EXPERIMENTAL PEOPLE

The exuberant world of a video-art visionary.

BY CALVIN TOMKINS

Video art was invented in the mid-nineteen-sixties by a slightly mad, Korean-born genius named Nam June Paik, and in spite of the oceanic flood of video artists that his discovery unleashed, for the longest time I was convinced that no one had come close to improving on Paik's mastery of the form. I'm no longer convinced. About a year ago, I started looking at the work that Ryan Trecartin and his loosely associated group of fellow artists and performers have produced during the past decade. Not even Paik, I decided, made videos that are as consistently non-boring as these, or as full of breaking news about the future.

Ryan Trecartin initially assumed that his videos might appear at film festivals: "I didn't even know that museums showed films."

Four new works that Trecartin showed at the Venice Biennale last summer had their New York première on December 11th, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and the event was sold out. I got there early, and watched the two-hundred-and-seventy-two-seat theatre fill up with excited young people in groups of three or more, many of them dressed in jeans and hoodies. They cheered and whooped and whistled when Trecartin, who is thirty-three but looks ten years younger, was brought onstage before the screening. "Hi, guys," he said, grinning broadly, and then, with an awkward wave before exiting, "I hope you like them."

The first video (Trecartin prefers to call them movies) was "Junior War," twenty-four minutes of footage shot fifteen years ago, when he was a high-school senior in Ohio, but not edited until last year. It showed a lot of blond, angelic-looking Midwestern boys and girls getting drunk, passing out, smashing mailboxes, tossing TV sets out the windows of speeding cars, setting small fires, and revelling in the annual rites of destruction that highlight autumn homecoming week in Whitehouse, Ohio. What struck me right away was how closely this early footage predicted Trecartin's future work. The chaotic energy, the virtuoso use of handheld camera techniques, the breaking of rules, and the theme of young people trying out different identities were all on display, although most of the time it was difficult to follow what the kids were saying.

The three other videos—"Comma Boat," "Center Jenny," and "Item Falls"—were technically more sophisticated and a good deal more complex in structure than "Junior War." In "Center Jenny," whose running time is fifty-three minutes, Trecartin's repertory troupe is augmented by a few professional actresses. Many are named Jenny in the

PHOTOGRAPH BY FITCH TRECARTIN STUDIO

film, and they are trying to emulate an archetypal Jenny who has evolved to a higher level of existence. A profusion of events and social interactions unfold, sometimes in split screens. Fragments of disjointed dialogue catch your ear ("We've got to learn to walk backward if we're going to fly"), but there is no sense of a coherent narrative. "My parents owned and funded the war," one girl announces, convincingly. "This fucking donkeybutt is dating my dad, and I can't fucking take it anymore," another says.

Trecartin himself, whose androgynous intensity usually makes him the most vivid presence in his films, is less visible in this one. The action is propelled by characters making loopy declarative statements about themselves, as young people tend to do, and doing inexplicable things, such as smashing fake concrete blocks with their bare hands, and, for reasons that are not entirely clear to me, my attention never flagged for the entire fifty-three minutes. It was caught and held by the shifting kaleidoscope of color-besotted images and animations, the cocksure pace and rhythm of the editing, and the spectacle of past and present collapsing into a wilderness of digital all-at-once.

Reviews of Trecartin's videos often verge on the ecstatic. The *Times* critic Roberta Smith described him, in 2011, as "an immense but not fully developed talent that seems bound for greatness." Peter Schjeldahl, of this magazine, called him "the most consequential artist to have emerged since the nineteen-eighties." Massimiliano Gioni, the chief curator and the associate director of the New Museum, told me recently that Trecartin's 2007 video "I-Be Area" was one of the inspirations for his "Younger Than Jesus" exhibition, in 2009. (It was a group show of artists born around 1980, making them younger than Jesus was when he died.) Although Gioni is only seven years older than Trecartin, the work opened up a world he knew nothing about. "It was like a cultural watershed," he said. "I felt this was the voice of a different age and a different time, a different sexuality, a different kind of behavior. There's this idea that a character can be many people at the same time. And the act of communication becomes the subject of his videos. We're all trying to communicate, and what we communicate about is less and less relevant. When I watch his videos, I feel a speeded-up version of what we're all doing."

