

# REGEN PROJECTS

Graiwer, Sarah Lehrer, "In the Studio: Ryan Trecartin," Art in America, June/July 2013

## Art in America

By Sarah Lehrer Graiwer, 6/3/2013



There is nothing else in today's art world even remotely like Ryan Trecartin's videos. Copying and pasting a crazy collage of dialects and accents, the protagonists—so many young, sexually ambiguous, wig-wearing and face-painted chatterboxes—deliver compu-pop poetry about their chronic over-existence. It's a sci-fi theater of the absurd for our manically paced YouTube era, a singular vision created by Trecartin in collaboration with his creative partner, Lizzie Fitch. His movies take up the torch of forebears like George Kuchar, Andy Warhol, Jack Smith, John Waters, Cindy Sherman, Alex Bag and Cameron Jamie. But, to Trecartin, apparent resemblances are merely superficial and retroactive; he is either uninterested or claims ignorance when any connections are made.

Born in Webster, Tex., in 1981 and raised in rural Ohio, Trecartin was what he calls "a tech major" (film/animation/video) at the Rhode Island School of Design, in Providence, where he lived with a group of art students who came to be the core of his collaborative team. He attracted the attention of the art world in 2004 with his senior thesis, a video called

A Family Finds Entertainment, which was posted online—as all his videos tend to be. Two years later he was included in the 2006 Whitney Biennial, "Day for Night," and his first feature, I-Be Area, screened at New York's Elizabeth Dee Gallery in 2007. By all critical accounts, Trecartin and Fitch's immersive, setlike video installations (dubbed "sculptural theaters") stole the show at the New Museum's "Younger Than Jesus" survey in 2009. And their tour-de-force seven-part suite, Any Ever (2009-10), which was presented at museums around the world, fixed Trecartin in the firmament.

Throughout all the hoopla of this meteoric rise, Trecartin and Fitch have kept a conspicuous distance from New York, opting instead to live and work in Providence, New Orleans, Philadelphia, Miami and now Los Angeles, where they have been based since 2010. In L.A., Fitch-Trecartin Studios—the essence of sprawl, low and vast—occupies a warehouse just off the freeway in Burbank. Shooting recently wrapped for a new group of multichannel videos (his first since Any Ever) that Trecartin is presenting inside five free-standing sculptural theaters in "The Encyclopedic Palace," curated by Massimiliano Gioni, at the 55th Venice Biennale. Retaining the awkward, blocky feel of its SketchUp origins, the L.A. set was one big room fragmented into themed zones replete with an enormous hot tub, a spinning bed, bleachers and at least a dozen disconnected toilets. But the set was deserted: party over. Trecartin and I spoke in April at his Los Feliz home and studio, where he had just resurfaced from his latest 30-hour-plus session editing these as-yet-untitled movies.

SARAH LEHRER-GRAIWER All of your videos are so layered and ambitious, I'm curious how you feel talking about a work when you're still in the middle of it.

RYAN TRECARTIN Because I work so collaboratively, I never know what the works are fully going to be until they're done. So I can't really talk about them until then. It's typical that the things I think they're about end up being background linearities, or like a larger mesh across the movies. The most interesting concepts I'm working on at a particular time are not in the forefront of my brain; the script works as a vehicle to dig into deeper, non-frontal questions.

I structure the movies more to create opportunities or obstacles than as planned works. I definitely embrace the unintended, even in the editing. Often I discover plots or ideas that I didn't know were there, and I then cut them into the work, altering the original script. I don't title works until they're finished.

LEHRER-GRAIWER Is this project for Venice a discrete work?

TRECARTIN It's a first phase. I showed three movies in "Younger Than Jesus" and at the time I knew they were going to grow into a larger system of works, but I hadn't conceived of Any Ever formally yet or its structure, which ended up being seven movies in total.

LEHRER-GRAIWER Are you at a comparable stage with this new work?

