



Taft, Catherine. California Video: Artists and Histories, Getty Publications, May 2008, pp. 54-57.

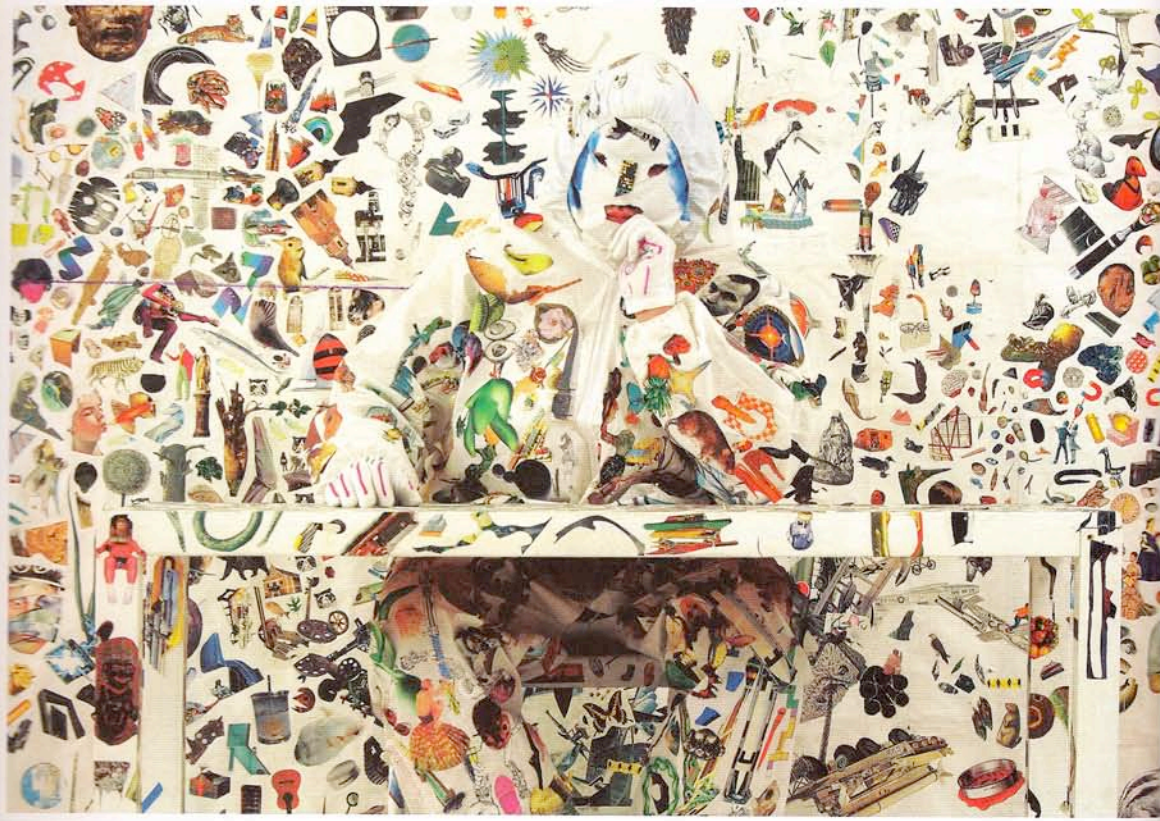
BRIAN BRESS

Born 1975, Norfolk, Virginia
Lives and works in Los Angeles, California

BRIAN BRESS'S SCRUPULOUS ART MAKING seems consumed by the material clutter of cultural castoffs, economic ebb and flow, social exchanges, and the margins of mass media. At an early age, Bress became comfortable interacting with strangers and strange objects, spending his free time at his parents' pawnshop (at one point, it was the largest shop of this type in the eastern half of the country). Among the used merchandise, cars, boats, litter, and riches, Bress cultivated unique conceptions of space and his own physical relation to things therein. He eventually began studying filmmaking and animation at the Rhode Island School of Design, building on his interests in painting and drawing (and leading to his participation in Spike & Mike's Sick and Twisted Festival of Animation). It wasn't until graduate school, however, that Bress began to bridge his investigations of two- and three-dimensional spaces. At the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), he discovered video, a medium that allowed the artist to negotiate painting, drawing, collage, photography, animation, performance, sculpture, and humor simultaneously, all of which appear in his wide-ranging practice. Bress's working model now includes building elaborate sets, costumes, and props; re-editing and recycling video footage, which also can transform into photographic prints or the backgrounds of layered compositions; and using the Internet as an extension of traditional exhibition spaces, streaming his videos to a broad public audience while challenging conventions of both art and entertainment.

