

# METRO PICTURES

"Josh Kline in conversation with Ilaria Marotta," *CURAMagazine.com* (June 21, 2018).

## CURA.



*For the occasion of the exhibition "Evidence" organised by Josh Kline at Metro Pictures, CURA. Editor in Chief Ilaria Marotta posed a few questions to the artist about American politics, artists' autonomy and the making of the group show.*

I would like to start from the title of the exhibition, "Evidence," a term described in the Cambridge Dictionary as "One or more reasons for believing that something is or is not true," which literally implies an absolute degree of objective and irrefutable manifestation. But in contrast to its common use, I think there is an ambiguity in the term "evidence," because beyond the objectivity it expresses, it does not take into account the human factor. What is evident to some, is not to others. And it is from this actual lack of evidence of facts and things that different views of good and bad arise, different political positions, differences as regards fundamental human rights, or the management of common good or justice. For example, what has evidently led most U.S. citizens to vote for Trump or in Italy to support an openly anti-European and xenophobic government? The "evidently" worse choice for some is not the worst for others. So what does "Evidence" mean in the context of the exhibition? Is or isn't this ambiguity, which I see, reflected in some of its aspects? Do you think that democracy lies in the intersection between "evident" and "not evident," and in the possibility for everyone to freely state their sense of evidence in things?



“Evidence” is a show about class in America, a country digging itself deeper and deeper into dystopia. I originally saw the works in the show as presenting various kinds of evidence of that descent, photographs of the oligarch skyscrapers being built on the ruins of Ground Zero (the former World Trade Center site), disposable consumer detritus, work about homelessness, or interviews with people about the aftermath of the 2016 election, etc. As in many of my projects, I wanted to create an immersive account of a specific time, to place people in a specific setting filled with specific kinds of information that would make them feel something about this moment in history. I wanted the focus of the show to be on the work and not so much on the title or the words around the exhibition. Titles like “dystopia” or “ruins” seemed too heavy-handed and not open enough to let the artists and works in the show speak for themselves. An ambiguous, vague title like “Evidence” seemed like the best way to accompany the work I assembled--which is complex and nuanced, but also extremely direct and in many ways deliberately unambiguous.

As for the role of evidence and facts in a democracy -and how electorates in countries like the US and Italy (or Turkey, Poland, Russia, The Philippines, etc) view facts, I think similar forces are at work in every country in the world right now. And similar post-truth propaganda strategies are being employed in all of these contexts. In many of these places, a combination of underfunded or underdeveloped education and malignant media (Fox News, Facebook, etc) have created populations without either a historical memory or the critical skills to navigate the lies of demagogues and their televised spokespeople. The Republicans have been cutting funding for public education for four decades now. There are two generations of voters who have been systematically dis-educated. This is compounded by current economic and labor conditions, which are placing huge parts of the population in very desperate circumstances. In most parts of the US, people have no right to healthcare, education, or a welfare safety-net. Any time someone gets sick, has to pay for college, or loses their job, they are confronted with crushing debt. At the same time, they have politicians lying to them on television and social media, placing the blame for the consequences of their own neoliberal policies on refugees, immigrants, and minorities. Extremist far right politicians are gaining ground all over the world right now. The impact of these populist would-be strongmen (and strongwomen) is tied to how much of the population feels hopeless. The years between 1914-1945 are very well documented. The policies developed in the post-war years in response are also well-documented. When the middle class is destabilized, it's easy for democracy to destabilize as well.

