

# Introduction

I WAS INTRODUCED TO Ryan Trecartin's videos on YouTube in 2008 and later experienced his work offline while attending his first major solo museum exhibition, *Any Ever*, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami in 2011 (simultaneously exhibited at MoMA PS1). I recall meandering from one immersive cinematic installation to another, attempting to absorb the expulsion of color and special effects gushing out of multiple huge screens that comprised the exhibition. Watching Trecartin's videos was something of an endurance exercise, as each shot succinctly unfolded at a vertiginous speed reminiscent of viral pop-ups ejected onto computer screens. While lying on a queen-size bed facing an overwhelming projection of genderqueer characters prancing around Miami's Design District, I realized that this work's impact did not merely reside in its apparent shock value but in its intrinsic ability to materialize the anxiety and excitement of a timely cultural revolution.

According to Peter Schjeldahl, head art critic for the *New Yorker*, Ryan Trecartin is "the most consequential artist to have emerged since the nineteen-eighties,"<sup>1</sup> while Roberta Smith from the *New York Times* declared the artist to be an "immense" talent who was "bound for greatness" and whose work was "game-changing."<sup>2</sup> She goes on to make the claim that Trecartin "shreds the false dichotomies and mutually demonizing oppositions that have plagued the art world for decades—between the political and the aesthetic, the conceptual and the formal, high and low, art and entertainment, outsider and insider, irony and sincerity, gay and straight."<sup>3</sup> What is at the heart of Trecartin's worldview, Smith concludes, is "an aspirational faith in the potential of uninhibited self-expression, both individual and collective, as an active agent against the mounting materialism of everyday life [. . .] What he has unleashed is larger than himself, which is why both his sudden appearance and continuing evolution are such cause for hope."<sup>4</sup>

Ryan Trecartin has produced a substantial body of work that spans from his early, pre-YouTube era video series *Early Baggage* (2001–03) to *Temple Time* (2016). Despite the recognition Trecartin has continued to receive among art critics, however, there exists to date no comprehensive study of this prolific artist's work. Typically, the articles

and blogs that celebrate his videos—he prefers to call them “movies”—have been written by critics, mostly untrained in cinematic analysis, who forgo close readings of his dense narratives, and with few exceptions, limit themselves to brief summaries. Regrettably, the field of film studies itself has all but completely ignored these significant and timely works, even though, as the chapters that follow demonstrate, they are profoundly relevant to many of the field’s concerns. The lack of close examination of Trecartin’s movies is no doubt due, at least in part, to the sheer difficulty of rigorously describing and interpreting these challenging, complex, multifaceted artworks. They unfold so quickly that almost every shot lasts a brief fraction of a second and are rife with semiotic instability. However, for all their obscurities, ambiguities, and ironies, these cinematic narratives are nonetheless intelligible and can be read.

*Queer Art Camp Superstar: Decoding the Cinematic Cyberworld of Ryan Trecartin* compensates for this absence of critical analyses of this timely work by looking closely at a selection of his most significant movies in order to discern their essential qualities while foregrounding their cultural currency. It constitutes the first book-length study of Trecartin’s artistic genealogy, evolving aesthetics, radical approach to digital and internet culture, and impact on contemporary art, film, and media. Precisely chosen screen captures extracted directly from the videos demonstrate the serious attention paid to camera angles, mise-en-scène and shot transitions, thus revealing and reflecting on the concepts that underwrite and are underwritten in these narratives.

The artist’s complex codes, motifs, and symbols cannot be described or contained within singular categories, as each individual video is packed with numerous interconnected concepts. Trecartin’s network of layered references to the grotesque and abject, carnivalesque and ludic, and camp imagery is given careful attention in order to illustrate and explain how the artist takes on reality television, technology, fashion, consumption, and cyberspace. The chapters that follow adhere to a faithful chronological order, thereby inviting readers to witness the ways thematic and formal concerns have evolved from Trecartin’s earliest movies to his most recent multimedia cinematic installations.

Ryan Trecartin was born in Webster, Texas, in 1981, the beginning of a decade that has proved to be an important historical juncture. The growth of the art market reflected the period's heightened consumerism when the commercialization of art was fueled by the proliferation of Wall Street's nouveaux riches and the implementation of aggressive marketing strategies by auction houses such as Sotheby's and Christie's. In this thriving market, many artists became overnight celebrities whose paintings and sculptures fetched millions of dollars. In addition, a surge in political activism through public art and performances, particularly within the LGBTQ community, erupted as a response to the AIDS crisis. The mid- to late 1980s also marked the advent of personal computers and digital video cameras, the widespread use of compact disc players, and the development of hypertext-writing systems.

The assimilation of digital technology has since transformed the long-established practices of painting, sculpture, and drawing, while also generating new categories, including internet and new media art. From the beginning of the new millennium, new media art has received increasingly productive critical attention and found its position within the art market. This increased interest is also apparent in the proliferation of organizations such as Rhizome, Eyebeam, Electronic Arts Intermix, and more recently New, Inc. founded to exhibit, curate, and/or commission new media projects. In addition, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, for example, has established the Digital Art Vault collection to collect and preserve digital and electronic art.

