

Difference Machines: Technology and Identity in Contemporary Art

On View October 13 - December 16, 2023

Award-Winning Exhibition Sheds Light on Struggle Between Digital Dominance and Personal Identity Through Lens of Contemporary Art

Wrightwood 659 in Chicago is Final Stop on National Museum Tour

Exhibition Celebrates 5th Anniversary of Wrightwood 659

Press Preview: October 12, 2023, @ 10:00AM



(CHICAGO, IL, September 11, 2023) – With the evolution of the Web came the dream of a new frontier in human relations, one free from the usual identifiers of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and dis/ability. This fall, Wrightwood 659 questions that promise and its darker side of surveillance, erasure, and exploitation. ***Difference Machines: Technology and Identity in Contemporary Art*** opens Friday, October 13, 2023, and will be on view through Saturday, December 16, 2023. Organized by the Buffalo AKG Art Museum (formerly the Albright-Knox Art Gallery) in Buffalo, New York, the award-winning exhibition is making its final stop in Chicago after a four-city national tour.

The exhibition is presented by Alphawood Exhibitions at Wrightwood 659.

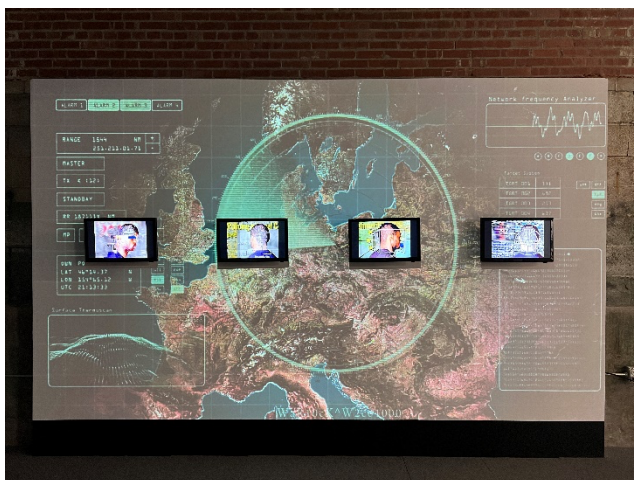
Difference Machines is co-curated by Tina Rivers Ryan, PhD, curator of the Buffalo AKG Art Museum, and Paul Vanouse, professor at the University at Buffalo. The exhibition earned the 2022 Curatorial Award for Excellence from the Association of Art Museum Curators (AAMC), making it the first major survey of art and technology to be acknowledged by the AAMC.

"In light of the sudden explosion of interest in digital art, we hope this exhibition will help raise awareness of its longer history," explains Curator Tina Rivers Ryan. "These artworks demonstrate that artists who work with digital technologies have long considered the complex relationship between technology and difference. Unfortunately, as is true across contemporary art, these artists often have not been valued beyond their communities, due to the systemic biases of institutions including art museums and galleries."

The Exhibition

Difference Machines: Technology and Identity in Contemporary Art presents a diverse group of 17 artists and collectives who reimagine the digital tools shaping our lives. The exhibition includes projects spanning the last three decades, from software-based and internet art to animated videos, bioart experiments, digital games, and 3-D printed sculptures. Together, these works explore the aesthetic and social potential of emerging technologies and the essential question: What does it mean to live in a digital world?

The 20 works on view in ***Difference Machines*** exemplify different strategies for adapting technology to artmaking. The artist A.M. Darke, for instance, explores through the video game genre how the perception of identity categories is shaped by society. He has based his online two-player game on "Guess Who?," setting two monitors in front of a wall papered with a pink and green floral pattern



and decorating the screen's digital tabletops with '50s, Vegas-y pink and red rhombuses. The artist's game differs from its commercial inspiration in that all the mystery characters are Black male celebrities, and the majority are just one person—Kanye West. When prompted to differentiate identity in this deck of Black faces, the player of *'Ye or Nay?*, 2020, confronts the power of context. While playful on its surface, the game also puts us in the position of describing, categorizing, and "eliminating" Black characters, paralleling

how databases and algorithms identify, track, and discriminate against Black people and other marginalized groups.

