

# Around Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch



Editor ISABEL VENERO

Between April 6 and August 5, 2019, Fondazione Prada presented *Whether Line*, a new exhibition project conceived by Lizzie Fitch (USA, 1981) and Ryan Trecartin (USA, 1981), in its Milan venue. Commissioned by Fondazione Prada, their large-scale multimedia installation represents the first output of a creative process begun in late 2016, aimed at realizing a new movie that investigates the perpetual promise of "new" terrain and the inherent instability of territory. This exceptional project was the starting point for this special feature. Special thanks to Nicolò Scialanga.

Artists Lizzie Fitch and Ryan Trecartin’s collaborative union is coming on two decades deep. Since meeting in Rhode Island in 2000, they have lived in New Orleans, Philadelphia, Miami, Los Angeles, and now, Athens, Ohio, making generation-defining movies and installations. Their work relies on a long credits roll. It’s the movies! You need performers, costume designers, sets, props, and more.

Fitch and Trecartin’s casts and crews are summoned from an extensive network of friends, family, and fellow professionals. Among them are famous faces—like Telfar Clemens, an award-winning fashion designer, and Ian Isiah, a Gospel singer and erotic icon, much-needed in our era of sexual recession—as well as “backstage” hands; Adam Trecartin, Ryan’s younger brother, is a genius craftsman, builder, and engineer.

In the same way that Fitch and Trecartin’s work merges what’s best about major motion picture production (fantasy, ambition, specialty role allocation, and giving credit where it’s due), with what’s still vital in the art world (freedom, freakiness, theoretical thrusts, and critical standards), with the seductions of the Internet (polyvocality, collective individualism, speed and political gravity masquerading as folly), these two artists know how to integrate outstanding contributions from their many collaborators, all of whom come to set with different skills and personalities.

Novembre spoke with thirteen core collaborators, and the principals, Fitch and Trecartin. Here, they address first

meetings and lasting impressions, stand-out memories, favorite looks, and style notes. Many of their testimonies relate to Fitch and Trecartin’s latest public offering, *Whether Line*, an installation and movie at the Fondazione Prada, that was filmed on many acres of rural Ohio land. *Whether Line*, to those who were involved, represented a maturation, a family reunion, and a crowning consummation of years of collaboration in art and life.

**Fiona Alison Duncan**

**Enjoy the extended version of “Around Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch”, online on [novembremagazine.com](http://novembremagazine.com) now**

# Ryan Trecartin:

“The movies access a network of creative individuals who are all active and who all have a strong vision and voice, people who value and celebrate the complexity of community.”

“It’s just like people are Funky, right?”

“In small towns people aren’t gaming labels as much so local conversations around identity are maybe less affected by the more dominant conversations that revolve around these issues, yet there is still a thoughtful desire to care and engage so it isn’t escapist. People are just individually fluid and willing to let things be odd.”

“There is lots of queerness and expressions of bisexuality that stand completely outside of developing queer-norms and that is very exciting to me — I had forgotten how open-minded, nonconformist, and unpredictable Ohio can be as a container for so many contradictions, politically and culturally.”

“There is a generative sprawl that happens, so we often end up making more movies than we originally intended.”

“We think of our movies as something we grow rather than simply execute according to some plan we’ve created. As they develop, we work in a way that is about generating opportunities to complicate and evolve our ideas rather than than finding ways of making them more digestible.”



Photo by Rhett LaRue

“Capitalism affects the English language in such wild ways and trains our brains to think of words as being positive or negative. We forget to activate the mutable potential of a word — and when we do, when we morph language, culture is ultimately changed in the process.”

# Lizzie Fitch:

“Ryan and I met at school in Freshman year. We had some of the same friends. At first we were like, ugh, that person, about each other. But quickly that changed. We just started working together immediately. Our friendship was really wrapped up in projects. It wasn’t, let’s go smoke a joint in the quad. It was, let’s go make something.”

