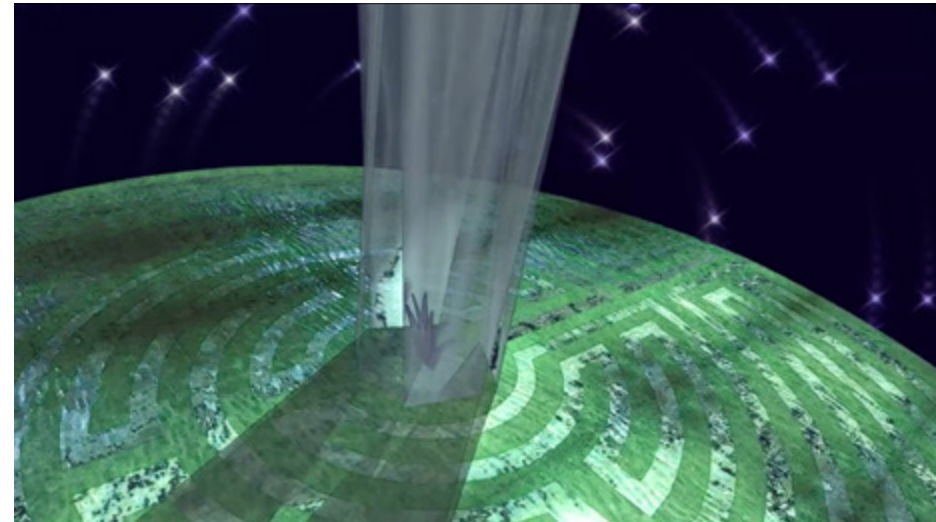

AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID FINKELSTEIN

Back in 2013 we were running the London & Porto Underground Film Festivals. That year we received over 900 submissions, we saw a great variety of films that were being created by filmmakers and artists from around the world, working in all manner of forms and styles. A lot of the films sent to us could be assigned to existing and well trodden categories and genres but every so often a film would startle us for its originality and personal vision, it would electrify our senses and leave us hungry for more. David Finkelstein's 18 minute film *Epistolary Fusillades* was one such film. Since then we have kept in touch with David and about a year ago he wrote to us with news about his first feature length film *Suggestive Gestures*.

Suggestive Gestures takes us on a mysterious journey to the centre of a dream-like labyrinth created from vivid computer-generated imagery accompanied by a hypnotic score and drifting poetic voices. This colourful and layered film is like some lost artefact from the early days of computer animation, the images seem to unravel before our eyes as we are swept along with the musical momentum of the narrative flow. Described by David as a 'landscape' which concerns itself more with the expression of an unconscious voice rather than the telling of a story, it is no doubt a journey of the mind, an inner journey in which fragments of information, thoughts and memories half-forgotten or half-remembered drift into view then fade away again as we move on steadily along the path to an ever-nearing centre.

Born from a series of performed improvisations between David and actress Cassie Tunnick, *Suggestive Gestures* uses words as gesture or words as images which conjure on the screen and in the mind of the viewer a string of associations which shoot off in all directions. Nothing can be pinned down or fixed to a single point of view, the world of his films is fluid and ungraspable and the meaning is not within the images but within the experience of the images. This is precisely what we find so exciting, aesthetically beautiful and enticing, the film draws us in but then the journey we take through this labyrinth is entirely our own.

In January 2017 we'll be screening *Suggestive Gestures* as a part of Film Panic Presents! in Portugal, David will be attending the screening to present the film. The following interview was conducted via email.



Still from *Suggestive Gestures* (2013)

Can you start by telling us a bit about your performance group Lake Ivan, its history and the kind of work that you create?

I began making experimental performances in 1982. I made visually oriented theater pieces, inspired by the great period of New York experimental theater I grew up seeing in the 1970's: such artists as Meredith Monk, Elizabeth LeCompte, Robert Wilson and Richard Foreman. I began to focus exclusively on completely improvised performances around 1992, and at that time I began to develop my own theory and technique of improvisation. I have always made my living as a musician playing for dance classes, which means that I am paid to improvise music every day. My application of the principles of music improvisation to performance and later to film flowed naturally from my job.

When did you begin making films and how did this move from live performance to video come about?

I began to change from making performance

work to making films in 2000. I was excited by my discovery of the core principles of improvisation, but at the same time, I was frustrated that the texture of my improvised live shows was all the same: everything had a fluid, constantly changing form. I wanted to be able to create a counter-dynamic against all of that fluidity: a layer of the work which was meticulously analyzed and constructed to work against the fluid spontaneity of the improvisation. Video provided a natural way to accomplish that.

