

Custom

February 14-April 5, 2020

Artists:

Nikita Gale

Dahn Gim

Spencer Longo

Erick Medel

Natani Notah

Louise Rosendal

Tailgate Projects

Michael J. Bauman

Dana Hoey

Conversation with Erick Medel and Kale Roberts of Tailgate Projects conducted over the phone in January 2020.

You're both involved in trucks as art projects - Kale, with Tailgate Projects, and Erick, with your new truck/project, which is currently in development and launches this Spring. I'd like to start the interview by having you each discuss your approach to car customization within these artworks, and the ideas you're exploring behind these two projects.

Kale: The answer to that question is still evolving. The more I sit with this project, which is going on two and a half years now, the more I unpack about my history and relationship to car culture and masculinity, and how that applies to my identity, my body, my family history, and being in the South in particular.

Tailgate Projects started in Florida during Trump's initial campaign. His campaign style activated a lot of folks to be very brazen, very vocal, very racist, and misogynistic; physically out there things. I had just purchased a truck with the idea of this project, but I didn't quite know how it was going to work. I was having trouble explaining all the different components.

With the truck, we've got flags exhibiting in the back of it, which I knew was the first thing I wanted for sure, and a mural on the outside. I wanted to be able to create a performance platform and I didn't really know how that would look, but I needed to have the truck first. The Milagros and I worked on the exterior of the truck to come up with a mural. In two days, outside, without a paint booth, by hand, we finished the paint job. Then the flag went up with Dana Hoey as the first artist. The flags were a way to visually occupy the landscape and give a different narrative other than Confederate flag culture, which is very pervasive here in the South. I wanted to have a different set of conversations.

<http://www.gas.gallery>

This is a truck in drag. My exposure to car culture aside from my father has come out of Pimp My Ride, Souped Up Cars, Art Cars, and personalization. With 17 different artists now detailing the interior and the exterior, the truck is more about radical inclusivity, and a collective identity with a focus on rewriting and reassessing what masculinity can actually look like tied to trucks.

My father was an auto mechanic. He remodeled and restored old antique cars. But because I was assigned female at birth, I wasn't really shown anything, I was able to drive the cars, but I wasn't shown how to work on them. He rebuilt a Model T from the ground up, he had a 1910 Cadillac, I learned how to parallel park in a 67 convertible Cadillac. I've been around car culture, but I have had no access to it. Working on the truck, learning about the truck, has been an experience. Interacting with cis-men with my body to gain this knowledge is layered and complex. I feel like I'm wearing a double skin, and in a way the truck is as well.

I'm wondering, Erick, if you wanted to talk about your project, because we've also had similar conversations about how masculinity is performed with car culture, especially how cut across with class, and race, and other things? Do you want to talk about your truck project and your ambition with that? And how it's related to your practice?

Erick: I'm realizing Kale and I have a lot of similarities in the way we are approaching the truck. For me, it's more of my own connection to the experience of being working class, which again, is also connected to being a Mexican immigrant. Definitely within that, there's a sense of masculinity. I don't really care so much about trucks or cars in general, to me it's just a tool that I need to use to get from point A to point B. But, it's definitely intriguing to me, it's fascinating how it can sort of become... I mean it is an extension of yourself. Your truck signals a lot of things about

you, about yourself. In my case, I'm definitely going into a more hyper-masculine take on what a truck can look like.

Also for me, Americanness plays a big role in it. Not being American born in the country, I'll always have to, I don't know, to me it's this effort to reach full Americanness. Also, knowing that I can't ever fully get there because I have an accent, I'm brown, all of these things that aren't considered American. So, anything I can buy at this point, to make the truck fully American I guess. Getting it lifted, getting the big wheels, I got some license plate frames with barbed wire. I'm going to take that really tough exterior approach, but also I'm going to have the flags as well, like I made for the previous truck project.

Also, I want to start using the back of the truck to display my own work. It's still tentative for me. I want to reach out to other Latinx artists and collaborate in a way.

That idea of taking up space, we have that similarity as well

Being a minority, or not being part of the mainstream, just being the other, it's a powerful act to just take up space in a place where you're not really allowed to have much space, or not this ability at all. I don't know if it's a radical thing, but it's important for us to do that, just to be seen.

For both of your projects, you are engaging with the public in a specific context. Kale, you're based in Tampa, FL, where Tailgate Projects is part of this cultural landscape, especially tied to sporting events, etc, which you're attempting to queer and make your own.

