

PART TWO

Bring the Noise!

Color as Signal / Noise

I. "A GRINDER AND MIXER OF MULTICOLOR DRUGS"

Ryan Trecartin was born in Webster, Texas, in 1981, and since his undergraduate years at the Rhode Island School of Design (2000–2004), he has produced eccentric, performance-based digital video and installation art with his troupe “The Experimental People Band.” Soon after graduating from RISD, he emerged as a “rising star” in the art world and beyond, receiving media coverage in the *Wall Street Journal* and solo exhibitions at the Los Angeles MOCA (2010), MoMA’s PS1 in New York (2011), the Musée d’Art Moderne in Paris (2011), and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Miami (2011), all before the age of thirty.¹ He is now represented by the Saatchi gallery in London and the Elizabeth Dee gallery in New York. But given his in-your-face, gauche pop culture aesthetic, catering to what Wayne Koestenbaum coins the “bubble brain gestalt of the identity surfer”² in an “attention-deficient Internet culture,”³ how does one account for his swift success in the upper echelons of the blue-chip art world?

Trecartin is undeniably “a grinder and mixer of multicolor drugs,” as Plato put it in reference to artists in general.⁴ His fashionable use of digital media, fast-paced editing, belligerent makeup and costume, and chaotic, broken, and synthesized dialogue, echo his unforgiving color juxtapositions. His work also emerged during a time in the early 2000s when the art world was embracing a trickle-down of academic trends in post-media, post-identity politics, and queer theory. Accordingly, Deitch Projects founder Jeffrey Deitch compares his fragmented aesthetic to the “multivalent structures” of Cubism,⁵ while Linda Norden places his “commercial leveling” on plane with Andy Warhol’s use of Day-Glo colors to acclimate a post-war art world to a new culture of advertising. Likewise, I argue here that Trecartin’s

work analogously sanctions the colors of a newer world of selfies, social media apps, the internet, and automated-effects plug-ins.⁶ One set of arguments in this chapter proposes that 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 the once-gauche and noisy to become prosaic as pop culture kitsch.⁷ At the same time, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Trecartin's noisy colorism offers a refreshing strategy for coping with Western culture's progressive applications of digital signal processing. Instead of compressing data to produce the least amount of noise and the most amount of signal, we find a playful, campy embrace of noise and anti-compression techniques to undo myths of transparency and streamline efficiency held too sacred in a world realistically void of them.

In this chapter's analysis of Trecartin's work from the 2000s, I identify three key tenets of his style: a transgression of categories and ways of classifying the world in favor of noise and ambiguity; an aesthetic category I theorize as "accidental color"; and his use of whacky stops and pauses—in the tradition of the avant-garde—to incite subject disorientation and criticality. While each tenet is distinct, they often overlap and feed into one another. The chapter also extends Kevin Lynch's definition of trash as something "worthless or unused for human purpose" (see Introduction), to uses of color in visual communications. Specifically, I theorize how "color as noise" in Trecartin's work corresponds with what I have identified as an aesthetic paradigm of failure, marked by a total and irreversible cross-disciplinarily, post-media, pansexual, polycultural everything, including traditionally queer, class-based, and gendered subjectivities. There are no boundaries to break, let alone adhere to. Trecartin's work embodies this landscape of imploding axioms, and for this reason, it provides the most potent case study for this chapter's analysis of color as signal and noise. While I analyze his work primarily through the lens of media technology and aesthetics, I also encourage readers to explore queer and gender-based interpretations of his work elsewhere.⁸ Before jumping into this work, however, it is first necessary to establish a set of distinctions between color as signal versus color as noise.

II. COLOR AS SIGNAL AND NOISE

In *Chromatic Algorithms*, I analyzed the role of synthetic color in computer art after 1960, contextualized within a longer history of countless attempts to isolate, harness, and control color as a stable object of inquiry. Such efforts inevitably fail, I argued there, because color is always on the move, shifting, transforming, or escaping the rules and protocols that attempt to contain it. Colors of any sort may be placed in a box, inside a frame, dyed into a fabric or placed on a chart, but its transgressive essence ensures it will not remain there for very long.⁹ On its own, color tends toward the ephemeral and shape-shifting. This is its nature. Colors

fade, oxidize, bleed, and change their appearance based on their surroundings.¹⁰ As Bauhaus colorist Josef Albers puts it, “in visual perception a color is almost never seen as it really is—as it physically is. This fact makes color the most relative medium in art.”¹¹ Over time, a strain of artists, philosophers, and scientists have gravitated towards this subjective approach to understanding color. As a phenomenon of individual perception, color is fundamentally strange and estranged, inconsistent, noisy, and unreliable.

