

Jon Rafman - Press Clippings

Frieze, No. 157, Oct 2013

UK

MICHAEL DEAN

Herald St, London

That art and communication are synonymous is a convenient assumption in an art world that requires a contextualizable product, a still target for valuation. Inarticulacy has consequently become a condition of resistance, even if it proves to be merely token; the implied paradox is usually sidestepped and, with it, the potential criticality. Michael Dean's sculptural/textual installations arrange signs for the failure of communication, the unachieved residue of spoken language, theatrical gesture and sculptural form – all occasions for the transmission of sense or image to a viewer. Starkly materialistic and formalistic concrete sculptures, offering up their scored and scratched planes like mute screens, are combined with self-produced books in which theatrical dialogues are reduced to shreds and shards of fragmented language. Contextualize the style of this presentation, and one is forced back to the art and literature that developed, in the latter half of the 20th century, out of a crisis in the manifestation of the artist's self in language and form: phenomenological Minimalist sculpture; concrete poetry, such as the typewritten drawings/scripts of Henri Chopin; the spare, late prose of Samuel Beckett; and, more recently, deconstructive American 'Language' poetry, such as that of Susan Howe or Michael Palmer.

Dean, however, assumes the postures associated with this schism between subjectivity and language, but without a sense of the crisis which generated it. The London-based artist capitalizes on the resemblances between an elegant formal spareness and the depletion of an utterance disabused of its pretensions to convey the self from which it issues. His installation at Herald St ('Hah Ahahahahaha ha Hahaha', 2013) consisted of a series of sculptural vignettes constructed out of raw MDF. Each formed a minimal table and chair set, foiled by vertical and horizontal MDF planes suggesting a rudimentary stage setting. Balanced precariously on the furniture, organic-looking concrete sculptures took the role of the self or body that might occupy these putative interiors. Some had arm/wing forms fanning out from their sides. Smaller concrete sculptures, resembling enlarged tongues, drooped off the MDF walls or the edge of a tabletop, as though about to ooze further along the surfaces, like slugs. Open on the tables, backless books contained the printed letters 'ha', repeated *ad infinitum*, in the indented and paragraphed form of a prose narrative, as though the tongues had been reduced to inarticulate laughter, the linguistic trace of a laugh, drained of its sound and humour.

The rough patina of Dean's sculptures derives from allowing the idiosyncrasies of casting concrete to remain visible. They tend to be basic, geometric forms that fan out into protruding and receding facets. Here, the modelling was more involved than before, the facets decorated with additional lumps of concrete. The effect was to push the oblique figurative connotations of his freestanding forms into a more blatant, cartoonish direction.



The sculptures' standard anthracite-grey colouring was also diversified, in a few of the pieces, with the use of a kitschy flesh-pink concrete. Offset by the cool MDF planes of the furniture, these biomorphic, asymmetrical objects claimed the pathos of an awkward vulnerability. But the contrast between flat industrial foils and the lumpen organic grotesquery ranged against it was too diametrically poised for that pathos to be more than a studied generalization.

By exploiting these polarities, the installation pivoted rhetorically between signs for subjectivity and its absence. Each of the micro-scenarios packed into the gallery was a locus for the missing, intimated figure. In the first-person prose narratives of Beckett's later work, the stream of language is all there is to keep subjectivity afloat. It is both preserver and progenitor of the self. If its thread breaks – as it must, even in the silence between words – the self is threatened with dissolution. There is both terror and humour in this panic-stricken suspension of identity. Dean's sculptures might have been intended as an equivalent to this disembodied voice, striving to attain the quiddity of selfhood against their minimalistic backdrops. Their squirming, vaulting postures, soundlessly soundtracked by a mental patter of 'ha's, signified Dean's attempt to humanize the immaculate stasis of his previous formalism. But he never allows absurdity to structurally threaten style, or a composed artistic persona to devolve into a threatened self. Rather than a distillation of hysterical guffawing, the stream of 'h's and 'a's coalesced into the textual equivalent of a monochrome, leaving the books they filled as commodifiable art objects – as much signs for the form of the deconstructive prose work as the sheets of MDF are signs for accommodating décor, and the concrete excrescences for beleaguered subjectivity.

MARK PRINCE

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Michael Dean
'Hah Ahahahahaha ha Hahaha',
2013, installation view

UK

JON RAFMAN

Seventeen, London

Flitting from one image to another, between different fragments of information and imagery, the experience of Jon Rafman's exhibition at Seventeen was somehow analogous to our everyday use of the Internet. The films and other works presented in 'A Man Digging' plunge into different histories and roam around virtual worlds, shifting from quasi-anachronistic to cutting-edge technologies, from a tactile experience to a perusal of flat-screen monitors. Rafman's imperfect digital worlds encapsulate violence, destruction and melancholy, yet also seductiveness and beauty.

The Montreal-based artist has been producing videos for ten years, but employing the techniques of video-games and the online virtual world *Second Life* for making these works is a recent departure. Rafman does this by actually playing a video-game that is simultaneously recorded; he later edits it, adding sound and a voice-over. In the resulting works, these virtual platforms are an encounter between romanticism and artificiality – even moments of rapt contemplation become disturbing.

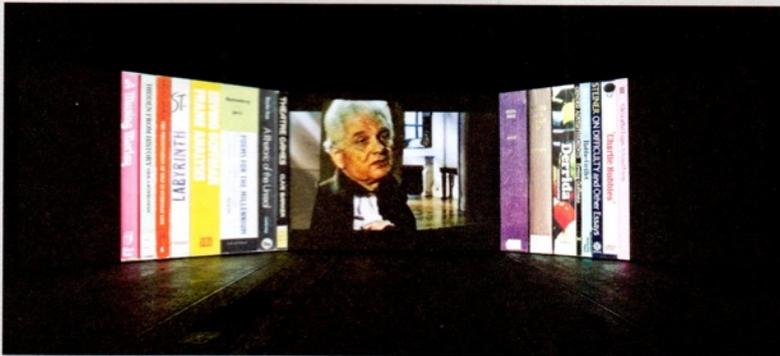
In *The Realms of Gold* (2012) opens with a pastoral landscape, which is rudely interrupted by the sudden appearance of a camouflaged soldier. He seems to lack autonomy, unable to exit this rural environment. This inability to escape the 'real world' is also evident in the 14-minute *Remember Carthage* (2012–13), in which the narrator travels back in time, trying to locate an uninhabited 'resort' in the Sahara desert. His journey remains unresolved. An uncanny feeling is instilled by the narrator's descriptions: he seems somehow familiar with these places, such as a Tunisian marketplace, even though he has never visited them before. Unlike the video-games – with their fulfilment of desires and multiple choices – that provide the sources for these works, in Rafman's films there is no possibility of autonomy. Real and virtual worlds collapse in on each other, until one comes to seem much like the other.

