[GROUNDINGS]

REFLECTING ON REFLECTIONS; SPECULATING ON SPECULATING, ALL AT ONCE—

Dr. Omar Kholeif

[OCCASIONAL]
[GROUNDWORK]

In early 2021, in light of the density of internet use in both the personal and professional realm due to the limited mobility imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, we invited author, curator and cultural historian, Dr. Omar Kholeif to revisit their publication *You Are Here: Art After the Internet*. Here, they revisit the potential impact and relationship of the internet to artistic practices and art's infrastructures.

You Are Here: Art After the Internet[1] was the first major published collection to critically explore both the effects and affects that the internet has had on contemporary artistic practices. It positioned itself as a provocation on the current state of cultural production, relying on first-person accounts from artists, writers and curators as its primary source material. Responding to an era that had increasingly chosen to dub itself as 'post-internet', the collective text explored the relationship of the internet to art from the early millennium to its publication in late 2013. The book raised once urgent questions about how we negotiate the formal, aesthetic and conceptual relationship of art and its effects after the ubiquitous rise of the digital. Questions all the more relevant today, as citizen-users navigate the necessities of being online in an age of overtly algorithmic bias, data mining, as well as the planetary aftermath of the tangible internet.

1 Edited and co-authored by Omar Kholeif with contributions from Sam Ashby, Sophia Al-Maria, Jeremy Bailey, Stephanie Bailey, Erika Balsom, Zach Blas, James Bridle, Jennifer Chan, Tyler Coburn, Michael Connor, Jesse Darling, Brian Droitcour, Constant Dullaart, Ed Halter, Omar Kholeif, Gene McHugh, Jamie Shovlin, Basak Senova, Brad Troemel, Lucia Pietroiusti, Model Court, Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme and James Richards.

"My library is an archive of longings"[2]

The genesis of a story is composed of a distinctive 'gene', not simply a point of origin, but a confluence of biological, embodied and cerebral experiences—constellations of fragments that in a summative sense form the foundation of a whole. The fragment, in popular iconography and attendant studies of iconology, conjures designs of broken, wounded, or ruined culture.[3] Fragments possess prickly, malformed contours, which exist as remnants of a historical era. The cover of my third-edited and co-authored volume, *You Are Here: Art After the Internet*, sought to create a dialogical conversation with this concept of the fragment as an entry-point—putting a punctured slab slap bang on its cover. The white paperback is occupied by a splintered wedge of marble (some thought it a slice of cheese eaten by a mouse, which I did not anticipate). Rather, its punctiliously perforated edges were intended to suggest a loose and unsettled portion of a gravestone—astray, unrooted, no longer moot. Its suggestion of death equally sought to function as a metaphor for history—once the story is authored, it is assumed that the subject of discussion is metaphorically deceased.[4]

The seemingly playful gesture of graphic design was the first provocation. What does it mean to pull together the threads of a history that the world believes to be entirely nascent, it sought to ask? How can one weave genealogical lines through a hyperbolized cultural-moment to make evident its routes and roots, was another? It also sought to make explicit the unmanageable task of being

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2 Susan Sontag, *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh: Journals and Notebooks, 1964-1980*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012.

3 See: W.J.T Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986.

4 Here, I am invoking concepts that had emerged in the lead up to the rise of the initial dotcom boom such as the writing of Francis Fukuyama and Samuel P Huntington, in particular, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Free Press: 1992) and *Clash of Civilization* (Simon & Schuster: 1996).

panoptical in scope. This was, and still is, a slice—a situated, subjective piece of a history in constant motion, or as the book's contributors suggest, in potential free-fall.

