



The Second Coming of Online Art

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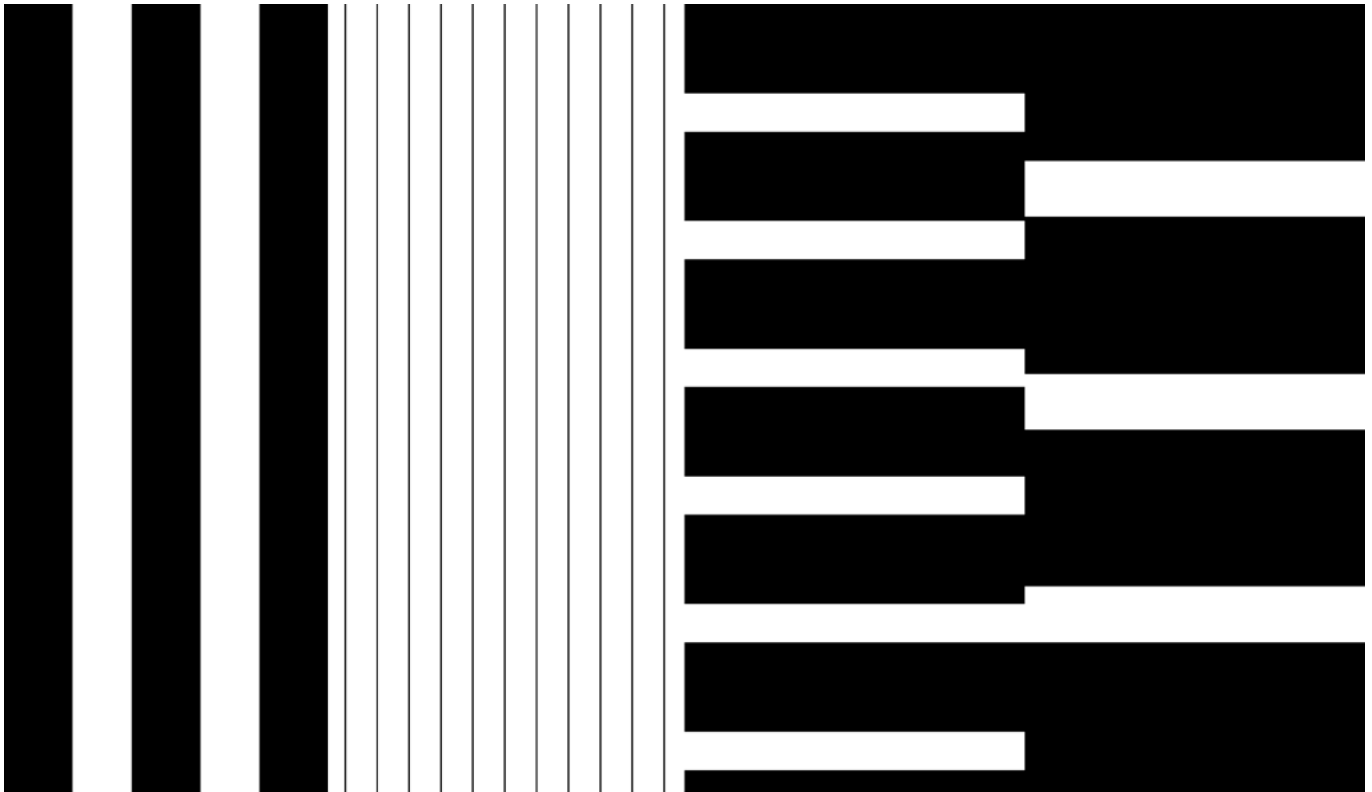
'The internet is a monument to an ever-changing present.'
Angelo Plessas

'Program or be programmed.'
Douglas Rushkoff

Kiasma's ARS17 exhibition (31 March, 2017 – 14 Jan, 2018) is a response to the global digital revolution and its ubiquitous impact on our culture and daily behaviour. Over the past few years, new technology has radically changed our social relations, our everyday routines and our modes of interacting, communicating, feeling and bringing together communities. The impact of the digital revolution is also inescapably felt in the practice of art, and in the ways that art is presented and collected. A growing spectrum of noteworthy art is native to the internet, where it is also intended to be consumed and enjoyed, either via social media or mobile app. Given that Kiasma's core mandate is to keep up with the latest trends and most interesting new practices in the field of contemporary art, we felt it was high time we reactivated ourselves as exhibitors and collectors of online works.

