

Controra Ep. I

Luca Francesconi, Jon Rafman, Sara Sadik, Amalia Ulman.

Curated by Like A Little Disaster

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Palazzo San Giuseppe
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Like A Little Disaster is proud to launch the first episode of the nomadic and periodic series "Controra".

The "controra" is a space-time suspended in the sunny early afternoon of Southern Italy - from noon to 4pm approximately.

It is the time of day when the sun casts its shadow straight and the body disappears, leaving room for poetry, mythology, and the fear of meridian demons.

These are the "heavy hours" dedicated to dreams and nightmares, hallucinations and "Fata Morganas", the hours of idle indolence, experienced and performed in anarchist opposition to the efficiency of the production flow dictated by chrono-capitalism.

One must refrain from going to open and public places and it is appropriate to exile oneself in one's own home, shutters closed, in dim light and in silence. One may doze or sleep, but it is not the only expected activity; indeed, thinking, reading even just a few pages and meditating on them, taking notes. Caring for, loving oneself and devoting oneself to active idleness. The controra is an oxymoron, where otium proposes a reflective inversion to the course of our thoughts.

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LUCA FRANCESCONI

In his work Luca Francesconi analyzes the links between human and nature, space and time, works of art and materials, as well as the dynamics in the exhibition space. He often took primordial references such as rivers, lunar cycles, fields and agriculture as a starting point. In his exhibitions these themes become the concrete and symbolic cornerstone of a group of works that involve space explorations, physics and its relationship with time. The exhibition display itself, as an aesthetic object, is a central component of his speculations.

Through his research Francesconi examines the natural processes present in the supply chain and production system of food, its distribution, its consumption and the human implications that this entails. The theme of (natural) transformation, such as decomposition, the various fermentation processes and their symbolic value, serve as a starting point for examining contemporary modes of production and consumption. Linked to the medium of sculpture and sculptural installation,

Francesconi brings together various types of natural elements, which echo the formal aspects and functioning of the human body, while emphasizing our dissolving relationship with nature and its ecosystems. By proposing new alternatives of environmentally sustainable production and consumption, Francesconi aims to revive our relationship with the earth and the environment in general.

The group of sculptures in the show (five “Cafoni” and the “Capurale”) are stylized anthropomorphic figures with interchangeable vegetable heads. These laborers are inserted in a temporal and productive reality in which professional and personal identity has been lost, so even the body loses shape and substance to become a simple tool for large-scale production.

The sculptures investigate the boundary between essentiality and overproduction, between a world in which the relationship between man and nature was still 1 to 1, when what governed was the cyclical nature of natural laws to which man adapted for a production destined for simple sustenance. , without affecting the balance of the food chain, and that of contemporaneity, a time of aseptic monodirectional surpluses.

JON RAFMAN

Jon Rafman (*1981) is acclaimed for a multifaceted oeuvre that encompasses video, animation, photography, sculpture and installation. His quasi-anthropological works—often incorporating internet-sourced images and narrative material—investigate digital technologies and the communities they create, focusing on the losses, longings and fantasies that shape our technology-infused lives today. The Montreal-based artist turns an empathic but critical eye on the internet age, investigating experiences of alienation, nostalgia, loneliness and grief.

Rafman’s complex take on internet technologies is implicit even in his earliest work. *The Nine Eyes of Google Street View* (2007–present), an ever-growing collection of photographic images and frequently updated website, finds him rummaging the panoramic street view feature of Google Maps for unusual images. Like a cyber *flâneur* he stumbles upon surprising moments of humanity, vulnerability and sometimes beauty; his discoveries include pictures of children playing in run-down neighborhoods, horses and reindeer roaming the streets, poetic landscapes, grumbling prostitutes and police arrests. By showing these automatically captured images in a new light, Rafman reveals the visual grammar and blind spots of Google’s technology.

Many of Rafman’s later videos explore lesser-known facets of the digital world. A case in point is *Codes of Honor* (2011), a docu-fiction short that combines real film footage with images from the online platform Second Life to tell the story of a video gamer’s life. Another is the film essay trilogy consisting of *Still Life (Betamale)* (2013), *Mainsqueeze* (2014) and *ERYSICHTON* (2015), a visual study of niche internet cultures including cosplayers, hentai pornography enthusiasts or people who pursue obscure sexual fetishes.

Not all of the artist’s works use found images. While the bust-like objects of his series *New Age Demanded* (2012–present) evoke classical modernist sculptures, they were actually created using digital imaging techniques and technologies including 3D printing or 3D model-based carving. A series of large-scale photographs

titled *You Are Standing in an Open Field* (2015) juxtaposes grimy computer keyboards and trash-heaped desks with pastoral landscape painting backgrounds. *Sticky Drama* (2015), a short about the loss of digitally stored memories, is Rafman's first live-action film.

