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## 'Pictures Want to Be Kissed': Author and Curator Omar Kholeif on Dating Apps, Digital Artifice, and Visual Constructions of Desire

Read an excerpt from Sharjah Art Foundation curator Omar Kholeif's new book 'Internet Art.'



Courtesy of Omar Kholeif. Photo by Reem Sawan.

Omar Kholeif (<https://news.artnet.com/about/omar-kholeif-33318>) May 24, 2023

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The following essay has been adapted from the new book [Internet Art](https://www.phaidon.com/store/art/internet_art-from-the-birth-of-the-web-to-the-rise-of-nfts-9781838664077/) ([https://www.phaidon.com/store/art/internet\\_art-from-the-birth-of-the-web-to-the-rise-of-nfts-9781838664077/](https://www.phaidon.com/store/art/internet_art-from-the-birth-of-the-web-to-the-rise-of-nfts-9781838664077/)) by Omar Kholeif (Phaidon, 2023), originally published under the title "Curated Desire, Curating Bodies: Everywhere All the Time."

Kholeif is collections director and senior curator at the Sharjah Art Foundation, UAE, as well as an author, broadcaster, and the avatar of Dr. O—a polymath who lives in the metaverse. A leading commentator on art and digital culture, Kholeif is the author of dozens of books, a curator of more than 60 exhibitions, and the founder of [artpost21.com](http://www.artpost21.com/) (<http://www.artpost21.com/>), which supports art and

*social justice in the age of the "meta" metaverse.*

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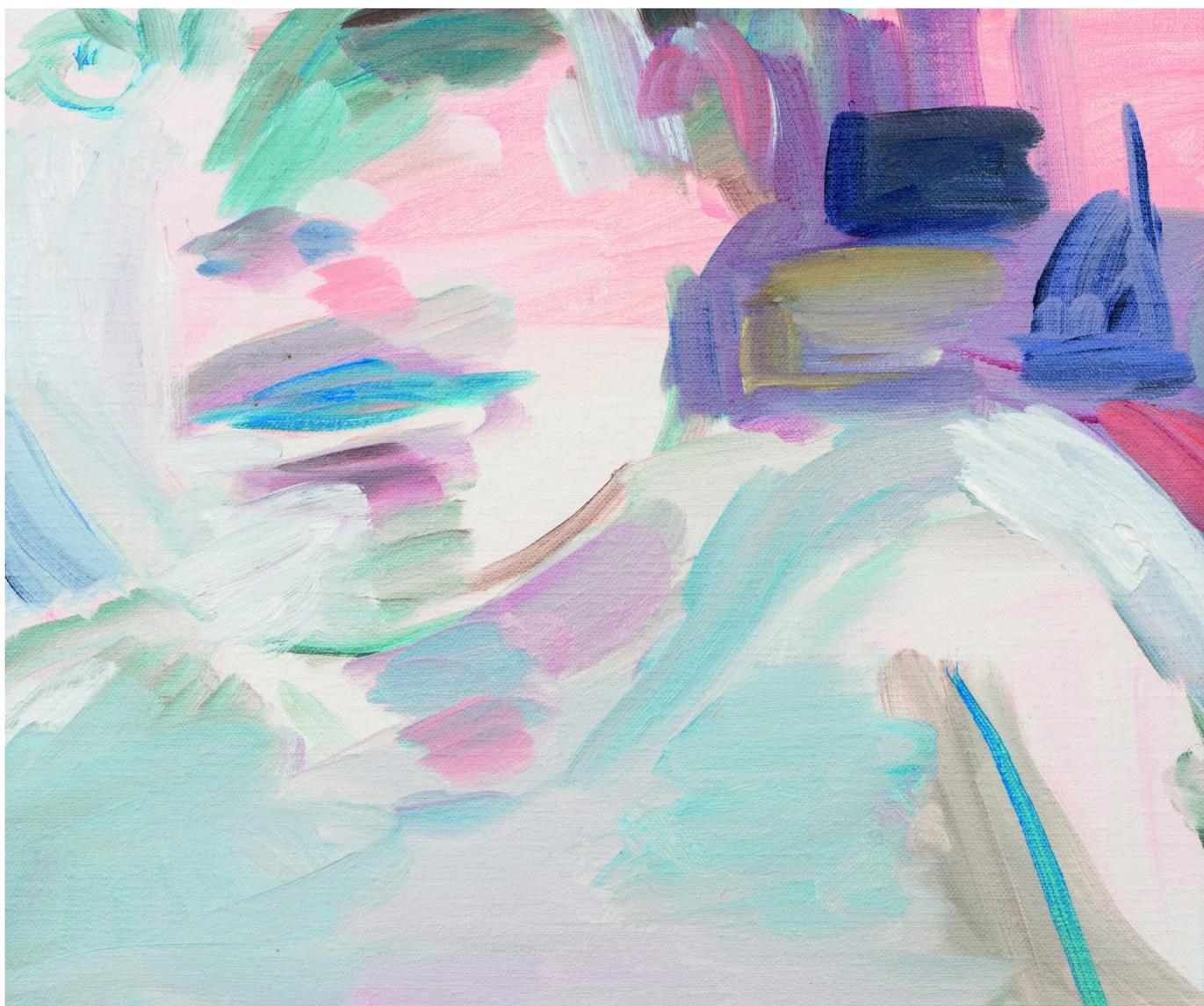
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The sense of intimacy—and alienation—that has emerged since the advent of online dating forums has been the subject of much discussion. From Tinder to Hinge, desire is now reduced to a checklist of predetermined factors, aspirational shopping lists of elusive amorous companions. On the other side of this are websites, such as Chatrandom, which became a point of obsession for the painter Celia Hempton. In her series "Chat Random" (2014–ongoing), the artist logs onto the website, where she encounters anonymous strangers whom she seeks to engage as models for her portraits. Her online meetings—with men in search of physical connection, as well as trans women—wheel the artist around the contours of the globe. Through an informal invitation, Hempton initiates her process, painting the portrait of each subject on a canvas, often no larger than the size of a laptop screen. The result is a performative suite of works most often formed of gestural brushstrokes. Once the man in question clicks on the screen to the next person, the artist's process grinds to a halt. The finished work is an intimate snapshot into an unambiguous moment that could only be embodied in the act of engaging through a networked computer.