Trecartin came of age when new technologies were changing the way we look at moving images—from the big screen to laptops and iPhones, from network to cable and broadband streaming—and the Internet was messing with our brains. He sees himself as a "bridge" person, someone who grew up before the revolution in digital technology, whose effects are now second nature to the generation that was born into it. His work is not about technology or social media, he has said, but about how the Internet changes the way we relate to the world and to one another, and his videos are rooted in the very world these changes have brought about. It is a place of multiple individual narratives unfolding simultaneously, of shifting identities and genders, of triumphant consumerism, and of young people yakking maniacally into cell phones, breaking windows and furniture, and saying things like "The world ended three weeks ago, starting now," or "I exist because of Command V.... Don't ignore ignore ignore me me me me." Everybody in Trecartin's work overcommunicates, Gioni observed, and the message is almost always about the self—a melodrama of solipsism, with occasional references to larger, public events whose reality is peripheral or fantastical. ("Reality, in Trecartin's multi-racial social bubble, derives from personality assertion," as Wayne Koestenbaum wrote in *Artforum*.) This may sound ludicrously self-indulgent, but by some alchemy of language, technical virtuosity, and visual seduction Trecartin makes it seem compelling and hugely enjoyable. He is one of the few artists of the postmodern era who are not opposed to pleasure. He once said, "My satisfaction comes—at least in part—from giving people what they want."

Trecartin, his close friend and collaborator Lizzie Fitch, and several other co-workers have been based, since the end of 2010, in a Spanish-style house in the Los Feliz section of Los Angeles. The house has seen better days, but its eccentric shabbiness suits the group's raffish life style and intensive work habits. Fitch does much of the cooking, and

her companion, Sergio Pastor, publishes books and applies his computer wizardry to an endless variety of technical problems that crop up in Trecartin's work and in the activities of four or five young people who live elsewhere but have computer stations in a large, otherwise empty common room on the ground floor. The sitting room to the left of the front door still looks the way it did as a set for the video "Item Falls"—turquoise walls and four queen-size beds side by side, facing a giant flat-screen TV. Alison Powell, a rather shy African-American woman who has been a regular performer in Trecartin's videos since they were both undergraduates at the Rhode Island School of Design, lives in a separate apartment below the office space. Anthony Valdez, whom Trecartin has been dating since 2012, was in New York when I visited, working on a project with a group from the online magazine *dis*, whose investigations of future trends in fashion, retailing, and art have often included Trecartin's active participation. Three cats have the run of the house, and a dozen or more chickens occupy a coop in the front yard and provide eggs for breakfast; they evolved from three chicks that appear in "Item Falls."

Trecartin, an exuberantly alert young man, wearing cut-off jeans, sneakers, and a bleached T-shirt, led me up a winding staircase to the second floor. We passed through his bedroom—a windowless cave with drifts of discarded clothes underfoot and several bookshelves full of vitamins and health supplements—and into the darkened editing room, where he not infrequently spends eighteen-hour stretches working at one or more of his three desktop computers. Apart from a long table against the opposite wall, some plastic crates full of files, and three office chairs on rollers, there was no furniture. Black plastic bags were taped to the windows in lieu of shades; he removed one of them to admit some daylight. A ceiling light kept going off and on, unnoticed by Trecartin as he sat in an office chair with one leg tucked under him, taking swigs from a bottle of kombucha and talking a blue streak. His voice is deep and resonant—surprisingly, considering his slight frame and ingenuous, newly hatched look. He laughs a lot (his e-mails teem with "lol"s), and he speaks with what one of his friends calls "extreme confidence and very little arrogance."

When I asked him to explain the title of "I-Be Area," his video about adoption, cloning, shared identities, and other possible aspects of the new social order, he said that it came partly from his thinking about people having areas, which he described—I am paraphrasing—as the totality of each person's cumulative effect on others. "There is this character I-Be 2, whom I play, and he's a clone who's trying to find his independent identity. The basic idea of the film is that what identifies people is not necessarily their bodies anymore; it's all the relationships they maintain with others. You are your area, rather than you are yourself. If someone describes you, that description becomes a part of your area, whether you like it or not." He paused, and said, doubtfully, "Is that clear?"

Trecartin's area has many layers, one of which is that he appears to have had an uncommonly happy childhood. He and his brother, Adam, who is two and a half years younger, spent their earliest years in Texas, in a suburb of Houston. Their father, Burdell (Dell), worked in various divisions of the steel industry, and in 1985, when Ryan was four, they moved to Massillon, Ohio, where Dell had taken a new job. "My dad is an extremely creative person who doesn't know he's creative," Trecartin told me. "He left work at work, so I never really knew what he did. On the phone to someone at the plant, he'd sound so macho, but around us he wasn't like that at all. He never put pressure on me to do sports, although one year he did make me go out for baseball. It was kind of a joke—my brother was much better at stuff like that. Dad would say, 'You guys can go to the candy store if Ryan can catch two balls in a row,' and I never could." He rummaged through some boxes, and pulled out an old snapshot of himself at about five, with his face painted in lurid colors for Halloween. "My dad did that," he said. "When we got older, all my school friends wanted to come to our house, because they liked my parents so much." His mother, Cathy, was a teacher who had switched to part-time private tutoring and substitute teaching so that she could stay at home with the boys. (She had trained at a Montessori school, and had a master's degree in early-childhood education.) "My mom was very psychological, and I like talking, so we got along really well," he said.

