I was getting off the subway and heard someone call out my name in an excited manner. I turned round to see James Leary, a young artist who had interviewed me several years back for a project for his art group, Bruce High Quality Foundation, “a learning experiment where artists work together to manifest creative, productive, resistant, useless, and demanding interactions between art and the world.”

James let me know that he was keen on making films and wanted to get together and talk. After our first and animated outing in Chinatown, he asked me if I wanted to reenact our conversation so he could videotape it. So we did. As we spent time together he told me he was interested in acting, and soon I felt compelled to create a film around him.

So I started writing and sent him a note about how I was thinking of things. It was to be a story of two dispositions, two friends, one appetite, the other intellect, one acting seemingly indifferent to consequence, the other, if you like, always calculating—it would be set in and between the worlds of art, academia, art dealers and drug dealers, trust-fund kids and kids working three jobs to keep afloat, about an increasingly disappearing “downtown” New York; it would be about the misadventures and aspirations of friends, based on the real life of Dash Snow and his friends and their friends, and James Leary enacting that fiction as a documentary film. As the documentarist he would rely on judgment and intellect, and on the other hand, the artist would be driven by his appetites and intuitions. All along I was thinking it would be so good to have James play both characters. We as an audience are always delighted to see an actor command two contrasting roles in a film (for example Peter Sellers in Dr. Strangelove or James Fox in Performance). Imagine Fight Club with Brad Pitt or Edward Norton playing both roles rather than being split in two. Yes, the ideal would be for James to enact the two dispositions, to play the roles of director and artist inside the film.

To get going I arranged to meet with an actor I had worked with on several films, Aaron Schroeder. We talked about the recently deceased artist Dash Snow. As we talked I realized Aaron really wanted to dig down and re-create Snow’s life as he saw it in the photographs of Snow’s good friend Ryan McGinley. Aaron wanted to do a close study. He mentioned that Snow died at twenty-seven and that twenty-seven was the age many young artists died. This really intrigued me. What it was to be twenty-seven. I wasn’t so interested in the actual life but the appetite, the way of going that was Snow. Someone who refused to have a cell phone, who would come and go as he pleased, who defined and had success on his own terms and yet did not make it through this auspicious year. Twenty-seven, the age of Hilbert in Exploding Oedipus.
After more writing and research I met with James at Au Breve, a coffeehouse near Cooper Union, where he had gone to school. The small place was packed with very serious-looking young students. There was James in a corner with his newly dyed blond hair, bright eyed and pensive, with a copy of the Ionesco play *Rhinoceros*. As I thought of Snow and all the young careering people in the café, there was something so apt about Ionesco’s insight. Maybe Snow had imploded as he turned away from the ever-growing crowd of rhinos.

We sat in the crowded corner. I unfurled my scenarios, uncertain as to how he was taking in my loose agglomeration of ideas, especially about the young artist, he himself being young and having met with quite a bit of success in the art world. He was very open and as always had real insight into these young men who were in fact his colleagues. And as he spoke my mind drifted off to Philip Seymour Hoffman playing Truman Capote, the voice, the wardrobe, the sets, all the accoutrements and support it took to make Hoffman, a truly talented actor, shine in that role. Hearing myself say this and from my earlier meetings with Aaron, I knew this was not the way to go. It was not the kind of production I could support logistically, financially, temporally. I could not do it.

What I was so convinced of and had researched for weeks vanished. Here I was again at that place where the imaginary meets the real and has to reinvent itself on the spot. Often when I am floating ideas, I am interested in not exactly the literal thing I am talking about but the space of emotions and affect around something. Often then people read it as more of an actuality than what I am thinking about. This is something I so often come up against that I just start making up other things and other things, all the while thinking, we are going to do something, what, who knows, as long as we are engaged in finding that something, things are good.

I move on to other things that were also interesting me, that were to be part of the scenario. I told James that I had met this Italian professor of philosophy at the New School, Chiara Bottici. James would be taking a class with her while making the documentary.

He would play Lucien and would be in her class, and she would be lecturing on power and sex, and during the course she would take her students to Benjamin Britten’s two-act opera *The Rape of Lucretia*. He would meet her at her office and be very turned on and enamored with her intellect.

As he leaves her office and walks down the hall another female professor (an actual colleague of Chiara’s) would see Lucien walking away. The two professors would talk about him, about bedding him, maybe even making a bet about it.

Late one evening, Chiara runs into Lucien, who is out with a group of friends, including fellow students. Something is not right and Lucien walks off and the two of them find themselves together. He
is drunk and Chiara takes him home. We discuss how this happens. I mention two films, *Storytelling* by Todd Solondz and *Bad Timing: A Sensual Obsession* by Nicolas Roeg.

