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Old Ways and New Media

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in New York City

Surround Audience: The 2015 New Museum Triennial

You may have heard of “Surround Audience,” the latest extravaganza at the New Museum, as the new-media triennial. You would be wrong.

Even before it opened, the curators were back-pedaling. It had been *their* hype and *their* buzz, but no longer. No, the 2015 New Museum triennial is not to be pigeonholed so easily, because it was all along about bursting boundaries, only starting with media. It is about crossing from art into politics and life—and from the New York art scene into a globally connected society. It is about escaping the museum itself, thanks to dance, performance, and (yes) social media. It is a “platform for an emergent generation . . . that is shaping the discourse of contemporary art.” It is about reaching out to surround its audience.

If only. Then at least the largely forgettable display of fifty-one artists and collectives would have an excuse. Still, this is, to its credit, not just another day in the galleries. The triennial sticks to artists still under thirty-five, from more than twenty-five countries, and it commissioned roughly half the work. In effect, it is actively engaging artists, to ask whether art can still have relevance for a generation that takes the latest technology in stride. And that leaves open the possibility that its answer might be *no*.



Surround sound

That would, I promise, be the wrong answer, even if *this* triennial cannot deliver a better one. Set that aside, though, to stick to the New Museum and the question. Is this really about new media? You might think so in the lobby, where Casey Jane Ellison’s talking heads on TV are saying, well, something about art. Within, Li Liao’s ID card, uniform, labor contract, and iPad Mini testify to his laboring twelve hours a day in China, where Apple outsources its latest. For easily the show’s most hyped work, Josh Kline embeds LED screens and still more talking heads into the bellies of a Teletubby SWAT team, accompanied by President Obama on the monitor behind them.

If that has you excited, there is more like it on every floor, but wait a second. One can see new media with greater sophistication any day, and these performances are as lifeless as Teletubbies. Obama recites the State of the Union that Kline only wishes he had delivered, but the old-fashioned way, through an actor. (I hear *Saturday Night Live* coming on.) Ashland Mines fills the stairwells and bathrooms with colored lights and gently throbbing music practically out of a “happening” from the 1960s. Maybe the curators should have called the show “Surround Sound.”

Then, too, comes the less than cutting-edge technology, with roughly the novelty of lithographs and running water. Eloise Hawser turns to lithographic plates for her gentle abstractions, adding a crushed assembly on the floor. DIS, a collective, somehow extends plumbing into the galleries, transforming its center into a combination kitchen and bath with a working shower. It looks sadly like an upscale showroom. More water fills Olga Balema’s paint-spattered Ziploc bags, like a cross between Abstract Expressionism and a waterbed. Antoine Catala even contributes a fishtank.

Actual painting is hard to come by, but not allusions to past forms and older media. Nicholas Mangan’s jagged tabletop, Shreyas Karle’s smoother totems, and Kiluanji Kia Henda’s open geometries in space justify **early modern** and Sol LeWitt retreads through allusions to Third World cultures and developing cities. Ketuta Alexi-Meskishvili’s colorful photos play up the imperfections in found objects, but with the comforting blur of photograms. Juliana Huxtable poses in the nude as a Nubian goddess, give or take testicles, both for her own prints and for Frank Benson’s sculpture. They pay a politically correct tribute to her as an African American and as transgender, but they also put the role of the artist on a podium. At least those looking for currency can take comfort that Benson’s apparent bronze serves as an Accura Xtreme Plastic “prototype.”

In truth, it is not so easy to escape the past, not in what critics have called today’s “Neo-Mannerism.” One can hear a real yearning for it beneath the din. Nadim Abbas positively reaches for it, with gloves leading into quarantine chambers, filled with such signs of domesticity as plants and toilet paper. Catala’s fishtank filled with live coral might belong in a child’s bedroom, and he means his facing letter *E* and number *3* as a symbol for *empathy*. Even so, corruption can enter memories of home. For a similar display last fall by another artist, Glenn Kaino, algae had penetrated the coral as an invasive species.

Nor is it easy to claim the new. Art between **abstraction** and **realism** has become practically the norm. Art based on social media and Twitter has appeared before as well. More dangerously, a triennial must compete with yet another Whitney Biennial or art fair. Emerging artists must compete with “Greater New York” at MoMA PS1 and periodic surveys at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Amid the seemingly constant plea for attention, the market still governs all.

Social or self-involved?

The New Museum introduced the “generational” with its first triennial, including Ryan Trecartin, and it insisted on a world beyond New York with its second. Now Trecartin serves as curator along with the New Museum’s Lauren Cornell, and one can see his art’s short attention span and outsize good cheer throughout. It appears in Steve Roggenbuck’s screaming self-help video, satire or not. It appears in Njideka Akunyili Crosby’s images of family in pop-culture collage or Catala’s plea for empathy. It appears twice over in Kline’s reduction of the police action against Occupy Wall Street to Teletubbies. His version of Obama seeks a greater idealism, but the real thing was far more eloquent.

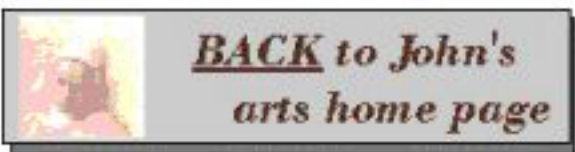
For all their good intentions, they barely engage politics or the present. The show depends on wall text, lots of it, with all too little help from the art. One may never learn what Li Liao suffered in a Chinese factory or what contagion Abbas and his sealed chambers are so desperate to avoid. One must take Onejoon CHE’s word for it that his photographs document ties between Africa and North Korea. One must accept that Exterritory’s brain scans measure responses to Israeli censorship and dissidence. One must accept, too, that the experiment has anything to do with science.

“Surround Audience” has some perfectly decent painting, including abstraction with hints of human life and human alphabets by Sascha Braunig, Avery Singer, and Rachel Lord. The last points to another implicit theme, of sign systems. Lisa Holzer presents her abstraction as new names for nail polish. Others have already spoken more vividly for art as language and the return of painting, but fine. One can find delights, too, in Daniel Steegmann Mangrané’s gleaming white forest behind 3D glasses. Jennifer Steinkamp has simulated nature before without devolving into a carnival attraction, but his virtual reality is disorienting, humbling, and beautiful.

What the show rarely has is the urgency of art or politics, in all its six entire floors of mostly political art. One can feel the poignancy of displacement in Shadi Habib Allah’s video of Bedouins. One can feel trapped in one’s own body in Renaud Jerez gaunt PVC skeletons or Eva Kotátková’s mannequins that one might well mistake for actual museum visitors. She inserts them in a simulated living room and real wire cages. The dated decor may have more to do with ambivalence toward the past than a platform for the new. Still, she evokes both longings for freedom and longings for home.

What has gone so wrong elsewhere? Maybe the planet has not advanced beyond New York arts after all. Maybe the reliance on commissions places undue restraints, when a true respect for the present would allow artists to find their own way. Maybe, too, so young a generation has not had time to grow, although past explosions sure began young. (Think of “Primary Structures” at the Jewish Museum in 1966 or “Sixteen Americans” at MoMA in 1959.) Maybe, too, the New Museum just does not have what it takes.

Could it instead be doing *too* good a job of representing the new, in an age of social media? The danger goes beyond any one age group. On video, Donna Kukama applies her “signature dark lipstick,” ignoring activists giving voice to Kenyan independence. She could be making fun of self-involvement or wrapped up in it herself. A breakthrough will take more patience with ambiguity and fewer distractions. In fact, it will take halfway decent art.



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“Surround Audience” ran at the New Museum through May 24, 2015.