Entertainment

Art: At the ICA, electronic artists examine how the Web has invaded our lives

By **Jody Feinberg**
The Patriot Ledger
Posted Feb 13, 2018 at 11:09 AM
Updated Feb 13, 2018 at 11:09 AM

The Internet has changed our lives so radically that it's hard to imagine life without it. And in the midst of constant change, we often are too close to fully grasp its impact. In these times, the exhibit "Art in the Age of the Internet, 1989 to Today" at the Institute of Contemporary Art /Boston provides an important perspective.

"This is not a show about technology," said ICA curator Ava Respini. "It's about the Internet as a social construct that has affected all aspects of our lives. It asks the question, 'How has the Internet changed art?' (The answer) is varied and nuanced as each artist."

The first major U.S. exhibit of its kind features 70 artists working individually and in collaboration from North and South America, Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Russia, and New Zealand. Spread among multiple galleries, the exhibit is dominated by video, but also includes sculpture, photography, and painting, as well as virtual reality. The works intrigue, disturb and provoke, as the artists express ways the Internet has affected communication, socialization, identity, privacy and political engagement.

To give coherence to the exhibit's expansive scope, Respini selected works to explore five themes: interconnection, the human body, virtual reality, surveillance and resistance, and identity.

At the exhibit's entrance, two works – each with dozens of television monitors set in a wall - show how the interconnectivity of the Internet embodies both a promise and a reality, Respini said. "Internet Dream," by South Korean artist Nam June Paik, uses images of a diverse group of people to express their

connection, while "HOWDOYOUSAYYAMINAFRICAN," by the collaborative thewayblackmachine, use images from social media and the press to reveal the impact of police brutality on African Americans.

Using images and tools from the Internet, American Laura Owens merged high and low art in her untitled painting. She pixilated a painting, "The Man at the Café," by Spanish Cubist artist Juan Gris to blur the painting and combined that with a pattern from a poster for the comic strip Garfield.

The section "Hybrid Bodies" is an examination of what makes us human. In "Saving Money with Subcontractors," American artist Josh Kline explored the dehumanizing impact of new technologies on labor. He created three 3-D printed heads and set them atop a bed of packing peanuts in a FedEx box and accompanied that with a video of a FedEx driver talking about his experiences as a driver on contract with no benefits and 12 hour days. "Rigged" by English artist Kate Cooper features a video of a computer generated female avatar with expressionless eyes who represents the idealized view of beauty presented in advertisements.

On a lighter note, a black Samsung smart refrigerator occupies a virtual world as it speaks, and its words (read by the artist's digital voice) scroll along a video screen. In "GreenScreenRefrigeratorAction," Mark Leckey of England focused on the human inclination to anthropomorphize objects and to forge an identity through them. "Cat" by Antoine Catala of France plays off the popularity of cat images online with a hologram of a cat's head floating above an aluminum sculpture of its body.

"Serious Games IV: A Sun with No Shadow," by Harun Farocki of Germany, explores the military application of virtual reality. In a video, the U.S. Military employs gaming technology to train soldiers and uses virtual reality to treat soldiers with post traumatic stress disorder.

One of the most powerful sections looks at the loss of privacy from surveillance and the power of the Internet to support resistance to political oppression. In "Surface Tension," by Mexican artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, a human eye fills a video screen and surveys the gallery. In "The Fall of a Hair: Blow Ups," by Rabih Mroue, seven life-size inkjet prints show blurry images of Syrian army fighters pointing guns at protesters during the Syrian Civil War. These photos were

taken by protesters with cell phones, who reportedly were killed after taking them, but the images were uploaded to the Internet and show the importance of citizen journalists and civilians in documenting the Civil War.

"Performing the Self," explores the ways we document and shape our identities on the Internet. American artist Cindy Sherman created a photo of multiple views of herself, a version of the photos people post to show off their status and connections. American sculptor Frank Benson, inspired by a digital print in the exhibit made by Juliana Huxtable, made a shimmering green bronze sculpture of a nude transgender woman, reclining in a pose common in Classical sculpture.

"Social media was liberating for Juliana and helped her find her identity," Respini said. "The sculpture became an icon for the transgender community and went viral. What started as a digital image became manifest (in form) and then went back online. It shows how circulated images can have immense power."

To give visitors an opportunity to experience virtual reality, the Institute of Contemporary Art commissioned Canadian artist Jon Rafman to create "View of Harbor," which starts with the harbor outside the museum. It's an engrossing doomsday scenario with a tidal wave, tormented bodies below and beneath the water, and a post apocalyptic community. (Visitors must sign up for the eight-minute experience located in the third floor glass corridor overlooking the harbor).

The exhibit is accompanied by a web site and a book of recent scholarship and is the starting point of a collaboration between the Institute of Contemporary Art and 13 Greater Boston arts and educational institutions to explore the role the region has played in the development of technology.