TRECARTIN Yeah, except that what I'm showing in Venice is complete in itself. I'll continue to work with all the material we shot this spring and continue to shoot more, probably over the next couple of years. Instead of discovering its phase logic gradually through the process, Lizzie [Fitch] and I have planned the phases ahead of time, which changes the way we film and build sets. We're deliberately challenging our process—the way we actually organize and make our ideas happen.

LEHRER-GRAIWER Do you mean logistically, as in the way you organize people?

TRECARTIN I mean everything. We now feel more of a responsibility to our work than we used to. Since 2011, we've had to think about continuing to exhibit our work and manage its installation so it shows the way we intend. (Our works are not easy to install.) I'm lucky to have a creative partnership where we believe in each other. You can do so much more with someone else than you can alone. One person's ideas become less important, and it's the exchange that matters. The nuance and particularity of how things are shared between people makes something special. I'm not interested in one-to-one ratios, but in what happens when many people's associations merge in unexpected combinations.

LEHRER-GRAIWER Have you and Lizzie lived together since 2000, when you first began collaborating?

TRECARTIN Aside from gaps for logistical reasons, we pretty much have lived together the whole time. I've done everything with Lizzie. I have also lived near [artist] Rhett LaRue since 2000. The three of us have worked together, on and off, since 2005.

LEHRER-GRAIWER The movies are a focal point where your collaborative network converges.

TRECARTIN There's this idea in these new scripts that an audience revolution takes place in which people are liberated. The movie supposes that if you ignore or abuse something long enough it'll create an "I" and gain free will. The revolution generates multiple worlds that are interior, pioneering into consciousness rather than outward into space and matter. That begins an era of multiple, parallel worlds rather than one of leaders, audiences, crowds and mass.

LEHRER-GRAIWER The idea of making a self—an "I"—out of ideas and nonhuman objects has been bubbling in your work for a while.

TRECARTIN That's a very deep concept for me and shows up in all aspects of the work, even in the stand-alone sculptures that Lizzie and I make together, which I think of more as scripts, games, personalities or behaviors than sculptures.

LEHRER-GRAIWER Where did the "personality" for your new movie come from?

TRECARTIN I recently revisited some footage I shot back in 1999, basically right after *The Blair Witch Project* came out, when I was a senior in high school. It's full of night vision. Watching my old footage now is so strange; people had a very different relationship to the camera. They didn't want to be filmed. Then they either forgot the camera was there, which doesn't happen now, or they narrated what they were doing. You can see how people's relationship to the camera used to be really primitive.

These high school videos inspired a lot of this project's content in a way that I'm not sure I'm comfortable with. I've started thinking about the footage in relation to anthropology.

LEHRER-GRAIWER How so? As in going undercover in a subculture?

TRECARTIN Anthropology is one of those things that eludes me. The "study of humans" could mean anything. I'm interested in the way people simultaneously negotiate divergent presentations of themselves for a variety of contexts. American culture has always had people in occupations that have to do that—politicians, PR agents, narcs.

LEHRER-GRAIWER You play a character in the new movie who I've heard referred to by your collaborators as the "dick director." What kind of director is that character and what kind of a director are you?

TRECARTIN My character was commenting on everyone's delivery of their lines in a very linear and aggressive way, like that person just said this and here's my response posted on a message board. He was very into stopping or blocking things from happening by narrating them in real time.

That's the character's agenda; as a director, I shoot from scripts very linearly. A script might be 15 pages and I just go straight through, line by line. Normally I don't show anyone the script. Sometimes lines are assigned to people ahead of time and sometimes not. Sometimes I direct body language or encourage an accent. I used to break the script down into short lines five or six words long, and have someone say them over and over. They would say them so many times that they might forget what they were saying.

This time I fed people paragraph-long lines and told them to say what they thought I said back to the camera. That kind of distortion of the script has been important. It's a very intense thing to put someone through. I'm asking for a lot of trust and I take that trust very seriously.

There were about a hundred people in this project, half I know well and half I've never worked with. The sets were built in a warehouse and are not domestic scale. I learned that the amount of physical space between you and a wall is significant. I was shocked by how much the space changed acting behaviors and me as a director.

