



Ryan Trecartin Artforum September 2011

Ryan Trecartin

MoMA PS1, NEW YORK
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EMULATING THE INFORMATION NETWORKS that are its chief distribution platform, Ryan Trecartin's digital cinema doesn't tell stories—it generates content. And then some. His exhibition at MoMA PS1, "Any Ever," presents seven films: the trilogy *Trill-ogy Comp*, 2009, and the quartet *Re'Search Wait'S*, 2009–10. Like all of Trecartin's videos, these are replete with the fashion-conscious use of post-gender drag, zeitgeist-baiting sound bites, hyperkinetic montages of live and animated footage, and a troupe of youthful protagonists who nimbly wend their way through a rapid sequence of surreally anarchic situations. Each film occupied its own haphazardly and idiosyncratically furnished room, evoking the soundstages of reality shows like *Paradise Hotel* or the virtual environs of *The Sims*.

Such maximalism threatens to overwhelm the average viewer, who may lack Trecartin's high tolerance for sensory overload and his command of pop-cultural nuance. But "Any Ever" has been praised by many critics precisely for its sensory enactment of technological immersion—though perhaps counterintuitively, this praise has come largely from the older generation, rather than from members of Trecartin's cohort. The *New York Times*' Roberta

Smith described the show as a "cocooning experience. . . a rabbit hole full of rabbit holes." *New Yorker* critic Peter Schjeldahl lauded the artist's "revolutionary" tactics, commenting that, "like General George Washington confounding the British, [Trecartin] exploits the strategic advantage of a limitless hinterland, in his case the digital jungle." Additionally, Smith and Schjeldahl propose this digital terrain as the aesthetic ground for a contemporary notion of identity politics. To the extent that the exhaustive dedifferentiation of queer, gendered, and race-related tropes is crucial to the digitally mediated texture of "Any Ever," Trecartin intimates a scenario wherein the contemporary subject computes identity and its meanings through an endlessly mutable set of criteria. Smith writes, "Queerness here is not a cause; it is a constant condition that has now permeated the culture at large." Schjeldahl suggests that Trecartin's "prophecy of a future in which personal, sexual, racial, and all other identities will be masks donned or discarded at an individual's whim . . . pays off beautifully."

This examination of other critics' appraisals may seem a curious way to approach my own task as a reviewer. However, their (unintentionally) synchronized praise of Trecartin's work is illuminating, especially since reviews such as these purport to speak not for the one but for the commonwealth of the many. Their routine reversion to plural pronouns attests to the imagined consensus that is naturalized in the delivery of their critical appraisals. This really is the royal "we": These published judgments seek to establish the existence of a sovereign "us," homogenous and self-sustaining. And this "us" is the very subject that Trecartin ostensibly disarticulates with his inventive take on contemporary identity formation.

In actuality, the dynamic is quite different. Trecartin's cinematic hyperbole clues audiences in on the existence of various heterotopic identifications, but as a kind of docile pageantry. Written into the code of his practice is a disinterest in transgression as a real artistic possibility. He favors a synthetic approach to cultural meaning that creatively

reconciles his fluid identities with the symbolic economies that govern "our" now-global culture. To quote a relevant line from *Popular Sky (section ish)*, 2009: "Capitulation is sexy when you land on the right vibration."

This might explain why it is that the impish characters of "Any Ever" are primarily situated within either decoratively "trashed" prefab homes or nontraditional, *nouvel esprit* corporate offices. As I strolled through the installations in which Trecartin's films are embedded at PS1—past furniture recomposed for maximum artisanal effect, purses stuck to the legs of a sofa, aluminum bleachers caught in the pointless breeze of an industrial fan humming alongside the museum's central air-conditioning—it came to seem almost inevitable that Trecartin would root his protagonists' narratives in the primal scenes of economic

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growth. There, they labor hyperactively not to disclose meaning but to extract the value latent in their ever-flexible, niche-marketable identities. The obligatory joy with which Trecartin's *mise-en-scène* is obliterated into heaps of garbage testifies that these wild identities remain pleasantly captive among the artificial flora of their social habitat. Far from engaging (even critically) the activist project of identity politics, Trecartin's work—his disinhibited bodies coursing through the monetized cultural sites of "our" contemporary world—offers a vision of value-added identitarianism. "I love being in places that mean nothing to me," declares one character, this one played by the artist himself. This may be understood as an ironic expression of nihilistic pathos, but it's not. In fact, delivered by this glowing young artist, it's speculative glee. □

"Ryan Trecartin: Any Ever" will be on view at MoMA PS1 through September 3.

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From left: View of "Ryan Trecartin: Any Ever," 2011. Photo: Matthew Septimus.

Ryan Trecartin, *Ready (Re'Search Wait'S)*, 2009–10, still from a color HD video, 26 minutes 49 seconds.

