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Accidental Colour, Performative Colour: Video Art's New Disruptors

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Abstract

Colour is flippant; unreliable and notoriously difficult to work with. It resists being placed in a static chart, frame, or dyed into a "colourfast" fabric, giving way to oxidization, fading, and changing their appearance based on their surroundings. However, in an age of HD digital video, working with colour – from the perspective of an artist – has never been more convenient and user friendly. Thus, one may wonder how disruptive colours show their face today? This article answers this by turning to the work of American video artist Ryan Trecartin. Trecartin's fashionable use of digital media, fast-paced editing, belligerent makeup and costume, and broken dialogue all echo his unforgiving colour juxtapositions (making him a "grinder and mixer of multicolour drugs," as Plato put it in reference to artists in general). This article discusses Trecartin's work and the way in which it sanctions the disruptive colours of a newer world of selfies, social media apps, the Internet, and automated effects plug-ins through three strategies rooted in categorical transgression (in favour of noise and ambiguity); an aesthetic category I theorize as "accidental colour"; and a use of whacky stops and pauses – in the tradition of the avant-garde – to incite subject disorientation and criticality.

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I. The Video Colourist

Video Art, according to the annals of art and media history, began with the commercialization of the Portapak video camera in 1967. The device was, as its name suggests, portable. It was also an affordable, easy-to-use, self-contained analogue video recording system that artists quickly took to. Today such devices can be found on most of our cell phones in high definition colour.

Colour is key. For several years after the introduction of the Portapak, video art remained black and white. A precarious kind of inconsistent, analogue video colour became available to artists and consumers in the late 1970s, but still, it was nothing like the crisp kind of digital colour we now expect from all our electronic screens. Circa 2020, one can record HD digital video on their cell phone "in millions of colours" and then edit, distribute and create special effects for it to an even greater capacity. What then is a video artist who seeks to use colour to break social conventions and confront gender and racial stereotypes to do with these crisp, technologically advanced digital colour systems?

Elsewhere I have discussed a slew of contemporary artists who have turned to "glitch art."[1] The genre is marked by garish and loud digital colours, used to stylize a new visual vernacular of digital noise, error and accident. Glitch art emerged through the work of people like John Cates, Rosa Menkman, Takeshi Murata and the net art duo Jodi in the late 1990s and early 2000s and bears strong links to the avant-garde.[2] For these artists, computer errors, failures and glitches provide the fodder for a new style of art-making that has the potential to break with illusions of technological transparency and efficiency. In this article, I move away from this work to consider digital video colour in contemporary media art as another kind of disruptor. That is, the ways in which automated and easy-to-use digital colour can act still as a destabilizer by overturning cultural symbolism and convention through eccentric, campy colours brought forth in American artist Ryan Trecartin's video art from the 2000s. Before delving into his work, it is

[1] See Kane, *High-Tech Trash*

[2] See Kane, "Glitch Art."

first necessary to establish a set of concepts for understanding colour in relation to design harmony, memory and standardized "taste."

II. Colour as Symbol Versus Colour as Disruptor

Colour is intrinsically flippant. This is one reason why it takes so long to stabilize colour in any new technology. Colour is notoriously unreliable and difficult to work with. By nature, colour resists being placed in a static chart, frame, or dyed into a "colourfast" fabrics, giving way to oxidization, fading and changing their appearance based on their surroundings.[3] Even the colours of everyday objects in the world are perceived differently by different people. Bauhaus colourist Josef Albers thus explains:

> If one says "Red" (the name of a colour) and there are 50 people listening, it can be expected that there will be 50 reds in their minds. And one can be sure that all these reds will be very different… When we consider further associations and reactions which are experienced in connection with the colour and the name, probably everyone will diverge again in many different directions.[4]

To make matters worse, colour and memory are also inconsistent. After exposure to a bright red dress, for example, when one later attempts to recall the colour of the dress through memory, it is usually recalled in a hue darker than it actually was.[5] Language and nomenclature also exacerbate colour problems. Ludwig Wittgenstein argued that the English phrase "red-green" denoted a fundamentally insecure relationship between colour and language by invoking a colour reality that could not possibly exist. Colour was, and is, an elusive "language game" where one assumes a colour consistently denotes a hue like "grey-green," but what this term actually means is "indeterminate and relative to specific contexts and situations."[6]

And yet, regardless of disparate genres, platforms, or subjective discrepancies, colour media have persisted through long histories and countless attempts to adapt, harness or control them as a stable

[3] See Kane, *Chromatic Algorithms*, chapter 1.

[4] Albers, *Interaction of Colour*, 3.

[5] Kane, *Chromatic Algorithms*, 24.

[6] Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Colour*, 3.

object of inquiry.[7] Such efforts inevitably fail because, as noted, colour is always on the move, shifting, transforming, or escaping the rules and protocols that attempt to contain it. In the modern era, a strain of artists, philosophers and scientists gravitated towards this understanding of colour as a complex phenomenon, with the potential to destabilize convention, single historical narratives and especially, so-called a-historical norms.[8] For others, all of these "colour problems" have amounted to its mass fear and distrust. For them, and ultimately all of us who have inherited traditions in the "West," have witnessed and experienced how colour, for centuries, has been subject to a secondary, subordinate "Other," linked to falsity, defect and décor or, to quote David Batchelor, "some 'foreign' body – "usually the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological."[9]

Through more banal forms of cultural convention and communication practices, colour has also been moulded into a series of vernacular symbols. For example, when encountering a red stop sign while driving, one slows to a stop, and then continues driving. This is colour as prosaic symbol. The communicative meaning of the red is clear. Because red stop signs are cross-cultural and pervasive, decoding them tends to be more automatic than deliberate.[10] When the sign is not a normative red but instead, purple, one may still stop because the sign bears the same octagonal shape, text, and positioning on the road, but the odd colour introduces a temporary disorientation in the experience, a kind of visual noise that disrupts our cultural knowledge and automation of behavioural conventions. It is unclear to the driver how it can or should be interpreted through pre-existent conventions. This is how colour operates as a *disruptor* of convention, at least in this first, naïve encounter.