For others, all of color’s shape-shifting amounts to an ancient fear dating back to the origins of Western metaphysics. Sophists, rhetoricians, and painters are “creator[s] of phantoms,”¹² Plato argued, “technicians of ornament and makeup.” But by far the most poisonous of simulacra was color: a cosmetic and false appearance that, like the Sophist’s “gaudy speeches” and “glistening words,” seduces the listener with its “ambiguity and deceiving sparkle.”¹³ Unlike words, however, color does not even have the benefit of carrying a signifying capacity beyond itself. In short, color holds to nothing and to no one, and herein lies the source of its perceived danger and fear.

For Plato, the most sensible way to deal with this “color problem” was to relegate it to the realm of artifice, cosmetic, and appearance. Likewise, for Immanuel Kant, a preliminary solution was to codify “a mere colour” as “charming” so its seriousness or threat could be disregarded.¹⁴ As a marginalized phenomenon, color is sanitized, safely associated with nothing beyond decorative charm or mimetic supplement.¹⁵ Hence its association with women, racial and ethnic minorities, and the fluffy and whimsical. As secondary and marginal, color can seduce the senses through deceptive means, but it will always be excluded from the hierarchy of the beautiful and the sublime, let alone the formulation of truth and reason.

For centuries now, color has had to maintain this secondary, subordinate status as “Other” linked to falsity, defect, ornament, and décor, to quote David Batchelor, “some ‘foreign’ body—“usually the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological.”¹⁶ Insofar as color can never constitute an original truth, Jacqueline Lichtenstein argues, it can never be the object of genuine value or recognition, and thus its uncontrollability ceases to be a problem for “real” philosophical inquiry. Banished from metaphysics, transcendental truth and logic, color remains just where Plato left it: as a simulacrum on the walls of a cave, growing stronger there, amplifying and intensifying the dangers and shadow-inspired fears that instigated its expulsion in the first place.¹⁷

Color, like trash and noise, only returns to upend the system from the inside out. Herein color and noise find their shared terrain. Put differently, color as color has always been a kind a noise.¹⁸ Through a long history of culture and communication, however, color has been molded into a series of signals. For example, when encountering a red stop sign while driving, one slows to a stop, and then continues driving. This is color as signal because 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.¹⁹

What happens when the signal is not the normative red but, say, purple? One might stop because the sign bears the same octagonal shape, text, and positioning on the road, but the odd color introduces a temporary disorientation in experience, a kind of *visual noise*. It is unclear to the driver how it can or should be interpreted through existing convention. This is how color operates as noise, at least in this first, naïve encounter. As noise, a color halts unconscious processes of data interpretation and in so doing, opens up a space of questioning. On a deeper level, color as noise is akin to a “conceptual glitch,” discussed in chapter 2, or Duchamp’s *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (1915), illustrating the concept in a framework entirely divorced from color. In this piece, one finds a single, basic snow shovel buttressed against the wall of the gallery. At first sight, its vernacular meaning seems obvious, but as an *artwork*, its meaning is unclear (i.e.: conceptual noise). After reading the title, however, one is able to connect the work to its implied meaning as a human prosthetic, instantiating a relationship between hand and tool analogous to that between an art object and its caption. *In Advance of the Broken Arm* makes preliminary meanings ambiguous and in so doing, generates a conceptual glitch that forces a moment of pause, followed by a resignification of the object’s meaning. The power of color as noise holds the same potential in the visual field.

Unleashing the powerful yet traditionally feared capacity of color as noise has been an understudied theme in a visual tradition stretching back through Turner, Van Gogh, Monet, Seurat, Signac, and Francis Bacon through James Turrell, Olafur Eliasson, Pipilotti Rist, and Jeremy Blake. In interior and graphic design, one can find tangential correlatives in Russian and Art Deco poster design, the work of Pushpin Studios (Milton Glaser, Seymour Chwast, and Edward Sorel), Verner Panton, Ettore Sottsass, or more recently, David Carson and April Greiman. These artists and designers use color as a form of free-floating noise—at times for political ends—and yet they do so elegantly, without losing sight of our aesthetic and cognitive need to find meaning in the world.

At the same time, color as noise can just as easily prevent critical questioning and self-reflexive pauses. Consider certain print or television advertisements. If the goal is to capture and sustain attention, then the use of bold and abstract color becomes one of the most effective strategies for maintaining “eyeballs” and stringing a viewer along. Color still operates as color, which is to say, noisy and “liberated” from narrative, convention, 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 to simply project as many images, logos, and brand names in as quick a time as possible.

