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The Past Is Another Los Angeles

Ryan Trecartin's Priority Innfield



Still from *Junior War*, Ryan Trecartin, 2013.

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AT THE END OF 2012, I left New York on the advice of Ryan Trecartin. He hadn't personally intervened to motivate my move, but his work had jolted me out of my new urbanist slumber. Downtown had failed; New York was festering with vampires—we stayed out late every night to drink each other's blood—and the best minds were getting hooked on eschatology. As we stood around at parties waiting for the world to end, we churned out demonic theologies: collapsonomics, cybersquatting, hot yoga. Occupy Wall Street briefly suggested the arrival of a genuine millennium, but the tent city at Zuccotti Park lasted only two months. Living in the city in such close quarters had paved the way for some useful apps, but it had not delivered the good life: instead of jouissance, collaboration, and communal living, we got Grindr, Trello, and Airbnb.

One day I went to PS1 to watch *Any Ever* (2009–10), the seven-part suite of movies that preceded *Priority Innfield*. The movies made me long for Miami, but I settled for Los Angeles, where I discovered the Fitch-Trecartin HQ. Whereas New York was governed by omnipotent brands and institutions, southern California was organized around an unlimited cult of celebrity. LA seemed like a utopia in Thomas Moore's original sense—a "no place" place without bankers, lawyers or even really a mayor. Unlike Moore's Utopia, though, LA had not dispensed with inequality, human misery, or fancy clothes. Instead of a finance culture, LA had a performance culture, and its seeming disconnection from world affairs provided an enticing backdrop for my own fantasy of earthly escape.

That LA is a captivating and problematic place to live, work, and play is just one of the hidden upshots of *Priority Innfield*, a tetralogy that veers from the Arcadian exuberance of *Any Ever* and meticulously examines both the promise and limitations of performance-based escapism. *Any Ever*, I always thought, should make you desire; *Priority Innfield* should make you worry. The series is a step back from Utopia—an alternately gloomy and hopeful foray into the conceptual minefield of success, complicity, path dependency, personal

history, and even the nature of historical causation. *Priority Innfield* isn't pessimistic, though; it's an unblinkered visualization of the slipperiness of identity and the porousness of time. We'll get over it.

NO ONE ELSE CAN SEE WHAT YOU SEE

Behind every great fortune is a great crime. In *CENTER JENNY*, we are all guilty, though we'll never really know what happened or who was responsible. The film is both a crash after a drugged-out marathon and an attempt to pick up the pieces of a night (a life? a world?) that has gone terribly wrong. As the movie begins, we stumble down a hallway getting pelted with fragments; we have a sickening feeling that much has already happened. Did our car get smashed? Did we fuck our best friend's father? Did we waive all of our rights while on acid? Despite the movie's title, our perspective is decidedly decentered: whereas in the rest of *Priority Innfield*, the characters' eyes are often glued to the camera, in *CENTER JENNY*, almost everyone looks away. We're stuck viewing the "making of" footage, the behind-the-scenes. Even the audio sounds like playback. "He's just playing a joke on you," a character explains, "no one else can see what you see." We feel abused, but also that we've transgressed. "I'm going to get in so much trouble," says a girl in a sweatshirt emblazoned with the word "Witness."

We've been deposited in a world filled with "Jennys"—a fembot army struggling to appear and sound uniform but actually looking quite motley through all of their nearly standardized sweatshirts, colored contacts, and blondish wigs. In order to ascertain whether we could possibly belong, we're looking for sources and witnesses. Who is "Sara Source"? Where did we come from? What is our name? Slowly we get reacquainted with the history of the world. We're at a university. We're rushing a sorority. We're getting quizzed about the human era—a time after dinosaurs became chickens but before humans became animations and animations became us. We learn there have been wars and revolutions, and that some Jennys are bigger than others. "I'm

privileged as fuck, get used to it," declares one of the many female protagonists claiming to be Sara Source. "My parents owned and funded the war," brags another. A third character admits to having styled the war. "Did you see those weaponized earmuffs? Those weapons, those earmuffs! I styled them! I styled them!" Over time, the war has become a nursery rhyme.

Wars have soldiers, but they also have creative directors. Were we one of them? We transfer our anxiety onto an ingenue redhead (played by Rachel Lord) who bears the brunt of a sadistically framed, though actually quite tame, initiation ritual. Subjugation at the hands of the group becomes yet another recreational pose—BDSM, but without the bondage, the discipline, the sadomasochism or the sex. "It's a big deal," a khaki-clad Jenny tells us, "We are going to be accessing the foundation of consciousness as a university." There's no euphoria on this trip, but every arbitrary group needs an arbitrary history with its own reprogramming ritual. This is about the journey, not the destination—the university might not exist tomorrow.

