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CONTEMPORARY ART AND CULTURE

The online anthropology of **Jon Rafman**
by Gary Zhexi Zhang

INFINITE LIVES

'I'm with *them*, dancing in the shit,' says Jon Rafman. It's an expression of resolute solidarity with the virtual revellers who populate his work, from the denizens of *Second Life* to the 'furry' fetishists of 4chan. Rafman is an amateur anthropologist of sorts, a curious *flâneur* who walks amongst the digital subaltern, pausing to sigh at the scenery of a virtual sublime.

Rafman's earlier video works found him trudging for miles on end (a performance in itself) along the cheaply rendered lands of *Second Life* and the virtual pathways of Google Street View. In the former, he plays the part of a rambling voyeur, using as his avatar the 'Kool-Aid Man' – a smiling, human-sized pitcher of iced red beverage that is the mascot of the popular US powdered drink mix. Rafman's version strolls through the servers of *Second Life* in search of nothing in particular, but discovering all things playful and perverted. Best known for smashing through walls in TV advertisements, which the artist remembers watching as a child, now the very presence of Kool-Aid Man's rictus grin implies the act of trolling. In the shared fantasy of *Second Life*'s role-playing world, Kool-Aid Man refuses to play along: 'It's like I'm destroying the consistency of their make-believe,' says Rafman; he's been banned from many worlds just for being there. Perhaps it's the allusion to the phrase 'drinking the Kool-Aid', associated with the 1978 Jonestown cult deaths, which transposes the context from one 'massively multiplayer' illusion to another.

Later, darker works, like *Mainsqueeze* (2014), evoke the death drive of the internet's collective psyche, comprising a traumatic found-footage montage featuring manifold acts describing what could roughly be termed 'fetish physics': squeezing, heaving, rubbing, scrolling, surfing. With a motley cast, including a bodybuilder who can crack a watermelon between his thighs, a gory art-historical Tumblr feed and an unsuspecting crayfish, *Mainsqueeze* became notorious for introducing a whole new audience to the 'crush' fetish. Resembling, at turns, the Wordsworthian sublime and Bataillean excess, the centripetal pull of the screen is made only more palpable by the hypnotic recurrence of a washing machine spinning violently into self-destruction. Rafman's found-footage films probe at the fringes of our screen-mediated desires, asking what it is we want from technology and, perhaps more urgently, what it produces in us.

Whether *they*, those virtual revellers, want to dance with Rafman is another matter. After all, the subaltern is an understandably tetchy crowd. In 2013, when Rafman made *Still Life (Betamale)* with the musician Daniel Lopatin, who goes by the name Oneohtrix Point Never, he premiered it on the anarchic bulletin board of 4chan. This seemed its native home or, at the very least, the lawless online landmass from which much of the montage's seedy video gems were plundered. 4chan's community, 'Anonymous', immediately recognized themselves in the work, eponymously caricatured in all their socially anxious, basement-dwelling degeneracy. Suspicious of Rafman's appropriative intent, comments on the discussion thread ranged from the disgusted to the awed to the defensive: 'Is he shit-talking my shitty lifestyle?' or 'This is weirdly moving.' Faced with these generic artefacts of their own culture, so extravagantly exhumed by an outsider, their exegeses fell to an introspective tone: 'It's like we lose our ability to feel normal things if we live our lives on the internet, and we have to create progressively more extreme stimuli to get off at all …'[1]

Like most of Rafman's work, *Still Life (Betamale)* was freely viewable online, acquiring a viral following. As did the Street View project, *9-Eyes* (2008–ongoing), which made Rafman's name after finding an audience ranging from Tumblr users to *Daily Telegraph* readers. There's a blurring of auratic boundaries, an intimate, in-browser continuity forming between art object and fetish object, between the dreamy magnetism of Rafman's videos and all the other weird shit you find yourself compulsively scrolling through at 3am, numbly lit by the glow of your screen.

Fast-forward a couple of years to late 2015, and Rafman has just opened a sprawling survey show at London's Zabludowicz Collection, the latest in a succession of institutional solo exhibitions. The presentation is friendlier here – the unnerving intimacy of solitary online viewing replaced by the familiar ritual of the public exhibition. Videos are variously and decadently installed: in a filing cabinet, a massage

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Rafman's films ask what it is we want from technology and, perhaps more urgently, what it produces in us.

Opening page:
Sticky Dreams (with Chambers Point Never), 2015, production still

1
'Jon Rafman', 2015, exhibition view at Zabludowicz Collection, London

2
A Man Digging, 2013, video still

3
Still Life [Betamale] (with Chambers Point Never), 2015, video still

All images courtesy the artist, Zac Feuer/Mother, New York, Seventeen, London, Zabludowicz Collection, London, and Future Gallery, Berlin

chair, a waterbed. With fellow visitors, you can watch *Mainsqueeze* in the awkwardly satisfying comfort of a UV-lit ball pool. At a talk accompanying the exhibition, a sold-out audience of fashionable 89-plussers nod in affirmation as Rafman waxes lyrical about memes, romanticism and collapsing real virtual dichotomies. Evidently, the work speaks to young, post-digital sensibilities, but there's an irony in the fact that, chances are, most attendees have, at best, a superficial understanding of those seedier corners of the web that Rafman has spent so much time dredging.

The fleeting nature of internet temporality means that it is connectivity, rather than content, which matters. Subcultures burgeon and die away, producing ruins at an exponential rate; entire communal lifeworlds razed with a hastily erased search history, leaving only sedimentary traces of macros and memes buried deep within the layers of a collective, vernacular memory – all but forgotten with the last of the 'oldfags' (to borrow 4chan's term for veteran users who have been there 'since the good old days'). After all, 4chan's notoriety peaked in the late 2000s, its resident 'betamales' having probably migrated over to Reddit, the popular news and messaging board better known to the wider world as the internet's strident misogyny machine. And, inevitably, as internet culture grew more public, it became more homogenous, more censorious, more 'safe for work'. Back at Zabludowicz, I find myself wondering how many of Rafman's fans share his affinity with the losers he appropriates, and how many are here for the brief ironic thrill of the weird-porn aesthetic brought into the white cube. ('Furries are so WEIRD! Japanese porn is so CREEPY!' mocked one 4chan user.) These marginalized desires, reified across virtual worlds – the mindless, playful anarchy of the internet troll; the joy of 'crushing' – they were there all along: pale, white and angry, their desperate irony streaked with hard-earned sincerity. Social mores aside, Rafman's anthropological digs evoke a desirous digital underworld where one can pierce the stultifying ennui of asocial reality with ecstatic *jouissance*; where endemic cultural pessimism is matched by a sweet, terrifying vitality.

