

Electronic Superhighway

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Amalia Ulman, *Excellences & Perfections (Instagram Update, 18th June 2014)*, 2015

A functioning server sits on a plinth. It can be seen as a sculpture and used as a tool to connect to the Internet via Tor, an encryption system which makes it very difficult for spies, state and corporate, to tell what you are doing. Large service providers, which collaborate with state surveillance, do not like this one bit, and having used it to send a (presumably unspied upon) text, I had a message that any further usage was blocked. This 'work', if that is quite the right

word, is by Jacob Applebaum, and researcher, activist and artist Trevor Paglen, and it points to the remarkable synthesis of artistry and function that emerged from widespread cultural engagement with the Internet.

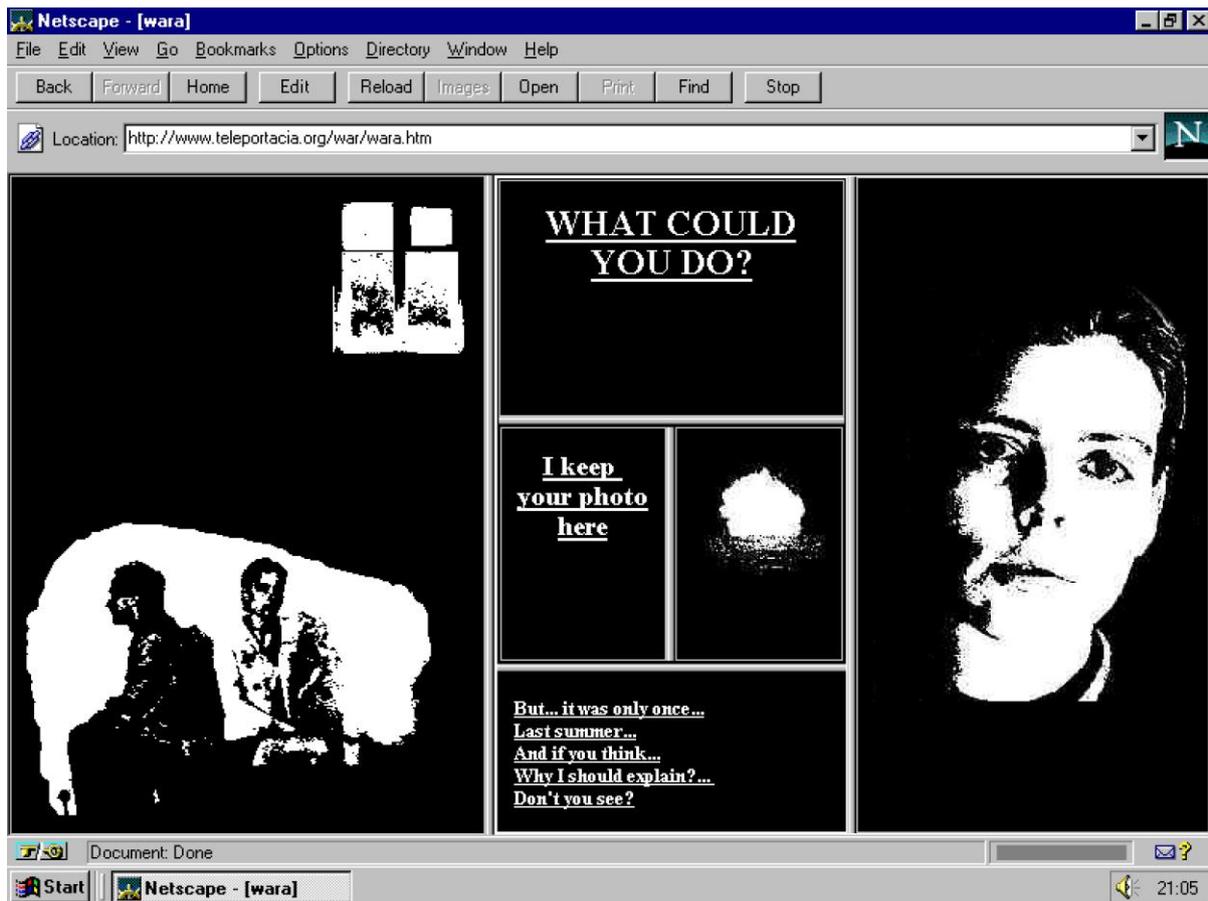
It is about fifty years since the first computers were connected to each other in a US military and academic research project that spread to become the Internet. *Electronic Superhighway*, an ambitious, various and stimulating exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery, looks at artistic engagements with aspects of technology (by no means all to do with computer communication or even digital media) over that long period—in computing terms, astoundingly long. In the early days, access to computers, let alone networked computers, was the preserve of a tiny number of people in mainstream institutions, yet the very idea of mechanical computation and cybernetics, along with the effects of feedback and media immersion on the human subject fascinated artists, and would eventually be folded into the digital realm.