LEHRER-GRAIWER Was the spaciousness freeing?

TRECARTIN No, the opposite! Free isn't the right word. The architecture created a situation where people felt they should project, even though we miked them individually. It's different than yelling. Someone trying to project their voice out is less subtle in their body. I try to avoid theater associations like projection. I like things that feel real, even if someone's acting completely psycho, it should be convincing as a person being animated and bizarre. I only like put-ons when they are used to communicate an idea.

LEHRER-GRAIWER It seems like another important directorial decision was to shoot at night.



TRECARTIN But we always shoot all night long. That started years ago because I hated setting up lights; it ruins the flow. Night shoots are the easiest way to make sure no light comes in the windows. I also realized that at night people are less likely to get phone calls and e-mails. The performances I'm looking for require being possessed and falling into a fragile zone that is easily ruined. On nighttime shoots, people are more in touch with edgier, perverse thoughts. Their associations are different than daytime associations. Unpredictable and repressed things come out when people get really tired.

LEHRER-GRAIWER That nocturnal quality feels timeless, the same way the sets are a no-place place. That unlocatable space is very specific to your videos.

TRECARTIN I don't ever establish location when I'm shooting. Instead of a person saying something within a space, I want to think about the space being on top of or framing the words.

LEHRER-GRAIWER Does that pose a relationship between place and media? Or maybe place is just data located in a box or hard drive.

TRECARTIN 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.

LEHRER-GRAIWER And give way to disobedience?

TRECARTIN Yeah. The first phase of this project is supposed to be like level one in a gaming system, where human ancestors are accessed as information. It's a game and it's also a university. In the first level of the game, no one has a name—or rather, everyone's named Jenny at first.

LEHRER-GRAIWER How do you specifically address the idea of mainstream American youth culture? The world of this new movie seems to be overtly fratty, sorority, college, MTV, spring breaker-esque.

TRECARTIN And it's accessed in a way that's super-reduced and basic. The idea that "pop" and "mass" are more a constructed, marketing idea than a lived reality keeps coming up in the movie. Characters constantly say they don't want to go Top 40 because they want to be niche and pick their own fans. They refuse to be filtered through a sense of "mass."

LEHRER-GRAIWER Has this new body of work been influenced by the fact that you've been living in L.A.? You have a bigger budget and are using Hollywood professionals for the first time—like set builders and some professional actresses. Is your "dick director" character modeled on a Hollywood type?

TRECARTIN No. Directing happens in all fields, not just movie-making. I was thinking of my director character more as an animator. In this movie, humans evolve into animations. Then the animations generate their own free will. It's suggested that, in the movies, no one is human after all, but just animated. However, basing the design of the set on different television conventions was in my mind because of being in Los Angeles. Sitcoms and game shows always shoot from the same angles where one wall, the fourth wall, is missing. We positioned several open sets around a central stage so it became a continuous 360-degree situation: no inside, no outside, no separate audience position, no clear delineation of roles, on or off stage.

LEHRER-GRAIWER Is that different from your previous movies?

TRECARTIN I've always done 360-degree sets, but this is the first time I took the idea outside of a domestic space. There were multiple cameras. If you were helping with the shoot you were in costume too. The crew, who appear in the shots, wear sweatshirts with the word "Witness" on them.

They also wear green hats, because I associate green-screen color with production; there is a lot of green-screen color that I'm not keying out. My character also wears a Witness sweatshirt. He's the most vocal Witness, though everyone in the sweatshirts is really part of the same conglomerate character. That character is the point of access for us viewers.

LEHRER-GRAIWER Your work has generally taken a positive, optimistic outlook on the prospect of subject formation today, despite the homogenizing force of global corporate culture. Does this movie take a darker turn?

TRECARTIN 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. Rhett sent me an article about the automation of the court systems, suggesting computers could do a better job of judging a crime than humans. Now that sounds scary to me because, personally, I like feeling that if I had to I could talk my way out of something. Clearly we're going to evolve into something beyond what we are now, so it doesn't really matter.