Erick, you're working in LA, after living in Southern California and Northern Mexico for most of your life. How do you create a public with this object of the truck, and all the things it symbolizes given these distinctive spaces?

Kale: I've thought a lot about 'creating a public'. You know that question professors love to ask where they're like, "So who exactly is your audience??"

Erick: Yeah.

Kale: What I really enjoy with the truck, and I eventually you'll start to have that too with yours Erick, is that the conversation about audience and public is almost limitless in a vehicle. The audience is broad because it is something public, moving and outside. I have conversations in parking lots, grocery stores, gas stations, at stop lights, and curated art events. Each of these are bringing really distinct ways of interacting with the public in a very radically inclusive way. The truck is a space to get from point A to B.

When I think of queer sexuality, and sexual promiscuity, there is a history of bodies forced outside, outdoors, and on the streets, a similar narrative for other minority groups as well. The truck is a space that has that access and safety. You can drive and park and be visible in a way our bodies do not always have access to. A unique way to occupy space and change the visual landscape. Short of being towed away, you can create moments and leave quickly. It enables a quick space for happenings.

I've started to ask people when inquiring about the truck if they've ever been into a gallery. The majority respond with, "Oh, I've never actually been " or "I did once..." or "When I was in school." People are not going to galleries unless you're part of that world. It becomes really insular for folks consuming and making art and those that are interested in those sorts of conversations. The language starts to fade over a larger social gap. What is our role in making art if it is supposed to be inclusive? The truck becomes a conversation catalyst and a way to bring people back into the conversation through an alternative access point.

Erick: Yeah, I agree with that last comment. I also have been

thinking of that and who gets to experience this project. Kale right about that, it's really like if you're in the arts you go to openings, I would say normal people don't really go to the art: Latinos, they don't really participate in that world as often.

I keep that in mind, how do I approach an audience that isn't, guess trained to understand art? Because I think that makes people not want to interact with art, or they just feel like they don't belong there. I've just been thinking of ways to approach the non-typical gallery-attending audience. Trying to find ways make it more accessible and not having to rely on big words to explain the work. Breach that gap, you don't belong here because you don't get this, or you didn't go to art school so you're not going to get it. It can be intimidating, you're walking into a gallery, if you don't know anyone it's kind of intimidating because it's really cliquey. It's like, if you have friends there, you're cool, but if not you like an outsider.

The other thing I was thinking about in terms of publics, is how you collaborate. Kale, I know you also work really closely with the artists, in almost a collective fashion. You have a very generous way in which you talk to artists, and work with artists, and it seems to me that it results in working with others to create space differently, and allows a lot of people to be brought into the conversation. Can you talk about your approach as a curator in creating Tailgate Projects?

Kale: I've really tried to work with an idea of being radically inclusive by not just saying, I will only work with queer artists. Gosh, it's so dangerous sometimes. I feel so nervous to use the word queer in such a broad context, but I feel like there's so much power and potential in that word. When I use it, it's something that's constantly challenging itself, and it's in motion it's an adjective and a verb. Just like the truck is transitioning and in movement. I feel like the word queer is inclusive, not in opposition to. I use this as a way to approach curation and collaboration. Empathetic fallibility is important too.

Through collaborating and meeting people, I'm bridging new connections. Since the truck merges many different communities people that have worked on the truck or been part of past events suggest new artists and vet for the project. It begins to unfold in new relationships and visions for the platform and gallery.

The interior of the truck is still being detailed, and will eventually be its own gallery sound and audio space. All interior pieces are being remade by multiple artists. Gary Schmidt, Neil Bender, Jennifer Miller, Eric Ondina, have begun this process. It is still growing and the space has been used to show different artists films as well.

The truck bed is both the 'Flag Gallery' and a morphing performance platform. Artists working with these textiles are switched every three to four months with a different set of flags. I've done research with pep rallies, cheerleading, color guard parades, funeral processions, colonizing space, surrender, identity, nationality, etcetera to generate conversations and inspiration about flag content and culture. I work with artists that might not have flags as a body of work, but see correlations in their practice and content that apply and might activate conversations in a different way outside a gallery context.

Then there's the tailgate parties/shows/happenings in the bed and surrounding the truck. I work with artists to create new visions of a platform. Folks can either take over and utilize the truck or I'm am able to co-curate, co-host, perform, work collaboratively, or let loose the reins for a full take over.

