

WIRED

Tracing the 50-Year Love Affair Between Art and Computers

AUTHOR: MARGARET RHODES. MARGARET RHODES

February 16, 2016



Addie Wagenknecht's *Asymmetric Love* from 2013. Steel, CCTV cameras and DSL internet cables.

ON OCTOBER 13, 1966, 10 artists and more than 30 engineers from Bell Laboratories convened in New York for 9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering. The festival ran for nine nights, and featured 10 performances in which an artist, dancer, or musician was paired with a Bell engineer who had the technical expertise to bring the performer's vision to life. This meant building tools like a proportional control system, an electronic pen and surface interface to control lights and audio during a performance, and televisions and projectors capable of producing kinetic images in response to sound. This partnership was good for the artists, and fantastic for Bell's engineers: it provided a stage upon which they could prototype the future of the tech sector.

9 Evenings is where Electronic Superhighway, a new exhibit at London's Whitechapel Gallery, begins. Although, to be accurate, it's where the exhibit ends. Curators arranged the experience anti-chronologically, so stepping into the first gallery space reveals a visual cacophony of contemporary artwork. "It's overwhelming downstairs, purposefully so," says Emily Butler, who co-curated the show. This is art in 2016: almost impossible to separate from digital technology. As you proceed through the exhibit, which traces the impact of computers and the Internet on art over time, things quiet down. When you make it to the last gallery, artifacts and footage from 9 Evenings concludes your trip back through

time.

No shortage of exhibits explores the relationship between art and computers and the web. Right now, at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City, Laura Poitras's *Astro Noise* exhibits uses film footage and document to reveal her life under surveillance. The New Museum's 2015 Triennial, *Surround Audience*, focused exclusively on how the digital world permeates art. At last year's *Future of Storytelling* show at the Museum of the Moving Image, VR headsets were everywhere—and that's a mere fraction of this genre.

Electronic Superhighway sticks to works with more seminal impact—pieces that point to specific moments in time. Butler says the curators chose works that showed “artists actually using material they found online,” and “artists reflecting on technology itself, and reflecting on the meaning it has in our lives, and the relationships between physical and virtual worlds.”

Among works created using material found online, you see works that expose these new, technical mediums plainly for what they are, without much content. Frieder Nake's *Walk-Through-Raster Vancouver Version* is like this. It's a screenprint based on a random pattern generated by an early algorithm-writing computer program. Other's, like Douglas Coupland's *Deep Face*, which mulls the effects of facial-recognition software, are more introspective. This dualism—celebrating new technology while simultaneously questioning it—is central to Butler's thesis for the exhibit. “Artists are in a unique position to help visitors reflect on their relationship to technology,” she says. “They're really helping us to be aware of the issues surrounding technology, but they can also show the amazing possibilities that technology can bring about—the utopian and dystopian possibilities.”