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BRAD TROEMEL, THE TROLL OF INTERNET ART

His work is a jab at the rigid rules of the art world and an experiment in what art might look like if those rules didn't exist.

By Adrian Chen

Troemel finds the gallery system too slow, too insular, and too full of gatekeepers.

On a recent afternoon, Brad Troemel showed me an image of a sculpture that seemed beyond belief: seven hundred monarch butterflies stacked on a levitating magnetic pedestal. Troemel had devised the sculpture six months before, and listed it, for twelve hundred dollars, in his online art store, Ultra Violet Production House. The work looked catalogue-slick, but it didn't actually exist; the image had been created in Photoshop. The buyer would receive the components to make the work, along with directions for assembling it and a certificate of authenticity. Then she would build it herself, gluing on the butterflies one at a time. Troemel had calculated that the butterflies would weigh about thirteen ounces, the heaviest load that the pedestal could withstand. The

sculpture would probably last for just an instant, like an element from the periodic table that can exist only briefly, before it crashed to the floor.

The sculpture was one of seventy-eight art works that Troemel and his collaborator, the artist Joshua Citarella, had conceived in the past six months and put up for sale in their store on Etsy, the online marketplace for handmade goods. Many were everyday objects with odd details that rendered them absurd: a couch was covered with hardcore-punk-band patches; a plank of wood atop two Apple computers functioned as a bench.

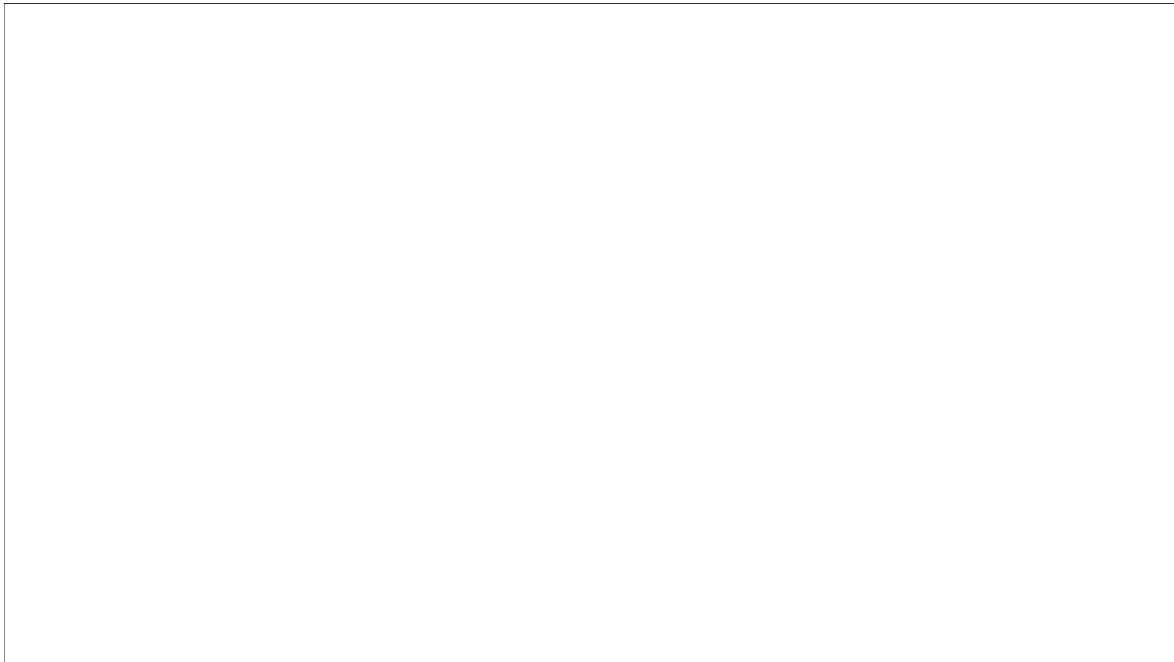
U.V. Production House was Troemel's latest attempt to use the Internet to make art outside the commercial-gallery system, which he finds too slow, too insular, too full of gatekeepers, and too dependent on the financially onerous and time-consuming practice of making art objects; it could benefit from an Amazon-style disruption. Troemel's project is simultaneously a jab at the rigid rules of the art world and an experiment in what art might look like if those rules didn't exist. "You can't make this with a straight face," Troemel said. "You'd have to be a real lunatic to do that."