Trecartin belongs to the first generation of artists introduced to computers at an early age. He began to create work at the beginning of the new millennium that acutely reflects the ways we interface, communicate, and relate to others. This is significant as Trecartin's critical and commercial acclaim is due in large part to his art's ability to further our understanding of new technology and its ramifications on our virtually mediated existence. In his essay "The Post-Reality Show," Jeffrey Deitch asks the question, "Could Ryan Trecartin be the first twenty-first century artist?"<sup>5</sup> and follows by declaring, "He is one of the first artists whose work looks and feels like life today."<sup>6</sup> But how does it feel to live in today's world? And, what is a twenty-first century artist? As a member of the Millennial Generation, he has been immersed in digital culture from an early age,

and its deep impact is inseparable from the formation of his art. This in turn has played a crucial role in the development of his distinctive visual and verbal language that resonates not only with his own generation, but also with a broad cross-section of intergenerational hyperconnected cultural consumers who possess computers, smartphones, iPads, and iPods.

Individuals, regardless of their age, race, gender, and sexuality, rely on technological devices every day and have developed (sub)cultures around this digital sphere. In cyberspace, web surfers can create virtual communities and engage in multiplayer games allowing them to play out extraordinary scenarios in imaginary worlds and build polygonal avatars of varying physical appearance. The propagation of social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram, has redefined human interaction. Thus, Web 2.0 provides both a space and an opportunity to perform in front of a global audience.

As a result of this phenomenon, contemporary art has expanded beyond early examples of internet-based projects. Constant technological innovations, globalization, and the impact of the omnipresence of the net, have not only shaped the content of art but also changed the way it is exhibited. Art is no longer exclusively experienced at museums, galleries, and art fairs, but also on mobile devices, for example. Contemporary artists do not have to wait to be “picked up” by a gallery or featured in a museum show to achieve visibility; they can simply post their work directly online in the hope of gaining mass exposure. In fact, Ryan Trecartin became an internet sensation before finding major gallery representation.<sup>7</sup>

While he is obviously not opposed to the commercial sale of his art (as is evidenced by a history of gallery representation including Elizabeth Dee Gallery and Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York City, Regen Projects in Los Angeles, and Sprüth Magers in Berlin), he posts and shares for free the majority of his videos online, thereby creating a hybrid model for exhibition and distribution. As we will discuss later on in chapter 3, his use of online sharing platforms as vehicles of dissemination and circulation informs his populist, do-it-yourself aesthetic.

The artist has established and sustained a viable relationship with web-based spectators. His exhibitionistic jam-packed videos comprised of a hodgepodge of pop culture references fit right in amid webcam-recorded YouTube confessionals. Each movie is perfectly formatted for phones,

tablets, and computer screens in order to broaden his reach for distribution and collaboration.

With their incessant jump cuts and frenetic flow of information, Trecartin's films hyperbolize high-speed communication as is exemplified in (*Tommy-Chat Just E-mailed Me.*) (2006). In this work, which the artist describes as a "narrative video short that takes place inside and outside of an e-mail,"<sup>8</sup> characters are depicted as projected combinations of stereotypes that reflect Trecartin's and his contemporaries' response to our media-saturated culture. His aim in designing these characterizations is not to define each character as representing a single identity. To Trecartin, the self is capable of having multiple identities (virtual avatar, social network identity, public work identity, various genders, etc.) that can be programmed, updated, and even deleted at will.

The opening scene introduces us to one of the protagonists, Tammy 1 (Ryan Trecartin) by means of a split screen. Tammy 1 occupies a small portion of the bottom right of the frame, surrounded by overwhelming close-ups of a laptop and printer that appear to suffocate her. An array of electronic gadget and ringing telephone sounds relegate Tammy's high-pitched shriek to the sonic background. The protagonist and her roommate Beth (Lizzie Fitch) suddenly receive an e-mail from their friend Tommy inviting them to "go out." They both proceed to address the camera as if communicating with other friends via cam, urging them to join them on their outing. The camera moves from character to character as the narrative is propelled at a manic pace following the protagonists' frenzied electronic interactions. Scenes depicting online mediation are crosscut to overlap each other; images constantly fade in and out; and special effects appear and disappear haphazardly without any apparent logical connection. Viewers are meant to feel like they are surfing through web pages.

As in most of his movies, Trecartin performs the role of several characters simultaneously: Tammy 1, Tammy 2, Tommy Chat, High/Low Tommy Video Voice, and Tommy Video Girl. Costume and makeup help create characters distinct from one another, but Ryan Trecartin's voice, face, and body undeniably emanate from each. By not casting other actors to play the above-named characters, but rather playing all these parts himself, he communicates his understanding of the self as a multiplicity of identities in constant flux.