These are the ways in which I've been collaborating with artists and the truck.

Again, you talked about the transitional nature of the truck itself. You can engage, there's a fluidity

there in terms of, it can be a stage, it can be a surface, it can be all of these things all at once. It's really inspiring to hear about how you're pulling through all these different groups together to create this evolving space.

I was really struck with your attention to the flags as part of Tailgate Projects, and I see this tying into Erick's work as well. Erick, I know for your MFA thesis show at RISD, you created a number of flags which you displayed on the back of truck. I'd love to hear you discuss how flags operated in the project.

Erick: I think what inspired me to do that was, maybe the same type of thing that you can see in Florida of people with big trucks, waving a huge American flag in the back. I think you've seen that even going in Providence, Boston, you come across this truck and that display of patriotism, got me to think of what the purpose of the flag is in relation to identity and how people use them to send out a message to the world, or the public of where they stand. In regards to their politics, how they identify, how they see themselves, so that what got me to start thinking of flags, and what they mean, and how people read them when they're out in public.

That's why I started thinking I could just make my own flags that sort of represent my, not multiple identities, but parts of me people wouldn't really think apply. I just started shopping around. The first one I made was a Realtree Camo pattern. I'm really obsessed with that pattern, it's such a crazy thing. That's becoming more popular in streetwear but its connection to hunting, that's so foreign to me, to see it on full display. I don't know, when I went to Texas this year, and I went to one of those hunting stores and that blew my mind. It's so crazy to see how much, you can buy anything with the print on it. I just made a bunch of flags using that.

Then it became more about things that I considered

American. I would buy fabric of say, prints with Spiderman, or Mickey Mouse or burgers. I went to New York a bunch of times to get a fabric. I got french fries prints, flames, skulls and that connected them more to masculinity. I was finding ways to make flags, American flags without using the red, the white, and the stars.

I had one with the hundred dollar bill print on it. I made 50, I was just going for volume. I just wanted to make a statement about how all these flags represent a type of American, or sort of how I see myself in them even though at times there are conflicting things that I don't agree with, I don't see myself in them. That's push and pull. Contradictions.

I think that's part of being an American, those contradictions. I love this country, but also there are certain things, like the history of this country is problematic. To be American is to exist with these conflicting ideas.

In your practice, you're almost working like a cultural anthropologist, for instance, collecting swatches of different types of camo. If I remember correctly, the flag project for your thesis show, you basically filled the back of a truck with, I don't know, how many flags was it?

Erick: 50.

50, you basically stuffed the back bed with that object, as almost an extreme presentation of someone simply hoisting two flags on the back of their truck. Then you also had other objects that you had created for that project right? Am I remembering that correctly?

Erick: Yeah, it was like my own gallery. I had the truck taking up all this space. I think of consumption as being American, as there's extreme consumption in America. That's a way to become American, is through consumption, I think. That's

why I made patches, I have my ceramic work in the back, I made stickers.

That's an element that I will have in the new truck. It'll be a functional thing where I will have things that people can purchase. I don't know, that's funny to me, also that could be a way to make my work accessible to people, just by making things that aren't that expensive. Because that's also part of the art world, a certain class of people can afford to buy a work of art. I guess by having those stickers, key chains, stuff like that, I feel like that could make people engage with the work in a way.

I wanted to bring up the fact that both of you are planning road trips this year. Kale, I'd love to hear about how that's progressing and what you're anticipating with that extension of the project. I'd love to also hear, Erick, your plans for that too.

Kale: Yeah, I'm already super excited, Erick, just hearing you talk right now. I'm like, Oh, we have to work together when Tailgate Projects comes out to LA for Queer Biennial in May.

Erick: That's sick.

Kale: Yeah, Tailgate Project's involvement in Queer Biennial will be over the weekend of May 16th, 2020. I'll be driving the truck from Tampa, Florida, to Los Angeles, and back. Some of these decisions comes down to crowdsourcing and fundraising in order to enable the trip across. We want to do a couple of stops keeping them lighter. LA will just be the largest of the happenings, performances, and installations for Queer Biennial. One of my collaborators and travel partners, Coe Lapossy and I plan to stop at spots along the way with the truck, documenting conversations, photographing, and attempt some live streaming. Even now as we're talking, in my head I'm brewing...so Erick, want to show case some flags for the drive cycle of Queer Biennial? because that would be phenomenal?

