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## ‘Electronic Superhighway (2016-1966)’: a trip into cyberspace’s art history.

By [Aina Pomar](#) *Fri, Feb 05, 2016*

In 1966 engineers Billy Klüver and Fred Waldhauer and artists Robert Rauschenberg and Robert Whitman started a series of collaborations called ‘Experiments in Art and Technology’. E.A.T. was a ground-breaking interdisciplinary group that pioneered the exploration of the advanced synergies between art and new technologies during the sixties. With their revolutionary understanding of art and a growing collaborative network, the group changed the traditional perception of the role of the artist and foresaw new multidisciplinary practices in the contemporary art. E.A.T. functioned as a starting point for several historical multimedia artworks. But in ‘Electronic Superhighway (2016-1966)’, the recent major exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery, E.A.T. is the conclusion point.



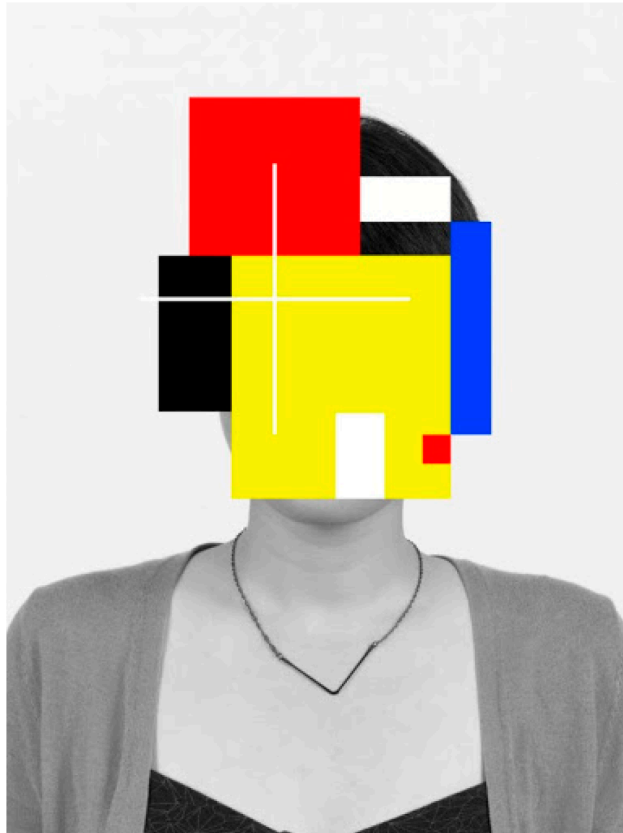
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The show’s kick-off is a piece called ‘Text Butt’ (2015) by artist Olaf Breuning, a giant explicit wallpaper image that explore the relationship between the body and the communication technologies that we constantly use. From this point onwards, the visitor starts a journey back in time, going in reverse chronological order from contemporary artworks to some of the first artists to use virtual media in their works. The curators Omar Kholeif, Emily Butler and Séamus McCormack have selected works from more than 70 artists, all of which explore the ways that computers and internet technologies have influenced their practice throughout the last fifty years.

The works displayed in the main gallery at Whitechapel delve into topics that have become commonplace in our daily computerised, post-internet, digitised lives. Perhaps for this reason, the tone of the display is less connected with the early media artists’ curiosity for the use of technological devices and focuses more on the outputs of this use. Getting beyond the early-idealised appreciation of the Internet as a means of democratisation, the works tell stories of appropriation, surveillance and connectivity, among other contemporary affairs.

Oliver Laric, for instance, tackles notions of authenticity and originality in his piece ‘Versions (Missile Variations)’ (2010). He presents different photographs of a parody aroused online after the Iranian Revolutionary Guard released a fake image of a missile test, digitally adding more rockets to make the image more threatening.



Douglas Coupland, *Deep Face*. 2015. Acrylic on B&W photograph, mounted on diabond. 160.6 x 120.6 cm. Courtesy the artist and The Daniel Faria Gallery, Toronto © Douglas Coupland

On the other side of the room, writer and visual artist Douglas Coupland presents 'Deep Face' (2015), a critique of Facebook's development of facial recognition software. The artist's counterclaim resistance to this imposition is created by covering the faces of portraits with Mondrian-like abstract designs. Coupland, as well as Celia Hempton, Joshua Nathanson and Jonas Lund, are some of the artists in the show that merge the tradition of painting and abstract art with contemporary digital media.

