

Greasing the Glue and Gluing the Grease: Beautiful Civic Engagement with Kids, by Kids, for Kids

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What does it take for kids—especially kids in immigrant families—to have a real sense of belonging in their neighbourhood? How can kids gain a sense of ownership when every day they pass galleries, high-end shops, restaurants and theatres that represent another world? Ask Darren O'Donnell, because that's exactly what he's trying to do in Toronto's Parkdale district, through playful "interventions"—like kids cutting hair—that challenge stodgy notions of art and artistic practice. O'Donnell uses his essay to further ideas about artists as "social impresarios" who can effect radical change in how all of us live, work and play.

Let's face it: culture, creativity and artists are being mobilized to deal with everything from youth gun violence to the health of the economy. First, there's the move by the state to put culture in service of the community—thereby forcing artists to fix social problems by engaging youth. (In Ontario, funding to arts programs in education has been cut at the same time as arts organizations are required to include a youth component in their work. A crafty move—artists are cheaper than teachers—we're accustomed to working without benefits, for next to nothing.) Second, artists are being asked provide content and activities to keep the information-age rolling. You know the trumpet call: how important the arts are for the economy, as, for instance, Toronto's Live With Culture campaign.

So, we have the artist as cheap glue for the social fabric and the artist as cheap grease for the wheels of commerce. The good news is that there is an opening for the artist/activist to become a kind of undercover agent, with a keen eye towards addressing inequity. In short, there is a third, more radical, progressive tendency: the notion of the artist as social engineer or impresario whose aesthetic of civic engagement calls the Creative City on its bluff, saying: "Okay, you say I'm crucial to the health of this place, then I want in at ground-level on the policies that form civil society." This perspective demands concrete, long-term engagement, creating events that—even if only temporarily—scramble power dynamics, invert hierarchies, engage individuals from marginalized communities and bring radically new ontologies to light.

As matters stand, the artist in her function as social glue is being asked to create community-based projects outside the realm of mainstage artistic activities, while the artist as economic grease is being asked to create spectacular entertainment for the masses in large-scale initiatives such as Toronto's Nuit Blanche. An aesthetic of civic engagement breaks down the

barrier between the two. When small-scale community work that addresses on-the-ground inequity begins to shape the large-scale efforts, the results is equality in the greater public realm. In turn, the artist who is deployed to grease the economic wheels also enters the community realm. This way, the socially ameliorative effects that the state needs for social control become a public affair with the potential to do oh so much more than boost kids' confidence. In fact, there is genuine potential for more equity across the board.

So, what are the gaps in the Creative City? These are easy enough to identify, there's so little engagement with the real fabric of the city: poverty, immigrant services, transportation, housing. The engaged artist, then, can collaborate with a wide variety of populations, situations and locales, and mix the two imperatives of glue and grease. Artist as glue is based on engaging youth; while the artist as grease implies creating media spectacle. Not surprisingly, these worlds tend to be mutually exclusive. Most community-based work does not become spectacle, and the Creative City is designed to appeal almost exclusively to adults. In short, there are all kinds of community youth initiatives that the public doesn't know of; on the other hand, in Toronto's highly publicized and stunningly successful Nuit Blanche, 400,000 people hit the streets for an all-night love affair with contemporary art. Yet only one of 130 events featured young collaborators and appealed to a young audience. That was my *Ballroom Dancing*.

My practice, then, focuses on hauling the social glue of working with youth into the very public sphere of the Creative City spectacle. Working with children provides a direct way to deal with a whole range of inequities. Take diversity, for instance. Since most of Toronto is not white, working with almost any school in the city takes you directly into a diverse demographic. But, even more generally, *all* kids are great collaborators, because they're relatively accessible, keen and—let's just say it up front—powerless. In fact, because they're powerless, it's easy to empower them, to reverse hierarchies and to challenge the status quo in dramatic but entertaining ways. By injecting children into the Creative City, we can subvert the economic imperative, while bringing marginalized communities into the realm of spectacle.

