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HOW TO GET AHEAD IN TELEVISION

New York artist Alex Bag became the medium she loves and loathes: TV. In her high-grain, lo-def video critiques, art-school grads, gallerists, punks, PRs and vacuous presenters are all subverted with savage wit, while she also turns the camera back on herself. “Autobiography: it’s this malignant, festering, oozing thing that will not die no matter how many times you burn or stab it,” she tells *Francesca Gavin*



Above, previous page and opposite: ALEX BAG, *Untitled (Project for the Whitney Museum)*, 2009. Courtesy of Team Gallery, New York.

NEVER MIND THE INTERNET: back in the day, the medium that brainwashed humankind more powerfully than any other was television. And one of the most interesting artists to critique and take over the medium is Alex Bag.

Bag is the ultimate TV viewer – squeezing, absorbing, loving, hating and regurgitating TV to art audiences in a refreshing, inventive and thought-provoking way. “Hell yes I watch TV,” she says. “Not as much as I would like, which would not be humanly possible. I love how it’s so reliable. So dependable. Always there. Always giving... selfless. It’s Ouroboros right there in the living room. Just eating itself contentedly,” she notes.

Bag was born in New York in 1969, and without her there would probably not be Ryan Trecartin’s confessional hyper-Americana or Kalup Lindsay’s soap opera switch-up. In Alex

Bag’s work, identity is constantly fluid, the representation of femininity is perpetually in flux. “All gender roles are role play,” she says. She was also an early pioneer of TV glitch art, before the waves of YouTube make-and-do flooded the collective virtual psyches.

The work that made Bag’s name was “Fall ’95”, from the same year. The DIY confessional film depicts her as an art student recording the growing pains of the art school experience directly into a VHS camera. Interspersed with the student protagonist’s development and thoughts, Bag added small segments like scenes glimpsed from a changing remote control. They ranged from a lo-fi toy soap opera about bunny murder to fake chatline sex ads, to a comedic take on dated video art.

Bag is the queen of pop metamorphosis, a mantle she could conceivably steal from Cindy

Sherman. Like Sherman, she has used herself as a medium, twisting the process of performance to suit her sense of satire. In her films she personifies a cast of over-the-top characters, advertising clichés and Hollywood divas. The whole of audio-visual archive culture is hers to be reused and reworked. She highlights the ideological mechanisms that we suck up unawares. Her work is an ode to trash TV and its melting, ever-changing sense of meaning and identity.

“Shapeshifting is a hobby that I would wholeheartedly recommend to anyone with a fractured psyche,” Bag says. “It’s a relatively healthy outlet to drain perpetual pain, disappointment and yearning into.”

Apart from Bag’s deft performances and transformations, what makes “Fall ’95” so enjoyable to watch is how it highlights the stupidity,



ODES TO TRASH TV: Alex Bag, in disguise and on the box

hypocrisy and motivations of the art world itself. It's a vein that has run throughout her practice.

Art is a source of humour in "Fancy Pantz" (1997), depicting a terrible art dance troupe, and 2001's "The Van". In the latter, three artists (all played by Bag herself) are filmed in the back of a van, talking about their work on the way to an art fair. Each describe their work, all perfect contemporary artwork clichés. The gallerist "Leroy Laloup" is equally as risible, exclaiming, "I'm the best, my gallery is the best and you girls, you're the beat! You're like the coolest, sexiest, hippest pieces of art known to man."

What's interesting about examining the structures of the art world itself? "What's that tattoo on Angelina Jolie's stomach?" Bag wonders. "'Destroy what you love' or 'Eat what you love' or 'Eat what you destroy'? Whatever it says, that's my answer." (In fact, it's "Quod me

nutrit me destruit"; "What nourishes me, also destroys me.")

There is a sense of disillusionment or disintegration in much of Bag's work. Her characters are often moaning about their lot, their creative failure, their disappointments with life. She reveals the flipside of the superficial character of TV culture and the upbeat, positivist rhetoric of America, and her work illuminates the darker side of contemporary capitalism. The character in "Fall '95" moves from youthful teenage rebellion to utter disappointment for a creative future. "Failure is an option!" My high school football coach used to scream that at us before every game and I guess it sort of stuck."

"Untitled (Project for the Whitney Museum)" is another perfect case of the disillusionment of TV culture and the inner life. The film was commissioned in 2009 for the Whitney Museum's

foyer. Bag is the clinically depressed star of a Seventies-style children's TV variety programme, talking to her puppet dragon sidekick while apocalyptic psychedelic visuals play on the screen behind her. In the 1970s Bag's mother hosted children's shows including "The Patchwork Family" and "The Carol Corbett Show"; the artist even featured as a child on screen.

