

# Popularity: The Spectator as Statistic

questions posed by the editors for Joshua Schwebel

*Popularity* was a public intervention that involved coordinating over 750 counterfeit public visits to a single art exhibition. In this piece, the artist paid thirty-five people per day to attend an art exhibition every day throughout the five weeks that the gallery was open to the public. The visitors were instructed to behave as any art spectator would, to stand in the gallery looking at the work. Each visit to the gallery was counted by gallery staff and submitted to an online database measuring the popularity of the gallery in relation to other galleries. Each day that they were “counted” the false inflation in the gallery’s publicity created a statistical anomaly in this gallery’s CADAC report (Canadian Arts Data—a web-based application dedicated to the collection and analysis of statistical and financial information about Canadian arts organizations). This action was executed unbeknownst to the staff of the artist-run centre or the artist whose show was on exhibit.

1. In writing about *Popularity* you state that you “are suspicious about the implied link between the popularity of art and its support through funding initiatives.” Can you expand on contemporary notions of value within the Canadian contemporary art scene and how these relate to the current funding models available to artists, artist-run centres, and galleries?

This project, like much of my work, is concerned with how we understand value. Currently all Canadian arts organizations that receive federal funding must submit annual reports, CADAC (Canadian Arts Data/Données sur les arts au Canada), that quantify their operations. Significantly, amongst the data required for exhibition venues such as artist-run centres is a lengthy survey of attendance rates.

In these reports, cultural work is condensed into data comprised by the *number of people co-present with an art object or event*. In other words, the popularity of an exhibition or performance event is used as a measure of the work’s success. When I learned of this, I had serious concerns about the limitations of the framework defining this survey: it only recognizes those encounters which transpire in the immediate space of the exhibition or performance, disregarding contact with the work through documentation, word of mouth, or even by looking through the gallery window. In the quantitative terms required by the CADAC, artistic work becomes measurable by its effectiveness in attracting a public into the gallery. Artistic production becomes a vehicle for audience production.



Over the course of a single, five-week exhibition, I paid people to attend a gallery as counterfeit spectators. I did so to artificially inflate the popularity of the show.

The action was executed without the knowledge or consent of the staff of the artist’s-run centre, or the artist whose show was inexplicably popular.

My ‘art public’ of 35 people per day attended a single show every day for five weeks, standing in the gallery for a minimum of ten minutes. In total almost 1,000 counterfeit visits were generated.



*Popularity*: postcard. Postcard sent to artist-run centres across Canada. 4 × 5½, 2012.

Image courtesy of Joshua Schwebel

The quantification of art’s success by its popularity negates the significance of divergent interpretations, different durations of encounter, and the potential of the work to communicate in manifold ways. The qualities of an artwork that may evade or forbid measurement are overlooked, as the spectator’s relation to the work is translated into a binary state of presence or absence. The exchange with the work, the time spent examining or discussing it, the qualitative affects it may generate, are rendered irrelevant. The irony of arts administration dismissing quality in favour of



quantity is what led me to *Popularity*, which performs a critique by complying with this bureaucratic fantasy, enacting a literal interpretation of their equation by putting more bodies in a room with art.

The quantification of art's contribution and its link to funding bodies puts artistic practices that are not immediately popular at risk of losing their already fragile structures of support. When funders put pressure on the artist-run organizations that support risk-taking by demanding mathematically measurable proof of success in the limited terms of "popularity," it implies that non-quantifiable pursuits are less successful, and therefore less valuable.

**2. In the documentation of your work, you locate *Popularity* sometime in 2012 without revealing the artist-run centre where the action took place. How important is it for the site to remain anonymous?**

This project questions the construct of the "art public" by generating an inauthentic copy of this contested body, which is qualified on the one hand by shared but manifold experience(s) of a particular art event, and quantified on the other by a statistical appropriation. In *Popularity* I considered these contesting notions of the art public by questioning who is the public of art, who "sees" the "work," and what exactly they are looking at. The project questions what properly constitutes an art public, and in so doing, exposes the inadequacy upon which a measure of popularity is premised.

The performance of *Popularity* established a situation for multiple publics, with multiple motives, and multiple degrees of awareness or ignorance of each others' identity to intersect. First is the spectator who visited the gallery to see the programmed exhibit. S/he will not likely perceive the presence of other spectators in the gallery as anything other than normal. Second are the "members of the public" commissioned as agents in my work, who appear to be identical to the former group, but have a completely different experience of the gallery in which they stand, the work

before them, and the other bodies in the space. Third is myself, the conductor or choreographer of the work. I actually never saw the work: I was never in the gallery at the same time as the performers. I spent the entire five-week duration of the work coordinating the performers from a nearby café, recording their comings and goings, preparing receipts and payments, discussing the individual performers' experiences and anecdotes, problem solving, and answering questions performers had about the project. Fourth are the gallery administrators who will certainly *perceive* the increase in attendance, yet without recognizing this influx to be a coordinated art action. Finally are the funding administrators who will also recognize the increase in attendance without being able to locate its cause or origin.

