

# Performing Products: When Acting Up Is Selling Out

by T. Nikki Cesare Schotzko, Didier Morelli,  
and Isabel Stowell-Kaplan

On 2 November 2014, Mexican artist Roberto de la Torre premiered *AYOTZINAPA, búsqueda, muerte, y resurrección* (*Ayotzinapa, search, death, and resurrection*) in Toronto. Presented by FADO Performance Art Centre as part of the 7a\*11d International Performance Art Festival, the piece centred on the forty-three students abducted in Mexico on 26 September 2014. De la Torre began by unearthing a spoon from an indoor plant box; then a trowel, a pair of long forks, and a rake, before moving outdoors to dig for more tools—a ladle, a spade. Now, a shovel, and then another, and another, until de la Torre invited the audience to take up these shovels and dig with him. Finally, he seemed to find what he'd been searching for: he drew clothing from the last hole he had dug as portraits of the students missing from Iguala, Mexico, appeared in windows of the building (which had once been a school) that surrounded the audience. De la Torre led those holding shovels in a rhythmic tapping on the ground while the rest of the audience stomped its feet. From an open window on the top floor of the building, an unseen assistant tossed photocopied images of protests over what had happened to the students down onto the audience. Less a call to action than a call to labour, de la Torre's performance became something between artistic protest and restless requiem.

Writing in the popular visual art blog *Hyperallergic*, Abe Ahn contemplates the possibility and plausibility of artistic expression in the face of social unrest. Responding to the events in Ferguson, Missouri, that followed a grand jury's decision not to indict white police officer Darren Wilson, for the fatal shooting of black teenager Michael Brown, Ahn warns, "[A] work of art can never be a substitute for political and economic action, and it's helpful to understand what art can and cannot accomplish." If we accept such limits on artistic action, and accept too that such work, whether implicitly (or, at times, explicitly), is always already imbricated within commodity culture, then its precarious economic status only adds to our anxiety that it cannot or should not intervene. *New Yorker* art critic Peter Schjeldahl, considering what he dubs "stunt art," asks, addressing an issue adjacent to that which Ahn brings up, what we might make of work that does risk such patent intervention. Invoking Banksy and Istvan Kantor—two artists whose work is included in this issue—Schjeldahl

ponders just what to make of this "illegal" or "illicit" work. "Stuntists" (the would-be subgenre's practitioners), he suggests, "usurp physical sites that they don't own, as well as the time of people—police, cleanup workers—whom they don't employ." Implicit in Schjeldahl's criticism is an understanding that this work, which also implicates de la Torre's collective action in Toronto, might be little more than self-indulgent and navel-gazing, appropriating a labour that the artists have not earned to make a point that might not be worth it.

These tensions and confusions, these preoccupations and paranoid anxieties are precisely what we are addressing in *Performing Products: When Acting Up Is Selling Out*. How can we, as artists, scholars, and critics, determine where art might and might not intervene into matters that exceed its immediate aesthetic parameters? Why is there such a pervasive fear within the art commu-



*AYOTZINAPA, búsqueda, muerte, y resurrección* (*Ayotzinapa, search, death, and resurrection*) by Roberto de la Torre, presented by FADO Performance Art Centre in the context of the 7a\*11d International Festival of Performance Art on 2 November 2014 (Toronto). Photo by Henry Chan



Faces of 43 abducted students appear in the window of a school, in de la Torre's performance.  
Photo by Henry Chan

nity that art might presume too much, getting in the way of “real action” and “real change”? Moreover, does art’s role, witting or not, within commodity culture render any political motivation it might carry with it a commodity as well? And if this is in fact the case, then is art—“art” here as inclusive of theatre, performance, music, dance, and visual art—that intervenes, that subverts, or that acts up only ever selling out?

