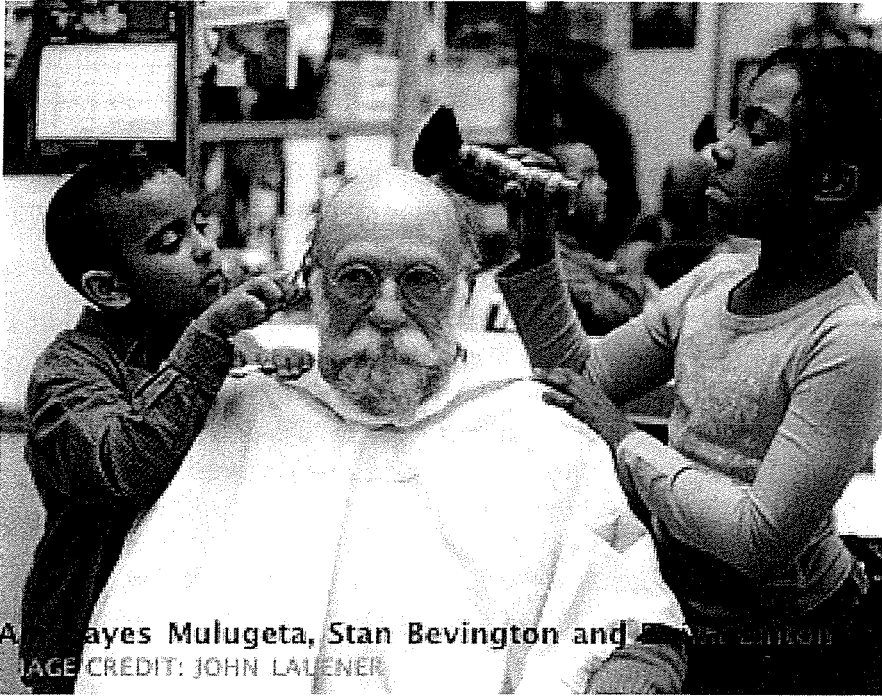


# TORONTO LIFE

## Running With Scissors

Artist Darren O'Donnell's *Haircuts by Children* gives kids the opportunity to shape their destinies while giving you a new coif By Jason McBride



In books (*Social Acupuncture*, *Your Secrets Sleep With Me*), performance art (*Diplomatic Immunities*) and plays (*A Suicide-Site Guide to the City*), artist Darren O'Donnell has tried to do one simple thing—get people to talk to one another. As interested in removing social inhibitions as he is in producing unique forms of art and entertainment, O'Donnell has created situations in which strangers interact in the public sphere. In his latest project, *Haircuts by Children*, O'Donnell rounded up a group of 10-year-olds and trained them to cut hair; throughout May they're offering free trims to anyone who wants one. O'Donnell's point? To illustrate that kids are creative and competent individuals whose aesthetic—and, by extension, political—choices should be trusted. Scary or sublime? Make yourself an appointment and find out.

### How will *Haircuts by Children* work?

It's exactly what the title says. We're working with a Grade 5/6 class at Parkdale Public School and we're training the kids, with certified, licensed hair stylists, to cut hair. Then, for four hours every Saturday in May, at a different salon [see list below], we'll be offering haircuts to anyone who wants their hair cut by a kid.

### Do the kids get paid?

Yeah, I forget how much. It's an honorarium. It's more than I'm getting.

### And what's the thinking behind this project?

It's part of a larger practice I call Social Acupuncture. We do stuff that induces atypical encounters between strangers in the public sphere. We go out into public and create situations where people who don't normally hang out with each other get to hang out with each other. Things like *The Talking Creature*, where we just get strangers talking to one another, or *Home Tours*, where we knock on doors and ask for tours of random people's homes. We have another project called *Diplomatic Immunities*, where we take a group of performers from locale to locale to meet and interview people; then we return to Buddies in Bad Times Theatre and report on our findings. And that's the show. This is all just to prove the power, abundance and generosity of the social sphere, that there's no reason to be afraid of people.