“He’s my best friend.

There are so many things that are just merged at this point.

We do them together.”

“We’ve just been talking a lot about, it’s cheesy, but country versus city. And these ideas of territories, boundaries. And it’s funny because the political situation... We bought the place before Trump was elected. We didn’t realize... Even just the run up to the elections contained a lot of the seeds to that brewing. But it wasn’t like we said, this is happening culturally, and we should go somewhere that’s a hotbed for that. That’s not how it happened at all. It was more like two rivers flowed and met as one...”

“I think moving is a huge part of our creative process.”

“It’s not that we left LA because we didn’t like LA. We left LA because we wanted to continue this... It seemed like it was time. There’s so much that I miss about all the cities. Specially LA. And Miami. And Philadelphia.”

“There’s thought behind how everyone is interacting with everyone, even though it sometimes gets very fluid and organic.”



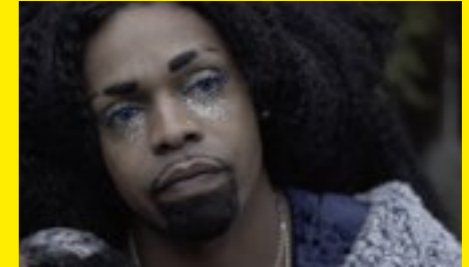
# Ian Isiah:

About the style in *Whether Line*:

**“Voodoo Doll Glam...  
Dirt Road Rosie...  
Amish Ashly...  
Disney Deborah...”**



“I’ve learned more than anything that if I have an idea, even a ‘mustard seed’ of an idea, if I believe in it strong enough, and with the right team of course, I can make it become a reality. That’s what I’ve learned from watching the both of them manifest in their work.”



“He would tell me the project he’s working on in the most imaginative way possible, and I would usually just gag and become really excited to see how or even where I would fit in any of this lol.”



“Times are changing.  
American Politics are weak.

Culture is Rising.”

*“Ian sings beautiful gospel music and seems completely expanded by his relationship with religion and never limited by presumptions. I love that, allowing things to coexist inside yourself... Just following your own creative instincts wherever they lead, not being constrained in the exploration of your musical vision. Ian has always represented to me a kind of fluid authenticity... It is totally inspiring.”*

—Ryan Trecartin

**I could keep going lol”**

# Telfar Clemens:



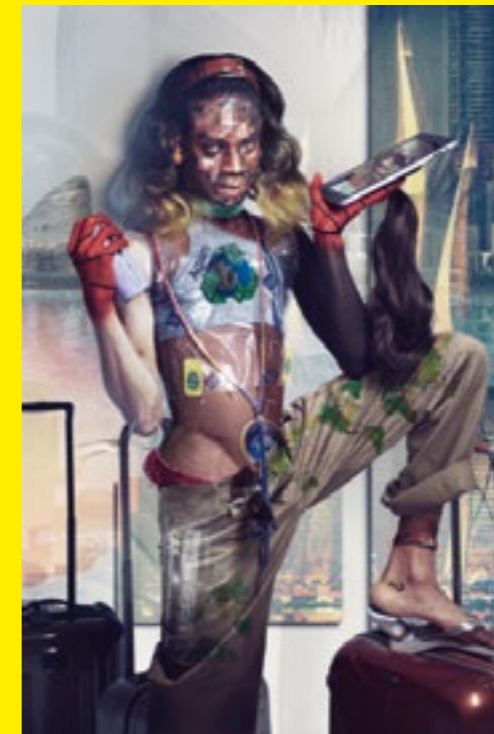
**“The movie is so long because it’s like life. He’s living in his movie.”**

**“Like it could go on forever. It’s relatable to life or suburban life, the idea of having land and all this space but still your community is involving you. No matter how far you go you are surrounded, by people, you are, you know.”**

