Electronic Superhighway

London

by JULIAN STALLABRASS

A FUNCTIONING SERVER sits on a plinth. It can be seen as a sculpture and used as a tool to connect to the Internet via Tor, an encryption system which makes it very difficult for spies, state or corporate, to tell what you are doing. Large service providers, which collaborate with state surveillance, do not like this one bit, and having used it to send a (presumably unspied upon) text, I had a message that blocked any further usage. This 'work', if that is quite the right word, is by Jacob Applebaum and the researcher, activist and artist Trevor Paglen, and it points to the remarkable synthesis of artistry and function that emerged from widespread cultural engagement with the Internet.

It is about fifty years since the first computers were connected to each other in a US military and academic research project that spread to become the Internet. *Electronic Superhighway*, an ambitious, various and stimulating exhibition at the **Whitechapel Gallery, London** (to 15th May), looks at artistic engagements with aspects of technology (by no means all to do with computer communication, or even digital media) over that period, which, in computing terms, is astoundingly long. In the early days, access to computers, let alone networked computers, was the preserve of a tiny number of people in mainstream institutions. Yet the very idea of mechanical computation and cybernetics, along with the effects of feedback and media immersion on the human subject, fascinated artists, who would eventually be folded into the digital realm.

Electronic Superhighway takes a reverse chronological look at its period, so that the viewer begins with the various blandishments of 'post-Internet' art (art that reflects and is dependent on networked culture but is not necessarily confined to digital media), and

73. *Internet Dream*, by Nam June Paik. 1994. Video sculpture, 287 by 380 by 80 cm. (ZKM Centre for Art and Media, Karlsruhe; exh. Whitechapel Gallery, London).

ends after a dizzying journey back down the long, dark barrel of Moore's Law to a period of laborious computer printouts, manipulations of video and ideal musings about what the collaboration of artists and engineers might involve. The origin is here taken to be the sinister managerial pronouncements of the Experiments in Art and Technology group in 1967, seeking to technologise art and humanise engineering, in a manner apparently blind to the obstacles in a field so thoroughly entangled in the military–industrial complex. Intentionally or not, the effect of the reverse chronology is a disturbing one, which plays up the deep strangeness of the present, and settles upon some of the darker intimations about the future that were already abroad in the prehistory of online culture.

The deep ambivalence that attends the use of electronic technology is already present in the work of Nam June Paik (Fig.73), who coined the phrase of the show's title. There is both fascination and joy at playing with the possibilities of new media, and the nightmar-

ish aesthetic of overload, and the suspicion, both with broadcast media and even more sharply with interactive media, of being reduced to a component of the machine. The new work – including the slack-jawed, rowdy youth culture videos of Ryan Trecartin, the Instagram performances of Amalia Ulman (Fig.75), or the acidic sweetness of Thomson and Craighead's spam karaoke machine, and Constant Dullaart's highlighting of the utopian but sexist ideology of the first Photoshop sample image – are seen through the clunky, fumbling experiments of the low- or no-bandwidth era. Witness Allan Kaprow's social experiment *Hello* (1960), in which people play with the novel experience of seeing each other remotely via video camera. Confronted with many monitors, they wave and shout to get each other's attention, frequently misfiring their disjointed attempts at communication. Seen here, the work becomes a premonition of the mandatory, workaday and fragmentary character of much social media interaction, and of the world of universal surveillance.

There is much in the exhibition about how artists engaged with the emerging technology and its new powers, but less on what those powers did to the art world. Think of the fate of postmodernism itself, which seemed buoyant in the 1980s and in sync with the idea that the network was structured like Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomes, and that its use would lead to a rich culture of hypertext works demonstrating the unfixed character of all meaning. Olia Lialina's *My boyfriend came back from the war* (1996; Fig.74) is one such work, using a web browser to tell a story with many branching routes. It is carefully displayed in *Electronic Superhighway* on a connection (or a simulation) that replicates the slow loading speeds of the 1990s, so that the work unfolds as was intended. But, following Moore's Law, which turned out to be applicable to storage capabilities and communication speeds as well as computing power, postmodernism found itself stuck in a cage with a technological gorilla that doubled

74. *My boyfriend came back from the war*, by Olia Lialina. 1996. Net project. (Courtesy the artist; exh. Whitechapel Gallery, London).
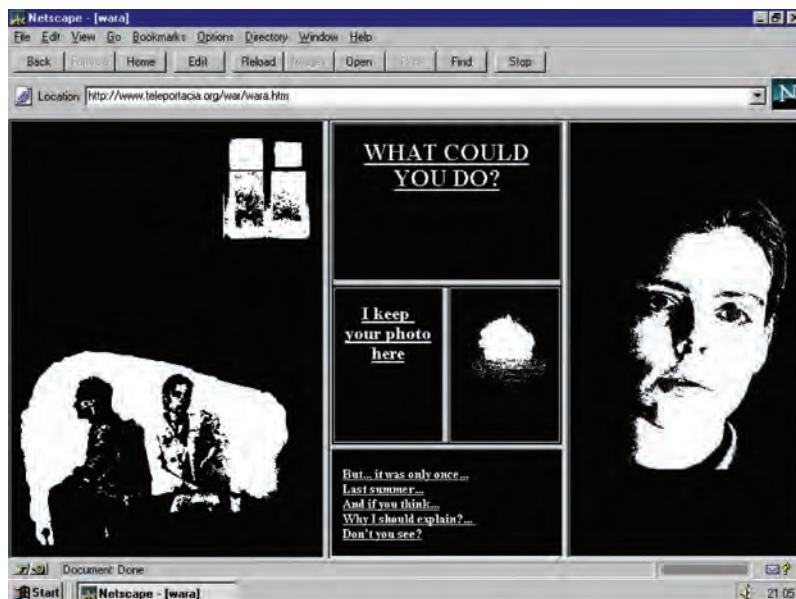
75. *Excellence and Perfection (Instagram Update, 18th June 2014)*, by Amalia Ulman. C–Type print dry mounted on aluminium, 125 by 125 by 3.5 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Arcadia Missa, London; exh. Whitechapel Gallery, London).

