

Interview between Darren O'Donnell and Chen Tamir, Nov 10, 2007.

I recently had a child cut my hair. It was an art project, part of *Haircuts by Children*, conceived of by Darren O'Donnell, a social practice artist based in Toronto. Organized by Art in General and part of PERFORMA07, it took place over two consecutive Saturdays at 2 in 1 Hair Salon and Hair 2 Stay respectively, both in Chinatown. The children were more like young teenagers and all of them were Asian and spoke broken English. They had been trained for a mere six hours in the art of coiffure. The timid but evidentially excited stylists were packed in with nervous-looking but faithful creative types.

Chen Tamir: Were you anxious about how this was going to come out?

Darren O'Donnell: No, I've done it enough times now that it always turns out well. The logistics are always a pain in the ass like everything, but there's never been any anxiety really.

CT: What are you hoping to accomplish with this project?

DO: I'm trying to engage is an atypical social dynamic, to make encounters between people that wouldn't normally happen. In this case, you wouldn't ordinarily find a bunch of kids who are three years from China, in New York, hanging out with a bunch of art hipsters. That tends to be the demographic that will come and get their hair cut here. So making a playful encounter between those two, where there's a bit of risk, not real risk but fashion risk, is something that doesn't happen. And all my work is about creating atypical social encounters.

CT: You do that in a really specific way. You break down social boundaries by breaking down or invading personal space.

DO: I guess that's true. It sort of started with this thing called *The Talking Creature*, a performance in which I would invite the "audience" to a public meeting spot. We'd disperse and everybody would try to find somebody to invite back to just hang out with us and talk. That's how all this stuff started. At the same time there was a Spin-the-Bottle game. It was during SARS, so it was about showing us not to be scared of each other's saliva, that while Toronto was quarantined we weren't afraid of being there, and that led to a series of more erotic kissing performances.

People were just asking me to do that kind of stuff and I wanted to distance myself from it. So I thought I would take it 180 degrees and start some projects with kids. Amazingly, people's memories are so hilarious. That other stuff just dropped. Nobody even asked me for that [kissing] stuff anymore. All I get asked for now are kids. I love how you can re-invent yourself because people have such short memories.

CT: Or maybe they're just always looking for new thrills. I wonder, do you do these projects – trying to create atypical situations – to provoke? Would you consider yourself a

provocateur?

DO: People do because there's an aggressive aspect to it. But for me, I always forget how nervous people are because I'm not. I've been doing this for so long that I'm really comfortable. I just did this project as part of Open Engagement, which is a conference that happened in Regina. I got all the conference participants to offer free massages to the students at the First Nations university. And people got kind of pissed off with me because I didn't give anyone a choice, but of course I gave them a choice. The people that didn't want to give massages felt the gesture was unkind or something because they felt bad that they didn't want to give massages. I just had to explain, "well, don't feel bad just stick with your decision." You don't want to give a massage, you don't want to give a massage. Nobody's going to judge you. You just don't do it. But people have to go through so much of their own stuff. A lot of this tends to provoke projection. With the kissing, people re-lived junior-high trauma and got mad at me and were just disgusted that I would do Spin-the-Bottle because it was such a difficult thing for them when they were kids. So, step up or step back but take responsibility. It's not the end of the world. Come on, we're adults.

There was something I did called *Back of the Bus*, which was this bus trip up to a York University Art Gallery opening. I invited people stepping onto the bus if they wanted to play a kissing game, and if they did I put them in the back of the bus and we would pull names out of a hat and they'd have to join this growing group of people that were kissing each other. I put the people who didn't want to play in the front. They had to listen to all this fun going on behind them but they had to take responsibility, "You don't want to play a kissing game, you don't have to play a kissing game, but don't get cheeky!" We're trying to reproduce the cool-kid-in-the-back dynamic but in such a way that you were invited to be a cool kid and either you stepped up or you didn't, but you had to choose. Unlike high-school where there wasn't an invitation, this wasn't exclusive. It was open to everybody but you had to take responsibility for your decision. There were a lot of grumpy people sitting up with their arms crossed over their chest just annoyed with all of this debauchery happening in the back.

CT: It kind of reminds me of the Milgram experiment and all these "unethical" psychology experiments they did in the 60s.

DO: They're kind of related to that. There's another thing I do when I work with university students or youth groups. It's a project called *Out of My League*. I send them out to the surrounding area and ask them to approach people they think are out of their league and go up to the person and tell them so and ask if they agree. I would call that training for this kind of work. I get to them to chant over and over, "It's good to be rejected" before they go out. You have to be rejected in order to build up immunity against rejection. This guy that used to run IBM said that in order to increase your success rate you double your failure rate and take more risk. It's about taking social risks.

CT: What are your thoughts on Relational Aesthetics or other kinds of social practice movements that have come about?

DO: I think they're great. I would rather them than not. But I side with Claire Bishop. Often they lack antagonism. I prefer to call it "fruitful antagonism," where things can be forgiven. They happen in a performative arena where people are triggered but it's easily forgiven. There's whimsy to a lot of Relational stuff and it can be annoying. Like gifting, sweetness, and lovingness. For example, Newmindspace. They have public pillow fights and bubble-blowing events. They're about a hundred people, but it's an homogenous group of people; it doesn't induce discomfort and discomfort is important. It's analogous to confusion. When you're learning something new you have to go through a moment of confusion. You can't learn a new math problem without becoming confused. And you don't become more socially intelligent without feeling uncomfortable. You have to suffer through discomfort just like you have to suffer through confusion in order to raise your social intelligence. Conceptual intelligence is raised through confusion; social intelligence is raised through discomfort. I'm always trying to create encounters which are slightly uncomfortable and weird for people, but in a way that's easily forgiven. These kids were shaking this morning, and the adults are nervous too.

CT: I noticed you taking a lot of photographs though. How do you feel about documentation standing-in or surviving after your work that's so experience and time based?

DO: With something like this, the concept is so simple and obvious, and you experience a lot here in a way that you wouldn't otherwise. There's an intimacy that happens, quiet banter. The crush of people is important. I love when there are tons of people and everyone is shoving around each other. I think documentation actually captures a lot in this case because the concept is a no-brainer. And that's why when we first did it in Toronto we spent a lot of money on ephemera. We made a poster that had lots of didactic information. It was designed by Cecilia Berkovic from Instant Coffee and the intention was to make an art object with this information that people would put on their walls for years as *art*. So the documentation is partly about that but then it's partly about my wanting these kids to be stars. I want them to be in an international performance art festival on par with people like Carolee Schneeman and Yoko Ono. And they are.

CT: But it's not the kids. It's *you*. You would be on par with Carolee Schneeman and Yoko Ono.

DO: Of course. But they're collaborators in the event. Without them I'm nothing. To what extent they know that, I don't know. But they're certainly the focus of all the flashes.

CT: You're soon going to Pakistan. What are you going to be doing there?

DO: It's a theatre show called *Diplomatic Immunity*. We go around and shoot video interviews of people on the streets. We ask them about the end of the world, what they think about heaven, describing hell, their fears, what keeps them up at night. Then we have a gossip session on stage. I'm trying to leave theatre behind except I get operating funding from all the councils in Canada to make theatre. I'm trying to make theatre I can stand. I could do a show about children's rights, or I could give children rights.

