

# „Difference is beautiful“

## – Über die Notwendigkeit der Vielfalt in der Kunst. Ein Interview mit Darren O’Donnell



Darren O’Donnell ist ein mehrfach preisgekrönter kanadischer Autor, Regisseur, Performer und als künstlerischer Leiter von Mammalian Diving Reflex weltweit unterwegs. Mit Projekten wie Torontinians oder upLIFTERS und MOA hat er Projekte entwickelt, die ungewöhnliche Wege in der Kulturarbeit vor allem mit Jugendlichen beschreiten. So, wie er auf gegenseitiges Vertrauen und eine ausgeglichene Kommunikation unter den Beteiligten setzt, ist Darren O’Donnell ein Vorbild für alle, die sich mit Diversität beschäftigen. Wir wollten mehr über seine Arbeitsweise und die Gedanken erfahren, die ihn antreiben. In dem Interview haben wir mit Darren über die Bedeutung von Diversität im Kulturbetrieb gesprochen. Er hat uns viel erzählt über die Rolle der Kunst in Veränderungsprozessen, über die Freiräume, die es braucht und natürlich auch über die Chancen, die sich hier über die künstlerischen Ausdrucksformen bieten. Darren O’Donnell hat uns auch aufgezeigt, wie wichtig es ist, über den eigenen Tellerrand hinauszublicken, die Bedürfnisse anderer in den Blick zu nehmen und den gewohnten Kanon der Kultursparten zu erweitern. Die vielleicht wichtigste Erkenntnis aus dem Gespräch: Es kommt auf eine langfristige und gleichberechtigte Zusammenarbeit mit den jungen Menschen an!

Since 1993, you have been working with Mammalian Diving Reflex in the area of performance. But, you are also conducting research that examines the present condition of society. Although it may be difficult for you, as a white male, to speak about diversity, perhaps you can tell us a little about your point of view on this subject. Do you think that diversity is an important argument when it comes to the future of cultural institutions?

There are a number of reasons why diversity is important, not least of which is the fact that we live in a diverse world and, to remain culturally relevant, our work must include collaborations with diverse populations.

The crass way to express this is that without diversity we risk losing an audience. Another important and obvious reason is that it’s just the right thing to do; pretty much everyone pays taxes, therefore, our cultural institutions should, as best they can, be of interest to everyone. Yet another reason is that culture can function as an intermediary, helping people reach across and understand our differences, contributing to more harmonious societies. Finally, there’s the aesthetic dimension: difference is beautiful; bringing together a variety of contrasting elements, whether those elements are people, languages, cultures or even colours or notes in a musical composition, creates more complex and interesting works.



basic questions are: “Who is here?” “Who isn’t here?” “Who should be here?” “Who wants to be here?” and “How do we work with them?” If the project is already defined, then, included in the rider (the document that accompanies that contract that includes all of the conditions necessary to accurately realize the project) is often a definition of the population I would prefer to work with, in an ideal world. For a project involving children and young people, there will often be a request to work with young people who, if they themselves are not immigrants to the region, then their parents are.

You once mentioned that you use art as a magical shroud to drape over atypical activities, allowing unusual social configurations or realities to come into being. Which role can diversity play in this artistic process?

“Art as a magical shroud” means that by calling something ‘art,’ we can get away with doing things that would, ordinarily, be prohibited, like allowing children to run a hair salon and give the public crazy haircuts. To the extent that diversity is something that is not happening, or not likely to happen, then calling some activity ‘art’ will make that unlikely-to-happen event more likely to happen. Diversity is only an issue here insofar as it might be something that is not happening, nor likely to happen, in any given situation.

With your projects, you undertake a special intervention in the institutions you work with. Can you describe the determining factors in getting these institutions started with the process of re-thinking their role in society?

You have described the methodology of your work as social acupuncture, a creative way to correct imbalances. How important is it for you to focus on the context of imbalances or inequality in general?

Most relationships with institutions start with a specific project already in mind, in which case some research needs to be done about the possible populations that we can collaborate with. If there’s no project in mind, then I start with a site visit and take a look at how the institution is situated in the urban landscape in terms of how it relates to the local social, cultural and built-form geography. The

In any case, the general request to our company is that the institutions they attempt to work with a defined population that they probably do not have much of a relationship with. When possible – and this is rare – I extend the relationship between the institution and the people we’re working with so that either we create subsequent projects together, or the institution continues to work with the people after I’ve left. With the young people and the Ruhrtriennale it was a bit of both, with the initial relationship lasting six years but, as of 2018, with the festival’s change of leadership, I’m no longer involved, though I have continued a relationship with some of the young people through my work with the Bochum Schauspielhaus.

