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## **New Ways of Communicating and Constructing Identities. Speech and Identity in Ryan Trecartin's Movies**

<1>

Ryan Trecartin (\*1981) has, over the past few years, become a favorite of art critics. His movies are exaggerated representations of today's zeitgeist.<sup>1</sup> They are fast, loud and full of references to the Internet and social media. Two interesting and reoccurring themes of his works are language and identity. The abundance of spoken word in Trecartin's movies is immediately apparent. The characters chatter non-stop, often simultaneously, and at first incomprehensibly. Additionally, several of his video works address the subject of identity. The main theme of *I-Be Area* (2007), for example, is the protagonist's search for a personal identity. In other movies, however, the aspect of identity construction is addressed on the periphery. This paper argues that in order to understand the role that language and identity play in Trecartin's movies, one must look at how he depicts new forms of communication and the construction of his character's identities. Focusing on identity construction in Ryan Trecartin's movies also enables an understanding of the extent to which people construct their identity in the real world. The Internet and short message services have become widespread tools for the construction of identity and Trecartin portrays this through his character's ephemeral personalities.

<2>

The Internet enables us to communicate globally and in real-time simultaneously. This has affected all kinds of relationships, from the interpersonal to those within and between international companies. The use of Internet services such as Skype, chat rooms and email accounts for communication continues to increase. Trecartin conveys this acceleration in communication by increasing the pace of his dialogues to an extreme. The protagonists in his movies talk so fast that it is difficult to follow what they are saying. Furthermore, the use of short message services has not only changed the way we communicate, but even changed language itself. This becomes clear when reflecting on the use of acronyms such as ›LOL‹ (laughing out loud) and abbreviations in general. Scientists have observed that correct grammar is becoming increasingly irrelevant (even for those who command it) in SMS communication.<sup>2</sup> This is due to a variety of factors such as the values and demands of our

fast-moving age. People tend to send each other short messages when on the go to coordinate locations and activities, and to exchange information. Interestingly, the rejection of grammar and the use of colloquial expressions in short messages can also help form greater bonds between the communicators. Abbreviations even hint at certain group identities.<sup>3</sup> This apparent closeness is due to the fact that such services enable us to communicate instantly with people worldwide. This also makes them suitable for intimate conversations that are not concerned with interchanging useful information or coordinating schedules, but rather the communicators' emotional lives.

<3>

Mobile phones and instant messaging apps thus take up more and more space in our daily lives. These devices have become part of the identity of a whole generation. So-called ›digital natives‹ have grown up with computers, the World Wide Web and cell phones and cannot imagine a world without such technologies. They are not only tools, which facilitate everyday life, but have become extensions of our identities. Mobile phones, for example, can carry a lot of information about their owners via the photos and applications stored on them. This is clearly something that Ryan Trecartin has observed when he expresses the ubiquity of mobile phones and the Internet in his movies: his characters are either constantly using their phones or using words taken from this new media and Internet context. Moreover, SMS and chat rooms enable the verbal staging of identity. In her analysis of SMS communication, Caroline Tagg shows how people intentionally interchange correct grammar and spelling with abbreviations and onomatopoeia, depending on who they are communicating with, how they wish to present themselves and their objectives.<sup>4</sup> Individuals adopt identities depending on the situation. This fact shows how new forms of communication and identity construction are interrelated.

<4>

Identity is greatly influenced by speech. The subjects that an individual addresses and the accent or dialect they use form parts of their identity.<sup>5</sup> All of these aspects have an element of free choice. At a certain age one may choose to maintain a hometown dialect or switch to standardized language, and thus willfully reconstruct parts of one's identity.<sup>6</sup> An example of the importance of language in identity building can be observed in regimes that regulate language and thus prevent individuals from developing different identities.<sup>7</sup> As discussed above, technologies such as the Internet and short message services have influenced and changed language globally. They have also changed the construction of identity. The Internet makes it possible to present an edited version of one's identity online. Identities presented on social media platforms such as Facebook often represent edited and improved versions of the user.<sup>8</sup>

Technologies such as chat rooms best exemplify how easy it is to construct an identity, especially those without web cams, where people must rely fully on language to describe themselves. Here the user can either convey their real identity or construct a new and totally different self, depending on the situation and their intentions. Ryan Trecartin's characters depict these transformative and artificial identities.