When asked about the place his physical self takes within his work, Trecartin replied that he ultimately wishes for bodies to dissolve or mutate into nonphysical forms of expression.<sup>9</sup> During postproduction, he is able to animate his body (via filtering and three-dimensional modulation) in ways live performance cannot achieve. This practice enables him to enact the performance beyond the physical limitations of corporeal existence. The artist seeks to break away from previous essentialist notions of identity by creating characters that are able to switch and merge genders and sexual orientation. For the artist, the body is simply a vehicle that helps him translate his ever-shifting multiple “personalities.”<sup>10</sup>

Although watching Trecartin’s videos may feel like entering an overwhelming technological cosmos, they are not at all alienating. On the contrary, the artist’s work clearly reflects the world we live in. Cybernated cultural landscapes and new media have become integral to our everyday lives. Like internauts who proclaim that, “if you are not online, you don’t exist,” characters chat in web slang ad absurdum. We might perceive them as overidentifying with digital culture. Yet, as foreign as they may seem, they do not appear unfamiliar. Curator Chris Wiley suggests that they act, “in a manner that you might if you accepted every aspect of contemporary culture at face value.”<sup>11</sup>

### Historical Context

Ryan Trecartin’s work can be placed within a lineage of experimental cinema, performance, and video art. Avant-garde aesthetics, experimental editing, and televisual style are detectable in his subversive approach. The disruptive and anarchic spirit expressed in Trecartin’s movies can be traced back to Dada’s provocative performances and readings at the Cabaret Voltaire, which often ended in mayhem. Self-proclaimed nihilists, members of the Dada movement protested against the bourgeoisie, capitalism, and the art establishment, opting instead to embrace irrationality and disorder in a rebellious attempt to condemn social practices and the atrocities of World War I.

Dadaists did not aspire to craft elegant objects, opting instead to challenge artistic norms by creating conceptual works unconcerned with

visual appeal. For example, Raoul Hausmann's photomontages—cutouts of random photographs, newspapers, and advertising—initiated an approach that can be detected in Trecartin's visual mash-ups of found internet footage. And, while Hausmann's experimental two-dimensional photographic collages appear static, they do succeed in transmitting a sense of chaos and disorder that Trecartin's disjointed cinematic montages successfully convey. The popularity of Trecartin's work is clearly not due, in fact, to refined aesthetics or high production values. It is precisely because it appears unpolished that the work draws so much attention. His highly processed and layered digital alterations at first give the impression that they are solely a wild and random collision of signs and symbols. However, on closer inspection, it becomes apparent that his movies are scripted and carefully crafted. He celebrates the spirit of anarchy and freedom, but under the direction of a carefully orchestrated revolution.

Dadaism's proclivity for irrationality and disorder is well illustrated in poetic "word salads," such as Tristan Tzara's "Cinema Calendar of the Abstract Heart-09" (1920), in which mixtures of random words and phrases are reassembled in the most ludicrous fashion as a way to shock audiences. Ryan Trecartin composes all of his scripts with a distinctive vocabulary utilizing computer language, symbols, and internet jargon.

"IT is not |You|,, IT IS WE!" [...] "IT is not |em| and>/ Will not matter as Such." [...] "The New Look for This Company, IS re-Thinking the Word |Humanity| as an Object with a (Goal)."<sup>12</sup>

The artist's experimentation with language disrupts syntax and grammar, opening itself to misinterpretation and misreading. *P.opular S.ky* (section ish) (2009), for instance, opens with the word "REMEMBER" in enormous bold type only to meld a few seconds later into a cryptic message that reads "R3N.3ND3R." This might seem to amount to nothing more than a non sequitur, but it is a way for Trecartin to comment on the fragile and sometimes failing logic of technology and telecommunications. While Roberta Smith contends that the artist idealizes technology, I view him as maintaining a critical distance from it by acknowledging its shortcomings.<sup>13</sup> Yet, the artist does not treat computer glitches and corrupted

strings of programming code simply as limitations, but as opportunities to find alternative modes of expression that escape the predictable, the norm, the orderly. Language, manipulated at will, functions in tandem with his ever-shifting, open-ended, fast-paced visuals.

Dada filmic experimentation that helped pave the path to the emergence of avant-garde cinema featured animated rayographs in Man Ray's *Retour à la Raison* (1923), whirling Rotoreliefs in Marcel Duchamp's *Anémic Cinéma* (1926), and stop-motion animation in Hans Richter's *Ghosts before Breakfast* (1928). Later filmmakers such as Stan Brakhage, Jonas Mekas, and Kenneth Anger sought to explore the potential and challenge the limitations of the medium by playing with a variety of techniques that included painting directly onto film, scratching the celluloid surface, and superimposing multiple exposures. Trecartin's labor intensive, postproduction process, infused with the application of a broad range of digital effects similarly creates spectacular digital collages that showcase his experimental style. Lev Manovich writes, "The avant-garde [has become] materialized in a computer."<sup>14</sup> In an interview for CreativePlanetNetwork.com, Trecartin discussed the new technological freedom available to him.