Over the past couple of years, I've begun to explore these ideas in a number of public art projects. The four I outline here range from smaller-scale, intimate encounters that possess tiny but revolutionary potential to larger-scale civic spectacles that facilitate new ways to bring generations together. These are initial experiments and, as such, may not live up to my rhetoric; consider them fruitful baby steps.

Beachballs41+All

Volunteers provide 100 kids with 400 inflatable toys at Alexandra public pool

Beachballs41+All was a simple urban intervention that pretended not to be an intervention. Through the charitable status of my performance company,

Mammalian Diving Reflex (MDR), 400 inflatable pool toys were donated by Liz and Rennie's No Frills to Alexandra Pool's Wacky Fun Day. MDR then put out the call for lungpower. About 20 people showed up in the early morning, providing 400 toys for about 100 kids.

My intention was to spark an encounter between two sets of people who have very little contact: artsy culture types (mostly white and relatively comfortable) and the kids who frequent the pool. These kids, from Kensington Market, the Alexandra Park Housing Co-op, and surrounding area, comprise a variety of ethnicities with lower than average household incomes. By getting these two groups together, I hoped to create a small alliance: to offer the adults an opportunity to act in the interest of the kids, and to have the kids be beneficiaries of fairly random, spontaneous generosity.

What *Beachballs41+All*'s actually did was demonstrate abundance. After all, with 400 toys available, the kids could take home as many as they wanted. For most of us, such moments of abundant resources are rare. I wanted to introduce abundance if only to prove that it's possible. Abundance exists; it's just a matter of shuffling things around, of distribution. That randomness also made the artist less creator than conduit for already existing energies and resources; my job was to redirect things, to tweak them in a quiet way. That said, if not for abundant excess, *Beachballs41+All* would have looked a lot like charity. Effective charity is work for others undertaken to make your own life more tolerable. In the case of *Beachballs41+All*, the benefit accruing to adults was the opportunity to hang around and have some fun.

Beachballs also broke a few sacred rules along the way. Even though the prohibition against talking (let alone playing) with strangers is irrational, since children are more likely to be abused at home than by a playful adult on the street, there is a strong perception of the public sphere as dangerous. How odd, then, to advance the idea that children might benefit from playing with strange adults. (Aha, the root of the rule is exposed for what it is—social control.) In any case, pools are great places to cavort, and a tank of water levels the playing field; when you're up to your neck in water in a swimsuit, it's hard to control outcomes—you've got to go with the flow. Besides, playing in water ensures equality: almost everybody becomes a kid again, which means everyone has the potential to benefit from this equalizing effect. Play has abundant possibilities as public intervention, just as generating atypical playmates allows for scrutinizing stereotypical power dynamics.

Haircuts by Children

Ten-year-olds are trained to cut hair

Haircuts by Children is exactly that: we work with professional stylists to train groups of ten year-olds to offer free haircuts to the public in a variety of salons around town. So far, we've worked with teachers Amanda Biber and her students at Toronto's Parkdale Public School and Kathleen Diener at Luther

Burbank School, Los Angeles, through the Outpost for Contemporary Art. We're also shaping-up to present in Vancouver, Calgary, New York, Cleveland and Birmingham, UK.

Call it performance, community building or confidence building—the basic intention is to flip the typical dynamic between children and adults and give the kids some power. In practice, the dynamic is much more nuanced, since responsibility falls to both parties to communicate and protect each other. The adult yields control, believing in the abilities of the child, and the child has to avoid chopping off an ear. I'd expected the scene to be relatively anarchic, with hair flying all over the place but, in reality, with kids taking the responsibility so seriously, the mood in the salon becomes almost somber. The kids focus total attention on the task at hand. The intimacy that develops between the young stylists and their adult clients is another unexpected consequence with small quiet conversations occurring between the two. So, while our intention was simply to empower kids, the event results in a more sophisticated social dynamic that intimates new kinds of social interaction across generations.

