

# REGEN PROJECTS

Podesva, Kristina Lee. "When the time comes you won't understand the battlefield," Fillip  
(Spring 2011) pp. 100 – 105 [ill.]



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Ryan Trecartin & Kristina Lee Podesva

## *When the time comes you won't understand the battlefield*

*Kristina Lee Podesva:* Let's start with some quotes from your film *Popular.S.ky (section ish)* (2009), which I have pulled to help us formulate a discussion about your work in general. Besides being drawn in by the way the films look, I love the talking, the dialogue in them. Could you discuss the fact that your films are highly scripted?

*I want to live in a world where narration is the devil.*

*Ryan Trecartin:* The writing of these movies tends to take four distinct forms, which all unfold simultaneously. The most obvious one is the written script, the shape of which can change depending on the scene and people involved. At times the script can be fairly traditional in form, with play-by-play, character-assigned dialogue sequences. Other times the script is a list of phrases, a monologue or a poem with no concrete delineations of characters, even if the performative space involves a group of personalities. The script can also be an agenda or a written structure, and the goals of that structure are explored based on topics and suggestions—collaborative, assignment-based translations of a phrase. The sets, props, costumes, hair, and makeup also constitute a type of script that I usually make in collaboration with artist Lizzie Fitch. This narrative space intersects the written script during the shoot and creates an intuitive space for the performers to activate a sort of nuanced improv within the structure of a sentence being performed. The editing, sound design, and effects processes are another phase of writing that reconsiders everything that has been captured on camera as raw supplies. A new script is then created, and the performance of that would be watching and reading the movie as a viewer.

— I think your projects, on many levels, have a kind of radical hybridity at work and a resistance to linearity and simplicity and the separation between things. That hybridity is communicated on many levels; for instance, you activate many forms and mediums in the films, which include but are not limited to installation, performance, painting, photography, sculpture, video, digital graphics, and so on. Could you talk about when you started bringing all of these forms and mediums together and why?

— I've always put a lot of energy into exploring the momentum of culture and our abilities to understand and translate vibes and sensations. A person is born at a certain point within a cultural momentum, with certain concepts and awarenesses handed to them as givens. It's almost like each year babies' presets are updated, and their default ideologies are ingrained into their collective "over it." I think the collaborative wave of culture can become more important than any author. At the moment in time I was born, it was natural not to recognize boundaries between artistic mediums—as well as ideas, genders, races, and all sorts of nuances that are historically shoved into and understood in terms of categorical containers. I grew up alongside computer adolescence. I think lots of people born at the same time, or anytime after the birth of the home computer, see "-isms" as applications rather than truths and see definitions as filters rather than containers. It's an exciting privilege to be chucked into the culture flow after so many people have made it possible to be fluid in practice, instead of merely in theory. Rather than talking around the idea which you call "radical hybridity" in theory, we are truly able to demonstrate it in a much more native way than previous generations. The "talk around" is somewhere else now, maybe post-human politics or cyber moral codes, or public-privacy issues. Art school was the first time I ever thought about mediums as autonomous dialogues. And it was fun.

— It's funny because art schools really do try hard to slot students into a discipline early on.

— Many of them do, and RISD (Rhode Island

# REGEN PROJECTS

School of Design) very much does or at least did from 2000 to 2004. They have majors, but I loved it—it wasn't oppressive at all, it was just a very focused experience. I was in a tech major, and so even though all my classes centred around learning software and talking about editing, I never felt like I had to stick to any formats. Movies inherently put you in a place where you have to consider many mediums at once. You can make a sculpture, and then you can contextualize the sculpture in the scene while exploring a multitude of different points of view. You can set up an experience that translates the way you feel about that sculpture, the actual sculpture can even talk in the first, second, and third person all at once. Video lends itself to collaboration very well, not just with people but with mediums and ideas. I lived mostly with friends in the painting major, but video was a very natural home for a lot of our ideas.

*When the time comes, you won't understand the battlefield and all of its multi-complexities. I can't wait until they invent concept camo....*

— I think this quote comes back to the exuberance in your mixed media approach, which you don't actually see as even that mixed, but it is. It could be said to echo or renew some aspirations of art from the late '60s and '70s, when artists broke away from preoccupations with medium specificity and then innovated a multiplicity of styles, genres, and questions. However, it seems that your work is not so interested in the precursory, but in the contemporary. I wonder if any of those earlier genres or styles—and I've heard that you never saw John Waters or Kenneth Anger before you started making films—I wonder if there are any salient precedents for your work?

