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**Devin Kenny**  
**"rootkits rootwork"**

MoMA PS1  
 9 June – 2 September 2019

Increasingly evident in the wake of the present crisis is the question of what constitutes radical practice. Debates around the highly controversial the Teargas Biennial (this year's Whitney Biennial) – which remains on view through the end of September – continue to rage. At the root of the matter is the position of institutions within the matrix of capital, and the means by which culture and money intermingle and are subject to a series of conversions that appear, in nearly every instance, to trace back to blood.

Meanwhile, a cluster of servers in the IT department of the Museum of Modern Art is quietly mining the Monero cryptocurrency. In a comparable process of alchemy, computer servers are encrypting and decrypting information. The resulting tokens will be converted to US dollars and then be passed on to the Immigrant Bail Fund in order to quicken the churning of incarcerated individuals from detention into freedom. Information into tokens, tokens into money, money into bonds, bonds into bodies, bodies into blood into language into culture – the circulation of which is capital.

This explains some of why it's difficult to talk about Devin Kenny's solo show at MoMA PS1 within the usual paradigms of black identity, subjective authorship, or even institutional critique. Devin Kenny – or should that be Devin Kkenny, photorejuve, or dkyk? – is an artist working in as many aliases as they are mediums. This time, he is the shamanic engineer behind the exhibition that brought about the museum's collaboration with the Immigrant Bail Fund. The idea of the self as cipher is most evident in the music videos and



Devin Kenny, *dkyk* "el aire es mugre" "ne2c" from *Queering the Wheel* curated by Antonius Bui and Tonya Huynh, Houston, TX, 2019

the sound pieces in the show, which highlight Kenny's activity as a curator and music historian, blurring the line between entertainment, education, and indexical consciousness. In several of them, Kenny's image collapses into the voices of the rappers he venerates and chases after in lyric and image.

In *los giros de la siguiente* (the turns of the next) (2019), by contrast, Kenny jockeys video-game clips into geopolitical commentary in a live "performance essay". This is accompanied by a high-bias cassette tape, available at the PS1 museum store, that overlaps "chopped and

**SQUARE ROOT**

screwed" *cumbias rebajadas* music with the rap dialects of the Dirty South. The tensions between these sound forms reflect the personas suggested elsewhere: the singer struggles towards

identity – towards meaning – while at the same time refusing its anchorage. One overarching idea in the show is that freedom might find greater manifestation in noise than in voice. In general, the music videos and the sound works seem more important than the sculpture and paintings on view, suggesting that what matters most about the works in the show is how they sound: less like a protest, more like a transposition of political strategy onto the social economy of the art institution.

*More or Less* (2015) isn't about trying to escape a system, but about trying to escape control. Dark shadows trace the spectrum of visibility in a dimly lit, steel blue room: the artist's movements are at first only visible through the textural shifts of 2015 camera technology. Imagine Yvonne Rainer playing the lava game (the one where you put objects on the floor to avoid touching the carpet) or the experience of a caste-marked individual walking through an upper-class district. Kenny moves tacitly through a small room trying not to trigger a motion sensor camera. He fails, and the lights turn on, revealing an unremarkable domestic space fitted only with a black chair and a

Photo: Kyle Shirley, Courtesy the artist

black monitor on the floor. The work is described as a "postmodern dance performance"; it could also be a structural metaphor for the cyberneticised society. Until the lights turn on, Kenny is an anonymous referent, a mass shadow, noise. When visibility is triggered, Kenny stands up and walks out of the room – as a subject, as a civilian profile.

But as strong as many of the works on view are, one can't help but wonder if the artist is using his first museum solo show as a political front job: in the background, Kenny has ordered a number of stipulations that make visible the structural relationship between artist, audience, and institution. That the exhibition is closed to the public for half an hour per day – to allow for the museums largely black and working-class staff to interact with the works (or not, if they so choose) – seems tucked into the foot of the press release after a generic description of the so-called identity politics on display. It's

great that viewers can basically ignore the standard-fare discursive litany (why do words like "address" or "interrogate" in the press release read as blaringly juridical here?) while they hang out and watch music videos. These are stationed uncomfortably at neck-wrenching height in the two galleries that comprise the show. The experience of watching them in an art museum is similar to the reprieve of daytime television in the waiting room for food stamps.