As far as complexities of travel, Tailgate Projects truck has a particular aesthetic that's hard to miss. We've got this color fade textural mural with sensual objects painted all over from the Milagros Collective, the teeth on the side of the truck, and flags in the truck bed. It is a really loud conversation catalyst. I've had some really powerful interactions with folks unexpectedly, as well as a few negative ones. I always have a traveling partner because certain dangerous scenarios can unpack, just as the celebratory and kind unexpected ones. The south and south east can have dangerous way of preserving toxic mentalities, but it's also a site where people through preserving their own safe way of existing become invisible.

I still am blown away by the socially programmed assumptions I'm still unpacking. This projects consistently broadens my scope of what queer looks like....what different people's identities, actually look like. So when people come out to me, when people have conversations with me, because of the what the truck looks like, they feel safe to talk about things that they normally wouldn't talk about.

I try to utilize asking questions first to position where the person is that I'm talking to. People are approaching the truck with assumptions and their own informative histories. Reading body language, tone, accessing your surrounding, and questions are where the interaction can begin or sharply end. These are the public variables of the project but I believe they are catalysts change and visibility.

Erick and I had some of these conversations last time we spoke. I recognize that although I'm dealing with queerness, and queer visibility, he's dealing with something completely different in traveling across the United States with his identity. The conversation and obstacles he's going to deal with will be very different, especially in rural parts that harbor negative, toxic, fear-based information about immigration, the border, race, citizenship, and nationality. All are we

things to consider as you driving across the US.

Then when you stop, are you going to be doing performances? Are you going to be connecting to other art communities or clubs or anything on the way to or from?

Kale: We're either going up and over, and down and across but that's dependent on how and who we are able to connect with as we get closer to the travel date. Ideally connecting with different queer communities, galleries, creatives and performers are a few of our target communities..labels like queer are not always the language generationally and demographically everyone has access to or aligns with. We might need to let identity and nomenclature unfold as we connect and figure out what our connections looks like and where they will take us.

Right now I have a stripper pole mounted in the back of the truck bed, and we'll have two other components that are prepared for Queer Biennial that will be part of the truck as well. I'll be able to connect with folks and say "Hey here's the stage and here's the equipment that I have, would you be interested in doing a happening? We're going to be coming through that area on this date." Then we can do a setup, a pop up event, and even host with some food tailgate style. It's a great ritual sort of thing to tie in, plug in art instead of sports, and then wrap it up, pack it away, and drive on to the next spot.

We will even need spaces to crash along the way which we create connection and content as well.

That sounds really exciting and I look forward to following the adventure on Instagram.

Erick, do you want to talk about your plans? Because I know you're still working on the truck and you're still figuring things out, but I'd love to

hear what your ambitions are with a possible road trip this summer.

Erick: I thinking ways to approach different audiences in different cities. I definitely won't have the flags out while I'm driving. For me it'll be more of a performance. I want to set up pop-ups along the way. When I'm done figuring out the logistics of it, I'm going to hit up a bunch of spaces and see if it's down to collaborate or to host the truck for, like I said, one night, a popup. I think that's the way to connect with artists communities in different cities, exposing the product to a wider audience. I will be documenting for the whole... The way I see it, this project ends in becoming a book. Because I have a lot of photos and I think it has the potential to become a book as a final product.

I see myself exploring and taking it all in, because I've never driven across the country. I've been to the South a couple of times but I think it'll be a whole different experience to actually be there, and just take it all in; take photos, write down my thoughts. I definitely want to connect with other artists in different cities and a car artist as well.

I'm not going to be driving that long because definitely, I'm concerned about certain places. I have to be aware, I'm really aware of there are places that are not welcoming. I just don't want to run into any trouble. That's why I don't want to have the flags. I'll probably just have one flag at all times. It would sort of be more limited I guess, in a way.

I want to go to Chicago and have a pop up there. I just want to hit up all the major cities. Then I have to figure out timing because I know that it's going to take a lot of work and I don't want to rush it. I think maybe two weeks should be, that's what I'm aiming for, it'll be a two week trip from here to New York and back. I'm still trying to figure it out, how to approach it.

When we were talking about it, I wasn't sure if

you're joking or not, but you mentioned it would be "the Last Tour" because we're going into an election year and things are obviously pretty crazy in our country right now. Are you conceptually thinking of it being related to that?