I first installed a suite of these paintings in "Electronic Superhighway (2016–1966)" at the Whitechapel Gallery, London. Clustered on a table, they began to resemble open windows on a computer screen. I chose to install them as if they were multiplying chat boxes, desirous conversations accumulating into an archive of wanton intimacies. These were experiences suspended in time, never to be completely realized. Despite the alienation of the mysterious platform Chatrandom, Hempton's paintings summon different emotions. They are studies of vulnerability, intimacy detailed by a stranger, and the abnormalities of bodies in places near and far.



Celia Hempton, *Misha, Odessa, Ukraine, 8th July 2014* (2014). Courtesy of the artist and Southard Reid.

The subject of online dating rooms and applications has occupied the visual field for nearly two decades. At the 2011 Venice Biennale, artist Frances Stark became the subject of much discussion for her video work *My Best Thing* (2011). Here, sensual webcam conversations revolving around the subject of “cam sex” with Italian strangers were collected into an unassuming animation, embodying a conception of a virtual Adam and Eve. The topic of interactive romance has also been the subject of myriad fictive interventions. In 2008, I came across Ann Hirsch’s *Scandalishious* (2008–9), an 18-month performance on YouTube where the artist assumed the persona of Caroline, a self-aware college freshman whose sexualized dancing and video blogs attracted an interactive cohort who created responsive videos and commentary. The work revealed how satire could animate a world of minor celebrity—Andy Warhol’s 15 minutes of fame stretched out over months.

The most well-known example of such performative acts is Amalia Ulman’s *Excellences & Perfections* (2014). A post on Instagram from April of that year began the project, in which Ulman took on the role of a fictional character with her own narrative. Her persona was consumed with a desire for physical augmentation and obsessed with extreme makeover culture. By the final post of the project on September 19, 2014, she had attracted 88,906 followers. Whether directly pointed against the Kim Kardashians of the world or not, the sardonic performance generated forms of feedback similar to those that might be directed at such a reality T.V. star. Aspirational messages from devoted followers gave way to abusive judgments, produced from nothing more than the selfies posted online. To answer the question posed by art historian W.J.T. Mitchell’s book *What Do Pictures Want?* (2005), pictures want to be kissed. The image, as Ulman reveals, creates its own self-contained world, which summons and reveals the expectations of real-world society. Insecurity, chauvinism, and sexism are rife in the digital sphere, concealed behind the made-up names of internet users.



