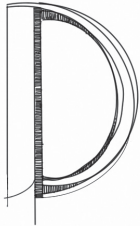


IN conversation with

DAN COLEN

BY MICHAEL BULLOCK

Photographed by
Jeff Henrikson

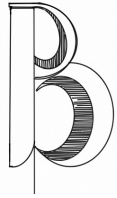


Dan Colen's reputation has always preceded him. In his early days, post 9-11 the six-foot-six tall artist along with his circle of outsiders and misfits, skaters and graffiti artists, captured New York City's attention with their chaotic, drug-fueled, post-punk, hedonistic bravado. The highlights were documented by photographer Ryan McGinley, one of Colen's best friends, and the images of degenerate, youthful rebellion were seen in magazines around the world, turning the crew into mascots for a new generation of downtown artist-rebels. The art and media worlds ate it up. In 2006, Colen showed three graffiti covered boulders at the Whitney Biennial. In 2007, New York magazine featured him on their cover in bed with McGinley and his other close friend artist Dash Snow. The title declared them "Warhol's Children". From a distance the trio looked like effortless rising stars backed by youth, charisma and raw talent but anyone watching closely could feel their incredible ambition, drive, ego and focus on fame.



SKY HIGH FARM





By 2010, Colen's place in the art world was cemented when he became one of the youngest artists to ever be represented by Gagosian Gallery. The rapid shift from one side of the spectrum to the other opened the door to big questions. How can an artist keep their outsider-punk credentials when they show at one of the most powerful galleries in the world? What happens to a career fueled by transgression once you have joined what many see as the establishment? For over a decade the partnership between Colen and Gagosian has enjoyed sustained success, with solo shows and museum exhibitions around the world. But at the same time something much more radical was quietly happening: Dan Colen was becoming an activist-farmer.

9 years ago, an instinct to return the land surrounding his upstate New York home and studio back to its origins slowly but steadily started him on a new path that has since taken over his life. Incredible ambition and bravado are still very much a part of Colen's persona but these days those attributes are in service to solving structural inequities in America's food system. His project has since evolved into Sky High Farms, a non-profit that gives away 100 percent of its produce to people in need. The homepage of the farm's website tracks their donations by the pound. As of May 2021, they have donated 86,687 pounds of vegetables and 49,765 pounds of proteins to food banks throughout New York State.

For Neptune, writer Michael Bullock and Colen discuss transgression, shifting identities, self-perception, structural change, food insecurity, rejecting bourgeois values, sustainable farming and manifesting the promise of youthful rebellion in adulthood.

m Most successful people end up being involved in some form of philanthropy, but this endeavor goes way beyond supporting a cause. This seems life changing.

d I wasn't able to say that until recently because for me, changing my life means changing the way I see what it means to make art. It's going to take some time for me to find the right words to describe how I consider this project and how it relates to my past work and who I am, but I am happy to consider this together. I have come to believe that this farm is part of my creative practice. It's helped me clarify how vague art is.

Do you mean it's broadened your idea of art's function and potential impact?

I see art as a tool to change reality but that can get lost in the marketplace. There is a shadow that the art world casts over an artist's creative practice that's corrosive; the artist has to figure out how to exist in a place that doesn't

really actually foster or support their art's intentions. You only realize that this doesn't make sense when you become successful and by then to work your way out of it doesn't feel like the right answer. Great artists are able to create force fields that allow them to continue to evolve despite this system, but then I didn't start this farm in a rebellious way. It happened on instinct. When I went from having barely enough to very quickly having more than enough, I was trying to resolve that with some sort of activity in my life. It wasn't a conscious act of resistance to the art world, although if I stop to think, this farm is the opposite of what the art world is.

The first realm of your public identity, around 9-11 was the embodiment of youthful rebellion. At first glance it just looked like over the top, self-obsessed, messy, hedonism but for me there was one important transgressive aspect that was often overlooked.









Two of your closest friends were gay skaters/artist at a time when straight-gay friendships were rare or rarely visible. But as you started to attract media attention the interesting elements of that period got flattened in the press as you and your friends became the poster children for what was at the time, this new style of New York City, wild-child, party identity that your circle fostered.

This is honestly what I'd like to share the most. It's so weird because I think about this a lot and there isn't usually a natural context to talk about it but I relate to what you're saying and personally it's something that I'm sensitive about because I feel misunderstood. The farming world is full of radicals. Whatever you think of as a radical in the city, it's on another level here. Meeting these farmers has helped me reconnect to my start as an artist. My identity ended up being kind of simplified, right? At first it was through this party context but over time, the public discourse around me describes me as 1) a market artist and 2) a typical straight man. It's awkward to even discuss how I feel about the second conception because I am a 6 foot 6, 200-pound, white, heterosexual man but when I first moved to NY our crew was Dash Snow, Ryan McGinley, Kunle Martins and me. Dash and I both never felt comfortable embodying typical straight masculine identities. Ryan and Kunle didn't feel comfortable as gay man and I don't think Raina (Hamner), my girlfriend at the time, felt comfortable living within the typical feminine archetypes. So, we were all different kinds of outsiders that found each other, in a time period long before this current conversation about identity politics.

