

Brad Downey

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in conversation with Emanuela Mazzonis di Pralafera

• You were born and raised in the US, first in Atlanta and then in NYC. When you were living in Brooklyn, you began studying film production. Why did you choose to dedicate yourself to the world of film production? Can you tell me about Public Discourse? Once you have declared that: 'Public Discourse' it summed up what to me is essential in art: to be open in dialogue either with words, images, objects. reconfiguring buildings, bending street furniture, being strong in creating hisown reality.

I grew up moving between military bases across the United States. Daily life was shaped by patriotic imagery, strict codes of conduct, armed military police, high-security zones, and constant surveillance. From an early age, I became aware of rigid social hierarchies – rank determined everything. At the same time, many families came from modest or disadvantaged backgrounds, creating racially and economically mixed communities.

My earliest visual influences came from the monuments on military bases and from skateboard culture.

Skateboarding, in particular, fundamentally shaped how I think. It taught me to reinterpret my surroundings and question the intended function of objects and spaces – to see the city as something malleable rather than fixed.

Before university, I was already making films with friends through skateboarding. When I entered university in Brooklyn in 1998, I chose to study documentary filmmaking because it allowed me to engage directly with real life. Film offered a way to enter situations and understand how meaning is constructed through context. This naturally led me toward working in public space, where everyday life is already charged.

In 1999, I was expelled from university due to financial difficulties. Shortly afterward, I carried a ladder and a rubber hammer to a Shell gas station and removed the "S" from its illuminated sign. That act marked one of the first decisive steps in my artistic trajectory—an unsanctioned action that moved my thinking beyond just film and into direct intervention.

• Why did you choose to leave US and move to Europe, first to London and then to Berlin? Would you consider moving back to the US?

I left the United States for Europe, initially driven by a somewhat clichéd belief that to become an artist, I needed to see the places where the "masters" had worked. Over time, however, Europe became home. Having lived here for more than twenty years, I've shaped my entire adult life around a European lifestyle and mentality. I'm no longer convinced I could easily settle back into life in the U.S. I once titled a show *Reverse Culture Shock*, referring to the disorientation that occurs when returning to one's home country after living abroad for a long time, when instead of feeling familiar, everything suddenly feels off.

• I'm interested in the statue you have dedicated to Melania Trump in her hometown, Sevnica, Slovenia. You have hired an amateur chainsaw sculptor (born in the same year and same hospital as Melania) carving a statue of Melania from a tree trunk. After the work received significant media attention, it was destroyed. What did this gesture toward the statue mean to you?

More than a tribute to the first lady, I see this statue as an exploration of the unpredictability of human life.

The gesture was never intended as a tribute. Instead, it functioned as an anti-monument, an attempt to construct an archetype that could embody my broader frustrations with politics. I was interested in how a physical object might be charged with metaphysical meaning, similar to the idea of a symbolic threshold made tangible through form. The woodworker I commissioned and Melania were born in the same month of the same year, in the same maternity ward, yet their lives unfolded in radically different directions. That shared point of origin – and the vast divergence that followed – formed the emotional and conceptual core of the work. More broadly, I find contemporary political systems grotesque – particularly the practices of my country of origin – where money and corporate interests exert disproportionate influence over political agendas.

Rather than taking a fixed ideological position, my aim was to complicate narratives and expose contradictions. In *Melania*, I deliberately adopted the official posture of monument-making while undermining its symbolic clarity. The result was a paradoxical monument – neither tribute nor attack – reinforced through additional media, some of which I produced myself, that resisted a single, stable interpretation.

The project began after my first visit to Slovenia in the summer of 2018. Set against her husband's antiimmigrant rhetoric, this coincidence became a central contradiction of the work. Together with Slovenian collaborators and members of the local community, I commissioned Maxi, an amateur chainsaw sculptor, to carve the statue from a poplar tree. The monument was unveiled in Rožno, near Sevnica, on the 4th of July, the U.S. Independence Day. A documentary film accompanying the project focuses on Maxi and the process of making the sculpture.

The intense media attention and the statue's eventual destruction were not separate from the work – revealing how fragile, charged, and unstable public symbols can be when placed in contested political terrain. Exactly one year later, on July 4, 2020, the monument was burned down by unknown perpetrators. After its removal, I worked again with the local community to plan a replacement in bronze. The bronze stood for five years, until shortly after Trump was re-elected, when it was mutilated and stolen in May 2025.