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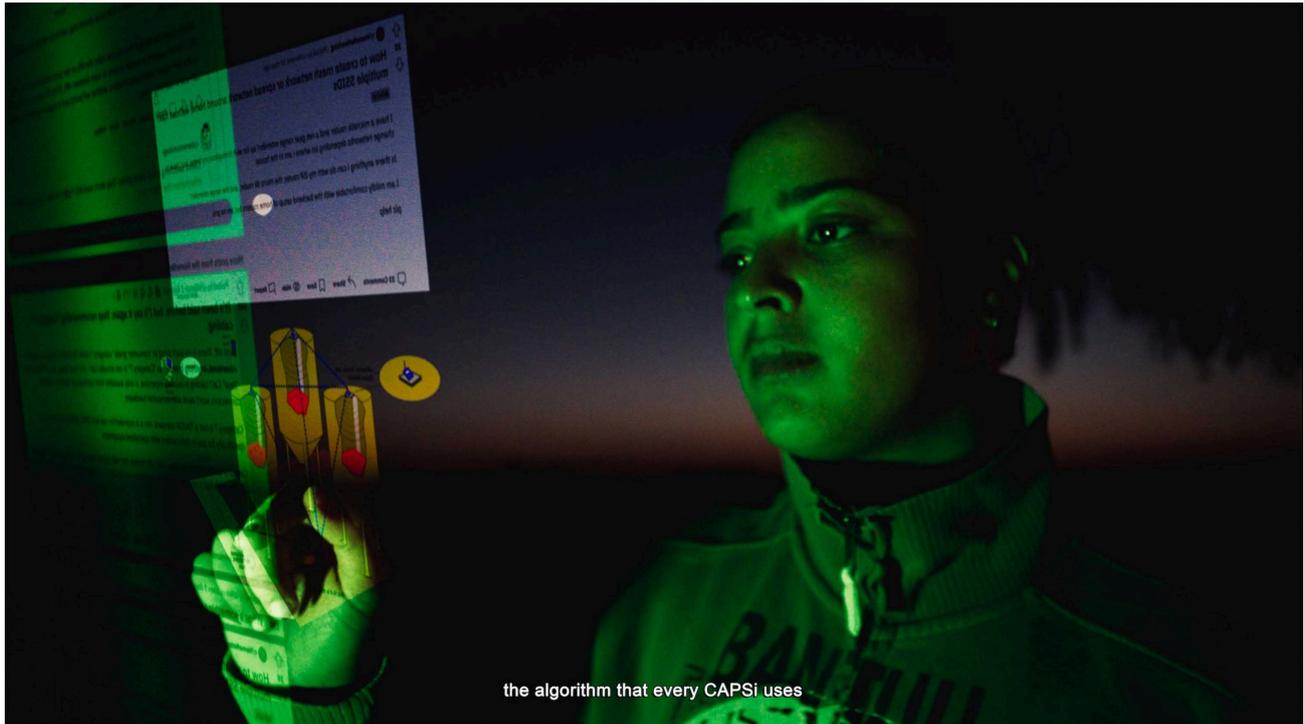
# We Are the Metaverse: A Parting Verse

by Omar Kholeif

30.06.2023

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the algorithm that every CAPSi uses

Artist, curator and broadcaster Omar Kholeif journeys readers behind the scenes, and into the making of their latest book, *Internet\_Art: From the Birth of*

*the Web to the Rise of NFTs*, presenting a rare excerpt and introduction.

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Apt is the excerpt that begins at the end of the story. For this ending proffers a new beginning—one in the present tense, a world that belongs both to individuals and collective society. After completing my work on *Internet\_Art: From the Birth of the Web to the Rise of NFTs*, I was concerned that I would have nothing left to say—that I had been sponged and hollowed from within. In “dropping the mic” with my own proposition of the metaverse, a sense of liberation presented itself, a possibility for a beginning that exists outside the field of speculative futurism.