There is a sense that Rafman is constantly between places, cultures, generations: the indignant geekery of net culture and the saccharine swank of the vernissage. He's a generation too old to be a 'digital native', but grew up through the highs and lows of web 2.0 utopianism. He reminisces fondly about the golden days of legendary troll-lair *Encyclopedia Dramatica* (2004–11) and, at 34, tells me he's 'on the verge' of having to leech off a younger generation to remain relevant. Given all this, Rafman is an ideally positioned observer of the transition to digitality over the last few decades, an obsessive witness to the death of so many languages, cultures and formats – from video-game arcades (actual places!) to VR headsets – a catalogue of archaic social practices and the dead technologies that produced them.

A slew of recent work turns from the grimy software of online desire to the affective hardware of dead media and dirty matter. The atmospheric textures in his film *Neon Parallel 1996* (2015) sit somewhere between the warm softcore haze of Just Jaeckin's *Emmanuelle* (1974) and the dystopian visions of Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962), cut like a tourist-board montage for an LA circa *Blade Runner* (1982). Across the screen, a chatroom conversation plays out between two lost replicants, 'ang3l' and 'spider_': 'You have to learn how to look. How to open yourself to the data ...' An ironic varnish of oily nostalgia drips from the work – from the sexy cyber-noir heroine to the goocy techno-pagan

An ironic varnish of oily nostalgia runs to the core: nostalgia for antiquated tech, perhaps, for lost futures past, for a vintage tomb we just can't stop raiding.

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climax. Nostalgia for *what* is harder to pin down: for antiquated tech, perhaps; for lost futures past; for a vintage tomb we just can't stop raiding. The entire video, digitally produced, was re-recorded to VHS and is displayed on a massive Sony Trinitron: the obsolete A/V display turned primordial Kubrickian monolith. The strains of romanticism that run through Rafman's work come invariably tinged with disappointment. The film features viral clips of 'BigDog' – an intelligent canine robot designed by Google's military R&D company, Boston Dynamics – juxtaposed with shots of a glistening neon metropolis. Funny to think that the promise of blue-lit hover-cars on cruise control turned out to be our present zombie neoliberalism and a weaponized robot dog. *Neon Parallel 1996* is its own fetish film of sorts. Rafman introduced it as 'A Lost Vaporwave Classic', 'a rescue of the present', an endless archaeology of the recent past, replete with a smooth tenor-synth demo. 'ang3l' cryptically types: 'I came to retrace my steps.' Filmic fragments evoke cycles of libidinal investment turning in on themselves, flows of personal and historical desire, utopian fantasies short-circuited by the inescapable present of capital. Even as we untether from our bodies and upload ourselves into the cloud, spectral dreams of futurity haunt us from the archives.

Desire, like data, circulates in and out of the machine; through glancing flirtations, leaking radio signals, hormonal changes, financial flows. *Erysichthon* (2015), named after the Greek king cursed with insatiable hunger, is an intense mood poem on circulation. Against a kinetic electronic soundtrack, shots involving drone footage and an autophagic snake are accompanied by a voice-over gravely intoning something about dead ends. Rafman says it completes the trilogy that began with *Still Life (Betamale)* and there's a sense that his interests are shifting from the fringes of virtualized desire towards something more systemic in nature. The fetish dynamics of *Mainsqueeze* manifest themselves again in the perpetual motion machine of *Erysichthon*. Rafman intimates the closed, artificial nature of networked worlds whilst pointing, via fluid shots of a gleaming CGI data centre, to the workhouses that power the matrix. In *Sticky Drama* (2015), a Live Action Role Play (LARP) short film that Rafman made in London this summer – again collaborating with Lopatin, who

'Jon Rafman', 2015, exhibition view at Zabludowicz Collection, London

You Ar Standing in an Open Field (Gale), 2015 archival pigment print, polystyrene, resin, 1 S•2.3 m

provides the soundtrack - the usual virtual constructions are reversed: real kids playing 4chan-inspired characters enact an ad-hoc gang war, with latex cosmetics and green gunk flung in abundance.

An ectoplasm-like substance recurs throughout Rafman's recent works, the characteristic 30 gloop that figures as a short-hand for the gelatinous excess of virtual materiality. Treacly instantiations of an essentially fluid morphology, not unlike Rafman himself, whose attention-deficit world is reflected in his ever-mutable practice: he says he's now working on a screenplay. The word 'ectoplasm' was coined to denote lumpy reifications of paranormal energy, exuding from the medium communicating between material and immaterial worlds - the entropic waste of transmission, splurging out at the seams. At the London show, its viscid forms are rendered in marble outdoor sculptures flanking the entrance, splattered across the set of *Sticll)1Drama,* and the constitutive *stuff* of the CG-inspired busts that line *Sculpt1,re Garden (HedgeMaze)* (2015), leading up to Rafman's minotaur, a glutinous gold-leafed biomorph. *Sculpture Garden* comprises an artificial labyrinth filling an entire room at Zabludowicz, with a much-lauded Oculus Rift virtual reality experience at its centre: it's a seductive, if somewhat decorative, glimpse into sublinlely illusive territory. New digital depths for the voyeur to plumb, no doubt. In Rafman's words: **'If you have a shitty Life, a shitty job, no lover, why not live in the virtual world?'**

1http://joorafman com/4chan pdf

Jon Ra/man is an artist based in Montreal, Canada. He has recently had solo exhibitions at Zabludowicz Collection, London, UK; Musee d'art contemporai11 de Montreal, Canada; Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis, USA; Palais de Tokyo, Paris, France; and Saatchi Gallery, London. His work is on show at the 13th Biennale de Lyon, France, until J 'January, and in 2015 was included in the 6th Moscow Biennial, Russia; 'Digital Conditions' at Kunstverein Hannover, Gennany; 'The Future of Memory; Kunsthalle Wien, Austria; and 'Private Settings Art After The Internet; MOMA Warsau,, Poland. His solo exhibition at Westfiilischer Kunstverein, Munster, Germany, opens in February.

