Queer Art Camp Superstar: Decoding the Video Cyberworld of Ryan Trecartin

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UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

QUEER ART CAMP SUPERSTAR: DECODING THE VIDEO CYBERWORLD OF RYAN TRECARTIN

By
Ricardo E. Zulueta

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty of the University of Miami in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

QUEER ART CAMP SUPERSTAR: DECODING THE VIDEO CYBERWORLD OF RYAN TRECARTIN

Ricardo E. Zulueta

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This dissertation constitutes the first in-depth study of contemporary artist Ryan Trecartin’s video art. Although the artist’s work has received tremendous critical attention in recent years, currently there exists no academic book-length comprehensive analysis of his art. The primary goal of this dissertation is to fill this gap in the research by closely analyzing a selection that encompasses the breadth of his most significant videos, from his pre-YouTube era video series *Early Baggage* (2001-3) to his latest project installed at the 55th Venice Biennale, *Priority Innfield* (2013). The lack of thorough examination of Trecartin’s body of work is partly due to the difficulty and rigor it demands, as each cut, frame, and shot lasts no longer than brief seconds. In addition, the artist’s complex codes and symbols cannot be described or contained within singular categories as each individual video is packed with multiple, interconnected concepts. I aim to focus the scope of my “video readings” by demonstrating how altermodernity and queerness inform and manifest themselves throughout much of his experimental media work. In examining his network of multi-layered, multi-ethnic, and polysexual references to the grotesque and abject, carnivalesque, and camp imagery, this study illustrates how Trecartin takes on reality television, technology, consumerism, and cyberspace.
Acknowledgments

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Introduction

In 2011, The New Yorker art critic, Peter Schjeldahl, described Ryan Trecartin as “the most consequential artist to have emerged since the nineteen-eighties [...] hailed as the magus of the Internet century”¹ and The New York Times art critic, Roberta Smith, declared his work “game-changing.”² It is clear that Trecartin’s work has received much critical attention in recent years. He has produced a substantial body of work which spans from his early, pre-YouTube era video series Early Baggage (2001-3) to his latest project, Priority Innfield (2013). Yet, currently there exists no book-length comprehensive analysis of this prolific artist’s work. Even more surprisingly, to date, there are very few academic essays dedicated to the in-depth scholarly investigation of any of his videos. In fact, most of the articles and blogs pertaining to his art consistently neglect thoroughly investigating his dense narratives, instead focusing on briefly summarizing the work. The primary goal of this dissertation is to fill this gap in the research by closely analyzing a selection that encompasses the breadth of what I consider his most significant videos in terms of content and form. The lack of thorough examination of Trecartin’s oeuvre is partly due to the difficulty and rigor the work demands, as each cut, frame, and shot lasts no longer than brief seconds. In addition, the artist’s complex codes and symbols cannot be described or contained within singular categories, as each individual video is packed with multiple interconnected concepts. I aim to focus the scope of my “video readings” by explaining how altermodernity and queerness inform and manifest themselves throughout much of his experimental media

work. Through Trecartin’s network of multi-layered references to the grotesque and abject, carnivalesque and ludic, and camp imagery, I will illustrate how the artist takes on reality television, technology, fashion, consumption, and cyberspace. Unpacking these idiosyncratic video performance projects becomes at once, a challenging, rewarding, and very timely enterprise.

Born in 1981, Trecartin belongs to the first generation of artists introduced to computers in early adolescence. His upbringing has been immersed in digital culture and its deep impact has been translated into the formation of his art. Trecartin has developed a new visual and verbal language that speaks not only to his own generation, but to a broader cross-section of intergenerational hyper-connected cultural consumers who also possess smartphones, iPads, iPods, and computers with Internet connection. While watching his videos may feel like entering an overwhelming technological cosmos, his art, however, is not at all alienating. On the contrary, Trecartin’s work clearly reflects the world we live in. Cybernated cultural landscapes, technology, and new media define our existence leading many internauts\(^3\) to claim, “if you are not online, you don’t exist.” Individuals, regardless of their age, race, gender, and sexuality, rely on technological devices every day and have developed (sub)cultures around this digital sphere. In the Internet cyberspace, web surfers can create virtual communities and engage in multiplayer games which allow them to play out extraordinary scenarios in imaginary worlds and build polygonal avatars of any age, race, gender, physical appearance, and sexuality. In addition, the proliferation of social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have redefined the concept of human interaction. Face-to-face conversations have been

\(^3\) Term used for any individual technically capable of using the Internet.
replaced by instant face page updates, while sentences have been truncated to brief acronyms of Internet jargon and text message abbreviations. Whether sitting at a coffee shop or mingling at a bar, people (particularly younger generations) would rather interact through telephone touch screens while anxiously awaiting the next best thing that will alleviate their FOMO (fear of missing out). The millennium generation or Millennials could be perceived as victims of their own time; however, some believe, the information revolution has actually empowered them. As Joel Stein notes, thanks to the Internet, these young educated consumers are able to compete against big corporations: “bloggers vs. newspapers, [...] YouTube directors vs. studios, app-makers vs. entire industries.”

Thanks to reality-TV, the bombardment of personalized pop-up advertising, and the omnipresence of Facebook, members of this new generation know how to brand themselves – they are always camera-ready. The web 2.0 is thus both a space and an opportunity to perform in front of a global audience.

With their incessant jump cuts and frenetic flow of information, the artist’s videos hyperbolize high-speed communication. His characters, named after computer software programs, chat in web slang at-absurdum; and can be perceived as over-identifying with digital culture. Yet, as foreign as they may seem, they do not appear unfamiliar. Curator Chris Wiley suggests they act, “in a manner that you might if you accepted every aspect of contemporary culture at face value.”

Trecartin’s performers are representative of a generation that is not used to waiting, always multi-tasking - always on the go. Over the past few years, the art world has evolved to keep up with constant technical and

---

5 Ibid.
6 Wiley, Chris. “We Have a Situation,” in Frieze 142, October 2011.
technological innovations that have transformed the way art is produced and distributed. Art is no longer exclusively experienced in museums, galleries, and art fairs, but also on the phone. Contemporary artists do not have to wait to be “picked up” by a gallery or be featured in a museum show to become visible; they can simply post their work directly online in order to gain mass exposure. In fact, Trecartin became an Internet sensation before finding major gallery representation. His exhibitionist videos fit right in, amidst the Webcam-recorded YouTube confessionals. They are perfectly formatted to fit inside a two by four iPod screen and jump-packed with a hodgepodge of pop culture references so twixters watching them can feel right at home.

Throughout his art career, which spans from 2001 to the present, Trecartin has won numerous important awards in the arts, such as the Jack Wolgin Fine Art Prize from the Tyler School of Art at Temple University; the Calvin Klein New Artist of the Year Award at the Guggenheim Museum; as well as the Pew Fellowship in the Arts. My selection of Ryan Trecartin’s work as a dissertation topic, however, is primarily based on my personal taste and cultural investment in his art, rather than the accolades he has garnered in the field.

**Historical Context**

In his article, “Ryan Trecartin: The Real Internet is Inside You,” Patrick Langley posits that “Trecartin’s work is typically placed by critics within a genealogy of American subversives. And yes, it is easy to detect within his work a strain of avant-

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8 Term used to describe a new generation of Americans who are trapped between adolescence and adulthood.
garde aesthetics that feels uniquely US […] Trecartin’s video art is indeed indebted to a tradition of experimental cinema and shares commonality with the works of Jack Smith, Andy Warhol, and George Kuchar. Given these filmmakers’ significant contribution to the history of cinema, it stands to reason that clear connections exist between the influence of their films and the work of the new generation of video artists that has recently emerged. It is quite evident in the case of Ryan Trecartin that he has developed an aesthetic that has a particularly direct relationship with these three American avant-garde directors.

Known as the “King of the Underground,” Jack Smith is considered to be one of the most consequential and influential artists of the queer American avant-garde movement. Throughout his filmmaking career, he developed an experimental style consisting of a mélange of campy aesthetics, Hollywood orientalism, and kitsch. Much like Smith’s low-budget versions of the Hollywood Technicolor B-movies of the 1950s, Ryan Trecartin’s videos portray a grotesque mediatized society that operates in a sort of hybrid world or dream-like third dimension. Unlike mainstream cinema, Smith’s experimental films were produced on extremely low budgets, shot on discarded raw film stock, giving the image an overexposed look. He often recorded his performances in his own apartment or on roof-tops in the Lower East Side and built his movie sets with cardboard while enlisting his friends as actors. However, Smith compensated for his lack of funding with his ingenious resourcefulness, often converting glitter into diamond dust and tablecloths into nightgowns. Trecartin also repurposes, assembles, and

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12 Ibid.
recombines the consumer goods he acquires in shopping malls and home improvement stores.\textsuperscript{13} In \textit{P.opular S.ky (section ish)} (2009) for instance, an outdoor resin garden statue of a Madonna is removed from its intended location and reallocated for use in the interior of a suburban home while multiple bed frames are turned upside down and converted into monkey bars. Much like Smith, Trecartin also casts a multitude of friends in his pieces, mostly from Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) and different artist residency sites around the country in his videos.

Smith enjoyed complete creative freedom which allowed him to push the boundaries of the film medium and challenge standards of “good taste.” His eccentric narratives often featured transvestites, androgynous actors, vampires, and monsters all taking part in orgiastic activities. \textit{Flaming Creatures} (1963), Jack Smith’s most famous and notorious film, consists of a series of black and white sequences juxtaposed in non-linear fashion. In it, Smith employed off-center shots, in-and-out-of-focus photography, and extreme close-ups of various body parts in order to blur the distinction between intertwined semi-nude male and female bodies. Although Trecartin’s videos are not overtly sexual, they also feature bizarre characters with ambiguous sexualities and gender(s). Trecartin’s butch queens\textsuperscript{14}, vogue femmes\textsuperscript{15}, girlfags\textsuperscript{16}, guydykes\textsuperscript{17}, and other kinds of genderqueer characters all partake in his delirious non-linear narratives, dancing, sashaying, and convulsing in mythical and ritualistic performances that are reminiscent of

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[14] Term used to describe masculine looking drag queens.
\item[15] Term employed to describe female impersonators with exaggerated feminine movements influenced by ballet.
\item[16] Term used to describe female-born individuals who feel a strong attraction to gay and bisexual men, and gay male culture.
\item[17] Term used to describe male-born individuals attracted to lesbians, bisexual women, and lesbian culture.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Smith’s *Flaming Creatures*. His low-tech aesthetic also borrows from Smith’s avant-garde visual vocabulary, as he too shoots with a hand-held camera, often frames his protagonists in fragmented shots and twisted camera angles, and completely disregards continuity editing of classical cinema.

After his last feature *No President* (1967-70), Smith ceased exhibiting his films in traditional movie theaters and opted instead to project excerpts of them during his live performance shows. This radical decision was mainly motivated by the fact that Smith was against the commercialization of his films. Trecartin differs in this respect as he is obviously not against the commercialization of his art, since he is currently represented by several international commercial art galleries including Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York City and Regent Projects in Los Angeles. He does, however, distribute and exhibit the entirety of his videos for free online. Thereby, creating an interesting hybrid model for distribution and exhibition. Trecartin and Smith also differ on their perception of pop culture. As Julia Stotscheck writes in *Collection Number Six: Flaming Creatures*, “Smith vehemently resisted being swallowed up by pop culture.” Conversely, Trecartin embraces everything there is about pop culture – indeed, he has been swallowed up, digested, and excreted by pop culture. In this regard, Trecartin aligns himself more closely with Andy Warhol, the pop culture vulture.

Warhol, considered by P. Adams Sitney as the “precursor of the structural film,” turned to film as an art medium at the height of his career. He became familiar with the

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19 Ibid.
avant-garde productions of Stan Brakhage, Kenneth Anger, and Jack Smith, not to imitate them but rather to develop a new (and quite distinct) cinematic aesthetic. Unlike Brakhage’s lyrical, dream-like, highly-processed films, Warhol “simply turned the camera on and walked away.”\(^\text{21}\) In this sense, Trecartin’s flashy digital collages and intensive editing process might be seen as returning to earlier avant-garde practices rather than Warhol’s fixed-frame cinematography with continuous long takes. Trecartin’s work clearly does not resemble Warhol’s in its form but rather in its content. Warhol’s interest in fame (“15 minutes”) as well as media culture and mass consumerism lead him to re-examine mundane objects from popular culture and transpose them within the context of high art. He glamorized and immortalized products of mass consumption such as Coca-Cola bottles and Campbell’s soup cans and celebrated them as symbols of American pop culture in the 1960s. Richard Dyer comments that what drew media attention to Warhol’s work was not the skillful artistry required to produce it but the audacity of glorifying such objects of “mass culture trash.”\(^\text{22}\)

Likewise, Trecartin’s popularity in the art world is not due to the highbrow aesthetics or breathtaking cinematography of his videos. On the contrary, it is precisely because they appear unpolished that they draw so much attention. Their do-it-yourself aesthetic goes hand-in-hand with their ability to capture the feeling of information saturation being transmitted in the Internet age. Watching a Trecartin video is something of an endurance exercise, as each shot succinctly unravels at a vertiginous speed reminiscent of viral pop-ups being ejected onto a computer screen. He addresses his


spectators much like an Internet audience. For instance, the opening sequence of Trecartin’s *Roamie View: History Enhancement* (2009-10) features JJ Check (Trecartin) who attempts to explain the conceptual framework of the artworks surrounding him while directly addressing the camera. *Roamie View* opens with a high angle shot of JJ Check in his bedroom/art studio. No other character is interacting with him; therefore, during his extensive monologue spectators understand that the words being spoken are specifically intended for them (us).

Much like Warhol, Trecartin’s fascination with consumer culture manifests itself through the abundance of mass produced objects he incorporates into his videos, such as smartphones, computers, tablets, clothing, and jewelry, that surround and at times appear to even suffocate the protagonists. Many of the plots in the series, *Any Ever* (2009-2010), for example, end with the characters destroying and smashing their personal possessions, either as a way to rebel against consumption or perhaps to start anew and consume again. Objects are thus fetishized and rendered disposable simultaneously – much like Apple gadgets that are initially marketed as collector’s items, only to then be constantly rendered obsolete when an updated and repackaged version of the tech toy appears in the marketplace.

In an interview, Warhol was quoted, “I love Los Angeles…I love Hollywood…Everybody’s plastic – but I love plastic. I want to be plastic.” This statement exemplifies the essence of Warhol’s philosophy. His art never gave us access to who he was as a human being; instead his work stood in as a representation of the superficiality of his generation. I would argue that Trecartin’s videos offer viewers a deeper

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understanding of the artist’s thought process, however, they in no way represent what could be considered by some to be classified as self-portraits. The characters he depicts are only capable of projecting images of themselves the same way his contemporaries post “selfies” online. As Dyer mentions, “the early gay underground films sought authenticity in the self, often with recourse to metaphysical systems that would heighten the sense of self. By the time we get to Warhol notions of the authentic self have been discarded, to be replaced by the desire to be as inauthentic as possible.” And by the time we get to Trecartin, notions of self and identity are completely shattered. Identity can be everything and nothing – one may have multiple identities: a virtual avatar, a social network identity, a public work identity, a private one, and various genders. For Trecartin identity(ies) can be programmed, updated, and even erased at will.

The multiple connections between the work of Ryan Trecartin and avant-garde filmmakers are undeniable, although their mediums and tools of choice fundamentally differ. However, since the 1960s, the gap between video art and film has been highly diminished partly due to the arrival of new digital technology and the availability of low cost commercial equipment. Nevertheless, historically, individual mediums remain generally distinct from one another. While avant-garde film sought to challenge mainstream filmmaking techniques employed by classical cinema, video art emerged in the U.S. initially with a preoccupation for critiquing commercial television. The initial wave of pioneer video artists was making work that addressed this rising socio-cultural influence of television. Moreover, they were responding to the commercialization and

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24 A photo of one's self usually taken in the mirror.
control of traditional news and mass media and its influence on Americans. Many filmmakers working with film, such as George Kuchar, saw the potential of video (aesthetic, technical, and/or political) over traditional film and as a result, transitioned to video later in their careers.

Kuchar played with various televisual tropes and strategies even while working with film. He can, thus, be seen as a transitional figure, link, or bridge between experimental film and video and between early avant-garde filmmakers and Ryan Trecartin. “The exuberant auteur of the no-budget film” eventually went on to become one of the first underground directors who made the final transition from film to video later on in his career. However, even before making the switch, Kuchar recognized the immense power of television. He incorporated a televisual style which, according to Christina Lane, includes structuring devices such as immediacy, seriality (as demonstrated in the sequential episodes of soap operas), “dailiness,” fragmentation, fluidity and direct address which are all properties associated with television. Many of these televisual characteristics are present in both Kuchar and Trecartin’s work. For example, a sense of immediacy is instantly noticeable in the intensely fast-paced editing they implement. Lane associates fast-pace editing with the deep emotional investment viewers experience when watching television melodramas. She writes, “The accelerated cinematography and intense editing increase the intimacy already associated with the medium [TV], capitalizing on the melodrama by making it visceral and immediate.”

Indubitably, Kuchar and Trecartin are both drama queens. Each frame and angle is

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29 Ibid, 71.
carefully selected to disorientate the viewer and provide some insight into the characters’ psyche. Kuchar for instance employs many dramatic tilted angles, extreme (and claustrophobic) close-ups, as well as obstructed views to illustrate what the protagonist is experiencing – what he, himself, is experiencing. Indeed, as mentioned above, Kuchar often casts himself in his own films, most often as the central character, and also enlists friends and family members to play the supporting roles (as does Trecartin). In doing so, Kuchar not only kept production costs down but also managed to create intimate and personal films.

In *Eclipse of the Sun Virgin* (1967), for instance, the director places its characters in the context of domesticity. George (George Kuchar) tries to come to terms with his homosexuality while struggling with religious guilt and a domineering mother. Somewhat autobiographical, the film can certainly be read as a therapeutic outlet that allowed for the release of some of Kuchar’s sexual anxiety. Interestingly, Ryan Trecartin’s *A Family Finds Entertainment* (2004) has a parallel narrative. The video chronicles the story of Skippy (Trecartin), a gay teenager who comes out to his family. Following a narrative trope not unlike *Eclipse of the Sun Virgin, A Family Finds Entertainment* is a contemporary remix of the melodrama with its exaggerated and stereotyped characters struggling to overcome impending dramatic emotional crises.

However, unlike Hollywood melodramas, neither Kuchar nor Trecartin provides any sense of closure or resolution. Their videos end in a “to be continued…” way and leave the viewer wondering what will happen next. This sense of seriality is further

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explored in Trecartin’s later series, *Any Ever*, in which recurring characters take part in multiple and completely unrelated ongoing narratives, as it does in Kuchar’s video project, *Weather Diaries* (1986-96), which documents his annual trips to Tornado Alley in Oklahoma. In his article, “George Kuchar: Half the Story,” Mark Finch quotes Kuchar saying, “With video I can enjoy the mundane [...] I can do bathroom shots, faucet close-ups, what you ate, stuff like that.” In *Eclipse of The Sun Virgin*, characters shower, cook, eat, and sleep. In a similar way, Trecartin’s work features characters chatting in their living rooms, sitting on the toilet, or getting ready to go out, performing office and house work, thus emphasizing their “dailiness.”

Fragmentation and fluidity are also significant structuring devices that need to be considered when examining Kuchar’s and Trecartin’s connection. The notion of “flow,” as described by John Fiske means that “television is a continuous succession of images which follows no laws of logic or cause and effect, but which constitutes the cultural experience of ‘watching television’.” Both Trecartin and Kuchar achieve this illusion of fluidity by linking fragmented and unrelated scenes or sequences through a continuous soundtrack.

Finally, both artists employ many metacinematic devices. *Hold Me While I’m Naked* revolves around a pornography filmmaker in search of an actress to replace his female lead in this film within a film. The opening sequence features a frontal view of Kuchar, the actor and director, standing behind his camera shooting a scene. In addition

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to this, later in the film, George’s character lays down on the floor deflated, unable to finish his movie, and immerses himself in a pile of reels of film, thus accentuating the acknowledgment of the self-reflexivity of film. Trecartin’s art work is flooded with the self-reflexivity of his medium(s) through the omnipresence of computer screens, TV monitors, and cell phones which reflects his reference to the hyper-connectivity of our technologically-driven world. He draws a correlation between his software(s) and medium of choice (form) and the language or discourse (content) they engender.

Forty years before Trecartin became an Internet and contemporary art world sensation, Kuchar also sought to create work that was representative of his generation. Many of his protagonists (including himself) are intentionally shown communicating via telephone. Telephonic busy signal sound effects are integrated into the scenes, much like Trecartin interjects computer audio effects into his soundtrack. In other words, both Kuchar and Trecartin aspire to make work that reflects their culture and “time.” They demonstrate this by highlighting technology(ies) that are commercially available to them and their projected audience.

From a purely formalistic perspective, the work of Trecartin shares a stylistic camp aesthetic with Kuchar. Their similar sensibility influenced their employment of low-budget hand-built sets painted in psychedelic bright colors reminiscent of comic book graphics. They manipulate the voices of their characters giving them an unnaturally high-pitched tone that Trecartin achieves by manipulating Auto-Tune. The cheap-looking, amateurish visual style of their art is indeed a political statement. For Kuchar, it meant resisting the polished aesthetic of mainstream cinema while executing his subversive experimental vision. For Trecartin, it is a way to continue the conversation
about the long established critique around the commercialization of television started by pioneer video artists, while remaining relatable to his populist, do-it-yourself YouTube audience.

Indeed, Trecartin’s videos draw from a long tradition of video art, spanning from Nam June Paik to Cory Arcangel. The history of video art can be traced back to the early 1960s and has its roots in the radical anti-art movement known as “Fluxus.”34 Like the Futurists and Dadaists before them, members of the Fluxus movement challenged the authority of elitist museums and galleries to determine the value of art. Fluxus artists sought to popularize art and were highly critical of consumerism, often organizing live performances in public places.35 Artists Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell, both connected to the Fluxus movement, are considered the early pioneers of video art.

Although the introduction of the Portapak system by Sony in 1967 is often cited as a critical event in the history of video art, Paik and Vostell both began incorporating the television apparatus into their installations years before its invention.36 In his piece, _TV de-Collage_ (1961), for instance, Wolf Vostell altered the image of several TV sets by interfering with the television receivers of a department store in Paris.37 In 1963, Nam June Paik also distorted TV images electronically with the help of an engineer who reconfigured TV circuits for his exhibition, _Exposition of Music-Electronic Television_.38 With the advent of the Portapak, artists finally found a device that could directly record and playback their footage. Despite the low-contrast grainy black and white quality of

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35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid, 13.
the video recorder and its very limited editing capabilities, the new technology nevertheless attracted many artists precisely because of its newness. As Chris Meigh-Andrews notes, “video had no tradition […] it had no formal burdens at all.”39 By the mid-1970s, many feminist artists eager for self-representation, such as Ulriche Rosenbach and Martha Rosler, began to use video because of the instantaneousness and immediacy of the medium.40 In the early 1980s, frame-accurate video editing became easily accessible to video artists who adopted the fast looping of sequences known as “scratching” – a technique employed as a satire of broadcast TV.41 Dara Birnbaum’s Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman (1978) is considered an early precursor of the so-called “scratch” videos.42

In the last decade of the twentieth century, the increased access to high performance home computers led to the development of image-processing computer software.43 In 1990, the digital darkroom software Adobe Photoshop allowed video artists to edit their footage in a “non-linear” way much like professional film editors.44 The recent invention of even more advanced image-processing computer software has dissolved “the boundaries and distinctions between artists’ video and experimental film.”45 Lev Manovich believes, “the avant-garde [has become] materialized in a computer.”46 Ryan Trecartin appropriates the manual manipulation techniques of early

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40 Ibid, 236.
41 Ibid, 84.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid, 265.
44 Ibid.
avant-garde filmmakers and combines them with today’s high-performance digital technology. In a recent interview for CreativePlanetNetwork.com, Trecartin was quoted discussing the new technological freedom available to him, “When you break down the hierarchy of [traditional] editing, you have people doing a rough cut, then a final cut, then they work on sound and visual effects. But in After Effects you can do all these things at the same time if you want to, and that helps me massage the work and bring out nuances.”

The notion of “editing” is central to Trecartin’s work as it is, according to the artist, an integral part of his video performances. As he explains in his interview with artist Cindy Sherman, “The performance is not live; everything is performed for the edit – performed to become live through mediation. Editing is itself a part of articulating the character, and so I see it as a performative gesture.” It then seems that Trecartin’s art not only aligns itself with a tradition of experimental cinema and video art but is also indebted to a history of performance art.

In her book Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present, RoseLee Goldberg defines performance art as,

Work [that] may be presented solo or with a group, with lighting, music or visuals made by the performance artist him or herself, or in collaboration, and performed in places ranging from an art gallery or museum to an ‘alternative space’, a theatre, café, bar or street corner. Unlike theatre, the performer is the artist, seldom a character like an actor, and the content rarely follows a traditional plot or narrative. The performance might be a series of intimate gestures or large-scale visual theatre, lasting from a few minutes to many hours; it might be performed only once or repeated

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several times, with or without a prepared script, spontaneously improvised, or rehearsed over many months.\textsuperscript{49} Although the origins of performance art can be traced back to the early happenings of the Futurists and Dadaists, this art practice experienced an explosion in the 1960s.\textsuperscript{50} Youth activists and art movements such as the Situationists actively rebelled against the commercialization of art and denounced art institutions as elitists.\textsuperscript{51} These artists ceased to make objects and instead began to use their bodies as a medium of artistic expression.

The 60s and 70s also coincided with the rise of second-wave feminism. Whereas first-wave feminism focused mainly on voting and property rights, second-wave feminism extended the debate to a broader range of issues such as abortion rights and equality in the workplace. Many female artists such as Yoko Ono, Carolee Schneemann, and Ana Mendieta began to explore social and sexual boundaries during provocative and personal performances. As Amelia Jones notes, “the often shocking enactment of these taboos allowed the artist to experience a personal transformation through the event, and the audience was also affected, expected to undergo a mass sense of release.”\textsuperscript{52} In 1963, Schneemann became part of her own installation in \textit{Eye Body} at her loft in New York City. Her naked body merged with her environment of self-made constructions and paintings. The artist used her body to protest against the traditional placement of females in paintings and sculptures made by men. The female body that had long been objectified was now going to reinvent itself by placing itself in the center of the polemic.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
Performance art also produced a variety of other approaches such as ritual and endurance art. In *Rhythm 10* (1973), Marina Abramovic played the Russian game in which she drove a knife as fast as she could between her fingers while recording the sound of the performance via two tape recorders. Each time she cut herself, she picked up a new knife from the row of twenty she had arranged in front of her and continued with her ritual. Abramovic aimed to explore her physical and mental limitations.

Male artists such as Chris Burden also sought to push the limits of the body. In *Trans-Fixed* (1974), for instance, Burden turned himself into a martyr to consumerism by nailing his palms to the roof of a Volkswagen Beetle. More recently, Ron Athey, known for his extreme bloody ritualistic performances involving aspects of S&M, often scars and mutilates his own body to challenge preconceived notions about AIDS, masculinity, and religion.

The emergence of second-wave feminism indeed prompted other marginalized communities to take more radical action towards reclaiming their human rights. The Gay Liberation Movement surfaced by the end of the 1960s, following the Stonewall Riots of 1969. As a result, queer artists eventually began to engage in public demonstrations as a form of activism. The works of Holly Hughes and Tim Miller, for instance, explored issues regarding gender and sexuality, LGBT identity, and even marriage equality. In his seminal performance piece, *My Queer Body* (1992), Miller traced the journey of a young gay man, from his first teenage kiss to his experience encountering homophobia. Conceptual artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres also turned to performance in his piece *Untitled (Go-Go Dancing Platform)* (1991) in which a gay male go-go dancer danced on top of a

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stripper platform box encased in light bulbs. Although seemingly playful at first sight, the performance provided a cross-section of viewers with a peak into the queer subculture of discos and sex clubs. Whether used as a way to challenge traditional moral values or to confront the establishment, the human body was seen as a primary tool of expression in performance art.

While Trecartin uses his own body in order to create characterizations, he never appears erotic or sexual, unlike early body art performers. For Trecartin, the body is simply a vehicle that helps him translate his ever-shifting multiple “personalities.” Similarly, performance artist Jürgen Klauke explored the possibility of an identity in a constant state of flux in his photo-performance *Transformer* (1973) in which he posed in androgynous costumes and alien-like make-up in order to create “a happy hybrid.” Much like Klauke, Cindy Sherman also documented her role-playing in the photographic series, *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980), in which she posed as a variety of typecast female heroines taken from black and white movies. Trecartin’s work relates to Sherman’s in the sense that the characters she impersonates seem strangely familiar though they do not really exist in real life – each performance represents a different archetype or a mélange of several. Although both Klauke and Sherman used photography versus video as their medium of choice, they share commonality with Trecartin’s work in the sense that their performances do not constitute self-portraits but instead allow the artists to cross the limitations of the forms their body assumes in order to become “other.”

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In *I’m Not the Girl Who Misses Much* (1986), video artist Pipilotti Rist appropriates the pop music video format much like Trecartin does in his video *Wayne’s World* (2003). Rist repeatedly sings "I’m not the girl who misses much," as a reference to the song *Happiness Is a Warm Gun* (1968) by the Beatles while dancing frenetically wearing a black dress cut open to reveal her bare breasts.\(^{55}\) Similar to Trecartin, Rist alters her voice, giving it a high-pitch tone, and fast-forwards the footage to inflect a comical effect. Other artists such as Alex Bag also resorted to performance art to criticize and parody elements of pop culture and mass media. Bag’s videos are largely influenced by television. In *Untitled (Project for the Andy Warhol Museum)* (1996), Bag recreates the experience of channel-surfing by incessantly jump-cutting back and forth between short fake commercials, daytime and late-night talk shows, music videos, soap operas, and news programs which all feature her as the protagonist. Wearing wigs, costumes, and make-up, Bag does not seek to deliver a naturalistic performance but rather deliberately performs in an artificial manner.\(^{56}\) Much like Trecartin, Bag writes her own scripts and her visual language mimics that of the TV shows she works with.\(^{57}\) Unlike early video performance artists who used video simply as a way to document their performances, both Alex Bag and Ryan Trecartin stage their performances specifically for the camera.\(^{58}\)

A new wave of performance artists has emerged in the last decade whose practices blend performance and new technology. In these cutting-edge performance-


\(^{57}\) Ibid.

\(^{58}\) Ibid.
based works, the body per se is not the primary tool of expression. Computer graphics, animations, robotics, music, and architecture all participate in providing viewers with interactive and immersive experiences. In her performance piece, *Fruit Machine 2* (2013), contemporary artist Xavier Cha stages an experimental game show in which several performers dressed in fruit costumes interact with a digital application she designed called the “Fruit Machine.” As we will see, Trecartin’s sculptural installations aim to offer a similar participatory experience, engaging viewers interactively beyond the visual.

While the humorous and colorful world of Ryan Trecartin appears to deviate from early confrontational and sometimes painful performances of the 60s and 70s, his work nevertheless challenges viewers to think critically about the world they live in. As RoseLee Goldberg wrote, “performance has been a way of appealing directly to a large public, as well as shocking audiences into reassessing their own notions of art and its relation to culture.” Trecartin’s immersive video performances/installations continue the tradition of breaking down the barrier between art and the public which was the original mission of performance art. He understands and acknowledges the past, yet, he is aware that, while there has been much social progress, we still have not reached the state of equality his antecedents fought for.

The artist takes a very different approach, however, by opting to portray seemingly apolitical worlds in which characters are able to switch and merge genders, sexual orientation, and identities. In doing so, he seeks to break away from previous

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essentialist notions of identity. In an interview for Another Man, Trecartin was quoted, “we [society] could reach a point where personality defines you more than your gender, sexuality or career because nothing is fixed – it’s all a choice.”60 The possibility of “choice” is a concept that Trecartin is now able to take for granted in part thanks to early performance artists. However, it is important to note that he does not disregard the past. He has digested it and now chooses to move beyond it. He may reference it as is the case in A Family Finds Entertainment but always while keeping a critical (and humorous) distance.

Methodology

This dissertation employs an interdisciplinary methodological approach which blends film textual analysis, cultural studies, and art history. Each approach offers its own set of tools useful to my research. I aim to merge these in order to extract the essence of Ryan Trecartin’s work, comparing and contrasting it from its predecessors, while foregrounding its cultural currency at the commencement of this new millennium. Each chapter consists of the analysis of one of Trecartin’s video series and will follow a chronological order: Early Baggage (2001-2003), A Family Finds Entertainment (2004), I-Be Area (2007), Any Ever (2009-2010), and Priority Innfield (2013).

In his essay “The Post-Reality Show,” Jeffrey Deitch, director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, asks the question, “Could Ryan Trecartin be the first

60 “Q & A: Ryan Trecartin and James Franco: All-American Golden Boy,” in Another Man (November 2010).
twenty-first century artist?” and follows by saying, “He is one of the first artists whose work looks and feels like life today.” Deitch’s comment raises its own set of questions: How does it feel to live in today’s world? And, what is a twenty-first century artist? It then becomes clear that Trecartin’s art needs to be situated within a broader socio-cultural nexus in order to understand why he has become such a phenomenon.

When adopting a cultural studies methodology, *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon* by Alexander Doty possesses an approach that is particularly suitable to my research. He revisits canonical Hollywood narratives and contextualizes them within a queer framework by analyzing each film through cultural and star studies. For instance, chapter one examines the relationship between *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919) and Weimar Germany’s “fascination with notions of sexual ambiguity.” Doty also points out that *Caligari*’s closeted homosexual star Conrad Veidt, simultaneously appeared onscreen in *Anders als die Andern* (*Different from the Others*, 1919), one of the first films ever made about male homosexuality. Doty’s interpretation also relies on extra-textual materials such as unpublished letters and magazine publications that provide him with a deeper understanding of the films he examines. My approach in investigating Ryan Trecartin’s body of work resembles Doty’s in that it adheres to the relationship of his work to its historical moment or contemporaneity – a time characterized by its multiplicity of ways of being in time and space. As an artist and Internet celebrity, Trecartin has gained prominence not only in the art world but also in popular culture,

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62 Ibid.
which often lead to invitations to participate in projects outside of the art world, such as editorial spreads in entertainment and fashion publications. Like Doty, I will examine how cultural studies and queer theory inform the artist’s work, directly or indirectly. My aim is to evince how Trecartin appropriates and reconciles these concepts in new and exciting ways.

It would, however, be naïve to believe that Trecartin’s experimental, emerging, cutting edge videos are completely “new” and devoid of any historical precedence. As I have explained earlier, while he is making art that is very current in its content and form, his work is nevertheless indebted to a history of avant-garde filmmaking and video art which makes it imperative to construct a framework with which to position it utilizing art history as a methodology. Art history will be utilized as a methodology to contextualize Trecartin’s work within artistic practices and movements and among other artists, in order to help elucidate the sometimes obscure sources from which he draws his references.

In his book *A History of Experimental Film and Video*, A. L. Rees gives a historical account of experimental film and video. Rees sees the avant-garde film and video movement as an art movement with its “own internal development and aesthetics.”65 Thus, his book aims to “emphasize art rather than cinema.”66 His methodology not only provides a chronological historical analysis of experimental film and video but also locates these works within a broader avant-garde art movement. My study seeks to be as comprehensive as possible and thus it must also account for the

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66 Ibid.
various art historical influences that inform the works of Ryan Trecartin. Given “contemporary art’s radical pluralism,” writing about a contemporary artist such as Trecartin ultimately takes on an interdisciplinary approach – one that will challenge and reframe disciplinary boundaries.

A significant portion of my methodological approach to examining Trecartin’s video works will also consist of in-depth film textual analysis. William Rothman was instrumental in introducing me to a formal approach in analyzing the moving image medium and the camera’s motivation. As Rothman writes,

Using frame enlargements as illustration and evidence, I attempt to put into words the thinking inscribed in their successions of frames. (In transcribing dialogue and describing gestures, expressions, and movements of the camera, I relied on no scripts and checked my language only by direct observation of the films themselves.)

Rothman’s process of engaging in “close scene readings” serves me well when writing about Trecartin’s videos as I too aim to take into account both narrative and formal cinematic devices. I believe that shots, camera angles, and mise-en-scène can offer alternative interpretations to the actual plot and thus need to be seriously considered and analyzed within the work as a whole. Additionally, using precisely chosen screen captures extracted directly from the videos, I will illustrate my readings. This highly selective process is a method that strongly reinforces the academic text.

**Literature Review**

The first in-depth study of Ryan Trecartin’s videos, my dissertation fills a gap within art history, while building upon work produced within the field of film studies and

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cultural studies. My research is informed by a wide range of academic writings as well as curatorial projects, journalistic writings, blogs, vlogs, interviews, and art catalogs. While these works may have been produced within disciplines as varied as performance studies, queer and gender studies, sociology, and video game theory, each engages in a dialogue around the concept of “altermodernism.” This contemporary art movement accounts for the multiplicity of ways of being in today’s world in which time, space, and identity are no longer necessarily straight-forward, linear, quantifiable, and classifiable. As such, altermodernism aligns itself with the concept of open-ended identities articulated in queer theory. A major portion of my dissertation will be dedicated to illustrating how these concepts are applied and negotiated in Ryan Trecartin’s videos.