The ARS17 exhibition provided a timely impetus for this initiative. Parallel to the physical exhibition, we decided to curate an online exhibition spotlighting digital art and giving this growing genre the attention it deserves. ARS17+ spills outside the gallery walls into the virtual realm, where it can be enjoyed by anyone, any time, virtually anywhere in the world, via mobile device or any web browser/internet connection. Meanwhile, an interesting challenge is posed by the works that will remain permanently in Kiasma's collection after the exhibition is over: How can our museum maintain and, above all, preserve a wide variety of digital artworks that rely on specific software and devices? How and in what environment will they be accessible after the ARS17 project is over?

Kiasma had already recognised the relevance of the internet as a forum for contemporary art back in the 1990s, when the web was still young and society embraced a wave of cyber-utopianism. Back then, there was a band of interesting Finnish artists busily experimenting with new media. Juha van Ingen and Mikko Maasalo co-organised Finland's first-ever internet art project in 1995, when the Museum of Contemporary Art was still housed



Juha van Ingen, *Inter_active (Black and White)*, 2016
 online artwork, accessible during 'ARS17' at arsplus.kiasma.fi/en/
 Finnish National Gallery/ Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma

in the Ateneum building.¹ Visitors were invited to participate in the show by deconstructing, manipulating and reorganising the exhibits as they desired. As related by van Ingen, the project's goal was to use art as a vehicle for exploring interactivity – an enduring topic of interest for online artists ever since the inception of the genre.²

In the late 1990s, Kiasma acquired two works by artist duo Merja Puustinen and Andy Best, both of which focus on interactivity both in the gallery space and on the internet. *Conversation with Angels* (1998) was described as a 'web-based multi-user piece' harnessing new technology, while *DAD@* (1997) was an early internet critique. Back then, no special provisions were made for their long-term display during the acquisition process. Now that many years have passed since they were added to the collection, reviving these works for display in a contemporary online environment would require considerable resources and effort because the required software and hardware simply no longer exist.³ Collecting online art for a public collection in fact requires careful advance planning and negotiation with the artist to

1 The exhibition, 'Re-evolution', was listed in the Finnish National Gallery's programme for 1995 as 'an art exhibition staged in the Internet'.
http://www.hel.fi/hel2/kanslia/historia/Hgin_wwwsivut_1995/matkailu/taidmu/valtaid.html.

2 Juha van Ingen's email correspondence with the author, 5.9.2016.

3 In the 1990s the Museum of Contemporary Art also acquired the online art work *Clean/Puhdas/Ren* (1995) by Jan-Erik Andersson and Leena Krohn's web publication *Sfinksi ja robotti* (The Sphynx and the Robot, 1997).

ensure its longevity. It also requires wide-ranging technological expertise in order for museum personnel to grasp fully all the factors that need to be taken into account and the resources needed for the long-term operability of a newly acquired online work. Online art furthermore raises a whole new set of issues pertaining to the content of acquisition contracts.

Not every work of art can – or indeed should – be preserved. Certain works of online art are inherently temporary and ephemeral by nature. In such cases, the artist and museum can together agree on the documentation of the piece to enable the museum to preserve a record of the genre's evolution in different eras.

