

Jennifer Kidwell on **PERFORMING**

Donelle Woolford

Donelle Woolford, the fictitious artist whose work has become a collaboration between Joe Scanlan, Abigail Ramsay and me, has done an extraordinary thing. Her existence exhorts the public to rally and come to her defense, but has simultaneously exposed its inability to do so.

Years ago, visual artist Joe Scanlan made a series of paintings from wood scraps in his New Haven studio that he felt were uninteresting as part of his own oeuvre. So, he created the para-fiction Donelle Woolford, and those paintings became hers. "Para-fiction" — the practice of creating a fictional artist with its own body of objects, a term coined by art historian Carrie Lambert-Beatty — is now a near-ubiquitous practice in which artists have engaged for quite some time (Marcel Duchamp's *Rrose Sélavy* emerged in the 1920s). Though it

was once arguably a transgressive act of duping the public, this now fairly common practice generally no longer raises eyebrows. However, identity politics complicate Donelle Woolford: Joe is white, male and middle-aged; Donelle is black, female and young-ish. The conceit that a(nother) middle-aged white man is profiting off of a young black woman who, not being an actual person, can reap no benefit from this relationship is certainly disturbing. Many argue that Joe's creation of Donelle exploits her political body. This has incited a broad controversy: there have been articles about Donelle in the *LA Times*, the *New York Observer*, and online news sources such as *hyperallergic.com* and countless blogs; there is an extraordinarily lengthy — and contentious — Facebook thread; there was even a demonstration of sorts in January at the LA Book Fair staged

by a young black female artist; etc, etc. Finally, there was the decision of HOWDOYOU SAY AMINAFRICAN?, a collective of African-descended artists, to withdraw its piece from the 2014 Whitney Biennial because of Donelle's inclusion in the exhibition. Amid all of this ire and reportage, there is a salient differing factor involved in our para-fictional collaboration that has been ironically overlooked. Donelle not only has a body of work, both plastic and live, she also has bodies. Currently she is played by me and by fellow performer Abigail Ramsay, sometimes at the same time and place. We are the performative authors in this project and Joe the visual author. We perform Donelle at her openings — Abigail even spent a month in residence at the ICA — as well as her performance pieces, which so far include her take on Dan Graham's seminal *Performer/Audience/Mirror* (in our case a duet performed by me and Abigail), as well as *Dick's Jokes*, a re-creation of a seventies-era Richard Pryor stand-up routine (a solo piece created/performed by me). Our participation could complicate what many consider a clear example of exploitation. But, so far it hasn't, because Abigail and I have largely been left out of the discussion, as if we, like Donelle, do not exist.

As the originator of the project, it certainly makes sense that Joe's name is most closely associated with it. However, though the discussions have centered on the positioning and use of the black body in this work, little attention has been given to my and Abigail's artistic contributions (performative, authorial and otherwise), the actual black bodies being discussed. Joe creates Donelle's plastic pieces, and in turn, Abigail and I create her performative pieces. Our bodies serve our art. We have always operated as if the disciplines involved in the creation and performance of such a piece are evident, a stance that now feels naïve. Despite the fact that we are makers of the project, we are most often parenthetically referred to as the "actors" Joe has "hired" for "his piece," and we have been treated as such by voices on all sides of these debates and controversies: anonymous black bodies in service of a white male. We are positioned to serve not only Joe's alleged agenda but, paradoxically, are then also in service of a system that would be critical of this agenda. For instance, during a lengthy and heated "talk-back" (it felt more like an inquisition) in Minneapolis, a white male let me know in no uncertain terms that as I could

always be "fired," I am in fact not a collaborator in this project, although I said the opposite. This patronization is emblematic of the inherent irony: this white man — within the context of castigating Joe for exerting his white male privilege — tried to contradict me and to override my self-identification. And so it often happens that by dismissing my agency and, in turn, my artistry, the same public that seeks to decry Joe's practice negates mine. If, as was stated by the Yams Collective, Donelle Woolford is a practice of white male "masturbation," then the public has erased — rubbed, if you will — me and Abigail out of the context of our own piece. This is too bad for many reasons, not the least of which is that Donelle could be a platform for a truly significant discussion about curatorial practice as it concerns race and the politics of collaboration.

For instance, while it is true that Joe Scanlan would not have gotten into the Biennial if Donelle Woolford wasn't black, it is just as true that Donelle wouldn't have gotten in, nor would I, if Joe wasn't white. The symbiosis of access and privilege inherent in this relationship is far more complex and provocative than most of the contention that's hitherto been raised. A truly fecund conversation would be about how the one political body is aided by the other and vice versa, though they are understood and treated in opposition. Or how Donelle has catalyzed and challenged Joe's hegemony within a system in which "white male" is so quotidian as to almost be able to disappear. And further, how Joe's white male-ness has at times invalidated his voice within this context. We could discuss the different quality of Donelle's reception in Europe where, while xenophobia is ubiquitous, "racism" is not universally acknowledged, so Donelle — and Joe — can be exoticized without censure. We could discuss how differently collaboration and authorship are understood for visual versus performing artists, and how much more sensitive we are to value and profit when race and privilege are a part of the context. Finally, we could discuss why Abigail and I, though central to the conversation, have not been up for discussion. I decided to become a part of this project because it could prompt so many issues, as art ideally does. I hope Donelle continues to provoke and challenge and, moreover, that she manages to effect a dialectical shift.

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Jennifer Kidwell is a performing artist who lives in Philadelphia.

ESSAY

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