

Ryan Trecartin: Conversation and Critique

DRAKE HOTEL, TORONTO MAR 23 2010

by SHEILA HETI



Artist Ryan Trecartin, Power Plant assistant curator of public programs Jon Davies and Power Plant senior curator of programs Helena Reckitt at the Drake Hotel on March 23, 2010

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Close Move

Ryan Trecartin, the 29-year-old American video artist, sits before us on a stool at the Drake Hotel bar, the Toronto twilight in the windows behind him. He is dressed tidily but casually in jeans, a T-shirt and an unbuttoned button-down shirt. His dark hair is slightly wavy; his face, open and appealing. He is unrecognizable as the characters he plays in his films.

To his left, on stools, sit Power Plant curators Jon Davies (in a remarkable, graphic knit sweater) and Helena Reckitt (in a serene suit jacket and skirt). Before they begin to ask him questions, which he'll obligingly answer, the standing-room-only crowd (mostly artists under 40) watches a four-minute clip, projected on video screens above our heads. Trecartin watches too, a placid, resigned, relaxed heart; opaque.

It later becomes clear that Trecartin is not opaque, but tired. He was to fly to Toronto on Saturday to set up "Ryan Trecartin: Any Ever" at the Power Plant—the largest exhibition of his work to date—but instead came three days later, hours before the talk. He'd spent the past 36 hours finishing edits on one of the films that would be premiering that week.

During the 40-minute interview, Trecartin's "100 percent most important collaborator," Lizzie Fitch, sits at the back of the stage, mostly hidden from view. At one point, she answers a question that he is stumbling through. She talks for a full minute while the audience sits, confused; no one gives her a microphone. None of us can hear. Reckitt brushes off her contribution, saying, "I think Ryan can answer that one," and turns to gaze at him.



Ryan Trecartin *Sibling Topics (Section A)* 2009 Video still Courtesy the artist and Elizabeth Dee New York

As great as it was to see and hear Ryan Trecartin—what a sincere and gentle man, and what a great artist, too—that moment typified the lack of imagination put into the night.

Yes, they made him talk—and it was clear that here was a person with a complete worldview, not just seven ideas about art. Yes, he spoke of many things: brands (they “go through you”); film vs. video (it’s not a distinction he thinks about: “I prefer the word *movie* because it means *move*”); the sped-up pacing of dialogue in his work (“in two years it will seem slow”); writing (“I have the characters address themselves in the first, second and third person”); sampling (“I’m more interested in digesting”); and casting (initially he used “collaborator-friend-artists,” but recently he cast unemployed child actors who hope to work for Disney).

But it would have been more apt, entertaining and revealing (and more fun and useful for Trecartin, you’d think) if the questioners had not been the show’s curators. Did the organizers really take a good look at Ryan Trecartin—his youth, his work, his aesthetic—and think that these would best be expressed by having him sit on a stage with museum officials, answering their predictable, often distancing, questions?

How much better would the event have been if a 14-year-old girl had been up there—perhaps a video-game connoisseur who had just seen one his films? Maybe she and her best friend should have questioned him. Trecartin’s father was in attendance; why not put *him* on the stage? Or why not have Trecartin in conversation with his collaborator, Fitch? To proceed in such a rote way demonstrates the curators’ refusal to show how or even *that* they were affected or inspired by his work—and thus obliged to respond to it in their design of the event. In cases like this, a lack of imagination is somewhat insulting.

It’s not surprising, then, that Trecartin grew most excited during the Q & A, when a fey young man went to the microphone with both a desperate and mock-desperate need to know (on behalf of himself and his boyfriend) how many Blackberries Trecartin had smashed in a certain film. “Two thousand, right?” Trecartin, delighted, proudly proclaimed that they had only smashed three.



Ryan Trecartin *K-Corea/INC.K (Section A)* 2009 Video still Courtesy the artist and Elizabeth Dee New York
One word kept returning to Trecartin's mouth that night: *maintenance*.

In his working process, 20-hour editing stretches are a form of maintenance. Such continual presence is necessary because “when you leave your computer, the files aren’t in your body anymore and you don’t know where they are.”

Viewers of Trecartin’s frenetic, jazzy, cut-up and brightly painted movies will know that in his world, people, things, rooms and plots slip into each other and merge. (“Plot might be a character or an area,” he explained.) So it was surprising to hear him touch on the ways identities are maintained; he sees personality as not fixed, but held in place by external factors and forces. If those forces disappear, identity may easily slip away. Even language cannot be made concrete with words: “It’s not just what someone says, but how the person flips her hair while saying it, or where she chooses to stand in a room.”

The phenomenon of everything’s inevitable slippage perhaps explains why rooms are so important to Trecartin and are so well realized in his films. He said he began conceiving his movies by thinking of rooms, and on the scale of things, a room does seem like a pretty stable maintainer of factors and forces. As he pointed out, when there are a number of people in a room, they share characteristics with each other—the characteristics which are being maintained by the room.

In the room we were in at the Drake, Trecartin sat near his collaborator, Fitch. Two curators interviewed him—collaborating on the interview. And I sat watching the whole event beside my collaborator, Margaux Williamson. It was a room that maintained collaborators.

Trecartin sat at the front of the room, but in no other way did he feel different from the people who sat in the audience; everyone that night seemed equally humble, sincere, placid and curious. If our identity is not something essential, but rather something maintained by factors which maintain identity, then it’s particularly unfortunate that the Power Plant chose to maintain that Trecartin was just an official visiting artist, when it was clear that he’s something much less stable than that.

Video documentation of Ryan Trecartin’s March 23 talk is on view in the Power Plant’s reading room to May 24.

Sheila Heti is the author of two books, Ticknor and The Middle Stories, as well as the forthcoming How Should a Person Be? She frequently conducts interviews for The Believer, and is the creator of the Trampoline Hall lecture series. On May 16, Heti will give a Sunday Scene talk at the Power Plant with Margaux Williamson.



Ryan Trecartin *Sibling Topics (Section A)* 2009 Video still Courtesy the artist and Elizabeth Dee New York

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Simon Starling's exhibition "Cuttings (Supplement)," at The Power Plant, is part of an ongoing dialogue between artist and gallery that draws on several years of mutual support. (The Power Plant helped realize his 2005 show "Cuttings" at the Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Basel.)