Lastly, the difference between color as signal versus color as noise is in no way fixed or universal. In order to be, become, and sustain itself as noise, color must

be worked and reworked; released and liberated from subordination to line, form, convention, or structure using deliberate and medium-specific strategies. Once a cipher for decoding meaning is provided, a noise ceases to be noise and instead communicates as signal. In *Advance of the Broken Arm*, the “shovel” attains new value as a communicative signal once it takes on the implication of a human prosthetic. In my stop sign scenario, a driver might take into account the placement of a purple stop sign (e.g., in a graffiti-strewn neighborhood), and whether there is a special occasion for it, like Halloween. Reestablishing symbolic connections catapults a once-noisy color back into its role as signal. Definitive meaning is restored and color communicates exactly what it was intended to.

In short, color as noise is in no way divorced from the world that gives it shape and meaning (or a lack thereof). Further, my binary distinction between color as noise / signal does not propose a universal, ahistorical, acultural, or apolitical definition but rather, recognizes how this binary is constantly shifting and changing according to context, perspective, circumstance, memory, lighting, and numerous other factors. In the art and design work noted above, what might have appeared as noise at one point in history is now conveniently canonized as signal, as argued of avant-garde glitch in chapter 2. In the case of Trecartin’s noisy colors, we encounter them on the cusp of their appropriation into mainstream media cultures.

III. COLOR AS NOISE: RYAN TRECARTIN’S WORK FROM THE 2000S

To expand on Deitch’s description of Trecartin’s work, briefly cited above:

[It] incorporates almost all of the innovations of twentieth-century art, literature, and performance to break into the twenty-first. His works’ multivalent structure alludes to Cubism. His scripts fuse Gertrude Stein with infomercials. His eccentric, vividly painted characters draw on a vanguard tradition stretching from Weimar Berlin to Jack Smith. His community of collaborators, living and working with him in a Los Feliz McMansion that looks like an abandoned swingers’ club, fuses elements of Warhol’s Factory, the Wooster Group, and MTV’s *The Real World*.²⁰

All of this is accurate, and yet, there is much more at stake in the substance of the work itself. For one thing, there is a systematic transgression of categories and ways of classifying the world (i.e., nouns become adjectives and vice versa); second, there is a stylized use of what I theorize as “accidental color;” and third, a use of zany stops and pauses to incite disorientation in contemporary subjectivity. We begin with the first.

Noise in the Epistēmē

In his 2009 essay on Trecartin’s 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.”²¹ Gioni’s witty reversal of the normative assumption that people utter information temporarily 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 highly critical noise in the midst of their multilayered, chronologically overlapping universes. This is illustrated in Trecartin’s work early on, *A Family Finds Entertainment (AFFE)*, presented as his 2004 BFA thesis at RISD. Ever since, the plot has been interpreted ambiguously. Ricardo E. Zulueta analyzes it as a parody of the classical family mellow drama; *New York Times* critic Roberta Smith argues it is a “coming out” narrative; Dennis Cooper claims it is a story about “Skippy, a clownish but terrifyingly psychopathic boy.”²² There is some truth in all of these interpretations, and it is this ambiguity that keeps the work alive, unclear and muddy, simultaneously thriving on multiple registers.

This same incapacity to find any single interpretive meaning for the plot is illustrated in Trecartin’s 108-minute single-channel video *I-BE AREA* (2007). In one early section of the work, the character named Pasta (played by Trecartin) drives with her friend Wendy MPEGgy / sen-teen (played by Alison Powell) to the house of the characters Amanda / Hunter (Kelly Pittenger) and a character who appears to be named Charity (actor unknown). So far so good; the viewer is given a loose narrative structure—Pasta gets in a car, drives to a house, parks, gets out, locks the door, goes inside, the girls have fun, and the evening is over—but what is actually expressed on screen is something else entirely.

Rewind and replay: from out of nowhere the video jumps back in time to the inside of character Pasta’s car. Like the protagonist I-BE 2 (also played by Trecartin), Pasta is an “ambiguously gendered . . . mixed-media humanoid.”²³ Pasta’s face is painted opaque yellow with blue, purple, red, and white smudges circling her eyes and nose. Her irises are also yellow, those of a kind of human jackal in a hyperactive trance, both scary and smiling. 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, for its part, is synthesized to a barely recognizable pitch, matching the over-the-top makeup, both of which are then juxtaposed with Pasta’s exceedingly conservative suburban outfit: light blue mom jeans with a crisp white, short-sleeved button-down shirt tucked into them.

Ricardo E. Zulueta and Kevin McGarry shed light on Pasta’s origin story: stolen as child named “Jango,” Pasta has since “developed herself” into another person. And yet, McGarry 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.”²⁴ 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



FIGURE 14. Ryan Trecartin, *I-BE AREA* (2007). Digital video, color, 1 hour, 48 minutes, compilation of video stills.

identities to assume.”²⁵ The plot, whether explained accurately or not, matches the confusing and genre-defying mixture of graphics, CGI, 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. This is boilerplate Trecartin.