With subtle criticality, Bress's videos cleverly poke fun at mainstream TV. In *Over and Over* (2006), the artist—wearing a makeshift mask, stuffed in a bright yellow trashcan, and set against a bamboo forest backdrop—slightly rocks as he repeats the jingle, “You do the same thing over, over and over, people won't be confused.” His gestures and words channel the repetitiveness of commercials, dumbed-down programming, and wacky children's shows; and like TV, it's infectiously catchy. Similarly, *Under Cover* (2007) becomes an understated indictment of fine art and the structure of its lucrative market. In it, Bress moves through a comical series of roles loosely based on the profession's stereotypes: the clueless artist, the opportunistic collector, the analytical critic, the plastic arts personified. Contained by a complexly messy set (Bress's DIY “production studio”), the video riffs on artifice while unraveling its own craft design.

Catherine Taft





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Interview conducted by Catherine Taft on May 4, 2007, at Brian Bress's home in Los Angeles, California

CT: You were explaining to me that you worked in animation and design before you figured out how to "profit from the Web boom." How did you profit?

BRIAN BRESS: In 1998, I realized that people were getting rich off the Internet. So I locked myself in my room and taught myself HTML to make money. I got a really great job as the head Web designer at a firm on Fifth Avenue in New York City, because, for as little as I knew, the people that hired me knew even less. And in 1998, if you even knew what HTML stood for, then you got a job in New York City.

But eventually you ended up in California. What lured you away from that great job? Grad school—but I went to Chicago for two years and then came out here, to UCLA. When I applied to UCLA, Lari Pittman and Paul McCarthy were teaching. The thought that I could work with these great artists that had shaped the art world in some way seemed really amazing to me. I applied in painting. I saw my animation background as this commercial track and painting as something really personal. I always wanted them to intersect and cross over, but I really couldn't figure that out. But that was another reason I came to UCLA, because you could work between many different media and no one would care.

You eventually came to the New Genres department and started making video. Did you start using yourself in your videos right away, or did you tape other things? Well, everyone is pretty vain or a little self-conscious, and that's true of me, too. It took me a while to get used to seeing myself on camera, so I didn't use myself right away. I remember seeing some of my first videos, and I'd walk into the frame to adjust something and see myself, and I was like, "Whoa. I look like that?" But it didn't take long before I started getting in front of the camera. The first video I made at UCLA was really by accident. I had painted over a photograph of a woman, and I wanted to make a sculpture based on this figure because I was "branching out" in my mind. So I made this cardboard sculpture and thought, "Oh, that's possibly the ugliest sculpture anyone has ever made and it should be burned immediately." So I took it outside behind the studios, and I thought, "If I'm gonna light this on fire, I might as well film it burning." Burning a figure is pretty dramatic, and usually you see that in protests or when something is burned in effigy. So I went out there, and someone was playing this loud techno music, and I couldn't resist the urge to dance. I went up to the burning embers, and I started dancing on them. When I saw the footage, it looked pretty beautiful. I played it in reverse, and it looked like little things dancing around my feet. The figure was coming to life instead of being destroyed. So that was the direct transition between my painting and my time-based work.

It's interesting to hear that you were transfixed by your own image on the monitor for the first time, because that's what so many early video artists say, too. Being able to watch yourself in real time on a television set was revolutionary. That a young artist can say the same thing today is a surprise, especially when we assume that we live in such a heavily mediated world. I always feel like that. Even when you see yourself in stores on closed-circuit security cameras, you're not really sure if it's you or not. It's like coming around the corner and coming into contact with a less attractive version of yourself. That's pretty intense. Once I got used to that, I realized that it's okay to be seen and to let go of self-consciousness, if it served the purpose of telling a story.