**“When we met, I was like, oh we’re friends cause Ryan can do the splits. He can do them both ways.”**

**“But mostly sideways.  
And it just seemed, like a lot simpler time.”**

**“Going to Ohio is also a new thing for us. We got to go Columbus for a White Castle trip. I brought Ryan to White Castle — he saw when I was inducted into the Hall of Fame.”**



**“One of the main things that Lizzie has helped me with is this idea of installations and structures and sets... but relating it to a retail setting, or an environment for a show.”**

**About the Athens property: “The thing is they have little houses. They even talked about building one on the property that would be my house. I have a fantasy that it’s like an honor system clothing shop, you come to the property and you leave money in a jar and you buy a shirt.”**

**“My character in *Whether Line* I’m kinda like the mayor, the mayor who is a party girl.”**





"NOT"

FLAG FLIPPER

# Mary Ann Heagerty:



“At the end of the day, we just trust that it’ll be good, because we trust Lizzie and Ryan’s vision, so we can be more free and have fun.”



“Ryan was always filming. I don’t know if his goal is to bring people together, I think it might be a happy accident. I think he loves his friends and he loves community, but I don’t think that’s the goal. He was always directing as a child. He’s told me stories about how he and his little brother named Adam, who does a lot of the sets, he would give Adam messages written on rocks and direct him to do kinda crazy things. It’s like he was always directing the people around him. It’s just funny because he’s not pushy... he’s just a quiet sweet guy. But I think he was the kind to make people do shit when he was little.”

“I remember being so impressed with that, and he said,

it’s no fun.”

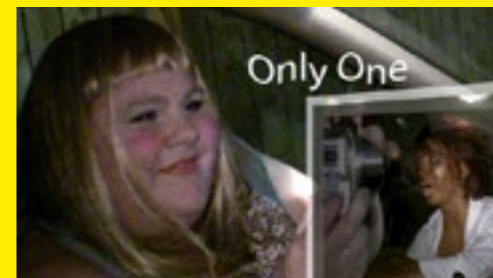


‘If I’m doing it alone,



“Ryan won this award from the Guggenheim. I can’t remember the year. It was live-streamed. I remember watching it, and Ryan said, when he accepted the award:

‘If you want to understand my work, read the credits and digest them.’”



“His parents are definitely amazing.”

“When you meet them, you’re like ooooooh, this is how. He has pictures on his instagram of halloween face makeup, his dad did the makeup, and it looks like makeup from his early movies.”



# Murphy Maxwell:

## How they met:

“I’d just moved to LA when they were working on all of their stuff in their studio in Burbank, for *CENTER JENNY* and all that stuff...”



“It was a crazy house. Really old Hollywood mansion in Los Feliz. Different styles were built onto it at different times. They threw a crazy New Years party in 2010. I didn’t go, but there were remnants of that party in the house for many years after, when we lived there.”



