, occupy yourself at the sinks until one becomes available; avoid eye-contact; and don't speak to your fellow urinators. From here Politzer branches out into surveying different types of urinals and ends with a meditation on Marcel Duchamp, whose landmark readymade sculpture *Fountain* (1917), a urinal turned 90 degrees, Politzer posits as a sign of public-urination-phobia rather than formalistic insouciance.

The last video on Politzer's DVD compilation, *Business/Pleasure*, is an oblique narrative about an office worker conducting what might be an affair—or enduring extreme sexual harassment—with possibly more than one coworker. Long close-ups of banal office tasks being done and undone (documents printing, being collated, stapled ... and then unstapled) are accompanied by a sordid tale that ends with the narrator kneeling before his boss, preparing to administer a blow job ("my first") and telling himself, "just try to be professional."

There is a lot of humor in Politzer's work. The artist has described the importance of comedians like Jerry Seinfeld or Woody Allen, whose material is rooted in observation, and in mundane challenges that become magnified by neuroses and narcissism. Several of his videos adopt the classic comedy-duo format, with Politzer acting as both straight man and funny man—the foil responding to the funny man, who appears on a television in pre-recorded performances. Politzer's work, like most comedians, is also rooted in writing. It's not surprising then that he mentions George Saunders, author of satirical, absurdist short stories, as another inspiration.

But, despite its humor, there is a great deal of pathos—and pathology—in Politzer's videos. In *Hanging Baggage*, one of his video sculptures installed at Real Art Ways, "Dr. Dave," a skewed send up of television's Dr. Phil, is paired with a potential client/customer, a young graphic artist who lives with his parents and "suffers from guilt." Images of the two men, both played by Politzer, are screened on televisions housed in heavy wooden consoles and suspended from the ceiling by a system of ropes and pulleys, a showcase of

masculine hardware. Hanging in front of the televisions is a plain wooden chair that suggests the presence of a viewer, but remains unoccupied.

Assertive and confident, Dr. Dave appears on the screen, offering help to those suffering from "male guilt." His presentation is slick and reassuring, but his suggestions and asides become increasingly inappropriate and disturbing. And like any motivational coach or televangelist crowding the late-night airwaves, his improvement and salvation come at a cost: \$29.99 for his book, *Guilt Busters*. Meanwhile, on the adjoining screen, the young graphic designer (yet another, meta-version of "David Politzer") represents a different specimen of manhood: bumbling, a bit clueless, but for all appearances harmless. Except that, by the end of the video, he too deteriorates into an anti-social caricature. Only, unlike the slick and smarmy Dr. Dave, this David Politzer is more primal and violent.

Rio Macho, which also appeared at Real Art Ways, is rooted, like much of Politzer's work, in autobiography. In the winter of 2007–2008 Politzer was an artist-in-residence in Roswell, New Mexico. Transplanted from the East Coast to the Southwest, he began to consider how the cowboy has shaped American ideas of masculinity. Shot partially in Monument Valley, where John Ford filmed many of his Westerns, the video uses the comedy-duo set up to explore an ordinary man's attempt—goaded by a testosterone-charged double on a television he lugs around with him—to become a cowboy. Failure to achieve archetypal masculinity lies at the heart of the work, although the video ends with a surprisingly tender duet in which the "successful" David-Politzer-cowboy and the "failed" one sing together, in harmony. It is a rare moment in Politzer's videos in which dueling forces—the id and the ego, say, or what the artist has described as the "inner" and "cultural" voices—reach a harmonious accord.

Politzer describes *Rio Macho* as "Self-Deprecation 101." As we watch the video we realize how futile it is to realize an ideal



Study for Parade Float, photo collage and ink on paper, 36" x 36", 2008.

of manhood fabricated in Hollywood—or any branch of pop culture. In the introduction to his video compilation, Politzer admits as much, saying that television, film, and pop music don't "tell you what it's like to be a man in a realistic way." The catch is that, even knowing this doesn't make a person immune to trying. What Politzer gives us then is a contemporary anti-hero: the ersatz cowboy who ends up with a donkey instead of a horse; the impotent urbanite abused by his coworkers; the existential musings of a man trying to get the urinal thing right. He might be predestined to fail. But he is an eternal striver and thus, in his own way, a hero.

Martha Schwendener is a writer based in Brooklyn, New York. Her writing has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *Artforum*, *Bookforum*, *Art in America*, *Time Out New York*, *The Village Voice*, *Flash Art*, *Nextbook*, and other publications.