Troemel is best known as the co-creator of the popular Tumblr blog the Jogging, an online art factory that, starting in 2009, produced thousands of strange images that blurred the distinction between art and meme. A closeup photograph of a MacBook submerged in a bathtub went viral, and remains a staple of gag Web sites. The most compelling products of Internet culture—the videos, catchphrases, and characters that surface in our social-media streams—get their power from radical shifts in context. A meme might begin as a running joke between friends or as an obscure message-board trope, and this intimacy clings to it even as it circulates among an ever-expanding audience. Troemel's work, at its best, gives the viewer the thrill of stumbling on an authentic viral gem.

The Jogging marked a shift in how artists approach the Internet. While practitioners of "Net art" in the nineteen-nineties and early aughts largely

considered the Internet a virtual space, separate from the real world, by the early teens many artists regarded it as “something that pervaded existence in every way,” Lauren Cornell, a curator at the New Museum, told me. They were responding to the Internet “not as a new medium but as a mass medium.” Many of these artists—like Petra Cortright, Parker Ito, Artie Vierkant, and Amalia Ulman—had grown up with Napster and AOL and Myspace; now they hung out on Facebook and Tumblr. The Internet was both an obsession and an everyday reality. These artists made up a quasi-movement that came to be known, at first somewhat facetiously, as “post-Internet.” (The term quickly fell out of fashion and is now mostly met with groans of embarrassment.) The Jogging’s self-conscious embrace of the Web’s vernacular, its shameless courting of attention, and its blurring of the real and the virtual were well suited to a post-Internet moment.

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Troemel’s art plays with a central paradox of the Internet: the technology that was supposed to liberate us from the dreary real world has inspired a whole new set of anxieties. For the growing number of artists who use the Internet to distribute their work, a key problem has become how to stand out amid a torrent of information—what the digital-art pioneer Cory Arcangel has termed “fourteen-year-old Finnish-kid syndrome,” in which any teen-ager with an iPhone can

make something attention-grabbing. For Troemel, the solution is to embrace frantic creative production and the skillful use of social media. In an essay from 2014, Troemel coined the term “aesthlete” to describe the type of artist who can maintain relevance today. The aesthlete, he wrote, “produces a constant stream of work in social media to ride atop the wave in viewers’ newsfeeds, or else become the wave itself.” Troemel has some fifty-six thousand followers on Instagram, and he typically posts a photograph each day at 1 P.M., when he finds that user engagement is highest.

When Troemel showed me the butterfly sculpture, he was in the midst of a three-week arts residency, called Work in Progress, organized by the twenty-four-year-old British collector and curator Tiffany Zabludowicz. Zabludowicz’s father, a prominent collector, owns the office building in Times Square that housed the residency, where Troemel and I were talking. A press release that she handed me at the reception desk stated that the residency “questions the romantic and idealized notion of the artists’ studio.”

This suited Troemel, whose view of art could not be less romantic. He once described to me the “formula” for a gallery show: “You have a series of wall works that are meant to sell, and the stuff on the floor that’s meant to make things look difficult.”

A competitive wrestler in high school, Troemel, who is twenty-nine, has an intense, wide-eyed stare, and when he talks about his art he circles his arms energetically, as if he were literally cranking out ideas. He works out a lot and drinks N.O.-XPLODE, a fitness supplement. “I think he is a jock deep down, and I think he wants to win at art,” the artist Nick DeMarco, a former contributor to the *Jogging*, told me. When I asked Troemel why he liked his current dealer, Zach Feuer, a co-owner of Feuer/Mesler Gallery, in downtown Manhattan, he recalled that, when they met, Feuer told him, “I’m a capitalist. I want to make money from you and I want to make money for you.”

At eight o'clock on the morning that the residency began, before the other artists arrived, Troemel and Citarella claimed the corner office, which they left empty except for two desks shoved back-to-back, with iMacs on top of them, and a tattered suitcase that Troemel had used to carry the computers. The men planned to double the number of objects in the online store in three weeks.