<5>

The construction of self in various contexts has been the subject of several sociological studies. Erving Goffman's *dramaturgical approach*, first published in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* in 1959, suggests that individuals try to give the best possible impression of themselves in face-to-face interaction and thus try to control how the other person sees them. They therefore adopt identity depending on the context. Heiner Keupp's idea of patchwork identities also recognizes that an individual has multiple selves during the course of their life rather than one consistent identity. Keupp, however, does not see identity as being staged, but rather as a life-long development of personality traits.<sup>9</sup> Like Goffman, however, Keupp does appreciate that identity is formed depending on the context. Both of these theories prove relevant when looking at Ryan Trecartin's movies. His characters also negotiate their identities through dialogues and, as shown below, the artist sees identity as being fluid.

<6>

Before analyzing Trecartin's movies in detail with regards to communication and identity, this paragraph will introduce Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. In her essay *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory* she suggests that gender identity in particular is constructed through the repetition of acts.<sup>10</sup> The historical assumption was that actions convey an existing and stable identity. According to Butler, gender is not fixed and preordained but is constantly constructed via actions.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, she does not see gender as being a dichotomy between female and male: gender is not determined at birth but rather is formed within social frameworks. This approach is also relevant for the analysis of Ryan Trecartin's movies, the characters of which are not portrayed in a pure dichotomy of genders.

<7>

After this brief introduction to theories on speech and identity, the following paragraphs are concerned with the importance of speech and new forms of communication in Ryan Trecartin's movies. Trecartin uses techniques that accelerate the dialogues and distort the voices of his actors in order to accentuate the feeling of non-stop chatter. In addition, characters often talk simultaneously, with music playing in the background, making it difficult to understand what

they are saying. The movies require multiple viewings before the content of the dialogues becomes clear – at first they seem meaningless, with the intention of confusing. Trecartin states, however, that all of his movies start out with a script and a narrative. These are open to the audience's interpretation. Lizzie Fitch, Trecartin's main artistic collaborator, states the following with regards to the narrative: »Through content, shifting language, compulsive editing, animations, layered contexts, and performance, the movies continuously reroute narrative into myriad story lines [...] the audience is not an assembly of viewers but many individual, active readers who continue the enlargement and opening up of the work«. <sup>12</sup> Trecartin challenges the audience to interpret his movies as they wish, focusing on whichever story line they please and making their own sense of the movie as a whole. There are a number of different interpretations, all of which are eligible. Even if the audience struggles to make out any meaning in his movies, Trecartin actually uses language as a starting point in each of them, stating: »I spend a ton of time scripting the work on many levels, and the process is choreographed accordingly«. <sup>13</sup> He draws inspiration from everyday life, from conversations or from observing other people and goes as far as to say: »I try to explore language as something that extends into every aspect of the presentation [...]. The whole piece is language [...].«. <sup>14</sup> The whole aesthetic of his movies therefore depends on dialogues and language in general. The costumes, the make-up, the sets and the graphic design are all created according to his scripts. Language clearly plays a pivotal role in Trecartin's movies and forms a basis for everything that follows.

<8>

But why does Trecartin use language in such a confusing and absurd way? The fact that the audience has trouble following what the characters are saying suggests that Trecartin's main concern is not the telling of a story. Rather, he is addressing human communication per se. Massimiliano Gioni has also come to this conclusion: »We're all trying to communicate, and what we communicate about is less and less relevant. When we watch his [Ryan Trecartin's] videos, I feel a speeded-up version of what we're all doing«. <sup>15</sup> Trecartin is conveying society's preoccupation with communication whenever and wherever we are, whether face-to-face or via the Internet and smartphones. The content becomes less relevant, but communication itself enables us to establish relationships. This becomes apparent when taking into account emotional SMS conversations, which are more about interaction between two individuals than the communication of useful information. <sup>16</sup> Networks and relationships play an important role in today's society. For Trecartin, relationships form part of our identities. Talking about his movie *I-Be Area*: »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«. <sup>17</sup> This means that the people we connect with and count as family,

friends, business partners etc. form, to a great extent, our identity and can reflect a lot about who we are. He transports this idea into his movies by portraying new ways of communicating that focus on building and maintaining relationships with others.

