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RYAN TRECARTIN
STILL FROM ***A FAMILY FINDS ENTERTAINMENT*, 2004**
DIGITAL VIDEO TRANSFERRED TO DVD, 41 MIN 12 SEC
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ELIZABETH DEE GALLERY, NEW YORK

STREAMING CREATURES

A NEW GENERATION OF QUEER VIDEO ART

By MICHAEL WANG

In 1991, in *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson contended that experimental video maintains a dialectical relationship with commercial television. Today, new interactions between video art and the Internet position work like that of Ryan Trecartin, Kalup Linzy, K8 Hardy, and other young video artists as a kind of limit case. Linzy and Trecartin are both influenced by forms of commercial TV—Linzy, the daytime soap; Trecartin, the music video and the commercial break—and both actively post work on YouTube, putting their ostensibly "high" art into the "total flow" of streaming video. (Of course, even to speak of high and low in this context is at best quaint, at worst to perpetuate a strand of postmodern panegyric.) Moreover, their work bears the imprint of the fragmentation, denarrativization, and detemporalization of streaming video, reflecting the new euphorias of the digitized subject.

The fact that the three artists I mention are all queer is perhaps no coincidence. Queers—and queer artists—found an ambivalent ally in the postmodern. The calling into question of master narratives and the reconfiguration of bodies as texts served to reposition queerness as, perhaps, *the* representative mode of postmodernism, even while these very techniques threatened the deterioration of a queer *political* project through the nonhierarchical flattening of difference. Video, for Jameson, the postmodern form par excellence, accommodated queer theatricality. The multiple feed-

back loops between the queer and the postmodern, new media and new markets, configure the precarious status of the artists under discussion. Queer practice and the postmodern anticipated the emergence of new media and new markets, networked conditions that continue to shape both the postmodern and the queer.

Trecartin's bloody and beglittered *A Family Finds Entertainment* (2004) earned the artist queer-video poster-boy status for the digital age. The work, "discovered" by artist Sue de Beer on Friendster in 2005, found quick and enthusiastic reception online, celebrated on, among other sites, Cooper's blog. It is currently accessible on YouTube in five installments, a literal fragmentation that corresponds neatly to the fragmentation of streaming video. The 41-minute piece is a delirious montage of digital effect, disaffected dialogue, and musical interludes, elaborating a hypersaturated world of clownishly made-up characters in the grips of stuttering intersubjective paralysis. Trecartin performs a number of roles, loosely structuring the plot around his characters Skippy, a toothless and self-destructive delinquent struck down by a car in the midst of a short-lived coming-out narrative, and Shin, a hyperactive redhead who flits among youth-culture or art-school cliques. Half the video deliriously follows Shin through a labyrinthine house party. Midway through, in reference to a particularly psychedelic sequence, a voice drones, "a digital relic from a future age of cyberchaos and analog holocaust." It's a decent epigram for the work as a whole. The total reification of the social as evidenced on social-networking sites like Friendster, where users indulge in the endless customization of their online identities while collecting and displaying friends in a virtual "gallery," resonates with *A Family Finds Entertainment*, both at the level of content and through its online distribution. Here and in other works, the 26-year-old relentlessly pursues the giddiness of this splintering subject.

Many of Trecartin's works also thematize that earlier fragmentary order invoked by Jameson: the televisual. In *Waynes World* (2003), Trecartin and collaborator Lizzie Fitch appear in what presumably represents a public-access program's basement studio. In *What's the Love Making Babies For* (2003), Trecartin, wearing a white wig and muumuu, presents a dominatrix-y "devil" with a television commercial in which he stars. A slack-jawed Trecartin lisps, "So I made a commercial, guys. These are the costumes. It's experimental."

