

SWARMACHINES*, LADDERS AND LOOKOUTS

The urban city is a jungle. Becoming snake, becoming clandestine in nights of micro cultural mutation. Becoming zero as machinic assemblages mashup and crossfade. Becoming diagonal as markets lock into guerrilla commerce, ever-decamping nomad cultures, melting in the heat of the chase. Alienated and loving it. Current. (')

It's difficult to get my bearings on my first visit for I am swept up in the unseen and irresistible logic that is the propulsion of bodies. Trying to move through this squash of bodies, I am propelled by their collective cogitation. I slide past shadows indiscernible in the dim light like an incorporeal body-mud. And I don't know why I bother to even consider exerting the degree of agency and self-positioning that is implied by that sentiment: 'getting my bearings'. It's the semi-darkness, you see. It feels kind of swampy moving through this mass of congregated shadow-forms – as if I must just give into the momentum of its internal compulsion. Not sure that 'alienation' is quite the right word here: I am definitely in the middle of things, surrounded, as I am, by these bodies that feel not quite like flesh but more like something incorporeal (image-bodies, perhaps). And yet I feel momentarily set apart. I am inside the network and, at the same, time looking onto it for there is a structure – ARCHITECTURE – to this space. And, I come to realise that this network, this mass morph of bodies that surrounds me is in fact being punctuated – PUNCTURED – by the hard, light-emitting tectonics of screen structures, bleachers and stages. These organising topographies, scripts, spotlights and stages beckon bodies amassed around the flicker, the flash of light. They're lighthouses, lookouts that provide points for seeing and being seeing. They're instants of separation from the dark, swampy, shadowy mud of bodies. Colour, oh colour, flickering light, sound and image abound on the stages of theatres so distinct from the surrounding movement of body-images. Bodies attracted to light, to watching and being watched like some primordial thing – that magnetism of light, that comfort of darkness – propelled insect-like, a shadowy swarm.

Lizzie Fitch and Ryan Trecartin's *Priority Innfield* (2013) presents a world that is produced through the tension between the soft and malleable spaces of body-images, and the hard architecture of the organisational tectonics of language, visual signifiers and built forms such as bleachers, stages, pool houses, ladders and other structural forms. Organised across spaces that Fitch and Trecartin have termed 'sculptural theaters', *Priority Innfield* negotiates a holding-pattern between a seemingly limitless expansion of the post-human body (a body sorted by 'type') and the limits imposed by ordering structures. These are not only structures of language and architectural or built forms but also those enacted through the intrinsic gaming logic of the work as a whole. We must, therefore, see *Priority Innfield* (and the works collected within this system) as the acceleration of the corporeal body into image, and of space into an unfolding logic of 'situations' of encounter and transmission. It is a work of limits and of testing limits. This tension occurs in *Priority Innfield* between a body that is strung out to its limit and the recognition of the structural workings of these limits in language. It also takes place in the processing and reprocessing of bodies and images (body-images) that are folded through the camera. This is a pull between the seeming freedom of the body as suggested through the freeform and playful processes of improvisation for example, and the architectures of script and score. This essay explores the striving of the body conditioned by the libidinal flows of capital towards freedom. It refers to a body seeking freedom and, at the same time, recognising the impossibility of this freedom.

The world that is created in and by *Priority Innfield* is one in which (incorporeal) bodies and fleeting sensations predominate. This is not to suggest that there is not a carefully planned dramaturgy and scripting to the work but that there is, in *Priority Innfield*, an important shift

in the relationship between body and language. ⁽ⁱⁱ⁾ This is the morphing and collapse of body (and sensation) and language together such that bodies are 'read' as a kind of language and language is materially manifested in the activity (or movement) of bodies. It is important to acknowledge the manner in which Fitch and Trecartin's work addresses a body that is incorporeal and conditioned by the effects of language and language structures, and particularly the way in which the effects of capital have infiltrated and further conditioned the body (and languages of the body). This has had the effect that bodies are recognised and organised according to 'type' capacity or situation – as we see in the work, *Center Jenny* (2013) presented within *Priority Innfield*. *Center Jenny* presents a series of scenarios that are populated by women named Jenny. This rule of naming operates as a basic ordering principle that does not seek definition on the basis of gender or other identities, but implodes them. Instead, affiliation occurs around naming, around dress or uniform, and around the performance of a particular accent or behaviour. As Trecartin has said: 'We might try to interpret a car commercial as a hairdo, an ideology as a designer skintone, a banking situation as a cheekbone, copyright issues as a jawline or maybe an application as a facial agenda.' ⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾ *Yay Jenny, Jenny Rules. Yay Jenny, Jenny Rules. Yay Jenny, Jenny Rules*. This is a world of signs and signals announced by 'nameable affinities / FB likes, dating profile stats or competencies (the school assessment report, the HR review)', as Brian Droitcour has observed. ^(iv) Here the body is rendered image – an image-body that is enacted through its behaviours and expressed affinities rather than a deep materialism of the body's capacity, its desires or its *flesh*. ^(v)

The production of a body that is governed not by fleshy needs or capacities but by affiliations, behaviours and appearances, suggests what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have termed 'machinic'. ^(vi) Here the body is governed by the logics of its production – it is both produced by and distributed across the flows of capital. It is a body – or body-image – that is chronically networked and hyper-connected. It is in this context (which it so brilliantly enacts) that Fitch and Trecartin's work insinuates itself. It presents us with the situation in which the image-bodies of the protagonists within the videos are governed by the opportunities of situation and appearance. Trecartin teases apart this interplay between self-determination and its loss through his understanding of improvisation as a constant negotiation between structure and freedom. This is presented as a situation in which the body that is completely deterritorialised and strung out by the force of the flows of capital, fights for some kind of agency. 'I want everyone to have authority in their relationship to being directed, ...' Trecartin has said. ^(vii)