A number of projects explore how digital technologies surveil society, particularly impacting marginalized communities, including one project conceived three decades before today's facial recognition systems. Keith Piper's *Surveillance: Tagging the Other*, 1992, employs four video screens to show a Black man slowly rotating his head for the camera, while a target continuously follows his face. For Black people who have been "tagged" since slavery, the new technology promises only more of the same. Another artist, Zach Blas, provides a peculiar weapon for women, gay men, and Black, Latinx, and Indigenous people to evade digital surveillance. In *Facial Weaponization Suite*, 2012-14, he presents four shiny fuchsia, blue, black, and gray blob-like masks, including *Fag Face*, drawn from aggregated facial data derived from participants in his previous workshops. The resulting mutated, alien faces cannot be read or parsed by biometric facial recognition technologies.

A recurring subject in the exhibition is the erasure of marginalized communities through digital technologies—whether by accident or design. One of the exhibition's most poignant pieces is Rafael Loranzo-Hemmer's *Level of Confidence*, 2015, honoring the memory of 43 students who disappeared in a mass kidnapping in the state of Guerrero, Mexico, eight years ago. Loranzo-Hemmer's piece utilizes a facial recognition system that scans the face of each viewer and, using an algorithm, detects which of the lost students the viewer most resembles. The fact that the search is in reality futile, given the likely fate of the students, is part of Lorenzo-Hemmer's intention, underscoring how so often sophisticated digital systems are mere window-dressing in the hands of those seeking to erode civil rights.

In 2018, the artist Sean Fader began combing through old issues of queer publications, many of which had never been digitized, and historical archives, to compile a database of every LGBTQ+ person murdered in a hate crime in the United States. From this image library he has constructed the interactive piece *Insufficient Memory*, 2020. Fader is among the artists featured in *Difference Machines* who seek to convey how visibility can be dangerous or traumatic for LGBTQ+ people, yet being excluded from the digital realm is its own kind of erasure.

Other artists in the show embrace visibility, empowered by taking ownership over the digital technologies shaping identity. These include the Mohawk multimedia artist Skawennati, who is



represented by a video retelling the traditional Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) creation story as a science fiction narrative on the platform Second Life. The New York-based artist Saya Woolfalk also works in the tradition of science fiction. She contributes a truly mind-blowing video installation to *Difference Machines* wherein enigmatic, glowing god-like figures float, crowned by pink-studded stag horns, rhombuses, and a futuristic and stylized peacock tail; adorned in intricate, multi-hued

patterned clothing; and surrounded by a rainbow of feathers and flora.

Artist Roster

The artists represented in *Difference Machines* are Morehshin Allahyari, Zach Blas, Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley, A.M. Darke, Stephanie Dinkins, Hasan Elahi, Sean Fader, Rian Ciela Hammond, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, Joiri Minaya, Mongrel, Mendi +



Keith Obadike, Sondra Perry, Keith Piper, Skawennati, Saya Woolfalk, and Lior Zalmanson.

Also on View: Tadao Ando: *Spontaneous Sketches*

On its fifth anniversary, Wrightwood 659 presents an exhibition of drawings by the Pritzker Prize-winning architect of Wrightwood 659, Tadao Ando. Ando quickly sketched directly on the walls during the inaugural exhibition at Wrightwood 659, *Ando and Le Corbusier: Masters of Architecture* (October 12 - December 15, 2018), and the drawings have been carefully preserved and framed. These hand-drawn sketches—all done in blue marker on painted sheetrock—have a spontaneous quality denoting an ephemerality, while their vibrancy expresses Ando's creative generative process. The drawings represent some of Ando's most important commissions, including his work on the island of Naoshima; the Pulitzer Arts Foundation in St. Louis, Missouri; the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth; the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts; and his iconic Church of the Light in Ibaraki, Osaka, Japan.