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THE REFRACTING EYE ON JON RAFMAN

AN ARTIFICIAL EYE SCANS THE HORIZON. IT LOOKS LIKE AN IMMENSE MARBLE, AND OCCUPIES THE ENTIRE SCREEN. NOTHING EXISTS OUTSIDE OF IT, AND WITHIN IT IS REFRACTED THE VASTNESS OF AN ENIGMATIC, INDUSTRIAL WORLD. WE SEE DISTORTED THROUGH ITS GLASSY GAZE ABSTRACT REPRESENTATIONS OF INDUSTRIAL WASTELANDS, WHAT APPEARS TO BE A QUARRY THAT CARVES A BLACK HOLE INTO THE CENTER OF THE EARTH; IT ANTICIPATES A LATER IMAGE OF A SINKHOLE IN A BODY OF WATER, AS IF THE EYE IS GATHERING EVIDENCE. A TANGLE OF WIRES ALSO PASSES THROUGH, AS DO POWER LINES AND LIGHTNING IN THE DARK SKY. THE SKY IS NOT NIGHT, BUT THE DARKNESS OF INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY IN THE PROCESS OF RECONSTRUCTING NIGHT AND DAY AS IT PLEASES, LIT ONLY BY ARTIFICIAL LIGHT. ELECTRICITY STRUGGLES TO RETAIN ITS NATURAL POWER AGAINST DENATURALIZATION. AMBIGUOUS, IT CAN BE SEEN AS EITHER ENTROPIC NATURE, OR AS MUNDANELY LAB CULTIVATED. THE BLATANT ARTIFICE OF WHAT IS REFRACTED ARGUES THAT THE MANMADE OBLIVION FLASHING BEFORE US IS NOT AN INEVITABLE OUTCOME OF REALITY, BUT RATHER A DREAMSCAPE WITH A PECULIAR IMAGINATION. THAT THE EYE CONSUMES THE ENTIRE SCREEN IMPLIES THAT WHAT IS OBJECTIVELY SEEN IS CHANGED BY HOW IT IS SEEN.

THIS OCCURS IN *ERYSICHTHON*, A VIDEO BY JON RAFMAN THAT STAKES A NEARLY LIBIDINAL THEORY ABOUT THE PARALLEL BETWEEN THE DISTRACTED EXPERIENCE OF THE CONTEMPORARY *IMAGERIE*, AND THE GREEK MYTH OF A MAN DOOMED TO ETERNAL HUNGER, WHO EVENTUALLY DEVOURED HIMSELF. IT IS RIFE WITH IMAGES OF SELF-CONSUMING THINGS: A CRYSTALLINE MAGNET BEING SWALLOWED BY MAGNETIC LIQUID, AN OUROBOROS IN A KIDDIE POOL, A CARTOON OF ANIMALS SWALLOWING WHOLE OTHER ANIMALS, ETC. THE VIDEO EXAMINES VORE, A NEW PHENOMENA IN WHICH PEOPLE WANT TO BE CONSUMED AS A REACTION TO SOCIAL TRANSPARENCY, BUT THE CONSOLIDATION OF SELF-CONSUMING IMAGERY ALSO GIVES IT THE FEEL OF A RESEARCH OR ARCHIVAL PROJECT. AS SUCH, IT HAS THE QUALITY OF A DISTORTED MANUAL FOR HOW TO EXIST IN SOCIETY. TO THIS END, AN ABSTRACT CONCEPT OF MAN IN AN OFFICE TAKES NOTES ON THE SELF-CONSUMING MAGNET IN PARTICULAR, AS IF HE MAY HAVE SOMETHING TO LEARN FROM IT. THIS SCENE IMAGINES THAT OUR GENERIC ALIENATION IS A PLATFORM FOR SIGNIFICANT CHANGES IN HUMAN EXPERIENCE. GENERALLY, RAFMAN'S PROTAGONISTS ARE SEEN ONLY AS PARTIAL OBJECTS, EYES AND HANDS COORDINATING TO ANALYZE CULTURE FROM A DISTANCE. THIS IS A KEY INTO UNDERSTANDING *ERYSICHTHON*, AND RAFMAN'S PROJECT MORE GENERALLY: IT ARGUES THAT THE HELL-ON-EARTH *IMAGE*–

RIE, WHICH IS OFTEN LAMENTED AS A NIHILISTIC DISTRACTION OR THE END OF EXPERIENCE, CAN IN TRUTH BE A BASIS FOR EXPERIENCE. THIS IS CONFIRMED IN THE VIDEO *OPEN HEART WARRIOR*, WHICH PROCLAIMS THAT "YOUR NIGHTMARES ARE THE ONLY WAY OUT." THE NIGHTMARE IS NOT REALITY, BUT OUR CONTRADICTORY FEARS AND WISHES ABOUT LIVING IN DISTRACTION. THE SINKHOLES FOR INSTANCE CAN BE PERCEIVED AS AN ALLEGORY FOR NEW PROGRESSIVE INWARDNESS – RADICAL THOUGHT FOLLOWING THE UNKNOWN – OR A STATEMENT ON IMPENDING NIHILISM. THEY CAN BE PERCEIVED AS AN EFFECT OF INDUSTRIALIZATION, OR A MAGICAL YAWNING INTO A PRIMORDIAL ABYSS. THEY ARE PROBABLY BOTH, WITH RATIONAL INDUSTRIALIZATION MERELY EXACERBATING AGE-OLD FORMS OF SOCIETY AND ITS ATTENDANT SYMPTOMS. NEW TECHNOLOGICAL INQUIRIES ARE PUT TO THE SERVICE OF COMPLETING ANCIENT WORK INSTEAD OF CREATING NEW WORK.