This work grew out of a dissatisfaction with the traditional avenues for socializing, as well as with what passes for entertainment or art. I don't like sitting in a dark room, separate from other people, staring up at flickering light or idiots on a stage. I can't stand live music events. I don't like those configurations. The grown-up ways of having fun seemed so dumb and limited. Only kids played. I wanted to figure out how adults could play, how talking with people you didn't know could be fun and anarchic, how it could lead to discovery.

The empirical proof of what we're doing is the blackout of 2003, when people were jettisoned out of their ordinary social circumstances, when power had been taken away both literally and figuratively. Electricity was gone, but so too was economic power. Those things travel the same wires. You're attached to your computer, checking your e-mail all the time, watching your DVDs-you're plugged into a network that determines social flows. The blackout interrupted those flows and proved definitively that the world is a safe and generous place. It proved there was something to, not anarchy, but anarchism. That we can take care of each other, we don't need the old hierarchies. (For one night, obviously. When you have to figure out how to ship food, other issues will come up.) But it was clear on that one night that people were really happy to bust out of their normal circuits of interaction. It made them ecstatic.

***Haircuts by Children* is an illustration of your argument for giving children more political power, essentially giving them the right to vote.**

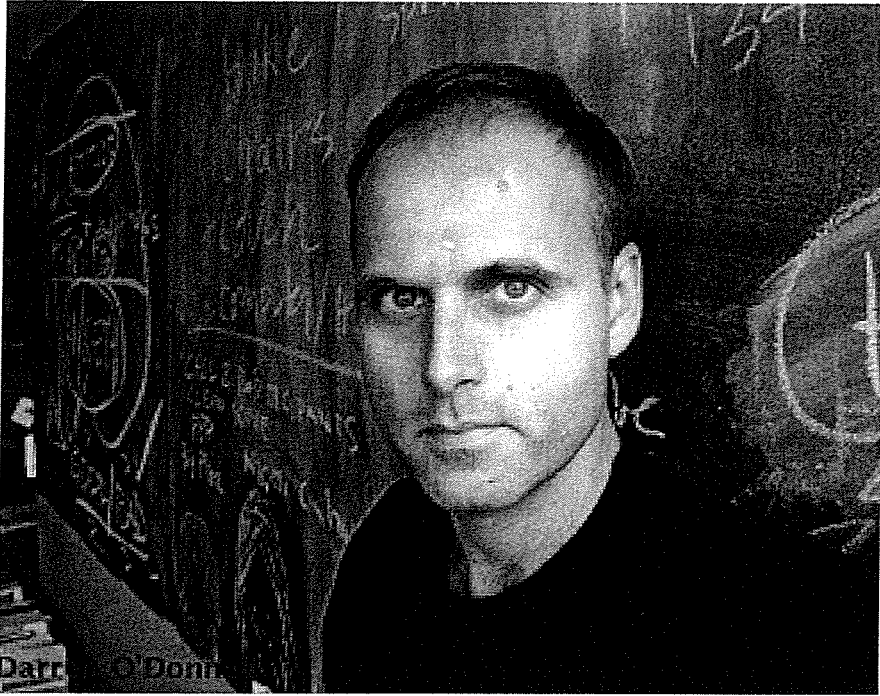
That's how we're framing it. I don't know that it will do that.

**Do you think kids want to vote?**

Yeah, sure. Kids want to participate. They often think they're not qualified to. They've bought the propaganda-they don't think they're mature enough, know enough about the issues. But most of my friends don't have a clue, either.

**And I bet most of your friends don't vote. Do you want to encourage kids to participate in a system that's flawed, that maybe doesn't work?**

Yeah, yeah. I'd like them to feel the frustration of voting and see that Stephen Harper gets, what, 39 per cent of the popular vote, and then gets power. I'd like them to experience the bafflement of that. I think some kids will want to vote and some kids won't, just like adults. It just seems illogical to not include children in the political process, to deny that children are intelligent people who can respond rationally.



