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“Heat maps of proto-fascism” —*Hyperallergic*

“A real-time diary that’s a dazzling testament to its subject’s basic incomprehensibility” —*The Brooklyn Rail*

# “IT IS WHAT IT IS”

All the Cards Issued to Donald Trump, January 2017 - January 2021

by Richard Kraft

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**NEW PUBLICATION DATE: DECEMBER 21, 2021** artist’s books + contemporary art + politics

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## RECENT PRESS

**Leah Ollman, *The Brooklyn Rail*:** “Kraft heaps toxic muck into a formal vehicle of exceeding elegance and grace. His stance is both scathing and playful, his aesthetic at once stark and lush. All of this generative friction makes for an engrossing experience. Not just the eye, and not just the intellect, not just the heart, not just the hand, and not just the conscience—all at once are engaged, pressured, provoked.”

**Louis Bury, *Hyperallergic*:** “The color grids resemble a data visualization project — heat maps of proto-fascism — as if realized by Ellsworth Kelly . . . The sheer accumulation of malefactions makes *It Is What It Is* not just a feat of bearing witness but also a commentary on how concerned citizens struggled to process Trump’s calamitous, norm-violating presidency in an age of information overload.”

**Fran Bigman, *Bookforum*:** “The stubborn systematism of Kraft’s project, and its touchingly futile attempt to collate ephemeral news and prevent forgetting, remind me of On Kawara’s “Today” series . . . Kraft’s project is also personal, reflecting his childhood love of soccer. But there’s a redemptive element absent from Kawara’s work: Kraft’s idea of art as a survival tactic that makes beauty out of ugliness. For the viewer, though, the effect of both projects may be overwhelming, as they document the relentless assault of devastating world-historical news and the continuing lack of accountability of those in power.”

## ABOUT “IT IS WHAT IT IS”

On inauguration day January 20, 2017, artist Richard Kraft began issuing Donald Trump colored cards, just as a soccer referee penalizes players who transgress the rules and code of conduct.

For four years, Kraft scoured the news and Trump’s Twitter feed, each day notating and assigning each of Trump’s transgressions a colored penalty card (at first, yellow and red, as in soccer—and then Kraft devised magenta, purple, and crimson for ever-escalating offenses). In this set of five artist’s books, totaling over 1600 pages, the every-mutating, accumulating grids of almost 11,000 colored cards reveal the frequency, chronology, and intensity of Trump’s transgressions. They also become an almost hyperopic landscape—evoking musical notation, abstract painting, the processing of digital information, or geologic strata.

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In a variation of John Cage's chance operations, the composition of the colored grids is essentially Trump-determined: the arrangement of the cards reflects the order in which Trump's transgressions came to the artist's attention. This irony reflects Kraft's intention to turn toxicity into beauty while never looking away from the ugliness: each individual card also denotes a specific offense, misdeed, violation, or crime.

The textual annotations, totaling over 500,000 words, are color-coded to correspond with the card they describe, written in as neutrally as possible. These annotations are a shocking chronicle, a kind of minute-by-minute, day-to-day account, juxtaposing the banal with the monumental, revealing the depths of the echo chamber and the gestation of the most insidious lies. While most entries are succinct, they sometimes extensively quote Trump to let his logorrhea serve as self-incrimination. At the end of each volume is an index that reorganizes the penalty cards by broad subject and date as a different means to identify, name, and bear witness to the assaults and causalities of Trump and his administration.

When asked about COVID-19's staggering daily death toll by journalist Jonathan Swan, Trump replied: "It is what it is." This project takes its title from that callous dismissal. It asks readers to confront the erasure resulting from the daily bombardment by the Trump administration: What do we remember? What have become inured to? What shocks us out of our complacency, our fatigue? How does memory shape our experience of what seemed impossible four years ago? How do we remain vigilant as Trump's lies not only persist past his presidency but also inspire insidious new laws that will disenfranchise voters across the country?

A marriage of outrage with absurdity, vigilance with futility, *"It Is What It Is": All the Cards Issued to Donald Trump* originates in Kraft's refusal to normalize this presidency. He says in his introduction:

"I signed up to be a referee for a game that everyone is watching, but for which the rules, when applied, seem to have no effect. From about any vantage point, this piece is an exercise in futility, and that futility made the effort all the more worthwhile. After all, what better way to counter a man for whom money is the only measure of worth than to make a durational art work that is broad in its reach, large in scale, and crucially, utterly useless ... nevertheless, I feel exactly the same now as I did when I began: the gravest danger with autocrats is to allow their crimes to disappear. This is a record, one among many, all of them essential as a bulwark against forgetting."

Kraft continues:

"But differently from many of those other records, this is also a work of art ... In addition to creating a comprehensive catalog of Trump's transgressions, I could also transform his malevolence, his toxicity, into something beautiful, a work that, in its formal coherence, would counter the chaos and ugliness of his time in office ... That goal enabled me to keep going, to enter everyday a space that quickly began to feel like a sewer. Whenever I wanted a day of respite, I fortified my resolve not to succumb, not to allow the unabating pace of Trump's lies, attacks, ineptitudes, errors of judgement, craven self-dealing—in short, the grotesque nature of his presidency—to wear me down. My belief in the transformative, alchemical power of art served as a survival mechanism."

### About Richard Kraft

Richard Kraft is a British born artist whose multidisciplinary works engage many spheres of inquiry (language, literature, history, and popular culture) and incorporate a variety of media (film, collage, photography, drawing, and performance). This diversity of interests and methods is united in acts of alteration and transformation of the everyday world, and in the exploration of simultaneity, multiplicity and indeterminacy. Kraft is the recipient of a 2021 Guggenheim Fellowship and his work has been widely exhibited at museums, galleries, and university spaces. He also uses public spaces (library aisles, sides of buses, city streets, cow pastures, abandoned air force bases) to interrupt and reconfigure the everyday. He is the author of the artist's book *Here Comes Kitty: A Comic Opera* and the co-editor of John Cage's *Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matter Worse)*, *Marcel Broodthaers: My Ogre Book*, *Shadow Theater*, *Midnight*, and *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Photostats*.

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