PORTRAIT: JON RAFMAN

by Aaron Moulton

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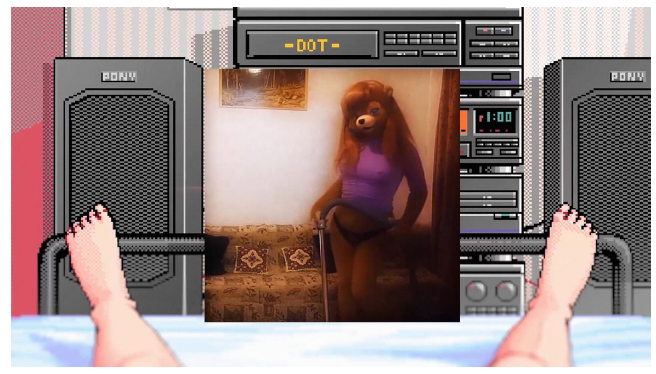


Still from *Still Life (Betamale)*, 2013, single-channel video, 4:54 min, courtesy of Jon Rafman Studios

Artist **JON RAFMAN** and curator **AARON MOULTON** talk about the breakdown of culture as we know it, and the perpetual evolution of the artist's role as visionary oracle. Weaving together meme culture, conspiracy theories, and critical theory, they discuss the trends, stereotypes, and impulses that made the 2010s a decade of blind repetition as well as burgeoning change.

Aaron Moulton: I wanted to know your feelings about being a visionary today. Your work comes out of the 2010s with a real voice.

Jon Rafman: The word *visionary* is compelling. Prophets in the Bible were visionaries, and I am attracted to this idea of worldbuilding as a visionary act, like Ezekiel seeing his psychedelic vision of an angel with four heads riding on a divine chariot as a premonition of the coming apocalypse. In the past, I was interested in appropriating, framing, and depicting worlds that already existed online and virtually. *Dream Journal 2016–2019*, however, is a departure for me in that I'm worldbuilding from my own psyche, with the desire to create a Boschian-like vision of our current hellscape.

Messianic stuff is undeniably messy. Have you heard of this notion of specially gifted, so-called Indigo children?

Yeah, from the 1980 and 90s.

There is also the notion of Crystal children. The Crystal child is influenced at some biological level by the digital information floating in the atmosphere and is able to respond to it. Your subjects are such prescient visions. Do you ever feel you have an extrasensory link to themes that fascinate you?

Artists should be curious and tapped-in to the zeitgeist, but I don't think I'm ever predicting the future, more that I'm highlighting and framing aspects of the present in order to make certain obsessions or points of tension in our culture more transparent. I'm trying to understand the profound transformations and changes that are occurring and that are often imperceptible because either they are too ubiquitous or we don't have categories yet to make sense of them.

What is it that you see or feel when you detect a chrysalis moment, or avantgarde-ish impulse, emerging? A place where there are no words, compass, or map, only a dangerous hole between language and culture?

Well, that is what got me into the art world. The new in itself is something inherently interesting to me. I think art can exist outside of the instrumentalised administrative late-capitalist system we are a part of by depicting the horrors of our contemporary society in all their banality.

What about the purpose of art and your practice as a vehicle for understanding reality through these different prisms? What about the evolution of how the industry sees such a purpose?

From my perspective, I see a growing disillusionment with the art industry. I never wanted to be an "art-world artist", but rather to be more connected to culture as a whole. The art world feels less and less tied to culture per se and more connected to the market. I used to feel a part of something larger, a vital online conversation that was occurring between lots of artists, and that is now much less the case. Perhaps that is just the toxic nature of the internet today. Hopefully, it's just a phase.

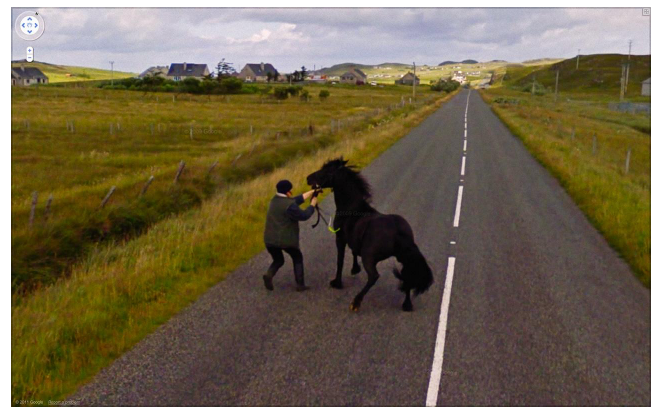
CORPORATE COLLABORATIONS USED TO BE FROWNED UPON AND NOW, THEY SEEM TO BE AS GOOD AS IT GETS.