• **Many of your pieces are a collaboration with other people (not only artists). What does it mean to you to collaborate with different people in the creation of a work of art?**

In a sense, all artwork is a collaborative process – especially when it involves real people, real places, and real contexts. The first artist I had a significant collaboration with was Leon Reid IV aka VERBS, and the urgency was simple: we had no money, no transportation, and no storage. The work was heavy, and we wanted to install it all over New York, which meant carrying massive pieces on the subway. Two pairs of hands were simply much better than one. A lot of the collaborations I've done initially came out of necessity – a need for help. Over time, though, I got used to working with other people. For one thing, it's usually much more fun than spinning out on something entirely on your own.

• **You have been arrested several times after your urban interventions. What do you feel while you are making your art intervention?**

I always told the police that this was something I had to do, which, for them, never made much sense – because I was doing it for free. I see my actions as political. I believe that even simple acts of nonconformity can disrupt societal standards enough to benefit society.

Forcing art into public space can be unsettling. It requires both generosity and detachment to leave artworks knowing they will disappear. Working independently and clandestinely allows ideas to move quickly from thought to action. Most physical unsanctioned work is destroyed or removed quickly, so I am always pleasantly surprised when an artwork remains. When it does, it can become a meeting point or part of a community. In some cases, I have faced violent reactions, including death threats. Experiencing these extremes is both disarming and motivating – it is always challenging to approach the edges of what people will accept. I have always felt that the work was a form of public service.

• **What does art mean to you?**

I do drawings almost every morning after breakfast and go walking almost every evening after dinner. Probably that's the foundation of my life and art. I guess eating and cooking are quite important for me also. It feels extremely different to cook over a fire than in the kitchen. The conversations and mood change depending on the context. Once, I shared a hotel room, with Rammellzee. I said "do you have any idea how lucky you were to be an artist in New York in the 80s before cell phones with video cameras?" He smiled and said "all formations of word knowledge are constructed under the symbolic thoughts of the infinity sign." I said "what's the infinite sign" because I had misunderstood him. He said "that's for you to figure out".

• **How important are irony, humor, and fun?**

Comedy has always been a consistent influence. One of my favorites comedians is Norm Macdonald, who said, "The perfect joke would be where the setup and punch line were identical." That idea resonates with me – I want to make art like that: simple, surprising, and simultaneously playful and precise.

I see myself as something between a failed architect and a failed comedian. A few years ago, I started calling my work "*Slapstick Formalism*."

The word *slapstick* evokes a universal kind of laughter—silly, immediate, and unpretentious. *Formalism*, on the other hand, represents structure, order, and a careful engagement with context, history and symbolism.

Combining the two allows me to remain playful, absurd, and accessible across different social and cultural contexts.

• **What do you think about social media?**

I see digital platforms as an extension of public space, reflecting the traditional idea of the internet as a digital commons. Admittedly, the fact that many of these platforms are corporate entities complicates matters, but most physical public spaces are also privately owned.

I have mainly used Instagram, and I have made work about different platforms. The main issue I have with Instagram is that everything is so oppressively cropped – that everything has the same size, value and resolution. This enforced uniformity makes me feel a bit sick.

• **Do you want to create or to destroy?**

It is difficult to act at all without changing something. Whether that change is described as destruction often depends on perspective and external interpretation. For this reason, ethics and kindness are central to my practice. I believe it is possible to vandalize something ethically, just as an act of good intention can appear destructive from another point of view.

These concerns take material form in acts of breaking, smashing, and dismantling objects. Such gestures are not driven by nihilism, but function as critical tools to interrogate art history, material culture, humanity's relationship with nature, history, sculpture and power. Destruction becomes a method for uncovering hidden histories, challenging institutional authority, and generating new meanings from discarded or overlooked materials.

I am drawn to interests that appear divergent or contradictory. Sustaining paradox, rather than resolving it, is for me a key condition for long-term growth. I try to live within these tensions – to embrace paradox as an essential part of making, learning, and becoming. Paradox does not need fixing.

• **Do you see yourself in this comparison to David Hammons?"**

Of course, I like Hammons' work, particularly *Pissed Off* – two actions he did in response to Richard Serra's large, intrusive public sculpture in Lower Manhattan. As I understand it, he would stop and urinate on the artwork whenever he passed by. The urine oxidized the metal, creating these abstract drip paintings. Of course, he was not only making fun of Serra but also of Warhol, since Warhol made those oxidation paintings by pissing on metal. At the same time, he was forcing a kind of collaboration with the sculpture – making a painting that permanently eats into the metal. He did several interventions on that Serra work; on another occasion, he threw twenty-five pairs of shoes over it.

