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Television Could Be Much Better

Brian Kennon on the work of Brian Bress

No shorter than a music video and no longer than a Bugs Bunny cartoon, Brian Bress' videos are constructed out of the very familiar building blocks that also create the television we watch on a daily basis. Like a TV-addicted Bruce Nauman, Bress' videos are simple, absurdly mundane performances taped in his studio in front of a single, unmoving camera. Even though it is clear that the videos are performed within the context of an artist's studio, the videos revolve around the construction of a crudely elaborate set that allows the viewer oscillation between the "absorption" of watching *Saturday Night Live*-style sketch comedy and the "awareness" of watching video art; two actions that might not be so very separate at all.

In *Over and Over*, a store-bought backdrop offers the illusion of a deep yellow forest receding into the distance. At the ground plane, the backdrop is met by a plain yellow tarp that has been haphazardly scattered with tree branches and leaves, creating the illusion of a forest floor. Casually arranged around the set are bamboo shoots constructed out of table legs and a chair that, for no given reason, has been camouflaged to blend into the forest. For the duration of the seven-minute video, a masked, shirtless Bress, crouched into a yellow plastic trash can, dances from side to side, repeating in a cartoonish singing voice, "If you do the same thing over, over and over, people won't be confused" sometimes overlapping with the chant "Change is bad!" These phrases can be read simultaneously as an art world stab at the blandness and stupidity of television and as the perfect recipe

for a successful, long-term art career.

Repetition is a consistent act within Bress' practice. Not only are the majority of his videos a single, simple idea repeated again and again, but Bress also recycles the materials from one video to another. With a quick costume change and prop rotation, each set spawns a number of videos. In *Danger*, Bress keeps the forest backdrop, swapping the yellow mask of *Over and Over* for a Gorilla suit and camouflaged cowboy hat (remaining in the trash can) to make a video featuring a paranoid gorilla with a robotic voice and a not quite perfect sense of approaching danger. This recycling also continues into the making of photographs and collages such as *Bamboo Room*, a simple photograph of the yellow forest set, revealing the edges of the backdrop. *Sometimes You Are Just a Hat* is a close up of the camouflaged cowboy hat resting on the floor of the forest set with cacti, snakes and bamboo collaged in.

As seamlessly as Bress' videos emerge from television and pop culture, they just as easily re-submerge back into it. Recently, Bress uploaded a number of his videos to the popular video-sharing website YouTube. There, Bress' clips mingle among bootlegged versions of videos from Paul McCarthy and Raymond Pettibon, *The Daily Show* re-runs and thousands of videos of teenagers lip-syncing and dancing to their favorite Top 40 hits. Bress' *Rock Your Body* meshes perfectly in this context. Set in a green room with large white windows that look out into the yellow forest, the video features Bress, dressed in

white painter's coveralls and a welding mask while dancing to Justin Timberlake's "Rock Your Body" and slowly pulling sticks from out of the coveralls and placing them into a blue vase. The video concludes when Bress has removed all the sticks from his outfit and, much like a music video, when the song is finished. Since YouTube organizes its catalog through keywords, Bress' *Rock Your Body* is presented next to not only the real music video for "Rock Your Body" but next to about a dozen videos of teenagers in front of web-cams, doing exactly the same thing as Bress (if not as elaborately).

Twenty-five years ago, artists like William Wegman and Michael Smith made video works that embraced television conventions, leaving a grey space where criticality was supposed to be. At the time, the art world's discourse insisted on a critical relationship to popular culture. Today, the basis for a separation between the art world and pop culture seems far more difficult to maintain, if not entirely unnecessary. Bress' videos are made within the context of an artistic practice, but they also make great for TV. □

Brian Bress, *Over and Over*. Courtesy of artist.

