

# CULTURED

Fugitive Interlocution with Devin Kenny: Jonathan Gonzálas Speaks to the Interdisciplinary and Boundary-Pushing Huston-Based Artist Devin Kenny about the Algorithms of the Everyday  
By Jonathan Gonzálas, March 2, 2020

SculptureCenter



PORTRAIT BY TROY MONTES.

**Devin Kenny:** “Seemingly disparate groups can commune or talk or antagonize or make something together that would not previously have happened...The same materials exist, but if you look at it in a different way... new things are made with new eyes.”

In the corner of a crowded dive bar on the Lower East Side, Devin Kenny, who is visiting New York for a few days, shares stories of his developing research, including accounts of purchasable rare items and their folklore. He parses through intentions to obtain these goods for public distribution, or just for keepsaking. Balancing these stories with a rigorous exposition and humorous wit, Kenny explains the interior of each item and the conditions which figure his IRL vs URL searches. It is in moments like these, a gathering for crosstalk in which collective intelligences converge, where one might encounter the provocative threads at play in Kenny’s interdisciplinary practice. His work reinvigorates a viewer’s vantage on the condition of objects, the surround and digital interactions, by revealing apparatuses of power encoded in algorithms of everyday production. Simply and playfully, Kenny might ask his audience to take the time to share responses amongst one another as step one towards imagining that wholly other holistic framework of engagement in collectivity.

**DK:** “To fix this car back up in such a short amount of time, to know and rely upon the tradespeople necessary to do this—those kind of relationships aren’t made possible in the new economy.”

In *Untitled (Purves st.)* (2020), Kenny and collaborator Andrea Solstad repurpose a 33-year old Chevrolet to look much older from its illegally parked position out front SculptureCenter for the exhibition “In Practice: Total Disbelief,” on view through March 23. Referring to the conditions of late capitalism which enable the bloat of residential high-rises and urban privatizations in the Long Island City neighborhood, Kenny and Solstad take note of the NO PARKING sign on Purves Street and Robert Moses’s city planning era of car production as threads of inquiry into the surveillances of the developing city. The car sits as a forgotten talisman of early industry, contrasting the surround of construction sites, and gallery visitors are invited to experience the work as well as donate towards the accumulating parking ticket expenses.

**DK:** “Who can, or who is allowed to claim this municipal rule about parking? And, who does it benefit?”

Speculating on the semiotics of Purves Street—which previously housed auto body shops and storage facilities—Kenny and Solstad illuminate the erasure enacted through city planning and gentrification. Limiting parking access can be made synonymous with limiting the capacity for an individual to reside, to remain and to return to said location. The decaying vehicle is an incapacitated apparition of a previous era, transgressing our present pedestrian and municipal regulations. So, what if we halted to be moved, like the vehicle? What if we abandoned our participation in business-as-usual—the business of the contemporary milieu that constructs hegemonic civility on divisions of class and archetypes of white-hetero-domesticity in which few are legible. Becoming a provocative nuisance, the Chevrolet

interferes with Western principles of efficiency shaping the smart city in its greater lack of austerity and kineticism. It refuses, as in the words of Bartleby, as it personifies those subjects made peripheral in order to demand notice that certain intelligences and skills—of the mechanical and corporeal kind—have been invisibilized through mechanisms of development (i.e. NO PARKING)



INSTALLATION VIEW OF KENNY'S "IN PRACTICE: TOTAL DISBELIEF" AT SCULPTURECENTER, NEW YORK, 2020.

**DK:** "You have to have a certain kind of social intelligence to be able to recognize when you need to reveal your knowledge. And then you have to have another kind of intelligence to know when to not, right?"

In August 2013, Devin performed his work *Untitled/Clefa* (2013) at Biquini Wax Gallery in Mexico City. Kenny describes the work as a meme performance of 'Trayvoning' in which "the artist collapses forward, and the ensuing explosion of Skittles and Arizona Iced Tea droplets proliferates. The duration is set to Migos's 'Versace' on loop four times." Here, 'Trayvoning' can be understood as the online cultural trend in which people imitate the way that they imagine Trayvon Martin's final moments, while wearing a hooded sweatshirt and with a package of Skittles in hand. Kenny imitates the atrocities of online players as an abstracted replication—a performance reinterpreted from the internet, this time, slowed down to display the tragic glitch as Drake's lyrics replay: "This is a gated community, please get the f\*\*\* off the property." This danse macabre in adagio becomes a prophetic ballet requesting a refusal to the consumption and optics of Black Death spectacularity. Diving into the logics of the cybertrend, Kenny mourns what is embedded in the deep web of an internet spiral. Here, computational space becomes a trove of hidden and visible networks that replicate corporeal systems of violence generated by the controller who exists, disembodied and anonymous, like the militarized state and racial capitalism. It is intentions that linger as artifacts within the algorithmic design of a single post and a community of sharers who together form a violent habitus where the illusion of a neutral digital landscape comes undone.



INSTALLATION VIEW OF DEVIN KENNY'S "ROOTKITS ROOTWORK," ON VIEW AT MOMA PS1 FROM JUNE 9 TO SEPTEMBER 2, 2019.

**DK:** "I want to have things that have multiple entry points... If I have multiple audiences, multiple ways of viewing, multiple ways of thinking about them, that allows for more people to have a dialogue."

rootkits rootwork (2019), presented at MoMA PS1 last summer, examined the contractual conditions that challenge the traditional capacities of the museum exhibition model as well as an institution's audience. Rootkits refers to an undetectable computer virus, while rootwork pertains to rituals of Black-American folk magic. Together, the terms also contain a double meaning, referencing the DNA kits that people now use to lend clues to their ancestry. Individuating this exhibit, thirty minutes of each day were closed to the public. In this time, security employees stationed within the galleries were invited to interact with the work, if they wished. By problematizing the audience and flow of labor, Kenny posits the role of security as outside of the experience of a traditional witness under the guidelines of museum regulations. While a security officer may have an intimate understanding of how to protect the artworks on display, and might be given a score to perform in certain instances, there is a contractual rift between their professional utility and the opportunity to be a witness within this ecosystem. Offering an open proposal to interact, security officers may also use this thirty minutes not to experience the work. Perhaps they rest?

Similarly, Kenny collaborated with the museum's Department of Information Technology to install Bail Bloc software (developed by Dark Inquiry) on a group of museum-operated computers. These mainframes mined the cryptocurrency "Monero" for conversion into US dollars to be deposited towards the Immigrant Bail Fund. Identifying the museum as a site of bureaucratic measures in which systems are devised, and perhaps divisive, Kenny formalizes a practice within the day-to-day administration of MoMA to rectify the distance between art's production as artifice vs pragmatism when referring to these urgent realities. What arrives of this permutation is the chance that the institution could be a part of the revolution.

**DK:** “There are layers of meaning [in every artifact] which are accessible to some and not to others. I don’t want to necessarily lament what is unknown because in that gap there are new possibilities.”

In the splinter between the materiality of his works and ourselves as viewers-witnesses-participants, we might find that we have been neglecting the potential to zoom out on the circumstances of our engagements. Devin Kenny enters into these liminal transactions of our everyday to reorient the paradigm with poetic and practical measure. Making the unknown desirable and possible, he offers a scaffolding, and it is up to us to locate what we do with it.