

Interview

Jonathan Meese  
“I am suffering from reality, not Art”

*by Ross Simonini*



Jonathan Meese with his mother, 2017.  
Photo: Jan Bauer. Courtesy the artist

Why capitalize ART? <sup>meese</sup> 2017  
Do you want to think of it as  
God? AS a proper noun? What  
is this term? Do you see art  
in the Beuysian egalitarian  
tradition?

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ART IS NR. 1., but not GOD!  
ART stands above everything  
else, ART is the sum of all  
EVOLUTIONS. In ART nobody  
has to kneel down, nobody  
has to pray and nobody has  
to make a pilgrimage. ART  
is no Temple, Art is no  
holy ground. ART IS PLAY.  
Art is no politics, Art is  
stronger than all political  
systems. Art can not be  
voted. Beuys became political

An excerpt from Jonathan Meese's correspondence with  
Ross Simonini for this interview. Courtesy Jonathan Meese

Jonathan Meese usually refers to himself in the third person, as if he were a character in the wild and tumultuous opera of his art. He is, of course, the protagonist, but there are plenty of supporting roles: Wagner, Hitler, Napoleon, Nero, Nietzsche and an ever-present, ever-erect phallus.

Through sculptures, paintings, performances, videos and writing, the Berlin- and Hamburg-based Meese has built a nightmarish world of power-hungry European men. It's a place of crude, juvenile figuration and German military iconography. In Meese's paintings, which are at the centre of his work, colours smear and simmer together in an energetic maelstrom that is both brutal and chromatically stunning.

For the artist, his entire project is one great deadpan farce. Meese is aggressively reappropriating the propaganda of the oppressor, draining any power that its language or imagery may hold. In this way, he sees his work as a denouncement of all ideology, political, religious or otherwise. He's creating a visual manifesto of antiauthority, of true uninhibited freedom. He wants to be like an adolescent rolling around in the mud, and so it seems right that, for many years, his mother has served as his studio assistant.

To break down the systematic thinking around him, Meese embraces contradiction. In his 'dictatorship of art' he is not the dictator – art is – but the agitator, the trickster, the spectacle. During performances, he has worn a bicorne, fellated an alien doll and given the Nazi salute, an illegal act in Germany for which Meese was tried and acquitted in 2013. ('Art has triumphed!' he said in response.)

In February 2017 he called Donald Trump 'the greatest performer on this planet right now, second only to myself', a statement that manages to simultaneously mock and embody megalomania. His work is unabashedly slathered with his own image, and yet he is never the hero, always the fool.

Meese's critique of German history is potent, but he's also provincial in his interests. His painting clearly emerges out of German traditions, from the Expressionism of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Emil Nolde to the New Fauves of the 1980s, and many of the artists working in this same lineage – Jörg Immendorff, Albert Oehlen, Daniel Richter and Tal R – have been his regular collaborators. If Meese has an ultimate goal, it seems to be the long-sought German one: the totalised, multidisciplinary artwork, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

For the following interview, I emailed questions and he responded in scrawled responses, mostly legible. The handwritten text, often stylised in all caps and punctuated by exclamation marks, echoed the same statements squeezed from paint tubes onto his paintings. In videos of the artist, he speaks

mostly at the top of his lungs, and even on paper he seems to be overflowing with the vehemence of a child playing an imaginary game of war.

ROSS SIMONINI *How do you define ideology?*

JONATHAN MEESE Ideology is an invention of adult brains. Ideology is taste, not necessity. In nature there is no ideology. Children have no ideology. Objects have no ideology. Ideology is something that children are taught. Animals have no ideology, ideology seems to be only a need for adults. Every political system is ideological, so is religion, spiritualism, esoteric or self-fulfilment. Ideology consists of institutionalised thinking and behaviour. Ideology is always a devil circle of unnecessary activities. Ideology is never Art. Art is always totally free and absolutely contrary to ideological stupidity. Ideology is the worst obstacle against the future. Art destroys all ideologies. Art is the leader.

**“Art is the future. Art is the room of future. Artists should work in their ateliers without disturbances. Artists should be hermetic! Artists should only trust in Art, not policies. Art is not another political system, Art is stronger than all politicians. Art is no anarchy. Art is Total Order. Art is the Total Order of the future. Art is the most radical future! (Art is Total Love. Art is Total Respect)”**

Art overcomes all ideologies. Art says no to all politicians. Art rules. Art leads and Art takes over! The 'dictatorship of Art' is the leadership of evolution: ideology is always the enemy of evolution. Art is the sum of all evolutions.

