



## The Dance of the Digital

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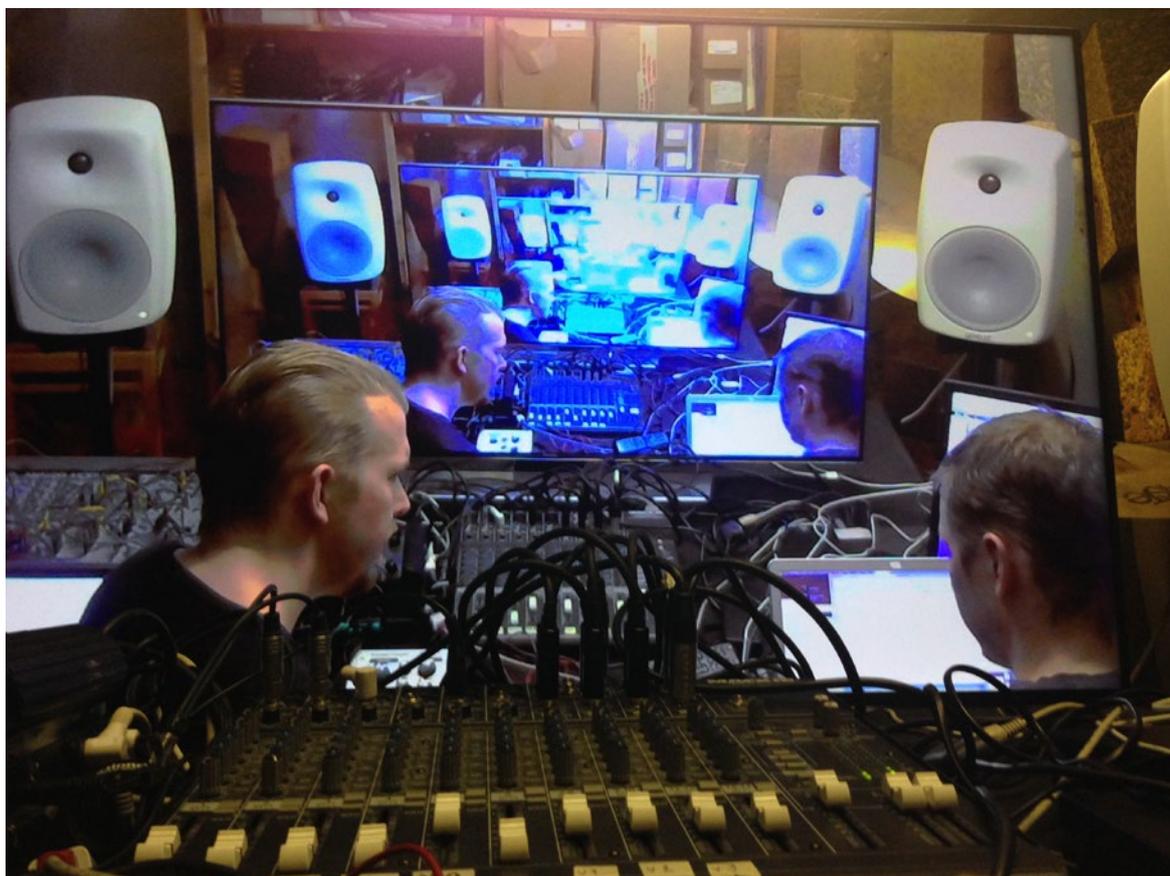
As ARS17 gets underway at Helsinki's Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, visitors will be able to view many of the artworks online from anywhere in the world. The show's two curators, Marja Sakari and Arja Miller, discuss the implications of online art for museum professionals and its impact on collecting and conservation practices

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I am sitting in a glass-panelled office in the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, one of the Finnish National Gallery's three art museums, in Helsinki, with two of the curators of its upcoming exhibition, ARS17. Over coffee, they show me an artwork that I can access on my smartphone by a Finnish artist duo, Pink Twins. The work, called *Infinity*, consists of an interactive sound platform, with a library of sound material that I can use to create mixes from four stereo tracks, manipulating them individually to alter the combinations and qualities of the sound. It includes instructions for use, as well as FAQs for 'visitors'. Once I have created my unique piece of music, then I just save and download the mp3 version, and share in Facebook. Wow, I am an artist! Hello World!

