



at the Dunlop

ESSAYS | SUMMER 2018



Dominique Pétrin, *You won't solve the problem with an air freshener*, 2017, silkscreened paper installation, grunt gallery. Photo: courtesy of the artist.

# EXHIBITION ESSAY

## PING PONG

BY BLAIR FORNWALD, JENNIFER MATOTEK AND WENDY PEART

*URL:IRL* considers self-fashioning in the digital age, with the selected artists using digital media and digital space as their subject and theme, creating places to critique culture. Some artists explore the impact of the digital on photography and moving image, delving into the history of digital aesthetics and the visual culture of the ‘errors’ one encounters in cyberspace. Some works reference art history, and how the internet has altered traditional ways of understanding culture, ideas, and their dissemination. Most of the works consider the gaps between IRL (in real life) experiences involving the living body and the disembodied digital experience, and how this process of detachment makes people (including corporations) behave differently in online spaces.

On the internet, subjects are turned into objects – objects often subjected to a disinhibited critique that would never be thrust upon them IRL. This antisocial behavior is made possible due to the absence of restraint one might feel moving through the internet thanks to the options of false identity or anonymity. Toronto artist Maya Ben David’s works play with identity to address the misogyny of online fan communities – user groups who use the internet to find their people and accuse women users as being dabblers or “fake nerds,” often subjecting them to hateful, lewd comments and sexualizing them and their creations. Ben David calls out the haters on social media and in wickedly funny videos and live performances. Although her best-known creation is an anthropomorphic plane named Air Canada Gal, Ben David

often cosplays unlikely inanimate objects, like a stucco popcorn ceiling. She gives her characters rich backstories, personalities, and agency, a feminist act that implores us to consider how everyday objects are anthropomorphized and even eroticized, while women are conversely objectified.

Other artists in *URL:IRL* who consider the treatment of women in society and online, and how social norms can play out problematically in digital space are Angela Washko and Endam Nihan. In her video series *Free Will Mode*, New York artist and writer Angela Washko documents scenarios she has created using the video game *The Sims*. Capturing her *Sims* fumbling through controlled architectures she has designed, guided by the game's "free will mode", the *Sims* eat, sleep, pee, yell, cry, and eventually die, seemingly unable to free themselves from their predicaments. Metaphorically, their inability to control their environment by seeking to change it parallels with the ways we all accept, to varying extents, traditional power structures and gender roles, even at our peril. In Turkish-born, USA-based artist Endam Nihan's *perfect 365*, one selfie cycles 108 times through an augmented reality (AR) smartphone app that uses face detection technology to add layers of makeup filters. Eventually, the facial features become lost and the application fails to recognize the face. *perfect 365* touches on

many complicated issues around digital life – the strangeness of facial detection software, and the potential for the software to create a generation of users who develop unrealistic beauty expectations or lose the ability to truthfully see themselves IRL. Works by Ben David, Washko, and Nihan could be interpreted as challenging the utopic myth that cyberspace is liberating, a space where you can leave your body and gender behind.

Like Ben David, some artists in *URL:IRL* use digital media to create and claim spaces that might not otherwise exist to political, cultural, and often poetic, effect. Anishinaabe Montreal-based intermedia artist Scott Benesiinaabandan's virtual reality (VR) world of *Monumentalisms* is comprised of over 600 photographs of two monument locations – the Jaques Cartier monument in St. Henri and the Chomedey-Maisonneuve monument in Old Montreal. In *Monumentalisms*, monuments are no longer designed to conjure the past, but to create a future, using VR as a medium for colonialist critique. Anishinaabe Ottawa-based artist Barry Ace fuses traditional and contemporary materials and forms, articulating how Indigenous people have continually adapted to cultural and technological changes by using new forms, materials and mediums in culturally-specific ways that counter and resist dominant hegemonies. The bandolier bags by Ace included in *URL:IRL* honour individuals and communities, much

like the traditional Anishinaabeg bandolier bags given in ceremony as gifts of friendship and honour, respectfully acknowledging that his work exists within a historical lineage. The works also call to mind the important role of the internet in facilitating and broadcasting the work of Indigenous-led resistance movements like Idle No More and Families of Sisters in Spirit.

