There is no escaping the gargantuan pair of women’s buttocks greeting the visitor entering Electronic Superhighway (2016–1966). With a series of speech bubbles emerging from deep within, Olaf Breuning’s wall-scale photograph Text Butt (2015) places onto the naked female body a fragmented smartphone conversation made up of unrelated questions and nonsensical replies, in which she is quite literally speaking out of her ass.

Introducing the theme of the body’s changing relationship to technology that curator Omar Kholeif described as the starting point of the show’s exploration of art and the internet, this is just one of the (exclusively) female bodies chosen to map this connection. To the left sits Katja Novitskova’s Innate Disposition 2 (2012), a large cutout print of a small furry animal, nestled in a pair of manicured women’s hands. To the right, in James Bridle’s Homo Sacer (2014), a projected holographic image of a smiling woman hovers behind a wooden desk. Reminiscent of the kind of hologram appearing in bureaucratic spaces such as airports and government buildings to provide depersonalized instructions, she is a virtual receptionist who flickers into life as each gallery-goer walks through the door. Quoting decontextualized extracts from various nations’ citizenship legislation, her singsong introduction welcomes us in, at the same time drawing our attention to the ways in which our sense of belonging is fragile and might be revoked.

It is not clear whether the gendered nature of this opening display was intentional or an unthinking coincidence, but it places the image of woman in interesting relation to the technology at the heart of the exhibition—as naked, sexualized body parts to be penetrated and overcome, or as a kind of gatekeeper, a guardian of the secrets that follow in all their noisy, brazen, and in places, trashy glory.

Including over one hundred works by seventy artists, Electronic Superhighway takes us back through time, posing the question: How has the internet changed art? Broad in scope, the curated response encompasses a variety of media and approaches, from the latest social media platforms, net.art, and computer-generated drawing, to traditional oil painting, photography, sculpture, film, and video. It covers many thematic bases: appropriation and remediation, authenticity and digital manipulation, technology and identity, the deconstruction of modernist paradigms and traditions, surveillance, and resistant forms of political agency. It was perhaps unavoidable that many are treated with a light touch, and in the crowded spaces of the large ground floor galleries of contemporary work, the flashing colors and glaring screens create an experience that at times feels like a rapid frog-march through its various themes. There is a lot to see.

Covering the ever-evolving platforms in which we engage with the internet today, all the way back to the pre-internet era in which the earliest digital stirrings presented an exciting prospect to artists of the 1960s, there is no shared artistic approach. But the fluctuating and often uncomfortable relationship that emerges as the human body adopts, incorporates, and at times resists technology is an enduring theme throughout.

It’s about the internet, so there’s a lot of sex. As part of his examination of its role in the negotiation of contemporary masculinity, Egyptian artist Mahmoud Khaled’s series Do You Have Work Tomorrow? (2012) stages a Grindr conversation between two men. Presenting a fictional narrative as a series of thirty-two prints of iPhone screen shots, the banality of the dialogue draws attention to technology’s everyday mediation of sexuality, despite the background turmoil of the Arab Spring suggested by the conversation’s date. A similar relationship between social media and sexuality is explored in Celia Hempton’s portraits of men encountered in chat rooms—albeit in a wholly different format. Named after their subject or merely the place and date of encounter—Jack, Scotland, 4th September 2015 or just Israel, 10th April 2015 (both 2015)—Hempton’s diminutive oil paintings have an expressive, gestural charge, heightened by her process. Painted live as she struck up conversations with strangers, the unfinished brushmarks betray the hurried nature of each brief exchange that lasted only until her subject swiped to end the meeting. With blurred glimpses of the naked bodies and sexual activities she frequently encountered, the unresolved results convey a sense of both the speed of
Internet communication and the easy rejection and frustrated desires that it has produced.