Could you talk us through the process of creating your films, what is the starting point and how does that lead you to such a striking and unique final film? Is there any written prep or discussion/direction at all before the improvisations start or do you all go in blank?

The improvisation technique I use does not depend on deciding any of the content or the form of the piece ahead of time. On the other hand, it depends very much on the actor: being able to master the technique of how



Still from *Epistolary Fusillades* (2010)

to harness their intuition in order to translate their moment-to-moment consciousness into words and gestures.

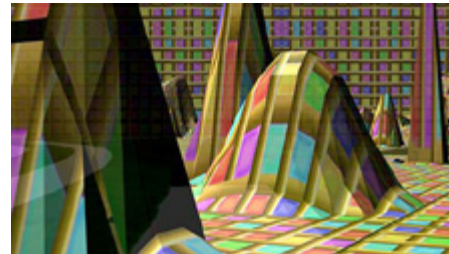
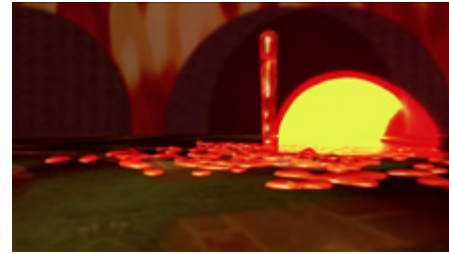
I have boxes and boxes of videotapes of improvised scenes. When I begin a new film, I look through these tapes to find a scene which I find so striking that it makes me excited enough to want to spend almost a year turning it into a film (In the case of *Suggestive Gestures*, that was two years.) The second stage of the process is for me to listen to the improvised text many, many times, and compose a musical score. The complete soundtrack for the film, music mixed with dialog, is finished before I make any images. The images are the last layer to be added, and like the music they are a way for me to interpret the text and to bring out the strong underlying unity which is always undergirding the apparent volatility of the improvised performance.

Could you tell us something about the music and sound and how you go about creating it?

Since I am a musician by profession, it is really fun for me to compose music for my films. I try to capture the underlying rhythm, texture, and emotional quality of each part of the spoken dialog. I perform all the parts myself, using a MIDI keyboard and the program Reason.

Do you still do live performances or has this given way to video now? How does the experience of creating a live work differ for you than creating a video work and what do you get from each of these processes that the other can't supply?

I don't do too many live shows anymore. I have mainly done them as a way of introducing a film program, to give the audience an idea of the kind of improvised dialog which



Stills from *Suggestive Gestures* (2013)

is the basis of the films. I think the films are much more artistically successful than the improvised performances by themselves, so I now consider myself a video artist.

I am interested in how you use language as gesture rather than for fixed meaning, the words seem to be used almost like music and while watching the films they cascade, flow and drift in and out of focus, I wonder if you could say a few words about this and your use of language?

In my feature film, *Suggestive Gestures*, I focused more intensely on language as rhythm, texture, and feeling rather than words which

convey ideas, thoughts or stories. I considered this film to be in a somewhat different form than my shorts, a form I called a "landscape" improv. The idea is that different moods and "energy states" pass through the two actors, and that these moods are turned into language, so that words are used, as you said, almost as music. It is like watching the weather change in a landscape. This idea is of course directly inspired by Gertrude Steir and her revolutionary idea of a "landscape play." In my other films, there is more of a balance between ideas, stories, feelings, and an abstract use of words.

Would you say there is any kind of therapeutic dimension to the process of creating your films? Does the improvisation lead you to uncovering things about yourself that are maybe hidden from view by the rational mind?

I would use the word "spiritual" before I would use "therapeutic." For me, improvisation can be a way to integrate my body, emotions, intuition, and my mind, and also to connect to another person, to the world, to history, and to various unseen forces at large in the universe, so I think it is a practice which is akin to meditation. This of course is not the primary focus, which is to make a certain kind of very alive experience for the film's viewers.

I have read somewhere that your dream project would be to make a film adaptation of Percy Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, can you tell us a bit about that?

I've actually completed two sections of that project already, my shorts *Earth And Moon in Love* and *The Two Fauns*. I love Shelley's language because it is so strange, convoluted and so over-the-top that it is almost campy but at the same time the poem is incredibly beautiful and also politically revolutionary.