The reasons for addressing imbalances are directly related to the questions of diversity in the first place, and the reasons are identical: 1. Remaining relevant; 2. Fairness; 3. Social health; 4. Beauty. That said, using tiny art pro-

jects to address the relevance of art to diverse populations, address inequity and attend to social health is a pretty quixotic endeavour and is unlikely to create widespread change. At best, art projects can model and test new ways of being together, proving that things can change, that change can feel good, but only at a very modest scale, with no guarantee of affecting anything beyond the immediate moment. However, what seems to be certain is that addressing imbalances or inequities can often make for interesting and beautiful art, so while success with relevance, fairness and social health may be limited, aesthetic beauty is more likely. But I do try to keep hopeful about relevance, fairness and social health.

to, but when the solution is offered first and foremost, people don’t tend to focus on the implied critique and so I don’t tend to piss anyone off.



To what extent should an artist focus on social responsibility?

With your projects, you’re pioneering new methods of facilitating participation. Can we ask you for some ideas as to what works as a door opener if you want to initiate the participation process and address young people who are not taking advantage of the cultural offerings?

Let’s talk about sustainability. You attach importance to long-term projects because therein lies the opportunity for the impact the interventions can have. If we look at your projects, such as Mit Ohne Alles, Torontinians or upLIFTERS – how would you view their role with regard to the change process in cultural institutions? In particular, in connection to the concept of diversity. Can the artistic concepts they stand for be an accelerator for new ways of thinking?

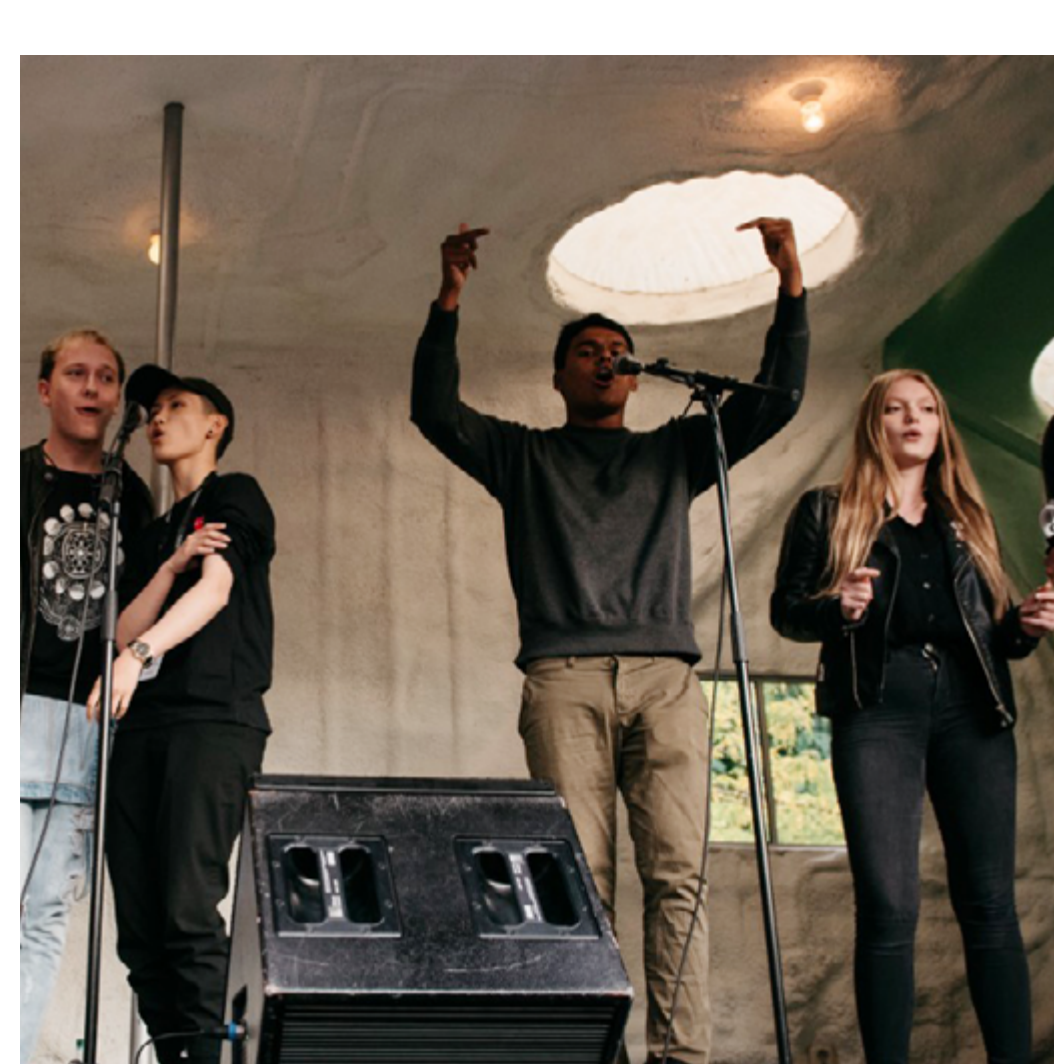
Personally, I try to side-step this whole issue by not working in an oppositional manner; I avoid negative critiques and don’t try to identify any problematic behaviour of others but, instead, work in a propositional manner, offering solutions, not pointing to problems. Of course, in proposing a solution, there’s an implied problem that I am actually pointing