In his book *What is Contemporary Art*, Terry Smith, attempts to answer the seemingly simple yet extremely complex question, “What is contemporary art?” He writes,

> Contemporary Art is the institutionalized network through which the art of today presents itself to itself and to its interested audiences all over the world. It is an intense, expansionist, proliferating global subculture, with its own values and discourse; communicative networks; heroes, heroines, and renegades; professional organizations; defining events; meetings and monuments; markets and museums – in sum, distinctive structures of stasis and change.69

Looking at this definition, it is clear that contemporary art is “much more than a mindless embrace of the present.”70 Terry Smith asserts that at the turn of the millennium, the direction of contemporary art has shifted to one that refers to what he calls our “contemporaneity.” According to him, “contemporaneity” has several meanings

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70 Ibid, 1.
and thus cannot be contained within one singular definition. In its ordinary usage, “contemporaneity” refers to the quality or state of being in the “now,” in the present.71 In relation to art, however, “contemporaneity manifests itself not just in the unprecedented proliferation of art, or only in its seemingly infinite variegation, but above all in the emergence of, and contestation between, quite different ways of making art and communicating through it to others.”72

Indeed, Smith acknowledges the various expressive modes in contemporary art. Particularly relevant to my research is his explanation of how contemporary work derives its conceptual framework from a “generational change.”73 This current in art is more concerned with “interactive potentialities of various material media, virtual communicative networks, and open-ended modes of tangible connectivity. These artists seek to arrest the immediate, to grasp the changing nature of time, place, media, and mood today.”74 Smith further states that there are diverse cultural conditions (globalization, the sense of urgency, immersion in an image economy) that are specific to the Millennial generation which directly influence today’s art world. According to the author, contemporary art is characterized by three “main currents”: it is global, distinct from postmodernism, and generational.75

What is Contemporary Art? provides a basis to further extrapolate on artistic practices and movements such as “altermodernism,” defined by Nicolas Bourriaud below,

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72 Ibid, 6.
73 Ibid, 8.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid.
which shares a commonality with Smith’s three attributes of what constitutes contemporary art,

Altermodernism can be defined as that moment when it became possible for us to produce something that made sense starting from an assumed heterochrony, that is, from a vision of human history as constituted of multiple temporalities […] a positive vision of chaos and complexity. It is neither a petrified kind of time advancing in loops (postmodernism) nor a linear vision of history (modernism), but a positive experience of disorientation through an art-form exploring all dimensions of the present, tracing lines in all directions of time and space. The artist turns cultural nomad […]

Firstly, altermodernism also operates on a global scale. Bourriaud explains that “in the era of the altermodern, displacement has become a method of depiction, and that artistic styles and formats must henceforth be regarded from the viewpoint of diaspora, migration and exodus.” Bourriaud’s concept of altermodernism offers a particularly relevant lens with which to examine the work of my selected artist. Ryan Trecartin navigates through a cultural landscape saturated with media imagery. He creates new pathways between multiple formats of expression and communication thereby becoming, in Bourriaud’s words, a “‘homo viator,’ the prototype of contemporary traveler whose passage through signs and formats refers to an experience of mobility, travel, and transpassing.” This bohemian wanderer translates information from one format to another, for example, from video to sculpture to multi-media installation, while appropriating and leaping through geographic location and history. He can create and edit work directly from his laptop or portable tablet. Via Flickr, Google, and iStockphoto, Trecartin is exposed to different cultural forms of expression which he appropriates and transforms at-will through digital

77 Ibid.
mash-ups. The artist also shares, distributes, exports, and exhibits his work freely on the Internet through popular websites such as Youtube and Vimeo, which are accessible worldwide, thereby producing work that is not physically restricted to a particular place. In Bourriaud’s words, Ryan Trecartin has indeed turned into a “cultural nomad.”

Although some art critics and bloggers have contextualized Trecartin’s videos within postmodernism, I argue that, because his art cannot be identified solely through reductive classifications such as gender or race, his work in fact challenges postmodernism’s restrictive value system. Postmodernism has been and still is a point of contention among scholars. While many (including Bourriaud) believe postmodernism is “dead,” others believe it never happened, and some think we are in fact still in it. The multiple (and often contradictory) perspectives revolving around the notion of postmodernism often diverge.

In comparing Terry Smith, Nicolas Bourriaud, and Jack Halberstam’s understanding of the concept of postmodernism, it appears that the term, as it pertains to queer theory (in the case of Halberstam), is indeed closely related to its art historical meaning. In his pivotal book, *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, Jack Halberstam (formerly Judith) claims that “queer/queerness” is intimately connected to postmodernism as he explains, “‘queer time’ is a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism.” Halberstam does

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79 Art historian Yves-Alain Bois, who calls himself a formalist, strictly rejects postmodern discourses revolving around cultural studies, gender studies, and postcolonial studies.
80 Jean Baudrillard in his book *Why Hasn’t Everything Already Disappeared?* (2009), published two years after his death, describes today’s digital society as postmodern.
not provide a clear time-frame for what he considers to be “postmodernism;” instead, he writes,

I see postmodernism as simultaneously a crisis and an opportunity – a crisis in the stability of form and meaning, and opportunity to rethink the practice of cultural production, its hierarchies and power dynamics, its tendency to resist or capitulate.82

This definition points to the fact that postmodernism is a period of transition since it is both a “crisis and an opportunity.” But a transition between what? Terry Smith explains that “postmodernism” is “the moment of transition between these two eras [modernism and contemporary art], an anachronism from the 1970s and 1980s.”83 Bourriaud refers to postmodernism as “the philosophy of mourning, a long melancholic episode in our cultural life” – which started roughly around the early 70s.84 Interestingly, Halberstam argues that “queer time” came to consciousness within the LGBTQ community at the end of the 20th century with the AIDS crisis during which many AIDS victims saw their life expectancies dramatically reduced – which happened around the same time in which postmodernism happened according to Smith and Bourriaud. Although Halberstam’s definition is not an art historical one per se, he does refer to a rethinking of “the practice of cultural production.” In fact, as Nicolas Bourriaud points out in Altermodern, in the period of postmodernism, artists and art critics used to find meaning in a work of art by examining the social background to its production asking questions such as “Where does the artist come from?” In the postmodern era, identification with gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation had become a system of

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allotting meaning and reducing individuals’ identity back to their origins.\textsuperscript{85} According to Bourriaud, in his proclamation titled “Altermodern Manifesto: Postmodernism is Dead,” the postmodern has been replaced:

Many signs suggest that the historical period defined by postmodernism is coming to an end: multiculturalism and the discourse of identity is being overtaken by a planetary movement of creolisation; cultural relativism and deconstruction, substituted for modernist universalism, give us no weapons against the twofold threat of uniformity and mass culture and traditionalist, far-right, withdrawal […] If twentieth-century modernism was above all a western cultural phenomenon, altermodernity arises out of planetary negotiations, discussions between agents from different cultures. Stripped of a center, it can only be polyglot. Altermodernity is characterized by translation, unlike the modernism of the twentieth century which spoke the abstract language of the colonial west, and postmodernism, which encloses artistic phenomena in origins and identities.\textsuperscript{86}

Thus, the term “postmodern” does not define a specific style but rather a tool that seeks to categorize, compartmentalize, and standardize identity. Much like Halberstam’s definition of postmodernism, I agree that this historical moment was both an “opportunity” and a “crisis.” An opportunity for minorities to gain more visibility in the art world, but a crisis in which artworks are labeled according to identity categories such as race, gender, sexuality, or nationality which seems problematic. As a working artist in New York City, I often had conversations with curators who invited me to participate in exhibitions they were organizing around central themes of ethnicity or nationality. Even in what was considered a postmodern time in 1980s New York, I understood the limitations inherent in categorizing art works, mine (or others), whose subject matter or content were not directly or even indirectly related to the themes of multiculturalism. On the other hand, I also understood its value – political, and otherwise, and therefore

\textsuperscript{85} Bourriaud, Nicolas (2009), p. 20.
supported its intention while understanding its shortcomings, preferring instead to participate in projects that dealt with the form and content of the work as it applied to broader, global issues that provided insight into the “time” I was living.

While I do agree with Jack Halberstam’s definition of postmodernism, I, however, contest his concept of “queer time and place.” In his book, Halberstam attempts to make, as he puts it, “the perhaps overly ambitious claim that there is such a thing as ‘queer time’ and ‘queer space.’”87 According to him, queer time and space exist “in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction.”88 “Queer time” is time outside the traditional “reproductive” or “familial” time. In later chapters, the author analyzes the narrative of Boys Don’t Cry (1999) to illustrate the concept of a “queer place.” Halberstam claims that “queer subcultures thrive in urban areas.”89 He points out that queer individuals feel more comfortable living in cities and most of them tend to leave rural areas to live in larger metropolitan areas.90 He calls this urban queer lifestyle “metronormativity.”91 Queer individuals feel more threatened in the rural areas as they stand out more. Moving to the city thus becomes a survival strategy or as Halberstam notes, a “necessity.”92 The queer place is thus a safe space in which various queer communities exist and allow for queer cultural expressions different from the dominant culture. When Boys Don’t Cry (1999) came out, many critics, queers and straight alike, wondered why the transgender protagonist remained in the close-minded rural environment she lived in instead of going to the city where she would be accepted. It

88 Ibid.
89 Ibid.
90 Ibid.
91 Ibid, 36.
92 Ibid.
seems then that spectator’s expectations acknowledge Halberstam’s understanding of such a thing as a queer place, the city, and a heteronormative place, the rural area. While Halberstam’s theory of a “queer place” may apply to some queer individuals and narratives, his concept, does not completely pertain to the artist and works I have selected, as Trecartin is not restricted to a specific city locale and yet I consider him to be queer in his expression of identity and artworks. His studio can take on different formats (art space, video green screen, editing room, computer etc.) and be located anywhere; in fact, he often produces work in the suburbs or rural areas. For instance, the series Any Ever (2009-2010), he produced while in residency in Miami, was mainly shot in suburban settings. As Nicolas Bourriaud notes, “In a world every inch of which is under satellite surveillance, territory takes the form of a construction or a journey.”

Thus, trying to categorize specific locales as queer or straight loses its political appeal when erasing the imaginary frontiers of our global world. Trecartin’s video work has been exhibited internationally in venues such as the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (2011) and at international biennials including the Gwangju Biennial (2010) and the Singapore Biennial (2011), thus his art is also understood from a global perspective. Furthermore, he creates narratives that function outside heteronormative constraints, in a parallel universe where transgender, genderless, and hybrid characters co-exist regardless of the environments they situate themselves in.

I also find Halberstam’s monolithic concept of queer time and place problematic as it suggests that queer subcultures only exist “outside” heteronormativity. Thus, a queer identity is one, according to Jack Halberstam, that counteridentifies with the

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dominant ideology. As other academics have suggested, counteridentification is not the only option available for queer identities. José Muñoz, in his book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, notes that “Identity markers such as *queer* (from the German *quer* meaning ‘transverse’) [is a term] that defies notions of uniform identity or origin." For Muñoz, a queer identity is not fixed; it is flexible. Using Michel Pêcheux’s theory of disidentification, Muñoz describes the three modes in which a subject’s identity is shaped by various ideologies. Muñoz distinguishes between identification (or assimilation), which he says means to embrace, take on, and willingly re-enact what the dominant ideology dictates, and counteridentification which he explains as rejecting, refusing, and denying the dominant ideology. He writes that disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, “one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology […] this “working on and against” is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance.” As he explains, “these subjects’ [queers of color] different identity components occupy adjacent spaces and are not comfortably situated in any one discourse of minority subjectivity. These hybridized identificatory positions are always in transit, shuttling between different identity vectors.” According to Muñoz, these “identity vectors” refer to sexuality and race. To illustrate this concept, he investigates the works of various artists (and queers of color) such as Carmelita

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95 Ibid, 11-12.
96 Ibid.
97 Ibid, 32.
Tropicana, Vaginal Crème Davis, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres among others, who negotiate their “double” minority identities by creating their own queer world through their art. They acknowledge what is unfair or wrong with society, are concerned about it, and aware of the history that precedes the discourse. They react to it by being playful, humorous, and mildly sarcastic as a form of disidentification.

Although Muñoz applies his concept of “disidentification” strictly to queers of color, I posit that any queer subject can disidentify. In his book’s final chapter, Muñoz proposes a new definition of disidentification,

Disidentification is about cultural, material, and psychic survival. It is a response to state and global power apparatuses that employ systems of racial, sexual, and national subjugation. […] Disidentification is about managing and negotiating historical trauma and systemic violence.98

I assert that this broad definition may apply to any queer individual of any race. However, when speaking exclusively in regard to queers of color, it becomes evident that there indeed exists the possibility for varying disidentification strategies. This is clearly illustrated in the selection of artists Muñoz chooses for his study. While Carmelita Tropicana and Vaginal Crème Davis both make work that clearly deal with their sexual and racial minority identity status, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “actively rebelled against any reductive understanding of how his identity affects his cultural production."99 Indeed, contemporary Cuban artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres completely “rejected the general strictures of identity” and embraced “the complexity of contemporary hybrid identities.”100 Thus, the author’s decision to include this artist in his book points to the

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99 Ibid, 165.
fact that there are indeed multiple philosophical approaches from which to disidentify. In the case of Gonzalez-Torres, his disidentificatory strategy consists of implementing a neo-minimalist vernacular as a method for both dispelling personal identity labels and addressing the larger societal issues relating to the role of sexuality and ethnicity. Similarly, Trecartin disidentifies by doing away with a fixed identity. By painting his characters’ faces in flashy unnatural flesh tones or striped varying shades of make-up foundation, he mocks what he considers the simplistic idea of multiculturalism in art that his generation feels they have transgressed.

Players involved in the contemporary art world today are international and global. No longer is the art market controlled by western artists, dealers, critics, collectors, and institutions, nor is a discussion primarily surrounding multiculturalism essential in this post globalized market as it was at the end of the twentieth century. While he may cast Asian, Caucasian, Hispanic, and/or African American actors in his work, he destabilizes the very concept of racial identity by cross-accessorizing their look with non-corresponding hair and skin choices manifested through blond wigs, ghostly white faces, striped multi skin tone foundation or electric green make-up. Trecartin commented on the styling of his personae and said, “We might try to interpret a car commercial as a hairdo, an ideology as a designer skin tone, a banking situation as a cheekbone, copyright issues as a jaw line, or maybe an application as a facial agenda.”

Trecartin’s protagonists no longer represent human beings but rather embody our commodifying culture.

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In an interview for *The Economist*, Ryan Trecartin was asked to comment on the lack of distinction between his characters’ gender. He replied,

I see it less as a lack of distinction in binary terms and more as an exploration of territories within infinite gender creation, individualization and specificity. I imagine this as a type of multiplex space. I’m often interested in realities where gender takes a back-seat to personality articulation [...] and the thing I love about personality is that it can be added to, changed or re-worked at will, while not being classified or grouped very easily. [...] I see my characters exploring a technologically driven yet non-gender-centric psychologically complex transitional world which is inherently positive and energetic as opposed to neutral and formulaic.\(^{102}\)

While Trecartin does not explicitly refer to his artwork as “queer,” preferring instead to describe his videos as “realities where gender [and sexuality] take[s] a back-seat,” I assert that queerness is a central concept in his video art. In order to better comprehend how queerness operates in Trecartin’s work, it becomes necessary to clarify the term “queer.”

While Halberstam’s definition of “queer” as “nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time,”\(^{103}\) provides a starting point to clarify “queerness,” his definition fails to account for the complex and sometimes contradictory ways the term is deployed in scholarly writings. Both Halberstam and Muñoz use “queer” to mean gay or any way(s) of being that is not straight. For a more comprehensive definition of the term “queer,” I will turn to Alexander Doty’s *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon*.


According to Doty, “queer/queerness” can be synonymous to gay, lesbian, or bisexual.\textsuperscript{104} “Queer” can also be used as an umbrella term that takes into account any “non-straight” position. The term can be applied to describe non-heteronormative modes of spectatorship which allow for different readings of texts regardless of the sexuality of the person who originally produced the text. “Queer/queerness” may also describe “non-normative” or in-between genders not easily categorized within the binary paradigms male/female.\textsuperscript{105} Among the various definitions Doty proposes, his sixth and last, is the one that I find most relevant to my research because it is the most inclusive. His last rendering of the term “queer/queerness” is as follows, “To describe those aspects of spectatorship, cultural readership, production, and textual coding that seem to establish spaces not described by, or contained within, straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, or transgendered understandings and categorizations of gender and sexuality.”\textsuperscript{106} I believe his final definition accurately reflects how I see Ryan Trecartin incorporating a sense of “queerness” in his videos. He creates narratives that are not strictly linked to his sexualit(ies) and often blurs external signifiers such as gender which allows him to develop new identity categories that cannot be solely described, in Doty’s words, as “straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, or transgendered.”\textsuperscript{107} Indeed, Trecartin’s characters are always situated at the edge of these boundaries. They can be considered to be “genderfuck,” which, as Jodie Taylor expresses in \textit{Playing it Queer}, “deliberately
mixes gender cues in an attempt to subvert the logic of the sex/gender/sexuality paradigm by exposing the false dualities that lie at the heart of heteronormativity.\textsuperscript{108}

Trecartin adheres to Doty’s understanding that anyone can be queer regardless of their sexual orientation. However, I must also address that while I believe that Doty’s sixth definition most accurately reflects how I see Ryan Trecartin incorporating a sense of “queerness” in his videos, it is crucial to remember that, as Eve Sedgwick affirms, the roots of “queer” stem from a complex intersection between gender and sexuality, in particular, “same-sex sexual object choices.”\textsuperscript{109} For this reason the term “queer” will be used interchangeably throughout this chapter and dissertation to specifically denote both non-straight sexualities as well as non-heteronormative and non-fixed positions. The concept of non-fixity plays a particularly significant role in the artist’s work as we will see that queerness is not affixed to a singular body.

As he suggests in \textit{The Economist} interview, Trecartin uses the body as a blank canvas on which “personalities” are projected, negotiated, and articulated – the body is thus open-ended. Interestingly, it is precisely this idea of liminality in relation to the body and identity that places Mikhail Bakhtin’s writing at the intersection between the grotesque and queer.

In \textit{Rabelais and his World}, a study of the French Renaissance author, Francois Rabelais, Bakhtin sees the grotesque body as an open, unsealed body that is always in the process of becoming and engendering another body. He writes,

The grotesque body [...] is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body. [...] Thus the artistic logic of the grotesque image ignores the closed, smooth, and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body’s limited space or into the body’s depths.\(^{110}\)

For Bakhtin, the grotesque challenges identity, system, and order. It transgresses and merges bodily limits and can be best described as in-between and ambiguous. Bakhtin emphasizes specific characteristics of the grotesque body, namely its openness, its penetrative aspect, and the "lower stratum." Indeed, the grotesque body is aware of its own orifices (mouth, anus, vagina, etc.). As Bakhtin explains, “all these convexities and orifices have a common characteristic; it is within them that the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome: there is an interchange and an interorientation.”\(^{111}\) The author contrasts the open-ended body of carnival as the grotesque body par excellence from the “classical body of official culture” which, as he explains, is “an entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body, which is shown from the outside as something individual.”\(^{112}\) The carnival is a collective phenomenon – it unifies the individuals taking part in it. As the author notes, “[...] the carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions.”\(^{113}\) Thus, members of carnival no longer see themselves as individuals but as belonging to a broader whole, as being part of a community. During these festivities, social hierarchies are suspended and emphasis is placed on the body and its connection to the life of the community. The same way individuals transform their bodies through costumes and

\(^{111}\) Ibid.
\(^{112}\) Ibid, 320.
\(^{113}\) Ibid, 10.
masks during carnival, the grotesque body is also in a perpetual state of in-betweenness. The grotesque body is thus a queer body according to Doty’s sixth rendering of “queerness.”

Scholars have often employed the concepts of the grotesque and the abject alongside one another without differentiating them. While these two terms are in fact closely related, they are nevertheless distinct. In her book *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva defines the abject as, “something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us.”

She then clarifies that what causes abjection is “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.” Thus, like the grotesque, the abject disturbs notions of fixed identity by occupying the state of in-betweenness and ambiguity. However, unlike Bakhtin’s conception of the grotesque, which is characterized by the carnivalesque and ludic, the abject is traumatic and threatening.

The utopian and playful aspect of Bakhtin’s writing on carnival also relates to Trecartin’s “inherently positive” digital universe. I believe it is important to problematize the ludic aspect of Trecartin’s work. There may seem at first to be a disconnection between the subversiveness of his art and the carnivalesque playfulness inherent in his videos, however, as Victor Turner writes in his essay “Carnival in Rio: Dionysian Drama in an Industrialized Society,”

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115 Ibid.
The play frame, where events are scrutinized in the leisure time of the social process, has to some extent inherited the function of the ritual frame. The message it delivers are often serious beneath the outward trappings of absurdity, fantasy, and ribaldry, as contemporary stage plays, some movies and some TV shows illustrate. Clearly, carnival is a form of play.116

Turner makes a similar argument to Bakhtin’s when he writes that during the carnival festivities, society is in “its mood of fantasizing, its playful mood.”117 According to the author, playfulness can be serious and even subversive. Trecartin’s art’s transgressiveness lies in its ability to address time-sensitive issues in a non-threatening, playful, humorous and even mischievous way. In my dissertation, I will demonstrate that, underneath the artifice of Trecartin’s carnivalesque, sugar coated, rainbow explosion, his charged videos deal in fact with very serious thematic undercurrents such as homophobia, suicide, globalization, and corporate culture.

Furthermore, Turner points to the fact that although the ludic can seem chaotic, void of structure or rules, the carnival, in all its fantasy and apparent eccentricity, actually demands great technical control, synchronization of dance and music, and a lot of preparation in the design of the costumes and hairstyles. As he notes, “it takes a great amount of order to produce ‘a sweet disorder,’ a great deal of structuring to create a sacred play-space and time for antistructure.”118 Interestingly, Ryan Trecartin has made similar claims in regard to his work saying, “What I have to deal with […] is people assuming that the movies are improvised parties. I spend a ton of time scripting the work on many levels, and the process is choreographed accordingly. Everyone involved works

117 Ibid, 104.
118 Ibid, 118.
their asses off!” 119 Indeed, although each shot flows at a frantic pace making the final product feel like a big blurry mess, each camera angle is in fact carefully planned out.

While Mikhail Bakhtin applies his theory on the grotesque and carnivalesque to literary works, Robert Stam, continues the discussion, in *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film*, as he applies Bakhtin’s theory to film. In his book, Stam reinforces some of Bakhtin’s previous claims on carnival by reiterating that “carnival represents an alternative cosmovision characterized by the ludic undermining of all norms. The carnivalesque principle abolishes hierarchies, levels social classes, and creates another life free from conventional rules and restrictions.” 120 Stam’s study is relevant to my own research as it makes the claim that Bakhtinian notions of the carnivalesque and grotesque have “broad relevance for cinematic expression.” 121 The author proposes a wide gamut of films that can be described as being “carnivalesque,” from films or film-related experiences that “strive to erase barriers between spectator and spectacle” (such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* phenomenon) to films that “aggressively overturn a classical aesthetic based on formal harmony and good taste” (such as John Waters’ *Pink Flamingos* (1972)). 122 Stam argues that many films have been “misunderstood or misappreciated” because they have “been judged by the canons of ‘good taste’ or ‘political correctness’ rather than as prolongations of a perennial

121 Ibid, 110.
122 Ibid, 110-111.
The author’s last argument broaches a critical concept in art: Is there such a thing as good art or bad art? As Stam infers, this judgment can vary according to the lens under which the work is examined.

Francesco Bonami, artistic director of the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo and curator of the Whitney Biennial in 2010 and the 50th Venice Biennale, raises the questions surrounding the “value” of contemporary art in his article “The Good, The Bad and The Ugly.” Bonami points out that before 1989, there was a general consensus, or “unwritten by-laws” among art critics who judged the merit of artworks accordingly. In 1989, however, with the arrival of Jeff Koons’s series, Made in Heaven, art criterions dramatically changed, as the spectacle marked “the beginning of critical chaos.” First shown in 1990 at the 44th Venice Biennale, the work consists of paintings, photographs, and sculptures portraying Jeff Koons and pornstar, Ilona Staller, in explicit sexual positions. The piece created considerable controversy as it presented pornography as art which crossed the boundaries of “good taste.” While some art critics were horrified by Koons’s kitschy pornographic imagery, others thought the show was of major art-historical importance. Certainly, the art world had to readjust its own critical standards and even do away with them completely.

The work of Ryan Trecartin has been subjected to a related debate – on the one hand, it has been praised as game-changing, while on the other it has been classified “as a cynical exploitation of the celebrity art market.” My aim is not to place any stringent value judgment on his work. I do not intend to persuade readers that his art is “great” or

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even “good,” as I believe that it is more fruitful to consider whether his work is contributing significantly to the ongoing discourse surrounding the broader history of art. I propose that Trecartin’s videos are important because they manage to capture and comment on an exciting era, a generation in constant flux, while simultaneously generating an interactive dialogue with a global audience.

Bonami’s article is particularly direct in calling attention to the fact that in today’s art world, there is no bad or good taste – the good, the bad, and the ugly “have joined together to create a chaos from which it is hard to forecast a clear outcome.” We are living in a thrilling time in art history that allows us to embrace tackiness, campiness, and a mélange of techniques and forms without shame, judgment, or social repercussion, which makes contemporary art so exciting.

Much like Jeff Koons’s seminal series, Trecartin’s work is replete with camp imagery. Camp is also closely related to the Bakhtinian grotesque as it too destabilizes aesthetic conventions in a similar manner. Caryl Flinn comments in “The Deaths of Camp,” “Like the disunified grotesque, camp also works to violate the standards of ‘good taste’ […]” Camp aligns itself with the carnivalesque in its relation to playfulness. Susan Sontag writes in “Notes on ‘Camp’,” “Camp is a solvent of morality. It neutralizes moral indignation, sponsors playfulness. […] Camp taste is above all, a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation – not judgment.” While Sontag frames camp as a general phenomenon of mass culture, Jack Babuscio asserts that camp is really “a creative

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expression of the gay sensibility.” Babuscio defines “gay sensibility,” as “a creative energy reflecting a consciousness that is different from the mainstream; a heightened awareness of certain human complications of feeling that spring from the fact of social oppressions; in short, a perception of the world which is colored, shaped, directed, and defined by the fact of one’s gayness.” While I agree with Babuscio’s definition of a “gay sensibility,” I believe that it is too restrictive for the purpose of my dissertation as it places sexuality in a simplistic oppositional binary model.

Furthermore, in recent years, the definition of camp has shifted from a notion of it being an exclusively “gay camp” to a more inclusive notion of “queer camp.” Aymar Jean Christian states that in the new era of camp, which he calls “camp 2.0,” “the notion of ‘queering’ something is now fundamental to camp and suggests anything from blurring dichotomies – androgyny, confounding male and female – to challenging societal assumptions […]” According to Christian, online platforms such as YouTube have in fact “humanized” expressions of camp, as camp is no longer used to claim one’s difference but one’s individuality.

In addition, his lo-tech camp aesthetic is actually much in tune with the consumer-friendly technology available to the masses. In a recent online interview, Trecartin said that he used a small Canon camera, the kind “that fits in your hand,” to shoot his series *Any Ever* and edited the footage with iMovie. The audio was recorded directly from the

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129 Ibid.


131 Ibid.
He is aware that the “artist” is no longer exclusively the image maker and that in the “age of digital reproduction,” anyone can become a photographer, filmmaker, or graphic designer. Douglas Davis notes, “Only the unwary mind would deny the further inevitability that a ‘neurasthenic’ computer, programmed by humanoid codes […] will shortly create paintings from first stroke to last.” Davis takes his cue from Walter Benjamin, who a century before made similar arguments to substantiate the claims for the populist appeal of the photographic image.

With the emergence of Web 2.0, online users are able to engage with works of arts in unprecedented ways. Online YouTube viewers, for instance, not only interpret Trecartin’s videos but are actively involved in shaping its cultural significance. Through the website’s interface, they can share the work with other members, create discussion boards about specific videos, and even more interesting, they can download them and edit, cut, remix, and re-upload them for others to watch. Nicolas Bourriaud calls this form of participatory work “relational art.”

In his book Relational Aesthetics, Bourriaud makes the claim that in relational art, the audience is conceived as a “micro-community.” The artwork is more than just an object on display for the audience to passively look at, instead, this artistic practice produces intersubjective encounters. Through these encounters, meaning is created

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134 Ibid.
The public is the source of “the aura.” Bourriaud writes, “the aura of art no longer lies in the hinter-world represented by the work, nor in form itself, but in front of it, within the contemporary collective form that it produces by being put on a show.”

Bourriaud’s concept questions the notion of authorship. If, as he asserts, the viewer is the conveyor of meaning, then, can we still claim that Ryan Trecartin is an author. He is the first to state that his videos are the result of a collaborative process whereby everyone has “the authority in their relationship to being directed” and always credits his closest collaborators, especially Lizzie Fitch, who performs in all his videos and is significantly involved in the designing of the sets, as well as Rhett LaRue who assists him with special effects. Yet Trecartin clearly imposes his own directorial choices when filming and editing his digitally processed videos. He is, in John Roberts’s terms, a “bio-computational” author. In this model of authorship, “artists no longer compose their works but rather ‘program’ them. In this, previous artworks are no longer things to be cited or surpassed, but congeries of signs to be inhabited and manipulated, and, once these signs enter the realm of electronic space, a continuous means of generating other works and activities. The artwork, then, functions as a temporal nodal point in a larger flow or network of art’s productive relations.”

Much like a video game programmer, Trecartin conceives of his work as an experience in which spectators are actively engaged and able to navigate scenes as gamers move through levels. As he explains, “I’m trying now to explore applications, hardware, and software ideas that would give more navigational agency to the viewer

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136 Ibid, 61.
To achieve this level of intersubjectivity in his work, he appropriates video
game aesthetics. Comparable to a “first-person shooter” (FPS) video game, Trecartin’s
video art offers multiple subjective shots which Alexander Galloway defines as
perspectives that “show the exact physiological or emotional qualities of what a character
would see [...] the subjective shot very precisely positions itself inside the skull of that
character.”

In a short “scene reading” of his video, *P. Opular S. ky* (2009-10), that best
demonstrates this perspective, we are transported to the midst of the action, via
Trecartin’s hand-held mobile camera. We find ourselves facing a group of twenty-
somethings moving frenetically while verbally addressing the camera with coded
technology jargon. Their confrontational tech-slang form of direct address gives us
(spectators) the impression that they are interacting with us face-to-face. As the video
camera dances in unison with the performers, Trecartin emphasizes its subjectivity by
blurring and distorting the image through digital manipulation employing Adobe After
Effects CS4 and its plethora of filters in order to transmit to spectators a mood or emotion
much as is done in FPS video games.

In *Doom* (1993), for example, one of the earliest and most iconic virtual games,
the screen image becomes fuzzy to represent the main character’s instability after being
repeatedly attacked by the enemy. Interestingly, Trecartin’s camera often freely moves
through his video set in a manner that recreates these 3-dimensional computerized
environments. His camera is rarely static in order to conjure a “fully rendered and

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138 Trecartin, Ryan, Kevin McGarry, Lauren Cornell, Lizzie Fitch, Linda Norden, Cindy Sherman, and

139 Galloway, Alexander. “Origins of the First-Person Shooter” in *Critical Visions in Film Theory:
Classic and Contemporary Readings* ed. by Corrigan, Timothy, Patricia White, and Meta Mazaj. (Boston:
Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2011), p. 1072-84.
actionable space,” as one would experience when exploring the pixelated set of an FPS video game. These subjective video-graphic devices help to create a dynamic and engaged viewing experience for Trecartin spectators.

This concept of interactivity is also noticeable in the way the work is being experienced at institutions such as museums, not-for-profit, public art, and alternative art venues. For instance, when Ryan Trecartin’s series Any Ever was exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art (“MoCA”) in Miami in 2011, the museum recreated the three dimensional sculptural art installations as environments or sets that mirrored those of the videos on display in order to immerse spectators in multi-sensory filmic experience. Trecartin’s video piece, K-CoreaiNC.K (section a), for example, was exhibited in a darkened room furnished with a white circular conference table and office chairs. Interestingly, his video was projected in front of an identical conference table and featured a blond female office worker who addressed the camera directly while sitting at a conference table identical to the one in the museum. Spectators participated in the video performance piece as the character onscreen sat (virtually) across from them while directly addressing them, creating an immersive experience in which viewers felt they were all physically in the same room at the same time.

In addition to the academic texts I have presented here, there is an extensive body of non-academic illustrated books, web pages, and magazine articles written about Ryan Trecartin and his art. To date, there is only one publication dedicated in its entirety to the his work titled, Ryan Trecartin: Any Ever. This illustrated volume represents the sole monograph on his art. It is a collection primarily of screen shots and short essays written by a diverse and eclectic group ranging from curator and museum director, Jeffrey
Deitch, to artist and friend, Cindy Sherman. The book attempts to examine the currency of Trecartin’s groundbreaking work *Any Ever* from various perspectives in terms of its contemporaneity and cultural relevance by providing insider information regarding the way the artist produces his art. When reading Trecartin’s interview in the book, it becomes clear that he has total control and authority over his projects, unconstrained by the pressure of studios, crews and bureaucratic policies that burden many filmmakers. Although this peek into the mind and methods of the artist is an invaluable asset in my research, the book is comprised mainly of visual images taken from his videos. The written text, while enlightening, discusses Trecartin’s work in general terms and never deeply analyzes any of his videos in their entirety. This dissertation aims to compensate for this hiatus in the critical analysis of such exciting and cutting-edge work.

**Outline of Dissertation**

The first chapter, *Early Baggage: Filmic Experimentation and Televisuality* Retrieved as “Carry-On” Language, considers two early videos from Trecartin’s *Early Baggage* series: *Valentine’s Day Girl* (2001) and *Wayne’s World* (2003). I posit that Trecartin did not gradually develop his unique visual language but in fact established it at the outset of his career. His distinct style is characterized by a televisuality that emerges as a reaction to the commercialization and popularization of television much like the early pioneers of video art in the early 1960s. However, Trecartin declares that he prefers to refer to his videos as “movies,” thereby designating them within a film context. Through close scene readings, I will show how he appropriates and reinterprets various avant-garde traditions, borrowing from both experimental film and video art. I will also
establish the recurring motifs in his work: queerness, camp, the grotesque body, the carnivalesque, and the abject.

The following chapter, *A Family Finds Entertainment: The “Coming Out” Melodrama Remix*, focuses on his video piece *A Family Finds Entertainment* (2004) which Trecartin submitted as his BFA thesis project at RISD. In this digital work, he continues with a familiar televisual language developed for *Early Baggage*; however, in this installment, he introduces the melodrama format. *A Family Finds Entertainment* presents itself as a “coming out” story. Its narrative, as well as formal elements, aptly illustrated by the omnipresence of doors and windows, all revolve around the idea of “crossing over.” We will see that Trecartin uses this visual allegory in a literal sense to evoke the act of “coming out of the closet” which can be understood as openly declaring one’s same-sex desire to the world. At the same time, the artist also refers to the concept metaphorically to express how he seeks to contribute to televisual and cinematic traditions. He positions himself “out there” in order to explore the vast, mostly unchartered, and limitless universe of the Internet – a symbol for who he is, who we are, and who we are capable of becoming.

Chapter three, *I-BE Area: Altermodern Time and Cyberqueer Place*, examines *I-BE Area* (2007), which emerged at a time of great innovation during the explosion of the Web 2.0 platforms. The narrative follows the peripeteia of I-BE 2, a self-claimed “real life mixed media,” clone of I-BE, the first “total original.” As he navigates online across multiple virtual chat rooms, the protagonist drifts into new personae. The video clearly reveals Trecartin’s preoccupation with a multiplicity of ways of being afforded to him by the Internet. In addition to experimenting with identity, the artist also takes advantage of
the endless possibilities of the Web to create virtual geographies and multi-linear narratives. In doing so, he challenges previous notions of time and place by expanding their applicability through Internet mediation. We will see that for Ryan Trecartin, the frontier between the virtual and the corporeal world no longer exists.

