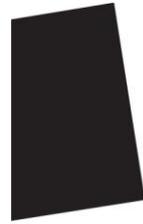


# Gabriel Lester

## Interview

### 13 January – 24 February 2007



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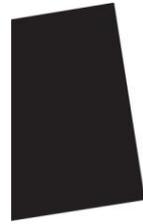
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**Graham Gussin:** I was looking at the catalogue you made recently entitled *How to Act* (2000), which is also the title of one of the pieces planned for the show. This phrase seems key to you, the way it situates the viewer in respect to the work, how it evokes a theatrical scenario but is also very conceptual, making the awareness of the viewer as participant very important. It also refers to the making process, a kind of 'what to do'.

**Gabriel Lester:** Until I attended the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam I had been making music, writing prose and directing video-clips and commercials. In fact, when I applied for the Rijksakademie, I imagined I would focus on rather traditional fiction film. The possibility to make art, let alone become an artist, had not occurred to me. Sometime during the first year, there was an internal open studios and as I was walking around, I remember thinking to myself, "I can do art, why not?". Mind you, it is not as if I was an alien to contemporary art - my grandfather had been an art collector, my mother was an art historian, married to an artist and I had attended an art academy for one year (studying so called 'audio-visual-art'). I guess in many ways, the question 'how to act?' occurred to me then. So maybe, at first, it was a question, a question I posed myself - 'how to act as an artwork/artist?'

Later on the idea of 'how to act' became, indeed, both a question as well as a proposition. In the introduction to my book, I mention the influence my father's pantomime theatre has had on me - and in many respects, the title refers to the conditioning of the spectator, much like pantomime does. Since the installation (*How to Act*) could be understood as a film in mime (reducing cinema to sound and light), the conditioning of the spectator is addressed and becomes very apparent. Frequently, I have been told that the sounds and lights evoke images; this is exactly what I had intended. As such *How to Act* illustrates how one relates to certain stimuli - and how one constructs something highly substantial out of something suggestive. I could state that principally desire is what constitutes one's perception. This is nothing new; it is at best an effective and aesthetic illustration. By showing something that is unmistakably incomplete, which is completed in the mind of the spectator, I employ something like a Socratic method - having the spectator reason his or her truth out of a proposition. Many of my works employ this or similar techniques, where the spectator is placed in an (implicit) narrative where one can create his or her (personal and explicit) narrative. Addressing the idea of 'how to act' as such, it becomes an invitation to the spectator, inviting him or her to take position and create a relation. I guess it is all about conditioning and identification...



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**GG:** So 'how to act' becomes 'where we stand' - giving your practice a sense of navigation. Can you say a little more about the narrative element? I see the viewer like an editor in your works, wandering around aware they are constructing an event or a picture, not so much a story.

**GL:** I don't know if I can say that 'how to act' becomes 'where we stand'. If we could say that art creates desires (rather than satisfy existing desires) then the work creates a desire (or numerous desires) and it is up to the spectator how and what it satisfies... I am thinking about the word you use - 'navigation'. It has never occurred to me that way... I have spoken about my work as places where one is 'IN' and then has to reason or associate him or herself 'OUT'. Maybe 'orientation' is a better word. As for the viewer becoming an editor in my work, yes, this sounds familiar. I have deliberately sought for ways to construct my installations like a composition in sequence. And the narrative element is not so much explicit, but rather implicit. All time-based media provide special possibilities, simply because the element of time divides the work into a before, a now, and an after. This creates an inner context, where one thing from the past can reappear or influence the now (or future or vice versa). A typical example is the melody in a song, a running gag in a comedy or a technique such as 'set-up and pay-off' - where something is shown in minute three and then re-occurs in minute sixty four. By involving the spectator in the film by means of clues and connections, he or she becomes involved - the story becomes something one is part of or 'IN'. My installations are designed and constructed like time-based media. Although the installations do not literally move, they have a sense of time - past, present and future. So, editing the work is an act of connecting the work and involving oneself to a degree where one becomes part of its completion... Something like that.