*Internet\_Art* is a career-long project, but it began in earnest at an airport in early 2020. Peering eyeballs were transfixed to screens; everyone resembled the androids that humans so feared. The initial semblance for the narrative was a response to the sudden paranoia found in the thickening digital sphere during COVID-19, aka the recent pandemic era. A codependence with screen-based technologies was certainly not novel, but now the paternal and fraternal bodies of Gen X, the Boomers, and the in-betweeners were arguing for the urgency of electronic devices, using them as social distancing tools—as shields from impending death—anxious time.

The form of the book is an experiment in publishing—as prose, but also as sculpture—envisioned as such because of the visual omnipresence of technological hardware. Absent in the world was the very materiality of the internet as a thing, as a tangible object of cable and wire, funneled under oceans and across epic expanses. This fact, it seemed, was to elide the energy guzzling crowd who argued that Zoom was a more ecologically friendly means of navigating the world than any other. The book’s physical form—a golden object, a bar of glistening gold to be traded speculatively; one that would catch and refract light even if never to be read; a thing that would always remind you from its title that the mass medium of our time—the internet—is a thing that consumes energy and inhabits space and time, was decided.

Drafting the first manuscript, newfound speculation emerged in the wake of the sale of a single NFT at a momentous price point. Individuals—art collectors, traders, e-commerce specialists—serving as angel investors arose to invest capital. They spoke like prophets, despite a seeming lack of interest in aesthetics. They professed themselves as vessels of Web3. Ambassadors eager to level out a playing field. Individuals here to craft a new world order that would democratize art using blockchain technologies. The necessity of the book hit like a lightning bolt.

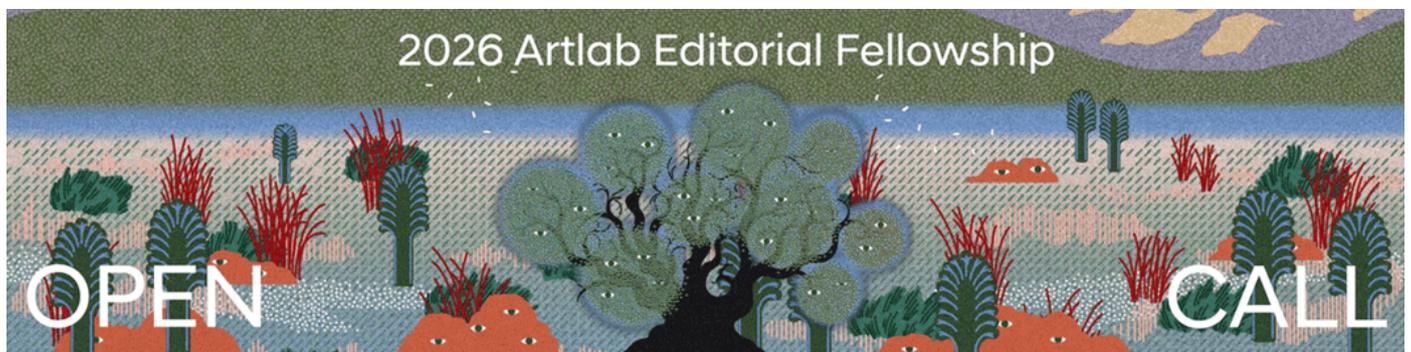
A seeming cultural amnesia plagued the air. Claims to nascent histories were being made without context beyond the desire for financialization. I argued back in *Internet\_Art* that an avatar has existed since the early web, in gaming and in various forms of live-action role-play. I maintain that building “another art world” is not a return to “Year Zero” as many have intimated. Another set of gatekeepers guarding a different set of doors is no democracy. A document, a recent history, one that would trace the sediments, needed to be put into play. And while I would still offer the citations to key sources and references, it felt imperative that after hiding indoors during the pandemic that I be seen. For my distinguishing identity affects my ocular sensibilities, and thus the way that I experience and feel the sensorium of visual culture—the same goes for every one of us. With this, oral histories would become imperative. For sociality, arguably one of the defining qualities of the business of art, would be deployed as a methodology to explain what occurs in the interstices—to situate and contextualize the happenings of the last thirty years. Here I present to you a closing verse, excerpted from *Internet\_Art: From the Birth of the Web to the Rise of NFTs*.