So she seduces Lucien, she “rapes” him. I tell him at the opera I will film select scenes, cutting between him and the two professors, and at the end-of-the-semester lecture, when the class discusses opera, power, and rape, we would see the three of them critiquing the very dynamic they had enacted.

I also suggested he would be making a documentary on writers all twenty-seven or around that age, and I told him I had set up an interview with Tao Lin. James did not know Tao’s writing but had lots of thoughts on the post-ironic and the said posture of new sincerity. I was interested in Tao as someone who truly grew up online. I wanted to give description to that moment when you find you’re inside a mode of narrative or that moment when you see yourself depicted by others while at the same time you actively narrate yourself practically in real time. Yes, something performative, narrative in its very constitution.

So the film would be a documentary of him making this fiction film about these artists, me making a documentary about him as an artist, about him starting up painting again, interviewing figure models and writers, getting involved with some of them and this woman professor and him, and his studio. We would have a go at all these things.

Perhaps one of the writers or models would be a college student who tries to make ends meet as an S and M bondage person-for-hire within a world of wealthy businessmen and lavish penthouses. The quest for true love and happiness contrasts with the dark nighttime in NYC, ridden with perverse sex and drugs (taking cues from *Tokyo Decadence* here)—that could be another line in the story, all depending on who we meet, who showed up for auditions.

It would be about him making this documentary, university politics, the art scene, his friends, dealing with studio mates across the hall or rather the theater troupe that has subleased from him—they are putting on a process play and are always doing exercises that include shooting, running around—a living theater.

About the drug-addled couple downstairs, Aaron and Morgan (the Dalton girl and her weapons-obsessed boyfriend).

The professor, the rape.

I went on and on and over the weeks sent him e-mails and more scenarios.

With James’s interest, I began casting, asking around to meet young writers and academics through friends at the New School and the editor of an online magazine, *Thought Catalog*. I also placed an ad on Mandy and Craiglist:

“*Part fiction, part documentary, 27 follows the interwoven lives of seven twenty-seven-year-olds. It maps them as a network of narr-
narratives and affects, along twenty-seven nodes of anything and everything—a fold where all things touch in dreams, in algorithms, in a kiss mapped into any number of vectors and correlations of love, death, ambition, euphoria, confusion, desire, mystery, addiction, wonder, disgust and mania.”

So I wrote to my editor friend with the ad and added, “With that said, I would be most grateful if you could introduce me to ten people: writers, thinkers, storytellers, journalists, actors, designers, technologists, artisans, etc.—anyone that you think of interest—there are so many good writers on your site and I would like to talk to and interview as many as I can and readers as well (they will be in stellar company)—around the age of twenty-seven.”

Chris Lavergne’s response:
“I gotta condense this into something very palpable to recruit people.
Can I call it a mock documentary? Or ... do I say it’s just an experimental film?”

A friend turned it into this, which Chris passed around:
“ A film that is a bleed of fiction and documentary entitled 27. It’s a taking on of this moment in people’s lives today: What is it to reckon the world at twenty-seven today? What turns you on in every sense? How do you go, what do you think, what do you do? This is not an exposé but a reckoning, a putting on, a play.”

“Been talking to some people. Making progress on putting together a roster. One concern: people are freaked out by the ‘fiction’ element. Any way to ease this concern?”

—Chris Lavergne of Thought Catalog

It was so odd to read that line for me—people who write fiction “freaked out by the fiction element.”

After all, what I was interested in was the event of recording, the performance of it, the multiplicity of ways people were now documenting and presenting themselves, in their tweets, hash tags, social media posts, Vine videos, Instagram pictures, blogs as “real” with the exponent of “fiction.” How was it possible that their participation in the “real” would not invite them to see it as “fiction”? Weren’t their fictions, as had always been, the piecing together of both documentation and invention?

This narrative space was what was now becoming most interesting to me. After making Hi, How Are You Guest 10497, I did not think of making another film, as it was so close to what my interest had been in constructing an image for the screen, not the big screen, the cinema screen, but the screens of the everyday. There was something that continued here in the idea of constituting narrative in a world where we are always narrating ourselves in our pervasive social media. How was it that all these parallel, asynchronous postings constituted a narrative coherence and how might they inform a way to think about and author a contemporary cinema? Not in literally showing them, but by using them as a constructed language along the new ways, they have entrained
us to be authors and readers of dispersed, open, and parallel narratives.

As things gathered momentum, with all these people to meet and casting to be set up, I contacted Sasha Sakhar, who was an intern on a documentary I was making, Revolution of the Present, on network culture. She invited me to the New School and introduced me to a number of her student friends, including Divina Hasselmann, an extraordinarily bright grad student whom I came to see would be perfect to match up with James as they were both extremely articulate. That evening, as I often do with my camera with me, I interviewed her, in a casual way in the setting of her peers. The things she said about love, death, sex, intimacy, so easily, caught me as all the things I wanted in the fiction I was looking for—and here she was, right in front of me.

