

# On having a love/hate relationship with technology



Artist Lauren Huret on being both inspired by and critical of technology, the complicated notion of content moderation, and why we should strive to burst our insular “iron bubbles” online.

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2323 words.

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**People refer to you as a digital or “new media” artist. How did your creative practice originate? Were you always working with technology in some way?**

How did I start? Hmm. As a child I drew a lot and made a lot of drawings and collages, mostly stuff on paper. Around age 10 I got a computer and I began to use it creatively. It had programs like Paint and PowerPoint. I used PowerPoint a lot to make drawings and fake newspapers. I was really creative with that. Though I use video a lot, I don’t like to label my practice as “new media.” I think I often get this label because of the subject matter I address—the mythologies and effects of communication technology.

**How would you categorize your art practice now?**

Right now, I’m mostly working on videos and video installations. Occasionally I make sculptures and collages, but it’s mostly moving images and video collages. As an artist I think it is important to reflect on what type of images I am putting out and where. I try to think about how media and the proliferation of images are shaping us as beings.

**That seems to be the through-line in a lot of your work—the relationship we have with media and technology, or how it affects how we live. Do you have a contentious relationship with technology? Do you have the sense that it’s shaping the way that we think in ways that are mostly negative?**

Having been born in 1984, the internet for me seemed friendly as I grew up with it. I’ve seen it transform and change, and I’ve seen it taken over by corporations and politics and fake news and all these things that we know now. I’ve seen it become all about surveillance and data collection. I feel like it’s not like a friendly sibling anymore, but more of an evil surveillance creature.

I’m trying to be critical about how we use the internet and social media. I think that we have the tendency to blindly believe in certain concepts. Many of us tend to think, “Oh yeah, it’s technology, it’s wonderful, it’s working!” But it’s far more complex than that. The ways we use technology involve a lot of hidden and underpaid human labor. I try to learn about the implications and the effects that using such new technologies have.

The last project I did was to try to meet content moderators who work for social media companies. These are people whose job it is to basically look at horrible stuff all day long, and they have to decide what is going to stay on the platform and what is going to be taken down. When these people look at pedo-pornographic images,

beheadings videos, and hate speech all day long, it makes them depressed. I know that the suicide rate is very high for people who do this kind of work.

**The idea of "content moderation" is complicated. How does one become a content moderator? Are those jobs typically outsourced to places far away? Who are the people who end up doing that work?**

Yeah, the question is very complex. There are people doing this job here in the US, but most of the jobs are outsourced to third-party companies in other countries. There are thousands of people in the Philippines doing content moderation for all the major US platforms, but if you do some research, you'll find that everywhere in the world there are now people being hired to do this type of work. In Poland there are people moderating South American content, and so on.

**Were you able to speak to anyone who does that job? I can't imagine the psychological repercussions of having to do that all day long. It's hard to imagine something more terrible for your psyche than literally looking at the worst kinds of imagery imaginable all day as your full-time job.**

I've been in contact with some people, only by email and chat. Everyone with whom I had an appointment to meet always backed out at the last minute. They often have to sign non-disclosure agreements forbidding them from talking about who they work for and what exactly they do. But a lot of research has been done on the issue. Adrian Chen wrote an article for *Wired* a couple years ago. There is a good documentary about it called *The Cleaners*, made by Hans Block et Moritz Rieseewieck, and the researcher Sarah T. Roberts has also written a lot of articles on the topic. All this work testifies to the difficulty endured by these laborers, and the lack of psychological support they receive. I think of content moderators as "the sacrificial victims of the freely circulating image."

**The difference between "moderating" content and "censoring" it is also complicated.**

Exactly. The guidelines of the various companies are totally different. What is allowed or not depends on the moral taboos of the country and its political system. But we use the word "censorship" when it's applied by governments, by law. We know that now, for example, Facebook is totally making arrangements with different governments about this stuff.

**Is it even possible to use the internet or social media in a way that doesn't allow for being tracked or surveilled?**

Honestly, I don't know if I can exactly answer this question. It isn't just social media. Every website you go to tracks your activities, and they are monitoring this information to make money—that's how it is now. The rest is massive surveillance from government agencies.

**On your personal website there's a disclaimer that says: "I don't put much of my things on my website, because I don't trust the Internet, neither you. Sorry."**

Yes. It's very much related to the idea that, for example, when I look at other creative peoples' websites, I don't feel that the work was made for this medium, you know? To me the question of media is super important—how you transmit your work, how you transmit your ideas. I feel like the internet is still great for transmitting ideas and sharing thoughts, but in terms of showing my artwork, I feel like I have to move outside of that. At the moment, I don't build pieces for the internet—I create things to show in art spaces or in a room where people are actually present. Maybe I'm a bit old fashioned for being like that, but when I do something for the internet, I'll know. It will be shown on the internet for that reason.