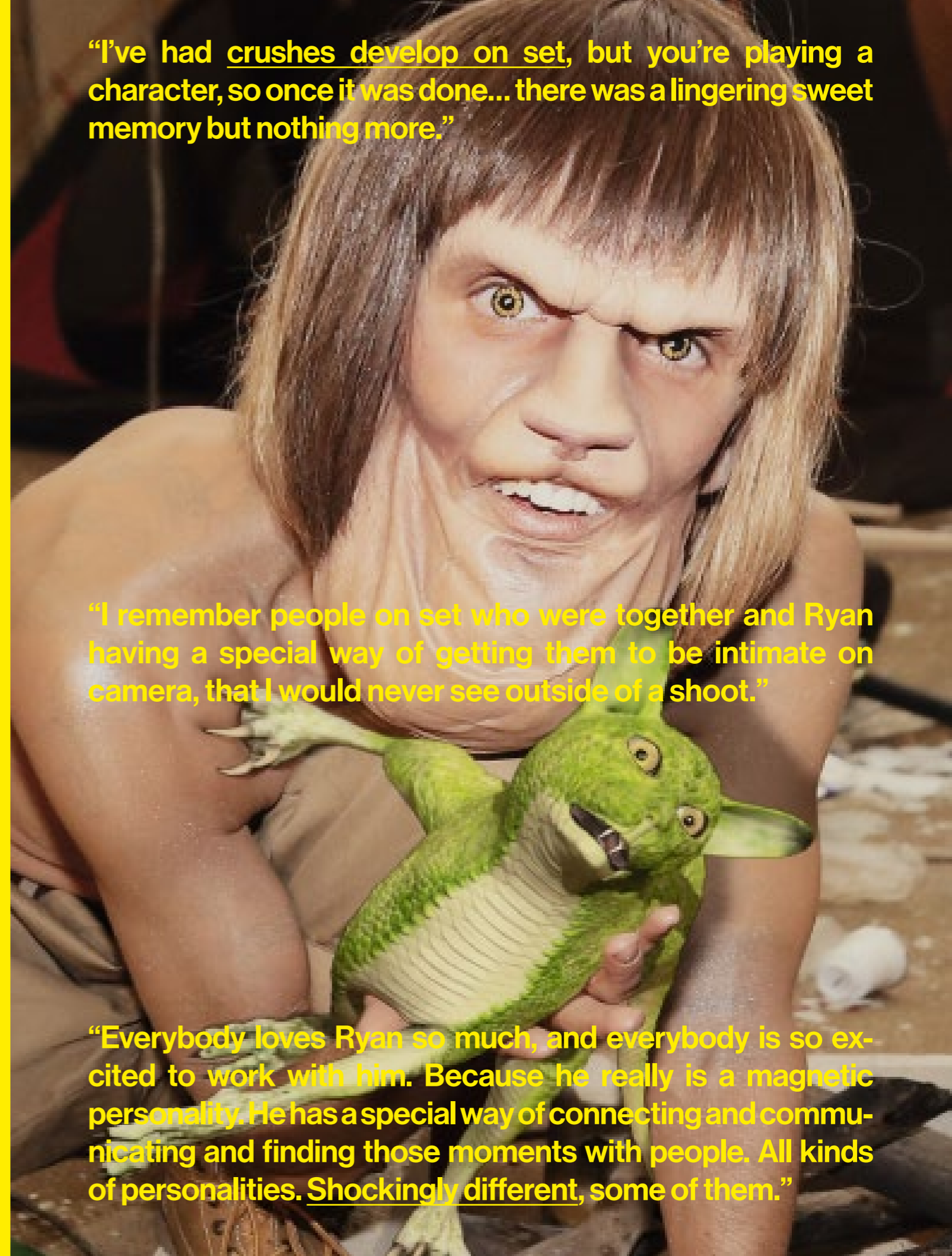
“Their ideas are constantly changing. They give instructions and assignments but they leave a lot to be to filled in.”



“I’ve had crushes develop on set, but you’re playing a character, so once it was done... there was a lingering sweet memory but nothing more.”

“I remember people on set who were together and Ryan having a special way of getting them to be intimate on camera, that I would never see outside of a shoot.”

“Everybody loves Ryan so much, and everybody is so excited to work with him. Because he really is a magnetic personality. He has a special way of connecting and communicating and finding those moments with people. All kinds of personalities. Shockingly different, some of them.”



# Janiva Ellis:



“LA relishes in a level of campy glamour.”



What kind of makeup?

“... like half smoky half blurry.”

“Kind of like the makeup you do when you’re younger and you’re like, I’m going to be like this when I’m older.”

“And then the other part was this gradient.”

“I was there for about three days and was there with a lot of other friends from New York.”

“You know it’s interesting to think about it now because I forget that what was manifest from that experience was a movie.”

“It felt like a really natural way to hang out and read. It was a really nostalgic feeling. There was a particular time in my life that felt very much about expressing my identity through dressing up and this kind of fantasy...”



