

Electronic Superhighway 2016-1966: Digital Art in Historic Context

by Natalie Hegert



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Surface Tension*, 1992, plasma or rear-projection screen, computerised surveillance system, custom-made software.
Courtesy the artist and Carroll/Fletcher, London. Photo: Maxime Dufour. © Rafael Lozano-Hemmer.

In the September 2012 issue of *Artforum*, art critic Claire Bishop caused a stir in a piece called the "Digital Divide." In this article, which begins with the provocative statement, "Whatever happened to digital art?" Bishop claimed that "the appearance and content of contemporary art have been curiously unresponsive to the total upheaval in our labor and leisure inaugurated by the digital revolution." Whilst dismissing new media art as a specialized corner of the art world, altogether too "niche" to consider with regards to her argument, she lamented that the "mainstream art world" on the whole has seemed to willfully ignore the effects of the digital age.

In the wake of exhibitions like the 2015 New Museum Triennial and the rise of the art world's Instagram obsession, it seems that the digital revolution and the drastic changes it has wrought in every aspect of how we live, work, and play have become more central to the art conversation now. Many of the new media artists that Bishop passed over in 2012 as belonging to an obscure niche could be considered mainstream in 2016. Art museums now sponsor festivals of Internet Cat Videos. Yet we are still clearly in the throes of grappling with the question of "what it means to think, see, and filter affect through the digital," while the digital landscape continues to shift and change quickly and often imperceptibly under our feet. We are caught in swell, with the horizon line lost in the distance. A period in time when it suddenly becomes nearly impossible to imagine what life was like before the internet. (What on earth did we do all day?)

A new exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery in London, opening January 29, 2016, attempts to give some historical perspective to how computer and internet technologies have left their imprint on art making in the last 50 years. “Electronic Superhighway (2016-1966),” curated by Omar Kholeif with Séamus McCormack, is a major exhibition comprising over 100 artworks from artists like Hito Steyerl, Amalia Ulman, Cory Arcangel, Ryan Trecartin, Nam June Paik, and Stan VanDerBeek—a timely and welcome retrospective of art practices from post-internet to proto-internet.

Significantly, the exhibition moves backwards in time, from 2016 to 1966. This orientation of the chronology is instructive in a number of ways. Firstly, because internet technologies are so pervasive in our daily lives, it can be difficult to distance one’s perspective from them. By moving back in time, the exhibition eases us into the past, rather than launching us abruptly back into 1966 when computers took up whole rooms and were operated by punch cards and dials. Secondly, by experiencing the newer works first, their impressions are overlaid onto the earlier works, whose foundational qualities become more apparent, from early net art, to computer generated drawings, to performances synchronized to occur at a global scale.

The exhibition begins with works of art made in the last decade or so (from 2000-2016), works that engage with the contemporary conditions enabled and engendered by the pervasive influence of the internet into our daily lives. Works like Oliver Laric’s painting series *Versions (Missile Variations)* (2010) address the new ecology of images we inhabit, while Amalia Ulman’s Instagram project *Excellences & Perfections* (2014-2015) examines how we construct our lives and relate to each other through social media. More sinister issues of the global network, from surveillance to commercialization, are explored through works from artists like Trevor Paglen to activist collectives like *The Yes Men*.

Stepping back to the age before the advent of the high resolution digital image, before the widespread adoption of social media, before Web 2.0 and the dot-com boom, the early days of the world wide web, in the 1990’s, gave rise to early user-based net art, such as Olia Lialina’s 1996 project *My Boyfriend Came Back from the War*. The new media art of this period centered on the development of individual web pages, many of which are now archived by the digital arts organization Rhizome. Net art, while graphically primitive, emphasized the built-in characteristics of the web browser and other developments in digital network technologies that were new at the time: hyperlinks and interactive features allowed narratives to unfold at the click of the mouse.

Prior to 1989, in the pre-internet days, artists were involved in myriad experiments in other emergent electronic technologies that anticipated the networked and globally connected world. As a good example, in *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell* (1984), artist Nam June Paik organized an ambitious live television program of performances by artists and pop musicians, from Laurie Anderson to the Thompson Twins, transmitted internationally via satellite and broadcast in the U.S., Germany, and South Korea. It was Paik, in fact, who coined the phrase “electronic superhighway,” back in 1974, predicting the rise of global communications networks and the inter-connected world.

“Electronic Superhighway” concludes in 1966 with *Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.)*, an organization that paired artists with engineers. E.A.T. debuted in 1966 with a series of performance art presentations involving new technologies such as closed-circuit television, fiber optics, and wireless transmitters. These performances took place over nine evenings at the 69th Regiment Armory in New York, with artists such as Öyvind Fahlström, John Cage, and Robert Rauschenberg. As an organization, E.A.T., presided over by engineer Billy Klüver, facilitated the innovations of many artists in collaboration with scientists and engineers, forming networks of professionals and bridging the gap

between new technologies and new media.

It is particularly fitting that the exhibition's closing note strikes a chord on the notion of collaboration and networks. So much of the art that has been produced under the influence of the internet is collaborative—involving the interaction of its digital audiences, for instance, or produced in collaboration with the technology, interface, or platform it is based on. Our networked world is primarily a collaborative one—we are working together, all the time, to create and recreate it.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Seduction of a Cyborg*, 1994, DVD with sound, still image.
ZKM Collection. © (2015) ZKM Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, © Lynn Hershman Leeson.

Perhaps the fact that so much of our lives take place within this networked, technologically based world makes us somewhat blind to its effects. But that's where the artists come in, to help us recognize that—even if we don't see the importance of their efforts right away. Writing about the first performances of E.A.T. in 1966, artist Robert Smithson pessimistically deemed it "The Funeral of Technology." Sometimes the critics miss the point, in the moment. Of course, art's true impact is always clearer in retrospect.

—Natalie Hegert