

“*The Social Impresario*: capitalizing on the desire to be remembered for as long as it takes wood to rot” by Darren O’Donnell

Like so many of us in the culture industries, I am pulled by two seemingly conflicted concerns: I want my work to be politically engaged, ameliorating aspects of this horrible world and making it a better place, but, on the other hand, I want to be rich and famous, an A-Lister with tons of power, glory and influence. Initially, my method was to oscillate neurotically between these two poles, trying to nurture one while obliterating the other. Then there was the more successful attempt at synthesizing them to produce art *in response* to the problems in the world, in a have-cake-eat-too strategy. This was pretty good; it worked for a while and it won me points in the local entertainment weeklies. There was a big temptation to stop at that point, resting on the belief that working with political content is the same as political engagement, perhaps some of the insights of contemporary physics having convinced me that witnessing is doing. And, maybe in some cases it is but, for the most part, it’s not.

So rather than trying to overlap these two concerns by creating *responses*, I’ve decided to conflate the two to create *interactions*. My own understanding of my identity within this undergoes a shift. By accepting my dueling desires, I don two masks at once: the social worker and the opera impresario, leading to a new figure: the Social Impresario, an individual who shamelessly, flamboyantly and aggressively promotes socially ameliorative acts for the expressed purpose of making *MY* world a better place. But, if done ethically, the selfishness of this actually leads to more honest and effective results.

Case Study: *The Floating Curator*

In my own practice this has yielded a series of events that I term social acupuncture, small interventions that attempt to disrupt or redirect social flows. With much of my work in this realm, it’s important to note that small, intimate projects possessing aspects of my intentions serve as the basis for larger-scale events that bring the ideas more fully into fruition and, in turn, feedback into further experimentation. Components are tested in isolation, with full appreciation of the incompleteness of the event. While this might sound like I’m apologizing for the shortcomings – and I am a bit – it’s important to understand the event as part of a group of events and always as research for *other* events. You don’t design a car and a stereo at the same time but when they’re combined you’ve got a nice set of wheels. I also want to point out that I create this work with the confidence that not only does artistic meaning occur during the actual event but that, because of the conceptual simplicity, the event easily continues in conversation and in my documentation and analysis. In other words, I consider this article, too, as part of the performance and, without it, the work loses a crucial dimension. This would be the concern of the press-obsessed impresario.

The Floating Curator brings together the social worker and the impresario by creating a highly charged event where social fortification is combined with conceptual aggression and flamboyance in one of the smallest, intimate and most socially charged dynamics: communication and friendship between a stranger and a child.

The Floating Curator was undertaken for curator Christine Shaw's *Public Acts* project, which 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 29 public acts (<http://www.publicacts.ca/>). I was assigned Public Act 21 (<http://www.publicacts.ca/act21/>), "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.

The concept was simple: I drafted an airtight contract that required Christine to spend an hour-and-a-half per 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 declare: "Children do not exist."

The Contract

The Floating Curator is an artistic contract between Christine Shaw (hereafter referred to as The Curator) and Darren O'Donnell (hereafter referred to as The Artist).

1. Over the course of August 3, 2006 – August 7, 2006, The Curator shall spend 1.5 hours per day (5 days) floating in the shallow end of the Alexandra Park outdoor pool located at Bathurst and Dundas, Toronto, ON.
2. The Curator shall not be accompanied by any friends or associates and will only bring a towel and sunscreen onto the pool deck. All reading material is forbidden.
3. The Curator shall spend as much time in the shallow end of the pool as is comfortable.
4. Wrinkling fingers shall not constitute discomfort but shivering shall.
5. The Curator shall initiate a) extended conversations with the children playing in the pool, b) convince them to take her photo, c) spend some time outside the pool with at least one child first met at the pool and who is of a different race than The Curator and c) attempt to be photographed with said child. Each of these activities is assigned a percentage value. (See 14.)
6. An extended conversation shall be defined as an exchange lasting more than one minute and in which the child asks The Curator at least one question.
7. The Curator shall keep track of her daily and accumulative totals and submit a daily email or phone report to The Artist.