Drag—as both a performance technique and queer signifier—undergirds much of Trecartin's and Linzy's practices. Favoring surface and artifice over the natural, drag historically exemplified the provisional identity formation of the fractured postmodern subject. Whether donning a *Jem and the Holograms*–style wig or tricking out a scene in tinsel, Trecartin (following the logic of the gesamtkunstwerk) employs drag in multiple modes. *A Family Finds Entertainment* was shot in his gritty Providence "pink house," decked out with crepe-paper streamers, paper cutouts, Christmas lights (and trees), and armloads of garland. Despite the slapdash stagings, he arrives at a hallucinatory synthesis through the liberal application of a range of digital effects. The makeshift quality of Trecartin's sets harkens back to Jack Smith's dime-store exoticisms. Linzy too works in the style of a forefather (or drag mother), that of the legendary Vaginal Davis—"terrorist drag," *pace* theorist José Esteban Muñoz. The 29-year-old Linzy, a recent Guggenheim fellow, eschews makeup and dons ill-fitting wigs—often paired with a five o'clock shadow—in an effort to differentiate gender (or, more often and more simply, character) in his generally solo performances. While Davis channels Black Panther militancy (her drag nom de guerre pays homage to Angela Davis) and summons racist or homophobic spectacle (white supremacists, serial killers) in her screeching live acts, Linzy often inhabits quotidian artworld scenes (a first gallery show, an artist interview) haunted by race, class, and queer desire. Both Davis and Linzy notably forgo drag's potential for illusion—ever more "real" in an age of increasingly sophisticated surgeries. For Davis, the tactics of "passing" (or, more specifically, not) fuel a politicized détournement of toxic tropes. In Linzy's work, the same queer strategies (albeit domesticated) reinforce the impossibility of a racialized subject to pass in an overwhelmingly white artworld (*Conversations wit de Churen V: As da Art World Might Turn* [2006], *KK Queens Survey* [2005]).

Linzy's and Trecartin's work circulates, in ways that would have been unimaginable for their homo predecessors, through the appropriation of "new" media and the simultaneous expansion of the art market. Jack Smith is again an apposite figure of contrast. After the underground "success" (and scandal) of *Flaming Creatures* (1963), he refused to produce finished works (he repeatedly accused Jonas Mekas's championing of the film as "sucking the life from it"). This effective removal of his works from circulation aligns with his adaptive strategies of incorporating live performance and real-time editing (Smith would splice raw footage in the projection room), all of which resisted the alienation of the artist from his works. Ironically, the postmodern era annexed precisely these avant-garde modes (fragmentation, denarrativization) in the configuration of flows and networks in the service of production and distribution. The "unfinished work," on sites like YouTube, becomes the preferred object of consumption. Whereas Smith's work could never have been shown in an art context during his lifetime, Linzy's poignant and often hilarious takes on the artworld might be read as symptomatic of the absorption of marginal practices into an art context. Cameo appearances by Linzy's friends, figures like artist Matthew Day Jackson and Linzy's New York gallerist Kelly Taxter, cement the impression of an elaborate in-joke. In *KK Queens Survey*, Linzy asks as an artworld telephone data collector: "Metaphorically speaking, how many asses do you kiss a week?" The recuperation of market themes in the work indexes artworld consumption as the very site at which the work is produced.

While Linzy's spare production values decline the spectacle Trecartin's achieves with his digital visual effects, both manipulate the audio track to similar effect. To borrow a reading from Frankfurt School critique, the dislocation of the voice