Let's talk about the works for SPAZIOC21 in Reggio Emilia:

• *Why did you choose to work with trees? What does nature mean to you?*

I have worked with trees before. Once I secretly moved and planted a tree at a construction site. I did this one evening. The next morning, we recorded workers surprised to find a fully grown tree with fruit in a ditch they had dug the day before. Some of them sat down and, confused, ate the apples, unsure what to do next. For me, working with trees began as a question of materiality – and ultimately, ethics. The exhibition title *Dead God, Thank You* reflects this tension. On the surface, it draws a parallel between trees and God, but it also arises from a sense of consumption guilt. Artists – and the art world – are deeply materialistic, and I am aware of how much I produce and consume. Working with trees became a way to confront that contradiction and take responsibility for my materials by making objects from the ground up. Nature, in this sense, is not romanticized; it is something to negotiate with, work with, and test one's ethics against. Encountering nature has always involved play, ritual, and experimentation. We learn by actively interrogating and collaborating with nature, my work follows this thinking, using material exploration as a way of understanding.

This project illustrates these ideas through paper-making. A single tree – photographed in an idyllic landscape – is cut down and processed into a thick, handmade sheet of paper. The photograph of that same tree is then printed on the paper made from its body. Image, material, and origin converge in a single object, asking what it means to transform life into representation.

• *Can you tell me how the process of producing cellulose, and then the paper on which you will print the photos of the trees, takes place?*

The process was far more complicated than we initially imagined. First of all, people rarely make paper from woods as hard as oak or cherry – these trees are extremely dense. As a result, we had to invent our own methods and recipes – a process that took about more than a year. One surprising discovery was that many people who claim to make paper themselves are not actually achieving it, even when working with very soft materials. Industrial paper production relies almost exclusively on softwoods. Much of this progress was to my colleague Rok Pahor, a trained conservator and master of material mixing, who conducted deep research and developed DIY solutions we hadn't seen elsewhere.

The main challenge for us was processing only one tree at a time. Existing machines are designed to operate only when large quantities of material are loaded, so isolating and preserving the material from a single tree proved nearly impossible within any conventional facility.

For that reason, we had to work outside established systems. We purchased and taught ourselves how to use around six different machines, and we experienced countless failures during testing. In simple terms, the process involved enormous amounts of water at every stage. We extracted the cellulose from the wood using different cooking methods, and after extraction, the material had to be washed repeatedly to lighten the pulp and remove as much of the wood's natural color as possible.

• *Do you consider the photographs of the six trees as true portraits of the plants? A testimony of the now-lost identity of that living being, which in turn regains a new form through the photograph printed on its own skin?*

I'm interested in capturing the space between materiality and immateriality – the transient zone between life and death. Does anything ever truly vanish? The object functions as a kind of portrait, but a delicate, intimate one, because the tree is depicted using its own materials. It becomes a relic, preserving memory within its form. Both the paper and the ink are made from the same tree they represent – completing a full material transformation.

As a result, each work differs physically: some sheets are much thicker than others, and in one case, the photograph is significantly smaller because the cypress yielded far less material.

• *I understand you'll be working in a darkroom to produce these photographs, and at life size, if I'm not mistaken. Have you ever worked in a darkroom before, and how are you planning to organize the process?*

Actually, I decided not to use the darkroom. During the process of extracting the cellulose, we discovered that the water contained so much color.

After some experimentation, I devised a system to extract the color and turn it into ink. This was ideal, as it aligned perfectly with the concept of keeping the object as pure and representative of the tree as possible. And each paper and each ink has a slightly different tone and color.

For printing, I am working with the artist Dominik Mahnič. I chose to collaborate with him because he builds custom printing machines. These machines function like traditional printers but have the capacity to hold brushes. I found this appropriate because the rest of the materials were handmade. It made sense that the printer itself would also be a DIY, experimental tool.

• *What do you think of Banksy? In 2011, at the Bethanien exhibition, where you brought to light Banksy's 2003 stencil, you carried out an action that sparked a lot of debate about appropriation and authorship in art. Was your work a statement about the meaning of success and the value of authenticity in art?*

My first exhibition in Europe took place in 2003 at *Backjumps: The Live Issue* at Kunstraum Kreuzberg Bethanien, a group exhibition that also included an installation by Banksy. At the time, the moment felt open and unburdened, before fame and market forces fully took hold.