This tension between freedom and control is evident in Trecartin's notion of 'curatorial personalities' as the development of platforms for freedom in which the participants improvised and develop behaviours for their characters, on the one hand, and, on the other, the control enacted by the director who feeds them only one line at a time. These performances are then highly reworked in post-production becoming the basis for animation, overworking or for being 'cropped, altered, repurposed and enhanced.' ^(viii) They exist to be re-filtered (or folded) back into the production of the work itself. The stakes are high here because to see and be seen is 'to be'. As Jenny says, 'I have no choice but to address the camera'. ^(ix) The camera acts as both a picturing device and an active protagonist within Fitch and Trecartin's work. It is 'a subject that captures itself through the act of capturing something else', Trecartin has observed, and continues that he can see a point at which the camera and screen collapse further into the work so to be indistinguishable. ^(x) Yet, at the same time, through the interposing of the 'sculptural theatres' within the space of the exhibition (and thus as part of the work), Fitch and Trecartin introduce these points of gathering – places to see and be seen (as suggested earlier). These structures (or theatres) act to insert questions of command and control into what seems an amorphous and free-flowing movement of image-bodies, while at the same

time suggesting the possibility of a space apart – a theatrical space in which the protagonists – body-images – might break free from the flows and forces that condition their movements. ^(xi)

Imagine an imaginary think tank: command central in a de-centred world of ‘libidinizing flows’ and delirious movements. ^(xii) A theatre in your head... or a factory. A contradiction in terms, you say? ‘I need to rehabilitate my think tank to get over it’, she replies. ^(xiii) *Priority Innfield’s* sculptural theatres activate a space that punctures the incorporeal movements of body-images strung out across market flows. Here, in these spaces that are created by images – by the flickering light of images transmitted – and by the hyper-performance of body-images is an attempt to make a break for (some kind of) freedom. Maybe freedom is too strong a word here, perhaps, instead, it is just to recognise the possibility for something new, something out of this world – a possibility that is also concurrently an impossibility as it is constantly being cleaved back and re-folded by the internalised conditions of the machine, the swarm. It is a hyper-theatre in which words are repeated and repeated, and a world appears framed, processed and reprocessed by the camera creates the space of our encounter. A delirious interplay between the improvisation and performance of body-images and the hard-architecture of their structural confines. In a world in which the relationship between bodies and images has become more porous, and our movement seems boundless, the hard-tectonics of the scripts, stages and other structural confines in Fitch and Trecartin’s work is important to recognise. The presence of the ladder in the videos (such as *Item Falls* and *Comma Boat*) suggests this movement – this breakout – from the incorporeal mud and mutation of the swarm. And perhaps this is the most important ‘message’ of *Priority Innfield*. In a world apparently globalised and definitely made delirious through the seemingly endless flows of images and the constant reception of information, we must look to its limits – its centres of control – and our own schizoid-negotiation of these limits.

ⁱ Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU), 'Swarmachines' (1996). Accessed via: <http://virtualfutures.co.uk/archive/papers/swarmachines/>

The Cybernetic Culture Research Unit that operated out of Warwick University in the late 1990s. Founded by Professor Sadie Plant, the unit was later taken on by Nick Land who's work addressing the delirium of late 1990s capitalism being itself increasingly delirious and the CCRU was wound up in 1997.

ⁱⁱ Trecartin himself as well as various other writers and commentators have noted the limitations inherent in approaching his work on a visual level only and ignoring its dense textual elements. In 'Societies of Out of Control: Language and Technology in Ryan Trecartin's Movies', Brian Droitcour claims that critics ignore the language in Trecartin's work instead focusing on 'visual analysis with a dash of social commentary.' However, my point is that language or text and visual elements cannot be separated in Fitch and Trecartin's work.

Brian Droitcour, 'Societies of Out of Control: Language and Technology in Ryan Trecartin's Movies' in Omar Kholeif (ed), *Art After the Internet*, (London and Manchester: Space and Cornerhouse, 2014), 45.

ⁱⁱⁱ Interview with Cindy Sherman, 144

^{iv} Brian Droitcour, 'Societies of Out of Control: Language and Technology in Ryan Trecartin's Movies', 52.

^v It is interesting to note that in the video, *Item Falls* (2013 and also included in *Priority Innfield*) tears are squeezed onto the face. So that rather than being emitted from the depths of the body, they are superimposed onto it.

^{vi} See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* (London and New York: Continuum, 2012)

^{vii} Interview with Cindy Sherman, 144.

^{viii} Interview with Cindy Sherman, 144.

^{ix} Lizzie Fitch and Ryan Trecartin, *Center Jenny* (2013)

^x Interview with Cindy Sherman, 144.

^{xi} ... 'I think it would be interesting to explore the organizational, programming and structural components of a merged media experience as an active performance. Structures and tools are important terrain for contemporary art.' (Interview with Cindy Sherman, 144.)

^{xii} Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU), 'Swarmachines' (1996). Accessed via: <http://virtualfutures.co.uk/archive/papers/swarmachines/>

^{xiii} Lizzie Fitch and Ryan Trecartin, *Center Jenny* (2013)