Rafman sees himself as an artist-archivist, attempting to contribute to the cataloguing of history: 'Framing my own experiences to create my own archive that is aesthetic [...] but not necessarily rational.' This recalls Mark Leckey's influential performance-lecture *Mark Leckey in the Long Tail* (2009), which traced the recent history of communication technologies while trying to locate the tangibility of digital information storage on the Internet. Leckey came full circle by returning to two towers of computers, implying that we always seek material form – however outmoded – for information.

Rafman's subversive archiving gestures are present in two new works, *Nine Eyes of Google Street View Microfiche Archive* and *Annals of Time Lost Microfiche Archive* (both 2013), in which he has transferred images from Google Street View onto quasi-obsolete microfiche readers. These works evolved from an earlier project based upon enlarged Google Street View images. Another archiving gesture employs schematic drawings from online artist communities layered over fragmented digital images of paintings taken from The National Gallery's collection, printed on chiffon and presented on

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REVIEWS



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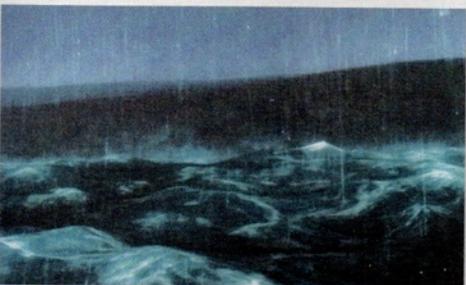
an architectural blueprint display rack. As with the microfiche readers, Rafman here seeks to set aside the dichotomy between technologies, displaying the latest technology hung on a classic method of archival storage.

These pieces reflect Rafman's aim, which he has described as 'to eliminate the dichotomy between technologies'. Critical of real and virtual worlds, the artist sees both as limited and deterministic. Whether heavily programmed or controlled by socio-political structures, for Rafman neither world offers greater freedom. By including historical references in his virtual works, he always emphasizes the 'real world' origins of digital products. He also raises awareness about the continuous change in how we view, perceive and store images due to technological change. Rafman's traversing of online and offline platforms allows him to intervene in the past, but also the future. His attempt to archive digital content might be, however, ultimately Sisyphean.

GALIT MANA



3



4

STEPHEN SUTCLIFFE Tramway, Glasgow

I was about to begin this review with a quote from Peter Brook's writing on 'The Rough Theatre' in *The Empty Space* (1968) 'the spectacle takes its socially liberating role...' etc. etc., so forth and so on. But then I stopped myself. Peter Brook would hate Stephen Sutcliffe's *Outwork* (2013).

Instead I'm examining the author photograph of Tom Wolfe printed on the back cover of *Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers* (1970), a book I had pulled out specifically for this review to double-check the quote 'in its moment of naked triumph...' as a way to describe the quality of VHS reproduction texture. And now it strikes me: the very surface of Wolfe's dandy-checked three-piece suit, in particular the way the fly bulges over his crotch with *too much knowledge*, expresses much more about *Outwork's* episteme than Brook's observations on the temporal presentation of experience.

Commissioned for the Margaret Tait Award, *Outwork* is Sutcliffe's longest work to date, at around 24 minutes, and his first multi-screen projection, including material not only from the Glasgow-based artist's personal archive of film, televisual broadcasts and sound recordings, but also cannibalizing a number of his own previous pieces, such as *New Numbers* (2012), to produce a glistening, hiccupping, densely populated work that might well cause reference-gout in those who watch it with ardent desire for too total a comprehension.

An incomplete inventory of *Outwork's* reworked parts would include: often synchronic clips from the films *Stripes* (1981), *Marat/Sade* (1967) and *Charlie Bubbles* (1967); out-takes from *The Cannanball Run* (1981); trailers for films by Alain Resnais, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Rainer Werner Fassbinder; Sutcliffe being interviewed (at art school, his face Rorschached to interpolate with a trailer for Pasolini's 1969 film *Porcile*); Sutcliffe snoring; Sutcliffe being interviewed (this time by British radio broadcaster Robert Elms for BBC London); witty animations that look like Saul Steinberg's work for *The New Yorker*; footage of Jacques Derrida seated on a stage,

his head enlarged cartoonishly in a superimposed box; a man dancing to and simultaneously signing for the deaf to a pop video playing in the background; Christopher Logue's poem 'He Was a Youth from the Suburbs' (1969); a wee splash of Monty Python.

All of these 'bits' are exercised speculatively within two sociological world-views, one mooted in Erving Goffman's *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organisation of Experience* (1974) and the other in Derrida's *Dissemination* (1981). Goffman writes in *Frame Analysis*, 'the individual in our society is effective in his use of particular frameworks. The elements and the processes he assumes in his reading of the activity often are ones that the activity itself manifests.' *Outwork* shows us (not least through its structure, built around shouty uppercase chapter titles taken from *Frame Analysis*) that how you look at something is just as important as what you look at, through the way the thing itself is primed, contextualized or 'framed'.

Writing about prefaces in his own preface to *Dissemination* (from which *Outwork's* title is borrowed), Derrida says: 'Time is the time of the preface; space – whose time it will have been the Truth – is the space of the preface. The preface would thus occupy the entire location and duration of the book.' *Outwork* sandwiches what appears to be its own main content, or supposed centre on the middle screen, between verso and recto elements, which agitate, unsettle and ultimately stage a notational putsch using their own margins.

Returning to that checked cloth stretched tightly over Tom Wolfe's crotch.

Careful watching, or again reading, of *Outwork* must consider it as a *roman à clef* or *Bildungsroman*, in method but also in narrative character, for the work imbibes the practice of autobiography – How do I learn? How do I know what I prefer? How do I make myself? – to produce a work concerned with selfhood through editorial occlusion; through what is left out, what is (just about) covered up.

In the final lines of 'The Rough Theatre', Brook writes: 'We must prove that there will be no trickery, nothing hidden. We must open our empty hands and show that really there is nothing up our sleeves. Only then can we begin.' This is the very reason Brook would hate Stephen Sutcliffe's *Outwork*.

MARIA FUSCO

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Stephen Sutcliffe
Outwork, 2013,
three-channel projection

3 & 4
Jon Rafman
Remember Carthage,
2012-13, DVD stills

Time Out, July 2013

Jon Rafman: A Man Digging



'Remember Carthage' by Jon Rafman © the artist, courtesy Seventeen Gallery

Montreal-based artist and filmmaker Jon Rafman casts himself as an intrepid explorer, a sort of modern day Dr Livingstone. But he isn't traipsing through savage, pristine jungle, he's plunging into the depths of the internet. Here, he attempts to reveal the true nature of our relationship with the digital world through appropriated imagery culled from video games, medieval painting and commissions from online art community deviantart.com.