<9>

The further one analyzes Trecartin's use of language, the more unconventionally it appears. The artist combines words in sentences that do not follow the conventional logic of language. They therefore seem to have no sense. In doing so, Trecartin liberates words from their usual meanings, opening up an array of possible associations. He deliberately constructs the sentences in his movies to be ambiguous and have double meanings, so that various interpretations are possible. In general, Trecartin's attitude towards language is playful. He uses wordplay and homophones, but his movies are particularly characterized by repetition. The characters repeat certain words several times in a row, emphasizing these single words rather than the sentence as a whole. The meaning of a single word thus grows in importance, liberating it from rigid grammatical rules. For instance, in *CENTER JENNY* (2013, Abb. 1) the character Joshua repeats the same words of a sentence in different order over and over again.<sup>18</sup> Trecartin elaborates on this: »I'm exploring all levels of a particular word – how it's said and with what accent and what positioning within a sentence and how a person's face is moving and what kind of props they're using with that word. It's all communication«. <sup>19</sup> So the artist plays with language and explores how a single word can add to the meaning of a whole scene.



Abb. 1: Ryan Trecartin: *CENTER JENNY*, 2013, HD Video, 00:53:15 min.

<10>

Trecartin also makes use of homophones – words that have the same pronunciation, but different meanings. One example is the use of homophones in his characters' names, which therefore go beyond simply serving as a name by also carrying meaning. The viewer only notices the difference when watching the credits. For example one character in *Roamie View: Enhancement (Re'Search Wait'S)* (2009–2010) is called ›Bridge It‹ instead of Bridget. Moreover, the names of his characters are usually taken from computer products, such as ›Adobe‹ or ›Able Update‹,<sup>20</sup> with a witty nod to today's society, our embracing of computer technology and its influence on everyday life. The titles of his films are also larded with homophones. Trecartin confuses and amuses his audience through his use of homophones and ambiguity. The fact that he uses these words for his titles or his characters names shows that language plays an important part in his artistic approach.

<11>

Trecartin adds a further level of meaning by inserting written texts in his movies. He uses spelling and grammar common in SMS or chat room communication, referring once more to Internet culture. Abbreviations such as ›dontu‹ instead of ›don't you‹ and ›4‹ instead of ›for‹, hinting at the pace of his movies and the speed of *turn-taking* in SMS communication. The fact that most people can understand these abbreviations shows how natural this style of writing has become. Written communication such as email or SMS increasingly replaces interpersonal interaction and thus they constitute new ways of communicating. Trecartin refers to the Internet not only through his use of a certain vocabulary, but also in the way his actors behave: they speak directly to the camera and not to each other. This is reminiscent of the video blogs common on YouTube, but also of real-time communication via webcams. His movies are therefore much less about the direct interaction between his characters, but rather characters selling themselves to the audience. They are attention-seekers, trying to entertain us. Moreover, Internet telephony has now become a vital part of both public and private life. Trecartin is therefore portraying a new form of behavior, which has developed out of Internet technologies, in which it is usual to talk to a webcam rather than directly to a person.

<12>

Having analyzed Trecartin's treatment of language, the following paragraphs focus on the presentation and construction of identity in his videos. Through the clothing and behavior of his actors it is apparent that the artist understands identity, and especially gender, as being open and transitory. The characters constantly focus on themselves, playing with their identity. Dichotomies such as female/male and global/local are dissolving ever more in today's society and Trecartin reflects on that. For example, in his movie *Sibling Topics (section a)* (2009, Abb.

2), the gender of the characters is not completely clear. Trecartin himself plays a character who has undergone a mastectomy, although it is clear to the audience the body is that of a man. We are therefore left unsure as to whether the scars really are the result of a mastectomy or have some other meaning. Lauren Cornell states that »there is no politics of ›otherness‹ around them [the characters], partly because the notion of a gender binary or a status quo to which they would be alternative doesn't exist here«. <sup>21</sup> One cannot tell whether the characters are women or men, because their looks and behavior do not fully relate to one or the other. Interestingly, an open gender identity is comparable to the Internet's constant transformation via updates. It is a transitory place, which changes on a daily basis.



