‘You see the things that were inside you. This is the womb, the original site of the imagination.’

\- Jon Rafman, *STILL LIFE (BETAMALE)* voiceover.[1]

CONTAGION, MALFUNCTION AND SURVEILLANCE: HEALTH ANXIETY IN CONTEMPORARY INTERNET ART

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[1]Jon Rafman, *STILL LIFE (BETAMALE)*, voiceover, 2013, video, 4 minutes 54 seconds, vimeo.com/channels/652340/75534042 (Date Originally Accessed: 08/04/2020, rearchived 15/11/2022).


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Report - edit, 2022.
This text was originally written as my undergraduate thesis, began 2019 and finished 2020. Some text content and all archived net art / contemporary internet art sourced was updated between Summer 2022 and the first few months of 2023, due to elements on archived sites not emulating well. In the three years since I began writing this work, open source archiving technologies already handle web art far better. It must also be noted that in the year following the completion of this text the themes of health anxiety, internet art and overuse / overexposure to internet content became far more relevant with the rapid movement of the global population online due to the COVID pandemic.

All digital sources can be found archived at conifer.rhizome.org/rosemlondon/contagion-malfunction-surveillance, including video footage of artworks.

CONTEMPORARY internet art displays the symptoms of a health anxiety that remains unaddressed by art historical academia. Published texts examine internet art's political importance, impact on global communication, and detachment from traditional art infrastructure, but insufficient art history inspects the internal effect internet art has on our bodies.[2] The internet is a highly personal intimate space, often experienced alone. We tend to treat cyberspace as separate to our corporeal forms, outside the skin – but the internet and its hardware have an organic presence in our lives: computers can become infected, links can rot, websites age and die. Contemporary internet artists are increasingly playing with this bio-digital cleavage, materialising technological fears through the seemingly contradictory visual language of the medical, the virological, the corporeal and the explicitly bodily. Kris Paulsen's 2014 essay *Ill Communication: Anxiety and Identity in 1990s Net Art* is one of the few academic texts that investigates online art with both anxiety and health, describing how early 'net artists' such as JODI, Prema Murthy and Mark Napier engaged with '[internet] user's fears of contagion, malfunction and surveillance', linking net art anxiety with 'AIDS-era concerns about illness and viral contamination.'[3] However, *Ill Communication* engages predominantly with identity anxiety. From Paulsen's starting point of 'contagion, malfunction and surveillance', using Søren Kierkegaard's definition of anxiety and four contemporary internet artists as case studies: Jon Rafman, Ed Akins, UBERMORGEN and Molly Soda, I will offer a reappraisal of *Ill Communication*, updating it for the modern internet's turn to health anxiety: the fear for one's physical well-being after internet exposure. Ultimately, the often upsetting art of internet health anxiety encourages us to moderate our exposure to the digital world to protect our health.

While health anxiety in contemporary internet art has not been addressed within academia, it has begun to be recognised by brick-and-mortar art exhibitions

[2]Melissa Gronlund, *Contemporary Art and Digital Culture* (Abingdon, 2017); Rachel Greene, *Internet Art* (London, 2004); Julian Stallabrass, *Internet Art: The Online Clash of Culture and Commerce* (London, 2003).
[3]Kris Paulsen, 'Ill Communication: Anxiety and Identity in 1990s Net Art', in *Come as You are: Art of the 1990s*, ed. Alexandra Schwartz (Berkeley, 2014), p. 66.

– from the Science Gallery's 'On Edge: Living in an Age of Anxiety', Somerset House's '24/7: A Wake-Up Call for Our Non-Stop World', and the various encounters between biology and technology at the 2019 Venice Biennale, with Anicka Yi's *Biologizing the Machine* (2019), Hito Steyerl's *This is the Future* (2019) and Jon Rafman's *Dream Journal* (2017). Furthermore, medical conceptualisation of internet art is not entirely new. The seed of this thesis was not only drawn from *Ill Communication*'s alignment of net art with viral anxiety, but from Joline Blais and Jon Ippolito's *At The Edge of Art*, which hypothesizes that art functions as an antibody for the social body that technology is invading, isolating and comparing six stages of immune response to mediums of contemporary art.[4] Melissa Gronlund's *From Narcissism to the Dialogic: Identity in Art after the Internet*, while focused similarly to *Ill Communication* on identity anxiety, encouraged me to continue the digital theory practice of closely updating twentieth-century texts for the twenty-first century in her reappraisal of Rosalind Krauss's 1976 *Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism*.[5] The little art historical scholarship on health in contemporary art takes the form of short articles – both Jill Bennett's *Are We All Anxious Now?* and Nina Power's *Artist, Heal Thyself!* explore growing anxiety disorders within the social context of our age, mapping health art within similar parameters to 'contagion, malfunction, and surveillance'.[6] However, both articles fall short of specifying a trend of health anxiety in internet art.

Language surrounding internet art is myriad and variable – Paulsen's term 'net art' is reserved for pre-2005 internet art working with the software and hardware of early computers.[7] This era of the internet is distinguished from the current 'Web 2.0' era, the highly participatory form of the web beginning roughly around 2004.[8] 'Post-internet', 'art after the internet' and 'internet art' are often used interchangeably – I will use 'internet art' to describe contemporary art reflecting the artist's time on Web 2.0, either through internet mediums (video files, websites, social media platforms) or through traditional mediums, while still engaging heavily with internet culture.[9] Furthermore, the brevity of Paulsen's text results in her not defining 'anxiety'. Anxiety definitions are various and disparate, and this term's centrality to my work requires consolidation. Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927) roots anxiety in facing

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[4]Joline Blais, 'Introduction', in *At The Edge of Art*, ed. Joline Blais and Jon Ippolito (London, 2006), pp. 8-11.
[5]Melissa Gronlund, 'From Narcissism to the Dialogic: Identity in Art after the Internet', *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, no. 37 (2014), p. 4-13.
[6]Nina Power, 'Artist, Heal Thyself!', *Art Review*, 17/10/2018. Online edition. https://artreview.com/ar-september-2018-feature-nina-power/, accessed 05/05/2020; Jill Bennett, 'Are We All Anxious Now?', *Tate Etc*, 25/06/2019. Online edition. https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-39-spring-2017/are-we-all-anxious-now, accessed 05/05/2020. (Archived at: https://conifer.rhizome.org/rosemlondon/contagion-malfunction-surveillance)
[7]DANAE, 'Net Art, Post-internet Art, New Aesthetics: The Fundamentals of Art on the Internet', *Medium*, 31/01/2019. https://medium.com/digital-art-weekly/net-art-post-internet-art-new-aesthetics-the-fundamentals-of-art-on-the-internet-55dcbd9d6a5, accessed 08/04/2020.
[8]Daniel Nations, 'What Does 'Web 2.0' Even Mean?', *Lifewire*, 24/02/2020. https://www.lifewire.com/what-is-web-2-0-p2-3486624, accessed 05/05/2020.
[9]Greene, *Internet Art*, p. 14.