Because of the simplicity of an event like Haircuts, I invested more resources than usual in a brochure that would be beautiful enough to function as art, something that would compel people to post it on their fridges. This publicity material then became part of the performance and, in turn, the media became collaborators. This dynamic took on exciting dimensions when MTV dropped by and pretty much took total control. When I challenged the producer, she pointed out that they were helping us out. I then reminded her that we'd been doing just fine without them. In any case, the MTV crew essentially crafted the event for the camera, "recreating" things that had never happened. In other words, for all intents and purposes, MTV's intervention effectively destroyed the intention of the piece. We rolled with it anyway and quickly organized a postmortem with the kids to deconstruct the media coverage, discuss how they chose to portray the kids and how they manipulated reality. Together, we emailed a Globe and Mail reporter and challenged him on his exaggerated portrayal of the dangers of kids with scissors. The LA the media was also happy to oblige—coming into the classroom, taking over, rearranging everything and telling the story according to parameters of their choice, forcing a nice but completely fabricated moment where all the kids converged on me and chopped off huge chunks of my hair. As all this was going down, I buzzed around the class whispering to the kids to keep an eye on this new dynamic and note how we were all getting totally pushed around. This provided an exciting pedagogical opportunity. The kids had no difficulty understanding that we had just lost total control of our world.

The Floating Curator

Where the friendly curator befriends kids in the shallow end of an outdoor public pool

The civic sphere is also fertile ground for intimate performance gestures that can forcefully alter social ontologies in very real ways. Take, for instance, curator Christine Shaw's Public Acts project that assigned the themes of the 29 issues of the cultural theory quarterly *Public Access* to artists across Canada. In the summer of 2006, Shaw traveled the Trans Canada highway to document these twenty-nine public acts. (<http://www.publicacts.ca/>). I was assigned Public Act 21, Childhood, and in an act of childish mischief, I designed a project that placed the onus squarely on Christine, using her as the subject of a social experiment entitled *The Floating Curator*.

I drafted an airtight contract that required she spend an hour-and-a-half an day for five days in August floating in the shallow end of the Alexandra Park outdoor pool, approaching children and becoming their friends. Marks were assigned for—among other things—participation, convincing the kids to take her photo, time spent with the children outside the confines of the pool area and connecting with kids of different races. If Christine did not achieve a mark of 50% or more, she had to remove all traces of the project from her website and accompanying material and, when referencing the 21st Public Act, she had to write: "Children do not exist."

Needless to say, Christine was angry and nervous about being perceived as a pervert. I sympathized but felt that, at worst, they would think she was a batty lady and, in the event, they did vilify her. Well, what can I say, art is risky and, to quote my associates, Instant Coffee, there's nothing romantic about taking a risk.

I was impressed with Christine's strategy—she simply went up to the staff at the pool and explained the whole project. Even when approaching the kids she, again, thoroughly outlined the premise. I thought this was the best and certainly most respectful approach, assuming a sophisticated understanding on the part of the kids. On the second day she met Elise, an 11-year-old who lived near the pool and spent nearly every day there. They hit it off and I joined them, the three of us spending portions of the rest of the week as an ad hoc family, chilling together outside the pool, going for dinner, playing in the park and spending time with her parents.

The only consistent contact kids have with the world outside the institutions of family and school are almost exclusively with the consumerist world of corporate visual culture: films, the internet, television, pop music. *The Floating Curator* invokes the notion of the uselessness of art, of art as completely devoid of any instrumentalism and, in so doing, is able to sneak past one of the most rigid social prohibitions: children talking to strangers. Like a magic cloak of invisibility, the diaphanous shroud of art can be cunningly instrumentalized, turned against the culture's dominant economic imperative. By contemporary social codes, the situation we created is atypical, yet when the shroud of "art" is draped over the activity, it becomes the easiest thing in the world. What is art, then, that it can so easily yet so radically change the terms of social engagement?

Ballroom Dancing

A dance party DJed by 10-year-olds in a gym filled with rubber balls.