In 2011, I was invited back to the same institution and given the very room where Banksy's installation had originally appeared. I began a restoration project uncovering Banksy's works that had been painted over for years. By then, the optimism I felt in 2003 had largely disappeared. I titled the work *What Lies Beneath*. I restored the large mural on the back wall, extracted several sections of the wall, and painted the entire room red – an atmosphere inspired by what I had seen in Pompeii. Media attention completely eclipsed the exhibition and my re-authorship, framing the story almost entirely as "Banksy in Berlin." That erasure became part of the work itself. On the final night, I destroyed the uncovered mural, leaving only rubble for the curators to find the next morning. I had also removed several sections of the wall earlier – an action that went largely unnoticed. This erasure has become an integral part of the work.

Since then, the project has continued to evolve through reconstructions, technological imaging, and restorations presented over multiple years. Banksy functioned less as a subject than as a lens through which to examine authorship, appropriation, copyright, and the distortions of the art market. The work sits within a lineage of appropriation – such as Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* or Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* – and is part of a broader series that treats restoration itself as a contemporary artistic act. Ultimately, the media's misrepresentation of the project reinforced its central point: how context, authorship, and intention are easily erased once value and spectacle take over.

• *In the work you will exhibit in April in Reggio Emilia, you have brought three Banksy stencils back to life, which will be presented as diptychs in dialogue with the red wall where they were originally located. How do you relate the ephemerality of street art to the institutionalization of art? How would you define your participation in this context?*

As I mentioned earlier, the works were originally installed in *Backjumps: The Live Issue* at Kunstraum Kreuzberg Bethanien, a well-established institution in Berlin. In that sense, the question of institutional framing is somewhat moot. I don't strongly differentiate between forms of art; I believe they can move fluidly between contexts. I was heavily influenced by artists like Robert Smithson, and one of my professors was Bruce McLean, whose work consistently shifted context. I'm also drawn to forms of anti-comedy, such as Andy Kaufman's performances, which provoke confusion or discomfort rather than straightforward laughter. For me, the issue is always one of reframing.

These works function particularly well within a photography festival because photographic techniques are central to their making.

The project unfolds through documentation, extraction, reconstruction, and imaging.

Three of the works were created using hyperspectral photography. These pieces had been left covered and unrestored, and with the help of the Jožef Stefan Institute in Ljubljana, we used special cameras that capture light waves rather than conventional images. This technique can reveal information invisible to the naked eye or standard photography. In the context of my work, it allows the images to be recovered from beneath surface. In another instance, the destruction of a mural became an intervention in itself, documented photographically. I later reconstructed *Flying Copper* from the rubble left after one of the murals was destroyed. What remains is an image of wall fragments – debris that once carried traces of a suddenly coveted artwork. In this way, ephemerality, restoration, and institutional presentation are not opposites but part of the same continuous process.

• *Would you describe yourself as an artist, activist, performer, subverter, experimenter, transformer, traveler or someone else?*

I usually say "sculptor," because that's what all my best art professors – Bruce McLean and Phyllida Barlow – called themselves. But in reality, I'm probably still some kind of editor.

BRAD DOWNEY (1980, Louisville)

is a Berlin-based artist and activist. He has a dual background in the arts, having earned a BFA in Documentary Film from the Pratt Institute in New York (1998-2003) followed by an MFA in Painting from the Slade School of Art in London (2003-2005).

This combination allows him to document his urban interventions with a filmmaker's precision and a painter's eye.

His multifaceted projects range from performative actions and video to installations, paintings, and drawings.

Through the use of humor, sensitivity, and precise interventions, Downey investigates the underlying structures of our cities, landscapes, and sacred sites, as well as forgotten peripheries and contested borders.

Since 2003 Brad Downey has exhibited widely in Europe, as well as in numerous international exhibitions, museums and biennials, from the Kunstraum Kreuzberg Bethanien di Berlino, in a collective show named *Backjumps: The Live Issue*, to the Tbilisi Architecture Biennale in 2020. There have been several monographic exhibitions of Downey's work, including *Slow Motion Disasters* at Kunstraum Kreuzberg Bethanien in Berlin in 2019, and *Reverse Culture Shock* at MU Hybrid Art House in Eindhoven in 2018. Further solo exhibitions include *Flupp Blubb Boing* at Kunstverein Arnsberg in 2020, and *This Echo* at the Galerija Vžigalica in Ljubljana in 2019.

In 2020 Hatje Cantz published a 20 year survey of Downey's work entitled *Slapstick Formalism Process, Project, Object*.

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