When I try to get people to understand what I'm doing now it almost seems impossible because there is this whole area of my life that they can't see.

I understand what you're doing now in the context of your history, rebelling against a prescribed identity seems essential to who you are but I also see why it's difficult for most people to understand why you would need to rebel against your current identity: a successful artist represented by Gagosian.

I don't get to indulge in this that often because it's not offered to me and obviously none of this is about regret or resentment, it's more just about curiosity and definitely about trying to figure out how to connect with an audience. This farm is very much about trying to find an audience that's collaborative. A lot of my artwork was built to resist the market. I made work that decomposed. I made work that disappeared. I made totally ridiculous things when it would have much easier to just make paintings and it didn't connect. I was still stuck in this mold of blue-chip market artist. When you're working in that framework there's no way to be transgressive and art can't exist without transgressive act or intent. The market dulls the audience's experience with an artwork. This farm, as I see it now, is a more direct, bombastic way of challenging structures and perceptions. So much of it has to do with going back to being a young artist. Resistance was such a big part of my life, but it was totally unfocused. I was on fire but at the core it was about trying to challenge hierarchies and societal norms.

I remember the New York Magazine cover in 2007 with you in bed with Ryan (McGinley) and Dash

(Snow). At that time – and maybe still today – most straight men wouldn't risk any possibility that they might be perceived as gay and there you were in bed in your boxers with two other men, cuddling with your gay best friend. I appreciated that you used your identity so publicly to mix things up.

I recently listened to a Wolfgang Tillman interview and he said he considers queerness to be inclusive and expansive which I really relate to, especially now that you don't usually hear it described that way anymore. *I get the contemporary impulse to take refuge within and empower your own specific community, but it can stifle opportunities to unify with other groups of people with a similar vision. In terms of identity, running this farm is an unexpected and interesting intervention. It definitely keeps you from being boxed into any singular ideology or expectation. You started almost ten years ago, long before the term social justice became part of our everyday conversation.*

To have built something that is so well constructed to interface with this moment is really strange because I'm not versed in those discourses. I'm still trying to catch up. But it's true this farm has evolved into something that is so perfect for this moment on so many levels, almost awkwardly so, right?

I admit, at first, I was cynical. I didn't hear about this project until the Sky High Farm merch line launched at Dover Street Market earlier this year. And everything about it seemed so politically on trend but then I read a little bit and I understood you have been at this for a long time and that the Sky High brand is a fundraiser for the project to continue to grow in order to feed more people experiencing food insecurity.

This year we became a nonprofit organization, a 501C3. So now we have a board and there are more people besides

myself directing the farm's growth and evolution. This has allowed us to plan bigger projects and increase our food production. The proceeds for the street wear project that you saw are 100% for charity so all of the production was donated and all the retail funds farming. We have 4 phases of merchandise planned for this year and next year we will launch an actual full brand of workwear. Comme des Garçons is producing and distributing for us. In February 2022 we'll debut our first spring/summer collection and we will make two collections a year after that. The whole project is about bringing as many different types of people and practices together as possible. Recently, I've become very dedicated to the idea of trying to offer opportunities for a new generation of donors. I see the Sky High T-shirts as that opportunity, everybody who buys one becomes a donor and hopefully an activist and advocate. Our partnership with Comme des Garçons allows the conversation about food inequality and sustainable farming to reach a much bigger audience.

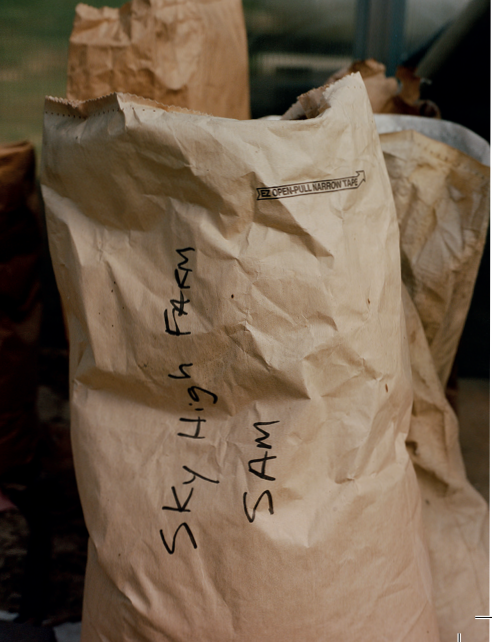
It's impressive to see your enormous ambition, energy, creativity and vast social and production networks all directed toward helping people in need. I'm curious, could you sum up your first impulse to decide to use your land for this purpose?