[7] See Kane, Chapter 1 of *Chromatic Algorithms*.

[8] For example, see the strain of colour discussed in the work of Goethe, Derrida, Deleuze, Benjamin and Barthes. Reader may also find a synopsis of this history of thinking about colour in the introduction of *Chromatic Algorithms*.

[9] Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, 22.

[10] Neo-Marxist Louis Althusser in the late 1960 coined this process "interpellation," denoting the way in which bodies and subjects are "hailed" to undertake certain actions or ideas such as the command: "STOP!"

At the same time, colour as a disruptor of cultural conventions can just as easily prevent critical questioning or self-reflexive pauses. Consider certain print and television advertisements. If the goal is to capture and sustain attention, then the use of bold, abstract and often non-codified colour shapes becomes one of the most effective strategies for maintaining "eyeballs" and stringing a viewer along. Colour still operates as colour, which is to say "liberated" from narrative, code, or structure, but unlike avant-garde techniques, the goal is much less to call attention to the materiality of the media apparatus, or the politics of viewing, than it is to simply project as many images, logos and brand names in as short and quick a time as possible. Colour's disruptive power is unleashed for commercial gain.

Lastly, the difference between colour as symbol versus colour as disruptor of convention, is in no way fixed or universal. In order to be, become and sustain itself as a disruptor, colour must be worked and reworked; released and liberated from subordination to line, form and convention, using deliberate and medium-specific strategies. Once a cipher for decoding meaning is provided, colour can communicate as a vernacular cultural symbol. In the purple stop sign scenario, a driver might take into account where the sign is placed (in a graffiti-strewn neighborhood) and why and to what purpose the change serves (is there a special occasion that day—like Pride or Halloween?). If such symbolic connections can be re-established, the new affiliation catapults a once-disruptive colour back into its role as a sign. Definitive meaning is restored and colour communicates exactly what one intended. In the case of Ryan Trecartin's disruptive colours, we encounter them on the cusp of their appropriation into mainstream social media culture.

In the next section, I analyze selections of Trecartin's work and identify three key stylistic tenets that, together, lend themselves to an overall use of colour that acts as a destabilizer of convention and identity politics in particular. These three are: a) a transgression of categories and ways of classifying the world in favour of ambiguity; b) an aesthetic concept I introduce and theorize as "accidental colour"; and c) a whacky use of stops and pauses—in the tradition of the avant-garde— to incite subject disorientation and criticality. I conclude by discussing how colour in Trecartin's work corresponds with a broader aesthetic paradigm of incongruence, marked by

cross-disciplinarity, post-media, pansexual, poly-cultural everything, including traditionally queer, class-based and gendered subjectivities. Trecartin's work embodies this landscape of imploding axioms and for this reason it provides the most potent case study for an analysis *and questioning* of colour as an effective disruptor.

III. Ryan Trecartin's Disruptive Colours

In his 2009 essay on Trecartin's video work, director of New York's New Museum of Contemporary Art, Massimiliano Gioni described the artist's style as one where "Information is speaking the characters, rather than the other way around."[11] Gioni's witty reversal of the normative assumption that *people* utter information appeals to the nonsense-making at the core of Trecartin's work, but to my mind, it is much more that the characters speak a critical language of disruption in the midst of their multilayered, chronologically overlapping universes. This is illustrated early on in Trecartin's work. *A Family Finds Entertainment* (*AFFE*), for example, presented as his 2004 BFA thesis at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) demonstrates such incongruities in its narrative and cast of characters.

We begin with the plot. Scholar Ricardo Zulueta analyzes it as a parody of the classical family melodrama, while Roberta Smith argues it is a coming out narrative and Dennis Cooper claims it is a story about "Skippy, a clownish but terrifyingly psychopathic boy."[12] It is this ambiguity that keeps the work alive; it is unclear and disruptive on multiple registers. This same incapacity to find any stable symbolic meaning for the plot is illustrated in Trecartin's 108-minute single channel video *I-Be Area* (2007). In one early section from the larger work, the character named Pasta (played by Trecartin) drives with her friend Wendy MPEGgy / sen-teen (played by Alison Powell) to the characters Amanda / Hunter (Kelly Pittenger) and a character who appears to be named Charity's house (actor unknown). So far the viewer is given a loose narrative structure—Pasta gets in a car, drives to a house, parks, gets out—but what is actually shown is something else entirely.

[11] Gioni in Kennedy, "His Nonlinear Reality."

[12] Zulueta, *Queer Art*, 134; Cooper "A Family"; Smith, "Like Living."