Figures from renaissance art, printed on billowing sheets of chiffon, are overlaid with blueprints for virtual reality visors and pixelated anime characters, painting an HG Wells-ian picture of armchair time travel. In the dungeon-like basement, two films made of video game imagery play into the darkness, narrated tensely by the artist.

Back upstairs, Rafman has transposed surreal and often beautiful images taken from Google's Streetview on to old-fashioned microfiche viewers. His '9-Eyes' blog – where you can see more of Streetview's incredible accidental artistry – is fantastically clever and effective internet art, but it loses its power when obscured by dusty, old-fashioned screens. However, displaying such modern images in an out-dated, archival fashion makes a clear point: libraries and archives are all being shoved into obscurity by the internet.

Fortunately, there is a personal aspect to the work that saves it from heavy-handed conceptualism. The images document Rafman's struggles with formulating and relating to his own memories. The internet becomes a personal archive, a storage system for the individual, essentially a constantly evolving digital self-portrait. How we are learning to deal with that, and the paranoia and anxiety that ensues, defines the exhibition.

Eddy Frankel

Huffington Post, February 2012

HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

Jon Rafman's Surreal Google Street View Accidents



First Posted: 02/27/2012 2:23 pm

In 2007, Google released Google Street View, in which a computer user could access a virtual panoramic image of many streets in the world. House or apartment hunters could check out properties from the comfort of their kitchen table before they made the trek out to visit a potential place.

In order to accomplish the giant task of capturing images from streets across the world, cars drove around with nine cameras in tow. But problems soon arose with respect to privacy issues, which is why when people intrude in the shots, their faces are blurred. And a new art form was born. [Jon Rafman](#) curates choice images from the Google Street View all-seeing machine, capturing surreal moments in time.



Rafman hunts through Google Street View pictures and accesses notable, jarring moments. Some are uncanny (e.g., two old men walking independently down a lone highway in matching outfits), others dramatically stunning (e.g., a black stallion rebelling mid-street), and others surreal (e.g., an alien lounging in tie-dye). The images themselves are raw and unimpressed, passing over empty streets and blood-drenched car wrecks with the same automated gaze.



The gap between the camera's indifference and the human eye's inclination towards narrative is where Rafman takes interest. In his words: "This very way of recording our world, this tension between an automated camera and a human who seeks meaning, reflects our modern experience. As social beings we want to matter and we want to matter to someone, we want to count and be counted, but loneliness and anonymity are more often our plight."

Rafman's images are full of dark comedy and wondrous beauty. Ripe with prostitutes, bums, kisses, car crashes and sublime natural forms, the collection shows how technology has not succeeded in reducing the world to a knowledge base. Call them accidents or glitches or simply the human need to find meaning in the world. Whether or not we live in an indifferent universe, we live in a richly mysterious one.

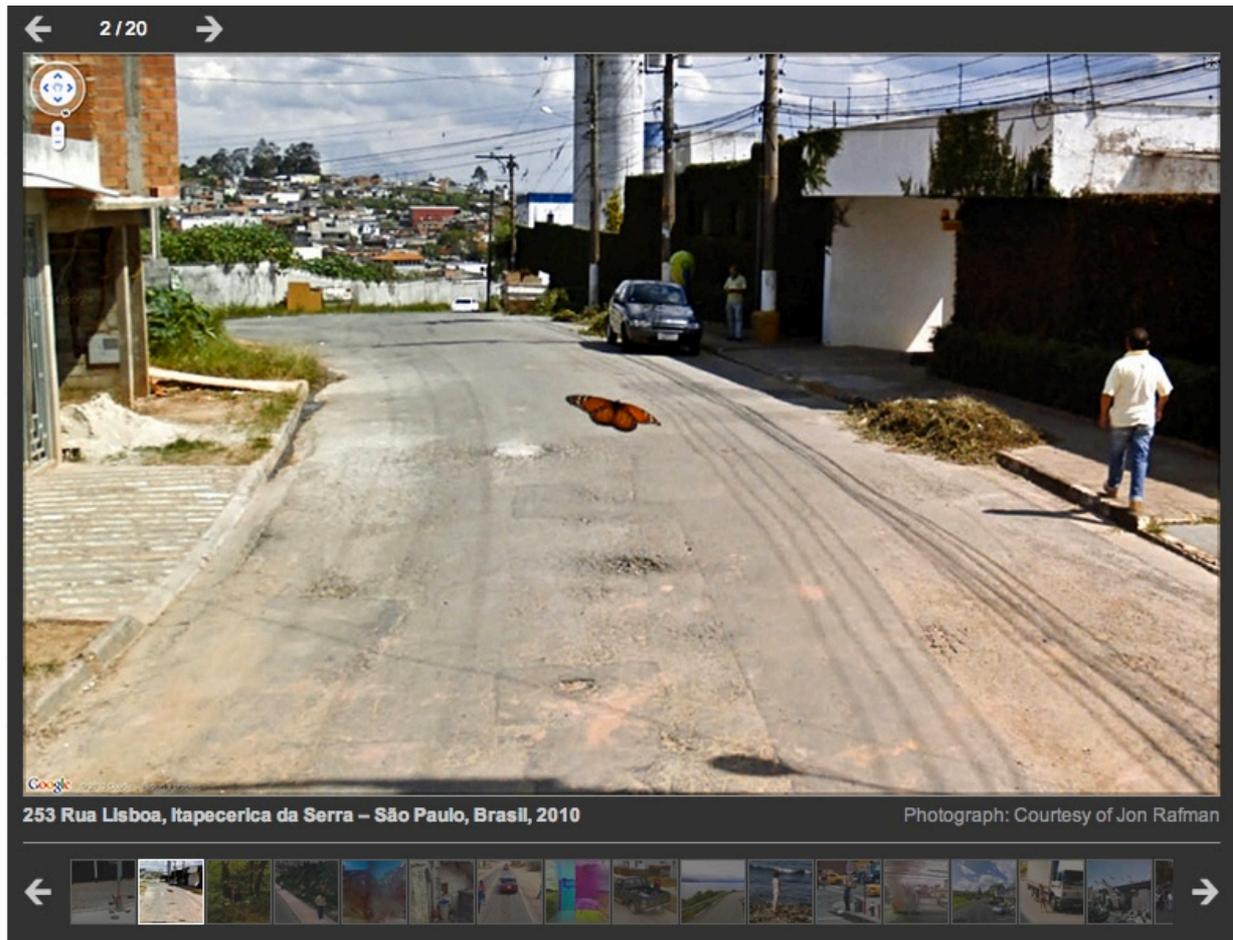
The Guardian, February 2012

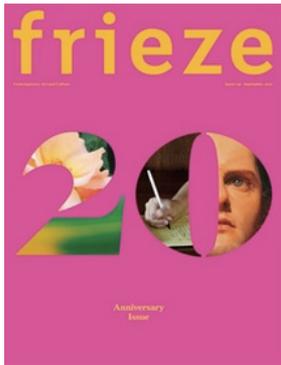
theguardian

The street views Google wasn't expecting you to see – in pictures

Artist Jon Rafman's photo project [The Nine Eyes of Google Street View](#), named after the nine lenses mounted on a Google Street View car, collects the strange and beautiful images they capture by accident from around the world

