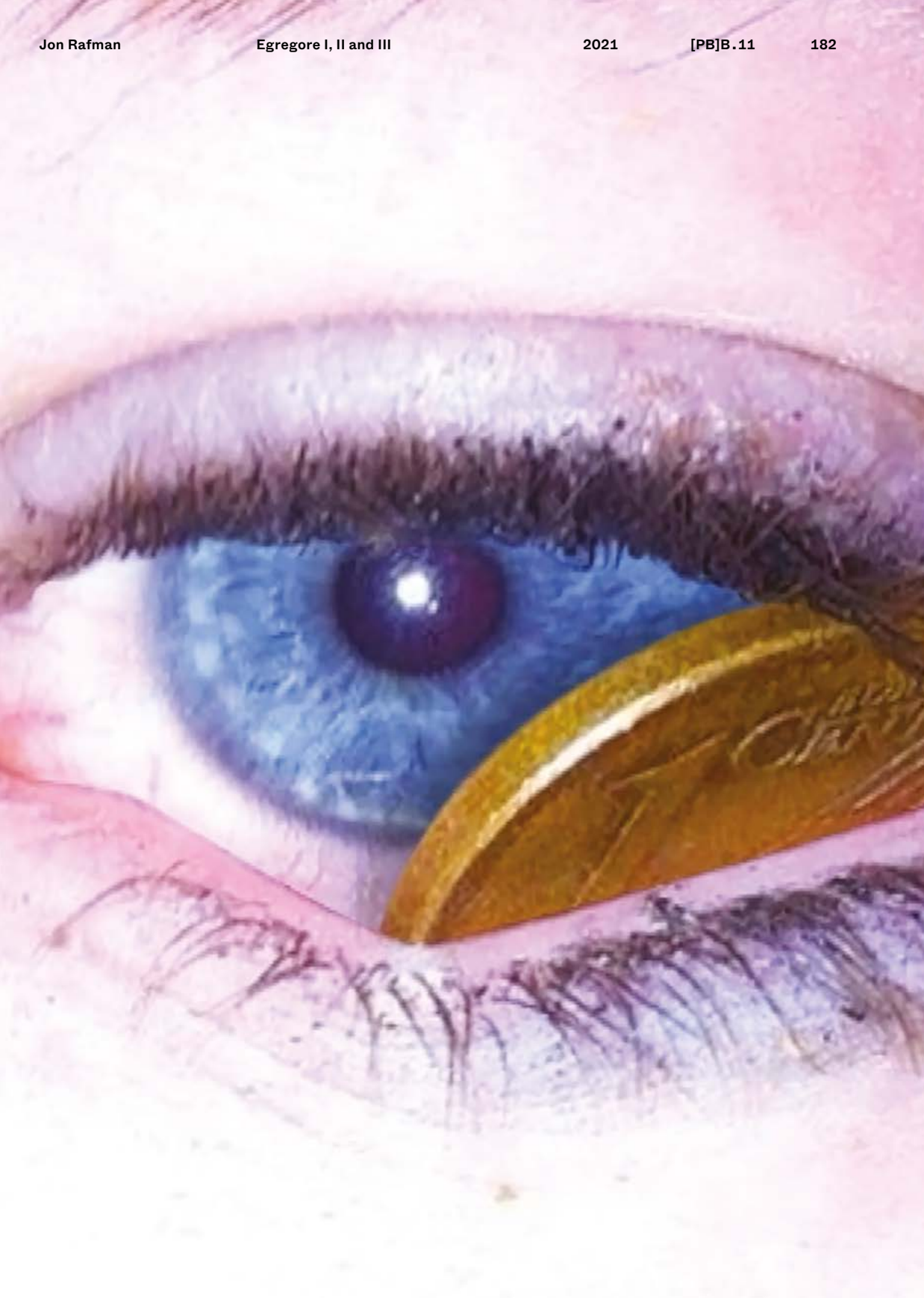




[PB]B.11 JON RAFMAN EGREGORE I, II AND III 2021



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SUMMONING THE CURSED IMAGE: JON RAFMAN'S EGREGORE

Marco De Mutiis

Jon Rafman's video-triptych *Egregore I, II and III* features a collection of photographs that the artist has found online, then carefully manipulated and animated with digital tools. Through micromovements and visual transformations accompanied by high-pitched squeaking or excruciatingly slow noises, the original images are distorted into disturbing scenes of surreal mundane discomfort: we encounter a fish with a set of teeth being flossed, a seahorse carrying a cotton swab underwater and a furless, disassembled Furby toy. These eerie and unsettling images, appropriated from the internet and animated by the artist, form the visual substrate of the collective unconscious of the web and its users – a world that Rafman famously and masterfully summons throughout his body of work, excavating and investigating the deeper layers of internet users' anxieties and desires.

Many of these images belong to an aesthetic that has been labelled 'cursed', following an anonymous Tumblr blog launched in 2015 titled 'cursedimages'. The site would post photographs primarily sourced from Flickr, often taken in low resolution with cheap digital point-and-shoot cameras from the early 2000s. Cursed images are perhaps best defined as providing an uncanny aura, along with the sense that something is not quite right – provoking feelings of slight unease in the viewers and leaving them to question the reason the image exists in the first place. In some of these pictures, different subjects appear involved in mysterious activities;

others show awkward or jarring juxtapositions of mundane objects in unthinkable contexts, including displaced and masked human bodies, unfortunate perspectives, digital glitches and optical errors. On the Tumblr site, the images are usually accompanied by a caption that numbered the cursed image – as if they were selected files from a detailed archive that someone had professionally compiled.