Even for artists interested in the digital realm, selling physical work is usually the only way to make a living. Troemel's gallery work is an eclectic mixture of assemblage, sculpture, and painting that comments on such contemporary phenomena as Bitcoin, the art market, and the sharing economy. One of his favorite strategies is to combine consumer goods that have symbolic value—coins, organic food, political posters, books of critical theory—to create an argument, which is usually opaque until one reads the lengthy artist statements that he writes for nearly all his shows.

Troemel tends to think of his gallery work in terms of posting on the Internet. "It wouldn't make for a very interesting Instagram feed if for seven years I posted the same work every day," he told me. Once, at an art fair, he curated a booth where he changed the work every hour, in an attempt to mimic the Internet's content churn. A lot of his work disintegrates with the inevitability of a status update being pushed down a screen. For one show, he placed fresh fish he had bought in Chinatown along with flowers and metal coins representing the digital currency Litecoin onto a plastic board, vacuum-sealed them, and hung the bundle on the wall. This created an eerily beautiful bas-relief until, after a few days in the hot gallery, the fish rotted, filling the piece with gas and eventually exploding. Not all the entropy is intentional. During an opening last year, a drone piloted by Troemel spun out of control and became horribly entangled in a gallery-goer's hair. At the same show, three sixteen-foot-tall stacks of oversized Jenga blocks crashed to the floor during installation. Troemel replaced the blocks with a series of water-filled vases suspended at odd angles above the floor; on opening night, one tipped over and drenched a visitor. "Brad's installs are always chaotic," Lauren Marinaro, the director at Feuer/Mesler, said. "He comes in sure with all of his

ideas, but he's sometimes finalizing form."

Troemel hoped that U.V. Production House would make creating physical work as risk-free as posting a photo to Instagram. No more tedious fabrication process or expensive studio rental: simply slap together a concept image, source the necessary materials on the Internet, and wait for the orders to roll in. When I visited the Work in Progress residency, he and Citarella had made thirty-two sales and about three thousand dollars in gross profit. The most expensive items, sold for five hundred dollars each, were two framed checks from a class-action settlement against the natural-products company Tom's of Maine.

When Troemel was thirteen years old, he discovered the file-sharing services Napster and KaZaA. He and his mother lived with her parents, in the Chicago suburb of Aurora. He estimates that he illegally downloaded as many as fifteen thousand songs at his grandparents' house. File-sharing "gave me access to consuming so much culture, so many songs and bands, which are always lead-ins for other things," he said. "I learned a lot." But, in 2001, his grandfather was sued by the Recording Industry Association of America. The family settled for five thousand dollars. "It was just kind of sad and tense," he said. "It didn't ruin us. It was just a setback, and not enjoyed."

His middle- and high-school years were dominated by wrestling, which his father, who lived nearby, encouraged. Troemel trained year-round and went to a tournament almost every week. He admired the meritocratic nature of the sport, where competitors are paired off by weight and age. "It's like a really pure form of competition," he said. He still follows wrestling closely: one afternoon, while we were at lunch, he pulled out his phone and watched video highlights of a recent high-school tournament while wolfing down a Cuban sandwich.

During his sophomore year of high school, Troemel took a photography class. He liked how photography let him reframe the mundane details of his environment, in a way similar, he said, to how a skateboarder could turn a handrail into a

productive obstacle. He received a scholarship to a pre-college program at the School of Visual Arts, in New York City, and when he returned to Illinois he started considering a career in art.

His work was inspired by the German husband-and-wife team Bernd and Hilla Becher, who photographed hundreds of industrial structures and arranged them in grids that they called “typologies.” Troemel’s subject was the landscape near his home. It was 2007, the height of the housing boom, and he went around taking pictures of various artifacts of suburban development. He did one series of concrete subdivision markers, arranging a hundred photographs into a Becher-like grid. The work looked impressive in a frame on his wall, but when he shared a photo of it on Facebook it was shrunk to the size of any other post, becoming lost in the ocean of content. “The labor-to-visibility ratio wasn’t good,” he said.

Troemel enrolled in the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he became disillusioned by what he saw as the lack of seriousness among many of his classmates. He suggests that there is “some truth” to the stereotype that artists are layabouts. “The types of people who go to art school are often wealthy, and it’s a vacation for some of them,” he told me. Troemel was a contentious figure on campus. He dominated class discussions and was relentlessly critical of his fellow-students. “I recognize it was obnoxious and pretentious and narcissistic and generally probably unbearable to be around,” he said.