While "rootkits" refers to a kind of computer virus that undetectably affects the operating system itself, "rootwork" is a reference to "black-American folk magic." The shamanic dimension of systems administration gets embodied in trash that appears to float weightlessly in consumer-grade DNA jars. This is self as content, as fixed internal referent, not to mention a hilarious insinuation of individualism as a mode of capitalist reproduction. All trash is unique but equal. The question implied by means of

cast resin so clean that the viewer confuses the material inside with water is something like "how deep do you need to go into this system of self to combat the alienation that produced it?"

"rootkits rootwork" is a matrix of opposition: Black magic and crypto-economics on one axis; institutional resources and surplus populations on the other. What's ultimately at stake is an interrogation of the radical hypothesis that what's radical is not revolt, what's radical is what gets to the root (√). It is a square root, emblematic of the shape outlined by performers of the cumbia dance step. And what's visible is an attempt to catalyse participation at the margins: both in the opening of the formal and aesthetic boundaries of sculpture, painting, and image-making in general, but perhaps most importantly through a willingness to exploit the vulnerabilities in systems of power and representation in order to reconfigure the social horizons of art.

**Victoria Campbell**

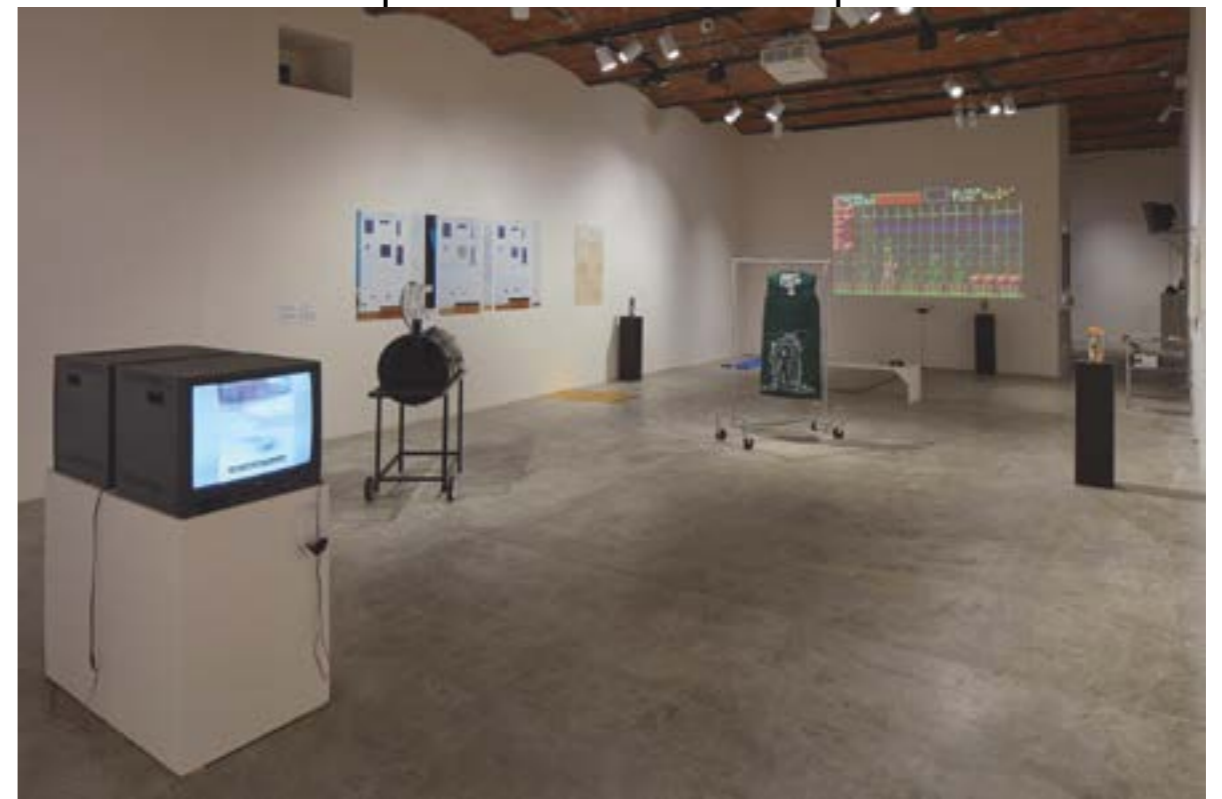


Photo: Matthew Septimus

View of Devin Kenny "rootkits rootwork", MoMA PS1, 2019