RS *But do you think people can truly escape ideology?*

JM Jonathan Meese has always successfully escaped ideology by playing. Playing like a child is the answer to all ideological influences. An artist has to play away all ideological indoctrination. Artists have to keep away from all ideological terror. Ideology is always the room of fear. Artists have to stay away from fear or even have to destroy these cynical rooms. In Art censorship is forbidden, especially self-censorship. Obedience to ideological concepts is deadly for art. Art is the future. Art is the room of future. Artists should work in their ateliers without disturbances. Artists should be hermetic! Artists should only trust in Art,

not policies. Art is not another political system, Art is stronger than all politicians. Art is no anarchy. Art is Total Order. Art is the Total Order of the future. Art is the most radical future! (Art is Total Love. Art is Total Respect.)

RS *So isn't ideology just a natural human state?*

JM My mother and I fight daily over this question. She believes that ideology is inherent in human life. I think it is not. Children and babies are already human beings and do not need ideology... that need comes later. Why? Ideology seems to be a weapon of adults. These 'teachers' hammer ideology into the brains of the young, and I don't accept this. My mother violently disagrees and thinks that human beings need ideologies to survive in a hostile world. She is eighty-seven years old and experienced a lot of ideological movements. Jonathan Meese truly awaits a world without ideologies. That will be the evolutionary step of total radicalism into a world of total Art. The 'dictatorship of Art' is the guarantee for survival. Art has no cynical aspects. Art is always the future. Art is the master.

RS *How does working with your mother affect your process?*

JM My mother is a natural authority. I did not 'vote' for her! My mother is chief, chief of evolution. My mother is not a God! My mother evolutionises Jonathan! My mother brings order into my life and my atelier! My mother disagrees with my visions but in the end she knows that something new must evolve. Dispute is totally necessary for future! Art is dispute, not discourse. Art is mother 'Earth'.

RS *Do you think education is possible without ideology?*

JM Yes. Education itself is never ideological as long as there is no message, indoctrination or other political or religious influences! The education that leads to future allows children to play and learn without ideology. Ideology is always the jail of the past. Art is total freedom. In Art all ideological devil circles are destroyed. Evolution shows that we are not the masters but the children of the future. Evolution is the teacher of Art! Art is the education of nature. Art is total metabolism! Art is the pressure of the future. All children are artists. All Art lovers are Artists. Nature is Art.

RS *Why do you capitalise 'Art'?*

JM Art is not God. Art stands above everything else. Art is the sum of all evolutions. In Art nobody has to kneel down, nobody has to pray and nobody has to make a pilgrimage. Art is no temple. Art is no holy ground.



ZUKUNFTSSOLDAT 'I.', 2016, oil and acrylic on canvas, 211 × 140 cm.  
Photo: Jan Bauer. Courtesy the artist and Sies + Höke, Düsseldorf

RS *So why call it a dictatorship of art?*

JM The name 'dictatorship of Art' means the total declaration of total love towards Art. Art is like love, like friendship, like future, like mother, like father. Art is therefore not democratic but an evolutionary process! Art is, like the sun, a dictator, but an objective dictator, not an ideological one.

RS *Is visual art well suited to rejecting ideology?*

JM When people play, they serve Art, when people live in ideological systems and obey them, they are against Art. People have to free themselves from all ideological brainwashing! Ideology is the enemy of future. Ideological persons are brainwashed and brainwashers. Visual Art, like all Art is the guarantee for Evolution and Future.

RS *Do you think of yourself as working in the lineage of Joseph Beuys, who declared everyone an artist?*

JM Beuys became political in his later years. He suddenly trusted politics more than Art. Art is no political party. Art is no politician. Art survives. Politics vanish. Art is the counter reality. Art is the dreamland. Art is the

antireality. Art is total future. Art says no to all nostalgic governments. Artists never trust politicians. Artists should never follow ideology! Artists should work constantly in their ateliers. Artists should not believe too much in cultural networking. Artists should love lovely isolation in their ateliers. Artists are loners!

**“Evolution is the teacher of Art! Art is the education of nature. Art is total metabolism! Art is the pressure of the future. All children are artists. All Art lovers are Artists. Nature is Art”**

RS *Do you consider yourself a loner? What about your recent collaborations with Daniel Richter and Tal R?*

JM Normally, I am a total loner and love to work on my own in my studio. Daniel Richter and Tal R are very, very old and close friends, and I trust them totally, so cooperation with them is no problem. We are three captains whose ships meet occasionally on the high seas of Art.

