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ART & DESIGN

## Review: New Museum Triennial Casts a Wary Eye on the Future

By HOLLAND COTTER FEB. 26, 2015



Josh Kline's installation "Freedom" is an evocation of Zuccotti Park in Manhattan filled with a SWAT team of police Teletubbies and a video of a Barack Obama avatar.

Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

If you're fed up with big joke-shop sculpture, diva spectacles and brain-dead abstraction, the New Museum's 2015 Triennial, titled "Surround Audience," will come as a break in the clouds. Not a full flood of new light, but a pull in a different direction, a microgravity shift in a gross-objects industry. It's a glimpse, and just that, of terrain composed almost entirely of border crossings: between genders, media, disciplines, ethnicities and species. Welcome to Planet Trans.

The provisional as an aesthetic is no surprise, given the curators: Lauren Cornell of the New Museum and the artist Ryan Trecartin, with Sara O'Keeffe and Helga Christoffersen on the team. Formerly editor of the journal *Rhizome*, Ms. Cornell has been paying astute attention to digital art and the Internet for years. Mr. Trecartin's laptop-generated pop-epic videos on YouTube, with their whiplash editing, head-spinning script and queer (i.e., nonnormal) spirit, add up to some of the most distinctive art of the past decade.

Nothing by the 51 artists from 25 countries in "Surround Audience" is on their level of sustained ambition, which will leave some visitors disappointed. Indeed, at a once-over glance, which is the most some people will give, the show is easy to dismiss. A lot of what's here looks un-gelled, coded, hermetic. Full access requires reading labels, which are also pretty hermetic. What can I say? Do the work. Read. See if it helps. I found it did.

Also, if you're expecting a "digital" show, you won't get one, or not one that advertises itself as such. For most of the participants, the majority born in the 1980s, digital is nothing special, no big deal. It's a given. It's reality. In art, it's just another tool, though one that happens to be particularly useful for creating and capturing the effect of flux (material, social, whatever). To me, that's what the show's basically about: change — invention, mutation, transformation, but without utopian overlays. The opposite, even. There's a mood of weary suspicion and melancholy that seems odd in artists so young.

Evidence of transformation is right off the second-floor elevator in Frank Benson's sculpture of a life-size nude reclining on a pedestal and initially seen from behind. The voluptuous curves suggest that this is a figure of a woman in a classical odalisque pose, though there are unusual features. Her skin is the pearlescent green of weathered copper. And when you come around to face her, you see that she has female breasts and male genitals.

Computer-plotted, produced on a 3-D printer and then hand-painted, the sculpture is a portrait of another artist, Juliana Huxtable, whose photographic self-portraits hang nearby. Ms. Huxtable is herself a sculptural and cultural creation in progress. African-American, living as a trans woman, she took her last name from the black family in the 1980s "The Cosby Show" and has developed a variety of personal and theatrical identities, from Afrofuturistic cyborg to Nubian princess, which she shares on social media sites like Instagram and Tumblr.

The idea of the body as an unstable, ductile entity is also the subject of a short video animation called "Happy Birthday!!" by the British artist Ed Atkins, projected on a gallery wall. It begins with two men tenderly embracing, but any narrative quickly slides away as one of the figures begins to dematerialize and then re-form, each time with a different date on his forehead, as if he were skipping around history. In Mr. Atkins's fog-gray nowhere, the body is at once deathless and lifeless, caught in a digital limbo.

Figures are fluid in paintings: Lovers blend together in handsome collage-based pictures by Njideka Akunyili Crosby; faces dissolve into Op Art patterns in work by Sascha Braunig. Mutation crosses species. In a transfixing video by Oliver Laric, composed of clips from historical animations, human and animal forms meld and reshape like liquids in a slow blender.

And for a performance piece designed by the Argentine artist Eduardo Navarro, a dancer will wear a lightweight sculptural version of a giant tortoise shell, which is on view in a gallery. The piece was inspired by Lonesome George, the last surviving Pinta Island tortoise, who died in 2012 at close to 100, and whose long, slow life in the Galápagos Mr. Navarro describes in the catalog as a form of self-aware meditation, an existence that was in every way "the opposite of the Internet."