Tadao Ando: Spontaneous Sketches will open in conjunction with *Difference Machines* on October 13, 2023.

About Wrightwood 659

Celebrating its fifth anniversary, Wrightwood 659 was founded in 2018 as a private, non-collecting institution. Located at 659 W. Wrightwood Avenue, in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood, it was

envisioned as a new kind of arts space devoted to presenting exhibitions on architecture and to socially engaged art, including issues facing the LGBTQ+ community, and Asian art and architecture. Wrightwood 659 was designed by Pritzker Prize winner Tadao Ando, who transformed a 1920s building with his signature concrete forms and poetic treatment of natural light. Acclaimed as one of Chicago's "hidden treasures," Wrightwood 659 offers visitors a chance to engage with the pressing issues of our time in an intimate and beautiful space. For additional information, please visit <https://wrightwood659.org>.

About Alphawood Exhibitions

Alphawood Exhibitions is an affiliate of Alphawood Foundation, a Chicago-based, private grant-making foundation working for an equitable, just, and humane society.

About Buffalo AKG Art Museum

Founded in 1862, the Buffalo AKG Art Museum (formerly the Albright-Knox Art Gallery) is the sixth-oldest public art institution in the United States. For more than 160 years, the Buffalo AKG has collected, conserved, and exhibited the art of its time, often working directly with living artists. This tradition has given rise to one of the world's most extraordinary collections of modern and contemporary art. In summer 2023, following the completion of the most significant campus development and expansion project in its history, the Buffalo AKG opened anew to the public. The project is funded by a \$230 million capital campaign, the largest such campaign for a cultural institution in the history of Western New York, including \$195 million raised for construction and \$35 million in additional operating endowment funds.

Wrightwood 659 Hours of Operation

Fridays 12 noon-7 pm; Saturdays 10 am-5 pm.

Tickets

Admission is \$15 and is available online only at <https://tickets.wrightwood659.org/events>. Tickets go on sale September 14, 2023. Please note, admission is by advance ticket only. Walk-ups are not permitted.

COVID-19 Response

We require all staff and guests to be fully vaccinated and boosted against COVID-19. By entering Wrightwood 659, you warrant to us you are fully vaccinated and boosted against COVID-19. We reserve the right to ask guests to produce evidence of their vaccination.

Masks are required throughout the gallery. <https://wrightwood659.org/terms-and-conditions/health-safety/>.

National Media Contact

Ennis O'Brien

Betsy Ennis: betsy@ennisobrien.com | +1 917.783.6553

Stephanie Markovic: stephanie@ennisobrien.com | +1 347.628.4688

Chicago Media Contact

The Silverman Group

Beth Silverman: beth@silvermangroupchicago.com | +1 312.560.4783

Louise Yingduo Liu: louise@silvermangroupchicago.com | +1 312.961.9290

Images

Visitors with A.M. Darke's *'Ye or Nay?*, 2020, in *Difference Machines: Technology and Identity in Contemporary Art* at Albright-Knox Northland, on October 16, 2021. © A.M. Darke. Photo: Jeff Mace for Buffalo AKG Art Museum.

Installation view of Keith Piper's *Surveillance: Tagging the Other*, 1992, in *Difference Machines: Technology and Identity in Contemporary Art* at Albright-Knox Northland, October 16, 2021–January 16, 2022. © Keith Piper. Photo: Tina Rivers Ryan for Buffalo AKG Art Museum.

Visitor with Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Level of Confidence*, 2015, in *Difference Machines: Technology and Identity in Contemporary Art* at Albright-Knox Northland, on October 16, 2021. © Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. Photo: Jeff Mace for Buffalo AKG Art Museum.

Installation view of Sean Fader's *Insufficient Memory*, 2020, in *Difference Machines: Technology and Identity in Contemporary Art* at Albright-Knox Northland, October 16, 2021–January 16, 2022. © Sean Fader. Photo: Brenda Bieger for Buffalo AKG Art Museum.