guardian.co.uk, Monday 20 February 2012 12.58 GMT





Frieze, Issue 141, September 2011

In the Nostalgia District

Lauren Cornell is executive director of Rhizome and adjunct curator at the New Museum, New York, USA.

The 16 May 2011 issue of *The New Yorker* featured a cartoon titled 'In the Nostalgia District'. It depicts a row of run-down buildings. Their facades read: 'Joe's FIX-IT shop', 'Photo Developing', 'Stationery Supplies', 'ACME Travel Agency' and 'Kwik Konnect Internet Cafe', all businesses that have been replaced by online services. Yet their storefronts remain: whiplashed by a world that's changed around them, sudden relics, out-of-sync but resolute. It struck me that there's a connection between the 'Nostalgia District' and what we might call the 'art district', for both have experienced seismic technological change and have been reticent or slow to respond.



Jon Rafman *Polán, Spain* (2010) C-type print

Since 2005, I've been the director of the online organization Rhizome, and have spent a considerable amount of time thinking about why 'Internet' is such a gauche word in contemporary art. Here are a few simple reasons I've come up with. First, medium-specificity is out of style and the word 'Internet' suggests a medium – something separate, something cyber – even though the term can really be used now to describe the experiences that come with an expanded culture and communications system, not just its underlying network protocols. However, this perception of the Internet as a separate artistic territory persists, with its roots planted firmly in the 1990s. In step with Clinton-era rhetoric around globalization, and excitement for new information technologies, the first Internet bubble swelled in the '90s and burst in the early 2000s, as did patience with ambitious but under-resourced 'net art' exhibitions (read: faulty browsers and error signs). Quickly, it was all but abandoned by the art world save for a few ambitious museum media lounges. It's important to note that much of this '90s-era 'net art' was preoccupied with the technology itself, not with celebrating it, but considering and subverting it. This focus made it somewhat impenetrable for the non-technologically inclined and challenging to exhibit off-line. In the last few years, however, the field of art engaged with the Internet has expanded to being both about new tools and simply how we live our lives – the humanity on top, so to speak.

A second reason for the slow response is that, unlike other industries, such as music and publishing, the art world wasn't forced to react to cultural shifts wrought by the Internet because its economic model wasn't devastated by them. The quality of Christian Marclay's *The Clock* (2010), for instance, isn't dependent on YouTube votes or the extent to which it circulates virally, and nor can one download and install a BitTorrent of a Rachel Harrison sculpture. The principles that keep the visual arts economy running – scarcity, objecthood and value conferred by authority figures such as curators and critics – make it less vulnerable to piracy and democratized media. The difference between these models belies a more fundamental opposition in values that might give us a third and final reason why the art district and the Internet are polarized: broadly speaking, the art world is vertical (escalating levels of privilege and exclusivity) whereas the web is horizontal (based on free access, open sharing, unchecked distribution, an economy of attention). Furthermore, technology is bound to what we could call a Modernist narrative of cultural progress, innovation and mastery, whereas art is no longer tied to this model. As the artist Michael Bell-Smith put it: 'Technology is about fixing problems, art is about creating them.'¹

These points describe positions that have begun to break down. By now, every kind of artistic practice has been touched by the Internet as both a tool and as something that affects us in a broader sense. This can be seen in the ways it has seeped into painting or print (as in the work of Tauba Auerbach, for example, whose abstractions can at times look algorithmically programmed), opened up new territories within which to work (such as with Cao Fei or Jon Rafman, who direct films within virtual worlds), served to invigorate Luddite tendencies, or simply changed the way we live, find things out and talk to one another. The novelist and critic Zadie Smith recently deplored Facebook for leading her students to behave in ways that were beneath them, such as 'poking'.² Similarly, Jonathan Franzen has come down on the idea of 'liking', saying it discourages us from engaging with the wholesale, hard realities of love.³ I don't think Franzen has a

Facebook account, but he and Smith have valid points: the way our communication is structured online doesn't always encourage behaviour we feel good about. Artists are continually finding ways outside of these prescribed behaviours, whether by critiquing the systems themselves – for instance, in Joel Holmberg's *Legendary Account* (2007–10), a performance in which the artist asked profound, existential questions, such as 'What does it feel like to be in love?', in the user-generated forum Yahoo! Answers, which is commonly used for questions such as 'Where is the nearest pet store?' – or by recontextualizing these new ways of being into their work, as in Ryan Trecartin's performances and videos. Some of the most influential work being made today takes the problem of free distribution as a starting point, or considers the economy of images in which visual culture circulates.⁴ Artist collectives such as honf in Yogyakarta, dis in New York and vwork in Berlin that have strong online presences have fostered international artist communities that have incredible resonance for younger artists. There are countless examples that would demonstrate how artists have quickly appropriated the possibilities of the web, both philosophically and in terms of how they make work, create communities and present projects.

And yet, the structural model of the art world remains relatively unchanged. In the art district, we still commute to museums and international biennials, pay for admission and revolve around large-scale, in-person events. These are the art world's prescribed behaviours, and the problem is that they are insular. Although performance and moving image have made major inroads into exhibition programmes, institutions have traditionally been less supportive of works that don't take the form of objects, and they take little advantage of the publishing potential of the Internet. Social media are useful, but content drives the web. When art institutions note how many Facebook friends or Twitter followers they have, I fear they are missing the point. There is a disconnect between having social media resources and actually employing them to engage various audiences, from specialists and academics to those unfamiliar with art-world debates. Wall text has historically been the designated area in which to explain art to the public, but institutions could amplify their educational and social role by publishing – daily and online – a great deal more history, opinion, context and anecdote around their activities, rather than just issuing press releases and visitor information. At the moment, institutions are relatively silent amidst conversations online, when it would really be so helpful to have staff (directors, curators, educators) be conversant outside of physically printed catalogues.