This issue begins with an open, unedited letter from Istvan Kantor (a.k.a. Monty Cantsin) to Jeff Koons, offering Koons the “SUPREME GIFT”: six vials of Kantor’s own blood used in his action against (or, perhaps more appropriately positioned, toward) Koons’ work at the Whitney Museum of American Art in August 2014. The blood, by Kantor’s calculations, and therefore SUPREME GIFT as well, has an accrued value of \$60 million. Although Kantor’s acting up (or out) might be an especially violent critique of the art market, it is nonetheless operative within the same economy that supports Koons, if at a decidedly different level. Kantor’s action is still dependent on Koons and on the Whitney for its own subversive potential. Banksy’s acting up, in contrast—explored by Isabel Stowell-Kaplan in “Selling Himself in Central Park: Banksy Does New York”—is, at this point in his (or her? or their?) career, concurrent with his selling out; the incorporation of his work in major museums and galleries makes selling out an acting up in its own right. That the very idea of “a Banksy” has become as much an act as it might also be a product performs an almost perfectly Warholian move by which the art world might not only eat its cake but pay for it too.

In Paul Walde’s *Requiem for a Glacier* and the series of photo essays by Diane Borsato, art stands in—or, in Borsato’s *Falling Piece*, falls down—for larger issues of environmental and economic agency. *Requiem for a Glacier*, performed by an orchestra and chorus in British Columbia’s Jumbo Glacier range, combines “traditional requiem texts” with “a Latin translation of the BC Government’s press release announcing the approval of the de-

velopment [...] on sacred land known as Qat’muk to the Ktunaxa First Nations.” Its performance reasserts “a cultural value to the landscape” through its sound-based activism. There is a quieter yet no less implicating activism derived from flowers snuck from gardens in wealthy Toronto neighbourhoods; bodies falling, lightly, clumsily, or gracefully, for no apparent reason; and the scent of something pleasant and then increasingly less so in its abundance. Borsato’s *Bouquet*, *Falling Piece*, and *Cloud*, each taking place (at least in some of their iterations) during art-world galas, subtly gesture to the economics at play between artist and institution whether they are visibly on display or not.

Similarly, Peter Dickinson in “Showing Support: Some Reflections on Vancouver’s Dance Economies” demonstrates the various structures, often invisible, that contribute to the process by and through which art—in this case, that of Vancouver dance artists who make up plastic orchid factory, dumb instrument Dance, and Tara Cheyenne Performance—becomes product. Dickinson extends his consideration of the points of social intersection that might occur between the performance and scholarly communities to in turn “make visible—to show—through these intersections the work of living that goes into making and supporting the work.”

Self-consciously making a show of themselves (and, through it, also making the show), the producers of marathon theatre stage exhaustion on their own terms in a bid to reclaim their productive bodies from a system that would overwork and underpay them. Lawrence Switzky, in “Marathon Theatre as Affective Labour: Productive Exhaustion in *The Godot Cycle* and *Life and Times*,” asks whether “marathon theatre might become a potential site of resistance” as its practitioners “pre-empt their exhaustion by external market forces,” taking control of their bodies and making legible their own labour. If the actors, directors, and producers of marathon theatre are making manifest their own exertion, T. Nikki Cesare Schotzko, in “A Sufficiently Advanced Racket: Performance on the Margins of Art and Commerce,” in contrast, draws on three distinct performances—Vulfpeck’s silent album, *Sleepify*, released on Spotify; Mike Batt’s alleged copyright dispute with the John Cage estate; and Marina Abramović’s durational work, *512 Hours*—to examine what happens when the artist is engaged instead in the business of doing “nothing.”

Adriana Disman also considers the role of the productive body in the specific subgenre of participatory performance in “Performance Art, Pornography, and the Mis-spectator: The Ethics of Documenting Participatory Performance”—particularly how this body becomes part of performance’s documentation through, in Disman’s terms, *unconsensual* means. Disman contrasts two experiences of her own image—included in Abramović’s earlier *The Artist Is Present* and as it was appropriated from Disman’s own website to several porn sites—to question both the unconsensual process of becoming-product and the ways resulting mis-spectation might reveal unexpected possibilities within the work itself.

Francisco-Fernando Granados and Didier Morelli consider their own embodied attempts to reclaim personal, political, and aesthetic histories from their inscription in commercial publications. In *Chew, Drink, and Spit: A Book Review*, Morelli examines his own eponymous performance given in response to a book

launch and talk by Canadian conceptual artist Garry Neill Kennedy. In an attempt to challenge Kennedy's expensive, inaccessible, and nostalgic vision of his own days at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Morelli quite literally ingested the archive, cannibalizing his own art history. In "The Ballad of \_\_\_\_\_ B," Granados addresses the "violation of [...] appropriation" after his life story was taken by a Canadian English language textbook without his knowledge or permission. He reflects here on his own experimental script for an action-based installation, which might wrest back some narrative authority.

