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Single Black- and- White Feline Finds Love at Biennial

With wacky videos and performances riffing on sitcoms, personal ads, and class lectures, Ben Coonley has won over YouTube and art audiences alike

BY LAMAR CLARKSON

Ben Coonley is a new-media prankster. Using the tools of consumer technology—PowerPoint, YouTube, Photoshop—he turns media formats and genres inside out. He has packed movie-theater trivia slides with factoids about avant-garde cinema, edited a talking cat into a sitcom, and turned tedious formalist film styles into slapstick. Perhaps his best-known work is *Valentine for Perfect Strangers* (2006), which was featured in last year's Moscow Biennale and has attracted more than 244,000 hits on YouTube. To watch it is to see the media machine turned in on itself, the wires yanked out and plugged into all the wrong sockets, the stimuli zapping away at one another instead of at us.



The video is presented as a personal ad made by Coonley's cat, Otto. Speaking in a delirious, helium-deranged Mickey Mouse voice (with subtitles), Otto makes his appeal for friendship using his favorite YouTube clips. With the inspired desperation of an undergrad pulling an all-nighter, he leaps from the musical *Rent* to Walter Benjamin to the fortune-cookie wisdom of Balki Bartokomous, the Balkan cousin in the 1980s sitcom *Perfect Strangers*.

In a breathless final montage, Otto takes the place Balki's roommate had in the sitcom's opening credits and invites the viewer to take Balki's, so that together they may, in the words of the show's soaring theme song, "stand tall on the wings of a shared dream." It's pop nostalgia, cute overload, and sheer absurdity all in one.

After a year with no response to his ad, Otto decides to expand his search with a new video created for viewers in Russia, where, conveniently, a remake of *Perfect Strangers* is currently running on TV. "Dear Different Brother," Otto begins in Russian, riffing on the title of the Russian series. At the Moscow Biennale the video played in a loop with the English version.

For all their prankishness and knowing sentimentality, the videos are

Otto has edited himself into the final montage of *Valentine for Perfect Strangers*, 2006, and invites the viewer to take the place of Balki (Bronson Pinchot).

genuinely uplifting—even earnest. Like a karaoke singer injecting himself into his favorite song, Otto is carrying out “a contemporary sort of wish fulfillment,” explains Coonley, who grew up in the Boston suburbs and now lives in Brooklyn. “I don’t think karaoke is cheap or bad. It’s as good as you can get if you’re agnostic and still want a sense of joy.”

Using appropriated footage and shooting his cat are pragmatic choices for Coonley, 31, who makes his living teaching—this fall he is a lecturer in Princeton’s undergraduate visual arts program—and doesn’t have the budget for actors. His cut-and-paste method also enables him to critique the

was more distorted than the last. The film is both a dotting tribute to Edison and straight-up slapstick. “This was before MTV’s *Jackass*,” he adds. “Vomiting on video then seemed a lot more shocking than it does now.”

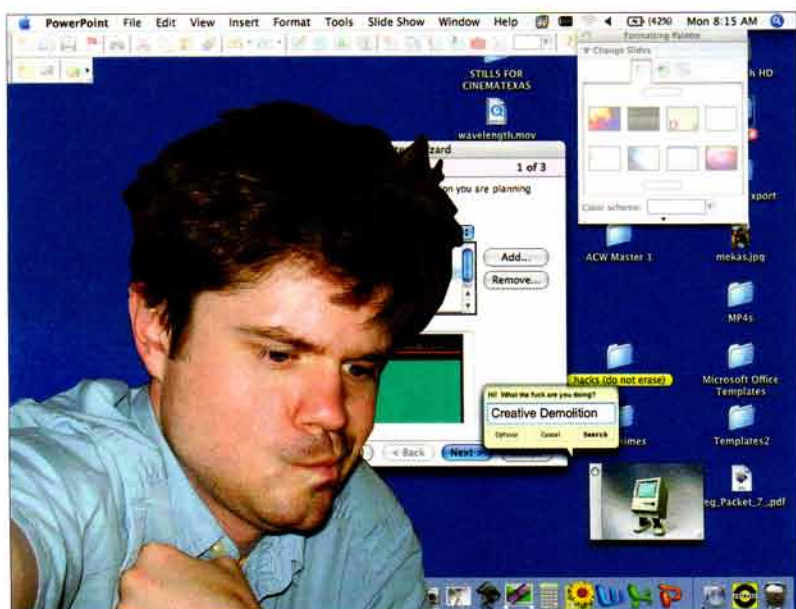
In 1998 Coonley sent *Pie Eating 101* to film festivals, and it was accepted at Rotterdam and Cinematexas. In Rotterdam he met the filmmaker Peggy Ahwesh, whom he admired for her skill in manipulating both pop-culture and avant-garde ideas. He knew that Ahwesh taught in the M.F.A. program at Bard College, and he applied to study there the next year.

While he was in graduate school, Coonley had a job videotaping literacy instruction in Boston public schools. After days spent observing strictly regimented lessons, he began to cast himself in his own videos as a teacher—“a sort of stuttering unreliable semipro expert,” he says—whose best friend is a talking mechanical hobbyhorse. Coonley and the pony demonstrate things like the Texas two-step and how to run a football play. The vignettes have the slightly forlorn quality of public-access TV, enhanced by his character’s desire to connect with an inanimate object.

By the time Coonley completed his master’s degree, in 2003, he was showing his work regularly at film festivals. The same year, his pony videos were screened at the Art Institute of Chicago. Video Data Bank director Abina Manning saw them and decided to distribute them.

In 2006, when Pacific Film Archive curator Steve Seid invited Coonley to participate in a PowerPoint symposium at the Robert Flaherty Film Seminar, the artist decided to test the software’s potential for performance art. In the resulting piece, *Otto Content Wizards* (which he has also performed at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., among other venues, and will present this winter at the Austin Film Society in Texas), the artist plays a lecturer whose computer crashes, erasing the PowerPoint presentation he has just begun. Otto pops up on-screen in a party hat and guides Coonley through building a generic version of his presentation. But Otto’s advice is flawed—he tries to salvage the talk by playing some of his favorite *Rent* lip-synch videos from YouTube.

This battle between the forces of productivity and entropy also powered Coonley’s performance last winter at the New Museum. Inevitably, his character loses control—in this case thanks to a bout of accidental time travel—and his high-minded lecture on perception devolves into side-by-side videos of cat feces and chocolate. As ever, Coonley is both professor and class clown, expert and exhibitionist. ■



Ben Coonley plays a lecturer whose computer crashes in his PowerPoint performance *Otto Content Wizards*, 2006.

media using its own language, says Lauren Cornell, director of Rhizome, an affiliate of New York’s New Museum that focuses on new-media art. “He recognizes how much we internalize the media’s logic,” she adds, so he approaches it from within.

“All of my college films were these structuralist/materialist jokes,” says Coonley, a self-described film-theory junkie. (He is referring to the school of film that focuses on the medium’s inherent formal attributes rather than on narrative.) As a student at Brown University he made *Pie Eating 101: 101 Years of Pie* (1998), in which he and a classmate reenact Thomas Edison’s short film of a pie-eating contest. “Except we ate ipecac and were vomiting all over the place,” says Coonley, whose big grin and rumpled wholesomeness would be well suited to an Old Navy commercial. He made a one-second clip of himself vomiting and converted it between analog and digital signals 101 times, so that each successive version

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