Trecartin’s noise becomes literal and conceptual in its consistent transgression of pre-established categories of being and knowing, undone through his trademark campy defiance. As critics like Zulueta note, Trecartin’s eccentric merging

of perspectives and subjectivities compound into a multisensory cacophony of “cyberqueer,” interpreted here as a techno-mediated estrangement that extends beyond sexuality.²⁶ As Trecartin describes it, “[i]t’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.”²⁷ This is key because, in making art, one does not want to make a piece *too* strange and *too* chaotic, leaving no foothold for a viewer, and thus one simply dismisses the work altogether (discussed in chapter 5 as a “botching” of the Deleuzian “diagram”). And, rest assured, Trecartin leaves some such signals amid this onslaught of noise; we just have to do a bit of work to get to them.

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, perspectiveless computer maze of animated graphics and QuickTime files. High-speed aerial zooms show computer-generated mountain ranges, mixed with abstract color lines and tiled images of Amanda and Charity, floating backwards and forwards in a no-space space, featured on an outdated QuickTime player.²⁸ As Pasta jerks forwards and backwards in her car, she laughs. The laughter echoes through the synthetic maze and an (otherwise) noneventful drive 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 conventional Snapchat segue in an episode of *Keeping up with the Kardashians*).

It is night outside when Pasta arrives at the house, where she greets Wendy MPEGgy, who has made 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 to look for singular meanings). Pasta and Wendy MPEGgy perform for us, and the camera, and the media people, and the young girls. The ambiguity, again intentional, complements the blurring of boundaries between genders, genres, narratives, data space, and physical space. Trecartin calls this a “continuous 360-degree situation,” inferring an obfuscation of temporalities, epistemologies, and just about anything and everything in between.²⁹ Pasta is also the girls’ former baby sitter, now hired by the girls as a media producer, along with Wendy MPEGgy. Pasta and Wendy announce themselves as cofounders of “Instant action . . . Life reproductions.” The drama hits the heightened pitch of an afternoon talk show. The team boasts 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 signature staccato style, never resting on a scene, face, persona, or sound bite for longer than a couple of seconds.

The content of the dialogue further echoes this belying of linguist categories. By inverting nouns and verbs, using props as characters and remaking behaviors into objects, one begins to question unconscious assumptions about things and their relationship to one another.³⁰ Examples abound in *I-Be Area*: from the title, which implies a person is a space, to the character Pasta, which is something we eat, to Wendy MPEGgy, whose last name is an acronym for an algorithmic compression scheme. Even such casual remarks as “I don’t know you need to delete your birth mom” or, “No, it’s not, it’s about how the world ended three weeks ago. Starting now,” further illustrate the semantic play. “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 noise engendered by the purple stop sign hypothesized above.³¹ 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.”³² 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. “Trecartin understands how a concentration on distraction can ironically enhance absorption,” Linda Norden writes, citing Wayne Koestenbaum.³³ Distraction—noise in so many forms and formats—becomes the germ and seed for a new order and rhythm. I return to this in this chapter’s conclusion on the “pacified sublime,” and to the concept of the sublime in chapters 6 and 7. For now, let us consider how the *quality* of this kind of empty but persistent absorption echoes models of mainstream media consumption.

Jodi Dean has theorized this media landscape under the rubric of “communicative capitalism,” which, she explains, is chock full of noise and failed communications. For Dean, this “noise” is fundamental to our communication infrastructures and yet, it’s also the very thing that hinders actual communication from occurring. Her paradigmatic example is the “democratic” internet with its ubiquitous data flows, falling under the guise of “communication” 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 the war grew closer, thousands of bloggers commented on each step but mainstream U.S. news outlets failed to cover the mass demonstrations and protests.³⁴ The White House and president acknowledged the existence of such voices but failed to directly respond to their critical content. The mere acknowledgment that such disparate voices existed constituted for them a sufficient response. Everyone had the “democratic opportunity” to voice opinions, but no actual “messages were received” by the people they aimed to communicate with. The same could be said

for numerous television talk shows, news programs, and podcasts. Trecartin's work echoes this growing 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 to their own solipsistic, internal agendas. The difference is that once it is subject to analysis, as is done here, noise can be reconstructed as critical signal. To cite Hito Steyerl again, writing in a different context, we might say that Trecartin's work, "In addition to a lot of confusion and stupefaction," also creates the possibility for "disruptive movements of . . . thought and affect,"³⁵ however politically active or benign they may be. Unfortunately, no such process appears on the horizon for politics or the popular press.

Accidental Color Aesthetics

The second facet of Trecartin's style deals with "accidental color," a turn of phrase used by editor and publisher of the *Pantone View Colour Planner*, David Shah, at the 2017 color planners meeting in London. In an exchange with an "American forecaster in the room" (A) the exchange proceeds as follows:³⁶

Shah: What is the zeitgeist going on in the United States about color?
Are they big colors? Are they strong colors? Prime colors?

