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BOMB POETRY CONTEST

Joe Scanlan
by Jeremy Sigler
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Clockwise: *Avatar*, 2008. Abigail Ramsay as Donelle Woolford in *Double Agent*, ICA London, 2008, installation and performance. Studio view of Jennifer Kidwell as Donelle Woolford, *Harlem*, 2008. Studio view of Namik Minter as Donelle Woolford, New Haven, Connecticut, 2006. All images courtesy of the artist and Wallspace.

In my edgy conversation with Joe Scanlan, I pretty much drilled him on his latest artistic creation where he hires numerous black female actors to play the roll of a fictional, emerging New-York artist named Donelle Woolford. While the body of work is his own, Joe has gotten us to imagine it as part of the oeuvre of an

entirely different artist. In our conversation, Joe eventually suggested that I stop interrogating him about topics such as Blaxploitation and speak directly to Donelle Woolford. Not a bad idea; he has coached her to appear internationally at various openings and lectures, surely he could direct one of his professionally trained actors to perform an interview with a probing poet. But had I ventured there—that is, inside the fiction as it is being played out in reality—I'd have wanted to be equipped with an avatar of my own so as to level the playing field. In any case, as Joe and I talked in earnest, I became increasingly perplexed by the work's meaning as well as the motives behind it. Is Donelle a bait and switch? Or is the project intended as a kind of calculated litmus test to measure the status quo of race relations in our society—like Jean Genet's *The Blacks* in the 1950s, Adrian Piper's *The Mythic Being Cycle* in the 1970s, Pruitt-Early's *Red, Black, Green, Red, White and Blue* in the 1990s, or David Mamet's *Race* currently on Broadway. Or does it generously provide me (or anyone clued in to her reality-tweaking presence) with a means to interrogate myself? Is Donelle Woolford a restaging of the age-old stereotypical racist hierarchies, a machination one expects when a white guy delegates his inbred societal authority? Or is Donelle Woolford delightfully perverse? Perhaps I am completely jaded—tuning in to paranoid visions of a dystopian, post-equal rights, corporate-engineered enterprise by a cyborg determined to invent new marketing strategies in an increasingly commercialized boutique industry? No matter how dubious or controversial the artist or interviewer, I am now certain that Donelle Woolford is speaking boldly for herself and himself, in black and white, and that he and she are both attempting to have a meaningful and thrilling conversation with us all.

JEREMY SIGLER Joe, the Donelle Woolford project is pretty outrageous. It stages a situation where a body of your work—Kurt Schwitters-like abstractions in scrap wood—appear fictitiously as the studio practice of an emerging African American artist named Donelle Woolford, an actor you have hired to play the artist.

JOE SCANLAN Donelle Woolford began ten years ago when I first appropriated her name from a professional football player I admired. After the first collages happened in my studio, I liked them but they seemed like they would be more interesting if someone else made them, someone who could better exploit their historical and cultural references. So I studied the collages for a while and let them tell me who their author should be. From there the work has changed subtly—like the shift from Analytic to Synthetic Cubism—but the character of their maker, Donelle, has changed dramatically; she has become much more contradictory and complex.

JER When you bring up Cubism, it implies that you're still involved in the debate about Cubism being derived from primitive African masks—and your gesture certainly adds a new twist to this narrative. Can you explain how Donelle has become, as you say, more complex? When I met her at her Wallspace opening last fall, she was, well, just standing there in the room a few feet away from you.

JOE There were in fact two actors playing the role of the artist simultaneously. Throughout the opening the two Donelles were doing a performance called *Long Crosses*, where each of them behaves like any artist would at her opening, but all the while maintaining eye contact and moving in relation to one another. At designated moments—and for dramatic effect—they would simultaneously cross the gallery, change places, and attempt to carry on whatever conversation the other was engaged in.