In recent years, contemporary art museums and arts organizations have begun to initiate online programmes, from exhibitions or fundraising initiatives to thoughtful shows (such as the social media around Marina Abramovic's 2010 exhibition 'The Artist is Present' at the Museum of Modern Art, New York), and this will only increase in years to come. (Amongst others nationally and internationally, US institutions including the Walker Art Centre in Minneapolis, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Whitney and New Museum in New York – at which I work – have been involved in such programming since the mid-'90s.) One reason why it hasn't begun sooner is that institutional resources are traditionally so tied to exhibitions. It is now not just important, but essential, that institutions stop marginalizing online or non-object-based practices. I find it constantly disheartening to speak with young artists who feel

compelled to translate performance, video, web-based projects or sound works into something gallery-ready, because physical exhibitions still remain the dominant way that art is named, seen, reviewed and converted into saleable asset. This issue is connected to one of the most significant questions that institutions with admission fees now confront: how to continue attracting visitors, when everything is seemingly available online for free. This problem is all the more reason for institutions to make a better and more widely available case for the art itself and the experience of the museum, and also better balance exhibitions with other initiatives that usually hang on the periphery of institutional art programmes, like theatre, online curated projects or festivals. Institutions need to figure out how to reconsider their models and coordinate the values of the art district with an expanded public sphere, rather than the values of the nostalgia district.

1 'Do Artists and Technologists Create Things the Same Way? Seven on Seven Guests Respond', survey published on rhizome.org, 11 May 2011, <http://bit.ly/mzUIWf>

2 Zadie Smith, 'Generation Why?', *The New York Review of Books*, 25 November 2010, <http://bit.ly/bAUO7Z>

3 Jonathan Franzen, 'Liking is for Cowards. Go for What Hurts', *The New York Times*, 29 May 2011, <http://nyti.ms/ijV5UC>

4 For example, Seth Price's essay 'Dispersion', <http://bit.ly/c4mguw>, and Hito Steyerl's essay 'In Defense of the Poor Image', <http://bit.ly/5AwXpU>

Kaleidoscope blog, September 2011

KALEIDOSCOPE

JON RAFMAN interviewed by AIDS 3D (Daniel Keller and Nik Kosmas)



9-Eyes.com, ongoing

Aids3d: As an artist you've got a lot of different things going on. Do you think it's important as an artist to have a seemingly cohesive body of work, or at least some kind of delineation between different sub-practices. Could you outline some structure that organizes your practice as a whole?

Jon Rafman: What ties my practice together is not so much a particular style, form, or material but an underlying perception of contemporary experience and a desire to convey this understanding. One theme that I am continually interested in is the way technology seems to bring us closer to each other while simultaneously estranging us from ourselves. Another one is the quest to marry opposites or at least have conversations between them, the past and the present, the romantic and the ironic, even though these conversations often end in total clashes. All my work tends to combine irony, humor and melancholy.

A3D: What for instance connects Brand New Paint Job to say Codes of Honor?

JR: We live in an age in which the new is constantly sweeping away or destabilizing history and tradition at a faster and faster rate. But in the past, situating oneself within history and tradition was a classic way by which an individual redeemed himself or built a coherent self. One of the connections between Codes of Honor and BNPJ is that each one in its own way examines the implications of this loss, this changing role of history and tradition. In BNPJ there is a clash of cultural weights between the texture (2d painting) and the underlying structure (3d object). History (like a BNPJ) is ultimately wrapped around whatever we do.

In *Codes of Honor*, the narrator is profoundly sad that the time when his life had meaning, solidarity, and achievement is now irrevocably over, but the lack of tradition and history inherent to a video game blocks his path to give life new meaning.



Codes of Honor, 2011

A3D: How do you think an idea of territorialism fits in to your work? I mean this in a few ways, 1st literally, in Google Street Views and Second Life tours, you're literally exploring public spaces and sorta claiming them for your practice.

JR: If I use a public space for critical or creative purposes, I view it as "my territory." Yet it is mine no more or no less than that of any other artist.

A3D: But I also wonder about whether or not you believe in any idea of artistic territory, or is this an increasingly outmoded way of categorizing artistic practice? (In the sense that Seth Price owns vacuum sealed ropes or Cory Arcangel owns Nintendo hacks)

JR: Personally I find it outmoded, but as an artist it is very important to be aware of what came before you, otherwise you might make references in your work without being conscious of it. I do think it is important to 'own' your work in that sense.

A3D: Being a bit open and dilettantish is obviously easier than ever, but do you think that it is a good move for a young artist just starting a career? I wonder this myself, as we've jumped around a whole lot in 5 years of work, and I've heard many times that its hard to see a visual continuity within aids-3d.

JR: I don't quite see it that way. I see a definite continuity, both visual and conceptual, in Aids-3d. But I think we struggle with similar issues of not fitting easily into an artistic type or genre. The themes running through our work are consistent, yet we are just always looking for different modes of expressing them? I

am constantly searching for an ideal, be it a girl, a mentor, the sublime, while simultaneously trying to reveal the sadness that accompanies the loss of these ideals or the failure to achieve them.

A3D: You've started getting some success in the art market in the past year or so, do you think that the "market forces" will lead you towards a more crystalized and apparent Jon Rafman style, or do you think that commercial support could allow you to be even more experimental?



