

USELESS

BECAUSE LIFE IS LONGER THAN YOU THINK

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RYAN TREC- ARTIN

VIRTUAL REALITY
FROM YOUTUBE
TO SAATCHI

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Images: Stills from *A Family Finds Entertainment*, 2004

Courtesy of Elizabeth Dee Gallery

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'I LIKE TO WATCH MYSELF WATCH TV'

One of the most compelling works in this year's Whitney Biennial was a 41-minute narrative video from Philadelphia-based artist Ryan Trecartin. A *Family Finds Entertainment* is the story of 'Skippy,' a maniac whose friends kill him in an accidental hit-and-run; the story of Trecartin's discovery is almost as fortuitous. Not long ago, the artist was trading video projects with an audience of like-minded on-liners. A fan forwarded his work to a curator at the New Museum, and it soon made its way to gallery owner and tastemaker, Charles Saatchi. Trecartin's video is joyfully over-the-top: enthusiastically amateur acting, whirling handheld cameras, and a sped-up soundtrack that skews all sense of real-time. Heavily made-up actors are recorded watching their own performances, then given direction from another on-screen character. In a Biennial chocked with aggressive sound and visuals, Trecartin's work stood out as subtly captivating and sweetly post-modern.

I watched some of your work on YouTube.com. It's a nice platform for video art; what kind of content do you watch on the site?

You can do a lot with YouTube. I watch a lot of personal diary videos. There's one particularly outrageous girl, 'Amorvincitom' - everyone leaves comments on her space about how ugly she is. She just says, "I know I don't look that great, I know I have a big chin."

On YouTube, can she just be who she is?

For her, being online isn't a destination. It's just part of life, she turns on her webcam and she talks. But it's a space where she doesn't have to physically deal with the people writing about her. She gets to mediate herself for her online-only friends and enemies. If these people got together in real life, they would probably just be, like, "Oh, yeah, you're 'Clubmix1996'! That was so funny, when you...!"

With so many websites, it seems you're only a click away from finding out everything about someone. Is that part of the appeal?

Yeah, you get so much more specific with your friends. There's so many more inside details, and opinions, and culture collecting. It's hard to penetrate a friend group, or let someone penetrate yours, but I think young people have made the Internet totally natural, despite everything. I think that a lot of people on the Internet are very sincere. It's still a new world, for people to really be free in. There's sincerity in the context; the person they respond to, and when.

How do you get to know someone, as a friend, intimately?

For me, it's always collaborating. Creating something with a person. Once that happens, you have fun - it doesn't have to be making art, it can be playing music, thinking out an idea, painting together, dancing, *making shit*. Making something new. My friends tell me that it's hard to become a close friend of mine. I don't party that much, I don't do too many social things like that. I like to hang out by making stuff with people.

And your friends are often your actors?

I'm trying to expand my actor base. I've been trying to find people on the Internet. I also like finding people the way I found the 'mother' character, in *A Family Finds Entertainment*. She was a nude model at RISD. It's fun to do it that way: you just see someone in public and you ask them. Once, we were singing karaoke at a bar in Philadelphia -

Singing what?

Sheryl Crow, "Every Day is a Winding Road" - and there was this lady - well, it was an awesome guy-lady - and she just joined us on stage, in this crazy performance, so I took her number.

When someone is an exhibitionist, or is just skilled at performing live, does it translate to camera the way you need it to?

Oh, yeah. The direction and script is specific, but sometimes I'll throw a bunch of costumes out and say, "Pick one," for example. Sometimes I give assignments, and sometimes it's setting people in place, sculpting the atmosphere on the set. Sometimes the performance ends up coaching you. I usually direct while I'm acting, and the process can become very interactive.

The art world isn't used to that aspect of sharing: I direct, and write the script, and edit, but it's still collaborative. Performers will accidentally say a line that makes the movie a million times better. When you keep those doors open, it's amazing what you can make with people. Good stuff is made when one, or two, or three people take control and *push*. But I don't think of myself in terms of, you know, "the artist." I make stuff for creative people, with creative people. I think it's anti-human to want the "pure" work.

Because your videos use comedy, some people have called them camp. Camp takes earnest stuff and makes it funny, but that's not exactly your style of humor.

The performance of humor is sincere in intention. It may be twisted or two-faced but they're sincerely that way. There are no tricks, there's no holding on to a joke. There's no playing of a role, of something cultural. No drag, like "I am a housewife," or "I am a businessman." There's no trying to "be something", and romanticizing any failure at that attempt. It's performing by using personality as a language, to try to clear the air and create a dialogue. It's awesome to me when someone *just says it*. Especially if they say it twice.

You're working on an hour-long video for your solo show in May. What kind of response are you hoping for after the success at the Biennial?

If no one is interested, I'd feel like I failed. I think about community when I make art. I want to affect people. I feel "thank-the-world" lucky that my art was taken in different contexts: in an entertaining TV way, in an art-world way, in a YouTube way. If my next project goes well everywhere except the art world, I'll be disappointed. But if it only does well with art world people then I'll feel like a loser.

You want your work to engage a couple of kinds of audiences?

Yes... because I do really think about the entertaining quality of art, even if it's not necessarily entertaining in a "fun" way.

You've had your whole life, up to this point, to pour everything into this debut work, and then it's, "Ok, let's see the next thing now."

It's serious. And I don't want to repeat myself. There are certain themes and character types in *A Family Finds Entertainment* that I feel passionate about; can I repeat those in my new project? Some people are really drawn to the aesthetic of *A Family Finds Entertainment*. And it's the visual aesthetic that's going to keep changing, over time. The approach to writing and directing is what is always going to interest me; the malleability, and the playfulness, and experimentation. I'm not afraid that I'll lose that, but I am afraid that some people performing for me on camera might lose that. They may get scared to be open, because they're going to be in something that people will see. If that gets destroyed, it'll be a huge failure.

Then you'll have to get professionals.

Or people off the Internet who don't know anything about the art world, which could be rad.