Many of the artist's most recent works use 3D animation. Examples include his *Dream Journal 2016–2019*, for which Rafman documents his daily dreams before mixing them with found narratives from mythology, video games and TV series. The animated video essays *Legendary Reality* (2017), *SHADOWBANNED* (2018) and *Disasters under the Sun* (2019) offer a serious look at the current human condition with a visual language reminiscent of science fiction films.

Rafman's films and videos are often set to hypnotic, experimental-electro music soundtracks by artists including Oneohtrix Point Never or James Ferraro. Although available online, they are most effectively experienced in specially-designed sculptural installations. These emphatically physical installations squeeze viewers into booths, transport them to the bedroom of a typical North American teenager, invite them to lie on polyurethane foam seating or in pools of plastic balls.

All of Jon Rafman's works explore the vicissitudes of self-formation in the digital age. They ask what it means to live in a time when technologies structure our every waking hour, or when the price of easy fulfillment of our needs is loneliness in front of a computer screen. They explore the ever-present experience of living in a world where nothing is permanent, but nothing is forgotten.

Disasters Under the Sun (2019)
Poor Magic (2017)

Jon Rafman stages computer-generated dystopian worlds in which horror has become part of everyday life.

Disasters Under the Sun (2019) and *Poor Magic* (2017), which form a diptych in Rafman's mind, resonate in uncanny and frightening ways with the current crisis we are living. The first, which was presented at the Venice Biennale in 2019, was recently acquired by the MAC (Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal). Both films are darker in tone than his earlier works, delving as they do into the murkier corners of the Web. While his installations, photographs and videos of recent years proposed a melancholic and ironic view of social conventions and virtual communities, these two works offer a more critical perspective. The films portray a post-human dystopia featuring faceless 3-D avatars continuously tortured in abstract digital space. In what is essentially a poetic lament, Rafman addresses the fragmented consciousness of a post-physical existence. The films show a terrifying image of a future where all humanity is uploaded to a virtual purgatory and endlessly abused. Or is it also a brutal representation of the present moment and the effect that a world dominated by algorithms has on our flesh and psyche?

Rafman shows us the alienation that separates people through digital and technological means and dissolves any sense of community. In contrast to the utopian visions of the future that characterized early modernity, Rafman designs post-human scenarios in which humans exist only as digital avatars. He

demonstrates the harmful effects that a world ruled by algorithms has on the body and mind.

Poor Magic and Disaster Under the Sun effect a beautiful yet terrifying rendition of contemporary consciousness, gesturing towards civilisation's listless drift beyond the corporeal, and technology's infinite desire to penetrate and artificially replicate human essence. Computer-generated crowd simulations run berserk in dreamlike repetition, while a 3D endoscopic journey takes us through the body's most intimate passages.

SARA SADIK

Through filmed or performed fictitious narratives, ranging from documentaries to science fiction through to reality TV and a massive use of chromakey, 3D modulations and other CGI post-production techniques, Sara Sadik notably addresses issues related to adolescence and masculinity, documenting their mysteries and deconstructing their social mythologies.

Sara Sadik's work is rooted in what she terms "beurcore": the essence of the youth culture arising from French working-class members of the Maghrebi diaspora, whose specificities she captures and analyses, to translate them into visual and material concepts. Her work combines video, performance, installation and photography, in order to explore beurcore's manifestations, while her references span music, language, fashion, social networks and science fiction. Starting from the semiological and sociological analysis of "beurness", Sadik implements a process of hijacking these social clichés by deconstructing and reintegrating them into fiction.

Sadik reengages, reconnects and re-problematizes the social symbols, the visual aesthetics, the economic systems as well as the languages used and/or created by this community, in order to create fictional and surreal situations which take place either in the present or in the near future.

Although rooted in a local perspective, her scripts, films, and performances tackle wider issues, such as the politics of identities and behaviours that lack media representation.

Through her computer-generated images and gamified references to pop culture items including Capri Sun, Dragon Ball, and Kalenji clothing, Sadik builds her imaginary scenarios, evading the colonialism(s) that have usurped physical and virtual territories.

Sadik's tactical use of new technologies and social media creates new spaces for fairer representations.

Khtobtogone, 2021, 16'

Khtobtogone (2021) depicts young French-Maghrebi working-class members' daily life and their emotional and political rollercoasters by exploring the possibilities of the cinema mode of the Grand Theft Auto V video game — notorious for its violence, misogyny, and racism —.

The film's narrative takes place in Marseille and chronicles the life of a young man named Zine, and his battles to regain self-love and to become a better man. But in

the introspective narrative, Zine is faced with the agonising and contradictory expectations that shape his future, battles and struggles he has to go through in order to regain self-confidence and self-love, as well as his coming of age in Marseille's Maghrebi community. Sadik's portrayal of Zine focuses on the tensions exerted by racial, class-based and gendered norms, and how these norms differ at the same time. The love that Zine feels for his male friends is incompatible with the love he feels for the woman Bulma, although the words he uses to describe his feelings are similar in both cases.