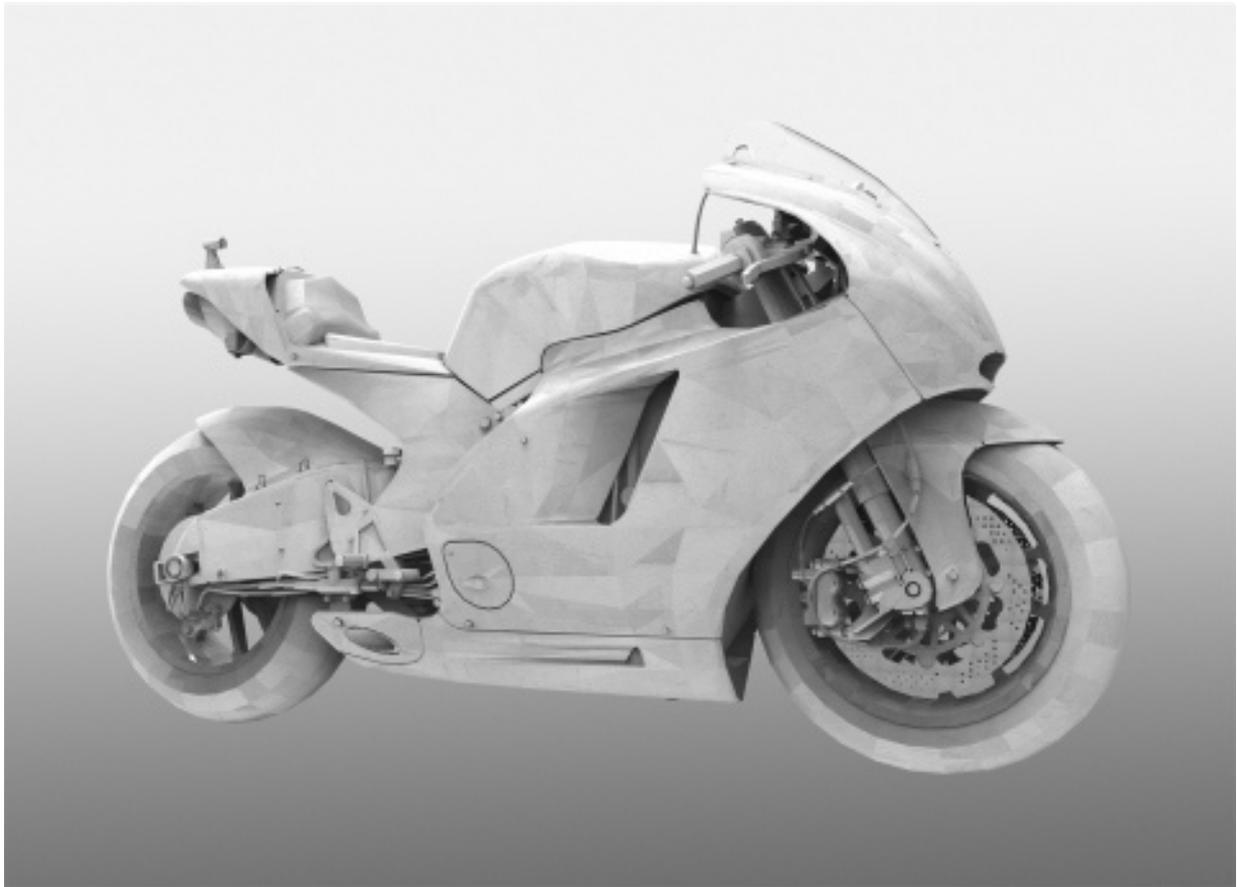
Codes of Honor, 2011

JR: I don't think I will ever be able to settle on any one way of making work even if I ever have huge market success. If a Jon Rafman style develops it won't be the result of a conscious effort. Although financial success would help make it easier for me to afford to make things that I would not otherwise be able to. For example, I would love to create a real life Malevich Ducati or make a feature length film. Money would allow me to be more experimental in that way.

A3D: I think that maybe the most crucial element in your work, do you have different rules when you're exploring Second Life versus Google Street View?

JR: The rules are constantly evolving and changing and I often only become aware of them in retrospect. This may not be what you have in mind, but if I were to give any rule I think the main one that guides me is the desire to find or produce something genuinely new without necessarily knowing what it is in advance. I really want to create something that can both act on the future and the past; an art that is new and yet finds continuity with art history. I think that a new art re-works and transforms, retrospectively, the history of art. We went to see an excellent Post Modernism exhibition at the V&A in London together and I remember you reached a point when you started getting depressed because it was so clear that so much of

the stuff going on right now amongst our peers was a just a repetition of what had already happened. Now I think that gloomy feeling is valid because, on one level, repetition is a form of regression, for as we move further and further away from the original source our consciousness of the historical condition lessens. But there is also an emancipatory character to repetition if the repetition is made explicit. Maybe as artists we are continually driven to re-attain lost moments in art history but in new ways.



Malevich Ducati, 2011

A3D: I can see how one might take the poignant and sometimes tragic subject matter of your Google Street Views as being a bit exploitative (clearly the people depicted have given no consent). Do you feel that you have the same responsibilities towards your subjects as a traditional street photographer might have? Does the technological mediation give you a free pass to depict whatever you find?

JR: I believe I advocate the total autonomy of the artist to capture or create whatever he or she may please, even though I know that this is an aspiration rather than an achieved state. I think it is important to be conscious of the potential exploitative nature of one's art but I also think that, if you start making decisions based on political or moral correctness, your art ceases to be autonomous.

Yet, I think all artists have to take responsibility for their creation. And that it is very possible for an artist not to actually see the truth in their work, it is possible for a photographer to be blind towards what he is photographing. A classic example of this in film is in the movie *Blow Up*. At first, the protagonist does not see the actual murder taking place in his photo. In order to see the reality in your work, you have to be worthy of it and truly committed to your creations. The moral and epistemological perspectives are intertwined. For me, that means that in order to see the truth in my Street View photos, I have to be open to the inherent violence in them. I think whenever you capture something in art or writing you are doing violence to a certain extent because you are wrenching it from the constant flow of inchoate reality.

A3D: Recently, we both attended the #OWS protest in London. Maybe we can detour and talk about that for a little bit... I've always been especially taken by this one Critical Art Ensemble quote from their text



9-Eyes.com, ongoing



9-Eyes.com, ongoing

Electronic Civil Disobedience, “CAE has said it before, and we will say it again: as far as power is concerned, the streets are dead capital! Nothing of value to the power elite can be found on the streets, nor does this class need control of the streets to efficiently run and maintain state institutions.”

JR: I think if the streets had a coherent ideology with a revolutionary consciousness that assertion would be untrue, but the truth is that a politically effective Left has been dead for a long time now. I think this supposed renaissance of the Left can easily lead to a even further disintegration or splintering of what remains of the Left. But just to back up a little bit, I think it is important to talk about the roots of the #OWS movement and recent leftist history in order to grasp it clearly. For me, the #Occupy movement shares many similarities to the anti-globalization movements of the 1990s, most clearly expressed in the anti-WTO protests in Seattle at the turn of the millennium. For instance both movements were spearheaded by anarchist groups and have been supported by the labor movement. Both movements were “leaderless” and expressed a populist discontent. A major theme of the “post-New left”, “post-ideological” 1990s-era Left was, as in the current #Occupy movements, resistance/reaction rather than pressing for concrete liberal reforms let alone real revolution. The standard narrative is that the 90s anti-globalization movement faded out after the 9/11 attacks and became focused on attacking the Bush administration and Israel during the “War on Terror” era. But the #OWS movement is not objecting to neo-conservatism and US imperialism as in the 2000s, but to neo-liberalism and capitalism in general. While I do think that the shift away from a politics based on opposing US hegemony towards one that is based on critiquing capitalism as a whole is a good one, I do not think that any form of coherent emancipatory politic is guiding the movement. Over the past half century there has been a profound banalization and degeneration of revolutionary politics. All problems cannot simply be blamed on corruption or greed. The anti-intellectual strain in anarcho politics coming out of the #OWS movement is partly a result of the desire to reject the grand-narratives of the Old Left. There is now a conflation of lifestyle choices with political action and very little attempt to form structural critiques of capitalism. Micropolitics have totally supplanted macropolitics. I understand that there is an appealing optimism to the localist impulse, but I think behind the lightness of culture jamming and everyday politics of resistance lies something darker, a profound cynicism and sense that there is nothing ‘outside’ the current social order. There is a real despair at the failure of past revolutionary struggles which has resulted in a almost inescapable skepticism of any totalizing politics. The practice of everyday resistance (buying local/organic?) seems a lot easier and safer than methodological struggle of building a sustained alternative ideological world-view. But that said, there is definitely a new possibility to articulate the current situation that I don’t think was possible while the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were raging. Yet I have seen no clear articulation of the situation by any political leaders or movements. The #OWS movement is raising some issues that have been out of the public sphere for a little while. Like what would it mean to challenge the very structure of society? It is clear that we do not live in the best of possible worlds. Yet how could a new global political movement meet these concerns in practice? At this moment in time, I cannot imagine a revolutionary ideology good enough to meet the historical possibilities of our moment. Even conceiving the possibilities for radical transformation today is truly challenging for me.