Figure 1. Ryan Trecartin, *I-BE AREA*, 2007 compilation of video stills. Duration 1 hour, 48 minutes

Rewind and replay: from out of nowhere the video jumps back in time to the inside of the character named Pasta's car (played by Ryan Trecartin). Pasta, like the protagonist I-BE 2 (also played by Trecartin), is an "ambiguously gendered…mixed-media humanoid."[13] Pasta's face is painted opaque yellow with blue, purple, red and white smudges circling her eyes and nose. Her irises are also yellow, resembling a human-jackal who is both scary and smiling in a hyperactive trance. Retro 1990s computer-generated snowflakes dance across the screen as pink and purple lines recede toward a floating vanishing point to the pop song "Kiss Me" by *Sixpence None the Richer* (1998). The song,

[13] McGarry, "Ryan Trecartin"; also cited in Zulueta, *Queer Art*, 159.

for its part, is synthesized to a barely recognizable pitch, matching the over-the-top makeup, both of which are then juxtaposed with the exceedingly conservative suburban outfit Pasta sports: light blue mom jeans with a crisp, white, short-sleeved, button-down shirt tucked into them.

Zulueta and Kevin McGarry shed light on Pasta's origin story: stolen as a child named "Jango," Pasta has since "developed herself" into another person. And yet, McGrary continues, "Jango the child continues to live in temporal coexistence with Pasta the adult, perhaps unaware of Pasta yet destined to one day invent her."[14] Zulueta offers a somewhat distinct take on the narrative logic:

> I-BE Area follows the peripeteia of I-BE 2, a self-claimed 'real life mixed media,' clone of I-BE, the first 'total original.' [I-BE 2] is in the midst of an existential crisis as he desperately seeks to abandon his original incarnation in pursuit of other identities to assume.[15]

The plot, whether explained accurately or not, matches the confusing and genre-defying mixture of graphics, CGI, video document and characters (actors, performers, and/or real life characters). Some fragments and phrases are familiar, but for the most part, the combined whole is deliberately estranged.

In this consistent transgression of pre-established categories and worldly conventions, Trecartin's disruptions becomes literal and conceptual. They are campy in the way they undo cinematic convention and, as critics like Zulueta note, the merging of perspectives, timelines and subjectivities compound into a multisensory "cacophony of cyberqueer" fit for the Internet age.[16] As Trecartin describes it, "It's important to me that the work invent new or alternate meanings in the context of something familiar, rather than merely demonstrate something already known."[17] This is key because, in making art, one does not want to make a piece *too* strange and *too* chaotic, so no foothold is left for a viewer to grab onto, and thus one simply dismisses the work altogether.

[14] McGarry, "Ryan Trecartin," Zulueta, *Queer Art*, 163.

[15] Zulueta, *Queer Art*, 134.

[16] Zulueta *Queer Art*, 133-135; McGary, "Press Release."

[17] Trecartin in conversation with Sherman, *Any Ever*, 143.

To return to *I-Be Area*, as Pasta's car moves, highways and streets are nowhere to be seen. Car windows open to a depthless, perspectival-less computer maze of animated graphics and QuickTime files. High-speed aerial zooms show computer generated mountain ranges, mixed with abstract colour lines and tiled images of Amanda and Charity, floating backwards and forwards in a no-space space, played on an outdated QuickTime.[18] As Pasta jerks forwards and backwards in her car, she laughs. The laughter echoes through the synthetic maze and an (otherwise) uneventful drive to the house is transformed into a hallucinogenic trip through a hybrid world of photography, infomercials, video game glitches and rudimentary computer animations (already offering a blueprint for what will become a Snapchat segue in an episode of *Keeping up with the Kardashians*).[19]
It is night outside when Pasta arrives at the house to greet Wendy MPEGgy, who makes a brief appearance in the car along the way, but disappears before Pasta reaches the destination. Wendy MPEGgy sports thick green eye shadow with blue around the edges of her teeth. Once inside Amanda and Charity's house, the girls, who appear to be "normal," unadorned, but highly affected American preteens, announce the "media people are here," by which they mean the Internet, or the video they will be producing for it (one must cease looking for singular meanings). Pasta and Wendy MPEGgy perform for us, the camera, the media people and the young girls. The ambiguity, again intentional, complements the blurring of boundaries between genders, genres and dataspace versus physical space. Trecartin calls this a "continuous 360-degree situation," inferring an obfuscation of temporalities, epistemologies and just about anything and everything in between.[20] Thus Pasta, also the girls' former baby sitter, now turned media producer and hired here by the girls along with Wendy MPEGgy, announce themselves as cofounders of "Instant action… Life reproductions." The drama hits the heightened pitch of an afternoon talk show. The team boast being "On top of shit. Always in the moment. Always. Always. Always… Right now," in the style of a cliché infomercial, they repeat their "instant" proclamations in Trecartin's

[18] Tiling is an effect where the same image can be repeated on the screen or desktop.

[19] Trecartin, *I-Be Area* (41:00-46:00)

[20] Lehrer-Graiwer, "In the Studio" Also in Zulueta, *Queer Art*, 243.

signature staccato style, never resting on a scene, face, persona, or sound bite for longer than a couple seconds.[21]

The dialogue further echoes this bellying of linguist categories. By inverting nouns and verbs, using props as characters and re-making behaviours into objects, one begins to question unconscious assumptions about things and their relationship to one another.[22] In *I-Be Area*, examples abound: from the title of the movie itself, which implies a person is a space; to the character Pasta, which is something we eat, not a person we know, and Wendy MPEGgy, whose last name is an acronym for an algorithmic compression scheme; and casual expressions like "I don't know; you need to delete your birth mom" or "no it's not, it's about how the world ended 3 weeks ago. Starting now," uttered in *I-Be Area* a few scenes later. "Maintenance" is the term Trecartin uses to describe this technique where categories and classes of things are emptied out just enough to open them up to questioning—like the convention disruption engendered by the purple stop sign alluded to above.[23] While working, "we might try to interpret a car commercial as a hairdo," Trecartin explains in conversation with Cindy Sherman, "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."[24] Nouns become adjectives and verbs become both and vice versa. The deliberately crafted mumbo-jumbo prevents sustained attention, at least on the level of logic. On the level of surface experience, however, it enhances it. Citing Wayne Koestenbaum, Norden notes, "Trecartin understands how a concentration on distraction can ironically enhance absorption."[25] Distraction, in so many forms and formats, becomes the germ and seed for a new order and rhythm. I return to this in my conclusion on the "pacified sublime." For now, let us consider how the *quality* of this

[21] Trecartin, *I-Be Area* (48:00-50:00)

[22] Trecartin refers to the technique as "substitution," by which we can infer a substitution for one class or kind for an entirely different one. Ulbrist interview with Trecartin.