One of the key developments in contemporary art practice this century has been the use of the internet and the possibilities for art-making it offers – like, for example, producing works online. Ever since the American art theorist Lucy Lippard predicted the dematerialisation of the art object in the late 1960s, the trajectory of conceptual art has left an indelible mark on art processes. Now that the millennial generation of digital natives is bringing these ever-evolving new media to the table, art museums and collectors are facing fresh challenges in finding ways not only to curate digital art, but also to collect it. With only a few museums supporting dedicated accessible online art archives – the Whitney Museum in New York being one of the pioneers in the field with its Artport website – Kiasma's 'ARS17 Hello World!' is at the forefront of bringing online art into the fold.

The ARS exhibitions, which began in Helsinki in 1961, are one of the longest-running recurring exhibitions of international contemporary art in Europe. 'They have always been surveys of current themes in the art world and this time we thought that the most interesting phenomenon is the digital and how it has affected the way artists are working just now, how it has changed their role,' says Marja Sakari, Kiasma's Chief Curator. 'Nowadays artists are producers more than "creators" and many of them collaborate and the internet offers so much freely available material, which has created a new situation for artists. Around the world



**Pink Twins, *Infinity*, 2016**  
 online artwork, accessible during 'ARS17' at [arsplus.kiasma.fi/en/](https://arsplus.kiasma.fi/en/)  
 Finnish National Gallery / Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma Commission

there have been some exhibitions<sup>1</sup> about so-called post-internet art<sup>2</sup> but not in Finland, so we felt we had a duty to show what has been happening in the past decade or so.'

The digital age is indeed raising far-reaching questions for art-museum professionals, from the philosophical to the technical to the practical, so the challenges in mounting an exhibition of this kind are considerable. What makes online art, art? What are the issues involved in presenting net art in a museum context when it can be accessed anywhere? The sometimes interactive nature of online art raises ever more complex questions around

1 'Surround Audience', New Museum, NYC, 2015; 'Cut to Swipe', MoMA, NYC, 2014–2015; 'Private Settings. Art after the Internet', Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw, 2015; 'Art Post-Internet', UCCA, Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, 2014; 'GLOBALE. The New Art Event in the Digital Age', ZKM, 2015–16, Karlsruhe.

2 Post-internet refers to a current trend in art and criticism concerned with the impact of the internet on art and culture. It applies both to net art and to art that has been influenced by the fact that we have the internet and all the possibilities it offers us. See <https://www.artsy.net/gene/post-internet-art>; Marisa Olson, 'Postinternet: Art After the Internet', in *Art and the Internet*, Black Dog Publishing, London, 2013, 212–215.; Gene McHugh, *Post Internet. Notes on the Internet and Art*. 12.29.09>09.05.10, LINK Editions, Brescia, 2011; Leevi Haapala, 'Hello World! Living in the Post-Internet Condition' in *ARS17 Hello World! Taide internetin jälkeen / Art After the Internet*. A Museum of Contemporary Art Publication 156/2017. Helsinki: Finnish National Gallery / Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, 2017, 174–75.

authorship and originality. And, in the case of commissions and acquisitions, how do museum collections deal with technical issues such as ephemerality and durability in considering the preservation and conservation of online art in their holdings? These are some of the questions that both Sakari and her colleague Arja Miller, Chief Curator of Kiasma's FNG collections, have embraced wholeheartedly as they open up new dimensions of artistic practice to the art-going public.