“For me and what it feels like...

Like referencing things infinitely,

like things folding in on themselves,

over and over again, and players talking back...”



# Veronica Gelbaum:



“You know, I’m not really a person that collaborates with lots of people, I’m really not that kind of person.”

“...Ryan and I did a live performance at a club night in LA. It was really different because it was kind of off-the-radar. It was like really cute and cool. It was at Wildness, a club night started by Wu Tsang and Ashland Mines at the Silver Platter.”



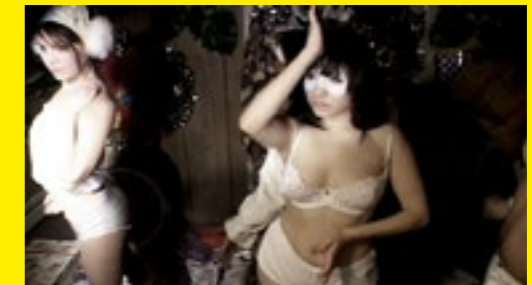
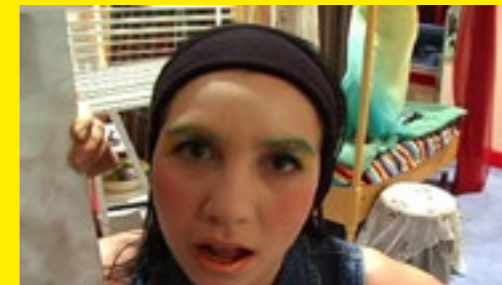
“The politics of this new batch of movies... I feel they’re politically a little more risky and more dysphoric than some of his other movies.”

“Our characters look so funny and act like gods...”

On *Whether Line*:

“I didn’t know if it was something crazy, like an action movie or something like that. Where we were shooting, in the middle of the night, there was always a torchlight.”

“I liked bringing all these people into a shipping container with a flamethrower.”



“I’m not performative in my everyday life at all. I do have a low-key Instagram storying action. Maybe I could be seen as a *little* performative.”

On her characters:

“Basically Colony Panderson is a really dominant, passionate landowner. I don’t know, sort of victimising the planet. I’m always playing the same sorts of characters. It’s this weird little tyrant character. I’m not very much like the characters I play.”

# Rhett LaRue:



“I was working with the people who did the cement pouring for the Lazy River for *Whether Line*. I made them match diagrams, and scaling regions of the river, so that they were digging at the right depths, and getting the right shapes that Lizzie, Ryan and I decided on.”

“I’ve been full-time pretty much for the last 6 years or more.”



Animations by Rhett LaRue

The 2010 New Years Party: “It was very campy ahead of time.” There was a pole dancer in the living room. It was also their housewarming in a way. It was a microcosm of a movie process but also more like nerd camp. Making movies can be more like endurance and discipline.”

“People come in and out and bring what they can, and often it’s just about whether they’re available.”



# Peggy Noland:

“I was completely blown away by the absurdity of what I was seeing, and also loved that it was being taken seriously by the art world, even at that time, it was just incredibly inspiring and exciting to see real bonafide weirdos to get the attention they deserve.”



“I couldn’t grapple with what it was or why they were making it, and that’s what was so exciting.”



“It feels so pure, I suppose.

I think one of the trappings of professional artists is you have to start thinking about making money, and how it will fit into capitalism.”

“They work really hard to not have to consider the usual boxes people feel they have to put themselves in. They encapsulate the spirit of being artists. They are trying to create a different experience.”

“I think the biggest stand-out memory is seeing their new space in Ohio. It encourages artists, their friends, and their fans, to not limit yourself based on what the art world wants from you. I just love their kitties, their love for the things around them, and the care for their food, and friends, and pets. It’s just a sweet story.”

# Solomon Chase & David Toro:



“With this film it was a bit different... we were able to see the story evolve and unfold from beginning to end which is incredible, just the way their minds work...”



