

# The "corporate ethos" is my primary interest

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# THE «CORPORATE ETHOS» IS MY PRIMARY INTEREST

*Damien Crisp/Alex Meszmer* New York based artist, musician, activist and author Damien Crisp uses Social Media as part of his work to create a community and a personal audience. In the interview he talks about his roots, his reflections of the American and especially New York art scene, his engagement with occupy and how he experiments with Facebook and Co to "self-curate" himself. The interview took place as a Facebook group.

Alex Meszmer: Perhaps for a first: Can you explain who you are and where you come from?

**Damien Crisp:** I grew up in southeast Tennessee, the American south, and my time was divided between my mother's place and my father's place. The difference between the two places – my mother and father themselves were not so different – is how I remember growing up. My dad lived off the grid, a cabin he built in the woods: environmentalist, carpenter, artist, book worm. He was inspired by Thoreau. Quiet. Slow time. People lived nearby who had never left the mountains. Old country people. Lamp light. And always the narrative. Dad had come there for political, social reasons. He wanted to escape the small town where we were all born and where I spent most of my time with my mom. Where I grew up with my

mom was Cleveland, Tennessee; it is a small town ruled by absurd mutations of right-wing political thought and hijacked Christianity. Global corporations have free reign over the landscape. Clusters of fast food chains off interstate exits are the scenic markers. Eras of the town can be traced around shopping malls or newer and newer Wal-Marts.

Alex Meszmer: I guess, Europeans only have an idea about Tennessee from Whiskey ads...

**Damien Crisp:** We called our town the buckle of the Bible belt. A church on every block. My mom taught me how to live inside all of this with a sense of humor and endless rebellion. We navigated our way through the craziness. Two black sheep. From a distance people might imagine a sleepy quaint town with nice churches. In reality it is a landscape of telephone poles, strip malls, churches in tin warehouse buildings and old offices, with enough parking for end times. So I was an 'indie' music singer and began leaving town in high school to play around the southeast, graduated high school and moved to the closest city. This experience of a place untouched by systems of manipulation – the mountains – versus the small town overrun by manufactured religion and global corporatism, was im-

portant and shaped my thoughts. Another experience that shaped my thoughts was indie culture in the US during the 1990s. I spent my time there, singing. Making art too – but art was just part of daily life; making strange films, paintings, zines, collages, objects, furniture. To be a part of the indie scene meant you were part of a cultural protest.

AM: Protest against the established political class? Clinton was president at that time, wasn't he? or against what you call the global corporatism, the sects and churches?

DC: Protest against the over-commercialization of culture.

AM: Is there another form of culture in the US apart from commercialized culture? I would guess, it is not really visible.

DC: We had our own music stores, our own magazines, critics, venues, record labels and distribution networks. They had become very strong since the punk era. It was explicit: indie culture was about respect for making music, for example, and that was the reason to be together. I always thought of the while thing as a protest against corporate control over culture. In the 1980s and 1990s

global corporate record companies were writing most music in a sense. In many ways, indie culture won and things have balanced somewhat. I would say what has actually taken over is the belief that “the overall problem is that the commercialisation of the world has taken over everything.” But that nothing has changed and resistance remains resistance. It matters at the point where choices are made – who writes the song, how does it sound, is it made to experiment and create something that adds to society or is it just sound to manipulate an audience through an overall business strategy. The sounds are very different.

AM: Yes – one thing has changed, fundamentally: attention! What once was a corporate attention through certain newspapers, radio stations and TV channels has become more individualized through social media to the extent that it has risen the resistance against or the awareness about commercialized corporate culture, politics, religion and what to think in general in case of morals, beliefs – I agree. But today it gets more and more difficult to separate the one from the other, or many people are at least aware when they use commercialized corporate culture.

DC: Well, it also depends on what kind of “corporate”. There are a few I often address in writing. Facebook is corporate. I use it heavily. Facebook has never told me I cannot publish a piece of writing because it will turn off advertisers in the audience. The only issue – of “corporatism” – I have with Facebook is I think it should be ran from the bottom up. There is also “global corporatism”. This is linked to the way corporations have hollowed out most governments and have the ability to engage in wide social plans for us, while manipulating us through sophisticated imitations of culture and beyond. And there is a “corporate ethos”. I think of this as something like a symptom of fascism you might find in everyday relations between people or in a society’s domi-



1  
from «Day and Night», A book  
project of phone images, 2011–2013  
(in progress), Tennessee

nant ethics. The “corporate ethos” is my primary interest. And how it has become the context for the status quo in contemporary art – from how business is conducted, to social relations, how people relate, to a demand for a polished consistency in work or a corporate style statement, to the bright white spaces so standardized among NY galleries. I see all of this as a symptom of corporatism. I differ from many people who believe that everything is tainted and hope is lost. I still believe in what you could call a sentiment: the avant garde. And I have been thoroughly taught the opposite.