Your work doesn't really tell stories, though. No, they're not narrative stories, but some of them have parable-like content. *Over and Over* [2006] isn't a story, but it is like a jingle, and it has a message. There is a statement and a main character in a setting, and he has a message, so it's like an advertisement or propaganda.

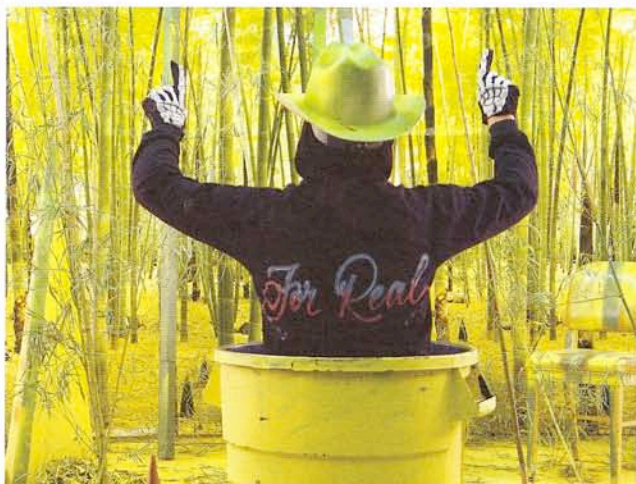
A lot of your work takes the advertisement, or newscast, or television format, and turns it into something else. I don't watch any TV now, but when I was growing up I watched my fair share. I'm just too susceptible to TV's power. When I hear that newscast music, I get a little excited—like they're going to tell me something really important. I totally buy into it, even when I know that's what they're trying to get me to do.

We were talking with Chris Burden, who did a series of commercial TV spots in the 1970s, which basically advertised his name. He explained that he thought TV was too monolithic—you could only receive it one way—and he wanted to reverse that system or get inside of it and mess with it. Today, we have the Internet, and YouTube, and all these other ways to get "inside" the system and make it two-way. That's true. But television content isn't really changing. There is new content on YouTube; or maybe it's not new, but we're just seeing all this stuff at once. It seems to me that YouTube is functioning in many ways. It's a place of political action, marginalized news, stunts, indie music videos, etcetera. But what it's doing for art is obviously the most interesting to me. I think it's a great place for art to seep into the mainstream. It's functioning in one way like a massive gallery for people familiar with the art world to find more art videos that might not be getting screened anywhere in their community. And on the other hand, it's introducing art videos to folks that might not be familiar with art in the context of a new type of television. This almost subversive introduction of art into and amongst so many other types of mainstream content is an exciting prospect, especially because I derive so much inspiration from the bits of entertainment that find their way onto YouTube.

Do you think YouTube gives people an excuse to videotape the mundane things in their lives that they wouldn't tape otherwise? I think having access to the video camera, and the videophone, and all these new technologies gives people the ability to film mundane

P-54
Brian Bress, production still from *Under Cover*, 2007 (single-channel video, color, sound; 13 min., 16 sec.).

P-55
Brian Bress, production still from *Danger*, 2006 (single-channel video, color, sound; 2 min., 28 sec.).





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things. You couldn't have a YouTube chock full of mundane things if you didn't have the ubiquitous digital video camera. But I have to say that maybe it does mean that people film more odd, quiet, weird things about their lives. I mean, the "video confessional" on YouTube is pretty fascinating.

Like an eighty-year-old man in England who just discovered the Internet? Yeah, like "Hello YouTubers! I wanna talk to you all." You know, I'm more fascinated with people being fascinated with *that* than I am with watching it. I'm more interested in the idea of all these people sitting around the campfire as this eighty-year-old man talks to them. *That* is a picture. The whole way that video art is sold and marketed today turns video into these distinct, autonomous, and "limited edition" objects. It's nice that maybe there is a way for people who can't afford to buy video to still experience the work. Not all video artists are down with putting all their work online, but I am.