**Do you worry that you idealize or romanticize children?**

No. When I was 10, I was all over the mayoral campaign in Edmonton. I was backing Cec Purves big time; I would go to the all-candidates meetings and get his autograph. I was really interested in him winning, and I tried to participate. Kids know.

**Who cuts your hair?**

Normally I do. But I went to one of the stylists when I was recruiting her for the gig and got her to cut my hair. I'm going to get the kids to cut my hair when they're training.

**How did you convince the hair stylists to do it?**

They were funny. You know, we trained for a long time; it's not easy. You can't just give somebody a pair of scissors and ask them to cut hair. One of the stylists is a former theatre person, so she was down with the performance part. The other one thought it was weird, but she liked it. But we're paying them. The salons were really easy to get; we're renting them. Next year we want to do *Haircuts by Children: The Cut Off*, and we want to have competitions between schools around the city and have it culminate in a *Haircut Idol*-kind of thing at Harbourfront Centre.

**In your book *Social Acupuncture: A Guide to Suicide, Performance and Utopia*, you describe your work as a kind of acupuncture performed on the social body. But acupuncture is typically something individual people willingly request. A lot of your work is done on an unsuspecting public-or at least a public who hasn't asked for it. And a lot of it could be perceived as aggressive. Do you worry that perceived aggression could alienate people and thus further atomize them?**

When I punch you, that's aggressive. If I don't know you and go up and talk to you, that's not aggressive. I say over and over in the book that I think human rights discourse is being applied too liberally. In *Diplomatic Immunities*, we get the audience to stand up and then sit down based on how much money they make. The last person standing is the richest person in the room; we then bring that person onstage to interview him or her. Misha Glouberman [one of the participants in *Diplomatic*

*Immunities*] asked me if that person was really consenting to that, considering the "huge power imbalance" between us, who are in the know, and this one person. A huge power imbalance? If I have a gun to your head, that's a huge power imbalance. If I have your kid as a hostage, that's a huge power imbalance. We're playing. So you'll be slightly embarrassed. If it was really so abusive or coercive or aggressive, people would easily be able to resist it. If you don't want to talk to me, you don't have to talk to me. Somehow, people expect comfort as their birthright. Comfort is not your birthright. Especially in a world where people are bought off with comfort. People don't want to endure discomfort, but it's necessary, to get anything done, to endure some discomfort. I think the fact that strangers can't comfortably talk to one another is an awful thing.

**What advice do you have for people who are shy or reserved, who can't transcend social boundaries as easily as you do?**

I would say it's not that difficult. It's OK if we have an awkward time together. It's OK that you're not enjoying it. I'm probably not enjoying it too much if you're not enjoying it. I use the analogy of conceptual intelligence. Nobody looks at a math problem and understands it right off. You have to be confused at first and then clarity will come. It's the same with social intelligence. You have to be made uncomfortable before you can become smarter socially. It's OK to be uncomfortable, to be shy; it's OK that it hurts a little bit. And you can always walk away. You can walk out of the theatre. People often worry they'll say something they'll regret. Hey, I live with regret every minute of every day-it's no big deal.

***Haircuts by Children*** takes place on Saturday, May 13, noon-4 p.m., at Wisdom's Barber & Beauty Salon (1754 Eglinton Ave. W.); Saturday, May 20, noon-4 p.m., at Camille Unisex Beauty Lounge (1524 Queen St. W.); and Saturday, May 27 and Sunday, May 28, noon-4 p.m., at Queens Quay Hair Design and Esthetic (208 Queens Quay W., unit 8) as part of the MILK International Children's Festival of the Arts. For a free appointment call 416-703-5491, or just drop by to watch.