I wasn't quite expecting to feel the way I did when I embarked on my Rafmanathon. I'd finally caught Covid – not that I was actually trying to catch it – and I was in the perfect captive state just to lie back and look. Particularly at those Rafman videos, films and images that lead me further away from myself into a near/far distance. And the further I went, the more I kept on reconnecting with my own half-remembered dreams, half-forgotten cinematic memories, and childhood/adult fears. All those moments which blur the real and the unreal into moments which simply exist. It was fascinating to drift into and be absorbed by familiar/strange worlds. Friendly faces which turn into grimaces, moments of the mundane morphing into the bizarre, all done with ease and their own inner logic. The rush of being guided by a camera which swoops over mountains and un/known landscapes until you're dropped into situations which you may or may not quite recognize. And although the Verfremdung should have made me feel rather cool about the whole experience, it didn't. Its lack of obvious emotional and linear narrative paradoxically pulled at my own non-virtual heartstrings. Because for me Jon Rafman is not just a master of technological tricks, it's his way of implying the emotion that lurks behind the scenes, the palpable life in these virtual characters that pull you in to their distorted worlds. You end up on the journey with them. Second Life is a life after all. And let's not even begin to approach any discussion of what reality is...

JON RAFMAN'S PUNCTURED SKY

WORDS BY NICK BYRNE

...It's fairly easy to access the key examples of his work on the web. Google Earth, Google Street View show those moments caught in time, randomly, deliberately, by chance, by design which suggest so much more than they sometimes show. Kool-Aid Man in Second Life takes the viewer on a Picaresque journey that takes you to emotional place which may surprise you. And the latest short film Punctured Sky is a wonderfully restrained exercise in the near-nostalgia of those generations of thirty to forty year olds that are seeing their own tech youth shift into a sort of technological twilight.

Jon Rafman's background has its own personal qualities of Verfremdung. He comes from an Anglophone Jewish community in French speaking Montreal. An only child as well. His Canadian identity is there, growing up in a country where there is a sense of provinciality, a place or a country not being in the centre of things. He studied Philosophy and Literature at McGill in Montreal, then at the Art Institute of Chicago. This combination I think is key to his work. The philosophical mind and the artistic eye working very much in synch. This is technological art for the soul.
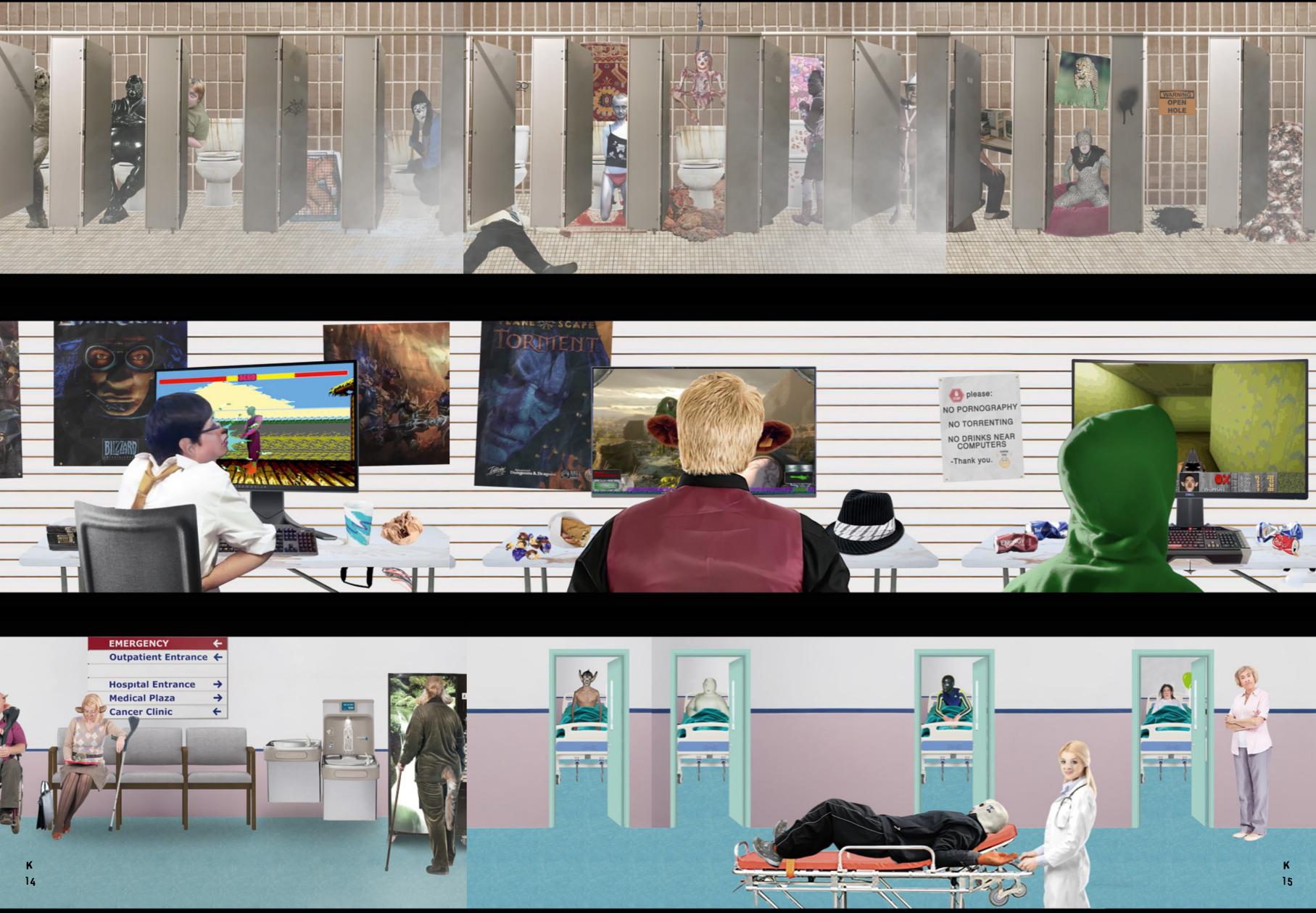
JON RAFMAN