JER She too is an assemblage. The work may have a subtle complexity, but it still reads as a pretty in-your-face gesture. I guess that is why I brought up Schwitters, aside from the visual reference to Merz in the works themselves. Schwitters has always seemed serious and credible to me, while at the same time a lunatic who, as a Dadaist, had a nihilistic sense of humor and a desire to turn art on its head. I also think of Orson Welles, who took creative delight in

masterminding pranks, like in *F for Fake*, his faux documentary about an infamous art forger. No matter how grounded your project is in art history, I still see Donelle as a trick. What led you to “cast” the work the way you did?

JOE I really like this idea of “casting” the work. In the show at Wallspace the paintings were very staged. Donelle not only made the paintings but devised scenes for the paintings (and herself) to inhabit as well: there was a “studio” scene, where the pictures hung on the wall casually and a few of them were resting on the floor; a “museum” scene, where two paintings performed the rubric of precise historical analysis; and of course a “gallery” scene.



Donelle Woolford, *Studio Scene*, installation view, Wallspace, 2010.

I don't recall ever having *F for Fake* in mind in relation to Donelle; I guess I don't think of her as being fake. Donelle is fictional. Fake, to me, means bogus or deceptive. Fictional has more nuance; it alludes to the way characters in a story might get folded into daily life as familiar things we reference, argue about, and emulate. At a certain point they become mythic and even real.

JER And your fiction certainly is taking place in reality.

JOE There is a Patricia Highsmith novel, *Ripley Under Water*. One of the subplots revolves around an art dealer who represents a lucrative but very depressed painter—a real Mark Rothko type. The dealer anticipates that his star painter might one day commit suicide, so he begins to practice making credible copies of his work so that his cash flow can be sustained after the artist is gone. The inevitable happens—the artist kills himself. But the more paintings the dealer makes the more depressed he becomes, until one day he commits suicide too. I like the idea that paintings are not representations of an artist's psyche; they are what give the artist her psyche in the first place.

JER So you're hypothesizing that there might be no real difference between the forged and the authentic paintings because they both had the power to create the same psyche and ultimately to produce the same suicide. I guess my poems give me my psyche too, and without their fictional “version of me” I could be a danger to myself—a Rothko. But the self-loathing cartoon character who plays me in my work has a sense of humor too, and I enjoy pushing the poems into absurd darkness just for kicks. If someone who forged my poems didn't understand this, and were to miss the humor, I guess it'd be dangerous. The forger might get really depressed.

Donelle might be another synthetic element added to your *tabula rasa* (and she may be giving you your psyche and suicide as we speak), but she also represents a subtraction: that of a middle-aged white man. I see this as humorous and self-deprecating. It is as if you are making this apology for being a white guy, you know what I mean? It expresses a certain conflict about being Caucasian.

JOE I can see it as a conflict, but more one between the nature of the writer and that of the characters he creates, and to what extent they have to be "true" to each other in order to be believable. I'm learning about myself by developing a story about someone whom I'm not, and, in the process, I'm learning about that character, too. And the art world. I suppose one of the impulses that generated Donelle was my wanting to work against the tendency we have of understanding artworks through their maker's biography.

There is value in the fact that, when it comes to Donelle, I don't know what I am doing and the project has nothing to do with my own biography. Unlike her, I was not born in Detroit. I did not attend an Ivy League university. I am not black. I did not go on vacation to Europe when I was in grade school or have the confidence to put off college for a year, just so I could see what's what. I did not have any of the experiences spelled out in Donelle's biography, but that doesn't disqualify me from making art about them.

JER Nonetheless, if the work is seen and discussed in terms of race, there are certainly a few red flags or taboos. In this way, I think it is a courageous and very sensitive experiment. Not so many artists would be comfortable enough about the volatility of black and white to make work where there is such a high risk and probability of being called racist.

JOE There is a long history of black characters created by white authors. In American literature there was contentious debate throughout the 20th century around black fictional characters. But the arguments posed by Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin were always about the quality and depth of black characters in the works of William Faulkner or Nelson Algren or Flannery O'Connor, not about whether white writers were allowed to create black characters at all. So, at this point in time, I don't understand needing permission to do it.

JER I guess I am implying that some subjects feel as though they're off limits, at least at the start.