Another level of exposure for the work occurred through documentation that I circulated by postcard after the project was enacted. This card was sent to all artist-run centres in Canada with an anonymous hand-written project description. In circulating this postcard as documentation, I didn't want to simply inform people that the project had happened. Rather, I wanted to use the postcard as a suggestive tool. The postcard deliberately avoids specifying *where* the work was enacted in order to introduce the possibility that the intervention may have occurred at *any* Canadian centre. By announcing the action without determining where it occurred, all art publics and the quantitative data collected about them are placed under doubt: any person in any gallery could be an infiltrator or an imposter. All popularity could be constructed (and, indeed, if we reflect more deeply on the relationship between popularity and financial support and incentive, the more accurate this observation becomes).

While at the federal data-analysis level the location of the gallery will be perhaps obvious, at other levels of encounter, the work's exact location should remain hidden. For the piece to be effective, it must destabilize the relation between the statistics administrators and their data—the data will seem, perhaps, unbelievable or incredible. To accomplish this task, the work must

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*Popularity*: invoices. Modified scans of selected invoices for payment to performers, 2012.  
Image courtesy of Joshua Schwebel



remain invisible to the gallery administrators who collect the data so that they are submitted to the CADAC in good faith (or as sincerely as possible, since most gallery administrators submit these forms with a grain or two of salt, given the problematic framework addressed above). While many people encountered my intervention in progress, nobody saw the project as a performance or indeed as an artwork, and therefore the work had no explicit public.

**3. In order to conduct this piece, you were reliant yourself on funding from the CALQ. How was your piece assessed or approved by the CALQ, either retrospectively or during the application process?**

I had proposed the work to both the Canada and Quebec arts councils. The Canada Council, which is also responsible for the problematic survey, refused to fund the work. The Quebec Arts Council (the CALQ) offered full funding to the project, which not only made it possible to pay each spectator for the task they performed, but also, perhaps unintentionally, sustained the province's subversive political role in national politics. This exchange of payment for participation was important on a political level for me, but also was conceptually necessary to differentiate the performers' actions from a "normal" act of spectatorship. By accepting money, my participants became performers: identical in appearance to a normal spectator, but with a covert motive. The payment, which changed hands outside of the gallery, became the marker of differentiation between art/artifice and everyday life. Indeed, while this was a large-scale choreographed performance, I specifically instructed all performers that they must avoid any affectations in their behaviour and must remain as neutral as possible while in the gallery. Their task was to simply be present in the space. Anything beyond that would misdirect the work.

When I attempted to submit a final report for the work, I ran into some trouble in regards to documentation. For each performer that stood in the gallery I had collected a signed receipt for payment that I intended to use both as a financial record for accounting purposes and as a form of documentation for the project. The CALQ, however, would not recognize these administrative records of financial exchange as a form of visual documen-

tation, and requested photographic proof of the work. Without visual proof—evidence produced by a photographer documenting performers in action—in the eyes of the funding body the work was not complete.

I had not photographed the action. For me, the project resists photographic representation: the camera cannot distinguish legitimate from illegitimate spectators. Photographic documentation produces information similar to a statistical survey of popularity: what we end up seeing in a photograph are precisely bodies in a room, stripped of duration, level of engagement, or affective exchange with the work. Further, I did not want the action to be "provable." Photographic documentation would imply "outing" the actors and the space, distinguishing authentic from inauthentic, and would betray the work's and the performers' anonymity.

To fulfil the CALQ's requirement, I returned to the gallery and photographed people at an unrelated opening. I submitted these images solely to the CALQ, and while they had no factual connection to my project, they served the purpose of providing a visual representation of the work. As photographs that were an artificial representation of the project yet replicated the formal properties of bodies standing in a room with art, these images became an ideal representation of the work: in their formal replication of impersonation and substitution—impersonation of proof, substitution of bodies—the very falseness of the photographs provides a conceptual echo of the performance.

## About the Author

Schwebel received an MFA from NSCAD University (2008) and a BFA in interdisciplinary fine arts from Concordia University (2006). Recent exhibitions and projects include the *Currencies* independent project (Havana, Cuba, 2012); [*Caché*] Artspace (Solo exhibition, Peterborough, Canada, 2013); *Popularity* (public intervention in undisclosed locations in Montreal, Canada, 2012); as well as numerous projects in other Canadian and international venues. He is the recipient of a research/creation grant from the *Conseil des Arts et des Lettres de Québec* and the laureate of the *Résidence Croisées France/Québec*, supported by the *Quartier Éphémère/ Fonderie Darling, Montréal/Paris*. He will represent Quebec at the Québec Studio in Berlin at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien in 2015.