



Situation Hacker

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM on the art of Ryan Trecartin

Ryan Trecartin, *Sitting Ryan*
(Installation), 2009. Still from a
color video, 50 minutes.



This page: Ryan Trecartin, *Be Search War 3* (Cat 1, Missing the Search Corruption Budget), 2009, stills from a color video, 66 minutes. Opposite page: Ryan Trecartin, *A Family Finds Entertainment*, 2004, still from a color video, 41 minutes 32 seconds.

IMAGINE SLASHER FILMS WITHOUT BLOOD; porn without nudity; the Sistine Chapel without God; the New York Stock Exchange without capital. Pretend that Hieronymus Bosch's intermeshed figures could text. Ryan Trecartin's videos depict a vertiginous world I'm barely stable enough to describe. Watching them, I face the identity-flux of Internet existence: surfing-as-dwelling. Images evaporate, bleed, spill, metamorphose, and explode. Through frenetic pacing, rapid cuts, and destabilizing overlaps between representational planes (3-D turns into 2-D and then into 5-D), Trecartin violently repositions our chakras. Digitally virtuosos, his work excites me but also causes stomach cramps. I'm somatizing. But I'm also trying to concentrate.

Trecartin, born in Texas (a trace of drawl is a vocal leitmotif of his videos), broke into the art world with *A Family Finds Entertainment* in 2004, the year he graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design. (The art world: Does Trecartin need it?) Then, in 2006, came the seven-minute-long video (*Tommy Chat Just E-mailed Me.*) and the feature-length *I-Be Area*, both available on YouTube and UbuWeb. In the "Younger than Jesus" exhibition, at New York's New Museum until July 5, Trecartin unveiled installments of his latest epic, composed of three interconnected, modular psychodramas: *Sibling Topics* (Section A), *K-Core INC. K* (Section A), and *Re'Search Wait'S* (Edit 1: *Missing Re'Search Corruption Budget*), all 2009. (The videos are also on display this summer, with a larger installation, at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia.) Trecartin, who writes, directs, and performs in his videos, works closely with fellow RISD alum Lizzie Fitch. She, too, stars in the videos; she also collaborates on sets and costumes and on the sculptural installations accompanying the films. (In the New Museum trilogy, Rhett LaRue is another credited collaborator; he handles the 3-D animations.) Like Andy Warhol, Jack Smith, John Waters, the Maysles brothers, and the brothers Kuchar, Trecartin capitalizes on a quarry of gifted, histrionic associates and discoveries—charismatic screen presences include Veronica Gelbaum, Courtney Malick, Telfar Clemens, and Alison Powell. Of all the actors, Trecartin might be my favorite: His neo-brainy antics, though sui generis, have the acerbic pizzazz of Ondine, Mickey Rooney, "Little" Edie Bouvier Beale, Sacha Baron Cohen, Alex Bag, and Amy Sedaris. (Lists, lists! Can't live without them.) Trecartin's mind may be as iconoclastic as Noam Chomsky's, but his mien is as juvenile as Jackie Coogan's. Trecartin is an adorable, demented trickster who never stops aiming twisted affect at the camera.

In new sculptural works, such as *The Aboutthing (in the air)* and *Now, in the Sunroom* (both 2009), Trecartin and Fitch show tableaux of intertwined, evocative objects, like a dream's *disiecta membra* or props from a trashy film studio: swimming pool, mannequins in meltdown, luggage thrown helter-skelter. The sculpture has considerable charm, ambition, and suggestiveness, but my heart is in the videos, which I'd rather see at home than in a museum or gallery, if only because the

videos demand time and concentration. After several viewings, I still can't keep track of the personalities; they zap in and out, like extraterrestrial desiderata on interactive flying saucers.

I want to ride Trecartin's flying saucers, but I'm also afraid of them. His cosmos, not a tranquilizer, presents a terror-spiked forecast. Of apocalypse-as-art. Of psychological evisceration as spiritual exuberance. Of "being-at-home" as whirling-dervish danceteria. All I can do is generalize about this world and point to it with a yearning, stumped pleasure; my pointing finger is the gesture of an outsider, a tourist, gawking at a radioactive carnival I can't domesticate or quarantine. I don't want to sell or explain Trecartin. Nor do I wish to overemphasize the differences among his various works, all recently produced. I interpret them as evolving mutations of a single worldview, a visual and verbal idiom I take the risk of essentializing as "Trecartinesque" (the mother tongue of Trecartinesia). What follows is a subjective survey of his idiom's idiosyncracies.



care and Carolee Schneemann, and the chromatic punch of Hans Hofmann and Mary Heilmann. The stakes of Trecartin's (and Fitch's) painterly gestures are etherialization disguised as materialization: turn burdensome bodies into animated arrows, and lift the person from the doldrums of humanness by upgrading unmarked skin into brightly apotropaic abstraction.