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 color 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 colors together?

A: Exactly, and different from what it's been before. It's almost like a counterculture type of a feeling—you deliberately use colors that would not ordinarily work together.

Shah: Accidental colors

A: That's a good way of putting it, yes

In the context of this book, accidental colors are also noisy colors. The distinction is that accidental colors must then be skillfully transformed into an ordered, stylized set that retains an *aura* of accident or noise. In other words, the strategy aims to make the colors in a set *appear* off, wrong, ad-hoc, or unexpected. *Intention* is key, since it differentiates an actual color accident from the deliberate and consciously produced appearance of one. For example, one might encounter a purple stop sign and experience what I refer to as "color as noise." This does not count as accidental color, however, because it is not deliberately designed as an aesthetic object. And herein lies the contradiction at the heart of accidental color aesthetics: there is nothing accidental about it. I provide some concrete examples below, after reviewing accidental color's antithesis: *conventional* color systems.

In art, science, and the world at large, there are numerous conventional color systems, all established through a history of media (neon colors, electronic colors, televisual colors, etc.); fashion and interior design (textile standards, Pantone colors); physics (the seven spectral colors of the rainbow); or any discipline that involves visual perception. In most art and design curricula, the standard twelve-hue color circle explicates these basic complementary pairs: purple appears opposite to yellow, and orange appears opposite to blue, forming complementary pairs. Trichromatic color is another example. Normative in humans and the vast majority of electronic devices, trichromatic color consists of the primaries: red, green, and blue, and all other possible colors derive from these three. In nature, we find established color systems through cliché associations with the beauty of nature, almost always tending towards complementary pairs such as a light blue sky and orange sunset, or red flowers rising from fresh green grass. The human perceptual system has a natural tendency to create balance, so when we are exposed to one hue for an extended period of time, we naturally begin to crave its opposite. In short, conventional color systems extend across media and have ingrained themselves in society through thousands of years of culture and habit.

In contrast, accidental colors are marked by the appearance of being unconventional or “off.” This veneer of a half-hazard design choice in some ways works to dismantle conventional color systems by opening up new possibilities. This is also why I refer to accidental colors as a set and not a system. It should also be noted that, as with noise and glitch art, their capacity to disrupt is not guaranteed but always contingent on context. One example of accidental color could include light pink and baby blue placed with the strong contrast of black and white. Using two pastel colors paired with a monochromatic contrast, the set is acceptable but slightly off, since the two different systems (pastel and monochrome black and white) don’t necessarily belong to any recognizable color system or conventional use. In this way, accidental colors are also antithetical to color matching. Accidental colors 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 color exists in the world, one can perform this test: does this group of colors fit with any pre-established color convention in color theory, biology, or the natural environment? If the answer is no, we can press on to analyze it for additional correlations. A second set of qualities to consider concerns context. Accidental color panders to a façade of accident and happenstance and yet, very much like glitch art, maintains tight precision and control over design choices, from start to finish. Furthermore, once accidental colors lose their novel front (also like glitch art), they become mainstream trend. So-called accidental colors fade into standardized colors as they find their permanent home in a slot as one of the “64 colors arranged into nine distinct palettes” in the *Pantoneview Colour Planner*—a prêt-à-porter aesthetic for designers and cultural producers in the years to come. No longer deemed accidental at all, they are

now formulaic. Until this occurs, however, accidental colors can and will operate as a low-level noise in the background of media and visual culture. As practitioners and theorists, it is our responsibility to pay attention to these transitions in the media environment. Doing so allows us to see how and when a new set of color relations is deemed too edgy, versus those on the brink of cliché. Because accidental color aesthetics are endemic to Trecartin's work, the concept provides a fruitful analytic tool that can now be brought into a discussion of his work.

Trecartin's Accidental Color Aesthetic

Almost any sequence from any of Trecartin's works (which he calls "movies") could be used to illustrate the accidental color concept. In almost every scene of every one of his works, one finds bizarre color combinations: a haphazardly painted yellow face, a white wall attacked with red, a mismatched outfit, white teeth that bleed blue, yellow skin, yellow eyes, and so forth. All of these constitute deliberately stylized, accidental color, used to stun, shock, or undermine color convention. Nonetheless, I focus here only on one of the opening scenes from one early work: *A Family Finds Entertainment* (AFFE; 2004), a 42-minute epic horrification of the "after school special" genre.

In an early scene in *AFFE*, we find four Caucasian twenty-somethings sitting in a living room. The room's interior is decorated in a lime green and dark yellow color scheme, alluding to the folksy get-together culture of a 1960s family interior. One plain-faced boy (by which I mean he is not wearing an apparent costume or makeup) sits on a stool, while another, equally unadorned white male in cozy 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 sing, "I will hold on, I will hold on . . ." A character named Veronica (played by Veronica Gelbaum) gazes longingly at him, and when he is done, she responds, "Oh, Ben, that was so romantic. . . . I love that more than anything." The mellow drama is both forced and raw.