Abb. 2: Ryan Trecartin: *Sibling Topics* (section a), 2009, HD Video, 00:51:26 min.

<13>

Moreover, Trecartin's view of identity emphasizes personality traits rather than gender or race. To him, the mind serves the development of identity more than the body: »I'm often interested in realities where gender takes a back-seat to personality articulation. As people explore and expand into spaces that are not dependent on the body, but rather the mind, the construction and use of one's personality can become the most defining aspect to identity«. <sup>22</sup> Since the audience has no other information about the characters, their identity is based on what they say, how they behave and what they wear. As Judith Butler might have put it, the viewer constructs the character's identity by observing his actions. Still, it seems that even in today's forward-thinking society, a gender identity is very much defined by bodily appearance. This becomes clear when one considers the example of Caitlyn (formerly Bruce) Jenner's very



public transformation into a woman.<sup>23</sup> Only after plastic surgery did the public truly consider her a woman.

<14>

The interchangeability of identity is presented in Trecartin's movie *I-Be Area* (2007, Abb. 3). The protagonist is an avatar in search of its own identity. At one point it purchases the identity of a girl called Oliver. The identity is in a box, containing a cell phone, passwords, clothes and a CD, which contains a PDF of information about her relationships and the reasons for why she acts the way she does. Here, identities are interchangeable, digitized and for sale, pointing again at how identities are constructed and not predefined.



Abb. 3: Ryan Trecartin: *I-Be Area*, 2007, HD Video, 01:48:00 min.

<15>

Another aspect relevant to the construction of identity in Ryan Trecartin's movies is the general growing awareness of cameras. People have become accustomed to the fact that they may be filmed anywhere and at any time, whether on a cell phone, by webcams or CCTV cameras on the street. The result is that people perform and act up more. Trecartin has noted: »It's funny how everyone now is used to performing and translating ideas and using all forms of language, not just words.«<sup>24</sup> The Internet age has enabled quick and easy dissemination of images, allowing people to communicate increasingly via body language and staged situations



rather than words. Individuals deliberately use pictures of themselves performing or posing in order to communicate a certain message about themselves. Moreover, the Internet is perfect for acting out narcissist character traits. Trecartin reflects on that too. As pointed out above the characters in his movies speak directly to the camera. They seek the viewer's attention. For instance, in Trecartin's film *The Re'Search (Re'Search Wait'S)* (2009-2010, Abb. 4) the viewer watches the character Sammy B alone in a room performing in front of the camera. She repeats several times the sentence »focus on me«. <sup>25</sup> Here, Trecartin alludes to the fact that an ever-growing number of people upload Video Blogs online. These videos often show people talking directly at the camera. They want to be seen and want the attention of the user.



Abb. 4: Ryan Trecartin: *The Re'Search (Re'Search Wait'S)*, 2009-2010, HD Video, 00:40:06 min.

Apart from deliberately acting in front of a camera, people nowadays are increasingly aware of the fact that they could be filmed at any time. This leads to people acting out more, even in everyday life. In today's society individuals know how to behave in front of a camera in order to bring across a certain message. This phenomenon was already apparent to Roland Barthes: »Now, once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of ›posing‹, I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image«. <sup>26</sup> The characters in Trecartin's movies are thus exaggerated versions of people in today's society, who are used to performing and posing in certain situations, such as when being filmed.

<16>

The previous paragraphs have revealed some parallels between the identity construction theories of Goffman and Keupp, and Trecartin's portrayal of transforming identities. The following analysis focuses on Trecartin's idea of identity in the future, which he sees as defined by personality traits rather than gender or profession. He envisions a neutral body and an age »where expression is existence«,<sup>27</sup> an identity solely dependent on the individual's emotions and speech. Identity would construct itself in the moment when feelings or thoughts are expressed and would be detached from the attributions of others, relating to a social status quo or the concept of otherness. In Trecartin's words: »If everyone's individualized and can make decisions, and can composite their identity, there's no authentic point of origin«. <sup>28</sup> Furthermore, the artist is convinced that the different identities individuals construct in social media networks will be expressed corporeally. In his opinion, the future human being will possess a technological body that can be easily altered. Identity will therefore be more freely constructed, beyond the social restrictions that still prevail in today's society. The artist portrays this future in his movies by using lurid and colorful make up and special effects.

