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, 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 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 BNJ.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 BNPJ.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 (hereon 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 paining amateur 3D
New Age Demanded #4 (Ryman), (2011)
C-print, 80x60 cm

plane, or El Lisibsky 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 not 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 web: legitimate digital goods could in principle be dumped inhabited by barfoot, 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, poetic statement of place in an interior design magazine, others is destined, not even with the protection of the Artists Rights Society, to 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. 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. Sten in its progression, through forty or so pieces, from the first Cy Twombly Lamberghini Galtardo of 2010 to the recent Cu Twomby Apartment of 2011, BNP looks like an intensively, speeded-up course of appropriation and refinement of a tool. The act itself is a very simple one, the banal addition: model + texture = BNPU. 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 photograph. In the series 

Paint FX Sculpture Garden he maps his textures (appropriated from other paintings or created by him 5) onto his maps his textures (appropriated from other paintings or created by him 5) onto 

leaves, flowers, Noguchi sculptures set in "real" gardens.

paint FX sculpture garden
[4] The expression is attributed to Stuart Brand, founder of the Whole Earth Catalogue. For further information, cfr. 
http://www.sci-hub.eu/whole-earth-catalogue.html

[5] Post-modernism, is about to be redesigned, along with the title of the project, which could be summed up in a famous hacker slogan: information wants to be free.

We thus come to the series New Age Demanded (2011), in which the various stylistic registries and production strategies explored in the recent series work together to form a language of exceptional complexity. The centre of each of these images is occupied by a eerie, mysterious, faceless figure, somewhere between a deformed classical bust and a sci-fi character. The material it is made of is a mixture of changes from work to work – from sleek and ironic to serious and purist. 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 main elements of the project in a series of digitally created abstract "paintings" on the same web platform, using the most simple, banal default effects of the most popular graphic programmes. We thus come to the series New Age Demanded (2011), in which the various stylistic registries 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 a eerie, mysterious, faceless figure, somewhere between a deformed classical bust and a sci-fi character. The material it is made of is a mixture of changes from work to work – from sleek and ironic to serious and purist. 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 main elements of the project in a series of digitally created abstract "paintings" on the same web platform, using the most simple, banal default effects of the most popular graphic programmes. 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.

The materials that comprise an interior. Which is why some people find it so threatening.

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