

# Present Absences



Joshua Schwebel, *Presentation*, 2008, Anna Leonowens Gallery 2, Halifax, NS. All images: courtesy the artist.

## The Vexing Art of Joshua Schwebel

by Jon Davies

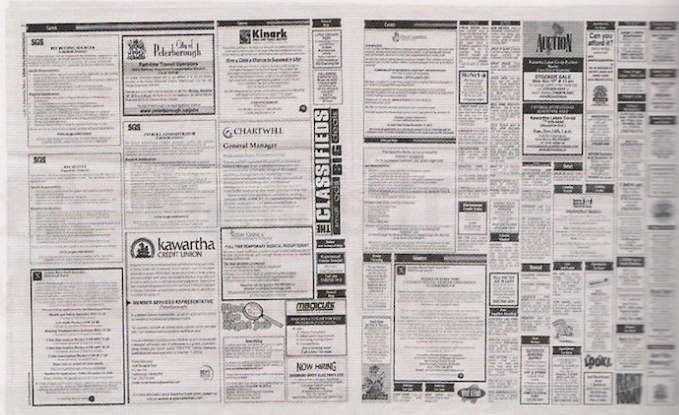
For his 2008 MFA thesis project at NSCAD University, artist Joshua Schwebel presented *Presentation*, which consisted of an empty Anna Leonowens Gallery. While such an act was nothing new in the annals of art history, this fulsome absence brought into focus the conceptual project that Schwebel had undertaken during his thesis year, one that only became legible as a performance in retrospect. During the lead up to *Presentation*, Schwebel produced fictional evidence of his labours that included staged photographs of the artist working, supposedly on an ambitious sculpture, injuries ostensibly sustained during work on said sculpture, receipts for materials, repeatedly deferred studio visits with faculty members, and promotional material. A photo of Schwebel toiling in the NSCAD metal shop even ended up in the university's official "gift report," which thanks donors and reproduces images of students' noteworthy artistic accomplishments. Schwebel's "work on his thesis project" was thus exposed as a performative ruse the moment the doors to the gallery opened and no sculpture was to be seen. His subsequent declining to rationalize and explain the work to the NSCAD public raised hackles further. *Presentation* culminated in an artist talk that Schwebel observed in total silence; instead, artist Michelle Lacombe dressed in Schwebel's clothes to lead a discussion among attendees. Tensions ran high as agitated faculty and students worked through the intentions, consequences and value of Schwebel's project.

Described by the artist as "a performance that would only become visible in the absence of the event," *Presentation* encapsulates many of the strategies at play in Schwebel's conceptually dazzling and incisive practice, which has evolved in Borgesian complexity in the five years since his graduation from NSCAD. Schwebel's practice circulates around the question of when an artwork comes into legibility, and what form and role art should play in our broken world. The answer to the question "where is the work?" is always "somewhere else." If relational aesthetics and social practice have consummated the longstanding

discursive shift from art-as-object to art-as-encounter, Schwebel destabilizes the ground that audiences occupy during this encounter by keeping its timing a secret—often the aesthetic encounter is only discovered in retrospect or experienced at a remove, thereby dodging audience expectations of what art should look like or do. He also keeps one or more of the agents involved in the artwork in the dark or uninformed of their role in its creation. False documentation obscures what may or may not have been performative acts.

Parsing signification from communication (as the artist puts it), discourse from evidence, the documentation of Schwebel's performances that ends up displayed in galleries refuses to give an account of what took place and does not attempt to reconstitute an origin event. Instead it produces a confrontation with absence that reflects the audience's own desires and projections back to them. Each component of the performance and the documentation acts as only a fragment, and together they produce a destabilized whole that evades completion and "closure"—to borrow a pop-psychological term—like a perpetually open wound. Schwebel also choreographs the discourse around his works, manipulating the formats of the artist talk or panel discussion with actors following scripted analyses and even attacks. Mimicking the obfuscating practices of governments and corporations—national security agencies, federal reserves and bureaucratic overseers among them—he controls the information the public receives throughout the process, cultivating discomfort and distrust. His work pivots on questions of access and knowledge—who is in the know and who is not, and what is at stake in terms of power and agency when we find ourselves passing from one position and into the other.