Erick: Yeah, I totally forgot about that. I think that could be my working title, like, America, the Last Tour. Next year, it's like election year, so it's going to be politically crazy. I think it's a good time to just put it all out there and really talk about how the country is going to be. I don't know, it's a real historic time right now, so fucking crazy. I'll definitely keep that, I think I'll keep that name, I kind of like it.

Thank you for taking the time to chat about your projects. It's been interesting to hear how you navigate space, how you engage with the public, how the projects have developed and will develop and then also all of the things that go into the truck as a thing, that exists within its surroundings.

Do you have any other last thoughts or comments?

Kale: Side by side, both of these projects touch on the significance and importance in the diversity of tactics, in order to infiltrate spaces. His truck, without having flags on and an additional lift, is able to get in spaces without it being as loud as my truck. When I think of stealth, and being under the radar, you can move into a space in a very different way. You can walk in undirected and then turn up the volume. This is a different approach to having the volume turned all the way up right from the go. I really appreciate and like what you're doing Erick. There is importance in different approaches to making change.

ORIENTATION

" FACED WITH THIS WORLD OF FAITHFUL AND COMPLICATED OBJECTS, THE CHILD CAN ONLY IDENTIFY HIMSELF AS OWNER, AS USER, NEVER AS CREATOR; HE DOES NOT INVENT THE WORLD, HE USES IT: THERE ARE, PREPARED FOR HIM, ACTIONS WITHOUT ADVENTURE, WITHOUT WONDER, WITHOUT JOY."

-BARTHES, "TOY"

YOU LEARNED TO LOVE THE IMAGE BEFORE YOU KNEW THE THING ITSELF. ACCIDENTS, DEATH AND HEARTBREAK WERE ABSTRACT EVENTS LODGED SOMEWHERE WITHIN THE HORIZON.

THE TRAUMA OF VIOLENCE WAS ALWAYS RESOLVED WITH A SWIFT RECOVERY AND A PERFECT NEW FORM EXACTLY LIKE THE ONE YOU LOST.

TAKING YOU TOWARD THE GOAL.

YOU DEVELOPED UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS FOR RECOVERY AND REPAIR. BUY FLOWERS. GO TO DINNER. PROPOSE. HAVE A BABY. BUY A HOUSE. APOLOGIZE.



Top: Erick Medel with truck

Bottom: Tailgate Projects with Dana Hoey's *Fighters* (2016)

**YOU LEARNED TO LOVE THE
IMAGE OF SPEED, THE IMAGE OF
MOVING FORWARD, BURNING
THROUGH HISTORY - FOSSILS-
FOSSIL FUEL-OIL--HURDLING
TOWARDS THE MYTH OF A
BETTER FUTURE, OF PROGRESS, OF
PERFECT SEX, OF THE ETERNAL,
OF CONSISTENT PERFORMANCE, OF
SUSTAINED GOOD FEELINGS—
FEELINGS OF INFATUATION WITH
SOME NEW LOVE AND THE FEELING OF IT
WORKING YOU OVER. CATHEXIS. SOME
NEW TOUCH FROM SOME NEW AND
SENSITIVE NETWORK.**

AS CHILDREN, PEOPLE PLAY WITH TOY CARS BEFORE HAVING ANY UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT A CAR IS OR HOW IT FUNCTIONS; CHILDREN DERIVE PLEASURE FROM HANDLING THE SCALED DOWN REPRESENTATION OF THIS OBJECT. THE SCALE IS UNCANNY. YOU TOUCH A BUTTON OR A LEVER AND THE OBJECT RESPONDS IN MORE OR LESS THE SAME WAY EACH TIME. THIS IS A RELATIONSHIP WITH AN OBJECT OUTSIDE OF YOUR OWN BODY.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO MOVE FROM HOLDING AN IMAGE IN YOUR HAND TO EVENTUALLY PLACING YOUR BODY INSIDE OF THE SIGNIFIED OBJECT? HOW DOES IT INFORM HOW YOU RELATE TO THE OBJECT AT IT'S NATURAL SCALE (AS AN ACTUAL AUTOMOBILE)?

[Excerpt from Nikita Gale's *LOW MAINTENANCE: i only believe in horsepower now* from 2016. Full document: <https://www.nikitagale.com/low-maintenance>]