EVER SINCE ARTISTS HAVE TAKEN UP THE INTERNET AS MUSE, IT HAS BEEN BEFUDDLED BY VULGAR OPPORTUNISM AND UNCRITICAL SUBORDINATION TO WHATEVER MATERIALS THE STATE PROVIDES. AS NEW MEDIA ART CAN OFTEN SERVE AS PROMOTION FOR THE MOST RECENT FORMS OF TECHNOLOGICAL DOMINATION, IT CAN APPEAR AS SHAMELESS PROSTITUTION. BUT THE EAGERNESS TO SELL ONESELF TO THE NEW IS A RADICALLY NEW PHENOMENON. IT LEADS ONE TO BELIEVE THAT THERE IS SOMETHING ABOUT OUR ALIENATION THAT IS NOT THE END OF OUR FREEDOM BUT A POSSIBLE ORIGIN. WHAT OUR NET, AND POST-INTERNET ARTISTS OFTEN PORTRAY IS SUBJECTIVE ISOLATION, PAIRED WITH AN ACCUMULATION OF DEAD CULTURAL HISTORY. THE EXEGESIS OF FOUND IMAGERY HAS THE FEEL OF RIDDING ITSELF OF THE INESSENTIAL, IMPLYING THAT THIS IS NOT ABOUT PROMOTING REALITY AS SUCH, BUT RATHER EXPOSING IT AS DREAM, TO MOVE BEYOND IT. RAFMAN'S VIDEOS, FOR INSTANCE *REMEMBER CARTHAGE*, OFTEN FEATURE A NARRATOR ATTEMPTING TO RECONSTRUCT SOME MEMORY TO A STREAM OF AUDITORY CONSCIOUSNESS, WHILE FOUND VIDEOS IN THE CONTEMPORARY VIDEOGAME PARLANCE ANIMATE SKULKING GLITCHES OF HUMANS SPRAWLED ACROSS REPRESENTATIONS OF URBAN WASTELANDS. THAT HUMANS APPEAR OUT OF PLACE IN THESE VIRTUAL WASTELANDS ASKS THE QUESTION, "WHY HAVE WE CONSTRUCTED A WORLD WE ARE SO UNCOMFORTABLE IN?" THAT THERE IS NO HUMANITY EVIDENT, AND YET NO VISUAL EXPERIENCE COULD FEEL MORE TRUTHFUL, MAY PROVIDE SOME ANSWER. A MONOLOGUE FANTASIZES "ABOUT BEING THE LAST HUMAN ON EARTH." THE ACUTE ARTIFICE OF THE IMAGERY POSITIONS CULTURAL DECAY AS BY NO MEANS AN OBJECTIVE OR INEVITABLE SOCIAL REALITY, BUT INSTEAD BOTH A FEAR AND A WISH. IT EXEMPLIFIES A SUBJECTIVE CONTRADICTION REFLECTED BY GLITCHY HUMANS BOTH AT HOME, AND UNCOMFORTABLE IN THEIR NERVOUS WANDERING. RAFMAN'S PROJECT IS EXEMPLARY IN NOT REINFORCING VIRTUAL REALITY, BUT IN SUBMERGING THE EXPANSE OF VISUAL CULTURE INTO A MEDIATED SUBJECTIVE REALM. IN DOING SO, OUR EPHEMERAL DREAMSCAPE IS MADE TO APPEAR ETERNAL AND PRIMARY. ITS PROTEST AGAINST REALITY IS TAKING FLEETING IMAGERY MORE SERIOUSLY THAN IT TAKES ITSELF, AND BY DOING SO IT RETURNS THE DETRITUS OF CONTEMPORARY IMAGERY BACK INTO THE SHADOWY SINKHOLES OF SPECULATION. THE COEXISTENCE OF AN ENDLESS PRODUCTION OF MEANINGLESS IMAGERY WITH ITS OPPOSITE, SPECULATION, CREATES A CHARGED ATMOSPHERE THAT FRAMES REALITY AS A MERE HYPOTHESIS. THE MOST ADVANCED TECHNOLOGICAL MEANS ARE USED AGAINST THEMSELVES, AND WITHIN A FRAMEWORK OF PRIMAL DISAMBIGUATION THAT QUESTIONS, BUT DOES NOT DO AWAY WITH THE ORIGINAL IMPULSES OF TECHNOLOGICAL PRODUCTION.

THIS CONTEMPORARY *APORIA*, THE FEAR AND THE HOPE OF CULTURAL DECAY, IS EXPRESSED ACUTELY VIA SPECIFIC FORMS OF AESTHETIC ORGANIZATION IN TIME. THE IMAGES AND THE NARRATION INVERT THEIR USUAL ROLES. TYPICALLY, A NARRATOR LEADS THE VISUAL EXPERIENCE, OFTEN TELLING A STORY, SUGGESTING THAT CONSCIOUSNESS IS SOMEHOW IN CONTROL OF REALITY. IN RAFMAN'S VIDEOS, IMAGES OFTEN COME FIRST, THE NARRATOR STRUGGLING TO MAKE A COHERENT NARRATIVE. CONSCIOUSNESS DESPERATELY TRIES TO KEEP UP WITH PRODUCTION. THE NARRATOR'S IS A DISEMBODIED VOICE, EXPRESSING THE FEELING OF AN ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE THAT USES, OR OCCUPIES, IMAGES TO SPONTANEOUSLY IMPROVISE WHATEVER REALITY CAN BE COBBLED TOGETHER. THE VOICE SPEAKS FROM BEYOND THE SCREEN, HAVING NO EVIDENT PAST AND NO ASSUMED FUTURE. IT SEEMS LIKE A MERE VIEWING APPARATUS COMING INTO LIFE, USUALLY SPOKEN WITH A SUBTLE, ELECTRONIC WARBLING TONE, AS IF THE VOICE HAS NEARLY MASTERED THE TASK OF SOUNDING HUMAN. BUT THE MIMESIS REMAINS INCOMPLETE, ITS PERFECTION IS ALSO ITS BLIND SPOT. IT HOPES TO EXIST AS A THING IN THE WORLD BY VIRTUE OF IT MERELY SAYING SO. OUR VISUAL SUBJECT IS FREE-ASSOCIATED, A HALF-CONSCIOUS SEARCHING TO BUILD A STORY ABOUT ITSELF THAT MIGHT SUSTAIN IT IN THE REALITY OF CULTURAL PRODUCTION AND DECAY THAT HAS SO FAR DONE JUST FINE WITHOUT A HUMANITY THAT INTERVENES IN ITS OWN SELF-INTEREST. THE UNDERDEVELOPED NARRATORS, FINDING PRODUCTIVE LIFE IN DISTRACTION, SOUND LIKE AMNESIA PATIENTS WHO ARE SHOWN RANDOM IMAGES BY A PSYCHOLOGIST WHO EXPECT THEM TO FREE-ASSOCIATE. BUT THERE IS NO PSYCHOLOGIST; THE AMNESIACS THEMSELVES MAY RUN THE ASYLUM! ISOLATED AND SELF-PSYCHOLOGIZING, THEY PROCEED TO QUICKLY SYNTHESIZE A STORY. BUT THE ACTIVITY

Jon Rafman, Huehuehuehue (Mango f sh), 2016. V sua zat on (cover) L'Ava és des ava és (The Swa ower Swa owed) Be uga/Pony/Komodo Dragon/Dog/Human, 2016 V sua zat on (pp. 54-55) Courtesy the art st

OF APPERCEPTION CHANGES REALITY IN TURN, CONTAMINATING THE SOCIAL *IMAGERIE* WITH ITS RADICAL UNKNOWINGNESS.