'the ultimate conditions of existence', arguing that anxiety's temporary detachment allows for experience of the authentic self.[10] The distressing symptoms of anxiety in Jean-Paul Satre's *Nausea* (1938) lead to 'revelation', a new understanding of existence.[11] However, the definition offered by Søren Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety* (1884) fits the anxiety described in *Ill Communication*, present in contemporary internet art. Using Kierkegaard's text allows the location of a comparable, precise form of anxiety in the art of Jon Rafman, Ed Akins, UBERMORGEN and Molly Soda. *The Concept of Anxiety* defines anxiety as an unfocused, un-specific fear, a symptom of the overwhelming choice of free will.[12] Kierkegaard describes how '[h]e whose eye happens to look down into the yawning abyss becomes dizzy … Hence anxiety is the dizziness of freedom ... In anxiety there is the selfish infinity of possibility, which does not tempt like a choice but ensnaringly disquiets with its sweet anxiousness.'[13] The text is primarily a theological discussion of the Original Sin: divine prohibition of eating fruit from the tree of knowledge implied Adam free to obey or not, spawning anxiety in the face of an 'abyss' of choice. 'The prohibition induces in [Adam] anxiety, for the prohibition awakens in him freedom's possibility … the anxious possibility of being able.'[14] In contemporary internet art, the 'yawning abyss' of endless choice on the internet and the increasingly expanding technological field causes a Kierkegaardian 'dizziness of freedom'. This anxiety threatens that incorrect internet usage will result in illness, disease or death.

Kierkegaard's theory has been heavily used by internet cultural theorists – quite unexpectedly perhaps, for century-old theological theory quite at odds with the internet's atheist leaning. However, journalists and theorists across the internet find it necessary to revisit Kierkegaard's work as internet culture critique.[15] Hubert Dreyfus's *Nihilism on the Information Highway: Anonymity vs. Commitment in the Present Age* creates an analogy between Kierkegaard's time and our own, arguing that Kierkegaard's 1846 book *Two Ages: A Literary Review* is an effective tool for criticising the intellectual levelling that occurs on the internet, citing a continuity between the qualms Kierkegaard had with the press

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[10]James Magrini, '"Anxiety" in Heidegger's Being and Time: The Harbinger of Authenticity', *Philosophy Scholarship* 15 (2006), p. 77-86.
[11]Eric H. du Plessis, 'Sartre, Existentialism and Panic Attacks' *The Linacre Quarterly* 59, no. 2 (1992) pp. 63-68.
[12]Søren Kierkegaard, 'Anxiety as the Presupposition of Hereditary Sin and as Explaining Hereditary Sin Retrogressively in Terms of Its Origin.', in *Kierkegaard's Writings, VIII, Volume 8: Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, ed. Thomte Reidar (Princeton, 1980), p. 42.
[13]Søren Kierkegaard, 'Anxiety as Explaining Hereditary Sin Progressively.', in *Kierkegaard's Writings, VIII, Volume 8: Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, ed. Thomte Reidar (Princeton, 1980), p. 61.
[14]Kierkegaard, 'Anxiety as the Presupposition of Hereditary Sin', p. 44.
[15]Julian Baggini, 'Happy birthday Kierkegaard, we need you now', *Aeon*, 06/05/2013. https://aeon.co/essays/happy-birthday-kierkegaard-we-need-you-now, accessed 06/05/2020; Micheal Stark, 'Kierkegaard for the Internet Age', *Huffington Post*, 05/05/2017. Online edition. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/kierkegaard-for-the-internet-age_b_590bf912e4b046ea176ae9bb?guccounter=1, accessed 06/05/2020; Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate the World* (London, 2012) pp. 182-225.

and many of the cracks beginning to show in our hyper-networked world.[16] Investigation into Kierkegaard's application to the internet poses multiple problems beyond the remit of this essay, from biographical critique into the legitimacy of his arguments, concerns regarding separating his philosophy from his theology, to more intricate analysis of *The Concept of Anxiety* opening up new avenues of online cultural theory – for example, George Pattison's correlation of Kierkegaard's concept of anxiety with the insecurity of adolescence adding another link between artists like Jon Rafman and Ed Atkins and the philosopher.[17] In this essay I will purely be utilising Kierkegaard's definition of anxiety to clarify my concept of 'health anxiety' as 'dizzying freedom' manifest in concern for one's health.

Ill Communication: Anxiety and Identity in 1990s Net Art forms part of Alexandra Schwartz's *Come as You Are: Art of the 1990s*, and explains how first-generation net artists disrupted the early internet's network protocols, 'purposefully introducing frustration, disinformation, unreadability and anxiety into the web.'[18] Paulsen examines only five artists to illuminate net art anxieties, and to remain close in my reappraisal, I chose to follow *Ill Communication*'s example by explicating a small circle of artists and artworks around my central theme of health anxiety. Much early net art was an act of exploration within the caverns of the new networks, exploring the limits of HTML and CSS coding, hosting websites partly enjoyable for the novelty of the medium itself. Paulsen describes artists who experimented with 'the fluidity of racial and sexual identity' – Prema Murthy's parody cam-girl website *Bindi Girl* (2001) satirising ethnicity fetishisation by leading the viewer down a labyrinthine passage of pop-up boxes and pornographic images obscured by Bindi dots, and duo Mendi + Keith Obadike's *Blackness for Sale* (2001), an eBay page advertising Keith's 'blackness', mimicking the homogenisation of black culture and the fluidity of identity on the internet – as well as highlighting artists who engaged with 'the politics and erotics of globalised exchange', notably Mark Tribe's *Traces of a Constructed City* (1995) where Berlin in the immediate years after the collapse of the Berlin Wall is allegorised side-by-side with the slow physical and digital construction of the internet. However, the material of *Ill Communication* most relevant to this essay is the art that obfuscated the user interface of the web browser, such as net art collective JODI's *%Location* and Mark Napier's *Shredder*, which exposed 'the vulnerability of the individual to lurking threats of contamination and disease', locating internet health anxiety as present as early as the 1990s.[19] This threat of 'contamination and disease' has grown on Web 2.0, rivalling *Ill Communication*'s adjoining anxiety over identity and globalism.