When you break down the hierarchy of [traditional] editing, you have people doing a rough cut, then a final cut, then they work on sound and visual effects. But in After Effects you can do all these things at the same time if you want to, and that helps me massage the work and bring out nuances.<sup>15</sup>

Although he applies visual effects to alter digital footage, much as avant-garde filmmakers manipulated the film medium, Trecartin is not primarily interested in exploring the medium for form's sake but rather to express his view of contemporary culture in which social constructs and labels are disrupted and erased. As he points out,

At the moment in time I was born, it was natural not to recognize boundaries between artistic mediums—as well as ideas, genders, races, and all sorts of nuances that are historically shoved into and understood in terms of categorical containers. I grew up alongside computer adolescence. I think lots of people born at



the same time, or anytime after the birth of the home computer, see “-isms” as applications rather than truths and see definitions as filters rather than containers. It’s an exciting privilege to be chucked into the culture flow after so many people have made it possible to be fluid in practice, instead of merely in theory.<sup>16</sup>

By creating a feeling of total digital immersion, Trecartin’s movies serve as allegories of our dual mode of existence, at once inside and outside the realm of digital technology and devoid of rigid categorizations.

Avant-garde films have been positioned against the dominant mode embodied by the Hollywood film industry. Yet, filmmakers like Jack Smith, “King of the Underground,”<sup>17</sup> have celebrated aspects of mainstream Hollywood, especially its camp qualities. Smith developed an experimental style consisting of a *mélange* of camp aesthetics, Hollywood orientalism, and kitsch. Working outside the mainstream, the filmmaker enjoyed a creative freedom that allowed him to push the boundaries by challenging standards of “good taste.” His eccentric narratives often featured transvestites, androgynous actors, vampires, and monsters all taking part in orgiastic debauchery. *Flaming Creatures* (1963), his most notorious film, consists of a series of black-and-white sequences juxtaposed in a nonlinear fashion. In it, Smith employed off-center shots, in-and-out-of-focus cinematography, and extreme close-ups of various body parts in order to blur the distinction between intertwined seminude male and female bodies. Although Trecartin’s videos are not overtly sexual, they also feature bizarre characters with ambiguous sexualities and gender(s). Trecartin’s butch queens, vogue femmes, girlfags, gurdykes, and other genderqueer<sup>18</sup> characters all partake in his delirious narratives, dancing, sashaying, and convulsing in mythical and ritualistic performances reminiscent of *Flaming Creatures*. His low-tech aesthetic, like Smith’s, is identifiable: handheld cameras, handmade sets, fragmented shots and twisted camera angles, and complete disregard for continuity editing.

After his last feature *No President* (1967–70), Smith ceased exhibiting his films in art house cinemas and opted instead to project re-edited excerpts of them. His decision to recut his films for each of his live performances was primarily motivated by the fact that he rejected the commodification of his work.<sup>19</sup> As Julia Stoscheck writes in *Collection Number Six*:

*Flaming Creatures*, “Smith vehemently resisted being swallowed up by pop culture.”<sup>20</sup> Conversely, Trecartin embraces everything there is about popular culture—indeed, he has been swallowed up by it.

In this regard, Trecartin’s approach shares a connection with that of Andy Warhol, whose keen interest in mass consumerism led him to recontextualize, glamorize, and immortalize Coca-Cola bottles and cans of Campbell’s soup as symbols of 1960s Americana by transplanting such pop culture iconography into museums, traditionally the realm of high art. Richard Dyer comments that what drew media attention to Warhol’s work was not the skillful artistry required to produce it but the audacity of glorifying such objects of “mass culture trash.”<sup>21</sup> Trecartin’s preoccupation with consumer culture reveals itself through the abundance of mass-produced objects he incorporates in his sets and costumes. The artist often names protagonists after commercial software companies such as Adobe or Cedar and inscribes corporate logos onto their skin. Smartphones, computers, tablets, clothing, and jewelry surround and at times appear almost to smother the protagonists. Objects are simultaneously fetishized and rendered disposable—much like tech gadgets, initially marketed as collector’s items, only to be constantly rendered obsolete when an updated and repackaged version of the “toy” is introduced into the marketplace.

Warhol became familiar with the films of Stan Brakhage, Kenneth Anger, and Jack Smith, not to imitate them but rather to break away and develop a new and quite distinct cinematic aesthetic. Unlike the avant-garde lyrical, dreamlike, highly processed films, Warhol “simply turned the camera on and walked away.”<sup>22</sup> Contrary to Trecartin, who bombards viewers with imagery at the speed of creative thought, Warhol suspends you in real-time minimalist contemplation. Trecartin’s proclivity for in-your-face visual stimulus is associated with earlier avant-garde formal practices rather than Warhol’s prestructuralist fixed-frame cinematography of continuous long takes. Thus, Trecartin’s work clearly intersects with Warhol’s in terms of content, rather than form.