You Are Here: Art After the Internet, which for indexical purposes, was co-published by SPACE, London and Cornerhouse Books in its first iteration in December 2013/January 2014, has despite modest beginnings gone on, to my surprise, to occupy a pivotal space in art history. The subject of multiple reprints, it has informed course syllabi the world over, in higher education and secondary schools, where I have been consistently informed that it is a particular favourite among A-Level students in Art. The book is, by all accounts, the first anthology to critically consider and disentangle debated terms and platforms, from 'The New Aesthetic' to 'Post-internet art', as well as the attendant birth of what Brian Droitcour dubbed to be 'societies out of control'. The shift from a web to an app-based culture is explored by Gene McHugh, who discussed online relationships; I queried the birth of 'platform culture', from Artsy to S[edition] and artist-theoretician, Zach Blas rounded the thesis of the book with the launch of the manifesto *Contra-Internet Aesthetics*. The latter has been a useful tool in linking theories of the internet to de-colonial, anti-racist and queer study.

The spirit from which these topics were drawn was not strategic, nor were they carefully choreographed. I now smirk scrolling down the book's Amazon page to read a buyer review, "Totally random…will leave you feeling empty." If, a book could make one *feel* especially *empty* in a world so full of content, then perhaps it is to be deemed a successful act of making. The reviewer also touches upon one of the book's guiding principles: randomness, which as a practice is a historical key by and through which culture can and is accessed in the post-digital age.

While I was Curator at the Foundation for Art and Creative Technology (FACT) in Liverpool, I was introduced to a pioneering artist, Roy Ascott, who had founded the infamous Groundcourse

programme. At both the Ealing Art School and Ipswich School of Art, the course, which counted Brian Eno and Pete Townshend among its students, was notorious for its experimental pedagogy and as noted in certain oral histories is believed to have extended the idea, popularized by John Cage, of Aleatoric music—music by chance; 'the accident' as a defining principle. In the 1960s Brian Eno, the progenitor of ambient and generative music, and by proxy art of this nature, articulated that 'randomness' was the driving impetus behind much, if not all, of his artistic endeavours.[5] At FACT this became a defining perspective for me—from the lab where early adopters were tinkering with open-source software through to our galleries and public spaces, where our CEO had encouraged the programming team to explore the concept of the 'future human'; unsystematic structures felt apt. The mind was now hyperlinked. Despite arguments of 'The Shallows' of knowledge and memory as articulated by Nicolas Carr, the information field had become more expansive and inclusive than it had seemed before.[6]

In the political arena, the events of the so-called 'Arab Spring' took me to my grandfather's side before his death, as we protested in Tahrir Square in downtown Cairo. We swam in the optimism surrounding the potential expanse made permeable with and through the internet. It seemed, on a certain surface, that citizens were shredding through the digital divide. The exponential interest in the cultural artefacts that emerged from this field was inevitable. From the vantage point of 2021, it has become clearer that the digital divide is contorted. Instead, it exists more acutely between the shareholders and CEOs of social media platforms and the active proletariat who populate them with content, as opposed to the

5 See Christopher Scoates, *Brian Eno: Visual Music*. London and San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2019, and Brian Eno *Light Music*. London: Paul Stolper Gallery, 2017.

6 Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: How the Internet is Changing the Way we Think, Read and Remember*. London: Atlantic Books, 2010.

binary notion of access versus no-access.[7]

Pooling together ideas in a 'new media' centre as a queer person of colour, who also happened to be Muslim, initially felt like an opportunity for a new perspective to emerge. That is, until the parade of new media aristocracy waltzed through the doors in 2011 during a bi-annual academic conference for 'new media' hosted by the institution where I worked. The vestiges of a certain aristocracy had arrived, mostly from western Europe. I could see no one like me, not in age, experience, or race. The now antediluvian histories under discussion were ones that I was intimately aware of by this point. Yet, they were not contextualised within the frame of the present, or a propulsive future. A critical historian will argue that history only repeats itself if it is dissociated from the context of the present. A contemporary lens keeps the phenomenological experience of the bygone era intrinsically relatable—alive. Everything 'new' about 'media' seemed too lifeless in this hermetic circuit.