<17>

In conclusion, this paragraph summarizes the importance of language and identity in Ryan Trecartin's movies. As previously shown, language is the starting point in all of his movies, from which the aesthetics then evolve. His movies are characterized by non-stop chatter, which makes it hard to understand the actual content of the dialogue. In addition, the artist plays with words and thus builds up different layers of meaning. The unintelligibility of the dialogues emphasizes the actual act of communication over the meaning of what is said. Trecartin uses new forms of communication in his movies, such as language used in SMS or instant messaging, technologies whose function now tends to be the maintaining of relationships rather than the conveying of information. Additionally, he utilizes new communication behavior that has evolved through the use of the Internet, such as talking directly to the camera. His movies portray how these new technologies have augmented and accelerated global communication. Trecartin portrays identities that transform and reject the dichotomy of male and female. His characters are simultaneously male and female, human being and avatar. Their identities change in an instant according to the situation and context. Trecartin also shows the extent to which identities are staged in today's society. In his opinion, everyone is performing all of the time, something he pushes to an extreme with the characters in his movies. The focus of their attention is the camera; they perform for the audience as if on their own YouTube channel or communicating via Skype. At first these movies appear shrill, artificial and otherworldly. However, through their analysis it becomes clear they are an exaggerated portrayal of behavior that Trecartin has meticulously observed in today's society.

Moreover, Trecartin's movies convey his idea of future identity. In his opinion, identity as we understand it today will be replaced by the construction of identities through the expression of emotions and language alone. Identity in the future will no longer be based on gender, profession and social standing. His vision may at first seem overly futuristic, but it becomes more understandable when looking at the fundamental changes and evolution of language over the past centuries. Why should identity remain static when language, which is so important in its construction, is in a state of flux?

<18>

Ryan Trecartin's movies are truly unique and unparalleled in today's art world. They offer a great number of research subjects besides those analyzed in this paper. Examples worthy of further discussion include their aesthetics and their installation within the museum context. It would also be worthwhile analyzing Trecartin's collaborations with other artists and the role of collaboration in contemporary artistic practice. Further research is desirable in order to increase our understanding of Ryan Trecartin's complex oeuvre.

### **Zur Autorin**

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## **Abbildungsverzeichnis**

**Abb. 1:** Ryan Trecartin: *CENTER JENNY*, 2013, HD Video, 53:15 min., still image from video 00:12:35:27 min. © Ryan Trecartin. Courtesy of the artist; Sprüth Magers; Regen Projects, Los Angeles; Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

**Abb. 2:** Ryan Trecartin: *Sibling Topics (section a)*, 2009, HD Video, 51:26 min., still image from video 00:08:52:17 min. © Ryan Trecartin. Courtesy of the artist; Sprüth Magers; Regen Projects, Los Angeles; Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

**Abb. 3:** Ryan Trecartin: *I-Be Area*, 2007, HD Video, 01:48:00 min., still image from video 00:21:23:23 min. © Ryan Trecartin. Courtesy of the artist; Sprüth Magers; Regen Projects, Los Angeles; Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

**Abb. 4:** Ryan Trecartin: *The Re'Search (Re'Search Wait'S)*, 2009-2010, HD Video, 40:06 min., still image from video 00:08:13:09 min. © Ryan Trecartin. Courtesy of the artist; Sprüth Magers; Regen Projects, Los Angeles; Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