Days later I invited her to be part of the film and told her we would meet at St. Mark’s bookstore in the East Village. I only had to give her enough of a scenario that could be a starting point for her. At this point the Italian professor told me she was up for tenure and that my scenario would not be looked on very favorably by her peers. (Of course I thought it was exactly what a professor should do, to enact the text she is teaching.) With Chiara out of the picture, Divina would be my “professor,” and as a peer to James, we could explore the same issues of intimacy, freedom, power, sex, and closeness in a more intimate, if less conceptual, way.

I would create a fiction that would allow me to document her, James, and the other cast of nine that I had interested in making a film.

I had simply to give them enough fiction for me to document them. This then would become the project, to find, discover, catalyze a recording event that can put on the now of these twenty-seven-year-olds.

In the end I needed all these narratives and fictional armatures to give both the actors and non-actors a beginning, otherwise I would be straight-up interviewing them. I could not do all the stories I had researched and written, per se—the enactment of a scenario from A to Z—rather the film would have to be this encounter between my fictions and imaginings and these people, in the lensing and time dimension of the event of recording of us together. Shooting the fiction would allow us, give space and permission to all of us, to explore all the ideas that were brewing, that now the group of us were brimming with and ready to reckon with. It was time now to shoot.

In order to take hold of us, writing, art, and cinema needs to define our most contemporary sense of our perception of ourselves—so with the group of actors, writers, and artists, I now set out to find a new form that would include all these varied kinds of recording events—documentary, fiction, selfie, social media, theater, and performance art.
More impressionistic than plot—what is plot, to you?

“*The idea of a plot is unattractive, because I never liked people who plotted out their lives. I don’t like people who plot too much. I try to stay away from people who plot. But a story can be more liquid. It can be without a point. It can be more impressionistic.*”

—Harmony Korine

“*[After the screening of *My Own Private River*], an audience member made a comment that in this film, it took a while for the story to kick in. James [Franco] said he feels sometimes that a narrative can ‘strangle a film’ and he prefers to not rely on a strong narrative when making films.*”

—On Location Vacations

“I work in waves ... and I take liberties I wouldn’t have taken before ... I got all kinds of wonderful effects that I never achieved before. They all have beautiful passages, such large passages, not like those early paintings.”

—Cy Twombly
At St. Mark’s Church James and Divina walk along under the night sky, conversational and easy. James listens:

“You’re sure about this—not being attached to each other.”

“I’ve thought about this, and yes.”

When Divina tells James “we can be with other people,” he begins to doubt his existence—his language, his appearance, and his mind.

He soon sees himself split into another young man, Aaron, as if his shadow has run away.

He chases him, fragments of language and narratives, deliriums and pleasures, all these doubling all over the film, dream, reality, time, biography.

Soon James is acting in a surrealist Mexican movie.

And so those initial ideas of James playing two characters come up from the unconscious and find a way into the film.
Hi Marc,

Hope everything is going great! Just wanted to again thank you for the opportunity to work on your film—after working on other productions, being a surreal Mexican director pretty much beats everything else. I’ve also begun revisiting my Jodorowsky films and rediscovering what a great filmmaker he is.

The above is a note from the young Mexican actor Andrew Rogers after our shoot. Having met him in auditions, I knew he was someone with whom I could work. There was also the very knowledgeable Shakespearean actor Tim Eliot. In finding them, I began to write for them and adapting the text to them. Everything I had written began to morph and pursue its potential, given what was in front of me.

Marc Lafia
Tue, Apr 30, 2013 at 11:35 PM
Subject: scenario updated 1–14 please read

Hi Tim,

This is what I have as of tonight—please give this a read. Thanks.

Scenario
1.
- On a ferry, Tim and his elephant proclaim a new world.
- Aaron rides his bike in elephant mask.
- Divina reads in St. Mark’s Bookshop a book on utopia.
- James draws Emma.
- Andy takes ecstasy.
- Andrew in the park stages the fight scene of his surreal Mexican epic film.

2.
- Tim disembarks onto the mainland and introduces his new creature.
- The public says, he is foul, a beast, a monster.
- Tim insists this is the beginning of a new sense of love.
- Andrew discourses on the meaning of the fight to James and Aaron.
[And from here I go on and on, writing to Tim scenes and lists and ideas until I get to the part about the elephant. All of these lists and notes and dialogues are written through and through again and again.]

So the elephant and you.