“In this case it was also contextual, understanding Athens, Ohio, meeting people they’d met, the aesthetics — patchwork cars seemed to be reflected in the patchwork Hobby Barn they designed and built.”

“I think you can see the impact of Ohio as a quintessential Purple State, but how in reality it feels strangely futuristic — and open, full of diverse perspectives.”



“The film reflects a lot of political paranoia of today, from a post-sustainability/deep adaptation movement away from coastal regions, to conflicts between info-capitalist city liberals and rural residents with economies built around resource extraction.”

On Lizzie and Ryan’s collaborations with DIS:

“We also did a ‘where are they now’ fashion shoot with the teen stars of *The Re’search* in Miami two years after it was shot, for our annual summer trends story.”

“We had Lizzie design our first office, DIS HQ, complete with chairs chained to dumbbells and purses, a greenscreen surveillance system, and tiled bunk beds. She also designed our exhibition/retail store DISown at Redbull Studios in 2014 — she killed it...”

“The scripts are of course amazing... Often you don’t really know what you’re saying, but it’s interesting because the ideas of the film do kind of click somehow, even when you’re not sure what’s going on — and that leads to actors kind of channeling Ryan’s use of language and thematics into amazing riffs.”



*I Can Barely*

# Raúl De Nieves:



**“We really just kept in contact via snail mail and e-mail. We didn’t meet for about seven years, face to face.”**

**(Raul was based in SF then, Ryan was in New Orleans & LA)**

**“I moved to NY, he moved to Philly**

**— I got to work on I-Be Area”**



**“It felt very serendipitous, very open to interpretation, of what can be done with the characters and the film script. I always feel it’s good to try and follow what the narrative is saying, but definitely there’s always the freedom to interpret some of the words.”**



**“You kind of have no idea, even as you’re performing, what it’s going to be.”**

**“It has so much transformation.”**

**“I try to not analyze the characters so much, because that’s not the point. I think it’s more about seeing how each character has mannerisms that make them individual to who they are, and maybe from those you can make more assumptions of who they are. I think the beauty of it, everyone can make their assumptions from the character... Mannerisms as body language, ticks. I think his characters become known by their mannerisms, the way that they speak, their body language is really important...”**

**“I remember talking to Ryan, and he just wanted to make musicals. I feel like, when we’re filming, you get to see this live, over-acting experience.”**



“So fun...”

“It’s always serious.  
There’s always a seriousness

because you’re doing  
something meaningful.

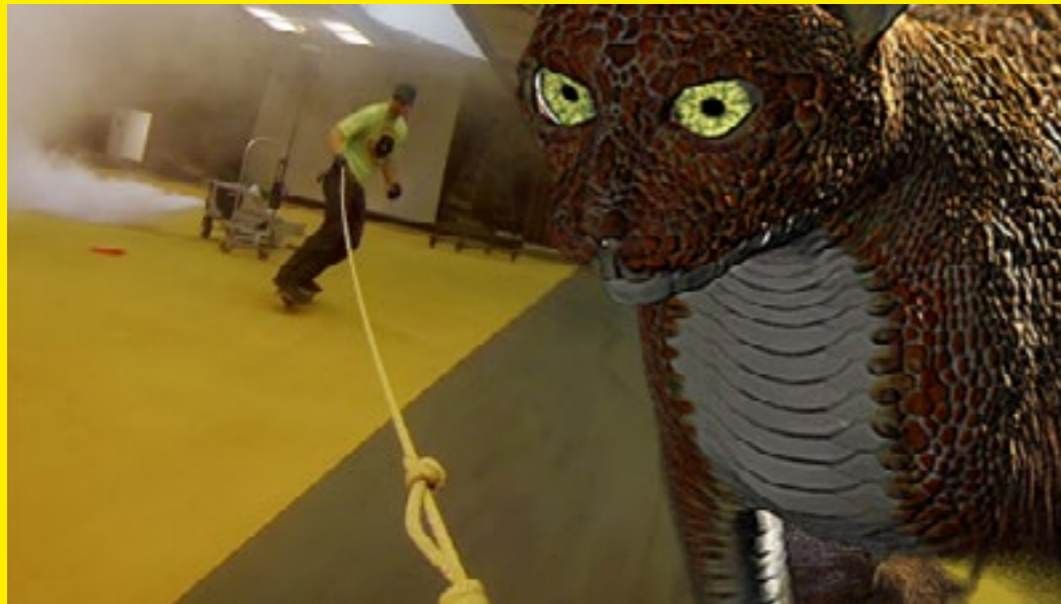
People take it very  
seriously.

