

## INTERVIEW: Josh Schwebel's Anti-Social Practice

by Joseph Henry 23/11/13 6:15 PM EST

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Josh Schwebel, "Sinister," ongoing.  
(Courtesy of the artist.)

In 2012, noted Toronto artist [Micah Lexier](#) sent an exhibition proposal to the small artist-run center [articule](#) in Montreal's Mile End neighborhood. Excited by Lexier's name-brand stature, one presumes, [articule](#) accepted the proposal, even though its work failed to impress, as the artist even admitted. Except it wasn't Micah Lexier who proposed the show, and who in reality knew nothing about it, but rather an imposter — the artist [Josh Schwebel](#). The Montreal conceptualist had taken ("stolen, appropriated, whatever," he qualifies) Lexier's CV, sample images, and even Facebook identity to see if "reputation would outweigh a really weak proposal." [Articule](#) went forward with the show, Schwebel [outed](#) himself, and everyone's sense of trust remained a little worse for wear.

Such has been the *modus operandi* of Schwebel, an enfant terrible of sorts whose simple if audacious interventions have flummoxed and enraged audiences while flying under the Canadian artworld's radar. In his notorious 2008 [MFA thesis at NSCAD](#), the Toronto-native led his colleagues to believe an enormous sculptural installation was in the works, complete with Schwebel's promises, his theatrically weathered appearance, and falsified documentation. Attendees at the opening found themselves with an empty gallery and now playing the role of participants in artwork about the very mechanisms of expectation and productivity. With a larger target in his sights, last year Schwebel [crafted](#) identical copies of [AGO](#) admission tags, and freely passed out the 1,396 replicas at [Angell Gallery](#) in a gesture critic the [Sholem Krishtalka](#) could only label "[fuckery](#)." Schwebel's deceptive practice might resemble so much impudent mischief, but behind his provocations lies a complicated interest in the institutions, sensibilities, and rules that rigidly govern art production and reception.

With a string of international residencies under his belt, and a new installation titled "[[Caché](#)]" at [Artspace](#) in Peterborough (up until December 17), Schwebel seems primed to gain a greater notoriety. The Artspace presentation articulates a new level of conceptual complexity, featuring a false wall within the space whose door leads into a restaged documentation of a 2011 intervention at [Plateau/Frac-Île-de-France](#) in Paris based on the 2005 [Michael Haneke](#) thriller "[Caché](#)." Complete with fabricated catalogues, an invisible video installation, and Google Street View stalking, Schwebel moves his interruptive trickery into new territory. **BLOUIN ARTINFO Canada** spoke with Schwebel in the middle of a residence in Beijing, hitting on the exhausting motivation for the Artspace show, the ethics of artistic antagonism, and the duplicitous value of gallery

attendance.

**Can you talk about how you came to formulate the idea for “[Caché]”?**

It came out of a 2011 residency project in Paris. The project I had proposed was to find a gallery that was playing a video on a loop, and to try and stand in front of that video for the total exhibited duration, so from the opening until the closing everyday for the entire exhibit. I wasn't able to fulfill that initial mandate, but turning a loop into an extended duration formed the background of the project.

When I got to Paris, I found this exhibit [“Nul si découvert”] that actually couldn't have been more perfect for the project and informed it in so many ways. The show was about the role of the observer in relation to the presence of the thing observed, and in relation to its absence. So I started to go to that gallery and stand in front of a single video on a two-and-a-half minute loop for hours and hours everyday — which was miserable. Obviously the gallery attendants were rather uncomfortable with my odd presence there, but at the same time, what was I doing in standing there was becoming part of the exhibit without being included in the exhibit. I also had a video camera hidden on my body, and I was recording the video loop, but the effect of that was that the people who would come through the show, the background noise, the movements of my body — all of these things transformed this identical loop into an extended, boring narrative.

**There is an antagonistic posture in some of your work, like in the fake AGO tags, your “Micah Lexier” proposal, and your non-MFA show. Do you aim to elicit that confrontation, or is it more a byproduct of your practice?**

There's definitely an intention to provoke and to disturb, but it's not antagonistic, it's not coming just from a teenage [desire] to annoy people as much a deeply held value around what the role of art should be. I'm very disappointed by most art, because it doesn't affect me at all, because it's just obedient: it's sitting in a gallery and looking like art. Right now, there's just such a strong conformist thread in art. It's very conservative these days. I know that most people, when art does something they're not expecting it to, they react as though that's antagonistic and frame that as negative because it's exceeding or challenging what they expect. I feel like it's limiting to simply call that ‘antagonism’.