IN TRECARTIN'S UNIVERSE, a singular personality style dominates: gregarious, theatrical, spewing. Faces are painted, often with marks suggesting wounds, bandages, plastic surgery, or racial disguise. Bodies are canvases for abstract paintings, with the subversive spirit of Yves Klein

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Trecartin's world is unashamedly faggy. He digitally alters voices—pitch raised or lowered—to obscure gender. You can squeak or boom, pipe or bellow: Vocal transplants occur, instantaneously. "Ethnic" talk-idioms slide the speaker outside identity categories into spiky, gratifying hipness. Conversation succumbs to monologue: Everyone rants, or issues stinging declarations—diverse idiolects remixed into philosophical investigations. (One character in *I-Be Area* ventures a thought experiment that Ludwig Wittgenstein could have accommodated in his *Remarks on Colour*: "I think we should show him the color yellow for a year, and then the next year only the color green. And see if it makes him different or more interesting or cooler than everyone else his age. I think in high school it will give him the razor's edge.") Some players seem high, but the real drug is connectivity, morphability. Orgasm is beside the point. The kids would rather talk; their hands clutch phantom cell phones. It's surprising that for a social world as based in visual overstimulation as Trecartin's, language retains its place as identity-marker and identity-transfuser: *Talk* (chatter, rant, monologue) remains the plasma through which personality affirms its right to die and to live.

Players tease and set fire to one another—but nonlethally. Here you can delete frenemies. You can cut and paste them.

With digital sleight of hand, you can lobotomize or Drano them. And they reap! Actions seem violent, but even if you've been evaporated by a sidekick's superior will, you can recolonize yourself on another atoll. (In *K-Corea INC. K*, a commanding transgender character named Global Korea has the power—through incongruous cock-flash under short skirt, and through audacious stewardess-CEO-speak—to shame her fellow travelers into nonexistence.) Deleuze and Guattari described this hypersphere, but they didn't make it seem fun. Trecartin's gang blisses out on rhizomatic existence. Books are dead. Books are "cute" relics. In *Re/Search Wait's*, one of Trecartin's characters, a "spaz" named J. J. Check, thinks it would be cute to rewrite the US Constitution. Every time the word *people* or *humanity* appears, he replaces it with *situations*; and every time *God* appears, he substitutes *The Internet*. J. J.'s tenancy on-screen is temporary; he is a pit stop between other personalities—a puerile turnstile, like Linda Blair in *The Exorcist*, but with an ego purchased at the Container Store.

In Trecartin's world, there are no old people and only a few over thirty. Fathers have vanished: Good-bye to patriarchy. The Moms may be several, lesbian, and kindly, but in *I-Be Area*, Trecartin himself assumes the role of a psycho Mom, practical and chic as Doris Day interfacing with Lance Loud. (Is *I-Be Area* the transitional arena—of flux and play—in which "I" am "free" to "be"? Or is it the cordoned-off, always-already-under-surveillance area in which the "I" is quarantined, sequestered for observation—the "I" led on a wild-goose chase through the labyrinth of its own putative freedom?) The "Mom" is a major category in Trecartin's cosmos: Anyone's eligible. In this drag matriarchy, body alteration abounds, some of it recidivist, as scary as Elsa Lanchester's Bride of Frankenstein. In *Sibling Topics*, one of Trecartin's gender-transitional characters proudly flashes his breast-reduction surgery scars. If you're not pregnant, you can morph your belly, anyway, to appear knocked up. All genders in Trecartinesia are created equal, but "Mom" still has an underground sway, like Erda or Fricka in Wagner's Ring, if summoned, could cast its complicated, pervy light on Trecartin's Mom-locus, its neo-Oedipal flora and fauna.

