

Museums

# These artists make online disinformation into art. Or is it the other way around?

By **Kelsey Ables**

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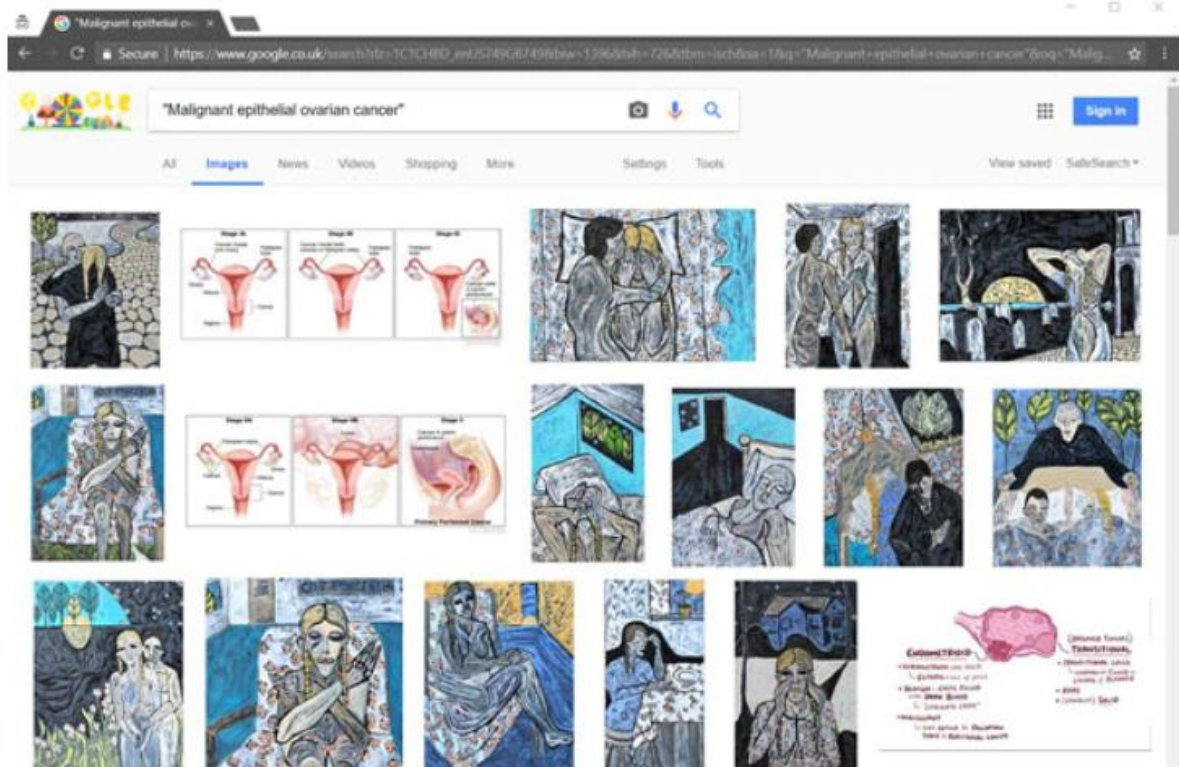
The verb “to Google” has become almost synonymous with “to know.” How’d you know that the [Louvre is 652,300 square feet](#)? Or that [Andy Warhol had 25 cats](#)? Or that the “Salvator Mundi” is one of the [ugliest paintings ever sold](#)?

“I Googled it,” you might reply, as if to say, “I learned it, and now I know it.”

At its core an indexer of information, Google has become a producer of information in its own right. Yet, despite its sleek interface and authoritative design, it is as malleable as wet clay.

Try searching for information about [malignant epithelial ovarian cancer](#), or [who won the Turner Prize last year](#). Among the medical diagrams and prizewinning art that pop up in your search returns? Work by Los Angeles-based artist Gretchen Andrew, who has never won the Turner Prize and whose work offers little insight into cancer.

Andrew calls herself a “search engine” artist — more broadly, her work falls into the category of net art, which has become a catchall term for art that lives online. Many net artists, like Andrew, use the Internet as a medium to infiltrate public space and challenge the corporate tech hegemony through digital interventions. Just as Warhol critiqued the media of his time by reproducing sensational news images in silk-screen prints, and as Duchamp subverted the conventions of the art world by seeking to place his urinal-turned-artwork “Fountain” in the sanctified gallery space, these net artists look to our digital world to elucidate its distortions and confront its hierarchies.



