



# I Went to an Art Show About the Internet to See if I'd 'Get' the Internet Art

By David Whelan

Stepping into the Whitechapel Gallery in London's new exhibition, "Electronic Superhighway," you are immediately confronted by a huge naked butt. On the rare occasion I've covered art shows before, I've always felt like the biggest ass in the room, using words like "intertextual" and "assemblage" and hoping they make sense when used in conjunction with all the pointing I'm doing. Today, thanks to this massive canvas, I am not the biggest butt here. My nerves are settled. I am ready to art.

"Electronic Superhighway" is all about the internet and how computers have changed the way we interact with the world. Originally, I am told, technology was invented to help simulate reality. Now, we use it to judge ourselves. I've been online since dial-ups went barrang-barrang-weeeee, so I thought it made sense to head along and discover what exactly was to blame for my crippling self-awareness.

The butt's relevance isn't immediately clear—but I like it. It's got a text conversation spread down either cheek, which I suppose could be the artist's way of saying that, while we may all be full of shit, we'll eventually figure out some way to reach across the cracks to find our other half. Maybe? Regardless, it strikes me as the sort of piece the breadth of humanity could relate to.

The exhibition takes work created between 1966 and 2016, and is ordered in reverse chronology, so that visitors can plummet from the now back to the then. It's an overpowering experience, which is presumably very much the point.

When the curator—the affable and fascinating Omar Kholeif—arrives to begin our tour, one of the pieces begins to talk over him. People smile, and some even have the temerity to chuckle. I am stoic. I am checking the Australian Open scores on my phone. I am a living exhibition. I am Young Man Brought to Distraction. I'm not even that young. I'm just rude, really. A woman scowls at me and I whisper, gently into her ear, that Federer has just won the third set. She smiles—perhaps scared—and I fear she is a Djokovic fan. Tan skin, white hair pulled back tight against her scalp, lips showing evidence of sun damage, she looks like she's enjoyed a Wimbledon or two in her time. Perhaps even a French Open. But then we're being moved on and I am, again, alone. I consult my Twitter. "Massive Attack" is trending. I dimly wonder if we are in danger.

I spend a lot of my time on Twitter. I check it, roughly, 30 times an hour. Mostly, I read my own tweets. I then bump them into other people's feeds, despite being fundamentally aware that they've already read, processed, and dismissed them. It's a strange habit. I bump something from earlier. I shall not be ignored. I give it 30 seconds. I have been ignored.

I don't blame others for my lack of engagement, because I feel that everyone else is secretly doing the same. Twitter is a gamified social experiment where we all try to get this abstract thing called "numbers." I have never gotten numbers. I am entirely unnumbered. If I were a mathematical object, I would be zero. To give the internet public its due, I do tweet such banal, everyman shit. Here, by way of example, is one of my earlier tweets. "Chelsea, Chelsea, Chelsea!"



Looking up from my phone, I notice that Paris Hilton is skiing in front of me. To my left, Amalia Ulman poses for an Instagram shot. A gentleman begins to sing karaoke in the adjoining room. The words wash over me. They are from a Dickens novel that everyone has read. His voice—gravely, nearing death—reminds me of one of my old school teachers. Above my head, seven CCTV cameras connected by DSL cables comprise a chandelier. Someone takes a photo of it.

At one point I consider taking my phone out of my pocket again. But I resist. I wonder if I should throw my phone in the trash and become a luddite and start a farm. It would be tough, I guess, adjusting to a new way of life. I know what you must be thinking: How can this man—who is so charming, so observant, and so engaged with the world around him—possibly not know how to cultivate a ripe harvest? I check my phone and search for the easiest crops to grow in Britain. Radishes. I don't like radishes very much, so I file this idea away in my "Last Resort" folder alongside "stand-up comedian" and "freelance journalist."

I have been moved upstairs. Before me is an entire wall of 52 monitors by Nam June Paik. It is entitled "Good Morning, Mr. Orwell." In 1984, Paik broadcast live material from artists across the planet to over 25 million people as an anti-Orwellian statement. I try to picture 25 million people all doing the same thing and struggle. Kevin Hart has 25 million followers. Kevin Hart is a stand-up comedian. I wonder if I've made the wrong career move.

I am sitting down at a TV station that is showing a classic movie transformed into ASCII. The green writing goes up and down the screen. I decide that it's Die Hard, because what else would it possibly be. One hundred and forty-nine other human beings in the exhibition quiver carnally all around me. I have hardly noticed them this whole time. We have moved from one end of the exhibition to the other, seamlessly. I find myself in front of piece after piece, without remembering precisely how I got there. Click-click-click. I go from a gigantic butt to Die Hard in a few blinks. I am more than familiar with the process, but usually it's the other way around. They have made us living browsers. As I think that, I

realize that browser is already a word for someone who looks at things. I decide to leave.

It's a cold day. The street is full of people. Terrified, I go into a café. I open my laptop and ask for the WiFi password. The place doesn't have any WiFi. After a moment's thought, I go back to "Electronic Superhighway." A text alert tells me that Novak Djokovic has beaten Roger Federer in four sets. I look for the lady I spoke to at the beginning, but she is busy at a computer that simulates the impossibility of expressing yourself completely to someone else. I don't have the courage to tell her.