[23] Norden, "When the Rainbow," in *Any ever*, 12. Norden writes, "The trick is to maintain a word long enough to let it lodge without depleting its creative potential." 12; Trecartin, *I-Be Area* (48:00-50:00)

[24] Trecartin in conversation with Sherman, *Any Ever*, 144

[25] Norden in *Any Ever*, 12.

kind of empty but persistent absorption echoes models of mainstream media consumption.

Political philosopher Jodi Dean theorizes the contemporary social and political landscape as one of "communicative capitalism," a paradigm chock-full of failed communications. This system is fundamental to our communication infrastructures, but it is also the very thing that hinders actual communication from occurring.[26] Her paradigmatic example is the "democratic" Internet with its ubiquitous data flows, all falling under the guise of "communication",[27] but failing to communicate anything of substance. She recounts the contesting discussions surrounding the second Iraq war. Insightful reports, commentary and critical voices were seen and heard from independent news media to blogs and beyond. As the march to war grew closer, she explains, thousands more bloggers commented on each step. And yet, mainstream US news outlets failed to cover the mass demonstrations and protests.[28] The White House and U.S. president, for their part, acknowledged the existence of such voices, but failed to directly respond to their critical content. The mere acknowledgment that such disparate and disruptive voices existed, constituted for them a sufficient response. All had the "democratic opportunity" to voice their opinion but no actual "messages were received" by the people they aimed to communicate with. Trecartin's work echoes this dynamic of communicative capitalism, with its broken dialogue, stilted relations and vapid characters who seem to respond not to the person who spoke before them, but instead to their own solipsistic, internal agendas. The difference is that with Trecartin's colourful disturbances, once subject to analysis as is done here, can be reconstructed as a critical symbol. Unfortunately, no such process appears on the horizon for politics or the popular press.

[26] Dean, "Communicative Capitalism"

[27] Granted this claim of information overload is not unique to the Internet. It is a global condition that is merely exacerbated by and through it. For more on this, see Paul Stephens' "The Poetics of Information Overload."

[28] Dean, "Communicative Capitalism"

Accidental Colour Aesthetics

The second facet of Trecartin's style deals with "accidental colour," a turn of phrase used in an entirely different context by David Shah, editor of the Pantone View Colour Planner and present at the 2017 Pantone colour planners' meeting in London. The phrase is here borrowed from a report of this meeting and extrapolated into an aesthetic concept.[29] According to Bruce Flaconer, whose account of the event in the *New York Times Magazine* I closely follow, colour forecasters from around the world gathered at this meeting, the majority of them from Europe and North America. As the group turned to discuss the theme of "love" for Spring/Summer 2019, Shah queried the "American forecaster" (A) in the room:

> Shah: What is the zeitgeist going on in the United States? Are they big colours? Are they strong colours? Prime colours?
> A: I think what's going on in the United States now is that it's all happening… It's almost reflective of the conflict going on around us—where you're not having one definite colour correction, but you're seeing examples in various areas. I think it's mostly about mixes.
> Shah: So it's not about solids, it's about how you put colours together?
> A: Exactly, and different from what it's been before… It's almost like a counterculture type of a feeling—you deliberately use colours that would not ordinarily work together.
> Shah: Accidental colours
> A: That's a good way of putting it, yes.[30]

It is possible that Shah had nothing more in mind than echoing what he heard, and the discussion of accidental colour went no further. Regardless, the turn of phrase is suggestive and I build on it here to develop an aesthetic theory of "accidental colour," indicative of colour use in contemporary art, media and fashion trends.

In the context of this discussion, it is important to keep accidental colours distinct from mismatched patterns. The distinction is that the latter bears colour secondarily and by default, whereas accidental colours mix colour *as colour*, not as mismatched lines and designs that also happen to have colour filling in the lines between them. Second, accidental colours are disruptive colours. At least they begin this

[29] Falconer "What Is."

[30] Falconer "What Is."

way. Disruptive colour is then skilfully transformed into an ordered or stylized set that retains an *aura* of accident. In other words, the strategy aims to make colours *appear* off, wrong, ad-hoc, gauche, disruptive or unexpected. Intention is key as it differentiates an actual colour accident with the deliberate and consciously produced appearance of one. For example, one might encounter a purple stop sign and experience what I refer to as above as "colour as disruptive of convention." This, however, does not count as accidental colour because it is (presumably) not *designed* as an aesthetic object. Herein lies the contradiction at the heart of the concept of accidental colour aesthetics: *there is nothing accidental about it*. I provide some concrete examples after we review what a *conventional* colour system is.

