

## Teletubby Riot Police and Razor-Blade Doughnuts: This is Freedom

Artist Josh Kline brings his immersive dystopia to Portland.

By Rebecca Jacobson

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Installation view. Courtesy of 47 Canal.

Teletubby riot police. Doughnuts made from bullets and razor blades. President Barack Obama's 2009 inaugural address, reimagined as an impassioned, progressive rallying cry denouncing the D.C. gun mafia, profiteering bankers, and "peddlers of hate."

Welcome to the twisted dystopia of Josh Kline's *Freedom*, opening this weekend at the Portland Art Museum. The installation, which premiered in New York last spring, takes on just about everything bleak in America today: economic collapse, police brutality, mass surveillance, war in the Middle East, activist retrenchment—the list goes on. The *New Yorker* called it "galvanic."

We talked with Kline about face-substitution software, Teletubbyland, and why he doesn't consider his artwork activism.

### **First off, I'm very curious about the Teletubbies dressed in riot gear. What's the story there?**

Teletubbyland—where the Teletubbies live in the TV show—is a kind of pre-kindergarten dystopia. The Teletubbies are the only vaguely living things there. The grass is AstroTurf. Their pet is a robot vacuum cleaner drone and the sun is some kind of gurgling baby video special effect. Direction in the Teletubbies' lives is provided by piped-in voices of authority whose faces are never seen on screen. In each episode

of the show, these piped-in voices direct the Teletubbies to slurp up pink slime/gruel and watch regular people going about their lives on their implanted tummy-TVs. Little Brother and Little Sister. In my installation the Teletubbies become a metaphor for police surveillance. Ordinary people's social media feeds—and through them, their lives, feelings, and beliefs—are digested in the belly of the friendly-faced information police. The generation that actually watched them in their childhood is starting to come of age as young adults, so they seemed like a particularly potent image to use now.

**Can you talk about your use of face-substitution software? How did you come to it? How does it relate to your exploration of surveillance?**

During Occupy Wall Street (and now with Black Lives Matter), you would see militarized SWAT troops recording footage of protestors. Cameras instead of (or in addition to) guns. Even back in 2011, it seemed pretty obvious that all this footage—hundreds upon hundreds of hours—was ultimately unwatchable by human beings. It was destined for processing by some kind of facial recognition software, either then or further down the line in the future.

The video playing in the bellies of my Teletubby sculptures employs off-duty and retired law enforcement personnel as actors. Through free, open-source “Face Substitution” software (developed at NYU by Kyle McDonald) the police officers assume the identities of activists who use social media. The former officers wear the activists' faces and read scripts culled from their social media feeds. It's a kind of identity hijack.

**You've described our present moment as a “soft dystopia.” What do you mean by that?**

If you were to time travel into the past, say 30 or 40 years ago, and describe 2016's America to someone you met, focusing on the darker aspects of our time—the disintegration of America's political system, the erosion of privacy, the never-ending war we're prosecuting in the Middle East and the refugees fleeing it, the income inequality, the environmental destruction, etc.—it would sound like a sci-fi dystopia. And yet, for many of us—our quality of life is quite good and most of our era's horrors don't touch us directly. Here in Portland, there's great food in the restaurants, people are hiking in the forests or surfing on the coast, and loving parents are buying their children artisanal donuts—and there are tent cities. The first black President of the United States is sitting in the Oval Office at the same time that black men are being murdered in America for wearing hoodies or having broken tail lights.

**How do you see the relationship between activism and art? Do you consider yourself both an artist and activist?**

I don't consider my artwork activism. Art doesn't directly change the world. It provokes conversations and gives people space to think about their world in ways that aren't usually possible through mass media, but it doesn't have the power to topple corrupt governments or feed the hungry. Art operates via the ripple effect and through indirect influence. As an artist, I feel fortunate to have a public platform right now and I want to use it to speak out about issues that I feel are important—while at the same time making work that reflects the human experience in the present. At the same time, I understand very well that my reach is millions of times smaller than CNN's or even of certain Twitter accounts.

Unfortunately, in America—and this is part of what my show at the Portland Art Museum deals with—activism's impact has been dramatically curtailed by the media and by law enforcement in the wake of the '60s. The media covers progressive political movements, but then moves on after a couple weeks or a month—changing the subject before those movements can use that attention to grow large enough to become a statistically significant force. If Occupy Wall Street had received the kind of sustained media attention that the Tea Party received, we'd be living in a very different country now.

My show in Portland is about the hopelessness and the impotence that many of us—particularly the country's youth—feel when they look at our system. The problems are very clear for most people—financial desperation, the absence of any kind of safety net, the coming climate catastrophe, but all the doors out of the burning building are locked. The people holding the keys are in the penthouse oblivious to the blaze downstairs... or hanging out by the rooftop pool waiting for Elon Musk's Tesla escape pod to whisk them off to Mars.

***Freedom* opened in spring 2015. But given recent events—continued police violence, Dallas, the rise of Donald Trump—do you see it having new or changed resonance?**

I've never made work whose meaning has changed so much and with such speed since I put it out into the world. The video featuring a reimagined 2009 inaugural address by President Obama had a totally different meaning in the wake of the 2014 mid-term elections than it does now. When I made the video in late 2014—after the Republicans took control of the Senate and the government's paralysis went full-body, this feeling of hopelessness I described above was particularly acute. In contrast to an Obama who was trying to work with the GOP, I wanted to create a vision of the Obama that America's youth voted for—the candidate promising radical transformation and renewal. Since that moment, as Obama has given up on working with the Republicans, the real Obama and the imaginary one have converged. His speeches in 2015 and 2016 are much more provocative and closer to the calls to action he made in 2008. Every twist and turn in the election makes the video's meaning shift. When Bernie Sanders was gathering momentum it meant one thing. Now that Hillary is the Democratic nominee its meaning has changed again. When the election's winner stands on the steps of the Capitol delivering the next inaugural address in January 2017 the video transform again. If Trump wins the White House, the video will probably become profoundly sad.

Josh Kline's *Freedom* opens at the Portland Art Museum on July 23 and runs through Nov 13.