LEHRER-GRAIWER Could you say more about that?

TRECARTIN 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. Who knows? In the past couple of years I've felt like the outcome is not set. I feel more angst and anger than usual.

LEHRER-GRAIWER Does that angst correspond to your own trajectory of rapid success?

TRECARTIN I'm sure it does in some ways. But I try to only pay attention to expectations coming from my friends and peers, the people that I really care about. I don't really have anything in particular to say about art-world success, because for the most part I feel extremely lucky and excited to have the resources to be able to focus on making art.

I felt a similar angst and anger during the making of *I-Be Area* [2007]. I think it's a phase. When I made *A Family Finds Entertainment* [2004], I was in a very positive state. With *I-Be Area*, I rebelled and made the process hard on myself. After beating myself up during *I-Be Area*, *Any Ever* [2009-10] came out in a very natural, inspired way. *Any Ever* has perversion and darkness but generally embraces the attitude that as long as you stay aware and utilize things that are happening to and around you, you're still free.

This new project focuses more on basic human interactions, blending the lines between controlled experience and complete breakdown.

LEHRER-GRAIWER Breakdown as a way to get perspective?

TRECARTIN Yeah, to disassociate and fall apart. When a relationship stops being challenging and starts coasting, usually someone breaks the other person or themselves. Maybe humanity doesn't actually like stability all that much.

LEHRER-GRAIWER You brought Parkour guys on set. Parkour stunts evolved out of military training on obstacle courses, right? And the whole spring-break vibe is very American. I've heard that a lot of props on your set were weaponized, like earmuffs stuffed with razor blades, as though any depiction of "mainstream America" would have a bellicose dimension.

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TRECARTIN That's a big part of it. People in the movie talk about funding wars as if that were a badge. Characters are always talking about how they've weaponized things, even family members. I weaponized the party gear, like big red Solo cups that shatter, to mirror the idea that something pleasant, communal and social can be used as a weapon.

LEHRER-GRAIWER You're a fan of the TV show Killer Karaoke, which imposes risk-taking to exaggerate performance. Has that influenced this project?

TRECARTIN I love that show! It definitely inspired my directing style for this movie, now that I think about it. Movement didn't happen like it used to in my work because shooting on one big open set actually produced a trapped feeling; so risk had to instigate movement.

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. This was different; the raw footage is really fun to watch.

LEHRER-GRAIWER Is that partly because you used some professional, celebrity actresses?

TRECARTIN We just used a few. I wanted to work with Molly Tarlov [from the MTV show Awkward], Aubrey Plaza [from Parks and Recreation] and Alia Shawkat [from Arrested Development]. Natalie Love and Jena Malone are in it, too. Jena was already a friend beforehand. I have always loved actresses in secondary roles who you wish were onscreen more.

LEHRER-GRAIWER Were they familiar with your practice?

TRECARTIN I don't think so, except for Jena, but they watched it and said yes. It wasn't that different from directing friends, which was great. They were good at saying something that sounds absurd and delivering it with a sense of decisiveness and confidence that's controlled yet belligerent.

LEHRER-GRAIWER Do you think their age is part of why they were such a good fit?

TRECARTIN Yeah, they're all generally my age or younger. I'm 32. People born in the '80s, particularly '86 and after, really do have a different way of accessing performance.

I've always been very unnostalgic about history, which is just as creative and malleable as the future. I don't

think people need to be hung up on accuracy. A larger objective history is just not important. I think we're moving into a world where, as everything gets captured and recorded, we're gaining a new sense of time. Someday we'll be able to time travel through information. The focus will then shift to intention and feelings.

I used to be fine with the idea that we supposedly make things to be maintained for history, but I don't think that will matter in the future. If you're making something for history or legacy or the ages, it's in vain. The only thing that matters to me at this moment is making things for the present—and the future. It's not about becoming a part of history. Timelessness is a romantic throwaway.

Currently on view Ryan Trecartin in "The Encyclopedic Palace," at the 55th Venice Biennale, through Nov. 24.