The fourth chapter, *Any Ever: Stardom, Fashion, and Consumption*, focuses on *Any Ever* (2009-2010) which is divided into two parts, *Trill-ogy Comp* (2009) and *Re’Search Wait’S* (2009-2010). Together they are subdivided into a total of seven individual works. The series deals with a complex and intricate system that comments on the commodification and standardization of culture in which individuality and subjectivity are homogenized. Trecartin’s take on the chaotic state of what Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer call the “culture industry,” or the mass production of culture is expressed through an idiosyncratic perspective on the grotesque in fashion and style. While his work has always been imbued with a fashion-forward aesthetic, in *Any Ever*, it is taken yet a step further. Fashion constitutes a language of its own, offering deeper insights into the narrative. Therefore, sartorial analysis serves an important role and will be conducted concomitantly with scene readings. In order to interrogate the relationship between his art and its connection to fashion, we will also analyze the editorial spread Trecartin art directed for *W* magazine.

The final chapter, *Priority Innfield: Interactive Gaming Simulation as Expanded Cinema*, delves into Trecartin’s latest installment, *Priority Innfield* (2013), exhibited at the 55th Venice Biennale. The series was conceived as a gaming system in which characters have evolved into animations. It explores the possibility of an immersive cinematic experience that offers more navigational agency to the spectator than in his
prior works. Employing formal elements and narrative strategies from video games, Trecartin no longer sees himself exclusively as a director but augments his role to that of animator/programmer. The last part of the chapter will reflect upon the artist’s trajectory and ponder its consequence.
Chapter 1

Early Baggage:
Filmic Experimentation and Televisuality Retrieved as “Carry-On” Language

Ryan Trecartin created Early Baggage (2001-2003) during his tenure as a college art student at Rhode Island School of Design. The series consists of four individual short videos: Valentine’s Day Girl (2001), Yo A Romantic Comedy (2002), What’s The Love Making Babies For (2003), and Wayne’s World (2003), which are thematically and stylistically fully characteristic of his video language. In this early, pre-YouTube era body of work, viewers can already identify many of the defining formal elements that would firmly establish the artist’s style - fast-paced editing, superimposition, oblique camera angles, repetition, fragmented shots, and discontinuity. Early Baggage also presents us Trecartin’s recurring preoccupation with queerness, camp, the carnivalesque, and the grotesque and abject body. Indeed, I assert that Trecartin’s first body of work clearly shows that rather than gradually developing a visual vocabulary over time, he had already established a unique style at the outset of his career.

This is not to say that Early Baggage reveals all we mean when we speak of Trecartin’s work. While it encompasses much of his formal approach, it does not contain many of the motifs the artist will explore and develop throughout the course of his career. Ryan Trecartin first introduces us to his “language” by merging, inverting, and blending shots and utilizing post-production tools. He borrows a myriad of stylistic references and techniques from experimental filmmaking and television which afford him infinite

possibilities for creative freedom. For instance, through his masterful use of Apple iMovie post production software with its multitude of special effects such as “overlay” to achieve a superimposition effect, “reverse” function that inverts images, and “instant replay” that repeats shots, he attempts to pay homage to a long standing tradition of experimental filmmaking with its trajectory of works concerning themselves with the formal manipulation of the moving image. In addition, he also incorporates a remix of television tropes such as the music video, commercial, soap opera, reality TV, and talk show which he typically presents to spectators in rapidly expelled imagery and media sound bites.

In *Early Baggage*, the artist begins to examine the impact of mass media on youth culture\(^\text{141}\) by exploring how young people readily identify with consumer culture and create and perform their identity around it. The four-part video work begins with *Valentine’s Day Girl*, a fantasy narrative about a teen girl who has fallen victim to a holiday shopping obsession. *Yo A Romantic Comedy* follows, featuring white suburban teenagers appropriating the vocabulary, body language, and street fashions characteristic of hip-hop subculture. The low-tech creatures in *What’s The Love Making Babies For* then communicate through a dynamic instant text messaging dialect. Finally, in *Wayne’s World*, Trecartin ponders the significance of the content generated by mainstream forms of youth entertainment, by referencing MTV’s music videos, reality programs such as

\(^{141}\) In his essay “Youth Cultures: A Critical Outline of Key Debates” published in *Youth Cultures: Scenes, Subcultures and Tribes*, Paul Hodkinson explains: “Whether in the form of the development of nighttime entertainment, of youth music and fashion or youth oriented magazines and television programmes, the increasing relationship between young people and particular kinds of consumption has been a key theme of recent scholarship on youth cultures. […] many contemporary youth theorists believe that alongside the decline of traditional elements of belonging such as class and community, this expansion in the role of consumption has rendered young people’s already uncertain transitions increasingly characterized by ephemeral and individualized tastes, practices and identities.”(2007: 3)
The Real World, and homespun community cable programming. Valentine’s Day Girl
and Wayne’s World make for particularly interesting close readings as both not only
comment on the effects of media on youth culture but also demonstrate the direct
correlation that exists early on in Trecartin’s art with experimental cinema and television.

Valentine’s Day Girl opens with a black screen. No image appears within the
first thirty seconds of the video, yet the manic soundtrack playing in the background
anticipates the frantic action that is about to unravel. Although Trecartin’s work is
considered primarily visual in nature, he “intends his viewers to be listeners as well.”
Linda Norden comments, “The best way to gain conversance in Trecartin’s work is to
watch it – and listen to it – repeatedly.” Indeed, the chaotic opening soundtrack
meshes well with his fast paced “in-your-face” visual aesthetics. The brief silence of the
opening scene is shattered by a digital cacophony that takes the viewer by surprise as a
loud discordant mixture of electronic sounds including video game buzz and computer
system crash warning signals sound off at full blast. Although the incessant noise is at
first unpleasant, if one watches and listens to it repeatedly, we may identify a certain
rhythm in which sounds are repeated in a sequential order which progressively increases
in speed until each note and vibration converge and merge to create a sort of techno-clash
melody. The overwhelming symphonic expulsion actually prepares us for full immersion
into Trecartin’s saturated style.

142 Norden, Linda. “When the Rainbow is an Option” in Any Ever: Ryan Trecartin. (New York: Skira
143 Ibid.
Suddenly he cuts to a close-up of an LCD alarm clock that reads “11:59 p.m.” Loud shrieks of excitement can be overheard in the background. Trecartin cuts to a close-up of the protagonist’s feet stomping on a red linoleum floor. The opening sequence is structured as a set of increasingly rapid crosscuts between close-ups of the alarm clock and an array of shots of Lizzie Fitch impatiently waiting for the clock to strike 12:00 midnight. Trecartin’s stylistic decisions convey the quickly shifting succession of moods the protagonist is experiencing. The artist translates a range of emotions that include anticipation, impatience, and finally euphoria. He accomplishes these fluctuations by employing rapid editing and artful cinematography that includes tilted camera angles, jump cuts, and claustrophobic close-ups. The video appears to be in a perpetual state of motion, as no shot lasts longer than three seconds. Flux, is in fact, a defining characteristic of all his work.
After jumping out of bed, the heroine of *Valentine’s Day Girl* stretches her arms wide open as if waking up from an extended hibernation and exclaims, “I don’t like Frederick. Boys are gross! Boys are gross!” Lizzie is then framed through an overhead shot as she casually says, “I think I like girls this year.” This high-angle shot prevents us from seeing her face. We do not know at this point if this sudden shift of her sexual preference is willed, or if it is a change that she has discovered after the fact, something that has happened to her spontaneously, without her consciously willing it. The jarring background soundtrack comes to a sudden standstill and a close-up of the heroine fills the screen. The protagonist casts her eyes upwards and for a moment of stasis appears to be in a state of ecstasy. She then utters the name of her new object of affection, “Ashley” in an exaggerated sensual voice. It is at this instance that we come to the conclusion that she is open to change; she accepts this shift and indeed embraces it. This lengthy five second close-up reveals to us that the protagonist’s switch is not involuntary but is in fact of her choosing. She then proceeds to erase Frederick’s name from a cardboard heart she keeps tucked underneath her sweater. Interestingly, Frederick’s name appears last in a long list of crossed-out male and female contenders’ names which further demonstrates
Valentine’s Day girl’s precedence for fluctuating between sexual preferences and people. This scene is emblematic of the artist’s categorical rejection of essentialism. When asked to comment on the identity(ies) of the characters in his videos, Trecartin replied that he looks forward to when “we [can] reach a point where personality defines you more than your gender, sexuality, or career because nothing is fixed – it’s all a choice.”

Trecartin’s understanding of “personality” as non-fixed aligns itself with Alexander Doty’s sixth definition of queerness, as mentioned in the introduction. In the close-up described above, the protagonist not only expresses her choice but also affirms her queerness. Valentine’s Day girl becomes a prototype for many of Trecartin’s later queer subjects. It is important to understand that it is not because Ryan Trecartin and his character do not label themselves that they are queer. It is because the artist and characters actively tag themselves as individuals that cannot be labeled, that I understand

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145 Trecartin uses the term “personality” specifically because according to him, “personality […] can be changed or reworked at will, while not being classified or grouped very easily.” Quoted from “The Q&A: Ryan Trecartin, Video Artist,” by Whitney Ford at http://moreintelligentlife.com/blog/whitney-ford/qa-ryan-trecartin (2010).
them and they understand themselves to be queer. It is in this proactive labeling that they play a subversive role in the affirmation of their queer identity. His characters are anything but passive, they seek “personal agency [...] in an age of infinite optionality.”

Trecartin frames his protagonists through partial views and tight close-ups that only reveal portions of their face or body to represent their fragmented identities. In one close-up, for instance, the camera focuses on the protagonist’s thighs as she sits on top of her kitchen table making her body appear truncated. She is overheard exclaiming “I wish I had a penis!” The artist employs this fractional shot, as if assembling pieces of a puzzle. These in turn stand as symbols of the multidimensionality of his characterizations, made up of infinite options that he reconfigures, merges, or does away with. Valentine’s Day girl may decide next year that she will be a pansexual femme or a transsexual butch queen; either way, she, like all the other protagonists who will come after her, occupies a space that is not contained within or described by a fixed gender/identity – in Alexander Doty’s terms, Trecartin’s characters are simply queer.

As the scene unravels, Trecartin provides wide angle shots of the gaudy apartment’s décor. Every nook and cranny of the low-budget set surrounding the heroine is replete with heart-shaped or cupid-inspired decorations and iconography. The over-the-top, campy mise-en-scène is strewn with carefully selected red, pink, and white party props, tinsel garland, and love-themed pattern fabrics. In her pivotal essay “Notes on Camp,” Susan Sontag writes, “To emphasize style is to slight content, or to introduce an attitude which is neutral with respect to content. It goes without saying that the Camp

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146 From the BAMcinématek press release for the fifth annual Migrating Forms film festival.
sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized – or at least apolitical.” While Trecartin’s campiness is, in Sontag’s term “playful,” it is in no way disengaged. On the contrary, the oversaturation of sanguine colors and abundance of mass manufactured plastic Valentine’s Day tchotchkes point to the subversive nature of his commentary on the material culture of holiday hyper-commercialism. In addition, the protagonist’s fanatical excitement is never justified, as she is never shown actually celebrating with anyone but herself. This facet of Fitch’s character represents young consumers influenced by the media to anticipate and take part in capitalist seasonal festivities, even though they may not have any sort of real personal investment in them. The contrast between this alienation and obsession with Valentine’s Day reinforces its irony.

Jack Babuscio notes, “Camp is often exaggerated. When the stress on style is ‘outrageous’ or ‘too much’, it results in incongruities: the emphasis shifts from what a thing or a person is to what it looks like; from what is being done to how it is being

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Interestingly, Trecartin has expressed that his characters do not represent people but social behavioral archetypes – they do not refer to themselves as human beings but as ideas. He is more interested in what his protagonist represents than who/what she is. In keeping with Babuscio’s analogy, Trecartin does not focus on what his protagonist does but on how she does it. For instance, when the character jumps out of bed to celebrate Valentine’s Day, the incessant crosscuts, jump cuts, and oblique camera angles aim to reinforce the protagonist’s euphoria. Thus, the primary goal of Trecartin’s montage editing is not to serve a narrative function but to convey emotion.

After an initial burst of enthusiasm, Fitch is shown through a low angle shot that captures her every step as she meanders around her apartment aimlessly. This sudden shift in mood may be motivated by the fact that she realizes that her earlier exhilaration was in fact unwarranted. With nobody else to engage with but herself, she occupies her screen time slowly walking toward the camera until her feet eventually cover and then exit the frame. The artist accentuates the protagonist’s boredom by rewinding and replaying that very same footage repeatedly in order to extend its action. Suddenly, Fitch hears a knock emanating from her kitchen pantry. She runs towards it, opens the door, and receives a love letter from an unnamed character who appears to be hiding in a crouched position inside the kitchen storage closet. Trecartin then cuts to a medium close-up of the protagonist sitting at the kitchen table reading a letter from an anonymous admirer. The note informs her that some “treats” are hidden under her oven. Through a series of quickly edited shots, reminiscent of a cartoon flip book, the heroine is seen

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running into her kitchenette retrieving and consuming the red sweets. Trecartin then captures the protagonist’s dizzying slow motion reaction to their consumption while a mad soundtrack morphs into a deranged lullaby. We suddenly realize that the large bulbous treats she ingested seem to be laced with a hallucinogenic substance causing her whirling sensation. She finally regains consciousness only to realize that her private celebration at home has been invaded by a mob of Christmas-themed intruders. Rapid sequences of images catapult viewers inexplicably from shots of Valentine’s decorations to nightmarish visions of Christmas ornaments. The heart-patterned fabrics hanging on the walls have been transformed into Christmas tree pattern textiles and the garland has been replaced with synthetic green pine wreaths. This pseudo-surrealist vision creates, as Amelia Jones puts it, an “alternative universe where seeing and knowing are split from each other such that vision promises nothing but uncoded, irrational images conveying [...] ‘psychosomatic symptoms’ of subconscious fantasy.”

While these frightening images appear “irrational,” they are not, as Jones states, “uncoded.” Through them, Trecartin further develops his original commentary regarding the commercialization of

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Figure 1.9

Figure 1.10

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holidays by disrupting his protagonist’s Valentine’s utopia, only to suddenly fast-forward her to Christmas, perhaps to comment on the advanced marketing we are subjected to for holidays that are months into the future. The director provides us with a point-of-view shot of the protagonist running across her living room as she tries to find a way to escape in vain from the Christmas coup d’état. The chaotic sequence suddenly ends where it all began - with a black screen.

![Figure 1.11](image)

The second act of *Valentine’s Day Girl* opens with a point-of-view shot (from the protagonist’s perspective) depicting a hoard of creepy Christmas fairies directly facing the camera. They address the heroine in asynchronous and incomprehensible high-pitched voices which accentuate their fantastic nature as they appear to speak a foreign dialect. The director then cuts to a succession of rapidly edited shots depicting the
creatures partaking in delirious festivities while ravaging her apartment. Trecartin utilizes undercranking, dramatic high/low camera angles and fast-paced editing to accentuate the high physicality of their overall performance. The characters are seen jumping, clapping, executing acrobatic moves, and dancing. Robert Stam describes such a spectacular and ostentatious form of play as carnivalesque: “an alternative cosmovision characterized by the ludic undermining of all norms.”

In *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin argues that carnival time offers alternative temporalities from the fixed and linear official time:

As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed.

Although the first part of *Valentine’s Day Girl* does not follow a classic linear narrative per se as events are repeated and certain scenes do not advance the plot, it however does

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adhere to a certain logical progression of cause and effect: character waits for alarm clock to beep/character jumps out of bed; character receives a letter; character reads letter. On the other hand, the second half of the video, in all its carnivalesque playfulness, follows a completely different logic that Bakhtin coins “the logic of the ‘inside/out.’” 154 This entertaining and chaotic logic continuously shifts “from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings.” 155 The party scene in Valentine’s Day Girl, with its constant shift from high to low camera angles, long shots to extreme close-ups, fragmented shots, undercranking, and overall topsy-turvy editing, can thus be seen as a cinematic exemplification of Bakhtin’s “logic of the ‘inside/out.’”

Although the party sequence appears at first as a string of randomly edited clips, each rapid shot in fact engenders the following one as a continuous extension. I must emphasize that this does not, as I mentioned earlier, follow cause and effect logic, but instead prolongs or continues an action performed. Trecartin achieves this effect, for example, by cutting from a scene portraying a character in the middle of an action, to a subsequent shot of a different character continuing that same action. In one particular medium shot, we see a Christmas fairy clapping. The scene then cuts to another medium shot of a different pixie completing the clapping action. Subsequently, one creature jumps up in the air and the following shot shows a different character landing on the floor. This editing strategy unifies the individual characters into one unstable and indistinguishable entity always in a state of constant change.

155 Ibid.
The body of carnival, as represented by the Christmas characters’ whimsical pandemonium, is indeed a body in flux, “continually built, created,” thus grotesque, per Bakhtin’s definition. According to Bakhtin, the carnival, as the “feast of becoming, change,” inscribes itself as the grotesque body par excellence, “a body in the act of becoming.” As I previously mentioned, Bakhtin sees the grotesque body as an open, unsealed body that is always in the process of becoming and engendering another body. He writes,

The grotesque body […] is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body. […] Thus the artistic logic of the grotesque image ignores the closed, smooth, and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body’s limited space or into the body’s depths.156

The concept of “a body in the act of becoming,” is visually translated through Trecartin’s montage. It “outgrows its own self” as it is continually evolving.157 As we shall see, Ryan Trecartin employs this visual tactic, which I coin the “grotesque montage,” throughout much of his later works. Many of his subsequent videos will climax in delirious party scenes in which characters come in and out of screens; shots are repeated and assembled in a non-linear way to unify the performers into one body in motion which gives the impression that these parties are ever-shifting entities or characters in their own right.

As the Valentine’s Day festivities progress, we discover a shift in mood: the action becomes progressively faster, the characters’ laughter turns menacing, and their smiles transform into grimaces. The creatures start puncturing the balloons they had originally inflated and begin slapping each other. One evil garland draped character slaps

157 Ibid.
the camera lens which causes the footage to shake. After this threat to the camera, successive shots of rapid oblique angles create a sense of nauseating delirium. The director turns the Christmas party into an ominous madhouse. He cuts to a close-up of a holiday reveler opening his mouth and expelling a blob of phlem. What originally seemed like a playful carnivalesque festivity now turns into threatening orgiastic degeneracy. The ecstatic Christmas creatures have shifted from grotesque to abject. According to Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror*, the abject can be interpreted as a response to a collapse in meaning caused by the loss of distinction between subject and object, between “I” and other:

> The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning, which, as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it, what is *abject*, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses.\(^\text{158}\)

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While the abject disturbs notions of fixed identity by occupying a state of in-betweenness much like Bakhtin’s concept of the grotesque, “abjection, on the other hand, is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles […].” The body of carnival in Valentine’s Day Girl can thus be interpreted as abject since it is both in a constant state of flux and traumatic.

![Figure 1.15](image)

Ajay RS Hothi and Christabel Stewart state that, “Trecartin’s films tread a fine line between comedy and horror.” However, by fully embracing both, his video actually obliterates the distinction. Much like Jack Smith’s Flaming Creatures (1963), Trecartin’s polysexual and polymorphous fairies inspire both fear and laughter. In Smith’s film, seemingly harmless androgynous characters, homeless junkies, and trannies, all congregate to ravage a voluptuous young woman, Delicious Dolores (Sheila Bick). Similarly, in Trecartin’s Valentine’s Day video, a wicked Christmas character is seen crawling toward the protagonist who is gagged and strapped to a chair. As the

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villain approaches he flaunts his physique and begins to disrobe. Trecartin then cuts to a medium shot of the distressed heroine. The camera surveys her legs and breasts in a slow, deliberate manner that suggests she is about to be victimized. Trecartin seems to be playing with the concept of the helplessness of consumers over the commercialism of Christmas by interjecting a metaphor that symbolizes this dynamic. While his specific camera angles are suggestive of an impending attack, *Flaming Creatures*’ shots explicitly depict an orgiastic bacchanal. Jack Smith’s overhead camera seems to take part in the all-consuming orgy as it surveys the mass of indiscernible entangled bodies. It reveals Delicious Dolores being consumed by a hoard of half-naked male and female creatures, close-ups of breasts, buttocks, vaginas, penises, and wagging tongues emerge from the helter skelter intermittently. Much like *Valentine’s Day Girl*’s protagonist, Delicious Dolores is unable to escape and surrenders. Smith ends the scene with an abrupt silence – the carnage is over. In a similar manner, *Valentine’s Day Girl*’s climax also comes to an abrupt stop as Trecartin cuts to a black screen, once again, without warning. The

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demented soundtrack fades into a sweet lullaby, and we are confronted with an overwhelmingly disturbing close-up of the menacing Christmas character smiling directly into the camera.

Unlike Smith, Trecartin does not film sexual genitalia to challenge or shock spectators. Instead, his videos are disturbing in what they leave unsaid or unanswered. As Wayne Koestenbaum wrote in his article “Situation Hacker,” Trecartin’s videos are like “slasher films without blood [or] porn without nudity.” Trecartin understands that viewers have become desensitized to sex and violence. The vertiginous pace of his editing, his hybrid characters, and constantly shifting narratives destabilize viewers who are reminded that what they are watching, in fact, represents a facet of the world they live in. However, the seizure-inducing speed of his videos does not conceal an underlying symptom of fear but rather a genuine excitement toward the unknown as Trecartin embraces change. Trecartin captures the feeling of information saturation of the twenty-

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162 Koestenbaum, Wayne. “Situation Hacker.” *Artforum* 47, no. 10 (Summer 2009).
first century. His work makes sense because it so accurately reflects the way we process and interact with information and new technology. The hyper-speed of its editing is a constant reminder of the unstable, ever-shifting, ever-upgrading, techno-centric world we live in. In a very revealing interview titled “All-American Golden Boy” for Another Man magazine, Trecartin was quoted:

You know, a lot of the time terrifying aspects of our culture are really a symptom of something very positive that may be happening underneath. I think amazing things sometimes just seem superficial and negative at first because we have to change our moral codes before we can appreciate them properly.\(^{163}\)

It is precisely his openness, willingness to adapt to the unknown that makes his work sublime and so true to life. His videos transport viewers into a journey of perpetual transformation which at first may appear disturbing and “terrifying” but actually reveals itself to be a positive experience.

Some of the feedback on YouTube regarding Trecartin’s work is also suggestive of the emotional impact his videos have on viewers as is exemplified by a comment left by YouTube member “crambearyyy,” who posted after watching Valentine’s Day Girl, “[...] I feel mostly engrossed, interested, happy, multidimensional but sometimes nauseous and self questioning. Nonetheless, I can't stop watching and I've seen all your stuff on youtube. You're one of my favorite artists of all time (\&space:)].”\(^{164}\) Valentine’s Day Girl can even be described as destabilizing as it takes spectators on an emotional rollercoaster, vacillating from humor to panic and finally leaves them pondering what happens to the protagonist at the end. Judging by the final haunting close-up of the villainous Christmas creature, our heroine appears to have been subdued by the onslaught

\(^{163}\) Trecartin, Ryan and James Franco. “All-American Golden Boy,” in Another Man, November 2010.

\(^{164}\) Comment can be found at http://www.youtube.com/user/WianTreetin/discussion
of holiday merchandising. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, *Valentine’s Day Girl* constitutes the first episode in *Early Baggage*. It will not be until we examine the last segment, *Wayne’s World*, that we truly uncover the underlying positive message of the work.

While the heroine of *Valentine’s Day Girl* might be considered a victim of consumerism, the protagonists in *Wayne’s World* are producers in control of their own representation. Much like the characters of the original *Wayne’s World* film (1992) adapted from a sketch of the same name on NBC’s *Saturday Night Live*, cohorts, Ryan and Lizzie, appear to broadcast a low budget cable access program from their basement.

![Figure 1.18](image1)

![Figure 1.19](image2)

Similar to Alex Bag’s *Untitled (Project for the Andy Warhol Museum)* (1996), in which she recreates the experience of channel-surfing by incessantly jump-cutting back and forth between commercials, daytime and late-night talk shows, music videos, soap operas, and news programs which all feature her as the protagonist, Trecartin simulates the experience of watching TV by incorporating many of the specific properties associated with it: immediacy, direct address, interruption, and segmentation.
Wayne’s World’s opening sequence privileges sound over image. However, while Valentine’s Day Girl’s introduction confronts viewers with an opaque black screen, Wayne’s World’s opening shot directly references the music industry. The video opens with a series of hand-painted vintage-inspired graphics reminiscent of MTV’s 1980s
promotional logo. The sequence crosscuts between jittering images of flashy geometric design patterns and medium close-ups of Trecartin and Lizzie’s bright clunky sneakers moving in unison to music. In *Experiencing Music Video*, Carol Vernalis notes, “Music videos do not embody complete narratives [but instead] follow the song’s form, which tends to be cyclical and episodic rather than sequentially directed.” While ballads might however tell complete stories, Vernalis, here, refers specifically to the pop song format which consists of a repetitive verse–chorus structure. Trecartin manipulates the footage by fast-forwarding it, slowing it down, and repeating shots in order to create a visual rhythm in sync with the repetitive beats of his frenetic soundtrack of what sounds like discordant merry-go-round music. We are then provided a full-frontal shot of Trecartin and Fitch’s spastic choreography. Although at first, we feel we are looking in on and intruding into the characters’ private universe, we quickly realize that they are actually inviting us into it. This is made evident to us, as the two begin to look directly into the camera and address it, as if speaking to us.

The camera’s presence is further emphasized when we observe them taking Polaroid snapshots of its lens. This intentional nod to the camera informs us of their desire to acknowledge and call attention to the self-reflexivity of the medium. We can trace this formal acknowledgment and recurring motif in the history of cinema from *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), *Sherlock Jr.* (1924), and *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929) to *Hold Me While I’m Naked* (1966) by George Kuchar, one of Trecartin’s direct influences. *Wayne’s World* not only brings to our attention his awareness of metacinematic devices but also to the immediacy of the instant image produced by a

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Polaroid camera. In choosing to feature the recording device, Trecartin informs us that he and his audience belong to a new generation of teens and young adults who are media savvy, used to performing in front of cameras, and attracted to the instant gratification that comes from the immediacy of the digital image.

Trecartin attributes the phenomenon of an entire generation of camera performers to the extensive influence of television. In an interview for *Another Man* magazine, the artist was quoted:

I feel I was really affected by my babysitters, watching them get excited by some TV show and how it affected their lives and how it changed the way they talked and how it added to their language and those other forms of intelligence that exist, like body language and accents. It’s funny how
everyone now is used to performing and translating ideas and using all forms of language.\textsuperscript{166}

Trecartin’s characters emit the same authenticity (or lack thereof) as reality TV stars. They are putting on a spectacle for us. We are never expected to embark on a journey of suspended disbelief. His decision to utilize theatrical over-acting ensures our understanding that everything is scripted, fabricated, staged, and exaggerated. Even the close-ups, “which used to admit the mysteriousness of the human face,”\textsuperscript{167} do not allow the subjects to reveal themselves. Instead, Trecartin uses the close up as a way to magnify affected facial gestures to inform us that they know they are being filmed.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure124.jpg}
\caption{Figure 1.24}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{166} Trecartin, Ryan and James Franco. “All-American Golden Boy,” in \textit{Another Man}, November 2010.
Through a series of static camera angles, Trecartin is shown dancing and singing inside constructed environments fabricated to resemble sets straight out of the 1980s world of post-punk pop culture with the production value of Jack Smith’s hand painted sets in *Flaming Creatures* (1963). Suddenly, the blaring soundtrack fades and the image slowly dissolves into an extreme close-up of a plastic bottle labeled “carrot juice 100% pure pressed” – an apparent nod to a commercial break. The image fades out once again, this time to present viewers with a tilted angle shot of Ryan and Lizzie preparing for what appears to be an impromptu public access television talk show. However, before they engage in banter, the pair is interrupted by an overwhelming silence that appears to emanate from outside the frame. The background music comes to a halt. The characters focus their hearing in an attempt to ascertain this unfamiliar muteness, as if silence had a sound to itself. Because they have been raised with the constant bombardment of media and data “noise,” this unexpected tidal wave of noiselessness overwhelms the scene with its foreign and unexpected stillness. As Jessica Helfand notes in *Screen,*

Silence, in contemporary life, is not only a commodity, it is an endangered species: hard to come by, harder still to sustain, and oddly associated with a kind of anachronistic world view: silence is the stuff of old media, a body of stillness, an inert mass.\(^{168}\)

After being interrupted by the unexpected wave of silence, the protagonists open the entrance door to their basement in order to ascertain the disruptive yet inaudible source. The camera offers us a back view of the characters as they open the door. As they attempt to uncover what lies outside their bunker-style underground shelter, they come face-to-face with a blinding tower of light. An explosion of pixelated 2-D bubble graphics emerges from the glare and consumes the entire shot. The effusion of bubbles

literally and figuratively penetrates the protagonists’ space, paralyzing them and leaving them confused as to what just occurred. Both characters look at each other and simultaneously ask: “What what what what does it mean mean mean mean? What’s the significance?” They ponder the significance of the illogical sequences of images, we, TV viewers and Internet users, are being transmitted on a daily basis. The protagonists return to their seats and continue asking themselves: “What does it mean?” Fitch looks back at Ryan and simply responds, “Dah!” (as if the answer were obvious). Ryan looks at the camera and concurs “Dah!” Satisfied with Fitch’s analysis, Ryan moves on to the next topic. The artist does not attempt to provide answers, as he infers that there is really no complex meaning behind most of what is being shown on TV. Indeed, much like network-era television’s discontinuous flow, *Wayne’s World*’s plot is segmented into
parcels, switching back and forth from talk show to day-time soap opera, to commercial, and to music video. This segmentation precludes the possibility of a fluid viewing experience as TV constantly interrupts itself. After all, as Jeremy Butler points out, “to the television industry, programs are just filler, a necessary inconvenience interrupting the true function of television: broadcasting commercials.” This instance of the video’s self-reflexivity may raise the question of whether or not there is indeed any complex meaning behind Trecartin’s video since *Wayne’s World* essentially tries to recreate a TV-watching experience which, as I have just demonstrated, bares little to no significance. However, I assert that it is through the very process of recreating a televisual experience that Trecartin is able to take a distanced critical approach and dispel the myth of television, which makes his video so meaningful.

In her essay “Nothing Sells Like Teen Spirit: The Commodification of Youth Culture,” Karen Brooks posits that the media appropriate and objectify youth culture in order to sell products:

> In these television shows, youth is a performance, a ‘repeated ritualization’ that can be imitated and consumed by audiences of all ages, perpetuating and commodifying what the dominant market forces imagine youth, in all its manifestations, to constitute. […] Because of their apparent lack of political agency, young people are most often reduced to objects in this process: They are commodified and marketed back to themselves, stripped of any history, individual identity, or power. The commodification of youth and youth culture presents young people as important only when they are either products or consumers as opposed to critical, social subjects.

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Trecartin comments on this very commodification of youth culture in a scene in which the protagonists parody a daytime soap opera. Employing direct address, the fictional characters engage in a cliché break-up dialogue. The entire sequence is shot via medium close-ups – a tight framing tactic employed by TV directors to stress the “characters’ heightened emotional state.”\textsuperscript{172} Ironically, \textit{Wayne’s World}’s protagonists are completely detached from their emotions as they recite their lines in a mechanical manner, smiling and giggling at uncomfortable pauses. In doing so, Trecartin emphasizes the apparent artificiality of the network drama.

In a scene where Lizzie “pours her heart out” in front of the camera, devastated from the demise of her “long-term” three-week relationship, Ryan (playing her boyfriend) responds by breaking out into song in order to express his emotions. He is only capable of processing and communicating his feelings through the structure of the verse and chorus of a pop ballad:

Lizzie Fitch: “How could you break what you have been building, and the show was a thrill, and the cold has been frozen?”

“I know that I am being very bad, I can’t bring to say what I thought I could tell you.”

Ryan Trecartin: “Come on baby hold me, I love you. You’ll always be my baby. Get a life.”

“Come on baby hold me, I told you, you’ll always be my baby. Get a life.”

“When we talk for hours. It’s dirty. I take a shower baby. don’t send me flowers, oops, I told you.”

“Let me break it down. I told you, I told you it means nothing, it’s nothing. Get over it.”

Their musical duet is an anti-romance/break-up song that resembles those by pop queens, Britney Spears or Christina Aguilera. Trecartin is framed in medium shots, sashaying and swishing his hips in an exaggerated manner that recalls Spears’s *I’m a Slave 4 U*’s risqué choreography. He identifies and seeks to emulate his pop idols by reenacting a fictional storyline directly inspired by the plot of Spears’s music video *Oops!...I Did It Again* (2000) about a heartbreaker who plays with her lover’s feelings. Spears’s ironic lyrics, “I made you believe we're more than just friends…Oh baby!” resemble Trecartin’s, “Come on baby hold me, I love you. You’ll always be my baby. Get a life.” It is worth pointing out that although their lyrics are similar, they are also distinct. Nothing in Spears’s words corresponds to Trecartin’s incredible repeated “Get a life.” This distinction between the two highlights his critical distance from the influence he reworks as his pastiche is obviously exaggerated. We are meant to know that his imitation of Spears’s song is in fact an imitation.

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However ironic and comical Trecartin’s lyrics may seem, they also conjure up a somber time for pop culture fans across the world who experienced the 2002 Britney Spears and Justin Timberlake break-up. Both pop stars publicly mourned the loss of their relationship, Justin wrote and performed *Cry Me a River* (2002), and Britney avoided dealing with her pain by going on her big-budget “Dream Within a Dream” tour. Lizzie and Ryan attempt to find meaning in this sudden and unexplained pop tragedy by enacting what we imagine would have been the perfect way for Britney and Justin to dissolve their made-in-pop-heaven union: an auto-tuned break-up duet.

Although the protagonists in *Wayne’s World* may appear to be passive consumers of popular culture infatuated with celebrity relationships, they understand the codes and conventions of television and seek to challenge them. For instance, in one of their variety show segments, Lizzie reads a poem to Ryan:

Lizzie: “I see Oprah on the TV screen. What does it mean? What does it mean?”

“She sees herself on the TV screen. What does she see? What does she see?”

“I see Oprah but she doesn’t see me.”

(Ryan interrupts his co-host and addresses the camera.)

Ryan: “Bore Me to Death…Self Reference!” (laughter)

Trecartin understands that self-referentiality in TV lures viewers into thinking that they are empowered by making them privy to the ways media texts are constructed, however, this strategy may be employed “to further obscure the nature of media production.”

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Robert Stam writes that “self-referentiality, far from demystifying the product or exposing hidden codes, conceals the deadly seriousness of the commercial—the fact that it is after the spectator’s money.” As a savvy consumer, Ryan Trecartin is also well-aware of advertisers’ marketing tactics and appropriates and inverts them in order to take control of his own representation, thereby manufacturing his own version of himself and his generation. Trecartin is part of this new youth movement in which, as Karen Brooks notes, “Youth are able to appropriate *themselves* as cultural products, position *themselves* within the circuits of consumption and so resist, challenge, and even, in a subversive gesture, celebrate the ideological imperialism that (re)creates young people as commodities instead of recognizing their potential as liminal subjects.”

Brooks seems to infer that celebrating the commodification of youth and recognizing their potential as liminal subjects are mutually exclusive. However, Trecartin does both simultaneously. He embraces consumer culture as is demonstrated in his abundance of pop culture references. But *Wayne’s World*’s protagonists do not fetishize the objects they consume, instead, they readily dispose of them in order to move on to the next best thing. As the artist states, “We consume and consume and puke, more than fetishize the objects and information we use. […] We don’t act inside or outside of consumer culture, entertainment, or art culture, we consume and translate, we’re a by-product of it.” Trecartin’s remarks sum up very important concepts inherent in his work. By stating that he and his characters “don’t act inside or outside,” he emphasizes

177 Quote by Ryan Trecartin found at http://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/ryan_trecartin.htm
the concept of the “space in between,” a term that once again aligns itself with Alexander Doty’s notion of queerness. Furthermore, his reference above to puke and also to the term “by-product” evoking defecation, are part of what Bakhtin describes as “the main events in the life of the grotesque body, the acts of the bodily drama.”\textsuperscript{178} The concept of excrement as bodily discharge also aligns itself with Kristeva’s notion of the abject. As Judith Butler notes,

The ‘abject’ designates that which has been expelled from the body, discharged as excrement, literally rendered ‘Other.’ […] The boundary between the inner and outer is confounded by those excremental passages in which the inner effectively becomes outer, and this excreting function becomes, as it were, the model by which other forms of identity-differentiation are accomplished. In effect, this is the mode by which Others become shit.\textsuperscript{179}

However, Trecartin does not see excrement as the ‘other,’ on the contrary, he embraces otherness in his affirmation, “we’re a by-product.” As Arthur Lubow has suggested, Trecartin “sees himself as a transitional figure.”\textsuperscript{180} He does not identify with the “inner” or “outer” but with “those excremental passages in which the inner effectively becomes outer.” Therefore, the by-product that Trecartin refers to is not a fixed entity or “empty category” manufactured by “mainstream market forces”\textsuperscript{181} as implied by Brooks, but a complex and unstable being located within a liminal – an in-between and transitional – space.\textsuperscript{182} The artist translates this concept through his mise-en-scene: characters are never placed in the foreground or background; instead, they are shown in the middle.

plane of the shot. Furthermore, *Wayne's World*'s protagonists’ flashy facial and body make-up color matches those of the various interiors that surround them. The characters can thus be seen as extensions, or “by-products” of the mise-en-scène – and vice versa. This is not to say that they are camouflaged within the set – since each truly demands viewers’ attention as they double snap, sashay, and verbally address them during their respective performance.