This was born out of a very personal intimate experience of loss and transformation and you know yadda, yadda. I'm constantly trying to figure out the right word to describe how this came to be. Sometimes I say it was a whim but it doesn't feel right because it's the hardest thing I've ever done in my life. Sometimes I say it was a miracle, but it wasn't grand.











All that I did was make a decision and follow through with it. There was no master plan.

At what point did you feel like you understood what you're doing here?

For a long time I was very insecure about being a farmer and an activist.

It's funny to think a confident, accomplished person like you could suffer from impostor syndrome?

I got over it by accepting that I'm neither a farmer or an activist. That allowed me to start to see the farm as part of my creative process. When I was able to start looking back it became clear to me that I built this farm like I have built all of my art. If you launch a business without a plan it's considered totally irresponsible, but to make art you just have to go with a feeling, faith has to come before facts or even your own understanding. After the first two years I started to ask myself "what the fuck is this"? For the first eight years the answer was: it's a farm and we give food away. But then that wasn't enough, it didn't fit with who I am. So I started looking back and the only thing I could relate it to was my studio practice. So yeah, at the start there was no clear intention. I didn't fully understand social justice or food insecurity. I definitely didn't understand farming, environmentalism or mutual aid. Resistance when we were twenty was about the world not being a fair, equitable place but when you're young you're so unfocused that your reaction to it can just end up turning into self-destruction. Within my circle of friends there was so much love. I found people that were as confused, tormented and dissatisfied as I was. We all felt victimized by the power structure but felt we had no ability

to actually change it. This frustration was expressed through random acts or anger, rule-breaking and illegal activity that had no impact.

In that period before social media, injustice was embedded in everything. It was such a fact of life that it seemed unchangeable. We didn't even have the language to identify the problems as structural inequalities.

Totally.

But art was a good solution, individual self-expression always builds up collectively. The hope, bravery, freedom and utopic visions that an artist allows themselves grants others the permission to do the same or go further. For me Ryan McGinley's first few collections of photographs – which you were often in – documented your lives in which gay kids and straight kids hung out together within the typically homophobic, hyper-masculine worlds of graffiti and skateboarding. At the time I found mainstream gay life so oppressive, so those images offered me a radical new way forward. In reality only a handful of kids were actually living that way but seeing it depicted opened up new possibilities for me, so much so that I teamed up with Ryan to amplify his vision. I read recently, in the forward in Tyler Mitchell's latest book, that he discovered Ryan's work as a teenager and connected with that sensibility and now expands on that sense of freedom in his own images. Watching this process and interplay of ideas and evolution allows me to witness a full cycle of how small ideas and actions can end up having a big impact. Back then art was the best tool we had to foster change and I still believe in its power; but with Sky High Farm you're taking aim at structural problems on a much bigger scale with the resources and experience of your unique position and perspective. Your commitment to long term systemic reform is a true act of rebellion.

Transgression is something I think about all the time. That is the operative word for us then and for young people today. I do think the communities that we were a part





of in the early 2000's affected change.
That very young, very wild...again,
untargeted transgression.

One thing that feels different about that period from the youth culture of today was that the end goal wasn't about aspiring to be rich. The lifestyle your set was living back then was hard core, hedonistic, guttural... sometimes disgusting...the intention wasn't to aspire to a bourgeois life. It was to freak out bourgeois people.

Wealth is different now than it was then. It's more of a problem but it's also more accessible. I didn't even know what it really meant to be wealthy. I never stopped to think about this but it's true wealth wasn't the aspiration; fame definitely was but we never associated with wealth. When I look back at me and my friends at that time, if anything we were trying to run away from wealth.

I remember in Dash's case his family's extreme wealth was always a destructive force in his life.

It was a cord that was uncuttable but the only thing he truly wanted was to sever it, but that wasn't possible. Wealth is more powerful than ever, that's the main problem with the world, how corrosive and corrupt and powerful true accumulations of wealth are and how hard they are to dismantle.

With this farm you're demonstrating something rare: what can happen when wealth is detached from bourgeois values and greed.

As I try to come to understand what's happening here, transgression is a really important red line. When I started the goal wasn't to find a new transgressive space but I feel really confident at this point that this place is the most transgressive thing that I was able to do in the last 10 years.

I can't think of a more direct way to subvert capitalism then creating a sustainable business model that gives away all of its product to strangers so that they can enjoy better lives.

Food justice and food sovereignty as a whole you know, that's what we are working towards. It's really weird to have somehow come to this place where I'm collaborating with farmers to grow food out of the earth to donate it to food banks for people that I know need it. It's so immediate and powerful. ☉

