

# America Offline

As the world of tech shows its bad side, some of the best art/tech artists are logging off.

by Emily Watlington

One of the strangest feelings I've had in recent memory occurred after a week off, not just off from work, but from my computer altogether, the longest I've ever gone without one in my adult life. No laptop meant no typing, and when I returned to the keyboard, my fingers found the ordinary tapping motions alien. It made me want to log off in a deeper way – and I'm not the only one. I felt a sense of relief viewing the mold that artist Faith Holland unleashed on her beat-up laptops and smart phones, allowing it to slowly eat away the devices, in her recent exhibition "Death Drive," at Microscope Gallery in New York.

Recently, some of today's most compelling artists and writers – ones who were big names in the art and tech scene of the 2010s, like Holland, as well as Hito Steyerl and Ryan Trecartin – have been questioning the ubiquity of seemingly inescapable consumer technology by looking to prehistory, on the premise that somewhere along the way, humankind messed up. They're going Paleolithic, Amish, or back to the land. Holland's 2015 solo debut at

Transfer Gallery in New York, "Technophilia," comprised a series of videos that she uploaded to a porn site and also showed in the gallery. In them, she toyed with the internet's misogynistic logic: pornos with feminist plot twists, including one of Holland preparing to perform fellatio but instead turning to suck the camera: she consumed the gaze that was all set to consume her.

"Death Drive" marks a shift from toying with technology's rules to plying them against technology itself: Holland describes the show as emerging from the pandemic, from experiencing mass death online in the form of Zoom funerals and depressing infographics. She became newly aware of the thousands, if not millions, of years by which these devices will outlive us humans, and decided to help expedite the process.

She also trained an AI to "grow" (generate images of) mold, which she printed on aluminum, her logic being that "by teaching an AI system to reproduce mold, it could also prepare the technology to imagine its own, organic death."

In the 2010s, Steyerl and Trecartin were trying to carve out space for the democratic ambitions of the early-ish internet – harnessing this tool with the power to distribute access, information, and a voice in ostensibly equal ways – while also inviting skepticism toward the ways various platforms surveil us and can also reproduce inequality. Steyerl was long considered an authority on the societal impacts of technology: in the 2010s, she produced conversation-changing films and essays that endeavored to show how opaque technological systems worked and the ideologies they embodied. Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch's signature hour(s)-long multichannel videos captivated the art world around the same time with an energy so frenetic that viewers often feel exhausted just watching one. The duos' practice captured how endless push notifications and umpteen open browser tabs can produce symptoms of ADHD in even the most chemically balanced of brains. They managed to convey the too-muchness of it all, and made viewers painfully aware of the fact that there is now



Faith Holland:  
*Death Doula:*  
MacBook, 2023.