Troemel gravitated toward artists whose work falls under the label of institutional critique, which takes as its subject the hidden workings of the art world itself. Institutional critique was born in the political climate of the late nineteen-sixties, when conceptual artists began to mischievously subvert the conventions of the museum and the gallery. For the French artist Daniel Buren’s first solo show, an installation of his trademark vertical stripes, he blocked the entrance to the gallery. Marcel Broodthaers, the Belgian poet and artist, created a fictional museum that had gone bankrupt and needed to sell off its collection. Troemel was struck particularly by the work of Andrea Fraser, whose performances confront

the art-world élite. (For one piece, Fraser filmed herself having sex with a collector, who paid for the privilege.)

Today, Troemel is influenced by the critic Lucy Lippard, who in the nineteen-seventies argued that “dematerialized” conceptual art—tutorials, performances, light—might be able to escape commodification by the art market. He is attracted to what Lippard and the critic John Chandler once called the “ultra-conceptual,” where the idea behind a work is all that matters. Many of Troemel’s favorite artists aren’t even artists: when I asked him to list those he admires, he included the comedian Andy Kaufman, the BuzzFeed founder Jonah Peretti, and Ross Ulbricht, the founder of the online drug market the Silk Road.

As Troemel absorbed the lessons of institutional critique, he discovered the work of popular technology writers such as Clay Shirky and the former *Wired* editor Chris Anderson, who believed that the Internet was bringing about a democratic revolution in other cultural arenas. He read Anderson’s book “The Long Tail,” which argues that the infinite options proliferating on the Internet will lead to the success of niche products and businesses. Troemel saw the Internet as a way to circumvent the art world, by distributing art freely. He embraced a radical techno-libertarian ideology that he summed up in his undergraduate thesis, a twenty-page manifesto titled “Free Art.”

“Free Art” reframes the history of modern art as a story of power-hungry critics and curators trying to contain the democratizing power of new technologies. But the Internet, Troemel explains ecstatically, has ushered in an era of art as pure information, uncontainable by the market. “We have been given a chance to achieve great things on our own without the market, galleries’ or museums’ corrupting effects,” he writes. “The sacrifice Free Art asks is your own comfort and complacency; it is easier to continue to allow others to represent and distribute art, but wouldn’t you rather do it yourself?”

At art school, Troemel and a fellow-student, Lauren Christiansen, his girlfriend at the time, ran a gallery called Scott Projects out of their apartment. Scott Projects showed work by art students in Chicago, and its shows were well attended. When Troemel and Christiansen began showing artists from outside Chicago, however, attendance declined drastically. People had been coming out to support their friends. But Troemel noticed that traffic on the gallery's Web site had spiked—fans of the artists from outside Chicago were clicking on photos of their shows—and he began to think of the gallery as secondary to its blog.

Troemel and Christiansen's apartment filled up with leftover bits of material from Scott Projects' shows, so they began to use them to make what Troemel describes as “trash sculptures.” They posted photos of the sculptures on a Tumblr blog that they named the Jogging, for the sustained pace that they sought. Like Troemel, Christiansen had been a star athlete in high school—she had turned down a track-and-field scholarship from Arizona State University—and they shared a competitive streak, which they funnelled into making their trash sculptures as quickly as possible. At first, Christiansen said, “it was just a fun and, frankly, intimate thing we were doing together.”

The art was not much to look at. There was a pile of ice that was spray-painted gold and a litre bottle of Diet 7 UP Cherry that was balanced atop a pool cue. Troemel and Christiansen began to use Photoshop to enhance the photos of their sculptures with images and textures found on Google. Eventually, they began creating realistic-looking “sculptures” that were made up entirely of images found on the Web.

The Jogging was an inside joke that doubled as a form of institutional critique. Each work, no matter how tossed off or improvisational, was given a formal title. In addition to being a satirical jab at art-world pretension, this was, Troemel says, a deliberate attempt to use the “social capital” of art museums to help the Jogging's crappy images stand out among many thousands of crappy images on

Tumblr. The Jogging's sensibility would come to be defined by this irony; it seemed to be pointing out that the emperor had no clothes while sprinting by in an invisible Nike sweatsuit.

