

# Alex Da Corte on scaling your art



March 21, 2017 - Alex Da Corte is a Philadelphia-based visual artist known for elaborate set design and large-scale installation environments. His latest piece, "Blue Moon," made its debut on an electronic billboard in Times Square, accompanied by a karaoke sing-a-long at midnight.

As told to Gary Canino, 2268 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Process](#), [Independence](#).

**Screenwriters often give the advice that when writing a script there should be no mental limitations based on what the eventual budget will be. When conceiving art, do finances ever enter into the equation?**

Just being in this world, [finances] always matter. I'm not independently wealthy. All of the work does hinge on access. So many of my shows end up being in museums, and these museums don't have tons of money to produce things. Commercial galleries do, but largely the work hinges on whatever kind of production budget the museum has, and then you have to be clever with how you spend things and how you create spaces. I work with affordable materials: paper, carpets, and neon lights.

More square footage for a show can get intimidating, because you think outside of yourself, but it doesn't necessarily make it better. It's like getting signed to a major label or something. It doesn't make the music better. It actually might damage it, and then eventually the singer leaves the label and goes back to their old one.



Le Miroir Vivant, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, The Netherlands 2015

**Scaling things appropriately is a skill in itself.**

I studied under this artist, Jessica Stockholder, and she always spoke about how volume costs money, and it really does. To make a big painting, you don't necessarily have to grow the production. So much of it is relative, like the scale itself is relative, but to make a big installation with these materials is hard. Wood costs money, plastic costs money, everything does.

Even if it's cheap materials or found objects, they add up, and to fill a space in a certain kind of way costs a lot. You have to be inventive in terms of how you're doing that, and not compromising the code of ethics that is your work. You want it to be accessible, but you don't want to compromise who you are and what you want out of the work. If the show is really big, you don't want it to alienate people. You don't want to be Jeff Koons, or at least I don't. I want it to be something that everyone can partake in and do. You want to be able to say, "Oh, that's a cool idea... but I could also go back and do that myself." I don't want it to be this thing about magic. I think that there's too much of that in the world, too much ego. I don't necessarily want for it to do that to people.

**One aspect I appreciate about your video work is the way time's manipulated. For instance, "A Night in Hell" is played in reverse and "Bad Blood" is played in slow motion. It creates a dreamlike quality. How did you get interested in this kind of thing?**

When I first started studying animation, around 1996-97, I was only looking at classical ways, hand-drawn animation that is very slow. Eadweard Muybridge and his studies of the human body in motion was my direct reference, and so I was always thinking about how moving images are just a series of photographs. Around 2010, when I started doing video after graduate school, I conducted every single video as though it were a moving painting. The two videos you mentioned are based on Rimbaud's "A Season in Hell," and when I first constructed

the videos, I decided I would make a sort of response to each segment of the nine parts of that poem.



*A Man Full Of Trouble*, Maccarone, New York 2016

I imagined that it existed in a not-so-distant future, which I related to the chavs that were living in my neighborhood: the certain kind of well-groomed thug man. I equated it to being a dandy, and the video environment would be something like what American Apparel proposed its customers to be: a sort of clean, white-washed, sci-fi kind of aesthetic. So I think looking at a man in a solid color buttoned down is both reminiscent of a past, but also some kind of weird future, where all the actions are deliberate and frontal in the same way that running, or a man climbing stairs would be. And filmed at half speed, it becomes at times like still life.

**Altering the sound achieves an ethereal quality.**

Slowed down sound is funny because maybe it's an attempt to slow down time, and then it creates a new time or unfamiliar space. Which I think is similar to how you move in dreams, in so far as that there is no contact. In dreams, if you throw a punch or fall, there's never the actual hit. It's just the feeling of that, and I think slowed down music is like that and a very middle space. I think maybe what Rimbaud was speaking of with hell was this middle space which he reached by taking a copious amount of drugs, between being awake and dreaming. The kind of sorrow or "Hell" he spoke of was that middle space, which to me feels like half speed or that slow music.





*Season In Hell*, Art & Practice, Los Angeles 2016

**You've experimented with temperature and smells in your work. How did you first get into experimenting with sensory stimulation?**

In 2009, I was at school during the the recession, and there was a real pull from art in relationship to commerce. It was like there was nothing to lose. I wanted to animate, but because I wasn't an animator, I couldn't draw the ways in which I would use objects. So I'd say, if I take a red bucket and then I pour red liquid on it, as the red liquid slowly oozes off of the bucket, it'll be as though the bucket is melting, or the bucket is moving. The ways in which I was engaging with objects was really physical, and my hope with how they would be shared was really physical.

In 2010, the world quickly became so image heavy, where we could share images much faster with our phones and Instagram. I thought so much of how people were seeing art was just through their phone and through pictures, so for me it felt like an urgent moment to say the world is still physical and the world still smells and it's still hot and it's all of these things that photos can't share. So I started making things aggressively in response to that kind of loss of touch.