Within indie culture I began to make more and more art, while drifting away from singing. But I took all of the principles of do-it-yourself, indie, culture with me which are rooted in punk of course.

A big part of who I am is that I believe the avant garde is simply a sentiment and belief in the opposite produces complicit work. The basic point about indie culture is: it is only theory that because a musical style may be adopted, for example, by a corporation that it loses its resistance. Great music is produced by people who intend to resist the mainstream – that is the sentiment of the avant garde... very simply stated. To do something not for popularity. And the postmodern idea that the avant garde is dead paved the way for people to revel in corporate influence in art, to revel in money, spectacle, Warhol as an excuse. So I had a much more simple idea of the underground and resistance. Not from art theory but from experience: seeing the kind of great culture produced by doing it as resistance. I

decided to go to art school when I was 20. I had gradually stopped singing by then and began making art on my own more seriously. Mostly this consisted of videos of appropriated footage re-shot, slowed down, given out to friends to watch in their living rooms on VCRs. At community college in Chattanooga, Tennessee, I got into writing, photography, painting, sculpture and great basic classes on Conceptual Art, Abstract Expressionism and Feminism. I moved to Knoxville, Tennessee – farther north in the Smokey Mountains – and finished school at the University of Tennessee. My focus was painting but I played around with photography, print-making, sound art and video. I made work about the space around us: McDonald’s, the school janitor, imaginary suburban characters. When I graduated in 2005, I came straight to New York and started graduate school at the School of Visual Arts. I began to push very much towards collapsing the distinction between art and life at SVA. I finished school and began to follow what is now the standard path for an artist in New York. I began to make my way into the networks of people, spaces and events.

AM: Can you describe what you mean with “corporate system of the industry” especially the art industry – how does this work?

DC: I am thinking more about ethos than system. What is the ethos of the artworld in New York where I am working as an artist? Some examples of the ethos would be how people relate, the way mainstream spaces look, the way they func-

tion, the truisms that accrue in this kind of bubble, how these things effect what is made, what is shown. The art market bubble in New York had a wide impact. It created a really entrenched social and economic status quo which generated this ethos. One example, I often write about how artists are pressured to erase themselves in this environment. I call all of this a corporate ethos. I see what has developed as imitating broader corporate culture. In broader corporate culture these is also the pressure to erase yourself, to fit in, to be homogenized. Being vulnerable, poetic, personal, or critical, or political, taking risks with material, ideas, writings, thoughts – all of these become problematic when the context you are trying to work within has a corporate ethos.

AM: When did you discover Facebook as a means of representation of yourself and your art?

DC: It was a personal and theoretical response to the artworld. I have written a lot about the ethos that grew from the growth of a subculture into an industry and how that imitates broader society especially within the empire – the US – the corporate empire, itself. Because the ethos in all aspects can be described as a corporate ethos in the New York artworld. One critique I had of the social context of the artworld here is the idea you have to erase yourself, be a-political, maybe intellectual but not passionately political, not vulnerable, or a little crazy. You had to have a very cool corporate identity, an identity everyone liked. So the idea of autobiography became in one sense a parameter of material I look for – as it always had been for me and I realized it contained a social critique of the context of the artworld, which goes beyond the artworld. I think you find the same zeitgeist to erase yourself in the broader world. And, I think that erasure of identity – social homogenization, belief resistance is futile, relishing in star culture – is a symptom of the social political issues I fight against and write about.

AM: Damien, you have lived in NYC for many years. Can you tell more about your life and how to make a living as an artist in NYC?

DC: I've lived in New York for 8 years. To live in New York and pay either the average rent for a whole apartment, or half for half, you need to either make a decent amount of money regularly from your work, have a full time job, a combination of the two or have money from your family. The size of space you get in return for this hard work is not really worth it, honestly. Right now I have a tiny room. My possessions are stripped down and packed away. My rent is cheap. I've usually worked as an art handler or artist assistant, though with cheap rent I'm looking for a simple job two days per week. I have begun to build my own group of a-typical collectors. Money from selling affordable works on paper, or reasonably priced paintings, has kept me alive this year. I'm also playing with ideas of being crowd-funded as a writer for various projects. This of course avoids editorial control or corporate influence. I write exactly what I want to write and the audience donates if or when they can donate.