Our beloved and overused social media channels are clearly present in the show through Amalia Ulman's images of her Instagram selfies performance, or the work 'Do you have to work tomorrow' (2012). In this piece Mahmoud Khaled examines constructions of male identity through a conversation between two men via the gay dating app Grindr during the Arab Spring in Egypt.

One of the key names of the exhibition and a renowned artist of Internet and computer art, Constant Dullaart, presents the iconic work 'Jennifer in Paradise' (2014). The work is the result of a digital archaeology task, tracing the first image to be used by the creator of Photoshop in 1987 for early demonstrations of the software.



Ulla Wiggen, *Den röda Tv:n*. 1967. Acrylic on board, 89 x 116 cm. Collection Moderna Museet, Stockholm. Courtesy Moderna Museet, Stockholm/Asa Lundén © Ulla Wiggen

Following the journey to the 90s, the viewer will find archaic-looking websites and some of the first Internet pieces in the public domain. The space focused on the apparition of the World Wide Web and the subsequent emergence of net art has been curated in collaboration with Rhizome, the online platform created in 1996 to present and archive net and new media artworks. Displayed are some essential names, like the duo JODI whose 1995 website <http://www.wwwwwww.jodi.org/> is shown along with works by Taryn Simon, Olia Lialina and Heath Bunting.

The last part of the show is dedicated to VHS nostalgia, showing a selection of the new media art pioneers. It's curious to observe that for some generations seeing a work by Nam June Paik or a Kaprow may feel as moving an experience as standing in front of pieces by revolutionary artists of their time, such as Miró or Calder. Their contribution to the history of art is remarkable, but perhaps the emotional impact of the show also relies on our current understanding of how quickly this exciting new technology became totally obsolete. Who knows how long it will take to feel the same sensation with works like 'Homo Sacer' (2014) by contemporary artist James Bridle? My guess would be less than fifty years.

The 52-monitor video wall sculpture 'Internet Dream' (1994) by Nam June Paik, a hyperlinked visual narrative, is one of the most impressive installations in this area. The title of the show was actually coined in 1974 by this influential member of Fluxus and was used to describe the apparent potential of telecommunications systems.



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Surface Tension*. 1992. Plasma or rear-projection screen, computerised surveillance system, custom-made software. Dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Carroll/Fletcher, London. Installation photograph by Maxime Dufour © Rafael Lozano-Hemmer

Next to him, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's 'Surface Tension' (1992), addresses the theme of surveillance in an elegant and beautiful display. The idea that we are all being watched has been a long-lasting concern in the work of multimedia artists.

One of the central pieces of the show is Allan Kaprow's 'Hello' (1969), an examination of tele-presence through an interlinked happening. To develop the work, a number of artists in different locations connected to each other using satellite public television, saying phrases like 'hello, can you see me', 'hello, can you hear me'.

While the audience approaches the E.A.T. artefacts displayed at the end of the gallery, they will see interactive pieces by Vuk Ćosić, Lynn Hershman Leeson (with the first laser-disc technology art piece 'Lorna', 1979-82), Eduardo Kac, Roy Ascott and other renowned artists using early computer generated art.

'Electronic Superhighway (2016-1966)' follows the Whitechapel informative and inclusive exhibition style, prioritising a democratic and wide representation of the theme addressed. Putting together a show on the relationship of Internet and computer technologies with art is an immense challenge and responsibility, thanks in no small part to the plethora of possible perspectives on the topic. In this sense, the show serves to give small glimpses into that relationship, pointing out the history of new media art, net art and, in general, the main artists who are working with new technologies.



Addie Wagenknecht, *Asymmetric Love*. 2013. Steel, CCTV cameras and DSL internet cables, 99 x 149.8 cm. Courtesy bitforms gallery, New York. Photograph by David Payr © Addie Wagenknecht

The viewer will probably find it difficult to construct connections between the works displayed, especially in the packed ground floor gallery where one finds multiple distractions and interruptions, an adequate mirror of our saturated infobahn.

Nevertheless, this extensive survey of new media artworks, which includes rarely seen pieces by renowned artists, is without doubt a must-see of 2016 London art exhibitions, and probably a stop on the way to reflect on the fast-running history of multimedia art.

Image above: Oliver Laric, *Versions (Missile Variations)*. 2010. Airbrushed paint on aluminum composite board, in 10 parts, 25 x 45 cm (each). Private Collection, London. Image courtesy the artist and Seventeen Gallery, London © Oliver Laric

[Electronic Superhighway](#) (2016-1966) is at Whitechapel Gallery until 15 May.