



Oliver Laric, *Versions (Missile Variations)*, 2010

How computers and the Internet have impacted on artists' ways of working has become an incisive curatorial subject. The latest exhibition in this vein is *Electronic Superhighway* at the Whitechapel Gallery in London, which pinpoints the proliferation of art mining new media ideas. In previewing the show, DAMN° had a chance to survey not only the tantalising atmosphere generated by such a concisely framed genre of work, but also to reflect on the bizarre fact that until 50 years ago, none of these pieces could have existed.



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Surface Tension*, 1992

One of the things that differentiates *Electronic Superhighway* from other exhibition contenders is its reverse chronological approach. Starting with the most recent pieces, it steadily leads back to the origins of computer-inspired art. The decision to eschew convention, opting instead to focus on where digital art is now and then proceed to how it got here, feels less didactic. It achieves the nowness tone, investigating why new technologies appeal so much to artists whilst taking us on a memory-lane meander.

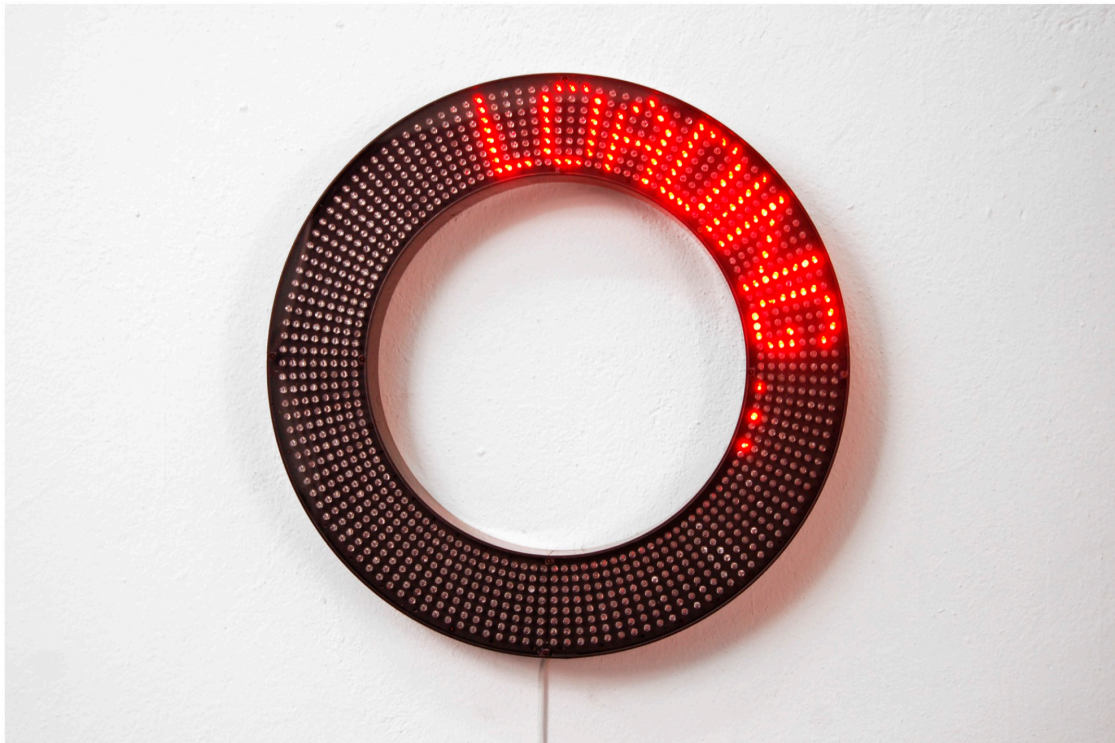
“I wanted viewers to feel that they were walking into the cloud – the critical imaginings of contemporary artists – and to dance backwards from the present to the Internet’s early beginnings”, explains curator Omar Kholeif. The exhibition title refers to a term coined in 1974 by Nam June Paik, the pioneering South Korean video artist who anticipated



technology's potentiality in global communications. Paik's piece, *Internet Dream* (1994), a video sculpture composed of several dozen TV screens, encapsulates his vision of mass media. However, *Electronic Superhighway* spans 50 years, harking back to a series of performances called *Experiments in Art and Technology* (E.A.T.), which were held at the 69th Regiment Armory in New York in 1966. This saw artists such as John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, and Yvonne Rainer collaborating with engineers from Bell Laboratories. "The following year, E.A.T established itself as an institution, the very same year that the concept of the Internet emerged, as published in the ARPANET papers", says Kholeif. "January 2016 marks the 50th anniversary of this landmark event and opens up a historical framework for our understanding of this exhibition."



Addie Wagenknecht, *Asymmetric Love*, 2013



Aristarkh Chernyshev, Loading, 2007

Work by around 70 artists features in the show, ranging from painting, drawing, and sculpture to photography and film. Among the early pieces is Ulla Wiggen's *Den röda TV'n* (1967), one of some 30 paintings by the Swedish artist representing the insides of electronic devices. Historic works being restaged include Stan VanDerBeek's computer-animated films from his *Poemfield* series (1966-1971) and Lynn Hershman Leeson's interactive video installation *Lorna* (1983), about a fictional agoraphobic woman who enables visitors to make choices affecting her life. There's also Judith Barry's *Speed Flesh* (1998), a 360-degree video installation in which a woman's body is seen at the bottom of a swimming pool, plus works by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer and Olia Lialina.

What discoveries did Omar Kholeif, who has recently been appointed senior curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, make whilst researching the exhibition? "It was most interesting to see how particular concerns kept on resurfacing for artists over time, such as an over-reliance on technological forms and the threat of consciousness becoming subsumed by machines", he replies, adding that in works made by the younger generation of artists "a heightened awareness of the corporate mechanisms that govern and control the Internet [manifest as] a recurring motif." Indeed, artists such as Cory Arcangel, Jon Rafman, Ryan Trecartin, and Amalia Ulman demonstrate critical and



innovative ways of stretching technology and examining consumer culture. Kholeif has also brought in new practitioners such as 29-year-old Jacoby Satterwhite, whose digital video installation *Music of Objective Romance* (2015) is on display.

Inevitably, perhaps, some of the exhibition feels slightly *déjà-vu*, as it assembles the usual roster of international artists known for inventing and furthering digital art. What's fascinating to see, though, is the inclusion of sculptures, paintings, and photographs that reveal the back-and-forth between new and conventional media as sources of inspiration. For instance, the circular wall sculpture *Loading* (2007) by Russian artist Aristarkh Chernyshev, alludes to a DVD. Meanwhile, a suspended sculpture, *Asymmetric Love* (2013) by American artist Addie Wagenknecht, loosely recalls a chandelier but is made from CCTV cameras and DSL cables.

"Lots of artists continue to invoke the context of the Internet in traditional forms of media", Kholeif says. "It's exciting to be looking at the camera-less photographic techniques Thomas Ruff has appropriated from manga cartoons, as well as the digitally-supported paintworks of Albert Oehlen and Joshua Nathanson, as well as those of Celia Hempton, whose *Chat Random* series considers painting as a performative act. The world is no flat screen by any means at all."

Conspicuously absent are Richard Prince's *New Portraits* (2015), which have stirred controversy because the American artist did not seek permission from the Instagram users whose images he appropriated. "Richard Prince was on the checklist but the works we wanted were not available", Kholeif explains. As for where digital media may be heading, he is succinct: "It will continue to change in unexpected ways that we are completely unable to control or imagine at present."