The connections between the work of Ryan Trecartin and avant-garde filmmakers are undeniable, although their respective mediums and access to technology fundamentally differed. Historically, individual mediums remained generally distinct from one another. While avant-garde

filmmakers sought to challenge the codes and conventions of classical American cinema (often neglecting to recognize its underlying affinities with them), video art, as it emerged in the United States, was initially preoccupied with critiquing commercial television. Trecartin celebrates both and extends the discourse to examine the liberating potential of the internet. His approach takes into account the net's relatively recent history while understanding its impact as an infinite network.

The initial wave of pioneer video artists such as Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell was responding to the commercialization and control of traditional news and the influence of mass media. In his piece *TV Dé-collage* (1961), Vostell altered the image of several TV sets by interfering with the television receivers of a department store in Paris.<sup>23</sup> In 1963, Nam June Paik also distorted TV images electronically with the help of an engineer who reconfigured TV circuits for his exhibition, *Exposition of Music-Electronic Television*.<sup>24</sup> With the advent of the Portapak videotape analog recording system by Sony in 1967, artists finally found a device that could directly record and playback their footage.<sup>25</sup> Despite the low-contrast grainy black-and-white quality of the video recorder and its very limited capabilities, the new technology attracted many artists precisely because of its newness. As Chris Meigh-Andrews notes, "video had no tradition [...] it had no formal burdens at all."<sup>26</sup> It is worth mentioning that initially Paik and Vostell primarily employed video sculpturally as both single and multimonitor installations playing prerecorded content.

By the mid-1960s, many feminist artists eager for self-representation, such as Yoko Ono, Marina Abramović, and Ana Mendieta, began to use video as a recording device to document their live performances. The 1960s and 1970s were indeed organically linked with the rise of second-wave feminism, opening up the debate to issues such as abortion rights and equality in the workplace. These female artists explored social and sexual boundaries in provocative and personal performances. In *Cut Piece* (1965), Yoko Ono kneeled in a traditional Japanese woman's submissive pose and invited the audience to approach her onstage and cut off pieces of her clothes with scissors she had placed on the floor in front of her. In her endurance performance, *Rhythm 0* (1974), Marina Abramović placed seventy-two objects, some of which could administer pleasure while others delivered pain, on a table in front of the audience, allowing them to use them on

her body while she stood still naked. In *Untitled (Body Tracks)* (1974), Ana Mendieta dipped her hands into animal blood and utilized her body as a paintbrush to leave vertical tracks from top to bottom on long sheets of paper, while Cuban drumming played in the background. This performance refers to the objectification of the female subject by the male gaze throughout the history of painting. Regarding such early performances, Amelia Jones comments, “The often shocking enactment of these taboos allowed the artist to experience a personal transformation through the event, and the audience was also affected, expected to undergo a mass sense of release.”<sup>27</sup>

The performative aspects of Trecartin’s work do not lie in the embodied physicality of his characters but rather reside primarily in his editing process. As he explains in his interview with Cindy Sherman, “The performance is not live; everything is performed for the edit—performed to become live through mediation. Editing is itself a part of articulating the character, and so I see it as a performative gesture.”<sup>28</sup> Although the artist’s edited performances do not take place in real time, they nevertheless trigger powerful and visceral responses from viewers, thanks in part to the mediated immediacy of their enveloping multisensory stimulation. The early feminist performance artists mentioned above recorded live performances employing their fixed bodies, whereas Trecartin transforms and mutates bodies, gender, and race via the endless options available through editing and software.

Chris Burden also sought to push the limits of the body through ritualistic time-based performances. In *Shoot* (1971), Burden asked a friend to shoot him with a .22 rifle from a distance of fifteen feet, which resulted in the bullet going through his left arm. With his explosive tendencies and penchant for the outrageous, Burden became a harbinger of the emerging punk sensibility. The punk movement rebelled against conservative politics, capitalist consumerism, and mainstream culture, beginning in the mid-1970s. Its subculture created defiant and sometimes violent forms of expression. This energy was expressed in part through punk music spearheaded by bands such as the Ramones in New York City, the Sex Pistols in London, and Black Flag in Los Angeles, among many others. Their live concerts were orchestrated as aggressive stage performances meant to shock the public—smashing guitars into pieces, playing with blood, stage

diving, and insulting audience members were all part of the program. The eruptive emergence of slam dancing reflected the movement's forceful vitality through direct confrontational body contact, including tackling, shoving, and stomping.

This sense of punk anarchist expression is palpable in Trecartin's "Let's fuck shit up"<sup>29</sup> attitude—the leitmotif of *Priority Infield's Junior War* (2013), a 24-minute short composed of footage of Trecartin's high school friends drinking, smoking, and smashing mailboxes and television sets with sledge hammers. The artist has expressed in several interviews that his goal while making it was to document belligerent escapades with his friends. The result is a decoupage of randomly edited grainy video shots filmed in night-vision mode. The seven movies that comprise *Any Ever* (2009–10) further emphasize a defiant subtext, as each one also culminates with characters destroying and shattering personal possessions—perhaps as a way to rebel against consumption, or as a way to start anew and consume again.