We are faced with an art market right now where everything has a value; there is no such thing as an artwork having no value. With YouTube, how do you value all that ubiquitous stuff? With YouTube, it might be that there is value—not quite monetary, but maybe cultural value—that you can't put a price on. The fact that some kid in the middle of Arkansas even knows me—well, the cultural value is that YouTube broadens the art world's appeal. If some guy filming his cat can get a million views, then maybe there's an artist out there that can too. It broadens the art market's reach, and that has a value. Maybe it brings more eyes to the art world, and creates more people interested in art and more people who ultimately support the arts or seek to make their own art or whatever.

But that's what commercial advertisers are hoping for. To bring more eyes— Right. There are people making money off the fact that I spent money to make my videos. But I get to have all those eyes watching me, too. Like advertisers pay for bandwidth, they get the advertisement. Hmm... that does leave a little bit of a bad taste in my mouth.

Okay, well what about the sets in your videos? They're incredible to look at, which seems to draw plenty of viewers, too. I originally made the sets just to use in the videos, but, that being said, I did treat them as two-dimensional images, meaning I wanted a fixed frame. I want to be in control of everything, and I used the monitor on live feed so I can see exactly what is happening on the set. One of the great things about video—or at least the technology that I have available to me—is that it flattens out imagery in a way that has a lot to do with painting and what fascinates me about painting and collage. I think the complaint of a lot of people who come from film is that video is too flat, it doesn't have the same space. High-definition video is really a new chapter in video, because there is a lot of space that I can discern within its frame. But in the current technology of MiniDV, the ground is still flat, and to me, that's a gift. I'm interested in making the artifice of the set—the fake backdrops or the props—compressed into a two-dimensional image. When you see the character enter the space, it feels like he's entering a painting and not the artist's studio. I also try to make more general, archetypal spaces. It's almost like the backdrop can be a lot of different characters in the way that I become a lot of different characters. That's one of the first ways I think about making a set, that it have a certain fluidity or versatility.

What sorts of things were you thinking about when you made the sets and characters for *Under Cover* [2007]? I don't want to close

down any other interpretations, but I do have a loose explanation. I had just moved into a new studio and was anxious about being in the new space. I needed to quickly make art in the space to be comfortable in it. I wanted to make a longer video and really start to edit multiple scenes together to make a conversation. Also on my mind was how stressful, but fun, it is to make art and the idea of an art collector being an artist and an artist being a collector. One of the characters in the video is like a collector who is into the consumption of art and the whole game of art. The line that she uses in the video is "show me number one; now show me number two" and "it's a crapshoot anyway." It's a little cynical if taken just in this context, but this whole decision process about how you buy art is really funny, and this process about how art is made and how it's consumed is really mysterious. You take a chance when you buy art, but also when you make art. The ambiguity or transition from consuming to making is one thread that runs through the work.

The other thread that is really important to me is the psychotherapist character who sits in the chair kind of thinking about things. And there's a clock next to him, so you can see when your time is running up; it's toward the end of the video and your time is running up on this big therapy session. So the collector is the consumer and the psychotherapist is the critic, and then the character getting interrogated is the artist admitting that he doesn't know anything. To me, this interpretation holds water. When the artist character is getting dunked, it's a self-interrogation, which is the only real kind of interrogation the artist should be subject to. That scene is funny because it mocks tropes of movies and, on the surface, you can enjoy it as that. But to me, it's more important that the artist is saying, "I have no idea." Does any of that come through?

Having worked in a gallery, the collector character was spot on. I loved that and got it right away. And those color bars in the beginning are so typical of any piece of video art ever made. They really situate the viewer right into the language of video and its history. It was a conscious move to say that this thing doesn't exist in a vacuum. This might be a little cheesy, but the color bars are hand painted. I am so desperate to make paintings but they always end up as sets or props for the videos. That a hand-painted color bar can turn into a space and be interacted with is really rich. It's not only about the history of video but the history of painting, which is a really important connection for me and how I want to see the sets formally, their light and space, and flatly on a monitor.