[16]Hubert L. Dreyfus, *On the Internet* (London, 2008) pp. 71-88.
[17]George Pattison, *The Philosophy of Kierkegaard (Continental European Philosophy)* (London, 2005) pp. 10-56.
[18]Paulsen, 'Ill Communication', p. 65.
[19]Paulsen, 'Ill Communication', p. 66.

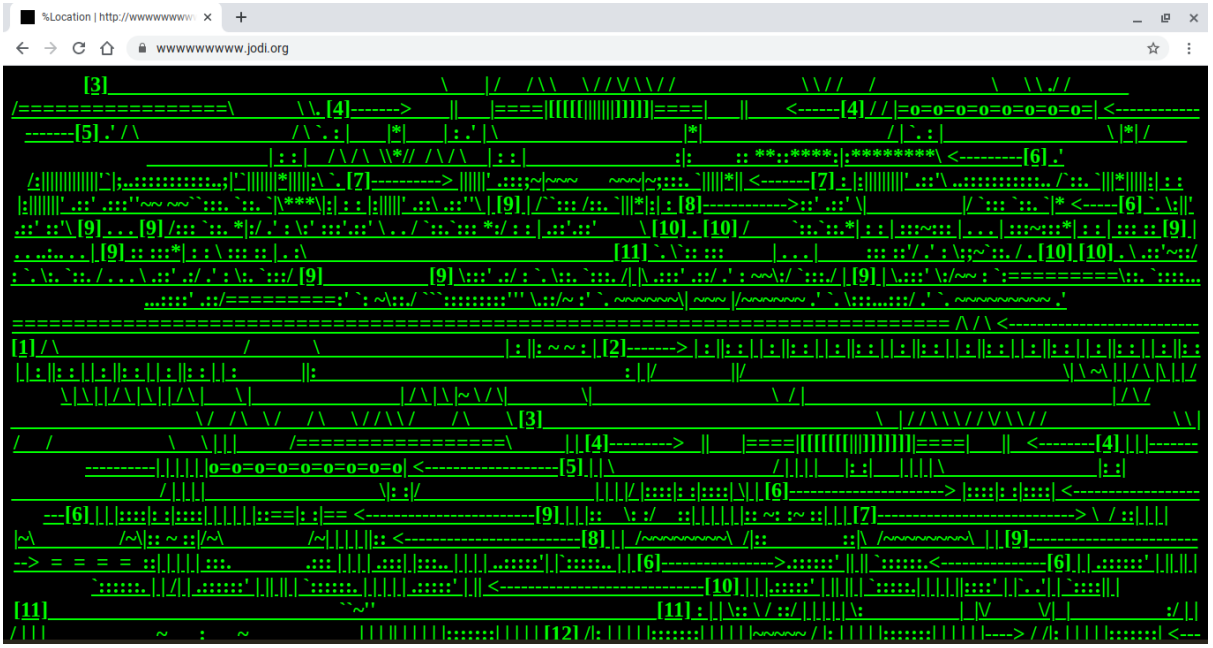

Figure 1. JODI, *%Location*, landing page still, 1995-1998, website, dimensions variable, archived at https://wwwwwwwww.jodi.org/ (Photo: Author's own screenshot)

Contagion and Infection

Ill Communication begins with JODI's *%Location* exemplifying early net art's disruption of internet software protocol, but innately betraying a fear of 'contagion': that your computer was infected, and the pathogen from contaminated online visual content could trespass from the machine to the body of the user (Fig. 1). Paulsen implies this by aligning JODI's work to 'a fear of contagion', but does not explore it.[20] Contemporary internet art demonstrates a health anxiety through a similar fear of 'contagion' – a fear of infection and disease transmitted through the internet damaging one's physical well-being. In the work of UBERMORGEN and Jon Rafman, contagion fears have gained urgency, actively diagnosing technology as a source of ill health. *%Location*, a website online from 1995-98, presented viewers with chaotic HTML hyperlinked pages, which when navigated disorientated the user with endless confusing imagery and text (Fig. 2).

[20]Paulsen, 'Ill Communication', p. 66.

Figure 2. JODI, *%Location*, still, 1995-1998, website, dimensions variable, archived at https://wwwwwwwww.jodi.org/ (Photo: Author's own screenshot)

Paulsen states that *%Location* caused anxiety that 'the website is not broken, but rather the machine may have been corrupted by contact with the suspicious site ... JODI reveals the user as a novice consumer, unaware of the workings of the web and lost in the system.'[21] We understand digital illness by comparison to our own physical condition – the language of computer virology is inherently biological, conjuring imagery of parasites and disease with viruses nicknamed 'brain' 'infector', and compared to 'worms' that 'propagate'.[22] Exploring *%Location* is uncomfortable not only because we fear the computer is compromised, but because we fear we will be, too.

Contemporary internet artists manufacture similar effects to *%Location* by destabilising the viewer's senses. However, where *%Location* manifested internet anxiety in militaristic visual aesthetics and 'the informational structure of Berners-Lee's web … hijacked for abstraction', contemporary artists focus on health anxiety.[23] Art collective UBERMORGEN's film *Chinese Coin (Red Blood)* explores Chinese Bitcoin mining farms, exposing viewers to the new possibilities of internet technology allegorised as visual metaphors of blood, cancer and death (Fig. 3). Bitcoin is the largest and oldest 'cryptocurrency', a digital currency with no central issuing authority made possible by the advanced capabilities of the modern internet. Encryption regulates the generation of currency and verifies

[21]Paulsen, 'Ill Communication', p. 67.
[22]Chris Fistonich, 'Our computers, ourselves: digital vs. biological security', *Malwarebytes*. 25/10/2017. https://blog.malwarebytes.com/101/2017/10/our-computers-ourselves-digital-vs-biological-security/, accessed 06/05/2020.
[23]Paulsen, 'Ill Communication', p. 67.

currency ownership, and 'mining' validates transactions.[24]