In 2010, Troemel and Christiansen moved to New York; he pursued a master's degree in studio art at New York University while she opened a gallery in Chelsea. The Jogging, which had gained a small but dedicated audience, took a nearly two-year hiatus. At N.Y.U., Troemel began to slightly modify his anti-art-object stance. He became interested in the Silk Road, which used Bitcoin and identity-masking software like the Tor network to allow users to buy and sell illegal drugs. He ordered small amounts of designer psychedelics, amphetamines, and other drugs, using computers in an N.Y.U. lab so that he would remain anonymous. The lab had creaky wood floors, and he remembers feeling as if everyone were looking at him. It didn't help his paranoia that he was liberally partaking of the drugs he bought. "I was getting pretty close to a nervous breakdown," he said.

He was as fascinated by the Silk Road packages as by their contents, the ways in which the sellers balanced the need for anonymity with the desire to brand their wares. Troemel's master's thesis was a jumbled installation featuring shipping materials that he had received from Silk Road vendors. There was a plastic baggie emblazoned with red dice, a fake I.D. slipped into a voter pamphlet for a local election in Pierce County, Washington, and a package of ketamine taped to the back of a Christmas card. On the floor were thousands of counterfeit pennies that he had ordered online from China, along with a hundred copies of a "bump key," made at a nearby locksmith, that would theoretically allow anyone to break into the gallery. "I was, like, Well, I can make objects if they're totally illegal," he said.

Troemel is interested in the artistic potential of a particular form of attention unique to social media: the rapid snowballing of clicks, likes, and shares known as virality. In 2012, the Jogging relaunched, with virality as an explicit goal. Troemel had become fascinated by the anarchic message board 4chan, whose

anonymous users are famous for posting pornography and explicit gore. They are a powerful force in Internet culture, and Troemel was impressed by the success of some of their stunts, such as when they vaulted the founder of 4chan, Christopher (moot) Poole, to the top of *Time's* Person of the Year poll.

The Jogging's embrace of institutional critique vanished after Troemel and Christiansen opened the site to submissions from outsiders and started to pay them according to the amount of attention their posts attracted. The Jogging had by then grown to be among the top one per cent of blogs on Tumblr, and attracted widespread coverage both inside and outside the art world.

The critic Paddy Johnson recalls visiting art schools at the time, and "there wasn't a single art student I met who wasn't reading that site." The Jogging also had detractors. The critic Brian Droitcour published a takedown in *Art in America*, arguing that the Jogging's appropriation of corporate branding strategies amounted to little more than a shallow exercise in careerism. "What appears to be art is basically business," he wrote.

It was around this time that I discovered the Jogging, after it was shared by one of the Tumblr blogs I followed. Each post was interesting on its own, but the steady rate at which new posts appeared, every few hours, each displaying a bizarre but consistent aesthetic, was the real mystery. Who was doing this, and why? Instead of names, posts were accompanied by abstract symbols that linked to the creator's Web site. A lot of them linked to the portfolios of young artists, many still in grad school. At the time, I was an enthusiast of Internet culture, but I didn't care at all about art. One of the main attractions of Internet culture is its transparency. A meme or a viral video can serve as a gateway to another world, since it can often be traced, through links, back to its source. I had imagined that contemporary art was the Internet's opposite: hermetically sealed, rendered opaque by dense theories and twisted power structures. Yet here were young artists expending huge amounts of time and effort to make charmingly strange stuff on the Internet for free, and adopting the vernacular of social media so effectively that their work

slipped into the consciousness of millions of people who had little interest in art.

The rapper Gucci Mane, to announce a mixtape, tweeted a Jogging image of his body merged with a waterfall. A photograph of a piece of bacon cooked in a hair straightener has become a staple of Web sites that catalogue online oddities. Troemel delighted in the way that these images infiltrated the mundane corners of the Web. To him, it proved that making art on social media, at the pace of social media, was a new way to achieve an old goal of conceptual art: producing art that does not just reflect society but is a part of it. In an essay about this phenomenon, titled “The Accidental Audience,” he asks, “At what point do artists using social media stop making art for the idealized art world audience they want and start embracing the new audience they have?”

“Do we need to do this in public?”

