

Bad Dreams and Nintendo The Mythology of Jonathan Monaghan

INTERVIEW

October 6, 2020 • Text by Julia Meyer-Brehm

Are we all accomplices in our consumer culture? Jonathan Monaghan's work is motivated by the ecological consequences of our consumer behavior and social dependence on technology. In addition to critical reflection, his works also offer a lot of pomp, fluff and extravagance.



Jonathan Monaghan: Still from “Den of Wolves”, 2018, video (color, sound), media player, projector. Courtesy of bitforms gallery, New York.

For those who like to lose themselves in artistic utopias, the works of Jonathan Monaghan are warmly recommended. Decadent, fluffy sofa cushions glitter in empty rooms, pastel-colored machines bob up and down organically. Oh, a unicorn! Monaghan combines traditional myths with elements from science fiction, surveillance systems and materialistic culture. And so something in his colorful fantasy world always seems lurking and threatening. The artist spoke to gallerytalk.net about this ambivalence, about advertising aesthetics and his new mythologies.

gallerytalk.net: Are we currently living in times like Marie Antoinette - including inequality, consumption and decadence?

Jonathan Monaghan: I created my first works during the global financial crisis 2007-2008. There was this fear in the air, this uncertainty about the future, when the foundations of our capitalist and consumerist society were exposed as

dangerously unstable. The years after the crisis were also shaped by the widening income gap. All of these influences still permeate my work today.



Jonathan Monaghan: "Sentries", 2019, custom wall decals. Installation view from Anna Nova Gallery, St. Petersburg.

Should we feel guilty about this?

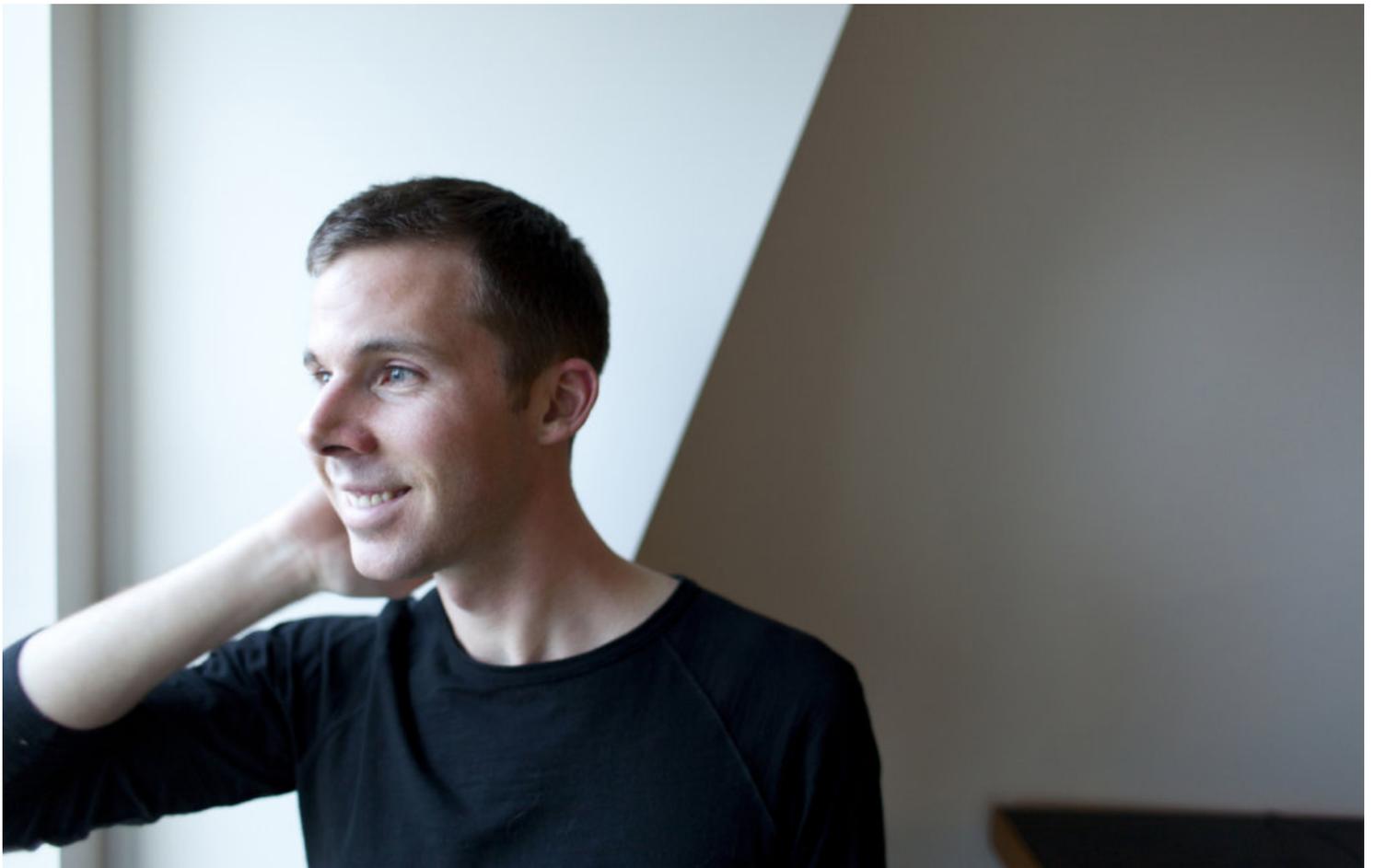
All of this is beyond the control of any one person, but yes, people feel guilty about it. You could see my work as therapy for an uncertain future. Similar to a dream, the symbolism of my work embodies all of our fears and fears.