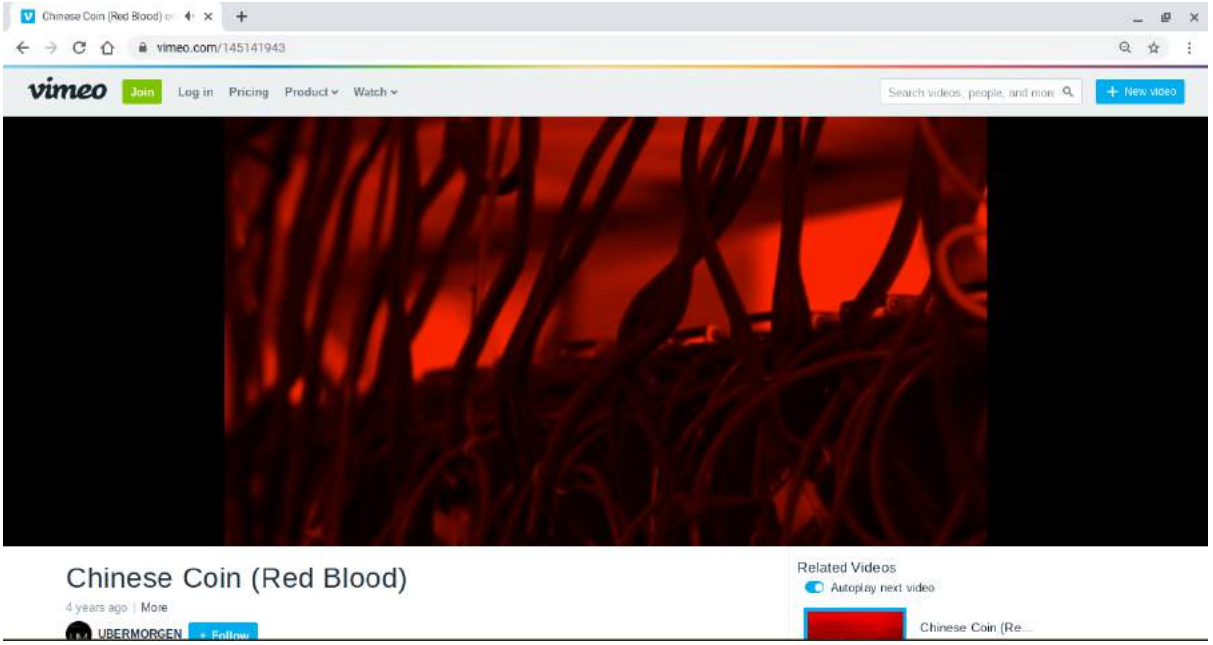

Figure 3. UBERMORGEN, *Chinese coin (Red Blood)*, still at 5:41, 2015, video, 9 minutes 50 seconds, viewable at https://vimeo.com/145141943 (Photo: Author's own screenshot)

For many, cryptocurrency represents the most disorientating and impenetrable area of internet culture, and the work emphasises this bewilderment. *Chinese Coin (Red Blood)* slowly tours the hardware and flashing red lights of thousands of computer processing units known as 'mining rigs' inside a Chinese Bitcoin mining factory (Fig. 4). The viewer cannot locate themselves in the space, or see any exits, entrances or paths to move around, and the monochromatic red lighting affords us no distance perspective. An 8-Bit font explains that China has become the world's largest Bitcoin producer: 'Bitcoin mining … comes down to who can produce the fastest, most energy-efficient chips for the least amount of money and deploy them the quickest. This is very similar to the red blood cells production in the human body' (Fig. 5). The replicating red lights take on the carnal physicality of red blood cells, malignantly dividing. Further footage shows decay and degradation rather than the vital, flourishing technology more often associated with cryptocurrency industries; tangled wiring and rusted computer hardware elements (Fig. 6), emulating vascular entrails and intracellular organic matter (Fig. 7). The visual effect of the film is of organic decay, the degraded mining farm allegorised as the diseased processes of our bodies. The red lighting even echoes scientific aesthetic precedents for visualising internal organic matter (Fig. 8). Much like with our biological processes, the average viewer cannot understand the complexity of these mining farms – similarly to *%Location*, our ignorance of online spaces is used to instil anxiety in us, and destabilised senses incite fear that

[24]Antony Lewis, *The Basics of Bitcoins and Blockchains: An Introduction to Cryptocurrencies and the Technology that Powers Them* (Miami, 2018) p. 4.

the digital contagion could spread to our bodies. The film ends abruptly with a text slide quoting a news report on the 2015 Sogan colliery knife attack in Aksu, Xinjiang, located in the 'northwestern Chinese Coin mine' the viewer has just toured (Fig. 9).[25] This sudden interruption of real death – 'The attackers killed the workers while they were asleep in bunkhouses … ' – forces the viewer to re-evaluate the film within the context of horror-tragedy: the red-soaked footage of the empty factory further resembling gore. *Chinese Coin (Red Blood)* asks questions about Bitcoin's, and by extension the expanding technological field enabled by Web 2.0's, role in the death of fifty workers at the Sogan colliery in Aksu. Where *Ill Communication*'s net art contagion motifs were aesthetic tools, *Chinese Coin (Red Blood)*'s fear of the 'dizzying freedom' of cryptocurrencies poses a real threat to our health: we are told the footage is similar to our blood cell production, but the footage is corrupt and panicked, signalling a dividing cancerous contagion unlocatable in this non-space, ending with a real event of death. In *Chinese Coin (Red Blood)*, UBERMORGEN disrupts our belief in a bio-digital cleavage: the divide between computer processing and the human body is blurred, and the health anxiety conceived from the potentially life-threatening developing industries of the modern internet is allegorised into the panicked visuals of disease.

Exposing threats of 'contagion' from internet use as well as unveiling the faded line between reality and virtual reality is essential to Jon Rafman's work. Like JODI and UBERMORGEN he overwhelms the senses, but his work serves to reveal the detrimental health effects of heavy internet use symptomatic of Web 2.0's deep penetration into our lives, demonstrating how far health anxieties have advanced since Paulsen's net era. Rafman's film *STILL LIFE (BETAMALE)* deep-dives into the male micro-communities multiplying in dark corners of the internet (Fig. 10). Splicing footage of erotic vintage anime, cam-girl clips, decontextualised fetish images and sordid pornography, *STILL LIFE (BETAMALE)* is distinctly unhygienic, alerting risk receptors in the viewer's brain – keyboards covered in cigarette stubs and food (Fig. 11), bedrooms drowning in rubbish (Fig. 12, 13).

[25]Reuters, 'At least 50 reported to have died in attack on coalmine in Xinjiang in September', *The Guardian*, 01/10/2015. Online edition. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/01/at-least-50-reported-dead-in-september-attack-as-china-celebrates-xinjiang, accessed 07/05/2020.

