

Jon Rafman: A Profound Dissonance

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fresque aux singes bleus de l'ancienne Akrotiri sur l'île de Santorini. Une douzaine de primates tout en arabesques s'élancent dans l'espace semi-abstrait de la représentation selon une rythmique oblique, bondissant d'un point à l'autre et indexant à la fois un parcours sinueux et une structure linéaire stricte. La position étudiée, bien que souple, des corps s'inscrit rigoureusement dans un plan parallèle à celui du tableau, aplatissant par le fait même toute velléité d'une lecture perspectiviste de la scène.

L'apparition de l'« image », dans l'œuvre de Mathieu Gaudet, est, dans une certaine mesure, paradoxale et s'oppose d'emblée à la présentation de l'objet dans sa matérialité. Depuis l'entrée de la salle, c'est-à-dire d'un point de vue éloigné, les arabesques s'associent à un schéma perceptuel de l'ordre de la bidimensionnalité. Même en s'approchant du mur, les éléments d'acier perdent, en quelque sorte, leur matérialité au profit d'un archétype pictural. Pourtant, il existe dans la question de l'accrochage des pièces au mur une tension qui leur redonne un poids matériel. Aussi, on peut concevoir que les modules se détachent littéralement de la planéité et de sa frontalité vers un espace tridimensionnel indépendant, quoique coordonné, du mur grâce à une interface énergétique proprement magnétique⁴, qui sépare tout en tenant, qui distingue tout en unissant le mur des modules. Par ce truchement, l'objet est « objectivé » et reprend sa fonction de sculpture indépendamment de l'« image » qui l'aplatit et le dissout dans la fluidité de la surface. Comme dans *Leurre baroque* (2007), toutes les tensions latérales, soigneusement orchestrées par la disposition des modules sur le mur, appartiennent au plan pictural. Cependant, comme dans *Sans titre* (2005), la projection des modules dans le vide de la pièce vers le spectateur affirme l'espace sculptural.

Dans cette confrontation entre la planéité et la volumétrie, et pour reprendre les mots d'Alain Albertganti, « Il ne s'agit plus de saisir les valeurs intrinsèques de l'objet, mais d'habiter un réseau, un espace de circulation, qui relie le corps du spectateur, l'objet et l'espace environnant⁵. » Le visiteur, devant *L'habitude* (2014), n'aura d'autre souci que d'évaluer, à travers le jeu mille fois répété des courbes et des obliques, des noirs et des blancs, des pleins et des vides, la distance utopique entre ces deux concepts.

1. Alain Albertganti, *De l'art de l'installation, la spatialité immersive*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2013, p. 64.
2. Au sens mathématique, c'est-à-dire qui comporte des unités distinctes.
3. Le néologisme traduit le terme anglais « relatability » tel que défini par Kellman, P. J., et Shipley, T. F. dans un texte fondamental quant à cette notion, « A theory of visual interpolation in object perception », *Cognitive Psychology*, n° 23, 1991, p.141-221.
4. Le champ magnétique est ici bien réel, quoiqu'invisible puisque les formes sont « collées » au mur par des aimants.
5. Alain Albertganti, *op. cit.*, p. 80

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**GALERIE ANTOINE ERTASKIRAN
MONTREAL
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“A profound dissonance” is how Giorgio Agamben explains the condition of being *contemporary*. He continues: “the contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness.”¹ In a lecture at the Contemporary Art Museum of St. Louis in relation to his first solo exhibition in an American Museum last summer, the Canadian artist Jon Rafman explained that by looking at the dismal side of the world, he hopes to reveal some fundamental truths about the profound values of society.² Rafman's *HOPE SPRINGS ETERNAL II* presented last fall at galerie antoine ertaskiran was a statement about contemporaneity in that the artist looked at the virtual world to convey a portrait of today's society.