He was encouraged to repeat first grade, and he and Adam were thought to have learning disabilities at school, the result of what was probably a mild form of dyslexia (although it was never diagnosed as such). Being held back didn't bother Ryan at all. "I remember feeling so happy when my mom told me, because I always thought the grade below mine was special," he said. "It was the Class of 2000, and they got to do a lot of special things." As a child, Cathy recalls, Ryan was almost always excited about something he was doing. "He had a lot of friends, and he had what I want to call joyfulness, not that he couldn't be a pain in the butt sometimes." He had always loved to draw. He started piano lessons in first grade, and a year later, after his parents let him watch the movie "Dirty Dancing," he took dance lessons. His mother borrowed an early VHS camera from a friend, so that she could film his dance routines—improvised after watching performances on MTV—and also the skits that he made up and performed, with Adam and their friends, in the basement at home.

Cathy discovered a magnet school in Canton, Ohio, about fifteen miles away, which offered classes for students who were gifted in dance, drama, music, and art. Ryan applied, and was accepted. "It was one of those schools where you had to live in the township to attend, and so we moved there," Trecartin said. "My parents were always really supportive." (The school was for grades four through eight, and when Adam was old enough he went there, too.) For the last three years, Ryan concentrated on music and dance and then on drama and dance. "In drama class, I was told I overacted, so I rarely got parts," he said. "But I always got the dancing parts." He quit the dance classes after eighth grade, because some of the kids had started making fun

of him. "They were calling me a faggot," he said. By then, Ryan knew he was gay, but he hadn't told his parents. "I was afraid they'd be disappointed, and I was really scared about AIDS," he said. Deprived of dancing, he shifted his focus to music, and began playing in bands, and skateboarding. He also became a topflight snowboarder. He was always popular, never feeling like an outsider, and in eighth grade he was elected class president.

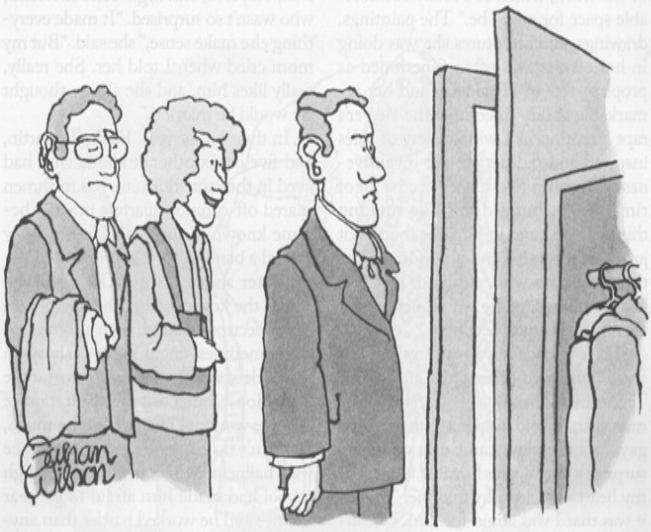
After Ryan spent a year at GlenOak High School, in Canton, his father's next job took the family to Whitehouse, Ohio, a farm town in the northwest corner of the state. Lisa Reyerse, who is now a senior graphic designer at the Toledo Museum of Art, told me about her first encounter with Ryan: "He was the new kid, and he was in a couple of my classes. One day in history class, I was turning in one of my exams, and Ryan grabbed me from behind, picked me up and cracked my back, took both my hands and cracked my knuckles, and then broke up laughing. That's how we met." They were such close friends in their junior and senior years that everyone—including, at times, Trecartin and Reyerse—assumed they were boyfriend and girlfriend. Reyerse said, "There was a lot of respect for Ryan at the school, just because he was so different, and he didn't really care what people thought. He wasn't interested in sports, but to be social he would go to the football games and the bonfires."

For Ryan's seventeenth birthday, his mother gave him a Sony Handycam, and in his senior year he began filming school events—among them the astonishing carnival known as the Senior-Junior Wars. (There had been nothing like this in the more citified schools he'd gone to before.) "The juniors and seniors would have this war, which lasted all week," Reyerse recalled. "When Ryan showed up with his video camera, it caused huge excitement." Trecartin had recently seen "The Blair Witch Project," and so had most of the other students. His Handycam had a night-vision lens, which allowed him to shoot after dark, when the misbehavior was at its height. "It looks so absurd now, but I made all these friendships that I probably would never have made otherwise," he said. The gleeful vandalism in his high-school footage carries over into his early videos, where young people trash rooms, break windows and walls and lamps and furniture, and set things on fire. When I asked him about this, he grinned and ducked his head. "Destruction is a creative act at that age," he said. "It's something I've done my whole life," he later added. "I don't know where it comes from, but I usually break more things when I'm happy."