The character with the helmet and the drawing all over his jumpsuit is like art embodied. It's almost like an artist assistant joke at this point—just the idea that you must be creative, and then you just go work for a more successful artist. When this character says, "From many I will make much," it's more like, "Yeah, if I had an army of people working for me, I'd be making a lot of art too!" [Laughter] The art drones ask the lead character, "What should we make?" But he doesn't know.

It's interesting that right when you were moving into a new studio space and starting your career as an artist, you sort of had to exorcise these roles and get them out of your system. Yeah! And now I feel like it was expulsive and cathartic. But it's scary to enter this business at any point—as a collector, curator, or critic, going in there and trying to figure things out. The scene in the video that clearly exemplifies my stress about being in this space is the collage set where the character is covered in collage materials. Originally, the impetus to make that suit and set was thinking about decorator crabs and how they just kind of take something from their surroundings and stick it on their head and try to blend



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in. But it took on a whole new meaning when I finished making the set and costume. I set everything up and put on that suit, and at that exact moment, I could hear every sound; I could hear every train going by, every car going by, every noise next door. I had this hypersensitive sound thing going on, and all the little images that I had cut out seemed to embody every sound I could hear. It was like I was wearing the sound and I think that in the video, the character's talking about, "I can hear bip bop bip bop" and "Oh my god, it's in my head," which is about being really fucked up in your own neurosis. The visual look of that set matched exactly how I was feeling and my neurosis.

Was it like synesthesia? Exactly, and it wasn't planned that way.

Sort of like an acid trip? Well, that's another thing.

What's another thing? I don't make art on drugs. A lot of YouTube reaction—well, a lot of reaction to art in general—is that if it's off the beaten path or "weird," it must be drug induced. And I wondered why people always thought that about me. I think the general public assumes that my videos are drug-induced performances, and they are not that at all. Maybe drugs are helpful for some people to become more creative, but I think a lot of artists make pretty trippy work not tripping. So that's it. I just think the general public doesn't necessarily have the language to accept certain kinds of art forms.

I know what you mean. On the one hand, we have art in our world so we can explore other kinds of realities without altering mental states. On the other hand, a lot of great artwork is about induced states. Andy Warhol's greatest films are about time as an upper or a downer. So, you're getting this response directly from your mainstream audience on YouTube? Yeah, they say, "Dude, trip much?" Or my favorite, "Whatever he's on, I want some." I want

to compile these comments. It's not like it bothers me, but I don't want the videos to be dismissed as a kind of drug-induced oddity. When you sit down in front of a camera and you have some idea of what you might do, and you have so much going through your mind, your subconscious just lets things out.

You can get some mean-spirited comments on YouTube, but they're kind of funny. You can tell the work is affecting people, but at least they didn't ignore it. Praise and blame are different things, but they both require a certain amount of energy. I think it's also a little scary to see a person alone in a room by themselves because it's not socialized. I made a video with a friend, and there were two of us in the room; that video got a lot less criticism. It became about play. But when you're playing alone in a room, you're crazy. When you're playing with somebody else, it must be fun.

YouTube seems to generate its own kind of "art criticism," but what about the unexpected fan base that you've developed through it? That's a really rewarding facet. I eventually realized that the videos were getting this weird attention on blogs. People who didn't give a shit about art were seeing my videos and analyzing them and had ideas about them. I thought, "Wow, these people have engaged art without really caring that it was art; without having to go to a gallery." And they had some really interesting ideas about it, too. I did a video called *Being Bamboo* (2006) about a character going in front of a set with what he called bamboo, which was really six table legs screwed together. He proceeds to talk creatively about what this object could be, "It could be a hobby horse, it could be a really big pencil." On her blog, this fifteen-year-old girl was so psyched about what the video meant to her. She understood the metaphor that a kid with some blocks can imagine them to be whatever she wants them to be. That's a basic thing, but she got it and if your audience can be as broad as fifteen-year-old kids to people who are fully immersed in the art world, then that is pretty encouraging.