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Memoirs of Ourselves Watching TV: The Disconcertingly Real Work of Brian Bress

by Andrew Berardini



To Andrew Berardini, the greatest achievement of Brian Bress's seemingly wild, surreal work is that it makes us keenly aware of a major phenomenon that now affects all generations: the solitude of television. From toddlers sedated by the saccharine pap of advertising and cartoons, to adults lobotomized by commercial TV, we must ask ourselves whether entertainment is something external, useful for a brief moment of reprieve, or something deeply internalized that has shaped our mental processes...

At 6am on almost every Saturday morning from the age of 5 to 11, my eyes would snap open and I would drag my blanket in a walk-run through the hall to the sofa in the living room, bare feet shuffling through carpet and slapping across linoleum. I'd then proceed to pull myself out some standard tools: a bowl, a spoon, some milk, a choice sugary cereal with a corporate character beaming brightly from the box (Tony the Tiger for Frosted Flakes: "It's Greeeeaaaatttt!"; Snap, Crackle, and Pop, gnomish and red-cheeked, singing the song of breakfast for Rice Krispies). Everything in place, I'd settle into the overstuffed cushions, yellow synthetic-cotton blend blanket wrapped snugly around me, and for the next six uninterrupted hours, I would do what was my god-given right as an American child in the 1980s: watch television.

I didn't learn this until much later (in fact yesterday), but network television was looking for a place to bundle advertising for children and certain kinds of cartoons were cheaper apparently than others. Your average moving picture contains 24 frames per-a-second. For a live-action, show this 24 frames can be pretty darned expensive, what with health insurance and sets and actors and their parents and the agent to watch the children and toilets, etc., a little too expensive for Saturday morning apparently. In cartoons with 24-frames a second, in that last innocent era before Computer Generated Imagery (CGI to the kid-on-the-street), each frame had to be hand-drawn, less expensive than hiring actors, but still apparently fairly pricey. To save a little money and besides the kids wouldn't notice (I don't think I hardly did), the networks would make Saturday Morning Cartoons at sometimes as little as three or four frames a second, which as you can imagine slows things down a bit, making the movements crude and limited. Mouths pop open to reveal black holes, words fall out, then mouths snap shut. A character would be standing, then the boingy sound of high jump, cut to a static image of the character in the air with a foot extended, their face in a rictus, backed by a dramatic, whooshing sound, then cut to the audible crash of them hitting their target.

These limitations of course create a weird kind of sluggish movement. Sometimes, mouths didn't even open. It gives one a surreal sense of time, matched of course with the simple sugars and carbohydrates surging through and the regular program interruptions for commercials, or rather, the commercials being regularly interrupted by the cartoons. These ads were pornographic in their gratuity, showing kids so joyful their faces were beyond orgasmic as they flicked the controls of their radio-controlled boats, cars, tractor-pulls, and monster trucks, as their babies wet themselves with giggling regularity, and as varyingly fuzzy, always smiling cartoons busted through walls and skateboarded down mountains offering us a variety of flavored sugar, slogans repeated two dozen times throughout the mornings. This is as close as I'll ever likely get to heaven.

Of course, somebody noticed. Maybe not my parents, but somebody's observed the look of idiotic bliss on their child's face and realized that the combination of consumerism, sugar, and passive entertainment was probably not such a great idea. The government got involved. By the time I was smoking dope behind the bleachers, the epoch of Saturday Morning Cartoons had come to a close.

Before this though in the tail end of the vaguely Utopic 1960s, the world famous Sesame Street with its muppets and number/letter sponsors was invented under the rubric of "educational

commercials” and whose founders, as quoted in Michael Davis’ history of the program, Street Gang, wanted to “master the addictive qualities of television and do something good with them.” I suppose this is like mixing in vitamins with the heroin, but it worked! Saturday morning cartoons died, Sesame Street lives on, with much higher production values but a similarly slow and goofy sense of logic, which move with a breaking skit driven discursion found on other often absurd kid shows in the 1980s, like the Canadian “You Can’t Do That on Television” remembered most for its characters, preteens and teenagers, hanging out in a geodesic dome and randomly getting slimed, which was patently bright neon green.