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*Air Conditioning* (2022), a work that I commissioned by the Turner Prize-winning artist Lawrence Abu Hamdan, was the subject of this June morning’s news cycle in 2022. It is the preview day of the 12th Berlin Biennale, an arts festival in Germany that includes Abu Hamdan’s installation—a sprawling 180-foot (54.8-meter) visualization of what the artist has referred to as the “atmospheric violence” that took place in Lebanese skies between 2007 and 2021. This morning, the project and the launch of the accompanying website [www.airpressure.info](http://www.airpressure.info) caught the *Guardian* newspaper’s attention.

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In *Air Conditioning*, enveloping, thickening plumes of ash inflect bulbous clouds across a single painterly visualization that tightly lines the walls of the gallery. The work, developed in collaboration with the collective Cream Projects, London, comprises documents from the United Nations Digital Library that detail the number of unlawful entries by F35 planes, drones, and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) into Lebanon’s air space. The artist charted these incidences

through a special effects engine called Houdini, software that was also used in the making of Disney's *Frozen II* (2019). In a supplementary film and website, Abu Hamdan reveals that these aerial encroachments pose severe health risks to the local population below. These accompanying platforms play with the codification of digital imagery, which is simultaneously innocuous and violent.

In the gallery setting, the composite picture takes on art-historical resonances. The cloud paintings of J. M. W. Turner and the thundering landscapes of Walter De Maria quickly come to mind, as do the curved galleries at the Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris, that house the iconic *Water Lilies* (ca. 1914–26) by Claude Monet. Rarely has the cloud felt like such an apt exploration of the wires and cables that make up the physical apparatus of the internet. By transmuted the data held on servers into the soothing and familiar aesthetic found within museums for centuries, *Air Conditioning* bestows the onlooker with multiple sensorial encounters. And just like the internet, the sensuous pleasure it offers the spectator brings to light various forms of human complicity.

Human responsibility for the internet continues to be pivotal for societies to coexist. I authored *Internet\_Art* to reveal the scope of the internet's influence on art, and, inversely, the ways in which art accentuates the possibilities of the internet. Examining the interrelated dynamics of this social realm is a vital and necessary act against the ongoing cultural amnesia that is currently sweeping across society. I began this journey seeking to map out the field of art and culture since 1989, when the concept of the World Wide Web was first put to paper. I was led to explore how the internet has fundamentally shifted almost every aspect of art making and its exhibition. The acceleration of networked computational technology has engendered a nervous class of citizens: 24/7 work and life. In response, artists have expanded the function and stories narrated by networked tools, holding the black mirror up to its manufacturers and users alike.

Pioneering anarchists in the field of art have deployed technology creatively since the 1980s, unpicking programming languages and employing web browsers and phone-based applications to tell stories that otherwise might have escaped the pages of the official record or history. With the dot-com boom, its collapse, and the subsequent surge in social media usage, artists transformed the seemingly intangible realm of the internet into a form of living media, using images of power and corporate technology to socialize and mobilize around political causes. Culture jamming in the early 2000s would later open doors for minority representation, resuscitating hidden visual cultures and promoting resistance to meet and supersede swelling waves of mass hate.

The seeds for these forms of artistic expression did not mature in a vacuum. The initial experiments with networked technology in the late 1960s enabled artists engaged with various forms of media—from Nam June Paik to Lynn Hershman Leeson—to speculatively map and propose techniques for imagining the very nature of the internet's existence. At every juncture onward—from the aestheticization of political storytelling in browser-based art through to the commodification of meme culture through the sale of NFTs—visual artists have generated forums for critical reflection through compelling, encompassing, agitating, thrilling, and affecting visual art.

