

# Always on *Screen*

Playing with the connection between people and technology, artist RAFAËL ROZENDAAL's web works address the issue of ownership.



# RAFAËL



**RAFAËL ROZENDAAL WAS** born in the Netherlands to a Dutch father and a Brazilian mother. He studied art in The Hague and Maastricht and completed his first website work in 1999. After graduating, he began travelling while still working on web art, as 'it meant I didn't need to be tied to a studio'. Graphic and deceptively simple, his works seem to ponder our relationship with technology by playing with expectations of interactivity and online functionality. Rozendaal has invented a model in which the collector who buys a website signs a contract to keep it publicly accessible. 'Other artists make websites,' he says, 'but my focus is almost exclusively on websites.' Rozendaal currently lives in New York City.

**Which came first for you: art or the internet?**

Definitely art. My parents were artists, and as a kid I was constantly drawing. I was always interested in reproducible media – stickers, comic books and that sort of thing – because basically I like things to spread. I'm also drawn to reduction. 'Reproducible' means you have to simplify.

**Why did you gravitate towards technology?**

Mainly because it was a new area, so it was easier to do something fresh. Before that I'd tried all sorts of things. Moving images seemed to work best for me, so I stuck with that. When I did my first website I had to reduce my work even more, and I was struck by a sense of freedom – the freedom of a lack of history, and the freedom of distribution.

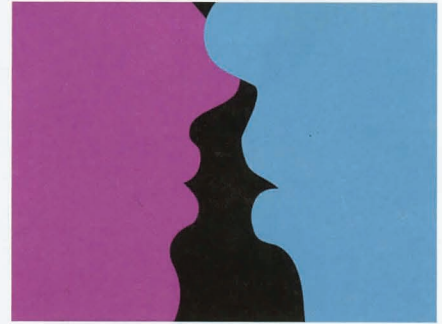
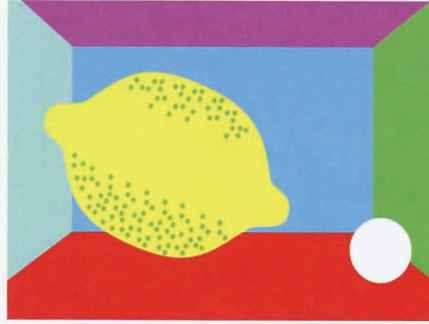
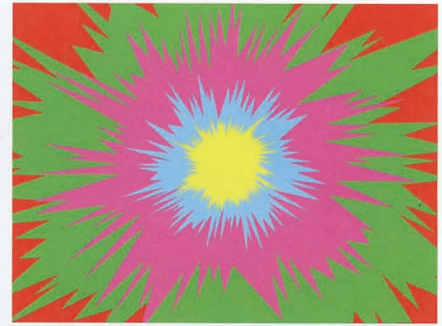
**How do you make these works?** They usually start off as hand drawings. I draw rectangles and sketch out ideas in those frames. I can't sketch on a phone or an iPad. It's quicker by hand, and some things are just harder to draw digitally.

When I decide to develop a sketch, I contact my programmer; I've worked with the same one since 2001. It would have taken me three years to learn what he can do in ten minutes. So I make a few frames, maybe a rough animation, and we Skype. He makes a prototype in JavaScript, and I can change the variables to create a different effect. That's the nice thing about programming.

**What's the best thing about the website as a medium?** Well, the resolution is independent – it's just instructions – which means it can be seen anywhere at any scale. In a way, it's an indestructible medium. It exists in multitudes. And it can always be changed. I usually don't alter my works, but I like the idea that they *can* be manipulated. It feels free and that's unique – this kind of freedom didn't exist before.

The web is important to me as a free space and a public studio. No-one is looking over my shoulder, asking me if I'm sure about what I'm doing – the type of response you'd get from a curator. I wouldn't be comfortable working with someone else's interference. »

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*Much Better Than This* appeared on electronic billboards in New York's Times Square in 2015. Other web works (above) also incorporate moving imagery.





Rozendaal curated Sleep Mode: The Art of the Screensaver, an exhibition at Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam that playfully explores the somewhat redundant medium.

**Why is it so important to make sure that your art stays publicly accessible?** At art school I couldn't find any examples of interactive art – it's so marginal. I believe in the value of passing on knowledge. Think about the online presence of David Bowie versus that of David Hockney. Visual art is hard to experience online as it's mostly *documentation* of the work, not the work itself. With music, on the other hand, you can listen to the actual songs. I like to see the full story of an artist, but very few get their own museum. I'm building my own lifetime museum together with the collectors. For them it's strange not to own something outright, but there's a joy in sharing.

I've made around 110 websites. Collectively, they get 50 million visitors a year, many more than any private work can achieve. For me, digital media is always about accessibility. Sure, music from an MP3 sounds worse than what's on vinyl, but you can listen to it anywhere. That said, my work is always uncompressed. I make it with the network in mind; it's not the same process as reducing music to an MP3.

**What do you explore with your work?**

I'm against the idea that my work is *about* something. If anything, the internet is about unimportant thoughts. Painters deal with curators, writers with editors. On the internet, there's no-one; it's more a stream of consciousness. I'm interested in certain themes, like interactivity, infinity and composition.

**'The web is important to me as a free space and a public studio'**

**How important is interactivity in what you do?** Very. With technology, interactivity is always goal driven. You click to send something, go somewhere, buy something. I'm interested in interactivity for its own sake. I want to make people conscious of clicking.

**How has the development of technology affected your work?** The web was very limited in the beginning. Up until 2008, it kept getting better and better, more and more sophisticated. When mobile phones emerged, I wanted to reduce my art even more. It

became simpler, because of the small screen, but also slower, with even less of a 'point'.

I'm not interested in virtual reality or anything like that. I like technology that's available to everybody.

**Is it difficult to exhibit website art in galleries?** It's not easy, but the economics involved are the real challenge. With paintings and other works, the big issues are transport and security. For websites you need, say, 50 projectors and 50 computers, equipment that requires a sizable base budget – but the rest is quite simple.

**With the rapid advance of technology, could your work become obsolete?** It's actually a very practical medium, because with the passage of time you can recode. Displays are getting very cheap, so it's easier every year. My works are just instructions, remember? We're used to works of art deteriorating over time, but mine are the opposite. They will only get crisper, brighter, sharper.

**And your work appears everywhere, from phones to giant screens in major cities.** I see it as being similar to a song you might hear at a party and then while alone. All the experiences are complementary, and together they *are* the work. A website should be like gas – able to adapt to fill any space.

**You've branched out into other areas – podcasts and haikus among them. Will you continue to work with websites?** Yes, but also with other media. I find I have lots of time left over every day. And I love coming up with things that didn't exist before. ●

Sleep Mode: The Art of the Screensaver is on show at Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam until 20 August 2017  
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