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## The Penalty Presidency

A conversation with Richard Kraft about his artist book in which he created penalty flags for nearly 10,000 of Trump's misdeeds.



Louis Bury December 1, 2021



Richard Kraft, *"It Is What It Is": All the Cards Issued to Donald Trump, January 2017-January 2020, 2021*, (all images courtesy Siglio Press)

Taking its title from Donald Trump's flippant characterization of the United States' enormous COVID-19 death toll, Richard Kraft's five-volume epic, *It Is What It Is*, published by Siglio Press, catalogues the profusion of misdeeds — nearly 10,000 total — committed by Trump

during his presidency. Kraft began with the idea of assigning Trump's transgressions yellow and red cards in the manner of a soccer referee but their variety and severity — from Trump's 2017 immigration travel ban to his 2020 refusal to commit to a peaceful transfer of power — led the author to expand the project's visual lexicon to include magenta, purple, and crimson cards, each representing a more egregious offense.

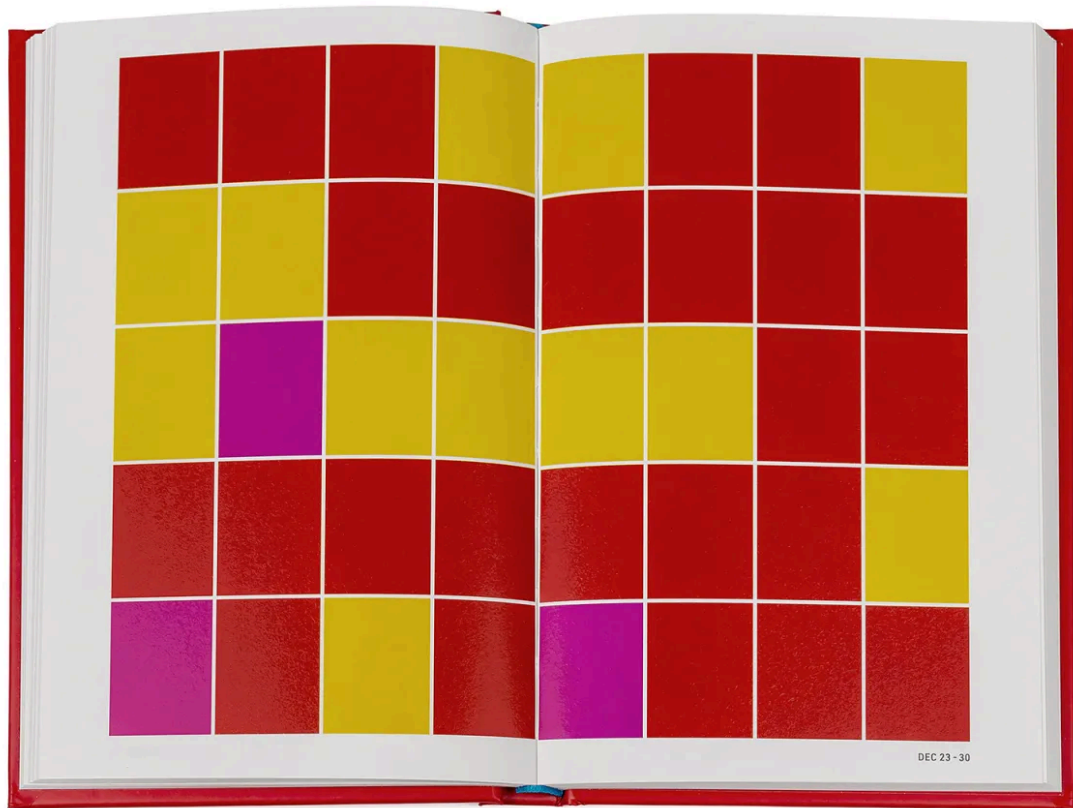
The resultant color grids resemble a data visualization project — heat maps of proto-fascism — as if realized by Ellsworth Kelly. Kraft's decision to annotate each card in an endnote rather than in the main text emphasizes this gestalt effect. The sheer accumulation of malefactions makes *It Is What 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.