Blue kiss

KING KONG

Call me Digital

18 www.pegi.info

More than anything being an only child born to a single working mother who always encouraged my desire to become an artist had the most significant influence on my development. Every artist strives to create little worlds that reflect their vision and experience. And I've been building my own imaginary universes to entertain myself for as long as I can remember.

Another huge influence was the regular voyages my mother took me on. She spent every penny she earned on exotic trips around the globe. Before I was 12 years old, I had visited every continent but Antarctica. One memory that stands out was my voyage across the USSR when I was eight years old in 1989. She said she wanted me to see the Soviet Union before it collapsed. The most incredible memory I have from that trip is the Buzkashi match we witnessed in the mountains of Soviet Kyrgyzstan. Buzkashi is a Central Asian sport where horse-mounted players attempt to shoot goat carcasses into the opposing goal. Some players wore rusty old Soviet tank helmets. This juxtaposition of the remnants of the Soviet Union and this old equestrian game left a powerful impression on me.

After graduating from a Jewish high school, I moved to Israel for a year for college before returning to Montreal to attend McGill University. I majored in philosophy and literature. The necessity for a Classical liberal arts education was instilled in me early on. I'm glad I didn't go straight to art school because the books I studied in that period were foundational to my worldview. I'd always ask my professors if I could hand in films in place of final papers. I convinced my Russian Lit professor to let me adapt Dead Souls by Gogol into a 3-hour epic movie instead of writing a final term paper. With the help of a rag-tag crew of friends and random out-of-work actors and strange characters, I found on Craiglist, and I miraculously completed the film. But it damn near broke me. Unfortunately, the film is embarrassingly unwatchable. Still, my prof gave me an A for effort.

After McGill, I went to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago for my MFA, but my expectations were too high. I naively imagined I'd find a gang of artist kindred spirits. I'd constantly be engaged in enriching discourse and form a movement that would revolutionize cinema or something. Instead, I found myself with massive student loan debt. Unfortunately, I found out the hard way that fine art schools have become factories that churn out thousands of MFAs each year into a world with practically no job opportunities for them. So many art students leave school with crippling debt, and only 0.1% of them can survive off their art practice. But that's a whole other bag of worms.

In terms of specific artistic influences, there are too many to list. When you don't have a father, you have to freedom to move from one father figure to another throughout your life. But choosing one artistic mentor who stands out from the rest is hard. In recent years, I'd say it would be Cormac McCarthy. His writing has a trance-inducing hallucinatory effect on me. When I discovered his books, it was a revelation. The sheer amount of condensed beauty in his sentences continually blows me away. I strive in my work to achieve that perfect marriage of the fantastic and brutal reality, to make the banal and everyday glow with the eternal mysteries of life. His work made me recognize that my favorite genre is the epic Picaresque, which captures the horrors of existence and merges the mythic with the prosaic. I'm also attracted to the Picaresques because the genre tells the story of a rogue-like character who is not a hero, not good, not bad. They don't get redeemed, and they reflect the society they live in. That, for me, is the most exciting type of protagonist.