Furtive and difficult to substantiate, Schwebel's ongoing project *Hiding*, which began in 2007, is a kind of building block for his broader practice that follows from performances by figures such as Chris Burden and Tehching Hsieh. Here the artist announces a date, time and perimeter of streets in the lost-and-found section of a newspaper, and then hides somewhere within the published geographic and temporal bounds. The ad serves to announce where the artist will (not) be, his body and his time committed regardless of whether anyone actually looks for or finds him. (And of course, seeing him is not the same as finding him, because you have to actually be looking for something lost in order to find it.) Michelle Lacombe has aptly written, "*Hiding* becomes the theoretical, philosophical and political action of a body simultaneously and equally (in)visible, present and absent—a trace, a ghost, a possibility and a multiple body."



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Passing as male, Schwebel controls the disclosure of his trans-identity as carefully as he does the disclosure of information about his work—his trans-status informs his practice and interfaces with his strategic deceptions. Arguably, the core of transphobia is a fear of appropriation—a key concern of the artist's work—and discomfort with the idea of someone taking on or going undercover



1. *Hiding*, 2007, (Friday, November 5, 2010, Peterborough, Ontario), newspaper classified publications, lost and found section.

2. *Hiding*, 2007, performance documentation Newark, New Jersey, 2009, Google street-view image: Wed Mar 25: 14:45–15:30, Bank St/ Washington St/Academy St/Halsey St.

3. *Hiding*, 2007, performance documentation Montreal, Quebec, 2009, Google street-view image: Thus. Sept. 24: 14h–16h30, Sherbrooke, Mansfield, Metcalfe, De Maisonneuve.

4. (*Caché*): 49 rue Brillat-Savarin, 2011, digital print, 36 x 40 inches.

in a gender that is not theirs by birthright, in order to fulfill needs and desires, and access power. Having “appropriated” a male identity, Schwebel seeks to subvert white male privilege and destabilize masculinity as an institution from the inside, while exploring the psychic tensions around fluidity and permanence, passing and disclosure, realness and artifice. Fascinated by the abjected figure of the fraud—the one who is exposed for trying to be something that they “rightfully” are not—his work is driven by a “difference that’s invisible that we can never prove.”

Schwebel’s oeuvre is roughly divided into elaborate, multi-part projects that evolve and unfold like a set of Russian nesting dolls, and more self-contained conceptual gestures akin to sketches. A witty example of the latter would be his project realized during a 2013 residency in China. Entitled *Beijing Insertions*, the artist purchased some of the knock-off designer goods that have proliferated amid the country’s booming consumer culture, and surreptitiously inserted them into the racks of “legitimate” designer boutiques. Once there, they would either be discovered and removed from the premises, or enter into the consumer ecosystem as a successful act of class drag and—to some—economic sabotage. In a similar vein, Schwebel’s 2012 exhibition *Currencies* in Toronto featured a pile of hand-drawn Art Gallery of Ontario members’ tags that the public could take away and, if bold enough, wear to gain free admission to the

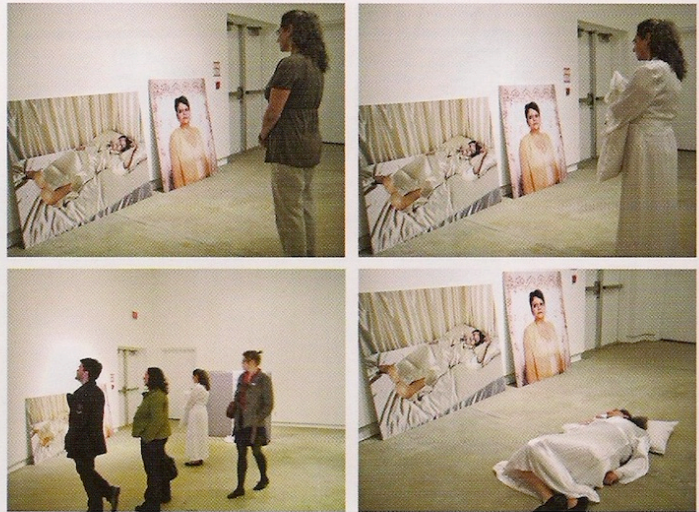
public gallery. The pile was accompanied by works on paper that may or may not have been forgeries of AGO director/CEO Matthew Teitelbaum’s signature. The ensemble scathingly dramatized the fraught codependent relationships between art institutions and the artists who often cannot afford to enter them despite having produced the objects that are displayed inside. The tags’ slogan, “Members Matter,” echoes the insider/outsider dynamic at play in Schwebel’s practice, which draws its power from systemic social exclusions.

