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"50 Years of Media Art Collide in 'Electronic Superhighway'"

By DJ Pangburn



The term "new media art" is a bit a deceptive. As artist Jeremy Bailey recently told The Creators Project, there is a tendency amongst the millennial generation to believe that they discovered and, indeed, perfected computer and internet art. This is why the London-based Whitechapel Gallery's latest exhibition, *Electronic Superhighway* (2016-1966), is such an important retrospective. Running until May 15, 2016, the exhibition features media artworks by over 70 artists, covering multimedia, computer art, photography, sculpture and many other genres, and artists including Nam June Paik, Cory Arcangel, Constant Dullaart and others.

Whitechapel Gallery took the title from South Korean video art pioneer Nam June Paik, who coined the term when imagining the great global networks that would be created with technology. The artworks in *Electronic Superhighway* run in reverse chronological order, starting with the most recent on the ground floor and working back to those created in the mid-60s on the upper floors.

"What was interesting to see was how particular concerns kept on re-surfacing for artists over time such as over-reliance on technological forms, and the threat of consciousness becoming subsumed by machines, in the present a heightened awareness of the corporate mechanisms that govern and control the internet is a recurring motif in the work of many artists," *Electronic Superhighway* curator Omar Kholeif tells The Creators Project. "Having said that, there were also very interesting material correlations and connotations where we saw lots of artists continuing to invoke the context of the internet in traditional forms of media, i.e. painting, sculpture, and photography—the world is no flat screen by any means at all."

On the ground floor are works created in the last five years. There visitors will, for instance, find works by Cory Arcangel alongside Jeremy Bailey's patent drawings. One of the more recent works is Amalia Ulman's *Excelsences & Perfections*, for which the artist created an artificial social media persona that satirized selfies, shallow self-realizations, and Instagram model culture. The first floor features a number of select photographs from Ulman's Instagram series.



Other artists exhibiting on the ground floor include Celia Hempton and Thomson & Craighead. Hempton, who says her work isn't particularly internet technology-focused, is showing eight works made by painting from her laptop while using a video chat website. The eight works are scattered over one wall similar to how a computer user might have several windows open on a screen. Each painting depicts a separate online encounter, like two Albanian teens chatting or an Australian man masturbating.

Hempton says that the most obvious thing to assume about media art is that it is only art that "literally uses" materials that resemble materials used in technology—metal, plastic, digital images, smooth surfaces and so on. She hopes that when visitors see her painted works that they ask broader and more exciting questions about what counts as media or new media art.

The London-based artist team Thomson & Craighead, on the other hand, have been creating a variety of screen and web-based artworks together since 2008. But their experience with art and the web goes back to the early 90s.

At Electronic Superhighway, Thomson & Craighead are showing *More Songs Of Innocence And Of Experience*, inspired by the illuminated texts of William Blake. The work is a karaoke machine—a media player, screen, amp and mic—that plays a series of songs that combine "a certain type of sentimental karaoke backing tracks" with "lyrics" taken from scam emails. To be exact, these are the junk emails that tells users hard-luck stories, then offer them vast amounts of cash in an attempt at extortion.

"For us these narratives are interesting because they often refer to real world events; warfare in the Middle East, for example, or the toppling of a dictator, and yet for all this they are lies and fabrications; romantic tales from beyond the comfort zones of the developed world," Thomson tells *The Creators Project*. "We're happy to be included in the ground floor of this exhibition—the rather explosive myriad of more contemporary works. Like Franco and Eva Mattes (also on the ground floor), we have been working as artists for 20 years and so ours and their work acts as a kind of bridge between what's happening now and the historical element upstairs."

This bridge between past and present at Electronic Superhighway might be best exemplified by pioneering Moscow-born artist Olia Lialina's *My Boyfriend Came Back from the War* (1996), an interactive, browser-based work of fiction, not so much for the content or execution, but the medium upon which it was built and currently lives—the internet. Installed in a computer that simulated the bandwidth of mid-90s internet, the work showed how far ahead of her time Lialina was and, indeed, still is.

This floor of the exhibition also includes a centerpiece in Nam June Paik's *Internet Dream*, which he created in 1994—the early days of the internet. The piece is a video wall of 52 monitors full of electronically-processed

images. The exhibition also features *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell*, appropriately unleashed in 1984.

“On New Year’s Day 1984 Paik broadcast live and pre-recorded material from artists including John Cage and The Thompson Twins from a series of satellite-linked television studios in New York, West Germany, South Korea and Paris’ Pompidou Centre to an estimated audience of 25 million viewers worldwide,” Whitechapel Gallery explains. “Paik saw the event as a counter rEsponse to George Orwell’s dystopian vision of 1984.”



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Seduction of a Cyborg*, 1994. DVD with sound, still image. 6.48mins. ZKM Collection. © (2015) ZKM Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe. © Lynn Hershman Leeson

The exhibition’s last few spaces deal with early technology-fueled art in the form of artefacts from the performance series *9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering*. Initiated in 1966 by Bell Laboratories engineers Billy Klüver and Fred Waldhauer and artists Robert Rauschenberg and Robert Whitman, ten artists teamed up with 30 engineers to produce avant-garde performances in theatre, dance and sound that included technologies like CCTV and wireless FM transmitters. These art and technology sessions eventually became known as *Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.)*.

“The following year, in 1967, E.A.T. constituted itself as an institution and this was the very same year that the concept of the internet emerged as published in the ARPANET papers,” Kholief says. “January 2016 marks the 50th of anniversary of this landmark event that opens up a historical framework for our understanding of this exhibition.”

To visit *Electronic Superhighway* is to realize that artists and technologists have been making media art far longer than many imagined. And so it’s as much about acknowledging distant though revolutionary artworks as it is about seeing media art in cross-generational dialogue. [Click here](#) to learn more about the exhibition.