With *Early Baggage*, Ryan Trecartin establishes a unique video practice with an idiosyncratic visual style. Through his playful appropriation of earlier artistic forms, his extensive use of special effects made available by digital editing software, and delirious multi-linear narratives, he generates content that feels like run amok narratives. However, while this loud and spontaneous approach might result in what appears to be an unscripted overload of hyper-stimulating imagery, I have demonstrated that it is much more complex. Every frame, cut, and shot is intentionally selected. Text, sound, and image operate synergistically to create an embodied and sensory viewing experience. While his videos may dangerously raise the viewer’s blood pressure, they will equally increase her/his dopamine. With his consecutive jump cuts, fast forward and slow motion, reverse, and rewind effects, Trecartin packages his narratives in a way that makes sense to a generation known for its multitasking and short attention span. Kevin McGarry sums up that the artist’s videos’ “combination of assaultive, nearly impenetrable avant-garde logics and equally outlandish, virtuoso uses of color, form, drama and montage produces a sublime, stream-of-consciousness effect that feels
bewilderingly true to life.” What is terrifying in them is underwritten by something positive, their embrace of change. The artist advocates for a flexible and adaptable world through his art. But this revelation can only come to light by spending time with the work. Ironically, although Trecartin’s narratives unravel at the speed of light, unveiling their meaning demands careful scrutiny. Ryan Trecartin’s visuals actually advance faster than their accompanying music. This early impatience denotes his excitement toward the future and eagerness to grow as an artist.

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Chapter 2

_A Family Finds Entertainment:_

The “Coming Out” Melodrama Remix

Shortly after creating _A Family Finds Entertainment_ for his BFA thesis exhibition in 2004, Trecartin rose to fame partly due to a series of extraordinary coincidences one might expect from a Sirkian melodrama. As fate would have it, after uploading an excerpt of his video to the networking site Friendster.com in 2005, multimedia artist Sue de Beer was so impressed with the work that she decided to share it with former New Museum curator Rachel Greene.\(^{184}\) A year later, _A Family Finds Entertainment_ was exhibited at the 2006 Whitney Biennial of American Art.\(^{185}\) The video has since become one of Trecartin’s most popular works. My claim is that this is due in large part to its familiar narrative structure adopted from a beloved mode of storytelling: the Hollywood family melodrama.

In his book, _Hollywood Genres_, Thomas Schatz notes that most Hollywood movies might be described as “melodramatic” since at its most basic level, melodrama is defined as a narrative form which combines music or “melos” with drama to punctuate emotional effects.\(^{186}\) However, he later argues that there is such a genre as the melodrama which he refers to as the “family melodrama” – a term previously coined by Thomas Elsaesser.\(^{187}\) According to Schatz, family melodrama’s narrative formula is characterized by “its interrelated family of characters, its repressive small-town milieu,

and its preoccupation with America’s sociosexual mores.” Following Schatz’s previous scholarship, John Mercer and Martin Shingler proposed that the family melodrama “deals with highly-charged emotional issues, characterized by an extravagantly dramatic register [which] has the ability to provoke strong emotions in audiences, from tears of sorrow and identification, to derisive laughter.” Given its inherent intensity, it follows then that Trecartin would draw reference to the rhetoric of melodrama, since one of his main goals when writing his scripts “is for viewers to leave his work with a deep emotional response to a reflection of their culture.”

A Family Finds Entertainment’s dramatic logic, cinematography, mise-en-scène, performance style, and music accompaniment, all borrow from the tropes proper to the family melodrama. Yet, Trecartin does not simply seek to produce a pastiche, which Richard Dyer defines as “a kind of aesthetic imitation,” of melodrama’s mode of address. On the contrary, the artist revises it, transforms it, and ultimately – “remixes” it. Stefan Sonvilla-Weiss describes the cultural practice of remixing as one that may include “one or many materials, media either from other sources, art pieces (visual arts, film, music, video, literature, etc.) or one’s own artworks through alteration, re-combination, manipulation, copying etc. to create a whole new piece.” While the end product in its entirety may not be a faithful copy of the original, the sources of the individual components that they comprise are identifiable.

193 Ibid.
of inspiration is clearly recognizable, as the artist does not attempt to conceal it but pay homage to it. Therefore, *A Family Finds Entertainment* is discernibly Trecartin’s remix version of the family melodrama genre.

Since the late 1970s, feminist film scholars have adopted this critical category of films as a major area of debate, often investigating the extent to which patriarchal ideology is embedded within the narratives." Working within a revised feminist discourse in the 1990s, video performance artist, Pipilotti Rist, commented on the empowerment of the melodrama’s female protagonist in her video installation *Ever is Over All* (1997). Shot in slow motion to heighten its dramatic effect, a young woman dressed in a cocktail gown is shown walking down a city street smashing the windows of parked automobiles with a giant flower-shaped hammer. At the end of the piece, a female police officer passes by and smiles with approval. Introducing comic tension into this anarchistic final scene is Rist’s way of challenging the formulaic predictable punishment of the liberated female protagonist in melodrama.

![Image of a woman walking down a street with a giant flower-shaped hammer, smashing windows.](image)

Figure 2.1

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Similarly, contemporary video artist, Shana Moulton, draws on melodrama’s narrative strategies in her series, *Whispering Pines* (2002 – present). Moulton plays Cynthia, a hypochondriac housewife in search of her lost cat. Although Cynthia is placed within the context of heteronormative domesticity, the character deviates from this paradigm. While Cynthia’s character’s sexuality is never directly addressed, Moulton makes it clear that Cynthia lives in a queer world where the “time of reproduction” is not ruled by her biological clock. She is unconcerned with child rearing, inheritance, or by strict bourgeois rules of comportment.\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\^\'^
sexuality.”196 Openly gay film directors such as Todd Haynes have employed the language of melodrama to situate queer desire within mainstream culture. In Far From Heaven (2002), a pastiche of Douglas Sirk’s All That Heaven Allows (1955), Haynes queers the narrative by making the protagonist’s husband, Frank Whitaker (Dennis Quaid), a closeted homosexual. However, while Haynes’s version weaves in a homosexual subplot, it is important to note that Frank’s storyline is secondary to Cathy’s (Julianne Moore) interracial liaison with her gardener Raymond (Dennis Haysbert). Thus, Far From Heaven remains primarily preoccupied with heterosexual romance.

Ryan Trecartin, on the other hand, goes a step further by placing the issue of queerness at the forefront of the family melodrama with A Family Finds Entertainment. In order to better comprehend how queerness operates in Trecartin’s video, it becomes necessary to revisit the various workings of the term “queer.” Queer/queerness has been deployed in a multitude of (and sometimes contradictory) ways among scholars. Jack Halberstam, in his book, In A Queer Time and Place, defines it as “nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time.”197 José Muñoz voiced that “Identity markers such as queer (from the German quer meaning ‘transverse’) [is a term] that defies notions of uniform identity or origin.”198 Today, the meaning of the term “queer” has deepened within the field of queer theory. It has expanded to include more than gay, lesbian, bisexual, or way(s) of being that are not straight. As mentioned in the introduction, Alexander Doty proposed a more

comprehensive definition of queerness, explaining that the term may be used “To describe those aspects of spectatorship, cultural readership, production, and textual coding that seem to establish spaces not described by, or contained within, straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, or transgendered understandings and categorizations of gender and sexuality.”\textsuperscript{199} In agreement with Doty’s assertion, Jay Prosser posits that queer theory celebrates the space in-between since it offers “freedom and mobility for the subject.”\textsuperscript{200} While I believe that Doty’s sixth definition most accurately reflects how I see Ryan Trecartin incorporating a sense of “queerness” in his videos, it is crucial to remember that, as Eve Sedgwick affirms, the roots of “queer” stem from a complex intersection between gender and sexuality, in particular, “same-sex sexual object choices.”\textsuperscript{201} For this reason the term “queer” will be used interchangeably throughout this chapter and dissertation to specifically denote both non-straight sexualities as well as non-heteronormative and non-fixed positions. Elizabeth Grosz further states in “Bodies and Pleasures in Queer Theory,” “Simply being straight or being gay, in itself, provides no guarantee of an individual’s position as sexually radical: it depends on how one lives one’s queerness or how one renders one’s straightness as queer.”\textsuperscript{202} Therefore, it is important to note that Trecartin is both gay and queer and this distinction informs much of \textit{A Family Finds Entertainment}.

Although Trecartin claims that his video is about coming of age rather than coming out, it would seem rather unlikely that the recurring metaphoric references to

closets is unrelated to his own emergence as a gay man. If not the artist’s focus, then ours will be to examine these implications inherent in *A Family Finds Entertainment*. In 2011, *The New York Times* art critic, Roberta Smith, suggested that the video was his “way of coming out to his parents.” Although I argue that the overarching theme of *A Family Finds Entertainment* is about coming out, the video itself was never intended to help Trecartin divulge his sexual orientation to his parents as Smith wrote. In fact, he explained in a recent interview that he had come out to his parents a few years before the release of the video, during his freshman year at RISD. Therefore, the artist’s thesis project cannot be understood as his way to reveal his sexual orientation but as an affirmation and embrace of his queerness.

The video’s narrative follows the (mis)adventures of three characters, each representing different stages of the coming out process: Lisa (Kelly Pittenger), a middle-class prepubescent girl attempting to keep a secret from her mother while undergoing what Richard Troiden calls “sensitization,” the first stage of the coming out process which is characterized by feelings of marginality; Skippy (Ryan Trecartin), an adolescent struggling to come out of the closet in the next phase of identity confusion; and finally, Shin (Ryan Trecartin), a third-sex she-male, fully coming out. The concept of coming out is illustrated visually through the omnipresence of doors and windows, which all revolve around the idea of “crossing over.” Characters are often shown attempting to come out of closets and cramped spaces. We will see that Trecartin uses this visual

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allegory in a literal sense to evoke the act of “coming out of the closet” which can be understood as openly declaring one’s same-sex desire to the world. At the same time, the artist also refers to the concept metaphorically to express how he seeks to contribute to televisual and cinematic traditions. He positions himself “out there” in order to explore the vast, mostly unchartered, and limitless universe of the Internet – a symbol for who he is, who we are, and who we are capable of becoming.

Unlike Douglas Sirk’s melodramas, which often begin with sumptuous panoramic establishing shots, *A Family Finds Entertainment*’s opening scene directly transports viewers into a claustrophobic high angle shot of Lisa locked inside a compact bathroom. The narrow interior setting, coupled with the close proximity of the camera, conveys a stifling sense of entrapment.

![Figure 2.3](image1)

![Figure 2.4](image2)

She opens the washroom closet and a frightening derelict creature, Closet Monster (Ryan Trecartin), jumps out, taking her by surprise. Closet Monster, who appears to be held captive inside Lisa’s bathroom storage, asks her, “Lisa do I have to stay in here forever?” The scene then cuts to a point-of-view shot of Lisa replying, “I don’t want to talk about it right now!” as she forcefully closes the closet door to contain her prisoner.
Lisa is seen through a low angle shot, which reinforces her position of dominance while simultaneously rendering Trecartin’s character helpless. The image slowly fades to black while Closet Monster’s pleading voice is audible in the background muttering Lisa’s name. Closet Monster sounds defeated, as if he already knows that coming out of the closet is not really a possibility.

Within the first few minutes, viewers are introduced to the video’s “coming out” theme through the literal allegory of Closet Monster’s attempt to escape from the closet. Melodrama’s preoccupation with failure and hopelessness is invoked through the stereotypical dramatic character’s struggle to overcome an emotional crisis. As Barbara Klinger writes in *Melodrama and Meaning*, “melodramatic plots are particularly focused on the heights of dramatic conflict and the emotional affect such conflicts can arouse on the part of the spectator. Situations such as the moral plunge of a character […] are manipulated to produce intense pathetic emotions in the viewer.”

Trecartin seeks to intensify the pathos of the entrapped character through dramatic high and low contrasted

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camera angles, as well as tight framing. Spectators are encouraged to feel a certain compassion for Closet Monster despite his frightening appearance. While viewers may be emotionally invested in the character’s plight, Trecartin does not make us privy to what happens next to him, as he is suddenly completely dropped from the narrative. The artist cuts to a long shot of Lisa standing in the dark, adjusting her flashlight in front of the kitchen sink. The camera slowly advances toward her and a voice which seems to emanate from behind the lens abruptly yells out “Lisa!” The young girl turns around and points her flashlight at the camera while giggling and singing “I’m being as quiet as I possibly can, but you still notice me.” Through this coded lullaby, Trecartin alludes to the ways queer individuals have learned to design their lives as a series of masterful compromises consisting of projections and exclusions. By shielding their non-conformity from public scrutiny, queer peoples manage to construct an invisible identity within what Eve Sedgwick has labeled “the epistemology of the closet.”

Lisa is seen running across the dining room as the camera follows and attempts to catch her. The character continues playing with the concept of invisibility as she is presented playing hide-and-seek with the camera. Her “performance of closeted-ness”

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209 Ibid, p. 3.
is apparent via her avoidance of the camera’s gaze, which transmits to us that there is something deeply personal she is concealing. Trecartin cuts to a medium long shot, as Lisa sets foot into the living room. A peroxide blond female character (Booty Girl, according to the credits) enters wearing a midriff shirt and tight pants that accentuate her curves. Booty Girl is framed in the foreground of the living room posing in an alluring manner while calling out Lisa’s name seductively. This particular shot is held a few seconds longer than any other shot in the video, thus calling attention to itself. Trecartin does this in order to emphasize the dichotomy between Booty Girl’s vulgar appearance and the mise-en-scène. He contrasts what appears to be the epitome of the proper middle-class suburban American home with the non-conformity of his character that results in an almost surreal effect, as if she had been transported from the mise-en-scene of another video. Booty Girl is clearly out of place in the domestic setting. Together, Lisa and Booty Girl navigate through the dark, mysterious interior of the house holding flashlights as if traversing the unknown in search of safety. Trecartin carries on
melodrama’s theme of domesticity by making the household a site of social interaction and struggle. Thomas Elsaesser notes, “The setting of the family melodrama almost by definition is the middle-class home, filled with objects, […] that becomes increasingly suffocating.” The house in *A Family Finds Entertainment* is not overcrowded with objects and furniture to create this effect. Instead, in order to transmit a similar sense of oppression, Trecartin opts to shoot the entire scene with the lights off. He consequently turns the house into a somber labyrinth, lacking in an established route, direction, or the familial support she craves in order to come out.

Booty Girl climbs up the stairs to join Lisa in her well-lit blue bedroom. A medium long shot reveals Lisa and Booty Girl sitting on Lisa’s bed. The shot is framed by the bedroom’s doorway. The doorframe in the foreground symbolizes the border between Lisa’s bedroom and the rest of the house. Her room represents a safe refuge. However, this private sanctuary is suddenly invaded by Lisa’s mother (Shell Pittenger).

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A medium tilted camera angle shows her standing in the doorway, upset that her daughter is still awake: “Lisa! What are you doing out of bed? It’s midnight!” The scene cuts to a medium shot of Lisa standing on her bed as she nonchalantly mimics her mother’s voice, “Lisa! What are you doing out of bed?” Booty Girl ends the repeated sentence with “It’s midnight!” and breaks into laughter. For the first time since her first appearance, viewers are able to catch a glimpse of Booty Girl’s face. We notice that s/he is the same performer who played Closet Monster earlier (Ryan Trecartin). Booty Girl’s mockery does not seem to faze Lisa’s mother who responds, “I’m checking up on you.” The mother’s total oblivion to Booty Girl’s presence leads us to believe that she may not in fact physically exist. She may instead be a product of Lisa’s imagination. The scene continues with Lisa, once again, disrespectfully repeating her mother’s words. Her mother crosses her arms and exclaims, “Fine! I’m going to bed now!” Lisa predictably returns with the same statement. As she is about to leave, the mother smiles at her daughter and affectionately says, “Lisa, it is you that I love.” Lisa remains silent and
closes the door behind her mother. Similar to many maternal melodramas such as *Mildred Pierce* (1945), there is an emotional conflict and disconnect between mother and daughter, whereby the parent desperately attempts to step into the child’s world, while the latter pushes her further away. Lisa’s dismissal of her mom is partly motivated by her need to conceal a deep secret from her.

After shutting the door, Lisa turns toward Booty Girl and repeats, “Lisa, it is you that I love, as well.” Lisa sits on her bed and retrieves a multi-colored plastic pencil box while addressing the camera: “Look, I found something that is very dear to me. I’ve been searching for it. Inside is a story, something that I like. Be good and be thinking of for it. Like a bedtime story.” It is important to emphasize the fact that although Lisa is talking to Booty Girl, she does not look at her and instead fixes her stare on the camera. However, as the camera zooms in on her face, her eyes momentarily shift away from it as if trying to escape its scrutinizing gaze. It is as though Lisa were aware of the camera’s every move and intention. When framed through a medium shot, Lisa is more comfortable looking directly into the lens. Conversely, she becomes visibly ill-at-ease with the near proximity of a close-up shot. She understands that the camera represents more than a recording machine. It symbolizes the point of convergence between the world of the video and the audience watching her. Looking into its lens would imply
exposing her secret not only to the camera but to viewers as well. Lisa knows she is concealing something important from her mother and from us. She soon relinquishes her need to avoid facing the lens and decides to stare back at it. This intimate tight close-up divulges that she can no longer hide her queerness from us. Her character can be interpreted as a surrogate for a young Trecartin struggling to understand and acknowledge his queerness. This is further reinforced by the fact that both Closet Monster and Booty Girl are played by Trecartin and as such do not represent individual characters but rather stand in as the artist’s closeted alter egos. The camera then cuts to a close-up of the inside of the open pencil box which suddenly transports spectators into a psychedelic third dimension, a parallel universe.

Through digital collages made possible with iMovie, After Effects, and Photoshop, Trecartin layers multiple 2D animations on top of one another. The short animated sequence begins with a close-up of the moon. The camera slowly pans out until the scene suddenly cuts to a close-up of a small fish swimming in a fish bowl.
lightning effect is superimposed on top of the shot. Trecartin then cuts to a 2-D bitmap of a beating heart. The animation continues with swirling spiral motifs resembling zoetrope patterns onto which a projection of teenagers listening to a live garage band is layered. The sequence culminates with a complex series of visuals in which a human anatomic model is layered on top of a tropical forest and miniature animated beating hearts appear to fly in the air while moving across the screen.
The image fades, and we are transported to a bright yellow living room in which teens are gathered playing guitar and singing. Veronica (Veronica Gelbaum) jumps from the couch and yells, “Skippy! Open that fucking fuckdoor of yours!” The scene cuts to a close-up of a half-open door. We are then introduced to the video’s central protagonist, Skippy, a flamboyant gay teen. His skin color continuously shifts from red to yellow. The painted bright colors of his face give him a clownish appearance while his black teeth render him menacing. However, despite his disturbing appearance, Skippy is privileged by being shot primarily via close-ups to emphasize his emotional distress, thus allowing a high degree of empathy and spectator identification.

He is locked inside a bathroom decorated with a porcelain statue of the Virgin Mary. The reference to Christian iconography recalls a scene in George Kuchar’s *Eclipse of the Sun Virgin* (1967) in which a close-up of George’s (George Kuchar) face fantasizing about a young man is crosscut with a close-up of an illustration of Jesus.
Somewhat autobiographical, both videos can be read as therapeutic outlets that allowed both artists to reconcile religious dogma with their sexuality. In an interview for Filmbrats.com, Trecartin was asked how much of *A Family Finds Entertainment* was drawn from his own experience. He replied by saying, “It’s very personal. I get nervous.” While most of his work does not constitute a form of self-portraiture, *A Family Finds Entertainment* seems to be the exception to the rule. Skippy’s character serves as a stand in (albeit an exaggerated one) of the artist. The parallels between the artist and protagonist are multiple, for example, both grew up as closeted gay teens struggling with their sexual orientation in the Midwest and coming to terms with their family and religion.

Veronica begs Skippy to come out as she stands in front of the bathroom’s slightly ajar door. The camera zooms in on the door to emphasize that it is unlocked. Veronica may be physically capable of opening it; however, only Skippy has the power

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to “come out.” Trecartin consistently employs motifs such as doors, windows, and locks, to evoke the idea of coming out. The recurring image of the half-open door signifies that Skippy is on the verge of taking the big step. Yet, despite pleas from his friend to come out, the protagonist remains hidden in the bathroom. He is seen adhering a large kitchen knife with tape to a mirror, fumbling with bathroom accoutrements, taking Polaroid pictures of himself, and then cutting the images and flushing them down the toilet.

Sitting on the bathroom sink, Skippy looks at himself in the mirror and says, “I believe that somewhere there is something worth dying for, and I think it’s amazing…amazing!” The scene cuts to an extreme close-up of the character sticking his tongue out and smiling at his reflection in the mirror. The recurring symbol of the charged mirror in the mise-en-scène is borrowed from Douglas Sirk who “suggested that
mirrors were of interest because they produce an image that seems to represent the person looking into the mirror when in fact what they see is their exact opposite. In Sirk’s films, we see characters looking in mirrors when they are […] deluding themselves. Mirrors, then, represent both illusion and delusion in his films…”

Skippy deceives himself into thinking that death is the solution to his existential problem. As he stares back at his reflection, he appears to be expecting confirmation that there is indeed something amazing worth dying for.

The scene then cuts once again to a close-up of Veronica lying on the floor declaring, “Skippy, you can’t keep things this way, you just can’t…” The suspense mounts until the sequence reaches a traumatic climax in which Skippy is pointing a large kitchen knife close to his face.

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We are then assaulted with a disturbing shot of Skippy slitting his wrists. Bright red liquid representing blood gushes down from above the frame to his forearm, as if it were being poured from outside the shot. In true melodrama fashion, Trecartin intensifies the protagonist’s inner turmoil by accompanying the scene with slow deliberately dramatic music. As John Mercer notes, in melodramas,

Music is used to mark the emotional events, constituting a system of punctuation, heightening the expressive and emotional contrasts of the storyline. In such moments, music makes these films much more dramatic [...]^{214}

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Melodramas favor the spectators by making them aware of the music accompaniment while the characters in the movie are oblivious to it. However, in Trecartin’s video, the protagonist also possesses this knowledge as he is seen singing along to the lyrics of the background music: “It’s not that I want to keep things this way, it’s just that I may be impersonating some people who are not me.” The lyrics refer to queer individuals’ struggle with constructing multiple compartmentalized identities in order to function within heteronormative society. This survival mechanism often leads many to structure life through a series of binary oppositions: workplace/private life, sex/intimacy, and faith/sexuality. In doing so, the sense of self is lost beneath the fabricated façade. When Skippy looks at himself in the mirror, he desperately yearns to find his true self; however, he is left with the empty reflection of his projected image. Earlier in the scene, the protagonist looked into the mirror searching for an answer to his question about whether there is something worth dying for. The fact that he later proceeds to slit his wrists may suggest that he found what he was looking for in the mirror. However, at this moment in the video, we are not made aware of such a revelation.
The scene ends as Skippy, drenched in “blood,” stares into the camera with a disturbing smile and proceeds to form a heart shape figure with his fingers over his chest, while the soundtrack blares in the background. Despite Trecartin’s apparent artificiality and camp aesthetic, he succeeds in producing a powerful emotionally-charged scene. He accentuates the notion that verisimilitude is not a requisite for affective engagement. The emotional crescendo suddenly subsides, the music stops, and the image fades into a long shot of a house on a block covered in snow.

A character known as Snowy White Girl (Ryan Trecartin) ventures outside. Her arrival in the narrative comes as a surprise; yet, I believe she does not represent an entirely new character. She is introduced immediately after Skippy’s suicide attempt. Her “blood”-smeared face and clothes suggest that she in fact might represent a new incarnation of Skippy. The ensuing scene can be interpreted as a dream sequence that occurs while Skippy is lying unconscious in the bathtub. For the first time, a character is placed outside, engulfed in the gloomy exterior of the house. Trecartin employs color
much like Douglas Sirk did to express emotion and the inner conflict of the characters, as is evident when contrasting the bright and colorful interior footage with the gray outdoor shots. Snowy White Girl is lost and in distress, running aimlessly across the frozen cityscape. She traverses a highway overpass, passing dark cars, and pedestrians swaddled in layers of winter outerwear. Unlike the previous scene in Skippy’s bathroom, shot almost exclusively via close-ups, this outdoor segment is framed primarily through extreme long shots. This stylistic decision creates a distance between spectators and the character which further reinforces our understanding that the protagonist is lost within the vast wintry landscape. The sound of wind, snowflakes falling, and the character’s gasps for air are echoed repeatedly. The outside world is depicted as a threat. The scene functions as an allegory for the protagonist stepping out of his comfort zone, away from the insulation of the home into a public arena in which exposing one’s queerness could potentially be dangerous. Judging by the bleak and ominous exterior scenery, Skippy is

not yet ready to come out. The camera then zooms in on Snowy White Girl until her face is framed via an extreme close-up. Trecartin overlays an image of a window over her face so she appears trapped inside the frame. The scene ends where it began: the character is placed back inside the domestic setting and - inside the closet.

Figure 2.30  Figure 2.31

Snowy White Girl hosts a get together in her living room with a few of her friends (recalling Skippy’s soirée earlier). The party quickly turns sordid as the motley crew begin verbally assaulting one another. Trecartin confronts us with an extreme close-up of Drag Queen (Taya Koschnick) with her eyes rolled back as if possessed by an evil force.

Figure 2.32
As she regains composure she declares, “For an evening I’ll hate you.” The camera then zooms in on Cosmos Bitch (Lizzie Fitch) glaring at Snowy White Girl (Trecartin) and in a hostile tone repeats, “For an evening I’ll hate you.” The scene cuts to a close-up of a visibly perturbed Snowy White Girl who responds, “What?” The camera catches a glimpse of the other peripheral characters’ astonished and anxious reactions. Cosmos Bitch follows with another menacing threat, “I’ll give you a reason to die or kill!” Snowy White Girl laughs nervously, then abruptly adopts a serious expression. Cosmos Bitch’s anger is palpable in the extreme close-up. Yet we are not sure what brought on this sudden burst of emotion.

A series of extreme close-ups unraveling succinctly proceeds. It is accompanied by an intrusive instrumental tune, a combination of electronic synthesizer sounds and xylophone pitches that breaks an agonizing silence. This sensational cinematographic interlude serves as a vehicle to transmit the heightened emotionality of the characters. As
Geoffrey Nowell-Smith explains, there is such an excess of inner conflict in melodramas that the narrative cannot contain it. At such climaxes, the mise-en-scène serves as a visual metaphor to articulate the characters’ emotional outburst. The abundance of extreme close-ups, cross-cuts, saturated colors, and digital manipulations coupled with the abrupt soundtrack provide a surreal audiovisual effect similar in fashion to Skippy’s suicide attempt scene. The tension between the characters builds up until the image fades to Snowy White Girl soaked in blood lying on the kitchen floor holding a knife. Her friends yell hysterically at her, “Why did you do that?” and she replies, “I did it for fun!”

Death is presented as entertaining in Trecartin’s videos because death does not really exist there. Trecartin’s world is devoid of physical consequences – characters die and regenerate, much like pressing the replay button and starting all over again with video games. Death is only temporary, as spectators understand that the final outcome for characters is not final at all and thus, not tragic.

As stated in the introduction, the artist views the body as a blank canvas onto which “personalities” are projected and articulated. He looks forward to a future in which humans are no longer defined by their bodies:

216 Nowell-Smith, Geoffrey. “Minelli and Melodrama,” Screen (Summer 1977), 18, 2, p. 113-19.
“I see people as being what their personality is at the moment of expression. I feel genitals hold us back a lot. They keep us connected to our older ideals of humanity […] I think it’s really interesting that there are a lot of trannies now who are in transition and want to be in transition—they don’t want to be a man or a woman […] The more nuanced we get, the more things people want to be.”

In *A Family Finds Entertainment*, the body serves as a vehicle for multiple queer “personalities.” Thus, queerness is not fixed to a singular body. This disembodiment, in turn, assures that viewers can identify with queer characters because queerness is a “personality” trait that all of Trecartin’s characters share, regardless of their body/gender. This disembodied queer subjectivity is reflected in the way the video artist switches back and forth between individual characters’ identities, as if each distinct persona were a continuation of the artist’s queer subjectivity. For instance, directly after Snowy White Girl is presented covered in blood sitting on the kitchen floor, the image fades to a shot of Skippy waking up in a bathtub full of blood. He notices the bandages wrapped around his arms and exclaims in disappointment, “What the fuck? Who fixed my bloody arms?!” The director then cuts to a low angle shot of Veronica lying on the floor complaining that the party is boring. Skippy righteously snaps his fingers and responds by directly addressing the camera as if addressing her and us, “Hey listen girl, I can for sure make choices, keep that in mind!” The protagonist’s awakening can be interpreted as his rebirth. He decides to interpret his failed suicide attempt as an opportunity to come out of the closet and embark on the process of self-actualization.

Soon after Skippy recovers from his suicide attempt, Misunderstood Muddy Girl (Rachel Glazer) removes a tribal African mask from her face. She addresses the camera, “A digital relic from a future age of cyber chaos and analog holocaust.”

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zooms out until her image is framed within the rectangular screen of an old CRT (cathode ray tube) TV. The monitor is dingy, painted over with graffiti, and has the appearance of an excavated obsolete artifact of material culture.

The image of the TV monitor fades to white noise. Suddenly, the opening credits of a cable television game show, “Right Now,” take over the TV screen. The program is interrupted by quick shots of the camera crew filming the participants, while a monitor in the background plays back the video footage in “real time.” Through this meta-cinematic device, Trecartin highlights the mono-directional and insular network of television. As Gary Gumper and Susan J. Drucker note, “Television is a closed-circuit signal.” That is, the content being created by a select few is then directly fed to the passive consumer. However participatory it may seem in certain instances, television does not entirely possess the same interactive capacity of the Internet. The artist surpasses the limitations of television by embracing the endless possibilities of the Internet, thus expanding his options. At the finale of the game show sequence, the word “INTERMISSION” flashes

Figure 2.37

[Image of a graffitied CRT TV monitor]

across the screen as someone flips a compact disk over to play the b side, as if it were a vinyl record. This deliberately inaccurate anachronism draws attention to the layers of media archeology Trecartin juxtaposes to mark technological shifts. From this significant point on in his work, he transitions from addressing the aesthetic tools of the singular closed nexus of television to adopting the dynamic and open circuits of the Internet.

Trecartin correlates his embrace of the endless possibilities of the Internet platform with the freedom associated with coming out. He projects these connections through his alter ego Skippy as he comes to terms with his sexual orientation on multiple screens that pop up as web cam shots or streaming footage. The artist provides these visual cues to signify his readiness to leave the refuge and shame of the closet for the public network of cyberspace with the help of his multiple personas and gang of friends.

Part of his hesitation to come out can be attributed to the fact that according to an interview in *W* magazine, growing up during the onslaught of AIDS had a deep impact on him. Trecartin remembers being traumatized watching television news coverage of the AIDS crisis: “For me it was really frightening. […] It turned me off from the whole idea
of sex—‘So sex means you die?’”\textsuperscript{220} He also curiously mentions that during his closeted years in high school, he did not connect to the Internet because he “was afraid of viruses.”\textsuperscript{221} It was at RISD that he finally managed to overcome his viral phobia and accept his sexuality. A clear connection then exists between Trecartin’s ongoing process of self-acceptance as a queer young man and his relationship to the Net.

In the following scene, Skippy is framed through a close-up addressing the camera, “Yeah, you know I have messy dreams, I need to be more CON-FI-DENT! You know, in my life, no more fake blood for me, I want the real thing…” The camera zooms in on Skippy’s face as he is about to fit a condom over his boyfriend Billy’s (Kenny Curran) erect penis. Skippy is no longer phobic of carnal contact and viruses (albeit while practicing safe-sex). He has conquered the fear of the physical divide that prevents him from experiencing sex.

![Figure 2.39](image)

The protagonist’s erotic escapade is suddenly interrupted by a jump cut to a close-up of his mother’s (Annette K. Bonin) face. She engages in a conversation with someone off-screen, “Baby, I mean he is mad, he’s like an alien, really.” Skippy exits his

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{221} Ibid.
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\end{footnotesize}
bedroom only to be confronted by his mother, “Son you need to give it up! Yeah! This family is poisonous! Yeah! You need to find a new home!” Skippy’s mother is primarily framed through low angle shots which reinforce her position of dominance while his father (Aaron Jungels) is mainly seen through high-angle shots sitting on a chair in the background. Skippy’s Dad appears passive and emotionally detached from his son’s predicament. The father is ambiguous, as he makes homophobic comments that condemn his son’s sexuality, but later intimately kisses Skippy on the mouth. Dad provides us with a clue regarding his orientation when he comments on Skippy’s naked boyfriend, “You look good guy.” Perhaps, this is Trecartin’s way of alluding to closeted homosexuals in unhappy marriages that feign heterosexuality. John Mercer and Martin Shingler point out that the father in melodramas is “the most unsympathetic figure, even more so when absent…”  

Figure 2.40  

Figure 2.41

However, while Skippy’s Dad may be a conflicted father figure, he is certainly not the only unsympathetic character. Skippy’s mother is depicted as a shrew or as Skippy calls her, “a snake.” Not only is she callous, her presence is threatening. In one shot, she is seen holding a large kitchen knife exclaiming, “Shut your 

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stupid hole or I’ll knife it!” The tension escalates until she explodes: “I’ll burn you like a witch, you butt plunger. I know your secret is kept very well. Go eat some estrogen you homo!” She opens Skippy’s bedroom door only to find his naked boyfriend Billy sporting the iconic rainbow flag, graphic symbol of the LGBTQIA community, like a cape. Skippy’s mother provides her last bit of venomous analysis to Skippy, “Son, family is poison. You need to go find your homeboys.” She extracts a fifty dollar bill from her bra and hands it to him. “Be good and know that there is love.” She kisses him on the cheek as a final farewell and tells him to “get the fuck out” of her house.

Although many of the elements in *A Family Finds Entertainment* are somewhat autobiographical, the dialogue between Skippy and his parents is clearly fictional as mentioned earlier. His parents have admitted that at first they were surprised when Ryan came out due to his abundance of “girlfriends.” However, they soon embraced the fact and became very supportive. Therefore, while he did not experience the same kind of dysfunctional family exchange portrayed in his video, the artist nevertheless represents other queer teens’ experiences. Those who are not as fortunate as he and are often left homeless and rejected by their immediate families.

Skippy leaves his family in search of his “homeboys.” This new “family” represents one he forms by choice, as opposed to the relatives he inherits through procreation. A hand-held camera trails behind him as he descends the staircase and exits the front door of his parents’ home. Once outside on the porch, he catches the attention of a self-proclaimed documentary video artist, Zoey Spelling (Laura Callela). She informs him that she is producing a project about “medium age kids all over the world.”

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Zoey’s point of view reveals Skippy through her night vision camera. He proceeds to convince her that he is worthy of being in her documentary. The protagonist performs an exhibitionistic soliloquy in front of the camera. He exudes confidence and a diva attitude, snapping his fingers at the lens and emphasizing every syllable with the intonation of his voice. Skippy is no longer afraid to expose his queerness in front of the camera, especially because it affords him an opportunity to come out in a big way on screen. In her book *Melodrama and Meaning*, Barbara Klinger argues that melodrama “emphasizes the social mores of its time,” hence dealing with topics and issues relevant to the time it was made.²²⁴ At the time *A Family Finds Entertainment* was made, coming out on TV had become a trend: Pedro Zamora was openly gay on the reality TV show *The Real World: San Francisco* (MTV, 1994),²²⁵ Ellen DeGeneres publicly came out in 1997,²²⁶ Rosie O'Donnell came out in 2002,²²⁷ and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* first

![Figure 2.42](image-url)

²²⁶ *Time* magazine, April 14, 1997.
aired on the Bravo network in July 2003, featuring a group of openly gay men who provided aesthetic make-overs to heterosexual men. Skippy’s eventual decision to come out in front of the camera, therefore, had evolved very much in tune with the general mainstreaming of queerness in pop culture and Trecartin’s relationship to it.

When Skippy finally commits to come out, he approaches the decision as if he were making up for lost time. He sashays into the street demanding, “look at me, look at me,” only to be fatally struck down by an SUV. Similar to Sirkian melodramas’ irrational twists of fate, Trecartin uses contrived coincidences and reversals to advance the plot. As Steve Neale points out, “Melodramas are marked by chance happenings, coincidences, missed meetings, sudden conversions, last-minute rescues and revelations, deus ex machina endings.” Skippy’s (temporary) death is a pretext to introduce us to his next character, Shin. While lying on the road next to Skippy’s inert body, Zoey calls Shin (Trecartin) on her cell phone, asking what she should do. The scene cuts to a medium shot of Shin as s/he replies, “Zoey, just keep filming him.” Skippy’s storyline is temporarily placed on hold as Shin’s is just about to begin.

