# Jon Rafman
Brand New Paint Job

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«The age demanded an image
Of its accelerated grimace,
Something for the modern stage,
Not, at any rate, an Attic grace».
_ Ezra Pound [1]

1.
On 25 March 2011, the Canadian artist Jon Rafman received a cease and desist letter from Sodrac, a society of artists that represents intellectual property rights. The letter requested an immediate stop to the publication, on the website brandnewpaintjob.com, of images "reproducing artworks, or any substantial part thereof", by artists including Francis Bacon, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Marc Chagall, Alberto Giacometti, Adolph Gottlieb, Jasper Johns, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Yves Klein, Franz Kline, Willem De Kooning. On the site in question, for the last few months and at frequent, irregular intervals, Rafman has been creating art works which incorporate images that reference various famous modernist

BNPJ.exe, (2011)

paintings, as well as a small number of contemporary works. He utilizes these images as textures applied to various 3D models taken from Google 3D Warehouse, the online gallery that users of Google Sketchup – a free 3D modelling programme – can avail themselves of to upload and share their works.

This initial communication was followed on 11 April 2011 by another cease and desist letter signed by the Artists Rights Society (ARS) of New York, and its Paris-based sister company ADAGP. According to the letter, ADAGP noted that Rafman had been "displaying and distributing unauthorized reproductions of our members' works, including those of Joan Miró and Jackson Pollock, in the context of an online game", and consequently requested payment for reproduction rights.
The work in question is *BNPJ.exe* (2011), created by Jon Rafman in collaboration with his artist friend Tabor Robak, and distributed free online by Extra Extra, a non-profit space based in Philadelphia [2]. Rather than a classic videogame, it is a 3D navigable space that the visitor can move around in, without a precise mission, exploring various settings: indoor and outdoor, claustrophobic corridors and infinite deserts, modernist offices and futuristic cities. But the distinctive thing about it is that these spaces are entirely papered in textures taken from various ultra famous paintings by artists like Yves Klein, Jackson Pollock and Fernande Léger. The use of bits and pieces of these paintings creates highly atmospheric settings,

and it is not always easy to understand the provenance and size of the "loan". Some of them, like the Yves Klein Blue that greets us in the metaphysical, disorienting corridor leading into the world of *BJPJ.exe*, can only be understood in the light of the subsequent loans we encounter. In any case, these artworks are not "cited" in a postmodern fashion, but "deployed" in a purely functional manner: Pollock's drip paintings are well suited to conveying the rough stone of a desert, while Miró's constellations, teeming with life forms, make a wonderful home for a giant ant, also entirely covered with the same imagery.

2.
I have referred to these two recent events, although it might have been advisable to refrain from doing so, to point out the subversive power of an apparently innocuous project like *Brand New Paint Job* (here on in, *BNPJ*), which actually touches on various unresolved but crucial spheres of modern culture. What makes *BNPJ* a radical project, despite its apparent
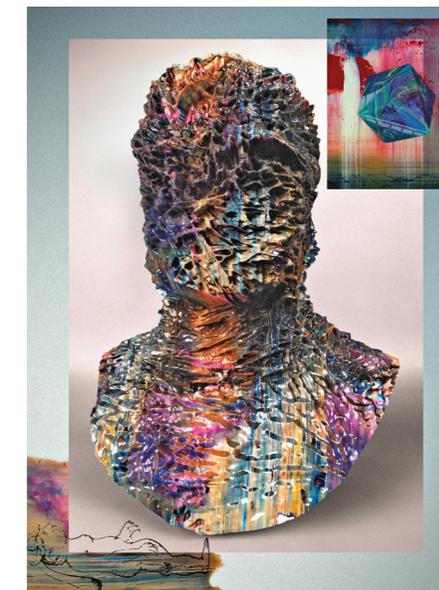
accessibility, is – on one hand – its not immediate identification as a work of art and – on the other – its referencing of a conception of intellectual property that is not shared by current legislation.
As for the first point, without entering into the legal motivations behind the cease and desist letters, it is interesting to note that neither of them refer to the artistic nature of the project. The first makes a generic mention of "images", and the second refers to an "online game". It has to be said that if Rafman had been recognised as an artist, and his work as art, it is highly likely that it would have satisfied the criteria for fair use: the limited use of copyright material for specific purposes, as normally applies to artistic appropriations [3]. So how was it possible that a collective set up to protect the interests of artists did not recognise, or refused to recognise, the artistic nature of a work?
I think the answer lies in the mode of production and distribution of the works gathered under the collective title *BNPJ*. As we have seen, the blog gathers works created by papering amateur 3D

design models with textures taken from famous paintings. The resulting images – be they bedrooms or lounges, bars or pieces of furniture, human bodies or classical sculptures, cars or planes, film stars or animals – are ambiguous in nature. Some would not look out of place in an interior design magazine, others appear to be extrapolated from a 3D design tutorial. Their distribution in blog form, but without any kind of explanatory information, does the rest, along with the title of the project, which lowers the noble pursuit of "painting" to the commercial slang of "paint job". The same could be said about **BNPJ.exe**, a "software programme" or "videogame": both far from being recognised as legitimate artistic languages.

Even more of a "violation" is the use that Rafman makes of his sources: these are not credited, and used for decorative purposes to embellish a scholastic 3D design exercise. Drawing a moustache on Mona Lisa is no longer a problem. But using Diego Rivera to decorate a living room, Theo Van Doesburg to embellish a

plane, or El Lissitzky to jazz up a Cadillac can become one. This is not about bringing high brow and low brow together, but more a question of putting the high into the service of the low, to produce something closer to the latter than the former, and deny the unique, exceptional nature of high culture.