Other examples of world-building for poetic and conceptual (if less politically charged) effect presented in *URL:IRL* include Toronto artist Amanda Low's web art projects and New York artist Sarah Rothberg's *Touching a Cactus*. Low's *ORIGINOFTHE.NET* poetically considers how the internet, conceptually, came to be, and *ETERNALLYMOVING.COM*, considers the phenomenon of "link rot" (slang for lost links and domains), challenging the idea that the web is a place for endless storage, reminding us that it is also a space capable of losing and forgetting. In *Touching a Cactus*, interactions with a virtual cactus lead to various scenes where time is slowed down, or sped up, amidst a poetic audio track. To an extent, the works by Low and Rothberg underscore the existential qualities of our visits to digital worlds.

*Preturna*, a pregnancy simulator by Toronto artists Jeremy Bailey and Kristen D. Schaffer, explores similarly existential territory. The user dons a VR headset to become endowed with a pregnant

belly that mimics an imaginary version of Schaffer's own body. Too perfect to be real, the experience, placed in a pharmaceutical ad-like landscape setting – the kind that the formerly allergic, impotent, or depressed find themselves frolicking through in television commercials – is narrated by the artists debating whether to have kids. The familiar IRL conversation does much more to simulate understanding and empathy in the user than the embodied digital experience of pregnancy they have created.

One becomes aware of the physical, lived experience of their IRL body through *URL:IRL*'s installations by Dominique Pétrin and Megan Smith. For *Riding Through Walls*, Regina artist Megan Smith connected the movements of a vintage stationary bike to Google Street View, using a networked computer to traverse the Canadian landscape from coast-to-coast in real-time, projected onscreen in front of her. Sharing moments of her journey on Instagram and through livestream technology – moments that capture human connections and mundanities, as well as technical glitches and errors – Smith seeks to humanize the experience of Google Street View in a unique way, and in her words, to "pierce the internet." The screen-printed, collaged installations of Montreal artist Dominique Pétrin create the bodily sensation of walking through digital noise into a moving, IRL GIF. Although Pétrin's work

is incredibly Instagrammable (search #dominiquepetrin for some examples), the proprioceptive affect generated by seeing her work IRL connects to many discourses around art and the internet today: How well one can understand an art work without seeing it in the flesh? Can virtual encounters replace the real encounter? Can you get it from just a .jpg?

The act of placing oneself in digital space has never had a bigger cultural moment than the advent of the selfie. While selfies have a bad rap in some circles, tagged as proof of millennial narcissism driven by an economy of hearts and likes, selfies can be a critical part of self-representation, destabilizing the self-portrait genre by providing the opportunity to present oneself exactly as one might wish to, affirming one's existence. In *URL:IRL*, many artists appear as themselves in their work, often to comedic and intellectual effect. For *The Selfie Drawings*, Brooklyn-based artist Carla Gannis created 52 self-portraits over a period of 52 weeks. The works depict Gannis in historical and contemporary contexts, referencing art history, popular culture, the media, semiotics, and technology. But to add another digital layer, viewers can hover over each image with their smartphone using the app Blippar to activate each image, creating an AR experience that causes imagery to leap off the still surface of the work. Although the work cannot be fully

experienced without employing a digital platform, her works still grapple with the traditional, historical, persistent question of the self-portrait genre: "Who am I?" In the performative video arrangement of *Nail Art Museum*, Famous New Media Artist Jeremy Bailey (as he coins himself) uses digital animation to transform his fingernails into museum plinths, displaying a dizzying array of contemporary artworks and "other stuff" like palm trees or corporate logos. In transforming his hand into a mini-museum, Bailey assumes the role of the artist as content aggregator and curator in a post-Postproduction landscape, harnessing institutional power and associated fame for himself. The VR user of Sarah Rothberg's *The New News* steps into a strange room in which an avatar of the artist reads, like a journalist behind a news desk, items from Rothberg's Facebook News Feed. During a fraught time where the ethics of Facebook's algorithms are being contested, Rothberg's *The New News*, created prior to such controversy, conversely reminds us that sometimes the internet is very mundane and perhaps everything will be OK. But will it be OK? If we are being honest with ourselves, we have always understood that internet was a space where corporations were probably stealing our information. Studies indicating negative effects for social media usage are increasingly outweighing research that suggests any benefit.



Maya Ben David, *MBD Origin Story*, 2016, video. Image: courtesy of the artist.