In the same vein as contemporary video artist Kalup Linzy, Trecartin’s narrative follows a “to be continued…” format reminiscent of daytime soap opera. In his video piece, All My Churen (2003), a parody of the melodramatic soap opera, All My Children, Linzy introduces us to several family members (all played by the artist) talking on the phone about an upcoming funeral. Far from the polished set designs and camera work of

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the ABC sitcom, *All My Churen* is shot with a low-tech digital camera that frames the characters in static medium shots. Linzy follows some of the conventions of the daytime drama format. The narrative, however, is far from being related to the glamorous plots of its Caucasian upper middle class counterpart. Tyron, Mama, and Sister are arguing about who is going to finance JoJo’s funeral (who “just got shot dead”). The characters address each other via “bitch”, “child,” or “girl!” evocative of black drag queen speak. Although Linzy and Trecartin both refer to the rhetoric of melodrama in their work, they do so for very different reasons: Kalup Linzy seeks to appropriate and transform dominant ideological practices through parody, while Ryan Trecartin pays them homage. Furthermore, both artists also have diverging views about the art of drag. In most of his video performances, Linzy portrays female characters, dressed in drag, adorned in European, straight, hair weaves or wigs, and skin tight dresses that accentuate his prosthetic curves. Trecartin, on the other hand, “reacts with mild exasperation when people relate the cross-dressing or role-playing in his movies to the ironic, campy impersonations of drag: ‘I want a feminine moment, but it has nothing to do with performing a role that is the opposite of my being a man.’”230 Thus, for Trecartin, gender is much more fluid and multidimensional.

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Shin’s character truly epitomizes Trecartin’s concept of gender fluidity. Neither a drag queen nor a drag king, Shin, or “man-cunt” as s/he is referred to by other characters, is a third-sex hybrid she-male with an ambivalent sexuality. The ambiguous name Shin, a common Japanese traditionally male name, does not help us define his/her gender either. Depending on the kanji characters used, “Shin” in Japanese, means “advance,” “progress,” “new,” or “move forward.”231 Shin represents this leap into the future that his/her name suggests as s/he is the personification of the hyperactive Internet new age. His/her constant verbal profusion, short attention span, and multicolored painted face are all characteristics that reflect the overabundant content generated online. Furthermore, Shin is almost always shown in relation to a portable electronic device: cell-phone or hand-held camera. Trecartin emphasizes the character’s connectivity and mobility.

Figure 2.45

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Shin’s cyber-hyperactiveness is best exemplified in a scene in which s/he decides to invite her friend Dameon (Will Gurley) to a party. Shin directly addresses the camera while engaged in a rapid monologue with Dameon on the phone:

Hey! Ha! Ha! Yeah! Dameon it’s me Shin [...] anyway you should call me more often I’m throwing a party tonight I put a fish in my water I just went exercising it was really fun anyways I’m throwing a party tonight F-U-N it’s called Experiments in Music bring everything that you own and well I just haven’t been feeling like myself lately and I need to get back in the mood of things you know moods anyways so, hum, yeah, are you in the middle of a manly club meeting or something? What’s going on?

The character’s verbal expulsion is representative of what Trecartin considers the bombardment of information on the Internet: click-on advertisements pop-up as multiple windows are open all at once while background cookies are stored as text strings into the web browser and then spit back into the server.

For instance, after Dameon hangs up on Shin, the image fades into a bright neon electromagnetic noise pattern that consumes the screen. Two separate partial shots of Shin are layered on top of one another while the sound of a busy telephone signal
pulsates in the background. The image is then shattered into thousands of particles propelled towards the viewer using software effects. Trecartin takes this opportunity to introduce us to a new motif that will become one of his recurring visual signatures: the multiple screens. He employs these much like Douglas Sirk introduced “frames within frames” as a visual device whereby characters appeared contained within windows, doorways, and picture frames. However, in Sirk’s melodramas, these devices symbolize the characters’ isolation and confinement, in Trecartin’s videos, multiple frames within the frame represent the multi-linearity of cyberspace. Individual micro-frames each feature a character with a corresponding narrative, simultaneously streaming videos, akin to a computer screen displaying several browsers at once. The multiple screen motif is the quintessential metaphor for Trecartin’s insatiable craving for infinite

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freedom. As Arthur Lubow states, “For Trecartin and many of his peers, ‘all ways’ is a much more appealing prospect than ‘always.’”

As Shin steps outside her/his house, s/he is welcomed by a group of colorful partiers dressed in vibrant colors holding bright sparklers. This time, being outside is portrayed as a festive time that contradicts the earlier drab and disturbing outdoor experience of Snowy White Girl. No longer confined inside interior spaces, the outside is now welcoming. Doors are opened and doorways crossed. Spaces are no longer divided by physical barriers, and characters can transition seamlessly between these. Shin holds his/her portable camera up in the air as a sign of victory and guides the group of friends toward the basement where the party is underway.

The chaotic party scene resembles the carnivalesque pandemonium of Valentine’s Day Girl. Shin inquisitively makes her/his way through the rooms of the house with his/her handheld camera in tow. Each room contains a musical theme: punk rock,

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classical, grunge, and electro-clash among others. Shin is mesmerized by what each room has to offer, yet only remains in each one for a few seconds. The sensory overload is so overwhelming, but although not fully able to grasp all of it, s/he opts to continue on this exhilarating exploration as if to make up for lost time. The character goes in and out of rooms the same way a web surfer navigates in and out of Internet pages. Shin enjoys the overwhelming journey while moving along quickly in order to experience everything. The hallways serve as metaphors for online search engines while individual bedrooms represent website pages. Through these visual devices, Trecartin is able to simulate the interactivity of the Internet despite the mono-directional nature of his video.

We are suddenly transported from the party to an overhead shot of Skippy’s spirit resurrecting from his body. Trecartin superimposes Skippy’s body and reduces the opacity of the second layer to achieve this effect. Zoey Spelling’s night vision camera captures his rising from the dead. “I hear music,” Skippy says. Trecartin cuts to a close-up of the documentary filmmaker encouraging him to “follow it.” Skippy snaps his fingers and with a fierce attitude exclaims, “I WILL!” The screen fades back to a close-up of Shin dancing. The partygoers all congregate outside to continue the celebration. The festivity culminates in a visual smorgasbord of special effects: overlay, superimposition, and image reversal. Trecartin’s editing abides no rules; images merge and collide with one another in a mind-bending spectacle. The abstraction of shapes and colors meld and morph into each other to form a multi-layered mass that transmits the characters’ excitement and exhilaration. The revelers gather around a children’s inflatable pool filled with water in which Shin’s body is submerged as if for a baptism ritual. Shin’s wig falls off as her/his make-up runs down his/her face. At this point, it is
no longer Shin we see but Ryan Trecartin himself. As he comes out of the pool, his gaze drifts upwards toward the sky. The artist cuts to a point-of-view shot of the moon. The camera zooms in on the bright lunar globe of light, a divine presence, descending from the sky. The image fades to black and the party comes to a close with a display of fireworks. *A Family Finds Entertainment* culminates in a happy ending. Trecartin has successfully completed his rite of passage transitioning from the insular space of the closet to the queer world and the Internet. *A Family Finds Entertainment* can thus be seen as a transitional stage in Trecartin’s personal and professional life. It will not be until *I-BE Area* (2007), that the artist will fully explore the new virtual mediascape of Web 2.0.
A pixelated three-dimensional waterfall effect drips down the screen. Through a “slide-down” transition filter, the image is then split in two to reveal a small frame in which I-BE 2 (Ryan Trecartin), addresses the camera “I don’t wanna see my original ‘cause I already know what he wants to look like and I don’t wanna look there.” The protagonist is chatting online with his avatar. A medium close-up shows him in the foreground holding a computer keyboard surrounded by his friends Cheeta (Rhett LaRue) and Jamy (Brian McKelligott). The digitization of the shot gives it the appearance of a video log filmed through a lo-tech webcam. A point of view shot of a Mac computer monitor follows of I-BE 2’s avatar, Independent Avatar (Ryan Trecartin), framed within the computer screen as it responds back in real time. I-BE 2 is confronted by his overbearing online alter ego who appears to have hijacked his life: “I am assigning you a 30 page historical paper with links to video and location. […] And the only bibliography is your memory. And this event must take place outside of your lifetime.”

Figure 3.1
Fed up with his virtual AV\textsuperscript{234}’s exhortative preachy life lessons, the protagonist decides to delete him. Trecartin cuts to an image of a desktop screen in which an arrow cursor clicks on a trashcan icon to emphasize his impending obliteration. I-BE 2 deposits Independent Avatar into the computer trash bin and empties it. His black and white image appears to descend further into a whirling vortex until it completely disappears. However, the artist superimposes a lemniscate loop of an Ouroboros snake symbol over the screen, to symbolize the Internet’s cyclicality and self-regeneration.

\textsuperscript{234} Acronym for avatar.
This section of the feature-length video *I-BE Area* (2007) clearly reveals Trecartin’s preoccupation with a multiplicity of ways of being afforded to him by the Internet.\(^{235}\) *I-BE Area* follows the peripeteia of I-BE 2, a self-claimed “real life mixed media,” clone of I-BE, the first “total original.” The protagonist is in the midst of an existential crisis as he desperately seeks to abandon his original incarnation in pursuit of other identities to assume. However, as a copy, he is unable to create entirely new identities, so instead he appropriates discarded ones from online users. As he navigates “inworld”\(^{236}\) across multiple virtual chat rooms, the protagonist drifts into new personae. I-BE 2 is the embodiment of the “cybersubject,” “a fluid subject, […] a ‘feedback loop’ constantly in formation through an interpenetration between self and not-self.”\(^{237}\) The cybersubject is, according to Matilda Tudor, the “ultimate manifestation of queer theory as it [is] seen to transcend the physical world in a parallel space, where it freely and flexibly [can] pick […] who to be,”\(^{238}\) choosing from an infinite combination of mutable online identities, including those possessing hybrid forms of gender expression coined by Nina Wakeford as “cyberqueer.” According to Wakeford, the term implies a “relationship between sexuality and space, where space is taken to be the arena accessible by computer-mediated interactions.”\(^{239}\) She identifies several types of cyberqueer spaces: chat rooms, websites, and newsgroups with a specific focus on the LGBTQIA community, further asserting,

\(^{236}\) Technical term meaning user is logged online.
Cyberqueer spaces are framed as new places within which lesbians, gay, transgender or queer experiences can take place, with a particular focus on the advantages compared to ‘real’ physically-located space. Mainstream cyberspace has often been promoted as creating ‘virtual communities’ and cyberqueer spaces may compensate for the social or geographical isolation of sexual minorities by operating as a medium through which contacts can be more easily facilitated…

The emergence of cyberqueer spaces can thus be seen as an “act of resistance.”

Following Wakeford’s argument, Pramod K. Nayar posits that,

These [cyberqueer] sites can serve as spaces of resistance to heterosexist cyberspace, where pockets of queer art can alter the nature of cyberspace representations. They are spaces of identity formation in a context where the “real” spaces of heterosexual, patriarchal technocapital have denied the queer his or her identity – the queer can begin the performance of identity (at least) in cyberspace.

While Trecartin definitely sees cyberqueer spaces as opportunities to further explore and perform his multiplicity of selves, we will see that for the artist, cyberspace does not exist “outside” “‘real’ physically-located space,” as he blurs the frontier between the virtual and the corporeal world.

Interplay in cyberspace not only allows for extensive experimentation with identity, it also enables internet surfers to navigate across multiple temporalities established within the multi-tasking computer interface. Trecartin takes advantage of the endless possibilities of the Web to create virtual geographies and multi-linear narratives. In doing so, the artist challenges previous notions of time and place by expanding their applicability through Internet mediation.

As such, *I-BE Area* can be seen as the cinematic exemplification of Nicolas Bourriaud’s concept of altermodernism. As explained in the introduction, Bourriaud

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241 Ibid.
defines altermodernism as “that moment when it became possible for us to produce something that made sense starting from [...] a vision of human history as constituted of multiple temporalities [...] a positive experience of disorientation through an art-form exploring all dimensions of the present, tracing lines in all directions of time and space.”

In his “altermodern manifesto,” he further declares that,

We are entering the era of universal subtitling, of generalized dubbing. Today’s art explores the bonds that text and image weave between themselves [...] This evolution can be seen in the way works are made: a new type of form is appearing, the journey-form, made of lines drawn both in space and time, materializing trajectories rather than destinations. The form of the work expresses a course, a wandering, rather than a fixed space-time.

Many artists pertaining to this new generation are thus less interested in creating objects and more focused in presenting an artistic process, or “journey” which may take the form of various formats (text, single video channels, performance, sound). Indeed, Ryan Trecartin does not conceive of his videos as collectible products. By freely releasing the entirety of his videos online, Trecartin’s media art is simply raw data that can be uploaded, downloaded, and remixed if desired. In an interview with Cindy Sherman, the artist commented, “It would be amazing if we lived in a post-information world where we could truly transcend form and habit.”

Trecartin shares with many contemporary artists a concern with democratizing new media’s production and distribution. When asked why he chose to upload his videos on YouTube, he replied,

I have very strong feelings about sharing. I make videos for people—the whole process is shared. [...] I think web 2.0 spaces relate tremendously to

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the logic and structures of physical space and plot sculpting in the movies. So I think it’s an appropriate home that brings out a quality in the work that you may look over in the gallery. Plus videos are meant to be accessed and watched.246

*I-BE Area* emerged at a time of great technological innovation marked by the advent of YouTube and the explosion of the Web 2.0 infrastructure. Web 2.0, a second, faster generation of the World Wide Web, offers an alternative way of interacting with online multimedia platforms. For instance, viewers can post comments on the video channel in real time and later “tweet” them out to the rest of the world, thereby engendering a dialogue on a global scale. As Trecartin explains, “With the Internet, people are understanding that the camera is like a place of transaction, that both ends of it are subjective, a fluid tube.”247 Patricia Zimmermann notes,

We are now in the midst of what feels like the amateurization of the entire media universe. It is a tsunami of user-generated, fan-produced, blogger-written, Twitter-feed practices. Developed on a wide scale over the last ten years, smartphone imaging, the user-friendly accessibilities of Web 2.0 for blogging, YouTube uploads, game-modding, the explosion of social networks like Facebook and Twitter, and the proliferation of fan culture engagements and modifications of commercial products from books, television shows, films, and games – all these present a monumental shift in media structures.248

This “monumental shift” has caused, Massimiliano Gioni claims, “a profound metamorphosis […] in the DNA of images.”249 Gioni argues that because new technology has become increasingly accessible, “art has lost any central role with respect to the image-making machine. Redefining the role of the artist in relation to this radical

246Lange, Jennifer. “Interview with Director Ryan Trecartin,” at http://wexarts.org/blog/interview-director-ryan-trecartin
247“Ryan Trecartin in conversation with LP studio” at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u2aUq91FVjU
transformation of the image will not be a job only for this generation: It will be one of the most important challenges for the new century.”

Lisa Phillips, Director of the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York City (“New Museum”), responds in *Younger Than Jesus: The Generation Book*, that the Millennial generation is “at ease with new technologies and new languages [and] has had a tremendous impact on the way we acquire, distribute, produce, and consume information, knowledge, and culture.”

Also known as “Generation Y,” its members were born, according to Lauren Cornell, past curator at Rhizome and current curator at the New Museum, on or after 1976. Ryan Trecartin (b. 1981), can thus be described as a “Millennial.” In her essay, “Them,” Laura Hoptman, curator at the Museum of Modern Art (“MoMA”) in New York City, attempts to attribute a set of characteristics idiosyncratic to the Generation Y. She writes, “The Millennials (b. 1976 - ) are: very optimistic (!), totally wired, self-absorbed but socially conscious, presume wealth and are born consumers, and want what they consume immediately.”

Hoptman’s statement may seem too broad, yet, one cannot deny that there may be a kernel of truth in her claim. In the technology-driven world we live in, iPhones, iPods, and iPads become bodily extensions. Gen Y is always connected. Hoptman confirms this when referring to the members of this new generation as “wired.” In an interview with LP Studio, Trecartin was quoted, “Technology and the infinite amount of data is not an overload for the new generation because they are in it, this is it for them, it’s just a

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way of life.” This saturation of encrypted and coded information has led to the creation of new forms of expression, of a new language – one that is concise and abbreviated enough to fit into text messages and catch our hyperactive, fleeting attention span. Who still has time for “I love you,” when I ♥ U is all they need? Massimiliano Gioni posits,

One has to [imagine] the relationship between generations and individuals as something similar to the relationship of language as an abstract set of rules on one hand, and language as speech, as its actual use on the other [...] Quite significantly, a new obsession with language seems to emerge precisely from the works of many artists born in and around the 80s. There is a linguistic explosion on all sides, an unstoppable flow of words.

Ryan Trecartin establishes his own dictionary. His language is technical, inspired by software programming languages. For instance, in one scene in I-BE Area, the protagonist exclaims:

I-BE 2: “Look I think I just saw a highly advanced, 3-D text message of my future self giving me the middle-finger and I’m gonna fuck right back in his face. […] Yeah Have yall been downstairs lately? It looked different. […] I think they had a ‘70s filter on a very low percentage ‘cause it reminded me of all the memories that I hate from that decade.”

Jamy: “It’s not a filter. It’s called Linda, a hidden decade from the present.”

I-BE 2: “Listen Quit explaining shit to me, Jamy. You think I don’t know about all the decades that they be hiding? They must have slipped me some computer pills or some shit because I had no control.”

Cheeta: “I-BE, I can’t translate your rants. What the hell you mean?”

I-BE 2: “Buy my Rosetta Stone.”

254 “Ryan Trecartin in conversation with LP studio” at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u2uUq91FVjU
While Trecartin’s version of the popular instructional language course might facilitate our deciphering of his highly coded lingo, many of his online followers already intrinsically understand its meaning as is illustrated by the following comment posted on Trecartin’s YouTube channel by “Scandibilly,”

No one has ever captured my mind. I didn't think it possible. I didn't know this film was possible. It was perfect. That one hour, 48 minutes was the closest I’d come to someone who could understand me. Thank you! Thank you! I understand!  

The artist clearly taps into the online consciousness of many members of his virtual community. It is through his twenty-first century dialect that Trecartin is able to interact with his techno-centric fanbase. Terry Smith notes that the concept of interactivity is an essential component of contemporary art. He states that contemporary artists’ works “involve methods of social exchanges, interactivity with the viewer within the aesthetic experience being offered to him/her, and the various communication processes, in their tangible dimension as tools serving to link individual groups together.”

Trecartin uses the Internet as a medium in and of itself in order to facilitate these social exchanges. As part of his auxiliary artistic/Internet projects, he created the website riverthe.net, in collaboration with Tumbler founder David Karp. Launched in 2010, the site functions as an endless stream of unflagged, unrestricted short ten-second videos uploaded by anonymous participants. Each random video is tagged with three key words. Videos with similar tags are linked together in order to create playlists. Viewers can click on the tags associated with a particular video as they watch it which will direct them to a new related playlist. This innovative participatory viewing experience not only

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256 Comment can be found at http://www.youtube.com/user/WianTreetin/discussion
258 Ibid.
allows spectators to generate content but also to direct what they watch by enabling them to pick and choose endless streaming pathways. As Trecartin explained during Rhizome’s Seven on Seven Technology and Art conference, the rationale behind the creation of the website was to build a platform in which the user interface is integrated within the video. He expressed his disappointment with the interface of video sharing sites such as YouTube, pointing out that all of the participatory elements such as tags, comments, and feedbacks, are broadcast “outside” of the video. Instead, Trecartin’s goal was to contain the interface “inside” the content, rather than surrounding it.\(^{259}\)

![Figure 3.6](image)

Although *I-BE Area* was released three years before the launch of riverthe.net, it can be understood as the artist’s first attempt at embedding the dynamic interface of webcast modes within his videos. Much like the shuffled user-generated content streaming on riverthe.net, *I-BE Area*’s plot and editing are unbound by traditional

\(^{259}\) Ryan Trecartin and David Karp for Rhizome’s Seven on Seven Technology and Art Conference, 2010.
narrative unities of time and place. Trecartin’s video transports viewers into a “sensory enactment of technological immersion”\textsuperscript{260} akin to surfing not on but within the Internet. The artist blurs the line between cyberspace and physical space by incorporating the web aesthetic into the creation of his work. While his visual language, characterized chiefly by fast-paced editing, superimposition, oblique camera angles, repetition, fragmented shots, and discontinuity, remains essentially similar to his earlier work, one cannot but notice a leap toward a more techno-centric style. Computer desktop wallpapers, monitors, three-dimensional special effects, digital pictograms, and graphical user interface-inspired designs are interspersed throughout.

Unlike in \textit{A Family Finds Entertainment}, in which the multiple screens were used as symbolic visual devices, in \textit{I-BE Area}, the multi-proliferatory screens serve a narrative function. That is, the action taking place inside the screens-within-the-screen has a direct consequence on the action surrounding it. Consequently, this effect creates multiple temporalities since narratives merge and unravel simultaneously.

This is best exemplified in a scene where I-BE 2 is rejected by his “clone-intolerant family group.”\textsuperscript{261} Soon after he is handed a clear plastic suitcase by one of his family members, the protagonist decides to go back upstairs to his bedroom in an attempt to avoid any further confrontation. I-BE 2 is filmed through a long shot opening a door leading to a staircase. As he exits the living room, the director cuts to an over-the-shoulder shot of Cheeta sitting in front of a computer, watching I-BE 2 on the monitor as he climbs up the stairs. The scene unravels as if it were live footage surveilled from a security camera. The camera then zooms in on the screen which now displays the

\textsuperscript{260} Pulitzer, Sam. “Ryan Trecartin,” in \textit{Artforum} (September, 2011).
protagonist entering his bedroom. Cheeta is then seen through a back shot as he watches himself in the screen talking to I-BE 2, “I-BE, I just watched the living room channel. I thought you were gonna fuck some shit up.” The director zooms in on Cheeta’s face until the edges of the monitor disappear completely from the frame. The characters continue their rapport, however, we are not sure if what we are watching is now taking place in the physical world or the computer-mediated sphere. I believe Trecartin precisely leaves this ambiguous as he seeks to erase the distinction between both. As James Bridle notes,

While the idea of cyberspace has proved useful for some time, it posits the digital realm as an elsewhere, a separate domain of experience, interaction and memory, with a clear frontier – which is contrary to our own experience. A planet-wide digital infrastructure; mobile devices; pervasive connectivity; social and private networks and other forms of communication; all point to a world in which the virtual intersects with the physical at every moment.\(^{262}\)

In Trecartin’s virtual utopia, cyberspace and the physical environment coexist simultaneously. Indeed, the artist “looks forward to a time when people no longer distinguish between their technology and their humanity.”\(^{263}\) He explains,

I think technology is us, not something we invented. […] I think we are more psychic now because we have cell phones and you can look and see who’s calling you. When people start seeing technology as us, as humanity, our whole idea of what existence is, is going to shift.\(^{264}\)

The artist perceives new media not as a form of representation but as a means to augment reality and become more human. However, the goal is not to reach a fixed destination or identity but to be in a constant process of becoming. As one character states in I-BE Area, “I need to feel endless in both directions.”


\(^{264}\) Ibid.
I-BE 2 never remains in a fixed identity as he constantly looks for a new one to adopt. The protagonist is thus always in a transitional state. In one of his multiple incarnations, he adopts the identity of Oliver (Jessica Williams), a teenage girl from Ohio who sells her identity so she can buy a plane ticket to Brazil and start a new life. Oliver is introduced through a digital media player screen similar to a thumbnail pop-up window. She is presented from a static frontal view reminiscent of a YouTube clip via direct address:

Hi, my name is Oliver. I’m 5’11” and I look like this. I’m just sick of this though. [...] I’m talking about my lifestyle vibe. My horoscope, my attitude, my email address, my fucking mother everyone. [...] Rewind. I could leave any day and just go. But don’t hear me wrong. I love my Total Ohio awesome. My liberal laid back lesbian moms. And my incredibly sexy, gay girl siblings. But fuck it. I just found myself and it doesn’t look like anything. Not Oliver, not Ohio, and not gay. It looks like this kind of. Sorry. I need a fucking poser to be me so I can compassionately ditch this shit with love and care while knowing that some well-bred loser bachelor motherfucker is happy butt-fucking my old lifestyle. My one-way plane ticket to Brazil costs 995 international dollars. My address should appear now, send me a one-way money order and you get this box.

Her home address written in neon green type flashes across the screen as she retrieves a suitcase from a trashcan. Oliver presents herself as a commercial product to be purchased and consumed. However, she also provides an outpouring of personal information in the form of an online digital diary. As Michael Strangelove notes, “there are hundreds of videos on YouTube titled The Real Me...”265 which function as webcam recorded confessionals. Amateur videographers can post advertisements onto their homemade online content via Google AdSense in order to generate more and more revenue as their videos gain more popularity. Cecilia Alemani wrote that today,

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“Everyone can be producer and consumer, celebrity and viewer all at once.”

This is a phenomenon which has taken over social media sharing platforms. However, becoming popular on the web is an arduous endeavor since, according to YouTube’s statistics, “100 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube every minute.” Thus, bloggers must compete against one another incessantly in order to be noticed.


Trecartin alludes to the competitiveness of the Web in the introduction of *I-BE Area*. Soon after the opening credits, a faded freeze frame of a smiling young girl (Jade James) takes over the screen. The word “AVAILABLE” flashes over the image. The director cuts to a close-up of the character holding a cell phone as she addresses the camera, “Hi Charity, it’s Nicole. Guess What?” Nicole suddenly begins her self-promoting sales pitch, “Hi, my name’s Nicole. Adopt me now. Get into it! I’m worth it! Five, six, seven, eight. Watch me now.” Performing in front of a projected audience, the young girl executes an overly cheerful choreographed dance. The scene abruptly ends with the opening freeze frame of Nicole repeated, this time with the world “SOLD” in bold red letters superimposed over the original shot. Trecartin then jump cuts to another amateurish video featuring Steven (Jack Ironstone), a nine-year-old boy also hoping to be adopted,

Hi. My name’s Steven. I’m nine years old, 70 pounds and four foot five. Hi. My multi-professional parents don’t raise me. They act like I’m see-through. [...] I am something inside of me to give, something that everybody needs. I know the world would pick me out of a crowd. [...] Someone please adopt me before the talent show. [...] If you’re surfing the Adoption Network, stop.
Much like Nicole, Steven attempts to show off his artistic talent as he performs a tap dance routine in front of the camera.

By juxtaposing these two scenes side by side, Trecartin emphasizes the duality between both characters. Each is competing for attention, which is clearly illustrated by their impulse to display their physical prowess as if trying to impress the judges of a talent contest. In doing so, both attempt to stand out by claiming their individuality. However, Hal Niedzviecki notes that this kind of exposure is not meant to show how special or exceptional we may be, it is about showing how “deserving of everyday human interaction we are.”

For Nicole and Steven, it is about proving their value in order to be adopted. Many of the self-broadcasted characters in *I-BE Area* claim their individuality not as a way to affirm their differences from others but to connect and belong to a community, and ultimately be adopted.

The concept of adoption, a recurring theme in *I-BE Area*, is manifested throughout the narrative in a couple of different ways. For example, it can pertain to the

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legal guardianship of children, like the characters of Nicole and Steven. However, Trecartin also employs the notion to refer to the act of co-opting someone else’s online profile. This is the case when we look at I-BE 2, who takes on an alternate identity, or as Trecartin prefers to call it a “personality,” of an avatar. Nakamura describes this concept as “identity tourism”:

Users of the Internet represent themselves within it solely through the medium of keystrokes and mouse-clicks, and through this medium they can describe themselves and their physical bodies any way they like; they perform their bodies as text. On the Internet, […] it is possible to ‘computer crossdress’ and represent yourself as a different gender, age, race, etc.\textsuperscript{269}

Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) allow users to create and customize virtual characters by selecting from a wide variety of features such as gender, hair color, body type, skills, and age, among other characteristics. In recent years, the practice of selling customized “advanced” characters online has gained much popularity. Websites entirely dedicated to the buying, selling, and trading of avatars have emerged such as epicnpc.com, playerauctions.com, and marketplace.secondlife.com. Ranging from one to thousands of dollars, buyers can choose from an impressively wide variety of characters, humans, animals, fantasy, male, female, or in-between, as is illustrated with the avatar named Jeffree, a transgender AO (Animation Override) on sale for one thousand Linden dollars (Second Life’s currency) which corresponds to approximately four American dollars. As mentioned by the seller, Jeffree comes with a modifiable shape, skin with hair base, sexy latex suit, eyebrows, and forty-six animations.\textsuperscript{270}

\textsuperscript{269} Niedzviecki (2009), p. 27.
\textsuperscript{270} Description of Jeffree avatar at https://marketplace.secondlife.com/p/JEFFREE-full-drag-queen-avatar-included-AO/2832962
Jeffree’s list of customizable features can be compared to the panoply of choices included with the purchase of Oliver’s personality. Pointing to a clear plastic suitcase, she states,

Inside is my cell phone, outfit, all my passwords slash keys, plus a live subscription, hard copy PDF file of all the people I know in my life, how we relate and why I do the things I do. [...] Please. It’s easy. I’m knowable, memorize this shit and save me.

As her monologue comes to an end, the media-player screen suddenly swirls uncontrollably and is subsequently minimized until it disappears. I-BE 2 simultaneously enters the frame wearing a wig and clothes identical to Oliver’s. With his new feminized voice, I-BE 2, now Oliver, shouts with excitement, “Hey, guys. Cheeta, Jamy, I’m gonna
do it. I’m gonna be her.” The protagonist grabs a pink cell phone (which belonged to the original Oliver) and proceeds to call her new mother, “Hello, Mother Mercedes?” Trecartin cuts to a close-up of Mother Mercedes (Susan Birmingham), an angry middle-age butch lesbian on the hunt for a new rock band to adopt. Surprised by her daughter’s unexpected call, she replies, “What the hell are you doing? I don’t get it. […] Oliver, Mayfly said you ran away.” The scene cuts back to I-BE 2 posing as Oliver as he exclaims, “Cheeta, I like this, I already like being her.” Cheeta replies, “Yeah, but Oliver’s a dumb name.”
Unhappy with his adopted name, I-BE 2-Oliver-poser opts to change it to “Amerisha.” Similar to the way Internet users customize and personalize their avatars, I-BE 2 “refreshes” Oliver’s history in order to establish his own. However, although he has appropriated Oliver/Amerisha’s persona, I-BE 2 still comes through. We notice this when the protagonist alternates between his initial masculine vocalization and his latter feminized one. I-BE 2 consciously modulates the pitch of his voice to make it sound more feminine. Therefore, we understand that I-BE 2 does not become Amerisha but performs Amerisha. Although his appearance closely resembles Oliver’s, I-BE 2’s impersonation is indubitably exaggerated. His incessant hair flips and affected mannerisms recall the campy YouTube drag performances of internet celebrity Chris Crocker. In his online video titled “The Hairflip!,” which currently has 6,448,010 views, Crocker expounds on the therapeutic effect of the hair flip,

If your best friend stole your man, say ‘you know what?!’ she can have my man but she can’t have my hair extensions, and you flip that hair until
that bitch is gone out of your mind, okay, it’s like therapy, you flipped your hair and you’re cool again, it’s the hair flip!\textsuperscript{271}

Crocker’s peroxide blond hair extensions fly in the air as he repeatedly executes his dramatic hair flips. His natural dark brown short hair is revealed hidden beneath synthetic hair extensions. This dual projection emphasizes Crocker’s androgyny.

![Video thumbnail](image)

\textit{Figure 3.20}

Although Amerisha is intended to represent a female character, her flat chest and slight pelvic bulge make this quite ambiguous. Therefore, the wig and attire merely serve as props that enable viewers to recognize I-BE 2’s impersonation of the original Oliver, while simultaneously allowing Trecartin to come through in the performance.

Trecartin’s performance style adheres to a recent incarnation of the type of camp Jean Christian coins “camp 2.0.”\textsuperscript{272} According to him, online camp performers do not

\textsuperscript{271} Crocker, Chris. “The Hairflip” at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wHAI VXljRmw
label themselves as “drag queens,” but rather see their performances as forms of personal self-expression. For Ryan Trecartin, blending gendered characteristics is not solely an attempt to destabilize gender categories. It is also his way to combine multiple characters/personalities into one. Amerisha’s I-BE 2 is a copy of I-BE the original, all coexisting simultaneously and channeled through Trecartin himself. The artist pluralizes “being-in-the-world” much in the same manner the Internet allows. His campy impersonation of Amerisha is personal because it symbolizes what Trecartin understands himself to be: a multiplicity of selves in constant flux.

![Figure 3.21](image)

The last shot in this particular scene exemplifies Trecartin’s multidimensional personalities. Soon after saying her final goodbyes to Cheeta and Jamy, Amerisha is seen through a medium long shot exiting I-BE 2’s bedroom for her “amazing next life.” Her reflection is projected onto a mirror hanging on an adjacent wall. However, Amerisha’s

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reflection is not in sync with her gestures. Trecartin visually expresses this disconnect by filming Amerisha’s mirror projection in slow motion while Amerisha is shot at 30 fps. The mirror image appears to have a life of its own. This dichotomy further indicates the character’s inherent plurality.

Typically, the next scene transports viewers into a completely different locale and introduces us to a brand new cast of characters. The sequence opens with an establishing shot depicting a young woman, Care-Inn (Tammy Zapotechne-Kelley) and a child, Jango (Solomon Kelley) standing in front of the entrance to a thrift shop. As she is about to enter the store, the camera slowly zooms in on the child but we are unable to see the child’s face as his back is turned to the camera. A hypnotic flickering light effect bathes the shot. The eerie accompanying musical score coupled with the slow motion cinematography reinforces the overall sense of mystery surrounding these two new characters.

![Image of thrift shop entrance with woman and child](image-url)
Trecartin cuts to an inside shot of the storefront. The camera zooms in on what we discover to be a boy’s face while leaving the young woman’s head out of the frame. While Trecartin directs viewers’ attention to the child character, little is known about him at this point. His relationship to the woman accompanying him is also obscure. She is seen walking into the store her back turned to him, oblivious to his presence. A store employee (Lizzie Fitch) shouts with excitement, “Care-Inn!”

BeadStoreGirl (Ryan Trecartin) greets Care-Inn, then immediately addresses her mini sidekick, “Fresh off the freakin’ boat. Hey, buddy, can you say buddy?” Care-Inn interjects with disdain, “He can’t talk yet.” The camera then cuts to a close shot of Jango smiling at the camera as he says, “When do I get to kill you?” The clarity of the child’s speech contradicts Care-Inn’s previous statement when she declared that he could not yet speak. This informs us that she has little knowledge of the child or is not directly related to him. She suddenly forcefully drags him by both hands across the floor and shoves him into a dressing room. Unaffected by Care-Inn’s brusque behavior, BeadStoreGirl enlists her co-workers, “Let’s steal these beads, girls. We got a career to start!”
Trecartin suddenly jump cuts to a frame within a frame in which the entire staff of the shop is seen facing the camera pronouncing in unison, “The bead store, where culture is a way of life! The bead store, where culture is a way of life!” Similar to a no-frills infomercial, each employee delivers their lines mechanically into the camera, as if addressing customers: “I need everything in this friggin’ store! […] Seriously, the whole world is right here in little beads. This is amazing!” Jango interrupts the production and asks Care-Inn, “When can I be adopted?” She quickly replies, “Jango, be quiet. […] If you want me to adopt you, you’re going to have to be a better person.” Much like Nicole and Steven, the two young characters featured at the beginning of the video, Jango seeks to become adopted. However, it is not clear what motivates such a desire since Care-Inn is portrayed as a careless individual. The camera cuts back to Jango sitting in the dressing room talking to himself, “Care-Inn’s amazing. She’s gonna give me a house and everything…” His delusion comes to an end as he realizes that his mother-to-be is keeping him locked inside the fitting room.
Soon after Care-Iinn withdraws to the basement of the store in order to “figure some things out,” the bead store girls gather to discuss the child’s future:

**BeadStoreGirl:** “Okay. I think we should show him the color yellow for a year, and then the next year only the color green.”

**Faye:** “I feel like he’s gonna be a thornless rose.”

**BeadStoreGirl:** “And modest. And modest.”

**Meddy:** “He’s gonna be amazing.”

Jango’s role within the narrative is still unclear. We are brought to wonder what function the character really serves as he appears to occupy such a prominent role throughout the scene despite his minimal onscreen presence. Trecartin does not provide us with an immediate answer and instead introduces us to yet another character (or so it seems).

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273 A reference to Linda Montano’s performance piece *Seven Years of Living Art* (1984-1991) in which she lived in a monochromatic room wearing color-matched outfits for one year at a time, expressing a different personality for each cycle.
One of the bead store girls, Daisy (Lizzie Fitch), receives an impromptu phone call from an unknown character. The image cuts to a three dimensional orb which erupts into a multitude of liquid particles. Daisy’s voice can be overheard calling out the name “Pasta?”

