

TUESDAY, JULY 31, 2007

**T:BA Darren O'Donnell Interview**

POSTED BY ALISON HALLETT ON TUE, JUL 31 AT 4:17 PM

After some thought, I've settled on the phrase "adorably provocative" to describe the **Mammalian Diving Reflex's** *Haircuts by Children*. The Toronto-based performance art group, helmed by Darren O'Donnell, advocates for the enfranchisement of children by asking grownups to trust a kid to cut their hair. Simple (and cute as hell) on the surface, but begging the question: Doesn't acknowledging that children are sentient, trustworthy beings demand a change in the way society generally treats them? It also begs the question, how big a sense of humor do you have about your hair.

I spoke with O'Donnell this morning; he's been in town for a week, working with elementary schoolers to prepare them for the event, which goes down this weekend at Rudy's barbershop (all of the free appointments have been booked, so it's too late to sign up for a haircut of your own, but the fun happens Sat-Sun from 12-4, if you're interested in gawking at the sure-to-be fascinating scene. Plus there's gonna be a lemonade stand! How cute is that shit. )

**So you're already working with the kids now?**

There's 20 kids from two classes that are getting trained [to cut hair] after school, then during school I work with the entirety of the two classes, about 50 kids. I'm giving them a workshop in conceptual, art, performance art, social practice art.

**How do you approach those themes with children? Do you bring in reference materials?**

I bring in stuff. Francis Alys, who's a Belgium-born artist based in Mexico, does a lot of interesting stuff that's also really simple and obvious. He makes this dog out of magnetic materials that he wheels behind him as he walks through the streets, and the dog picks up whatever objects are there that are magnetized. For one of his better-known pieces, there was this big mountain (or large hill) made mostly of sand, somewhere in Mexico, and he just got [a group of volunteers] to move it over one by foot... The kids understand that kind of stuff. We also do little exercises where, for example, I get them to write instructions for each other and then perform the instructions, and then we glue the instructions on a piece of paper and hang the paper on the wall, just to give them the idea that art can be more than just a pretty painting. I get them to question where the art is happening, who the artists are. Is it the person who writes the instructions, is it the person who performs the instructions, is it the person who organizes all the documentation and sticks it on the wall, things like that.

**I'm getting my hair cut on Saturday. If I just ask for a trim, am I gonna feel like a square?**

No, lots of people ask for trims, and [the kids] will do it really well, they're really keen on pleasing the client.

**I got that impression, looking at pictures from your website. The kids seem to take it really seriously.**

It was unanticipated. I was expecting anarchy when I first did it a couple years ago, and hoping for crazy haircuts, but for the most part it has even taken a while for me to convince the kids that when people say "Do whatever you want," they really can do whatever they want. Most of them would shy away from doing something that was too radical.

**Wasn't there some talk of the project not happening at all, due to licensing issues?**

The woman at Rudy's is kind of a by the book kind of person... I have a suspicion that if anyone [had questioned the legality of the project] in any of the other places we've done it, we would've gotten the same answer, but she was the first person who thought to ask, and The licensing people said it wasn't possible. But then it was just a matter of going up the chain, I guess somebody finally talked to somebody at the state level and they were just like, yeah, whatever, as long as there's a supervising stylist there it's not problem.

**So... why kids?**

That idea first occurred a bunch of years ago. I was in Chicago at this youth conference... I was stuck working in the kitchen, and there was a kid there with a pair of scissors. I tried to get him to cut my hair and he refused, and I was a little surprised that he would be frightened by that idea. I thought about how people are frightened when they're offered the opportunity for more responsibility, more power, how there's a tendency to balk when offered that, so I just thought that would be an interesting thing to make en masse, where kids could feel comfortable [assuming responsibility]. Around the same time, I'd written an essay about my belief that people should be allowed to vote any time they want to... like as soon as you can form the will to vote, you should be able too. And so it dovetailed with that. And the success of [Haircuts] has meant that suddenly I'm the kid guy. It's pretty crazy.

I was doing these somewhat erotic performances before, I was organizing mass games of spin the bottle, and all these kissing games in different forms, and people were starting to ask me to do all these performances, and I just got sick of that. So another part of the rationale was just to do something totally 180.

**Did you run into issues going from doing overtly erotic performance art to working with kids?**

Not because of that... people have really bad memories. Really, like the last thing you do is anything anyone remembers. But I do have problems with being a single man working with kids. It certainly generates suspicions. Usually not with the people I'm working with, but it'll be something like, for example I just did this project in Toronto where it was during the summer and we had this space at the school that we were working at... and there was one night where I was waiting with a couple of the girls, they were both about twelve years old, waiting for their mothers to come and pick them up. A woman was really, really scrutinizing me hard, and as soon as the parents came and picked up the kids, she came over and demanded to know what I was doing there hanging out with twelve year olds. Which, you know... my first response was "none of your business," but I knew that would only antagonize her, so I was really open and transparent and gave her my website... but for whatever reason, she wanted to de-legitimize me. It was like it was more exciting or more satisfying for her to see me as a bad person than as a nice guy who was working with kids.