Electronic Superhighway takes a reverse chronological look at its period, so that the viewer begins with the various blandishments of ‘post-Internet’ art (art that reflects on and is dependent on networked culture but is not necessarily confined to digital media), and ends after a dizzying journey back down the long, dark barrel of Moore’s Law to a period of laborious computer print-outs, manipulations of video, and ideal musings about what the collaboration of artists and engineers might involve. The origin is taken here to be the sinister managerial pronouncements of the Experiments in Art and Technology group in 1967, seeking to technologize art and humanise engineering, in a manner apparently blind to the obstacles in a field so thoroughly entangled in the military-industrial complex. Intentionally or not, the effect of the reverse chronology is a disturbing one, which plays up the deep strangeness of the present, and settles upon some of the darker intimations about the future that were abroad in the prehistory of online culture.



Nam June Paik, *Internet Dream*, 1994

The deep ambivalence that attends the use of electronic technology is already present in the work of Nam June Paik, who coined the phrase of the show's title. There is both fascination and joy at playing with the possibilities of new media, and the nightmarish aesthetic of overload, and the suspicion, both with broadcast media and even more sharply with interactive media, of being reduced to a component of the machine. The new work—including the slack-jawed, rowdy youth culture videos of Ryan Trecartin, the Instagram performances of Amalia Ulman, or the acidic sweetness of Thomson and Craighead's spam karaoke machine, and Constant Dullaart's highlighting of the utopian but sexist ideology of the first Photoshop sample image, are seen through the clunky, fumbling experiments of the low- or no-bandwidth era. This becomes particularly clear with Kaprow's social experiment *Hello* (1960), in which people play with the novel experience of seeing each other remotely via video camera. They are confronted with many monitors, and so wave and shout to get each other's attention in frequently disjointed and misfiring attempts at communication. Seen here, the work becomes a premonition of the mandatory, workaday and fragmentary character of much social media interaction, and of the world of universal surveillance.



Olia Lialina's *My Boyfriend Came Back from the War*, 1996

There is much in the exhibition about how artists engaged with the emerging technology and its new powers, but less on what those powers did to the art world. Think of the fate of postmodernism itself, which seem buoyant in the 1980s, particularly with the idea that the network was structured like Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomes, and that its use would lead to a rich culture of hypertext works, which would demonstrate the unfixed character of all meaning. Olia Lialina's *My Boyfriend Came Back from the War* (1996) is one such work, an early use of the web browser to tell a story with many branching routes. It is carefully displayed in *Electronic Superhighway* on a connection (or a simulation) that gives the slow loading speeds of the 1990s, so that the work unfolds as was intended. But, following Moore's Law, which turned out to apply to storage capabilities and communication speeds as well as computing power, end-of-history postmodernism was stuck in a cage with a technological gorilla that doubled in size and might every eighteen months, transforming the world in a new order of fierce hierarchy, and crushing the life out of it. Only the slowest among us now play with the bones of the rhizome.

The other great transformation is to do with artistic labour. Getting computers to do anything that might faintly interest the art world was, in the early years, a remarkably labour-intensive and generally thankless task. It often involved shuttling back and forth between analogue and digital media, and the results were curious more because of their origins than their results. Some, too, were tied to idealist thinking about the mathematical character of aesthetics which was deeply

out of tune with mainstream art-world views. Now, though, the machine takes on more and more of the labour of making things that at least might look like art. Evan Roth makes a self-portrait of every image he has browsed in a long roll of paper that spills from wall to floor. This represents an extreme in which the artist's only decision is to choose a format and press print. The lineaments of distinction are still present at the Whitechapel: the display is reserved and refined, the choice judicious, the catalogue well designed and the works beautifully reproduced, but there is nevertheless a disturbance here. It is felt with early video, which straddled many cultural worlds and which art discourse took at least a couple of decades to absorb, and in the display of net.art, which approached gallery display and art-world exclusiveness with tongue firmly in cheek. Do we see in the latest work, amid billions of producers who tap massive computing power and a vast world of readymade cultural material, the fading of the artist as an exceptional figure?