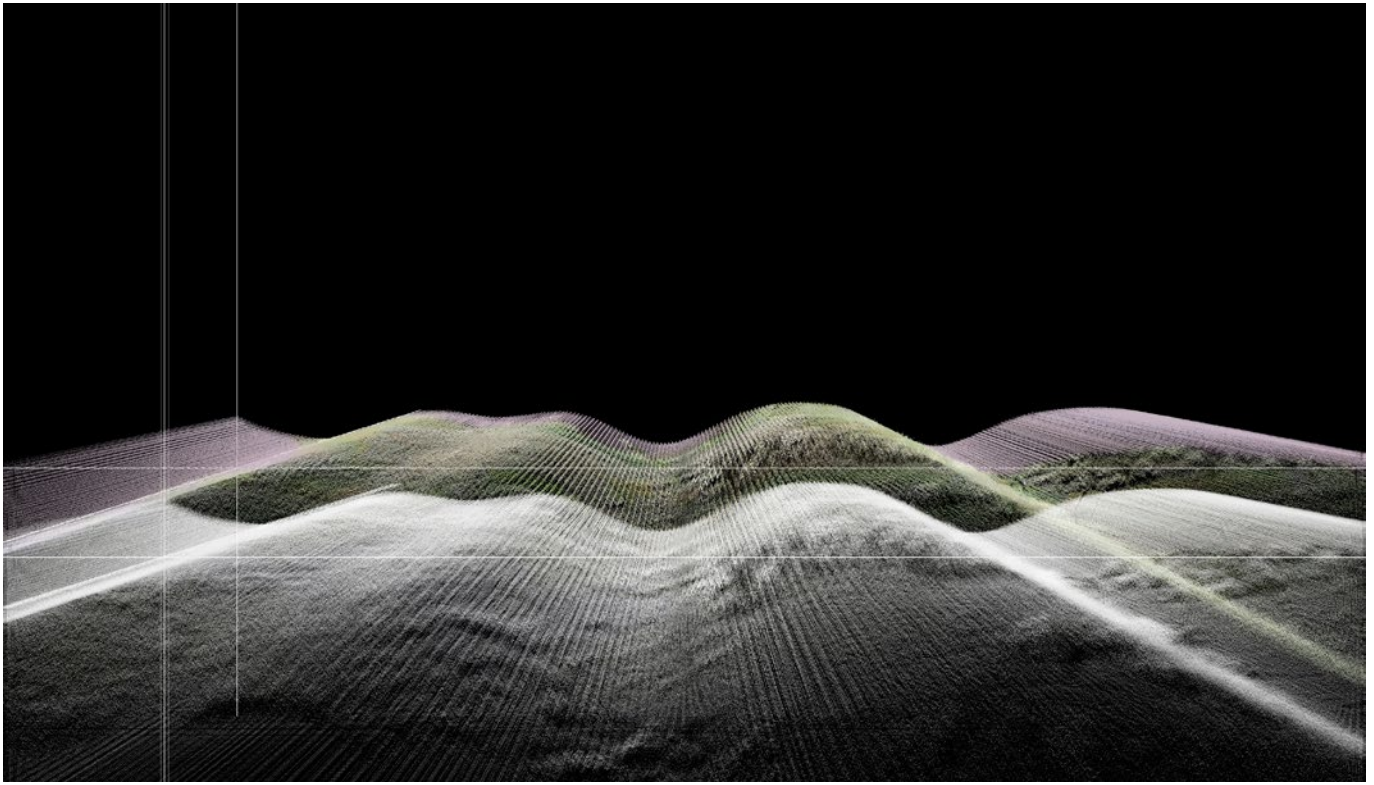
After a dormant period of a few years, online platforms and exhibitions have witnessed a worldwide resurgence, with various art institutions becoming more active as commissioners of digital art⁴ in recent years. Many large museums have added online art to their collections, though few as yet offer genuine direct access to digital artworks – what is offered is usually limited to texts and documentation. Notable exceptions include the Whitney Museum of American Art's Artport (<http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/Artport>), DIA Art Foundation's Artists' Web Projects (http://www.diaart.org/artist_web_projects), the ZKM Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe's Art On Your Screen (<http://aoy.s.zkm.de/>) and the Walker Art Center's Gallery 9 (<http://gallery9.walkerart.org/>), all of which devote special resources to ensuring the longevity of online works.⁵

Although today there are many generations of Finnish artists working in the online genre, it still represents a relatively new domain of art, at least from an institutional viewpoint and in the eyes of the general public. Added to this, the genre exists in a perpetual state of flux. The terminology, too, is challenging. The terms coined in the late 1990s – 'internet art', 'browser-based art' and 'software art' – all describe the same basic idea, though each from a slightly different angle. All terms nevertheless refer to artistic practice that uses digital technology and programming as an essential part of the creative process, and is native to the online environment.

Today 'online art' remains perhaps the most descriptive qualifier covering the entire field. With many generations of artists working within this field, the terminology was of course different for those artists and writers who became active in the early years of the genre. Moreover, online art has changed with the advent of new, more sophisticated technology and with the internet having become a commonplace tool in our daily lives. For the Millennials, the internet and social media are integral to their identity, an inseparable part of their daily lives and their reality, a self-evident channel of communication and self-expression. The fusing of the digital and physical worlds is second nature for the 'post-internet' generation. Time spent and moments shared on the web are no longer separable from real life; the digital domain has become just as real and tangible as physical reality.

