

April 17, 2017 - Rafaël Rozendaal is a Dutch-Brazilian visual artist who "uses the internet as his canvas." His websites attract an audience of 60 million unique visits per year. He's best known for these websites, but also creates drawings, installations, tapestries, haiku, lectures on a variety of subjects, and collaborates on a podcast. He's one of the first visual artists to sell websites as art objects.



As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2887 words.

Tags: Art, Process, Inspiration, Production, Beginnings.

Rafaël Rozendaal on streamlining your process

Is it complicated using a computer in your day-to-day since it's also how you make art?

It's funny, the computer is my tool, but also the exhibition place, the shopping mall, and it's also the place where you do your taxes. So it's kind of a private public space. It's confusing. But I'm not very inspired by things I see online. The things that trigger ideas are outside the computer.

When I'm on the computer, I'm actually more distracted by: "Oh, let's see if there's a new song by this person, or movie, or clip." I installed all kinds of blockers to block social media to use the computer as if there's no Internet. I work better that way.

There's this tool which might be helpful to the readers. It's a Chrome Extension called StayFocusd. If you use social media for more than a certain amount of time it says, "Shouldn't you be working?" I use that. I'll cheat every now and then. In the afternoon, I'll finish a lot of tasks then I'll do some browsing.

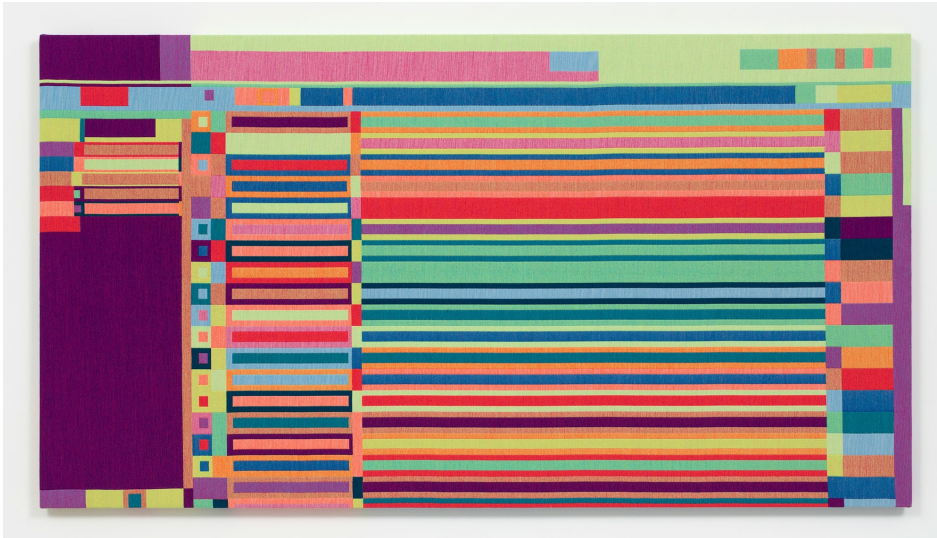
I also turn the browsing into a tool to make compositions. I made this plugin called Abstract Browsing. You can browse the web and then you click on a button in Chrome and it converts it into all of these rectangles. Then it takes the composition of each site. So I'll go through my browsing history everyday and look at compositions and then keep the best ones of that month. Then when I have an exhibition they're woven as actual textiles. Before it was more like I was fighting it, but now I'm just letting it in and filtering it through my own algorithm to make work out of it.

The computer is your exhibition space, but you find your material outside of it for the most part.

I don't use the computer as a subject; it's the exhibition space. For most of my work, the subject is either movement or an observation, but not as much as some of my peers who make work about online culture or about looking at Facebook.

The computer is the tool. From when I was a kid, I was interested in moving images. When I was 10 years old, we had a video camera and I would make stop-motion films with Legos. Then I saw the Internet, and bandwidth was very slow, so I thought I could make moving images. But I had to make them so they fit on the network, so it was in a visual language that was practical. When you reduce things, the loading time is much lower.

My interest in the Internet is the freedom to do whatever I want. To me it's unique. Throughout cultural history there's always been someone asking the maker, "Are you sure?" Whether it's a publisher, or a curator, or a gallerist, or an editor. There's always someone like, "Yeah that's great." With the Internet, for good or bad, you do whatever you do without thinking, and you publish immediately.



Abstract Browsing, Rafaël Rozendaal, 2015

Early on, I was attracted to that and very hopeful. I'm not so hopeful about it anymore. I don't know if it's a good idea. But to me, as an artist, there's something about it... If I want to make a farting website, and the next website has clouds, and the next website is abstract, and the one after that has a dog, no one is like, "What do those have to do with each other? Why are you putting them together?"

Though, when I do exhibitions it's more collaborative because you're speaking to the gallerist and it's more thought out. The internet for me is a waterfall. It's my waterfall where I just keep adding stuff without thinking too much. And the exhibitions are more like aquariums, more composed and more still.

A lot of people find limits useful when creating work. You're using something that's basically limitless. Is that ever a hindrance?

