



JOHN RAFFMAN

Surf's Up

COUNTERFEIT POAST (still), 2022, 4K stereo video, 28 mins

A self-described
“cyber flaneur,”
JON RAFMAN
talks to *Jordan
Richman* about
the internet,
existential loss,
and the stream
between
the French
Revolution and
cancel culture



JON RAFMAN photographed by JULIEN TELL
in Berlin for BLAU INTERNATIONAL

This autumn, Jon Rafman opened two major exhibitions at Berlin’s Sprüth Magers and Schinkel Pavillon, showing both video and inkjet painting. Having himself just experienced a run-in with the internet mob, he reflects on an online culture wide open with possibility—utopian and dystopian—and on why the troll is the hero and anti-hero of our time.

JORDAN RICHMAN: What do you remember of the early internet?

—JON RAFMAN: Many of my first artworks were inspired by my explorations of the early internet and the sense of excitement that accompanied those online voyages. I remember the moment the home computer connected to the World Wide Web on a mass scale. The experience of exploring back then was very different, and you had to guess URLs—it’s difficult even to recollect how one navigated because there was no search engine to filter everything. Back then, exploring the web was a less top-down process controlled by giant tech monopolies like Google. I’m also still heavily influenced by the aesthetics of Web 1.0 and old personal websites like the now-defunct GeoCities.

I’m from the micro-generation known as Xennials, born on the dividing line between Millennials and Gen X. Because the majority of youth was without the internet, I have a sense of being more acutely aware of the transformation that occurred in society, and of the individual level of consciousness and how one relates to experience after the internet’s emergence.

Can you explain the phrase “surfing the internet”?

—The idea of surfing as an idiom goes way back to the internet’s inception, but it took on a self-conscious form as an artistic practice during the second wave of net art. When I discovered these other artists who were also

obsessed with surfing the web, it was the first time I found a real artistic community. That second generation of net art, which emerged with the advent of Web 2.0, considered surfing an extension of their art practice, kind of like skateboarding or “real” surfing—cultures that have a unified base, yet every individual has their own style. At that time, net artists would bookmark in shared social media platforms like Delicious. It was here that I met many artists who, like me, recognized and appreciated the internet for all this potential. We were excited to use these new languages emerging from the internet in our art.

Is surfing still part of your artistic practice?

—Surfing is still a core part of my practice. I see myself as an explorer of these uncharted territories, rather than as some sort of hacker or expert coder, as the first great net artists were, like the Dutch net artist couple Jodi.

But for me and other net artists of my generation, we wanted to use the internet like your average person. There was no fundamental difference between my use of the web and some kid’s in Idaho. I was exploring and mining these new internet folk cultures that inspired me more than anything I saw in the high-art world of the time. For me, that still to this day is what inspires me the most in contemporary culture—the grammar and vocabulary that are forming in the far-flung corners of the web. These spaces are the richest places for me to mine my material.

Having witnessed the inception of the internet, when did it become so toxic?

—In the early days of the web there was excitement at democratizing possibilities of the net. There was this idea that information was going to be free, and everybody was going to be able to have access to all the world’s knowledge.



ἡνῶρ ἀνὸρ ἡνῶρ, (NUCLEAR KISS), 2022
Inkjet print and acrylic on canvas, 187 × 135 cm



Above: COUNTERFEIT POAST (still), 2022, 4K stereo video, 28 mins
 Below: PUNCTURED SKY (still), 2021, 4K video and sound, 21 mins



As the tech monopolies took more and more control of the internet, everything became filtered through specific algorithms and streams. Nowadays, everything is filtered through Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook.

Fucking algorithms.

— I've used the analogy of the modernization of Paris, which Walter Benjamin wrote about, specifically his unfinished *Arcades Project*. Paris used to be a medieval city that was easy to get lost in—all the winding streets. Then there were these social spaces, the arcades, where you could observe as a flaneur, and I've self-styled myself as a cyber flaneur.

But as algorithms began to dominate our lives, these medieval winding roads of the internet were demolished. This happened in Paris—the so-called “Haussmannization,” where now you have the Champs-Élysées and these giant boulevards that have become the main arteries through which everything is channeled.

Tech monopolies now control how you experience things and determine what should be seen and what shouldn't. On a structural level, these aspects of the internet have had hugely adverse effects. At the end of the day, what they care about is what any corporation cares about: the bottom line. And what drives engagement and what makes you money online is attention.

And what drives engagement is outrage. We learned that from the Facebook Papers.

— The companies creating these algorithms still don't fully understand their destructive consequences on the human psyche. That's what a lot of my recent work investigates. Throughout history, we see movements from romantic utopianism to disillusionment.

I'm interested in this age-old question of what it is to be human and what it is to experience the world. And I think technology has always

reflected how we experience the world, who we are as individuals, and how we relate to ourselves, each other, and the past.

Even the nature of how we remember things is affected. They say if you're not being spoken about, and if you don't exist on the internet, do you really exist on a social level?

Jon, as you know, I'm somewhat of a technophobe, but what are the latest digital technologies you used to make the work at the new exhibitions at Sprüth Magers and Schinkel Pavillon, technologies that weren't available when you last showed in Berlin in 2017?

— The most significant new tool that I'm using is the new clip-guided diffusion algorithms that allow me to type in anything and thus generate an image from those word prompts. I've been using that to make my new films and paintings.

In a way, it's similar to how the photograph transformed how we perceive reality. Painting had to react to that. I don't know if technology is the thing driving change or if technology reflects a change that has already occurred, but either way artists will fundamentally have to recognize and reckon with these transformations.