This is a special kind of logic, a pacing, a set of vibrant colors, inhabited by friendly monsters trying to teach me how to prevent wetting myself, whilst two channels over a commercial for a doll that does, and with glee from both its preschool mother and the announcer, sometimes randomly getting slimed. This is the kind of logic that shaped the minds of almost my entire generation, I read that something like 77 million Americans once watched Saturday Morning Cartoons.

The work Los Angeles-based artist Brian Bress functions on this same strange logic, but this logic after a time. It’s as if we were able to rapidly evolve all this content, this weird, brightly colored alter-reality of children’s television with all its strange commercial content and sometimes Utopic notions by about 25 years, past the zits of the teenage years, the brief exhilaration of college, the mid-twenties breakdown, and into the long, somewhat sad, featureless Jimmy Corrigan plateau of life that stretches from about thirty to fifty, where you’ve accepted your limitations and the world’s and only occasionally weep, late at night after washing down a microwavable meal with a Diet Coke, whilst watching an infomercial, with every iteration of the phrase “And That’s Not All!” only deepening your sobs.

Bress’ body of work consists primarily of short videos from a few minutes to the latest (recently premiered during Art Basel Miami Beach) being about twenty, involving a series of collages, a few odd elements particle-collided into each other with moments of intensely bright colors in a highly sophisticated visual tableau, across which move any number of characters, generally played by Bress himself.

It’s probably a good moment to try and describe at least one of the characters in Bress’ elaborate troupe in some detail. In *Status Report* (2010) which debuted at the artist’s exhibition at Cherry and Martin in Los Angeles, one character enters into the opening bars of Billy Joel’s *Piano Man* and is dressed the part, the song cutting out in a crash as the character jumps into the white stage, the words “It’s Because of the Depression” written in a classy, looping font on the clean, white wall behind him. For those that don’t know, *Piano Man* is one of those songs that’s moving and just a little bit cheesy and that you hope to never hear when you’re at a bar drinking by yourself. It tells the tale of the glint of joy that a piano player gives to a crowd of hopeless, lonely drunks and their dead-ended bartender. All the stories contained in the song are about failed aspiration, the only one with any hope to get out is the piano player, who people constantly ask, “Man, what are you doing here?” Bress’ “Piano Man” hops on stage in a white suit with white shoes, both lined with black and white piano keys as is his tie and collar. His face is obscured with a silver sequined mask without features. Many of the faces of Bress’ characters are obscured, likely a consequence of having so many characters being actually

played by him, but has the effect of making them seem bizarre allegories. It's only in his most recent video that he started using actors. Bress' *Piano Man* moves in an awkward dance, often asking questions and offering comfort in a pinched, high-pitched voice. This strange apparition and his particular voice and jangly movements is but one character amidst five in just a single video.

The other characters in *Status Report*, who seem to converse with each other across cuts, include an orange jump-suited and be-helmeted astronaut flying in a tiny capsule only big enough for his body, across a black space speckled with collage with a few figures moving through it also enveloped speckled with magazine cut-outs, both offering a vision both satisfyingly complex though a little disorientating. Another is the "Underminer" who constantly mutters in a rural accent from the mouth of his cave (what looks like drawings on cardboard), "Are you asking me about my work or my hobby?" Another wears a box outfit over his body painted with an Ellsworth Kellyesque green and blue triangles on a black field, which can also be seen on the wall behind him, and on the box over his head he (she?) wears an "Interview with a Vampire" t-shirt, Tom Cruise's white vampiric face a stand-in, as he squeaks out "He can't even take care of himself". Another is a Pumpkin orange-suited, tied, and socked with a black-and orange fabric pulled over his face who moves furtively in the background along the wall of a set painted with a colorful quilted pattern, in the center of the set sits an oversized Chinese vase, which he moves and shift about.

