

“Electronic Superhighway (2016–1966)”

By *Ajay Hothi* May 26, 2016 2:51pm

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“Electronic Superhighway” attempted an ambitious undertaking: to chronologically document the history of digital technologies in contemporary art and in so doing point to potential futures for art and technology. The exhibition collated more than a hundred works made by seventy-six international artists since 1966. The chronology was presented in reverse, opening with the most recent pieces and closing with some early examples of artistic experiments with networked technologies.

Nearly half of the works were displayed in the show’s first gallery. The breadth of this selection, which spanned from 2000 to today, was staggering, making for a cluttered display that lacked consistent themes. There was a noticeable divide, however, between works that inhabit digital or, more broadly, networked life and those that actively deconstruct that life. Unfortunately, the effectiveness of the latter was diminished by the dominating presence of the former. Standouts in the section were pieces (publications, a sculpture, and a video) from Zach Blas’s “Queer Technologies” (2007–12), which is based in his detailed research into the formation of the body, identity, and sex within ideological systems; the work *Gay Bombs* (2011), for example, is a guide appropriating actual United States Air Force research into an explosive that could release a chemical to stimulate homosexual urges. That the work shared gallery space with Olaf Breuning’s photo-based piece *Text Butt* (2015), in which a barely coherent text-message conversation emanates out of a giant, naked ass, is surprising. That’s not to say that Breuning’s work occupies a lower rung in some sort of cultural hierarchy. But its pairing with Blas’s project demonstrated that the show did not give the works enough of a structural frame, preferring instead to show the various frequencies at which technology-influenced contemporary art is produced today.

The boundaries of the internet are constantly shifting, with no (apparent) spatial or temporal limitations—perhaps it is this nonhierarchical, nonjudgmental, user-oriented principle that this first gallery attempted to mirror. The exhibition’s curator, Omar Kholeif, edited the 2014 anthology *You Are Here: Art after the Internet*, in which a series of writers and artists responded to the notion that users can redefine the territory of the internet from within. Unfortunately, the exhibition—without defining boundaries at its outset or, arguably, its core—rendered much of that territory formless.

That said, the exhibition began to offer a somewhat clearer focus past the first gallery. The next room presented nine web-based pieces selected with Rhizome, four of them interactive. This section introduced the concept of the digital archive, and rendered visible the otherwise invisible nature of the web’s structure. The selection ranged from 2014, with Olia Lialina’s take on circular activity on social media networks, <http://tilde.club/~olialia/640x480/>, to 1995, with the collaborative duo JODI’s almost impregnable technical interface www.jodi.org. Despite gathering a diverse group of works—role-playing narratives, interactive games, archives, search engines—this gallery provided a level of focus by reflecting on the creative relationships between artists and technologists.

The final section of the show, comprised of work by artists whose names are more familiar within the context of museum retrospectives, seemed the most measured, deliberate display. Nam June Paik featured heavily. His *Internet Dream* (1994), a behemoth fifty-two-monitor video wall that forms a shifting montage of imagery, and a precursor work, *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell* (1983), an international satellite broadcast of artists’ works aired live on New Year’s Day 1984, bookended the section. Lynn Hershman Leeson’s video installation *Lorna* (1979–82), also shown in this section, was the work that perhaps came closest in the exhibition to explicating how the individual is bracketed between traditional and digital social interactions.

In *Lorna*, we enter a fabricated domestic living room. A chair with a remote control for a laser-disc player is placed before the television set. Inside the laser-disc player is a video introducing us to Lorna, an agoraphobic woman. The video consists of thirty-six chapters that we can switch between at will, with each one revealing something new about Lorna’s personality, fears, relationships, and hopes for the future. Lorna is an extreme example of a person impacted by technology, of the archetype of the socially atomized—hooked to her television and its messages, and afraid of what she is told about the outside world. Paradoxically, she is both the viewer and the subject of our interactivity. We navigate her life, and ultimately control her destiny. We are given three choices of endings for her: we can choose that she remain as she is, that she commit suicide with a bullet to the head, or that she shoot the TV. Here, for the first time in the exhibition, the audience was put in a position of privilege, before the artist, before the system. It allowed us to lead a line of inquiry into practical concerns about the nature of computer and internet technologies in our daily life, about the behavioral disposition of the life lived online or by proxy.

“Electronic Superhighway” was based in the premise that we rely on networked technology and that its ever-increasing relevance to artists (beyond its clear technical capabilities) is evidence of this. As a temporary collection of artworks demonstrating the evolution of technology’s influence on contemporary art production, the exhibition was effective. However, as a survey prompting us to question the present and the future of such work and its social impacts, the show fell short, instead seeming content with trying to wrap up today with what we thought it might have looked like yesterday.