We all grew up with science fiction films and video game aesthetics. Which ones have particularly shaped you?

I've even gone so far as to include elements from Nintendo games in my videos, for example in "Sacrifice of the Mushroom Kings" from 2012.

If you could create the set or the costumes for a sci-fi movie, what would the finished film be called?

It is actually a dream of mine to be able to stage something artistically on a really big budget. Maybe a film about the future where technology has a life of its own. I have no idea what it would be called then, I've never been good with titles!



Jonathan Monaghan.

The worlds you create are "dehumanized". People like you and me are nowhere to be seen - utopia or dystopia?

Our increasing reliance on technology brings a certain alienation and isolation with it. A world in which life is lived more and more on digital screens. With my

animations I show a world in which the human no longer exists, but in which our technology and our consumer culture continue to flourish and lead a life of their own.

An appeal to the viewer?

I ask the viewer to think about what the future might look like if we continue on our current path of digital addiction. My worlds are not typical post-apocalyptic landscapes with destroyed cities or huge deserts. Instead, products are exhibited in my vision, everything is very physical and yet sterile, which creates an ironic dissonance between the fantastic and the banal.



Jonathan Monaghan: "Out of the Abyss", exhibition view. 2018, video (color, sound), media player, projectors. Courtesy of bitforms gallery, New York.

You often use modified company logos or brand names. Have you ever had problems because of that?

In the tradition of American pop art artists who have critically reflected on pop

culture, yes. I create worlds that are dream-like, but at the same time use company logos and consumer goods that are incredibly familiar to us. Logos are powerful symbols that are so ubiquitous in our lives that artists must be allowed to deal with them. So they are an important aspect of these new mythologies that I create in my video installations. There are many legal precedents protecting this artistic freedom.

This new mythology you are talking about, how is it different from our traditional mythology?

We know from the study of comparative mythology that similar themes and symbols exist over time and across different cultures. They are deeply rooted in the human psyche and I try to tap into this with my video installations. So the mythologies that I create are very similar to traditional mythological stories, but show images that come from the present.



Jonathan Monaghan: Still from "Disco Beast", 2016, video (color, sound), media player, projector. Courtesy of bitforms gallery, New York.

Like in your work “Disco Beast”?

“Disco Beast” is a video installation from 2016 in which a psychedelic unicorn wanders through a series of desolate business premises, through an empty shopping center and a luxury hotel lobby. The work relates both to the medieval iconography of a unicorn in captivity and to its appearance in popular culture. So I am building a new mythology of modern imprisonment through technology and materialism.

Your art can be consumed on the internet as well as viewed analogously in galleries. What do you prefer?

It is essential to experience works of art together with other people. Exhibitions also often have an important community aspect. That's why I think it's better if my work can be experienced in physical space, i.e. in a gallery, a museum or another public place.

You recently created a work for The Infinite Playa, a virtual Burning Man universe, in cooperation with Meow Wolf .

Yes, although the work is only available online, you can experience it with others in multiplayer. It was created in the context of a community, so it's very interesting for me.



Meow Wolf Collaboration. Virtual space. Courtesy of the artist.

Have you ever been to Burning Man yourself?

No never. The virtual version is certainly less sandy and easier to get to! It was a unique collaboration, the whole Infinite Playa is a really huge undertaking. The whole thing was a huge experiment and shows the great mindset of Meow Wolf and the people who develop The Infinite Playa!

Is there a dream collaboration that you would like to realize in the future?

I've been working on some music videos lately and I would love to continue that. Many musicians have great difficulties due to Corona. Creating low-production videos, just animated, is a great way to help each other right now. Maybe that could lead to working with some of the many performers I admire, like Lady Gaga or FKA Twigs. One can still dream!

WHEN: Jonathan Monaghan's work "Disco Beast _" can be seen in the exhibition "#cute" from Friday, October 9th . The exhibition runs until January 10, 2021.

WHERE: NRW-Forum, Ehrenhof 2, 40479 Düsseldorf.