**For people who would consider themselves digital artists, or for whom the computer or the internet is their medium, there can be something very ephemeral about the work—it exists in this realm where it could easily just disappear. What does the idea of documentation mean for you? For your work?**

Well, when I'm doing a performance, I refuse to let it be filmed. When I'm doing a conference I generally refuse that it be recorded, and I refuse to promote my work through using my face and my identity. So usually I don't give out any pictures or portraits, and when I do a conference I ask people to not put my face on the internet. In terms of documentation, I feel like text and pictures are still the best ways to give people reading about one's work a way to imagine what it is like. Sometimes there's beauty in only imagining what the performance would have been like, just by looking at the pictures and reading the text. When things are filmed and then posted online, specifically performances, it often doesn't really do justice to the performance. It's showing an aspect of reality that is very much fabricated, and that's a tricky thing for me. I also want to leave room for oblivion and altered memories.

**As an artist who is doing this kind of work, how do you make a living as an artist? Is it simply about applying for grants and fellowships and seeking out places that are interested in showing the kind of work you do?**

It's not that simple, but I do live in Switzerland and I feel like it's a very agreeable country in that they support living artists and there is a grant system here. Also, I am part of two groups active in fighting for artists' salaries, and for artists to be paid for what they're doing. We're doing an artist union, and we're meeting with politicians and institutional directors to move forward with this plan. In Switzerland for example, it's really shifting the way we perceive artist's work. You know, I don't sell much. I have sold some videos to institutions, but otherwise it's about teaching and doing performances, which I'm being paid for, and doing collaborations with other artists. This idea that your art has to be indexed on the art market is not valid for me anymore, because if institutions are willing to pay the artist for what they're doing (which some are beginning to do), then I can try to make a decent living from writing, doing performances, collaborating, and exhibiting.

**When so much of your work is about addressing issues related to technology, how does that affect your own personal relationship with technology?**

It's a very complex relationship—mostly a love/hate relationship, you know? But, at the same time, new media and the question of technology in general is such a massive inspiration for my work. I am drawn to it. I am inspired every day by what I'm seeing online and how people are affected by it. So, I just want to be sure that I will never lose my ability to be critical and to try to see new media, technology, and the internet through this critical lens. I'm also trying to give some kind of poetic vision of how I perceive the internet. I'm trying to make sure that my visions are very subjective and sometimes *almost* mystical and maybe a little religious, because technology is very deeply related to strong beliefs, irrationality, and feelings.

**Can you give me an example of that?**

Yeah. While I'm in NYC I'm going to present my latest project on content moderation at Pioneer Works which is all about the idea of the cursed image. It's based on the idea that seeing an image can curse you to the point that you can't return to your previous life. I will present the results and some of the videos from this project, and discuss my process. I also want to share some of my new research about surveillance, the feeling of being watched over, and ghosts.

**I'm fascinated with the idea that there are things, once seen, that can't be unseen. You are changed by having seen it, whether you want to be or not. That's another thing about the internet—you are often confronted by things that you didn't anticipate or ask for. And you can't go backwards from that.**

Exactly. I'm also interested in how something like scrolling through Instagram is often linked to the same feelings as gambling. What am I going to see next? It's about anticipation, and this feeling of surprise. It's a feeling that, of course, has been studied a lot by the people who are making this type of technology. The idea is to make you want to see more, to make us feel like we have to stay engaged and remain present on the network.

The cursed imagery for me was really based on hearing people say things like, "I've seen such-and-such video online, and since then I'm transformed, I'm mortified, I will never see the world in the same way that I saw it before." Usually it is in relation to traumatic content, very hardcore stuff that has been uploaded.

There is often an attraction/repulsion people have for that kind of content—you don't want to see it, but there is also this morbid curiosity. It's different, of course, if you stumble across that kind of imagery without anticipating it. Also, is there a flip side to the idea of the cursed image? People can often be so insulated from anything terrible, maybe we sometimes need to see terrible images to remind us that there are truly awful things happening in the world and we no longer have the luxury of pretending that those things can't touch us?

That is an interesting idea. Still, I feel like most of the people that are privileged enough to *not* see those things will not accept it. It's very hard to make someone understand—particularly somebody who's been living a very privileged and rich life—that other people on the planet are truly suffering. We're now talking about this concept called the "Iron Bubble"—the idea that everything that you see, everything that you can check online is very much related to your own world, and you have very few chances, if you're not looking for it, to see stuff that you don't want to see. It's very much designed like that now. It's important to break out of that—otherwise we all become trapped in these little online worlds that we didn't even know we were creating.

**Lauren Huret Recommends:**

to see: the video [Buffalo Billy + Milly](#) by Rosemarie Trockel

to read: [TechGnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information](#) by Erik Davis was a mind blower for me, and it shaped my practice. I had the chance to interview Erik [for a book that I made in 2016](#)

this is a must-see, a classic now I guess : *All watched over by the machines of loving grace* by [Adam Curtis](#). I would recommend the second episode: ['The Use and Abuse of Vegetational Concepts'](#).

Name

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Vocation

Artist

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