

Wednesday, February 17th, 2016

## Zombies and Vampires: Alex Bag's New Scary Movie at Team

by Noah Dillon

**Alex Bag: *The Van (Redux)\** at Team Gallery**

January 14 to February 28, 2016

47 Wooster Street (between Broome and Grand streets)

New York, 212 279 9219



Alex Bag, still from *The Van (Redux)\**, 2015. HD digital video, TRT: 27 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Team Gallery.

A lot of time and many outraged words have been expended for the indignities of Stefan Simchowicz, the LA-based art dealer, hypeman, and cultural entrepreneur. Simchowicz has promoted himself as an innovator who opens and connects new segments of the laity with future art market stars, challenging gallery orthodoxy. It's been pointed out — by [Jerry Saltz](#), [Christopher Glazek](#), [Dan Duray](#), [Marion Maneker](#), etc. — that those assertions are nonsense. The fretting he provokes is unbelievable; it's plain that he's a fairly typical private dealer whose main distinction is his flamboyant narcissism. But that doesn't stop him from being portrayed as demonic. He's a bit of a scapegoat who could easily be substituted with any number of hucksters and jingoists whose misdeeds raise less fury in the arts: various dealers, advisors, auction houses, fairs.



Alex Bag, still from *The Van (Redux)\**, 2015. HD digital video, TRT: 27 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Team Gallery.

This whole zeitgeist comes under scrutiny in Alex Bag's video *The Van (Redux)\** (2015), now showing as her first solo exhibition at Team Gallery.<sup>[1]</sup> The video is a sequel to Bag's *The Van* (2001) and features the reprise of Leroy LeLoup, a shady art world pitchman played by Bag's brother Damien in a buffoonish wig and a weasly New Jersey accent. LeLoup has arrived at Miami's Institute for Contemporary Art (where the video was filmed and first shown), delivering Bag's original eponymous van to be exhibited there. Killing many small birds with a single obscene stone and a lot of grubby advantage taking, LeLoup has three very young children with him and has installed them within the museum as unauthorized artists in residence, promoting them as emerging stars. He's followed by a documentary crew as they record his dissimulating, his appropriation of museum storage spaces to nap and screw escorts, and his drive to steal, steal, steal: food from an ICA employee fridge, packing materials, intellectual property, a case of Tito's Vodka, Cartier gift bags, and even silverware from event caterers.<sup>[2]</sup>

Along with some Miami-type dance music, the whole thing is backed with excerpts from the soundtrack of Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980), which is apt, as the mindless cutthroat LeLoup wanders ICA's hallways, bathes in a sink, and solicits art students. He often looks feral, as if the institution is inducing madness. LeLoup's a dark character, and has, apparently, led a very sordid life in the period between the original video and this new episode, serving time in prison for a variety of offenses. He's cagey about the specifics of his crimes, though after watching him for half an hour, it's pretty certain he's capable of serious moral atrocities.

Still, it's all really, *really* funny. The kids are goofy, the editing and timing are tight, the absurdist humor is titillating, Damien Bag is disgustingly farcical. Asked if he sees himself as a father figure to the children in his neglectful custody, he replies earnestly, "I like to think of myself more as a majority shareholder in each of them," and he's literally got liens to prove it. LeLoup, in fact, goes out of his way to remind the children, *often*, "I'm not your dad," as he coerces them to make art for him to sell, sometimes threatening them,

sometimes plying them with promises of trips to Disney World, sometimes coercively stuffing them with sugar. LeLoup gives one kid a printout of several paintings by Oscar Murillo, Lucien Smith, and others, and instructs him to copy them onto a square canvas, described as "the perfect size for Instagram."



Alex Bag, still from *The Van*, 2001. Color video with sound, TRT:

12 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Team Gallery.

