



[The Filmmaker's Community by Ajay RS Hothi](#)

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Game Keepers Without Game, Emily Wardill It's the season of mists. The rain, insistent, engulfs us at every angle and we have eight months of grey cloud ahead of us. Yet ...

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→ Rosemary Heather on why Ryan Trecartin makes art cool again



Any Ever, Ryan Trecartin

The third time I visited Ryan Trecartin's show of video installations, [Any Ever](#) in Toronto, it was near the end of the exhibition. A small army of people moved from room to room, notebooks in hand, recording their thoughts. Like few other art events I can think of, the show contained within it the seeds of a conversation. See Ryan Trecartin's work and you want to talk about it.

Trecartin opens up a space that is innate to video's technological capabilities; yet, before him, no one had quite dared to go there. And treading where others fear to tread can produce fear itself. Fear and a reluctance to engage is one response his work tends to get. Fear because a goal of sensory perception overload would seem to be one of the first principles from which Trecartin operates.

Ramping up the confusion, he leaves no aspect of the world within the frame unaltered. His performers, some of them former aspiring Disney child stars, wear a hybrid of clubbing gear and campy almost-drag. Spaces are filled-up with bodies and things; in one video, a gaggle of boys and girls in blonde wigs simper and scream while crowded onto a bus. Competing with the actors are layers of motion graphics, of the kind you might see on an infomercial – that is, the graphics normally relegated to a netherworld of bad video aesthetics – which are overlaid or inset, or spin and scroll across the screen.

Trecartin himself, ubiquitous throughout his work, sports bitchy attitude and mastectomy scars. Faces are adorned with self-tan, white lipstick or day-glo swatches of colour; this is make-up applied to bring the work's human element into alignment with its tawdry mise-en-scene. The scenarios play out among the accoutrements of a cheap Florida vacation; Trecartin produced the videos in the nine rooms of a rented house in Miami. His use of disposable IKEA dreck makes sense, considering the casual destruction the performers wreck on the place. People break things and smash Blackberries against the floor. Posters of things like fluffy white dogs on the walls further help to fragment the screen space, and everything is accompanied by the drone of cheesy synthesizer music. When the actors speak, their voices are sped-up, an especial irritant for some viewers. People talk into cell phones, or mimic this by holding thumb and pinkie up to their face, all the while mugging for the camera.

Trecartin's extreme emphasis on artifice helps to reinforce the feeling that you and the performers in his work exist in separate worlds. The focal point of a single camera lens means you peer into the frame, and they peer out at you. Trecartin's actors seem stuck in a box; one in which they are always compelled to perform for the camera. Of course, such an existential state of affairs would only seem like hell to a portion of Trecartin's audience. The actors he works with are adept at suggesting this is their native habitat. It's a naturalism of sorts, if of a world organized along the lines of a hilarious late night trip to the 711, where fluorescent lighting, a riot of purchasable items and the drugs you took are responsible for your disorientating experience of the place. It's a world as seen through the frame of TV, but with no discernible narrative – Sit-com or otherwise – to give it coherence.



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Keeping the operatic pitch of Trecartin's vision in check, ensuring that, finally, there is order in this world, is the absolute brilliance of the artist's language and editing technique. As with every other aspect of the work, the lines delivered by the performers are fragmented and nonsensical – but what poetry! “Don't worry, my death was really sexy and ultra tan!” Or in the opening moments of the video, K-CoreaINC.K (section a) (2009) “I really need a case of atmosphere. Are you finding Position? It's such a hunt.” He achieves the imagined ideal of an invented language that remains comprehensible. The same could be said for his work as a whole.

In response, people I've talked to have called Trecartin's work “empty.” “Visually stunning but vapid” opined a friend; another disparaged it rather grandly as “outtakes from the world's worst reality show.” In contrast to this opprobrium, the most intriguing comment I heard is that Trecartin's work gives us “a new way to look at the world.” Let's shorten that to “new”, as in “what kind of news does this artist bring us”? My guess: Trecartin answers the question about exactly where contemporary art fits into the cultural landscape. As with the response to his work, the news is both good and bad.