Cursed images form a unique kind of digital photograph, which merges the indexical quality of the photographic medium with the properties of networked images. Perhaps the last digital photographs before smartphone photography and social media would turn images into a tool through which we carefully perform our lives, their poor resolution has come to represent a feeling of authenticity and a faithful record of lived events. The ‘cursed energy’ of such images relies on this balancing act between the factual yet often confusing reality of what they depict and the networked conditions in which they are rooted: they point to real places and real people who have existed, but become authorless legends and myths by being severed from their source and original context – enhancing their unsettling force as they become even more surreal, incongruous and disturbing. Unlike the pleasures induced by the monstrous creatures and psychological thrills of horror movies, the anticipation inherent in these still images is never released by the unfolding of a scene, but it expands and evolves in the viewer’s imagination. It is this force Rafman taps into, pushing the sense of discomfort and stretching the properties of the image to attract and repel, leaving us glued to a disturbing reality we are hopelessly trying to escape.

The term ‘egregore’ that Rafman has chosen as the title of his work originates in occultism and refers to a thought-form that arises from the collective thoughts, emotions and intentions of a group of people. In esoteric traditions, an egregore represents a shared spiritual entity, embodying the collective psyche of the group, shaped by the desires, beliefs and actions of its members. Carl Jung’s concept of ‘collective unconscious’¹ resonates with Rafman’s series – the sense of a shared unconscious, energy or emotion that emerges from the collective experiences that are nowadays significantly shaped by the internet. These collective phenomena are more than just the sum of individual minds; they take on an independent force and shape. An egregore not only reflects the psychological and emotional currents of the group, but also develops its own belief systems and is attributed with magical or supernatural qualities. The images and symbols associated with it can transcend their original, physical contexts and acquire a life of their own, becoming more than representations – they become realities in themselves, evolving into fully realised egregores.

The spiritual and magical properties of the image are increasingly tied to the algorithmic nature of contemporary digital media. Recent advances in image technologies have

introduced a growing opacity in how these images are created and circulated, with the internal workings of their mechanisms often concealed from view. Bruno Latour’s concept of ‘blackboxing’² captures this phenomenon, where the complexity of a system’s operation is obscured, rendered opaque and hidden. The inner workings of social media algorithms or the processes behind machine learning in generative AI systems have become inscrutable to the users, who rely on them yet do not get to see what happens between the inputs and outputs of these systems. In this context, new forms of techno-spiritual rituals have emerged, with people ‘praying to the algorithm gods’, hoping that their content will be seen, shared or go viral on platforms like Instagram and TikTok. These practices reflect a blend of technological reliance and mystical belief, where users, driven by a faith in the invisible forces of algorithms to prioritise and hierarchically organise content online, engage in techno-spiritual behaviours like curating posts, using specific hashtags and sounds, timing uploads and employing engagement tactics. This is what Valentina Tanni refers to in *The Great Algorithm*, highlighting the algorithmic processes behind internet technologies as ‘the new decision makers [and] indisputable rulers of web visibility’.³ Algorithmic systems, with their hidden logics and unpredictable outcomes, have become akin to modern deities in the digital age, guiding the flow of attention, influence and cultural capital.

This shift toward techno-spiritual practices also connects with a deeper, more occult understanding of how images and data interact within the digital sphere. In the case of AI, for instance, curator Domenico Quaranta has written that the datasets that power machine learning models could be considered a type of egregore in themselves.⁴ These datasets – massive collections of images, text, and other forms of data produced and labelled through human labour – are the collective ‘thought-forms’ that AI draws upon, absorbing and amplifying the biases, desires and intentions embedded within them. Just as an egregore is shaped by the beliefs and actions of a group, so too these datasets encapsulate the collective knowledge, fears and fantasies of vast swathes of humanity. They are the modern ‘grimoire’, a book of spells written not by sorcerers, but by the countless individuals contributing personal data to the machine – with or without their consent. Just like Rafman’s creatures, screeching and slowly moving across the screen, the image unconscious buried in AI datasets might surface on the screen, summoned through mysterious text prompts. This is the case of digital cryptids like Crungus and Loab, strange and eerie figures that emerged through initial random AI prompts, which gave rise to consistent visual anomalies that looked like monstrous and undead beings. The text prompt used in generative AI platforms here becomes a spell to perform a digital exorcism to expel the creatures haunting the collective unconscious. Their existence embodies the unsettling qualities

of digital technologies: the dark, uncharted corners of machine learning where imagination and data intersect, existing in a space where the boundaries between human unconscious and machine agency blur.

By manipulating images appropriated from the internet through digital and AI tools, Rafman creates mythical creatures of digital folklore that are a by-product of intertwined human feelings and digital systems: desire and machine code, fear and algorithmic processes, disgust and binary logics. In front of this space of occult algorithms, networked curses and man-machine unconscious, the viewer is confronted with a new type of digital hauntology – one where images become not just representations of the real but active participants in shaping and distorting reality. These images, born from collective cultural anxieties and digital processes, are no longer static or passive but embody an eerie, autonomous force that transcends their origin. They function as digital egregores, imbued with the collective psyche of the internet age, manifesting as both reflections and agents of the deep, often disturbing currents of modern culture. In this space, we are forced to confront not only the power of the image but the power of the unseen forces that shape it – a new form of digital image magic where the boundaries between creation, meaning and influence are blurred beyond recognition.

[1] Carl Gustav Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, trans. R.F.C. Hull, 2nd ed., vol. 9, pt. 1 of *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

[2] Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

[3] Valentina Tanni, *The Great Algorithm* (Ljubljana: Aksioma, Institute for Contemporary Art, 2022), 8.

[4] Domenico Quaranta, 'Jon Rafman e le egregore del nostro tempo', *Il Giornale Dell'Arte*, 21 February 2022, <https://www.ilgiornaledellarte.com/Mostre/jon-rafman-e-le-egregore-del-nostro-tempo> (accessed 31 January 2025).