Are trolls artists and memes works of art?

— The internet troll, to me, is a very important figure in my practice. I see the troll as the hero or anti-hero of our time. The reclusive outsider has existed in previous forms throughout the ages but has today manifested in the form of the internet troll, or sometimes the incel. But reducing all young, alienated men who spend all their lives in front of the screen to evil incels is a dangerous form of ostracization that is important to resist. The internet troll has constructed so much of the culture we use today, and on the most fundamental level, the meme is, some would argue, more important to contemporary culture than most works

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of art. There is an expression that all culture runs downstream from 4chan, and it's true.

In today's much-changed online society, where there's a new language of accusation, once publicly accused, what recourse does one have for restoring one's reputation?

— The main thing is not to internalize any lies, which is something that often happens in totalitarianism. The person who was being purged would be forced into some sort of show trial, and frequently they would publicly admit their “guilt.” That is being done now online in the form of the apology statement. Not in some official governmental, kangaroo court style, but in a more insidious way, through online mob groupthink.

Exile is a very primordial fear, because in the past, if you were exiled from the tribe, that basically meant you were dead. Now, it's on a social level. But also, there's the danger of entering the culture war, alienating yourself from one side, and then being forced to make bedfellows with dangerous forces that on a fundamental, ideological level you don't agree with.

Is cancel culture canceling culture?

— From the time of the Old Testament, a core principle of a just society was the right to a fair hearing, but now with the advent of social

media that fundamental right is being thrown out the window. The very social contract, the fabric that holds society together is on the verge of tearing apart.

Mobs can mobilize instantly online and hold hostage society. Individual members of the mob are often powerless, but as a whole they are a force to be reckoned with, and there is an ecstasy in that.

Now, there's more of a will to resist these terrorizing forces. But it's difficult, because sometimes there's justification, and sometimes the accusation is completely based on lies.

I'm currently studying the French Revolution. It has become increasingly clear how easy it is for false rumors to spread like wildfire, and for them to be taken for reality. There was an event called the Great Fear that spread across France during the revolution. There were false rumors about secret plots to starve the population that caused widespread panic. You can see the effect that this mass hysteria had on the mind of the population from people's messages to each other. They had once been very candid in letters about their feelings on the historical events transpiring, but during the Fear and the Terror, correspondences became self-censored, for fear of being accused of treason.

And back during the French Revolution, they didn't even have all of this deepfake technology.

—Yes, and that relates back to my shows in Berlin. We have this enhanced ability now to construct a convincing false narrative, using technology to substantiate lies and illusions through highly sophisticated means. These new tools like AI image generation are now becoming available on a mass scale. When everyone has the ability to create deepfakes as easily as writing down a lie, there will be less and less consensus of what reality is. I mean, these technologies are here; they just haven't been distributed evenly.

“Tech giants control our literal perception of reality—not through state media, but through algorithms that are used to polarize us”

I think that maybe never in the history of humankind have there been entities as powerful as today's tech giants. And it's not because they control land or are able to send people to the gas chambers or Siberia. It's because they control our literal perception of reality—not through state media, but through algorithms that are used to polarize us.

Has cancel culture been particularly anti-Semitic?

—I think so. But I feel if one starts using that language, then you are playing into the whole victim culture paradigm, which is dangerous. I mean, I understand, as a Jew, Jews are obsessed with their past suffering. That's part of what ties the community together. It's a foundation of the Torah.

The idea of trying to remember past suffering is built into the DNA of Jewish culture, and maybe even literal genetics, depending on your views—the neurosis and fear, the constant paranoia of being exiled and scapegoated. There are only 15 million Jews alive today, and yet they've succeeded and could be said to be overrepresented in everything from art to science to business. Obviously, it's so easy to build conspiracy theories around this fact.

Your mother, Sandra, is a psychologist, and she wrote a text about your work, *The Reframing of Loss: Jon Rafman's*

Virtual Archives. Loss has always been a part of your work.

—Memory and loss, and the ability to construct one's identity and how one relates to the past—even the core of Jewish culture is tied to that as well: the destruction of the temple and exile from the Promised Land.

There are numerous desires to recapture something that is non-recapturable. That's where the darkness and potential pessimism comes in. Even if something in the past is irretrievable, there's a moment we cease to remember what's been lost, like a loved one. And it can also be something grander, such as the loss of the story itself, or the ability to create narrative. The collapse of the capacity to create a coherent narrative is something that has had horrifying effects on humanity.

Has the loss you've experienced in the last years permeated the new work?

—How could it not? When my son died, my entire world turned upside down. A traumatic event of that scale literally changes your identity and your relationship to the world around you, and affects all aspects of your life. One day I'll engage with it in a more concrete, direct way as an artist. But first it needs to fully process—it's still so fresh. Right now the loss permeates everything in a direct and indirect way.

Loss has been a subject of my work since the beginning, but I have now experienced it firsthand on a level I could have hardly imagined. Those new forms of loss and suffering are now a part of me forever.

A lot of artists don't have a choice; they just have to make work. Art is a productive way to deal with loss. I wouldn't even say there's anything cathartic about it, but it's not self-destructive or self-pitying. I'm talking about every type of loss—of friendship, community, love. You have to channel those forces into work. I think work sets you free, like it says on the gates of Auschwitz.



מִשֵּׁחַ אֶרֶץ, (MOSH PIT 2), 2022
Inkjet print and acrylic on canvas, 187 × 135 cm