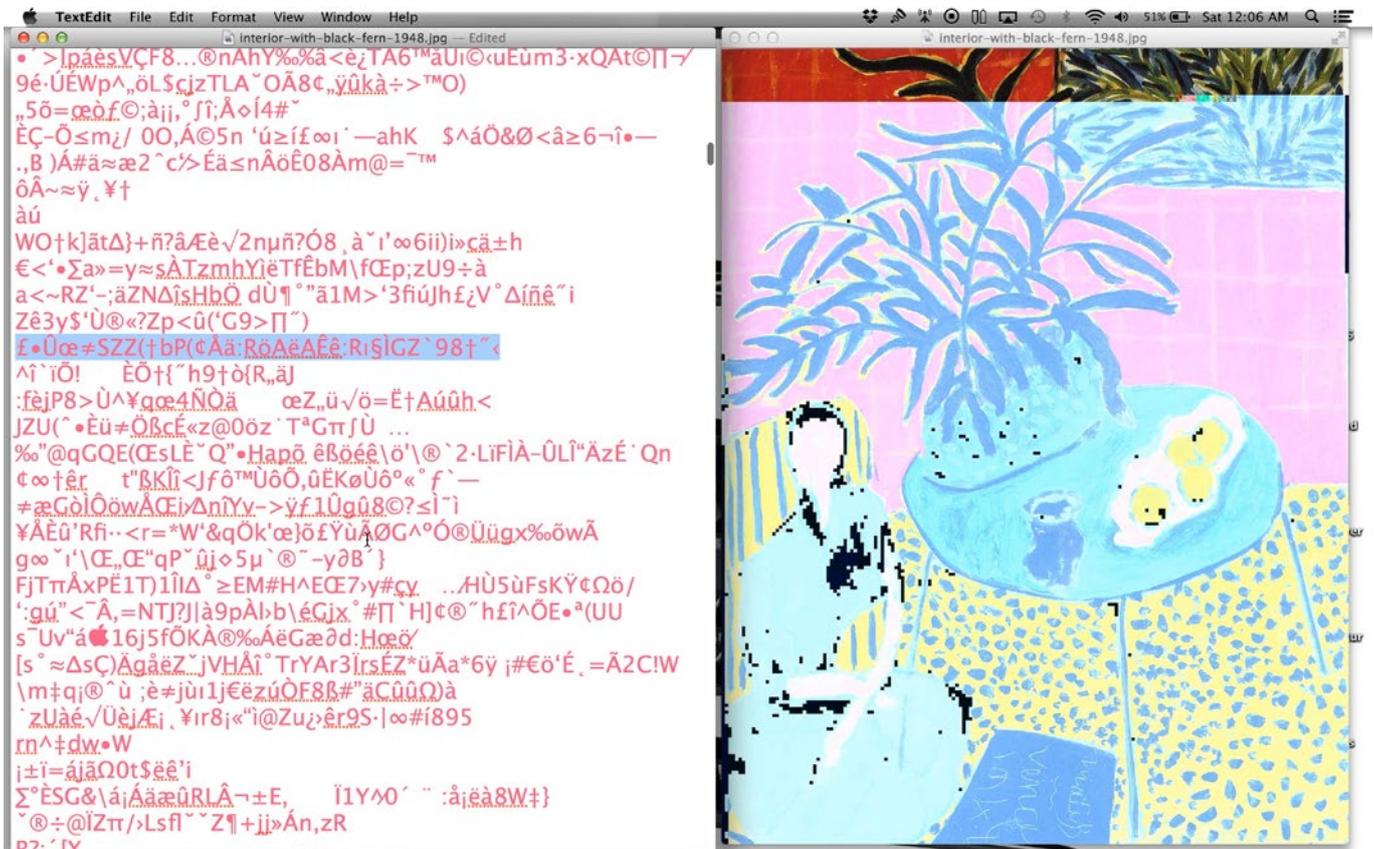
The exhibition at Kiasma presents 24 artists working in the digital field, and in a new initiative, an additional 16 artists are showcased in an online art section of the exhibition, ARS17+, via a dedicated website ([arsplus.kiasma.fi](https://arsplus.kiasma.fi)) that takes the viewing experience beyond the walls of the museum. This wide-ranging survey show includes artists at the top of the tree, such as LaBeouf, Rönkkö & Turner, who recently gained global prominence with their controversial post-Trump-inauguration work, *He Will Not Divide Us* (2017), British artist Ed Atkins, and also an early pioneer of internet art from Finland Juha van Ingen. So what kind of digital project is defined as art when it comes to selecting for such a show?

'When we see the works, it's not about applying Duchampian values by simply putting the work in an exhibition space to make into art,' says Sakari, 'but most of the works shown in the exhibition can be defined as art, like any other work of art, through their aesthetic aspects, but also from the skills that are used to produce meaning, and through the signification processes which are constructed in the complex juxtapositions of different images, texts and ideas, for example appropriated from the internet or quoted from TV news or social media or other communication modes. There are different kinds of artistic strategies that the artist can use to express his/her ideas which define the "art" of the works. When you encounter these works you understand that they affect you in a different and often more intriguing way to what you usually see on internet or TV or other media.' Arja Miller adds: 'There are lots of visually splendid online projects which are interesting but they lack the qualities of being multi-layered or thought-provoking. We were also looking for a certain level of originality in the ideas being presented.'