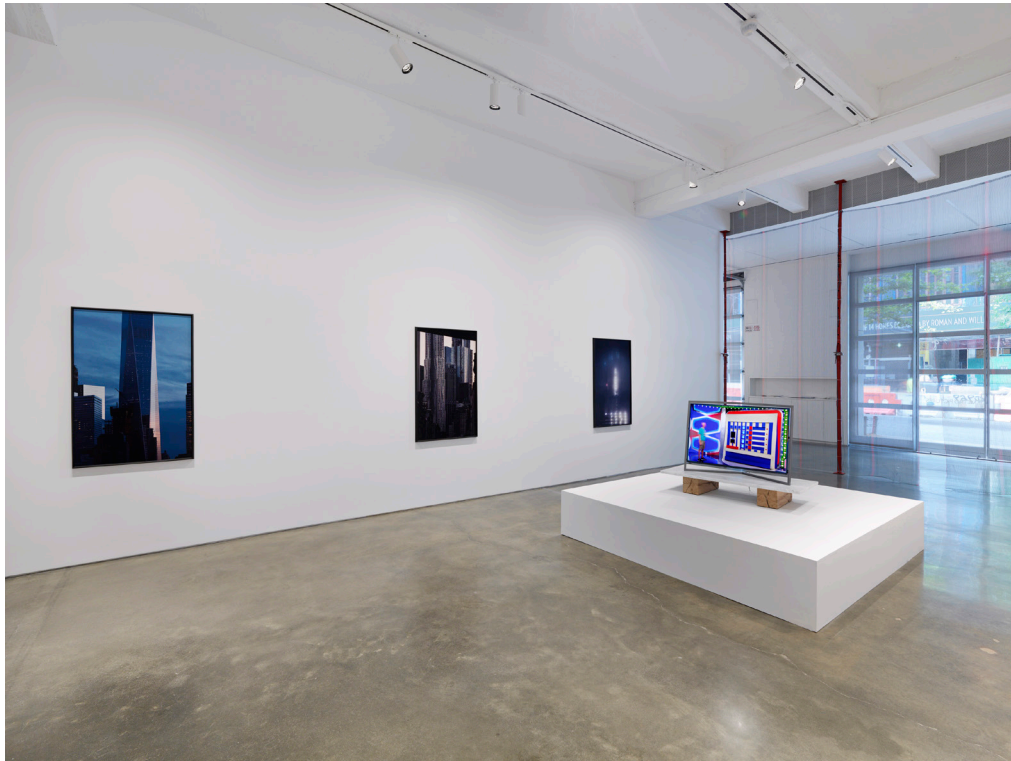


**I noticed a passage in the exhibition text about American post-truth. What does ‘post-truth’ mean? And above all do you think that the ‘post-something’ indicates a point of no-return, a moment of definitive break, something that cannot be healed, fixed, corrected?**

I think historical trends can always reverse themselves, or move in any direction that’s made possible by current conditions. Contemporary architecture is one of the best examples of this. On the other side of postmodernism, architects and designers are revisiting mid-century modern glass-and steel architecture and the Bauhaus, but run through computer algorithms. Post-truth is the term used by the media, politicians, and now much of country, to discuss Trump’s America. There are still real events happening. But the reporting and historical recording of those events has become a thousand times more politicized than it was even under Bush or Obama. And as I said earlier, you have a population that has been raised without the ability to tell fact from fiction, and without the historical knowledge to evaluate the news they are being given. There’s no longer a universally agreed upon institutional arbiter of the truth in America. And one of our political parties is actively working to undermine the possibility of a national consensus on facts. The other party is flailing about.

Beyond Trump’s lies and Fox News’ alternative facts, we’re moving into the era of deep fakes. Artificial intelligence can now quickly and cheaply create seamless fake video. This really is unprecedented. A politician like Trump combined with this technology will perhaps represent a turning point. Now this technology just needs to become easy to use and get out on the web. The jump from the face replacement software I was using in the videos I made in 2013 and 2015--the fictional Obama speech for instance--to what’s possible now is incredible. With this software, you can create believable video of anyone saying anything and spread it across the internet. You can put fake words in a real person’s mouth with barely any effort. Imagine if there was fake video of Hillary Clinton in the “pizzagate” restaurant or fake video of Barrack Obama ordering the FBI to spy on the Trump campaign. Imagine this video playing over and over on Fox News, with actors dressed up as journalists telling everyone the footage is real. This is where we could be sometime in the next 5-10 years.

If there aren’t universally agreed-upon facts, and media institutions that the majority of people trust to deliver those facts, consensual reality breaks down. At least in media and politics. Unfortunately for people who want to live in a fantasy world, real reality continues. You can deny climate change as much as you want. You can even live your life as if it isn’t real. But the sea levels are still going up. Likewise all those coal mining jobs are also never returning.



