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McMansion of media excess: Ryan Trecartin's and Lizzie Fitch's SITE VISIT

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Ryan Trecartin's and Lizzie Fitch's *SITE VISIT* (2014), curated by Ellen Blumenstein and Klaus Biesenbach at KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin, is an exaggerated, exhibitionistic orgy of media excess. Dozens of easy chairs are distributed throughout the multiple rooms of the installation space. Screens and speakers adorn walls and ceilings. Movies shot in the harsh glow of digital video populate the screens. Vibrators and neon lights outfit the seating. As a kind of McMansion of media excess, the exhibit is engrossing.

SITE VISIT is Trecartin's and Fitch's first joint 'solo' institutional exhibit in Germany (and not just Trecartin's solo exhibit, as the KW press announcement and website state). Often subsumed under the buzz category of 'post-Internet art', Trecartin's and Fitch's installations have become references *du jour* for a rising tide of artistic work that engages the mutations emerging media and technologies bring about in identity and subjectivity. The artists met as sophomores at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in the early 2000s and have been collaborators ever since. Since then they have exhibited work both jointly and individually in various institutional contexts.

Trecartin started gaining attention with his debut film *A Family Finds Entertainment* (2004), a wacky coming-of-age drama seemingly jumped up on amphetamines. That movie also served as his senior thesis for RISD and was part of the I Smell Pregnant show curated by Elisabeth Dee at QED in Los Angeles in January 2006. *A Family Finds Entertainment* was subsequently shown at the Whitney Biennial in 2006, where Trecartin's work began attracting wider critical interest. Trecartin's first feature-length film, *I-Be Area* (2007), a drama about adoption, cloning, and virtual identities, premiered at Elizabeth Dee Gallery in New York in 2007. It featured in the triennial The Generational: Younger than Jesus, curated by Lauren Cornell, Massimiliano Gioni, and Laura Hoptman at the New Museum in New York in 2009, which presented work by artists born after 1976 (making them younger than Jesus was at the time of his death). Younger than Jesus exhibited the visual cultures of a 'new' generation of artists – a generation variously referred to as Generation Y, iGeneration, or Generation Me. Trecartin's solo show Any Ever (2007-2010) traveled from the MoCA in Los Angeles in 2010 to New York's MoMA

PS1 in 2011. In 2013, Trecartin and Fitch featured prominently in the exhibition The Encyclopedic Palace at the 55th Venice Biennale, curated by Massimiliano Gioni.

Sometimes art does imitate life. In an oblique way the establishment of Trecartin's and Fitch's work and personae as obligatory references in the global art scene reproduces a culture of excessive media spectacle and narcissism already critically mimicked in their work. Ironically, it sometimes seems hard to distinguish the expectations projected onto their work and the content of their work itself. The cultures and trends of the global art world are not exactly the same as those of video sharing sites, social networking sites, and reality TV, to be sure, but are they really so different either? Indeed, *SITE VISIT* fits into a larger series of events and decisions, such as the announcement that the 2015 Berlin Biennale will be curated by DIS, a collective of young designers and media professionals a few years Trecartin's and Fitch's juniors. Growing expectations from the contemporary art scene invest the KW exhibit with greater potential for failure and disappointment. This is not without hazards for the artists. In contrast to big shows of canonical artists this backdrop of speculative financial and cultural interests tends, a bit like reality TV, to cultivate a public desire for some kind of failure or proof of vacuity. At least since Charles Saatchi's *Sensation* in 1997, this lust for *Schadenfreude* has been a standard fixture in the wider taste cultures of art consumption. Despite the fact that Trecartin and Fitch are no longer 'younger than

Lizzie Fitch / Ryan Trecartin SITE VISIT, 2014 Installationsansicht / Installation view © Lizzie Fitch / Ryan Trecartin Foto / Photo: Thomas Eugster Courtesy the artists; Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York; Regen Projects, Los Angeles; und / and Sprüth Magers Berlin London.

Jesus', their work stands out among the more interesting voices in the contemporary art world.

The aesthetics of media excess in *SITE VISIT* are thoroughly post-cinematic. The installation's post-cinematic attitude can be traced throughout its various strategies: its critical mimicking of domestic conditions of reception, its unrelenting experiential fragmentation, its emphasis on warped sound emissions and sonic primacy, its insistent display of excess, its accelerated speed, its aggressive medial intertextuality, its multiperspectivity, and its incessant exhibitionism. This post-cinematic aesthetic thwarts any attempt at a specific alignment with one art or medium.[15] *SITE VISIT* is better characterised as a mimetic performance of post-cinematic media ecologies that are fuelled by narcissistic chains of recursion (self-humiliation, self-curation, self-reference, etc.).[16] More specifically, *SITE VISIT* is not just a display of media excess but also excessive in its mediality itself – it is neither just cinematic, nor just televisual, nor just a piece of installation art; rather, it is at the same time all and none of the above.

