Internet artist bring ‘the cloud’ to earth

James Pickford

Tables are turned on Google as data storage plant is captured from the air

When the Irish artist John Gerrard wrote to Google to ask if he could photograph one of its big data storage plants in the open spaces of Oklahoma, he received an emphatic response.

“They said, ‘Absolutely no way,’ ” he recalled.

But Mr Gerrard, who wanted to create an artwork that laid bare the industrial physical infrastructure underpinning the internet, was not to be thwarted.

After speaking to the local police, he concluded that he would be perfectly within his legal rights to photograph the building from the air — just as Google had itself captured images of much of the planet from above.

So Mr Gerrard hired a helicopter and spent two hours flying around the Pryor Creek plant taking pictures. “It is a project that turns the tables on Google, who have spent so much time surveying us,” he said ahead of the work’s public unveiling on Saturday at London’s Thomas Dane Gallery.

With masters degrees in both art and computer science, Mr Gerrard is one of a handful of artists working in the medium of computer simulation. The “virtual sculptures” he makes look like films but are computer programs that use technology more familiar to the games industry or military programmers.

Farm took a year to make after the shoot in Oklahoma, using five programmers working for Mr Gerrard. The results are vividly realistic.

The plant, which handles billions of emails, data searches and social media messages, appears on a screen several metres wide, set in a flat, rural landscape under a cloudless sky. The viewpoint inches slowly around the building, while the position of the sun (and, at night, the stars) moves in real time over the course of a year, according to the program’s algorithm.

Wherever it is viewed in the world, it is Oklahoma time in the simulation and the shadows cast by the structure are positioned as those cast in reality. “Every time someone sees the work they are seeing a different image,” said Mr Gerrard.

Part of his motivation was to dispel the idea that the internet was “an ephemeral, quasi-mystical thing” fostered by terms such as the “cloud”. Farm shows a facility more akin to a chemical factory, with rows of back-up diesel generators and cooling towers for the servers inside the building. “I wanted to ask what the internet looks like,” he said.

Mr Gerrard, 40, began making simulations by looking at pig production plants in the US Midwest, creating accurate but eerie depictions of units containing hundreds of pigs, which are almost wholly automated. One of these, Sow Farm (2009), will go on display at Tate Britain in March.

Another work, Solar Reserve (2014), used the same techniques to depict a solar power station in the Nevada desert, with 10,000 mirrors in concentric circles around a turbine — whose design, Mr Gerrard pointed out, echoes the sun symbols of ancient Egyptian and Celtic civilisations.

The work was displayed on an LED screen in Lincoln Square, New York, for three months last year.