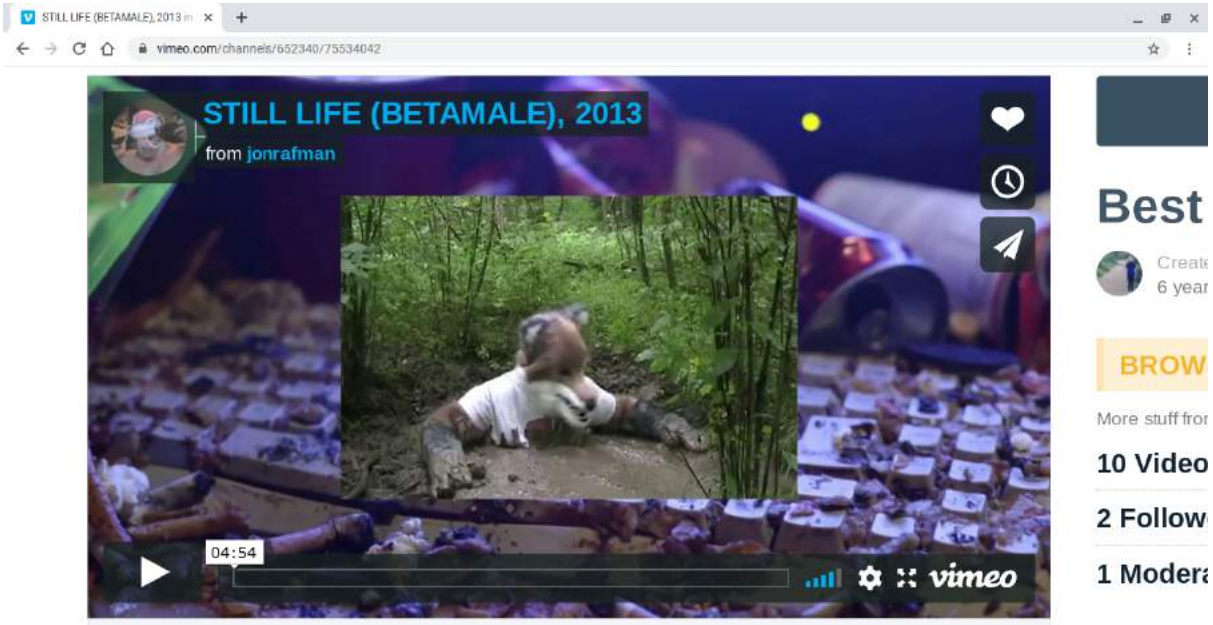

Figure 10. Jon Rafman, *STILL LIFE (BETAMALE)*, thumbnail, 2013, video, 4 minutes 52 seconds, viewable at https://vimeo.com/channels/652340/75534042 (Photo: Author's own screenshot)

The film exposes the living conditions of micro-communities withdrawn from society entirely and communicating only through the internet, represented by the protagonist whose threat of autoerotic suicide is the result of his internet-dependent life (Fig. 14).[26] The imagery is thoroughly abject – dripping in ejaculate and guts (Fig. 15, 16), reaching down into the insidious realms of the internet and presenting it for your horror. Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection fittingly infects much of internet art that lingers on health anxiety, as both the internet and Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980) were mired in the virological soup of the AIDS crisis and the subsequent awareness of fallible corporeality and pathological infection.[27] The abject footage is so grotesque, you find yourself cringing away from it, fearing contamination – as with *Chinese Coin*, the perceived wall between our bodies and the internet is disrupted. The film starts with the first-person insertion of a CD-ROM into a computer's DVD drive (Fig. 17), implying the viewer's purposeful selection of the film. Furthermore, much of the footage is framed by a computer monitor (Fig. 18), so by watching Rafman's artwork we are placed squarely in the position of the content watcher. Rafman's work shares this viewer-inclusive motif with much contemporary internet art addressing health anxiety. UBERMORGEN's hand-held camerawork mimics 'vlogging'-style content – viewers are not passively watching

[26]Gabriel H. Sanchez, 'Jon Rafman discusses his show at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis', *Artforum*, 03/07/2014. Online edition. https://www.artforum.com/interviews/jon-rafman-discusses-his-show-at-the-contemporary-art-museum-st-louis-47380, accessed 06/05/2020.
[27]Marilou Gagnon, 'Managing the Other Within the Self: Bodily Experiences of HIV/AIDS' in *Abjectly Boundless: Boundaries, Bodies and Health work*, ed. Trudy Rudge and Dave Holmes (Farnham, 2010), pp. 133–146.

the film, but actively exploring the factory. In the intimate space of Web 2.0 'prosumer' culture, where users are simultaneously content producers and consumers, viewed content becomes our own content, part of us. Not only are viewers of *STILL LIFE (BETAMALE)* and *Chinese Coin (Red Blood)* likely also internet users, implicitly engaged with the culture Rafman criticises, but 'prosumers' of the contaminated content, implicitly susceptible to the disease the work warns of. *STILL LIFE (BETAMALE)*'s voiceover locates it's imagery within the viewer's body – 'You see the things that were inside you,' conjuring images of the internal made external, surgical removal, open wounds and emesis.[28] Similarly, in Rafman's comparable cinematic work *Erysichthon* (2015), a voiceover laments – 'If you look at these images long enough, you begin to feel that you composed them ... They corrupt me so. Is it too late?'[29]

STILL LIFE (BETAMALE) shows Kierkegaard's theory of anxiety active as internet health anxiety. The abject footage is Kierkegaard's 'yawning abyss', the complete freedom of online micro-communities access to internet material and limitless choice, simply 'the possibility of being able' resulting in ill health. [30] Where net art frightened novice computer users with thoughts of viruses, *STILL LIFE (BETAMALE)* and UBERMORGEN's *Chinese Blood (Red Coin)* diagnoses technology as the source of contagion.

Malfunction and Death

Contracting 'contagion' threatens death, the fastigium of health anxiety's 'yawning abyss'.[31] *Ill Communication*'s focus on identity anxiety does not warrant consideration of death anxiety, but it has become a pervasive motif in contemporary internet art with works such as Oreet Ashery's meditation on dying online in *Revisiting Genesis* (2016) and Anna Orlikowska's video-game dans macabre in *Terminal Game* (2007). Ed Atkins's *A Tumour (In English)* and *Us Dead Talk Love* embody the next stage on from Rafman's health warnings regarding internet afflictions – in Atkins's work, the physical body is dying of digital intoxication, and ensuing technological anxiety is expressed in explicitly biological language. His work warns us that unhealthy internet usage will result in physical malfunction, disease or death, further undermining the idea of a bio-digital separation.

