

Vlog Like No One's Watching: Samantha Harmon's Untitled (green)

By Christiana Cefalu

What if a hedge fund manager wanted to become an artist? What if she vlogged about it?

She uses a dollar bill as a color swatch while clothes shopping, a “matching system” to help efficiently narrow down her choices while fulfilling her superstition that dressing the color of money will bring her money. Played by the artist Samantha Harmon, the character gives us a tour of her life in a manner so off-kilter that we somehow forget the ubiquity of unsolicited confessionals.

We still haven't seen her face when she wonders aloud about her alternate path as an artist. Perhaps her “hippie” parents would have been more proud of her, she says. The frame is a close-up of a rustling evergreen tree, a directorial choice that could have been made by Harmon, the character, or both. Because the video dually functions as both of their work, to watch it is to revel in the resultant ambiguities, like the mix of intentional and unintentional hilarity, and the extent to which she is aware of a camera. We are constantly deciphering her motivation—whether she is narrating to a hypothetical viewership, answering off-screen questions, or just talking to herself.

She likes to think of art projects she might do, like filming a line of people who have tattoos of butterflies, so that the butterflies appear to dance across the frame.

The video progressively seems to be created by the character on childishly muddled terms. Like a diary purposely left askew and open to the juiciest page for someone to find, it's an ostensibly private document made for some abstract audience she fantasizes will shake their heads in reverential awe, to be screened someday as an early work at her retrospective. But whether she is delusional or insecure about how fascinating she is, we are fascinated either way.

Preparing to visit her family for the weekend, she is at home watering her plants. As if prompted by an off-screen interviewer, she demonstrates her time-saving life hacks, like entering 5-5 in the microwave instead of 1-0-0, “so it's the same button twice instead of two different buttons three times.” With the time saved, she repeatedly says “I love you” to her two birds until they each respond with a slight croak. “I love you, too,” she says.

Even though she's alone, she speaks as if she's giving a PowerPoint presentation—loud and rehearsed, but with pauses for thought and “ums.” Then again, it's been a while since the absence of a live audience has deterred anyone from behaving like someone is watching, or otherwise treating life as a performance. Even more absurdly, she acts as though she can't be bothered to carry out this self-directed self-documentation, like a blurry selfie quickly taken to meet a quota.

By asserting herself to no explicit audience, we wonder whether this is her tragically transparent attempt to convince herself she is important, or she genuinely sees herself as being this important. Perhaps she subscribes to the fake-it-til-you-make-it philosophy, like a self-appointed amateur lifestyle expert who apologizes to no one for not having posted in a while.

She returns from her trip with an assortment of green trinkets from her childhood that she arranges on her nightstand: figurines of the Statue of Liberty, Buddha, a gremlin; a dream catcher, a balancing bird, earrings that say *Trust No Man*. On one audio track we hear her listing the objects, and on an overlapping track she reports back about the trip. In addition to reconnecting with family and friends, she mentions that her mom still has an oil painting she made hanging in the kitchen, and that she spent time looking at her entomologist grandfather's butterfly collection. She decides she will spend the drive home figuring out how to "re-focus" her energy on work the next day.

While applying eyeliner in the mirror the following morning, she calls her assistant Scott to tell him that she will work from home and so to cancel her meetings. While on the phone she draws butterfly wings on the outer corners of her eyes and fills them in with green eye shadow.

In the only silent moment of the piece, she carefully cuts butterflies out of dollar bills, her first art project. At the park, she places the cutouts on a tree, a lamppost, and a fence, among other locations. The camera lingers as some of them blow away in the wind. When Scott calls she says she's grabbing dinner but will "check on that for [him]" when she's back home.

Harmon does the clever work of showing us the mixture of self-awareness and self-unawareness that we constantly witness as internet users, but in such a specifically stilted way as to hypnotize us. She creates a reverse parody by presenting something surreal which we realize later is frighteningly close to our own reality. What begins as a disorienting slice of life is actually conventionally structured in three acts, and mimics countless videos that can be found in deep YouTube with a single-digit view count.

Using a dollar bill to match the color of her clothing to money, choreographing her fingers to save nanoseconds, presenting monochromatic items as a found-object tableau—we recognize the character's acts of practicality as unintentional performance art, better than her actual artwork if presented in another context. We feel the same funny but scary sensation when an old friend says something earnestly that we would say sarcastically.

By turning on its head the familiar idea of the artist who wonders if they'd be better off with a nine-to-five job, Harmon draws attention to the sometimes arbitrary and oppressive distinctions between artists and non-artists, good art and bad art. We ponder, too, whether it's better to be a "good" hedge fund manager or a "bad" artist. But then, why should anyone have to choose?

This is the era of personal branding, where consistency is a virtue. The character has fallen prey to the tyranny of professionalism and stands to be reminded that living is not performing, talking is not presenting, interest is not expertise. The constant opportunity for our thoughts to immediately become public knowledge has simultaneously forced us to exist in the gray area between real life and performance, and prohibited us from the gray area between managing a hedge fund and being an artist. Perhaps if she were to explore that area, she just might make some good work.