The graphics of Grand Theft Auto V have an impersonal quality that makes Zine's vulnerability seem transferable to other identifications, in spite of the specificity of the language, the cultural markers and his personal relationships. The slight glitches in the imagery skip over the hypermasculine behaviour and machoistic violence of typical GTA narratives, as Zine describes hours weeping over heartbreak and his imperative to be better, wanting to be seen by others in a positive light and becoming "the best version of himself".

Khtobtogone is an emotional film, which uses futuristic technology as a vector to visualise the real struggles and dreams of a young man who represents a prototype with an intimate voice able to immerse us in the daily introspection and emotional tensions he has to face.

Zine goes to the gym, but feels he is a heartless body "*Sometimes I feel like I'm nothing like a body. And that's it. An empty deshumanised body. A body that has no right to feel. That only exist to suffer and remains silent.*" Behind Zine's hulking frame, clad in designer tracksuit and fashionable midriff bag, is an emotional guy trying to "become a man". He is filled with love – for his friends and for his new girlfriend – but he is plagued by inner demons and a fear of not having a purpose in life. While delivering food on his motorbike, Zine pretends he is in a GTA game, as he hurtles through the beautiful coastal scenery, but customers' condescending looks and comments bring him down. Through her sensitive portrayal and inventive juxtapositions, Sadik compellingly depicts the predicaments of contemporary masculinity and provides an acute and, at the same time, empathic analysis of the social pressures and the burden of expectations on the shoulders of young adults in a post-migrant society.

AMALIA ULMAN

Amalia Ulman is an Argentinian-born artist living and working in L.A., shook up the Instagram IT Girl community in 2014. Her meticulously curated Instagram account detailing her life as a vapid but increasingly troubled fashionista turned out to be a hoax, perpetuated for the sake of her performative series *Excellences and Perfections*.

The Future Ahead, Improvements for the further Masculinization of Prepubescent Boys, 2014

The Future Ahead, similar to other video essays by the artist, uses the format of powerpoint presentations to collage found footage (among others images from the ironic LESBIANS WHO LOOK LIKE JUSTIN BIEBER Tumblr blog), animated gifs and cheap sound effects. Narrating a fictional story about the protagonist Justin Bieber with an over sexualised and infantilised voice using faux medical data, the video explores polarising online trends prevalent in 2014 when young boys

accentuated their forehead lines on social media. Teenage girls, on the other hand, would get botox to prevent forehead lines even before their appearance. Absurdist from beginning to end, *The Future Ahead* is a rollercoaster of rumors, office humor and conspiracy theories about gender roles and plastic surgery.

The Future Ahead, focuses on Justin Bieber's coming of age as a social media celebrity. In response to a cultural fixation with Bieber's angelic looks as a child and a decrease in his relevance around puberty, Ulman proposes that when Bieber was around 17 he developed an expression called "Office Blind Pose," wherein he raises his eyebrows so that his forehead resembles Venetian blinds. These wrinkles in his baby face project an air of maturity, which Ulman links to the social construction of masculinity, counteracting a crude meme at the time that Bieber was secretly a lesbian. The OBP strategy seems like a punchline until Ulman compiles a few dozen photos of Bieber making this face—which, it must be said, looks ridiculous—alongside clips of teen vloggers mimicking it themselves. Ulman shuffles through them one by one in a type of obsessive, tongue-in-cheek analysis not usually directed toward masculine-presenting cis men (recall the viral GIF of Paris Hilton making the same face in dozens of photographs).

The "destruction of experience" described in the lecture—plastic surgeries intended to iron out wrinkles in women's faces, the opposite of Bieber's trajectory—is also a clinical complement to the omnipresent reminders of the "biological clock." Ulman doesn't reductively condemn these procedures; instead, she points out how they are an industry built from deeply ingrained cultural expectations. She pivots to a broader tradition of surgically combatting gender normativity by quoting Genesis P-Orridge: "Bodies are just a cheap suitcase for the consciousness." But this post-ideological ideal collides with how well norms are upheld by an image-based culture, even when fashioning a new self. "Can we judge Justin for adapting to the sociocultural construction of gender?" Ulman asks, as though seeking a way out. It's not impossible, but the first step is recognizing the root of the matter.

Amalia Ulman studies issues concerning gender identity in a work based on the online commotion surrounding Justin Bieber's supposed gender transition. A fascinating research about the internet's influence on the perception of maleness in contemporary society. A study that questions the pop star's maleness and to address the fiction of bio-femininity.