

Internet-influenced art at UMMA

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"Saving Money with Subcontractors (FedEx Worker's Head)" by Josh Kline at UMMA. (Photo11: Michael H.

When Bill Gates and Steve Jobs were tinkering in their respective garages, even in their wildest dreams they could not have imagined the way their computers — and the Internet they spawned — would upend and redefine the world.

That upheaval is the subject of the visually entertaining show at the University of Michigan Museum of Art, "Art in the Age of the Internet: 1989 to Today," up through April 7, featuring the work of 36 individual artists and collectives.'

Why 1989? That's the year the World Wide Web was born.

As the introductory panel for this show organized

by the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston notes, the internet has "transformed attitudes and mores, affected how societies see themselves and others, and has challenged our perceptions of reality and truth." And how. Remember when a video was pretty much proof positive something had actually happened? Ah, for those halcyon, innocent days. Hailed initially for its role in helping groups resist dictatorships, as with the Arab Spring, the World Wide Web has subsequently been harnessed by

the oppressors themselves, landing us in a world where surveillance is invisible and probably omnipresent.

But it's also empowered the activist and citizen-journalist, as with "The Fall of a Hair: Blow Ups," by Lebanese artist Rabih Mroué.

These seven blurry images, blown up to huge size, all feature indistinct images of gunmen pointing their weapons toward the photographer, and thus the viewer. They were often taken moments before the protester in question — armed with his or her mobile phone — was shot and killed. As the accompanying text points out, since the regime has succeeded in keeping journalists out of Syria, many times what little we know about what's happening on the ground comes from such fuzzy images shot by individuals who themselves may have been in great peril.

Were it not for the Internet, of course, the dramatic pictures might die with the protester. Even had they made it onto the TV news somewhere, that would be an isolated drop in a media ocean. But uploaded to the internet, they can gain power and exposure unimaginable decades ago.

Appropriately for an entirely visual medium, much of this show is pretty dazzling — including the bank of 30 TV screens set in a black wall, "thewayblackmachine" from the Howdoyousayyaminafrican? artists collective. The algorithmically generated images flashing on the screens — many of them TV news clips — focus on police brutality and the gathering Black Lives Matter movement.

The installation was created as a contemporary nod, as the text explains, to activist Ida B. Wells' 1895 pamphlet, "The Red Record," documenting lynchings in the 19th century.

Some parts of the show document emerging technologies tied into the internet, as with Josh Kline's "Saving Money with Subcontractors (FedEx Worker's Head)."

This life-sized installation is ghoulish and borderline funny at the same time. The trio of 3-D printed heads — created from multiple digital pictures of a FedEx worker taken from dozens of angles — lie carefully arranged on packing peanuts in an open FedEx box.

It's a reminder, the artist writes, of how "fractured aspects of our lives (are) accumulating in different databases." Not an entirely happy thought.