

Rhizome is the home of born-digital art and culture since 1996. Learn about us and our #preservation, #commissions, and #7x7 programs. Explore #artworks, #publication, community, and events, online and IRL. [search](#)



Tomi Faison,
Carousel #1,
2023. 35mm
slide projection.
Courtesy of the
Artist.

Artist

Profile:by

Tomi Toniann

Faison Fernandez

2023-07-

12

The latest in a series of interviews with artists who make work that responds to network culture and digital technologies.

Toniann Fernandez: We first met on the Do Not Research Discord around the time of the first IRL DNR exhibition at Lower Cavity in Western Mass (2022). Your artistic practice explores digital space, but also comes to life in 16mm projections

and via slide projectors, very physical forms. What is the relationship between virtual space and film in your practice?

Tomi Faison: I spent incredible amounts of time online growing up: my first romantic relationships mostly existed online, and with the exception of a brief anarcho-primitivist phase where I used a flip-phone and lived on an island in the Potomac River, it's always been where I'm most at home. Nowadays that looks like semi-public spaces like Discord servers or message boards for niche interests like where we met, fast-moving group chats filled with multi-admin anonymous meme accounts, or more personal virtual relationships with other artists. The draw is a social one, sometimes as a participant, sometimes as a lurker-ethnographer. For the last few years, almost all my work is inspired by virtual phenomena or works with the visual language of internet subcultures or trends, often using these aesthetics or ideas to frame the questions I'm interested in about politics and drives.

I graduated from a very traditional film school in 2017, and since then I've shot and produced a number of experimental films, documentaries, and music videos on film.

I've also produced moving image work as a part of large scale sculptures and installations. Much of my older video and installation work was interested in landscapes and processes, and I used to really view that practice as very separate from my constant online posting. That changed after a year-long three part solo show at the Frederick Arts Council titled, [Phase Change](#) in 2019, which used phases of the hydraulic cycle to explore Deleuze's notion of becoming. It was ambitious, involving a 7ft stream simulation, a four channel opera, an 8mm short, and an installation of about half a ton of old brick I hand-carried into the space. I was covered in red dust for the better part of the year.



Still, Tomi Faison, *Phase Change: Act III* (2019). Film. Courtesy of the artist.

Coming off of that long show, I took a break from the studio and found myself spending more creative energy posting memes on anonymous accounts than I was making traditional art or films. For me, the difference between posting and making work for a gallery is mostly speed and audience. I still shitpost, but I can't say much more about that without doxxing myself and losing an essential part: anonymity.

The sort of art practice/shitposting practice divide started to collapse in 2020 when a bunch of us started [Do Not Research](#) (DNR) in artist and friend Joshua Citarella's Discord server. I co-organized DNR's film, video, and art critique programs. Working with artists like [Filip Kostic](#) and [Harris Rosenblum](#), I started developing ways to integrate very online ideas and aesthetics that excite me into my existing film and installation practice. It has been far more fulfilling to make work about what I'm actually engaged with day-to-day on the internet than it is trying to, say, explain Deleuze through a gradually changing sculpture (lol).

An example of integrating the two is *First As Tragedy, Then As LARP*, an installation including a 16mm film that I shot at the “Stop The Steal” protest turned riot at the Capitol on Jan 6. I went to D.C. after lurking right wing internet spaces; the gulags of the deplatformed. This installation is the first time I’m exhibiting film work on a film projector rather than from a digital scan. I did this because the work is largely about devirtualization. January 6th was in some ways a giant *thedonald.win* meetup, and there was a profound dissonance between what was going on at the Capitol and what was being circulated on the internet and reported by the news. By giving a physical body to the images with 16mm film, I’m also playing with the dissonance between what real events are unfolding in a physical space and the meme-ification, manipulation, and proliferation of those images. When the protesters asked me about my funny camera, I jokingly told them it was to keep the footage physical and therefore safe—so Zuckerberg could never get his hands on it.



Installation view, "Do Not Research" at lower_cavity, Holyoke, Massachusetts, 2022. Courtesy of Joshua Citarella.

