

i-D

“what’s happening to internet art?”

By Edward Siddons



Entering Electronic Superhighway, the new digital art retrospective at Whitechapel Gallery, you’re immediately confronted with Olaf Breuning’s Text Butt, which basically does what it says on the tin - it’s a hyper-enlarged print of an arse peppered with semi-coherent texts. Simultaneously, James Bridle’s Homo Sacer, a projected hologram woman issuing proclamations taken from UN charters and government documents, announces, “Citizenship is a privilege, not a right.”

Somerset House’s Big Bang Data is no less unsettling, heterogeneous or uneven. Watching a series of short films on the US Government’s surveillance schemes, “the kind of thing the Stasi could only dream of” according to one whistle blower, has me on the verge of throwing my phone in the loo, but the spell’s broken when a minute later I’m sucked into I Know Where Your Cat Lives, a data experiment that visualises a sample of over one million publicly available images of cats on a world map.

Galleries haven’t traditionally been an obvious home to such internet led art experiences. Maybe they still aren’t. But the sense of alienation, information overload and anxiety isn’t unfamiliar: it’s precisely the condition of being online. The exhibitions aren’t bite-size, and they pose far more questions than they answer. Why are we seeing two landmark exhibitions now? What exactly is going on with digital art? Where do we go from here?

To some extent, it’s a question of difficulty, says Claire Catterall, Exhibitions Director at Somerset House. “Digital and Internet art has until relatively recently been difficult to place,” she argues, “as both its production and its meaning is dependent on a knowledge of the technical capabilities of the media.” With that media endlessly changing, galleries, artists and the public don’t stand still for long

enough for technology to become normalised or comprehensible.

For James Bridle, the renowned artist, essayist and curator featured in both exhibitions, there are also obstacles that galleries struggle to overcome: “Works that are difficult to sell or difficult to put in white cube gallery space are difficult to make exhibitions about,” he argues. For that reason, this re-evaluation is “well overdue”, and might start more nuanced conversations around digital art that compensate for its lack of critical coverage. The digital has reached saturation point, and public interest is great enough to warrant major shows, argues Catterall. As the digital realm grows exponentially, the audience is becoming much more receptive to it,” he says. “It’s no longer something that’s other-worldly, but is now very much part of our everyday lives.” Whether they’re more receptive, or whether they just can’t escape anymore is another question entirely.

One of the headfucks when seeing shows like this is the inescapability of the digital in the new viewing experience whilst you’re simultaneously looking at the digital in the art on display: I’m reading a Grindr conversation mounted on a wall while having one; you’re looking at Amalia Ullman’s Instagram exploration of beauty ideals and pressures on women’s bodies and ‘gramming away as well.

Internet art isn’t doing just one thing, and its chaotic element means it defies categorisation for now, but both exhibitions have much common ground. They’re both hugely political, whether in Douglas Coupland’s use of Mondrian-esque prints to obscure faces in protest at the Orwellian headfuck of Facebook’s facial recognition software in Whitechapel Gallery, or the documentaries covering the US state’s contravention of civil law in mining data on its citizens. It’s not all terrifying totalitarian states and surveillance though. Hyperconnectivity and technological change also means fun (that cat installation was fucking great), new communities beyond traditional geographical confines, and new utopias that would have been inconceivable even five years ago.

Essentially, the exhibitions are best when they encapsulate the ambivalence of the digital realm. It forges new worlds, but those worlds are sometimes even shittier than what we’ve got IRL. In the words of Jonathan Harrison’s *Data Will Help Us* at Somerset House, “It will help us feel connected, but will it help us feel loved?” What these exhibitions mean for the future of internet art, and what internet art means for the future is unclear. The virtual nature of the work and obsession with endlessly reproducible and shareable images has already undone ideas of originality, the individuality of the artist and the notion of the gallery as the exclusive bastion of the art world - an institution that decides whether it will or won’t accept digital art. In Bridle’s words, “the gallery is now part of the internet, not the other way round.”

There are new directions we can discern though. Increasingly, we’re moving away from talking about digital art as a homogenous mass - or the blanket use of “post-Internet” a term which nobody actually agrees on - and distinguish between its genres. There are differences between networked art, internet art, and digital art more broadly, but what exactly they are is yet to be confirmed.

There are real world implications too. Somerset House proposes that data changes how we interact with the self and suggests the idea that it will create and is creating the “quantified self” - a self which tracks how many steps it takes, how many likes it accumulates, how many followers it has - and which is potentially reducible to data sets and patterns.

Jacolby Satterwhite, the artist behind *Reifying Desire 6*, an orgiastic video installation clashing improbably gymnastic porn and Windows 98 screensaver aesthetics in *Electronic Superhighway*, argues for something equally profound. “I believe the internet is going to continue to blur the boundaries between the concrete and abstract,” he says, “The internet is going to destroy linear pipeline labour, and

celebrate the eccentric. Art school will become the new law school.” Bold claims, but the fact that two major galleries are exploring these questions hints that the digital is something we need to critically engage with if we’re to control it and not vice versa. No claim seems too bold.

The overwhelming conclusion to be drawn, though, is unpredictability. You can’t guess what you’re going to see next within the two exhibitions, let alone where tech takes us in the coming years. But that’s not unique to 2016. According to Omar Kholeif, the lead curator of Electronic Superhighway, “every turn in digital art in my mind has been completely unexpected - the reality is that artists are continually opening things up for us critically in ways that we may have never imagined.”

For all the alienating newness of the works exhibited, maybe artists are doing precisely what they’ve done all along.