The barely disguised references might not be appreciable to people who are totally uninterested in venal art world scuttlebutt, but they're basically all barbs aimed at Simchowitz, who is known for targeting young artists — including Murillo and Smith — and has been accused of taking advantage of them, manipulating their work, and treating them as junk bonds rather than people.<sup>[3]</sup> Simchowitz promotes art, his fashions and reading lists, and his family on Instagram, and he's built a brand admired by a lot of people, including novice collectors and various art dilettantes. In *The Van*, LeLoup was a much more broadly drawn figure: an art-dealing grifter with a dubious gallery, taking his ingenues to the Armory. He was an everyman of the dangers posed by art's sales force. So the precise comparison to Simchowitz might arrest LeLoup in a mythos that lays all the anxieties of art workers in the lap of one person, and lets a whole lot of better-veiled people off the hook. One has to wonder why Simchowitz catches so much flack from critics and artists, while equivalent abuses (or worse) by other institutions typically receive little outcry.

The video isn't about Simchowitz per se. He serves as a synecdoche for art dealers as vampiric specters. Although his business is similar to other art world hustlers, Simchowitz seems to be criticized largely for his visibility, which many apparently find completely obnoxious. (And for his accomplishment, too, at having ridden a profitable trend in the desirability of dull, repetitious painting, though show me a successful dealer who hasn't.) Much of the carping looks like policing of the art market's self presentation. One big difference between Simchowitz and others in his class is his narcissistic public affect. In addition to his own online publicity, he's done a lot of press and he lists his personal contact information on his website. He responded when I solicited him for a reaction to Bag's video. Few other art dealers, gallerists or advisors do stuff like that.<sup>[4]</sup>

Simchowitz offered first that he has the utmost respect for Team and that he's done a lot of business with them. He was by turns both frank and mythologizing: he said he isn't doing anything much different from other dealers, but that he is challenging powerful institutions and pressing for radical changes in the way they operate. (What those changes are seems unclear.) He would have preferred it if Bag had contacted him directly, I suppose wanting her to hear him talk rather than make an artwork. Unsurprisingly, he thinks very little of the video. He finds it "Insulting [...] a dumb and greedy caricature." And he thought the comparison between himself (a fashionable, fit guy from South Africa and the UK) to LeLoup (an American grotesquerie) was kind of monstrous.



Installation view of "Alex Bag: *The Van (Redux)*," 2015, at Team

Gallery. Courtesy of the artist and Team Gallery.

The lecherous dealer stereotype is an old complaint, and has been satirized especially well, I think, by performance and video artists in the visual era.<sup>[5]</sup> All of these share the same wretched comedy of manners ethos of the contemptible-but-essential intrusion of the market on the creator, of the way its avarice seeks abjection and warps both parties. Often, the most detestable characters are those who respond eagerly, such as LeLoup and his abased art starlets in *The Van*.<sup>[6]</sup>

In some ways, LeLoup could be nearly as much a parody of Saltz: performer, booster, star of reality TV and avid user of Instagram. Again, Simchowitz is likely a much easier target by sheer dint of his availability, wealth and visibility — a scandalizer of magazine and newspaper lifestyle sections. And as Dan Duray tellingly notes, *New York Magazine*, in the issue with Saltz's essay on Simchowitz, [rated the dealer in its weekly Approval Matrix](#) as more despicable than the mock execution of a governor, Dick Cheney's continued warmongering, CIA torture revelations, and new Saudi statutes used to crack down on political dissidents.<sup>[7]</sup> Is this myopia or what?

There are really nasty things that go on in the unregulated Wild West of the art market. There are conspiracies, forgeries, auction manipulations, studio meddling, fraud, information opacity, theft of all sorts, and distasteful behavior on the parts of all sorts of people, including artists, galleries, auction houses, and museum administrators. The list goes on. And it's not like these things go unreported. And it's likely that much more happens without being reported at all, since few legal protections exist in the business.