The, at times, insular world of art is now confronted with a necessity to enact change. Augmented and virtual reality, as well as 3-D modeling, have generated a mediated means of experiencing art that some people prefer. The climate emergency might suggest this to be a more sustainable way of displaying art than shipping artworks across the globe. Even so, the gargantuan energy-guzzling toll of complex networked technology cannot be underestimated. The initial buzz around the market potential of NFTs, and the subsequent collapse in interest and reward for them, may be seen as a similar undoing. But with every downfall there emerges the potential to decode networked technology's expanded promise—what it can really do.

My optimism was resuscitated speaking with artist Simon Denny, whose exhibition *Blockchain Future States* (2016) first connoted the opportunities of cryptocurrency to me; he was also the first person to introduce me to the model of the decentralized autonomous organization (DAO)—protocols of definition and debate so capacious that they will inspire several more books. Denny proposed expanded methods of approaching cryptocurrency in ways that ravenous venture capitalists were initially too shortsighted to comprehend: namely, that NFTs offer a variety of functions beyond the instrumentalization of art for capital gain. One can just as easily mint their toothbrush and toilet paper, a used condom, a piece of code, an idea, a dream, or their last will and testament. You can do so by “minting” a “digital twin,” or by barcoding your NFT on a physical object. Why would one consider doing so? Ostensibly, it is an official archive of these assets in the digital world. A space where they are traceable, sharable, and linkable. Through smart contracts (which have yet to find their full potential) and ancillary distribution mechanisms, these sources equally become remixed, innovated forms, hopefully evolving to become more technically stable and carbon neutral.

Standing at the edge of the metaverse, we find ourselves looking at an epoch, potentially anchored by a dormant term that has come back into view. The term *metaverse* and its popularization by the company formerly known as Facebook, Inc. has many believing that we are on the precipice of something new, a perpetual obsession in the age of curated, contemporary culture.

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Orbiting this world, it is easy to see an emerging center of confusion. Once again, users are responding to what is perceived as a new world order, without the necessary vocabulary and context to do so. Professed NFT collectors argue that we have returned to Year Zero, a leveling of the playing field—except who holds the keys? Not a girl like me. Another art world, another walled community, veiled and shrouded is as antiquated an idea as the binary visual culture that we have spent decades attempting to retaliate against.

Abu Hamdan once asserted that language is an “evolving technology,” and I believe that the application of language evolves to the specific context of the individual using it. It is worth thinking of *metaverse* in relation to its Latin roots. *Meta* speaks to being “with,” “across,” or “after” events that occur in space and time. The metaverse, in its myriad manifestations, is also a site or space for transcending. In this regard, the metaverse is a world that surpasses the confines of a 3-D headset; it is something that is not only “self-referential” but also, as the word suggests, in a constant state of metamorphosis—like the nature of life itself.

The metaverse for me, as I believe it could be for you, is as illustrative of the experience of diving into the 75,000+ images of memories and screenshots on a personal phone as it is an immersion into the sculptural renderings of Lauren Halsey’s *We the ones (blackngold)* (2016), an artwork of colored synthetic hair and timber, an image lodged in my brain since I installed it in an exhibition in 2016. I

also see the immersion and augmentation of the metaverse as a field of cultural production that can be traced back to a realm before the World Wide Web. The Factory, Andy Warhol's studio and a hangout for artists and a self-contained group of aspirational figures, could be interpreted as a total and complete world of social interaction. Likewise, the panoptical ecology fashioned in the evocations of drugs, lust, and rock 'n' roll in *Cosmococa/CC5 Hendrix-War* (1973) by Hélio Oiticica evoke a total sensorium as the visitor descends into the tranquil swing of the installation's hammocks. Keith Haring's multipaneled Pop Shop in New York in the 1980s and 1990s is also my metaverse, as are Yayoi Kusama's *Infinity Mirror Rooms* or the late Virgil Abloh's sculptural worlds annotated with "inverted commas," becoming the signature motif of his art project turned fashion label Off-White. All of these evoke or conjure an augmented, total, and social space of experience. The difference between these renderings of the metaverse and those produced by a software engine is that they are part and parcel of a culture conceived and imagined by artists, as opposed to programmers employed by a corporation, or an AI, all the product of companies held by tech billionaire owners who continue to galvanize most of the world's wealth.