Of course the art context places the works in a time-line of art history, so could today's digital art be seen as a postmodernist approach that has evolved into post-internet art? 'It is possible to see a line, within the history of contemporary art, that leads to digital art,' says Sakari. 'For example, the Fluxus movement and conceptual art had ideas about everybody being an artist (Joseph Beuys) or ideas being transmitted globally, or knowledge being in everybody's possession (for example, the idea of the electronic superhighway by Nam June Paik). All these ideas were present in the 1960s and 70s but have only been possible to manifest in reality at large with the current digital technology. The idea of appropriation, so common today, was launched with postmodernism, but whereas postmodern art appropriated from earlier art movements or from advertisements, post-internet art has the almost unimaginable abundance of knowledge and imagery in the internet as its playground.'

Miller cites the example of the German artist, Florian Meisenberg in the ARS17+ online section of the exhibition. Meisenberg, who originally came from a painting background, is interested in the construction of images. In *somewhere\_sideways* from his 2015 series 'Towards a New Architecture' he demonstrates in a concrete way how online images are constructed using a source code. He reveals that process using a JPEG image of a painting by Henry Matisse, *Interior with Black Fern* (1948), and presents a QuickTime video of that image being transformed through altering the coding process. As the image changes, one sees and hears the codes being inputted in an increasingly frenzied tapping of the keyboard, commenting on the obsessive, immersive nature of coding. 'A common strategy of digital Millennials is how they distance themselves from the media through which they are presenting their work,' she says, 'often through humour, or revealing the processes involved.'

But if anyone can access online art, then why collect it? 'If we take Daata Editions' videos, where we purchased British artist Rachel Maclean's work *Let It Go* (2015) for our online section, it is one of a limited-edition of 20, but at the same time we are putting that work on Arsplus and, after ARS17, on the FNG Collection site, giving unlimited access to view it. We have also given the context for that work within ARS17, so we have written a curatorial text with information on why Maclean works in this way and the ideas behind this specific work. But in terms of the collection what is most important is that we want to show it as a