**In provocative strategies like yours, one tends to wonder “at whose expense?”. How do you deal with attacking or confusing an audience, and does that speak to a power dynamic for you?**

I think as I've grown as an artist, I've become better at creating work that disturbs people without being at anyone's expense. I try very hard not to take advantage or victimize; the level of disturbance that I'm aiming for is much more subtle. I fundamentally support an artist's ability to act autonomously and to provoke intellectual questions through symbolic gestures. I'm not doing work that triggers abjection or physical disgust, but [instead] intellectual uncertainty, neurosis, and paranoia. The ethics of those more ‘psycho-thriller’ type disturbances are very different, because there's an ambivalence.

One of the things I [noticed] when I was reading about avant-garde practice is this split that constantly happens between avant-garde politics and avant-garde art. Activists are like, “No, we have to have solidarity around an issue for ethical good,” and artists are like “We are about autonomy of ideas, and if the ideas aren't ethically good that doesn't mean that we're not going to pursue them.” The ethics of autonomy and of intellectual freedom aren't clearly ‘good’.

**I have a specific example in mind, the piece “Popularity” where you paid 750 people for five weeks to go to an anonymous gallery in Montreal and inflate its attendance numbers.**

It was about creating a statistical anomaly. The Canada Council [for the Arts] has this new survey that they send to all the artist-run centers they support, and it's like 40 pages of questions, most of which are about how to gauge success and the impact of their funding. One of those questions is how many people attended your show. When the Canada Council starts trying to measure the effect of art, the inverse is that art should have a measurable effect, and that it can be quantified. The quantification of art seems to me to be antithetical. I [tried to] artificially make a show radically popular for a gallery that's really

under-attended.

For five weeks, I paid people to attend the show without telling the gallery; the gallery had no idea who I was [and still doesn't]. I documented [the project] by sending postcards describing the action to all the artist-run centers across Canada, but I sent that description anonymously and without giving any information about which gallery I [selected]. So all statistical submissions of popularity of attendance would be under doubt, somehow.

**No artist-run center would know if their rates were inflated based on your piece or the popularity of their artwork. Could this be at a gallery's expense, if they think they're doing better or have a better show than they might actually have?**

Well, for me the value judgment of 'better' equals 'more popular' is already questionable. Just because more people like a show doesn't mean that the art is better; one person can have a deep connection with a work that nobody else will get. Art can speak to difference instead of conformity. If anything, the gallery benefitted from having better statistics, and at no point, I think, is there a victim in this because there's no proof.

**That's like saying if someone was murdered but you couldn't prove it, they wouldn't be the victim.**

I don't think the questions coming out of having a lot of people go to a gallery are bad either. The authenticity of the spectator comes down to what it means to be present to a work. What's a good spectator? What's a good encounter with an artwork, and are we simply trying to get bodies in a room?

**Not to sentimentalize, but wouldn't raising the hopes of the gallery speak to the ethical dilemma of your work?**

It would be if I were keeping other people from seeing the work. If I was doing anything that actually harmed that center from doing their real publicity, that would be one thing. But the action of that work did not impede the artist-run center from having their own public and popularizing their show as they would. There were just more people there. I think that a lot of the people who went actually ended up engaging quite seriously with the work, critically for sure, because the work had a lot of problems. There were a lot more people going to see that show than if it had just been left to the gallery's own means.

**Isn't that the exact barometer of success that you want to avoid?**

In that piece I was trying to question how exchange is being measured, and why exchange is being measured. I'm not opposed to exchange; I'm not opposed to a sincere engagement with art. I just don't think that more equals better. If you're just 'We want to do a popular show', you get shows like the AGO's [David Bowie](#) exhibition, or the **Marina Abramovic** show at the **MoMA**. It's not provocative, it's not doing what art can do. It's simply pandering to an entertainment model, and I think that art is fundamentally different than entertainment.

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