Of the propositions by artists, one of the transcendental evocations of a metaverse comes to life in Meriem Bennani's film *Life on the CAPS* (2022). CAPS is a fictional island set in the Atlantic. The film takes place in an age where Dr. Who-style teleportation has replaced air travel, and people are held captive on CAPS for having teleported illegally, perhaps because their ethnic, social, and economic makeup does not entitle them to this method of travel. Through live and animated scenes, the detention center is reimaged as an artist colony where communal gatherings turn into righteous protest songs with choreographed clapping and dancing—a transgenerational, intercultural song of joy and solidarity. Can humankind unspool the puppeteer's strings, forming meta metaverses that are shaped and contoured entirely to their own desire and choosing? I say you/me/we must at least try!

— *That's my mic drop.*

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Omar Kholeif, PhD, the avatar of Dr. O—the world's leading Pop Physician™, among others—is an artist, author, curator, and broadcaster who serves as the director of collections and senior curator at Sharjah Art Foundation, UAE. They are the founding director of artPost21, an agency that explores culture at the nexus of art, tech, and social justice. The curator of over seventy exhibitions of visual art, recent and forthcoming shows include *Lubaina Himid: Plaited Time / Deep Water* (2023); *In the Heart of Another Country* (2022/2023); *Hrair Sarkissian: The Other Side of Silence* (2021/2023); *My Life in the Metaverse* (2022); *Perpetual Inventory, Volume 1: An Exercise in Looking* (2022) and *Lawrence Abu Hamdan: The Sonic Image* (2022), among others. An author, editor, and publisher, Kholeif is the founding series editor of *imagine/otherwise*, a new publishing initiative presenting critical biographies on queer, non-binary and female-identifying artists published by Sternberg Press. They can be reached through their website.

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I was enthralled by how these female artists fashioned alternative routes that existed against the linear narratives of online dating and the manufactured image production that it engenders in the visual sphere. I exhibited these works, while also searching for male perspectives, whether cis male or otherwise. Braving the icy streets of Berlin in 2018, I met up with queer artist Andrew Holmquist. I was eager to catch up with him about the newfound life he had fashioned in Berlin, having moved there from Chicago. Speaking in angsty sound bites, the artist expressed a deep-seated frustration with the archetypal nature of gay male representation. We discussed the prototypes that had emerged from the male dating apps Grindr and Scruff—the tribal affinities, the sexualized notion of visual representation, which had to be made manifest through tiny square boxes on a smartphone. Holmquist’s frustration was manifesting in his gestural, abstract action paintings. One of these forays was *Fuckboy* (2018), which featured an intertwined cornucopia of bodies, each holding a cell phone up in the inevitable and essential act of self-capture.

Three years later, Holmquist and I sit in his car waiting for my immigration appointment at a center in downtown Los Angeles, where he has relocated with his partner. He tells me that *Fuckboy* was about a kind of “new toxic masculinity,” a form of longing constructed out of digital artifice. The accumulating bodies within his colorful canvas simultaneously represent a loss of the individual in favor of a construction of identity that is manicured to the contours of instantaneous capitalist desire. I pondered the artist’s words as I sat spinning my wedding ring—an emblem of a relationship suspended between life and death.

As I stared at the life-size images, I became subsumed, disappearing into their worlds, only to stand back and catch my breath, realizing the illusion. Looking at these pictures extends beyond the subject and object to involve the viewer, who ascends into an almost psychedelic state of consciousness. Perhaps it is the fictional gaze constructed by such artists as Laurie Simmons—a gaze that is as adaptive as it is critical—that holds the potential to enable us to locate, not only our bodies, but equally, our sense of self and that which it so deeply desires.

*Excerpted from [Internet Art: From the Birth of the Web to the Rise of NFTs](https://www.phaidon.com/store/art/internet_art-from-the-birth-of-the-web-to-the-rise-of-nfts-9781838664077/) (https://www.phaidon.com/store/art/internet\_art-from-the-birth-of-the-web-to-the-rise-of-nfts-9781838664077/). © 2023 by Omar Kholeif. Reproduced by permission of Phaidon. All rights reserved.*

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