INTERVIEW WITH ED FORNIELES

Katie Guggenheim: So, Ed, we've been installing your show for two weeks now. It's an intense process and so it's good that we've stepped out of the gallery and come to the park. I'd like to start by asking you about the website. It exists online, and people can access it there, but it's also presented on screens in the gallery and it's an important part of the exhibition.

Ed Fornieles: The website aggregates content from thousands of users, search terms and hashtags on a bunch of different platforms, like Tumblr, Instagram and Google, to generate different compositions. To begin with we've started feeding it with the most popular sources and search terms which key into the show. We're getting a lot of nails, newly-borns, porn, food porn, and selfies.

KG: How do you source the content though? Which hashtags do you search for?

EF: Popularity is a defining logic but there's also the thematics around the show – the family – and whatever is popular at the moment. Coffee is good: #coffee #cafe #cafelife #coffeeaddict #coffeelover #coffeeholic #coffeegram #coffeeoftheday… Sneakers are a good example of something that will always be popular but the content changes, so generic hashtags – like #instakicks #sneakerhead #sneakerfiend #shoegasm #peepmysneaks #flykicks – would have pulled up different images this time last year and will pull different images this time next year, and into the future.

This exhibition marks the birth of the site. It will grow over time, incorporating more and more sources, such as Google News, Pinterest, Facebook, Twitter, and spawn more and more compositions and layouts. We're also getting into big data, saving each file used so we'll have a record of the kinds of images people are using and developing trends.

You know, I think every time someone uploads, comments or reposts, they are asking themselves the question 'who am I?' and that's what I'm interested in.

KG: What's exciting about the website, but also slightly terrifying, is that the content is streamed live, so whenever someone uploads an image on a Tumblr account that you're accessing, or uses a search term that you've selected, then it appears on the screens in the exhibition. What degree of control do you have over the content of this work?

EF: Well, for example, there is pornography and that's because there is a lot of pornography online. That's the reason that that's there. It's important. Particularly in relation to the idea of the family and the household: I think it's the landscape we all exist in: one family member is in their bedroom searching for Hentai on Tumblr while in another part of the house someone's reposting interiors on Pinterest and someone else is updating their Linkedin profile.

In terms of the aesthetic success of the compositions, I have control when I'm setting it up but that's all relinquished the moment it goes live. From that point I'm interested in a ratio of success: how often the sources chime with each other.

KG: It raises questions about responsibility, though. How do you position yourself in relation to the content that is produced?

EF: Generally I like to work by building a structure where stuff – performative actions, people's online realities, immaterial experiments, games – can play itself out. I create a structure that then gets inhabited, and that might be the studio, or the production of a website. I suppose the responsibility – for the moral and the aesthetic side of things – is mapped out in the construction of the platform. There's no wrong or right and because everything is dictated by the momentum and the sources it's feeding off.

KG: It's a bit like starting the car and then going and sitting in the back seat… You're a participant in, or even an observer of, a situation that you've set in motion. What interests you about that as a way of working?

EF: What's most exciting is the moment of loosing control. At that point I am equal to other participants. And that, if it can be achieved, is good. I think a lot of artists ask what material they should use, what sort of form or subject matter they should be interested in… but I feel like I'm building this big machine that has its own logic. When the machine is telling me what to do, that's when I'm at my happiest.

KG: What do you like about that?

EF: That I have no control over it. With the performances, I like the moment when I loose control and people are just doing what they're doing. That's important.

KG: Why is that important?

EF: I think the idea of the auteur – of designing something – is limited, because everything is pre-set, whereas I have no idea what the end product will be and I quite like being shocked and slightly disturbed by what comes out. Escalation is important to me: to keep pushing and pushing and pushing until either it breaks or it starts working.

KG: You've had a large team of people working on this show, like a strange extended family. As well as a team of assistants and technicians working on the install you've also had programmers, a choreographer, dancers, even a tailor: it's like the crew on a film set.

EF: That's definitely a model I subscribe to. Often I find myself saying, 'when we're making work' – it's always a 'we' because I'm always just one person in a crazy production and that's exciting. I'm interested in mass collaboration and dialogue. With every film that's made you have the director but also the cinematographer, the writer… there's this mass of energy that will make the film a reality.

KG: You moved your studio back to London from Los Angeles for the summer and you've been working there with a team of assistants. You held a series of parties, making use of elements that are now in the exhibition, like the hot tub and the barbeque. You also had a party for kids and a hot tub party at Chisenhale during the exhibition install.

EF: Especially at the studio, the function of the parties was to generate material, dirtying, patina-ing, generating objects… it was important for this work to be inhabited. I love mess and I have a great pleasure in existing in a dirgy studio environment.

KG: There was a very intense energy around the studio and the group of people there. By the end you were even wearing matching shirts. How close did this environment come to the situations you've set up in previous performances and events with large groups?

EF: The studio also became a structure or a platform, like I was saying before; a platform in the same way that Facebook is a platform: it doesn't tell you what to write but provides the context for you to interact with your friends and represent yourself and broadcast to other people. *Dorm Daze* (2011), and the other live performances that I've done, have hopefully become a platform for people to inhabit. The studio as well.

