In philosopher Stanley Cavell’s early and influential essay, “The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of King Lear,” there is a provocative passage in which he discusses the ontological status of fictitious characters on the theatrical stage and poses a scenario in which someone in the audience mistakes the action happening in one of Shakespeare’s plays for something that is actually transpiring in real life. Cavell then asks, if his hypothetical audience member (or “yokel”) is mistaken, then what exactly are they mistaken about? At what register of reality do characters situate themselves in our lives and how do we draw distinctions between fiction and reality?

For Cavell, the distinction rests in one instance on the various possibilities of acknowledgement between the realms of fiction and what is real: we see them (the characters) but do they see us? And, if so, how? The articulation of this difference also rests on the flow back and forth between being in the presence of fictional characters to audience members being looped into their present (how we, as audience members, become affectively caught up in the actors’ narrative present). What is productive in the essay is the philosopher’s ability to shift our perspective, to tip the scales of conventional thinking toward considering things from an improbable vantage point. By taking seriously the “yokel’s” panicked misreading of a staged murder, the philosopher skews our stable categories of reality (which I would argue is always already a form of make-believe). For Cavell, that a character is fictional does not mean they aren’t real, that they do not exist, rather he asserts that they exist on another plane wherein their means of acknowledging our presence is markedly different. If this sounds a bit baffling, it is. For this reason, I would offer, the confusion is inherent to reality itself and thereby nearly any discourse about how so-called objective reality and theater intersect becomes severely entangled and messy. Categories and distinctions regarding art and life fold in on one another. These slippages can be intellectually dizzying. However, they have also proven to be incredibly productive for the fields of sociology, anthropology, and performance studies. The research gleaned from these fields has revealed to us how we assume varying roles in our daily lives, how theatrical scenarios point us back to what some might even consider a truer version of reality, and how rituals and staged scenarios can—no matter the artifice—take hold and charge a situation, as in the case of the infamous 1971 Stanford Prison Experiment.

With these notions of reality, theater, and performance in mind, we installed our concept of Reality Theater as the editorial motor for this issue. It is a concept set in direct opposition to what might be described as our present reality TV-induced moment, which rose to prominence (if not pop-cultural hegemony) at the turn-of-the-new-millennium with television programs like *Big Brother*, *Survivor*, *The Bachelor*, and—most notoriously—*The Apprentice*, starring the current...
occupant of the Oval Office. These minimally scripted “reality” programs were in fact simply game shows that made claims, due in large part to their settings, to be more real than the sitcoms they swiftly replaced in the wake of 2008 network writers’ strike. Ergo, one might be tempted to suggest that much of the Trump presidency and its horrible alternative-fact reality-programming are the products of bad writing (or bad reading, nay repugnant illiteracy). This issue of Portable Gray, however, is not a diatribe against television or a litany of grievances with the Trump administration. Instead, the contributions that comprise our reality theater issue could be thought of as something like an antidote for the reality TV *lebenswelt*, wherein we encounter artists, writers, curators, performers, composers, doctors, and scholars who are thinking about what it means to be in the world together, to perform, share the stage or a meal, a sense of wonder, and form a common place.

The issue begins with artist Catherine Sullivan’s “On Iffing and Not-Iffing,” which might best be described as a somewhat disorienting virtual reality essay on performance. This is followed by “Digesting the Ineffable at the WTF Café,” a conversation between performance curator Sarah Curran and dramaturg and opera scholar David J. Levin and myself on the nature of experimental performance. In “Make Room,” literary historian Sarah J. Johnson, takes us inside her project with artist Marissa Williams, in which they incorporate three different narratives from enslaved women as part of an installation modeled on an escape room. In “Fake It ’til You Make It,” Portable Gray’s Mike Schuh interviews UCLA professor and philosopher Pamela Hieronymi about her work as an advisor for the wildly inventive and popular NBC sitcom *The Good Place,* thinking through what it means to introduce moral and ethical philosophy into pop culture. With “Magic Together and Alone,” philosopher David Finkelstein interviews renowned magician Joshua Jay about magic’s status as an art form and a social practice. Comprising something like a feature in this issue, “From Hearing 2, Or Thinking Without Words” is a selection of scores and the title of an essay—never-before translated into English—by the Austrian composer Peter Ablinger. Accompanying the essay and scores is an excerpt of an interview that took place during Ablinger’s nine-day residency at the Gray Center this past January. In the interview, musicologist and executive editor of Portable Gray, Seth Brodsky, and artist Philip von Zweck talk with Ablinger about experimental music, how integral site-specificity and context are in conceptualizing and performing his musical compositions. With “Seven Small Bafflements,” author Kyle Beachy takes us on a poignant and personal journey in which he reimagines the skateboard as a public stage. On the occasion of her solo exhibition at the Miller ICA at Carnegie Mellon University, artist Andrea Zittel spoke with exhibition curator Elizabeth Chodos about how her works function as art objects and perform a utility in everyday life.
with an interview titled “An Institute for Investigative Living.” Anthropologist Stephan Palmié and artist Miralda share their research into the bright spectrum of Chicago’s food cultures in a collaborative piece called “All the World’s a Kitchen.” Chicago-based artist Edra Soto shares with us a portfolio of images from her ongoing project *Open 24 Hours*, in which she reclaims discarded bottles of alcohol from her neighborhood as a way of re-imaging the genre of still-life photography through the lens of a socially engaged art practice. Forming the other bookend of this issue, artist Julia Kuo illustrates “Common Place,” which details her work with physicians Elizabeth Tung and Monica Peek, as they probe the ways in which systemic racism impacts patient care and work together to create a more just and empathetic healthcare environment on the South Side of Chicago.

— ZACHARY CAHILL, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF