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All I know is what's on the internet

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**About the author(s)**

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# All I know is what's on the internet

by Sarah Perks • 14.02.2019

The internet is having something of a mid-life crisis. Born out of allegedly academic and altruistic research activities, it is now in a self-realised panic that it has become a monster, the dictator and slave forced together, forming new methods to torture its creators, owners, suppliers and users alike. Revealing the cruelty and economics of disadvantage behind every click has become a bit of a cliché in contemporary art, and a lot of artistic output – about the internet or otherwise – claims to be about the boundaries between truth and fiction, as does this exhibition about the internet and its relation to photography.

There are many artists packed into *All I Know Is What's On The Internet*, starting with the Hong Kong-based Winnie Soon, who presents the single-screen monitor piece *Unerasable Images* [FIG. 1](#). The monitor shows screenshots of Soon's Google search results for a censored image of a Lego character made to commemorate the 'Tank Man' protestor photographed by Stuart Franklin in Tiananmen Square in 1989. We are reminded of both the power of a single photograph and the lengths to which governments will go to repress images. Also displayed at the start of the exhibition is *World Brain* (2015) by Stéphane Degoutin and Gwenola Wagon, a film shown in two installations (or accessible online via the [gallery website](#)), which investigates the relationship between networked spaces and their physical locations. Featuring telepathic rats, collective kitten intelligence and sharks eating the underwater fabric of the internet, the film is shown in an uncomfortable setting – with tree-trunk seating and on topic fiction and non-fiction books scattered around.<sup>1</sup> The work is nevertheless an entertaining, free-flowing history of computerised collective intelligence, across all manner of conspiracy and theory in a just over an hour-long combination of YouTube, pseudo-science and re-enactments of researchers surviving in the forest using only Wikipedia.

The majority of the remaining works embrace the mechanics and technology of the internet. Silvio Lorusso's and Sebastian Schmiegl's *Five Years of Captured Captchas* (2017) consists of books that are displayed to chart the evolution of captcha from spam filter to image-recognition teacher. Mounted in large reflective aluminium sheets are recycled SIM cards purchased by Constant Dullaart to create an army of fake followers through PVAs (valuable Phone Verified Accounts), which he uses to question how much of what we see online is real and marshals to

fight online information wars. He displays the SIM cards in a tactical military formation, knowingly providing an irresistible Instagram moment for the viewer, to which his 'followers' will then respond. Stephanie Kneissl's and Max Lackner's purpose-built machines randomly scroll through and 'like' social media feeds on smartphones and tablets in order to disrupt the built-in algorithms that limit and effectively decide what we see within our networks, and therefore potentially create bias. The work that emerges, *Stop the Algorithm* (2017), is a sculptural vitrine display that feels more remote and dystopian than hopeful or activist **FIG. 2**. If it is this simple to disrupt or 'pollute' the mechanisms of our networks, one wonders, what might be possible with the resources of the Russian or United States governments?

The human labour behind smart technology is revealed through Andrew Norman Wilson's photograph of an employee's hand accidentally photographed while scanning pages for Google's behemoth digital library in *ScanOps* **FIG. 3**, and Emilio Vavarella's series depicting Google Street View vehicle drivers caught outside of their blur algorithms (*The Google Trilogy 3*; 2012). The artists' collective IOCOSE turns crowdsourcing platform workers into awkward online protestors in the series *A Crowded Apocalypse* (2012) by micro-tasking them to take photographs of themselves, their faces covered, holding slogan boards that claim to reveal a global conspiracy that consequently circulates online. This work predates and predicts how sophisticated the scandalous manipulation of social media networks by companies such as Cambridge Analytica was to become, potentially strong enough to throw a major political election or referendum results.

