

That's Entertainment



Oedipusmas Special (film still)

Berlin collective Conglomerate make TV-inspired videos bridging the gap between art as form and content

Text by Alicia Reuter

From the May 1969 exhibition "Television as a Creative Medium" at

New York's Howard Wise Gallery, to Jasper Johns appearing in an episode of "The Simpsons", television and art have enjoyed a long and sometimes contentious relationship. To date, many works featuring TV can either be classified as New Media or Post-Internet, and only recently have artists turned to the format of television programming itself as a framework for further exploration. These efforts have generally been presented as either talk show-style programmes or shows

events themselves. So, they thought, "Why not make these digital creations the goal of the process?" Thus, having extended invitations to Ethan Hayes-Chute, Derek Howard, and Dafna Maimon, the five artists and film-makers formed Conglomerate, and the Kinderhook & Caracas space has been, at least for now, dedicated to this new undertaking.

Soon they began producing a series of videos – heeding the hyperactivity of present day thought processes, as well as the rapid-fire presentation of computer screen content. These include: "Desde el Jardín", a titillating telenovela-inspired drama written and produced by Calero and Maimon; "The New Domestic Woodshop", produced by Hayes-Chute and Howard, in which a reluctant Bob Vila-esque host introduces viewers to the magic of modern woodworking; "Telethon", a collaborative effort, which takes the enthusiasm of North American telethons to new extremes and Kline's "The O.K. Show", a clever riff on children's infotainment programming. The results are subversive, transcending both the pretensions of art and the vacuity of most TV and internet offerings. Presented in 'blocks', as the group call them, that leave the impression of having zapped through 30 minutes of an outlandish YouTube series, the visual and emotional moods of the segments differ dramatically.



» Much like the lazy joys of flipping through stations, the content jumps from one idea to the next – the visual and emotional moods of the segments «



(Top) Behind the scenes of *Desde el Jardín* at David Dale Gallery (David Dale Gallery)
(Bottom) Installation view from *Oedipusmas Special* at 1646

dedicated to abstract video works. Provoked by this history, in 2016 a group of Berlin-based artists formed Conglomerate, a collective existing in the space between a medium for the masses and high culture. And the history behind the project is an interesting story in itself.

By early 2016, artists Christopher Kline and Sol Calero's project space, Kinderhook & Caracas (named after their respective hometowns in upstate New York and Venezuela), was already a success. Founded in 2011, their carefully selected programme, meticulous installations and collaborations with thought-provoking artists from the German capital and abroad had won them fans among the city's seen-it-all art crowds and critics.

After five years and two dozen gallery shows, Kline and Calero realised their digital exhibition media was enjoying a wider audience than the

All images courtesy Conglomerate, photos: Jhoeko

The appropriation of the on-screen format has proved to be persuasive. As Howard points out, it's made the project "visible to audiences that may not regularly go to galleries and watch videos, especially in their entirety... The fragmented nature of Conglomerate's 'blocks' fits to how people are used to consuming video content, but the assembly of all those little parts into a solid 'block' creates a viewing experience that is at once schizophrenic yet oddly cohesive." Moreover, by presenting their videos online and rejecting the tradition of showing them either at white cube screenings or on TV networks, the group has greater autonomy and bigger audiences. "We wanted everyone to be able to see [our films] everywhere, not to be exclusive, to give it away," says Maimon.

One of the thrills of Conglomerate's work is waiting to see who they'll collaborate with next. As Maimon explains, one of their founding concepts is to draw in artists from their social and artistic milieus in Berlin and beyond as collaborators. "Early on, we decided to never have thematic curation – in the sense that no 'block' has a particular theme. This lets us work with artists we know or know of and want to work with." The list of past and future participants is long and impressively diverse, including Keren Cytter, Jeremy Shaw, Christine Hill, Dull-Tech™, Stephen G. Rhodes, Ming Wong and Hanne Lippard. Some of these artists have been invited to produce pieces independently, but this year, the role of Kinderhook & Caracas as a project space has been to proffer their rooms to artists for the creation of a film set turned exhibition – or vice versa.

Compared to the often-sombre art world, the visually lush universe of Conglomerate is a respite. Add to this the vertiginous, agile wit interspersed throughout the videos and the project's appeal is manifold. According to Hayes-Chute, "We all have a good sense of humour so that naturally spilled into Conglomerate. It's always balanced; there's no obligation to be funny or serious." In light of all this, one might wonder: Is it art or entertainment? Kline believes it's both: "I'd say it's art first and entertainment second, though it's a blurry line at times. We've obviously gone to pains to try to make certain shows interesting or funny, and there's a backdrop of criticality, but a lot of television has both as well." If there is a social criticism here, it's not mordent. But it does call into question television's waning status as the dominant cultural and social medium as well as the recent radical evolution in our preferred viewing methods.

Laughter isn't limited to the final cut of Conglomerate's shoots. While scripts are written out and studied ahead of time, and potential props, backdrops, and costumes are prepared, the filming process reveals a conviviality that fosters impromptu decisions. It's during editing, which is done as a team, that final sequencing decisions are reached. The sets aren't just created in Berlin either. They've also been produced in the context of exhibitions abroad, including Calero's 2016 exhibition at Glasgow's David Dale Gallery, which was transformed into the set for an episode of *Desde el Jardín*, and at the 1646 project space in The Hague, where the group devised and filmed the 2016 *Oedipusmas Special*.

If, as some have argued, film is art and television is a medium, then Conglomerate is bridging the gap between the two. Their epigrammatic body of work suggests a mocking acceptance of high and lowbrow formats combined with an authentic self-awareness of their genera-



Desde el Jardín (still)

» *Is it art or entertainment?* «

tion's place within it. The work wouldn't be conceivable without their blithe, tongue-in-cheek charm, which is utterly humanising in a medium that frequently dehumanises.

As a team, Conglomerate's work exceeds the sum of its parts, and accesses an almost infinite landscape of visual possibilities and collaborations. When asked about what the limitations of the project were, everyone agreed: time. Kline summed it up best: "I think that the main limitation is time. If Conglomerate could transcend linear time, it would probably become some kind of black hole."

"Block 3" will be released in early June in Berlin



(Top) *The New Domestic Woodshop* (still)
(Bottom) *The O.K. Show* (still)

(Top) *Oedipusmas Special* (still)
(Bottom) *Telethon* (still)