T. Fernandez: The flags alongside the projection in *First As Tragedy, Then As Larp* feature 2D prints of 3D scans of Roman Classical sculptures from the Louvre. The first flag shows Zeus's Muse of Tragedy and reads "FIRST AS TRAGEDY." The second shows the muse of comedy, and says, "THEN AS LARP." The rendering and rerendering of IRL sculptures turned digital images turned printed images foregrounds some dissonance or confusion. How does the manipulation of images play into your work and why the muses of drama?

T. Faison: The classical sculptures on the flags are a reference to the neoclassical Capitol building itself and a neoclassical

sculpture at the site that acts as the loop point of the film. Tragedy and comedy reference the lineage of theater, democracy, and mimicry which I was familiar with from a young age. I grew up near Capitol Hill. Protests in D.C. always looked like theater to me, and the national mall felt like a stage. The locus of power is not actually in the Capitol.

I'm very interested in not just images, but the apparatus that produces them. The events of that day, and the subsequent response, became more about politicized images than political power. The flags are printed on cheap materials from banners.com, which is where many of the protesters' flags came from. The text, printed in "[top text/bottom text](#)" meme format, is a riff on a quote by Karl Marx from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* in which Marx says, "Hegel remarks somewhere that all great, world-historical facts and personages occur, as it were, twice. He has forgotten to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce." The text is the go-to example of Marx putting his idea of historical materialism into action. When looking at Jan 6, I'd like to see more of a materialist analysis as to why the events occurred than the gut

reaction to spectacle I observed in liberal and left discourse. I want Hegel, not click-bait.

I have this image in my mind that briefly appears in the film where the “insurrectionists” are advancing up the steps of the Capitol, every so often breaking the line of police and gaining ground. However, with each advancement, they stop and wait and look at their phones, or hang flags with images of Donald Trump photoshopped onto Schwarzenegger as the Terminator, until they can take another step forward. Then the “insurrectionists” get past the police, they make it all the way inside of the Capitol, and then what? They don't start issuing arrests. They don't write a new constitution. They don't perform the actual coup. All they can do is roleplay. All they can do is take a selfie. All they can do is generate images.



Still, Tomi Faison, *First As Tragedy, Then As LARP* (2022). Film. Courtesy of the artist.

T. Fernandez: Let's talk about *Carousel #1* and *Lack Loop*. In these works, you explore complicated themes of psychoanalysis like desire and death drive through images of dental surgery and car crashes. But there is also a healthy dose of humor present in each piece. What are we seeing in these works, and how does your interest in psychoanalysis connect to the political?

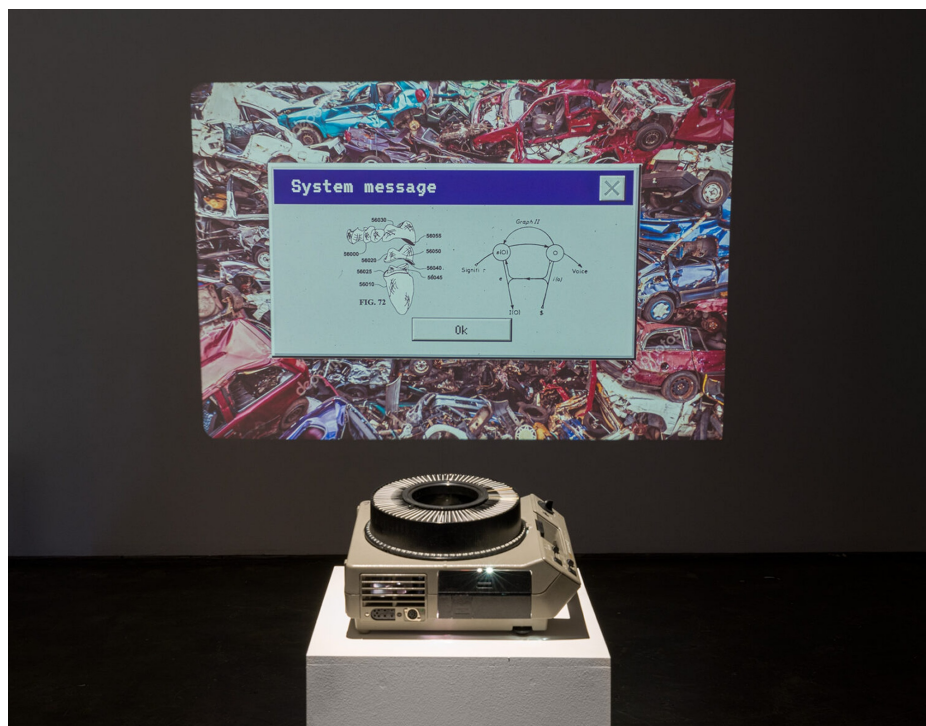
T. Faison: Yes, both *Carousel #1* (2023) as well as *Lack Loop* (2021-present) explore desire in a similar vein. They also mark a new, more iterative, way of working for