Eva and Franco Mattes's series of video installations *Dark Content* (2015) **FIG. 4** consists of fascinating interviews with internet content moderators, their voices fittingly matched to stock avatars. Their stories, however, reveal that they are real people with their own ideas of what offensive material might be. Embedded in generic and corporate Ikea office furniture, the work is often most effective thanks to its dark comedy: one moderator recounts the removal of a SpongeBob SquarePants GIF that offended the CEO's dog. Brave viewers can access all of these censored videos via the dark web.

Miao Ying explores another form of censorship, that practiced by the Chinese government. A rising star of what might be called post-Chinternet art, Miao presents her work *LAN Love Poem.gif* **FIG. 5**, a visual mishmash of cheesy phrases in three-dimensional word art, cheap 8-bit internet backdrops and 'website unavailable' notices, across six monitors. Her work criticises a simplistic conception of the aesthetic capabilities of the Chinese internet, challenging the assumption that lack of access to 'western' websites can leave only an ugly wasteland. China's own IT companies Alibaba, Baidu and Taobao have developed their own hugely popular aesthetic, embedding sophisticated commerce and

multi-platform functionality for millions of users, the downside, of course, being the government's ability to monitor these sites so effectively.

The entire back wall of the exhibition is papered with marketing materials, photographs and correspondence sourced from the murky world of internet surveillance companies by the artist Mari Bastashevski (*Nothing Personal*; FIG. 6). It feels appropriate to have literally hit the wall at this moment in the exhibition, since the form and scale of Bastashevski's piece produce feelings of desensitisation and demoralisation: a wall is completely papered with corporate promotional material and employee correspondence from hundreds of global internet surveillance companies, a juxtaposition that reveals the hypocrisy of these companies.

Jonas Lund's performance piece *Operation Earnest Voice* FIG. 7, held as part of the exhibition in early January 2019, created a minor ruckus after he set up a four-day influencing office 'tasked with reversing Brexit', causing Leave campaigners to write to Arts Council England asking them to withdraw their funding of the gallery.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps they felt threatened by Lund's investigation of 'online manipulation tactics', or indeed feared that the artist's intervention might actually work.

The exhibition's curator, Katrina Sluis, and her colleagues have researched extensively and pulled together a sound set of artists, although in places the presentation is too cramped, diluting the impact of some of the stronger works. Exhibitions about the internet, videogames or indeed labour, should be more interactive than they currently are, as so often they relapse into conventional museum display methods. The theoretical questions asked of photography at the very start of the exhibition – the blurring boundaries of truth and fiction and of man and machine – are not adequately addressed, largely because they are too simplistic considering the ground covered by the exhibition. Conversation around the internet's dark habits now demands further nuance and must go beyond the language of machine versus human or an imagined endless circulation of images causing havoc. Indeed, most of the world and its inhabitants are now primarily documented or accessed through the interfaces of the internet, but the people and power structures behind the manipulation of images remain frustratingly familiar. And as for the title of the exhibition, a quote from the American President that suggests the internet is his sole basis of information and intelligence acquisition, well, Trump gets enough airtime as it is.<sup>3</sup>

**Exhibition details** All I Know Is What's On The Internet  
The Photographers' Gallery, London  
26th October 2018–24th February 2019

## Footnotes

- 1** H. Bloom: *Global Brain: The Evolution of Mass Mind from the Big Bang to the 21st Century*, Hoboken NJ 2001; P.N. Edwards: *The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America (Inside Technology)*, Cambridge MA 1997; F. Hoyle: *The Black Cloud*, London 2010.
- 2** See A. Shaw: 'Leave campaigners call for Photographers' Gallery to be stripped of charitable status over Jonas Lund's project to 'reverse Brexit', *The Art Newspaper*, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/photographer-s-gallery-refutes-claims-by-pro-brexit-campaign-group-that-jonas-lund-project-breached-charity-commission-and-arts-council-rules> accessed 28th January 2019.
- 3** See R. Savransky: 'Trump: "All I know is what's on the internet"', *The Hill*, <https://thehill.com/blogs/ballot-box/presidential-races/272824-trump-all-i-know-is-whats-on-the-internet> accessed 28th January 2019.

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