After I had interviewed Divina and she told me her thoughts of new possibilities of love, sex, and intimacy, I went around and asked a number of people—if you could, how would you reinvent sex? Many people said they would like to have both sex organs. With this the film begins to turn on questions of inventing new relations, new languages of the possible, a new man—utopias and their discontents, one to one and many to many.

You, through, I am hoping, your knowledge of Shakespeare, will bring to bear a number of soliloquies on these topics, all the while parading about with your “elephant.”

I imagine you coming off the ferry into New York—the new world. And with you is this creature, a Caliban, an androgyne, a monstrous but beautiful new being. Is it chained to you? I don’t know. Are you its master, its lover? I don’t know.

He/she will be dressed up as a kind of fantastic creature of both sexes—many people whom we have talked to about reinventing sex wish not only to have both organs but all the relations of those two organs, of man and woman in one being—this is what I interpret “elephant” below to be.

So you will walk around with him/her in the Village, the East Village.

I think of this creature as being the dream of some of the actors and wonder if we can find the right costuming so that more than one actor can be your elephant.

Does this person wear a strap on, have an externalized penis, a vagina? (Think about how to do that, maybe without being literal.) This creature to me is something beautiful and strange and oddly utopian—in the end, the other of ourselves, our possibilities, our repressions. We will, in the end, sacrifice this creature, the brave new world will demand it.

So what I’d like from you, if this is okay, is your choice of a number of texts that speak to this, and you will perform them as you come into New York on the ferry, passing the Statue of Liberty and then disembarking. I am imaging you crossing lower Manhattan and Wall Street with this “elephant” with the sex of a man and a woman.
The film continued to adapt to its circumstances and what it could be and what some of the actors and artists wanted from it. That seems odd, this notion of what they wanted—after all, I am the writer and director. But I found that we collectively were in search of what it was to be an author, what it was to write ourselves, to unwrite what and who we were, those things we thought were expected of us, those things we put upon ourselves, our representations and self-representations. Divina wanted to ask from the very beginning, is there another way to have intimacy, to get close; is there another way we can think of death, not as finality, but a beginning. Film, as the site to enact fiction, became the site to engage these issues and document that engagement. As the author I then made a film about this process, and in that, captured what it means for me.

You are walking through the park and streets as if in a new world—along the way, you perform various passages from *The Tempest*, enact Prospero and Caliban and various novels or just more Shakespeare.

The idea is to narrate from your viewpoint something we do not see—because we see it as all too familiar. There is a world right in front of us we just don’t see.

And from one of the East Village punks interviewed in the film: "If I had a pussy and a dick I could just fuck myself all the time. I wouldn’t need anyone else."

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O, wonder!

*How many goodly creatures are there here!*

*How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,*

*That has such people in ’t!*

—*The Tempest*
“Reminds me of Love and Art. But this is subtler.

“I like the idea of having this young man as the narrator of this film. You take him, and through him, yourself, into a complex fictional territory.

“I like the fact that his ideas mirror your footage with the family, the actors. The film is shaped as a crystal. You, him, his art, your art, his life, your life, the film within the film and then you, in that film/dream. Just need more development, clarity. Käla thinks your editing is good and poetic, as is your camera work. We both like the parts when you manipulate the image. Gorgeous. You are making art while filming. Again, it is self-reflective like only you can be!”

—Lior Rosenfeld

As it turns out I worked with Käla Man-drake on the final edit of the film as I had done in the past with editor Keren Weinberg. I always make the first assemblies and edits of my films. I am the only one who knows the script, the logic of the narrative. Once I have the film, then it is always watching and watching and compressing down, and at that point it is helpful to work with someone else. And so for this film and the others, the film became the film—that is, it became what it needed to become, and I had only to follow it.

It became a film of narrative enactment and documentation, not so much about twenty-seven-year-olds but as a contextualizing or putting into relief the age twenty-seven as a turning point, a passageway, one of many. It is a portrait of a young man as an artist, James Leary, and a young woman, Divina, an academic and burgeoning filmmaker, their “friends” and the twelve-year-old Lola, a young girl with great feeling and poetic sense of a larger world, and myself, double James’s and Divina’s age, artist, husband, lover, parent, in the act of creation, swinging between pleasure and doubt. Twenty-seven this way would be seen against youth and age, a middle passage.

In the end I would present a very specific group of twenty-seven-year-olds. In a sense the cinema, or film form, became a stage, a platform, to enact, perform, dialogue, and communicate who they were, what cinema was and could be; a multiplicity of narrative tropes, a method for them to reveal themselves. This shared sense of “a film,” this agglomeration of tropes, was the event around which we came together. Here our bodies, philosophies, and emotions, tested and untested about love, desire, pleasure, performance, came unfurled and were reckoned with. Through fiction we come to the real.