in size and might every eighteen months, thereby transforming the world with its new fierce hierarchy, and crushing the life out of it. Only the slowest among us now play with the bones of the rhizome.

The other great transformation is to do with artistic labour. Getting computers to do anything that might faintly interest the art world was, in the early years, a remarkably labour-intensive and generally thankless task. It often involved shuttling back and forth between analogue and digital media, and the results were curious more because of their origins than their results. Some, too, were tied to idealist thinking about the mathematical character of aesthetics, which was deeply out of tune with mainstream art-world views. Now, though, the machine takes on more and more of the labour behind the making of things that at least might look like art. Evan Roth makes a self-portrait by showing every image he has browsed in a long roll of paper that spills from wall to floor. This represents an extreme in which the artist's only decision is to choose a format and press print. Yet the lineaments of distinction are still evident at the Whitechapel: the display is reserved and refined, the choice judicious, the catalogue[1] well designed and the works beautifully reproduced, but there is nevertheless a disturbance here. It is felt with early video, which straddled many cultural worlds and which art discourse took at least a couple of decades to absorb, and in the display of net.art, which approached gallery display and art-world exclusiveness with tongue firmly in cheek. Do we see in the latest work, amid billions of producers who tap massive computing power and a vast world of readymade cultural material, the fading of the artist as an exceptional figure?

Spring exhibitions

London

by JONATHAN VERNON

A SPATE OF exhibitions timed to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Alberto Giacometti seems likely to maintain the privileged place afforded to his post-War figure sculptures and portraits.[1] The rate of production achieved by Giacometti in the 1950s and 1960s, combined with the seductive mythology constructed for them by Jean-Paul Sartre, caused his earlier styles and methods to slip into the margins of his œuvre. Giacometti seemed taken with Sartre's ideas in his famous essay 'The Search for the Absolute' – which recast the brinkmanship of the sculptor's treatment of plaster as a Sisyphean struggle – and was sympathetic towards a teleological view of his art. Sartre's essay was published in the catalogue of Giacometti's first retrospective, held at Pierre Matisse's New York gallery in 1948, and appeared immediately before a letter from Giacometti to the dealer, written a year earlier. Here, Giacometti traced significant stages in the development of his work to a series of personal crises. For example, in 1925, he lost faith in the methods taught to him by Emile-Antoine Bourdelle at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, and turned instead to the avant-garde. An equally seismic shift in his work was triggered by the death of his father in 1933, and led to his expulsion from André Breton's Surrealist group in 1935.[2] This letter, and the period of experimentation Giacometti identified in the interlude between these crises, supplies the scope of *Alberto Giacometti: In his own words: Sculptures 1925–1934*, a small but incisive exhibition at **Luxembourg & Dayan, London** (to 9th April).[3] Like Giacometti's letter, the exhibition demonstrates that the basic concerns of the post-War works are already evident in his earliest avant-garde sculptures: the problems of rendering the figure in three dimensions, of reconciling detail and negative space with clarity and economy of design, and of satisfying highly specialised conditions of likeness.

The show's centrepiece is formed by eleven of the eighteen sculptures on view, arranged in a fluid archipelago across a flat wooden surface (Fig.76). The works divide broadly into two groups. The first belong to Giacometti's engagement, between 1925 and 1927, with the examples set by Lipchitz, Archipenko, Zadkine and Laurens in converting the lessons of early Cubist painting into sculpture. *Cubist figure I* (1926; cat. no.5), for instance, draws from the prismatic organisation, hard volumes and schematic devices for rendering detail in Picasso's portraiture of 1911–12. In the second group, developed around 1928, the facets of the prism collapse into totemic, free-standing reliefs known as the 'plaques' (nos.13–15), the schema reduced to minimal impressions and striations. Those familiar with Giacometti's early works will note that *Crouching figure* (1926; no.4) is given the responsibility of mediating the shift between these idioms in the absence of important transitional works (especially *Spoon woman*; 1926), which is present in the thumbnail illustrations by Giacometti in his letter to Matisse, blown up on the gallery's rear wall; see Fig.76). Indeed, the period of time referenced in the exhibition's title is a misnomer. In spite of the appearance of *Disagreeable object* and *Disagreeable object to be*

76. Installation view of *Alberto Giacometti: In his own words: Sculptures 1925–1934* at Luxembourg & Dayan, London, 2016.