A red Dodge SUV parks on a quiet sunny suburban street. A new character emerges from the car with bright yellow painted skin and scampers toward a toddler (Penelope Wright) playing alone by the sidewalk. Like I-BE 2, Pasta (Ryan Trecartin) is a “mixed-media humanoid.”

This gender-ambiguous character is uncategorizable much like Shin, the third-sex hybrid she-male in *A Family Finds Entertainment*. Although Shin possessed what could be considered some “gendered” characteristics such as a long wig and a purple dress, Pasta on the other hand, has no identifiable gender-specific attributes. With his blond pageboy hairstyle, suburban denim outfit, bright skin tones, and unisex name, Pasta is an unconventional figure, “not contained within [any identifiable] categorizations of gender and sexuality.”

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Unlike I-BE 2, Pasta does not seek to appropriate others’ forsaken identities but instead, is obsessed with the idea of adopting/stealing children. Mesmerized by the infant, Pasta cannot help but seize the child. The camera follows the character scurrying across the sidewalk en route to his/her apartment. Squeals of sheer excitement resonate as Pasta experiences a moment of pure ecstasy. Once inside, Pasta places the child on a wooden rocking horse. The camera offers us a wider view of Pasta’s living room. The array of children’s toys and miniature strollers scattered around the room informs us that Pasta has had previous contact with other children.
The character momentarily exits the living room only to return shortly to anxiously show several photographs to the toddler. The child attentively reviews the images and exclaims, “Baby, baby!” Viewers are not made privy to the content of the image at first. The camera, however, manages to catch a glimpse at the photo as it dangles from the toddler’s hand.
We suddenly realize that the child in the photo is none other than Jango. Spectators are led to believe that Jango may have encountered Pasta on a previous occasion. Again, Trecartin presents a view we cannot accurately interpret because he purposely withholds information to keep us in suspense. Although his videos unravel at supersonic speed, they do not readily provide us with all the answers, but instead slowly reveal themselves, and subsequently reveal the artist’s intentions.

Pasta grabs the child, carries her into a bedroom, retrieves a new set of photos, and shows them to the infant. A close-up of Jango’s portrait fills the screen. In the background, Pasta can be heard, “Polly, when I was your age I looked like this and my name was Jango. I changed it. Best decision of my life.” We now understand that Pasta was or still is Jango. The confusion between past, present, and future is due to the fact that Trecartin’s abrupt transitions do not suggest the passage of time. As we recall, the previous scene which takes place in the store ends when the shop girls receive a phone call from Pasta as they contemplate Jango’s future. Trecartin thus destabilizes temporal
logic by creating the impression that these two scenes happen concurrently. As Kevin McGarry also remarks,

[...] It is revealed that Pasta too was stolen as a child, before she had changed her name from Jango. Before is misleading, because her scenes and Jango’s take place simultaneously. Pasta has developed herself, Jango, into another person in order to seize maximal control of her options. Jango the child continues to live in temporal coexistence with Pasta the adult, perhaps unaware of Pasta yet destined to one day invent her.276

McGarry’s observation points to the fact that Pasta coexists as both child and adult and thus can be seen as living in a perpetual state of adolescence. The non-distinction between childhood and adulthood is, according to Jack Halberstam, an attribute characteristic of queer subcultures: “For queers, the separation between youth and adulthood quite simply does not hold, and queer adolescence can extend far beyond one’s twenties.”277 He further claims that while “heterosexual men and women are spending their weekends, their extra cash, and all their free time shuttling back and forth between the weddings of friends and family, urban queers tend to spend their leisure time and money on subcultural involvement: this may take the form of intense weekend clubbing, playing in small music bands [...]”278 Pasta shares some of the queer characteristics established by Halberstam, however, the character fundamentally diverges from the author’s queer paradigm, as s/he does not partake in “subcultural involvement.” Instead, Pasta’s main preoccupation revolves around the idea of parenting and fostering children.

In his book, In A Queer Time and Place, the author postulates that queer time and place exist “in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and

278 Ibid.
“Queer time” is time outside the traditional “reproductive” or “familial” time. Although the author notes that, “Not all gay, lesbian, and transgender people live their lives in radically different ways from their heterosexual counterparts,” he subsequently maintains that “part of what has made queerness compelling as a form of self-description in the past decade or so has to do with the way it has the potential to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space.” The issue at play is that Halberstam’s notions of “new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space” exist “outside” or counter to heteronormativity.

Trecartin on the other hand does not oppose hegemony, nor does he seek to comply with the norms of heteronormative society. Having to choose between either strategies would deny him the possibility of infinite options he so desires. Being able to live on the edge of both models is about claiming personal freedom. Pasta is both queer and concerned with child rearing. Yet, the character does not align her/himself with mainstream gay culture. If contemporary gay-rights movements focus on marriage equality and adoption, Pasta is seeking an even more radical alternative “life narrative.” The character does not ask for permission from an authority figure since s/he operates outside the socio-judicial system as s/he steals children nor does s/he seek to build a family. Indeed, Pasta’s insatiable baby craving can only be temporarily satisfied by acquiring a new child while doing away with the old one. As Pasta tells Polly, “In 25 years we won’t have Polly anymore…we just won’t need her.”

281 Ibid.
Pasta receives a phone call from his friend Sen-teen (Alison Powell) asking him to babysit two abandoned twins in Old New Jersey. After much consideration, Pasta decides to leave the toddler alone in the bedroom. The camera zooms in on the visibly upset child who cries out, “No!” The camera cuts back to a low angle shot of Pasta standing by the bedroom door as he shouts back, “No! Just stay there.” This particular shot parallels an earlier one of Care-Inn closing the dressing room door on Jango. Trecartin does this to build a bridge between Jango and Pasta in the narrative. Pasta’s memory of himself as Jango is thus invoked, which leads us to believe that the character is still traumatized by his past (or present).

Once outside his condo, Pasta revs the engine of his white MINI Cooper and drives off to Old New Jersey. A close-up of the character’s face behind the wheel is cross-cut with a panoramic view of a virtual landscape advancing forward. The polygonal environment represented in this scene consists of infinite rows of smooth surfaced mountains lining an endless highway. Far from the urban cityscape imagery
often associated with new technology and the World Wide Web\textsuperscript{282}, Trecartin’s digital space-making is devoid of the kinds of futuristic infrastructures one would envision finding in a high-tech virtual world. Although this desolate sight might surprise some viewers at first, Tom Boellstorff points out that virtual landscapes such as those found in the MMORPG Second Life “often have a rural feel to them – newcomers to Second Life often say it seems empty or abandoned. One reason for this is that to distribute server load, only a certain number of objects can be created or ‘rezzed’ on a parcel of land.”\textsuperscript{283} Following a similar trend toward “web-ruralization,”\textsuperscript{284} Tom Rielly, co-founder of Digital Queers, a national online network for LGBTQIA members, calls this virtual community center the “Queer Global Village.”\textsuperscript{285}

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{images/3.35_3.36.png}
\caption{Figure 3.35 Figure 3.36}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{284} Term used to express the idea of making the World Wide Web feel rural.
\textsuperscript{285} Silberman, Steve. “We’re Teen, We’re Queer, and We’ve Got E-mail,” in \textit{The Columbia Reader on Lesbians and Gay Men in Media, Society, and Politics}. ed. by Larry P. Gross and James D. Woods. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 537.
By situating Pasta within a digital rural environment, Trecartin challenges the commonly held belief that “queer subcultures thrive [primarily] in urban areas”\(^{286}\) – a concept that Halberstam dubs “metronormativity.”\(^{287}\) Indeed, Halberstam argues that queer individuals feel more threatened in rural areas as they stand out more. Moving to the city thus becomes a survival strategy or as the author states, a “necessity.”\(^{288}\) Although Halberstam nuances his claim by noting that “many queers [later] yearn to leave urban area and return to their small towns,”\(^{289}\) his statement still suggests that queers have to move to the city before going back to rural life. In reality, queer individuals today no longer have to move to the city in order to find/build communities thanks to the social-networking possibilities offered by the Internet. Steve Silberman further remarks that, “In the past, teens had to wait until they were old enough to get into a bar to meet other gays and lesbians. Now, online interaction lets teens find other gay youngsters – as well as mentors.”\(^{290}\)

Halberstam’s understanding of “queer place” positions the rural, a supposed heteronormative place, in opposition to the city, a supposed queer place. Yet, as Nicolas Bourriaud notes, “In a world every inch of which is under satellite surveillance, territory takes the form of a construction or a journey.”\(^{291}\) Thus, trying to categorize specific locales as queer or heteronormative loses its political appeal when erasing the imaginary

\(^{287}\) Ibid, 36.
\(^{288}\) Ibid, 37.
\(^{289}\) Ibid.
\(^{290}\) Silberman, Steve. “We’re Teen, We’re Queer, and We’ve Got E-mail,” in *The Columbia Reader on Lesbians and Gay Men in Media, Society, and Politics.* ed. by Larry P. Gross and James D. Woods. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 537.
frontiers of our global world. In *I-BE Area*, Trecartin seeks to eliminate geographical divisions by placing much emphasis on his characters’ mobility. The protagonists are able to move seamlessly from one place to another almost telepathically: pop-up windows simultaneously display the same character in different environments, jump cuts and cross-cuts also transport them to disparate situations, fades-in and out give the impression of spatial unity despite the fact that the scenes are shot in completely unrelated locations.

Trecartin also alludes to the characters’ portability through dialogue. For example, Pasta requests that his confidant, Mayflyflowna (Katrina), a suburban housewife, cash in a check and buy him a plane ticket: “I wanna a one-way, no way ticket to the end.” Pasta begins to retroactively count down from five to zero. The sound of a
space rocket taking off slowly fades in. When the protagonist reaches zero, the image cuts to a two-dimensional image of the sky which then dissolves into an aerial shot of a real-life sky in which a minuscule silhouette of a plane can be detected on the horizon. This furtive shot quickly leads to a 3D rendering of a bare beach at night bathed in bright light emitted by a full moon. This uncharacteristic romantic, almost peaceful vision is interrupted by the sudden (re)apparition of Amerisha. The camera provides us with a night-time long shot of a corn field. An indistinguishable figure seen from a distance runs frantically across the field, struggling to find a way out of it. As the character approaches the camera, we recognize the outfit and wig previously worn by Amerisha. Yet, when we are presented with a close-up of the mysterious intruder, we realize that the performer playing Amerisha is no longer Trecartin but Kenny Curran.
However, this recent version of Amerisha cannot be interpreted as a new character since it is later revealed in the credits that it is named “No name I-Be corn Glitch.” As such, Kenny Curran, as Amerisha, appears to be nothing more than a temporary computer system malfunction. Nevertheless, we are still pondering what is causing the character such distress and why she is so eager to escape the corn field. Interestingly, corn fields represent symbolic sites in Second Life. According to the website’s help portal, “The Corn Field is a region of mythological status where once naughty avatars were sent to think about what they had done.”

Although we are not made privy to what has led to Amerisha’s demise, we understand that she has become a “naughty avatar.” In computer jargon, a “naughty avatar” can mean an avatar with design flaws, or even worse, an avatar containing a virus. Working within a similar entropic logic, artist Cecile B. Evans and creative technologist Alice Bartlett recently developed a computer app that creates “a bad copy”

292 http://wiki.secondlife.com/wiki/The_Corn_Field
of your online identity on the social media site Twitter. The app, available at http://sevenonseven.herokuapp.com, hacks into Twitter profiles and changes behavior patterns randomly: adding strangers to the list of followers, and “un-following” others.

In this particular scene, the defective nature (glitch) of the character is highlighted by its nonsensical rant: “Stupid retro reality vote people fucking off TV can suck my… building.” Something off-screen momentarily catches the avatar/glitch’s attention. Like a mosquito attracted to light, Amerisha rushes madly in its direction. After crossing busy roads and traversing a forest, the character arrives at her destination. She momentarily pauses and points to a modern glass edifice nestled under a full moon and hypnotically declares: “Building, I’m gonna buy that building.”

![Image](image.jpg)

Figure 3.43

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294 Ibid.
Unable to resist the bewitching magnetism radiating from the superstructure, Amerisha races toward this perplexing corporate edifice. The next shot shows the character entering the building. However, she has returned to her original version I-BE 2 (Trecartin). Once inside, Amerisha wanders through dark gloomy halls, in search of “another soul.” The scene cuts to an extreme long shot of the character seen through glass windows as she hurtles across a corridor. An unidentified figure positioned in the foreground of the screen, her back turned to the camera, is observing Amerisha, as we are. The protagonist seems to be trapped inside this oppressive industrial structure which appeared so alluring earlier. The camera zooms in on an image of a spinning vortex overlaid atop the indistinguishable character. The visual recalls a previous spiral effect which appeared in the scene where I-BE 2 dumped his Independent Avatar into the computer trashcan icon. This parallel may indeed prefigure that Amerisha is about to experience the same fate as I-BE 2’s previous avatar. The image fades and we are now transported inside a bright classroom.

Figure 3.44
We have entered Jaime’s (Lizzie Fitch) area, a workshop in which trashed avatars are reformatted. Jaime is a pregnant drama teacher in charge of reprogramming these. With her protruding belly, she represents a mother figure – the motherboard. Referred to as “the fate creator” by the other characters, Jaime possesses the power to control all of the avatars ensnared in her territory. Although she calls herself a drama teacher, Jaime spends her time educating discarded avatars about consumerism and corporate culture:

You’re in front of a store. It’s over-stylized and controlling. They have dumb designs that fall apart and a scary smell […] Don’t be about the employees. It’s a guilty prop […] It’s cool. You can deal. Ask to see the manager and then his girlfriend, the CEO […] They’re like a young hip company. Kind of cool, kinda fair, kinda researched, all around wish-wash.

Jaime pauses from delivering her neoliberalist jargon-infused monologue to confront her students with a game of “Truth or Consequence.” Based on their response, she chooses a door to open which will determine their doomed fate. Her lecture is momentarily disrupted by the entrance of a new character, Jeff (Kevin McGarry), a “computer bug,” who magically storms out of a school locker. The character is framed
through multiple oblique camera angles, vacillating between close-ups and medium shots, to reinforce the sense of chaos he creates. Although Jeff’s role within the broader context of the narrative is minimal, his temporary onscreen presence is important as his sudden teleportation into the scene exemplifies Trecartin’s concept of mobile fluidity.
**I-BE Area**’s mise-en-scène can be perceived as an online chat room within which members may decide to join and participate or leave. Jeff’s entry into Jaime’s area through the locker portal can thus be read as barging in uninvited into the chat venue, further accentuated by flooding the room with repetitive senseless messages:

I’d like Orbit my Orbit silly Boo […] Outer space like seeing yourself out there, fluffy poo-poo cakes. Like I care. My outer goo-boo so fresh in poo-poo [...] I have five boyfriends to go sketch so open says me Out like a pre-Fab in a tornado. I have five boyfriends to go sketch. Open says me out like a pre-fab in a tornado. First, I’m gonna call my best friend to beat the fuck up out of Jeff, hello.

Jaime’s area is intercut with another chat room conversation. In it, three teen girls getting ready to go clubbing discuss their lifestyle blogs and their followers. Brief shots of Amerisha navigating aimlessly through the channels of the various chat rooms punctuate the scene. As a newcomer, Amerisha has been reformatted by Jaime, stripped of her personality, and is now renamed “No Name I-BE.” Lost in Jaime’s area, No Name I-BE comes across a mirror painted with the phrase, “Sally was here.” A familiar voice from outside the screen shouts, “Oliver Sally.” The protagonist quickly turns around and comes face-to-face with his previously trashed Independent Avatar who exclaims, “No compromise. I-BE Oliver Sally.” No Name I-BE looks at his reflection in the mirror. Jaime orders him in an authoritarian voice to “become an official Sally man.
now.” No Name I-BE removes his wig and asks Jaime which outfit he should wear to fulfill the role. However, she remains silent. As a result, he is left on his own to select his new wardrobe. No Name I-BE proceeds to grab a towel from a locker, wipe his face, and remove sections of the yellow make-up he wore when he was assuming Amerisha’s “personality.”

This significant turn in the narrative marks the first instance in which the character takes control over his representation. The central protagonist creates his own imagined version of Sally without having to depend on other online users to “hand down” their discarded “personality.” No Name I-BE, thus, becomes SallyManNow, or as Kevin Mcgarry describes it, a “self-authored identity.”

We understand that I-BE 2 has come a step closer to becoming the agent of his own destiny. He represents Trecartin’s prototypical protagonist: a character seeking “personal agency […] in an age of infinite optionality.” This is central to Trecartin’s philosophy since for the artist the Internet is not only a tool external to us, it is us, it helps us become more human, and thus helps us exist. By authoring his own “personality,” I-BE 2, or SallyManNow, creates a unique online profile that helps him affirm his place within cyberspace.

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296 From the BAMcinématek press release for the fifth annual Migrating Forms film festival.
Following his transformation, SallyManNow confronts the tyrannical Jaime. We realize through her exasperation that she is unable to control this “self-authored” avatar’s fate. The intensity of their conflict progressively escalates until Jaime and SallyManNow enter into what they call “a civil war.” Much like Trecartin’s earlier videos, *I-BE Area* ends in pandemonium: characters ravage their environment, destroying furniture, and lunging buckets of paint all over the walls. As Jaime’s area turns into a battlefield, her crew begins to shout, “I pick Sally.” SallyManNow gazes at his reflection in a mirror as he shouts, “That is me. Mirror, Sally, that is me. I look like how I feel now […] This is who I am. This is how I feel now.” We may not realize initially that the mirror represents a charged object utilized to highlight the character’s ongoing process of self-realization. This is due in part to SallyManNow’s temporary personality status – emphasized by the character’s reiteration of the word “now,” signifying the temporary present. I assert that while Trecartin may show us personalities that are fluid and/or temporary, this does not discount their ability to evolve and therefore the significance of the process of ongoing personal growth. This process does not occur in one continuous occurrence but instead happens in sections, scenes, or multiple screens.

Figure 3.51
In a final attempt to annihilate the protagonist, Jaime instructs her muse, Ramada Omar (Raul de Nieves), an avatar she has completely programmed, to kiss SallyManNow. By orchestrating this peck, Jaime hopes to transfer some of Ramada’s genetic coding into SallyManNow. In turn, this will facilitate the takeover of the protagonist. As the two kiss, Jaime “pauses” them indefinitely, as is illustrated via the use of a freeze frame. McGarry points out that, “In doing so, Jaime portrays I-BE 2’s entire personal narrative as a snapshot: finite, objectively knowable, and stripped of any potential futures. This is death in Trecartin’s world.”

However, since death is a foreign concept in the artist’s video universe, I believe that the pause serves instead as a regenerative transition that allows characters to reboot and start afresh.

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“Sometimes it’s really cool when things don’t move,” Jaime confesses to the camera. Behind her, a Polaroid shot of I-BE 2 and Ramada Omar smiling is pinned on the wall along with their clothes. Trecartin does not divulge what happens next to these two characters and instead redirects his focus to Jaime. Her demolished surroundings symbolize the eradication of her chat site. Stripped from the area that defines her, she gives up her role as motherboard and transmutes into another form by detaching her prosthetic belly. “This was nothing but a power prop! I did it for power! I did it for power!” she repeatedly shouts while undressing. By removing her clothes, Jaime liberates herself from her role as the central control agent of her area.
The madness suddenly comes to a halt with a cut to a panoramic view of Jaime’s ravaged bedroom shot via a rotating 360 degree angle. The camera’s lens surveys the wrecked room as if documenting the devastating aftermath. The great emphasis placed on the mise-en-scène shows a clear connection between Jaime’s relinquishment of power and the destruction of the space she inhabits.

Trecartin explained in an interview that one of the messages he wished to convey through the film was “that what identifies people is not necessarily their bodies anymore; it’s all the relationship they maintain with others. You are your area, rather than you are yourself.”298 Much as Web users update their Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, and many other online status to display their image of themselves to the world, the characters in I-BE Area are also merged with their online profiles. Space(s) and personality(ies) appear to be interrelated. However, it would be reductive to read Trecartin’s work as mere commentary on technology and social networks. The artist also invites us to explore the multidimensional modalities of existence made possible through the World Wide Web. In doing so, he frees us from the constraint to define ourselves in any fixed and linear ways. Trecartin’s utopic cyberqueer world promises a future in which technology helps us move beyond limitations and “unlock new realities that are already inside us.”299

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Chapter 4

*Any Ever:*
Stardom, Fashion, and Consumption

*Any Ever* (2009-10) was shot in Miami during the Great Recession of 2008. Ryan Trecartin arrived in South Florida to work on a short video project in collaboration with the nonprofit art space, Moore Space, founded by the eminent art collectors Rosa de la Cruz and Craig Robins. Unfortunately, the artist and his troupe of performers were soon forced to relocate after the exhibition space closed unexpectedly in October 2008. With the help of his New York art gallery at the time (Elizabeth Dee Gallery), private collectors, and maxed out credit cards, Trecartin rented a house in the Miami Design District of Wynwood and began working on what would become an ambitious epic series totaling close to four hours of footage. Conceived as a diptych, *Any Ever* comprises seven videos divided into two sections: *Trill-o-gy Comp* which contains three videos, *K-CoreaINC.K* (section a), *Sibling Topics* (section a), and *P.opular Sky* (section ish); and *Re’ Search Wait’S* which consists of four videos, *Ready*, *The Re’Search*, *Roamie View: History Enhancement*, and *Temp Stop*. All of the videos in the series are interconnected through recurring characters, narratives that begin in the middle of one video and end in another, and actions abruptly interrupted only to be resumed minutes later. Therefore, *Any Ever* may be understood as a single movie. As such, I will read the work as one continuous piece while distinguishing between its various parts in order to extract its complex, sometimes disjointed structure and meaning.

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302 Ibid.
*Any Ever* takes viewers on an overwhelmingly stimulating ride, bombarding them with mass media imagery and symbols. While contemporary media and advertising seek to produce passive consumers by over-stimulating their senses in order to dull them,\(^{303}\) Trecartin’s excessive style of communication invites viewers to become editors actively involved in curating the content in order to create their own meaning out of a clash of adjacent shots:

Well, I think meaning is a responsibility, and the blah, blah, blahs might be an exercise or a foreshadow to a very important shift in reality that seems to be in the air. I think we are becoming really good editors. It’s now a personal responsibility to curate your own understanding of the larger cultural mud we are all contributing to and navigating. The easier it becomes to participate in making culture, the more meaning is in the eye of the reader. And reading involves an act of writing. It’s no longer a handout that is consumed. It’s possibly a different kind of intelligence that is currently underappreciated, but nevertheless we are being forced to flex this muscle a lot in current, contemporary culture. I don’t see any of this as a negative.\(^{304}\)

The idea that “meaning is a responsibility” is central to *Any Ever*, as we will see that the artist assigns significance to objects beyond their function, turning “a careerist goal into living room furniture, an accent into a hairdo, or an ideology into a body language, or designer skin tone.”\(^{305}\)

Amidst foreclosure signs, Trecartin and his friends parade in eccentric accoutrements and asymmetrical multicolor make-up throughout constructed environments overloaded with objects and furniture sold at Target and Ikea, specifically selected for “their ubiquity and faux-designery corporate blandness.”\(^{306}\) Although at first


\(^{304}\) Trecartin, interview with Kristina Lee Podesva, “When the Time Comes You Won’t Understand the Battlefield,” *Fillip* 13 (Spring 2011): 103.

\(^{305}\) Ibid.

glance, his work may seem like a glorification of consumer society and its values, upon
closer inspection a more nuanced commentary on the recent economic crisis, global
corporate culture, and personality branding becomes apparent. *Any Ever* (2009-2010)
deals with a complex and intricate system that comments on the commodification and
standardization of culture in which individuality and subjectivity are homogenized.
Trecartin’s take on the chaotic state of what Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer call
the “culture industry,” or the mass production of culture is expressed through an
idiosyncratic perspective on the grotesque in fashion and style.

While his work has always been imbued with a fashion-forward aesthetic, in *Any
Ever*, it is taken yet a step further. Fashion constitutes a language of its own, offering
deeper insights into the narrative. Therefore, sartorial analysis serves an important role
and will be conducted concomitantly with scene readings. In order to interrogate the
relationship between his art and its connection to fashion, we will analyze the editorial
spread Trecartin art directed for *W* magazine. Diana Crane notes that the fashion industry
often co-opts with art as a way to confer meaning on fashion products and acquire
“cultural capital for the occupation.” Reciprocally, artists benefit from this association
as it provides them with an entry point into the mainstream, which subsequently has the
possibility of turning them into public figures and thus increasing the value of their work.
Contemporary artists thereby have the possibility of creating their own brand. This
chapter will closely examine Ryan Trecartin in various contexts: artist, brand, and pop
figure.

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Employing the visual language of advertising, Trecartin creates a world where “high art” and mass culture products, luxury brands, and industrial designs, coexist seamlessly. For the artist, there is no longer any “distinction between what’s ‘high’ or ‘low,’ anymore, what’s professional or amateur, all those dichotomies [...] inhabit the same media space now.” In this regard, he may be compared to pop culture icon Andy Warhol, whose interest in mass consumerism led him to reexamine mundane objects from popular culture and transpose them within the context of “high art.” However, while Warhol fervently embraced media culture, Trecartin’s position vis-à-vis advertising and conspicuous consumption is less radical and more complex. As Lauren Cornell puts it, “Trecartin’s work is not – to use a word that gets bandied about in the films – ‘anti.’ Rather, it’s radically ‘pro’ or constructive, absorptive and forgiving.” While there is much truth in this statement, I assert that his work is neither “anti” nor “pro.” Unlike other contemporary artists whose work is often interpreted as direct critiques of consumer culture such as Tom Sachs who creates sculptures from luxury brand packaging or Sylvie Fleury, who appears to glamorize the trappings of consumerism, Trecartin does not place a direct value judgment on our social practices. Instead, he opts to turn the dysfunctional side of our culture into a constructive and positive experience:

I enjoy exploring ideas more than judging them, and often when I see something in the world that feels destructive, disturbing, or ugly, I don’t necessarily see it as a bad thing [...] Sometimes when people watch my movies, I feel like they will say something like, “Oh my god, you’re showing how ugly our culture is, just an inch underneath,” and I’m like, no, I think that I’m showing, in a different way, why these things are potentially creative and positive.

310 Some examples include Campbell’s Soup I (1968), Coca-Cola (1962), and Brillo Soap Pads (1964-69)
However, this is not to say that *Any Ever* is devoid of any social commentary. On the contrary, the series clearly functions as an exaggerated magnification of our consumerist social practices. Yet, although his critique of our economic and sociopolitical systems may sometimes appear negative, the artist always finds a way to punctuate it with humor, perhaps as a mode by which to instill positivity in the collapsing system depicted in his work. When asked to comment on the idea of “entropic decay” in his videos, the artist simply replied, “I think it’s more about celebrating transition as a generative process.”

I consider *K-CoreaINC.K (section a)* to be the introductory section in the series (although Trecartin does not designate an order to the series). The video opens with a rotating three-dimensional model of the earth surrounded by four satellites. The monochromatic color scheme of the image (gray font superimposed in front of a gray globe) transmits blandness, which is further emphasized by the metaphorical message,

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“Dear HeyK, Please Don’t Accept your Progressaphobias in work flow by Brand Washing My Global Blanky with SAME Page. I really need a case of atmosphere. Are you finding Position? It’s such a Hunt.”

Within the first few seconds, Trecartin introduces us to the central theme expressed throughout the seven videos: the commodification and standardization of contemporary culture. This concept, however, is not a new one. Adorno and Horkheimer had taken notice of this phenomenon by the middle of the twentieth century when they wrote that, “Culture today is infecting everything with sameness. Film, radio, and magazines form a system. Each branch of culture is unanimous within itself and all are unanimous together.” Trecartin re-examines this concept in the midst of twenty-first century globalization, where singularity has become a myth. However, we will see that for Trecartin, sameness does not necessarily represent a loss of individuality but an opportunity to connect with others.

Figure 4.3

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K-CoreaINC.K’s opening scene quickly transitions to a medium shot of an office worker (Xavier Cha) standing in front of her desk, sporting a platinum blond wig, white powdered face, and a pristine white office shirt. “GSAK” appears in the foreground as an acronym for the character’s name, “General South AmeriK.” GSAK faces the camera while addressing another member of her team off-screen as if communicating through video conferencing technology. Unlike previous videos, K-CoreaINC.K (section a) is situated in corporate environments.

![GSAK](image)

Figure 4.4

Trecartin then cuts to a fast-paced montage sequence, employing his signature multiple screen motif to quickly introduce the video’s protagonists: a homogeneous team of clone-like office workers of an imaginary global corporation, named Korea Inc. Each staff member is presented onscreen alongside their acronyms such as “NAK” (North America Korea) or “MK” (Mexico Korea). Their names are devoid of any human signifiers and are instead based on the company’s international trade exchanges with other nations. The employees’ hyperactive verbal exchanges made up of sentence fragments and incomprehensible business-like jargon seems to be referring to the technicalization of language: “I copy-pasted the e-mail I just cc’ed you.” Brian Droitcour also remarks,
Their [the characters’] impulses and affects are subjugated to the fluid discourses of a brand identity; they speak the stilted business tongue of PowerPoint slides and memos. We live in the time of corporate personhood – when corporate bodies and perlocutionary corporate speech make the models of how a person should be.\textsuperscript{315}

Characters deliver their lines mechanically, detached from any recognizable emotion. They appear to have lost touch with their humanity, as is the case with USA Korea (Ryan Trecartin) whose robotic voice sounds like it has been generated by a computerized system. USAK is in the middle of a conflict with an ambitious self-appointed unpaid intern (Veronica Gelbaum) who desperately wants to become officially contracted by the company for this non-compensated position. The intern attempts to prove her worth by introducing her branding strategy to the firm: “The new look for this company is re-thinking the word humanity as an object with a goal.” Unfortunately, her speech is suddenly interrupted by USAK who interjects, “Well, actually, I don’t think Global Korea is hiring any career girls right now.”

\textsuperscript{315} Droitcour, Brian. “Societies of Out of Control: Language and Technology in Ryan Trecartin’s Movies” in \textit{You Are Here: Art After the Internet}. Ed by Omar Kholeif. (Cornerhouse, 2014), p. 46.
The dialogue can be understood as a direct reference to the hiring freeze imposed during the 2008 economic recession. However, USAK’s refusal to recruit her as free labor leads us to ponder if this is, in fact, her true motivation. Soon, the reason behind her decision is revealed when the character performs a brief soliloquy for the camera: “One thing I’ve learned in all these years, never hire someone who’s good, ‘cause she’ll have your job in four seconds.” The intern seems to represent a threat to USAK’s livelihood. Trecartin alludes to the cut-throat competitiveness of the corporate world in which maintaining a job is paramount to individual survival. Yet, the intern does not seem disconcerted by this apparent obstacle. As unpaid labor, she has the freedom to leave and start anew whenever she pleases. The careerists on the other hand are too preoccupied with internal politics – the hunt, therefore, is not to land a position but to maneuver corporate machinations.

In charge of this regimented chaos is Global Korea (Telfar Clemens), a devilishly manipulative, yet thoroughly entertaining drag queen whose main objective for the fiscal year is to reward her team with a company-sponsored get-together. Joanne Entwistle
applies Michel Foucault’s theory on the relationship between bodies and power in *Discipline and Punish*, when she explains that “particular strategies of dress such as the imposition of uniforms and dress codes at work, are utilized by corporations to exercise control over the bodies of the workers within.”

While this style of corporate discipline exercised through dress applies to most of the employees of Korea, Inc., GK manages to exert great control over her own body and dress. Unlike the rest of the employees whose uniform-like business attire consists of dull white office-shirts and khakis, GK’s outfit has a bit more business pizzazz. Global Korea is seen sporting a leopard print top with brown satin knee-length skirt. GK differentiates herself from her co-workers through her wardrobe as a way to establish her superior rank and non-conformity. She appears to be working within the corporate system but subverts it via her garment choices. However, she does not merely set herself apart with her clothing. She also neglects to attire herself with underwear, often flashing her penis at the other employees – perhaps as a “subtle” reminder of her dominance. She truly gives new meaning to the term “power dressing.”

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In *The Language of Fashion*, Roland Barthes writes that “Dress is, in the fullest sense, a ‘social model’, a more or less standardized picture of expected collective behavior.” Therefore, not adhering to institutional dress codes can be regarded as an act of defiance against the unity of the incorporated body and may subject one to disciplinary action from management. In the ensuing scene, a stewardess (Ryan Trecartin), dressed in a head-to-toe latex suit that resembles the fetishistic costumes of Leigh Bowery, rebels against the company by smashing a porcelain plate on the floor in front of Global Korea. The camera momentarily focuses on the debris splattered across the room to emphasize the gravity of this act of rebellion. In true drag queen form, GK raises her finger in the air and exclaims, “Oh no she didn’t!” while the employee sitting next to her replies, “Oh yes she did!” Trecartin cuts to a medium close-up of the stewardess as bold yellow letters spelling “FIRE HER” flash across the screen.

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319 Leigh Bowery was a performance artist, fashion designer, and club personality whose extravagant costume confections blurred the line between fashion and art.
Ironically, Global Korea takes the order much too literally and proceeds to set the disobedient employee on fire. Standing outside the building, GK drenches the rebel with gasoline while the rest of the crew witnesses the incendiary through the window. The contrasting festive ambience surrounding the scene is however unsettling. The employees laugh and clap as GK smokes a cigarette and commences to giggle while pouring fuel over a stewardess who sensually gyrates her body as the flammable liquid saturates her torso. The camera then zooms in on Global Korea as she says “I told you.” She proceeds to throw a lit cigarette at the stewardess and Trecartin adds an After Effect flame filter that consumes the screen.

![Figure 4.9](image)

Although the stewardess’s onscreen appearance is brief, her limited presence in the narrative nevertheless suffices to disturb the rest of the employees who immediately join in her annihilation. The character is a threat to the conglomerate, not because of her rebellious attitude, but because of her destabilizing image. Unlike the standardized uniform look of Korea’s workers, the stewardess’s full body latex suit exudes individuality and sexuality embodying a bondage S&M look. It is worth noting that her
face is completely covered, thus, her characterization is made possible primarily through
costume. In doing so, Trecartin presents a hybrid, almost cartoonish figure that is
difficult to read: is it human, cyborg, or should it be interpreted as a sculptural form? The
stewardess is thus not simply a performer, but a “designed” character.

Character design has become increasingly popular since the beginning of the new
millennium. Many contemporary experimental fashion designers and performance artists
have explored and transgressed the limits of the body through dress that features the
possibility of the expression of un-human-like characterizations. Deviating from
standardized ideals of beauty, these visionaries have created amorphous designs of
exaggerated proportions. Often featuring humorous, fetishistic, or even frightening
silhouettes, Japanese designer Rei Kawakubo, for instance, uses padding (feather down
pads) extensively in her collections to create a distorted female form with protruding
bodily appendages. In doing so, Kawakubo challenges mainstream body-shaping
tradition of Western fashion which often sexualizes the female figure by dressing it with

Figure 4.10

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body-hugging garments that accentuate an hour-glass shape. German designer Bernhard Willhelm, US designer Jeremy Scott, and Belgian designer Walter Van Beirendonck take on a more festive approach to their confections. The garish patterns and playful geometric shapes of their bright garments give them a cartoonish quality inspired by comic book super heroes. In 2008, Scott began a collaboration with sportswear brand Adidas to work on a collection of footwear and apparel. In line with his bold cartoonish aesthetic, the collection featured winged high tops and wildly patterned track suits.
British designer Gareth Pugh’s futuristic cyber-gothic pop fashion has a darker twist, eschewing vibrant colors for a monochromatic color scheme derived primarily of black and white tones. Performance artist Nick Cave creates fantastical “soundsuits” sculptures from a combination of manufactured and handmade fabrics constructed with unexpected materials such as toys, dyed human hair, and bottle caps.

On the edge between kinetic sculptures, art, and fashion, these garments extend beyond the bodily borders of the model and therefore align themselves with Bakhtin’s vision of the grotesque body – the unsealed and open-ended body.\textsuperscript{321} For Bakhtin, it is within body orifices “that the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome: there is an interchange and an interorientation.”\textsuperscript{322} The styling of Trecartin’s protagonists represents an outlet for the accumulation of a mass media expulsion they have internalized. Each look is comprised of a collection of various signs and symbols from contemporary visual culture placed on top of each other. A luxury


handbag may be paired with a sleeveless T-shirt made from a cropped trash bag onto which multiple logos are adhered, akin to a walking billboard. Such outfits allow for the discharge of surplus information which the characters can no longer contain, thereby confounding the boundary between the inner and outer body.

