

# ARTFORUM

500 WORDS

## Alex Bag

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Right: Alex Bag, *Mickey Mother*, 2002, color photograph, 33 x 41".

*Since the mid-1990s, the New York–based artist Alex Bag has created a wide array of acerbic video art—by turns hilarious and horrific—that frequently features Bag herself. Her latest commission opens on January 9 at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Coinciding with the exhibition, Electronic Arts Intermix is expanding its catalogue to include all of Bag’s videos for distribution.*

**MY MOTHER STARRED** in two children’s television programs: In the mid-to-late ‘60s she hosted *The Carol Corbett Show* on WPIX in New York City, and in the ‘70s, in the tristate area, she had a show on WCBS called *The Patchwork Family*. Each show follows a conventional format: My mother sits behind a desk with a puppet and is joined by various guests. A music guy sings a song with a small studio audience of children, someone paints with the kids, somebody comes on with animals, and another person brings a moon rock, to name a few examples.

My new work is based on preexisting footage of both of these shows. Using Chroma-key technology, I’ll be appropriating whole segments. Chroma key is my new best friend. I only recently began to work with it. Nothing is ever high-tech in my work, and I like Chroma key for its DIY aspect. If anyone is inspired by my work, or simply thinks that they could do it better, then that’s the greatest thing. In theory, but also in practice, I prefer not to seduce the viewer with technology.

In this new work, instead of being happy, smiley, and full of song, the hostess will be prone to depression, maybe a cutter—I don’t know yet. I’m working with actors who are my friends. I give them some direction; in this project, for example, I instructed them to act as though they are writing a suicide note to the youth of today. If they can only tell them about one thing, what will it be? If you’re going to have a studio audience full of children, don’t think about entertaining them. Instead, think about where you can derive some degree of earnestness. I don’t think my work has to be age-appropriate, but it does need to have a sense of urgency.

I’m a writer, and I consider that to be my primary strength. I’m really not an actress. Even though my videos look improvised, much of it is typically scripted. Since no one is a professional actor, we always use cue

cards. When you're shooting on video, you can keep doing it until you have it right. The whole thing is planned out, and then I leave room for... magic!

The Whitney show is new for me in terms of the size and scope of the audience. Anyone can walk in and see the piece in the lobby—you don't even have to pay to see it, which I really like. It's nice to have this kind of challenge. I like being given assignments. It's easier than simply pulling things out of the air. The fact that there are set parameters based on the space and its accessibility produces its own set of complications and joys.

I was a guest on *The Patchwork Family* when I was a child. Once there was a guy from a zoo, and because it was my mother's show, I had a monkey to myself all day. I pushed the monkey around in a doll stroller. It was the greatest day of my life—and it's all been downhill since then! Reruns of my mother's shows were on rotation through the early '90s, and I recall watching them Saturday mornings when I was in college. My clearest memories of the shows are from that period. If I stayed up all night on a Friday, as I was wont to do, there she was in the morning, standing before a psychedelic background sporting a big collar and singing songs to a puppet; it was great footage to fall asleep to. When I was really young, I found the shows disturbing; there was always an audience full of children with whom she'd share stories that she had already told to me, which could get very confusing. It was only in reruns that I really began to enjoy them.

— As told to Lauren O'Neill-Butler