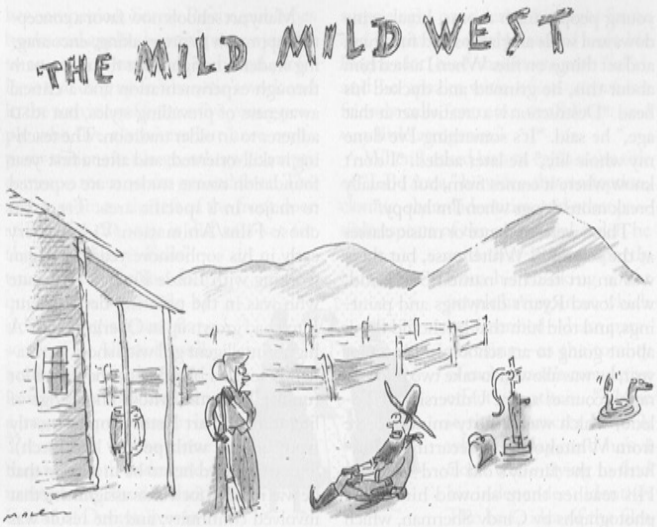
There were no dance or music classes at the school in Whitehouse, but there was an art teacher named Sue Ladd, who loved Ryan's drawings and paintings, and told him that he should think about going to art school. In his senior year, he was allowed to take two photography courses at the University of Toledo, which was a thirty-minute drive from Whitehouse. (Trecartin had inherited the family's old Ford Tempo.) His teacher there showed him some photographs by Cindy Sherman, which were his first significant introduction to contemporary art. For his art classes, Trecartin also spent time at the Toledo Museum, but nothing there inspired him—he has never had much interest in museums, or in art history. By the time he graduated from high school, he had put together a portfolio of drawings, paintings, sculptures, and photographs, which got him into the Rhode Island School of Design.

Many art schools now favor a conceptual approach to art-making, encouraging students to figure out their own path through experimentation and a critical awareness of prevailing styles, but RISD adheres to an older tradition. The teaching is skill-oriented, and after a first-year foundation course students are expected to major in a specific area. Trecartin chose Film/Animation/Video. Very early in his sophomore year, he began working with Lizzie Fitch, a classmate who was in the painting department. Fitch had grown up in Oberlin, Ohio. A highly intelligent girl with short, permanently tousled blond hair, she read a lot (unlike Trecartin, whose knowledge of literature and art history comes mostly from talking with people like Fitch). Trecartin asked her to be in a video that he was making for a class assignment that involved continuity, and the result was "Kitchen Girl," a very short (just under three minutes), extremely funny, and somewhat disturbing vignette, in which Fitch, screaming her head off, yanks a baby stroller—filled with oddly shaped woollen objects that she had crocheted—up a flight of stairs and into a kitchen. Her screams are neither frightened nor crazed but triumphant.

Fitch was in most of his student videos after that. "My work at RISD was very



"Say something pompous!"



"This snakebite is hurtin' mighty bad, Annabelle—I'm thinkin' of utterin' a cussword."

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unfocussed," she said, when I talked with her last fall. "I knew I didn't want to just be a painter. Because I was so interested in trying to locate what my work actually is, it was easier for me to work inside of his work, which is a really comfortable space for me to be." The paintings, drawings, and sculptures she was doing in her own studio often functioned as props or sets in his videos, and her remarkable ability to compel the viewer's rapt attention in a wide variety of roles inspired and fed his prolific inventiveness. Trecartin told me, "I need a lot of time alone, but I don't like making things alone," and in Fitch he found not just a collaborator and a performer but the partner his work required. Without her, he often says, he would never have been the artist he's become.

Their friendship was untroubled by sex. Fitch dated other guys, and so did Trecartin. Home for a break in his freshman year, he told his parents that he was gay, and the news came as a complete surprise to them. "It's horrible to say, but my heart sank," Cathy told me. "Part of it was that I was afraid for him. I wasn't upset with him, and neither was his father." Dell said, "I didn't understand it, because he'd had girlfriends and all that. It took me a while, but today it doesn't mean a thing. There's been ten times more joy with Ryan's presence than any of that could ever affect." Ryan also told Lisa Reyerse, his high-school friend, who wasn't so surprised. "It made everything else make sense," she said. "But my mom cried when I told her. She really, really likes him, and she always thought we would be married."

In their junior year, Fitch, Trecartin, and five or six other students who had lived in the same dormitory as freshmen shared off-campus quarters in what became known as the Pink House. They started a band called Experimental People, later shortened to XPPL—Ryan played the keyboard and the bass guitar, made electronic sounds with a computer, and sometimes sang. Fitch was always in the thick of whatever was going on at the Pink House, but Trecartin spent most of his time working. He didn't drink much, he didn't do drugs—a bad experience with hallucinogenic mushrooms in high school had made him afraid to go near them—and he worked harder than anyone else. "Ryan was always so focussed on becoming an artist, and so certain it was going to happen," Brian McKelligott, one of the Pink House fraternity, told me. "I don't think I've ever met anybody who was so determined."

