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EXHIBITIONS

Cory Arcangel and Olia Lialina “Asymmetrical Response” at The Kitchen, New York



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Cory Arcangel and Olia Lialina “Asymmetrical Response” at The Kitchen, New York, 2017
Photo: Jason Mandella

In military parlance, the terms *asymmetrical* and *symmetrical* have historically been employed in reference to political provocations and diplomatic *démarches*, escalation, and tension, as well as to power dynamics of the highest order. Yet today these terms are also useful for describing a set of relations that define our social and cultural connections to power, particularly as we take stock of contemporary media structures. In fact, this terminology is uniquely pertinent for any dialogue about the socio-cultural impact of the Internet as it has shifted in recent decades from a tool for military communication to an “information superhighway” promising open and equal exchange, and, finally, the increasingly asymmetric “content delivery system” that shapes contemporary experience.

On the eve of Y2K, Russian-born Olia Lialina—who is among the best-known participants in the 1990s net.art scene—first met American artist Cory Arcangel. Ever since, the artists have been deep in dialogue about such changing terms for the Internet. For their first collaboration in an exhibition format, Arcangel and Lialina present complex bodies of work that arose through their continuing conversation. The exhibition was curated by Caitlin Jones for Western Front,

<http://mousse magazine.it/cory-arcangel-olia-lialina-asymmetrical-response-the-kitchen-new-york-2017/>

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Vancouver (where it appeared last fall), and organized for The Kitchen by Tim Griffin and Lumi Tan.

The New York presentation of “Asymmetrical Response” comes at a time when Americans are all too familiar with the question of asymmetrical responses, escalation, and power relations as they pertain to the Internet. Public dialogues are still unfolding around the role of disinformation spread through technology during and after the most recent Presidential election, signaling a historic shift in the influence of social media platforms and their users on not only on cultural life but also societal organization. In this respect, the homogeneity of one’s Facebook feed may streamline the most outrageous fabrications; the character limit of Twitter is more effective discursively when fewer people read beyond the headlines.

Arcangel and Lialina’s works directly address such shaping of public discourse—and, in turn, personal identity—through manipulated media and corporate limitation, creating an installation in which multiple digital temporalities exist at once with respect to form and content. For example, when it comes to such found media and its shaping of ostensibly personal expression: While the gallery floor is carpeted with a diamond plate pattern frequently used on as a background on personal websites in the mid-1990s (including Arcangel’s own first site), the walls are covered in patterns taken from early Yahoo templates whose aim was to channel and standardize personal expression following their acquisition of Geocities in 1999. A central work in the exhibition is Lialina’s (*Nothing you can compare to your neighborhood hoe*), an immense screencast of an existing Tumblr page that includes Lialina’s *Animated Gif Model*, a gif of the artist hula-hooping that has been circulated on hundreds of websites since its creation in 2005. Her avatar, now beyond life-size, appears as merely one of many random images without attribution in a total rejection of template-based social media.

However, instead of looking back nostalgically on more innocent, amateur days of the Internet, the exhibition critically acknowledges a transition—or better, an abstraction—of power that Lialina has identified in her writing around the most fundamental linguistics of our digital life: from computers to technology, interface to experience, users to people. In the titular work by Lialina, two “empty” browsers are opened side-by-side on a monitor. One browser displays a 1×1 transparent gif, an early web convention, but also a tool of surveillance with which companies track users; the other browser, a 400 x 400 transparent gif that users of the popular image generator site Blingee.com, distributed amongst their community to go around Blingee’s template restrictions. This “invisible” response puts forth a canny strategy for resisting the increasingly visible modes of control sanctioned by the technologies marketed in our service.

In conjunction with the exhibition, Olia Lialina will present the U.S. premiere of *Bear With Me*, a performance starring Kevin Bewersdorf on February 18, at 8pm.