me. By using myself or close friends as characters, I can shoot these images with a quick turn around, almost the moment the idea comes to me. I try to do this before taking too much time to understand why I want to shoot them, rather I blurt them out the way a patient first brings a thought to analysis. I put these in conversation with other scenes or shots already in the work, analyze them, take notes, then go back and re-shoot new images or videos. It's very different from, say, taking a script through production where I'm executing a steady plan. I hope it will be a fruitful process for exploring the ways material circumstance, unconscious desire, and political positions create a series of feedback loops and form postmodern subjects.



Installation view, "The Manic American Humanist Show" at Public Works Administration, New York City, 2023. Pictured: Tomi Faison, *Lack Loop* (2021), seven channel video.

Lack Loop is a modular multi-channel video installation. I just finalized a version with seven screens mounted in a strip for "The Manic American Humanist Show" at Public Works Administration curated by Abbey Pusz in March. *Carousel #1* is a collection of 81 35mm slides housed in a looping carousel projector, which I showed in a solo show at Smack Mellon in January. Both works feature teeth, a reoccurring obsession of mine, as well as a series of jokes and word play.



Pictured: Tomi Faison, *Carousel #1* (2023), 35mm slide projection.
Installation view, Tomi Faison: "First as Tragedy, Then As LARP" at Smack Mellon, New York City, 2023. Courtesy of E Frossard.

The jumping off point for *Carousel #1* is the way Freud and later Lacan describe desire as being structured like a montage. Like the internet, the unconscious exists in a non-physical space, and using film allows me to materialize both the images and projector's cycling process. Then the looping projector can become the unconscious, driven to repeat and circle its desires, with no clear beginning or end. The content (film slides) is sourced three separate ways. First, there are 35mm photos of friends and loved ones driving cars, nude in bed, or browsing the web alongside close up shots of teeth. These images construct my physical, lived, and more conscious life. Second, slides I sourced from craigslist, yard sales, and random lots from eBay inject the outside world. Finally, digital images ripped from the internet and collages exposed onto celluloid introduce my virtual life and fantasies alongside screenshots grabbed online.

Humor is important in my work—I heart jokes and double meanings. For example, in *Carousel #1*, the “*death drive*” of psychoanalysis is shown as a literal car crash. Or addressing lack (a concept

originating in ideas around castration or penis envy) through montages of trans women and missing teeth. I love to flitter between emotional moments, dense philosophy, or theory and then suddenly pop culture or a joke: an intimate moment in bed is interrupted by the [breezewood](#) meme, then covered in error messages, then anime girls, then fire emojis, then a Lacan quote, then more car crashes. The humor is more on the surface in *Lack Loop*, which includes a performance where I act as a [sovereign citizen](#) who uses an esoteric reading of common law to argue with a police officer. It's a recreation of a classic genre of Youtube video.



Still, Tomi Faison, *Lack Loop*, (2023). Courtesy of the Artist.

Lack Loop uses self portraiture, collage, and first person narration to explore the

ways in which material circumstance and my body generate both desire as well as political positions. I use “meme-politics” to construct two opposing poles: the libertarian, wingnut, sovereign citizen vs the “[live in the pod, eat the bugs](#)” globalist liberal. I like these figures as caricatures of the current macro cultural/political battle occurring throughout the country, but I also use them as roles I can inhabit to play out personal psychodrama. Because I take hormones every day, or because I’m missing a bunch of teeth and would really like new ones, or because I have a nasty habit of making non-commercial installation art, my life would greatly benefit from certain state services. However, what seems more politically likely in my lifetime than universal basic services is universal rentierism. I talk about this more in [11 Notes From The Pod](#).