AM: When did you discover Facebook?

DC: I was on Friendster, then MySpace, then Facebook. I was on Facebook beginning around 2007 or 2008. It was a way of keeping in touch with friends from art schools and from the beginning it felt like a way to... a way for an artist to exist without much support.

AM: How did you start using Facebook as a means of your art?

DC: Writing thoughts about art on my status, what I wrote generated a lot of feedback. I found myself without work. I moved into a cheap art studio in an old factory a friend was subletting. I've had many times when I've been starving but this was the worst. I was thinking about experiences of the artworld and how they matched criticisms many of my friends

## CE QUI M'INTÉRESSE SURTOUT, C'EST L'ÉTHIQUE SOCIALE

*L'artiste, musicien, auteur et activiste newyorkais Damien Crisp utilise les réseaux sociaux comme une partie de son travail pour générer de l'attention pour son œuvre. Pendant cette interview, il parle de ses racines dans le «Bibel belt» aux USA, de ses réflexions sur le milieu artistique américain et surtout newyorkais, de son engagement pour le mouvement Occupy et de ses expériences sur Facebook et Cie où il est son propre commissaire d'exposition. Crisp signale la commercialisation de la culture américaine en une «corporate culture» et ses effets sur le milieu artistique et son éthique, effets qu'il analyse dans ses travaux artistiques. Il s'est créé de fausses identités sur Facebook – afin de saper le mouvement Tea Party ou de lancer des actions dont il présente les résultats à ses suiveurs Facebook. Par exemple, il a rédigé plusieurs fausses informations : en 2008, il a annoncé la mort subite de Jeff Koons à Tokyo; en 2013, il a lancé une communication en collaboration aléatoire selon laquelle la Gagosian Gallery présenterait une exposition individuelle de George W. Bush. Crisp construit un entrelacs d'identités virtuelles et de blogs, un journal intime intense qui tient ses lecteurs sous le charme.*

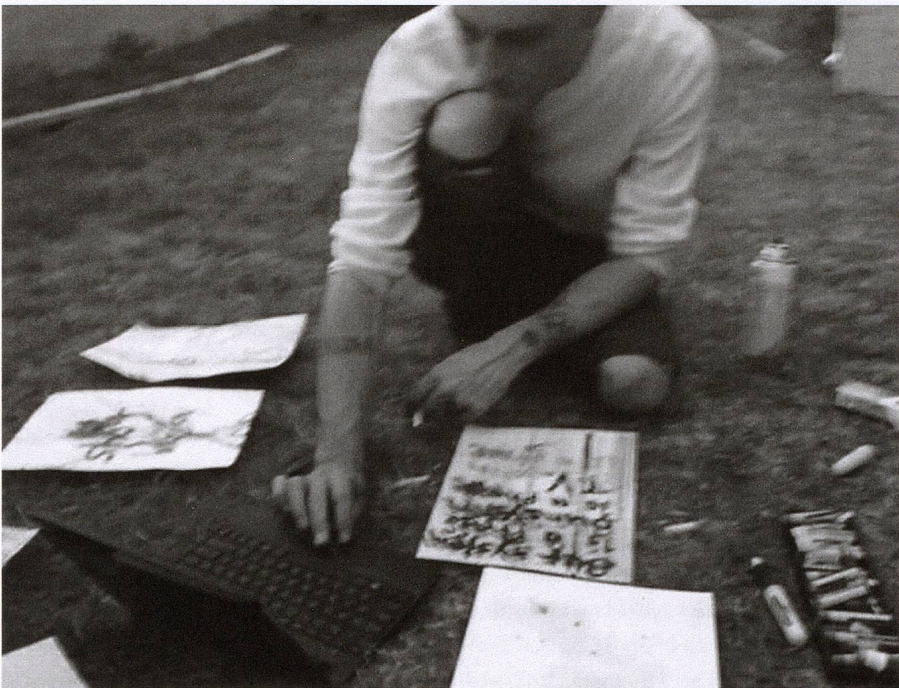


2  
«Text»  
Damien Crisp, 2010

3  
photograph by Susan Woodford,  
Tennessee, 2011

4/5  
Two Hoaxes: «Jeff Koons Dies in  
Tokyo Blast», 2010 and  
«Gagosian Gallery To Mount Bush  
Exhibition», 2013