8. In the daily report The Curator shall inform The Artist as to when on the following day she shall be at the pool.
9. The Artist shall make occasional and unannounced checks to confirm that The Curator is at the pool during the stated times. In the event the Curator is absent the contract is void. (See 11.)
10. The Curator shall score at least 50% or more.
11. In the event The Curator scores less than 50% the contract shall be considered void and The Curator shall be forbidden to speak, document or refer to the contract/project/Artist with respect to the contract/project in any way and must erase all traces of the contract/project/Artist from any previously written material concerning the contract/project including any blog, proposals, suggestions or any other material pertaining to The Curator's Public Acts project.
12. In the event The Curator scores less than 50% The Curator shall write "Public 21. Childhood. Children do not exist" in any and all instances where the details of The Curator's Public Acts project is mentioned when those details necessitate the inclusion of the 21st Public Act.
13. In the event The Curator is successful The Curator shall have the right to document the contract/project in a manner that is acceptable to The Artist. The Artist shall not unreasonably withhold consent.
14. The Curator shall give copies of all documentation to The Artist.
15. Whatever The Curator scores, The Artist reserves all rights to the contract/project and may document and/or reference it in any way, in any media throughout the universe and in perpetuity.
16. The activities and their value:

<u>Activity</u>	<u>Value</u>	
	Daily %	Total%
1.5 hours of floating per day for 5 days.	5%	25%
An extended conversation with a child a day for 5 days	5%	25%
A daily email or phone call to The Artist for 5 days	1%	5%
A photo of The Curator at the pool taken by a child.		10%

Out-of-pool social time with a child first met at the pool	15%
Photo of The Curator with the child outside the pool	10%
<u>The child is a different race than The Curator</u>	<u>10%</u>
TOTAL	100%

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 there's nothing romantic about taking a risk.

If you could have peered into my apartment the weekend you emailed me The Contract you would have seen me pass through a whole range of affective tonalities: anger, fear, sadness, tenacity, resilience, joy, will, determination. I think I might even [have] been heard muttering "Bring it on, Darren." Needless to say, you and this contract got under my skin. I was immediately aware of the potential risks and receptions involved as soon as I received the contract that night back in June: perversion, repulsion, anxiety, alienation, social fatigue, insecurity, vulnerability.... (Shaw, "You think this is easy?")¹

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, was 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?

The first thing the social impresario needs to examine is where the project sits along the continuum stretching between the two prevailing imperatives that culture is

currently being subjected to. 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 and other under-serviced communities. (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 in large-scale spectacular art events like Toronto's Nuit Blanche and the whole Live with Culture campaign. So we see the artist being deployed as cheap glue for the social fabric and cheap grease for wheels of the economy. The need to conflate these two is what the social impresario attempts, looking to bring the community into the realm of the spectacular and vice versa.

Public Acts was a national event, involving over 30 artists from Victoria to Halifax, and included public works that were intended for wide participation and more intimate events. With *The Floating Curator*, intimacy was pushed to the limits, the social aspect of the agenda taking precedence over the impresarial except with the conception itself, which was relatively obnoxious and flamboyant. This is where I locate the showmanship of the work: in the very idea of pinning someone down and demanding that – in order to retain the project – little kids would have to be approached in the pool. But once we get over the irrational stranger-danger, all we've got left is an earnest attempt to make the social sphere a more generous place.

The social impresario is concerned with diversity for the same reason that everyone is concerned with diversity: fairness. However, that's just the social side of the equation; the impresario also understands that it makes good business sense to involve and attract a diversity of participants. But cold hard capital is only one consideration; the impresario also appreciates the social, cultural and emotional capital that is generated in creating diverse networks, the possibilities that are created by encounters with difference. This, the impresario undertakes strictly to make himself a better person, in a proudly self-serving gesture. Including diversity in the contract with Christine was intended to make the world a better place, Christine a better person, but also to enrich my social circles – the impermissibility (for obvious reasons) of me playing with the kids at my favourite outdoor pool a yearly source of summertime frustration and sadness.

The impresario, then, relies on atypicalness, of generating unusual and flamboyantly charged encounters that produce new and meaningful contexts, questioning current social flows and throwing things into as much turmoil as possible. This, in contrast to the social worker who tries to introduce stability and normalcy and, rather than disrupting social flows, helps others to swim along more comfortably with the prevailing current. Not always, of course, but even when working with clients for whom conforming would mean death, there's still a disavowal of antagonism. The impresario, on the other hand, knows that antagonism sells, but not just any antagonisms, *fruitful* ones where friction and tension are triggered and the ensuing dynamic examined in a performative arena and under the gossamer shroud of Art, where all is easily forgiven. The impresario, being the ever-alert opportunist, looks for ways to maximize antagonism, turning to accepted hierarchies as a way in. In this, the two figures find agreement, with the social worker, too, struggling against the effects of hierarchies. In *The Floating Curator* we have the fruitful antagonism of the nice curator approaching children in the

pool combined with the nervousness and weakness she feels, where, ultimately, the kids have the power to blow the whistle on this aberrant behavior.

