

## Alex Bag and Patterson Beckwith

TEAM GALLERY



Alex Bag and  
Patterson Beckwith,  
*Cash from Chaos/  
Unicorns & Rainbows*,  
1994–97/2011, still  
from an eight-channel  
video installation,  
combined duration  
458 minutes.

Between 1994 and 1997, Alex Bag and Patterson Beckwith produced sixty-odd hours of two public-access cable-TV shows, *Cash from Chaos* and *Unicorns & Rainbows*. Their recent exhibition condensed it all to 458 minutes. The installation looked like a children's playroom crossed with a media-conglomerate viewing room mocked up by IKEA. Walls were painted glowing blue-screen blue, with a mural of test-pattern color bars at one end. Oversize red beanbags, gray-and-red hanging pod-chairs, and red shag carpet invited visitors to veg out before eight cube monitors on the floor. It looked innocuous, but there are reasons why Bag and Beckwith's programming aired at 2:30 AM, and why they were ousted from even this permissive slot. (Hence the show's two iterations. When *Cash from Chaos* got the boot for recycling scenes from remarkably gross porn, the slacker impresarios came back with *Unicorns & Rainbows*, continuing their low-tech sampling from bad TV plus mesmerizingly boring visits to various "attractions"—but laying off the prank calls.) On a recent afternoon, a parent who'd brought kids to the apparently friendly setup got suspicious. "Can I listen?" the mom asked a girl about four years old, whose skull was dwarfed by headphones. "Is it just music?" "No," murmured the small consumer. "It's about plastic surgery." For Alex Bag, such moments must be a triumph.

Bag and Beckwith were, the former says, "mind-melded" in the 1990s, and their project lends itself to thoughts about collaboration. Produced weekly, without any budget to speak of, the shows are remarkably consistent in their sparkly, psychotic appreciation of the waste-spaces of broadcast. Understanding Bag and Beckwith as a hinge generation—linking Dara Birnbaum, Mike Smith, Mike Kelley, and, of course, Cindy Sherman to Kalup Linzy, Ryan Trecartin, and Tamy Ben-Tor—is interesting. Technophiles might discourse on the already touchingly retro aspect of the work. ("Television . . . [is] like the ugly, crude, kid brother of film," Bag has said. And the plodding, fat uncle of YouTube.) Personae, parody, and self-display are relevant critical points, especially from a culturally satirical feminist perspective, as in the art of Harry Dodge, Stanya Kahn, or Mika Rottenberg. The completist angle is important, too, the tantalizing—or is it nauseating?—idea that everything ever streamed through a screen is archived somewhere, to be cut, spliced, and made new.

Why analyze? Better simply to report that Beckwith visits a Teriyaki Boy franchise to get a demonstration of its roll machine. A John Cleese look-alike discusses a chimpanzee named Congo who makes paintings. ("It's hard to believe this is a picture by a chimpanzee, because it's so well-composed.") A McDonald's training video explains the six steps of counter service ("Step 2: Suggestive Sell or Sell Up"). Bag, in a red fright wig and Nike sweatband, yaks on her landline to an air-freshener customer-service person; later, wearing a molded-plastic mask of a

man's face, Beckwith phones up Vaseline to ask "an embarrassing question." A clip from the sitcom *The Facts of Life* repeats until a character crowing "Terrific!" starts to sound as if she were crying "Horrific!" A bread-machine infomercial examines misshapen mistakes and causes thereof ("not enough liquid"). Bag and Beckwith visit a sheep farm. "What are they called? Kids?" Beckwith asks. "They're called lambs," the shepherd explains. Back at McDonald's, Bag cruises the drive-through wearing a dragon mask adorned with hot-pink fur. A pet koala gets a bath and a zookeeper retrieves its sperm. Then there's "the Lion Queen," whose quest to remake her face in the image of a big cat so absorbed the preschool-age gallerygoer. Everything on that particular monitor is, in fact, about art. Before Congo and his paintings, we catch Charles Manson offering words to live by: "If you're going to do something, do it well. And leave something witchy. Leave a sign to let the world know you were there." The mom had whisked the kids away by then.

—Frances Richard