What about the ways in which art has been co-opted for certain forms of lobbying purposes, like activism?

Art being used for propaganda is nothing new, I just haven't seen it become instrumentalised in such a direct way in recent memory.

Yes, but we've never seen it so meta before, the whole spectrum from artwashing to wokewashing.

It's just a trend like post-Internet was: once it's a trend, fewer people want to be a part of it. It's the same with any neoliberal cultural phenomenon. I remember it was the case back in the 90s: the second a movement was successful you knew it was going to be co-opted and any effort at remaining "authentic" to it was pure sentimental delusion. I'm recalling a line from *Capitalist Realism* where Mark Fisher states, "Cobain knew that he was just another piece of spectacle, that nothing runs better on MTV than a protest against MTV; knew that his every move was a cliché scripted in advance, knew that even realizing it is a cliché".



Corporate collaborations used to be frowned upon and now, in terms of one's career, they seem to be as good as it gets.

The idea of the bohemian dream is long dead. Even the idea of an art market where you can profit off Medici-like collectors is dying, because collectors are seen as corrupt unless they can prove themselves to be pure. This is impossible, so the solution is to look to corporations since they are seen as a lesser evil, which is hilarious.

THE RADICAL SOLIPSISTIC INDIVIDUAL IS REACHING ITS ULTIMATE CONCLUSION WITH FAKE NEWS AND POST-TRUTH.

I keep thinking of Terence McKenna's mantra that "culture is not your friend". One of the core developments of our times is how meaningless history has become. Growing up in the late twentieth century, one had endless references at one's disposal to prove one's point, whereas now no one cares about those details anymore.

I think recent history feels meaningless because people are repeating history without the knowledge of their doing so. The debris and the remnants of the past are always coming to the surface. At the end of his life, Hegel mentioned that before a qualitatively new transformation can occur in history, everything ugly from the past will rear its head. Trump is the end of the conservative white dad of cultural tradition as we know it. But I don't know how to say what's coming next, though I do think we are on the brink of something new.

That said, when I'm asked what the role of the artist is in their relation to social change, I believe that when the work becomes overtly didactic it loses its true aesthetic and critical potential. I still hold the view that art is self-justifying. For me, the most important demand of the artist is to reflect the world around them, but art only indirectly has the power to "do" things and to promote political change in the real world. The totalitarian desire to dissolve the distinction and critical relationship between art and politics is a sign of regression. The separation of art into its own autonomous domain is a hallmark of progress.

So the materials and techniques to render our transcendental aspirations and our avant-garde impulses are now old technology in a misguided industry? Regarding this fingering of the pulse and the management of perception that occurs in the art space; what is that energy meant to be used for, and how should it be used? This role used to be performed by oracles.

That's a great metaphor. But have you had that happen recently, where you walked into a gallery and were in the presence of an oracle?

To be honest, your film *Still Life (Betamale)* (2013) was a veritable crystal ball. If you had to breach another industry and pick up whole new tools, what would they be?

I'm interested in long-form storytelling. I would love to make a feature-length film. The stories of our era haven't actually been told. For example, the rise and fall of the hipster. It's almost like it didn't happen. I want somebody to tell the story of that because then you start to understand your place in history and understand historical change. In this sense, film is the form I am interested the most right now. For me, movies that came out this year – such as *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*, *Parasite*, and to a lesser extent, *The Joker* engendered the most interesting conversations I've had about culture recently.

But these tribes you refer to are really becoming a tribe of one. I think a down-to-earth form of the Singularity as Granularity: the universe becoming the individual's grain of sand, the human island as this ultimate endgame of the tribe. Radical individualism has never before existed at this level.

This was a logical conclusion that was being foretold even with the idea of the internet. The radical solipsistic individual is reaching its ultimate conclusion with fake news and post-truth. I don't know if we are choosing it or if it's being algorithmically given to us, but we are existing in our own realities in a triggering cycle of information that reifies whatever narrative we have fallen into. That is individualism but that is also the death of the individual. It's all hyper-individualism but structurally it's all the same. Adorno predicted this long ago.