6  
Occupy Wall Street, waiting to  
be arrested on the Brooklyn Bridge  
photo by Stanley Rogouski  
(photo resized from facebook,  
quality questionable)



▼ Report: Jeff Koons Dies In Tokyo Blast

02/09/2010

tags: death, Jeff Koons, Tokyo

30 minutes ago a friend who works at Artforum phoned me to say they were receiving messages from a Japanese news agency that Jeff Koons had died in Tokyo. His car was pulled away from his Tokyo hotel around 9pm eastern standard time. A large explosion was reported in the 20 square miles area. The friend noted that the Japanese press is not releasing the story at this time, waiting for Koons' family here in New York to be notified. The editors at Artforum are reportedly debating releasing the story before the Japanese press makes the announcement.

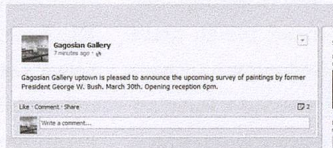


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▼ Report: Gagosian Gallery To Mount Bush Exhibition

03/25/2013

tags: American Legacy, art world, George W. Bush, Huffington Post, Larry Gagosian, New York City, paintings



and I held going through school wanted to describe what I saw and still see as a crisis in art created by its growth into an "industry". More than a scene, art, especially in New York, has become intertwined with context you might find in any specialized corporate industry. It is like an attack on the human for the sake of the consistent, safe and polished inhuman mark of the "corporate".

AM: Can you see some sort of development in using social media for your art?

DC: Yes. I do see development, or at least phases, slow shifts, shifts in how I perceive what I am doing on Facebook, shifts in what I write, detours into projects like the Death Of Jeff Koons or Judy America: a false identity I created to go into the world of the Tea Party online in 2008, which was published back to my Facebook followers. What I write about has changed over time. There are certain ideas I dwell on. And these ideas lead to other ideas. All of it comes out in bits and pieces on Facebook, publicly. Later, I write articles around collected texts. The most significant change in writing has been a shift from writing about the context of the artworld in New York, towards writing about society mixed with autobiographical fragments. You know, it is hard for me to say what it is I do with Facebook because my ideas change or the social relations evolve. Unexpected things happen. I follow the news, my energy. And activism. The energy of protests. And my own emotional life. It is similar to what everyone else does only heightened and called a project. It includes: constant writing about art, my life and society following a certain narrative within socio-political development – the rise of inverted totalitarianism, the effects of global capitalism, state violence, the erosion of democratic spirit, the instances of the rise of resistance increasing. And it includes descriptions of my neighbors, candid discussions about drug use, my love life, a stream of images and videos from my phone, my on-going life with Occupy Wall Street, Occupy Sandy and social justice in general. I want to use everything. Facebook is one

way to approach this thought. In 2010 I opened a gallery influenced by the ideas I had pieced together. It was an attempt to do the opposite: to be more human, thoughtful, a small scale; every aspect was rethought. We also published books. We divorced and the project ended too soon but it was a major part of Facebook. The audience for the gallery and the ideas grew on social media.

AM: You mentioned The Death of Jeff Koons – what did you do to Jeff Koons?

DC: I use painting, photography, video, collage, sculpture, installation, everything I can think of... writing, Facebook. I also have a growing series of hoaxes. The hoaxes are text, image, performance (spreading the word). The first hoax I tried was the Death of Jeff Koons. It was based on an absurd dystopian story in a blog post presented as breaking news. I posted the hoax to Unknown Journal, my first blog, which was a running critique of the artworld influenced by writings on Facebook. The story took off. People believed it. As the hoax reached its peak, I was dealing with a growing army of angry people debating the merit of the piece and still spreading the word, watching as new people believed the story.

It was fairly intense. Since then I've made a few unsuccessful and successful hoaxes. Brooklyn Terrorist Phantoms – which was written in the voice of Linda Yablonsky who essentially is a social writer for Artforum covering openings and events. The piece went nowhere.

Larry Gagosian To Be Indicted – which was a hoax about Larry Gagosian and one of his important collectors being indicted for sex slave trafficking. At the time, I was married and my wife was, among other things, an activist who spoke out against sex slavery. This influenced me to draw connections between Gagosian and corrupt Russian oligarchs because Russian oligarchs are part of the sex slave trade.