Schwebel has also specifically targeted artist-run culture and the vagaries of publicly funded art in Canada. For *Popularity*, 2012, Schwebel used arts council grant money to pay people to visit an unnamed artist-run centre about one thousand times. The work only becomes visible as a statistical anomaly in the gallery’s attendance records, which are reported to the Canada Council for the Arts as a standard practice of galleries receiving their funding. Artificially inflating the gallery’s attendance numbers, the work critiques the quantitative measuring of institutional success, and the social good that art is supposed to perform. With *Do Not Submit Original Artworks*, 2012, Schwebel answered a call for submissions from artist-run centre article in Montreal as famed conceptual artist Micah Lexier. With much of the application material easily found online as well as an intentionally uninspired proposal written by Schwebel, the submission was accepted—in the artist’s view, more

because of the currency of Lexier's name than the quality of the pitched idea—raising questions about value, ideals and mandates of artist-run culture. (The exhibition went ahead with Lexier's blessing, consisting largely of documentation of the communication between both artists and with the institution.)

In the more baroque projects, strategies of fabrication and falsity open up narratives where truth and fiction promiscuously commingle. In *Vertigo* (*Between The Deaths*), 2009, Schwebel was paired with photographer Robyn Cumming within a 2009 group exhibition at the Blackwood Gallery in Mississauga entitled *Fall In*. One of the facets involved Schwebel's hiring an impersonator (Jesse Levine) to portray him for an extended period including at the artists' dinner and in-studio visits with curators, as well as for a sleepover at Schwebel's father's house wearing the artist's clothes. He also coordinated a performer (Andrea Snider) to pose in front of one of Cumming's photographs during multiple visits, mimicking the figure in the photo in more and more detail with each "act." Leading us down the rabbit hole even further, Schwebel produced an artist's book with photo documentation of the project as well as his own translation of the French-language story that inspired the Alfred Hitchcock film *Vertigo*, 1958, which had its own enigmatic, doubled protagonist, Judy/Madeleine.

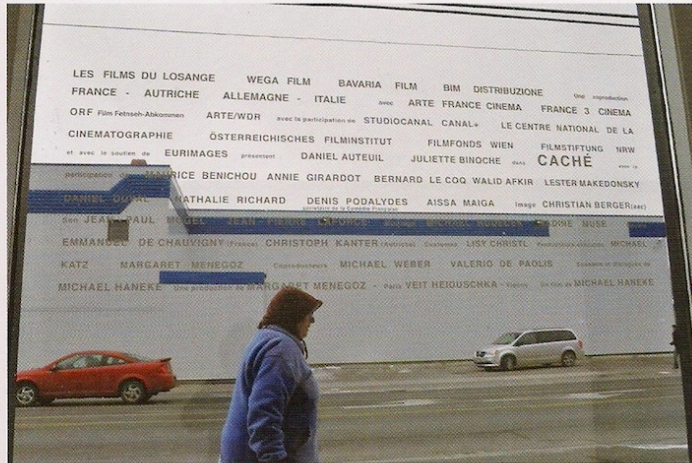
Schwebel's most labyrinthine project to date is (*Caché*), which draws on the 2005 film of the same name (*Hidden*) by director Michel Haneke, and a serendipitous visit to Le Plateau/Frac Île-de-France in Paris and their 2011 exhibition *Nul si découvert* ("Void if removed," according to the gallery, but "...uncovered" or "...discovered" are also accurate). For this show, curator Guillaume Désanges gathered artworks premised on being conceivable yet impossible, where the experience of being observed would entail their own negation. Working parasitically, Schwebel's project draws on the psychic and political power of the unseen and the out-of-frame. During a Paris residency, the artist sat in Le Plateau for several hours a day throughout the run of the exhibition, always video recording (or rather rerecording) the short excerpt of Éric Rohmer's film *La Collectionneuse*, 1967, which artist Daniel Pommereulle included in the gallery as a video loop. Schwebel subtly made himself part of a show that reflected his preoccupations with gestures that resist visibility, and contributed to *Nul si découvert* with the non-consensual but victimless crime of his durational performance as a loyally returning visitor—a "looped spectator"—and his constant, surreptitious video recording.