KG: The hot tub was certainly inhabited…

EF: The hot tub is important. A lot of people in California have hot tubs and it's the sleaziest place in the house. It's where the parents party when the kids are out and the kids party when the parents are out. As soon as you enter the warm, bubbly water something flips. With the performances and the parties I'm interested in the genuine experiences people have: when people stop thinking and they're just simply acting. Only in retrospect can they make sense of their interactions, that's an interesting place.

KG: Is there a parallel there with the way people behave online?

EF: It's so easy to hate online. I've been trolled before and when you meet the person who's been trolling you in real life they can't maintain it anymore and the whole attack breaks down. Online environments allow certain ways of thinking and speaking. When you meet someone in real life you have to review your behaviour.

KG: The exhibition is quite overwhelming. How would you like people to feel when they enter the space?

EF: I like the idea that people would be, like 'oh my god, whoa'. The environments that the exhibition is taken from are very high-octane, like the shopping mall, the LA garden, like Disneyland. As I was saying about the performances, when someone's in character and they stop thinking for a moment and they're just in it… I think that's exciting if you can do that in a gallery context: if you stop thinking and you're just in it. If that could be achieved for a millisecond then I'd be quite happy.

KG: Could you explain what's happening with the lighting and the music?

EF: There are cycles going on in the lighting, from light to dark, and that's reflected in the music, which is mainly taken from film soundtracks. It's this idea of narrative: a beginning, middle and end. It normally ends on a happy note, sometimes a sad note, and in between it takes you on a journey. There's a different experience to be had from looking at the website, or at a sculpture, when listening to a happy song or a sad song. Likewise, your initial perception of the exhibition when you enter depends on what point the lighting cycle is at. Everyone has a fundamentally different experience and no one can see everything: I can't see everything, there's just too much.

KG: Could you say something about the decision making process behind the sculptures? The gazebo and the platforms, for example, are taken directly from Google Images – if you search for 'contemporary

garden design' then they are some of the first results – and we just made them out of ply.

EF: That's true of a lot of my work, that I use popularity as a defining logic, so with the websites, it's search terms and hashtags. I like the idea of choosing popular imagery that's happens to be in the general consciousness and just downloading it, almost, into the sculpture. The images in the hot tub are simple associations from a general, party emoticon culture. Of course the Eiffel Tower goes with the glass of champagne, which goes with the heart, which goes with the lipstick…

KG: *How do you feel the work in this exhibition relates to the traditional notion of sculpture as self-contained object?*

EF: I see the sculptures as nodes in a big network. The sculptures point to the website, which points back at the performances and other pieces of work. It's this odd matrix.

KG: *What about the 'modern family'? How do they fit in? Why did you take the title of your show from the TV series?*

EF: The family is important. Society replicates itself through the family: it's how we all came into the world and where we define our norms. In the show there are sculptural works that point to roles. The trousers are definitely an authority figure in the room. I read them as maternal but I think that's because my mother wore the trousers in our household. For other people they are the father's.

The big fat man is 'father as man-child', who is at the heart of Homer from *The Simpsons* or Peter Griffin from *Family Guy*: a character who negates his responsibilities by entering this animalistic, child like dance state often provoked by simple pleasures like beer.

KG: *This is all coming from an extremely conservative place, which sits awkwardly in the context of art, where a more radical political perspective is the norm.*

EF: I think the artist always tends to be the indie kid and they define themselves against the central narrative, whereas I think looking at the centre is important. I like to think of this work as a mirror: not a passive device but one that makes you aware – you notice your hair isn't quite right, or the spinach in between your teeth – but you become aware of yourself within a context.

I've come under attack for some of the misogynistic content in my

work: the porn in this show, or performances, when people have adopted certain archetypes that I've given them and then found themselves behaving in certain ways or being treated in certain ways. Like the *Psyops* project two summers ago that went a bit dark. There was someone called Matt who took on a character called Nick for a few months and he ended up being quite messianic. He knew how to manipulate people and he did. When he came out of the character he was quite disgusted with that character and how it was in the archetype but also in him as well.

The work is supposed to create a sense of unease. Stereotypes and clichés are very important. Like in *Modern Family*, real change in society requires a mutation of the stereotype and without that no real change has occurred.

KG: We've cast dancers in the roles of the central characters in Modern Family *and one performer will inhabit the exhibition every day. You've described them as 'human gifs'. Could you explain what you mean?*

EF: Their movements are very slight and repetitive. The logic of it is a bit like Scrooge going back in time in *A Christmas Carol*, when he can see reality but not interact with it. They might meet your eye, but that's a coincidence. There might be a moment when you feel like you have a genuine interaction but it's actually a re-run: it's a videotape going back and forth, which feels a little unsettling.

KG: In this light some of the motivational slogans in the show seem a little ironic, or at least disingenuous.

EF: They're not ironic at all. 'Be yourself' and 'we are one' are the two main statements you find everywhere, from online quotes to advertising slogans. They're truisms that you hear again and again. Also, there's this thing where although we are born into the cult of the individual, we see ourselves as this giant networked society at the same time. There is an odd tension between the statements in the show.

It's like the *Lego Movie*, which I love and you should watch if you haven't seen it: 'Everything is awesome, everything is cool when you're part of a team'. Feeling like part of a team or part of a group during the install has been fun too. Struggle is quite important, I think, and when you struggle together something interesting happens.

Ed Fornieles interviewed by Katie Guggenheim, Exhibitions and Events Organiser, Chisenhale Gallery, September 2014.