In art, science and the world at large there are numerous conventional colour systems, all established through long histories of media (film colours, televisual colours, etc.); fashion and interior design (textile standards, Pantone colours); physics (the seven spectral colours of the rainbow) or any discipline that involves visual perception. In most art and design curricula, the standard 12-hue colour circle explicates these basic complementary pairs: purple appears opposite green, and orange appears opposite to blue, forming complementary pairs. Trichromatic colour is another example. It is normative in humans and the vast majority of electronic devices. The three trichromatic primaries are: red, green and blue, where all other possible colours derive from a combination of these three. Such conventional colour systems extend across media and, over centuries of practice and habit, have engrained themselves in symbolic culture.

In contrast, accidental colours are marked by an unconventional or mistaken appearance. Their seemingly haphazard design choice in some ways works to dismantle conventional colour systems by opening up a possibility for new formations. This is also why I refer to accidental colours as a set and not a system or fixed symbol. It should also be noted that accidental colour's capacity to disrupt is not guaranteed. It is always contingent on context. One example of accidental colour could include light pink and baby blue placed with the strong contrast of black and white. The set uses two pastel colours paired with a monochromatic contrast, it is acceptable but slightly off as the two different systems (pastel and monochrome black and

white) don't necessarily belong to any recognizable colour system or conventional use. In this way, accidental colours are also antithetical to colour matching. Accidental colours are undefined, unexpected and incomprehensive as a unified system. In essence, the set is an anti-system, and in this way, it is also anti-modern.

To identify where and how accidental colour exists in the world, one can do this test: does this group of colours fit with pre-established colour conventions in colour theory, biology or the environment, etc.? If the answer is no, then we can press on to analyze the groupings for additional correlations. A second set of qualities to consider concerns context. While accidental colour panders to a *façade* of accident and happenstance, like glitch art, it maintains tight precision and control over design choices, from start to finish. Further, once accidental colours (also like glitch art) lose their novel front, they become a mainstream trend. So-called accidental colours fade into standardized colours as they find their permanent home in a slot as one of the "64 colours arranged into nine distinct palettes" in the *Pantone Colour Planner*, targeted for reuse by designers and cultural producers in the years to come. No longer deemed accidental at all, they are now formulaic. Until this occurs, however, accidental colours can operate as a low-level disruption in the background of media culture. As practitioners and theorists, it is our responsibility to pay attention to these constant transitions in the media landscape. Doing so allows us to see how and when a new set of colour relations is deemed too edgy versus those on the brink of cliché. Because accidental colour aesthetics are endemic to Trecartin's work, this definition provides a fruitful entry point for further investigations into his work.

Trecartin's Accidental Colour Aesthetic

Even though almost any scene of any one of Trecartin's works (which he calls "movies") could be used to illustrate the concept of accidental colour, I focus here only on *A Family Finds Entertainment* (2004, 42 min, colour, sound), an epic horrification of the "after school special" genre. In almost every scene of every one of his works, one finds bizarre colour combinations: a haphazardly painted yellow face, a white wall attacked with red, a mismatched outfit, white teeth that bleed blue, yellow skin, yellow eyes, etc. All of these constitute deliberately

stylized, accidental colour, used to stun, shock or undermine colour convention.



Figure 2. Ryan Trecartin, *A Family Finds Entertainment* (2004). Campy and unhinged color relations features in the set design of the opening scenes.



Figure 2. Ryan Trecartin, *A Family Finds Entertainment* (2004). Campy and unhinged color relations features in the set design of the opening scenes.

In one of the opening scenes of *AFFE*, we find four Caucasian twenty-somethings sitting in a living room.[31] The room's interior is decorated in a lime green and dark yellow colour scheme, alluding to the folksy get-together culture of a 1960s family interior. One boy not wearing makeup or a costume sits on a stool while another, equally unadorned white male in cosy red socks rests on the arm of the couch, knees tucked in and guitar in hand. He begins to play as the first boy begins to

[31] Trecartin, *AFFE* (4:00-6:00)

sing, "… I will hold on, I will hold on…" The character named Veronica (played by Veronica Gelbaum) gazes longingly at him and when he is done responds, "oh Ben that was so romantical… I love that more than anything."[32] The melodrama is both forced and raw.

The strangeness is echoed in parts of Veronica's makeup which does not predominately consist of colour, but instead a series of black-and-white outlines of where colour would normatively be found. A close-up of her face shows her opaque white lips, outlined in a thick black pencil, echoed by a white teardrop below her right eye, also outlined in thick black and a streak of white (grey) on one side of her black head of hair. The technique undoes the normative role of makeup as filling in and colouring over, replacing it with an outline indicating colour's absence. This bad makeup covers nothing save to reveal its role as an empty artifice.

There is also the strategically developed bad accident of colour matching. Veronica is sitting on the couch in this scene, wearing a lime green velvet dress to match the lime green and yellow interior of the room and couch pattern behind her. The matching is far from subtle, seeming more wrong than right. If "matching" by definition is an attempt to fit things together in likeness and kind, according to the dictates of "good design," then here we encounter its inversion: matching catapulted to such an extreme it becomes a mockery of "good taste." The matching becomes so "off," it defies convention and forces a viewer to re-focus attention from the drama to the surface of the screen, allowing the visual motifs to perform their comic relief alongside the eccentric characters.[33]

One quickly notices the characters all act like zombies. Their lines are delivered in stilted isolation, even though they are sitting in the same room together, sharing the same intimate space of the velvet couch and stool. After the singing has ended and the band members inform Veronica they are going on tour, the camera cuts to a close of Veronica, whose response involves her turning to the red-and-white clad character beside her to say, "Penny May, I hate you so much." Not only is the communal after school special genre turned on its head, but so too any allusions to a linear narrative or social connection, primed

[32] Veronica in Trecartin, *AFFE* (5:00)

[33] Trecartin, *AFFE* (6:00-7:00)

at the pinnacle of the 1960s folk world. Instead of warm and friendly singing and emotional bonding, we witness bitterness, jealousy and the characters' alienation from one another. This peculiar lack of belonging is iterated again when we next cut to an image of Skippy who has "locked himself in the bathroom" to parody a series of suicidal bloodbath incidents, refusing to go downstairs to meet the others.

