ART F CITY

Will Electronic Superhighway Accurately Historicize New Media and Internet Art?

by Rea McNamara on November 13, 2015

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, Surface Tension (1992). Installation photograph by Maxime Dufour.
Credit: Whitechapel Gallery

How has technology impacted art? Whitechapel Gallery will be addressing this question in a landmark exhibition launching in January 2016. Entitled *Electronic Superhighway (2016-1966)*, the show will bring together over 100 multimedia artworks from the past 50 years. Over 70 artists will be involved, including Nam June Paik, Cory Arcangel, Lynn Hershman Leeson, Hito Steyerl, Jeremy Bailey, Amalia Ulman, Douglas Coupland and Judith Barry.

The show is clearly a major coup for its curator, Omar Kholeif, whose rise in the artworld has garnered comparisons with Hans Ulrich Obrist. It's an ambitious survey that is much needed in a genre still struggling for institutional validation. So, it's concerning that a majority of the internet art represented in the show will come via the archives of new media non-profit, Rhizome. While Rhizome has substantially impacted collecting and preserving digital art works, they still only represent the perspective of one organization.

For a curator like Kholeif, who has been involved in commissioning new works from Jon Rafman, Lawrence Abu Hamdan and Sophia Al-Maria, this can't be ideal. After all, he edited the 2014 essay compilation *You are Here: Art after the Internet*. He's clearly capable of historicizing this body of work, and has the connections and background to oversee such a survey.

But, when an institution partners with another in collaborative curating, it's usually indicative of pooled resources (the exhibition often travels to both institutions, for instance) and the offsetting of administrative labor. It's easier handling the art loan paperwork for a single collection or archive rather than directly engaging with individual artists or their gallery representatives.

It remains concerning, then, that a historical survey such as this would not engage other organizations involved in supporting the preservation of new media and digital-based artworks. Rhizome is not the only digital art archive. Why not also include Cornell University's Rose Goldsen Archive of New Media Art? Turbulence.org, a satellite project of New Radio and Performing Arts archived at the Rose Goldsen, has commissioned and exhibited net art and networked hybrid art since the mid-1990s and could have been approached. And one of the largest digital art archives is the Ars Electronica Archive; its yearly festival is an important exhibition opportunity for artists engaging with the internet and networked cultures, and they don't have a space either. The list goes on: Dia's Artist Web Projects, Medien Kunst Netz, the Tate's Intermedia Art Archive, the V&A's Computer Art collections, the Foundation for Art and Creative Technology (FACT) archive.

A vigilance in accurately representing the varied histories—especially operating outside the institutional confines—is needed. A huge part of this history has been how long it's been disregarded by the white cube, or how its been absorbed into institutions' broader outreach and fundraising initiatives via one-off browser-based exhibitions or one-night-only screenings or activations. So much of what has driven the development of internet and digital-based art have been artist-led projects: Lorna Mills's *Ways of Something* curatorial project, Aram Bartholl's Speed Show exhibition series, Rafaël Rozendaal's BYOB events, and even "Sheroes," the GIF event series I co-organized with Mills, Tony Halmos and Alvaro Giron. Out of necessary circumstance, these independent initiatives were DIY forms of exhibition-making, providing offline opportunities to artists that weren't being shown in the white cube.

It's a long way until January, though, so perhaps some further inclusions will be made. My hope is that they are already working on it.