If I speak only about my websites, the limits are that I choose to make works that are built out of lines and out of shapes, because the computer can render the different sizes and different ratios. That's the first limitation. Then I choose a limited color palette, one that works on any monitor. For example, I have a website called hotdoom.com. It's a volcano. But it's not a filmed volcano or a drawing of it; it's built out of code. So I use flickering and other things that the computer can do well to create sort of the intensity of a volcano without just filming it.

I think the limitations are finding out what the computer can do well. The computer is maybe limitless in the sense that you can do CGI, but I try to use the computer in a very basic way.

You write haiku, a stripped-down and specific form. Do you see the haiku and your websites as being related?

I think so. It's a bit complicated even for myself to figure out how they relate to each other and which one I should focus on. Not so much in the making, but more in the exhibiting. You're like, "Should I show this or should I show that?"

I enjoy limitations. For some reason that helps when you make stuff. I don't know if there are artists who just make completely different work every time, but I like working in a series. I like digging deep in a certain area. So you're like, "Okay, with my abstract websites a lot of them are about how do you divide a screen into different areas. So it might be rectangles. It might be circles bouncing into each other. It might be curves. You just keep thinking, "Oh I tried that. How can I flip it and respond to it?" Always in the dialogue with the previous work.



Into Time, Rafaël Rozendaal

What were some useful resources for you in learning how to do what you do?

I went to art school so I was always a visual person. My parents are artists. I tried all kinds of materials. I tried painting, drawing, photography, developing the photos in the dark room, filming, cutting out of stone, everything. I really enjoyed trying everything. But then as soon as I started making computer images—and by that I mean not stills, but images built out of code that have a randomness aspect—I thought I was onto something because that wasn't possible before the computer.

It was very interesting in the sense of freedom. Freedom, not in the sense of not having someone telling you what to do, but in the sense of very little history. That's what interested me. I made a website with a roll of toilet paper that you can unroll, a very abstract website. You're like, "Oh nobody did that before." But a lot of people painted a picture of a roll of toilet paper.

Also, the computer is the cheapest and the most accessible material in a sense. Well, except for the way I use it. I work with a coder. We work together. So the way I use it is a bit more complicated. You need some resources. It's not completely punk. Still, most people, growing up have a computer in their house. It's not like you have to go and buy paint. Even if you don't have the space, you can open up MS Paint and start making stuff.

You don't need a studio to do your work.

The only reason I would need a studio is to impress people. It's a bit embarrassing to work in your living room. It's not so baller. But then, it's hard to justify spending two, three thousand a month to impress people.

I was listening to your podcast with Jeremy Bailey. There's one about McDonald's and the idea of McDonald's aiming for efficiency, and focusing on hamburgers because 80% of the people who come in buy hamburgers. That kind of streamlining reminded me of your work.

It's funny. It's almost gotten too efficient. It's a problem for me because making it is almost like just hitting one button. As soon as I have the idea... it's very quick. I'll make the sketch. I'll talk to my programmer. Then it's done. There's no buying material. There's no publishing the website. Everything's set up.

There were a lot of growing pains like moving servers and getting more traffic and all that stuff. When I started to work with textiles I spent about a month setting everything up, and trying all the materials, but once that was defined, now even that's just the click of a button. I'll go through my browsing history and then I'm like, "Oh. That looks interesting." Then the work is done.

The efficiency part is interesting. Someone said that the difficult thing about poetry is knowing what to do with the other 23 hours of the day. Because there's really no sweat. It's just inspiration. When you paint you have this ritual of vacuuming the studio, and sanding, and grinding and gesso and all that stuff. I think the word writer's block is specifically because there's no labor part to writing. It's just writing. There's no material you have to prepare. So writers have all these weird rituals of like walking around the table five times or whatever.

I have this one haiku: "never working, never not working." That's really how it feels. The work part

doesn't feel like labor.

I'm obsessed with efficiency. Even with my emails I have all these standard replies so I can do my inbox in seven minutes. The efficiency is also the subject of the work.

I'm obsessed with efficiency and getting rid of stuff, but at the same time I make a lot of work. Which is very contradictory. They're like two opposing magnets.



Abstract Browsing, Rafaël Rozendaal, 2016

How do you decide if something is a success or a failure?

I'm not too critical of my own work. I try to not to think about whether work is good or bad. That's the Platonic ideal. That's not where I am, of course. I'm still always torturing myself. "Oh, is this good or bad?" But I figured yelling at yourself, "You have to be better!" doesn't work because you have a certain brain and certain capabilities and the more you scream at yourself, the more shy you become. Like, "I'm an idiot." "This work is lame." "It looks like everybody else." When you relax and just make stuff, it's a better attitude. That's what I like about the Internet. I'll just do whatever.

When it comes to making a book or an exhibition, then I'll often listen to other people and decide what fits or what would be a good move or what would be the best group of works. It gets confusing because I think as a human you always want to ask a question and find a simple answer. I think art is always moving away from that. Which is very counter... not counter productive, but it's very against what you're taught. You're always taught to look for solutions and then you're like, "No." You just have to completely look around and not think too much. It's hard not to think too much, but it's important.