Perhaps more critical in their outcome are two projects that question the sex and gender identities engrained within the apparently neutral hard- and software of digital technology itself. Zach Blas’s installation *Queer Technologies* (2007–12) questions its heteronormative framework. To expose technology’s precondition in the realm of the social, for *transCoder: Queer Programming Anti–Language*, Blas developed an “anti-programming” language, an application programming interface for collective use that engages with alternative spoken languages such as the vernacular queer Polari. Looking at the authentically packaged connecting serial adapters that make up the *ENgenderingGenderChangers* (2008)—complete with a mock serial number that reads “FEMALE DB9 TO BOI DB9”—I was reminded of my bemusement at the ability of my engineer father and physicist sister to refer to the parts of a plug as either male or female with straight faces. Blas’s playful disruption of the binary language in which software is written and hardware imagined both questions the need to assign gender to technology, and opens up its potential for new queer connectivities. As he put it, what might these new adaptors enable us to do?

Covering the gallery’s back wall, Constance Dullaart’s custom-made wallpaper *Jennifer in Paradise, Liquify WhiteChapel* (2015) reveals a different kind of gender basis in the formation of software. Forming the backdrop to the lenticular prints *Plastic Wrap_20.15.15* (2014) and *Glowing Edges_7.10* (2014), the wallpaper repeats the motif of a woman on a beach—*Jennifer in Paradise*, the first stock image supplied with Photoshop when introduced in the 1990s. As her image is warped and deformed through the application of visual effects (prosaically described as “Plastic Wrap” or “Glowing Edges”) the “real” Jennifer disappears. She becomes all image, an immaterial presence that reflects the fate of her image in real life: Jennifer was the wife of Photoshop creator John Knoll, who used her holiday snap as a demonstration image that, after their separation, effectively became extinct. Performing what Dullaart describes as an "archaeology of the image," *Jennifer in Paradise* is resurrected in the shared space of Web 2.0, exposing the technological structures and systems on which contemporary visual culture is based—here, the decontextualized image of an almost naked woman.

The potential for the artistic disruption of technology’s grip on real bodies and identities is powerfully explored in Trevor Paglen’s compelling—if easy to miss—*Autonomy Cube* (2014). Other works focused on resisting the ubiquitous gaze of surveillance technology. In Douglas Coupland’s *Deep Face* from 2015, for example, Piet Mondrian–like geometric shapes obscure the facial features of photographic portraits in a way that is reminiscent of the pixelation technique used to anonymize photographs, as well as a means of resisting facial recognition software used on platforms such as Facebook. But Paglen’s work directly intervened with those processes: creating a live Wi-Fi hotspot in the gallery, *Autonomy Cube* routes all traffic through the “Tor” global network of volunteer-run services designed to anonymize the user’s data. Interacting with the sculpture in the exhibition, visitors become part of a resistant infrastructure, invisible and unseen—if only for a moment.

For others, evading that gaze is more difficult, and it was a shame that two projects investigating the relationship between technology and race were relegated to the more marginal gallery of net.art upstairs. In *Blackness for Sale* from 2001 (displayed here on a monitor as a screenshot of an archived website), artists Mendi + Keith Obadike used eBay to auction off the latter’s own blackness, creating a live listing in which identity was reduced to series of keywords and signifiers, attracting twelve bids and a highest bid of $152.50. Nearby, Martine Syms’s *Reading Trayvon Martin* (2013) (online at www.readingtrayvonnmartin.com) maps a personal biography of the artist’s archiving of the case following Martin’s shooting, its landing page overlaid with the haunting image of his black hoodie.

The quiet work demanded of Syms’ project offers a more contemplative experience—one that is disrupted by the almost spectacular scale of Nam June Paik’s *Internet Dream* (1994) in the following...
room. It is from Paik’s 1974 imagining of a “super highway” for telecommunication information that this show takes its name, and it is no accident that his installation is placed at the threshold of new and old, between art produced in the age of the internet and that which came before. Walking back in time through the show’s reverse chronology, the pace slows, noise levels lower, colors fade. We are returned to a simpler, more utopian vision of our relationship with technology—from Paik’s dream of new possibilities in 1994, right back to the final room’s documentation of Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.’s) interdisciplinary events of 1966, and their manifesto’s aspiration to “supply a foundation of new and experimental technology to artists” to create an “effective interaction” amounting to an “organic social revolution” (E.A.T. Aims, 1967).

