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ART & DESIGN

Where Virtual Equals Real

New Museum's Triennial Is All About Being Wired

By RANDY KENNEDY FEB. 5, 2015

It is early 2009. Hope and change are in the air. President Obama stands before the camera delivering his Inaugural Address, but within seconds something seems off. The speech is not the pragmatic one he gave on that cold January day but a fiery message in which he excoriates "peddlers of hate whose stock-in-trade is xenophobia, homophobia, racism, sexism and isolationism, and who define America by our differences rather than our common bonds."

As he speaks, his face seems to be slipping digitally — and disturbingly — around his skull, and you suddenly realize it is not the president but an actor who has had the president's portrait software-mapped uncertainly to his own face. The video is the creation of Josh Kline, an influential 35-year-old New York artist. And his Philip K. Dick vision of an alternate past wishfully conjuring an alternate present provides a fitting window onto the ambitions of the New Museum's 2015 Triennial, a show that will take on the widely debated and often misunderstood ideas of "posthuman" and "post-Internet" art as squarely as any American museum has.

Opening Feb. 25, the exhibition includes Mr. Kline and 50 other

artists and collectives from more than two dozen countries, many of whom have never shown in the United States before and whose work casts a queasy science-fiction eye onto an ever more digital, more automated, more omniscient society. The show, the third iteration of the museum's emerging-art triennial, has been highly anticipated in part because of its two curators — Lauren Cornell, a former director of Rhizome, the Internet-focused art organization; and Ryan Trecartin, one of the most admired artists of his generation, whose video work has always seemed to exist at least a dozen years in the future, where identity, language and humanity itself have become as gleefully anarchic as a 14-year-old's social-media feed.

The triennial is titled "Surround Audience," Mr. Trecartin's effort to capture that sense of a wired world in which, as Ms. Cornell puts it, "technology and late capitalism have been absorbed into our bodies and altered our vision of the world." For many of the show's younger artists, the Internet and the digital revolution are no longer just the tools and delivery system for their work but the air they breathe and the world they see before their eyes. That also means that while the digital might not be formally present at all in some of the work, it still hovers sociologically and politically on every side.

"I think I look at the way things are changing more from an optimistic standpoint, and Lauren tends to see it more from a dystopian one, but the older I get the more complicated my own views get," said Mr. Trecartin, 34, who told The New Yorker last year: "Everything we do is going to be captured and archived in an accessible form, whether you want it or not. It's going to change all of our lives. We are a species that can no longer assume a sense of privacy. It's not an individual decision, and I feel that's exciting to explore — or something."

In an essay for a show last year called "Art Post-Internet" at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing, the curators Karen Archey and Robin Peckham tried to find some consensus about the kind of art that Mr. Trecartin and other young artists have brought to attention in recent years, writing that "post-Internet refers not to a time 'after' the Internet but rather to an Internet state of mind — to think in the fashion of the network."

And by that definition, most of the artists in the triennial seem to be fully in a "post" world, one without much abstract painting (there is none in the show) but lots of representations of bodies yearning to leave human form, in ways that science-fiction novelists and philosophers have been imagining for years. The posthuman has become more prevalent in pop culture, too — in movies like "Her" (man falls in love with operating system) and "Transcendence" (man becomes one with the Internet), but 21st-century artists can move with a nimbleness that often puts them in touch with the implications of technological change before the culture at large.

Casey Jane Ellison, a Los Angeles stand-up comic and artist in the triennial, creates video routines using digital avatars that vaguely resemble her but sometimes look more like Max Headroom. Antoine Catala, a French artist working in New York, has made previous work consisting of drones that fly around a space, analyzing the images in it and reciting descriptions of them in a mechanical voice. Daniel Steegmann Mangrané, a Spanish artist working in Brazil, has conceived an installation in which New Museum viewers will wear a version of the Oculus Rift virtual-reality headset and be transposed into a representation of the rapidly disappearing Mata Atlântica rain forest in Brazil.

There will be paint on canvas in the show, though most of it by artists deeply immersed in the digital, like Avery K. Singer, a figurative painter in the South Bronx who often depicts comically simple robot-like figures that she creates in virtual 3-D space using a SketchUp animation program.