— Well, it's true that I never saw Kenneth Anger's or Jack Smith's work until 2006, but I definitely saw John Waters's *Hairspray* (1988) and *Serial Mom* (1994) in high school.

— But you didn't see *Desperate Living* (1977)?

— Not until 2005. I wish I saw it sooner. It's so good. In college I didn't watch much. It was

a period of my life that I spent absorbing the act of making very intensely. I also spent a ton of time appreciating the way response to content is shared, created, and organized. I've often found conversations about books or movies to be just as exciting as the firsthand read. I think stories are more exciting when memory has space to trigger a creative recall.

— And mediation.

— Completely. All forms. It's fun to watch a show while a passionate group of people are screaming back at it. Or to get Red-Bull-ed-out with a friend, your favorite TV show, music equipment, and some editing software. The need for interactivity is so strong, it's hard to go back to just watching once you open the door to contribution and revision. And I think it's exciting to watch participation and to respond to humanity with language that accesses information freely.

— So you like the reception rather than the origin?

— I mean it's not that black and white. It's more like I value them both equally. I don't believe the dichotomies of original, revision, reception, or copy have any cultural or creative hierarchy.

— I was curious about whether or not you had seen John Waters's early films because it's possible to see in your work all these relationships to his work, even if these connections are obviously unintentional on your part. Is it possible that you had seen his influence on others' work, but filtered through MTV? Perhaps the directors who made the MTV videos that you watched were inspired by John Waters or Kenneth Anger.

— Yes. I think before going to college many people pick up on the voices of important cultural figures via their effects on mainstream culture and the ways media responds to itself.

*I'm going to wash off this picket fence and fuck up a tanning bed.*

# REGEN PROJECTS

— The last quote relates back to what we just discussed, but maybe you can expand on it. It is spoken by a character who is black but whose face is painted white. The scene expresses another sense in which radical hybridity comes through in the work, and I think it's productive because it engages with identity as post-identity. In this universe the film creates, everyone is marked and marking themselves, but in different registers all the time. Yet the masquerades are completely unanticipated, recalling a Michel Foucault quotation where he talks about how freedom can only happen when we have radical unanticipated figures of selfhood and collectivity. And so, when I see your characters at play, I see them as those radical unanticipated figures, because you can't pin them down; they always liquefy as soon as they take shape. In your films you don't know what gender people are, you don't know what race they are, and you are never sure about what their relationships are.

— That is a very interesting take. I like it, and I think about those ideas a lot. Being able to express on all levels of language and information at the speed of creative thought would, I think, create a state of existence that is very similar to the Foucault quotation you bring up. In the same way that gender has slowly separated from the genitals one is born with, accent is separating from geographic inheritance, race is separating from DNA, mentalities are separating from class and culture . . . this can be applied to much of what we see as fixed, consistent, authoritative realities. I think it will be healthy for us to see ourselves as people first, and for everything else to be tools of expression. 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.

— Depending on your perspective. . . .

— Depending on your perspective and how you want to orchestrate it within your personality and

how your personality isn't just yours. And your self depends on situations that you maintain, that you are a part of maintaining, and so without other people helping to maintain you, it's like in these realities, you don't really exist. And that's why characters just disappear.

*I'm really into sex music, you know, the kind that is really cute?*

— This quote illustrates how you play with language. And how you use the word "cute" frequently in the films.

— 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.

— So the way that you write the language— at first it seems familiar, but also paradoxically impenetrable. Then I think, "Wait a minute, I understand it," but then I don't seem to understand it. Finally, once I fall into a rhythm with the language, which I think is enhanced, or occasioned by, the editing technique and also the performative gestures on view, the language becomes absolutely intelligible. What is intriguing about the use of language here is that on one hand there is a peculiar achievement where you amplify the meaning of the word, but then you also completely evacuate the word of its meaning.

— I try to push each word in such a literal direction that it becomes abstract and disappears or solidifies into something that sounds foreign but feels intuitively close to home. I also try to allow all the competing potential meanings of a

# REGEN PROJECTS

he observes a concentration on distraction and how that can possibly enhance concentration and absorption rather than the apparent effect of completely dissolving meaning and knowledge. Also, when organizing content I enjoy playing games of what I think to be a kind of subjective math—maybe a “substitutioning,” “swapping”—almost a synthesis of possibilities expressed. An example might be attempting to make a relevant news story into a personality trait, a careerist goal into living room furniture, an accent into a hairdo, or an ideology into a body language, or designer skin tone. 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.”

— So you’re taking what’s already out there and you’re just re-presenting it in some ways, and seeing how the viewer...