[28]Jon Rafman, *STILL LIFE (BETAMALE)*, voiceover, 2013, video, 4 minutes 54 seconds, vimeo.com/channels/652340/75534042 (Date Accessed: 08/04/2020).
[29]Saelan Twerdy, 'This Is Where It Ends: The Denouement of Post-Internet Art in Jon Rafman's Deep Web', *Momus*, 09/07/2015. https://momus.ca/this-is-where-it-ends-the-denouement-of-post-internet-art-in-jon-rafmans-deep-web/, accessed 06/05/2020.
[30]Kierkegaard, 'Anxiety as the Presupposition of Hereditary Sin', p. 44.
[31]Kierkegaard, 'Anxiety as Explaining Hereditary Sin Progressively.', p. 61.

Figure 19. Ed Atkins, *A Tumour (In English)*, installation view at Bonner Kunstverein in 2012, 2011, video, 12 min 30 sec (Photo: Simon Vogel for Bonner Kunstverein)

Ed Atkins's film *A Tumour (In English)* promises to conjure a tumour in the viewer (Fig. 19). Computer Generated Imagery (CGI) shapes pass across the screen, resembling cancerous cysts – spheres, domes, dark spots, all accompanied by a slurred hypochondriac voiceover narrating broken lines of body-horror poetry such as 'Would you mind checking the mole on my shoulder?', 'Bone marrow, browned in the air', 'lonely juices bubbling beneath the crust'.[32] Atkins's CGI visuals echo video game graphics or virtual avatars, found in abundance across the Web 2.0 net. In a booklet accompanying screenings of the work, Atkins crosses the line between digital ephemerality and physical malfunction, writing that the film will 'conjure a tumour inside you … The dimension of the tumour will be exactly proportional to the amount of text that you read', explicitly warning viewers that his digital film and physical health are dangerously connected, and internet content consumption choices can lead to potentially fatal illness.[33] This bio-digital interpenetration is furthered by the accompanying audio vibrating within your ribs – Atkin's states 'it encloses the body, but it also affords the possibility of

[32]Francesco Spampinato, 2014, 'Ed Atkins: Melancholic Avatars in HD', paper presented at *AVANCA CINEMA 2014: International Conference Cinema – Art, Technology, Communication*, Avanca, Portugal, http://www.francescospampinato.com/files/spampinatoatkinsavanca.pdf (Date Accessed: 06/05/2020) p. 190.
[33]Spampinato, 'Ed Atkins: Melancholic Avatars in HD', p. 190.

penetrating the body sonically.'[34] This sonically penetrative aspect of *A Tumour (In English)* further threatens our physical well-being – in an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Atkins references inspiration from the industrial band *Throbbing Gristle,* who 'tried to make people shit themselves or be sick with the use of certain frequencies and tones, trying to embody this invisible thing, sound, within the viewer'.[35] *A Tumour (In English)* is a warning – collapsing the bio-digital cleavage, Ed Atkins alerts us to technology's power to get under the skin, to cause malfunction, to infect, squirm, alter, disturb, wound, and rot.

Moving from *A Tumour*'s terminal illness to death, *Us Dead Talk Love* is a video dialogue between two CGI cadavers (Fig. 20). The work allegorises the fear of dying in a technological age with health anxiety, responding to the 'dizzying freedom' of the digital world with intimate, biological language. Displayed separately on two screens with surround-sound, simple objects on one screen – an apple (Fig. 21), a weeping eye (Fig. 22), touching hands (Fig. 23) – prompt nostalgic recollection on physicality, sex, love, and death, in first-person prose-poetry. The video begins with Atkins's friendly London accent asking – 'I wanted to ask whether you thought that finding an eyelash under your foreskin was significant?' and continues in the same vein; morbid but detached, casual yet intimate.

> That hair and nails continue to grow after death, SO IT GOES. In an Osiris equilibrium with the eyeballs, which remain precisely the same size from birth till death but whose precarious jelly and precarious function and precarious perspective are the first things to go to seed in mortification.
>
> \- Ed Atkins, *Us Dead Talk Love* dialogue.[36]

Similarly to *A Tumour (In English)*, Atkins's virtual cadavers reflect online virtual avatar aesthetics, but his hyper-real computer modellings intensify elements of the body other digital renderings omit; tears, skin-marks and spots, wet eyelashes, stray hairs, remaining at a distance from true humanity by regularly glitching through the modelled form. The result is uncanny: we gain intimacy with the cadavers through their confidential talk of love, death and mortification, the casual monologue mirroring the oversharing common to Web 2.0 social media cultures, yet the discordant visuals question the boundaries between virtual and real life. Articles and reviews often complain of a squirming uneasiness that accompanies viewing *Us Dead Talk Love* – 'Digital film is innately mysterious – it's data in a box – but Atkins turns it into stuff you feel under your skin and in your gut.'[37] The discordance in his work affects you biologically, it 'ensnaringly disquiets', emulating Kierkegaard's symptoms of

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[34]Katie Guggenheim, 'Chisenhale Interviews: Ed Atkins', *Chisenhale*, 21/09/2012. https://chisenhale.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Chisenhale_Interviews_Ed_Atkins-1.pdf, accessed 06/05/2020.
[35]Hans Ulrich Obrist, 'Ed Atkins', *Kaleidoscope*, 24/02/2013. http://kaleidoscope.media/ed-atkins/, accessed 06/05/2020.
[36]Ed Atkins, *Us Dead Talk Love*, script, https://chisenhale.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2Hbvol15_web-1.pdf (Date Accessed: 06/05/2020).
[37]Skye Sherwin, 'Artist of the week 165: Ed Atkins', *The Guardian*, 24/11/2011. Online edition. https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/nov/24/artist-ed-atkins, accessed 06/05/2020.

anxiety.[38] In *Ill Communication*'s world of net art, virtual personas in works such as Murthy's *Bindi Girl* invited an anxiety over identity fluidity, with Murthy's virtual persona asking questions about 'how race and ethnicity become commercial products in online pornography.'[39] In the Web 2.0 age, Ed Atkins's health-anxious virtual cadavers reassert their corporeality with the base biological, the primitively human, the eyeballs and the eyelashes, as a reaction to incorporeal virtuality and death on the internet.