Taken together, the incidents read as both parodies of a serious adolescent "coming out" narrative and a kitschy first year film student project, with its excessive use of fake blood and gore. "It's not blood, its red," Jean-Luc Godard declared in a 1965 interview,[34] by which he meant cinematic blood is one facet of a larger cinematic apparatus that is itself artifice, generating an entire set of seemingly coherent and "transparent" signifiers in the mind of a viewer. Here, though, it is red (or fuchsia) that is meant to signify *not*-blood, not the other way around. Transparency is undone and artifice laid out to dry. Further, instead of cliché nostalgic flashbacks in washed-out "super-8" colour, typical of such historically "retro" styled pieces, Trecartin delivers an uncomfortable eeriness that pervades his "real" characters as they deliver broken lines, seem dazed and confused by the guitar and each other. Aside from some mania and bitterness, they are otherwise bored and vacant. Veronica's white lips with black outlines speak the same language of boredom as her zombie-like character does: anything laying claim to the authentic or serious catapults her and these "family" members into attention deficiency.

Accordingly, the next scene cuts to the character named "Snow White Girl" (also played by Trecartin). Snow White Girl is falling down a snowy hill, outfitted with opaque white hair and face paint, save for blotches of fuchsia (presumably meant to signify blood, but so off from the actual colour of blood the effect is comic) and white and light yellow clothing (again, a comic affront to the ostensible purity of snow white).[35] The screen splits into four quadrants, each one depicting a variation of Snow White Girl in her white costume and makeup, simultaneously engaging in different activities with different people. Each quadrant also has a soundtrack. Mostly screeching and

[34] Godard, "Let's Talk About"

[35] Zulueta suggests Snow White Girl is a dream sequence. This may provide another interesting interpretation of the plot.

screaming is heard—or is it singing? One can barely make out the words to Bonnie Tyler's 1983 pop hit, "Total Eclipse of the Heart." One hears faint screeching, "...Forever's going to start tonight... Forever's going to start tonight..." The voices overlap, but even together, the audio is barely intelligible. The sequence then cuts to Snow White Girl alone inside a room. The mood grows somber. She is bent over on the carpet, still donning opaque white face and an off-white top and yellow skirt. She appears to be having some sort of hallucinogenic trip, or is it a transcendental religious awakening? She slowly rises up from the floor in a slow-motion gesture, her eyes rolling back in ecstatic joy, her hands and arms slowly reach upward as she reaches Nirvana-qua-psychosis.[36]

On the one hand, Snow White Girl's colourful accidents need no further explanation. There is nothing pure or white about this character, drenched in fake blood and psychosis. All colours *appear*, at least at first, to be inconsistent with what or how we expect to see representations of blood, transcendental experience, or the iconic Snow White. Taken a step further, the sullied and accident-prone Snow White Girl (and the obsessive limes and greens in the "family" room), feed back into the piece's broader meta-reflection on the failures of utopian mythologies, from hippie folk cultures to youthful, transcendental awakenings or "serious" drama. The celebrated artifice of colour and these deliberately staged "bad accidents" boldly proclaim the older paradigm of single genres and authentic relations dead. Witnessing these pretentious edifices fall to the ground is how and where this family finds entertainment.

One final example of accidental colour in *AFFE* is found midway through the piece. Cliché colour matching techniques are again pushed to such an extreme they invert. In other words, and as I have hinted at above, an obsessive matching results in a lack of matching altogether. This occurs through a series of brief cuts through three different characters: Linda (Lizzie Fitch), Phalangena / Coughdrop (Alison Powell) and Shin (Ryan Trecartin). The scene cuts from one face to the next and each character utters brief soundbites. Shin, a character with no apparent gender or sexuality, takes the lead. Shin wears a red wig with a face painted in entirely opaque yellow, red and

[36] Trecartin, *AFFE* (8:00-10:00)

blue. Faint traces of green can be seen around the upper eyelids and the character's hair is orange, all strangely complemented by a purple and white plaid shirt. Shin also holds a bottle of Naked Juice. With the label facing forward, it is an obvious tie-in to match Shin's garish colour scheme. The background—is it wallpaper or a bedspread?—also conveys the same mix of hyper-saturated yellows, reds, blues and greens. An animated zig-zag line suddenly cuts across the centre of her face. Not surprisingly, these animated colours also bear the same bold hues demarcated by black and white boundaries, like the face, the backdrop, the wig, the bottle and the shirt. When this degree of over-matching is used throughout the work, it becomes a stylistic device that could not be further from an accident. As a staged accident by design, it undoes preconceived notions of what is implicitly deemed "tasteful."[37]

In sum, the accidental colour aesthetic discussed in these scenes deliberately defy norms of visual representation and cultural practice (that an image should be clear; makeup should not be noticed on the face; matching should be subtle; folk culture is intrinsically communal and friendly, etc.). The aesthetic of failure is deliberate, and herein lies the internal contradiction of glitch art and related colour-as-disruptor visual art genres: it dons the veneer of error all the while maintaining the opposite. Indeed, the a majority of Trecartin's colours, costumes, make up and editing effects are planned out in advance.[38] The work is not a random free-for-all or happenstance documentation of last night's party (one of the artist's critiques of a common reception of his work). Rather, they are designed to work in the guise of anti-design. In this way, Trecartin's designed accidents connect him to a legacy of once-disruptive colourists from Turner, Van Gogh, Monet, Seurat, Signac and Bacon, to Paul Sharits, Pipilotti Rist, Jeremy Blake and Paper Rad. For them, colours speak as rupture, or at least they did so in one moment in the history of visual art and media. Today many of these artists' colours no longer seem disruptive or garish, as they have been acclimated through decades of canonization. Trecartin's colours