**LB:** How does it feel to see this years-long project realized?

**RK:** Thank you for asking, Louis. I'm excited about the books! It was a long haul and when I began I wasn't sure what it would amount to, so to see it come together is immensely satisfying, particularly after being immersed in the debacle of Trump's presidency on a daily basis. Now, when I open the books, I find myself getting lost in the text, incredulous that the things recorded in it actually happened. Then there's this tension between the fact that each card marks an individual transgression yet their accumulation coalesces into a series of abstractions. I'm mesmerized by the rhythms that develop while also aware that each card indicates a mark of shame in what was an entirely aberrant presidency.

**LB:** What were the design considerations for the book version of the project and how were they similar to or different from versions realized in other media?

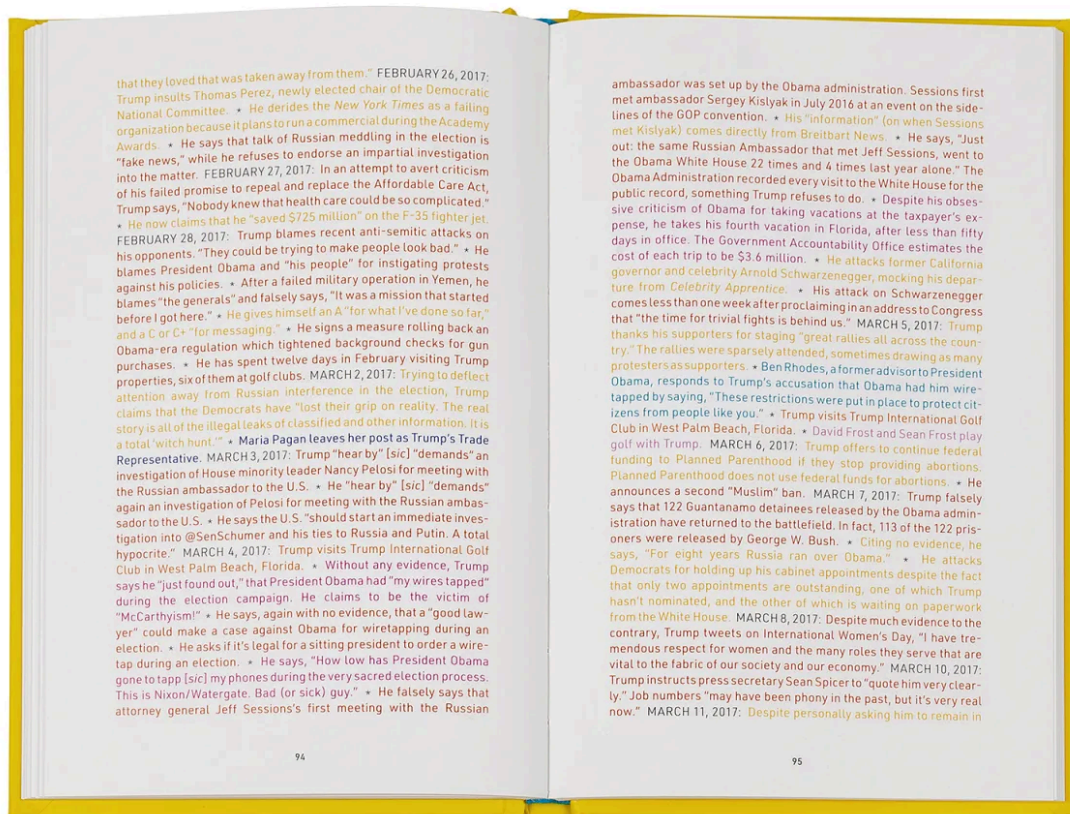
**RK:** As is often the case for me, this project immediately took on multiple forms, not all of which survived the four years that Trump was in office. The first iteration I made public, [on the website of the Racial Imaginary Institute](#), was a series of videos. There's also a single drawing which includes all 10,820 cards, as well as individual drawings of each day's cards. But I'd always conceived of this project as a book, in part because it would allow the reader to shape their own experience of the work: how they take in the visual accumulation of the cards and how they choose to read the annotations which accompany them. Both the visual and the textual aspects of the project are equally important.