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In Haneke's film, a bourgeois man and his family are spooked by videotapes delivered to their door that initially only show a surveillance recording of the façade of their home. As the tapes continue to arrive, the man comes to believe that an Algerian orphan whom he wronged as a child (the boy was taken in by his family in the aftermath of the 1961 Paris massacre of Algerian demonstrators) was somehow seeking revenge, and the film



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1. *Vertigo (Between the Deaths)*, 2009, unannounced performance by Andrea Snider, 5-week duration, each performance 30 minutes. Blackwood Gallery, Mississauga, part of "Fall In," curated by Christof Migone. Photograph: Jesse Levine impersonating artist Joshua Schwebel.

2. *[Caché]: Cassettes*, 2011, markers and pen on paper.

3. *[Caché]: Credits*, 2013, vinyl lettering, installation at Artspace, Peterborough.

4. *[Caché]: Avertissements*, 2013, publicity material (members of the centre are mailed a Google street-view image of their own address).

is suffused with a sense that France's colonial and post-colonial violence is unfinished history, at risk of exploding in every interaction. However, the identity and motivations of the voyeur remain resolutely intangible. In Haneke's "unknown observer," Schwebel found the perfect complement to the "unobservable object" that was the central concern of Désanges's exhibition.

When on view at Artspace in Peterborough in 2013, Schwebel's (*Caché*) consisted of numerous interrelated components. Before the exhibition opening, Schwebel looked up every address on the Artspace mailing list, capturing the Google street-view image of each subscriber's residence in order to send everyone an individualized postcard of their own home. This sent the message that everyone on the list was under surveillance—and by the artist in particular. Schwebel had also made daily deliveries of the tapes of his daily rerecordings of the video loop from *Nul si découvert* to 49 rue Brillat-Savarin, the address that played the role of the outside of the family's home in *Caché*. This action cites the

chilling act of surveillance at the heart of the film to the home's actual owners (this intervention—with Schwebel embodying a fictional terrorizer in the real world—stands out in the artist's mind as "going too far"). In the gallery, Schwebel presented hand-drawn replicas of the videotape boxes that he had dropped off at the Paris home, and a still created from multiple superimposed images he had shot once per day from the *Caché* voyeur's point-of-view of 49 rue Brillat-Savarin's façade. The exhibition also included a VHS deck looping Schwebel's footage of *La Collectionneuse* (without an output, so the images are invisible), and copies of the catalogue for *Nul si découvert* into which Schwebel has inserted himself as if he had been an official participating artist. Finally, he transformed the architecture of the space: a false wall replicated Le Plateau's entrance and signage, and a peephole facing out towards Aylmer St. North created a point-of-view to replicate Haneke's film's opening credits, here against the backdrop of downtown Peterborough rather than 49 rue Brillat-Savarin in Paris.

Schwebel creates situations that put the integrity of institutions and the conventions of art's consumption at risk. Do such acts of counterfeit and *détournement* have consequences? Certainly. However, Schwebel's practice is inspired by the politics of the whistleblower: the individual who holds personal ethics firm in the face of the hallowed "bottom line" of institutional self-protection and profit, which keeps most of us afraid to resist. While the rhetoric of much contemporary art is of critical rigour, and there is great symbolic capital to risk-taking (artists are rewarded for endangering themselves, Schwebel notes), his work pokes, prods and troubles institutions and their often dehumanizing and destructive logics. Branded as antagonistic, his works have attracted considerable suspicion and even vitriol, resulting in a distorted image of the artist as bad-boy poseur. (Schwebel remarked to me that artistic interventions far more violent than his have been digested into the canon once we achieved a safe historical remove from their original political contexts.) While Schwebel is careful to try to mitigate any collateral damage the agents involved in his projects might suffer in the process of his committed critique of systemic wrongs, he is ultimately willing to take the risks associated with perpetrating deeds, refusing the art-world convention of criticality in name only. ■

Jon Davies is a Toronto-based writer. In 2009 he wrote a book on the film *Trash* by Andy Warhol and Paul Morrissey for the series "Queer Film Classics." He is currently the Associate Curator at Oakville galleries.