[37] Trecartin, *AFFE* (21:00-24:00)

[38] Granted some room must be left for spontaneous, intuitive choices. I thank the faculty and students at Stanford University for their insightful comments and questions during my visit to the school for the 2018 digital aesthetics workshop.

have also begun their move into the prosaic. With so many social media apps and plug-ins (Snapchat, Instagram filters, etc.), what was once gauche about his monstrous deformations of image and sound have already entered mainstream culture as kitsch less than a decade out the gate.

Stops, Pauses and Ruptures

This brings us to the third and final facet of Trecartin's work: stops, zany pauses, brakes and ruptures as a critique of contemporary subjectivity. On the one hand, this repertoire of devices can all be classified as producing an aesthetic of failure, in so far as one aims for continuity, seamless editing and narrative cohesion. In so far as one does *not* follow the dictates of Hollywood or mainstream narrative media, but instead draws from precursors in the avant-garde breaks, pauses and fragmentation in the temporal flow instead become a vehicle for successfully exploring the materiality of the medium and critical questioning. To be clear, a critical pause does not automatically result in any one of these things, it is merely a possibility inserted into an otherwise conventional use of the medium. It should also be noted that Trecartin is not interested in formal or medium–specific experimentation, but instead with the destruction and stopping power of the absurd and zany, even as his visual strategies foreground our (human) failure to keep up with our media.

The first example is taken from the 2006 saga, *Tommy-Chat Just E-mailed Me*, also produced as an advertisement for the 2006 New York Underground Film Festival. The characters named Beth (played by Lizzie Fitch) and Tammy (played by Ryan Trecartin) appear in their messy, but abstract art-clad apartment. Tammy, dressed in the epitome of accidental colour sets: a blue dress, blond wig, and white face paint with blood-coloured makeup smeared across the left side of her neck, gets an email from Tommy (also played by Trecartin) who has conflicting plans for the evening. Beth inquires if they should invite Pam instead, but Tammy hates her. The solution? Beth and Tammy do a Google search.[39]

The mere suggestion of online activity triggers camp hysteria. Graphics begin to fly across the room to upbeat music. They enter the

[39] Trecartin, *Tommy Chat* (1:07)

keywords: "great lesbian subversive underground ugly…" into the Google prompt. Tammy asks Beth: "Why don't you become a lesbian for me?" "You know why," Beth replies in a high-pitched synthesized voice. Tammy looks directly into the camera, the pace slows as Beth with boyish grin pleads, "I don't know why." And then we catapult back to rapid-paced cuts, complemented by haphazard exchanges and bad accident sartorial choices. Being a lesbian *for* Beth, Tammy implies in this isolated instant, is as seamless *and* impossible as finding something on Google. This is not so much a performance of "clip-on identities"[40] as it is an articulation of what is already multiple. Media-savvy socially engineered millennials do not—cannot— revert to essential or existential notions of a "self" in any singular, static or non-mediated way. Who they are is how they use their media. In *Tommy-Chat*, Trecartin plays three roles simultaneously: Pam, a lesbian librarian with a screaming baby in an ultra-modern hotel room; Tammy who lives in an apartment filled with installation art with Beth (who also plays the character Bolivia) and Tommy, who is "only seen in a secluded lake house in the woods."[41] The ability to inhabit multiple identities, sexual preferences and gender roles and to put them on public display for each other through social media becomes an accurate reflection of the multi-channel environment young people inhabit today. At the same time, Trecartin's work is not only multi-channel disruption. Rather, his stops and stutters push away meaning up to the point when they open up an alternative route for reformation.

Two final examples from *K-CoreaINC. K (section a)* (2009) and *Center Jenny* (2013) illustrate this point. *K-CoreaINC. K (section a)* is a 33-minute, single-channel video where we encounter another campy plot circling around an "unending business meeting."[42] The participants are a group of young actors known as "Koreas," pronounced "careers," and held together in a "lightly allegorical cloud," as McGrary puts it. They wear blond wigs, ample face powder and tongue-in-cheek office casual

[40] Namely, Judith Butler's pivotal observation that while gender is performed, it is also "congealed" through life-long acts of repetition. Much of Trecartin's work takes stabs at this now classic theory, or rather, at the many ways it has been misinterpreted as equating gender identity with mere performance.

[41] Trecartin, *Tommy Chat*

[42] EAI, "*K-CoreaINC. K (section a)*"

attire (Trecartin refers to the look as "work face"). The Koreas perform as exaggerated, hyper-professional characters immersed in corporate carnival scenes held in offices and airplanes that seem less like any traditional office environment than a "bump and grind" party.[43] Accordingly, the Koreas' aim is to "assimilate cultural stereotypes and reductive international relationships as individual basic operating procedures."[44] But their jargon-clad business-speak, repeated at the highest of possibly bearable pitches, and cut to Trecartin's trademark staccato editing, thwarts the pretence of any actual business occurring.[45] As McGarry describes it, each of the Koreas' individuality is "subsumed into the group" and collectively reflected as a homogenous drive for "diversity."[46] The characters are so deeply immersed in this world of constant change and professionalisation, they conform to the rhetoric of *diversity* in order to accomplish *sameness*. The phrase "my career" is repeated so many times, it begins to morph into a darkly humorous battle cry for the ways in which individual subjectivity is inevitably subsumed by the "diversifying" discourses of the global economy.[47]