**GG:** Your work is full of contractions and expansions and in the backdrop piece spaces collide and overlap, confusing our readings of distance and time. This seems especially relevant with the title of the show being *BIG BANG and Assorted Minor Explosions*.

**GL:** In all honesty, the title was initially not so much a reference to my work. It had more to do with the theme for the main installation I will build and the kind of tabloid headlines one finds in English newspapers - simple, catchy and seductive. Then again, I have considered the implications of the title and when I had associated it with several possibilities of interpretation and all suited my intentions, I decided it was the title I needed.

**GG:** What's also interesting is how transparent your work is, I mean that the viewer is very aware of how it's made, what it's made of. This transparency seems to occur through a reduction, a simplicity in your use of material, taking clear elements from theatre, film and architecture and reframing them. This transparency doesn't lead to a lack of depth; on the contrary, it leads to a kind of infinite perspective. I was thinking of *Dogville* (2003) by Lars Von Trier, that sense that we are seeing through and into...

**GL:** You mention transparency, and indeed, it is in my works, at the same time I would say that, at first, there is a kind of illusion which is initially not transparent (even if only a split second). It is



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much like a simple magic-trick (illusion) shown and then explained - a mechanism revealed. In the case of my installations and films, both the illusion and the mechanism remain and this is one of the things I find interesting: when one understands the mechanism and still can't get the taste (the initial charm) of the magic and illusion out of one's mind. Here the spectator becomes aware of something interesting, but I am not sure how I should put it... "Aware of the reality and illusion from a position right in between the two"? Something like that - don't want to sound too Deleuze & Guattari here...

There is a simple illusionist trick with one's thumbs, where it seems like a thumb is split in two (you know this illusion, I guess). Kids love it, over and over again. Why? The illusion is always clear quite soon after – either explained or obvious. Still it maintains a charm, a magical charm, as if one can catch something between the illusion and the understanding of it. This fascinates me. So, yes, I look for things like that - and there is all of it to be found at the initial starting point of a new (illusionist) method or media - maybe one can say there is a lot to be found in between an old technique and a new one.... 3D perspective in drawing and painting, the development of the glass-lens (microscope, telescopes), early photography and film and so on. Close to the origin of these 'new' visual tools, there are the pre-mature stages; there is where I find some of my ideas... There is an optimism and generosity at this stage...and a sense of magic.

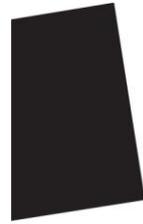
I've never been a big fan of Von Trier, but did feel a certain envy when I watched *Dogville*, like I wanted it to be mine or like it should have been. It is a very good example of how certain conditions constitute a reality. Here we are back to pantomime, where by using the right set of codes something not actually, physically there is imagined to be there - and as such is as much there as anything.

**GG:** Is there a particular way in which you see the three pieces at Bloomberg SPACE working together?

**GL:** The works at Bloomberg SPACE all relate to cinema and theatre - each representing a different aspect of the 'set' or 'scene': stage - *BIG BANG* (2007), light and sound - *How To Act* (2000), scenery - *Untitled (Backdrops)* (2007).

As such, the three parts of which the exhibition will consist, could be seen as the three basic elements of a - theatric and cinematic – narrative: location, setting and action...

Since the first idea I had is the main installation, I have sought for works to complement it; for works that would add something and at the same time works that can lend some of what *BIG BANG* offers. In this particular exhibition, it is my intention to communicate several levels of my installation art. It is not a retrospective or something like that, but it is a full pallet of directions I am working in. Also each space sort of dictates certain possibilities - for example, the backdrops piece seems perfect for the atrium... The in-between space is ideal for *How to Act* and the first space is very suited for a stage set...



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What has also been of importance, is the internal relation of the works. I imagine that the soundtracks of *How to Act* will drift into *BIG BANG*, as such adding an element to that piece. Likewise, the backdrops will be accompanied by a faint echo of the sound from *How to Act*. And while *How to Act* suggests images - evoking them through light and sound - the images of the backdrops suggest almost the opposite. So, all in all, the three works combined constitute a complete visual narrative, without ever making it hermetic or resolved....