I set my eyes to London and took on a new role at SPACE, London to head up their Art and Technology programme. Anna Harding, the CEO, was keenly attuned and interested in the artist's voice. Despite having founded the MFA programme in Curating at Goldsmiths; she had little patience for discourse that was obfuscating, especially if it were so for the artists who were being spoken and written about. Rather, she argued for a now popular term, 'support structures'[8], which enabled creative

7 For example, historically disconnected, mobile telephony has exponentially grown the number of individuals who have access to the internet. If we take the case of the African continent, one can see massive shifts in access that have emerged over the last decade. In Kenya over 85% of the population is online; 73% in Nigeria; Morocco is at nearly 70%. Despite variations across the continent in access, the cross-embedded nature of media has brought many more into the connected sphere at an exponential rate.

8 In 2009, artist Céline Condorelli released a pioneering manual, co-authored with numerous artists, curators and architects, on how to embody concepts of care in the practice of art-making. The book published by Sternberg Press grew out of a collaboration between Condorelli, Gavin Wade with James Langdon.

production. Part of my role was to oversee the organisation's flagship residency programme to be held in a new placemaking project anachronistically dubbed, The White Building. The once-derelict canal side building took inspiration from ateliers such as Eyebeam in New York and V2 in Rotterdam, except the proviso here was that everything produced had to embody a sense of public-ness. This manifested in myriad forms, but most potently for me in the conversations that occurred over rolled-up cigarettes and packed lunches by the river.

As we did not stage traditional 'exhibitions,' I initially assumed that we could not produce a catalogue. "A catalogue is more important than the exhibition", I have been informed by my mentors, but if *this* experience was not an exhibition, what was it?

What emerged during the short stint at SPACE, where I am now a trustee, is a universal 'pin drop' as Jesse Darling, one of the resident artists dubbed it. 'You Are Here!' I recall her exclaiming. How could we document this event? This sphere was more akin to the support structure, fashioned by artist Anton Vidokle and curator Eungie Joo, called Night School. This was a temporary school, in our case one for artists hankering to be a part of a space that they could not yet call their own.

Accordingly, despite inviting a few interlocutors from outside the scope of the residency, the majority of the writings within the book were authored by artists, curators or thinkers who critically engaged in some fashion in or with the conversations that emerged that year. There was little budget; the generosity of everyone involved was pivotal. I called in favours and had a dummy ready to show to publishers. I shopped the book around a coterie of editors, many of whom have now published one or more of my books. At the time, they declined. The book's topic was dubbed, 'too specific'; 'too early'. One went as far as to call it 'uncritical' which anyone who has flipped through the YAH's pages, as it is affectionately called, will likely disagree with. Fortuitously, Cornerhouse's former Artistic

Director, Professor Sarah Perks, was able to pass the book through the bureaucratic gates, past those still illiterate in the field, and to Cornerhouse's publishing arm and subsequently D.A.P., so that it could be read. The price was intentionally kept low.

Reflecting on the book less than a decade later; everything has changed and yet much remains the same. I considered what it would mean to perform a 'condition report' on the book. For the un-initiated, the world that we live in is still fragmented around two insular camps: the digital utopians and those who remain dystopian, as well as the odd centrist like myself. What we have been privy to since 2013 is what in 2020, I dubbed to be a 'thickening of the digital sphere; a digital time', as identified by the global pandemic Covid-19 and the impact of social distancing.[9] While certain organisations—from museums to government bodies, as well as tech companies – have seen this movement as a form of 'cost saving', the reality is all the more chilling. No more real-estate and attendant electricity costs for instance, does not forego the embodied realities of the internet. As I have argued in books including, *Electronic Superhighway (2016-1966)* (2016) *Goodbye, World! Looking at Art in the Digital Age* (2018) and *Art in the Age of Anxiety* (2021), the internet is a palpable 'thing' that demands specific physical form; its abstraction is our downfall.

