

Searching for the Humanity in Ryan Trecartin's Digital Dystopia

by Ben Davis

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A video still from Ryan Trecartin's "The Re'Search (Re'Search Wait'S)," 2009-2010
(Courtesy of the artist and Elizabeth Dee)

The first thing you absorb when cruising through Ryan Trecartin's extremely well-reviewed "[Any Ever](#)" show at MoMA PS1 is the artist's style. The seven video installations in the exhibition blare at you in one uniform voice. No shot ever lasts more than a few seconds. Imagery swarms at you, the screen splits and re-splits, snippets of text and stock footage appear and vanish. Actors — almost all women or men dressed as women — wear strange wigs and colorful makeup, vamp relentlessly, and shriek half-intelligible quips in voices that are sped up or slowed down.

Amid this unrelenting tide, focusing on the subject matter of Trecartin's videos is not easy — but they do have one. Wall text helpfully explains that there are two distinct clusters of work here. The back three chambers are part of a series called "Trill-ogy Comp," and make reference to a race of "Koreas," a strange breed of pan-cultural, pan-sexual corporate drones, marked by the fact that they all wear blonde wigs. The four films housed in the nearer rooms are part of the "Re'Search Wait'S" cycle, interlocking tales about a rapacious global marketing firm promoting "Transumerism" ("consumerism driven by experience").

Trecartin's videos, of course, are steeped in Internet culture, from the hyperkinetic pyrotechnics of [his iMovie-flavored](#) editing to his dialogue, which is laden with half-comprehensible LOLCats patois. His characters are so plugged-in that they actually have *blue teeth* (get it?). Critics sometimes describe Trecartin as an optimistic prophet of the polymorphous possibilities of identity in the Internet age, but the fact that his protagonists are marketing hacks, demonically self-absorbed child actors, and rootless corporate sharks shows that his worldview centers more on the dystopian side of digital experience. His videos are about being at sea in an endless tide of advertisements and information — in many ways, his characters behave as if they seized upon YouTube's motto, "Broadcast Yourself," as a mantra, only to find that there was no real self to broadcast, only a spray of clichés, slogans, and mindless cravings programmed into them by ads and pop culture.

Thus, in keeping with a fully commodified sense of self, his characters are perverse but never actually sexual: "I don't even believe in sex — just the drama around it," one character quips. And, in keeping with a world overrun with extreme imagery, the recurring motif is meaningless, unmotivated violence, with characters shredding things, pounding walls, destroying their environments, breaking mirrors, turning over cars.

My favorite video in "Any Ever" is the half-hour-long "[Roamie View: History Enhancement](#)." Here, as far as I can make it out, is the story: A sad sack character, JJ, is unhappy with himself. He brings in a company consisting of a trio of maniacal woman, led by someone named Roamie, to travel back in time to alter his present, which they do in a first episode by going to a suburban house and trying to help a teenager, Jason (a younger JJ?), get some kind of band off the ground. They communicate with the contemporary JJ via cell phone, who says that their intervention has not worked. The company then decides to try a new tack, helping him escape his forlorn state by going further back in time, creating a perfect little blonde girl avatar for him to inhabit. This process, apparently, also doesn't take, and thus in a second act we watch as one of the company's employees (known as "Liberty Lance") first tries to coach the girl, and then tries to also coach JJ into accepting the transformation. A third and final act takes place in a swanky hotel room, with a character named Katie, clad in a lacy negligee, seemingly symbolizing an ideal fantasy partner/role model. Characters wander in and out of this room who seem to represent different potentials for JJ's remodeled personality — a cleaned up, cooler version of himself; a strapping masculine hunk with flowing hair; a goofy, giggling guy in a wig dressed as a woman. They swirl around the Katie character, as if representing the pieces of a mind trying to find a comfortable sense of self, and a way to relate to its own desires.

Now, I've watched "Roamie View" four or five times, and I am still not totally sure what, exactly, is going on beneath all that frantic editing — but this difficulty, the tension between the work's surface and its depths, is part of the point too.

At the beginning of "Roamie View," JJ shows off his humorously pathetic art collection to the camera, which includes a piece that consists of the text of the U.S. Constitution, in which, he tells us, every reference to mankind has been replaced with "Situation" and every reference to God has been replaced by the word "Internet." People who know Trecartin tell me that the reference to Situationism is probably incidental, but the philosophy that seems to motivate his style does bear a remarkable kinship to Guy Debord's nihilistic theories, which hold that life has been totally commodified and reduced to a collection of disconnected spectacles, while all possibility to grasp or think about the world in a rational way is lost. Trecartin's films never slow down, and consequently the impression they leave is of a world with precious little room for reflection, for sincerity, for political engagement, for resistance. All there is to do, it would seem, is surf the tide of frantic banality.

As a philosophy, I find this pretty cynical. Which is why I think it is important, in a small way, not to stop at the surface, but to tease out the story Trecartin's movies are trying to tell. To be able to communicate one's story is to have some control over the meaning of one's life and to hold out hope for some form of basic human solidarity. Trecartin's world is one in which the pollution and clutter of the mental landscape has almost made this act of narration untenable — but not quite. "Roamie View" ends with a text that unspools on the screen: "I hope 4 youre sake your a good enough visualizer to contain your self long enough to pump out a few more gig alls before you see the button that u r and push it." Which reads to me like a kind of elliptical exhortation to embrace the process of discovering yourself, rather than merely accepting a role as an automaton in a tech-suffused, ad-driven culture. Enjoy life. Love yourself. That is a very old-fashioned, even corny, moral for such sci-fi work — but it is also heartening to think that somewhere, underneath it all, Trecartin believes you can invest your life with some kind of human meaning, however minor, on the way to digital junk heap.

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