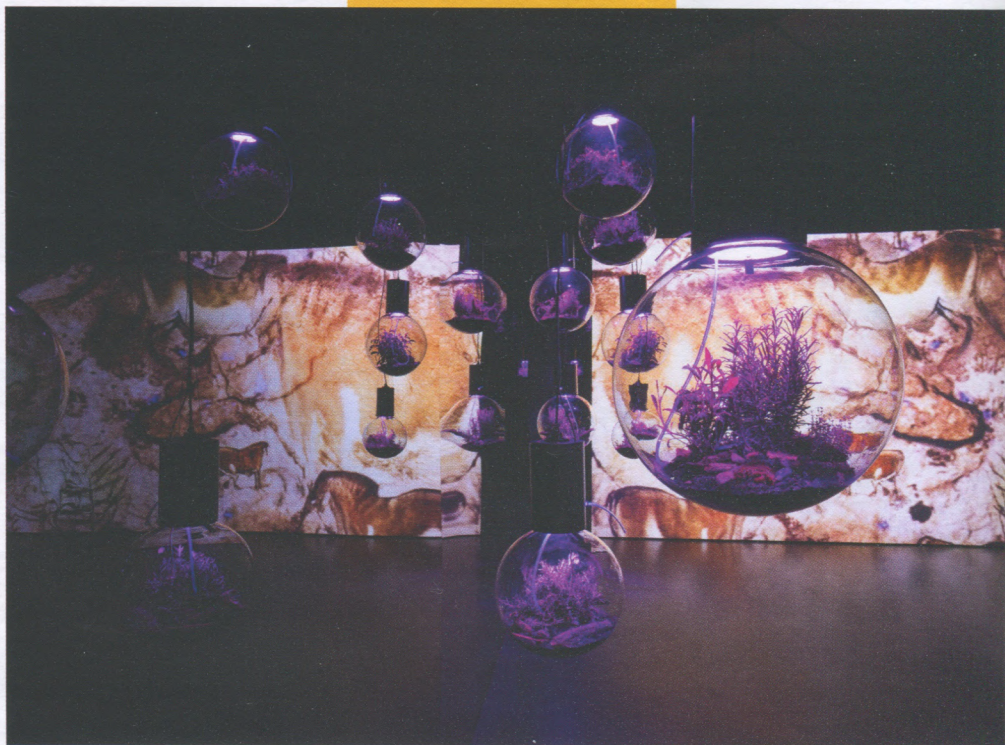
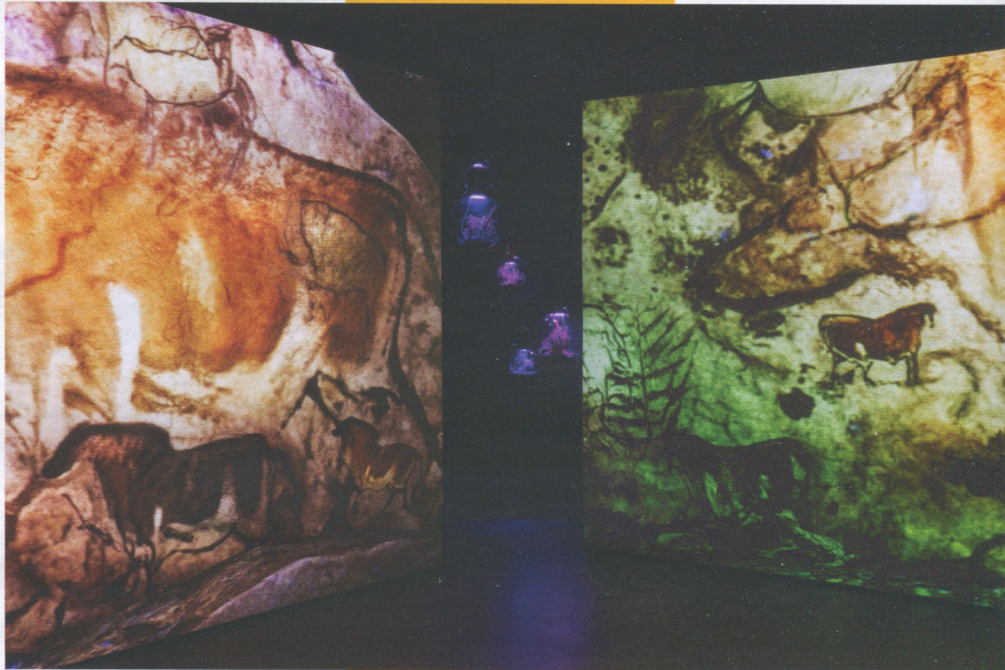
Four prints from Faith Holland's series "AI Forced to Confront Its Own Death," 2023, on view in the exhibition "Death Drive," 2023, at Microscope Gallery, New York.

more footage and data being captured and regurgitated online than the human mind can possibly comprehend. Perhaps it was inevitable that they would lead the way offline.

**But as the decade came to a close,** something shifted: critics, myself included, were flummoxed by Steyerl's 2019 show at Park Avenue Armory, in which she appeared to play journalist in an installation about gun violence in the United States that featured figures familiar from the news. And as her writing began to blur absurdity and authority in ways that didn't always translate – and felt irresponsible in the age of misinformation – an Artspace headline about her essays from the same year asked: “What Is She Talking About?”

Whether in response to such criticism or on her own accord, she changed things up dramatically. She's abandoned that authoritative tone and returned to the absurdist roots found in her best works, like *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (2013), and *Liquidity Inc.* (2014). In her new video, *Animal Spirits* (2022), a group of artists fantasizes about dropping out and becoming shepherds. They are inspired by Nel, a former historian who left the city to become a “quantum” shepherd (whatever that means) and an eco-influencer. Nel paints his face to avoid detection by autonomous surveillance drones, and goes on rants against eco-fascists, “Disney ecologists,” and NFT bros. Self-described “desperate artists” convene on Zoom to commiserate as their shows are indefinitely postponed due to Covid-19, and as their interest in the rat race wanes. They lean into the more enjoyable aspects of lockdown life, like being alone and slowing down.