THE CRISIS OF SUBJECTIVITY DUE TO LAPSE OF HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS, PAIRED WITH THE ACCUMULATION OF CULTURAL IMAGERY, REPRESENTS A TEMPORAL AESTHETIC INQUIRY THAT IS NOT SO MUCH BROKEN OR ISOLATED AS IT IS REFRACTED. RAFMAN'S VIDEO WORKS ARE OF COURSE INVESTIGATIONS INTO IMAGERY ON A BASIC LEVEL, BUT MORE SO INVESTIGATIONS INTO HOW TO QUESTION, VIA TRYING DIFFERENT EXPERIMENTS WITH ORGANIZATION. ALTHOUGH ADVANCED, IT PRETENDS AS THOUGH IT WERE NEVER DEVELOPED TO BEGIN WITH, OPERATING WITHIN PRIMITIVE AESTHETIC IMPULSES. THE AESTHETIC ORGANIZATION IS NOT 'COMPOSED' OR DETERMINED IN ADVANCE, BUT TAKES A MORE INDETERMINIST COURSE. THE THINKING VIEWER, LEARNING TO PROCESS IMAGES WITHOUT AN OVERRIDING STRUCTURE (E.G. SECURITY CAMERA), BECOMES A PRODUCER BY VIRTUE OF ITS MERE EXISTENCE: IT IS ITSELF PRODUCED AS A SPECIALIZED MATERIAL. THE ACTIVITY OF LOOKING HAS ITSELF BEEN MADE PRODUCTIVE BY LATE CAPITALISM. RAFMAN'S IS A PRACTICE THAT DOES NOT CREATE NEW THINGS, BUT RATHER ALLOWS THINGS TO FILTER THROUGH A TRANSPARENT MICROCOSM OF SPECULATIVE ORGANIZATION. METAPHORICALLY, THE CREATIVE PROCESS IS NOT ONE OF A CLOSED SKULL THAT IN TURN VIRTUOSICALLY CREATES INTEGRAL STRUCTURES, BUT RATHER A DENSE GLASS BALL THAT PERMITS IMAGES TO FILTER THROUGH, AND CHANGE AS THEY ARE REFRACTED THROUGH IT. THEIR INTERMINGLING IS ITSELF FRAMED AS A TRANSFORMATIVE PROCESS. THE ENSUING PROJECTIONS FOSTER A DISTANCE THAT CREATES OF REALITY A PRISMATIC DISPLAY OF UNFULFILLED POSSIBILITY, SERVING A SIMILAR PURPOSE TO ZOETROPES IN THE 19TH CENTURY, IN WHICH SPECTATORS DELIGHT AT DISCOVERING THEIR OWN FACULTIES OF ENCHANTMENT AND DISENCHANTMENT, BUT TO NO IMMEDIATE END.

THE VIDEOS AIM TO PRESERVE THE PROJECT OF MODERN AESTHETIC ALIENATION AS A PROTEST AGAINST REALITY AND POSTMODERN IMMEDIACY. AS SUCH, THE RUMINATING ACTIVITY OF RAFMAN'S VIDEOS FOCUSES ON THE UNDERDEVELOPMENT OF SUBJECTIVE RESOURCES TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN FORMS OF ARTIFICE AND FORMS OF REALITY, SUSPENDED WITHIN THE MEDIUM OF RUMINATION. NO JUDGMENT OF THE PAST OR FUTURE IS STAKED, ONLY A JUDGMENT ON THE PRESENT AS A CONDITION OF POSSIBILITY. THE GLASSY EYE THAT IMPERFECTLY FILTERS REALITY IS SOMETHING OF A CRYSTAL BALL – IMAGES THAT ONCE WERE, AND THINGS THAT HAVEN'T YET COME TO PASS – BUT VIEWED FROM A DISENCHANTED PERSPECTIVE THAT WHAT IS SEEN IS MORE SO A PROJECTION OF THE PRESENT. THIS IS THE CASE EVEN THOUGH IMAGES FROM THE PAST ACCUMULATE, AND THE IDEOLOGIES EXPECTED OF ARTWORKS ORIENT IT SOMEWHAT TOWARDS THE STATUS QUO CLAIMS OF WHAT MUST COME TO BE. REGARDING THE FORMER, RAFMAN'S DEVELOPMENTAL UNIVERSE IS RIFE WITH IMAGES FROM ART HISTORY. THE SUBJECT FLICKS THROUGH DOZENS OF CLASSICAL PAINTINGS, DISCONTENT WITH ALL OF THEM, NOT BECAUSE THEY ARE IRRELEVANT – THEY TAKE THEIR RIGHTFUL PLACE ALONGSIDE NET IMAGERY – BUT BECAUSE THEY ARE TOO SWIFTLY COMPREHENDED. THERE ARE INCOMPLETE HINTS OF CULTURAL TAXONOMY APPLIED TO DIFFERENT MATERIAL: IMAGES OF SHORN ANIMALS, RENAISSANCE PAINTINGS, SINKHOLES. THESE ARE QUICKLY ABANDONED, EVINCING DISSATISFACTION WITH THE ACTIVITY OF CLASSIFICATION AS A MEANS OF ORGANIZING EXPERIENCE. THE TEMPORAL FRACTURE OF THEIR DISPLAY RESULTS FROM THE INCOMPLETENESS OF THE VISUAL FACULTY ITSELF: THE INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY WE SEE IS UNDER ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT, BUT SO TOO IS THE VISUAL FACULTY THAT REFRACTS CULTURE A HALF-CONSTRUCTED SOCIAL PRODUCT. REPRESENTATION MIRRORS CRIPPLED SOCIETY ONLY IN ITS OWN SHATTERED, IMPERFECT FORMS, BUT IN SUCH A WAY THAT SOCIETY'S MALFUNCTIONING IS MADE INTO AN IMMERSIVE AND KALEIDOSCOPIC EFFECT.

NEVERTHELESS, ERUDITION DOES NOT PROTECT ONE FROM SOCIAL EXPERIENCE THAT SANCTIONS SUBJECTIVE INCOMPLETENESS. THE ENCYCLOPEDIC ABILITY TO SPOT AND PRODUCE REFERENCES ON CALL, THE VISUAL LITERACY REQUIRED TO PROCESS MULTIPLE STREAMS OF SCROLLING TEXTS, AND A GENERAL FACILITY FOR VISUAL MINUTIAE DON'T ADD UP TO WHAT THEY SHOULD. THE SIMULTANEOUS LACK AND OVERDEVELOPMENT OF ART HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE EXPOSES ERUDITION FOR WHAT IT HAS BECOME: TRANS-HISTORICAL MATERIAL WITHIN THE *IMAGERIE* THAT IS SUITABLE FOR SCANNING, AND YET PATHOLOGICALLY DEMANDS IT, BECAUSE IT LACKS HISTORICAL MOMENTUM. THOUSANDS OF YEARS OF ART HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND TECHNOLOGICAL PRODUCTION HAVE FINALLY CONVERGED, BUT IT APPEARS IN OUR CURRENT SOCIETY AS MERE ANTI-CLIMAX. YET THE CONVERGENCE OF CRISES IN SUBJECTIVITY WITH THE ACCUMULATION OF ART HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE IS NOT NOTHING. RAFMAN'S PROJECTS ASK NOT "WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE ALIVE TODAY?", BUT RATHER "HOW CAN ONE CONSTRUCT SUBJECTIVITY AESTHETICALLY?" IF WALTER BENJAMIN CONSIDERED HUMANITY IN CAPITALISM TO BE WHAT YOU HANG YOUR HAT ON, FOR RAFMAN, HUMANITY IS A SCAFFOLDING YOU HANG YOUR CULTURAL HISTORY ON.