DON'T EXPECT OLD-SCHOOL RELICS like penises or vaginas. Don't expect titillation. Pollution, pesticides, hormones, and waste-management crises have changed human anatomy: Every year, the distance between a man's wiener and butthole is shrinking. Good riddance to cocksurenness. Economies crash; decorators pin cash, like Mardi Gras tinsel, to circulating fans. Aspirants seize

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you assert eminence through body paint, gesture, and dialogue. And through concision. No one is tedious; players—as we learn in *Sibling Topics*—are “post-family and prehotel” and therefore always auditioning for Presence. Audition, or rehearsal, is a perpetually stimulated and vigilant state of being. Trecartin himself, in real life, is part of a musical group (XPPL [the Experimental People Band]); the chummy clubhouse atmosphere of his videos reminds me of *The Monkees* and *The Partridge Family*. In both situation comedies, “life” and “fiction” poached off each other. The tour bus ruled the land. The tour bus, a mobile Valhalla, pacified generational wars with a saccharine score. There’s

crazy new names, like household products or security codes: Pasta, Twi-Key, Sen-Teen, Adobe, Wait, Able. Parents abandon children: Abandonment is the new sexy sine qua non. Being a foundling doesn’t preclude having a Mom in tow. Trecartin and his muses hang out in a house, *unheimlich gemütlich* as the homes in *Eraserhead*, *Carrie*, *Blue Velvet*, *Notorious*, and *Naked*. In Trecartin’s zone, you needn’t buy or rent property—just squat. Trash the place; repaint it, upload it, hit “Send.” You never sleep and are never sleepy, unless your voice gets slowed down by QuickTime or some other software I don’t know the name of. Slash your neck with paint. Separate your head from your body to downplay the dull genitals. Surgically mark your neck with a horizontal pre-della or with a pseudo-tracheotomy scar—as if warming up for decapitation, or posthumously recovering from it. As far as I can judge, the most conspicuous and telling body paint, in several videos, occurs on the neck. Voice is the anxiety point, and therefore the painterly—the stroke, the slash, the cut, the mark—concentrates its supposedly *retardataire* energies on the very place where orality and literacy stage their war of the worlds.

One character turns into another by discovering an alter, avatar, or replica. Personality is always transitioning: One identity devours the next in line. Spongy egos slide into one another, like transgender, transracial part-objects glomming on to embryonic epistemes. You can efficiently dis anyone. Dissing—claiming turf—happens instantly and cleanly. In

K-Corea INC. K, the dominatrix-mogul Global Korea sends out this gnomish stinger: “Who the fuck is that baby shit-talker? That’s not one of my condiments.” Following the ontology of *Paris Is Burning*, Trecartin sets in play a black-inflected drag system of identity manufacture and parade, complete with couture-terrorized *écoles* and slum-Situationist ateliers, or sensibility workshops run by sacerdotal “mothers” and staffed by acolyte “children” who dwell in deep danger of being branded as “unreal.” Reality, in Trecartin’s multi-racial social bubble, derives from personality assertion;



Opposite page: View of "Younger than Jesus," 2009, New Museum, New York. Ryan Trecartin, untitled, 2009. This page: Ryan Trecartin, *K-Corea INC. K* (Section A), 2009, stills from a color video, 31 minutes 20 seconds.



This page: Ryan Trecartin, *Sitting Topica* (Section A, 2009, still from a color video, 50 minutes). Opposite page: Ryan Trecartin, *File Area*, 2007, still from a color video, 108 minutes.

comfort to be found in occupying the niche—the area, the container, the Winnicottian holding environment—of a TV-show-length module, an *informercial*, a *homeschooled band*. *The Manson Family* and *The Partridge Family* and *All in the Family* and the Jackson 5 and Sly and the Family Stone have found, in Trecartin's kinship regime, an heir who questions the value of "family" while reupholstering it.