SITE VISIT connects two almost incompatible sites: its production, an abandoned Masonic temple in Los Angeles; and its exhibition, the gallery KW in Berlin, for which *SITE VISIT* was specifically designed. Upon closer examination *SITE VISIT* merges these two sites to produce a third space of an uncanny American domesticity. This dynamic becomes apparent in the high-tech furniture used

Lizzie Fitch / Ryan Trecartin SITE VISIT, 2014 Installationsansicht / Installation view © Lizzie Fitch / Ryan Trecartin Foto / Photo: Thomas Eugster Courtesy the artists; Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York; Regen Projects, Los Angeles; und / and Sprüth Magers Berlin London.

throughout the installation. Upon entering *SITE VISIT* we find ourselves in a long compound room composed of several connected chambers that are filled with the smell of new cars, as their walls, floors, and ceilings are covered in carpet. They are furnished with reclining easy chairs and surrounded by an immersive, vibrating, pulsating, and spatialising soundscape. The easy chairs are equipped with green LED lights and a vibrating function enabled by low-frequency audio transducers – devices commonly referred to as 'butt kickers', which let viewers experience sound haptically, through the entire sensorium of their bodies. Through the luxurious, trashy excess of such furniture, Trecartin and Fitch experiment with the tropes and logics of the home cinema, the function of domestic viewing settings, and the display of vulgar consumerism. This critical mimicry of the domestic sphere has been a recurrent feature of Trecartin's work since *A Family Finds Entertainment*.

The installation's engagement with vernacular scenes of domesticity, particularly that of the high-tech living room and its furniture, recalls a genealogy of earlier artistic engagements with the domestic sphere, such as Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), a seminal piece of early feminist video art. Rosler parodied and defamiliarised daily domestic routines, such as cutting vegetables, by submitting them to the electronic eye of video. Trecartin and Fitch are, in a way, the bastard offspring of that method – but rather than representing domestic scenarios via the medium of video, as Rosler did, Trecartin's and Fitch's aesthetic instead makes the home and its furnishings themselves its very media.

The setup of the main exhibition space in the large theater-like room at the back of KW can only be seen in fragments from the carpeted chambers with the easy chairs. Despite this, the sounds of that room drift through the rest of the space in disturbing fragments. Even after having arrived in that main room, the distribution of projections around walls prevents the viewers from grasping the spectacle as anything other than fragments. Moving further into the show does not resolve the fragments into a whole. In fact, this initial experience of fragmentation gets closest to the overall experience of the exhibition.

Along with the fragmented and warped sounds drifting across the carpeted chambers, the absence of videos installed in these first rooms demonstrates the installation's emphasis on the sonic: the visitors hear before they see. As they move from the immersive soundscape of the carpeted chambers to the pulsating multimedia installation in the main exhibition space, they find themselves in an assemblage which looks like a massive, over-the-top home cinema, with an equally over-the-top high-tech multimedia set-up. This post-cinematic McMansion of media excess consists of six large video projection screens placed across the front and back walls and the ceiling, a 30-channel audio track displayed by a Dolby surround sound system, and an arsenal of generic furniture scattered across the main floor. Camping chairs, camping beds, living room chairs, and repurposed

Lizzie Fitch / Ryan Trecartin SITE VISIT, 2014 Installationsansicht / Installation view © Lizzie Fitch / Ryan Trecartin Foto / Photo: Timo Ohler Courtesy the artists; Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York; Regen Projects, Los Angeles; und / and Sprüth Magers Berlin London.

old cinema chairs point in different directions and invite the viewer to sit down and watch and listen from different perspectives. Since it is impossible to actually take in the whole scene all at once, the visitors' best option is to sit back, close their eyes, and let the sounds wash over them. In this way, and against the commonly assumed primacy of the visual in visual arts, *SITE VISIT* insists on the essential role of sound in post-cinematic media ecologies.[17] Its aesthetic challenges and inverts the superficial logics of scopic primacy identified with moving images and most contemporary art exhibitions.

Consequently, *SITE VISIT* also relies on an explicitly sonic model for its assemblage in space, as the main exhibition situates its video screens in analogy to the setup of 5.1 surround sound boxes. The dense audio track jumps through its 30 channels as it is projected across the room; the musical and rhythmic elements of the vibrating, screaming, and giggling soundtrack take priority over dialogue. Characteristic of earlier works by the artists, the dialogue is hard to follow and sometimes incomprehensible, consisting of fragments of disjointed words and idiosyncratic hyper-chatter. Imagine setting your Twitter feed to a trend like #realityTV or #foundfootage, then setting up an app that would dictate the scrolling statements as a kind of layered, incoherent monologue. *SITE VISIT* is a bit like that. The viewer is never quite sure if the loose threads of dialogue and narration lead anywhere. By design, the montage of enunciations layer without cohering or con-

solidating in any classical narrative sense. There are as many narrative perspectives in the movies as there are beds and chairs scattered across the room. The feverish speed of the editing and the characters' accelerated and auto-tuned voices magnify these effects.