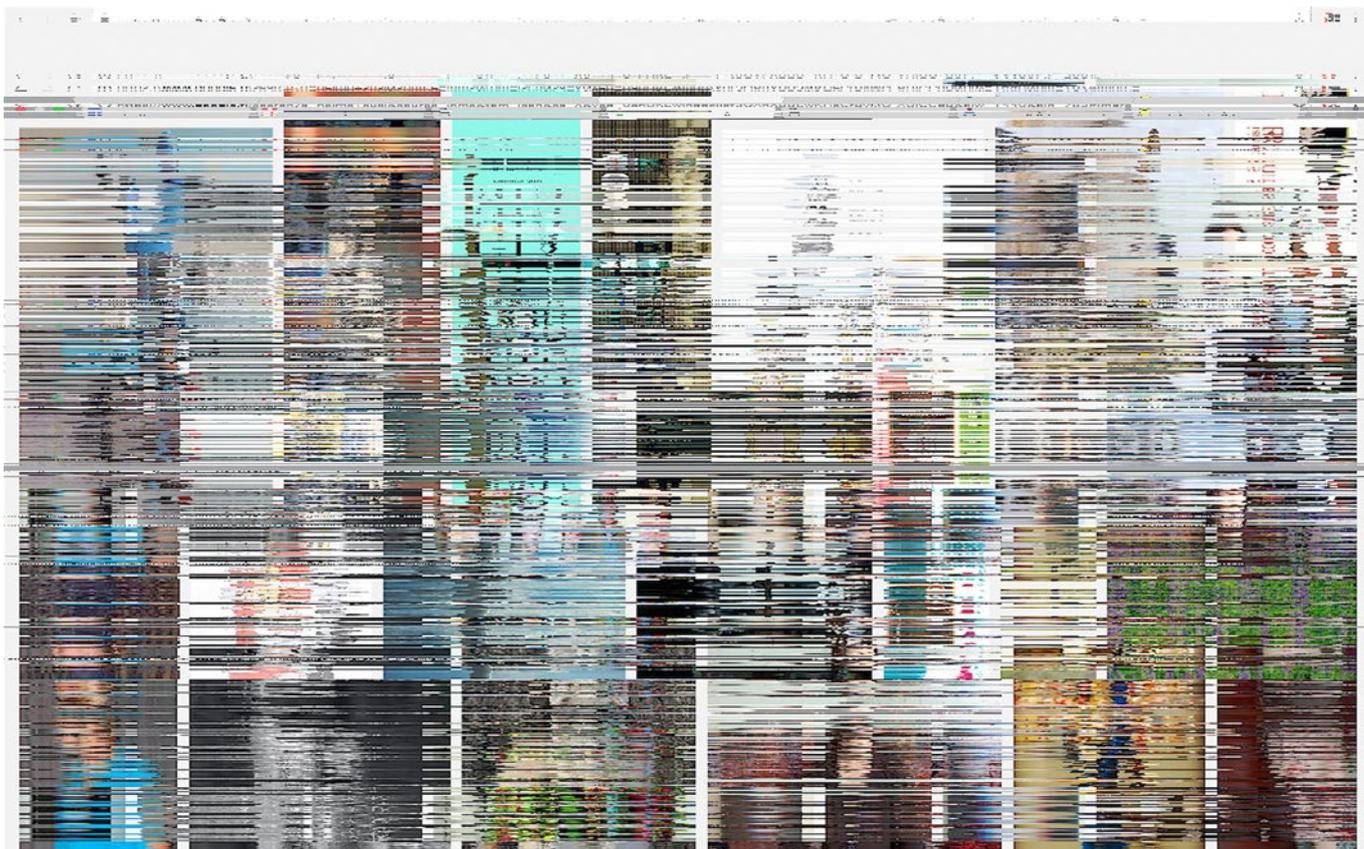


Florian Meisenberg, *somewhere\_sideways*, 2015, from the series of 'Towards a New Architecture' online artwork, accessible during 'ARS17' at [arsplus.kiasma.fi/en/](https://arsplus.kiasma.fi/en/), Finnish National Gallery/ Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma

leading example of contemporary practice and we want to preserve it for future generations from an art-historical viewpoint.'

Along with Pink Twins, several new commissions for ARS17+ emphasise the interactive element of net art, bringing further questions about who is actually the artist in the digital era and the implications of collaborative processes via the internet community in making an artwork. 'Nowadays with digital technologies you can use existing material in so many ways that it's impossible to track what is original,' says Miller. 'If you have the right tool it doesn't matter what kind of things you re-circulate but they are forming so many new combinations that the original is no longer recognisable and this is part of the scene.' In *O.D.O. (Ordered Dance Online)* 2017, for example, Jarkko Räsänen has created bespoke image-editing software that allows the visitor/user to upload their own snapshot and transform it into an abstract image by slicing up the image and reorganising it according to variants like brightness or colour or rhythm. The resulting images seem painterly, with an almost Gerhard Richter-like appearance – the original image being unrecognisable – but mediated through the aesthetics of new media. As visitors save these creations onto an online gallery, their images become part of a collaborative artwork, viewed as a patchwork of moving images that itself is sequenced, say shifting from darker to lighter as you scroll down through the image gallery.

Questions of ownership and authorship are thus becoming ever more complex in the digital era. One solution that takes a democratic approach to digital distribution is open data – data that anyone can access, use and share under a specific license, which allows re-use when the original is credited. 'So for example in the case of Pink Twins' work, *Infinity*, the artists



Jarkko Räsänen, *O.D.O (Ordered Dance Online)*, 2017  
 online artwork, accessible during 'ARS17' at [arsplus.kiasma.fi/en/](https://arsplus.kiasma.fi/en/)  
 Finnish National Gallery / Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma Commission

have licensed the sound material for anybody to use, but also the user has to give an open licence to resulting songs,' says Miller.

But for museums and collections the issues of preservation and conservation require careful consideration. When an interactive artwork relies not just on visitor participation but also their direct involvement in the creation of the work, at what point does the work become complete?

'Pink Twins have been thinking a lot about endurance issues and we agreed they would update their artwork for five years so that it will be functional for that whole period,' explains Miller. 'A prime motivator for many internet artists is interactivity because it raises the communication with the viewer to another level.' But the artist duo has thought even further ahead. 'We have bought an archival version of *Infinity*, i.e. the sound material that forms the base of the work. That can be revived according to the instructions given by the artists in a different system in the future,' she adds. 'The material, as well as the programme, is very large so the reviving job will be quite complex. But in the future perhaps the amount of data won't be a problem anymore. There are such huge advances being made.'

While Miller is optimistic about future advances in technology, there is also a downside that has already created obstacles in the conservation of digital art – obsolescence. Miller has worked to reactivate the museum's online FNG collection, not only through the commissions and acquisitions for this exhibition, but also in terms of works that were acquired at the start of the internet era in the 1990s, but which have literally disappeared into the ether as the technology was superseded. This is an issue that has caught out many museum collections.