**America is a country full of contradictions that I would synthesize in two opposing drives: political activism, aggregation and social promotion versus a reactionary and deeply conservative attitude. As in all syntheses, many nuances are obviously lost, but I think that, by looking at your art work, you know how to expose, with surprising ability, the very meaning of these contradictions, through radical and often controversial works that never go unnoticed. How much of this disruptive force can we expect to find in the exhibition setup? And what was different in your approach as a curator rather than an artist, when acting as an interpreter of an idea and its deeper meaning through the work of other artists?**

“Evidence” is absolutely informed by my interests as an artist - but it’s not one of my art installations. I tried to give everyone in the show as much autonomy as I could. All the artists have their own distinct space to show their work on their own terms (or as close to that as possible in a group exhibition). In a way it’s a show of separate installations. I feel a kinship with all of them--with Oto Gillen’s photographs of politically-loaded contemporary architecture and the mood that he evokes with them; Gloria Maximo’s fictional depiction on video of homelessness and precariousness; Paul Pfeiffer’s altered video of the Price is Right game show, etc. I feel like we’re all approaching the same smoldering crater, but from slightly different directions. There are also many similarities to how we sample and use loaded-cultural materials in sculptures and installations--for instance how Allyson Vieira used construction netting to frame out her sculptures, Liz Magic Laser evoked psychiatric wards through padded walls, or how Paul Chan placed his kinetic sculpture of two KKK brothers on a very domestic carpet--placing them in the context of some nuclear family home. This is also how I build my works.

Although I worked professionally for almost a decade as a curator, the curation of group exhibitions that I’ve done since 2009 has all been done from the position of artist. I approach curating group shows the same way that I make my work - intuitively. I start with a kind of feeling about a group of artists and about the work they’re making and build a show around those feelings and the connections between them. Once the exhibition is up - or even during install - this is when I start to fully understand the relationships between the works and artists.

**How did the seven artists respond to your invitation? How did they take part in the exhibition setup and how did you start the discussion on these topics?**

All of the artists in the show are people I consider friends or colleagues. They're all people I was already in dialogue with. When I asked them to be in the show, in some cases I had specific works in mind, with others I asked them to propose ideas. I had seen Allyson Vieira's solo show at Company gallery here in New York last year, in which she showed a similar installation and similar works. I wanted to give her a larger platform on which to present this body of work. We looked at the gallery floorplans together and worked out the best placement for her installation. For Gloria Maximo's video installation, she knew the scale her installation needed to be at and we worked together on the architecture and placement in the larger show. I probably had a lot less written down about the show than what appears in the press release. I think I told most of the artists that it was a show about America disintegrating.

**Do you feel the same sense of pessimism that I feel?**

Yes, but I am also optimistic. I am very pessimistic about the medium-term future in the West. The shows I made in 2016 ("Unemployment") and 2017 ("Civil War") express my feelings about where I think America and Europe are likely to be in the 2030s if something isn't done about income inequality, debt, and job-loss due to automation. Basically, if supposedly center-left parties like the Democrats in the US don't start thinking realistically about the next 20 years and acting pragmatically--instead of just looking 2-4 years ahead to the next election--the extremism on the right will escalate. And the number of people willing to give demagoguery a go will also rise. The parties on the left need to start proposing and implementing policies that provide real relief from the very real desperation and suffering of working people (of all backgrounds). What would have happened if Obama had offered consumer or student debt relief in his first year in office? Would he have been faced 6 years with a paralyzed and hostile Republican-controlled legislative branch of government? In the case of America's Democratic Party, they desperately need to start winning more elections. They also need to start confronting the consequences of technological automation head-on. If the predictions about the number of people who are going to lose their jobs to software is true, and if all these potential recently-middle-class people are left to fend for themselves, who knows what might happen or what kind of crazy politics could find its way into power. Trump is a disaster, but it really can get so much worse. We have so many historical examples of scenarios where it gets so much worse. In the US, if the Democrats don't do something meaningful, the rise of the extreme right that we've seen in the last few years will be eclipsed by what is to come.

There are so many parallels between our time and the first half of the Twentieth Century. The lessons of the two World Wars and the Great Depression are crystal clear. Those lessons were almost universally recognized in the aftermath of those catastrophes. Mass-unemployment without a social safety-net combined with a desperate middle-class and escalating income inequality leads to civil unrest, authoritarianism, and human suffering. Hungry people don't care about elections, representative government, and human rights.

All that said, the surge in activism in the US since Trump's election leaves me feeling hopeful, especially the number of people actively trying to get involved with and potentially change the course of the Democratic Party. It remains to be seen what's possible in our deeply dysfunctional and broken system, especially with such a sizable part of our electorate living in the post-truth alternate fantasy-world created by FoxNew - but I want to believe that things can change for the better, and that people can learn from history - even recent history.