BY BRET SCHNEIDER

L'Ava ée des ava és (The Swa ower Swa owed) Ram/Sea , 2016 V sua zat on (pp. 62-63) Courtesy the art s

L'Ava ée des ava és (The Swa ower Swa owed) Rh no/Bear, 2016 V sua zat on (pp. 60-61)

Jon Rafman and Daniel Lopatin

Sticky Drama

Featuring a cast of over 35 children, with Oneohtrix Point Never's soundtrack, *Sticky Drama* portrays the development of a role-playing game set in a fantastical and violent world in which its participants struggle to preserve their memory and past histories.

Sticky Drama

2015, HD Video, 11 minutes

Introduced by Michael Nardone

"How far back can you remember?" a compact-disc-donned teen from the future asks her pet, a cyborg tamagotchi-shitpile. As viewers, we experience fragments of this cyborg's formatted past, and hurtle through the circuits and frames of recollection and retrieval to the events themselves. There, time oscillates, its durations and recursions simultaneously present. Any divide between what is live and what is of another time remains uncertainly suspended.

Jon Rafman's previous works have focused on the cultural spaces and rhythms of networked digital milieus: they are itinerant, ethnographic depictions of life immersed within Google Earth, Second Life, PS3 video games, and the traffic of the deep web. In *Sticky Drama*, he portrays a version of the physical world, though it is a fantastic and futuristic one that is inextricably linked up with the virtual. The cyborg tragically recounts details of its once-upon-a-time kinships; a young warrior recites the high Romantic poetry of an Internet meme to a simulated butterfly; a soothsayer and mercenary leader communicate by means of interfaced avatars; life is a LARP [Live action role-playing game]. Imagined space, cyberspace, and meta-space all inform and shape one another while indistinguishably oozing together into some new assemblage.

Michael Nardone: "The idea of accumulating everything in a general archive," Wolfgang Ernst writes, "is a product of Modernity. Nevertheless, the archive is born of disorder…" In *Sticky Drama*, one begins to envision the great disorder of a future archive. It is made not only of documents such as printed reports and magazines, but all kinds of paraphernalia: re-jigged gadgets and doodads, makeshift prototypes, computer-creature hybrids and their disemboweled software and hardware remains. Will you discuss the past histories and the practices of archiving imagined in *Sticky Drama*?

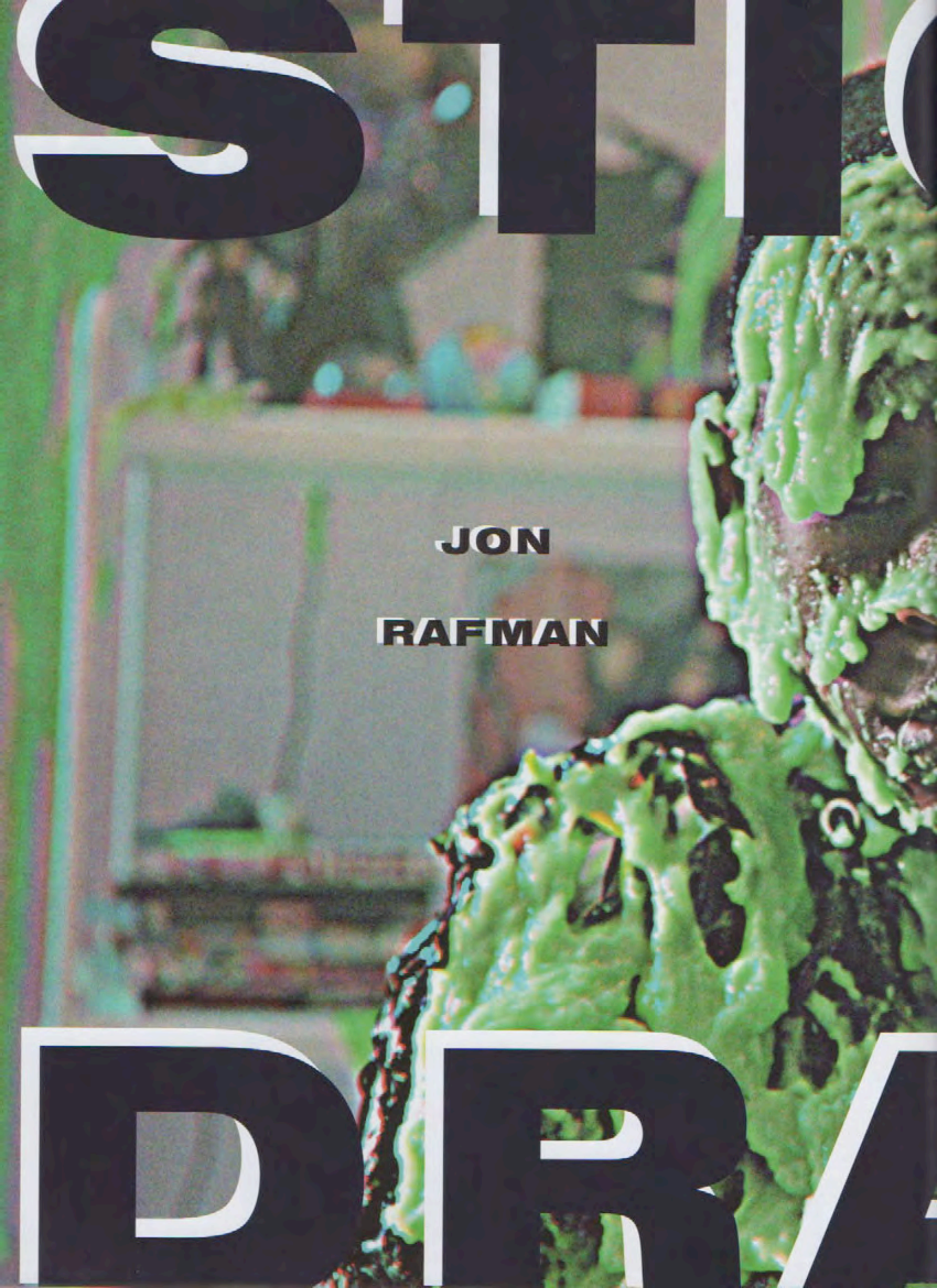
Jon Rafman: The original idea for the film came from conceiving of a super intelligent AI Tamagotchi: while it is dying of a virus, its owner attempts to save its archive. Instead of creating an archive through the usual contemporary digitization, the drama would center on the creation of an analogue archive through photographs, scrolls, print outs, written and oral history. Digital archives, for me, create challenging contemporary dilemmas. One characteristic of a digital archive is how easily it can be erased, how precarious it is. At the same time I am amazed at the speed with which the archive expands and accumulates data, to the point of overload.