#"I STRIVE IN MY WORK TO ACHIEVE THAT PERFECT MARRIAGE OF THE FANTASTIC AND BRUTAL REALITY, TO MAKE THE BANAL AND EVERYDAY GLOW WITH THE ETERNAL MYSTERIES OF LIFE."

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 *  │  Users online: coolguy69

 *  │  SpYd3R joined

_SpYd3R_  │  So you're looking for punctured Sky

coolguy69  │  yes what do you know about it

_SpYd3R_  │  not what. Where. 1337 Pembroke ave,  #404. Death overdrive studios. It all
          │  started there.

 *  │  SpYd3R left
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Glock 17

BLACK TAR

2C-B

2C-B
22.5

Candy and the Fel
Fuckfest

"The intimate experience of surfing the Internet alone on your laptop late at night and magically stumbling upon some website dedicated to an epic beanie baby collection or similarly stumbling upon work of netart is near impossible to capture in the Gallery space."

<Do you feel technology was a medium that could better communicate your themes of melancholy, loneliness, and emptiness> ?

I reluctantly concede to using words like technology or digital in describing my practice. It makes it easier for journalists and critics to write about my art. Critics have always used reductive labels to stick to artists. There is no point in spending too much energy fighting the inevitable. You got to pick your battles.

That said, I think using the word technology in this context is somewhat of an empty term. What is technology? Nearly everything we humans do can be considered technology. Language is a technology. To say I make art about technology doesn't capture what I'm exploring and employing in my art. I've never been a hacker or coder or particularly technologically savvy. I fell in love with Internet Art in the mid-aughts because the Internet had become a ubiquitous part of daily life. I'm not interested in technology for its own sake. I'm interested in contemporary life, especially our inner life and how the Internet changed how we relate to ourselves and each other. But, I also want to stress that I don't believe technology drives the transformation in some deterministic fashion. It's more of a dialectical process, and the Internet makes acute changes in consciousness that have already occurred.

There was an exciting vibe on the Internet then. New languages were emerging for artists to play with. I'd finally found the kindred artistic spirits I had yearned for in grad school. Like myself, these netartists were inspired by these nascent online vocabularies. It was the golden age of web surfing. This is when my passion for being a CyberFlâneur flourished. The Internet then was a 21st-century version of the Parisian 19th-century arcade.

<How do you create, use your thoughts, your feelings? And what is the difference between seeing your work in a gallery or at home> ?

The intimate experience of surfing the Internet alone on your laptop late at night and magically stumbling upon some website dedicated to an epic beanie baby collection or similarly stumbling upon work of netart is near impossible to capture in the Gallery space. On the other hand, galleries offer a unique meditative environment to contemplate work. The Internet is a consumerist media that function with an attention economy. Social media is driven by providing small dopamine rushes along with a constant neverending onslaught of information. Online, there is an endless amount of noise to compete with, an overload of data. It offers more data than ever before, yet with less and less meaning. Moreover, despite my deep love for the web, one must recognize the inherent poverty of the mediated screen experience. In my video installations, I try to find a middle ground that is most closely akin to the experience of going to the movies.

On a side note, I want to highlight a new challenge for practicing artists who engage with the Internet and have degrees from art schools and show in prestigious white wall galleries. Francis Ford Coppola once said, "One day some little fat girl in Ohio is going to be the next Mozart." This became blatantly clear with the content explosion after Web 2.0. A Youtube video by a little fat girl in Ohio could be more captivating and artistically relevant than anything else being produced. This caused many of my peers to drop out of the art game. How can one presume to be the avant-garde when a young kid from Ohio posting videos on TikTok that are undeniably better works of art than anything on the walls of museums without any pretensions of calling herself a professional Artist? Do you try to rise above all the mind-blowing 'amateur' content being produced through conceptual art historical gestures. . .

Or, do you let yourself be swept away in the constant flow of information and accept the total collapse of any distinction between high and low, amateur and professional, insider and outsider artist? What is the "professional" artist's role in this context today?

To get back to your first question, how do I create? I wish I knew. What I can tell you is that over the years, I've learned tricks for encouraging spontaneity and imaginative play through improvisation exercises. Reading books on improv, I learned practical tools to switch off the self-critical mind that paralyzes the imagination. One of the main techniques to build trust in your intuition is to go with the obvious and not the clever. The obvious for you is not the same obvious for someone else. The obvious is your true self, and the clever is an imitation of someone else. Another trick is to try and not feel responsible for the material that emerges from you. Accept what your imagination gives you, no matter what. This is hard to achieve, especially in the heavily policed society we live in, which has caused a tendency to self-censor. And lastly, do not try too hard. By "doing your best," you fill yourself with tension and fear, and nothing good will come of this. The best ideas come out of nowhere. I don't need to know what I'm doing. I just need to create the right conditions to catch my subconscious unawares.