Album covers designed by Jamie Reid arguably constitute the most powerful remnants of punk's iconography. In one of his most renowned creations, a poster for the Sex Pistols' album *God Save the Queen* (1977), Reid altered a Cecile Beaton photograph of Queen Elizabeth II by inserting a large safety pin through her nose. This irreverent gesture echoes Marcel Duchamp's iconoclastic bold move of drawing a moustache and goatee on a reproduction of Leonardo DaVinci's *Mona Lisa*.

Although the punk movement emerged roughly sixty years after Dadaism, Dada's original mission to disrupt the dominant system constituted a cultural intervention that resonated with the one undertaken by punk youth decades later. Like the Dadaists, punks rejected refined aesthetics, choosing instead to appropriate, reuse, and/or recontextualize mundane items in unlikely ways. This practice mirrored Marcel Duchamp's philosophy behind his "readymades." In *Bicycle Wheel* (1913), for example, Duchamp mounted a bicycle fork with its front wheel upside-down onto a wooden stool, turning it into a kinetic sculpture. Similarly, punks repurposed found objects and transformed them into art and accessories as a form of rebellion.

Punk style became instrumental in conveying a sense of individualism and opposition to popular culture. Punks repurposed razor blades,

trash bags, or tampons in a do-it-yourself spirit while originating unisex looks. Designers Vivienne Westwood and Zandra Rhodes also created androgynous fashions featuring bondage pants, studded motorcycle jackets, cropped blazers, and tattered or ripped separates. Looks were personalized with loose neckties or dog collars worn over shredded T-shirts, often paired with Dr. Martens boots. Men and women applied makeup, shaved their heads military style, or fashioned Mohawk crests of hair.

Trecartin's protagonists' outfits rival and pay homage to punk subversion in their disregard for social customs, order, and gender norms. A red brick may be converted into a purse, an iPad with a ponytail glued to its back stands in as a handheld mirror, watches are hung together on a chain to form a necklace, a Wite-Out bottle is converted into an earring, and an image of an automobile dashboard is imprinted across a character's forehead. Punk-inspired protagonists like Shin in *A Family Finds Entertainment* (2004) and Pasta in *I-BE Area* (2007) sport gender fluid garments with garish makeup and wigs, making it difficult—if not impossible—to determine their gender from an established binary model.

The DIY and cut-and-paste aesthetic of punk went hand-in-hand with video's ability to mediate a sense of rawness and immediacy. In the mid-1970s, the San Francisco-based art collective, Target Video, founded by Joseph Rees, began taping punk performances and activist happenings with a video camera. The art collective's video works consisted of a bricolage of performance footage, two-dimensional graphics, found footage, and special effects.<sup>30</sup> Target Video anticipated the potential of videotape as an artistic medium beyond that of a recording device.

Indeed, video as an art medium engendering its own language would not emerge until the mid- to late-1970s, a decade following Paik's and Vostell's early experimentations, when artists began to subvert televisual tropes to challenge the conservative ideologies and images promulgated by mainstream broadcasting. This shift occurred, in part, thanks to new editing equipment becoming available for home use. In her video, *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), for instance, Martha Rosler poses as the host of a TV cooking program in which she catalogs kitchen utensils in alphabetical order, and then proceeds to demonstrate their use in strange and sometimes violent ways. In this parody of televised food shows, Rosler plays with televisual conventions. The static camera frames Rosler in direct address with

a supposed audience and suggests that she is not only confined inside her small cramped kitchen but also trapped within the square television box.

Trecartin incorporates a televisual style of structuring devices such as immediacy, seriality, fragmentation, fluidity, and direct address not to undermine the institution of television but as a means to pay homage to TV he grew up watching. A sense of immediacy is evoked consistently through his intense rapid cutting. Many of his movies do not provide any sense of closure or resolution. Rather, they end in a “to be continued...” manner, leaving the viewer wondering what will happen next. This sense of seriality is further explored in Trecartin’s later series, *Any Ever*, in which recurring characters take part in several completely unrelated ongoing narratives. Fragmentation and fluidity are also tropes to be considered when reflecting on *Wayne’s World* (2003), for instance, whereby a TV-viewing experience is simulated by segmenting the plot, switching back and forth from commercial breaks to talk show, and from talk show to daytime soap opera. The notion of fluidity or flow, as articulated by John Fiske, takes television to be “a continuous succession of images which follows no laws of logic or cause and effect, but which constitutes the cultural experience of ‘watching television.’”<sup>31</sup> Trecartin achieves this illusion primarily by linking fragmented and unrelated scenes or sequences through a continuous soundtrack. Busy signal tones and computer sound-bites intersperse his audio tracks, pointing to the very connectivity of the technology(ies) commercially available to him and his intended audience. In fact, the director often addresses his spectators as if they were communicating with each other online. For instance, *Roamie View: History Enhancement* (2009–10) opens with a high-angle shot of JJ Check (Trecartin) in his bedroom/art studio. The character breaks the fourth wall by explaining the conceptual framework of the art surrounding him while directly addressing the audience. This direct mode of address is in line with the artist’s goal to augment viewer engagement.