In the first room of the gallery, the artist presented a number of sculptures from the series *Manifold*. At first glance, the sculptures' flowing forms and shapes recall some of the greatest works in art history – from Umberto Boccioni's *Forme uniche della continuità nello spazio* to some of Constantin Brâncuși's sculptures. Unlike Boccioni or Brâncuși however, Rafman used 3D printing technology to make preliminary structures that he subsequently covered with materials such as deep-coloured pigments, gold leaf, aluminum powder, concrete and even stainless steel paint. Comparable to his previous sculptural series, *New Age Demanded*, for which Rafman altered sculptural models to the point of being unrecognizable, *Manifold* testifies to the continued alteration of the human form in an era of incessant technological developments. Pointing to earlier forms of sculptural making, but yet embedded in a contemporary means of fabrication, this series of sculptures further testifies to a profound crisis of time. Over the past three decades the Internet has profoundly modified our relation to time. On a virtual interface, time is flattened and various chronologies coexist within an ever-changing atemporal collage. They exist side by side on the same Wikipedia entry or on everyone's Facebook feed. This interest in the temporal was already evident in Rafman's acclaimed project *9-eyes*, a series of fortuitous scenes and glitches captured by the indifferent eyes of Google Street View cameras during the construction of the most ambitious mapping of the world.

In the small room adjacent to antoine ertaskiran's main gallery, three videos – two wall pieces and one installation—displayed a contrasting and subversive aspect of Rafman's creative production. On the wall, images of a snake giving birth were obstructed by thick layers of shimmering bronze paint heavily applied on a TV monitor while in the middle of the room stood a large armoire made of black MDF. Inside it a close-quarters office was set up. In the claustrophobic space of this grimy station – one that recalled the dimly lit office of a hacker perhaps – visitors were invited to take part in the experience of

Mainsqueeze, a video collage made in part from content stemming from the darknet. The darknet – also called the deep web – contains what is deemed meaningless or offensive to the standard Internet user and thus is not charted by commercial search engines. Violence, sexual content and obscure subcultures thrive in this unsanctioned virtual environment. Sitting alone inside the confined space of the *Cockpit*, visitors find themselves isolated from the gallery space and even separated from the world, but in an ideal site to observe in anonymity. Rafman's *Cockpit* recreates the viewing conditions in which the content of the deep web is usually consumed, an insulated and confidential space.

Mainsqueeze is a bombarding sequence of images and amateur videos that are at times humorous, bizarre and disturbing. Before turning to the field of visual arts, Jon Rafman was a filmmaker and a great deal of his practice is still rooted in the moving image. Rather than follow a narrative, however, Rafman's videos generally result from a virtual exploration; one rooted in the divide between the real and the virtual, between the existence of something palpable in the world and its relative existence in the virtual sphere. Such is the case for *Mainsqueeze*. The work's jolting structure mirrors how content is viewed online: often juxtaposing a myriad of unrelated images, videos and text and showing how web reception is often interjected. The piece jumps between different subjects; content is abruptly interrupted by sinister images only to return later and pick up where it left off. By jumping between videos and returning to previous content, the viewer is not only travelling from one reality to another, but also leaping between various timespans.

In *Mainsqueeze* Jon Rafman overlaid his selection of videos with filmed images of various settings, interior and exterior scenes that operate literally and figuratively as time frames. While claiming to report something of the present, the selection of videos curated by Rafman are presented as already out-dated. Then, there is the *Cockpit* in which *Mainsqueeze* is being played that acts as a third set constructed to contextualize the physical presence (and present) of the viewer in the gallery space. In this way, Rafman accomplishes yet another contemporary action, that of "inscribing the present by marking it above all as archaic."³ These three overlaid decors serve to effectively insert a chronological discontinuity into our understanding of time, so that the past and present become intertwined in a more complex temporal



fabric. If photography's doubling effect already has been widely written about, Rafman's work triples and quadruples it by further complicating "the effect of difference, of deferral, or one-thing-after-another, or within another; of multiples burgeoning within the same."⁴

HOPE SPRINGS ETERNAL II offered a powerful exploration of the Internet's visual language, showing how it transforms our means of understanding the world we live in. Rafman manipulates this language with ease to produce engaging works of art that raise important yet unanswered questions. His work testifies to something of the present by imposing a distance and a separation that seem essential both to Rafman and Agamben to gain a worthier perspective on our times.

1. Giorgio Agamben, "What is The Contemporary" in *What is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, Stanford: Stanford University Press (2009) : 44.
2. Jon Rafman, "Artist Talk: Jon Rafman" Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis (youtube channel). Accessed online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JdZ03VdCxPY>
3. Giorgio Agamben, "What is The Contemporary" in *What is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, Stanford: Stanford University Press (2009): 50.
4. Rosalind Krauss, "The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism" in *October* (Winter, 1981): 25.

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