Ill Communication does not address any net art dealing with death bar thematically grouping JODI's work under the section heading 'Terminal Conditions', allegorising the hardware of network 'terminals' with terminal illness, but dichotomies between physical death and online death have been existent since the early internet.[40] Katie Argyle's essay *Life After Death* in *Cultures of Internet: Virtual Spaces, Real Histories, Living Bodies* describes Argyle's experience when a regular poster to an early digital culture newsletter died.[41] The essay was published in 1996, and is a nuanced historical document of many now-defunct early internet spaces – mostly 'Bulletin Board Systems' (BBS's), the beginning of the Web 2.0 'prosumer' culture. Argyle did not know the poster, named Michael, and had never met him – yet *Life after Death* sees her dealing with grief not dissimilar to a real-world experience of death. Argyle finds it hard to consider what she labels the 'meat', deceased presence of Micheal when considering the trail of his uploads to the newsletter, still existing. Most importantly, the description of her feelings are vividly flesh-like – she plays out the emotions of this new experience on her body, describing how she 'feels it in her blood and guts, the viscera', in the same way Atkins describes death in the language of eyeballs, foreskin, hair and nails.[42] The reassertion of corporeality in the face of digital death is therefore clearly not limited to Web 2.0, but these anxieties have become more pertinent now the dead remain animate on the internet: Youtube videos in which deceased users chat to viewers like friends stay live, Facebook pages remain to be interacted with by others, friends and family members are sent notifications of a deceased person's birthday yearly – some level of animate life continues online, while the 'meat', physical person has ceased to exist.[43] This gives works like *Us Dead Talk Love* a social urgency: Atkins's cadavers and their medical candour encourage us to examine digital death on equal footing with physical death, asking how exposure to the digital world affects our health.

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[38] Kierkegaard, 'Anxiety as Explaining Hereditary Sin Progressively.', p. 61.
[39]Paulsen, 'Ill Communication', p. 69.
[40]Paulsen, 'Ill Communication', p. 66.
[41]Katie Argyle, 'Life After Death', in *Cultures of Internet: Virtual Spaces, Real Histories, Living Bodies*, ed. Robert Shields (Thousand Oaks, 1992), pp. 133-142.
[42]Argyle, 'Life After Death', p. 139.
[43]Joanna Bourke, 'How the internet is transforming death', *Prospect*, 16/03/2018. Online edition. https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/die-online-technology-death-hospice-how-to-changing , accessed 06/05/2020.

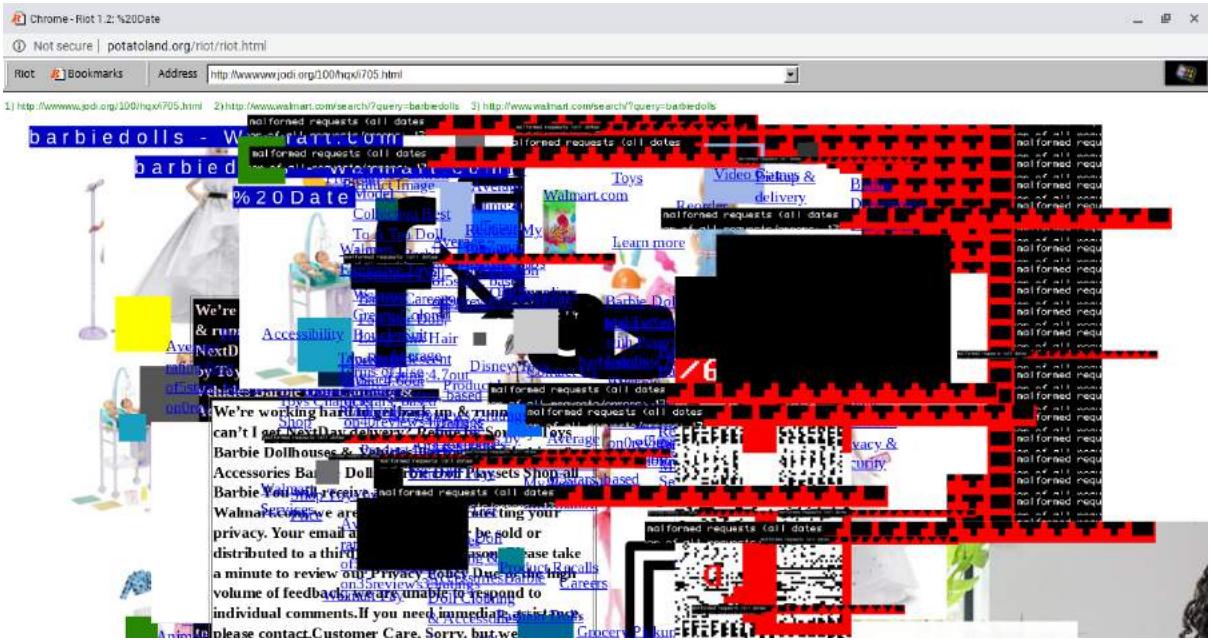

Figure 24. Mark Napier, *Riot*, still, 1999, website, dimensions variable, still active at http://potatoland.org/riot/ (Photo: Author's own screenshot)

Surveillance and Existence

The final paragraphs of *Ill Communication* address surveillance fears in net art. Paulsen describes how *%Location*'s meaningless link pathways warn of potential surveillance during internet exploration, 'calling up associations with the Internet's early identity as a military tool', and Mark Napier's *Riot* combines the content of multiple users in a single window – where 'one user's pornography may be interlaced with another's news or e-mail; not-for-profit.orgs are muddied by the corporate concerns of .coms', undermining the user's belief that personal browsing is private (Fig. 24).[44] In the 1990s, the internet's possibility for mass population surveillance was still a dystopian prospect, but in the age of Web 2.0 these surveillance fears have materialised, as Paulsen states in her conclusion – 'The fears and anxieties that the net artists explored have been actualised and have become commonplace.'[45] Network providers sell personal data on an unknown scale, huge data leaks occur regularly, and the spreading of personal information to attack public figures is commonplace.[46] Surveillance anxiety may appear to fit more with the macrocosmic political function of internet art I am seeking to counter, however, artists such as Molly Soda manifest the threat of surveillance as an attack on the validity of one's corporeal form. Her expression of health anxiety lacks the vivid corporeality of UBERMORGEN, Rafman and Atkins, but equally interrogates the viewer's health and well-being after internet exposure.