The strangeness is echoed by Veronica's makeup, which is not comprised of complementary colors but instead, a series of black-and-white outlines where color would (normatively) be found. A close-up of her face reveals her opaque white lips, outlined in a thick black pencil, mirrored by a white teardrop outlined in thick black below her right eye, and a streak of white (which appears grey) on one side of her black head of hair. The technique undoes the normative role of makeup as a filling in and coloring over, replacing it with a series of outlines to indicate color's absence. This "bad" makeup job deliberately covers nothing, save its self-revelation as an empty artifice.

And then there is the strategically developed bad accident of color matching in the room's interior design. 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, begging an inquiry into why or how it doesn't seem right. If "matching" by definition is an



FIGURE 15. Ryan Trecartin, *A Family Finds Entertainment* (2004). Digital video, color, 41 minutes. Noisy colors mark the set design of the opening scenes.



FIGURE 16. Ryan Trecartin, *A Family Finds Entertainment* (2004). Video still. More noisy color.

attempt to fit things together in likeness and kind, according to the dictates of “good design,” then here we encounter its inversion: matching taken to such an extreme it becomes a mockery of so-called “good” taste. The matching becomes so “off,” it forces a viewer to refocus attention from the drama to the colors composed on the surface of the screen, allowing these visual motifs to perform a complementary comic relief alongside the characters and their eccentric drama.

The characters, for their part, act like zombies. Their lines are delivered in stilted isolation, even though they are sitting in the same room, sharing the same intimate space of the velvet couch and stool. Some of this is explained by the fact that Trecartin deliberately refrains from giving lines to actors up until the moment they are to deliver them. “I don’t let most performers see the script ahead of time, because I like them not knowing where their character is going,” he says. “I tend to feed the performers their lines one or two at a time, and thus their performances often capture the feeling of still figuring out what a line is about, even as they’re saying it.”³⁷ Trecartin believes the tactic allows the actors to remain open and spontaneous when delivering their lines, and hence, the appearance of stilted connections between them. An apt example occurs in *AFFE* after the singing has ended and the band members inform Veronica they are going on tour. The camera cuts to a close-up of Veronica, who turns to the red-and-white-clad character beside her and says, “Penny May, I hate you so much.” Not only is the communal after-school special genre turned on its head, but so too are any allusions to a connected, 1960s folk culture. Instead of friendly singing or emotional support, we witness bitterness, jealousy, and the characters’ alienation from each other. 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 perform a series of parodic suicidal bloodbath incidents, refusing to go downstairs to meet the others.

Taken together, these scenes operate on multiple registers as parodies of a serious “coming out” narrative; an undoing of the cheap poetic endemic to folk

culture; and kitschy first-year film projects, with their excessive use of fake blood and gore. “It’s not blood, it’s red,” Jean-Luc Godard declared in a 1965 interview, by which he meant cinematic blood is one facet of a larger cinematic apparatus that is itself an artifice used to generate a 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 is laid out to dry. Furthermore, instead of cliché nostalgic flashbacks, featured in undersaturated “super-8” color, typical of such “retro” styled pieces, Trecartin delivers an uncomfortable eeriness that pervades the “real” characters as they deliver broken lines, seem dazed and confused by the guitar, and, aside from some mania and bitterness, are otherwise bored and vacant. Veronica’s white lips with black outlines speak the same language of boredom as her zombie-like character: anything laying claim to the authentic or serious catapults her and her “family” members, into attention deficiency.

The next scene cuts to a character named “Snow White Girl” (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 far off from the actual color of blood that the effect is comic), and white and light yellow clothing (again, a comic affront to the ostensible purity of snow white).³⁸ 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 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 faintly hears, “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 with an opaque white face, an off-white top and a 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, and her hands and arms slowly extending upward as she appears to reach Nirvana-qua-psychosis.

On the one hand, Snow White Girl’s colorful accidents need no further explanation. There is nothing pure or white about this character, drenched in fake blood and psychosis. All colors *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 utopic mythologies, from hippie folk cultures to youthful transcendental awakenings and “serious” drama. The celebrated artifice of color and these deliberately staged “bad accidents”

boldly proclaim dead the older paradigm of single genres and authentic relations. Witnessing these pretentious edifices fall to the ground is how and where this family finds entertainment.