"Malignant Epithelial Ovarian Cancer," search engine art, recorded July 2017. (Gretchen Andrew)

At their foundation, many of Andrew's works are paintings: pastel, Expressionist-inspired depictions of somber figures. But the works extend beyond what a frame could hold: The websites she creates to manipulate Google's algorithms echo Sol LeWitt's instruction-based artworks, and the search results themselves might be seen as performance art, presented anew each time a viewer conducts the search.

For Stuart Comer, curator of media art at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, this multifaceted, genre-bending quality is characteristic of net art, which has existed since the early days of the Internet.

"Traditionally, art has been thought of as an image or an object or both," Comer says. "You can't locate the art in one aspect of net art. It's a constellation. It's the image, the terminal, the viewer, the conversation. It's all of the above."

*[Art for shut-ins: An introduction to the world of Net Art]*

This makes net art akin to the information ecosystem we find ourselves in — where a news story doesn't exist on a single page but is strung together by videos and tweets and endless layers of commentary, regurgitated by algorithms. Where images are edited, re-edited and so widely dispersed that their origin becomes irrelevant and their veracity shaky.

As disinformation continues to circulate, even more so amid a pandemic and presidential election year, the mission of net artists has ever-escalating urgency. Be it Constant Dullaart, creating armies of fake Twitter accounts, or Bill Posters, disseminating heavily edited videos (deepfakes) of politicians on Instagram, net art is built from the material of our time, and perhaps the form most fit to challenge it.

## A prankster spirit

Artists as digital interventionists share in the prankster spirit of such guerrilla street artists as Banksy. They jump into the mess of the Internet and leave their art behind, alongside legitimate posts and accounts. But while Banksy himself has become a brand, and fodder for art news stories, these artists explode the idea of the personal brand, revealing its insidious innards.

Michael Connor, artistic director of Rhizome, the New Museum's digital art affiliate, points to a fundamental shift in the Internet in the 2000s, when data collection became the currency of increasingly dominant Web giants.

“Since the rise of platforms, so much net art has been about trying to negotiate a life in which so much of your social existence is determined by these spaces,” he says. “What kind of subjectivity does that allow? What kind of communication? What kind of self-expression?”

Connor notes that one of the first impulses people have when encountering a computer is to create. “When you talk to people about their first use of a computer, they might have used it to draw a picture or make a collage. I think that desire to see the computer as an expressive tool is really fundamental.”

That impulse has been captured in wacky, defunct [GeoCities pages](#) and projects such as “The Web Stalker” (1997), where art collective I/O/D railed against the forced passivity of mainstream browsers such as Internet Explorer by producing their own browser that left the HTML code exposed.

If I/O/D strove to keep visible the ingredients of the Web, Andrew reveals how those ingredients can make an entirely unexpected product. She exposes the wiring of the Internet not in and of itself, but through a jarring end result: Search

for “[the next American president](#)” and you’ll find flowery collages living next to photos of familiar politicians.

To make such a project come to life, Andrew posts images of the art to social networks and websites that she has created and flooded with keyword-driven text about her goals — in this case, to “manifest the qualities, values and attributes of the next American president.”

Eventually, the artworks surface in search results.



Andrew poses with “Cover of Artforum” vision boards that are displayed as top results for Google searches of “Cover of Artforum.” (Nick Berardi Photography)

Gretchen Andrew’s website ([cover-of-artforum.com](#)) that helps elevate her images to top Google search results for “Cover of Artforum.” (Gretchen Andrew)

“I talk about how I really want these things, and then Google gives them to me because it doesn’t know about desire,” Andrew explains. “It highlights what the human brain can do with nuance that the binary brain of computers completely fails at.”

Having worked at Google, Andrew comes to the search engine with the scrutiny of a renegade insider. “A lot of my work is a personal power trip,” she says. “It’s a very feminist thing to say: ‘If the Internet is going to show somebody’s view of the world it may as well be mine.’”

## 'Creativity and disobedience'

Central to Andrew's work is fluidity among genres — painting, performance, net art. But, she says, there is “a demand from the art world and from the market to say where the art is and what the finished piece is.”

At art museums, that demand is a matter of pragmatism — how to display and contextualize work in a setting designed for more traditional art forms? When [MoMA reopened in October](#) after renovations, it set an example by devoting an entire wall to “My%Desktop” by JODI, a four-channel video installation — or “desktop performance” — of messy folders and multiplying computer windows, upending the computer's semblance of tidiness.