While *CENTER JENNY* is preoccupied with origins (Sara Source), it's also worried about end points. Some of us may have fought in the audience revolution and some of us may have crafted weaponized earmuffs, but we all end up in Los Angeles, or, more specifically, we all end up on a fake TV set in a warehouse in Burbank, the eerie suburb that stands in approximate relation to LA as LA does to the world. There are no actual performers here, just stylists and stunt-chickens. Some provide mumbling vocals. Some perform feats of Parkour. Some draw all over us while we're still awake. Not to worry, though. No nightmare can survive sunrise.

ONE OF THE MOST ELEGANT THINGS ABOUT FACTS IS THAT I BELIEVE IN THEM

If *Priority Innfield* is one long drug-free but semipsychotic hallucination, then *Item Falls* is a peak experience.

We start out at a casting call, but before long we're firmly in the grip of hallucination, shedding our anxieties and regressing to the animation era, a time when stunt chickens were mere chicklets. Friendly archetypes float in and out of what seems to be our bedroom. The redheaded Jenny has returned, but this time she's squeaky and trusting. Unlike in *CENTER JENNY*, in *Item Falls* our perspective is literally centered. The camera seems planted in the middle of the room, which is good, because we're too blissed out to move. Luckily, our hallucinations look us in the eye.

The driving force of our trip is a producer (played by Alison Powell) who is coordinating auditions, which seem to control the progression from "first-level basic" to "second-level stupid" to "level-center." An Adele-like figure benevolently presides; as the film progresses, the producer shows off a boy band she has purchased.

Appropriately enough for a peak experience, the big questions show up. Do we have free will? Is what we're seeing real? What does it mean to be normal? "This is not a real chair," we're admonished at one point, "We animated it. It's not really here." Nothing quite makes sense, but it doesn't matter. "One of the most significant things about my stunt chickens is that I deserve a solo," says Jenny, who continues to muse about clubs and applications but without the fear and regret that fuels *CENTER JENNY*.

Jenny makes various attempts at logical argumentation but gets distracted by her own words. "Some of my friends believe that I should be an eagle," she asserts. "I believe that I'm grounded and that I should stay on the ground with the chicken, because chickens used to be dinosaurs. And it's a fact. One of the most elegant things about facts is that I believe in them." Her logical leaps take on a sharper edge when discussions amongst the group turn to family: "My parents ran one of the last print magazines . . . I was very generous to acknowledge the things that they did. It was a very common decision to make now. I fired them." Later, a boy-band member is disturbed to notice his own armpit hair: "Oh no! Look at my armpit hair. Hence my airs, hence my synonym,

hence my vibe, hence my arm!" The logical chain becomes a sort of failed genealogy. To the extent that boy band functions as a discrete gender, the speaker appears to be worried about becoming a man.

YOU FORGOT TO PULL OUT

In *Comma Boat*, the acid has worn off, but now we're on a power trip. The movie's main protagonist is a director-character played by Trecartin who oscillates between feelings of omnipotence and self-doubt. As if a posthuman, postgendered reincarnation of the Fellini character in *8 1/2*, the director gloats and frets about professional and ethical transgressions. "I know I lied to get ahead," he admits, force-feeding these lines to a character named Ethno-Anthro Nark. "I've made up so many different alphabets just to get ahead in my field." The director is fancier now, but the fear nags that he might be repeating himself "like a dumb soldier ova and ova and ova and ova." The metaconnection to the artist's own career, while obvious, is also a decoy. All art, at some level, is about the artist. Here, reflexivity is the surface level, providing a decodable veneer that encases something more unsettling.

Where *CENTER JENNY* sounds an alarm about the artist's complicity and helplessness within a system of indecipherable tribal rituals (and, more broadly, about any individual's powerlessness with respect to historical change), *Comma Boat* raises the possibility that these worries are essentially bullshit, convenient red herrings that disguise a deeper, more terrible truth: that in fact we have been in control all along, that we've stage-managed every aspect of this dream, and that our actions have not only damaged our own lives but potentially the lives of others too.

Arbitrary power is what drives the mock-authoritarian fantasy in *Comma Boat*, but it's also a joke. "I'm going to name a daycare after her," the director proclaims as punishment for an underling who uses words he doesn't understand, "but it's going to be very gas chamber oriented. Like, you'll go in,

but you won't come out." These are idle threats—the director is needling, but his subordinates are hardly cowering. "I'm going to put you at the end of a pier," he says soon after, "and you're going to stay there forever. I'm not going to do anything, you're just going to stay there." The pier scheme sounds Warholian, but it's not likely to come to fruition.

As with the rest of *Priority Innfield*, literal performance is delayed or refracted into pre- and postproduction. A group of singers seems to be continually testing levels, reliably affirming they sound "real good" without ever beginning the music video they appear to be filming.