JOE Yeah, for some reason the art world still clings to the idea that visual artists have an essential subjective authenticity that is made manifest in their work. It is a kind of security blanket—that, lacking anything else, two or three vital statistics will tell us what an artist's work is about. I don't find that to be true or even interesting. And I think artists of all stripes would agree with me. I'm not saying it's not sometimes true, and useful, I'm saying it isn't *necessarily* true. The premise just seems counter to the desire to invent, to take license, to not know—everything that being an artist entails. It can really make you crave the hypothetical scenario that Foucault once proposed: to have all artistic production carry on as usual for one year but without any identities attached to the work.



Donelle Woolford, *Explosion in a Shingle Factory*, 2010, scrap wood, enamel, and wood glue on canvas, 26.5 × 20.5 inches.

JER It's hard work being on the receiving end of the artwork, so the "reader" of, say, Donelle's *Explosion In a Shingle Factory* will often try to find a shortcut in an effort to get a handle on its title, its image, its maker. When I started in poetry, I realized that many poets had come out of the academic system and were already aligned with various schools, or as you call it, "profiles." Another poet tried to size me up and I could tell he couldn't figure me out. He couldn't get a handle on my work because he wasn't able to get a read on my background, and thus, he was unable to make assumptions based on my pedigree or college professors, etc. I realize now that this was an asset—that I hadn't studied poetry anywhere.

But I don't think it should be too easy to interpret or digest art. I enjoy the difficulty and resistance, the challenge of interpretation. And I like the sense of conflict, risk, friction, even trauma that comes between an artist and his audience, or from literally offending the tastemakers—as did, say, Lenny Bruce. Let's face it, there's never permission granted to an artist, even in this somewhat protected enclave we call the "art world," to make transgressive work, or work that grabs onto the thing that we are all afraid of, and each individual artist who does so may ultimately have to pay the price. I guess I feel that somehow you

should have to pay the price for your gall, Joe. Right now I really could imagine an uproar around Donelle Woolford, not unlike what happened to Lawrence Summers, former president of Harvard, when he blurted out that line about women not being cut out for the sciences. Shouldn't we all be questioning your motives? This doesn't seem like something to take lightly.

JOE Please don't compare me to Lawrence Summers. Whatever his intentions, those remarks were idiotic.

JER Maybe so. But, like art, sometimes ugly *idiotic* things just come out. You know? That's kind of what art is, no?

JOE Not for me . . .

JER ...and then the artist or poet or whoever has to find a way to deal with it, to process it, or to stand behind it. Or even apologize. When I began to grapple with Donelle Woolford I heard this reactionary, ignorant, and totally racist Archie Bunker-ish, voice in my head grunting: "So that's all there is to it—all you have to be is black to succeed in the art world." Which wasn't a very nice thought to have ricocheting around in my brain. And I then had to begin asking questions about how the work has impacted my thinking and visa versa. In other words, was I just hearing this voice in my head, or was your work *planting* this content—*racist* content maybe—in my head as perhaps a sophisticated form of satire.

JOE I would say you're cynical, but that sounds beyond cynical. That sounds like the plot of David Cronenberg's *Videodrome*, in which people's minds were controlled by insidious signals transmitted through their television screens.

JER I am pretty jaded, I guess. But I somehow imagine Donelle as not just a fiction but also a marketing strategy that announces: "I know this otherwise innocuous work will be really sexy if it is perceived as the creation of a rising art star who has maybe just gotten her MFA from an Ivy League institution and has been included in a show at the Studio Museum in Harlem... and gotten the stamp of approval from an important curator like Thelma Golden." It's all very predictable in a way, right down to my reflexive instinct to image search the artist to see if she's with Saatchi yet, or happens to be pictured on *Artforum.com*'s "Scene & Herd." I wonder: would Thelma Golden include Donelle in a show of emerging black artists?

JOE I'm not against marketing strategy being an aspect of Donelle's character. That may be the most common trait of successful young artists now.