Joshua Schwebel and Deborah Pearson, artists whose work, like the other Canadian artists included in this issue, is subject to provincial and federal granting agencies, discuss just how we (as audience, as artists, and as a country) value artistic labour in both affective and fiscal ways. Entrenched in our funding systems, what Schwebel suggests in "Popularity: The Spectator as Statistic," is the assumption that artistic value might be gleaned from statistical compilations of attendance rates, creating a means of artistic evaluation wherein quantity equals quality, or at the very least, equals governmental monies. Pearson, in "Unsustainable Acts of Love and Resistance: The Politics of Value and Cost in One-on-One Performances," likewise troubles the notion of "value" as she considers how one-on-one performance, an inherently unsustainable genre (financially speaking, that is), might give value, despite its cost.

When Nicole Lizée discusses with interviewer Howard Wiseman why she likes "merch," why it mattered that Rush liked her work, and why artistic sincerity trumps the possibility of copyright infringement, "merch" functions as both an aesthetic and a commercial project. Whether kitschy, iconic, or, most likely both, the logos, buttons, or, for instance, limited-edition silkscreen posters Lizée wants (and, in terms of the latter, has had) at her shows maintain an artistic integrity of their own that is related to but distinct from Lizée's compositional manipulation of both sound and film. In contrast, Laine Zisman Newman, in the video *Survival Strategy* that digitally accompanies this issue, <http://youtu.be/VcO3pFWJLck>, explores "selling out" through buying in: buying in to the spectacular, to the mundane, to the state of being constantly in motion without stopping because "survival is now" and "tomorrow is not important."

As guest editors of this issue, we are also grappling with the issues of labour, value, and commodification. Our own economics should not remain obscure, and so we should like to make clear that we have, where possible, paid all contributors equally for their work, dividing the funds without discrimination between artist and academic. (Whether "equally," in terms of dollars paid, might be synonymous with "equivalently," in terms of labour invested, we have no satisfying means of determining—nor are we sure we want to.) We say "where possible" because it is important to note that Percival P. Puppet and his collaborators received absolutely no financial remuneration for their contribution "Body as Subject, Body as Object"; a fact made necessary by the ongoing copyright

suit in which Percival is embroiled with Marina Abramović dictating that he and his creators must make no financial gain from their work.

We are all cognizant of the uncomfortable dichotomy that remains between how artistic and academic labour might be valued. This, too, is a dichotomy and a system of economics we are trying to challenge, and if possible to subvert, within this issue.

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If by acting up we feel sold out, and if acting up is indeed always already selling out, where might we go from here?

We asked, in our initial proposal for this issue, "What happens when an awareness of the shifting field of value comes up against a real desire to effect artistic and social change?" And as we began writing this introduction just after events in Ferguson, we are finishing passing this draft among us while watching and reading accounts of protests in New York City following a similar failure to indict the white officer, Daniel Pantaleo, in the case of the violent death by choking of the unarmed black man, Eric Garner. We cannot know yet how the conversation we have begun with the artists and scholars whose work we have featured in these pages might speak to these broader political matters—those of race, but also of class, agency, and civil disobedience, and whose hemispheric effects will, and should, ripple northward across our borders. We also cannot know whether or how these words and images might become actions in themselves, but we hope they will become part of the ongoing dialogue within theatre and performance studies about the politics within and between these shifting and shifty ideas of value, affect, labour, and creative capital.

Peter Schjeldahl, ever dismissive of those stuntists that he deems unconcerned with the invisible, additional labour their actions create, asks, "Are we mad yet?" Are we mad yet at the artists whose work blithely treads the boundaries between civil disobedience and insolence even as it is co-opted into the very market the artists are challenging? What we are asking instead in this issue is, Are we mad yet? Reorienting the focus of Schjeldahl's anger, we prefer to ask not whether we are mad at these artists but mad *with* these artists and these scholars, allowing them here to begin to answer what that being mad might not only mean, but what it might do.

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## Works Cited

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- Schjeldahl, Peter. "Stunted: The White Flags on the Brooklyn Bridge." *New Yorker* 25 Aug. 2014. Web. 4 Dec. 2014.