The basic principle is the same that applies to working with anyone, which is to be attentive to their interests and work together to find things that both attract and challenge them, enough so that they feel excited and they make some palpable progress. With creative work, I tend to keep an eye on what interests the youth and then build projects around these interests. With other kinds of work that approach might not be possible, but I think the same principles – observing and crafting the collaboration so that it aligns with their interests – can apply.

With long-term projects that occur over the course of many years and many projects, there is a much higher chance of developing collegial and even familiar relationships. When people work together over a long period of time and develop strong bonds, then the possibility of continuing to work together is increased. Often, youth-oriented projects do not consider the young people as colleagues – they are merely some diverse youth that organizations collaborate in order to tick some boxes related to the social obligations that might have been due to conditions attached to funding. Or, less cynically, they don’t take the time to do the right thing, but they don’t take the next step and consider the young people to be colleagues. Working long-term and across many projects simply increases the likelihood that the young people will continue in the sector.

In your book “Haircuts by Children and Other Evidence for a New Social Contract” you wrote about Martha Albertson Fineman and her understanding of the “vulnerable subject”. Are these thoughts guiding you towards a wider perspective on the topic of diversity? And if so, what can cultural institutions learn from this idea?

win. Through accommodating the vulnerable, we expand the possibilities for everyone. A very material metaphor is useful: the case of wheelchair access. By making our cities, roads, sidewalks and buildings accessible to people in wheelchairs, we also increase the access for many other people who do not use wheelchairs but do benefit from, say, sidewalks that slope to the street.



Fineman’s idea of the vulnerable subject is that vulnerability should replace the more neoliberal ideal of the autonomous, independent individual. So that everyone is assumed to be, first and foremost, vulnerable, and that social policy – be that hiring policies or just the way we approach collaboration – should start from that assumption. So much of what is understood as the norm excludes a lot of people who can’t keep up, particularly if we’re talking about children and young people, who have a different range of capacities, many of which are devalued. For cultural institutions, the idea of vulnerability extends to accommodating those who might not, for example, be entirely conversant or, for that matter, interested in the prevailing cultural forms or artistic forms. The vulnerability in this case is the vulnerability of being a bit out of certain loops. The thing to do then is to adjust our understanding, so that ‘the loop’ gets bigger. In this case, the situation becomes win-

variety of people to apply when we’re hiring. With publicly-supported institutions, it’s unfair to keep these institutions at a level where we’re just able to survive, while still expecting us to make widespread social change. If widespread social change is to be expected from public institutions, like theatres, then there need to be resources to make this happen. My three terms: long-term, collegiality and succession. Succession being the idea that we are working with the young people with the idea that, ultimately, they will be the ones running the show.

Can you tell us in three terms: What must a cultural institution be able to tolerate if they want their contribution to the challenge of diversity to have a positive impact?

Thank you, Darren, for this insight into your work and for sharing your thoughts with us.

Before I get to three terms (a very difficult task), I’d like to challenge your use of the word “tolerate,” which implies that diversity is a painful imposition that must be swallowed like some bitter medicine. I understand that it might be a language thing, but tolerance as a concept has been something that has been strongly critiqued, as, by definition, we ‘tolerate’ things we don’t agree with. I think that, within the cultural sector, we have an issue that makes change like diversity difficult: in relation to the relatively high profile of the cultural sector, the resources we have to work with are relatively meagre. To make widespread systemic change is hard, takes time and resources which many in our sector simply don’t have. My company is very small and the leadership (3 of us) are all white. We’d like to change this, but when we put out a call for a job, we might get 40 applications, 3 of which are not from white people. We’d like to do better, but we are already working too much in order just to survive as a company and it’s hard to solve how we might find more time to dedicate to finding a wider

**Über die Autorin**  
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