I really love that sentiment. There is a certain kind of frustration about not being about to reach through and touch an image, and so much of my work hinges on that kind of barrier. To be on one side of desire is to make for a certain kind of thought process, and then to be on the other side of desire makes for another kind of thought process. I think that to rally back and forth is a really nice spot to be, and so it takes both kinds of thinking. It takes the bounty of images that we get to have with a phone, and then it also takes throwing your phone in a creek.



*Free Roses*, MASS MoCA, North Adams 2016

**You grew up outside of Philadelphia, went to school in New York City, and then moved back to Philadelphia. What aspects of living in Philadelphia accommodate you as an artist?**

I'm very close with my family, and they're here. But you can also access huge spaces here, thousands and thousands of square feet for dirt cheap. I think you can work a part time job or you can take the time to afford a place to work, and not feel like you're in some kind of race to be on a scene, or a need to be seen in order to have the money come in. Philadelphia is pretty slow in terms of the pace that things move, and it's great. It makes for a quieter relationship with my city. I don't feel in a rush, and I love that. The world is really fucking fast and so it's nice to be here and not feel like so hectic. I can just come to the city or come to my studio and chill and do what I need, and then if I feel like I need a crazy shot of adrenaline, I can just go to New York City if I really need to. I see people moving here from all over the place, and it's really fast, but where I am is much slower and quieter so nobody bothers you. You can kind of pick and choose the garbage you want. My neighborhood is a bunch of characters and colorful people, wild personalities. It's sort of what I look to for inspiration.

**Ivanka Trump recently featured some of your art in an Instagram post, and you asked her to take the post down. What's your take on people owning or presenting art, where the artist doesn't support the views of the person.**

I think you can't really control where things go. You just can't. As an artist or maker of anything, you do your best to embed a certain kind of care and touch and politics into what you do, and you live your life and stand by those politics. And if other people adopt objects you've made into their life, or buy them and have oppositional

politics to you, your only hope is that the work will still sing and the work will sort of be true to the maker, and that the person who owns it will recognize that. That's the best you can do.

For that particular case, I think it was less about we don't want our artwork shown as much as it was about originally appealing to her to say if you collect the artworks of these people of color and people who are gay and people whose politics are in some ways in opposition to yours or your father's, recognize that and speak to that, or be a hypocrite.



*Free Roses*, MASS MoCA, North Adams 2016

You've mentioned in an earlier interview that your goal is to have "no taste" when creating. I hear that sentiment a lot, that good work will just spring up out of one's creative ether. A favorite songwriter of mine said that their job is done when all personality is completely excised from the lyrics and the music.

It's like if you were able to stand on your head, or see yourself from the back of your head. Sort of an uncanny, surprised feeling. You want to look at your work at the end of the show, or even while making something, and say "Wow, who did this? Where did that come from?" I still have no idea what "Easternsports" is about. I'm very confused. I still have no idea what that thing is that Jayson and I made. We made it in such a hot moment, and then it just came out of us. It was a bunch of very strange decisions, kind of pieced together to make this three hour film.

I want to feel like I'm not myself. I'm constantly taking risks and getting uglier and getting away from what keeps me safe, or makes me feel as though something is good, because I'm not interested in good. Even right now as I'm making this show, the colors really challenge me. I walk into my studio and I'm like "Oh, this is a bunch of really awkward decisions." But I just kind of let it wash over me, and hope that I can learn something from those things, because these things are in the world. Things that were made by other people. I want to say "Okay,



this is cool and good for someone." And how can it be cool for me too?



*50 Wigs*, Herning Museum of Art, Denmark 2016

**Not understanding where one's work came from fascinates me. Does that mean it's an intuitive process to some extent? Are there ever planned things along the way that you want to hit?**

I'll have loose word phrases that I'll look to, and then I'll write down notes slowly. [For example]: the Janet Jackson music video for "Love Will Never Do Without You" directed by Herb Ritts, spaghetti on a plate, my shoe lace is always untied, grape soda, this one scene from Batman where Burgess Meredith attacks the city with big umbrellas. So I take these things that I think are interesting, and tie them together. Maybe they're about time, or the particularity of objects, and then I slowly let it build. As I'm making the objects, I'm telling these stories and weaving. I think of the work as weaving or quilt making, and I'm telling jokes and making references to things that maybe only I know. But I'm hoping as I keep telling them to myself that in the work they will transcend and be something bigger. But it's also strange that I actually don't know what it is.

**Alex Da Corte recommends:**

Softness

The Roches

Alissa Bennett's Bad Behavior

Group Show

Bahn Mi Near Me

Name

Alex Da Corte

Vocation

Artist

Fact

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photo by Alex John Beck