A good amount of work in the show has, as Mr. Navarro's does, an ethical undertow, which in some cases turns straight-out political. An installation by Onejoon Che documents colossal Socialist Realism-style sculptures made by a North Korean design corporation for cities in Africa, art projects that lay the groundwork for parasitical economic links. And in one of the few genuinely "audience-surrounding" pieces, Josh Kline has built a low-light evocation of Zuccotti Park, filled it with a SWAT team of truth-telling police Teletubbies and a video of a Barack Obama avatar who sounds, in a speech on surveillance and public justice, like the hard-hitting, morally consolidating figure many people hoped he would be.

In general, consolidation isn't the prevailing dynamic here. Disintegration is. In sculptures by Olga Balema, iron bars are rusting away inside transparent, water-filled plastic bags. Nadim Abbas's cubicle-size bedrooms that are also sealed-off isolation tanks speak of the fear of disease. Quasi-anthropological ensembles by Nicholas Mangan and Asli Cavusoglu mourn cultures and populations gone. An installation of small, domestic-looking objects by Eva Kotatkova refuses to cohere; performers shift things around. And in a beautiful little film called "The Dent," by Basim Magdy, an imaginary village has its hopes for solvency shattered when its plans to attract new business fall through.

The plans, it is true, were on the grandiose side: The village wanted to host the Olympics. Mr. Magdy is always clear-eyed about human folly, but he has a nice sense of humor. So does Shreyas Karle, an artist from Mumbai and a find, who displays sly little fetish objects mixing popular religion and Bollywood in what he calls a museum-shop setting. It's hard to say what you'd make of these if you weren't a little familiar with South Asian culture. Frankly, some of the other art — Ms. Balema's water bags, say — you

can't imagine people wanting in their homes, though considering some of the gold-plated junk collected these days, that's a compliment.

And finally, in the realm of border crossings, there are sounds and words everywhere. Music of the Los Angeles composer and D.J. Ashland Mines fills the museum's stairwells and leaks into galleries. In a video called "The All-Hearing," by Lawrence Abu Hamdan, preachers in Cairo mosques inveigh against the city's noise pollution, which we, too, can hear. Closer to home, Casey Jane Ellison, the attitudinal host of an all-women interview show called "Touching the Art," demonstrates that, most evidence to the contrary, art dish can be intelligent. (Smart guests help.)

Lisa Tan makes lyrical use of literature in a video inspired, in part, by Virginia Woolf's novel "The Waves." Written work by Ms. Huxtable, along with some by other show artists (Lisa Holzer, Martine Syms, Mr. Atkins), appears in "The Animated Reader: Poetry of 'Surround Audience,'" a collection assembled for the occasion by the critic Brian Droitcour. And if you need a poetry fix fast, you'll find the Twitter-and-YouTube bard Steve Roggenbuck shouting away on video screens in the museum's lower level. He's yet another fence leaper, purveying a combo of poetry, performance art and stalker rant. He sounds sincerely nuts. I like him.

I don't much like a big, shiny, blocky thing called "The Island (KEN)," by the design collective DIS, which, being in the museum's lobby gallery, in effect opens and closes the show. It's a sculpture, a bed, a fountain, a shower, a performance platform. And I get that it's a sort of joke, a takeoff on design, though it looks like a pricey one. It all but obliterates a small wall installation by the Chinese artist Li Liao, which consists of little more than a uniform, an iPad, a labor contract and an ID card.

These items are souvenirs of an art project he embarked on a few years ago by signing on for a low-level, barely paying, 12-hour-shifts job at an Apple factory called Foxconn in China. The factory was notorious for the high rate of suicide among its workers, many of them from poor rural communities. Mr. Li finally quit after grueling weeks when he'd saved up enough to buy what he'd been helping to make: an iPad.

His project was meant to illustrate the yawning gap, at every level, between China's working class and its corporate elite. The DIS piece aims to send up a comparable elite from within. But self-critique of this sort is tricky: It's win-win for the wrong side. Almost everything else in "Surround Audience" says so. And placing Mr. Li's barely there art nearby says so loud and clear. Surely Ms. Cornell and Mr. Trecartin had exactly that in mind?

"Surround Audience" continues through May 24 at the New Museum, 235 Bowery, at Prince Street, Lower East Side; 212-219-1222