He had no trouble getting people to appear in his videos. "It was always fun to be in Ryan's videos," Rhett LaRue, another Pink House resident, recalls. (He and Trecartin had come out at around the same time; LaRue is now the Trecartin group's go-to person for animation.) "He knew what he wanted, but he was always very flexible." Trecartin told the performers what to do and say. They all painted their faces in primary colors, and there was a lot of gender shifting, enhanced by wigs and exaggerated vamping.

Critics often assume that Trecartin's movies were influenced by Andy Warhol, John Waters, Paul McCarthy, or other anti-traditionalists. Trecartin, however, was simply following his own established methods. "When I was a kid, organizing scenarios and directing people to do things, I always thought of it as something I would film if I could," he told me. "My understanding of structuring a scene, of movement through space, of cutaways and perspective and all those things people do to create a sense of place—I absorbed them intuitively. And then when I started watching films with people who studied that stuff"—his teachers at RISD—"they would point things out to me and I would think, Yeah, I do that." He had watched a lot of TV when he was growing up—everything from "Pee-wee's Playhouse" to the latest music videos. He likes TV more than movies because its structure is episodic and open-ended. Certain aspects of the Broadway shows that his parents took him to see when they visited his grandparents in New Jersey made him cringe. "I hate the way people talk onstage," he said. "That affected way of projecting so people in the back rows can hear."

In his senior year at RISD, he stopped going to classes and worked exclusively on his thesis project, a forty-one-minute video called "A Family Finds Entertainment." All his friends were in it, along with about forty others, several of whom played multiple roles. There was a script, Trecartin's first really detailed one, which evolved and changed as the filming progressed. He didn't show the script to the

performers, or try to explain to them what he had in mind. Working with his actors one at a time, he would give them a line of dialogue—maybe just four or five words—and have them say it over and over. If an actor said something that Trecartin liked better, which "gave it a weird twist," he would keep the change and write it into the script. He had already initiated the process, which he has continued ever since, of shooting at night and sleeping during the day. "There's no light coming in the windows at night, and people have fewer distractions—they're not checking their cell phones, and their associations are weirder at night, somehow," he explained. "As a director, I ask a lot from people, and then I kind of let them take control of it. I yield a lot. I tell them very basic things, like what to do, and I work on their accent, but I also allow them to run with something if they need to." Later, alone in the editing room, he shapes this raw material in ways that, as often as not, he had not anticipated. "A Family Finds Entertainment," with its chaotic pace and energy, dizzying color palette, driving soundtrack of noise music and ambient noise, and fragmented collage of teen-age language patterns, gave viewers direct access to the hyperconnected, electronic souk of the millennial generation.

Some people thought the video was about Ryan coming out as a gay person, but he says no, it's more like a coming-of-age story. Running through it is a vastly expanded notion of what "family" can mean to young people who live on the Internet and are free to assume various personalities at will. After a prologue involving a little girl (Trecartin's cousin) and her grownup, imaginary companion (played by Trecartin), we are in a suburban living room, where four or five people are sitting around talking and occasionally calling out to their friend Skippy, who has locked himself in the bathroom. Cut to Skippy (Trecartin), in a tank top, his front teeth blackened. He's holding a bread knife, looking in the bathroom mirror, and talking to the camera. ("I'm not sixteen anymore, but I feel like I'm five with sunglasses on.") He cuts his arm with the knife, and fake blood pours out. The screen breaks up into multiple images—portraits and abstract patterns, revolving and zooming in and out. Later, unscathed and wearing a Hawaiian shirt, Skippy enters a cluttered kitchen, where a skinny, fortyish woman tells him, "This family is poisonous. You need to find a new home." Skippy turns and confides to the camera, "Mama is a snake, yes, she is." Enter Billy (Kenny Curran), naked except for a flag around his shoulders; he has white lips and a blackened penis. After more conversation, Mama gives Skippy fifty dollars, embraces him, and says, "Get the fuck outta my house." He goes downstairs and out the door, saying, "Yay-yuh, it's a nice night out to die." Outside, he meets a young woman named Zoe, who says she's making a documentary on "medium-age kids all over the world." Skippy runs out into the street and is hit by a car, which doesn't stop. Zoe videotapes him lying in the street.

