

# Electronic Superhighway review – 50 years of internet sex and roadkill

**Whitechapel Gallery, London** This uneven, fascinating and terrifying show presents a history of internet art in a series of snapshots – and a signpost that things have just begun

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**E**lectronic Superhighway is a mess of monitors and post-internet paintings, real dumb objects and unreal dumb intimacies. Noisy and confusing, there's lots of sex, selfies, manipulated images, YouTube comedy acts and Jill Magid's up-skirt camera attached to her shoe. Working backward from the present to the 1960s, we are sucked into a world of grainy video experiments and computer-assisted drawings, a smashed-up monitor and keyboard yelling from the floor, Nam June Paik's bank of monitors with its roaring cacophony of competing and choreographed images, HD film installations and trivia.

Critics are no longer the people who have seen too much. We all have. We are all post-internet now, roadkill on the electronic superhighway. The internet has changed our minds – and our bodies. An enormous roll of paper avalanches from the wall and spills across the floor in Evan Roth's *Self Portrait: July 17, 2012*, a regurgitated visual record of his online surfing on a single day. This tumble of images is terrifying to behold. The entire exhibition duplicates this excess.

We go from Jacolby Satterwhite's phantasmagorical (and anatomically implausible) 2016 HD gay porn-fest, a sort of garden of perpetually morphing unearthly delights, to Peter Sedgley's captivating fuzzy-focus concentric rings of painted colour at the end, lit by changing coloured lights that significantly alter what you see.

These belong to a more innocent era. Celia Hempton's paintings are made while getting people to pose for her online in a chatroom. One bloke masturbates. She has to paint quickly because her subjects might not be there long. When they're gone, she's done. These glutinous canvases don't look as if they have much to do with the internet, except perhaps for their cropping – a closeup of one guy's arm, another bloke's hand and penis, two Albanians with their shirts off. Canadian novelist and artist Douglas Coupland presents photographic portraits in which geometric forms and overlays of stripes cover the faces, both disguising the subjects and hinting at a certain kind of energy.

Whatever is new will soon look old. Technology changes, the kinds of things that can be done with and to images is evolving. Ryan Trecartin's 2004 video play, *A Family Finds Entertainment*, is a mad melange of scenes from family life that's worse than dysfunctional.

It is a bizarre sitcom. Everyone talks rubbish, all the time. There is fake blood and blackened teeth, lots of makeup and cross-dressing. One character exposes his balls. You have to sit in a manky old sofa to watch. Described as Tracartin's "breakout piece", this college graduation video set the tone for his subsequent work and put its finger on lives lived as though everyone was participating, in perpetuity, in a reality TV show.

In Lynn Hershman Leeson's 1979-82 video installation *Lorna*, we can watch the life of an agoraphobic woman who does her nails, wanders about her apartment and carries a gun. I got no further, sitting in a version of her own domestic interior. You can flip channels with a remote, and watch other scenes from her life. I thought she might wander in and kill me, such is the problem I have distinguishing the real from the virtual.

As well as art spawned by the internet and the mentality of lives lived online, computers are still used as they were in the 1960s, as drawing tools and ways of making and playing with images in novel ways. Novelty palls, of course, all the more quickly as technology races ahead. The ways we interact change too. One minute it's Twitter, the next Grindr, YouTube or Instagram. Every platform has its own restraints, its own possibilities.

Jayson Musson, included here, is a sort of savvy art-world Ali G, whose YouTube series *Art Thoughtz* under the moniker *Hennessy Youngman* delves into everything from relational aesthetics to how to be a successful black artist. Lamponing the art world is fun, but there's also nothing the art world likes more than its court jesters.

As a history, *Electronic Highway* cannot do more than present a series of snapshots. It is very uneven but, like the internet itself, throws up fascinating asides and moments, from analogue black-and-white photos of Grindr conversations in Cairo, while there is insurrection on the streets outside, to a simpler age of hooked-up TV monitors and cameras where people can say "Hello, I see you!" in different locations around a city. How radical that must have seemed in 1969.

The exhibition title seems quaint now we are all connected. The internet and all it has brought has changed the ways in which we think and act and experience the world. I remember the time without it as impossibly distant, with less noise in one's head and fewer distractions. "Reality will soon cease to be the standard by which to judge the imperfect image. Instead, the virtual image will become the standard by which to measure the imperfections of reality," said Harun Farocki in his *Parallel I-IV*, occupying a whole gallery at the Whitechapel.

The computer may have started out as a tool, but it has now filled all the gaps between things, between one place and another, one thought and the next. We have to take *Electronic Superhighway* as an interim report. Things have only just begun.

- *Electronic Superhighway* (2016-1966) is at Whitechapel Gallery, London, until 15 May.



📍 Lynn Hershman Leeson's *Seduction of a Cyborg*, 1994 at Electronic Superhighway Photograph: PR Image



📍 Lynn Hershman Leeson's *Lorna* 1979-1982 installation. Photograph: Guy Bell/Rex/Shutterstock



📍 Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Surface Tension*, 2007, at Electronic Superhighway