And there will also be work by artists that addresses the technological revolution only by seeking to deny it as thoroughly as possible. Eduardo Navarro, an Argentine artist who has worked with meditation and trance, is creating a work called “Timeless Alex,” in which a performer will meditate for days to try to enter the mind-state of a turtle and then wear a handmade turtle shell and creep across the city. Mr. Navarro, who describes turtles as “the opposite of the Internet,” explained one recent morning in a studio adjacent to the New Museum, where he has been creating the turtle shell, that part of the aim is to suggest a conception of time probably always inconceivable to humans but now certainly so.

“If it’s boring to watch, I think that will be better because watching a turtle can be very boring,” he said, speaking quite slowly, as if already trying to get on reptile time. “I like the idea that turtles are not even aware of their own longevity.”

In a recent interview at the museum, after travels that took her, non-virtually, to more than two dozen countries in search of emerging artists, Ms. Cornell, 36, said: “I think there is this kind of expectation, because Ryan and I are the curators, that the show is going to be all holograms and that we’re going to fly in on U.F.O.s. But it’s because there are still pretty simplistic ways of thinking about art in the digital age. That kind of online-offline binary that used to exist about art made with technology or the Internet as a factor doesn’t really exist anymore.”

Mr. Kline is one of many artists in the show who plumb the darker depths of contemporary society — surveillance, identity theft, government coercion, the commodification of "the most literally intimate aspects of life," as the show's catalog says — with an unabashed political edge. For "Hope and Change," his Obama-inauguration piece, he hired David Meadvin, a veteran Democratic speechwriter and strategist, to rewrite the address in a way that imagines change from within the political system being possible.

Calling his creation a "kind of simulated open-source Obama," Mr. Kline said: "Obama campaigned as a transformational candidate and once he got into office, here was this very pragmatic, efficient technocrat. This is definitely about trying to actualize the presidency that people voted for." For the triennial, Mr. Kline has also created a piece in which he uses face-mapping software to morph off-duty uniformed police officers, whom he hired for the occasion, so that they come to look like civilians. In this transfigured state, the officers recite words from the social-media feeds of the civilians they have been made to resemble, as if their job entails not only monitoring the lives of others but also almost supplanting those lives. Similarly, Nadim Abbas, an artist working in Hong Kong, has built a artwork, commissioned by the New Museum, in the form of a kind of biohazard bunker that feels like a cozy apartment, an attempt to show how "violence has been sublimated into the fabric of the everyday," as he said in an interview.

But others in the show play around the idea of an emergent Big-Brother-capitalist-military state in much more ambiguous ways, making it tough to tell which side they are on — or suggesting that sides are just so depressingly 20th century. K-Hole, a New York collective that makes work in the form of brand research (in 2013 it coined the term

"normcore," which took the fashion world by storm) has made its work for the triennial in the form of an advertising campaign for the show itself, which will soon begin showing up on buses and the streets.

The ad slogans, written with input from Mr. Trecartin, tweak the suspicions and fears many people seem to harbor about the kind of art the show will feature: "No Past, No Present, No Problem" and "Nothing Lasts Forever" (Mr. Trecartin's suggestions included "Meaning Needed," "Triennial Season 3" and "Pay Me in Feelings;" he wrote to K-Hole explaining that the aim of his slogans was to "get high school and middle-school kids to come see the show on their own inspired terms.")

Probably the most visible and provocative piece in the show, in the glassed-in lobby gallery, will be by the New York collective DIS, which over the last four years has pushed questions of where art ends and fashion and merchandising begin to a kind of breaking point. The triennial work will be an installation in the form of a surreally combined kitchen and bathroom, made by the collective in collaboration with the high-end German fixture manufacturer Dornbracht.

"We like that it is going to be extremely confusing — some people are going to read this as a product showroom," said Lauren Boyle, one of the collective's members, who explained that the group became interested in the company after seeing its "hyper-real imagery" on Pinterest. "Google brought us to Dornbracht through Pinterest, in a way, through this weird sort of feedback loop. And so I guess we wanted to create another kind of feedback loop and bring the actual thing into the art world."

A performer in the kitchen-bathroom will shower as visitors watch, merging the role of performance artist and showroom model. But Ms. Boyle, evincing no hint of irony, said the group also dreamed of inviting

Gwyneth Paltrow to take part in the project, to add to it in ways they could not imagine. “Basically to do anything she wants to do,” Ms. Boyle said, beaming, “because she’s amazing.”

The sculptor Lena Henke is one of the artists in the New Museum’s 2015 Triennial, opening Feb. 25. The show, called “Surround Audience,” features works that may not be formally digital, but are all informed by the digital world.