What movies, art, music and books have influenced you?

I mentioned above some of the theater artists who have been my strongest influences. In film: Paradjanov, the Kuchar brothers, and Tarkovsky would be just a few. I loved Ulrike Ottinger's surreal spectacles and also her documentaries. I have extremely eclectic musical tastes, ranging from Handel to Chopin to Talking Heads and electronic dance music of many types, and all of these varied sounds find their way, at times, into music I write for my films. My favorite authors would include Harold Brodkey, Colette, Samuel Delaney, Don DeLillo, amongst many others. I already mentioned the primary influence of Gertrude Stein. I don't take as much conscious pleasure in painting and drawing, and I rarely go to galleries or museums, but I think a lot of visual art influences me in an unconscious way, since I have ended up making visual and verbal references to visual artists in many of my films, including Warhol, Joseph Cornell, and Bruegel.

Something I would really like to hear from you which would be of a personal interest to us and our own work but I would think to readers as well, is your advice and tips for working with improvised performance, anything that you can say from your experience that you think may be good to pass on.

There are over 40 pages of theory about improvisation on my website (lakeivan.org), so if you get me started on that topic, I could go on for a year! Just to pick one idea out of a hat: improv beginners often get into trouble because they don't know how to handle their "inner critic," that inner voice which can come up with thousands of negative things to say about us while we are in the middle of performing an improv. For me, it's all a matter of understanding how to interpret that voice.

Whatever kind of criticism your inner voice seems to be saying ("this scene is too long, too boring, too cliché...") you should treat it as if what the voice is really saying to you is "go deeper into what you are doing." An improv scene should always be structured by going deeper inside, not by avoiding feelings and jumping around from idea to idea.

What projects are you working on currently?

I'm working on a short with the working title *Miraculous Aqueduct*, which is based on an improv I recorded with actor Ian W. Hill. The *Acueducto de los Milagros* does make an appearance at one point in the film.

What contemporary films and filmmakers are you currently interested in?

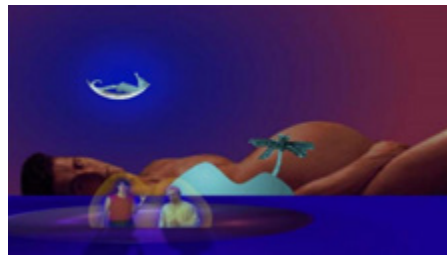
I'm always interested in what Mike Kuchar comes out with. Despite having made films for over 50 years, he is making his most adventurous, assured work right now. I recently came across some fascinating work by Orit Ben-Shitrit. M. Woods is making beautiful and brave work. Everything Ryan Trecartin does fascinates me. There are many contemporary film and video makers whose work I find exciting.



Still from *Earth And Moon In Love* (2004)



Still from *Two Distinct Courses Of Action* (2006)



Still from *Reproductive Technology* (2008)



Still from *The Two Fauns* (2011)



David Finkelstein (born in 1960, USA)

Filmography

Recording Device (2016 | 24.5 mins)
The Linen Closet (2016 | 22 mins)
Privy (2015 | 20 mins)
Suggestive Gestures (2013 | 75 mins)
Invincible City (2012 | 21 mins)
The Two Fauns (2011 | 18 mins)
Epistolary Fusillades (2010 | 18 mins)
Marvelous Discourse (2009 | 21 mins)

Burning Arc (2009 | 10 mins)
Terrifying Blankness (2008 | 30 mins)
Reproductive Technology (2008 | 25 mins)
Wrested Variations (2007 | 7.5 mins)
Two Distinct Courses of Action (2006 | 24 min)
Agnus Dei (2006 | 9 mins)
Electrical Fields (2006 | 12 mins)
Display Devices (2005 | 25 mins)
Lovely Academic Slaughter Houses (2005 | 27 mins)
All Love Is Sweet (2005 | 10 mins)
Earth And Moon In Love (2004 | 21 mins)
Born In Mid-Flight (2004 | 34 mins)
Radiant Emanators (2003 | 19 mins)
Lake Ivan Exists. episode #30: The Artificial (2002 | 29 mins)
Lake Ivan Exists. episode #47: Mardi Gras (2002 | 29 mins)
Lake Ivan Exists. episode #37: Starfield (2001 | 29 mins)
Lake Ivan Exists. episode #21: The Bathroom (2000 | 29 mins)

Find out more about David Finkelstein's films at www.lakeivan.org