



JON RAFMAN



JON RAFMAN
ZABLUDOWICZ
COLLECTION

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INTRODUCTION KEVIN MCGARRY

Contemporary art may be a microcosm, a world unto itself, but to most it's a subculture that can be bypassed without entirely forsaking cultural literacy. Those who do discover art and plunge into it may find themselves alienated by one means or another. A curious observer can be rebuffed as an outsider or dilettante. Conversely an earnest newbie might be warmly welcomed to join a parade of garbage posing as art.

Subculture as a source for Jon Rafman's work foremost has to do with these social dynamics of inclusion and exclusion – being rejected from a social order or getting absorbed into its perilous oblivion. Scary manifestations of the latter serve as the guiding motif of his most recent video, *Erysichthon* (2015), which opens with a glob of sparkly mercury swallowing a metallic cube. Similarly, infinite tracking shots circle stacks of computer servers hemorrhaging cords, and an albino snake chokes down its own tail as a proxy for the beloved mythological creature Ouroboros. From the same tradition, Erysichthon of Thessaly was a gluttonous, immoral king cursed with infinite hunger. In the end he ate himself. This figure of insatiable self-destruction is one that takes on more and more poignancy as the world dissolves into islands of individuals unmoored from collective nature and drifting into digital isolation.

Rafman has spent considerable time rummaging around in the basement of the Internet. An anecdotal conception like that, or any such reference to “deep internet” – the quasi-hidden online networks where savvy users share arcane or illicit material – elicits hate from those who dwell there. In this sense, as a reporter, the artist has experienced the aforementioned type of rejection that may come with trying to penetrate a niche community. In an interview given to Artforum, after citing a nasty comment lobbed at him in this way, he explained:

“Here the commenter is mocking my fetishization of these 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 sensation that there are subcultures within subcultures, worlds upon worlds upon worlds ad infinitum.”

This feels like a genuine sentiment to me, balancing his zeal for appropriating the poetics of found subcultures with the understanding that, while the art world may regard him as an expert on such things, and in fact in one way or another all his work exists online, where he treads he is often an unwanted nobody. Not even an exploiter, just irrelevant. Someone who might feel that way about Jon Rafman is the faceless figure from *Mainsqueeze* (2014), who, hogtied, gyrates inside a full-body furry frog costume; or the obese man from *Still Life (Betamale)* 2013, whose face is muzzled in little girl's underwear as he presses two handguns into his temples. Together with *Erysichthon* they form what he has called a trilogy about the deep internet, dreams full of

miserable symbols and characters who nonetheless demonstrate the beauty, power, or other burnishes of fringe communities given virtual spaces to cultivate.

What precedes them, and everything else Rafman has made, is an ongoing project that gained him a level of notoriety capable of busting beyond the limits of contemporary art as a boutique community. His collection of surreal and serendipitous screen caps lifted from Google Maps, *9 Eyes* (2008–ongoing), is one of this millennium's only works of contemporary art to permeate the consciousness of TIME Magazine, USA Today, and my extended family's Facebook feed alike. The only piece like it that comes to mind is Christian Marclay's "The Clock," a similarly comprehensive, laboriously constructed meditation on time, place, and the sublime as it occurs by mediated happenstance.

Whether he considers it a problem of not, Rafman can never escape the mythology of *9 Eyes*. It's a pedigree that may follow him to death. Like any artist of his generation, Rafman is inspired by online culture, but unlike almost everyone else, he is one of the few to have achieved bona fide virality, and in doing so has a first-hand understanding of the internet's libido. His mining of would-be memes successfully produced a big one unto its own. He's presided over an entire lifecycle of originally appropriated content.

Eventually someone had to do it, and as a matter of history it's Jon Rafman who did. The inevitability of scrounging for glitches on Google Maps doesn't diminish the artistic value of the project; it only elevates its pop quotient. For a dork huddled over the screen to become a rockstar is a meme in and of itself. Mirroring the communities he mines for various projects, Rafman has quite a dedicated following for his oeuvre of work that has grown increasingly disquieting and dark, about the abject margins of society.

Conflictingly, Rafman has always emphasized two things about *9 Eyes*. One, that he himself, not a squad of assistants, safaris to find each of the stills captured for the series. Two, that he wishes to downplay the volume of hours he spends doing this, feeling as though it fetishizes an unimportant pseudo-performative aspect to the work. Reading between these statutes, one could infer that Rafman has a kind of primal, masochistic disrespect for his own time, or a genuine love for getting lost. Both of these shades are relevant to the most affecting subjects of his work.

As *Erysichthon* continues, a number of onscreen circumstances simultaneously evoke and revoke humanness. A restrained and probably sedated horse is slid horizontally into an MRI scanner. A fleshy, synthetic larynx that manually simulates singing is also weird and brutally sad. It's a proxy for a living element; its liveness feels cheated and wasted. The toy could be taken as a manifestation of years frittered away online, miming in absurdity. Emotion in the video is further withheld from a viewer because it's essentially just a tour, like a Powerpoint cataloguing these dehumanized, unnerving products and events for a client who wishes to be briefed on them from a distance. The futility of understanding how any of this came to be, transforms melancholy into intrigue.

But the darkness Rafman pulls into epic forms comes from a place that's never dark. There's always a draining LED glow on the face of things. There's a line in *Erysichthon* about quashed potential: "I finally said it / My start-up failed." It's a post-Trecartin aphorism, but more than a jargony gesture reflecting modernity, it drills into the drama of botched actualization and channels sweeping anxieties about how the infinite possibilities promised by online culture have rearranged all deviation into a more towering than ever column of normalcy, indifferent to the difference that gives it such broad substance. A start-up is one pinned on capitalist ambition, and then there are the more pathetic acts of masochism that populate Rafman's work. Sad or mad kids might tacitly suspect they are cool or grow up, but broken adults are another thing. Rafman's drive-by sadness tourism produces a formal mythology of an exotic, hidden internet – of rich subcultures thriving underground – and while they may, at their cores are cold and lonely fantasies annexed from social order.