These considerations lead us to the second point, which could be summed up in a famous hacker slogan: *information wants to be free* [4]. When culture is converted into digital data, there is no longer any way to control it or block its circulation. This splendid axiom, which has been powerfully challenging the survival of traditional copyright for around 20 years now, acquires new meaning on today's net, a sort of huge dump inhabited by barefoot, hungry scavengers who collect, manipulate, reprocess, combine and sell on even the tiniest scrap of information. Nothing, once on the heap, can escape this destiny, not even with the protection of the Artists Rights Society. It is as though the sublime Morris Louis turned out to be the perfect plumage for a penguin badly drawn by a student, which has been abandoned to the web. The intrinsic potential of this primordial soup is massive and, as yet, impossible to quantify. Western culture, taken to the point of exhaustion by post-modernism, is about to be redesigned, not by the web, but by the scavengers that skulk in its gutters, reactivating abandoned scraps, using old tools the wrong way, sticking incompatible things together, remixing code, gulping down anything and then putting it back into circulation with a loud and satisfying burp. And enabling others to do the same, in a process that is rapid and unstoppable because it is shared in real time by a global community without respect or rules.

The age demands… new artists, capable of taking up this challenge, of plunging into this simmering broth and emerging with a new awareness, new languages, new rules.
And, behind its pleasing and apparently anti-artistic exterior, the ability of Rafman's work to respond to this call is what makes it so radical. Which is why some people find it so threatening.

3.
Seen in its progression, through forty or so pieces, from the first *Cy Twombly Lamborghini Gallardo* of 2010 to the recent *Cy Twombly Apartment* of 2011, **BNPJ** looks like an intensive, speeded-up course of appropriation and refinement of a tool. The act itself is a very simple one, the banal addition: model + texture = **BNPJ**. And this allows the artist to work on the details, implications and dialogue between model and texture. Sometimes he uses a fragment of an original work, sometimes the whole thing; sometimes he uses it on its own, at others he puts it with other works by the same artist. The former approach is more frequent with abstract works, which are easier to translate into repeated

patterns. Sometimes he uses other elementary effects of 3D modelling, like the mirror image used in **Honda Civic hatchback reflecting a Monet**. These choices reflect the dialogue between the two elements: the reflection effect suits Monet, who dedicated his life to painting stretches of water, and Picabia, obsessed with mechanisms, adorns a Monster Truck, while the Oriental-style swirls from a certain period of Van Gogh's do a great job of decorating a Volkswagen Bus, hippy icon par excellence.

But as the subjects accumulate, it gets more and more difficult to attribute the end result to a simple operation of addition. The images get more refined, and less outré. Rafman takes painstaking care over simulating the various materials that comprise an interior. **BNPJ** overlaps with other practices, like that – frequent for the artist – of setting his digital images in real space, making it difficult for the observer to distinguish between the end result and a photograph. In the series *Paint FX Sculpture Garden* he maps his textures (appropriated from other paintings or created by him[5]) onto modernist sculptures set in "real" gardens.
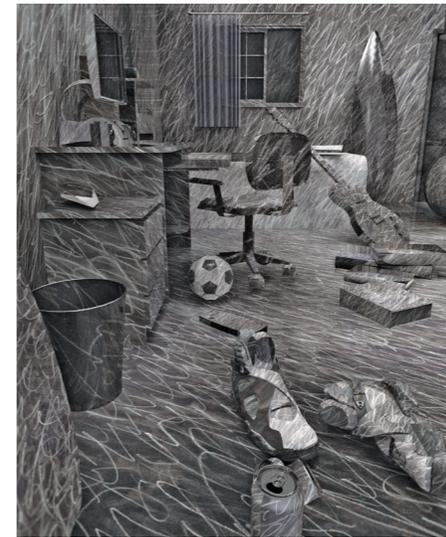
We thus come to the series **New Age Demanded** (2011), in which the various stylistic registers and production strategies explored separately in other works come together to form a language of exceptional complexity. The centre of each of these images is occupied by an eerie, mysterious, faceless figure, somewhere between a deformed classical bust and a sci-fi character. The material it is made of changes from work to work – from spiky and iridescent to porous and opaque. The skin comes from paintings by Franz Kline, Gerhard Richter or Robert Ryman, but the loan is almost entirely illegible, fully integrated into the vision. In the background, always in the same position, are elements that simulate painting or collage, or boldly declare their own digital origin. Along with cubes, geometric solids, drawings or prints borrowed from who knows where.
The Photoshop levels accumulate, as do the literary, philosophical, artistic and alchemical references. Each piece is a trip through time, between past and future, high art and low art, history and narration. Each piece is a response to what the new age seems to demand of an artist like Jon Rafman.

[1] Ezra Pound, *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, 1920.
[2] The work can be downloaded at http://eexxttrrraa.com/bnpj.html.
[3] For further information, cfr. *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fair_use.
[4] The expression is attributed to Stuart Brand, founder of the Whole Earth Catalogue. For further information, cfr. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Information_wants_to_be_free.
[5] *Paint FX* (www.paintfx.biz) is a collaborative project produced with Parker Ito, Micah Schippa, Tabor Robak and John Transue. The five artists anonymously publish a series of digitally created abstract "paintings" on the same web platform, using the most simple, banal default effects of the most popular graphics programmes.