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- <sup>1</sup> Trecartin himself prefers to call his works movies rather than videos or short films.
- <sup>2</sup> Caroline Tagg: *Discourse of Text Messaging. Analysis of SMS Communication*, London/New York 2012, p. 14.
- <sup>3</sup> Tagg 2012 (Note 2), p. 181.
- <sup>4</sup> Tagg 2012 (Note 2), p. 187.
- <sup>5</sup> Tagg 2012 (Note 2), p. 173.
- <sup>6</sup> Tagg 2012 (Note 2), p. 175.
- <sup>7</sup> Marijana Kresic: *Sprache, Sprechen und Identität. Studie zur sprachlich-medialen Konstruktion des Selbst*, München 2006, p. 30.
- <sup>8</sup> Lakshmi Chaudhry: *Mirror, Mirror, On the Web*, in: *Younger Than Jesus. The Generation Book*, hg. v. Lauren Cornell et al., Göttingen 2009, pp. 279-288, here p. 285.
- <sup>9</sup> Kresic 2006 (note 7), p. 129.
- <sup>10</sup> Judith Butler: *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*, in: *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, hg. v. Sue-Ellen Case, Baltimore 1997, pp. 270-282.
- <sup>11</sup> Butler, Judith: „Performative Acts and Gender Constitution. An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory“. In: Case, Sue-Ellen (Hg.): *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*. Baltimore 3 1997 (1990), p. 270f.
- <sup>12</sup> Lizzie Fitch: *Introduction*, in: *Any Ever*. Ryan Trecartin, hg. v. Kevin McGarry, New York 2011, p. 9.
- <sup>13</sup> Cindy Sherman: *Cindy Sherman interviews Ryan Trecartin*, in: *Any Ever*. Ryan Trecartin, hg. v. Kevin McGarry, New York 2011, pp. 143-146, here p. 143.
- <sup>14</sup> Whitney Ford: *The Q&A: Ryan Trecartin, Video Artist*, in: *Economist: Intelligent Life*, London March 19, 2012, <http://moreintelligentlife.com/blog/whitney-ford/qa-ryan-trecartin>.
- <sup>15</sup> Calvin Tomkins: *Experimental People. The Exuberant World of a Video-Art Visionary*, in: *The New Yorker*, hg. v. David Remnick, New York March 24, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/03/24/experimental-people>.
- <sup>16</sup> Tagg 2012 (Note 2), p. 13-18.
- <sup>17</sup> Tomkins 2014, (Note 13).
- <sup>18</sup> Ryan Trecartin: *CENTER JENNY*, 2013, HD Video, 12:10 min., <http://vimeo.com/75735816>, (25.09.2015). The stated minute refers to the example made above.
- <sup>19</sup> Lorraine Cwelich: *Ryan Trecartin: Art for the Age of YouTube*, in: *Wall Street Journal*, hg. v. Paul Gigot, New York July 20, 2010, <http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2010/07/20/ryan-trecartin-art-for-the-age-of-youtube/>.
- <sup>20</sup> These names refer to characters in Trecartin's series *Any Ever* (2009–2010).
- <sup>21</sup> Lauren Cornell: *Medium Living*, in: *Any Ever*. Ryan Trecartin, hg. v. Kevin McGarry, New York 2011, p. 55.
- <sup>22</sup> Ford 2012 (Note 12).
- <sup>23</sup> Caitlyn Jenner was born Bruce Jenner. She is a retired athlete and now a TV personality. She became famous through the reality TV show *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*.
- <sup>24</sup> James Franco and Ryan Trecartin: *All American Golden Boy. Q-&-A Ryan Trecartin & James Franco*, in: *AnOther Man*, hg. v. Ben Cobb, London November 2010, pp. 138-143, here p. 141.
- <sup>25</sup> Trecartin, Ryan: *The Re' Search (Re'Search Wait'S)*, 2009-2010, 08:15 min., <https://vimeo.com-/24631059>, (25.09.2015).
- <sup>26</sup> Roland Barthes: *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, New York 1981, p. 10.
- <sup>27</sup> Kristina Lee Podesva (hg. v.): *When the time comes you won't understand the battlefield*, in: *Fillip 13*, Vancouver Spring 2011, pp. 100-103, here p. 103.
- <sup>28</sup> Katie Kitamura/Hari Kunzru: *Ryan Trecartin: In Conversation*, in: *Frieze Magazine*, hg.v. Dan Fox, New York October 2011, pp. 202-203, here p. 202.