Retracing my steps to wander backward through the show, and forward in time once more, it is clear that that idealized integration is never fully achieved. The body remains in tension with the machine—for better, and for worse.

For better, there is the precision and spare beauty of Vera Molnar’s “plotter” printer vector drawings Intimations (1969) and Structure of Squares (1974), or Manfred Mohr’s algorithmic P-26-Q (1970) and P-159 (1974). Exploiting the potential of the computer to be a new medium capable of automatic mark-making determined by rules rather than artistic intention, the careful logic here replaces the gestural excess of the artist’s hand. But for worse elsewhere, it is clear that our own era’s dissatisfaction with the disembodied experience of a life lived increasingly online was already apparent in the explorations of early digitization—for example, in Allan Kaprow’s four-minute film Hello from 1969, intended to critique television’s inadequate mediation of relationships between people, and in Richard Serra and Nancy Holt’s Boomerang from 1974, in which video technology is inflicted upon the self. As Holt appears on video, hearing the instant playback of her own voice in her own ears, we experience the minute delay between her articulation of the word and its mediated echo as it comes back to her—just too late. She stutters and stumbles, pauses in a futile attempt to allow herself to catch up. Caught up in the loop of what Holt attempts to articulate as the “double reflections and refractions” where meaning unravels, her self-mediation sets in motion a dislocation from the self—that uncanny dissociation when, as she puts it, “words become things.” Disrupting any promise of authenticity, the video’s digital dislocation of self and self-image, body and machine, foresees the increasing alienation from the embodied experience of the world of things, people, and sensual experience that this exhibition narrates—one that we can’t escape as we step outside of the show, and back into real life, lived somewhere outside of ourselves.

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Laura Poitras: Astro Noise
WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
NEW YORK CITY
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Astro Noise is the first solo exhibition worldwide of the work of documentary filmmaker and political activist Laura Poitras. It is her first attempt to translate her research about post-9/11 anxičties into the context of an installation in order to develop a more direct interaction with audiences.1

Astro Noise is the name of the first encrypted file containing evidence of mass surveillance that former CIA employee and NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden shared with Poitras in 2013. It also refers to the muffled disturbance of leftover thermal radiation that is believed to have dispersed in the universe in the form of aimless microwaves after the Big Bang. The Snowden leaks had a similar retroactive effect, producing a leftover noise that is still echoing politically and socially. In this exhibition, Poitras attempts to construct a critical space to reflect on what happened, extending its ethical implications. The itinerary commences with the ANARCHIST series (2016), large-scale blown-up photographic images from the Snowden archive printed on huge aluminum sheets. At first sight they are merely beautiful images, but they are actually generated from signals from Israeli and Syrian drone feeds and radars intercepted by the British surveillance agency Government Communications Headquarters. The sheer scale and brilliance of the images is blinding and disorienting, so at first one barely registers the content. The real content of the images and their origin is not revealed until the visitor reads the wall labels. At this point, the images intercepted are no longer simply data collected from signals. They are pieces of a puzzle that can be put together in radically different manners. Data collection is the foundation on which governments create retrospective narratives based on specific political agendas. This retrospective manipulation of data, for Poitras, seems to convert objective data into malleable political narratives for “deep state” maneuvers.2 For Poitras, Astro Noise functions as a “subversive countermapping”3 that uses visitors’ knowledge of the historical narrative to clash directly with the data itself. She intends to strip the images, creating new possibilities of vision,4 but instead incites a move toward the spectacularization of horror by favoring aesthetic contemplation and experiential involvement over critical distancing.

Other artists have explored the question of data collection and governments’ tendencies to interpret patterns within data in ways useful to their own interests. Hasan Elahi, for instance, has turned surveillance on himself 24/7 in his ongoing project Tracking...