[44]Paulsen, 'Ill Communication', pp. 66-68.
[45]Paulsen, 'Ill Communication', p. 72.
[46]Louise Matsakis, 'The WIRED Guide to Your Personal Data (and Who Is Using It): Information about you, what you buy, where you go, even where you look is the oil that fuels the digital economy.', *Wired*, 2/15/2019. Online edition. https://www.wired.com/story/wired-guide-personal-data-collection/, accessed 06/05/2020; James Sanders, 'Data breaches increased 54% in 2019 so far', *TechRepublic*, 15/08/2019. https://www.techrepublic.com/article/data-breaches-increased-54-in-2019-so-far/, accessed 06/05/2020.

Bridging the gap between Instagram influencer and artist, Molly Soda's work builds from net art's identity anxieties, such as with Mendi + Keith Obadike's commodification of racial identity in *Blackness for Sale*. Works like *Inbox Full* (2013) and *My Bedroom to Yours* (2015) experiment with identity through meticulous self-curation, questioning personal authenticity mediated by technology. Soda's 2017 work *I Hate My Freckles* demonstrates contemporary internet art's move away from the identity anxieties of *Ill Communication* to the health anxieties of the Web 2.0 era (Fig. 25). Rather than reasserting her corporeality through biological language and explicit health warnings, Soda throws light on the alienation of physicality by internet exposure, a warning for the feared end result of our 'dizzying freedom' online.

I Hate My Freckles is a distorted 'funhouse' style full-body mirror printed with an Instagram direct message conversation, where another user has contacted Soda with the message 'Is she real'. The sender, identified by the username 'ggr.ace', is faceless – where an 'icon' or profile picture would usually sit, there is an empty circle. In *I Hate My Freckles,* modern surveillance is represented by the consensual uploading of personal information to social media such as Instagram, and in return, allowing the voyeuristic personal surveillance of an audience – what Paulsen describes as 'the automated violation of user's privacy.'[47] Here, this personal surveillance has undermined Soda's corporeal form. 'Is she real' becomes an othering of Soda's physical presence from her curated online Instagram identity: the pointed third person of 'she' indicates 'ggr.ace' does not view Soda and her online existence as the same. In externalising this private message, Soda gives validity to the questioning of her physical existence, the faceless icon becoming representative for the entire internet's voyeuristic pressure on her corporeal identity. The work's title, *I Hate My Freckles* is a broken diaristic snatch of self-criticism that directly links the act of receiving this message to a damaging of her self-esteem – ill-use of the internet and the pressure of surveillance reaches beyond cyberspace and has a direct impact on the health of the user.

The printed message is only one half of *I Hate My Freckles,* and is not the most visually stimulating element of the work. The mirror warps and projects back the viewer's reflection (Fig. 26). This visual distortion in the aim of queasiness is recognisable from JODI, UBERMORGEN and Rafman's work – the viewing experience made uncomfortable to simulate a disease in the beholder. The reflected body becomes the primary subject of Soda's work: she omits any of her own identifiers on the opened message page, allowing the message – 'Is she real' – to be addressed to the viewer. The message's threat of corporeal dissolution calls our own health into question. Just as Rafman frames his deviant visuals by a computer monitor, placing viewer as content consumer, as UBERMORGEN's hand-held cinematography places viewer as mining farm explorer, and as Ed Atkins's CGI monologues transfer their virtual tumours into the viewer, Molly Soda's viewer-inclusive mirror forces the viewer to experience bio-digital cleavage. This motif of viewer-inclusivity in

[47] Paulsen, 'Ill Communication', p. 72.

contemporary internet health anxiety art is a call to action, involving the art viewer in their diagnosis of the damaging health effects of internet use.

Since *Ill Communication*'s era of net art, online anxieties have shifted from concerns for our identity to concerns for our health. Paulsen's text uncovered the seeds of health anxiety in the 1990s, but this exploration has established a prevalent, definable trend of health anxiety in contemporary internet art. In the work of Jon Rafman, Ed Atkins, UBERMORGEN and Molly Soda, the ill health of the intimate sphere of the internet is turned inside out, its innards shown to the world. Like presenting the blackened flesh of a smoker's lungs, their works shock us with our potential to suffer similar symptoms of heavy internet usage: contagions and physical infections, bodily malfunction and internet-mediated death, and surveillance-induced subversion of our corporeal existence. Their externalisation of health anxieties asks us to critically consider our own content diet and internet use regime – perhaps even arguing, parallel to the internet's early social context in increased public health awareness after the 1980s AIDS epidemic, for an increased awareness of public *internet* health. Kierkegaard, when seeing the threat of anxiety in *The Concept of Anxiety* demanded a response, and believed that only unconditional commitment to the 'religious sphere of existence' could save us from the knife-edge of anxiety. [48] Similarly, Nina Power's *Artist, Heal Thyself!* concludes with a Kierkegaardian call for action; 'we have so far been too reticent in asserting art's public role, too fearful that its aesthetic purpose may be burdened or compromised by a mission to transform public health … But as the politics of identity and self-fabrication were core to art's postmodern agenda, so the project of tackling anxiety begins.' [49] It is becoming clear that we must consciously choose how to use the internet, considering recent issues of online misinformation affecting elections, growing social withdrawal and confinement in young adults due to internet usage, and increasingly young children gaining access to detrimental levels of online pornography.[50] Can we avoid these diseases of contagion, malfunction and surveillance by critically regulating personal content consumption, as encouraged with any other potentially harmful substance? In Kierkegaard's text, reacting positively to anxiety results in religious revelation. In the case of internet usage, moderating our online behaviour in response to the health anxieties of contemporary internet art could have a significant impact on the health of future internet users.

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[48]Dreyfus, *On the Internet*, p. 88.
[49]Bennet, 'Are We All Anxious Now?', *Tate Etc*.
[50]Hunt Allcott, 'Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election', *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31, no. 2 (2017), pp. 211-36; Katherine Hobson, 'Heavy Social Media Usage Linked to Isolation in Young Adults', *NPR*, 06/03/2017. Online edition. https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2017/03/06/518362255/feeling-lonely-too-much-time-on-social-media-may-be-why, accessed 06/05/2020; Carolyn C. Ross, 'Overexposed and Under-Prepared: The Effects of Early Exposure to Sexual Content', *Psychology Today*, 13/08/2012. Online edition. https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/real-healing/201208/overexposed-and-under-prepared-the-effects-early-exposure-sexual-content, accessed 06/05/2020.

who turn out this way.

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