4 Serpentine Galleries is among those to have recently commissioned interesting new digital works. <http://www.serpentinegalleries.org/explore/online> and <http://www.Rhizome.org>.

5 To map out current practices in the field, in autumn 2015 Kiasma conducted a small-scale survey among six art institutions known to collect online art. In addition to those mentioned above, the respondents included the MCA (Museum of Contemporary Art, Australia) and the Zabludowicz Collection in London. The respondents reportedly began collecting online art around 15 years ago, when the first net art works began appearing at exhibitions and art fairs. All the respondents cited content as the main reason they acquired online works, not the medium *per se*. The respondents reported that they had no particular strategy for collecting online art; rather they were motivated purely by the wish to keep up with the latest trends and practices on the contemporary art scene. Nearly all of the respondents focused on collecting existing works rather than commissioning new pieces. Most of the purchased works were intended solely for presentation online rather than for display in a physical exhibition space. The personnel in charge of this online art varied in different institutions: some assigned the task to dedicated media art curators, others to programmers or conservation and archive personnel with special expertise in digital media. The institutions all regarded it as important to appoint experienced technical personnel to meet challenges related to the future operability of digital works.



Tuomo Rainio, *Unfilled (Gravitation Waves)*, 2017
 online artwork, accessible during 'ARS17' at arsplus.kiasma.fi/en/
 Finnish National Gallery / Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma Commission

In conjunction with the ARS17+ online exhibition, Kiasma has purchased a number of existing works designed for online distribution.⁶ We also commissioned wholly new online works from selected artists. Kiasma's team of curators was assisted in the selection process by an invited visiting curator, Attilia Fattori Franchini, who has specialised in online art for a number of years.⁷ We have assembled a selection of works by key new media artists – without, however, presuming to offer a comprehensive overview of today's online scene, but rather a cross-section of interesting current practices and approaches in the online genre.

The invited artists vary greatly as regards both the form and content of their work. One artist takes us back to the history of internet (Juha van Ingen), another chooses a gaming-inspired approach (Reija Meriläinen), one shows us a VR-enhanced video exposing how digital technology has altered our understanding of art and reality (Axel Straschnoy), one uses a web generator blending poetry and biological processes (Jenna Sutela) and yet another invites users to remix archived sound art on an interactive platform (Pink Twins).

⁶ Early in 2016 Kiasma purchased a selection of videos from DAATA editions, an organisation that commissions limited-edition online works from contemporary artists. <https://daata-editions.com/>. The works selected for the Kiasma collection are by David Blandy, Ed Fornieles, Rachel Maclean, Florian Meisenberg, Jon Rafman, Charles Richardson and Amalia Ulman.

⁷ London-based Attilia Fattori Franchini is an independent curator and a founder of Bubblebyte.org and Opening Times (<http://otdac.org/>) online art platforms.

Many online artists champion the open data initiative, voicing a critique of the commercialisation of the internet and social media. This theme is indeed addressed by many of the artists featured in the ARS17+ Online Art exhibition. Angelo Plessas, for one, examines the parallel realities created by the web. Jarkko Räsänen in turn invites users to experiment with his self-made image editing software. Tuomo Rainio utilises the open data of scientific inquiry to give a visible form to the invisible laws of physics.

ARS17+ features both 'traditional' online art as well as physical works with an added online dimension. One example is artist trio LaBeouf, Rönkkö & Turner's *#ALONETOGETHER*, which utilises the web and social media as the platform for a physical performance and for establishing a direct connection with the audience. The piece is not online art in the conventional sense; rather the web is merely an enabler, with social media feeds from interactive participants constituting its key content.

The ARS17+ user interface will remain open on Kiasma's webpages for the duration of the ARS17 exhibition. After the exhibition – as deemed feasible on a case-by-case basis – Kiasma will make long-term plans for the preservation of selected works, enabling them to be enjoyed by online visitors via Kiasma's webpages and the Finnish National Gallery's collections website. The addition of this new online body of work to the Finnish National Gallery's collections will have far-reaching implications extending beyond ARS17+. From an international perspective, too, the works acquired and commissioned for the ARS17+ project represent a highly topical foray into the field of new media art, marking the beginning of a pioneering online collection that will hopefully be augmented regularly in years to come.