MN: You often portray the event of data loss so as to have tragic, if not horrific, consequences. It is a theme that permeates your works, implicitly and explicitly, and that you address via wildly different positionalities in different systems of information. What is it about this theme that compels you?

JR: The theme of loss permeates all my work to some degree. *Remember Carthage* (2013), *You the World and I* (2010), *Codes of Honour* (2011), and *A Man Digging* (2013) deal with it quite directly. It's a theme I come back to again and again; whether it be the loss of history, the loss of subcultures, the loss of love, or the loss of memory. When it comes to data loss specifically, on one level I think I am attracted to it simply because it a very relevant and timely fear to which we all can relate. In *Sticky Drama* in particular, I wanted to examine the relationship between memory and data, and the ways in which they are both corruptible, fragmentary, and subject to decay. The entire film ended up in an almost Rabelaisian exploration of this theme: the Tamagotchi—an oozing, diseased creature—is a massive digital archive of experiences that explodes and erases the records it contains.

MN: Wolfgang Ernst, the media theorist I mentioned earlier, is a writer who often comes to mind when I regard your works. In addition to numerous essays on the archive, he has written extensively on the field of media archaeology and the concept of machinic time. Ernst has argued that we need to see media as dynamic agents that participate in "media events" in the way that they store, process, and transmit signals. These signals introduce their own specific concepts of time— iterations, recursions, short circuits—that perpetually shift and reshape human-centered notions of time and history. Is this something that resonates with you and your works?

JR: That is very interesting notion that speaks closely to my *Nine Eyes of Google Street View* project. In point of fact, I have always seen a Google Street View image as essentially a "memory" that nobody has actually had. In *Sticky Drama* I was interested in using obsolete technology as an


JON
RAFMAN

SKY
MA

IDM
PSY TRANCE
HOUSE TRANCE
KROSS EDGE

FRANCESCA GAVIN

Jon Rafman has always been an artist with one foot in the Internet and the other in reality. Past works have ranged from his Kool-Aid Man avatar, wandering around Second Life, to his *Nine Eyes* project, which utilized Google image search to create a new picture of our new physical world. His latest solo show at the Zabludowicz Collection perfectly showcased that overlap between IRL, URL and fantasy. The exhibition was a blend of video and installation, VR work and 3D film. At the centre of it all was a new commissioned film, *Sticky Drama*.

The video developed out of Rafman's Gchat conversations with musician Daniel Lopatin. Linking his own interest in "the signs and symbols and tropes and aesthetics of live action role-play" with the character-led narrative universe Lopatin's created for his Oneohtrix Point Never project, Rafman agreed to produce a non-traditional music video. The result is a faux children's TV drama of violently warring groups that also brings to life one of the most obvious things in modern culture: our festishistic relationship with computers and technology.

The story roughly centres on a fictitious kid with molten-lava acne who is infected by a virus while hanging out at the musician's studio. "[Lapotin's] album is a lot about puberty and the transformation that occurs," Rafman explains. "These changes are violent and scary on one level, but I think they also point towards a creative transformation." Similar pre-teen and teen cultural influences feed into the artist's wider practise—'80s and '90s kids adventure movies like *The Goonies*, the vastness of a universe like Tolkein's.

Part of what makes the film unique is its aesthetic. The costumes, created by MA students at the Royal Academy, are refreshingly inventive. The film itself appears to be treated with an acidic metal affect, and sections of the film are framed by a faux computer screen. The aim was to reference retro TV as well as "the compression that occurs when something is regrammed a million times on Instragram," Rafman explains. "I wanted a unique look that spoke to the past and the present."

Here technology fuses with the organic. Slime and goo are one of the running motifs: it covers the

lumpy, Tamagotchi-like pets (complete with digital screens on their stomachs) that drive the loose narrative. There is something almost sexually obsessive about the relationship between the children and their slime-covered alien toys, as when a boy passionately kisses his toy while lying in bed. (The tech-sex reference emerges in a number of Rafman's recent films, which similarly focus on online fetish scenes).

"Puberty is a lot about bursts of the sexual. Dealing with the loss of innocence and moving into a world filled with taboos. I think what I like about slime and goo is that is has an attractive and a repulsive quality to it. There is something sensual and sensuous about goo, but it can also be revolting and gross. I like it when things contain those opposites together", Rafman says. "That occurs also in the claustrophobia and the womb-like comfort you experience in my video installations."

The soundtrack by Onehtrix Point Never, with one foot in avant-garde experimentation and the other in accessible pop, is a large part of what makes the work so successful. "It has no traditional verse-chorus structure, but at the same time, it almost could be a Britney Spears pop song or attached to a horror movie," Rafman considers.

When the film was first presented, aspects of the work were installed as installation pieces in the Zabludowicz Collection space. One of the central characters in the film is a young girl, situated in a bedroom not unlike the room in which Johnny Depp was murdered in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. There, a lumpy Tamagotchi alien moves around a physical maze (which also features in a VR piece based in the space). "I wanted to create a completely immersive experience in which the screens themselves and the videos in the screens were both portals into different worlds," he enthuses. "The film imbues things with an aura, a kind of uncanny-ness. I wanted there to be the sense of the moving between the screen and the real."

Jon Rafman (Canadian, b. 1981) is an artist who lives and works in Montreal. He is represented by Seventeen Gallery, London; Future Gallery, Berlin; and Zach Feuer Gallery, New York. After a groundbreaking recent solo show at Zabludowicz Collection, London, he will exhibit at Westfälischer Kunstverein, Münster, in February, and at Carl Kostyál, Stockholm, from 7 April.

Francesca Gavin is Editor-at-Large of *Kaleidoscope*. A curator and writer based between Berlin and London, she is currently the co-curator of the Historical Section of Manifesta 11, opening in June.

Stills: *Sticky Drama*, 2015, by Jon Rafman and Daniel Lopatin

Installation views: Jon Rafman at Zabludowicz Collection, London
Photo credit: Thierry Bal

REVIEW - 25 SEP 2015

Jon Rafman

BY JAMES D. CAMPBELL

Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, Canada

Jon Rafman, *You are Standing in an Open Field (Waterfall)*, 2015, inkjet print mounted on Dibond, resin, polystyrene, 1.3 x 1.5 m

Jon Rafman's first solo museum exhibition in his native Canada was chock-a-block with some of his favourite things. He is a seasoned voyeur and wily scavenger of virtual worlds, both sacred and profane.

His scouring of the internet is systematic. Rafman brilliantly collates his findings into exotic new narratives. He show litter-strewn Mac keyboards against utopian desktop wallpaper: lovingly detailed idylls of living with and consuming the virtual and its wreckage on a daily basis. They are also, of course, highly layered *cochonneries* offering windows that open wide onto internet heaven. Rafman employs video, photography, sculpture and installation to unpack the online sublime and the myriad porn utopias found deeply embedded in the substrata of the internet. His practice revolves around seeking out old and new footage with an eye towards preservation and subversion.