Increased user traffic over the last two years has led to the collapse of servers from some of the world's largest and most-visited websites, from Amazon to the various platforms by the company now known as Meta (formerly Facebook). Meanwhile streaming entertainment services such as Netflix have consumed copious bandwidth to the point that at one point the UK and European governments limited their streaming capacities, along

9 Omar Kholeif, 'Sick Living, Sick Society'. *Mousse* No. 72, 2020.

with YouTube.[10] Yet the environment that powers and contains this sphere is seemingly invisible to the masses. As we begin to demand increased bandwidth, soon the Earth may begin to devour itself in an entirely different fashion. The Jevons Paradox[11] is worth considering here. Give a human what they want and they will always crave more. Enhanced capabilities are not sufficient because they engender new forms of desire and imagination—that is what makes us human; we do not settle. The social, economic and political implications of those fields of desire can be so potent that we may soon be fighting for basic provisions in industrialised economies, even with our contactless credit cards in hand.[12]

Underwater cables, in theory, could disintegrate marine life; townships in the so-called 'developing world' could become eroded through the birth of new data centres: who wins in all of this is a loaded question. In this regard, the accelerationist discourses that technology will hurtle humanity to its ultimate demise seems, even *feels* inevitable, but what of its inexorable impact on art and artists; museums and biennials? What should one take note of and consider, what can we do, is a query that we continue to prod at each other.

As technological distribution has become more readily available as a tool, so too have the attendant voices from around the world, fusing and fuelling artistic exploration into experiments around Black, Brown, and Queer bodies and beyond. The concept of digital dualism, astutely decoded by Legacy Russell in their manifesto Glitch Feminism, brings us to a new ontological perspective. It is an increasingly common understanding that the person A.F.K. – Away

10 See: Hadas Gold, 'Netflix and YouTube are slowing down in Europe to stop the internet from Breaking. Available at: https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/19/tech/netflix-internet-overload-eu/index.html, 2020, accessed 28 July 2021.

11 An increase in the efficiency with which a resource is used generates an increased rate of consumption of that resource due to increasing demand; W.S. Jevons, *The Coal Question: An Inquiry Concerning the Progress of the Nation, and the Probable Exhaustion of our Coal Mines*. London: Macmillan and Co, 1865.

12 Consider looking at Stephen Emmott's *Ten Billion* (Vintage: 2013).

from the Keyboard – is not isolated from the individual traversing virtual worlds at a screen or in a web-based application. Conscious forms are intermingling, fashioning new constellations of identity that have enabled communities to take life into their own hands. Thus, it is no revelation that mass social media platforms have enabled the Black Lives Matter movement to mobilise using the aesthetics of digital culture, and have equally supported the struggle for expanding concepts of gender that we have been wrestling with for an elastic expanse of time.

The lens of the present is still in *need* of re-negotiation. We must consider a new language to speak of the interdependent relationship amongst our multiple selves. Humans are vessels for emotion and memory, and emerging technologies have heightened those sensorial aspects of our being. We must thus acknowledge that we live in what I have previously referred to as, 'the age of emotion'—a historical period where one's affect can be utilised legitimately as a means for narrating and making the world.

Missing from the original thesis of *You Are Here: Art After the Internet* is much discussion of Artificial Intelligence (AI), a form of scientific development that conjures the mythology of the *race* between human and machine. As Trevor Paglen and Kate Crawford have demonstrated with their project Excavating AI (interchangeably referred to as ImageNet Roulette), machine learning and its attendant training mechanisms are not yet sophisticated enough to be devoid of bias or discrimination. Their project, which unfurled the partialities of 6,000 'training images' from the open-source ImageNet archive, revealed innate racism that if unleashed on a mass scale, could, in principle, threaten and de-stabilise entire societal hierarchies.[13] When the project reached its apex through the museum world and hit the mainstream news media, the governing body behind ImageNet dumped the 6,000

13 See: https://excavating.ai/, accessed 28th July 2021.

images under interrogation by the duo from their database. Does this suggest that there is no one that can be held accountable? Delete?[14]

Should artists be considered the superheroes of the internet? That would be both inaccurate and an unfair burden. That said, throughout the internet's history, artists from Nam June Paik and Lynn Hershman-Leeson to Olia Lialina, have been exemplary disruptors and ongoing archivists of the field; their critical interrogations should hold their weight in time. As I author these words, a new vantage point emerges. I am completing a new book on the social history of the internet and the news headlines are rife with discussion of NFTs (Non-Fungible Tokens). Collectors and Venture Capitalists profess to see the future, but I see an unchanged present. Digital assets have always been forms of art. What interests me is the juridical potential of Smart contracts, self-executing legal documents that generate dividends. If they hold the possibility to engender new forms of wealth distribution; more diverse conversations about and around art, then count me in the dialogue. Like any space: this seemingly novel universe is not without incongruities—ones that exist contra to the utopia of its marketeers.