The narrative thread more or less disappears at this point, and the images get wilder and more frenetic. We're in the Pink House, where Shin, a red-haired girl (Trecartin again) whose face is painted in a clownish mask of red, yellow, and blue patches, dominates the increasingly crowded premises. Closeups of performers, all of them singing, zoom in and out against chaotically colorful backgrounds—video paintings. Faces get doubled, fragmented, collaged. Fifteen versions of repeated images appear in grids. Then we are in a wildly decorated room where more and more young people, wearing body paint, say things like "Identity failure," "Gravity slave," "Nonlinear trash," "Artificial intelligence," and "Cosmic puke." Bands hammer away in several rooms, and everybody dances. Out on the street, Skippy hears the music, revives, and goes to join the party. The revellers erupt into the street, and Shin, dancing in a child's inflatable pool, ducks underwater and comes up without the wig or the face paint—she has merged with Skippy (I think). Fireworks fill the night sky. A title fills the screen: "Dedicated to My Mom and Dad." The credits roll.

Cathy and Dell Trecartin travelled from Ohio for the film's first public screening, at RISD, in the spring of 2004. "It just shocked me," Dell said. His childhood friend Ken Johnson, an art critic for the *Times*, was there, along with Linda Norden, who, at the time, was a curator at the Fogg Museum, at Harvard, and would become one of Trecartin's most effective supporters. After the screening, Dell took Johnson aside and asked him what he thought. "Ken said, 'Listen, I have never seen anything like this. Leave him alone. It's *great*.'" The film may be autobiographical in some ways, but the family in it is not Ryan's. Cathy remembers seeing Ryan come into the bar they had gone to after the

screening, and thinking, It's all right. It's Ryan. Exhausted from his struggles with the final edit, Ryan spent the next three weeks in bed, recovering from a cold and a venomous-spider bite.

In the fall, Trecartin, Fitch, and most of the Pink House contingent moved to New Orleans. They rented a cheap house in the Ninth Ward, and got restaurant jobs that allowed time for their art work. Trecartin started a new video, and he and Fitch and the others made free-form sculptures. (Fitch had worked briefly for a Mardi Gras company, and learned a technique that involved using cardboard strips and contact cement to build figurative objects.) Trecartin, with a lot of help from his mother, was also burning DVDs of "A Family Finds Entertainment" and sending them to film festivals and college film societies. It was Cathy who told him about YouTube, which was just starting then; he posted "Family" on it some time later. The following August, Hurricane Katrina drove them all out of town. After three months in Oberlin, where Fitch's mother lived, they went to Los Angeles. Elizabeth Dee, a young New York art dealer, had arranged for them to have a group show at a gallery she co-owned there, called QED.

Dee had heard about Trecartin a few months earlier, from a curator at the New Museum named Rachel Greene, who learned about him from the artist Sue de Beer. Some students at the Cleveland Institute of Art had shown de Beer a DVD of "A Family Finds Entertainment," which she described to Greene as "incredibly hard-core," and Greene had tracked Trecartin down in New Orleans, through Friendster. After seeing the video, she invited him to New York, and introduced him to a number of curators and dealers, including Dee. "I can remember the temperature of the room when I watched the video," Dee said. "I was mesmerized, disturbed, and I just knew this was going to be huge." When Dee met Trecartin in New York, she recalls, "I said, 'Talk, tell me everything—where is this coming from?' He was so young and boylike and enthusiastic and positive. The core of his work is language, the experimental language that comes from an intuitive place, but this was combined with a complete lack of regard for the theoretical attitudes of conceptual art."

The show that Dee organized, called "I Smell Pregnant," opened at QED in January, 2006, and nearly everything was sold—around forty sculptures and the entire edition of "A Family Finds Entertainment," eight videos plus one of the artist's proofs at four thousand dollars apiece. Trecartin was mortified, because some sculptures by other members of the group were accidentally attributed to him. "That was extremely upsetting," he told me. "We got it corrected, and in the end it was probably a good thing, because it made us deal with the whole problem of giving credit. With the movies, I am the author. I write the script, although everyone influences it, and I direct, and then I edit, and they're all comfortable with that." The sculptures that he and Fitch make together—humanoid forms juxtaposed with manufactured objects—are signed "Fitch/Trecartin"; the others are credited to their makers, all of whom have their own independent practices, and everyone gets listed in the movie credits. In a piece for *Artforum* that came out in the same month as the QED show, Dennis Cooper concluded, "It's early yet, but the great excitement of Trecartin's work is that it honestly does seem to have come from out of nowhere."

Chrissie Iles and Philippe Vergne decided to include "A Family Finds Entertainment" in the 2006 Whitney Biennial, which they were co-curating. "You know how it is when you feel a page turning," Iles said, last fall. "What struck me about

the work is that it marked a shift away from television as we knew it. Because of the Internet, television was becoming something else. Ryan emerged at the beginning of the Internet's involvement with the art world, and his work has a visual richness that really engages your eye. He was also coming out of something we addressed in the 2004 Biennial, which was the queer voice—gay male artists who were making that important in their work." It had only recently dawned on Trecartin that the art world might be interested in his videos; he had assumed that they might appear at film festivals or art-house theatres. "I didn't even know museums showed films," he admitted. "The art world attached itself at just the right moment, because there was no way I could have had the freedom to do this anywhere else."

