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**\* DAVID ROBBINS**  
**THE HORSE**  
**BACKSTREET CHOPPER**  
**DECEMBER 2010**

**Jacob Fabricius:** You were a bit sceptical when I invited you for this project, right. However you instantly came up with three proposals for possible ads. What were your doubts? And could you describe the three ads?

**David Robbins:** Initially I'm always slightly irritated whenever someone asks me to address a project of theirs, because it distracts me from my own direction. I stopped doing group shows years ago, for that reason. But you're a friend so I agreed. And as usual, as soon as I actually start doing the work, it's always fun and easy. My scepticism had to do, too, with the gesture of using the context of magazine advertising as a site. Dan Graham had done this in the 1960s and I wondered why you were doing it now. But I've reached an age where I accept that I don't have to take a position regarding someone else's motivations. One of the rewards of getting older! I only remember two of the three images that I made. One was an image of an unfinished paint-by-numbers picture of a clown overlaid with a text: "I love life. I'm just not that into my own life." The other was a text, in a creepy-monster font: "Why does the pursuit of truth and beauty bring out the monster in so many of us?"

**JF:** The third ad was one about your personal trainer: 'Joshua Van Schaick, Personal Trainer, considered as an artist'?

**DR:** Oh, right! Now that's a different use of advertising. There I'm advertising another person, Josh, about whom I made a video trilogy called Lift as well as an exhibition. But I'm not advertising Lift, there's no mention of it in the ad, I'm instead advertising and promoting Josh, who's really a gifted personal trainer — something of an artist at it, as I indicate. Most of the time when artists

use advertising, they're advertising themselves. "Come see my new work." Self-promotion is such a bore. It's much more interesting to promote someone else! My ad for Josh is an example of that. I made a TV ad for him as well. I believe in the way he approaches his work.

**JF:** Yes, You have recently done a few TV advertisements. Could you talk a bit about them and how you have worked with advertisement (or advertising strategies) in the past?

**DR:** When I was actively using the gallery exhibition format I really enjoyed designing the ad and the announcement card. Don't most artists? More flat surfaces equals more chances to communicate in inventive ways and build a presence. And these surfaces, since their function is to clearly communicate a specific event, impose limitations that I always found refreshing after the wide-open, anything goes process of making an exhibition. I enjoy making the TV ads for the same reasons. TV commercials are a specific form with a specific packaging function, and I enjoy playing with that form. My TV commercials advertise art galleries or exhibitions, which is something we've never had because TV is a medium of populist economy while art performs within the elite economy.

Traditionally, broadcast TV and art were at odds. But that's breaking down. Our attitude now is that it's all just communication, right? I make the ads when I feel like it, usually to promote the exhibitions at a gallery here in Milwaukee named Green Gallery East. I buy TV time — it's cheap, here — and put them on TV, so that an ad for an art gallery appears within the normal flow of broadcast television. I get a kick out of invading TV in that way.

**JF:** You have just completed your extensive book Concrete Comedy: An Alternative History of Twentieth-

Century Comedy. Could you briefly relate/describe Concrete Comedy in relation to advertisement?

**DR:** Concrete comedy is the comedy of doing rather than saying — a comedy of objects and gestures rather than funny lines. That can have a relation to advertising in various ways. The advertising world has done its own share of concrete comedy. For example, Washington Mutual Bank produced a moulded plastic "Action Teller" doll as part of an ad campaign. That's concrete comedy produced by a corporation. That's one approach, but you might also be an independent concrete comedian who uses advertising forms. For example, years ago when I was spending time in Italy I toyed with the idea of renting a billboard and just having the single word "Berlusconi" on it in big letters. Someone seeing it wouldn't know whether the billboard was for or against Berlusconi. The gesture was more about the power involved in commandeering a billboard to influence the collective mind. Cattelan's newspaper ad "Your Vote Is Precious. Keep It!" is another example of concrete comedy.

**JF:** Artists have placed works and advertisements in magazines and television in the past, what is your favourite piece and why?

**DR:** I don't think that artists have done TV ads, actually. Chris Burden made one in the 1970s but it was an art piece, not really an ad per se.

There isn't a tradition of artists doing TV ads, maybe because artists think TV is a capitalist tool and they want to see themselves as rebels or something. Very old-fashioned thinking. To be honest I don't remember any artist's ads other than the Cattelan I've mentioned. Most are much too artistic and obscure to be memorable as ads. Richard Prince did some good ads — a picture of the comedian Phyllis Diller to announce an exhibition...

**JF:** I actually thought you would mention Andy Warhol, as an example, since you knew him and worked at the Factory. He did advertisements in more than one sense.

**DR:** Oh, that's such a big subject. In a sense everything Andy did was an advertisement for Andy! The TV ads I've seen him in are pretty lame — they seem an ad director's idea of who Andy Warhol is. I'm more interested in the way that Andy accepted commissions from companies to make paintings of their products. That's a really interesting confusion of art and advertising, years ahead of its time. We're still not quite ready to look at that, I think. We still approach art romantically and sentimentally. Not Andy!

**JF:** What from your perspective is a successful advertisement, besides getting the message across and the product sold?

**DR:** Something that makes you aware of the form as a form by extending or changing the form. A TV ad is either 15, 30, or 60 seconds long, and its function is to create an attraction to some kind of product, but other than that it's wide open. You can do anything you like. When I make a commercial I try to keep discovering ways to package information clearly, within a specific time period. It's a challenge to keep pushing the form while respecting the real-world limitations of where the ad is actually going to appear.

**JF:** Your advertisement in The Horse Backstreet Choppers, was — by chance of course — placed next to the magazine's Caption Contest, which shows an image of a pig holding its head and hooves above what appears as water. Did you send in your caption proposal? Did you win? If not, what would your caption have been?

**DR:** I'm not one for contests.

**JF:** Finally I have to ask: Why does the pursuit of truth and beauty bring out the monster in so many of us?

**DR:** A complex subject worthy of a novel. Art is ego-driven — an entire industry based on functionless objects, realised through force of will — and there's a lot of insecurity and raw vulnerability attached to that. Then there's the process of creating demand for those objects, which involves a good amount of illusion. Toss in money, power, jealousy, competitiveness, social mobility, social climbing... Either you look on all of this as a part of the human comedy or you keep your distance from its toxins. The nasty side of the art world is tied to our anxiety about a proximity to history, I imagine. History doesn't admit everyone behind that velvet rope. People will go to great lengths to be included.

*\*from 24 Advertisements, a project by Jacob Fabricius, pp. 33-35, Pork Salad Press, 2012*