Richard Kraft, "It Is What It Is": All the Cards Issued to Donald Trump, January 2017-January 2020

**LB:** How do you understand this accretive way of working in relation to your previous work? You've worked extensively with collage, for example, but in a typical collage the individual selections are based on artistic choice, whereas here the selections are based on a pre-arranged system.

**RK:** I knew from the outset that this project would be different in part because, as you say, it was based on a pre-arranged system. In that sense, I became an onlooker, watching as both the content and the look of the piece evolved. The accretion was uncanny, as if Trump were composing the piece unbeknownst to himself. It was somewhat similar to using John Cage's chance operations while [I was] co-editing his *Diary: How to Change the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse)* (2015). As we applied different typefaces, colors, and spacings to Cage's text, I found that I had to let go of my preconceptions, particularly about the piece's form. It was a reminder that there are many ways a work can unfurl and that staying open to the possibilities yields surprising results, ones that might not be possible with the imposition of personal taste.



Richard Kraft, *"It Is What It Is": All the Cards Issued to Donald Trump, January 2017-January 2020*

**LB:** Your own judgments appear mainly through the choice of card color you assign to each offense. What was your sense of agency as you were working on this project?

**RK:** My previous work is driven by subversion of authority and questioning established ways of seeing and thinking, but this is the most directly political piece I've made. The situation was so dire, I felt an urgency to catalog and document Trump's time in office to ensure that every offense and crime would be recorded. At the same time, I also wanted to see if it would be possible to transform his toxicity into something unexpected, marvelous, and beautiful. Of course, I was always aware of, and even embraced, the project's futility. I was issuing cards that had absolutely no effect. If Trump's presidency were judged by the same rules as a soccer game, he would have been banned for life. Instead he survived two impeachments and may well run again in 2024. I'd say I've got no agency.

**LB:** How can art help both artist and audience negotiate feelings of powerlessness? You may not have the agency to influence national politics but at a minimum you have the agency to document what's happening.

**RK:** That's a great question, one I've thought about a lot in relation to this project. I love William Carlos Williams's lines, "It is difficult / to get the news from poems / yet men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there," and I really want to believe them, but when it comes to

core human needs, eating comes first as does, probably, sex. That said, humans have been making images and telling stories for as long as we've been in existence, so there is clearly something fundamental about these things, too. This project began as a means of paying close attention to an extraordinarily mendacious and corrosive president, as well as serving as an outlet for my frustration and dismay. It was certainly more satisfying than screaming at the television or turning away. At the very least, I hope that others find some relief in knowing that this piece exists and that there was someone out there who shared their horror at what unfolded while Trump was in office.

**LB:** Can you say more about the relation between beauty and horror in *It Is What It Is*?

**RK:** There's another line from William Carlos Williams: "Beauty is / the defiance of authority." Making something beautiful out of the carnage served as both a survival mechanism and as a means of confrontation. My belief in the power of art to transform the world kept me going so that I was able to respond to the ugliness. It was also an experiment. I had no idea how the cards would accumulate visually, nor did I know that I would have to add colors whose temperature would escalate in an attempt to match the egregiousness of Trump's offenses. I was also thinking about the possibilities of abstraction, in particular [of] an acquaintance who insisted that there was no justification for abstract art in today's world. I took this as a challenge and sought to make a work of abstract art imbued with the zeitgeist. The tension between beauty and horror is for me a key dynamic in the work. It felt important to make something beguiling, something that could draw the viewer in and make them horrified by the content, at the same time that they can't avert their gaze.

***It Is What It Is* by Richard Kraft** is published by Siglio Press and is available online and from independent bookstores.