

It's Supposed To Be Simple, But I'm Not

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Minda Andrén
Giulia Essyad
Dorota Gawęda & Eglė Kulbokaitė
Josèfa Ntjam
Pipilotti Rist
Laura Schawelka
Jiajia Zhang

I'm lying in bed, phone in hand. It's 11:20 pm and I should be falling asleep soon. Almost automatically, I refresh my emails—maybe a notification? At this hour, I wouldn't even want to read it. I drift into other apps, where a torrent of posts feels both utterly trivial and unbearably significant—nauseating, dehumanising. Revolted—but still lying flat—I think about reacting, putting my “good conscience” on display. And yet, I wonder if this impulse is really just a passive action—or a confused, voluntary non-action. Is there no other way to engage than through posts and 10-second videos? Am I thinking too much? It's complicated. Anyway, it's late, 11:57 pm. I set my alarm, switch on my small DOB radio, and fall asleep listening to another round of information.

Back in the 1980s, Jean Baudrillard warned us of the growing power of images: they no longer merely *represent* reality—they *produce* it. Postmodernist thinking fractured universal certainties that had once shaped systems of thought and power structures, opening the way to plurality and the deconstruction of knowledge. But over time, it left behind an ideological and political void, where little feels solid or mobilising. Today, the word *simulacrum* gets pasted onto everything: deepfakes, digital animation, synthetic worlds. The “real” don't last long before hitting the digital.

Inspired by artist and theorist Hito Steyerl's recent book *Medium Hot* (2025) – in which she interrogates the speed and virality of images, probing the ethical, political, and environmental consequences of artificial intelligence – I wonder: while the democratisation of the Internet in the 1990s and 2000s helped disrupting entrenched hegemonies and amplifying the voices of

marginalised and invisibilised communities, it also created an oversaturated reality without lasting impact. Images proliferate, repeat, multiply. Everything feels urgent, but nothing endures. This is not a call to restore absolutes, but a desire to get back to some form of agency in how technologies are used—and, by extension, how identities, bodies, materiality, and the expanded notions of the living perform. French philosopher Catherine Malabou argues for the notion of *plasticity* over *simulacra*. For her, subjectivities are shaped by rupture, malleability, and transformation. So, how can we regain control over the technological machinery that seems to exceed us? Perhaps *fragmentation*, rather than dissolving us, might indeed be a site of resilience and action.

It's not simple, but neither am I.

The exhibition *It's Supposed to be Simple, But I'm Not* at Zeller van Almsick brings together artists who examine how image technologies permeate and shape contemporary life. Amid the ambivalence of hyper-connectedness, the works carve out spaces of resistance, questioning our relationship to the self, the body, and the performativity of social roles. Working across video, photography, sculpture and painting, the artists absorb and disrupt visual patterns, engaging critically with form and message.

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The early video works of **Pipilotti Rist** bring us back to the late 80s and early 90s, a focal moment of technological experimentation. In the iconic *I'm Not the Girl Who Misses Much* (presented during her studies in 1986), Rist manipulates the image through acceleration, vocal distortion and blurriness, transforming her body into a deconstructed and deobjectified subject. Repeating and cartoonishly deforming a line from John Lennon's song for Yoko Ono, she parodies the "doll dance," satirising cultural ideas around hysteria. In *Pickelporno* (1992)—with its psychedelic and cyberfeminist aesthetic—it is not only the subject but also the filming medium that intrigues: a mini surveillance camera (called "lipstick camera") wanders across the bodies, staging a sensuous choreography that unsettles the viewer's voyeuristic gaze.

Thirty years later, **Giulia Essayad** extends this line of inquiry in *Cornstar* (2024), a work that feels resonant to Rist's explorations of eroticism, fetishism, and image manipulation but transposed into a contemporary reality—one saturated by AI-generated imagery, gender politics, and the mass circulation of amateur pornography. The piece belongs to Essayad's ROSE PERIOD, which investigates the invisible, subcutaneous registers of the body—meaning desire, pleasure, attraction. Through censorship, blurring, and anonymity, she engages in a semi-automated, AI-assisted editing process where excess possibilities of tracking and morphing clash against one another.

Minda Andrén's new series of paintings (2025) is inspired by somatic therapies and the intimate ties between body, mind, and sexuality. Internalising images from her immediate environment as well as from the vast flow of the Internet and social media, her works translate these stimuli into painterly compositions. Through accumulation and absorption, she explores how erotic representation takes form in painting today—not through explicitness but through cracks and gaps, like the memory trying to reassemble fragments together.

Like a scrutinising gaze pointed at us, the work *Yield II* (2021) by **Dorota Gawęda and Eglė Kulbokaitė** reactivates a common and popular object in Eastern Europe: a flower-shaped cosmetic mirror, also secretly used during puberty to discover one's body. The artists' practice inscribes itself in speculative and post-digital aesthetics, merging organic and synthetic forms. Their freestanding metal structures, *Enclosures I-VII* (2023–2024), resemble screens, filters or folding paravents. Drawing on Slavic folk mythologies, they summon the beliefs of "field workers" into a hyper-technological world. The resulting images, generated from digital prompts and performance documentation, appear

ghostly, hallucinatory and mutable.

The techno-fantasy visual language of **Josèfa Ntjam**—who calls herself a child of the Internet and of the African diaspora—blends together a set of references aimed at dissolving hegemonic narratives. Between oceanic imaginaries, ancestral rituals, and African mythology, the video *Mélas de Saturne* (2020) constructs a diasporic and speculative experimentation, by conjuring "Persona"—an opaque, collective, and multiple identity that seeks emancipation from the digital depths of the darknet.

Jiajia Zhang's work *Untitled (After Love)* (2022) stitches together a patchwork of images and narratives drawn from personal archives alongside TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram gleaning. Set to karaoke and pop music, the video reveals both the persistent influence of the West in Chinese and Asian societies and the continued inner weight of family traditions and social roles. "Guilt, desperation, alienated role-playing... resignation to lesser accomplishment," as Zhang notes in the film, are part of the everyday realities many women face, particularly working mothers.

Laura Schawelka, meanwhile, recently attended TwitchCon, an annual fan convention of the massively popular streaming platform Tchitch, where millions watch others live through their phones and laptops. Twitch culture is intimate, often vaguely sexual, a mediated spectacle of observation. Schawelka's new work (2025) dissects this mediated intimacy, its zones of blurred boundaries, where spectatorship itself becomes performance.

Overall, the artists in this exhibition explore the social, political, and emotional dimensions of digital technologies and self-expression. Approaching the image as malleable matter—accumulated, distorted, transformed—they reveal its potential to unsettle. I stumbled upon a quote from French poet Paul Valéry who asked: "What is there more mysterious than clarity?" In what seems lucid lies great mystery. It is in opacity, incoherence, and fragmentation that tactics of subversion can take shape. The artists thus open up spaces where complexity and ambiguity may act as instruments of disruption and spaces of refuge.

Camille Regli