The videos he has done since 2006 build on the innovations of "A Family Finds Entertainment" and "I-Be Area," his much longer 2007 film (an hour and forty-two minutes), in increasingly complex and original ways. The "Any Ever" series (2009-11), seven separate but connected videos whose combined running time is three hours and fifty-five minutes, moves beyond the domestic sphere and makes frequent references to the recession, global corporate careerism, office life, and the "branding" of personalities and products. "I would like to Re-Brand, Re-Organize, and Internalize the entire 'Communications War,' so that, in effect, we are on all sides," a character in "K-CoreaINC.K" says. "Roamie View," another in the "Any Ever" series, closes with one of Trecartin's more openly poetic fancies:

> Well, if I is you and is all and personal now
> I have a news flash for you.
> Everyone shares a Katie.
> You're not the only sky to touch that star.

Except for "Junior War," the videos he showed in Venice last summer are paced more slowly than those in the "Any Ever" series, and it's somewhat easier to follow the dialogue. People tend to stay the same gender throughout, and to talk to each other, rather than to the camera. In "Comma Boat," a frenetic Trecartin, his face stained green and purple, plays the part of a "director," harassing the players in a parody of his own, much calmer directorial style. He and the other characters seem like tentative adults, reaching out to lives that might extend beyond the self, or selves.

The Trecartin ménage has moved several times in the past few years: to Philadelphia, where "I-Be Area" was made; to Miami, for the shooting of "Any Ever"; and then to Los Angeles, at the end of 2010. "I've never wanted to live in New York," Trecartin told me. "I feel it's a place where ideas are brought to

be shown and judged, and I don't think I could work there." His associates have always had other jobs to support themselves, but, now that more money is coming in, three new studio employees receive salaries paid by Fitch Trecartin Studio, a corporate entity founded in 2011. A few new people have come on board. Telfar Clemens, an African-American clothing designer who was born in LeFrak City, Queens, went to Philadelphia with some friends in 2006 and found himself playing several key parts in "I-Be Area." He told me, "I was twenty at the time, and I had no clue what the movie was about, but there was a lot of pizza and whiskey on the set." Clemens had an unpredictable charisma that Trecartin spotted immediately. "He'll never say a line the way I've given it to him, but what comes out of his mouth is way better," Trecartin said. Kevin McGarry, who studied filmmaking at N.Y.U. and, later, as a member of the selection committee for the New York Underground Film Festival, argued successfully for putting "A Family Finds Entertainment" in the 2005 festival, moved to Philadelphia in 2009, and became a close friend of the group's. Now a freelance writer, McGarry has written synopses of Trecartin's videos, and helps him answer people who ask for written statements about his work.

Trecartin ended his relationship with Elizabeth Dee in 2011. The break came with a lot of pain on both sides. Dee's passionate belief in him and his work had been a crucial element in getting it produced and shown, and their association had worked well for seven years. She had raised money for production costs, persuading several collectors to commit to the "Any Ever" films sight unseen, in exchange for discounts on the finished work. Dee had no objection to Trecartin's keeping his videos on YouTube or Vimeo—she recognized that his work was "conceptually native to online," and should be available to a wide public as well as to curators and collectors.

The edition of eight "I-Be Area" videos and one artist's proof sold out very quickly, for between twenty thousand and twenty-five thousand dollars apiece. The film had ended up costing more than a hundred thousand dollars, though, and Trecartin had maxed out several credit cards and borrowed money from his parents, who took out a line of credit on their house to come up with it. (They were also paying off some of his college loans.) With "Any Ever," which Dee co-produced, the costs rose exponentially. Trecartin and Fitch started building sculptural environments in which to show the videos, spaces furnished with lamps, bureaus, and other items that they bought at Target or IKEA. Dee was able to sell most of these (environment plus video for two hundred and fifty thousand dollars; single videos from forty-five thousand to sixty-five thousand dollars). This and two grants from private foundations enabled Trecartin to pay his parents back in full for the line of credit they had taken out. Dee brought in crucial support from two German collectors when the post-2008 recession made funding harder to find, and in 2010 and 2011 she put together a five-museum tour of the "Any Ever" material, with important stops at MOMA PS1, in Queens, and the Musée d'Art Moderne, in Paris. Tensions had been building in Trecartin and Fitch's relationship with Dee, however, and soon after the "Any Ever" museum tour they reached an impasse.