In Trecartin's postsexual world, everyone speaks in a hodgepodge of accents—a composite. (I say *postsexual* because there's hardly an allusion to fucking in the entire Trecartin oeuvre.) Dialects are his acrylics. Spanglish. Country and western. Hip-hop. Sotheby's. Secretarial. Subcontinental, any continent. Dallas. Instead of "yes," say "yay-us." His accents refer to class and attitude as much as to region or ethnicity. The point of an accent seems to be its potential placelessness—its telegraphic way of marking the site where recognizability gets bamboozled. Trecartin has a handsome mouthful of teeth and he puts them to good use. He paints them—green? blue? silver?—and sometimes supplements them with false teeth; he expands the mouth, which can barely contain the verbal torrent. His language shatters paradigms: In Trecartin's scripts (the lines are apparently not improvised), everyone speaks in tidbits, and these koans are a new form of poetry, laced with social critique and unclassifiable esprit. He juxtaposes lancing phrases; he sutures vernaculars. Utterances grow exciting when repeated and tidbitized, or when they are offered as propositions or dares rather than as factual statements. "Put your breasts back on." "I want a idea landfill." "I define myself as a situation hacker." "Fuck cookies." "I can't wait till the Internet declares its independence." "It reminds me of the future." "I don't know a single company that's experimental enough for me." "Am I overexisting, or am I overexisting?" "I never say 'they.' I say 'us' or 'we.'" "I love being in places that mean nothing to me." "I'm finally just an 'as if.'" "She's a toxic bisexual wearing unstable flip-flops." Occasional references to "my personal really concise pussy" leave me happy yet puzzled: In *Re/Search Wait's*, Trecartin's character, Wait, who can't cope with being gainfully employed, says, "My personal really concise pussy is creating a very inner monologue that I'm not going to share with you as I become dynamic." "J. J., check it," the sharp-souled, diminutive performer Alison Powell squeals. (Her screen name is Roamie, and she stars in an interlude called "A Roamie Connect History Enhancements," nested in *Re/Search Wait's*.) I've been repeating her phrase, "J. J., check it," compulsively. What brave new world will interpellate me if I intone this stolen mantra? J. J. is a charming "retard." Cognitive lag or interruption is no stigma for Trecartin's personae.

Walter Benjamin drew a distinction between *concentration* and *distraction*. Distraction meant falling prey to false

consciousness. Concentration meant rising to revolutionary art's—or history's—challenge. Occasions for concentration were fading, Benjamin feared. (Ghoulishly, in German, one word, *Konzentration*, sometimes indicates both concentration camp [*Konzentrationslager*] and mental concentration; the ability to concentrate, in Benjamin's 1940 "Baudelaire" essay, is *Konzentrationsvermögen*.) Benjamin wanted us to concentrate—to perform a mental deliberation akin to what art historian Michael Fried (following Diderot) has described as "absorption." (A figure in a painting should ignore the viewer and remain absorbed

in an activity, whether reading, praying, sewing, or sleeping.) Paradox: *Trecartin's characters concentrate on distraction*. They exercise the right to honor their own skittishness—but "distraction" now wears the guise of transformation, mutability. Being distractible (ADD?) intensifies consciousness. And the intensification of consciousness (even if this intensification poses as a dilution, evaporation, or deliquescence of knowyness) is one goal of any art I stand behind.

PLAYING DRESS-UP is philosophical boot camp. That's why Cindy Sherman's figments, whether glamorous or abject, belong with Trecartin's people. So do Nan Goldin's citizens.

Like Goldin, Trecartin focuses on purgatories—depressed or zippy coteries held together by hedonistic color and the luridness of interpersonal contact revved to the breaking point. And yet Goldin's and Sherman's photographs seem comfortably stable and monumental, like prie-dieux, when compared to Trecartin's jumpy productions—and not only because of the difference between still and moving images. I get hypomanic when I enter Trecartin's amped sphere. Falling under his spell is as needing to the nerves as straddling the Scylla and Charybdis of Warhol's split-screen *Chelsea Girls*. A Trecartin quip: "Listen, don't get a boner." I'll try not to get a boner over Trecartin's evocation of the Now. Quote: "Don't look at me—look at your mother, and globalize at *ber*." What does it feel like to be globalized, or to be dragged to the trash icon on the computer screen? The bubble-brain gestalt of the identity surfer turns depth psychology on its ass.

Trecartin's work might mean death to the Book, but tonight, I don't care. I'll find a nonbookish way to drum up a conceptual shelter in his stunted avatar Wait's personal really concise pussy. Narrative is one way: As Trecartin demonstrates, new forms of storytelling may thrive in talkative guerrilla cooperatives that eschew utopian promises, including the long-ago-dashed dreams of sexual and material liberation. And yet I imagine that Trecartin's tales, like any shape-shifter's, will need to keep floating evasively through the meshes of the market, if his flipped-out personae and hacked situations want to preserve their organlessness and their concentrated delirium. □

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