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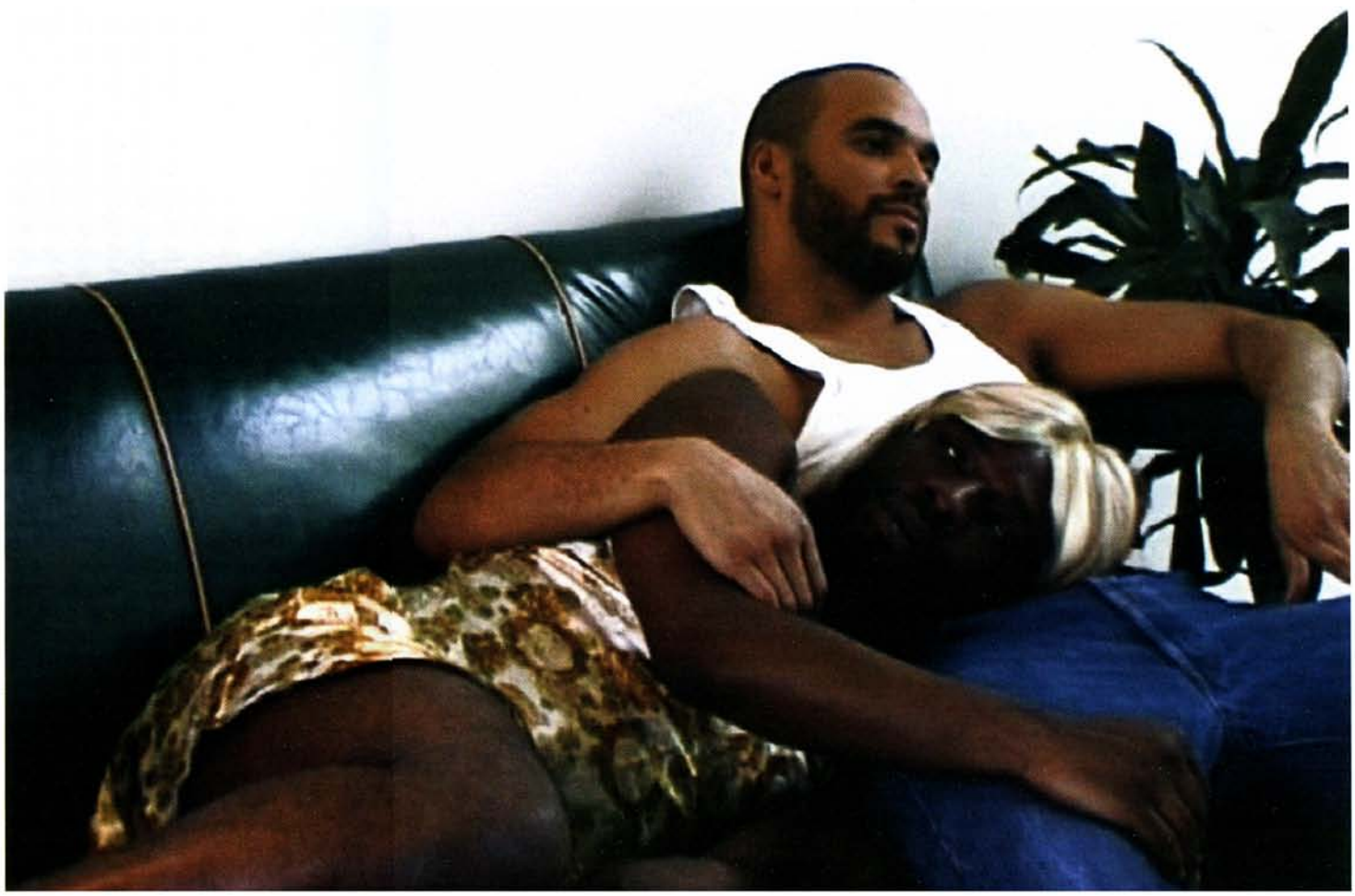
as a locus of authenticity is intimately tied up with its reproducibility and dissemination—a logic perhaps even more fully operative today via the total dematerialization of MP3s and other digital media. In Linzy's video work, nearly all the dialogue is performed over the telephone, with the artist himself playing most of the roles—Linzy in a power suit at a desk, Linzy in a hairnet and nightgown in the kitchen, Linzy in a skullcap and wifebeater—yet the total isolation of the characters is obscured by montage and abetted by a sound track that tweaks female voices a notch higher and slows down male voices to a deep bass. (Whether or not Linzy plays every role, he almost always performs the dialogue himself, recording his own voice over the performances of other actors.) The resulting mix of Linzy's technologically processed dialogue stitches together narrative (or narrative motifs) in a virtuoso performance that splits image and sound—an inverse lip sync—to shift "drag" from its status as a performance strategy to a consequence of the reproduction technology itself. Trecartin's videos employ similar techniques to achieve a range of vocal treatments: in his work, almost all the actors' voices are processed to some extent. Frequently the sound bears no connection to the video track, and at times fragments of sound and video are replayed or repeated together to achieve a halting, broken-record effect. This audio-visual split serves not only to detemporalize any vérité correspondence between speaking and acting, but also, through backward masking and repetition, to disrupt the narrative itself.

While Linzy and Trecartin redeploy queer tropes within the matrix of new media, K8 Hardy, another artist working in video and performance, attempts to enunciate a queer *body* in contradistinction to the often-spectacular dematerialization that attends these new forms. Militant rather than euphoric, often meant to be experienced firsthand rather than in mediated form, her works tend to highlight a disjunction between her body and its image—an ideological move that can be traced to her investment in lesbian feminism but which attempts to cut across the lesbian feminist–queer divide. (Lesbian feminism historically has essentialized gender, which often set it at odds with a poststructuralist queer theory.) In the live performance *Beautiful Radiating Energy* (2004), Hardy literally puts her body in front of the video projector, making gymnastic contortions that variously recall cheerleading steps or military exercises, all the while shouting above the video's music. Intoning "I am happy; I am here; I am hurt. I'm ready!" in timbres ranging from the childish to the combative, she displays an athleticism seemingly incompatible with her "hysterical" message. The work, it turns out, demands a month of vocal training.