I would be curious to know what Thelma Golden thinks, but no more than Donna De Salvo or Helen Molesworth or Bennett Simpson. Because I would hope that, as curators, one of their primary curiosities would be how the construction of myths around art can be both reified and critiqued, and that's what Donelle is about. De Salvo investigated both sides of the coin in *Hand-Painted Pop* by detailing the devolution of the authentic, expressive brushstroke into a premeditated banality; Helen did too in *Work Ethic*, an exhibition that looked at how attempts to demystify art in the 1960s by making it more workmanlike became quasi-spiritual rituals in themselves. And Bennett and Chrissie Iles' Dan Graham show—and practically all of Dan's work for that matter—is predicated on how and when we challenge our perceptions and how and when we give in to them. How we handle that balance, intellectually and psychically.

JER ...And like Dan Graham, who is known for blurting horrendously awkward lines out in public that automatically offend people, I have to say, this project feels like a shot fired into your own foot. But this doesn't surprise me. If I think of past works by you, like the DIY Ikea coffin, or even your little artificial, Man Ray-ish teardrop, *Catalyst* (1999), that adheres to ones face creating the appearance that one is crying, I feel like you have spent plenty of time meditating your own somewhat vaudevillian demise and humiliation. So not only is a depleted Joe Scanlan replaced by an up-and-coming stylish woman with a fancy website (that depicts her making art in what I imagine to be her spacious Bushwick studio), and

tons of marketability, but you get the chance to remove yourself from this whole aspiration climb, to experience your own symbolic death. Can you talk about death?

JOE Sure, I can talk about death, but let me talk about marketability first. I'm glad you mentioned them in the same breath.

There are other aspects of Donelle Woolford parallel to the narrative license the project allows. It has become integral for me to think of Donelle Woolford, in part, as the "business opposite" of myself in the most mundane, complicit sort of way. The risk entailed is: does her existence increase my exposure or over-extend my resources? Does she grow my reputation or cause it to collapse? This relates to the idea of Donelle as a manufactured myth but also as a critique of that myth—the "hot young artist"—and its roots in the cult of demographic authenticity. That is the risk she takes: she not only bears the brunt of whatever hostility her existence attracts, she also bears the brunt of her critique of artists like herself.

None of this is predicated on my wanting to be a businessman, or on how much money I can make. What is interesting is to introduce the business version of the concept of diversification to contemporary art and allow them to mingle, get to know each other, see what happens.



Installation view of *Donelle Woolford: A Narrative*, Galerie Chez Valentin, Paris, 2007.

JER To me they mingle by creating a surprising pun. It isn't diversification—like hiring a black man to teach in an all-white department—that you are getting at, but the kind of diversification that applies to portfolios and assets. Diversification as a form of security, not inclusion. This is the work's subversiveness. But this pun makes it all the more robust and demanding, even if the best reward I can imagine is a politically-correct uproar seeking to destroy you. Imagine what the debate around James Frey's controversial memoir accomplished in raising consciousness about the technique of exaggeration that goes into writing memoirs—even as he was forced into exile it created capital.

For poets, money never enters into it. So you got me there. I guess poets are just a cottage, without the industry. But I'm afraid I read the work the way I do because of my own past in the art world. My first job in New York was working for Annina Nosei, where I stepped right into the context of Basquiat—this was after he died, when Annina was selling the last of her "primitive looking" canvases out

of that same basement where she'd supposedly locked up her young, highly-productive captive. One can see this blatant stereotype in the cartoonish film *Wild Style* that captures the art world just when it starts to exploit the graffiti artists and naïve street muralists.

JOE I don't understand why you're still framing Donelle Woolford in terms of stereotype or caricature. She isn't some repressed tic I blurted into a live microphone—she's the main character in a story, an ongoing performance, that's been going on for several years now. We should be talking about character interpretation, plot structure, costume, and narrative. Or maybe you should be talking to the actors who portray Donelle, there have been five different ones so far, they know as much as I do about Donelle, who she is and what her motives are.

