"Electronic Superhighway (2016–1966)"
WHITECHAPEL GALLERY, LONDON
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The exhibition is divided into three sections, demarcating divergent paradigms. If there is any clear relationship between these portions of the show, it lies in their suggestion that technology has been flattening art since the 1960s. In the first section, the art of the present, ostensibly supported by an unprecedented range of sophisticated digital tools, seems nevertheless to be living a rather two-dimensional life, caught within the extreme flatness of digitized image screens. The second section stages the emergence of Net art in the '90s primarily as a relocation of the moving image onto the computer screen. The final chapter offers a panoramic exposure of works from the '90s, '80s, '70s, and '60s. Here, again, we mostly encounter a palette of images, in this case traditional artistic genres such as drawing and painting, serving both as representations of technology and as technologically constructed representations. But we also get glimpses of those fundamental reconfigurations of art that could have been at the heart of the show’s historical narration, mostly in the form of documentation of two pioneering instances of artistic engagement with technology: the 1966 founding of the group Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.) in New York, and the organization of the exhibition “Cybernetic Serendipity: The Computer and the Arts” at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London two years later. Rather than exploring art’s digitization as a history of shifting interfaces, however, the show’s curatorial framework deemphasizes such structural shifts, focusing instead on more strictly visual narratives that present technology as a tool for new forms of image production.

Most of the more than seventy works on display in the densely hung first-floor gallery were produced in this decade, and all of them are indiscriminately obliged to figure a heightened sense of contemporaneity. Differences between the works, from specific choices of media to contextual meaning, are suppressed so that they may be displayed as examples of a digitally expanded image culture, which makes them feel somewhat arbitrarily chosen. For example, Constant Dullaart’s series “Jennifer in Paradise,” 2013, represented here by a custom wallpaper and two lenticular prints from 2014, seems to simply surrender to digital technique, with the artist using standard Photoshop filters to serially disfigure the stock image of a woman sitting on a tropical beach that was included in early versions of the program for users to test their skills. Albert Oehlen’s large-scale ink-jet and oil painting Deathrockers, 2001, in contrast, presents painterly gestures fighting to maintain dominance of the canvas in the face of new technologies. But here both works end up looking similarly generic; when all forms are rendered as primarily technological, artistic authorship is not troubled but simply fades from view. This is clearly the case with the curators’ presentation of Amalia Ulman’s Excellences & Perfections, 2014. While the original work staged a carefully reproduced trail of Instagram posts that seemed to document the downfall and resurrection of a young female artist over the span of several months, visitors to the show see only two large-scale, painterly reproductions of Instagram posts, each showing the artist taking an exaggerated selfie. In this format, her work appears less a critique of the sexual mechanisms of online social exposure than a narcissistic repetition of them. Ryan Trecartin’s 2004 A Family Finds Entertainment, by contrast, appears as an almost historical work. Its celebration of the performative—even joyful—potential of the digitized human form stands in sharp relief against the disembodied visuality of the other works on this floor, where any resistance to the commodified standards of digitization is flattened, and bodies themselves are reduced to screens.

Curatorial intent continues to overpower artistic media in the exhibition’s second tranche, dedicated to Net art and assembled from the archives of Rhizome, the initiative founded by the artist Mark Tribe in 1996. The original versions of the ten works on display here set out
to interrogate assumptions about artistic media and authorship—many first existed as web pages and were explicitly interactive. But here, as Matthew Fuller has pointed out in his sharp critique for Mute, many lose their interactive dimension, and those formed by collaborative networks are presented as the work of a few singular authors. Even the works of such central figures in the emergence of Internet-based art as Josi and Heath Bunting, who attempted a fundamentally politicized postmedium shift of artistic practices to the Net, are reduced to screens and scriptures on the gallery wall. Their attempts to decontextualize digital processes and techniques are aesthetically, becoming indistinguishable from the normalizing functions that those means came to serve.