Inviting contact between kids and adults in the public sphere provides small demonstrations that other worlds and ways of being are possible. Bringing the adult into the realm of the kid—as with *Beachballs41+All* and *The Floating Curator*—is one way to go but, perhaps more exciting is pulling kids into the realm of the adult, as with *Haircuts by Children* and, even more spectacularly, with *Ballroom Dancing*.

Ballroom Dancing was a dance party DJed by 10-year-olds in a gymnasium filled with 2700 rubber and 33 Disco balls. The event, part of Toronto's inaugural Nuit Blanche, combined the dynamics of *Beachballs41+All* and *Haircuts by Children* to bring together children and adults in an atmosphere that was part dance club, part dodge ball, part gymnastics club, part Ikea ball room and pure chaos. My intention was to provide an environment that would appeal equally to kids and adults, yet creating an atypical space for the two groups to interact unselfconsciously (again, addressing the fear of strangers). I also wanted to create an environment that had an adult-like feel but where the kids were fully in control, were, essentially, the stars. I also wanted a place where adults could let loose and goof around with each other in the context of a contemporary art event.

I, again, worked with Amanda Biber and the students of Parkdale Public School, and brought in musician/DJs Rosina Kazi and Nicholas Murray to teach the kids the rudiments of mixing using the kids' favourite tracks; lighting wizard Rebecca Picherack crafted the ambience.

Turning kids into momentary media stars in the spotlight with full control of the playlist shakes up notions of what they can do, who they are and who they can be. Suddenly throwing them into a new and powerful environment where they experience the possibility of control and power illustrates that gaining power and control are at least possible. When I dropped by the school on the Monday following, I was happy to see some of the DJs still wearing their artists' pass. Those passes were useless now; in effect, the kids were showing-off, but as annoying as that might have been for students who hadn't participated, it still showed how these kinds of activities are within the realm of possibility for everyone.

In artspeak, *Ballroom Dancing* was a hybrid event that drew on community arts with a focus on participant-centered activities and skills-building mixed in with large-scale art spectacle in a forum—Nuit Blanche—where most of the other work was outside of the realm of community arts. In essence, my goals is to work with the kids of Parkdale PS to foster a sense of ownership and agency within the city's cultural flow so that the kids will possess the confidence and analytical dexterity to understand and to question the forces at work around them.

Beautiful Civic Engagement

You can see how these projects fly in the face of typical notions of what constitutes beautiful art. So, is the problem with the projects? No. The problem is with failing criteria; it's time we abandoned these and established new ones. Beautiful civic engagement, I believe, can be judged by the degree to which an artistic initiative successfully achieves a number of objectives. Here, in no particular order, are a few suggestions for what those objectives might be:

1. Gluing the Grease and Greasing the Glue: conflating the imperative to grease the wheels of commerce with the imperative to glue the social fabric; in other words, hauling the community into the commercial and the commercial into the community to spread, or equalize, power.
2. Diversity: age, race, sexual orientation, religion, occupation, etc.
3. Atypical Encounter: people doing things they wouldn't ordinarily do, or would ordinarily do but in an unordinary context with people they wouldn't ordinarily do it with.
4. Inversion of Hierarchies: those who normally have the power give it up, or participate in service to other less powerful participants.
5. Offering Agency: creating a context that provides agency to those who would not ordinarily have it.
6. Questioning Social Assumptions, Imperatives: creating a context where taboos are challenged by actions that reveal the taboo to be based in social control.
7. Atypical use of public and public/private space: playing where we're supposed to work and working where we're supposed to play.
8. Fruitful Antagonisms: triggering friction, tension, and examining the ensuing dynamic in a performative arena where all is easily forgiven.
9. Volunteer Ownership: providing opportunities for volunteers to participate to foster a wider sense of ownership.
10. Blurring of Roles: passersby become observers; observers become participants; participants become collaborators and volunteers become creators.
11. Generating Buzz: where the media is on par with other aspects of the project; the media as collaborators—slippery collaborators—but collaborators, nonetheless.