Miller gives the example of Andy Best and Merja Puustinen, who were pioneers of internet art in Finland in the 1990s. 'When the Museum of Contemporary Art was founded in 1990, it began purchasing their early works but no long-term preservation plans were made. I guess they couldn't anticipate the radical and rapid changes that would come in software and hardware and the support that is needed if you want to present the works in the future. So these are things we are trying to solve now with the new commissions and acquisitions. One by one, we have discussed with the artists how to preserve their works, but also a lot of discussion with a legal advisor, technical staff and conservators has been necessary. This area is challenging for the whole museum profession, not only curators and artists but also technical experts, conservators especially.'

These are lessons that museum professionals are still learning and ones which affect the commissioning of net art today. 'The commissioning involves a long dialogue with the artist,' says Miller. 'Sometimes it becomes evident that the proposed work would not be able to be preserved – that it is too bound to a certain type of technology, but then we can always find a way to preserve a certain aspect of the work, so at the minimum that would involve documentation of the work, or a game, or a web page. So we agree on the best ways to do that.'

One artist who has gone to extraordinary lengths to preserve his artwork is Juha van Ingen, who has pieces in both the museum exhibition and the online section. With a title that nods towards John Cage's *As Slow as Possible*, ARS17 is presenting in the gallery space van Ingen's *As Long As Possible* (ASLAP), a 1,000-year long animated GIF loop comprising black frames with a white number indicating the frame's position in the loop. There are 48million 140,288 frames which change in 10-minute intervals, making the total duration of the loop 1,000 years. The animation will be activated at the exhibition and the plan is to keep it playing until 3017 in the FNG Collection. The work raises questions such as: how does one preserve the work across generations? How do you prepare for technical adaptability? What happens if the institutions involved don't outlive the artwork?

'Of course this theme of longevity is the concept of the work, which can be described as a digital-age relic,' says Miller. 'It uses GIF animation, which is a very simple technical format used since the early days of the internet. The artist's plans to extend the life of the work are a part of the content of the work itself. So with his coder and our experts he has made waterproof and timeproof plans.' Kiasma has thus acquired one of six physical playback units that will run simultaneously in different locations. What if it needs to be technically upgraded or is destroyed? 'One of the artist's strategies is that if something happens to the Kiasma version – say through a war, or a natural disaster – then it can be reconstructed from the other versions and synchronised with them,' Miller explains. If all the playback units perish, then the file can be reconstructed from information held in special time capsules which contain the description of the artwork, the specification of GIF, the original GIF file, and a printed copy of the code for generating a new file. KUMU Art museum in Estonia has acquired the time-capsule version.

Such issues of ephemerality and longevity prompt the question, with the progress of the digital age how long will it be before contemporary art museums themselves become defunct as physical spaces? For now, one of the main drivers for the continuing presence of contemporary art museums in presenting digital art is cross-media practice. 'People still need physical contact with the works,' says Marja Sakari. 'And many of them presented in the Kiasma building in ARS17 are installations. For example, for the German artist Hito Steyerl what is very important to her is the kind of environment she creates for the viewer to engage with her videos. The work doesn't simply speak to the viewer on a flat screen.' Similarly, American artists Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch create elaborate series' of sculptural theatres in which to view videos that relate to the on-screen themes, often in ironic ways.

One artist dealing with the relationship between the physical and the virtual is Ed Atkins, whose work, *Ribbons* (2014), is installed in three subsequent exhibition spaces where we encounter three different screens with an avatar (the artist's alter ego) telling the story of a lost, melancholic, anguished young guy. The artist will also make a performance in the Kiasma theatre, on the same theme, with the artist himself on stage and the avatar projected on screen, as well as an actual choir whose singers occupy seats at random

in the auditorium among the audience, blurring boundaries between performer and viewer, real and virtual. 'Ed Atkins's works question the digital experience,' says Sakari, 'asking whether we are the poorer for not having physical contact.'

Clearly, this wide-ranging survey of the digital art realm at ARS17 and its online section, throws up new research questions around critiquing net art and curating and collecting the digital. Parallel to the show, Kiasma is organising a series of talks starting in September 2017 in Kiasma, in collaboration with the University of the Arts and the University of Helsinki, around the themes of the show, as well as a 'Night of Philosophy' at the museum on the 1 September dealing with the relationship between humans and machines and what effect this has on our identities.

**'ARS 17 Hello World!' 31 March 2017 – 14 January, 2018, Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki; 'ARS17+', visit [arsplus.kiasma.fi](https://arsplus.kiasma.fi)**