Rafman was an early adherent to the social bookmarking site Delicious and a legendary junkie of

internet ephemera, which are integrated into his work in the spirit of sharing, leavened with an adult dose of humour, irony and irreverence. He is obsessed with *Second Life*, the three-dimensional virtual world in which users, or 'residents', can assume whatever guise they favour. His great love for 'machinima' – or real-time in-game filming – is pervasive in his work and we might well call him a machinimist, for his work as a fan labourer has certainly kickstarted his mature, visionary work.

Jon Rafman, *Mainsqueeze*, 2014, video still

His reinvention of the iconic Kool-Aid Man is a signature appropriation of the ambulatory and avuncular pitcher filled with red Kool-Aid who first made his appearance in a 1975 TV commercial. Until a computer-generated makeover in 2013, Kool-Aid Man was played by an actor in a foam costume, although an animated version had appeared as the titular character in a 1983 videogame for the Atari 2600 and Intellivision consoles. This history obviously appealed to Rafman. Here, Kool-Aid Man is transformed from advertising superhero answering the calls of thirsty children everywhere to a savvy, convivial wastrel high-tailing it through digital worlds. More notably, he is also, of course, a surrogate for the artist himself, high-fiving his public on the front lines of Rafman's art. Indeed, the Kool-Aid Man is less about nostalgia than about offering a more realistic anti-superhero for our time.

While Rafman is associated with digital artists of his generation, including Cory Arcangel and Ryan Trecartin, the truth is that his real avatar is filmmaker Chris Marker and, beyond that, the vast web and archive of the internet itself, in all its festooned splendour and baroque, libidinal glamour. Marker led viewers beyond the failsafe point into the dystopia of our existence. So, too, does Rafman, even if it now seems clear that he has entered something like heaven. Like Wade Davis, the intrepid ethnobiologist who journeyed up the Amazon in search of psychoactive plants, Rafman the artist/ethnographer has journeyed deep into the heart of our web culture, in search of ecstasy and delivers a full measure of ecstasis, trance, rapture. More than any other artist who uses the web as both canvas and support, he wants to induce euphoria and change both perception and the condition of being here.

Jon Rafman

07.03.14

500 WORDS

RECENT ARCHIVE

Janine Antoni discusses her “retrospective” at the Fabric Workshop and Museum

William Kentridge discusses his project along the banks of the Tiber River

Maria Eichhorn talks about her solo exhibition at Chisenhale Gallery

Adam Pendleton on his exhibition in New Orleans and the *Black Dada Reader*

Rodney McMillian on his three solo museum exhibitions on the East Coast

Sabina Ott on her installation at the Hyde Park Art Center in Chicago

Jon Rafman, ***Still Life (Betamale)*, 2013,** HD video, color, sound, 4 minutes 54 seconds.

Jon Rafman is a Canadian artist whose work explores shifting boundaries between the virtual and the real while acknowledging fading distinctions between the two. Here, he discusses his recent work and debut solo exhibition in an American museum. “Jon Rafman: The end of the end of the end” is on view at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis from June 27 to August 10, 2014.

I BEGAN TO KNOW the fighting game community of New York while I was doing interviews for my 2011 film *Codes of Honor*, which is about a lone gamer recounting his past experiences in professional gaming. That work generally deals with a loss of history and the struggle to preserve tradition in a culture where the new sweeps away the old at a faster and faster pace. I saw the pro gamer as a contemporary tragic hero who strives for classic virtues in a hyperaccelerated age. The very hing the gamer attempts to master is constantly slipping away and becoming obsolete, which acutely reflects our contemporary condition.

When I held he pro gaming tournament at Zach Feuer in honor of the original Chinatown Fair arcade, which was the last great East Coast video arcade, it was as if the whole project had been leading up to that night. This was also true for the release on 4chan of my 2013 film *Still Life (Betamale)*, a work that brings to light the darker fe ishes of Internet subcultures—including furry fandom, kigurumi, and 8-bit anime. The community and the artist came face to face, and the reaction to the work was rich and varied. For instance, a 4chan user wrote:

this shit would have been cool in 2005 but you're on goddamn 4chan in 2013, one of the biggest sites for “SUCH A LOSER ;_;” people to ever browse the internet
someone didn't found out your dirty secret life and reveal it to everyone else
we've been doing it since the early/mid 2000's
it isn't special
get over it

Here the commenter is mocking my fe ishization of hese subcultures in classic 4chan style, while also revealing that sense that the moment you “discover” said culture it has already moved on. It also indirectly hints at the sublime feeling I every now and again experience when I'm surfing the Web and I suddenly discover a new community or fully formed subculture that has its own complex vocabulary and history. It’s this overwhelming sensa ion hat there are subcultures within subcultures, worlds upon worlds upon worlds ad infinitum.

My earlier work is more romantic: There’s a flaneur-like gaze hat crystallizes in he Google Street Views of *Nine Eyes* and he virtual safaris seen in the *Kool-Aid Man in Second Life* projects, for instance. As the Internet became a ubiquitous part of daily existence, I shared in the excitement of these new communities and was excited to explore the newly forming virtual worlds. Some imes I see myself as a member of the community, but in many cases I approach the subcultures as if I were a passing explorer or an amateur anthropologist.

My latest videos and installations have a darker tone, delving into the murkier corners of the Web. What concerns me is the general sense of entrapment and isolation felt by many as social and political life becomes increasingly abstracted and experience dematerialized. There is no viable or compelling avenue for effecting change or emancipating consciousness, so the energy that once motivated revolu ion or critique gets redirected into strange and sometimes disturbing expressions.

I had planned to premiere my latest video, *Mainsqueeze*, in St. Louis for “The end of the end of the end,” but it was deemed too difficult and disturbing for the context of the exhibition. Some of the content, particularly the section wi h the “crush fetish,” in which a woman is depicted stepping on a live shellfish, is indeed difficult to watch. But I think the fetishes can evoke repressed desires as well as reveal latent societal tensions. There’s an underlying barbarism that can be found in daily life that I’m trying to capture. That said, I think the film is as beautiful and ironic, or postironic, as it is horrifying.

Currently, I’m developing a sculpture and installation series that has grown out of my intense interest in “trollcaves,” which are the spaces inhabited by gamers during excessive hours in virtual reality. These spaces are actualized in a gallery environment and represent a borderland between the real and virtual. The troll caves contain a certain refined depravity that I find especially poignant today. They are at once abject and sublime spaces, revealing the material residue of a life completely dedicated to an online existence, and they point to the impossibility of total escape from physical reality.