For example, Jennifer Kidwell, one of the actors, has decided to play Donelle as rather sullen and inarticulate. At the first few events no one even wanted to talk to her, and so we would go round and round as director and actor, me trying to get her to lighten up a bit and her insisting that *that* was how she saw Donelle's character. When Jenn performed Donelle giving a visiting artist lecture at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Kymberly Pinder, a prominent art historian there, challenged Jenn's characterization by saying that, real or fictional, as a black artist she needed to be more well-spoken, more prepared. Jenn's response was, "Why? Aren't black artists allowed to be inarticulate?"

Jenn sees it as a political gesture, a kind of territorial claiming of a type of behavior black artists supposedly aren't allowed to have. But I also think it is a political gesture aimed somewhat at me, a refusal to speak on my behalf. Abigail Ramsay, on the other hand, plays Donelle in a rather sunny persona and is willing to talk to anyone in a charming, slightly overly enthusiastic, young artist sort of way. Though she is quite amenable as an actor, Abigail's Donelle is the type of person that many denizens of the art world find annoying, so her characterization is also a kind of statement. The two of them play off of each other quite nicely. In general, as a structure, I write the story, design the sets, and the actors have quite a bit of latitude in terms of how they play it and what they say. I rarely script any of their lines; at most I sketch out some broad themes, like recycling or surface tension or *Rashomon*, give them as much background information as they care to have, and they improvise from there.



Donelle Woolford, *Still Life with Chair Caning*, 2010, scrap wood, enamel paint, acrylic resin, graphite, chair caning and wood glue on canvas, 20.5×26.5 inches.

JER The cynicism I have been expressing reflects my basic distrust not of you but of the art world. Is the art world even a viable theater for a fictional characterization like the one you have staged? Or does your piece help expose the art world itself as a fraud, an absurdity, or maybe, what I would call, a "boutique theater"? This is why I want to come to terms with the work from a non-elite vantage point, to "argue" for or against it as though the art world were being looked at through the reactionary lens of the mainstream media—a CNN or *New York Times* news story. This is why I keep trying to sensationalize and maybe to some extent *vulgarize* the debate. I want ratings Joe!

JOE Is the art world a viable theatre? My experience thus far would suggest it isn't—at least not yet. I think some of the more oblique participants in the art world might agree, people like David Hammons or Jiri Kovanda, a Czech artist who made extremely subtle performances in the 1970s. Like Hammons snowball sale, Kovanda's most renowned piece, *Divaldo (Theatre)*, 1976, is something that nobody saw at the time but that has subsequently grown in significance. The piece entailed him going out into the street and followed a previously written script to the letter. The duration of the piece, and all of the movements involved, were rehearsed so that passersby would not suspect they were seeing "theatre" at all. Donelle Woolford requires a high level of skepticism and willingness in her audience in order for her theatricality to become palpable—and she needs them in equal measure. In order for that pressure, that tension, to be palpable there needs to be a frame, so her interpretation works best within the constraints of an opening reception, or a scheduled performance, or a visiting artist lecture. That said, I like the perversion of Donelle going out to see shows on a Saturday afternoon and interacting with people, even though she may be the only person aware that she is an actor portraying a fictional character. Thousands of people might see her, maybe a dozen will "notice" her. But we have no way of knowing if even one person pauses and thinks, "Hey, was that Donelle Woolford?"

I guess that is utterly invisible—failed—theatre. But I wouldn't say it is "boutique theatre." Actually, maybe it *is* "boutique" in the sense that it is a waste, an expenditure with no purpose, a kind of nihilism.

JER ...waste, like the expenditure seen in the funerary industry with those really expensive burial rituals and caskets and plots of land. Dying creates its very own boutique theater too, right? Can we talk about the coffin that was part of Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno's *No Ghost Just a Shell* exhibition, where you had Ann Lee go to Ikea and repurpose two Billy bookcases into a full-blown funeral for herself? Can you tell me a bit more about your preoccupation with death?