The movies of *SITE VISIT* depict a group of young, stylised, gender- and identity-flexible explorers, resembling the cast of a show like *Road Rules*, galavanting around, halfheartedly exploring the abandoned Masonic temple. They wear heavy make-up, wigs, colorful contact lenses, and T-shirts with the logos of Coke, NASA, and Jurassic Park. As with the multimedia setup, these T-shirts manifest traits of media excess. They look like advertisement banners being worn in an ironic fashion. The explorers engage in gleeful vandalism, act slightly paranoid, and repeatedly exclaim such phrases as: 'it's like someone's watching us!', 'I know what you did last summer', and 'legalize everything!', as they lose their way looking alternately for their tent colony or the toilet. Although it is difficult to detect any narrative structure in the digital wilderness of this hypnotic movie, we can make out a number of explicit references that recall scripted reality, horror movies, and reality TV. Films from the late 1990s such as *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick, Eduardo Sánchez, 1999), *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (Jim Gillespie, 1997), and *Scary Movie* (Keenen Ivory Wayans, 2000) are referenced via direct quoting of phrases and the insistent use of shaky handheld cameras, suggesting that the temple is somehow haunted. On a more general level, these intertextual references bear witness to the installation's post-cinematic medial hybridity, as they cite

Lizzie Fitch / Ryan Trecartin SITE VISIT, 2014 Installationsansicht / Installation view © Lizzie Fitch / Ryan Trecartin Foto / Photo: Thomas Eugster Courtesy the artists; Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York; Regen Projects, Los Angeles; und / and Sprüth Magers Berlin London.

films that are expanding the frame of cinema, letting it break down and become permeable through video, found footage, and other media artifacts.

The expansion of the frame of the cinematic by way of intertextual references is intensified through a number of technical strategies, such as the use of handheld cameras, as well as GoPro cameras mounted on airborne drones and the actors' bodies. The digital 3D animations of animals, trees, and bushes that populate the screens, created by Trecartin's and Fitch's fellow RISD alum Rhett LaRue, look like a hybridisation of drug-induced fantasies and video game environments. In this post-cinematic world we are never quite sure whether we should attribute our difficulty attending to the movies on the screens to the fact that our chairs or camping beds are just not quite in the right position, to the fact that we cannot see all six screens at the same time, or simply to some personal attention deficit or disorder. This playful engagement with questions of attention and multitasking underscores once more the critical stance this installation takes toward digital technologies and their impact on contemporary subjectivity and sociality.

In terms of its spatial assemblage, *SITE VISIT* recalls a range of cinematic experiments with perspectivalism, such as Expanded Cinema, or more recently Mike Figgis' *Timecode* (1999).[18] *Site Visit* takes these multiplicities of screens and perspectives to a new level: it likens the multiplication of perspectives to our experiences with our everyday use of computers, such as opening different windows on a screen at once.[19] Furthermore, its tactics involve inverting the gaze of surveillance. As such, it also reminds us of Trecartin's and Fitch's earlier work, the installation *Not Yet Titled* (2013), which was originally shown at the 55th Venice Biennale and has now moved to the Zabludowicz Collection in London where it is being exhibited as *Priority Innfield* (2014). That work also featured installations recalling scenarios of domestic media consumption. However, while *Priority Innfield* consists of a serial assemblage of different sculptural theaters that recall the televisual setup of typical family living rooms, *Site Visit* seems more engaged with thinking through the excessive multimedia remaking of domestic consumption.

As a post-cinematic installation, *SITE VISIT* does not ask what possible scenarios are imaginable when cinema (merely) breaks out of the black box and migrates into the white cube.[20] The *topos* of *SITE VISIT* instead lies with the question of what happens when cinema in particular and viewing arrangements in general become multimedial. As such, it paints a vulgar picture of media excess, acceleration, and the intensified proliferation of surfaces and platforms in contemporary media ecologies.

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Notes

15. On concepts related to the media excess of the post-cinematic see Bolter & Grusin 1999, Jenkins 2006, Krauss 2000, and Kim 2009.
16. On the notion of media ecologies see Hörl 2013.
17. On the importance of sound for digital media ecologies see Sterne 2012 and Mills 2010.
18. On expanded cinema's experimentation with perspective see Youngblood 1970. On post-cinema's experimentation with perspective see Elsaesser 2013.
19. On the notion of the post-perspectival see Friedberg 2006 and Steyerl 2013.
20. On this and notions of a cinematic aesthetic in installation art see Frohne & Haberer 2012.

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