Not surprisingly, there are autobiographical references in her work, though it could appear Bag hides herself behind the cast of characters in her films. "You can run, but you can't hide from autobiography. It's this malignant, festering, oozing thing that will not die no matter how many times you burn or stab it. Obviously some people I've been are closer to 'me' or my demographic equivalent, but I've also tried to move far, far away, to leave my troubles behind, as it were. No matter where you go, there you are.



ALEX BAG, *Untitled Fall '95*, 1995. Video still. Courtesy of the artist and Team Gallery, New York.

Most clichés are true, especially when you're hallucinating."

Bag is an incredibly entertaining comic writer – something which is innately part of her approach. As she points out, "when depression and anxiety have been clinically diagnosed, throw away those psych-meds, slap on a clown nose and smile smile smile." Her typewritten stream-of-consciousness texts are spread throughout the monograph published last year by JRP Ringier to accompany her retrospective at the Migros Museum. Bag describes the process in typically poetic terms: "My writing process usually begins with a quick trip to the Amazon, where I gather the leaves of certain plants and the bark of certain trees. I grind them into a sort of poultice, which I spread on rye toast and devour. Next I place some heavy stones on my eyes and wait.

MAKE 'EM LAUGH: "WHEN DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY HAVE BEEN CLINICALLY DIAGNOSED, THROW AWAY THOSE PSYCH-MEDS, SLAP ON A CLOWN NOSE AND SMILE SMILE SMILE"

Sooner or later my ancestors and a few obscure saints come swirling into focus, ranting and raving, at which point I rush to the nearest typewriter and start translating."

Despite the power of her performative skills, Bag largely works on her own. "I have horrible, crippling stage fright. I don't mind performing, I can even force myself to enjoy it, it's being

watched that ruins everything. Over time I've devised certain ways to avoid this conundrum. Being alone is best, but I've found a few relatives and friends that I'm not afraid to play with." There is a sense of intimacy that emerges between Bag and the camera, which she often addresses directly. "When the fourth wall is smashed to bits and the lady looks you right in the eye, then you know it's TV you're watching." That intimacy is also revealed in the sound elements of her work. In "Untitled Fall '95", for example, accompanying the speech is the constant sound traffic passing in streets near by. "Before 'reality TV' there was something much closer to reality," she says. "Something much noisier."

Bag has exhibited a large number of mediums alongside her films – drawings, sculptures, collages, photographs, and small TV-based video snippets made from found bootleg foot-



ALEX BAG, *Coven Services*, 2004. Video still. Courtesy of the artist and Team Gallery, New York.

age. Yet this ephemera seems to support and become overpowered by her film pieces. In her films the mechanisms of capitalism are stripped bare. "The funniest part is when all the recent art school graduates become disillusioned and bitter and rush en masse to the nearest advertising agency recruitment center to sign up. It's hilarious when they use all their art school knowhow to sell crap to their generation. It's so clever when they re-invent clever," she notes, tongue firmly in cheek. In her 2004 film "Coven Services for Consumer Mesmerism, Product Sorcery, and the Necromantic Reimagination of Consumption" Bag created fictional adverts for brands such as Chase Bank, Monsanto and AOL Time Warner by her gothic witchy agency. A critique of the mesmeristic nature of the global PR machine is implicit in the title alone.

This March Team Gallery in New York is bringing together Alex Bag's first artworks – a public broadcast TV series she created in collaboration with Art Club 2000 member Patterson Beckwith between 1994 and 1997. "Cash from Chaos/ Unicorns and Rainbows" was a weekly 30-minute TV show the duo created in the days when public TV channels would enable general audiences to broadcast their 15 minutes of fame. It established the approaches in her work – Bag's absorption by the medium she comments on. "Actually hijacking a regular time slot on a real TV gave us the greatest sense of joy and accomplishment. Being in our early twenties didn't hurt either," she recalls.

Although the materials she was using at the start of her career were contemporary, they have quickly become retro and historic: the lo-fi grain

of VHS, the DIY framing and texture. "Is VHS retro? I'm so old I remember when it was new. That 'grain' is the voice of the disenfranchised, or used to be before everything went hi-def and dumb." Her work exploits and highlights ideas around the audience's short attention span – something that started with TV and is only increasing in the digital era. "The faster time marches forward, the more compelled I am to retreat backward. I have this anxiety about history. I keep feeling like I'm forgetting something or I didn't know it to begin with." Bag's retro imagery and approach is a very sordid security blanket against the wave of so-called progress.

Alex Bag and Patterson Beckwith, *Cash from Chaos/ Unicorns and Rainbows*, March 29 – April 28 at Team Gallery, 83 Grand St, New York. TEAMGAL.COM