For Sianne Ngai, Trecartin's work embodies the aesthetic category of the zany. Ngai theorizes the zany as first and foremost based in an intensely affective character associated with camp and theatricality. Key examples include Charlie Chaplin, Lucille Ball and Jim Carey's character in *The Cable Guy*.[48] The character type derives from the Italian, "Zanni," denoting a comic character associated with the working or immigrant classes. The type emerged in the fourteenth century Italian theatre, she notes, and has since developed into these more familiar media icons.[49] For Ngai, Porte recounts in her review of this work, the zany has evolved in contemporary media culture as a direct response to new demands for worker flexibility, apropos to the

[43] EAI, "*K-CoreaINC. K (section a)*"

[44] EAI, "*K-CoreaINC. K (section a)*"

[45] EAI, "*K-CoreaINC. K (section a)*"

[46] McGarry, Press Release EAI

[47] McGarry, Press Release EAI; Ngai, *Aesthetic* Categories, 12.

[48] Though she also includes less common examples like the Dada cabaret of Hugo Ball and the commercials of Crazy Eddie; Ngai, *Our Aesthetic*, 14-15, 182. Also see Porte, "The Zany,"

[49] Porte, "The Zany"; Ngai, *Our Aesthetic*, 14-15.

needs of the post-industrial economy.[50] In Lucille Ball's *I Love Lucy*, Porte explains, the character Lucy Ricardo quixotically transforms from episode to episode, from ballerina to saleswoman to bellhop in "an undifferentiated, chaotic swirl."[51] The zany character is a natural response to a set of rapidly changing social and political conditions. For us, it is this impossible demand to seamlessly shift between things and states (channel surfing, multitasking, overlapping identities, etc.) in order to survive in an increasingly algorithmically-driven world. As error-prone humans, we must fail. Trecartin reflects this contemporary inevitability in the tension between our culture's demands to do too much, too fast and in too many "innovative" and "diverse" ways, while also somehow being "true to oneself."[52] The result? "One" becomes like every other cookie-cutter office-worker, seeking "outside the box" solutions to "creative destruction" strategies that all end up looking and sounding the same.

The last example of this is taken from *Center Jenny* (2013, 53 mins), the first piece created by the artist after moving with his troupe to Los Angeles. The influence of the city and Hollywood in particular bears an unspoken presence in the work. Hollywood, with its focus on actors, beauty and living one's life for the camera (as Warhol ingeniously depicted it), become the central tropes of *Center Jenny*. Instead of depicting a group of attractive young female actresses who naturally find fulfilment on screen and incite the attention of a (male) director, however, Trecartin inverts the trope to show its underside as cliché: a black comedy of vapid females vying like wolves in a pack for the (unavailable) attention of a solipsistic director. The set design, with its lack of polish and half-built walls and furniture, reinforce this X-ray glimpse into Hollywood's underworld.

The Jennys' common goal is to differentiate themselves from each another to attain idealized beauty and stardom, but the result, again, is homogenization. As they compete, they all look the same, all equally

[50] Porte, "The Zany,"

[51] Porte, "The Zany", also in Ngai, *Our Aesthetic*, 9, 182.

[52] At this point, it is interesting to note Trecartin's own working-class origins. As his comic critiques fire at everyone from the "gauche" tastes of the working class to solipsistic narcissism of the millennial-bourgeois, it would thus be unfair to argue his work is itself a classist mockery of so-called "low-culture." I thank Fred Turner and the graduate students at Stanford University for discussing this with me.

unattractive in their selfish ambitions. The male leaders/directors of the Jennys are equally self-involved: stereotypically misogynistic, they preach self-righteous platitudes to the Jennys, void of substance or context. In *Center Jenny*, as in Hollywood, differentiation is based on nothing in particular, but used to justify everything. Every Jenny always fails to be unique, being instead "basic" just like everyone else, who also wishes to be unique. The contradiction to embody both is admittedly zany and tragic, if it were not given such comic relief.

IV. Conclusion: Ephemeral, Disruptive Colour is Here to Stay

This article drew from Ryan Trecartin's work to offer a set of metaphors and aesthetic concepts to make sense of the images and practices of a noisy and chaotic present. It argued that Trecartin's work is shaped by these three aesthetic tenets: the undoing of conventional epistemologies, a deliberately forced accidental colour aesthetic and overlapping, multiple identities. Working together, they help to manifest the uncomfortable realization that ongoing confusion and uncertainty colours the state of almost all our affairs today. At the same time, the effects of colour as disruptor, as we now know, is never permanent or eternal. Seeing colour and allowing its inherent madness to do some damage, in the end, opens up only a brief game one that will soon dissipate into mainstream commerce and convention. Thus, one set of arguments in this article proposed Trecartin's over the top aesthetic from the 2000s acts as a precursor to the now ubiquitous social media apps and automated digital offerings—from Snapchat to Auto-Tune—allowing once-gauche and disruptive colour combinations to become prosaic as pop culture kitsch. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Trecartin's disruptive colourism offers a refreshing strategy for coping in a world subject to progressive forms of digital compression, however short-lived his campy colour defiance may last. To paraphrase Raymond Williams, the avant-garde acts as the forearm of capitalism.[53] Future aesthetic innovation depends on identifying and extracting similar moments of colour as disruptor, prior to their appropriation as monolithic symbol.

[53] See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*.

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