

ART REVIEW

‘I Was Raised on the Internet’ Review: Binary Reactions to the Digital World

Is the web an egalitarian tool with limitless potential or a vanity machine that severs real human connection? An exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago surveys artists’ reactions to the internet and the way it shapes our experience of the world.

By Brian P. Kelly

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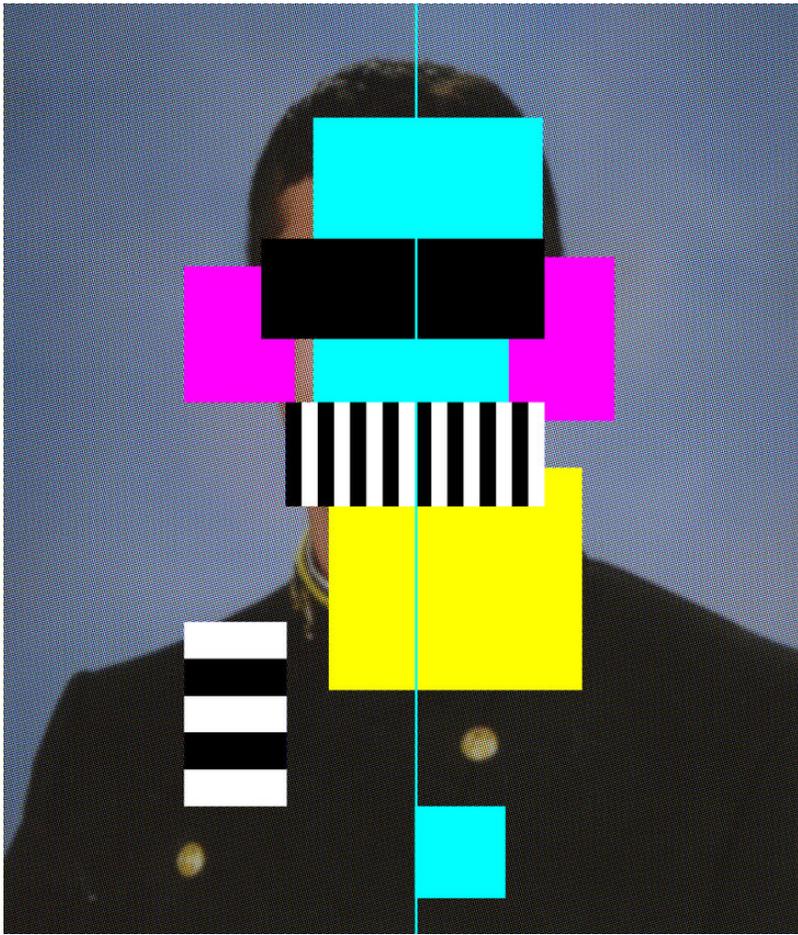
Chicago

With every step forward in human ingenuity, there have been technophobes warning that we’ve set the stage for our own demise and bright-eyed early adopters rushing to evangelize the newest fads. Guglielmo Marconi, inventor of the radio, felt the pull of both these poles. Worried about his creation and its uses, he once wondered, “Have I done the world good, or have I added a menace?”

Unsurprisingly, the internet has not been exempt from this duality. Partisans have praised it as an egalitarian tool with limitless potential, while others have decried it as a vanity machine that spits out echo chambers and severs real human connection. Now the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago has organized an exhibition that surveys artists’ reactions to the web and the way it shapes our experience of the world.

“I Was Raised on the Internet” (through Oct. 14), curated by Omar Kholeif, includes nearly 100 works by over 60 individuals, ranging from more traditional media, like photography, painting, sculpture, film and video, to emerging forms like interactive computer works and virtual reality. The size and scope of the show offer visitors the chance to see household names in the contemporary-art world working in both familiar and unfamiliar formats (Douglas Coupland’s acrylic paintings; Trevor Paglen’s encrypted computer-in-a-cube), while introducing them to lots of new artists doing the same.

Taking on a subject as freewheeling as the internet, MCA faced the challenge of how to organize the show, and the museum has broken it into five sections dealing with identity; translating



Douglas Coupland's 'Delaware' (2016) PHOTO: DOUGLAS COUPLAND/DANIEL FARIA GALLERY, TORONTO

digital space into the real world; surveillance, data collection, and control; immersive and interactive experiences; and corporate culture and consumerism. Many of the objects in the show could have been displayed in multiple

sections, and the categories occasionally feel arbitrary, as do some of the items included. Cory Arcangel's oversize ink-jet-on-canvas image of Adidas stripes, for example, seems to scream "Commercialism!" and not much else. All but one of the works were made after the turn of the millennium, and while the focus on the new is understandable, including earlier examples from pioneers in the realm like Roy Ascott would have provided some helpful context.