The group of artists – played by real artists Steyerl, Liam Gillick, Rabih Mroué, and James Bridle – conspires to audition together for a reality show called *Shepherd School*. Halfway through the piece, they're all flatly rejected. Mockeries of the blockchain and the metaverse follow: In the metaverse, animals fight to the death, and “Each time an animal burns, an NFT is minted and recorded to the blockchain as a unique digital asset.” A group of shepherds gets fed up with “the shitshow of the animal gladiator metaverse” (and, it's implied, the blockchain's notorious environmental effects). So they create their own exchange system: Cheese Coin. A narrator “explains” that cheese is what happens when milk becomes stone and searches for immortality. Like many technospheres, it's just its own circular logic, and it seems silly from the outside. At Documenta 15 and at Esther Schipper in Berlin, Steyerl showed the video as part of a trippy installation: herbs in dangling terrarium



Two views of Hito Steyerl's installation *Animal Spirits*, 2023, in the exhibition “Contemporary Cave Art” at Esther Schipper, Berlin.

spheres were hooked up to sensors. When a visitor's movement triggered a sensor, it told an AI to animate the Paleolithic cave paintings projected on the wall.

Even before Steyerl changed course, Trecartin and Fitch, in 2016, moved their studio from LA to rural Ohio, where they built a compound on a 32-acre property replete with a giant lazy river. Their exhaustion was palpable in “Whether Line,”

their 2019 show at the Prada Foundation in Milan, where they put together a prefab barn inside the museum, leaving half the space empty. To get to the barn, you had to navigate meandering stanchions as if in a long line for a roller coaster, minus the crowds. Inside the barn, a video took viewers into some version of the artists' Ohio life, where disillusioned tech dropouts, a rural queer community, and Amish neighbors bickered. (Trecartin plays a

rural Amish woman named Neighbor Girl.) The various parties dispute things like loud music and property lines; one neighbor gets another registered as “historic,” as if she were a building. This means she must request a permit to change even the way she waves hello. It is not a romantic view of the simple life, but still, a pink-haired person explains, “that’s why we’re here in the country, to like, reverse the curse.”

**The backdrop to these artists’ recent** works has been a general disenchantment with technologies that have lost their early promise. The *New York Times* recently reported on the “Luddite teens” of Brooklyn, a group of young people leading the “smart phone liberation movement.” Twitter, whose predecessor is a DIY invention of protesters at the 2004 Republican National Convention, is now the plaything of a billionaire, its content having degenerated from free speech to misinformation along the way.

At the same time Steyerl and Trecartin and Fitch were altering their trajectories, the author Tao Lin, who once turned tweets and emails

into novels, was at work on his 2021 novel *Leave Society* – a piece of autofiction about recovery from the symptoms of “dominator society.” Lin borrowed the term from Riane Eisler’s 1980s classic book *The Chalice and the Blade*, which distinguishes partnership societies – early cultures that worshipped goddesses and nature – from dominator, or patriarchal ones like ours. (As it happened, in real life Lin did not leave society so much as get canceled – first for dubious behavior with a 16-year-old when he was 22, and again for anti-vax preaching on Twitter.)

*Leave Society* accuses Google of being “censored, shadow-banned, and blacklisted natural health sites because its parent corporation since 2015, Alphabet, had ties to pharmaceutical corporations,” and calls Wikipedia a tool for “aggregate[ing] the mainstream.” Lin’s protagonist, Li, decides to stop looking stuff up online after realizing that “at some point public education had taught him that everything was already discovered, that new discoveries would be on the news.” Instead, he tries approaching the physical and natural

world around him with openness and curiosity.

Writing in the *New Yorker*, Andrea Long Chu accused *Leave Society* of a “naïve prelapsarianism,” an attitude David Graeber and David Wengrow parse brilliantly in their 2021 tome *The Dawn of Everything*, a search for the origins of inequality. The two anthropologists looked at anthropological studies of Neolithic societies like Çatalhöyük (a favorite of Lin’s too), and found examples of cities (not nomadic cultures) that thrived before implementing any hierarchical social orders. They conclude that, since the dawn of time, our ancestors were self-conscious political actors. Some narratives wager that when agriculture came along and brought with it the division of labor – meaning, not everyone had to spend their time securing food but were free to do other things, like make art – it brought about inequality, which is the unfortunate price of a sophisticated society. They argue instead that it was *people* – not agriculture, or any other invention – that caused inequality. “If something did go terribly wrong in human history – and given the current state of the world, it’s hard to deny something did,” they write, “then perhaps it began to go wrong precisely when people started losing that freedom to imagine and enact other forms of social existence.”

Dream as we might of reverting human “progress” – and these artists are indeed offering dreams, for their projects still necessitate participation in the art world and collaborations with technology – there might be other, more feasible moves. If Graeber and Wengrow are right, technology doesn’t determine the course of history: people do. So long as the robots don’t go rogue... ●

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Two views of the exhibition “Lizzie Fitch | Ryan Trecartin: Whether Line,” 2019 at the Prada Foundation, Milan.