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# Leigh Ledare film premiere at the Art Institute is both awful and spellbinding

by Lori Waxman  
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A still from "The Task," by Leigh Ledare. (Leigh Ledare)

Sometimes the most awful artworks are also the best. “The Plot,” an exhibition by Leigh Ledare up at the [Art Institute](#) through the end of the year, is just that kind of work. It’s about nothing and everything. I couldn’t tear myself away from it, and I felt sick afterward.

The show premieres a film called “The Task,” plus a related installation. “The Task” runs two hours and presents the results of a three-day group relations conference organized by Ledare in Chicago this past spring. It owes its name and structure to the Tavistock Method, an approach pioneered by the British psychoanalyst Wilfred R. Bion, who in the late 1940s began to experiment with the notion that groups are greater than

the sum of their parts. The task of a conference is to study group structures by studying itself: how authority is invested in leaders by others, the covert processes in operation, the problems encountered.

Ledare's conference brought together 28 participants, 10 psychologists trained in the method and three silent observers, most of whom sit for the duration of the film on white plastic chairs arranged in concentric circles. They appear to form a diverse group socially, sexually, racially, economically, professionally, generationally and temperamentally. The members spend their time discussing their own behavior as it happens: analyzing one another's positions and comments, talking over and silencing and misunderstanding each other, defending themselves and others, all while being palpably influenced by their own unconscious wishes, fears, biases and projections. The discourse is deeply honest, sincerely felt, full of vulnerability and absolutely dysfunctional.

In an adjacent gallery, ancillary materials are neatly arranged on low metal tables and hung in frames. Pages from fashion and architectural publications, porn magazines and art books commingle with portraits of children and politicians, as well as articles detailing abuses of power by the police. Most of these documents seem to date from the mid-20th century, the era during which Tavistock developed his method, and they lay out Ledare's interests with something that would be approaching clarity if it weren't all about complexity: voyeurism, authority, consent, desire and representation. In a clever display tactic, this metaphorical dirt rests alongside literal dirt, the tops of three out of eight tables being troughs lined with rich brown earth.

Ledare, who this year won a Guggenheim Fellowship and was featured in the Whitney Biennial, owes his career to a willingness to expose the subtexts of human interactions, including his own. He was born in Seattle in 1976 and has lived in New York since 1998, working early on

as an assistant to the notorious photographer Larry Clark. Ledare first came to notice for “Pretend You’re Actually Alive,” a case study of his own family that includes documentation of credit card fraud, portraits and photographs of his mother having sex with men she’d met through personal ads and while dancing at a strip club. In “An Invitation” Ledare manipulates a commission to make erotic portraits of the much younger female partner of a high-society couple, and in “Double Bind” he pairs his photos of his ex-wife in a remote cabin with images taken by her new husband in that same place.

For “The Task,” Ledare diverges from classic Tavistock — and reverts to classic Ledare — in his introduction of a six-person film crew with himself as director. It’s an unprecedented intervention that was assiduously negotiated with the psychologists and participants ahead of time. Nevertheless, periodically throughout the conference, various members are irked by the presence of the cameras. It seems likely that they misunderstood the extent to which recording devices will turn any experience into a spectacle that is at once staged and real. This is contemporary communication: It’s reality television and social media, where performance and lived life are inextricably intertwined and available for manipulation. It’s everything that’s wrong with the world today, and yet we can’t stop watching, commenting and posting.

But being observed by unimplicated outsiders is ultimately unsustainable, and so we view “The Task” — and so much else — forcibly implode when Ledare suddenly seats himself in an empty chair and attempts to join the group. Real life and artwork crash into one another and burn, and it turns out not everyone realized what they’d signed on for. Significantly, the two people who quit the conference room in protest are the older male consultants, one of whom is “enraged” at what he perceives to be “highly threatening” and “a violation.” The other explains that he feels as if his “balls have been taken away.” These men

don't like their authority to be undermined, and they have no trouble saying so.

Lucky them. In light of recent allegations of sexual harassment against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, Artforum publisher Knight Landesman, political journalist Mark Halperin, literary critic Leon Wieseltier and seemingly more powerful men each day, would that we all felt secure enough to say no and leave the room when someone transgressed our boundaries — and that the other people in charge listened, too.

*“Leigh Ledare: The Plot” runs through Dec. 31 at the Art Institute of Chicago, 111 S. Michigan Ave., 312-443-3600*