



Bassam Al-Sabah, *Dissolving beyond the worm moon*
Introductory text by Claire Walsh

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Legacy Russell's 2017 [video lecture on Glitch Feminism](#) begins with a series of pixelated quotes about the body by James Baldwin and Anaïs Duplan, with musical snippets from Frank Ocean's *Pink + White* and Mhysa's *Tonight* playing in the background:

"...it doesn't matter. it is only the body. [and] it will soon be over."¹

“I’m not opaque. I’m so relevant I’m disappearing”²

"When we are all stardust, we will say the media distorts the public's perception of cosmic bodies."³

True to the topic, her presentation is marked by fuzzy screenshots, scratchy audio feeds and buffering symbols (the dreaded twirling rainbow). In the video, Russell, a New York-based curator, outlines the inner workings of Glitch Feminism. The concept focuses on the flaws and potentials of the digital realm in relation to marginalised and non-confirming bodies.⁴ In Russell's understanding, the glitch represents an error in the system but also a refusal filled with potential for creating other ways of being in the world.

These ideas emerge in relation to the legacies of cyberfeminism and cyborg theory of the 1980s and 1990s, in which the digital realm was posited as a space of possibility for enacting the feminist aspirations of the era.⁵ While acknowledging a line of trajectory with this work, Russell expands on the limited white cis het context of early cyberfeminism, locating the foundations of her work instead within Black feminist and Queer traditions. Like its predecessors, Glitch Feminism recognises the digital as a means of world-building and the

¹ James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room: A Novel*, New York: Dial Press, 1956, pp. 88.

² Anaïs Duplan, *On a Scale of 1-10, How “Loving” Do You Feel?*, Hyperallergic, 2015.

³ Ibid.

⁴ See <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/legacy-russell-glitch-feminism-a-manifesto-1910221>

⁵ Major touchstones of cyberfeminism and cyborg theory from this era include Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) and Sadie Plant's *Zeros + ones : digital women + the new technoculture* (1997).

body as a highly politicised and constructed site.⁶ She questions whether a glitch in our already messed up world – “disturbed by economic, racial, social, sexual and cultural stratification” - even counts as an error. Could it be read instead, she asks, as “a correction to the machine?”⁷

Russell’s lecture gives viewers an insight into the possibilities located in the glitch between the body, gender, and technology. After a showcase of works by Mark Aghuar, Shawné Michaelain Holloway and others, she signs off the presentation with a simple request of her viewers, “Get glitched, become your avatars and stay cosmic.”⁸

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The glitch can reveal how things work as much as how they don’t. A recurring presence in Bassam Al-Sabah’s practice is the character of Grendizer, who makes an appearance here in *Dissolving beyond the worm moon* (2019, HD CGI film). The artist uses the figure of this anime robot fighter, the victorious hero of his childhood, to explore the ways in which highly templated, and often problematic, identities are marketed at kids. Popular in the Arab world in the 1980s and 1990s, Grendizer was one of several Japanese anime TV shows that were imported and dubbed over in generic Arabic, making them suitable for widespread distribution in the region. Its narratives of war and heroic resistance to invaders had the hyper-masculinised hero Grendizer at its centre. Al-Sabah has repeatedly recast the robot warrior within his work, each time softening his edges and exposing the malfunctions of his macho-ness. In *Dissolving beyond the worm moon*, Grendizer’s metallic body buckles and stumbles in the grip of what looks like a string of intestines. In an earlier life-size sculptural work, Grendizer appears as a hand-stitched figure slumped on the floor.⁹

The comparison between CGI Grendizer and his IRL handmade counterpart underlines the potential for readings of glitchy-ness in the work. Al-Sabah deliberately plays the slickness of his screen-based works off against visibly handsewn textiles, thumbed ceramic pots and other ‘less-than-perfect’ objects. In an interview about his most recent video piece, *I AM ERROR*, he admits “I like the idea of going to 95 per cent real, but then pulling back on like the last 5 per cent, where you see some of the kind of strange effects that happen when things go wrong in that software”.¹⁰

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⁶ As writer Pauline Nguyen points out, Russell’s concept is centred on the idea that all technology, created under the conditions of neoliberal capitalism, white supremacy and heteropatriarchy, is inherently political. See Pauline Nguyen, Glitch Feminism by Legacy Russell, *Femme Art Review*, 2021, <https://femmeartrview.com/2021/10/25/glitch-feminism-legacy-russell/>

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B4bnvzwQy1E>

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ This work was presented in a solo exhibition of Al-Sabah’s work titled *Illusions of Love Dyed by Sunset* at the LAB Gallery, Dublin, 2018.

¹⁰ How Iraqi-Irish artist Bassam Al-Sabah uses CGI to bring video game scenarios to life, Melissa Gronlund, The National UAE – Arts & Culture, 3 August, 2021

The opening scene of *Dissolving beyond the worm moon* is all bubbling oil, flesh and a shock of hair. The body of Al-Sabah's protagonist emerges, then floats, sinks, and dissolves back into the oozy abyss from whence he came. The characters in the video's seven segments each meet their end by losing their edges in one way or another. By turn, they are shattered, overgrown by grasses, defeated in combat or, as in the final scene, divided to death. But they reappear again and again. The camera floats and pans as though attached to a drone. Intermittent bombing is heard on the soundtrack, alongside muffled voices speaking Arabic and the unmistakable *zap! bam! kapow!* of cartoon fight scenes.

Childhood memories permeate Al-Sabah's practice: his family's exile from Baghdad in 2003 when he was nine and his entangled memories of watching TV and playing computer games while bombs dropped in the distance. How these sounds of real-life conflict - from the bombing of Iraq in 1998 to the outbreak of the Iraq war in 2003 - blended and merged with the sounds of cartoon wars, is an abiding memory for him. In the second scene of *Dissolving beyond the worm moon* we watch a young boy play-fighting his invisible opponents while TV sounds flash in the background. Eventually, just like the others, his skin gives way to secret forces that distort and consume his body.

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The lushness of the video's computer-generated trees, grasses, and flowers runs counter to recurring images of death and defeat. Against the backdrop of current conversations around the Anthropocene and its apocalyptic narratives, curator T.J. Demos wrote *Beyond the World's End*. The book's point of departure is a dethroning of the image of the unfolding climate catastrophe as *the end*, as a way to acknowledge the many worlds that have already ended through (ongoing) wars and genocide at the hands of colonial and imperial powers. Demos gives attention to how artists and collectives are using digital space both to articulate the aftermath of these ends and to test out speculative futures. He asks, "What of the many worlds that have already ended? Equally urgent, how do we represent the radical potentiality of the not-yet?".¹¹

Dissolving beyond the worm moon sits between Al-Sabah's earlier work which explored his personal memories of war and a more recent focus on queer possibility in the digital realm. The video combines the experience of trauma with future thinking and future testing. In the artist's own words, it "weaves a narrative from mental time travel, episodic future thinking (a projection of the self into the future to pre-experience an event) and PTSD".¹² This is a space in which historical trauma and queer futurity intersect, with the body forming a temporal loop between the no longer and the not-yet.

¹¹ T.J. Demos, *Beyond the World's End: Arts of Living at the Crossing*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2020, pp. 1.

¹² https://bassamalsabah.com/?page_id=447