Only a more contemporary example, Ann Hirsch’s 2013 work Twelve, an e-book that poses as an app, manages to retain a sense of relevance by digitally intensifying the forces that Ulman’s work merely signifies: the reconfiguration of sexual relations within social media. Using an iPad mini, installed on what is supposed to look like a preteen’s desk, the viewer enters the app, a reconstructed ’90s chat-room interface, by signing in as “Anni,” a twelve-year-old girl. Anni gradually meets the other characters hanging out in the room, including Jobe, who turns out to be a pedophile and becomes Anni’s cybersex partner. The fact that their contact remains strictly linguistic does not make the work any less devastating: Indeed, it offers a welcome reminder of the radical semiotics of Net art in an exhibition that otherwise reduces the form to purely visual nostalgia.

The show demonstrates that, since the 1960s, technology has been flattening art.

The show’s third, more historical, part is anchored by eminent figures of art’s technologicalization, such as Nam June Paik, who coined the phrase that lends the show its title in his early writings on media, and whose Internet Dream, 1994, is on view here; and Lynn Hershman Leeson, whose Lorna, 1979–82, and Seduction of a Cyborg, 1994, are also included. Such iconic works are juxtaposed with forays into computer drawing by Manfred Mohr, Vera Molnar, and Frieder Nake. This software art, as technologically aided reconfigurations of traditional artistic media became known, is also represented by Ulla Wiggen’s beautiful acrylic paintings of electric circuits and relays from the ’60s (shown in “Cybernetic Serendipity”) and by a film work by the Computer Technique Group from the same decade. But again, by gathering so many diverse works without context, the curators have lost touch with the specific critiques of media and computational standards that galvanize each work, particularly those that pointedly question the relationship between technological media and the human body. Hershman Leeson’s early engagement with cyberfeminism becomes invisible, for example, as does cyberfeminism itself, which plays no part in the show.

The only material that consistently points to a radical reconstruction of art in the face of life’s technologicalization is the sparse documentation of E.A.T. and of “Cybernetic Serendipity.” The former’s legendary performance series, “9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering,” which took place in New York in October 1966, is represented through Alfonso Schilling’s documentary footage of the event, as well as in the form of two wired tennis rackets that Bell Labs engineers Bill Kaminski and Jim McGee designed for Robert Rauschenberg’s contribution, Open Score. As Michelle Kuo has pointed out, E.A.T. “troubled definitions of art and technology, liberation and control . . . [as well as] definitions of individual agency and collective action, self and world.” Indeed, by forging sustained alliances between artists and engineers, the organization proposed to see computerization not as art’s newest compliant extension, but rather as its possible rewiring. “Cybernetic Serendipity” entered this nexus from another side, reframing the arts via Norbert Wiener’s understanding of cybernetics to embrace the computer as a tool of radical de-skilling that would break down any distinction between art and technology. (A similar attempt was made in Jack Burnham’s 1970 show “Software: Information Technology: Its New Meaning for Art” at New York’s Jewish Museum.) But if the machine itself appeared as the central artistic agent of the exhibition at the ICA decades ago, at the Whitechapel viewers saw only the original show’s printed matter: the poster, a magazine, the exhibition catalogue, and an LP cover. These instances of early computerized art represent two highly significant—and opposing—gravitational nodes within the divergent histories of art’s digitization. E.A.T. promised a postmedium artistic practice that challenged modern forms of labor, objecthood, representation, and circulation in both the arts and the sciences. “Cybernetic Serendipity,” on the other hand, staged the dualistic promise of an alternative form of postmedium production, one that implicated art in the computer’s very functions. “Electronic Superhighway,” however, muted such fundamental questioning of art’s changing status in a world increasingly mediated—even constructed—by technology, instead offering a strictly visual paradigm: technology as yet another ism or style.

In this historical schema, our present is a space of sexed clichés, while past moments drift within different stages of technological oblivion. Yet the handful of genuinely revolutionary experiments on view remind us that we should not give up on either the past or the present quite so easily.\[1\]

Electronic Superhighway (1966–1969) is on view through May 15.

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