Do you have any rituals you do to get into your mode of working?

Running in the morning sometimes helps. It helps my emotional state. I'm happier when I run.

With the websites, I specifically remember every time I had the idea for them. Especially with the first half of the group of works that were more figurative. Like, "I was making popcorn then I came up with the idea to make popcorn." I wrote down a list with all the moments that I came up with these ideas. "Sitting in a train." "I was in between a few bands and I was bored." I read all these, and I just didn't see any pattern. I thought, "Okay, if there's a pattern, if I got to the forest I'll get a good idea." But it doesn't work that way for me. I'll go to Central Park or a forest and be like, "Okay now I want the idea to happen." It doesn't happen.

You just have to wait for inspiration to strike.

The only thing that works is being bored, but I can't really force that. The perfect moment is when you're on a train and your battery runs out. The only thing you can do to entertain yourself is come up with ideas. I think the Rolling Stones were a cover band first and then their manager put them in a room without anything and was like, "I'm not letting you out until you have a song." I think that's the best thing, but that doesn't always work either. Sometimes it's like, okay, you have to hang out with your family.

I sometimes see [finding inspiration] as a bow and arrow. If you stretch it too far it'll snap. If you don't stretch it at all the arrow won't go very far. To me it's like torturing yourself finding the idea.

Finding it, finding it, finding it. You're not finding it, but you're already in the mode. You're very aware. You're searching. Then you go out. You go to the beach, or you go shopping, or you do something that's completely not working, and that's like letting go of the bow. If you're in your room torturing yourself for too long nothing happens. So you have to torture yourself for maybe two hours and then go out. Then you're on the train you're like, "Oh yeah! Of course." That often helps—the contrast between concentration and then distraction. So that might be a method.



Everything Dies, Rafaël Rozendaal, 2012

But I've never seen rituals by other artists that help me. What really helps me is to see other artists say things like, "Yeah I had some money so I got a big studio and that helped me to think bigger." Those kind of practical things... "Well, I had to move to another country cause my home country was too constrained." And you're like, "Oh, yeah, it's possible." The actual, "How'd you come up with painting the soup can?" is less interesting. "I don't know. I was at the supermarket and I saw the soup can."

Speaking of Warhol, it would make sense for you to merchandise your work, but you haven't gotten into merchandising.

Here's the thing. I really hate stuff. That's what I always liked about digital. I have a Kindle and I just read on that. If I want to see artist images I'll go on Google. Keep it simple. It allows for so much more. I can focus on what I want.

All my websites together have about 60,000,000 viewers a year, which is very hard to reach with physical work. You're right, it would make sense then to move to consumer priced physical goods. For a while I made t-shirts with a friend and for a while I did some posters. Cause I thought, it's more noble to sell things for \$15 than for \$15,000. I still believe people who can afford something that's \$15,000, there's probably going to be something a little fishy about that.

I noticed that as soon as you move to a consumer model, you're busy with a lot of things that are not making art. The reason that I minimize my life is that I can just constantly be drawing. If I have a lot of books I have to get a bigger apartment. I have higher rent. I have to compromise my work. I have a lot of furniture and I have a bigger house, then I'm taking care of a lot of stuff. The less stuff I have the less I take care of stuff.

The consumer model adds a lot of crap to your life, basically. I just hate stuff. I don't want to make shower curtains. I don't have a studio. Everything's at the gallery. Most of the stuff gets sold. I don't have to hold onto anything.

It's funny, I had a t-shirt line. They weren't images of my websites. It was a separate thing. We were bad at going to stores and saying, "Hey, do you guys want these t-shirts?" We got stressed out about shipping and you have all these large shirts left over and all the small shirts are sold out. It's not what you want to think about. For me, it's better if the work I'm selling is either free or it's expensive. The in-between is a lot of work.

Rafaël Rozendaal recommends:

5 favorite Japanese restaurants in New York

Kura
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Ootoya
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Izakaya
.....
Goemon
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Kajitsu
.....

5 great artists

Yayoi Kusama
.....
Fischli & Weiss
.....
Agnes Martin
.....
Jannis Kounellis
.....
Peter Halley
.....

Name

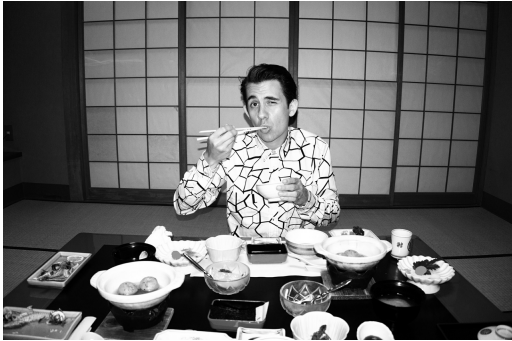
Rafaël Rozendaal

Vocation

Artist

Fact

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