The director worries he's not being sufficiently documented. He also worries about procreation: "There used to be a moment in time where people would peck on the lips and people would give them awards because of this thing . . . cinematic things." The director forces a sea punk girl to make out with a boy and then castigates them for being disgusting and "forgetting to pull out." "Ew, you're gonna start a family!" he chides. Babies, you might say, are the ultimate form of documentation, but they have short half-lives and are rarely faithful reproductions of the original. There are no babies in *Priority Innfield*.

The movie suggests that the director can no longer be educated. He has entered a fantasy world and won't come out. The predicament is summed up in a voiceover from the singer Lauren Devine: "What you gonna say now, you're too late now, I'm in LA now."

I'VE BEEN RIDING THESE WOODS SINCE I WAS THREE YEARS OLD

In *Junior War*, a throng of high schoolers congregates at night for a party in the woods sometime in the year 2000. A band plays, the kids get drunk, the boys and girls tepidly flirt, and groups deploy into cars for the purpose of destroying mailboxes, TP'ing houses, breaking lawn ornaments, and sparring with the police. The movie is composed entirely of footage Trecartin took

during his senior year of high school in exurban Ohio; as such, it baits the viewer with genealogical significance. The movie is incontrovertibly “source material” dangling the possibility that we’ve finally unearthed “Sara Source,” but it’s also rigorously repurposed, just as any #tbt on social media marks the present more reliably than it renders the past.

In the context of the tetralogy, *Junior War* looks like a time capsule from “the human era,” where themes and phrases from the other three films, searching for keys, smashing, farting, portentously recur. All of Trecartin’s trademarks are here—frenetic pacing, musical punctuation, carnivalesque destruction, adolescent dialect—but this time the Trecartin-verse is forged out of real-life coeds. “We found a golf ball, a tennis ball, and a baseball,” a boy proudly declares, underlining the male brain’s infinite capacity for pointless taxonomy. Other teens display aptitude for legalism, complaining about a policeman who was “wrongfully accusing” and “didn’t have probable cause to fucking pull us over.” Another boy at odds with law enforcement combatively declares, “I’ve been riding these woods since I was three years old. I know all these woods! If anything I’m going that way,” yielding a stream of teen poetry whose peculiarity might go unnoticed but for its resonance with the rest of *Priority Innfield*’s unruly syntax.

Are these the formative experiences that gave rise, a decade later, to the artist Ryan Trecartin? To the extent that *Priority Innfield* is an exercise in retroreflection, in revisiting the past and also reshaping it, *Junior War* looks more like the diary of a time traveler who has re-entered a historical moment and turbulently restructured it.

Most of the footage for the movie was recorded in night vision, a style that recalls both *The Blair Witch Project*, which came out in 1999, a year before Trecartin’s footage was shot, and *Zero Dark Thirty*, which came out in 2012, a year before *Junior War* was completed. The generation that graduated in rural America in the early 2000s is the same generation that continues to fight and die in Afghanistan. As Orwell has written, “The battle of Waterloo was won on

the playing-fields of Eton,” but the battles “of all subsequent wars have been lost there.” The youth in *Junior War* are expressly militarized; they’re also innocents who venture into the woods in search of the supernatural.

POSTTRAUMATIC

All remembering is editing—an attempt to create what scholars of collective memory call a “usable past”—a utilitarian myth that helps cement the identity of some present-day groups. In *Junior War*, as in the rest of the tetralogy, the editing is intentional and aggressive—but it’s not clear that the past it creates is usable. When memory fails and identities fail to successfully form—in a person or in a polity—scholars often invoke the category of trauma. For the trauma victim, the past cannot be made usable because it’s been blocked. Nothing makes sense—there’s no millennium to foreshadow. In *Priority Innfield*, the failure to manipulate the past into a usable script isn’t evidence of mental illness—it’s evidence of a commitment to recreation over strategy. Re-creating the past or planning the future can help pave the way for various presents, but it can also be pure fun. Living in the moment doesn’t mean living in the present.

The arrow of time—whichever direction it points—is fraught with guilt. To age is to decline: that’s what we’re always told. To trace is to blame: that’s what we’re afraid of. To the extent that *Priority Innfield* confounds our understanding of sequencing, iteration, and cause and effect, it also lets us off the hook for crimes of chronology. By the end we may feel confused, exhausted, and epistemologically spent, but we also feel exonerated. We feel disempowered, but ready for play. In the end, *Priority Innfield* is posttraumatic in the sense that it scrutinizes but ultimately rejects trauma as the structuring principle of memory and personal history. The world is complex. Some things are bad. We do not escape the past, but the past doesn’t escape us either. +