JOE I'm preoccupied with the idea of art being transient, being able to drift in and out of legibility. My earliest work revolved around consumption cycles, material cycles, the maintenance of the body. For example the *Bathroom Floor* I showed at Documenta IX. I particularly liked the idea that an artwork would have a job to do in daily life but could also enter the art world and be considered as art for a while—kind of like going to a spa and being pampered for a few days—and then return to its work-day existence.

As that idea developed, it still wasn't about death per se but about disappearance—a kind of embeddedness. The cosmetic tear functioned that way, the *Nesting Bookcase* does too—both artworks are capable of hiding in plain sight. Just like Donelle going to galleries on a Saturday, you could see someone wearing *Catalyst* or this slightly peculiar bookcase in someone's home and not know that you were seeing a work of art.

JER I love that idea.

JOE I guess that relates to what we were saying earlier about the art world as failed theatre—you can't know there's a play going on if you can't differentiate the actors. So I guess these artworks are a precedent to the way Donelle

Woolford operates, or at least her legibility.

JER And I suppose the women who get to play Donelle will be the best witnesses of the theatre. By the end they may gain the most insight, and have the most rewarding experiences. But you become a fly on the wall and the fly on the wall really gets a great show!

JOE I do get a great show, believe me. But you're right, Jenn and Abigail are probably the best witnesses. It's great to watch their interpretations of Donelle evolve. Just last month they interpreted Dan Graham's *Performer/Audience/Mirror* at Cedar Lake, as part of the first New York Gallery Week. But unlike the original Graham performance, in Donelle's there are two protagonists describing themselves in relation to the audience and the mirror, and each of them are quite distinct in their observations and manner. At the very end, after they've gone through each of Graham's four interactions, they turn and describe each other while facing each other, and as they do so their actions and words get repeated in an ever-tightening spiral. They both really enjoy being on stage, the prospect of which terrifies me, so our foreground/ background relation in the project suits the three of us perfectly.

JER And death?

JOE I'm interested in how the idea of disappearance relates to craftsmanship, and how craftsmanship relates to death. I don't mean craftsmanship in the sense of mortise joints and mother-of-pearl inlay, but in the sense of how the hands that have shaped a particular type of persuasion—a marketing campaign, a Photoshopped image, a politician—have to be invisible in order for the persuasion to be effective. A while back I was invited to participate in a group show titled *No Man's Land* in Germany and my proposal was to arrive two weeks prior, measure the curator, Julian Heynen, for a coffin, and then build it for him as my contribution to the show. He agreed! Suddenly I was really on the spot, I wanted to do a nice job for him, so I proceeded to sacrifice myself to the execution of the idea. The better the craftsmanship on the coffin, the less visible was my hand in its making. It was a revelatory experience.

Several more coffins ensued, with me getting more and more remote from each one's making, until I got the idea to reverse engineer the one out of Ikea products. I guess this is where the idea of the embedded reaches global proportions, since latent versions of that coffin exist as we speak on the shelves of Ikea stores all over the world. Ikea doesn't know the coffins are there—obviously they don't think they're in the funeral business. But I know the coffins are there, and so do the few thousand people who own *DIY*, the instruction manual for how to shop and make the coffin. At that point the embedded takes on a political dimension and becomes a kind of virus, a Trojan horse.



Joe Scanlan, *DIY*, 2003, installation view, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.

JER If you don't mind me going back to an earlier point in the conversation, I'm especially curious to know more about your connection to that football player you mentioned? Let's talk about the NFL sheets many of us had on our beds growing up.

JOE I didn't have those sheets, but I had a bicentennial sleeping bag. It was red and white-striped nylon on the outside and dark blue polyester twill with white stars on the inside.

There's not much of a story, really, in my transforming a male football player into a female artist. I liked Donnell Woolford because he was undersized by NFL standards, he was maybe 5'9", but he was real savvy and tenacious and not afraid of contact. You could tell that he loved being underestimated, and then making a big interception or a tackle to save the game.

Jeremy Sigler is a poet and associate editor of Parkett. *Crackpot Poet*, his new poetry collection, is just out from the Brooklyn Rail/Black Square Editions.

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