2:22pm – The Curator sees that the boy has finally settled into the pool and is having fun with his father. She approaches them to introduce herself. The boy's name is Ryan. The Curator tells the father about the Floating Curator Contract. He is at first guarded because he thought The Curator meant she wanted to take pictures of his little boy. She clarifies, "No, I want him to take pictures of me!" He likes the idea but defers to his wife, "You need to ask her. She is very sensitive about this sort of thing."

2:29pm – The Curator... shows the father how to use her camera thinking he might want to explain it to Ryan. Ryan grabs the camera from The Curator with his tiny hand and immediately shoves it in the Curator's face, toggling the zoom and clicking the shutter. The Curator is stunned: "He knows how to use it!" She laughs, in amazement. His tiny hands clasp the camera as it dangles over the water. The Curator is a bit nervous and controls her impulse to suggest that Ryan move away from the water. The camera is about 6 inches away from her face. The father, The Curator and Ryan hover at the pool edge while Ryan shoots many, many pictures of the Curator. (Shaw, "Daily Report #3")

Social assumptions were materially addressed in the doing of this project. The pool staff who were approached by Christine, the parents who fielded her requests to play with their children and the children themselves had to face common (and in my mind incorrect and damaging) assumptions about the safety of the social sphere. A realistic assessment of the risk to kids reveals not so surprising facts:

Five hundred thousand kids every year are classified as "throwaways" (children whose parents or guardians will not let them live at home, as distinguished from "runaways"). As many as 800,000 are beaten horribly. Even more are subject to emotional abuse and neglect. How much attention do they get? Instead, we focus our attention, almost all of it, on stranger-danger: things like abductions, of which there are between 100 and 200 annually. Our carefully controlled outrage is generated for our own purposes, certainly not to protect the children. (Kincaid)

The Social Impresario provokes a performance in which social assumptions are turned on their head so that everybody is confronted by the visceral and undeniable fact that the assumptions are baseless. Christine and I became friends with Elise, and spent time with her parents and family friends outside the pool, creating a new social dynamic that had much in common with the notion of the past as a place when things were simpler, kids were free to roam and perverts didn't exist. Well, they did exist but no more than they do now, the fetish for safety more a disguise for social control than any mechanism to protect the children.

The social impresario uses the social sphere as the venue for activity, trying to bring the spectacular out of the realm of privatized entertainment and into the public, but always – as dictated by the social side of the duality – with ameliorative effects in mind,

contaminating the grease with the glue. Situating the activity in public proves a challenge to the impresario, who knows that cache is developed by increasing demand by decreasing access – to a point – and that public transactions are harder to metre than those occurring in private. The Social Worker, however, wins this round, trumping the impresario with the fact that – in the long run – the public realm is the place where all the power is located. This is an act of faith; not the impresario's strong suit. On the other hand the public field does provide the opportunity to engage and entice additional participants, providing an opportunity for wider involvement in the project. In the case of *The Floating Curator*, the children who were approached got involved, contributing insights.

3:20 – The 2 people swim towards The Curator.

The Curator asks, “Are you kids? Do you think of yourselves as kids?”

They laugh.

The female replies, “I’m not a kid.”

The male replies, “I’m a kid. I don’t have to pay rent yet!”

3:25 – Together they begin to talk about the concept of “youth,” what constitutes being a kid and how it is an abstract concept. Donna (16 yrs of age) refuses to be thought of as a kid and reiterates once again that she is not a kid, without explanation. Tyson (15 yrs of age) tosses out a range of different examples that trouble the concept of childhood and youth. They all laugh together. (Shaw, “Daily Report #1”)

The social impresario, then, is keen on generating beauty and amazement, wanting to dazzle, but seeking the civic sphere as the challenging arena for these encounters, anxious to make the world a better place while still providing the requisite thrills, spills and chills. I adopt this identity as an experiment, developing and testing criteria, wanting, ultimately, my neighborhood to be a better place, even as I yearn for a statue to be erected in my honor. But it will be a wooden statue, only around long enough to inspire a generation or two before it's absorbed back into the same ground that will devour me.

Criteria to determine Beautiful Civic Engagement

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. Examples.
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.

Works Cited

Kincaid, James R. "Little Miss Sunshine: America's Obsession with Jon Benet Ramsey." Slate.com. 21 August 2006 <<http://www.slate.com/id/2148089/>>

Shaw, Christine. "You think this is easy?" <<http://www.publicacts.ca/act21/>>

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---. "Daily Report #3." *The Floating Curator* <<http://www.publicacts.ca/act21/>>

Notes

¹ A full account of *The Floating Curator* can be found on Christine Shaw's blog, "ACT 21. CHILDHOOD": <<http://www.publicacts.ca/act21/>>