I am wary and certainly concerned that museums and arts institutions are catching up with the 'thick time' of the digital sphere a little too late. In the 1990s and early millennium one was witness to a form of responsive curating. The likes of the Walker and Guggenheim began commissioning and collecting browser-based art, only to have to turn their backs to it when it was no longer tenable. An argument was that it demanded too many resources to maintain. Now, we see these artworks back online, but for how long?

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14 In *Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting* published by Princeton University Press in 2009, professor of internet and governance, Viktor Mayer-Schönberger argues that we must re-introduce our capacities for 'forgetting' in the face of the unprecedented archive that the internet offer humans. The question from our current vantage point is: To what extent should this be possible?

Sustained and meaningful digital engagement demands re-thinking. An open-source manual of collective thinking devised through conversations by agents with shared affinities, inclusive of artists and curators, is one possible aid.

I began *You Are Here* by professing to be 'anxious'. In this regard, the gene that initiated that project has not changed. The anxiety that our contemporary history will all too quickly become a 'dusty relic' before it has had the fortune of being examined, remains a concern. My anxiety was propelled by a need for communication and an understanding that could emerge from shared dialogue. Now that the book is out of print, and in some respects perhaps out-of-date, I am uncertain if our recent micro-histories will only emerge as I anticipated as forms of 'retromania'. Contrarily, society holds within its palm, the wherewithal to collectively create an ethical and equitable, open-access knowledge base that is inclusive of the myriad disparities that inform the various practices of its users—a library of longings that holds the potential to become animate.

Dr. Omar Kholeif, July 2021

Dr. Omar Kholeif is an author and artist; curator and historian whose work considers the impact of culture at the nexus of emerging technology and social justice. Kholeif is considered one of the leading authorities on art and digital culture—as an author; educator and exhibition maker. Their more than two-dozen books include, *Moving Image* (MIT Press/Whitechapel Gallery 2015); *Electronic Superhighway (2016-1966): From Experiments in Art and Technology to Art After the Internet* (Whitechapel Gallery/D.A.P. 2016); *The Artists Who Will Change the World* (Thames and Hudson 2018); *Goodbye, World! Looking at Art in the Digital Age* (Sternberg Press 2018) and *Art in the Age of Anxiety* (SAF/Mörel/MIT 2021). Their forthcoming monograph *Internet/Art: The First Thirty Years* (Phaidon, 2023) uses the history of the internet as a lens to consider the future of culture and cultural capital.

After an initial career in broadcast, Dr. Kholeif went on to lead cultural and curatorial projects and departments at some of the world's leading museums, art institutions and universities. They currently serve as Director of Collections and Senior Curator at Sharjah Art Foundation, UAE. They are a co-founder of the ethical design collaborative the Center of Cultural Confusion and the agency, www.artpost21.com.

Occasional Groundwork is an alliance of three European biennials EVA (Ireland's Biennial of Contemporary Art), GIBCA (Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art, Sweden), and LIAF (Lofoten International Art Festival, Norway) that are each concerned with re-proposing the model of the international art biennial. Seeking a rooted infrastructure for the production and dissemination of contemporary art, Occasional Groundwork serves as a peer group for thinking-through the existing and speculative frameworks of organisational practice.

Groundings is the first public initiative of Occasional Groundwork – a series of co-commissioned texts by writers, artists, curators, and academics, exploring themes of internationalism, sustainability, audience, and infrastructure within the context of the contemporary art biennial and the shift in conditions imposed by the ongoing pandemic.

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