

# The grit and the glory

**Kids on TV frontman, DJ, and Canadian queer icon John Caffery unpacks his sexy Working Conditions at Nuit Blanche and comes to Pop Montréal the night after.**

**By Jordan Arseneault**

John Caffery's pedigree is one that most Canadian queer artists could only dream of. A long-time go-go dancer at the legendary Vaseline parties in Toronto, Caffery was a close friend and acolyte of the late artist/curator Will Munro, and inhabits a vivacious scene in the Queen's City peopled by the likes of Diamond Rings and Austra. His art-rock trio Kids on TV has been a culturally inventive romp ostensibly valuing outfits over output, having taken a significant break from the recording gambit between their 2007 *Mixing Business with Pleasure* and their hotly anticipated *Pantheon* album which is slated for release this October.

In the meantime, the 31 year-old lead singer of this much-loved group got a job in a nonprofit, earned a DJ reputation, and began a fruitful friendship with (who else?) Ottawa gay gallerist with balls, Guy Bérubé. Over a year after Caffery had performed at favourite Bérubé haunt OverKill Bar and DJ'd at La Petite Mort, the two got talking about what to do for the capital's very first Nuit Blanche (Sept 22). Their conversation revealed a side of Caffery's personality that you might not see if you're distracted by the music videos, the Mighty Real party persona, (and well, look at him!). Behind the exhibitionistic queer dance music and pop-rock aesthetic fireworks lies a thoughtful empath with a defined politic and a surprising facility with art-speak. Who was this other John Caffery?

"If I'm there DJ'ing, I don't always have a chance to share political discourse," Caffery laments, shirtless on Skype in the crippling heatwave that united our two cities. He'd been involved in visual and performance art projects countless times in the past, as well as sitting on juries and contributing to al-

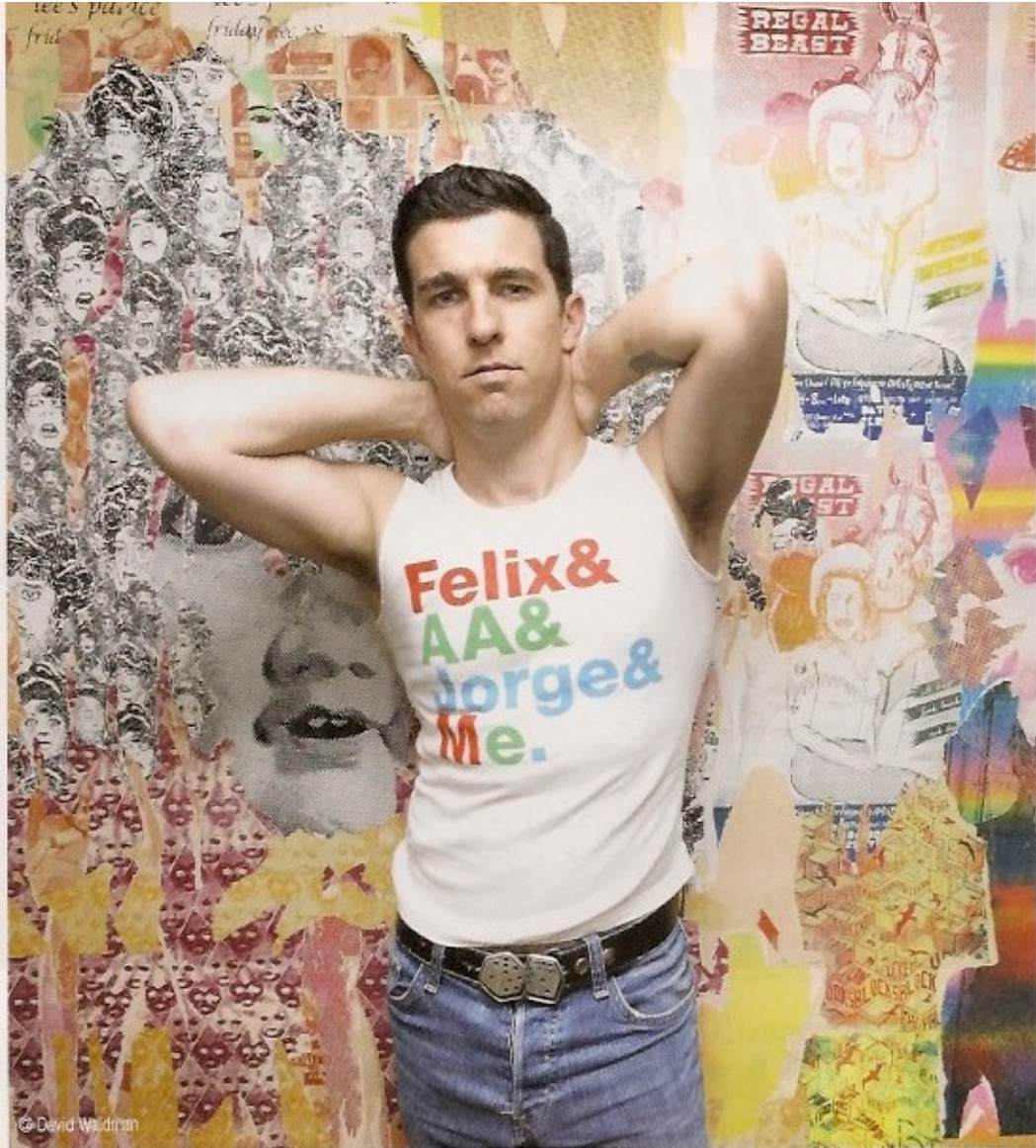
bums and publications. So it wasn't that Bérubé was surprised by Caffery's ideas: it's that his ideas were unrelated to music and video, the artforms for which the hunk in trunks is known. Caffery's proposal for the Nuit Blanche show revealed a witty awareness of the stodgy moral context of Harperian Ottawa, and a smart take on the boundary between performance art and sex work.

