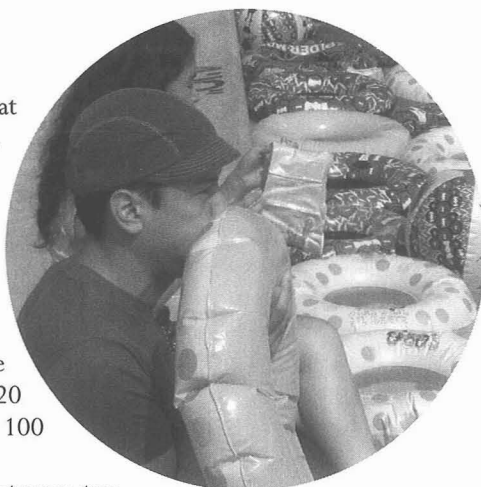


Beachballs 4 1+ All

DARREN O'DONNELL



Beachballs 4 1+ All was a simple intervention that tried its best to pretend not to be an intervention. Through the charitable status of Toronto-based performance company Mammalian Diving Reflex (MDR), 400 inflatable pool toys were donated from Liz and Rennie's No Frills to Alexandra Park pool for its Wacky Fun Day. Then, again using the resources of MDR, a call was made for participants to come down to the pool early in the morning to donate air and lungpower. About 20 people showed up, providing 400 toys for about 100 kids.



The intention was to induce an encounter between two sets of people who have very little contact. The first was the artsy culture types who check out MDR's work: friends, colleagues, and acquaintances, mostly white and, while not rolling in dough, certainly in relatively confident possession of social and cultural capital. The group included artists, curators, editors, producers, programmers, funders, academics, and one guy training to be a United Church minister. The other population was the kids who frequent the pool; they usually come from the lower half of Wards 19 and 20 (Kensington Market, the Alexandra Park Housing Co-op, and surrounding area) and comprise a variety of ethnicities with lower than average household incomes. Getting these two groups together for a moment was motivated by a desire to create a small alliance between the two populations, 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. The intervention was not so much about reversing an already existing power dynamic—though it did do that—but rather, introducing a relatively new and different dynamic, if only for the duration of the day.

Another of *Beachballs 4 1+ All's* concerns was to demonstrate abundance—thus the decision to offer the toys *en masse* to the kids and not hand them out in an orderly way. With 400 toys available, all kids in attendance could take home as many as they wanted. For most of us, moments of abundant resources and time are rare; we are used to “lack” as both a coercive idea and oppressive reality. Thus the objective was to introduce the sensation of abundance to prove that it's possible, it exists, it's just a matter of shuffling a few things around, but distribution—is always—is an issue.

If not for this abundant excess, *Beachballs 4 1+ All* would have looked a lot like charity. It was in its excessiveness that the event began to bear the weight of metaphor, artistic intention, and intervention—but an intervention where the artist is barely noticed, and instead of being a creator is a conduit for already existing energies and resources, redirecting them and tweaking them slightly in a quiet way. This strategy leaves plenty of room to experience the event with or without

criticality. It doesn't matter if the point isn't understood by participant, onlooker, or audience—the roles here being completely muddled—since the experience is being lived.

In his September 2005 visit to York University, Michael Hardt talked of unifying the opposing poles of charity and desire. Charity remains liberal do-goodery if it doesn't acknowledge and, in fact, encourage selfishness. It's not enough that charity might be the right thing to do, but it's the thing you do because you know it will render *your* life better. As long as the recipient is seen to be the only one on the receiving end, we sustain charity as an act of discrimination and tend to reinforce or sustain inequalities. Effective charity is work for others undertaken to make your own life more tolerable. In the case of *Beachballs 4 1+ All*, the benefit accruing to all the adults was the opportunity to hang around and have some fun.

Another result of the event was that adults and children who did not know each other played together, breaking one of the most sacred rules of childhood: don't talk to strangers. The prohibition against talking—let alone playing—with strangers is irrational; children are more likely to be molested or abused in the safety of their own home than by any playful adult on the street. There is a strong perception of the public sphere as a place of danger and atomization rather than safety and communication, and the lack of spontaneous play between strangers in public is one of the clearest indicators that public space is a sphere of intense, mostly internalized, surveillance. It feels odd to try to advance the idea that children benefit from playing with strange adults, not because the idea is particularly outlandish, but because it isn't outlandish at all. The whole thing looks to be a case of notions of security and safety once again cloaking social control. In any case, pools are great places to cavort. The sheer physical challenges offered by a tank of water level the playing field. No matter how powerful the individual, when you're only wearing a swimsuit and are up to your neck in water it's hard to control outcomes—you've got to go with the flow. While most spontaneous play is anarchic, playing in water introduces an element that ensures equality: almost everybody becomes a kid again and all parties have the potential to benefit from experiencing the affects of this equality. Play holds abundant possibilities for public intervention, and generating atypical playmates also holds the potential for examining typical and problematic power dynamics.

Nicholas Bourriaud, in his 1999 book *Relational Aesthetics*, states that today's artistic avant-garde has given up the quixotic desire for widespread social revolution and instead tries to simply inhabit the world in a better way. But what's missing from this strategy, and what makes Bourriaud and a lot of the current interventionist work vulnerable to criticism, is that without an analysis of power there can be no addressing of imbalances. Thus, there is a tendency for relational work to become glorified socializing. Rather than a relational aesthetic, which is too loose and accepting, what might be more effective is an aesthetic of civic engagement. This would involve an artistic use of the institutions of civil society, of community

centres, schools, seniors centres, sports clubs, and the media. Civic engagement as an aesthetic uses the consensual participation of these institutions and individuals *as material* to create work that, seen from most angles, appears to be mostly not art, nor even intervention, for that matter, but that takes modest glances at simple power dynamics and, for a moment, attempts to provide the sensation of other possibilities.



PHOTOS: Darren O'Donnell