



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 Bataille 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 ...'<sup>1</sup>

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 Zabłudowicz 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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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 Zabudowicz, I find myself wondering how many of Rafman's fans share his affinity with the loners 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



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Opening page  
Sticky Drama  
(with Oneohtrix Point Never)  
2015, production still

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

2  
*A Man Digging*, 2013,  
video still

3  
*Still Life (Betamale)*  
(with Oneohtrix Point  
Never), 2015, video still

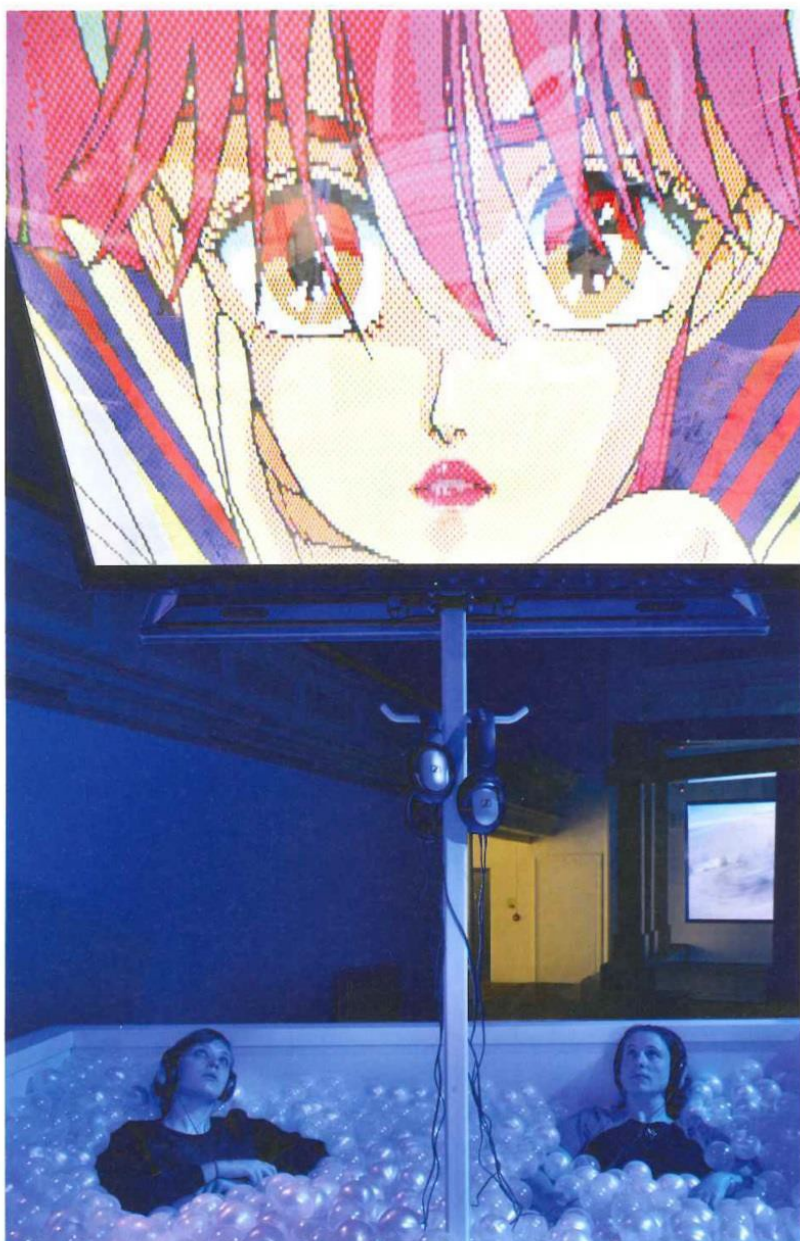
All images courtesy  
the artist, Zac Feuer/Mesler,  
New York, Seventeen, London,  
Zabudowicz Collection,  
London, and Future Gallery,  
Berlin

*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 chat-room 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 gooey 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.*



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. 'ang31' 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 Zabłudowicz  
Collection, London

*You Are Standing in an Open Field*  
(Gale), 2015, archival pigment print,  
polystyrene, resin, 1.5x2.3 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 3D gloom that figures as a shorthand for the gelatinous excess of virtual materiality. Treacherily 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 viscous forms are rendered in marble outdoor sculptures flanking the entrance, splattered across the set of *Sticlll Drama*, and the constitutive stuff of the CG-inspired busts that line *Sculpture Garden* (*Hedge Maze*) (2015), leading up to Rafman's minotaur, a glutinous gold-leafed biomorph. *Sculpture Garden* comprises an artificial labyrinth filling an entire room at Zabłudowicz, with a much-lauded Oculus Rift

virtual reality experience at its centre: it's a seductive, if somewhat decorative, glimpse into sublimely 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?''

1 <http://joorafman.com/4chan.pdf>

*Jon Rafman is an artist based in Montreal, Canada. He has recently had solo exhibitions at Zabłudowicz Collection, London, UK; Musée d'art contemporain 111 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 1 January, and in 2015 was included in the 6th Moscow Biennial, Russia; 'Digital Conditions' at Kunstverein Hannover, Germany; 'The Future of Memory' at Kunsthalle Wien, Austria; and 'Private Settings: Art After The Internet' at MOMA Warsaw, Poland. His solo exhibition at Westfälischer Kunstverein, Münster, Germany, opens in February.*

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