April 29 – June 3, 2017

SAVED BY THE WEB?
Hasan Elahi
Lin Ke
Eva and Franco Mattes

Lin Ke, *ScreenShot 2016 April 17*, 2016. Archival inkjet print. 74 x 118 inches.

Postmasters is pleased to announce *Saved by the web?*, an exhibition of Hasan Elahi, Lin Ke, and Eva and Franco Mattes, all artists whose work is a result of an engagement with the internet.

Please note the question mark in the title. Because the web will not save us.

This exhibition is all desktops and screens transformed into physical objects to exist in real space.

Imagine two pre-internet framing devices for this show: *Charlotte's Web*, the beloved, classic children's book and its various adaptations, and *Saved by the Bell*, the generational touchstone of a TV sitcom. Both narratives are grounded in the expression of friendship through direct interaction.

In *Charlotte's Web*, at the farm that is at once real and magical, the worlds of people and animals overlap. Charlotte, the spider, saves the life of Wilbur, the baby pig marked for slaughter, by weaving text messages onto her web.

SOME PIG! … TERRIFIC … RADIANT… HUMBLE …

Word spreads—the messages go viral; the ensuing media attention and publicity transforms Wilbur into Zuckerman's Famous Pig. Wilbur receives a special award at the State Fair, and his life is spared. Because nobody kills celebrities. Ever. *The words in the spider's web put human beings on notice that they must always watch the wide world for the arrival of wonders.* This web saved him.

Different web.

The Facebook website was launched on February 4, 2004. In *Saved by the Bell* there is no Facebook. There is a laugh track. Arguably the first great teen show of the past thirty years was a monster hit for NBC's Saturday-morning programming during its run from 1989 to 1993. Beloved and savaged in equal measure, the show follows the adventures of an archetypical gang of high school friends across eighty-six episodes. Lessons of life and love, big and small, pulse through this offline social network, and are resolved in thirty minutes. Jessie develops a caffeine dependency. Zach and Kate get fake-married for a class assignment. And (my personal favorite) romantic confusion flares during the school rap play, "Snow White and the Seven Dorks." The inherent innocence of the sitcom medium primes the onset of nostalgia for a more naïve past of less data and more interaction.

No web.

Dial up to current time, characterized by networked and mediated contact points, a no-touch experience in the digital realm. Living through our current screens is lonelier than television alone ever was.

Saved by the web is not happening.

HASAN ELAHI

An erroneous tip called into law enforcement authorities in 2002—a case of mistaken identity and racial profiling—subjected the Bangladeshi born Hasan Elahi to an intensive investigation by the FBI. After undergoing months of interrogations, he was finally cleared of suspicions. Elahi then conceived of the self-surveillance website trackingtransience.net uploading, publishing, and broadcasting nearly every aspect of his life. Predating the NSA's PRISM surveillance program by half a decade, the project questions the consequences of living under constant surveillance, continuously generating databases of imagery that tracks the artist in real-time. Initially created for the FBI agent on his case, the public also has access to monitor the artist's communication records, banking transactions, and transportation logs, along with various intelligence and government agencies that have been confirmed as visiting the website.

Orb v2.3 is a 72-channel video installation comprising tens of thousand of self-surveillance photos from the past fourteen years. The aesthetic of each sculpture is like Sputnik and a land mine—exploratory and explosive. Screens protrude from three central nodes, rearticulating networked content sharing in physical form. The amount of information made available by simultaneously illuminated screens is excessive, much like the data we produce, which is collected and stored in server farms amassing content. There is no way to watch it all.

LIN KE

Beijing-based artist Lin Ke, whose work was recently exhibited at K11 Art Foundation in Shanghai and Hong Kong, mines the mundane actions of software operations and web surfing as the fodder and form of his art. His work spans installation, image, sound, text, video, and computer painting.

Lin Ke's laptop is his studio. It is reflective and reflexive in his practice; he often turns the camera onto himself or translates his personal desktop experience into a form of self-portraiture. In the video installation *Like Me,* the artist raps dialogue appropriated from a 1960s *Star Trek* episode that alludes to humans (of the high-tech future) in a state of dire complacency, caught in a trap of their own making, merely "…zoo samples, like me." In *ScreenShot*, a screenshot of Lin Ke's desktop, which pictures a studio-come-living room, is brought back into physical space as a larger-than-life photo object, leaning against a wall. *Commander* is a recording of an improvised performance, in which Lin Ke provokes the computer by gesticulating in front of it. Here, the computer becomes an instrument as well as recorder, as the movements are caught on the built-in microphone and speaker system. *Once* records a summer day. With his webcam turned on, Lin Ke sat in front of his laptop listening to lounge music, resulting in a vague reflection emerging from and disappearing into an "oriental" landscape. Lin Ke's work is presented in collaboration with BANK Shanghai.

EVA and FRANCO MATTES

In their ongoing series *Dark Content*, Eva and Franco Mattes, the winners of 2017 Prix Net Art, take on the world of internet content moderators. Three sculptural video installations—*Episodes 4, 5,* and *6*—are presented in *Saved by the web?*. New episodes are also released periodically only on the Darknet. To watch them, download the Tor Browser and go to http://5cqzpj5d6ljxqsj7.onion.

Video avatars tell the stories of current and former content moderators, people that, outside of what can be determined by programmatic algorithms, decide what we see on our feeds. Many do not view themselves as censoring content; rather, they speak the language of politically correct tech companies, describing the scrubbing of media as meeting community standards. Along with the content that is erased from public view—breasts with nipples, Osama bin Laden, child pornography—so are the content moderators themselves. Similar to mechanical turk workers in the virtually nonexistent standard of pay and working conditions, the role of content moderator is far more morally troubling: When content is "moderated," real people bare the psychological burden of such erasures. As one moderator says in *Episode 4*, "Yeah, I can remove the content, but that shit is still in my head."