T. Fernandez: Tell me about the forthcoming feature film you’ve been working on, *Transformers Terminal*.

T. Faison: [Transformers: Terminal](#) is a film conceived by one of my oldest friends and close collaborators, Miles Engel-Hawbecker. We met working at a movie

theater starting in 2012 as Marvel was really taking off and Star Wars had its second reboot. We wanted to tackle this culture of consumerist nostalgia and explore the sort of subjects that are created. It's a cringe rom-com turned body horror about commodity fetishism and hyper fandom in a world where men are infantilized consumers while women are condemned to constant performativity.



Still, Tomi Faison and Miles Engel-Hawbecker, *Transformers Terminal*, (2023). Feature length film, Courtesy of Nick Gorey.

The film follows a fanboy named Aidan, who one day works up the courage to leave his mother's basement and travel across the country to meet Sierra, the youtuber of his dreams, and shoot a new video series at Comic Con. But when they meet in person, they can't connect. The whole situation devolves into nightmares,

and Aidan takes Sierra's phone, dawning her internet identity to finish the videos.

Similar to the Jan 6 piece, one question of the film is, what happens when the internet goes offline? For this work specifically, what happens when the "soy boy," homogenized, consumer fan-culture branch goes offline? For me, the answer is a body horror film. We hope it's a critical, but loving, mirror to the communities it portrays.

We just finished post-production and are currently exploring exhibition and distribution options. Miles and I met at the movies, so we're interested in a traditional theatrical or festival run, but given the content of the film, I believe it will find its true audience on the internet. We're looking for a partner in the Web3 space who could help us with that. Email me!

Age: 28

Location: Baltimore, MD

How/when did you begin working creatively with technology?

I started posting the moment I logged on. I

was about 10. I worked in MS Paint and then photoshop making content for sci-fi and fantasy book message boards. I also ran a terrible Youtube channel with my sister where we shot short films using our mom's laptop's webcam, moving and re-balancing the laptop on stools and stacks of books to get different angles.

What did you study at school or elsewhere?

I studied narrative film production and philosophy in undergrad and intermedia/digital art for grad school, both at state schools in Baltimore County.

What do you do for a living or what occupations have you held previously?

For the last few years I've been focused on keeping my cost of living low and welfare-maxxing. There isn't anything more valuable to me as an artist than time. I rode the pandemic unemployment payments to the bitter end ([and had a lot of fun doing so](#)), then enrolled in a funded MFA to get a modest stipend and healthcare. I've done a lot of freelance work: grip and electric department on film shoots, technical director for live events and film festivals, installation tech for

artists. I recently started teaching and I love it so far.

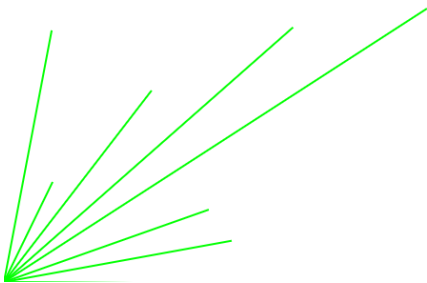
What does your desktop or workspace look like? (Pics or screenshots please!)



"Because I live in Baltimore, I'm fortunate to have both a studio, where I mostly stage work or build out installs, and an office at home for editing and "researching." Pictured is the workspace in my Charles Village apartment featuring a print by Holly Oliver, a sticker from the gallery Blade Study, and a side table where I can do my makeup while waiting for renders."

Tags

#Abbey Pusz,
#artist profile,
#Do Not
Research,
#Filip Kostic,
#Harris
Rosenblum,
#Miles Engel-
Hawbecker,
#Smack
Mellon, #Tomi
Faison,
#Toniann
Fernandez,
#Transformers:
Terminal



rhizome, 1996–2023; about, support, index, people, newsletter,
[instagram](#), [twitter](#), [facebook](#), [RSS](#), info@rhizome.org, [New Museum](#)

type your email address

submit