

Pedro Reyes on the horror of contemporary politics



October 31, 2016 - Pedro Reyes is a Mexican artist who works in a variety of media and techniques to create large (and small) scale projects intended to "take existing social problems and imagine solutions for a happier world." This has included 2008's *Palas por Pistolas*, where he melted guns into shovels with the goal of using them to plant trees around the world, and 2011's *Sanatorium*, where museum visitors were asked to sign up for a "temporary clinic... with the mission of treating various kinds of urban malaise." His "Doomocracy" installation at the Brooklyn Army Terminal is a haunted house featuring real-world horrors like climate change, gun violence, and the current US election.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 1531 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Politics](#).

People often talk about site-specific art. Your work also has an element of time specificity. With "Doomocracy," for instance, the piece went up around Halloween and the US election, and makes use of elements of both. Do you think "Doomocracy" could work at any other time, or did you need it to happen around Halloween and around the US election?

Certainly there couldn't be better timing, because this election is a kind of collective psychosis that created a perfect backdrop for the project. I haven't thought about whether or not the project could be re-staged some other time. I don't know if it would make sense. I think haunted houses have this kind of particularity. They are seasonal, like a carnival. If there's a combination of elements that would make sense again in the same, or a similar way, maybe I could do it again. The [Brooklyn Army Terminal] site was a fortunate coincidence. The fact that the Army Terminal was available; it's such an expansive site and has such an interesting history. It is definitely site-specific and time-specific. I don't control that, and it could maybe happen elsewhere in the future, but for now, everything in mind was for right now.



Pedro Reyes, "Doomocracy"'s Lady Liberty, Brooklyn Army Terminal, Photo by Will Star.

Do you see the project's meaning shifting depending on how the election turns out? For instance, if in the United States election, Trump were to win, do you view "Doomocracy" as a different kind of project, versus if Clinton wins or someone else wins? Or, to you, is it a separate artwork that doesn't shift.

There's a very short story by Augusto Monterroso that is known as one of the shortest stories ever, that goes like this: "When he woke up, the dinosaur was still there." That's the whole story. The idea that, I don't know, obviously... I don't know how it will breathe... but if Trump were to win it will be much more nightmare-ish. Precisely, I think that everything about the haunted house was, as opposed to normal haunted house where you have these kind of fictional monsters like Dracula, Frankenstein, here, when you exit, all those horrors are still out there. It's not so much about the candidates, though, but about the issues. Issues like climate change or gun control, or financial institutions, or pro-life, you know the debate about abortion. All those issues have been there for decades and will continue to be.

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I think that the project in that regard, it's like old-school political theatre, in the style of guerrilla theatre. But somehow using the form of the haunted house, which is a totally apolitical form, is in itself a kind of Trojan horse to address all these issues in an entertaining way. The thing about the elections that is much more scary than the candidates is... for me, the surprising thing is how much people are willing to vote for Trump. I can understand better the Clinton voter, whether they like Hillary or not they have pragmatic reason why would vote for her. In the case of Trump, it really tells you about mindset that, I don't know, that allows a very heavy... a very low standard for civilization.



Pedro Reyes, *Artisanal Air*, Actor: Carolina Do, Photo by Will Star.

Were you inspired by the right-wing haunted houses that pop up in the States, like in the documentary *Hell House*? "Doomocracy" is a counter to those.

The ["Doomocracy"] scene about abortion is precisely that, a kind of hijacking the idea of a hell-house, where you have these cheerleaders that are burning this witch. It's funny, well I don't know if it's funny, but the origin of Halloween is witch burning, but that, crazily, is a sad thing having to do with a religious-inspired femicide. A religious inspired genocide based on preventing women from having control over their bodies. Which is something that continues to happen today, with pro-life stances, and all these groups that try to cut budgets for Planned Parenthood. It's around the world, not only in the United States. It's interesting how that became a celebration which we don't reflect much upon.

In that scene it was interesting to combine many different elements. You have hell houses, you have the quintessential high school musical which is *Grease*, you have the history of witch burning, and it's a mix of the Pope and goth and a musical. That's a funny thing that we enjoyed doing so much in this project, because art allows you to use as source material some of the things that you may find in real life most horrifying. It's a totally guilty pleasure to do this kind of transformation of things, like writing the lyrics and doing the choreography, being in these people's minds but mocking them at the same time is a very interesting creative process.

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"Doomocracy" will be up during the Day of the Dead. Is there going to be anything that shifts on those days to reflect that, or is it going to keep to what it's been to this point?

No, basically once the show opened... the thing is that for the actors, it's like an act of rigor, what they do. Imagine they have to do the same scene 40 times every day, 40 loops. If you have an actress who cries she has to cry 40 times. It's very interesting to see them work. They have grown more comfortable in their characters, but we are not introducing changes.

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Did you decide the decision to end it right before the election, was that intentional or you figured it had run its course at that point?

It also had to do with a kind of provocation. It's a cast of nearly 40 actors and it was always conceived as something that was around Halloween as a social phenomena. What is beautiful about Halloween is that it's the moment of the year, especially in Europe, when people go crazy and everyone becomes some kind of an artist because they think of their costumes. It wouldn't make sense on this occasion to extend it farther than that. Who knows, I mean maybe in another form it could happen as a permanent spectacle, but in our minds it was just for this season.

Pedro Reyes recommends five poetry books:

[Black Pow-Wow: Jazz Poems](#), Ted Joans

[Balling Buddha](#), John Giorno

[Eunoia](#), Christian Bök

[Selections](#), Paul Celan

[Poems and Antipoems](#), Nicanor Parra

Also I think that the people will have total fatigue of the elections. People are very much looking for this madness to reach some point, to know what it's leading to.



Pedro Reyes, Voting Room Installation, Actor: Marjorie Conn, Photo by Will Star

The idea, I guess, is hopefully by November 8th everyone just breathes a sigh of relief and moves on. Do you plan to do anything for Halloween, are you going to celebrate Halloween at all?

Yes, actually we're going to do a talk in a cemetery, it's going to be an artist talk, critics are organizing. We're going to go to a cemetery, I don't know much of the details but that's the plan.

What is beautiful about Halloween is that it's the moment of the year, especially in Europe, when people go crazy and everyone becomes some kind of an artist because they think of their costumes.

Most people who go to "Doomocracy" are coming from a sympathetic political standpoint. Have you thought about re-staging it as something like that Hell House where you get unsuspecting people who might not agree politically to come into this house, deal with it that way, where they might be shocked or surprised or disagree with the politics of the scene?

I think it would be very interesting if it were to happen in another city. That was one of the criticisms that we heard, people saying, "Well, people who need to see this won't." Not because it's happening in New York. That's how it happened, so I would, who knows, maybe it could be re-staged next year somewhere else. If anyone wants to do it again I would be very happy to repeat it. I often go where I'm invited, and that's beyond my control.

Name

Pedro Reyes

Vocation

Visual Artist

Fact

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Photo: Will Star