When placing emphasis on producing alternative hybrid body shapes, experimental designers often also aim to either remove attention from or conceal the human face. They achieve this depersonalization either through intricate masks or make-up in order to direct attention to the clothes and away from individual facial signifiers. Leigh Bowery modeled his own flamboyant creations and was one of the first to initiate this trend with his head-to-toe body latex suit. He was known for designing a character look per year and wearing it all day for the entire year. Attired in his own outlandish, sometimes monstrous creations, Bowery manifested genderless fantastical queer creatures. The post-human non-identity of Bowery’s grotesque characters clearly parallel some of Trecartin’s constructed personae, such as the disobedient stewardess in *K-CoreaINC.K*. Similarly, Martin Margiela effaced the outward identity of his models by creating head-encasing masks from pantie hose or encrusted with jewels.
According to Francesca Granata, masking the face is a way for experimental designers to comment on the fluidity and instability of identity:

In its playful and amorphous quality and in its insistence on shielding the locus of subjectivity represented by the face, their work corroborates an understanding of identity as constructed, in flux and inherently unstable. In doing so, it illustrates and partially explains the centrality of fashion, and particularly experimental fashion, to contemporary culture and to our ability to negotiate a complex and multisided existence as pluri-cultural subjects in a globalized society where identity is no longer fixed.323

As we will see, Granata’s assertion that experimental fashion is central to “our ability to negotiate a complex and multisided existence as pluri-cultural subjects” is key to understanding Ryan Trecartin’s art direction.

In fall 2010, the year Any Ever made its national debut at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, Trecartin directed a fashion shoot for the annual artist issue of W magazine. Instead of employing traditional models, the artist cast his friends and recurrent performers from his films: Lizzie Fitch, Veronica Gelbaum, Telfar Clemens, and Ashland Mines. The overall styling of the photographs is very similar to Any Ever’s aesthetic: the models pose in overly-accessorized intricate garb, sporting designer goods mixed-matched with mass-manufactured items from department and novelty stores. Although the stillness of the images do not convey the frenetic pace of his video work, Trecartin nevertheless manages to tell a story by thematizing each editorial shot and turning his posers into idiosyncratic freeze frames of his characters.

Lizzie Fitch’s theme, “Negative Beach,” portrays a valley girl sporting tan lines in all the wrong places. Fitch holds a bottle of Penta purified water filled with guppies swimming around a buoyant red BlackBerry. On top of her head, a shiny army print eye

mask serves as a head band. First Class Forever stamps function as earrings attached to bulky amber mosquito fossils dangling from her earlobes. One of her teeth is also accessorized with a brass hoop tooth piercing. In an effort to blur the character’s gender, an Adam’s apple was added in post-production. Much like Margiela’s deconstructionist approach, Trecartin takes apart garments and reassembles them in inventive ways, as is the case with Fitch’s top, made up of an Ann-Sofie sleeveless back shirt merged with one half of a gray and blue Dries Van Noten shirt.\textsuperscript{324} The whole look is accomplished with multiple customized spray tan lines which contour Fitch’s face and body in distorted hypo- and hyperpigmented skin tones.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure420.png}
\caption{Figure 4.20}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{324} Trecartin, Ryan. “Ryan’s Web 1.0,” at http://dismagazine.com/dysmorphia/9844/ryan-trecartin-w-magazine/
Fitch’s California girl persona in the *W* spread is quite distinct from her role as Able, a self-important careerist in charge of a human resources department in *Ready (Re' Search Wait's)*. Unlike “Negative Beach’s” character who appears to be completely oblivious to the camera’s presence, Able, on the other hand, is very conscious of its gaze. She is always presented through frontal views addressing the camera while showing off her legs, either wide open or up in the air. Yet, she does not face the camera to be gazed upon or be seductive. Instead, she confronts it in order to display her dominance. A power struggle appears to be at play between Able and the camera, which is visually manifested through constant shifts between high and low angles. Both characters also diverge in the way they are styled. With her cropped bob hair, black shirt, skin-tight white lace leggings, and clunky shiny black pumps, Able’s “corporate” look is contradictory to that of the fashion spread’s futuristic beach outfit.

The clear dichotomy between both representations seems to create a disconnection between the fashion spread and the videos. If we consider *W* magazine’s photo shoot an extension of *Any Ever*, then we may wonder why Trecartin decided to create entirely new and seemingly unrelated characters specifically for the spread. He
could have reproduced the already popular images from his video to bridge the photo shoot with his movies. It is not uncommon to find actors and actresses posing in fashion shoots to promote their latest movies, sometimes styled and dressed in the same fashions they wear onscreen. However, for Trecartin, attempting to extract the protagonists from his videos to directly transpose them into the glossy pages of *W* magazine would imply that the characterizations are fixed. As I have demonstrated previously, the artist understands his characters to be fluid subjects or “pluri-cultural subjects.” It is precisely by styling them differently from his films that Trecartin is able to establish this type of connection between the fashion shoot and his videos. So, for the artist, while they may appear dissimilar style-wise, all of the characters posing in the spread are essentially manifestations of the same ones in his videos. Each is able to continue existing outside of the videos. After filming ends, Trecartin’s Able might be tempted to ditch her “managerial mask” and go zone out at the beach, for example.
Veronica Gelbaum is seen on the next page in an equally complex pose. As “Crop Charity,” Gelbaum shows off a white Dior calfskin tote encased inside a large plastic comforter bedding case. A water box that reads “BOXED WATER IS BETTER FOR THE VIEW” is detected on top of a pile of broken safety glass accumulated at the bottom of the plastic case. Above, a Dior handbag displays an attached Post-it which reads “Hobby Lossless 143: 1AB.” This play-on-words merges the tax code regulation “Hobby Loss Rule,” which limits losses that can be deducted from income (from Internal Revenue Code Section 183), with “Lossless,” a data compression term which means that no quality was lost during compression.\(^\text{325}\) According to Trecartin, “143” stands for “I love you,” and 1AB for “wannabe.”\(^\text{326}\)

Unlike Fitch’s character, Negative Beach, whose outfit consists of a mash-up of barely distinguishable garments, Gelbaum’s attire consists primarily of a mix of luxury brand items in their original identifiable state. In her right hand, she carries a pair of Martin Margiela Money shoes, a Chopard palladium resin and lacquer pen is suspended from her belt, and a dozen Movado watches are linked together to form a necklace. The fully customized designer outfit is then further accessorized with a multitude of department store clothing price tags from Target, Ross, and Marshalls, hung about her torso.

Veronica Gelbaum’s blasé socialite persona takes inspiration from the character she plays in *Temp Stop (Re’Search Wait’S)*. In it, Gelbaum plays Y-Ready, a power-hungry, abusive head manager. *Temp Stop* opens with an overhead shot of Y-Ready


\(^{326}\) Ibid.
lying on the floor conducting sit-up exercises as she delivers an offensive monologue to her subordinate workers:

Each and every time you walk past that door I need you to ask me what I want from you and even if I don’t want anything, [...] but I don’t want anything right now so you’re just bugging the shit out of me actually [...] Has anybody told you to go fuck yourself? Don’t ask me if I need your help unless I look at you, which I will never do because you are subservient.

Y-Ready’s degrading commands recall those delivered by almighty fashion editor, Miranda Priestly (Meryl Streep) in *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006): “Is there some reason that my coffee isn’t here? Has she died or something?” Both characters also sport similar garments and accessories consisting mainly of dichromatic combinations of black and white. However, much like Miranda Priestly, Y-Ready’s tough exterior is only a mask she dons during office hours. In *P.opular S.ky (section ish)*, she reveals her sensitive side. Sitting in a car’s passenger side, Y-Ready flirts with someone off-screen. Her apparent shyness and awkwardness betray a sense of insecurity which was completely undetectable in previous scenes. Examining and contrasting W’s photo shoot with the
videos in *Any Ever* enables us to understand how the protagonists “negotiate a complex and multi-sided existence.”

Trecartin comments on how he further expands on this theme which he began exploring in *I BE Area*, “We’re all networked and we’re maintaining our own discrete networks of multiple selves.”

In the same magazine spread, fashion designer/performance artist turned model, Telfar Clemens, strikes a pose in his techno-inspired shoot, “General Control.” In it, Clemens wears a sports bra with the recycle symbol printed on it. The bra is covered by a transparent cropped plastic bag designed by Clemens himself. Tags that read “NETWORK NEUTRALITY” hang from the handmade cropped top. An oversized zipper serves as a necklace which hangs from his neck wrapped in a thin layer of green

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bubble wrap with the logo “PROACTIVE SOLUTIONS” printed on it. A computer home icon is employed as a belly button ring. An iPad with a pony tail glued to its back stands in as a handheld mirror. One of his legs is propped up on top of a metallic carry-on suitcase to feature one of Trecartin’s shoe creations: sandals made from flip-flops and wattle-firming neck pumpers.

Finally, the last image in the editorial story, “Anti-Virals,” is modeled by Ashland Mines. Mines wears an Ed Hardy hat drenched in crusty White Out. A bottle of the correction liquid is hooked to a belly chain hanging off his hat. Trecartin creates what he calls a “belly button situation” by piercing the rim of the hat with a plastic button. One side is designed to look like an Internet mail button and the other a computer power
button.\textsuperscript{329} Ankle-length micro braids seem to spring out of the back of the Ed hardy hat, cascade down, and drape over the character’s right shoulder. Mines’s body is intensely “manscaped”\textsuperscript{330} to produce what the artist calls “a very personalized idea of sexy chiseled body-hair: ultra clean and gross…but weirdly pretty and sensitive.”\textsuperscript{331} The model also sports fingerless biker gloves, one green and one red, worn on top of surgical nitrile gloves. Trecartin explained that he wanted the hands to look like the “thumbs up”/“thumbs down” icons used as response tools in websites such as YouTube and Facebook.\textsuperscript{332}

Trecartin’s hyper-stylized photo shoot is intended to appeal to the primary sensory mode of consumer culture: visual display.\textsuperscript{333} However, these images are not meant as campaign ads attempting to sell products under the guise of high art. While advertising seeks to add value to products by showcasing their design or functionality, thereby promoting a desirable lifestyle and creating a false sense of need in consumers, the artist’s project, conversely takes objects out of context and creates meaning beyond their function. In doing so, he calls attention to the fact that consumption is not a passive process but an active one in which, as David Howes remarks, “all sorts of meanings and uses for products are generated that the designers and marketers of those products never imagined.”\textsuperscript{334} Thus, iPads are turned into handheld mirrors, postage stamps into earrings, belts into headbands, and a brick into a 5G network cellphone. Similarly, at the end of \textit{P.\textit{opular S.ky (section ish)}}, the entire crew gathers outside by the swimming pool and

\textsuperscript{330} Term refers to male grooming.
\textsuperscript{331} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{332} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{334} Ibid, 294.
transforms the garden into an obstacle course. Bed frames are turned upside down and converted into monkey bars and white Ikea book shelves are lunged into the pool and fashioned as surfing boards.

According to the artist, displacing objects from their intended use enables him to open up different interpretations of what is on display while simultaneously allowing audiences to reevaluate the meaning of a product beyond its packaging:

I think it’s exciting to house content in a state that is removed yet poetically connected to the known realities of its existence so that one can feel the vibe or sensation of that content in a more direct and visceral way. When something is housed in its normal environment, I think we tend to see only the accumulation of its “text” or chatter, but not the root of its body, the thing that makes people say, ‘I get it.’

Similarly, a new wave of artists are remapping and deconstructing the meaning of objects in their practice such as video performance artist Jacolby Satterwhite whose 3D animation work “inspires [him] to perform in a way that queers the meaning of the object, dissolving the political potential of the object in relationship to [his] body.”

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335 Trecartin, interview with Kristina Lee Podesva, “When the Time Comes You Won’t Understand the Battlefield,” Fillip 13 (Spring 2011): 103.
video *Country Ball* (1989-2012), Satterwhite magnifies the size of 3D cakes in order to make them look like skyscrapers. “Bondage contraptions” are installed on the roof where the artist can be found “voguing.”337 According to Satterwhite, this visual representation is a way to highlight how society “pollutes objects’ meanings with history, politics and social anxiety.”338

![Figure 4.28](image)

Jacolby Satterwhite’s usage of the term “pollute” in his quote above suggests that the process of re-contextualization in his art is an act of resistance against the established system of branding. For Trecartin, however, branding is just another useful tool to employ in his work. Both artists’ divergent approaches lead us to interrogate the relationship between art and advertising and ask ourselves if the separation between both still holds true today. In her article, “What Does Nike Want?,” Agatha Wara writes,

> Misunderstood by the critical art sector as the total corporate instrumentalization of human physiological responses, the field of advertising continues to be disavowed from having any “critical” potential. Yet in a world where the language of advertising is becoming evermore sophisticated and ubiquitous, it seems almost pathological for art to continue to disregard its presence. *Why should the emergent system of*

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337 Term refers to dancing to music in such a way as to imitate the characteristic poses struck by a model on a catwalk.
338 Ibid.
signs known as art escape the grasps of a more expansive material ontology? 339

Wara argues that although branding and art are “types of coding” which share a common goal in that they both seek to catch and hold attention, advertising has generally been looked down upon by critics due to its obvious commercial aim. 340 While it is not within the scope of this dissertation to answer such a broad and charged question as the one posed by Wara, her statement serves as an entry point to further examine artists as brands.

Ryan Trecartin’s conception of branding can be further explored in an article posted on Dis Magazine’s website, which details the artist’s creative process for his W magazine spread. Amidst the dozens of instructions carefully laid out by Trecartin in the article, one in particular appears to provide some clarity into his motivation. The directive stipulates that although the models in W magazine may have body parts in a state of transparency to blend with the background, the face and hair will always remain opaque. 341 The artist then reiterates that “Any transparent moments will be from the neck down.” 342 We then understand that Trecartin aims for his characters to be distinguishable.

Indeed, we discern that much emphasis was placed on the facial styling of each of his models. Fitch is made to look like she received a “ton of well done surgeries, at too young of an age. So that she looks 46,” through the use of contour makeup. The artist attempts to apply professional and refined makeup to Veronica Gelbaum, while having “a

340 Ibid.
342 Ibid.
343 Ibid.
quality of financially substituted features…;” Clemens’s face is painted with a “digital blur make-up foundation” composed of many multi-shaded digital pixel effects which transmit the appearance of a censorship blurring effect. Finally, a steering wheel is superimposed over Ashland Mines’s visage in order to give his forehead, cheek bones, and jaw line a “facial steering” look, “so that the face vaguely feels like a steering wheel or navigational device for long distance and memory.” What we are left with are characters wearing some sort of digital masks that evidently do aesthetically resemble those portrayed in what he calls his movies.

Interestingly, these protagonists bear multicolor asymmetrical makeup and irregular geometric designs. The cosmetic camouflage look has become increasingly popular in recent years as a tool by which to subvert biometric detection from machines. Due to the emergence of high-tech facial recognition programs, performance artist Jillian Mayer posts online videos inspired by YouTube makeup tutorials. She spoofs these by teaching viewers how to utilize makeup as an undercover device. However, her loud and grotesque maquillage reminds us that this trend is not “about blending in.” Mayer explains that “this is about sticking out yet remaining undetected by cameras.”

345 Ibid.
346 Ibid.
348 Ibid.
349 Ibid.
While it is clear that *Any Ever’s* protagonists do not attempt to blend in, they do not try to hide from cameras either. On the contrary, they constantly demand the camera’s attention through their direct mode of address. In fact, while their makeup may function as a sort of mask, they are nevertheless very much recognizable. Even in the *W* photo shoot, each performer is easily identifiable despite the abundance of post-production effects applied to their faces. So, if not to escape the camera’s scrutiny, then, what is the purpose of such gaudy makeup? I assert that Trecartin’s eccentric characterizations do not solely serve a stylistic function but are indeed a major part of his trademark – a clearly recognizable visual hallmark rooted in his branding.

Figure 4.29

Figure 4.30

Figure 4.31
In their essay “Characters on Parade,” Ginger Gregg Duggan and Judith Hoos Fox note that character design in both fashion and art is an ideal tool for branding as it “tap[s] into our consumer sensibilities [by] emphasizing spectacle.” Trecartin’s unique characters have become such iconic emblems of his art that they now independently trend on Instagram, posting selfies of themselves backstage. Much like fashion labels, the artist has managed to brand himself by creating a distinctive look. This is indicative of his desire to extend the visibility of his work beyond the art world into mainstream culture.

Figure 4.32
Figure 4.33

Ryan Trecartin’s pop status was first elevated when Vogue magazine originally featured him in its February 2010 issue. A video still of a close-up of Trecartin portraying Shin from A Family Finds Entertainment spanned across two full pages which introduced an article about his work. The feature, titled “The Body Eccentric” by Dodie Kazanjian, identified a new trend in contemporary art which the author termed “eccentric

figuration,” defined as artists’ tendency to create “grotesque” and even “disturbing” figurative works. Kazanjian’s focus on form and style was consistent with the magazine’s goal to relate art to fashion, keeping in mind its fashion-centric target audience.

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, art has increasingly been deployed to confer cultural meaning to fashion and luxury brands. Artists, in turn, have mutually benefited from this association as the publicity garnished through ad campaigns and fashion spreads has helped to propel some to stardom. This alliance began with the emergence of Pop Art in the late fifties and early sixties, with artists such as Richard Hamilton and Andy Warhol whose works blurred the lines between “high art” and pop culture. In 1974, Warhol, who founded his own magazine Interview in 1969, posed in the February/March issue of L’Uomo Vogue, modeling conservative men’s fashions that were intended to appeal to a mass audience. More recently, contemporary artist Tracey Emin and painters Elizabeth Peyton appeared in British Vogue and Purple Fashion, respectively, adorned in luxury labels such as Vivienne Westwood, Marc Jacobs, and Miu Miu.

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These alliances highlight the long-standing relationship between fashion and art, but these examples merely present the artists as models. Trecartin’s involvement with the fashion industry goes a step further since he not only directs photo shoots but also creates one-of-a-kind fashion pieces that are included in the projects. For instance, the market pages in the back of *W* magazine which detail product and shopping information for goods used in editorial spreads featured Trecartin’s accessories such as the sandals worn by Telfar Clemens on sale at dismagazine.com for $275.00. This connection to the fashion industry resembles that of artists such as Vanessa Beecroft and Takashi Murakami who both partnered with the luxury brand Louis Vuitton. Beecroft, who is primarily known for setting up and directing large-scale installations consisting of live models, staged a performance for the opening of the Louis Vuitton store on the Champs-Elysées in October 2005. She arranged models on the boutique’s shelves among the brand’s handbags. In 2002, Marc Jacobs, who was then the creative director of Louis

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355 *W* magazine, November 2010, p. 152.
Vuitton, invited Murakami to collaborate on a handbag collection. Murakami re-
interpreted the house’s signature LV monogram by merging it with his unique Manga-
inspired graphics, which was an immense commercial success.

![Image of Louis Vuitton handbag]

Similarly, Ryan Trecartin designed his own logo for apparel he included in a
group exhibition organized by the DIS Collective, titled *DISown: Not For Everyone*. The
show displays affordable mass-market products that can then be sold during the
exhibit. Trecartin produced replicas of the sweatshirts worn by the performers in his
latest video *Comma Boat* (2013) for this collaboration. Blurring the boundaries between
art and commerce, the exhibit also attempts to dispel the romantic myth that artists can
sustain themselves without having to sell their work. As Lauren Boyle, co-curator and
member of the DIS collective, remarks, “You actually do need money to live.”

Yet, paradoxically, we must not forget that Ryan Trecartin distributes the entirety
of his videos freely online. How do we then reconcile the image of Trecartin as personal

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357 Ibid.
brand with his non-commercial approach to the distribution of his work? When asked to comment on his unrestricted modes of distribution and exhibition, he replied:

I think the movies are native to a multiplicity of situations. [...] Also, artists who are inspired by a diverse range of cultural hubs and mentalities should share with the worlds that inspire them. I don’t think art is outside or higher than other aspects of culture, but it is special, since it potentially has no boundaries and complete freedom. It’s important to mix that into the world.\(^\text{358}\)

Going mainstream for Trecartin does not carry the negative connotation often associated with art merging with mass culture since he does not believe that “art is outside or higher than other aspects of culture.” In fact, he is the first one to admit that his work is “part of something that is larger than the art world, something that includes advertising and TV shows and journalism.”\(^\text{359}\) Therefore, we cannot say that Trecartin has only recently become a pop figure since he has always been one. Nor can his work be said to have made the transition from galleries and museums to the general public since it was never conceived for such venues in the first place. Gaining visibility for him is not about achieving fame. For the artist, it is about reaching a wider audience and sharing back with the world that inspires him.

The media artist’s vision of an egalitarian society in which information is universally accessible, transcending social constraints of class, race, and gender, might not have been possible a few decades ago, before the advent of Web 2.0 algorithms and social networking. Nowadays, even exclusive activities such as attending fashion shows have become attainable to the masses via the Internet: “Social media has warped our cultural landscape, none more so than in the context of fashion. The once exclusive

\(^{358}\) Trecartin, interview with Kristina Lee Podesva, “When the Time Comes You Won’t Understand the Battlefield,” *Fillip* 13 (Spring 2011): 103.

world has become normalized – shows are live streamed and tweeted in real time for all to see.”

These idealistic views on technology, or what Richard Coyne calls “technoromanticism,” however, fail to acknowledge technology’s limitations and instead look up to it as the ultimate problem-solver to all of humankind’s issues.

As new technology becomes more ubiquitously integrated into our lives, we begin to notice that our interactions with one another have become increasingly standardized. Everybody uses the same social platforms and accesses similar information. What we are witnessing is the global homogenization of culture mediated through technological automation. Although Trecartin sees technology as a way to “liberate ourselves into a state where expression is existence,” he also understands its shortcomings. While Any Ever maintains the general techno-utopian undercurrent characteristic of his earlier work, it also takes a critical distance.

Figure 4.38

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In *Popular Sky*, for instance, Trecartin comments on the loss of individuality through the commodification and standardization of culture. In one scene, Global Korea and her crew arrive at their meeting destination, a sterile white commercial facility. GK is filmed through a medium shot voguing across deserted hallways and unoccupied office spaces, until the logo, “Crea France,” catches her attention. She points her finger in its direction and exclaims “This is France!” The other employees agglutinate around the sign, completely mesmerized. Trecartin superimposes a map of France with floating made-up national flags on top of the video footage. GK appears in front of the corporate emblem and affirms “I’m the real France!” Territory as a concept is no longer understood as a geographic location with its own history and cultural practices but is instead reduced to a corporatized symbol. Short stereotypical political jingle fragments in multiple languages intermittently flash across the screen to reinforce the idea that cultures can be contained as finite snapshots stripped of any complexity.

Figure 4.39
Characters are then shown roaming the walkways of a commercial compound, traversing from one symbolic image of a nation to the next, as if web browsing popular destinations. Trecartin comments on the idea of travel and portability in the age of the Internet to emphasize how culture may be accessible at the click of a button. As the protagonists declare, “We are global!” They simultaneously identify with individual nations yet none at the same time. As noted earlier, global identity is visually expressed through the blandness of the characters’ uniform styling. They are assimilated into the white cubicle aesthetic of corporate interior design and have become as sterile as the decor itself. The workers have lost any sense of individuality, which is repeatedly emphasized by their constant remark: “Oh my God! You look so beautiful, you look like me! We are you!” Korea’s employees have merged into a standardized corporate collective programmed to factory presets.

The last shot of *Temp Stop (Re' Search Wait's)* also alludes to this global trend toward homogenization. A static headless plastic mannequin modeling a generic denim skirt suit is on display in the foreground of the screen. In the background, countless
replicas of the same ensemble line the aisles of the department store. A monotone background voice asks: “Should we get it? I like it. Let’s get it.”

![Image](image.jpg)

**Figure 4.41**

The characters’ readiness to be subsumed into the masses may be perceived as a threat to their individuality. However, Ryan Trecartin understands their willingness to adopt a uniform appearance as a way to adapt to their situation at hand and connect with each other. The protagonists evade uniqueness and embrace sameness in order to belong to a community. The trend forecasting group, K-Hole, calls this phenomenon “Normcore.” In its recent issue, “Youth Mode: A Report on Freedom,” K-Hole observed that:

> Normcore doesn’t want the freedom to become someone. Normcore wants the freedom to be with anyone. [...] In Normcore, one does not pretend to be above the indignity of belonging. Normcore moves away from a coolness that relies on difference to a post-authenticity coolness that opts in to sameness. [...] Normcore seeks the freedom that comes with non-exclusivity. It finds liberation in being nothing special, and realizes that adaptability leads to belonging. Normcore is a path to a more peaceful life.  

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Of course, the concept of Normcore cannot be endorsed verbatim and must be taken with a certain degree of critical distance. Particularly problematic is the statement’s last and most radical claim which states that “Normcore is a path to a more peaceful life.” While the power of this theory lies in its potential to unite individuals, it can also lead to their alienation. The need to belong to a community might impel some to significantly compromise in order to be accepted.

This is the case for USAK, who has forgone her personality in exchange for an internship at Korea Inc. However, her robotic verbal delivery is sometimes interrupted by interjections that reveal her repressed desires, “I should be at the beach…I should be at the beach on vay-kay!” Trecartin suddenly jump cuts to a shot of USAK speaking on the phone with the same mechanical tone, “Ok, I’ll take it. I love rotating!” The scenes involving her often consist of quick crosscuts between close-ups and medium shots of her supervisors who reply, “Our ego needs have to be second to this conglomeracy.” The abrupt transitions highlight USAK’s inner conflict. The protagonist struggles to reconcile her own individual aspirations with her duty to conform and serve the organization.

Figure 4.42

Figure 4.43
After repeated failed attempts to fulfill the tasks assigned by her boss, USAK suffers a nervous breakdown, “I’m doing way too much things today. I can’t even tap into selfhood to give me off-hood and protect-hood.” USAK’s erratic behavior coupled with her rambling non sequitur signals her system meltdown. The scene abruptly ends with a white screen as the sound of an explosion resonates in the background. An image slowly fades back in and we are now transported to K/Corea Correctional Cellular Tank (CCT), an intern wasteland where unwanted employees are discarded. There, USAK meets another rejected assistant, British Korea (Laura Walpole). Intrigued by USAK’s sudden apparition, BK slowly approaches the newcomer. The camera frames her from a low angle as she steps onto a red mat with the caption “WE’RE CRAZY ABOUT LOW”\(^{364}\) printed in big bold white letters recalling text pieces by Barbara Kruger.\(^{365}\)

Somewhat ironic, this message may be referring to the two interns’ lower status within the company. However, USAK’s denial is manifested through her self-

\(^{364}\) The actual poster comes from an advertisement by the furniture company Ikea. The entire message reads, “We’re Crazy about Low Prices,” however, the low camera angle does not let us see the word “Prices.”

\(^{365}\) Barbara Kruger is an American conceptual artist whose work consists primarily of photographs and signs overlaid with declarative statements.
description, “tall, up high in the sky,” which implies that she believes herself to be superior to her inmate, British Korea. Oblivious to USAK’s dismissive comments, British Korea opens up about the unfortunate chain of events that led to her demise. Although indifferent at first, USAK slowly begins to empathize with BK’s plight. Both characters appear to be forging a close bond based on their mutual struggle – possibly the beginning of a friendship or even a romance. The scene ends with them holding hands, embarking on an unknown adventure. Before exiting the screen, USAK momentarily faces the camera from a far angle and performs a happy wiggle dance. She has relinquished her corporate personality in order to follow individual desires.

Figure 4.45

The ending of *K-CoreaINC.K (section a)* suggests that in *Any Ever’s* cut-throat corporatized system, there is no place for non-conformity and inefficient workers. This idea is further reinforced in *Temp Stop* when Y-Ready orders Able to turn JJ Check (Ryan Trecartin) into the “perfect employee” by reformatting him and deleting his presets. The ideal employee thus consists of a blank canvas onto which corporate ideologies can be inculcated.
At the heart of Korea Inc.’s corporate identity is the concept of “transumerism,” a neologism describing a class of consumers more concerned with experiencing a product than owning it. As stipulated by Y-ready, this consumerist trend must be embraced by all employees at all times. This new approach to consumerism is presented as the central theme of *Roamie View: History Enhancement*, which focuses primarily on the newly reformatted character of JJ Check.

As a blank slate, JJ looks at each product handed down to him by management as if experiencing them for the first time. Mundane objects are given considerable attention by JJ who refers to everything around him as “cute.” In one particular scene, JJ showcases one of his new acquisitions, a printout of a historic document titled “The Life and Captions and Execution of John Brown.” “It’s about how there once was a time where cute people had to do very real things to make their situations work out.” We understand from the character’s description that we are no longer living in a time where people have to do “real things.” Captain John Brown’s life and struggle to abolish
slavery are turned into a simplified and compressed folk tale. Later in the scene, JJ points to the “old constitution, the first one,” describing it as “really cute,” “I thought it would be neat and really cute if someone took out all of the times they say people or humanity and replaced it with situations and then every reference to God, take it out, and replace it with the Internet and then play over a house beat…” JJ lacks the historical insight necessary to understand and interpret these archival artifacts accurately. However, his constant reiteration of the word “cute” also denotes a certain condescension. In an interview, Ryan Trecartin explained why he frequently referred to the word “cute” throughout the series:

I like to think of the word “cute” as a cultural foreshadowing to file sharing, tidbit-style writing, and user-friendly software. It’s like data and idea compression. When something is cute, it’s probably been compressed. The act of unzipping something cute, in both a literal and technological way, is really perverted-sounding and hilarious to me. It’s the funniest word. If something is really expansive and someone else stands next to it and calls it cute, it’s almost like saying, “I’m outside your mess right now, seeing a bigger picture in which you look really compressed via my ability to read you.” It’s bizarrely condescending, the act of which is very cute.366

JJ thus sums up U.S. history in a compressed digital format which can be unzipped and edited, as he suggests, by replacing every mention of “God” with “the Internet.” Captain John Brown, like JJ Check, has been dehumanized and turned into an updatable software program.367

As such, JJ lacks basic human emotions which he attempts to learn by watching commercials. Short clips taken from corporate stock-footage videos are superimposed on top of JJ’s face. The protagonist is captivated by the sequence of images unravelling before him: office workers interacting in between their cubicles and mall shoppers brandishing their bags as a sign of victory and ultimate gratification. However, he is left unable to experience feelings. At the end of the video, JJ renounces his position as the perfect employee and advises his colleagues to “take some time off.”

Both JJ Check and USAK’s episodes function as micro-vignettes that illustrate the ramifications of the accelerated commodification and corporatization of culture. The two protagonists attempt to escape the control exercised by the omnipotent Korea Inc. in order to reclaim ownership of their own destiny. Yet, although a gleam of hope remains by the end of their respective adventures, we are still uncertain of their fate as Trecartin leaves us in suspense. It would not be until we reach the end of the series that we are granted some sort of satisfaction to our curiosity.
In *Sibling Topics (section a)*, which I consider to be the last installment of *Any Ever*, the artist takes a closer look at the impact of the economic system on the family unit. Trecartin plays identical quadruplet sisters Adobe, Ceadar, Deno, and Britt. Much like the employees of Korea Inc., the four sisters understand themselves to be part of a corporation. In one scene for instance, Ceadar declares to her sisters that she is going to “quit” the family tie, “I am so sick of my non-profit family matter […] I have a plan, dissolve this company at your own pace!”

The storyline primarily focuses on Ceadar, a self-proclaimed “post-family” sister who seeks to “crop” herself out of the family unit in order to create her own “situation.” The video follows her teleporting herself through various locations, each time accompanied by a love interest, Jason (Lee Kyle), Henry (Holcombe Waller), or Mass Major (Ashland Mines). Although she appears to yearn for stability at first, Ceadar always ends her relationships prematurely in order to move on to the next one. Many scenes depict her homeless, wandering public spaces, or transitioning between houses.
and hotel rooms. However, this is not to say that Ceadar’s character should be understood as a bohemian nomad, following her impulses. On the contrary, Ceadar is in control of every “premise” she puts herself in, as she designs them prior to experiencing them, setting the mood, location, and actors. Each scene thus, represents a scenario that the protagonist has created in advance.

In one “premise” called “CONVERSATION IN EASY MODE,” Ceadar meets up with her first nameless lover, “Baby” (soon to be renamed Jason). We learn that it is Ceadar’s birthday and Baby has outlined a “birthday vacation hotel premise” for her. Although excited, Ceadar soon becomes irritated after her lover proposes to invite her sisters on their intimate vacation. The protagonist explains that they all have separate lives and that she particularly despises Britt who she sees as an archenemy. Baby attempts to make a case for Britt, informing Ceadar that her sister’s company “offers better discounts.” Yet, the birthday girl categorically opposes it and instead redirects the

![Figure 4.49](image-url)
conversation in order to obtain clearer details about her “birthday present structure” so she can set it up perfectly.

As the narrative progresses, Ceadar loses control over the premises she creates and design flaws inexplicably begin to infiltrate the situation. In one scene, Ceadar is on a plane on her way to her next location, a commercial shopping mall in the heart of Wynwood. She proceeds to call her new beau, Mass Major, in order to delineate the chain of events for her newly conceived scenario. However, Ceadar suddenly realizes that someone has hacked into her workflow, “Something has changed, I feel weird. Someone did something early.” Trecartin jump cuts to a shot of Mass Major sashaying around a fountain of sculptures by Romero Britto, well known for his mass produced work.

The sculptures are framed in almost all the shots, towering over the protagonists who attack and attempt to smash them with plastic puppy toys. One character exclaims, “Apparently, this place is full of looser post-rich identity tourists!” Although they appear at first to show a certain hostility towards the various commercial edifices scattered
throughout the newly developed shopping mall, they soon begin to embrace its artificiality. It is at this instance that Britt infiltrates Ceadar’s premise and joins the party.

Many of the recurring characters in *Any Ever* suddenly pop up out of nowhere and gather around the fountain to execute an overly-stylized choreographed dance. Each protagonist freezes in poses as contrived as the commercial art installation that surrounds them. The camera spontaneously focuses on accessories such as shoes or bags, as if showcasing merchandise on an online shopping network. Characters purposely flaunt their material goods in front of the camera to attract its attention. Thus, they are not just posing, they are modeling things. In doing so, they reveal a clear awareness of their own bodies.
Although Ryan Trecartin has repeatedly been quoted as saying that he longs for the day when we can liberate ourselves from the fixity of the body, the characters in *Any Ever* are very conscious of their corporeal existence, often directly referring to it, “The economy of my body is booming,” or “My body is a good place for business, and I’m over it!” In one scene, a go-go dancer exclaims, “Oh my god I love these new arms!” and another one responds, “I love it! Good purchase!” Yet, as these comments suggest, the body is understood as a target for consumerism. Even though *Any Ever*’s protagonists acknowledge the presence of their body, they do not wish to remain in them indefinitely as they understand that doing so would fix them into easily identifiable prey for marketers. Ceadar understands this better than any of the other characters in the series and actually wishes to completely do away with her own body.

In the final scene of *Sibling Topics*, Ceadar and Mass Major find themselves in the last premise, a time-share vacation home. Staring at the cookie cutter house, Mass Major asks, “Ceadar where are we? It feels like prison.” Ceadar then replies, “This is a vacation house. Can you say time share?” Both characters approach and walk inside the immaculate monochromatic house. Mass Major inspects every inch of it, trying to ascertain the meaning of such an alien edifice. They visit each room, engaging with the props and objects scattered throughout. Yet, they are unable to hold on to anything substantial. “Where are the people?” asks Mass Major. Ceadar responds, “They are no people. This is just a container!”

Ceadar opens one of the bedroom closet doors and exclaims, “I’m sick of all my outfits coming from default closets!” A medium shot of a variety of Hawaiian print shirts hang across the diameter of the closet. This represents another commentary on the mass
production of fashion and the globalization of style. The camera further emphasizes this by focusing on a variety of generic household decorative elements produced abroad. The vacation home itself, paint color, furniture, and decorative accents, resemble a typical track house anywhere in the country. It lacks in individualization and feels like a block of beige with accents in moss green. The floral bedspread matches Caeder’s tropical wardrobe which clues us into the location of the video. Miami’s clichéd tropical influence seems to be the overarching theme here. An interesting geographic location for this nomadic artist to set up shop, considering its strategic placement as the gateway to the Americas. Its location affords it the opportunity to make available a slew of imported products that reek of commercialized globalization.

Lost in this impersonal space, Ceader desperately wishes to disconnect from overwhelming social practice of consumerism by doing away with her body. “I don’t want a body anymore! Fuck the body! I want a soul, I want to make my own soul!” In the next scene, she continues wandering throughout the house, her body begins to fade out until it completely disappears from the screen. We no longer see her, but we can hear
her voice which informs us that she is still physically present. The scene ends with the protagonist announcing, “I am finally just an as if. Sense me now” as the word “Asif” appears on the screen.

For the artist, this represents a “post-body” state. Ceader has reached Trecartin’s ultimate fantasy in which personality has become the location rather than the body. As Entwistle states in “Fashion and the Fleshy Body,” consumerist practices, in particular fashion, are embodied practices. Therefore, Ceader’s desire to do away with her body implies eschewing the trappings of these social engagements, which in turn liberates the protagonist. But Trecartin does not want to do away with bodies or consumerism per se. He utilizes both to serve functions that enable his work. His commentary is specifically related to the fixed body. His aim is for the commodified body to be transcended in order for a fluid ever-changing one to emerge.