In his excellent book, [I.O.U.: Why Everyone Owes Everyone and No One Can Pay](#) (2010), John Lanchester observes that a postmodern era in finance led to the 2008 meltdown: “value, in the realm of finance capital, parallels the elusive nature of meaning in deconstructionism.” The financial world of course runs parallel to the artworld; at many points, the two intersect. As recent events have shown, both realms are adept at conjuring value out of practically nothing. Compared to the art profession, the financial world is a relative latecomer to this game, one who found itself seduced by the question: how far can you abstract monetary value away from its origin in real things before it collapses? It is still digging out from the wreckage of the answer it got. By comparison, the art system proves its resilience. It produces value around consensus that, however specious sometimes, is far from reckless. Art offers a model for the management of risk that is finely calibrated, and though it may conspire to elicit the occasional bad bet, it probably won't ever collapse.

Trecartin's work confirms something about this truth of the art world as purveyor of bankable assets. But he does this by showing us how the artwork as a value unto itself survives in spite of that. That's the good news. The bad news is that, while the art business might be a centre of value production, it for the most part isn't a centre of cultural energy today. It's easy enough to find this energy elsewhere; I hardly need to name the culprit: suffice to say, if you are reading this, you are looking it.



The Re'search (Re'Search Wait'S), Ryan Trecartin

Trecartin smuggles some of this energy into the art gallery and its inhabitants, who are used to more calculated outrages, are amazed. Even the Guggenheim, while acknowledging YouTube's power with its [Play Biennial](#), balked at going the full distance in their efforts. Almost all of the 25 shortlisted videos are slick graphic animations. This isn't what people care about on YouTube, which is at its best as a hybrid vernacular entertainment medium and communications tool. I took note when I heard my friend say Trecartin gives us a “new way to look at the world”, partly because it's such a big claim, but more important, because it begs the question why is Trecartin accorded this honour and not Facebook and YouTube? Isn't the Internet the new way we look at the world, so obvious we can't see it

staring us in the face? Why is it we need art to tell us what we are seeing is New, confirming the truth of what we already intuitively understood?

Trecartin relates to this new internet-defined field of play first of all as an unselfconscious participant. As a performer, image-maker and manipulator, he is one among the thousands who upload material everyday to the web. Second, Trecartin acts out his affinity with web aesthetics in his use of what Hito Steyerl has termed the '[poor image](#)'. While not making degraded images per se, the sheer busyness of Trecartin's videos places his work within the visual field of the degraded image produced by illicit copies, cellphones, handheld video cameras, and webcams. Widespread access to video technology means the image proliferates, and on the whole, its legion of producers isn't too concerned about quality.

The degree of visual noise Trecartin crams into his videos, places his work on the low end of what Steyerl identifies as the contemporary hierarchy of images, with "sharpness...and high resolution" being at the top; as Steyerl points out, this competition between image qualities is a form of class struggle. In Any Ever co-curator [Jon Davies](#)' characterisation, Trecartin "transforms the space of the screen into that of the computer desktop with hundreds of windows open." He degrades the video image by overloading it with information and indulging in its worst aesthetic tendencies.

A wildly accomplished practitioner of his craft, Trecartin is widely lauded but his work does tend to inspire a certain amount of aversion. I suspect this is because he single-handedly revives the dynamic between high and low art; something a largely ossified artworld had forgotten about. However, even though Trecartin's work might expose other visual art conceits to be hopelessly dated, the significance of the work he makes goes beyond that. Trecartin is important because he reaffirms the value of art beyond its monetary worth. He shows us the role artworks can play in reducing the world to its purely visual dimension. His work helps us extract what is New from the morass of everyday experience so that we can see it as historically specific, of today and therefore quite alien to any idea we might have of the past. It's the Shock of the New all over again; how surprising to discover again that artworks have to the power to deliver it.

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