Algorithms help determine what you see on social media, and in computational photography, they help your smartphone to guess what you might have photographed using other pictures stored on your phone or networks. Our understanding of the photographic medium has been completely transformed by this as well as the logic of Google's Image Search function, which is eroding the traditional ways images were once circulated, making every image on the internet, inherently, about its own dissemination. Generating fake pixels over found and manipulated historical photographs, Indian artist Nandan Ghiya takes "real" images and aesthetically and materially turns them "digital". *The Pet Pixel Unveiling of Our Ancestors* and *Eleven Perspectives* share the aesthetic of a corrupted or still-downloading image – picture frame and all. Mixing the visual culture of internet errors with archival images, Ghiya's image manipulations could be interpreted as a violent kind of gesture – the material objects seem to be suffering to support the existence of the scanned digital immaterial. This potential interpretation is doubly troubling given that Ghiya's works tend to use historical photographs of Indian families or objects, placed in groups with a logic shared with the Google Image Search engine, as though one searched a word, and these were the corresponding images which turned up.

The politics that drive what appears in Google's Search bar oppose one of the critical myths of the internet: that it has been, or continues to be, a democratic space. Although the cost of speech on the web can be low, it has always been easier for the rich to speak and be heard – and digital space is no exception. The present state of our capitalist market, with the precarious labour of the emerging gig economy, has undoubtedly been influenced by new communications technologies and AI. As such, the spectre of capitalism looms across *URL:IRL*. While some of Toronto artist Kaley Flowers' sculptures express a longing for the early, pre-commerce days of the internet – she crafts soft-bodied clay figures, decorated with colourful decals, who are contentedly losing themselves in their laptop screens – other works function as digital wallets. Sculpted to look like jewelry boxes and other precious containers, they are decalated with QR codes containing public keys for small amounts of cryptocurrency, stored online. The private keys are hidden inside each sculpture. A treatise on their own value as artworks, the sculptures would have to be destroyed to cash in the funds in their associated wallets. Desearch Reportment's works combine the visual culture of branding in the age of the internet with the hypocrisy of the commercial self-help industry (because marketing works best when it makes potential buyers feel bad and seek to remedy it through purchases). Madelyne



Beckles video *Theory of a Young Girl* takes inspiration from the French collective Tiquun's 1999 text *Preliminary materials for a theory of the young-girl*, which outlines how capitalism fashions young women and other marginalized groups into ideal consumers by conflating freedom, commercialism, and desire. Beckles' pithy delivery of Tiquun's text is intercut with soft-focus scenes of her using baby pink cosmetics and personal care products – the tools of culturally-prescribed and consumer-driven femininity – reminding the viewer, as in the work of the Endam Niham, the role commercial digital platforms play in making women and girls, susceptible to insecurities that are intended to be remedied by capitalist consumption.

Digital space, more than print, is now the primary location for people to share their opinions and values. Some of these values become manifest in the visual culture of the digital. The early years of digital computing built a recognizable, shared aesthetic (part dystopic, part neon) while the Y2K aesthetic of the late 1990s demonstrated considerable confusion around what an online space should look like (think web counters and blinking GIFs). Eventually, this gave way to a more confident vision – utopic scenes made using digital graphics, with curves and gradients covered in pastel shades, or dripping like liquid mercury. An artist in *URL:IRL* whose work references the visual culture and

contemporary values of the web is Lorna Mills. Yorkton-born, Toronto-based artist Lorna Mills' video installation *Colour Fields* situates eight monitors, each playing a GIF animation originally sourced from user-directed forums like Reddit and set within backgrounds of hyperbolic colour. The selected GIFs – pixeled, glitchy, uncontextualized, and in random conversation with one other – take a candid look at the underbelly of the internet, its bawdy foibles and our attractions to the maudlin, dirty, problematic, slapstick, and sybaritic, mirroring the experience of slithering through the wonders and perversity of the wild, wild web. The uncanny movements and blank expression of the generic 3D male figure in Winnipeg artist Freya Björg Olafson's video, *Painting With the Man*, is reminiscent of one of the earliest viral internet memes – 1996's Dancing Baby, popularized on TV's Ally McBeal. As Olafson's figure moves and morphs across the digital canvas, he leaves hallucinatory traces that fill the screen and create the composition.

*URL:IRL* is not a survey of works about how technology has changed the way we make and think about art. The internet has undeniably changed how we receive all forms of written, verbal, and visual communications (although it is important to note that presently only 40% of the world's population has a stable internet connection, and in many nations, the ability

to move around in digital space is limited, often by governing bodies). Ultimately, digital space and the internet have become a social construct – a space that has bred in us a set of habits and social practices that have changed how we fashion ourselves and think about reality.

Digital space is no longer a place of imaginary fantasy, but real life.