One final example of accidental color in *AFFE* is found midway through the piece. Cliché color-matching techniques are again pushed to such an extreme they begin to implode. 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 takes the lead, a character wearing a red wig, with a face painted in opaque yellow, red, and blue, and without apparent gender or sexuality. Faint traces of green can be seen around her upper eyelids. Her hair is orange and she dons a purple-and-white plaid shirt. She also holds a bottle of Naked Juice. With the label facing forward, it suggests a blatant tie-in to her color scheme. The background—is it wallpaper or a bedspread?—also conveys the same saturated yellows, reds, blues, and greens. An animated zigzag line suddenly cuts across the center of her face. Unsurprisingly, these animated colors also bear the same kind of bold red and blue with black-and-white boundaries—like face, like backdrop, like wig, like bottle, like shirt. When this degree of overmatching is used throughout, it becomes a stylistic device that could not be further from any actual accident.³⁹ As a staged accident by way of costume and set design, it undoes preconceived notions of what is implicitly deemed “tasteful.”

In sum, the accidental color aesthetic discussed in these scenes deliberately defies 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 noise genres: it bears a veneer of error, all the while maintaining the opposite. Indeed, a majority of Trecartin’s colors, costumes, makeup, and editing effects are planned out in advance.⁴⁰ 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 colorists mentioned earlier—from Turner, Van Gogh, Monet, Seurat, Signac, and Bacon to Paul Sharits, Pipilotti Rist, Jeremy Blake, and Paper Rad. For them, colors speak as noise, or at least they did during one moment in the history of visual art. Today, many of these artists’ colors no longer seem loud or garish because they have been acclimated through decades of canonization. Trecartin’s colors have also begun their move into the prosaic. With so many social media apps and plugins (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 (as critique of
contemporary subjectivity)*

This brings us to a third and final facet of Trecartin's work: stops, zany pauses, brakes, and ruptures as a critique of contemporary subjectivity. On the one hand, insofar as one aims for continuity, seamless editing, and narrative cohesion, this repertoire of devices can be classified as producing an aesthetic of failure. Insofar as one does *not* follow the dictates of Hollywood or mainstream narrative media, but draws instead from precursors in the avant-garde (as discussed in chapter 2) breaks, pauses, and fragmentation can become a vehicle for exploring the materiality of the medium, or for 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 a 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 a (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 color sets: a blue dress, blond wig, and white face paint with blood-colored 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 asks whether they should invite Pam instead, but Tammy hates her. The solution? Beth and Tammy do a Google search.

The mere suggestion of online activity triggers a camp hysteria. Graphics begin to fly across the room to upbeat music. They enter the 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." The image catapults into 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 as finding something on Google. This is not so much a performance of "clip-on identities"⁴¹ 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 unmediated 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 ultramodern 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."⁴² 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 multichannel environment young people inhabit today. At the same time, Trecartin's work is not all multichannel noise and rupture. Rather, his stops and stutters push away meaning up to the point when they open up an alternative route for reformation.

Two last examples from Trecartin's *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 in which we encounter another campy plot circling around an "unending business meeting."⁴³ The participants are a group of young actors known as "Koreas," pronounced "careers," held together in a "lightly allegorical cloud," as Kevin McGarry puts it.⁴⁴ They wear blond wigs, ample makeup, and tongue-in-cheek office attire which Trecartin refers to the look as "work face." The Koreas perform as exaggerated, hyper-professional characters, colliding in corporate carnival scenes held in offices and airplanes that seem less like any traditional office environment than a "bump and grind" party. Accordingly, the Koreas' aim is to "assimilate cultural stereotypes and reductive international relationships as individual basic operating procedures." But their jargon-clad business-speak, repeated at the highest of possibly bearable pitches, and cut to Trecartin's trademark staccato editing, thwarts the pretense 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 homogeneous drive for "diversity."⁴⁶ The characters are so deeply immersed in this world of constant change and professionalization that 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 all of their individual subjectivities have been subsumed into this "diversifying" discourse of the global economy.⁴⁷

For Sianne Ngai, Trecartin's work embodies the aesthetic category of the zany, first and foremost based in an intensely affective character associated with camp and theatricality. Ngai's key example is Lucille Ball's *I Love Lucy*,⁴⁸ though the character type has a much longer history with the Italian *zanni*, she explains, a comic character or "itinerant servant" associated with the working or immigrant classes in sixteenth-century Italy.⁴⁹ The zany "type" has since developed into a number of familiar media icons and, for Ngai, persists in contemporary media culture as a direct response to new demands for worker flexibility, apropos of the post-industrial economy.⁵⁰ In *I Love Lucy*, as also recounted by Rebecca Porte in her review of Ngai's work, 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. In the context of this book, it is the impossible demand to shift seamlessly between things and states (channel surfing, multitasking, overlapping identities, etc.) in order to survive in an increasingly algorithmic world. As error-prone humans, we must fail. Trecartin's Koreas reflect 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 and "creative destruction" strategies that all end up looking and sounding the same.