— Sometimes. It’s not my only goal or way of working. 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, I think it’s often like...

— It’s more of a symptom, or...

— Yeah, and I also think that a lot of the time, with disturbing things, actually deep down underneath them something positive is shifting, you know? Like how on reality TV shows a lot of the time people are acting like monsters, and they’re really mean to each other, and no one is afraid of being embarrassed. But then I kind of think that what’s happening underneath is that we are all being a lot more comfortable with full-frontal ugliness, like showing everything that’s running through our heads, and sharing everything, and not being afraid to be embarrassed and in a way that’s kind of a positive shift. Or maybe it’s

preparing us in a kind of pre-therapy state to deal with the acceleration of interactive technologies.

— Rather than hiding.

— But the surface of that change or this therapy can feel ugly. And so, 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. But at the same time, I like people reading what they read: It’s their edit.

— OK, final question. I think it’s productive that you make your videos available online, that the distribution of your videos is free. I know it’s not the full installation experience, but I just was curious if you could talk a little bit about why you’re so interested in making sure that the work gets distributed for free.

— Everything I make I make through collaborations with other creatives. Work made through sharing usually wants to be shared. I think the movies are native to a multiplicity of situations. Different contexts bring out different aspects of the work and encourage different readings. 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.

## About the Authors

Kristina Lee Podesva is Editor at Fillip.

Ryan Trecartin is a Los Angeles-based artist and filmmaker.

This interview would not have been possible without the support of Amy Kazymierchuk at VIVO Media Arts Centre, Vancouver, and Amy Zion at Emily Carr University’s 2010 Speakers’ Series. Transcription by Liza Eurich.

# REGEN PROJECTS

word to have territory at the same time, which will sometimes cancel out a sensation, creating a feeling of hearing something for the first time or hearing something that is projected onto the situation by the viewer. I also try to keep the agenda of a word open; I like when sentences feel like that and convey a decisive exploration but stay open to poetic shifts as they get revisited. I don't let most performers see the scripts ahead of time because I like them not knowing where the character is going. When you don't know exactly where your character came from and is going, your face has an openness that allows words to freely expand.

— But maybe today we have an excess of communication and yet a lack of meaning at the same time. In some ways, people are talking incessantly through blogs and Twitter, but for the most part they're talking about the inconsequential. It's like a plagues of the blah, blah, blahs.

— 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.

*Capitulation is sexy when you land on the right vibration. Who the fuck are you talking to, asshole?*

— I really liked that scene because what happens there, as I experienced it, is that an ethical issue arises. So this person is saying "Yeah, capitulation is sexy," which is an ethical question, and then someone else disrupts that consideration immediately. So just as you comprehend this ethical violation it dissolves and thus fails to solidify. In some ways we're marked today by political

apathy, especially with the financial bubble bursting among multiple controversies and scandals in the business world. In *P.opular S.ky* digital animations of credit cards all over the place, and then we see your characters with an Iraq war poster and gasoline appear onscreen. The effect is that instead of allowing a kind of hegemonic message of "capitulation is sexy" to take root, you disrupt it right away. Given these details in *P.opular S.ky*, I wonder how much, if at all, ethical questions come into play in the work?

— I'm not sure if it's apathy. I think there's something much more complicated and new going on. It's something that couldn't have existed before the mass acceptance and use of the Internet as an extension of consciousness. But I think I know exactly what you are getting at. Ethical questions come into play, of course. I tend to approach them as physical forms that have a grey scale of contradictions constantly spewing from the subject's mass like a gas planet with a romantic gravitational pull. The people expressing themselves in the scene or the ethical question are almost like tools articulating possible plots of an ethical pivot. The exciting creative possibilities are all legitimate realities in their own right, within a shared situation of supplies. It's the same way humanity can sometimes feel like an accessory to language—a mass of walking tools lubricating a larger life form, which is "language." Topics are sometimes more alive than the people that provide the culture for it. Our "free will" sometimes feels a little outsourced to the collective gravity around an idea's drama—drama being a place of creation and change. The dark side of this is the ability we have to maintain a state of drama, which I think depletes the creative potential of an idea, and a transitional moment can quickly become an institution dependent on solidifying a dichotomy, which I think in turn creates a kind of dead piece of peace.

This is very similar to people whose job it is to maintain their job, and so growth is retarded. I think the act of preventing solidification can be seen as a very excited, enthusiastic, positive, decisive state—a larger awareness of shared realities. Wayne Koestenbaum brings up a really interesting point in his essay on my work in *Artforum*, where