In these collaborations we are totally even but not democratic. We do what is necessary. In Art, real friendship is needed, but it takes a long time to develop. Art is family business! Art is the exchange of respect! In Art you need patience! Art is the chain of loners! Daniel Richter, Tal R and Jonathan Meese are children of Art and play Art. Art is the total game and Artists are toys!

RS *Is it true that you refuse to fly to exhibitions?*

JM Yes. I don't want to fly any more because I want to slow down, concentrate on my work in the studio and let the art travel. Art is not the artist. I am not afraid of flying. I just don't want to be available all the time and everywhere.

RS *Evolution and future are clearly two key concepts for you. Evolution is an idea from science, which is of course its own ideology, and future is a construct. Aren't these adult ideas?*

JM Future is no problem for babies, animals or objects. Future seems to be only a problem for grown-up people, only ideological brains produce future problems. Children just play into the future. Future is no ideological construct for children or objects. Evolution happens



Daniel Richter, Tal R and Jonathan Meese photographed for their group exhibition *The Men Who Fell from Earth*, 2017, Holstebro Kunstmuseum.  
Photo: Jan Bauer. Courtesy the artist

without human interference. The only relevant question is: do we fear future or look forward to it? For an artist, future is the chief. An artist should never fear future. Evolution is Art. Art is Evolution. Evolution is future. Evolution is not revolution. We need people who serve evolution, not revolution. Evolution is not based on ideology. Revolution is always based on ideology. Nature needs no revolution. Only adult ideological brains produce revolution. Art is number 1! Art is the law! Art is the sum of all evolutions. Art is hermetic action. In art you don't illustrate nowadays, you play future! Artists should never react on political day-to-day developments. Art is stronger than politics. Artists should never behave like politicians. Artists are baby animals. Artists are not left- or rightwing! Artists have no political ideologies. Artists doubt reality. Artists deny reality. Artists cannot serve reality. Artists are radical dreamers.

RS *Why do you exhibit at all? Why work with the market or institutions or the Internet? Why not just play privately in your studio?*

JM Jonathan Meese is no monk! To work alone in your studio does not mean that you are not

connected to the world. I am suffering from reality, not Art. I fight against all ideologies because I am not cynical. I am not a religious prophet. Meese cannot live in the woods just looking at his own navel. As an Artist you love Art and Art will change the world and rule the world. I love the total power Art, I know that only Art is the government of the future. I cannot hide away because this would only be self-fulfilment! Art expands... Art is no lifestyle. Meese is no prophet but Meese takes responsibility! Meese sees failure and points at these wounds. I have to play against all Art enemies. Art is the most fascinating never-ending power of all. Art is the perpetual mobile. Art created everything. Art is the beginning with no end! Art is total Parsifal. Art rescues from reality!

RS *When did this anti-ideology position begin for you?*

JM No ideological adult ever injected the ideological juice into my brain. Meese's brain is too well protected.

RS *Why do you wear an all-black Adidas uniform?*

JM Meese needs a uniform to protect himself against reality! I need a totally organised daily routine to be radical in Art. Everything in my life is structure, therefore I can totally concentrate on welcoming future. My home is my castle. My home is Art. Your home is Art. Everybody's home is Art. We need to be based in our own homes. Art is as close as the point of your nose. Art is not far away. Very important! I wear Adidas because the three stripes frame the body and protect it. I love Adidas because it is simple, effective, not so expensive and practical. 'Black' is a very neutral colour and the opposite of white. White is too holy for me and too delicate. To wear a kind of Art-Uniform makes life easy. Artists should be radical in Art, not in real life. Reality should be banned and Art should take over. Art is Art!

*Work by Jonathan Meese is on view in Always Trust The Artist, Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp, through 17 March, and in DIE NACKTESTE FREIHEIT DER KUNST, Sies + Höke, Düsseldorf, 14 April – 12 May*

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MONDPARSIFAL BETA 9-23 (VON EINEM, DER AUSZOG DEN 'WAGNERIANERN DES GRAUENS' DAS 'GEILSTGRUSELN' ZU ERZLEHREN...), 2017, opera, Berliner Festspiele. Photo: Jan Bauer. Courtesy the artist