Ryan Trecartin’s cinematic installations with their interactive mise-en-scène go further in breaking down the barrier between art and



Figure I.1  
*Roamie  
 View: History  
 Enhancement  
 (Re'Search  
 Wait'S)  
 (2010)*

audience, an integral component of the original mission of performance art. As RoseLee Goldberg writes, “The history of performance art in the twentieth century is the history of a permissive, open-ended medium with endless variables, executed by artists impatient with the limitations of more established art forms, and determined to take their art directly to the public. For this reason its base has always been anarchic.”<sup>32</sup>

Queer performance artists in the 1980s, such as Holly Hughes and Tim Miller (members of the NEA Four denied their federal artist grants), took action toward reclaiming their human rights, LGBTQ identity, and even marriage equality. Felix Gonzalez-Torres also turned to performance in his piece *Untitled (Go-Go Dancing Platform)* (1991) in which a gay male go-go dancer danced on top of a stripper platform box encased in light bulbs. Although seemingly playful at first sight, the performance provided a cross-section of viewers a peek into a gay subculture, with its allusion to discos, saunas, and sex clubs. More recently, Ron Athey and Franko B, known for their extreme bloody ritualistic performances involving aspects of sadomasochism, often scar and mutilate their own bodies to challenge preconceived notions about AIDS, masculinity, and/or organized religion.

While the humorous and colorful world of Ryan Trecartin appears to deviate from confrontational and sometimes painful performances, his subversive work engages with socially charged themes, including the emergence of virtual algorithms as tools of surveillance, queer visibility, and the homogenizing force of global corporate culture. Trecartin understands and acknowledges the relevance of past contributions made by his predecessors. However, he has digested the past and now elects to move beyond it.

### Postmodernism and Queer Theory

Although some art and film critics, as well as bloggers, have contextualized Trecartin’s videos within postmodernism, I argue that, because his art cannot be identified solely through reductive classifications such as identity politics, his work in fact challenges postmodernism’s restrictive value system. Postmodernism has been and still remains a point of contention among scholars. While many believe postmodernism is dead,



others believe it never took place, and some think we are in fact still in its midst. The various (and often contradictory) perspectives revolving around the notion of postmodernism and what postmodernism is often diverge.

In comparing Jack Halberstam's understanding of the concept of postmodernism to Terry Smith and Nicolas Bourriaud's, it appears that the term, as it pertains to queer theory according to Halberstam, is indeed closely related to its art historical meaning. In his pivotal book, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, he claims that "queer/queerness" is intimately connected to postmodernism as he explains, "'queer time' is a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism."<sup>33</sup> The author, however, does not provide a clear time frame for what he considers to be "postmodernism"; rather, he writes,

I see postmodernism as simultaneously a crisis and an opportunity—a crisis in the stability of form and meaning, and opportunity to rethink the practice of cultural production, its hierarchies and power dynamics, its tendency to resist or capitulate.<sup>34</sup>

This definition implies that postmodernism is a period of transition since it is both a "crisis and an opportunity." But a transition between what time frame? In his book *What Is Contemporary Art?*, Terry Smith argues that postmodernism is "the moment of transition between these two eras [modernism and contemporary art], an anachronism from the 1970s and 1980s."<sup>35</sup> Smith attempts to answer the seemingly simple yet extremely complex question, "What is contemporary art?" For Smith, contemporary art is "much more than a mindless embrace of the present."<sup>36</sup> Smith claims that at the turn of the millennium, the direction of contemporary art has shifted. According to him, "contemporaneity" has several meanings and thus cannot be contained within one singular definition. In its ordinary usage, the term refers to the quality or state of being in the *now*, in the present.<sup>37</sup> In relation to art, however, "contemporaneity manifests itself not just in the unprecedented proliferation of art, or only in its seemingly infinite variegation, but above all in the emergence of, and contestation between, quite different ways of making art and communicating through it to others."<sup>38</sup>

Ryan Trecartin's mixed-media approach to art-making explores today's cultural momentum in ways that could not have been possible before the mass popularization of the internet. As Trecartin notes, "Because of the way people read, share, and merge information now, the way something is contained and framed is just as valuable as the content inside."<sup>39</sup> The implications of this perspective of understanding what constitutes a work of art are very much anchored in contemporaneity. How artists maintain a relationship to their work in an interactive context and, in turn, the role identity fluidity plays when exhibited through open access technological platforms are questions Trecartin's highly provocative interventions in contemporary art raise and address.