There is a semantic mathematics happening in journalism now to delineate fake truth from the real truth. Despite being an important form of expanded critical thinking, labelling anything a "conspiracy theory" nowadays is a divisive trigger for creating sectarian thought patterns and pushing one away from critically analysing a topic. Doing so freezes speech around the particular theory and becomes a way of convincing us that there is no alternative to the established narrative.

It's called short-circuiting something.

It's predictive programming.

Which is kind of what everything is now: high-speed algorithms. Regarding conspiracy theory, Jeffrey Epstein's murder is the first time I have seen the left and right both agree on a conspiracy. On an even more structural level, you see that you can't investigate things deeply because there is such an information whiplash that we're incapable of filtering it. There are only these fleeting moments of consensus before reality is torn apart.

Thinking about *The Joker* and these shirts declaring the future is female, I think the future is Incel.

I think the Incel is an archetype of the present, not the future. Maybe even the recent past. In my earlier films from the "Betamale" trilogy, I was interested in another hyper-contemporary archetype: the Internet Troll. Aspects of the Internet Troll have since metastasised into what is known as the Incel. Back then, I saw the Troll as a reclusive aesthete of the 4chan era, a modern-day reincar-nation of the hero of Joris-Karl Huysman's novel *À rebours (Against the Grain)* [1884]. I think the Incel narrative in *The Joker* is pretty facile. *Taxi Driver* is way more interesting, because the hero inhabits a moral grey zone which is much more complex and ambigu-ous. It is important to create narratives that are able to deal with this grey zone in a nuanced way.

Culture tells you that the right wing doesn't understand comedy or know how to tell jokes. Most satire is from the left. However, most good memes come from the right.

Whether you are right or left, if you always think you're morally superior, then you can't meme as well. Because it's hard to meme if you're being sanctimonious.

WHETHER YOU ARE RIGHT OR LEFT, IF YOU ALWAYS THINK YOU'RE MORALLY SUPERIOR, THEN YOU CAN'T MEME.

If you think about the avant-garde from this militaristic or biological level, a true avant-garde is about survival. It's the cellular phenomenon that lives to tell the story. What does the cyclical pattern tell us are the strategies for the present?

What's happened to art is that it has become cultural politics and that's bad because that marks the death of the potential emancipatory revolutionary aspects of art, since it's always being subjugated to ideology. It is a question of looking backwards and forwards simultaneously to understand the nuances of change. Sometimes a transformation has occurred and the only way to see it is retrospectively. You know, the owl of Minerva flies at dusk. We can't fully understand what is happening until it's already passed. Maybe what's changed is the speed in which trends go in and out of style, but it isn't radical, qualitative transformation; it is a sort of pseudo-change at hyperspeed.

Many of these marginal internet spaces I was looking at five years ago have become ubiquitous in popular culture. It just goes to show that these seemingly hyper-niche spaces online actually can become the most significant point of acute tensions in our society, potentially obscured in mainstream spaces. On another note, I wanted to mention earlier what's interesting about the *The Joker* is that it proved that throwing yourself into the culture war, no matter which side you choose, can lead to commercial, mainstream success. It's the most financially successful superhero movie in history and it doesn't have a traditional liberal Hollywood ideology. These days, as long as it's part of the culture war, it will sell tickets.

JON RAFMAN was born in 1981 in Montreal, Canada, where he lives today.
His next solo show will take place at the Kunstverein Hannover in May. Recent solo exhibitions have taken place at Fondazione Fotografia Modena, Italy, in 2018; Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and West-fälischer Kunstverein in Münster, in 2016; Musée d'art Contemporain de Montréal, in 2015. Among other group shows he participated in "May You Live In Interesting Times", 58th Venice Biennial, in 2019; "Art in the Age of the Internet, 1989–Today", ICA Boston, in 2018; 9th Berlin Biennale, Manifesta, Zurich, both in 2017; Lyon Biennial; "Speculations on Anonymous Materials", Fridericianum, Kassel, in 2013.

AARON MOULTON is a curator based in Los Angeles. His upcoming exhibition "Pineal Eye Infection" in Los Angeles's Garden House is a diagnosis of the impulse or illness to transcend. It will survey evidence addressing ideas of extreme vision, total clarity or a sickness from seeing.

This interview appears in print in Spike #62, "The 2010s". You can buy it in our online shop.

JON RAFMAN MEMES POST-TRUTH 2010S AARON MOULTON

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