Even so, there's plenty worth digging into here, and the most interesting works are the ones that espouse the strongest belief in or worries about modern tech—the ones that transcend the curatorial categories and strike at the heart of what makes the web good and bad.

Heavily in the pro column is Oliver Laric. His "Sleeping Boy" (2016) is a reproduction of John Gibson's 1834 sculpture "Sleeping Shepherd Boy." Channeling pre-modern art history, where plaster copies of masterworks made it possible for viewers around the globe to glimpse the hand of Michelangelo or Bernini, Mr. Laric updates the practice. Using a digital scan of Gibson's original, he's re-created it with a variety of materials and a 3-D printer. At once classical and strikingly contemporary, the sculpture holds promise for the future of digital preservation and the ability to make reproductions inexpensively available to institutions of all sizes. One can see Mr. Laric's piece as a counterpoint to works like Daniel Arsham's "Future Relic" sculptures (not included in the show), in which cameras, Walkmans and other gadgets are portrayed as

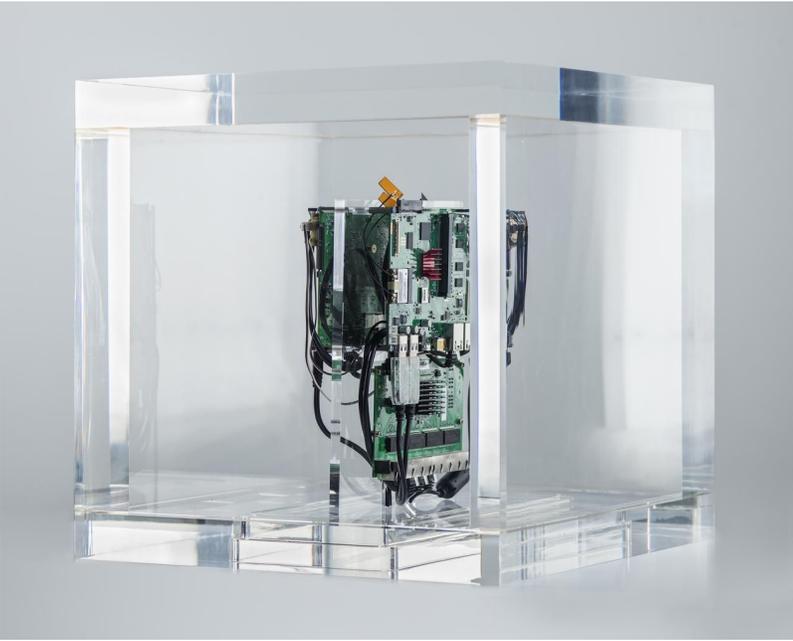


Installation view of 'I Was Raised on the Internet' at MCA Chicago with Laura Owens' 'Untitled' (2016), left, and Oliver Laric's 'Sleeping Boy' (2016), right PHOTO: MCA CHICAGO

crumbling artifacts. The former enthusiastically revives the past for the present; the latter sees our technological breakthroughs in an Ozymandian light.