In a recent conversation in the journal *Grey Room*, artist Gregg Bordowitz claimed that the objectlessness of Hardy's formulation in *Beautiful Radiating Energy* is "very queer." I would argue, rather, that a queer object specificity is maintained in the specularized display of Hardy's body itself. Dressed all in white including, ideally, white stockings, she blends into the screen onto which are projected a series of images: the artist's friend Math wandering away from the camera, found footage of reactions to the burial of the Baader-Meinhof terrorists on October 27, 1977 (the day of Hardy's birth), gay-rights parades, and body-building



FACING PAGE
JACK SMITH
STILL FROM ***FLAMING CREATURES*, 1963**
BLACK-AND-WHITE FILM WITH SOUND, 43 MIN
COURTESY ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES

ABOVE
KALUP LINZY
STILL FROM ***CONVERSATIONS WIT DE CHUREN V: AS DA ART WORLD MIGHT TURN*, 2006**
COLOR DVD WITH SOUND, 11 MIN 16 SEC
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND TAXTER & SPENGEMANN, NEW YORK

competitions. Hardy's politicized performances attempt to reclaim a coherent body even as certain aesthetic strategies—the merging with the screen in *Beautiful Radiating Energy* or the soft focus of *Hallmark Card* (2006), in which the artist appears overwhelmed by a profusion of roses—threaten the articulation of a delimited subject. She describes the diminutive *Hallmark Card* (installed as a rear projection on a screen of cotton jersey) as "against the pressure of coupling" while portraying a "singularity that is not totally single."

The sense of a social world (which exists only fictively in Linzy's one-man shows and tends toward schizophrenic breakdown in Trecartin's videos) also defines Hardy's other projects, especially her involvement with the radical gender-queer and lesbian-feminist art collective LTTR. Parroting the corporate strategies of MySpace (News Corporation) or YouTube (Google), LTTR, like a corporate conglomerate, rallies together varied individual practices under shared investments; they even boast a product, the journal *LTTR*. The group's expansive practices—aside from producing the journal, they stage events, performances, and parties—make an intriguing pairing with Hardy's MySpace page. (Linzy, it should be noted, links to a MySpace page from his official website.) While sites like MySpace enact the kind of total fragmentation and nonhierarchical structuring of what could only dubiously be called the social, since its inception MySpace has spawned sites of marginal community-making alongside the usual self-promotion that accompanies the fabrication of online identities. (Queer groups, from Radical Cheerleaders to Radical Faeries, maintain profiles alongside seemingly infinite numbers of music acts, et al.) Hardy's page, featuring friends and collaborators and publicizing upcoming events, also imagines a space of nonhistorical identification. Under the standard category "Who I'd like to meet," Hardy enumerates, "when I die and go to feminist hell: Kathy Acker, Claude Cahun, Maya Deren, Sarah Jacobson, Ana Mendieta, Gertrude Stein, Francesca Woodman, Aileen Wuornos, David Wojnarowicz."

The elaboration of queerness within the fragmented modes of video and new media risks the reification of "lifestyle" as nothing more than an empty sign of market-driven desires. As if mocking this threat, Trecartin, in *A Family Finds Entertainment* (posing as a sleazy film producer against a backdrop of chinoiserie), unctuously opines, "I enjoy an entertaining *lifestyle*." Hardy describes *Poser Reel* (2007), a redolent, if sentimental video of herself (as her character Elise) and artist Klara Liden walking the streets of Brooklyn, biting each other's arms and peeing into a glass (in the hazy glare of late afternoon) as a "lifestyle piece." The lifestyle Hardy offers here looks rather dreamy or even, in the language of ad copy and fashion spreads, "bohemian." Of course *style*, as a chosen way of life or even a survival strategy, versus a commodified *lifestyle* (something you buy into), historically positioned queer work as resistant to the normative—what Smith evocatively disdained as the "pasty." While Trecartin, Linzy, and Hardy (and LTTR) might serve up alternative "lifestyle cultures," Hardy insists on the possibility of queer critique within the totalizing matrix of the postmodern, reserving political potential even in that most slippery of status signifiers: the glamorous. When speaking of her "lifestyle" piece, she maintains that "it's glamorized a little bit—strategically—because it's a marginal position."

For more information on K8 Hardy, Kalup Linzy, and Ryan Trecartin, turn to Index, p. 126.