The second example of this kind of zany in Trecartin is taken from his 53-minute video *Center Jenny* (2013), the first piece he created after moving with his troupe to Los Angeles. The city plays an unspoken presence in the piece. Hollywood has long privileged actors, Western notions of beauty, and living one's life for the camera (as Warhol ingeniously depicted several decades prior). But, instead of depicting a group of attractive young female actresses who naturally find fulfillment on screen and incite the attention of a (male) director, *Center Jenny* inverts this trope to show its underside: a black comedy of vapid females vying like wolves in a pack for the (unavailable) attention of a solipsistic male 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' cliché goal is to differentiate themselves from each other to attain idealized beauty and stardom, but the result, again, is homogenization. As they compete against each other, they all end up looking the same, all equally unattractive in their selfish ambitions. The male leaders/directors of the Jennys are equally self-involved: stereotypically misogynistic, they preach self-righteous platitudes 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 already fails to be unique, being instead "basic," just like everyone else who also strives to be unique. The contradiction of embodying both is zany, yes, and potentially tragic, if it were not treated with such comic absurdity.

IV. CONCLUSION: PACIFIED CONTINUOUS SUBLIME

In sum, throughout Trecartin's work, these three aesthetic tenets prevail: the undoing of conventional epistemologies; a deliberately forced accidental color aesthetic; and overlapping, multiple identities. Together, they help manifest the uncomfortable realization that ongoing confusion and uncertainty color the state of affairs today. But the effect of color and/or color as noise, as we now know, is never permanent or eternal. Seeing color and allowing its noisy madness to do some damage, in the end, opens up only a brief play, one that will soon dissipate into mainstream commerce and convention. As noted, we already see this in a number of the plugins and "distortion" apps readily available on a myriad of social media platforms. Moreover, given that Trecartin's work was produced in the early 2000s, and these distortion effects have only become popular in the past few years, we can also conclude that his once gauche and noisy aesthetic has helped to transform this brand of cultural noise into mainstream kitsch. To paraphrase Raymond Williams, the

avant-garde acts as the forearm of capitalism. Future aesthetic innovation depends on identifying and extracting similar moments of color as noise, prior to their appropriation as monolithic signal. My concluding illustration turns to a recent installation produced by Ryan Trecartin and his long-time collaborator Lizzie Fitch.

In their 2016 exhibition at the Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York, *Lizzie Fitch / Ryan Trecartin*, the duo presented a series of new single and multichannel videos, large-scale installations, and densely layered soundscapes carefully crafted into a cave-like labyrinth inside the Gallery's luxurious multi-room space. The subject of the exhibition, the "comfort cravings of the American psyche," was embodied by the inclusion of physical space as an integral component of the exhibition, in what they call "sculptural theaters," dark coves that expand the on-screen work into an "environmental panoramas."⁵³ The many installations inside the gallery offered comfortable seating and expansive rooms for visitors to watch the "movies" for extended periods of time. The setting matched the aesthetic of the work itself: colorful gym mats, fake plastic rocks that one might find on the set of a movie production, slabs of carpet, and comfortable movie theater seating.

Sound also shaped the space. By deploying layers and fragments of voices, nature sounds (birds, trees), and other abstract sounds, the artists created a continuous yet fragmented soundscape throughout the space, heard as one wandered from enclave to enclave. As described by McGarry for the Andrea Rosen press release, the effect generated a "kind of numbed, placid continuity."⁵⁴ But this is not the same kind of placidness one might associate with trendy meditation practices. Traditionally, meditation involves a quieting of the mind and body, a "Zen out" from the noise and chaos of the world, a reprieve from work and the stresses of everyday life. Here, however, these layered sounds and noises lend themselves to the opposite: a unified, trancelike narcosis resulting from a *lack* of quiet and stillness. As an allegory for the noise of the high-tech world, or simply the busy Manhattan Street from which one exits in order to enter the gallery, pacification is actually *stimulation*, which is to say, fuel. The concluding insinuation: we have become beings who require constant stimulation and overlapping, attention-grabbing devices to maintain any semblance of peace.

This chapter drew on Ryan Trecartin's work to offer a set of metaphors and aesthetic concepts to make sense of the images and practices of our noisy and chaotic present.⁵⁵ It also built on my earlier work to substantiate digital colorism as an aesthetic category in its own right, locating it in a new paradigm of aesthetic failure. I introduced the concept of "accidental colors," theorized as akin to "color as noise," insofar as both designate an emergent aesthetic that no longer demands clear-cut meaning or definitive signification but rather, systematic abstraction and flux. Together, the noisy color and trashy noise inundating Trecartin's "multivalent structures"⁵⁶ and "myriad" of "narratives," as McGarry puts it,⁵⁷ offer an accurate metaphor for our otherwise noisy and (tragically) trash-filled lives.