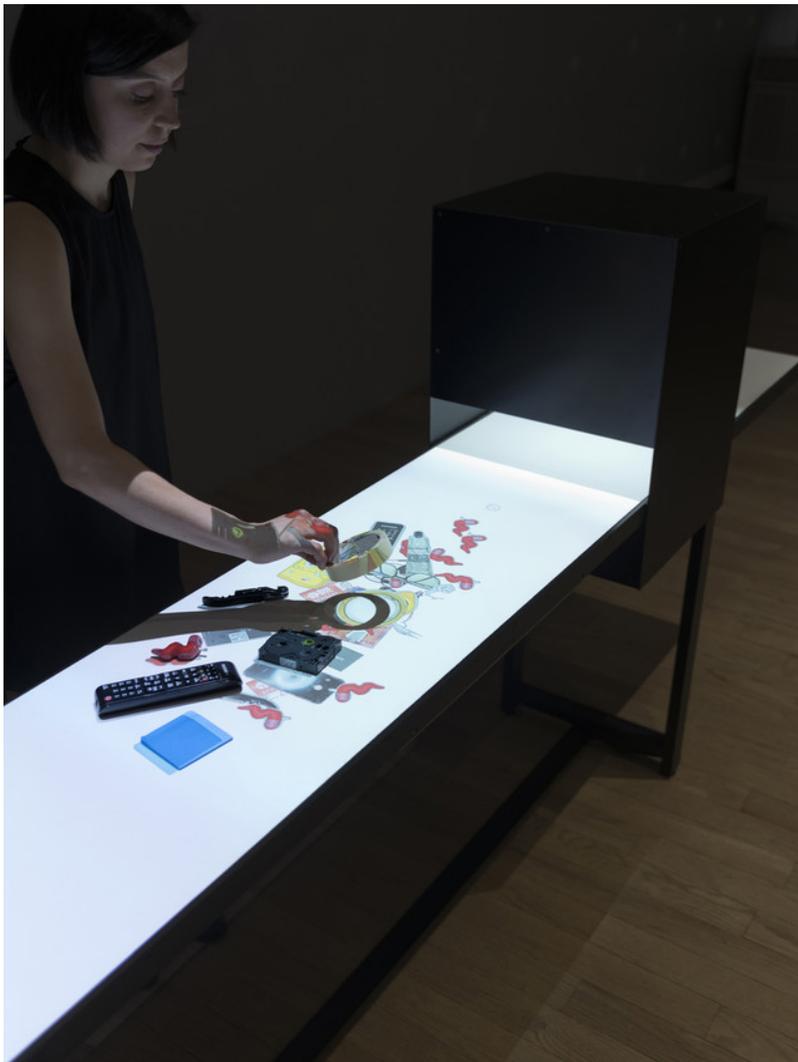
Rafael Lozano-Hemmer is far more suspicious of new technology. His "Please Empty Your Pockets" (2010) is a TSA-style conveyor belt on which visitors are invited to place their own objects. After they pass through a black box, they come out the other side and images of them are projected onto the belt, along with those of many other items that previous museumgoers had scanned and the machine has recorded. Mr. Lozano-Hemmer's piece serves as a simple but potent reminder that we give up a piece of ourselves in the name of security.

Not everything here carries a weighty message. A film pieced together from internet videos of cats playing the piano re-creates a Schoenberg composition, and a mechanized sculpture of an emoticon rotates, turning happiness ;) into sadness ;(. While undeniably influenced by the



Trevor Paglen's 'Autonomy Cube' (2014) PHOTO: TREVOR PAGLEN/METRO PICTURES, NY

internet, these objects feel out of place in an exhibition that includes work like Mendi + Keith Obadike's "Blackness for Sale" (2001), an unnerving eBay posting in which the author's race was put on the auction block—complete with warnings such as "The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used during



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's 'Please Empty Your Pockets' (2010) PHOTO: RAFAEL LOZANO-HEMMER/CARL & MARILYNN THOMA ART FOUNDATION

legal proceedings of any sort”—and whose echoes of slavery are unavoidable.



Amalia Ulman's 'Excellences & Perfections (Instagram Update, 5th September 2014)' (2014) . PHOTO: AMALIA ULMAN/ARCADIA MISSA

“I Was Raised on the Internet” can at times feel scattershot, but the duality of its subject is the one throughline that holds the show together. Where Juliana Huxtable has found the web a useful—if not always friendly—tool for expressing gender identity, Amalia Ulman was confronted with lust and violence when she underwent a months-long virtual “makeover” via her social media. In her video “Premium Connect” (2016)—part digital landscape, part hallucination, part history lesson, part anthropological interview—Tabita Rezaire proposes an internet that moves beyond bias. In contrast, Rachel Maclean’s film “It’s What’s Inside That Counts” (2016) imagines a postapocalyptic world with an underclass addicted to data and with hierarchies determined by social media presence and controlled by large corporations. MCA’s show is quick to point out that for every person who finds the internet liberating, another finds it oppressive; for every friend we find online, there’s a troll waiting to hurt us.

The centerpiece of the exhibition captures this double-edged nature of technology well. Jon Rafman’s “Transdimensional Serpent” (2016) lives up to its name. Viewers slip on VR headsets and take seats on a large fiberglass snake. Over the four-minute experience, we’re whisked through worlds both fantastic and familiar: soaring through treetops, huddled in a foreboding alleyway, surrounded by mystical beings in a desert. While not as shocking as Jordan Wolfson’s hyper-violent exhibit at the 2017 Whitney Biennial (in which the artist bludgeons a man to death), it is nonetheless one of the most engrossing VR experiences I’ve had in a gallery setting.



Jon Rafman's 'Transdimensional Serpent' (2016) PHOTO: COLLECTION MAJUDIA/MCA CHICAGO

The journey is disorienting, sometimes scary, but filled with the excitement of feeling like we're truly exploring these imaginary places—not unlike the internet itself.

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