The story had an update: The next hoax was more successful – meaning it was believed and it create unexpected effects. Jerry Saltz Resigns From NY Mag.

This hoax forced critic Jerry Saltz to respond on NY Magazine's online section Vulture. The piece draws attention to the relationship between NY Magazine, the new New Museum, and the writings of Saltz. NY Magazine and the New Museum had become like interchangeable business ventures. One of the most obvious examples of this relationship was the coverage the New Museum received from culture writers like Saltz.

AM: Can you explain briefly the role of Jerry Saltz in the US artworld?

DC: Jerry Saltz is one of the few known and widely followed critics in New York. While I often disagree with his particular populist approach – he appeared on a reality TV show that ran aspiring artists through various competitions for example – he was also a teacher of mine in graduate school, so I find myself agreeing with him at times then very disappointed in some of his opinions at times. He has been a defender of the status quo the past decade. Although, he is also critical of some aspects of this thing I call the corporate ethos.

AM: You did another hoax with the Gagosian Gallery? What did you do to them?

DC: The last hoax I constructed, this year – 2013 – was Gagosian Gallery To Mount Bush Exhibition. This piece was an accidental or unintentional collaboration with two other artists. Joshua Saunders made the flyer and sent it to NY hoping it would catch on itself as a fake story. A friend online, artist Lauri Lynne Murphy, posted it to Facebook, or posted her photograph of the flyer tacked to a bulletin board you might find in a gallery office. The flyer was a piece. Lauri's photo was a piece. I made an article on Unknown Journal which was the third piece, or third manifestation of the idea.

AM: Following your timeline can really suck you in — into this life in NY you describe. It is like a diary and it sounds

very personal. On the other hand, you told me once that this represents much of you, but then again there might be differences between the private non-Facebook Damien Crisp and the online one. How do you separate these? There is a lot of work behind it and you seem to be online constantly.

**DC:** I channel much of my life through my page online. I keep track of music I'm listening to, articles I'm reading. It is also a notebook. The photographs I post of my daily life via my phone establish my reality for people. They are also a long running book project. The images will be edited down for a series of books, arranged linearly, and presented in limited edition as objects. I do a lot of similar projects through my page. Because social media is an extension of my studio, my life, it is less work than it may seem.

**AM:** What do you get back from your audience?

**DC:** Writing often follows feedback online. Ideas, strains of thought, may come from responses to a text I've posted online. The direction then takes its cue from feedback instead of my own specific course.

**AM:** This issue of the Swiss art magazine is about curators. You are kind of 'curating' yourself, preparing and showing yourself to an outside world, aren't you?

**DC:** No, I don't think so. Social media is an outlet. It is a platform. I relate it more to indie music culture, to a band creating its own record label for example – its own platform – which gives them artistic control and freedom to exist and develop. They don't have to stay independent but it is important the core of their work has authenticity (a complicated word but useful here).

## MEIN HAUPTINTERESSE IST DER GESELLSCHAFTLICHE ETHOS

*Der New Yorker Künstler, Musiker, Autor und Aktivist Damien Crisp nutzt Social Media als Teil seiner Arbeit um Aufmerksamkeit für sein Werk zu generieren. In diesem Interview spricht er über seine Wurzeln im «Bibelgürtel» der USA, seine Reflexionen über die amerikanische und vor allem die New Yorker Kunstszene, sein Engagement mit der Occupy Bewegung, und wie er mit Facebook und Co experimentiert und sich dabei «selbstkuratiert». Crisp berichtet über die Kommerzialisierung der amerikanischen Kultur zu einer «corporate culture» und die Auswirkungen auf die Kunstszene und deren Ethos, den er mit seinen künstlerischen Arbeiten untersucht. Er hat für sich falsche Identitäten auf Facebook kreiert – um die Tea Party Bewegung zu unterwandern oder Aktionen machen zu können, deren Ergebnisse er seinen Facebook-Followern wieder zur Verfügung stellt. So verfasste er verschiedene Falschmeldungen: 2008 verkündete er den plötzlichen Tod von Jeff Koons in Tokio; 2013 lancierte er in einer zufälligen Kollaboration die Meldung, dass die Gagosian Gallery eine Einzelausstellung von Werken George W. Bushs zeigen würde. Crisp fügt ein Geflecht aus Social Media-Identitäten und Blogs zu einem intensiven Tagebuch, das den Leser in den Bann zieht.*