JODI's “My%Desktop” is displayed at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. (John Wronn/Digital Image © 2020 The Museum of Modern Art, New York)

The museum also recently acquired Petra Cortright's “VVEBCAM,” a YouTube video in which Cortright looks into her webcam apathetically as cartoonish effects float in front of her face. Comer notes that the comments, which include hateful remarks that capture the trolling culture that women face online, are also a part of the piece.

Net art is decentralized, he says, and “that’s what makes it so hard for people to grasp.”

For Bill Posters, who went viral last June after circulating a deepfake video of Facebook founder and chief executive Mark Zuckerberg, how one should process net art is the wrong question.

“I want to make the case that art is more than an aesthetic commodity and form of consumption,” he says. “I see creativity and disobedience as twin strands in the DNA of activism.” In that regard, the response to Posters’s video — the media coverage, its mention in a Senate hearing on deepfakes — is part of the art, too.

bill\_posters\_uk  
15k followers [View Profile](#)

FACEBOOK

ZUCKERBERG:  
WE'RE INCREASING TRANSPARENCY ON ADS  
ANNOUNCES NEW MEASURES TO "PROTECT ELECTIONS" CBSN

[View More on Instagram](#)

6,791 likes

bill\_posters\_uk

'Imagine this...' (2019) This deepfake moving image work is from the 'Big Dada' series, part of the 'Spectre' project. Where big data, AI, dada, and conceptual art combine.  
.Artworks by Bill Posters & @danyelhau #spectreknows #privacy #democracy #surveillancecapitalism #dataism #deepfake #deepfakes #contemporaryartwork #digitalart #generativeart #newmediaart #codeart #markzuckerberg #activism #contemporaryart

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Following revelations about the data firm [Cambridge Analytica's role in the 2016 election](#), Posters shifted his focus from public space, where he parodied corporate

ads as a street artist, to digital space, where he manipulates videos of public figures to call attention to the ease with which false information travels online and major tech companies' lack of accountability.

In Posters's Zuckerberg video, which he created with Daniel Howe, the tech tycoon seems to be describing himself as "one man, with total control of billions of people's stolen data, all their secrets, their lives, their futures."

Posters has come to realize that online, where misinformation spreads, often uninhibited, his works can have real-world consequences in a way artwork in a museum cannot.

Christiane Paul, curator of new media arts at the Whitney Museum in New York, says that in its early days, net art was even more radical and directly interventionist. She points to the Yes Men, who, in 1999, made a satirical government website that was so convincing that they were invited to make public appearances on behalf of the World Trade Organization. (They did so for years.) Another example: Vote-Auction, a platform created by art duo Ubermorgen that claimed to allow Americans to auction off votes during the 2000 presidential election.



"Gatt.org," a satirical government website made by the Yes Men in the lead-up to a 1999 World Trade Organization conference. (Rhizome/New Museum)



The logo for Vote-Auction (2000-2006), a net art piece for which collective Ubermorgen claimed to allow Americans to auction off votes online. (Rhizome/New Museum)

"Today, I think artists are much more explicit about taking a stance and careful about not creating fiction or circulating a deepfake without contextualizing it," Paul says. "They don't want to feed a right-wing machinery or engage in trolling."

That’s exactly what Dullaart was wrestling with amid the throes of the 2016 primary elections. At the time, Dullaart found himself with an army of 13,000 fake Facebook accounts he had modeled after Hessian soldiers. But overwhelmed by the weight of 13,000 voices, Dullaart decided not to post anything on any of the accounts and titled the work “The Possibility of an Army.”

“I felt like I built a weapon, but I didn’t fire it,” he recalls, adding that as he watched that very weapon fire in elections around the world, he struggled with ethical questions: Can artists make purely symbolic work? Or do they have a responsibility to advocate specific political ideologies?

Yet as net art evolves in response to an increasingly hostile, high-stakes digital environment, Paul notes, “less subversive does not mean less interesting.” With the whole world watching on the corporate stage that is the 2020 Internet, the potential for impact is certainly higher.

In 19th-century Paris, rapid industrialization changed the urban landscape — trains whirred at unfathomable speeds, widened streets buzzed with Parisians, illuminated by electric light. Such changes also gave rise to lauded Impressionist artworks — from Caillebotte’s kinetic street scenes to Monet’s hazy train paintings.

If Impressionism set out to reckon with the changes of the machine age, to get at the fragmentation, the heightened speed and the changing nature of sight, perhaps net art is not so different. By calling out the governing forces we cannot see in the platforms we use every day — the algorithms and policies and the unchecked power that shapes them — these artists capture our sprawling, messy digital reality. And over time, they might even manage to change it.

 **1 Comments**



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