A3D: Continuing from that, this work to me seems to be your most overtly political, if for no other reason than its engagement with the “real world.” Do you think we have any responsibility to engage with the political issues that the world is currently embroiled in?

JR: Whenever I am confronted with the question of the role of the artist in their relation to social change, I am reminded of this essay by Walter Benjamin “The Author as Producer.” In it Benjamin argues that no art can be of correct “political tendency” unless it is also of good aesthetic quality. The moment an artist’s work becomes overtly political or didactic it loses its true critical potential. Aesthetic experience for me is self-justifying. I believe that aesthetic experience reveals the critical elements of subjectivity. In the aesthetic experience, the subject recognizes not the power of experiential capacities and the transformative freedom of the human faculties, but rather their constraint and un-freedom, their self-contradictory and self-undermining powers.

I think the single most important demand of the artist is to reflect. Art should provoke recognition. I think art objects have the power to ‘do’ things, and to promote social change in the “real world,” but only

indirectly. Art has a role of reflection, critique and investigation of social reality, but no 'active' role. In this way, art is a discursive space through which it is possible to read social change. I am against the reconciliation of theory and practice or art and politics. The separation of art into its own autonomous



9-Eyes.com, ongoing

domain is a hallmark of our freedom. The separation of theory and practice that emerged in Modernity was progress. So for me this romantic desire to dissolve the distinction and critical relationship between theory and practice, art and politics, is a sign of regression. It is very important for me to maintain a separation between art, as a non-conceptual form of knowledge, and politics and critical theory, which is informed by conceptual knowledge.

Rhizome, August 2011

RHIZOME

Codes of Honor

Wed Aug 17th, 2011 1:59 p.m.

Chinatown Fair arcade closed down on February 28th, 2011, after over 50 years. Gamers are still in mourning. CF, as it was known, was one of the last video game arcades in America where one could count on finding top-level competition. I spent the better part of 2009 in that dingy, dim-lit arcade at the end of Mott street, which was the battleground for the best players in the history of pro-gaming. The first Street Fighter release in a decade —Street Fighter IV —just came out, sparking a short-lived renaissance in the fighting game community. I got to know the regulars at the arcade and began conducting daily video interviews, asking them to recall their greatest memories at the joysticks. I set up a [YouTube channel](#), which was widely followed and the comment section became a major forum for debate in the community. During that year, I learned that to be a top-pro one could not simply master the technical aspect of the game; to compete at the highest level one needed to have a strong character and a deep understanding of human psychology. I learned that pro-gamers ascribe to the values and virtues of the classical archetypes of yore: honour, respect for the other, and excellence. Hardcore gamers have an experience of achievement so intense that, although limited in scope and time, it is forever difficult to equal. Although nothing can rival the high they get from defeating a worthy opponent or the reputation during their reign, the fame is as fleeting as the high of the win. And so I learned of the tragic element that is inherent to the experience of video gaming.



I learned of many celebrated gamers but as legends go, no one topped Eddie Lee, the East Coast Champ. Eddie is recognized as the pioneer of the New York-style of gameplay, a variation of the “Turtle-Style.” Considered the most frustrating of all combat forms, turtling requires infinite patience. The strategy demands that one play a zero-risk game, keeping the perfect distance from the opponent, waiting for the enemy to make a mistake, but never taking the initiative, just waiting patiently for him to slip. When he finally does, he is punished. This was the style Eddie Lee felt he had to pass on — not the brave crowd-

pleasing grace of the “Rushdown” fighter, but the calculated brutality of the defensive master that shuns all desire for spectacle. Part of the appeal to the story of Eddie Lee was that he suddenly and mysteriously dropped out of the tournament scene at the height of his powers. It was rumoured that he went on to use these very skills to become a successful Wall Street day trader.

When I found the legend of Eddie Lee, I found the center to my film. In order to portray the tension between regret for the time spent playing without a visible legacy and nostalgia for the thrill of the game, I integrate three perspectives: i) a narrator in a virtual world who reminisces about his days as a pro-gamer, ii) a Chinatown Fair regular who recounts his greatest memory, and iii) classic cut-scenes from the games themselves. In this way, Codes of Honor moves through actual, virtual, and imaginary space and time.



Rather than adopting the popular perspective on gaming as a way of escaping life, engaging in violence or being antisocial, the film focuses on the gamers’ pure joy in their hard-sought achievements, the thrill of high-level competition, the significance it gives their lives, and the communities they create. We see the journey of a professional gamer as he moves from the prized moment when he masters a game or defeats an arch-rival to the despairing moment when he realizes his legacy will soon be forgotten. We see him confront a question that faces us all: in a world where history and tradition mean less and less, how do we achieve redemption? How do we even construct a continuous self?

<http://codesofhonor.com>

Blouin Art Info, International Edition, September 2010

BLOUIN ARTINFO

Out There: Taking it to the (Virtual) Streets

by Scott Indrisek

Published: September 28, 2010

"I have to mentally prepare myself before I go Street View surfing," says [Jon Rafman](#), one of several new-media artists who are harnessing Google's visual-mapping technologies to make fine art. "The process requires intense endurance and concentration. Once I'm in the groove, I enter a trancelike state." Rafman trawls Google's archives to locate digital shots capturing dramatic moments, which he then blows up, in some cases to nearly 6-by-10-foot formats. When hung in a gallery, the enlarged scenes take on a significance not conveyed on the computer screen: "The degradation that occurs gives them an almost painterly quality," he says.