One common trait of works that Troemel likes is a provocative ambiguity that allows for “multiple vehement interpretations,” he said. After the photo of the MacBook submerged in the bathtub was posted, some online commenters were suspicious that it was a stunt. Others commiserated with the owner, assuming that it was an accident. “It’s just an exquisite little scene of theatre all in one image,” Troemel said.

“Multiple vehement interpretations” could also describe the response to Troemel in the art world, where he is well known but divisive. “He just puts himself out there in this cocky way, and I think people either love or hate it, and ninety per cent of people hate it,” the curator Lindsay Howard said. “He embodies the white male artist to such an extreme degree that he is just a perfect enemy.”

“The definition of ‘pretension’ is somebody who elevates something that is not worthy of any kind of elevation,” Paddy Johnson told me. “Brad does that quite a bit, but nothing he makes is straight-up dumb.” Still, Troemel has been more successful at attracting attention than at winning critical laurels. His solo shows have never been reviewed by the *Times* or *Artforum*, and the critics who do notice

them tend to give them mixed reviews. A common complaint is that his art seems designed to work better in a browser window than on a gallery wall. In Johnson's review for Artnet of Troemel's first solo show, at Zach Feuer, in 2014, which included a piece made of books by the radical publisher Semiotext(e) vacuum-sealed with Litecoins and organic dried beans from Whole Foods, she wrote that his frantic mixture of branding and art didn't translate to a physical gallery space, "where audiences demand—and deserve—a more thoughtful message."

As the Jogging's reputation grew, its contributors were offered an increasing number of opportunities to collaborate with organizations such as the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and the magazine *Dis*. In 2013, they were invited to do a residency at the Still House Group, an artists' space in Red Hook, Brooklyn. The Jogging had grown to about a dozen official members, but this was the first time that most of them had worked together in person. They agreed that they wanted to make a site-specific installation that emphasized impermanence. Troemel thought that the pieces should start out looking extremely polished, as if they had been Photoshopped, before they decayed. Other members, who had been drawn to the Jogging for its critique of the art market, felt that this approach was overly commercial. "We were the ones who loved the shittiness of the Jogging," Nick DeMarco told me.

Troemel wouldn't budge. "Eventually, I just put my foot down," he said. DeMarco and an artist named Aaron Graham ended up leaving the group over the conflict. "It became very clear that Brad would not tolerate dissent and it was not a group," DeMarco told me. "Brad was the boss and we were his employees."

"He will not ever stand down to anybody," Christiansen said. "We would collaborate on ideas, we would do things together, but he was very much in charge of everything." Not long afterward, Christiansen and Troemel broke up. When I spoke to her, she told me that Troemel is a domineering narcissist who exploited her and the rest of the Jogging contributors for free labor to advance his own career. "To be honest, I want to be as distant as possible" from the Jogging,

she told me. “It haunts me everywhere I go.” (Troemel said that Christiansen’s view was “clouded.”)

The strife was not visible when I stopped by the Jogging show at the Still House on opening night. Troemel and Christiansen dashed around the brightly lit space putting finishing touches on the pieces as an art crowd of twentysomethings drank cans of Coors Light held in koozies made from baguettes. Neon hair extensions were frozen in a tall column of ice. Dead fish patterned with pink-and-red camouflage were tacked to the wall. My favorite piece was a white table coated in a hydrophobic substance on which Troemel poured a bottle of green Gatorade and a bottle of yellow Gatorade. He removed a divider and the colors blurred together in the middle. The piece pulsed to the vibrations of people walking around it. The show stayed up for a week, as the fish rotted, the ice sculpture melted, and the Gatorade evaporated into a pool of sticky neon goop.

A few days after my first trip to the Work in Progress residency, I visited again. It was 9:40 A.M., and Troemel and Citarella were the only artists present. Other offices were cluttered with work—the French artist Cyril Duval had filled his with selections from an enormous collection of counterfeit Chinese goods—but the U.V. Production House headquarters was still empty.

Citarella was hunched over a drawing pad connected to his computer, using a stylus to put the final touches on the display image for their newest work. Citarella, who was a key contributor to the Jogging, has a cheerful, laid-back demeanor and seemed unperturbed by what he described to me as his dire financial situation. In 2012, at the height of the latest art-market boom, he had moved from freelance jobs retouching photos for galleries and Web sites to selling his own work—highly polished composite images that he describes as “post-lens photography”—for as much as fifteen thousand dollars. He spent the next two years making extravagant, largely unsellable art—for one piece, he built a gallery in a forest—and now the market had cooled. He had a show in London the weekend after the residency, and, he said, “If it doesn’t go well I’m going back on

Sunday and looking for a job on Monday.”