<To what extent do you worry about the idea of how people access your art? And I'm just wondering if you did some sort of audit on how people access your work> ?

I can't tell you with any great certainty. And it has changed over the years. At first, my art was just viewed by a tightly knit internet art community. And then it grew and grew over the years. At the same time, culture, in general, became more and more fragmented. I'm sure many individuals know me exclusively from the art world. But unlike many artists, I believe most of my followers discovered me through the Internet. It also probably depends on the country you live in. For example, in Italy, I imagine most people found my work through real-life exhibitions because I've had a lot of shows there recently, and Italy still has a healthy offline existence. But vast swaths of the globe do not have thriving international art scenes, so I probably was found via the Internet in these places. This is my guess. I'm ceaselessly surprised and energized when I discover new unexpected fans of my work.

<Can you talk more about the sense of journey and discovery, where you want to take the viewer> ?

I want to share with viewers this excitement I experience in my virtual wanderings, the thrill I had when first surfing the endless expanses of Google Street View and Second Life. It is this excitement of the discovery of rich new online worlds that drove much of my early practice.

This is an excellent place to talk about my love for flânerie. Baudelaire saw the flâneur as having a pivotal role in understanding the modern city - through immersing himself in the contemporary experience.

Like Baudelaire's flâneur, my work emerges out of the joy or pain of the experience of the contemporary world around me. I like to employ Baudelaire's central poetic strategy: to extract the eternal from the ephemeral. The poet should become like a ragpicker. The artist rummages through the refuse of contemporary life. Out of this detritus of modernity, in this case, Internet ephemera, they derive the universal heroic and eternal beauty. In the old arcades of Paris or the deep corners of the web, one can locate mystical truth.

This poetic lyrical style is most apparent in my montage essay-style video work like Still: Life Betamale (2013) or, more recently, SHADOWBANNED (2019). . .

«FIVE CORPORATIONS CONTROL OUR PERCEPTION OF REALITY. AND THEIR ALGORITHMS ENCOURAGE POLARIZATION, CREATE ECHO CHAMBERS, AND SOW DIVISION, PARTLY BECAUSE IT DRIVES ENGAGEMENT AND EARNINGS. YET, THEY DON'T FULLY UNDERSTAND THE PROFOUND EFFECTS THE ALGORITHMS HAVE ON THE HUMAN PSYCHE.»

. . . I escort viewers on a journey across the web, which is a warped reflection of our increasingly fragmented, absurd world.

I might be misremembering this, but I think T.S. Eliot described said something like this: A person can fall in love in the morning, spend the day working as a wage slave for some multi-national company, read a book of esoteric philosophy in the evening while there is a war going on overseas. All that is feels disconnected. And I see the Internet as the manifestation of this fragmentation on an extreme level.

But unlike the streets of 19th-century Paris, today's world is highly mediated by screen-based technology and replete with immaterial virtual worlds within worlds within the world. These online communities are one aspect of the Internet that inspires me the most. This is what attracted me to Second Life. In my project Kool-Aid man Second Life, the sister project to Nine Eyes of Google Street View, I documented my journey across the expansive user-generated online world. The subculture and computer-generated landscape were a mirror of the web but in three-dimensional form. It is a world of all our repressed dreams and desires. And it became home for many of the Internet's unique and often bizarre marginal subcultures. I recently saw a post on 4chan that sums up perfectly what the Internet and, by extension, places like Second Life have fostered.

By contrast, Google Street View is a direct one-to-one photographic reflection of the physical world. It is the greatest photo archival project of all time. When I roam Google Street View, I often experience an exhilarating sensation that perhaps I am the first person to gaze upon a scene. Another aspect of Street View photography that gives it its potency is how the photos were captured by this indifferent robotic camera. There's a tension between the indifferent gaze of the multi-eyed camera and the human gaze, which sees beauty and projects meaning. This tension gives the Street View photos their power.

However, despite the camera's supposed neutrality, Street View images are still owned by Google. Their copyright watermarks every photo, making apparent that Google has indeed made an imperial claim on Reality, controlling the very organization and distribution of information. In the corner of every Google Street View image, it says, "report a problem." What does that mean? If you report a Street View photo of somebody dying on the side of the road to Google, for instance, what does that even do? Who are you reporting it to? What effect does that have? When was the picture taken? It's 21st century Kafkaesque. I see it as the extreme logical conclusion to the alienation that emerged since the beginning of modernity. Even the user interface of a Google Street View image reflects disconcerting truths about our times.