Given that Google technology is available to anyone with an Internet connection, it's not surprising that other artists have exploited the creative potential of Street View and Earth. [Michael Wolf](#), who lives in Hong Kong, trains a tripod-mounted camera on the images on his computer monitor; [Andreas Rutkauskas](#), in Montreal, produces richly detailed virtual mountain landscapes using Google Earth; New York's [Hermann Zschiegner](#) rephotographed Ed Ruscha's 1967 Thirty-four parking lots in Los Angeles using Google Earth satellite shots.

Google artists herald a new stage in the evolution of appropriation art. Zschiegner makes this explicit in his book "+walker evans +sherrie levine," a collection of all 26 images of [Allie Mae Burroughs](#), [Walker Evans's](#) most famous subject, which turned up in a Google Image search on the names of Evans and [Sherrie Levine](#) (an earlier rephotographer of Evans's work). With this new evolutionary stage comes a new crop of thorny intellectual-property issues. Since the artists using Google technology have obviously not produced the digital source material they're employing, how can they claim the work they make as their own? "The part of the process that makes it 'my' work is in framing and reframing the images," Rafman asserts. "By reintroducing the human gaze, I reassert the importance, the uniqueness of the individual." Michael Wolf — who started photographing Street View shots of Paris while living there — agrees. "It all boils down to what I notice and how I crop the image," the artist says, noting frequently seen details that he tends to fixate on: "extreme Google face erasures," the company's watermark hiding in clouds, urban pigeons.

Recently Rafman has been editing together stills plucked from Google Street View with swooping Google Earth aerial shots of iconic locales like Machu Picchu and Stonehenge for a digital film, "You, the World, and I," which pays homage to the French filmmaker [Chris Marker](#). The appropriated images illustrate a story about seeking lost love around the globe, told by a poetic narrator. "Each Street View was a sphere," he intones. "Each little sphere contained a potential memory, the possibility of finding her." Like artists such as Eva and [Franco Mattes](#), with their interventions in "Second Life," Rafman lands an emotional punch using a technology that seems horribly ill suited to earnestness.

The narrator of "You, the World, and I" is able to find but a single low-res Street View capture of his beloved, standing naked at the edge of a body of water. When he later returns to the same coordinates, the fickle currents of Google technology have swept away even that: "This image is no longer available."

"Taking It to the (Virtual) Streets" originally appeared in the September 2010 issue of Modern Painters. For a complete list of articles from this issue available on ARTINFO, see Modern Painters' September 2010 Table of Contents.

Bomblog, July 2010

BOMBLOG

REVEALING JON RAFMAN

By Lindsay Howard Jul 8, 2010

Netartist Jon Rafman's Kool-Aid Man avatar is one of his primary characters, taking appointments and leading tours through Second Life worlds both utopian and fetishistic, as well as starring in still images and films directed by Rafman himself, which humorously contrast the avatar's round red body with the super-sexy alter egos more commonly seen in Second Life. He speaks with Lindsay Howard about his work. Featuring an original Kool Aid Man in Second Life video!



Jon Rafman, KOOL AID MAN IN SECOND LIFE, 2009.

via [Kool Aid Man in Second Life](#).

“People make crush art about you all the time, don’t they?” That’s the first question I asked Jon Rafman one month ago after he discovered I was embarking upon an ongoing multi-media performance inspired by his work. Our conversation provided my first hint into Rafman’s process. He wanted to know what I’d done between the time I left work and the time I arrived at home, the name of the office building, where my roommate was born, the details of my relationship to certain net artists, and a host of other very specific questions which I later saw as part of his process for, and reverence toward, the construction of one’s personal narrative. The truth, though he wouldn’t admit it, is that Jon Rafman is one of the net art community’s most respected and beloved figures. This prestige, it seems to me, relates to his ability to position himself in shamanistic roles, as director, storyteller, and tour guide, as the middle man exploring essential concepts of modernity/contemporary experience, and then processing and framing them into

narratives. His work is concerned with virtual worlds, self-identity, and the collapse of high/low art. He is the artist/curator behind Googlestreetviews.com and the cartoonish internet *flâneur* directing tours through Second Life as Koolaidmaninsecondlife.com.

Rafman's Kool-Aid Man avatar is one of his most primary characters, taking appointments and leading tours through Second Life worlds both utopian and fetishistic, as well as starring in a collection of stills and films directed by Rafman himself, which humorously contrast the avatar's round red body against the super sexy alter egos much more commonly found in Second Life. The tours are primarily directed between virtual avatars, however Rafman also performs the tours live, inviting audience members to directly interact and inform the journey, as he subtly contextualizes and frames the experience. The Kool-Aid Man avatar, as it relates to Rafman's body of work as a whole, is an externalized representation of Rafman's honest and committed artistic struggle to construct and examine self in virtual culture.

When Rafman agreed to do this BOMB interview, our collaboration began with a series of ideas and links shared over g-chat conversations, emails, late-night video chats and Skype calls. We discussed constructing a short film inspired by Jean-Luc Godard's interview of Woody Allen or designing a text interview where every word or phrase hyperlinked to another obscure place on the web (à la the early papperad website). Ultimately, I confessed that my true intention for this interview was to reveal "the real" Jon Rafman. Our discussion over Skype (transcribed below) proposes that perhaps "revealing the real" is... well, I wouldn't want to give away a story right at the very beginning.

[BOMB Presents: Kool-Aid Man in Second Life by Jon Rafman in collaboration with Lindsay Howard, 2010 from BOMB Magazine on Vimeo.](#)

Lindsay Howard: Do you think about Kool-Aid Man as an extension of yourself? Is there an evolution there toward the fragmented virtual self and physical self? How are you considering that?

Jon Rafman: I think underlying that question is the unease consisting of where, how, and what is my physical self when I am in a social relation in cyberspace.

The Kool-Aid Man avatar relies on me to exist. If I don't log into Second Life, he is not out there somewhere in the world. He makes it clear to me that it is not necessary to have a computer chip implanted into your brain in order to become a man-machine. To fully connect physical existence with digital existence, it is not necessary to alter one's body. Perhaps Kool-Aid Man is a cyborg in the fullest sense in that he is combination of computer programming and human agency.

Even more important is that the cyborg/avatar demonstrates there is no such thing as a pure physical self. What we take as the most fundamental aspects of self are mediated through the lens of culture. I don't think identity is bound to our physical composition. How we feel and perceive ourselves, the roles we play are all socially mediated.

The internet includes social worlds in which an avatar is required in order to navigate and interact with other people. In these virtual worlds, be it Facebook or Second Life, our avatar is our social representative. What we choose reveals many ways in which our physical or 'real' self is constructed. So perhaps choosing an avatar makes manifest our fragmented and multiple selves.