Every character throughout *Status Report* seems to be enmeshed in some way with failed aspiration, when the Underminer repeats over and over again, "Are you asking me about my job or my hobby?" One can't help but think of the hard question of artmaking for those who don't make a real living doing it, which one might venture is more artists than the art world might care to count. The Underminer is this mechanical voice of aggressive reason, the kind most middle class parents with more "professional" aspirations for their children might naggingly embody. The Piano Man offers comfort, the Kellyesque with the t-shirt head, whispering doubt. Each one of us manages these impulses at one point or another, to make them manifest might be schizophrenia, but it also might be to attempt to make form and narrative out of a set of internal impulses we all have to manage in order to get through life, and which artists likely feel most painfully in their regular psychospiritual spelunkings. The pacing in this video, like much of Bress' work, isn't the energy-drink fueled haze likened to other video artists of the YouTube age that invoke the particularly language of internet television, but one of the queer slowness of four frames per-a-second.

In his most recent video, *Creative Ideas for Every Season* (2010), the area of inquiry expands wildly out of the often static, single camera shot that defined the aesthetic of much of his earlier work such as *Over and Over* (2007), into a narrative captured from multiple angles, though maintaining Bress' native pacing. An actress (the first in any of the artist's work) repeats the gnomic utterings of Agnes Martin's art Torah as she drives in a cardboard car along a gray landscape populated with shifting collage and typically Bressian characters: Yarn Man, who's covered entirely with yarn and has serious trouble eating his yarn spaghetti, Cartoon Man, who has a brief cameo of artistic aspiration in making a clay bust of his own mouthless face with its phallically protuberant nose, Bead Man, whose oddly shaped corpus is covered entirely with beads, the Mechanic, a near duplicate of the Underminer with his Appalachian

teeth, and *The Storm*, a duly conclusionary-type figure. The characters end up with her in her car, interrupting and distracting her monologue of adages that come off as both confusingly goofy and somewhat moving (“The best things in life happen to you when you’re alone;” and “Driving on without wheels is called discipline”). The most oddly beautiful saying comes not from Agnes Martin’s mystic ruminations on Modernist grid painting, but from a book the Mechanic pulls out whilst looking for the Driver’s Manual to fix the car, Richard Kollath’s *Year-Round Wreaths: Creative Ideas for Every Season*, from which the video takes its title. Like much of Bress’ work, it’s emotionally moving but from a sweetly and disorientatingly goofy place. This melancholic drive punctuated by the weird humor of the characters finds at its heart this book about creativity for average people, adherents of home crafts. Not to proscribe too specific a meaning on this, or any other of Bress’ videos whose joy comes from their inexplicability, but one can’t help but feel that this odd coterie is having a meditation on what it means to make things, how heartbreaking and illogical is the whole process.

I wouldn’t say necessarily that Bress is creating his own world though, it often feels that way, or that his work is surrealistic or psychedelic, easy refuges to explain what we encounter that seems weird or irresolvably colorful, but I will say that he’s carving something out of our reality, not disconnected from, but likely too intimately linked to the fractured logic of consumer capitalism (especially as it worked over on children) for us to admit its truth. Sit down, watch television with a child with a good handle on a channel changer, or watch it with a grown-up weaned on TV, cruising for something, anything, to watch on cable. Transcribe the content in your head as they flip from a serious seeming news-report on a fake political scandal of the week to the commercial for adult undergarments to Cal Worthington and his dog Spot selling Chevies at crazy prices to the Buddhist boy monk who can bend air and will unite the tribes to a home shopping network selling “genuine faux” diamonds with a close up that fills the screen with its cubic-zirconia gleam to an army of shirtless blue dwarfs chased by a balding sorcerer to an ad for a game about being a powerful capitalist who’s main goal is to fleecy their fellow entrepreneurs into bankruptcy and control the business of the city (called by most, Monopoly). You’ve transcribed it in your head, all the snatches of commentary and catalogued with your eyes, the flashes of color, the quick changes, the light of the television dancing over your face, its dumb repetitions making new memories. Would you call this surreal? Perhaps. More uncomfortably though is how real it is, how everyday. With humor and heart, Brian Bress captures this disconcerting memoir of our own loneliness of watching television, the comforting fractured logic of channel surfing, only modestly dented by YouTube and streaming online content (which might even be more fractured than regular television, even if less passive). The entertainment washes over us, a Macguffin for a bigger mystery of modern life of which television is only a symptom.

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