In *Altermodern*, Nicolas Bourriaud refers to postmodernism as "the philosophy of mourning, a long melancholic episode in our cultural life"—which started roughly around the early 1970s.<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, Halberstam argues that "queer time" came to consciousness within the LGBT community at the end of the twentieth century with the AIDS crisis, around the same time Smith and Bourriaud date postmodernism. Such accounts of queer life under AIDS are problematic as they perpetuate the pathologization of queer mourning in their linking of nonheteronormative time to loss and grief. In *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, Elizabeth Freeman comments on queer scholars' tendency to situate queerness in such a gloomy historical context.

Queer theory, then, pays attention to gaps and losses that are both structural and visceral: the all-too-real limits presented by the stigmatization of AIDS, by violence against lesbians and gays, by the unbearable heaviness of the gender binary. [...] Within this paradigm, queer becoming-collective-across-time and even the concept of futurity itself are predicated upon injury—separations, injuries, spatial displacements, preclusions, and other negative and negating forms of bodily experience.<sup>41</sup>

Freeman finds more productive ways to historicize queerness by suggesting that queer time "emerged beyond this heterosexually gendered double-time of stasis and progress" as ludic, deconstructed, and asynchronous.<sup>42</sup> Her conception of queer time is closer to Bourriaud's notion of altermodernism,

a moment in time “when it became possible for us to produce something that made sense starting from an assumed heterochrony, that is, from a vision of human history as constituted of multiple temporalities.”<sup>43</sup> As such, altermodernism challenges postmodernism as a restrictive and linear system. Bourriaud argues that during postmodernism, artists and art critics found meaning in a work of art by examining the social background of its production, asking questions such as “Where does the artist come from?” In the postmodern era, identification with gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation became a system of allotting meaning and reducing individuals’ identity to their origins.<sup>44</sup> According to his proclamation titled “Altermodern Manifesto: Postmodernism Is Dead,” the postmodern has been replaced. Thus, the term *postmodern* does not define a specific style but rather a tool that seeks to categorize, compartmentalize, and standardize identity. Much like Halberstam, I believe that this historical moment presented both an “opportunity” and a “crisis”—an opportunity for minorities to gain more visibility in the art world, but a crisis in which artworks were labeled according to identity categories such as race, gender, sexuality, or nationality, thus setting up these artworks for their incorporation into the hegemonic capitalist system.

Cultural producers today are international and global. No longer is the art market controlled exclusively by Western artists, dealers, critics, collectors, and institutions, nor is a discussion primarily surrounding multiculturalism essential in this globalized market as it was at the end of the twentieth century. While Trecartin may cast Asian, Black, Hispanic, and/or White actors in his work, he destabilizes the very concept of racial identity by cross-accessorizing their looks with unexpected nontraditional hair and skin choices manifested for example through blue wigs, ghostly white faces, or stripes of makeup of varying skin tones. Trecartin commented on the styling of his personae and said, “We might try to interpret a car commercial as a hairdo, an ideology as a designer skin tone, a banking situation as a cheekbone, copyright issues as a jaw line, or maybe an application as a facial agenda.”<sup>45</sup> His protagonists no longer represent human beings, but rather embody our commodifying culture in which time, space, and identity are no longer necessarily straightforward, linear, quantifiable, and/or classifiable. As such, this work aligns itself with the concept of open-endedness articulated in queer theory.

In an interview for the *Economist*, Ryan Trecartin was asked to comment on the lack of distinction regarding his characters' gender. He replied,

I see it less as a lack of distinction in binary terms and more as an exploration of territories within infinite gender creation, individualization and specificity. I imagine this as a type of multiplex space. I'm often interested in realities where gender takes a back-seat to personality articulation [...] and the thing I love about personality is that it can be added to, changed or re-worked at will, while not being classified or grouped very easily. [...] I see my characters exploring a technologically driven yet non-gender-centric psychologically complex transitional world which is inherently positive and energetic as opposed to neutral and formulaic.<sup>46</sup>

While the artist does not explicitly refer to his artwork as queer, preferring instead to describe his movies as “realities where gender [and sexuality] take[s] a back-seat,” I will argue, however, that queerness is a central concept in Trecartin's work. In order to better comprehend how queerness operates in his work, it is necessary to clarify how the term will be employed.

According to Halberstam, queer time and space exist “in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction.”<sup>47</sup> The author analyzes the narrative of Kimberly Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) to illustrate the concept of a queer place, pointing to the fact that when the film premiered, some film reviewers, queer and nonqueer alike, wondered why the transgender protagonist remained in a closed-minded rural environment instead of moving to the city where she would be accepted.<sup>48</sup> It seems then that spectators' expectations concur with the understanding that queer subcultures can only thrive in urban areas.<sup>49</sup>

While Halberstam's theory may apply to some queer narratives, his concept does not entirely pertain to Ryan Trecartin's work, as neither its production nor its content is restricted to a specific city locale. Trecartin's studio can take on different formats (art space, video green screen, editing room, computer, etc.) and be located anywhere; in fact, he often creates work in the suburbs or rural areas. For instance, the series *Any Ever* (2009–10), produced while in residency in Miami, was mainly shot in suburban settings. As Bourriaud notes, “In a world every inch of which