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Chapter 5

Priority Innfield: Interactive Gaming Simulation as Expanded Cinema

The future and the past can be equally malleable; I don’t think they go in opposite directions. Memory is more an act of memorizing than recalling: you’re creatively constructing something that doesn’t really exist behind you, it exists in the same place the future exists. In my videos the characters try to treat that idea as fact.³⁷⁰

Priority Innfield (2013), Trecartin’s latest installment, debuted at the 55th Venice Biennale as part of The Encyclopedic Palace exhibition. The artwork invites us to anticipate the future while looking back at the past. Comprised of four independent yet interrelated videos, Junior War, Comma Boat, Center Jenny, and Item Falls, the series permits us to reflect back on the artist’s trajectory, from his senior year in high school to the present. The series was conceived as a gaming system in which characters are no longer human-like but rather represent information or raw data that travels from one game level to another. Priority Innfield explores the possibility of an immersive cinematic experience that offers more navigational agency to the spectator than in his prior works.

In order to simulate this sense of immersion, Trecartin set up video installations that challenge conventions of spectatorship and modes of exhibition and provide an interactive and participatory experience. A. L. Rees calls this type of projection event “expanded cinema,” a term originally coined by media theorist Gene Youngblood. According to Rees, the conception of expanded cinema has three main characteristics,

The first was to melt down all art forms, including film, into multimedia and live-action events. The second was to explore electronic technologies and the coming of cyberspace, as heralded by Marshall McLuhan. The

third was to break down the barrier between artist and audience through new kinds of participation. Each of these challenged existing notions of cinema as a commercialized regime of passive consumption and entertainment.\textsuperscript{371}

As we will see, this concept informs much of Trecartin’s new work as each of these aspects are present in both the exhibition space and within the work itself.

For the first time in his repertoire, Trecartin transports his characters outside of domesticity and places them within an open-space containing green screens and movable walls. Game levels must be surpassed in order to gain experience. Therefore, spatial configurations advance the plot. Space is experienced rather than portrayed. Trecartin no longer sees himself exclusively as a director but expands his role to that of animator/programmer and merges the two. Many of the post-production effects he applies to his movies draw direct reference to recurring formal elements commonly found in digital animation: cel shading, moving 3-D models, morphing, datamoshing, and 360-degree camera pans.

_**Junior War**, the first video in the series, consists of recovered footage that Trecartin filmed in 1999 while still in high school, but edited for the Biennale. Inspired by _The Blair Witch Project_ (1999), the entire video was shot with a Handycam in an infrared effect to resemble footage seen with night vision goggles.\textsuperscript{372} The loose plot follows the random acts of vandalism of a group of teenagers on a late night excursion in Ohio. “Fucking shit up” is the main mantra and recurring theme of the video. The characters delight in smashing and banging things up, from television sets to metal


\textsuperscript{372} Lehrer-Graiwer, Sarah. “In the Studio: Ryan Trecartin.” _Art in America_, June 2013.
mailboxes – an action that is replicated throughout Trecartin’s body of work. The artist’s signature fast-pace and in-your-face editing style is clearly recognizable in this pseudo-anthropological look at youth in rural America. However, a significant stylistic aspect differs drastically from his later video work – the protagonists’ relationship to the camera.

*Junior War* was filmed before the advent of social network and selfies. As such, the camera’s presence was construed at the time as intrusive – a fact made evident by the teenagers’ repeated demands, “Ryan, turn it off!” Conversely, certain scenes illustrate that they also wish to perform specifically for the camera, however awkward and uneasy that seemed. For instance, one of Trecartin’s friends exclaims, “Let’s fuck shit up! …that’s the phrase right?” The artist has expressed that looking back at this footage made him realize that “people’s relationship to the camera used to be really primitive.”

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In an interview, Trecartin revealed that *Junior War* inspired much of the rest of *Priority Innfield’s* content. As we will see, the artist chose to explore the role of the camera further in the next three videos in the series. Its presence, however, no longer inhibits its protagonists’ performances but rather enhances it. Trecartin’s latter characterizations have internalized and adapted to new technology to the point that their existence seems to only be validated if recorded in “real-time.” The camera’s function is elevated from entry-point into the world of film to that of a navigational device. This, in turn, simulates audience members’ motion via Trecartin’s newly rendered universe. *Priority Innfield* shifts the focus from a character-centered narrative point-of-view to a first-person experiential one.

In fact, the cinematography in the last three videos consists primarily of first-person subjective camera angles. In his essay, “Origins of the First-Person Shooter,” Alexander Galloway argues that in this specific type of shot, which takes its cue from “first-person shooter” (FPS) video games, “The camera merges with the character both visually and subjectively [to] show the exact physiological or emotional qualities of what a character would see. […] The subjective shot very precisely positions itself inside the skull of that character.” This aesthetic decision further illustrates the artist’s most recent focus towards a “video gamic” mode of storytelling.

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Center Jenny opens with a point-of-view shot of a long narrow corridor. The camera moves in unison with the character’s footsteps in order to reinforce the feeling that we are simultaneously advancing as well. Making our way through the tight hallway is reminiscent of the effects of first generation 3D graphics FPS, such as Wolfenstein 3D (1992) or Doom (1993), which require gamers to maneuver through dark and constricted passages. This reference to nascent video games is further emphasized when a pair of translucent cropped 3D legs appear to be moving across the screen, indicating that the first-person perspective is in fact that of a digital avatar.
Trecartin’s visual reference to the pioneer generation of games is quite fitting as this opening scene affirms the artist’s theory that the past and future can exist simultaneously in the same space. Allusions to the past can also be observed through the off-screen voices which exclaim in the background, “What’s a camera? What’s a camera? Yeah, put it down!” These statements represent a direct replay of those made 15 years earlier by the teenagers in *Junior War* who repeatedly asked Ryan to turn his camera off since they were uncomfortable being filmed under certain circumstances for fear they would not be portrayed in the best possible light. These extradiegetic voices help us understand the evolution of the role of the camera in his work, from his first foray into directing to his latest and most interactive videos.

![Figure 5.4](image1.png) ![Figure 5.5](image2.png)

As the camera encroaches the exit, the artist jump cuts to what appears to be a war zone. The cut is accompanied by the sound of an explosion immediately proceeded by a loud alarm. We are suddenly witness to a group of young adults smashing car windows with hammers and skateboards. Simultaneously, several parkour athletes execute a series of dangerous acrobatic moves across the screen. This sense of high physicality is reinforced by the dynamic crosscuts between the various camera angles. Trecartin
merges multiple perspectives into one by layering several shots on top of each other and decreasing their opacity so that all are visible at the same time. This effect provides viewers with the impression that they are experiencing the action through the perspective of a 360-degree angle.

Although the editing style here is as intricately layered as ever, the actual footage does not appear very digitally processed. Trecartin points out, “A lot more happens in real time in this project. Normally I shoot to create material for the editing process, not for the live performances.”

Some critics have expressed disappointment in regards to the “lack” of media layering in *Priority Innfield* in comparison to his earlier work, claiming that,

> It is as if Trecartin has [...] proudly abandoned writing—a temporal process bound up with the act of documenting history—for instantaneous recording. These shifts away from writing and editing not only have regrettable political consequences, but also result in a relatively homogenous temporal and visual palette that cannot sustain the animating tensions found in *I-Be Area* or “Any Ever.”

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Trecartin’s decision to preserve the raw footage in its purest form should not be seen as detrimental to his work. On the contrary, in doing so, he unleashes the “linguistic potential” of the camera. He no longer simply edits the footage but also crops and rearranges space and time. The act of “writing” is now achieved not solely through editing but with the impetus of the filming.

For the artist, “holding the camera is itself a performance.” In fact, many of his cameramen also perform by actively partaking in the action while simultaneously filming it. For instance, in the combat scene in *Center Jenny*, a crew member smashes one of the characters’ heads with a cement brick while another is perched on the rooftop of a car recording the chaos with his camera. The cameras not only serve as points of access for viewers but also become subjects on screen. These interactive cameras stand in for audience members who are made to feel as if they were actively interfacing with the protagonists. This is indicative of Trecartin’s desire to simulate a fully actionable space accessible to spectators.

379 Ibid.
As we move into the next phase of this level, we encounter a group of sorority girls in the middle of what appears to be an initiation ceremony. Each girl is framed through a tight close-up as they introduce themselves to the camera. One, however, appears to be taken by surprise by its presence. Unlike the other girls, this character (Rachel Lord) does not possess a name, “I don’t have a name yet, we’re not even on a level.” She represents the simplest, most rudimentary incarnation possible in the gaming system and is referred to as “Basic Jenny.” She is often shot from high angles to reinforce her subordinate position. Her contact lenses give her an appearance of blindness that also indicates her lower status within the network as they symbolize her limited visual perception – a major impairment in Trecartin’s hyper-graphic domain.
Similar to avatars in role playing games such as those in the *Final Fantasy* franchise, the protagonists in *Priority Innfield* gain “experience points” by advancing to higher levels. In doing so, they acquire more skills and attributes including individual names. We are introduced to this concept in the opening scene of *Item Falls*, when a character points out, “This is first level, there are no names here. I am super simple. [...] My goal is to make it to Level Center.” “Level Center” represents the ultimate rank all protagonists aspire to reach. But, before accessing it, one must successfully complete each task leading to it. Each of the six individual sororities represent a level that the protagonist, Basic Jenny, must graduate from in order to evolve into a more advanced version of herself.

Like Ericka Beckman’s digital game video *Hiatus* (1999), *Center Jenny* follows a female lead who comes into existence by overcoming obstacles and learning how to act within the virtual world she has ventured into. Both works place their respective protagonists in new environments as they ascend levels. Each scene serves as a gradual stepping-stone toward the character’s main objective, to advance to the highest level of themselves.
"Center Jenny" can be considered a “cyberdrama,” a term coined by Janet Murray which describes an innovative kind of digital storytelling which emphasizes “the enactment of the story in the particular fictional space of the computer.”

"Center Jenny”’s plot is created much like a “walk through” game in which the space serves as the container for the narrative similar to the platform gameplay of Tomb Raider (1996). Polygonal environments are created with semi-definite boundaries and function as outlines in which the action is carried out. In open-gaming systems, the setting may be less static and more dynamic, as it shifts according to the pathway the gamer decides to take. Priority Innfield’s sets are conceived as those in open-gaming systems wherein boundaries between inside, outside, on- and off-stage, and audience position are all blurred. Trecartin calls this type of open mise-en-scène a “continuous 360-degree situation.”

The artist sought to recreate a similar immersive environment within his installation at The Encyclopedic Palace exhibition itself. He achieved this partly through the addition of freestanding sculptural theaters. His contribution to expanded cinema provides viewers with a feeling of active engagement within the space. His large-scale art projects share some similarities with those of conceptual artist Cory Arcangel who submerges spectators within the pixelated worlds of actual video games he redesigns, sometimes in collaboration with other artists. However, even though Arcangel’s immense projections are impressive in scale, they remain somewhat traditional as they consist primarily of large flat screens in front of which a single viewer may be able to participate. Trecartin, on the other hand, constructs three-dimensional environments in

which spectators stand, walk around, and interact, as they watch the videos projected within them. His mode of exhibition offers the possibility of a collective dimension of reception in addition to a singular viewer experience.

Trecartin had already expressed a desire to create fully interactive projects anticipating the *Priority Innfield* series, as he mentions in 2010, “I’d like to make a surround movie with multiple screens that is an actual experience that you can walk into
and use technology that allows the direction of the movies to change in relation to the audience’s response.” This latest work represents, to date, the closest realization of his highly relational vision. The idea that one can “walk into” a viewing experience suggests that the artist has taken into account the structural representation of his narrative. Sophia Psarra writes in *Architecture and Narrative*,

Narrative enters architecture in many ways, from the conceptual ‘messages’ it is made to stand for to the illustration of a design through models, drawings and other representational forms. This aspect of architectural expression, what the design *speaks of*, is relevant to narrative as representation. It concerns the semantic meanings of buildings and places, and the contribution of architecture to the expression of social and cultural messages.

Whether it pertains to exhibition venues or his videos’ sets, space plays a crucial role in Tercartin’s coded narratives. The soundstage used in *Center Jenny*, for example, was actually constructed by professional Hollywood set builders and made to adapt and modulate as the storyline progressed. The spatial configuration of the set thus assists in advancing the plot along.

![Figure 5.15](image)

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Space also shares a relationship to language. In software design for example, three dimensional structures are simply visual translations of software codes written in a particular computer language such as Java or C++. Commands in Java 3D API such as the one shown below create 3D nodes that are then added to a scene graph which serves as the outline of the actionable space,

```java
TransformGroup objTrans = new TransformGroup();
objTrans.setCapability(TransformGroup.ALLOW_TRANSFORM_WRITE);
objRoot.addChild(objTrans);
objTrans.addChild(new ColorCube().getShape());
```

Similarly, Trecartin conceives of speech as an architectural form. In an interview for *Frieze* magazine, he explained that,

> The characters are constantly negotiating ideas that I conceive of as architectures: their reality as an architecture, their being as an architecture. The space surrounding these structures is speech; reciprocally, articulation creates space. So, the characters are in the space of speech. Space is a translation of language, of information.\(^{384}\)

This idea is best illustrated in *Comma Boat* in which the artist plays an aggressive director/animator who controls and orders the performers around the set and announces the transformation of the set, “This stage is officially a tranny! […] Now come the fuck down stage!”
The director/protagonist commences dancing to hard rock as a massive circular platform suspended from the ceiling slowly descends to the ground in front of him. He controls the spatial arrangement of the set much in the same manner he directs the actors. The set magically morphs according to the character’s verbal commands. The character is able to manipulate his surroundings as if in “runtime,” controlling a graphic user interface. He not only directs the performers and controls the set but also chooses which camera angles to shoot at the same time. It is as though the writing, filming, and editing all occur simultaneously “inside” the camera. *Comma Boat*, like *Center Jenny*, offers viewers a multitude of perspectives by using multiple cameras that encircle the performers at all times. As we will see, the omnipresent camera transmits to us the feeling of surveillance – an overarching theme in *Priority Innfield*.

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385 Term used in computer engineering which describes the process by which a virtual machine executes the instructions of a computer program.
The director/animator character in *Comma Boat* may be interpreted as a stand-in for Ryan Trecartin. However, their directing styles are quite different. While Trecartin seeks to assign actors a sense of autonomy and freedom in the way they direct themselves, the director/protagonist in *Comma Boat* dictates their every move and appears to enjoy torturing them. “Hazers in the club, yeah!”

![Image](image_url)

*Figure 5.18*

An overall sense of hostility seems to permeate *Priority Innfield*. An aggressive undercurrent conveys the kind of combative atmosphere simulated in many violent video games. Gaming systems set in place structures that include winners and losers. As such, they often require players to defeat other opponents in order to declare the game over. Similarly, performers in *Priority Innfield* compete against each other in order to reach Level Center. They not only demolish their environments, but also attempt to destroy one another in the process. Characters throw faux cement bricks at each other and red cups explode and shatter across their faces. Some actors even guard themselves behind massive shields as if preparing for battle and refer to each other as the “enemy,” “I will fucking weaponize your territory on the enemy!” Others make direct allusions to the war.
One sorority girl declares, “I sense a rainstorm coming from the north.” A girl sitting next to her suddenly interjects, “How can you tell which way is north?” and she replies, “Because my ancestors outlived the war.” It is unclear this early on in the narrative if the war is over or if it is still taking place. Multiple references to martial law by several characters and the omnipresence of charged props such as pink earmuffs stuffed with razor blades suggest that they are still in the midst of combat.

It is apparent that Trecartin’s Gesamtkunstwerk possesses an underlying somber mood. When asked to comment on his work’s new direction, he answered,

I do think I’ve taken a darker turn. I generally feel very positive, but pretty soon I think there are going to be basic freedoms and rights that we’re going to have to fight for. All my movies have addressed that tipping point where one freedom replaces another. This has a lot to do with surveillance—not video camera surveillance, but the surveillance of people's activities, and the creation of algorithms that allow programs, companies or governments to understand what you like, buy or own. I think this is exciting and scary. […] Once technology makes it possible to alter our brains, we’re going to. Not everyone will. There will be more than one species of what are now humans. That split might follow class lines.  

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The artist’s concerns about the future expressed above are addressed in various ways throughout *Priority Innfield*. For example, the idea of pervasive surveillance is evoked through the presence of characters wearing sweatshirts with the words “WITNESS 360,” printed on them. They pride themselves on their ability to observe everything. These intrusive villains scrutinize the characters in an attempt to block them from advancing further through the levels. At the top of this oppressive futuristic caste system is Sara Source (Renee Plaza), the most “advanced” character who also oversees the entire network. In order to remain in power, she has set in place a very restrictive, linear structure whereby the only way to reach Level Center is to progressively ascend pre-defined levels. Skipping steps is considered a crime and any deviation from this pre-established path is subject to punishment. Basic Jenny, wishes to liberate herself from such a predetermined path and instead opts to freely travel across levels regardless of her rank within the network. However, her journey will be replete with hurdles and difficulties as Sara Source scrutinizes her every move.
After repeated failed attempts at infiltrating advanced-level cliques, Basic Jenny stumbles upon an underground group called “Left-of-Center.” Unlike the other sororities, members of this club do not strive to attain Level Center and instead pride themselves on being different. Each one sports a unique look and possesses an individual name. These “Left-of-Center” characters welcome Basic Jenny into their community and immediately make her one of them. The protagonist addresses the camera directly and declares her new self-assigned name for the first time, “Hi my name is Athens Ornamental and I’m a regular.” The ingenue has upgraded from a “basic” version to a “regular” one, bypassing the next level, thereby violating the rules of the system.

Trecartin suddenly cuts to a different scene in which an advanced Jenny (Jena Malone) humiliates Basic Jenny for her defiance. The bully then proceeds to pull her hair while confronting the camera,

This is one of my many intern protégé bullshit […] Don’t look at me Basic Jenny! […] She’s a first-level dummy […] She’s stupid! You are left of center, do you fucking understand me? […] No one wants to stay in your world. […] You’re a redundant ass and you might be respected on secondary levels but you will never graduate emotionally because your chip sucks. Stay here, we don’t want you there.
As we delve further into the narrative, it becomes apparent that the more “advanced” characters are in fact the most primitive, barbaric ones. These higher level sorority girls find great pleasure in binge drinking and physically assaulting each other. Sara Source declares directly into the camera, “I think the only thing I’ll ever study is the human era hazing and how significant and awesome it is. […] The humans were so cool.”

Characters talk about their human ancestors as if they were mythological figures. A university professor (Lee Kyle), for example, makes bombastic declaratives about world history to his students, “Back in the human era, dinosaurs evolved into chickens. This is a fact. […] We have evolved from animations, those are our ancestors.” His students react with hostility and have difficulty grasping the concepts being taught to them. One Jenny bluntly replies, “Like, the further we all move away from humanity, sexism just becomes, like, the coolest style.” The characters’ nonsensical rants betray their ignorance. Trecartin makes it clear that humanity has been relegated to a thing of
the past. In their apocalyptic humanoid future, humans have simply become irrelevant. *Junior War* footage suddenly seems like an artifact from an ancient era.

The artist’s animated cyborgs believe they have ascended to a higher existential plane, yet, their existence is utterly reliant on technology. So much so that their very livelihood depends on their ability to use cellphones. Sara Source confirms this, “If anyone brings their phone in here, they’re not gonna have a tracking system and they’re gonna fucking die!” *I-BE Area’s* high-tech utopia celebrated the promises of unlimited freedom afforded by technology while *Priority Innfield’s* dismal world envisions it as a means of entrapment much in the same vein as dystopian sci-fi films like *Blade Runner* (1982) or *The Matrix* (1999). However, the artist’s ominous vision should not be dismissed to the realm of fiction. Scientists have also recently began to share a critical concern with the effects of digital culture. Jonathan Zittrain, professor of Internet law and computer science at Harvard University, comments,

> Internet users are again embracing a range of ‘tethered appliances,’ reflecting a resurgence of the initial model of bundled hardware and software that is created and controlled by one company. This will affect how readily behavior on the Internet can be regulated, which in turn will determine the extent that regulators and commercial incumbents can constrain amateur innovation, which has been responsible for much of what we now consider precious about the Internet.  

Zittrain’s observation is consistent with Trecartin’s thoughts about the impact of the Internet on our basic freedom rights. However, this is not to say that the artist has become anti-technology. His commentary does not really critique technology as an entity, but rather criticizes the ways it is being utilized. The protagonists in *Center Jenny* are so consumed by the magnetizing power of their handheld cameras and touchscreen

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cellphones that they have become completely alienated from each other and their past. They are contacting each other increasingly but have strangely become more alienated because interactions are primarily mediated through the use of devices.

Basic Jenny is the only character who wishes to experience intimate interaction. *Priority Innfield* is set in a futuristic cyber world, but upon a deeper probing, we find that at the core of the narrative are thematic tropes that emphasize humanistic values – belonging, self-discovery, and freedom. Indeed, the artist has expressed,

I'm actually trying to think past technology at this point and more about creative desire. People want to feel situated and located, but they don't want to feel like they're a slave to anything. To deal with limitations of place, characters in the movie make "fourth-wall generators," "fifth-wall randomizers," "location situators" and "consciousness expanders," forcing old forms of exchange into scenarios that allow something to be broken. I'm interested in establishing a structure of obedient behaviors so that obedience can trigger destructive impulses.

Basic Jenny is the trigger that gives way to disobedience within the linear structure of the gaming system. It is through her that the other characters will converge and reconnect with each other and find the strength to rebel against the oppressive world they inhabit.

This phenomenon occurs in the video’s final scene. Multiple sororities gather around the heroine and begin scribbling directly on her body with markers. The ritualistic inscription seems like another degrading sorority initiation, at first. However, the protagonist reveals that she finds the experience empowering. She faces the camera, and declares, “I’m really into call and response.” The other characters yell back, “Call and response!” While call and response typically constitutes a form of verbal and non-verbal communication that stimulates participation between speakers and listeners, in this case, the exchange assists in undermining *Center Jenny’s* oppressive hierarchical

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structure. It is thanks to this egalitarian interchange that Basic Jenny finds the courage to revolt against the omnipotent Sara Source who controls the entire network, “That source is a fucking valet spot! I need to rehabilitate my think tank and recalibrate […]” The protagonist’s sudden insurgence leads other sorority members to challenge authority as well. One higher level Jenny proclaims, “I hate that government!”

Trecartin cuts to a reaction shot of the “Left-of-Center” clan members filmed behind the bars of a wrought iron bedframe. The parallel vertical lines,\(^{389}\) perhaps a nod to Alfred Hitchcock’s well establish visual motif, symbolizes the characters’ entrapment within the frame but also within Sara Source’s restrictive gaming system itself. One character brandishes a cement brick intended for Sara Source and shouts, “I’m gonna own you Sara Source! I’m gonna destroy you!” Sara Source retaliates,

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I might be some privileged bitch but I’m gonna fuck you up, ‘cause I’m a privileged bitch that knows how to do that shit! And I might throw a fucking brick at your face ‘cause you don’t know, we might be friends or we might not, but whatever, I’m the only one that knows.

We then see the other avatars rejoicing, while Sara Source is shown alone lying on a hammock. The character is framed through a medium shot as she delivers her last statement, “… Wha’…whatever, I’m the only one that knows…” She appears to doubt her own authority. Her reiteration does not reinforce her dominance but reveals her insecurity. She attempts to convince herself that she is still superior to the other avatars.
The video ends with a shot of Sara Source appearing unsure of her own future. Basic Jenny seems to have succeeded in overthrowing the established oppressive system. In the process, she has regained control of her destiny and is free to create her own future, regardless of her original rank within the network.

As we come to expect from Ryan Trecartin’s videos, *Center Jenny*’s ending leaves us with unanswered questions. Will Basic Jenny ever reach a higher existential level? Or does the collapse of the network imply that she will be stuck in her basic state forever? Some of our questions find their answers in *Item Falls*, which is the last video in the series. The narrative takes place during the aftermath of the revolution that occurred in *Center Jenny*. The general mood of *Item Falls* is more cheerful and evokes the playfulness of *A Family Finds Entertainment*. The action is set back in a constructed set resembling an all-American sorority house. It is inhabited by a horde of hyperactive animated characters. Among them, we recognize Basic Jenny, now renamed “Elegant Audition Chick Line Item,” who prides herself on having the capacity to exert her “free
will.” Characters have at this point all reached a much higher existential level which is visually manifested by their ability to meld into digital animations of themselves. At this important juncture, Trecartin returns to his earlier use of extensive media layering and image processing and expands upon it.

The artist enhances his already broad palette by augmenting it with cel shading. This non-photorealistic technique renders 3D surfaces into two dimensional graphics. The complex process, which first emerged in video games, most notably in Sega Dreamcast’s *Jet Set Radio* (2000), creates a cartoonish figure which simultaneously maintains a three dimensional appearance. Other visual artists have fused art with technology to create post-human representations as well. Stelarc seeks to transcend the physical limitations of the body by customizing his own with robotics. While both artists conduct experiments in human cyborgization, Stelarc’s work primarily revolves around remodeling his own body.
Trecartin, on the other hand, wants to do away with it completely. By flattening the protagonists’ image from a 3D to a 2D projection, he transmits the illusion that each character consists of a permeable artificial corporeal shell. He also utilizes datamoshing or compression artifacts, which consequently makes them look like they are missing pixel information. This effect represents the characters with an almost painterly quality which consequently depicts them as “unreal.”
This “lo-fi” look adopted from glitch art bears semblance to the work of Paper Rad, whose video art aestheticizes digital malfunctions by intentionally corrupting computational codes and data streams. In their video piece, *Super Mario Bros. Movie* (2005), which they produced in collaboration with Cory Arcangel, Paper Rad hacked Nintendo’s *Mario Bros.* video game and manipulated its visuals, as well as its narrative.

![Figure 5.32](image)

This artistic practice has recently reached mainstream entertainment, as is illustrated with the popular animated series, *Adventure Time* (2010 – present), currently airing on Cartoon Network which employed a similar computer bug aesthetic in its episode, *A Glitch Is a Glitch* (2013), directed by filmmaker David OReilly.

![Figure 5.33](image)
Trecartin’s digital abstractions also resemble those by art collective, Space Slave Trade, who appropriates images found online and layer them on top of each other until the final image takes on the form of a complex and nebulous, yet poetic graphic explosion. Although Space Slave Trade’s art is deeply influenced by the visual culture of the Internet, the stillness of their 2D images fails to convey the ecstatic velocity of cyberspace. Trecartin manages to transmit such a sensation by combining fast-pace editing with 3D computer graphic textures. Through the Trapcode Particular plug-in from After Effects, he can apply the cel shading filter directly onto motion graphics. The results display sophisticated digital masks that truly give the impression that we are no longer watching humans but animations instead.

In the final scene of *Item Falls*, the constructed set yields to a virtual environment modeled with Google’s open source software SketchUp.\(^{390}\) A 3D replica of Alison

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Powell (one of Trecartin’s regular performers) floats across the screen amidst dozens of 3D chickens. Like “the dinosaurs who evolved into chickens,”391 his characters have transformed into a more advanced species. They have transcended their form and reconfigured into a more flexible and open-ended format.

_I-BE Area_ attempted to evince this state of trans-humanism primarily through the use of make-up for example, but with _Item Falls_, the artist finally concretizes his utopic vision,

I hope it will someday be possible to truly liberate ourselves into a state where expression is existence and the accumulation of our situations become more of a catalogue of our identity rather than a written history. Maybe our personalities can be the location rather than our bodies. It would be great if the body could be utterly neutral and malleable.392

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391 Concept taught by the university professor character in _Center Jenny_.
This statement is emblematic of his outright rejection of essentialism and willingness to embrace change. As we have seen, the lightning pace of his montage, hybrid characters, and ever-shifting narratives do not conceal an underlying symptom of fear but rather a genuine excitement toward the future. His work transports viewers into a journey of perpetual transformation which at first may appear disturbing but actually reveals itself to be a positive and empowering experience. In all of his videos, the protagonists fight to establish their agency in order to claim ownership over their destiny and transcend their “condition.” This recurring theme in the work parallels Trecartin’s own unquenchable desire for infinite freedom, best exemplified through his use of a limitless visual language.

The feedback posted on his YouTube channel such as the one by “ioana dobroiu,” “it's like i've already died and get to see a new behavioural perception of reality...gummy gum..it't something something...great,”393 or Joshlikestea’s, “Your videos are the best thing that's ever happened to me,” corroborate that his work amounts to more than a critical observation of his own contemporaneity.

393 https://www.youtube.com/all_comments?v=ZR4sHDR-1XE
When contemplating his body of work, we recall that in *Early Baggage*, he had already established his idiosyncratic video practice, consisting of appropriations of earlier techniques from experimental filmmaking and television, which he revamped utilizing contemporary post-production software. In *A Family Finds Entertainment*, he playfully remixed the cinematic tropes of the family melodrama and further developed his vocabulary by introducing what would become his signature motif – the multiple screens. Followed by *I-BE Area*, where Trecartin blurred the line between cyberspace and physical space by incorporating the web aesthetic into his visual style. Characteristic formal elements remained present – fast-paced editing, superimposition, oblique camera angles, repetition, fragmented shots, and discontinuity – but there was definitely a leap toward a more techno-centric approach. Computer desktop wallpapers, monitors, three-dimensional special effects, digital pictograms, and graphical user interface-inspired
designs were interspersed throughout. *I-BE Area* was a significant turning point in Trecartin’s career, as it firmly grounded his engagement with technology.

![Figure 5.38](image1)

During the creation of his epic series *Any Ever*, the artist elevated his practice of multimedia layering to its extreme by applying an abundance of 2D and 3D special effects to almost every shot. It is also in this work that he explored the possibilities of the “post-body” state\(^\text{394}\) by applying transparency filters onto his protagonists so that their “bodies” merged with their environments.

![Figure 5.39](image2)

Finally, with *Priority Innfield*, Trecartin further blurs the boundaries between technology and humankind. His protagonists become personified by three-dimensional extensions of themselves, unrestricted by gravity. Although not completely "realistic," these 3D animations do not appear unfamiliar. This process of cyborgization feels completely "natural" in the evolution of his work. It is as if we had expected this all along. Perhaps because Trecartin slowly prepared us for it, or perhaps because we have come to understand that existing in the world is intrinsically connected with interacting with technology.

*Priority Innfield* simulates the logic of a video gaming system. Recent advancements will inevitably increase their applicability to the point that virtual reality will soon merge with our sense of physical reality. For example, a motion capture body suit called PrioVR (which can be pre-ordered directly from the company’s website for $429) is currently being developed by the YEI Corporation. The high-performance
harness equipped with multiple sensors will allow gamers to move their body, manipulate items, and interact with others in virtual environments as naturally as they would in the real world.\(^{395}\) Although not yet on the market, this device has already found applications.

Philip Rosedale, creator of the online community *Second Life*, announced in 2013 that he is working on a new virtual world called *High Fidelity* which will use the PrioVR device for body tracking.\(^{396}\) Adi Robertson, a technology correspondent for *The Verge*, a website dedicated to science, art, and culture, reported that the most significant upgrade between *Second Life* and *High Fidelity* will be the level of responsivity,

Using sophisticated motion capture techniques, you could mirror your head movement and facial expressions onto an avatar. Using a full-body harness, you could go a step further, moving your arms and torso naturally to interact. […] As Rosedale delivered his speech, his avatar loomed overhead, speaking and nodding. His partner, wearing a harness, played

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\(^{395}\) [http://www.yeitechnology.com/priovr](http://www.yeitechnology.com/priovr)

air drums and delivered a hug. Second Life and reality, bleeding together.397

Similarly, Ryan Trecartin hopes to develop software to make his videos more interactive and perhaps one day reach a sense of physical connection approximated by High Fidelity. In an interview for Dazed Digital, he mentioned that he would like to create an app which would allow viewers to navigate Any Ever by typing words linked to sequences.398

In 2015, Ryan Trecartin will be co-curating the New Museum of Contemporary Art’s third triennial with Lauren Cornell. The exhibition will be sponsored by Google Glass399 which will execute a “visitor engagement app” to enhance the viewing experience and increase interactivity between works of arts and the audience.400 This collaboration follows the museum’s numerous initiatives to further expand the increasingly interconnected relationship between contemporary art and technology. This summer, the New Museum will also open its first incubator located on the Bowery in New York City. Designed as a live/work environment, the space will invite visual artists, architects, and scientists working with technology in experimental ways to collaborate on innovative interdisciplinary projects.

In his book, The Third Culture, John Brockman wrote that a new breed of intellectuals has emerged,

The third culture consists of those scientists and other thinkers in the empirical world who, through their work and expository writing, are

399 Google Glass is a wearable voice activated computer equipped with an optical head-mounted display to allow the communication of information in a hands-free format.
taking the place of the traditional intellectual in rendering visible the
deep meanings of our lives, redefining who and what we are.\textsuperscript{401}

According to the author, third-culture thinkers include physicists, biologists, computer
scientists, and psychologists. Although quite inclusive, his list fails to acknowledge the
work of artists whose practices advance our understanding of technology such as Ryan
Trecartin. If an intellectual is, in Brockman’s words, “a synthesizer, a publicist, a
communicator,”\textsuperscript{402} then there is no doubt that, through his open-source mode of
distribution and exhibition online, Trecartin has earned the privilege to be recognized as
one of the “new public intellectuals.”\textsuperscript{403}

In her article, “Why Ryan Trecartin Makes Art Cool Again,” Rosemary Heather
declares,

Trecartin is important because he reaffirms the value of art beyond its
monetary worth. He shows us the role artworks can play in reducing the
world to its purely visual dimension. His work helps us extract what is
New from the morass of everyday experience so that we can see it as
historically specific, of today and therefore quite alien to any idea we
might have of the past. It’s the Shock of the New all over again; how
surprising to discover again that artworks have the power to deliver it.\textsuperscript{404}

Writer and close friend, Kevin McGarry, writes, “Ryan Trecartin has established a
singular video practice that in form and in function advances understandings of post-
millennial technology, narrative and identity, and also propels these matters as expressive
mediums.”\textsuperscript{405} Indeed, this dissertation has proven that Ryan Trecartin’s art actually
demonstrates that it possesses the ability to shape the thoughts of his generation. The

\textsuperscript{402} Ibid, 19.
\textsuperscript{403} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{404} Heather, Rosemary. “Rosemary Heather on Why Ryan Trecartin Makes Art Cool Again,” at
\textsuperscript{405} McGarry, Kevin. “Worlds Apart” in \textit{Any Ever: Ryan Trecartin}. New York: Skira Rizzoli Publications
in association with Elizabeth Dee, 2011.
artist has expressed his own understanding of how his work functions in a recent interview in *The New Yorker*,

Everything we do is going to be captured and archived in an accessible form, whether you want it or not. It’s going to change all of our lives. We are a species that can no longer assume a sense of privacy. It’s not an individual decision, and I feel that’s exciting to explore – or something. There’s a lot of cultural content being generated right now that sees itself as post-human, but it’s assuming the twentieth century as its audience. It leans on structures that we already understand, but that we’re moving away from. My work is about humanity, and about the time I’m making it.\footnote{Tomkins, Calvin. “Experimental People,” *The New Yorker*, March 24, 2014.}
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Ricardo E. Zulueta (né Ricardo Estanislao de Zulueta y Riaño) was born in Havana, Cuba in 1962 and grew up in Miami, Florida. He received a Master of Fine Arts degree with an Award of Academic Merit from the University of Miami in Coral Gables in 2010. Zulueta also attended graduate school at New York University (NYU) where he studied arts policy and museology from 1985 to 1987. While at NYU, he was selected to be a distinguished Helbein Scholar. He lived in New York City from 1985 to 2005 and was employed as an arts and culture administrator for museums, government, and non-profit organizations, in addition to working as a visual artist. During his career, Zulueta has been awarded the New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship, Cintas Foundation Fellowship in the Visual Arts, National Foundation for Advancement in the Arts CAVA Artist Fellowship, Art Matters Grant, Artist Space Grant, Ludwig Vogelstein Artist Grant, Igor Foundation Artist Grant, and the McKnight Doctoral Fellowship. In addition, his multimedia artworks have been exhibited nationally and internationally in venues such as the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York; the International Center for Photography, New York; Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid; Bard Center for Curatorial Studies Museum, New York; Museo Alejandro Otero, Caracas; Borusan Foundation, Istanbul; and the Norton Gallery of Art, Palm Beach. Zulueta’s art has received critical attention in *Mixed Blessings: Multicultural Art in America* by Lucy R. Lippard; *Whole Cloth* by Mildred Constantine; *Images of Ambiente: Homotextuality in Latin American Art* by Rudi C. Bley; *Memoria: Cuban Art of the Twentieth Century*; *Nueva Luz* by Deborah Willis; *Artforum* by Jude Schwendenwein; and *Flash Art* by Berta Sichel.