“Serious fun.”

# Adam Trecartin:

“It is a tall order to describe growing up in Ohio because there are so many different parts and we moved around... I certainly never considered Ohio to be completely Midwest. In Athens, where I have lived for the past 15 years, it is more Appalachia than Midwest.”

“During our childhood, we seemed to bring unlikely groups of people together and I think that was due to Ryan’s directorial role even as a child.”



“When experiencing the aftermath of one of their shoots, I can’t help but feel a sense of disconnect from reality. The overwhelming silence in contrast to the visible scars and wounds of loud actions and good times that overtook the space the night previous. The energy is still there somehow. That type of energy is what makes working for them enjoyable because they are really excited about creating.”

“I think Ryan is passionate about his work and the desire to fulfill that passion motivates him. He is motivated to succeed but he doesn’t let others determine what that success should look like...”

“I had been an assistant to an artist in the past before working with Ryan’s studio. Once I got into constructing sets and sculptures for them, it became clear to me they don’t like systems... but rather constantly create and reinvent their own approach.”



“Just being a brother, I have always been interested in what Ryan is up to.”

“Best way to find out is to get on board, right?”



Drone footage by Sergio Pastor

“They really came here and started from scratch. It created new pathways for how they work, create, collaborate. Something I believe that’s courageous.”

# Akeem Smith:

“I think she basically said that we will all be quote unquote successful and that we will all be collaborating with each other on things that will be seen on a wide scale.”

“For *CENTER JENNY*, I was sort of doing a lot of hair styles on myself. Wigs. A lot of that is found stuff at Walmart, super generic.

“Ryan and Lizzie don’t start working on things before getting the group involved. I kind of riff off what they already have going on, and kind of bring what I think of as Middle American normality, irony.”

“For *Whether Line*, I was coming up with slogans in my head, like Swing State Apparel... things that were like Bi-partisan Ambiguous kind of clothing.”

“I do remember when we became a thing: We were in Miami, and one of our friends did a weird psychic reading, with all of us in a room. She kind of said a lot of the things that would happen with all of us. Ryan, Lizzie, David, Solomon, Leilah, Telfar... Yeah it was crazy...”

“I wanna say *Whether Line* was my favorite, because I was sober.”

“I think when things are going bad, politically, it’s the best time for creatives. Generally speaking.”



“I don’t know what kind of rules they were looking at, but I felt it was just so contemporary. That was the part that really blew me away — their sonic practice.”

“**Completely strange.  
And completely  
present,  
and also,  
really informed  
by music history.**”

## Jason Moran:

“I felt like they took over PS1 maybe 10 years ago, 8 years ago. I went because a curator said you should really see that. I went and I was consumed. I felt like they ate me alive. That’s what the work did. The music I felt was the newest, most brave music I’ve ever heard.”

“The voices in the piece are rarely at normal speed. It reminds me of these Pachinko places in Japan, with all this noise existing at once, from all these games.”

“It was intoxicating to perform.”



Photo by Sean Grattan

“You know the box in the sky that deer hunters hunt from? It looked like that and a spaceship. The band was kind of inside this structure.”

“Originally, it was about the idea of jazz, and kind of the death of it, and the death of it occurring in these jazz festivals.”