Trecartin and Fitch had learned a lot more by this time about the art world and the artist-dealer relationship. Although Trecartin comes across to everyone as sweet and a little naïve, he has always been uncompromising where his work is concerned, and he and Fitch wanted to have a larger share in the over-all decision-making. Dee, they felt, either couldn't or wouldn't deal with this. "Once we started trying to have a different relationship with her, things got really messy," Trecartin said. Dee was shattered by the break. "I would have collaborated in any form that Ryan desired," she said. "It's very hard to watch an artist as talented as he is grow up in public." For a year after the association dissolved, Trecartin and Fitch chose to have no primary gallery. They are now represented in this country by two well-established dealers, Andrea Rosen Gallery, in New York, and Regen Projects, in Los Angeles. Working together, the Rosen and Regen galleries raised the money up front for Trecartin and Fitch to make and install the four new videos that premièred at the Venice Biennale, and they have been, as Trecartin put it, "so generous about cleaning up our messes."

The Venice videos were shown as sculptural theatre at the Arsenale, a medieval network of shipyards that serve as one of the main venues for the show, in spaces made for them by Trecartin and Fitch. I'm not convinced that the installations enhance the viewing experience, or that the "sculptural" elements are

"How much are we supposed to tip the guy who followed us to our room and flicked the light switch?"

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really sculpture—to me, they seem more like props. Many viewers wander in and out of them, staying for only a few minutes. Massimiliano Gioni, of the New Museum, who served as the director of the 2013 Biennale, nevertheless assured me that "the number of people who spent time with those pieces in Venice was amazing. They just sat there with headphones on." Lauren Cornell, a curator at the New Museum, values Trecartin's sense of the new cultural climate so highly that she asked him to co-curate the New Museum's next big triennial exhibition, which opens in February, 2015. "Ryan is an incredibly keen listener and observer," Cornell told me. "So much of his work comes from his intense attention to people—how they act and operate."

When I checked in with Trecartin in Los Angeles last month, he and Fitch were shooting a new movie in what used to be a Masonic temple, on Wilshire Boulevard. "Do you know Maurice Marciano?" he asked, referring to one of the founders of Guess jeans, who bought the building with his brother Paul last year. "The temple has been abandoned since the nineteen-nineties, and he's going to gut the whole thing and turn it into a private museum. He said we could break whatever we want in there." Most of the familiar faces in Trecartin's extended family appear in the new film. He's also using some parkour athletes, "to jump from high places and do splits and stuff." Trecartin got interested in stunts when they were making "Any Ever." He works with parkour people because they're not professional stunt artists, and are willing to collaborate on ideas.

Trecartin and Fitch had planned to show several new, post-Venice videos this fall, in Los Angeles, New York, and Berlin, but at this point nothing is certain. The Masonic-temple movie, which won't have anything to do with Masonic rites or symbols, is turning into a major work. It will include new footage shot last summer at a lake house in Minnesota that Rhett LaRue's grandfather owns, and the story in the temple itself will reflect Trecartin's recent research and thinking about zombies—beings "who foreshadow certain inevitable things, like life extension, and our past being reanimated," Trecartin informed me. His current body of work, which began with the four Venice films, may not be completed for some time.

Trecartin talks of moving to Mexico City next year. The group has never done two big projects in the same place, and a new location stimulates fresh thinking. He is aware of the dangers that early success can bring. Almost everything that he and Lizzie Fitch earn goes back into their work, and they are determined not to be constrained by market pressures. "We're deliberately abandoning things we planned to do, in order to explore new things," he said. Fitch, who continues to work on and act in their movies, co-manage the over-all operation, and sell her own sculptures, has become increasingly involved in their joint creative process. She sometimes handles the camera when Trecartin is acting, and she co-edited "Comma Boat" when they were struggling to finish it in time for the Biennale. There are limits, though, to Trecartin's willingness to share control. "I found out that, if I'm not writing and editing, I'm not doing my work," he told me. "I just love editing, and I want to do it alone." He can see them eventually working together on a Fitch-Trecartin production, but what's more likely, he said, is that he'll help Fitch make her own movie. They still discuss everything, and argue heatedly over decisions, such as whether a scene works. I asked Fitch who usually wins their arguments. "We both win," she said, beaming. "That's the best part. He's really my closest friend."

Trecartin wants to make another movie from the thirty reels of his high-school videos. "I think the new work really came out of the high-school movie, because it made me realize I had a past—I didn't even know I had one until then," he said. His default mode is still the future, though, and his main preoccupation is still with the ways technology has changed and is changing us. He said, "Everything we do is going to be captured and archived in an accessible form, whether you want it or not. It's going to change all of our lives. We are a species that can no longer assume a sense of privacy. It's not an individual decision, and I feel that's exciting to explore—or something. There's a lot of cultural content being generated right now that sees itself as post-human, but it's assuming the twentieth century as its audience. It leans on structures that we already understand, but that we're moving away from. My work is about humanity, and about the time I'm making it." ♦