## Trade barriers

The inspiration for his nighttime performance installation *Working Conditions* came from seeing the art that would be on display in September at LPM. "It was happening at a time when two photographers, Mimi Chakarova and Scot Sothorn, were exhibiting in his gallery, both of whom look at sex work. One is more celebratory and the other [Sothorn] is looking at the grit," Caffery explains. "It needed to be something that was complimentary, but that would also engage with the general public and be playful." The concept emerged that LPM would be transformed into a kind of holistic sexual commerce utopia, where burlesque artists, go-go dancers and massage therapists perform services for one another, and for the general public over a six-hour period. Dance, burlesque, and massage are "types of work that sometimes cross over into the sex trade, but they don't necessarily," and as such provide a "safe entryway" for the general public to observe or participate "in ways that make their practice more sustainable," the guest curator contends. In other words, the masseurs might get a dance, the dancers a massage, or members of the public might choose to give one or either to the workers on-site.

Caffery is excited about the themes in *Working Conditions* because of the court challenges that are outstanding in regards to sex work in Ontario, namely for bawdy houses and





living off the avails, which are to be decided by March of 2013. "It could give people in the capital the chance to have fun and think about the bigger picture after they leave," he hopes. Somehow, despite the fact that porn is everywhere and sexuality is supposedly liberated, the taboo of sex and money is one that endures in Canadian society, cloaked in silence.

"I think on so many levels, silence does equal death," the youth worker and long-time go-go boy affirms. One element he finds completely unjust is the article in Canada's criminal code that forbids communication, or in other words, soliciting or talking to a potential client in public about remunerated sex. "So you can't negotiate what you're gonna do, how much it costs, or safe sex. The way that the current laws are affecting people on the street, indigenous and trans people, further marginalizing them — that needs to change," Caffery adds, spoken with a genuine knowledge of the reality on the street, but also an awareness of what people need to hear. Thus, Working Conditions promises to "look at how things are celebratory and how things are gritty and unfair, and incorporate both themes into the project," he says.

#### Going til dawn

But will the Nuit Blanche really go all night in Ottawa as it does in Toronto and Montréal? "We might get shut down before, but I'm ready to go til dawn!" he enthuses, adding that

he'll also be at the decks DJ'ing the event — and maybe giving a good old go-go dance to some lucky attendee. His band's first EP was, after all, entitled *Hustle!*

Whether he has to rest all the next day or goes to bed early in the end, Caffery will have to save his energy for the next night, when he and his Kids on TV buddies Minus Smile and Roxy Luchak headline a queer night at Pop Montréal hosted by eccentric ex-folk musician Rae Spoon. KoTV will be playing songs from their as-yet unreleased album *Pantheon* and filling the Cagibi with a hungry audience of fans who have been deprived of their live shows for over two years. In both cities, John Caffery is sure to be welcomed with open, ahem, arms.

#### Working Conditions

w/ John Caffery @ Nuit Blanche  
Sat. Sept. 22, 8pm – 2am  
La Petite Mort Gallery, 306 Cumberland Street, Ottawa  
[lapetitemortgallery.com](http://lapetitemortgallery.com)

#### Kids on TV

w/ Rae Spoon  
Sun. Sept. 23  
Le Cagibi, 5490 boul. St-Laurent, Montréal  
[popmontreal.com](http://popmontreal.com)