

Rat Race / Art Race
by Edwin Janzen

“Success is the necessary misfortune of life, but it is only to the very unfortunate that it comes early.”
 —Anthony Trollope

The Quebec student protests of 2012 shone new light onto the challenges facing young people in the context of twenty-first century capitalism. It is now normal, we learned, for graduates in today’s “age of austerity” to enter the workforce carrying five-figure debts. Upon graduating, moreover, these young people encounter far stiffer competition and fewer opportunities than previous generations.

The contemporary art world has not proved immune to such trends. In 2012, for example, *articule*, a medium-size artist-run centre, received exactly 220 submissions for just four major exhibitions. Likewise, upon releasing a job posting for a new outreach coordinator, *articule* received just short of one hundred applications from interested parties.

This is not the Musée d’art contemporain we’re talking about. These conditions exist today at artist-run centres—institutions in most cases created to increase accessibility for emerging artists.

The pond is shrinking, and the fish are getting desperate. The usual solutions—beef up your internship experience, volunteer in the art world, get an MFA—aren’t working anymore. What is to be done?

Fraud—now relatively commonplace in both the corporate world and academia—is one response. Essay and thesis mills are doing a booming business, while it seems that every new day brings revelations about some CEO or administrator who forged their credentials to attain career success.

It does not seem unreasonable that an emerging artist might attempt a similar strategy. Indeed, one has: With his exhibition *Micah Lexier*, Montreal artist Joshua Schwebel has, for the sake of art, elected to bypass the painfully slow, brick-by-brick, no-guarantees process of building up an artistic career from scratch, opting instead to assume an already existing art career, namely that of the Winnipeg-born, New York-based Micah Lexier.

In responding to *articule*’s annual call for long-term programming proposals, Schwebel submitted a dossier in Lexier’s name. Using information about the artist readily available on-line, Schwebel assembled a complete, credible dossier including project proposal, C.V., and so on. Upon being notified that his application had been successful, Schwebel then wrote to *articule* exposing the deception.

It should perhaps be noted at this point that Schwebel’s aim in enacting this deception was more than merely a cynical grasp at an exhibition opportunity. By impersonating Lexier, Schwebel hoped to expose how art-world selection or jury procedures may be slanted or clouded by an institution’s insufficiently acknowledged presuppositions about celebrity. His act of deception thus is the art—not a genuine fraud, but a gesture that appropriates the attributes of fraud as its medium.

Schwebel had, in fact, no expectation about being allowed to mount an exhibition, and has said he half-expected a negative or hostile response from the gallery. *articule*’s staff and board members, however, felt that the project could activate an important discourse, and indicated they were ready to go ahead with a show.

But Schwebel wasn't through pushing the gallery's limits, and asked whether he might be permitted to produce fake correspondence on behalf of the gallery expressing reservations over his earlier deception. This the gallery refused to allow. articule was willing to accommodate the appropriation of Lexier's identity, but not the gallery's identity.

Law enforcement professionals and criminology scholars frequently point out that the twenty-first century's intensively networked, digital environment has brought with it a great expansion in identity theft and crime. Schwebel carries this analysis a step further into the realm of art theory by forcing us to understand that our digital avatars, personae and profiles are not merely more-or-less-secure collections of data. They are readymades. Which in turn prompts the question: How many deaths must the individualist myth of the artist-genius die before the art market actually changes?

For his part, the real Micah Lexier agreed to give the show his blessing, having been contacted by artist and gallery. He also agreed to contribute something for the exhibition—not an actual work of art, but the colophon page for a 1993 print series titled Preparatory Drawings for a Portrait of the Morrish Family. The page, together with the letters of correspondence between artist and gallery, comprises the show's material form.

About halfway down the colophon is the phrase, "This page is signed by Allen Ash writing the artist's name." Thus, it would appear that this is not Lexier's first time being impersonated by another.

Though politically charged, the material world of Schwebel's exhibition resides in bureaucratic greyscale. White pages printed with black text are pinned to walls painted grey, while Schwebel's letter of acceptance from articule and Lexier's piece rest on a plinth beneath a plexiglas cover—a museological gesture that comes across as a sort of understated flourish.

Intriguingly, in this context Lexier's piece seems to retreat into the background. There is a calm assurance about his Preparatory Drawings colophon that has less to do with the piece itself but more about its position in the midst of a bureaucratic discourse of which it is itself not a part. The missals between Schewel and articule—and moreso the larger issues and arguments they activate—seem to swirl around Lexier's piece without ever really touching it.

Indeed, Lexier's work operates in an older context. The famous artist's success and status—the reasons why Schwebel selected him—and, indeed, his work, come across as aspects or accoutrements of a bygone era. The struggles of today's emerging artist and the challenges facing today's artist-run centres are a milieu in which Lexier simply no longer needs to operate.

Clearly Lexier's decision to submit a typewritten document as his art contribution was a deliberate response to the bureaucratic material substance of the exhibition. Had his work been more traditionally "art-like"—with evidence of a hand-made gesture, a brush of colour, texture, etc.—it would pop up, jump out and perhaps take over. But Lexier's document sits quietly under the plexi, a cryptic, black-and-white, typewritten testimony to a print series of the past, simultaneously located and dislocated, contextualized and decontextualized.

With Micah Lexier (and, indeed, with Micah Lexier), Schwebel has created a compact laboratory in which viewers can explore the relationship between artist-run centres, emerging artists and established artists (many of whom, we may note, were involved in creating the first artist-run centres) in today's politics of economic austerity. In that regard, Schwebel's show is also a call for leadership—in politics, as in the art world—willing to create real policies to address real problems.

Born in Winnipeg and based in Montreal, **Edwin Janzen**'s work reaches across artistic disciplines to examine how we define ourselves through fantasies about technology. Edwin sits on articule's board of directors.

Joshua Schwebel (b. 1980) is an emerging artist currently practicing in Montreal. He completed his MFA at NSCAD in 2008. He has exhibited his work across Canada, most recently a solo exhibition at Galerie Sans Nom, in Moncton April-June 2012. He has pursued residencies at the Banff Centre for the Arts, Alberta, in 2010, and at the Couvent des Récollets in Paris, France, 2011. Currently, he is the recipient of a Development Grant from the Conseil des Arts et des Lettres de Québec. Upcoming will be a solo exhibition at AKA in Saskatoon, 2014.

This text is part of a writing series by members of the gallery, reflecting on the works, research and projects presented during articule's 2012-2013 programming season. Edwin Janzen's text has been produced for the exhibition *Micah Lexier* by Joshua Schwebel presented at articule from August 24 to September 30, 2012, and is also available on the gallery's blog.



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