It's also not as though Simchowitz is a charmer. He's kind of gross. He compares promoting and selling art to mineral extraction, like culture is a gulf that needs deep-water drilling, or a mountain that has to get its top removed. That attitude is an obscenity of its own. And both Elizabeth Dee (alluded to in the video) and Team's Jose Freire, like many galleries, have bad reputations among gossip mills, including accusations of greed, sexism, cradle-robbing, and non-payment.<sup>[8]</sup> Stephanie Cash, in a 2011 *Art in America* profile of Freire, noted his preference for young male artists succinctly, writing, "He steadily [built] his roster with star players like Cory Arcangel, Banks Violette and Ryan McGinley, often snatched up right out of art school." If you check the now-defunct rant blog *How's My Dealing*, you'll find anonymous complaints of all kinds about probably every gallery listed, enumerating all the bad behaviors being lampooned by Bag.

At base is the lack of legal and financial protection for artists against dealers of all kinds — public and private.<sup>[9]</sup> Artists are often stuck with whatever jerk is willing to give them a slimy hand up, risking kind of a lot in the hope it will pay off. So while *The Van (Redux)* is smart and cutting and, you know, a great entertaining work of art, it's also important not to overlook real villains in the art world when a mere ass like Simchowitz is found.



Installation view of "Alex Bag: The Van (Redux)," 2015, at Team Gallery. Courtesy of the artist and Team Gallery.

<sup>[1]</sup> Simchowitz isn't named explicitly, but the press release and the video's close both feature a portrait of Simchowitz from Glazek's 2014 profile for the *New York Times*, titled "The Art World's Patron Satan," which captures the maven dressed immodestly in underwear and socks, on the phone, surrounded by several pretty young female coworkers.

<sup>[2]</sup> For that matter, the van itself might be stolen, as LeLoup begins his stay by ripping out a seat marked "ELIZABETH DEE" (Bag's former gallery), dumping it in a trash bin several blocks from the museum, a gag that might be a shot at Dee.

<sup>[3]</sup> He's not the only person supporting these artists, sometimes derisively called "Zombie Formalists." Some of them have been granted institutional legitimacy, such as Murillo, whose paintings were included in "The Forever Now," MoMA's ire-inviting 2014-15 survey of contemporary painting. And some of them have distanced themselves from Simchowitz after finding better opportunities.

<sup>[4]</sup> Which isn't really an argument one way or the other about whether they should or not.

<sup>[5]</sup> Thanks to artcritical's Instagram followers for some of these suggestions and others: Paul McCarthy parodied market emasculation in *Painter* (1995). Maurizio Cattelan abused several gallerists in performances between 1993 and '99. There was Andrea Fraser's *Untitled* (2003), in which she had Friedrich Petzel arrange for a collector to fuck her in a hotel room, later exhibiting footage of the encounter. Plus there's Guy Richard Smit's *Grossmalerman* (2014) and Jim Kempner's flat *Madness of Art* (2010-present) webseries. And there are probably a lot of others, including, I think, Sleazy P. Martini, the fictional manager of parody metal band/theater troupe GWAR.

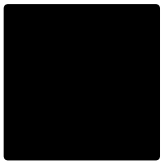
<sup>[6]</sup> What does it say that in the 14-year interim between Bag's original video and this new one, the three artists have become even more infantile and vulnerable? Simchowitz avers, defensively perhaps, that both artists and dealers are complicit in these arrangements, though dealers are the ones with money and power, whereas artists are almost exclusively *not*. And the amount of money in the art world [has literally grown exponentially in that time](#).

<sup>[7]</sup> Forget about more than 7 million displaced and dead Iraqis and Syrians. They don't even rate.

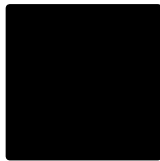
<sup>[8]</sup> So does Bag's critique extend past Simchowitz to cover her own new dealer, or not?

<sup>[9]</sup> For that matter, one could draw the analogy out even farther to the larger economy. It's not a far leap from Simchowitz-as-metonym to Martin Shkreli or Jack Abramoff as similar whipping boys in systems where at least some of their misdeeds are actually insidiously commonplace.

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