Troemel was leaning against the wall behind him, examining the image. It showed a plastic tube, filled with Mason jars of preserved meats, hung diagonally on the wall. A woman's disembodied hand held a jar at the bottom of the chute. The tube was marked with numbered notches, one for each day of the month; the idea was that the user would remove a jar of meat every day and eat it, and the rest of the jars would slide down a notch, marking time by meat. The concept was inspired by D.I.Y. projects that Troemel had come across on Pinterest.

Though Troemel often draws on darker communities of the Internet—hackers, trolls, and drug marketplaces—he has recently become engrossed in the relatively wholesome scene on Pinterest, where décor and craft enthusiasts gather. (His most recent gallery show consisted of objects he had made following tutorials on Pinterest.) He is fascinated by the contrast between D.I.Y. projects whose aim is to make the world a better place through, for example, “upcycling” household trash into attractive planters, and those which are meant to help people survive in an apocalypse. “The connection between ethical consumerism and shit-hits-the-fan survivalism is where our interests are right now,” he said.

Troemel noticed something that seemed off, in the lower half of the image. “Is that can in the woman's hand the same size as the ones in the chute?” he asked. A realistic image would help convince Etsy that this was actually an art work and not just two guys selling things that they had bought on Amazon. Since November, they had twice been temporarily banned for violating Etsy's guidelines on reselling commercial goods. Citarella assured him that the image had the correct proportions.

Next, they had to settle on a price. Troemel estimated that the tube would cost about fifteen hundred dollars. He said, “I think maybe making it a three-to-four-thousand-dollar product will safely cover us”—he laughed—“in the unfortunate circumstance someone actually buys it.”

The calendar went up on Etsy. “Next year this time, people will be telling the date by whether they had venison or turkey,” Troemel said. He asked if he had told me about a product called NADA Spiders for Change, their best-selling item. He hadn’t, but I had read about it on the Internet. If you paid U.V. Production House a dollar, it would release six wolf spiders at the New Art Dealers Alliance art fair, which had taken place earlier in the month in Manhattan. If anyone found a spider and sent in a photo of it, U.V. Production House would donate a hundred dollars to the Cancer Research Institute.

The spider stunt had caused some consternation for Lauren Marinaro, the director of Feuer/Mesler. She was on the selection committee for NADA, and when she arrived at the fair she was repeatedly asked whether the spiders were real. She said that she was ninety-nine-point-nine-per-cent sure they weren’t, but Troemel and Citarella wouldn’t tell her. “That was very annoying,” she said, with the exasperation of an older sister talking about her brother’s latest misbehavior. “There are repercussions to that, too, in the sense of, like, if the Board of Health thought that was real, they can shut them down.”

I had laughed when I saw a mention of the spiders by Paddy Johnson, on her blog Art F City, but I could see why someone invested in the fair would have deemed it, as she did, an “asshole-boy prank.” While Troemel’s work can embody the freewheeling creativity that is the best part of Internet culture, it often falls into the trap of the troll who mistakes a lack of accountability for freedom, provoking with obnoxious antics simply for the sake of generating a reaction, then laughing in your face when you fall for the joke.

Troemel, predictably, had a more considered take on the NADA-spiders project. He explained that at art fairs people are always walking around looking down at their phones and that, by making something that could spark discussion on social media, U.V. Production House could take part in the fair without actually being part of it. It would “create a palpable narrative that is more present in the media than some sort of abstract painting that you’d expect to see there,” he said.

I asked Citarella and Troemel if they had actually released any spiders. “None,” Citarella said. “Not any.” Troemel shot him a look.

“I mean, I wouldn’t say that,” Troemel said. “I don’t see a benefit of saying we didn’t do anything.”

Citarella gave him a look of exaggerated incredulity. “It’s . . . bioterrorism?” he said. They both laughed. ♦

Adrian Chen joined The New Yorker as a staff writer in 2016.

This article appears in other versions of the January 30, 2017, issue, with the headline “The Troll of Internet Art.”

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