

Using his muse to make love with the crowd

A creative artist re-defines citizen media as high art, and in the process makes social resonance a key quality of the digital era.

By DORIAN BENKOIL | If the Game Changer awards had existed eight years ago, Ze Frank could have won one then. That's when he accidentally launched one of the first viral videos. "How to Dance Properly" was a birthday party invitation made up of choppy black and white clips of him dancing in goofy hip-swiveling, arm-waving styles with titles like "Who's Your Daddy," "Basic Twirl," and "Make Love to the Crowd." Frank had dropped out of a rock band, worked as an insurance company temp, earned money sketching pencil drawings of dogs, and was doing work at an ad agency using Web skills he'd picked up on his own. After he sent the birthday invite to a handful of friends, he knew he'd hit on something when he started getting swamped with emails every 3-4 minutes from people he didn't know.

Since then, he's informed and enlightened us while getting us to participate in his works' creation. He brought thousands together recently with a project called "From 52 to 48 | 48 to 52 With Love" (the percentages voting for Obama and McCain) in which users sent conciliatory messages via photo illustrations across the political divide (and some sent him nasty hate mail, which he posted). He's achieved viral hits with animations of a frog whose mouth moves when you speak into your computer microphone, and a flower that changes shape and colors in similar fashion. He's won a Webby award, spoken at the TED Conference, gathered photos from his minions illustrating "toilet paper fashion" and gotten people to create an "earth sandwich" with bread on either side of the globe.



GAME CHANGER 09 CASE STUDY

Ze Frank

for unleashing the power of distributed advertising on personal media. SocialVibe taps into the networks of the young and connected, creating a place where members get sponsored and give back. Social media meets syndication and social good.

You could call him a participatory performance artist. His now-defunct Web TV show, “The Show,” included a weekly roundup of comments from users that he read in off-beat tones, “crowdsourcing the words that came out of his mouth,” as one observer put it. His style of speaking into a Web cam, then adding jump cut edits with zoom, angle and mood changes, has influenced a generation who today produce Web TV. He was doing social media before it was called that, always making sure that people who weren’t technically adept could easily participate. He seems most proud that he’s gotten us to interact. “How do you get people from what I call ‘zero’ to ‘one’? How do you motivate them to start something?” he asks. Observes fan Alexandre Enkerli: “Ze Frank is incredibly effective at motivating people to engage in social change. His approach is so subtle that he may not appear to be as influential as some other people but his impact on the world is quite real.”

His work lets the audience take hold of it, and change and meld it. Over time it appears in places he may not have anticipated, taking shapes and forms he can influence but rarely control. His various websites have millions of visitors every month, and he’s able to make a living from the ads, speaking engagements, consulting and scriptwriting. He will be exposed to a whole new audience this year with a mainstream TV venture centered on science. “Being able to publish, and relatively cheaply, to have access to these authorship tools and be able to distribute has been amazing for me, because it allows me to keep going and fight the demons of the creative process with a built-in playground,” he says.

Frank (whose first name, pronounced “zay,” is a nickname he’s had since he was 14, shortened from his given name of Hosea) struggles to describe what it is he does. “It has to do with the dynamics of contribution and what it means to contribute,” he says. Frank, who has studied neuroscience, is openly trying to figure it all out on a new blog named “The Explicit.” There, he breaks out principles of the media he’s created so that others can emulate his techniques.

“I don’t have any kind of goal that can be put into a sentence,” he says. “I don’t mean to sound trite, but maybe the overarching thing is a search for what it means to be human.”



Ze Frank
www.zefrank.com

A creative artist re-defines citizen media as high art. It’s video, comedy and social commentary wrapped in highest-order production techniques. ZeFrank expresses social resonance as a key quality of digital story-telling. He changes the game for writing, performance and digital story-telling.



One of Ze Frank’s posts on Twitter