<Can you talk more about Reality — how we perceive it in our lives? And the images created in V.R., how do they compare to what is generally recognized as "reality"> ?

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"VIRTUAL REALITY IS MORE HONEST OF A REPRESENTATION OF REALITY THAN THE "REAL" WORLD BECAUSE IT DOES NOT HIDE ITS ARTIFICIALITY. IT IS TRANSPARENT, ALL SURFACE, LESS INSIDIOUS. IN THE "REAL WORLD," THINGS HAVE BECOME SO REIFIED THAT THEY SEEM NATURAL WHEN THEY ARE JUST AS CONSTRUCTED AND ARTIFICIAL."

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<Can you talk more about Reality - how we perceive it in our lives? And the images created in V.R., how do they compare to what is generally recognized as "reality"> ?

I would take it further and say that even on a societal and emotional level, it has superseded the physical reality in many respects for huge swaths of the developed world. Suppose your physical life suffers from incessant brutal alienation, either because of mind-numbing work or unfulfilled relationships, but online, you have a thriving social life, you meet the love of your life you are a legendary elven warrior in World of Warcraft.

This is not less important than your "real" life. On the contrary, your virtual life is more fulfilling and meaningful. When you look back on your life, when you're old and dying, those memories of your World of Warcraft raids with your guild could be the most significant in your life. On one level, I celebrate this in my work while simultaneously critiquing it. There's a tragedy to this existence. Something is lacking in a life wholly lived online. So much has been lost. And each progressive generation knows less and less what even has been lost.

Yes, we are more closely connected through technology than ever before. Yet, at the same time, we're further apart than ever. More polarized than ever.

This shows how our perception of the Internet has changed over the past few decades. The academic literature about new media art in the 90s and early aughts was filled with utopian idealist discourse about the Internet. Yet now, there is a sense of dystopian resignation about the future and recognition of our entrapment by these technologies. Now the Internet is no longer seen as this revolutionary space or this great democratizing force that will allow everybody to have a platform to express themselves and be heard. The utopian imaginary has all but vanished. The tech monopolies have conquered the web. And never in history has there ever been more powerful individuals than these tech oligarchs. Five corporations control our perception of reality. And their algorithms encourage polarization, create echo chambers, and sow division, partly because it drives engagement and earnings. Yet, they don't fully understand the profound effects the algorithms have on the human psyche.

In urban development terms, it's like the Haussmannisation of Paris in the 19th-century, where the medieval quarters were bulldozed to make way for the modern Grands Boulevards in part to squelch the possibility of revolution. The same thing again occurred on the Internet, where in the early days, as I said, strolling the streets of the World Wide Web felt akin to being flâneur in the now-demolished arcades of Paris. But all the maze-like neighborhoods are all but gone. They were plowed through to create Facebook's Champs Elysées. Everything is now filtered through a small handful of social media streams, homogenizing everything to fit an Instagram post. There is less of a sense of discovery or being able to lose oneself in the labyrinthine backstreets of the deep web. Everything has been flattened.

<Your film Punctured Sky recently won an award at the Rotterdam Film Festival - can you tell us more about it> ?

Punctured Sky is a return to the narrative for me. The last time I made a straightforward narrative with a beginning, middle, and end was ten years ago when I made a film called You, the World and I. Punctured Sky deals with similar themes of loss and memory. In this case, the precariousness of memory, truth, and selfhood in the digital age. And like You, the World and I, it employs a first-person voice-over by an unseen narrator named Jon. After reuniting with an old friend, Jon sets off on a journey to uncover the truth behind the mysterious disappearance of his beloved childhood video game, Punctured Sky. In it, I explore how we perceive the past and how new technologies transform the way we remember. Our memories are fundamental to creating our own identities. They make up the content of our self-narrative, of who we are. But in Punctured Sky, the protagonist begins to question the validity of his childhood memories. Once the truth of our memories is thrown into question, so is our sense of a coherent self. Who do you make sense of one's own life?

"How can one presume to be the avant-garde when a young kid from Ohio posting videos on TikTok that are undeniably better works of art than anything on the walls of museums without any pretensions of calling herself a professional Artist"

"Do you let yourself be swept away in the constant flow of information and accept the total collapse of any distinction between high and low, amateur and professional, insider and outsider artist? What is the "professional" artist's role in this context today?"