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‘Digital’s Bitches’: The New Museum Triennial

By Jerry Saltz



DIS, The Island (KEN), 2015. Photo: Heij Shin/New Museum

Some inventions are mastered instantly. The earliest adapters of oil paint, including Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden, are still among the best who ever lived. After the invention of the electric guitar, early recordings confirm that Les Paul, T-Bone Walker, and Sister Rosetta Tharpe (followed soon thereafter by Jimi Hendrix) were immediate maestros, and some say the novel has never gotten better than *Don Quixote*. But the internet is not like these inventions or genres. We are 25 years in and we still have no van Eyck, van der Weyden, Hendrix, or Cervantes. In part, that's because nothing endures online; commerce and novelty topple all idols (even new ones); and today's links are already decaying and may be useless in the near future. But we have no new masters also because digital technology is more than an invention, tool, or genre. It is a whole new landscape, a new biology, one that is changing us as much as we are changing it — and could one day live on the moon or inside us. Either way, we are digital's bitches.

And have been for a while. Since everything changes but the avant-garde, art exhibitions about digital technology date back to at least 1968, and London's Institute of

Contemporary Arts' "Cybernetic Serendipity" examination of "computer art." Most such shows are spectacles of interactive keyboards, whiz-bang effects, listening stations, impossible-to-navigate websites that do little more than give visitors who touch them colds, and wearable helmets that project distorted cyberscapes. Now comes the New Museum's generously plentiful, frustrating but worthy-of-attention 2015 triennial, "Surround Audience." This is the museum's third triennial, each of which is devoted to "early-career artists" and is meant to be "predictive, rather than retrospective." This year's building-filling extravaganza is devoted to current art by newer artists who examine "the social and psychological effects of digital technology." The exhibition has been adroitly co-curated by the New Museum's Lauren Cornell, who made me happy when she said "media lounges have failed," and happier still when she said she loathes "techno gimmicks." Her co-curator is one of the best artists of his generation, 34-year-old Ryan Trecartin, someone who has narrowed the space between objects, images, digital manipulation, cultural narrative, millions of colors, and layers of sound to a supercharged splinter.

"Surround Audience" purports to examine "a world in which the effects of technology ... have been absorbed into our bodies and altered our vision of the world ... visual metaphors for the self and subjecthood." Before you bristle — *Excuse me, all art does this* — not only are there no keyboards, workstations, or websites here, and only one helmet (Daniel Steegmann Mangrané's fantastically alluring depiction of layered linear space), there are, thankfully, no darkened rooms with portentous videos that make you wonder if curators are human beings aware that they're spending fortunes while abusing the curiosity, patience, and humanity of their audience. That's a big leap for the art world. These curators understand, finally, that there's no such thing as "digital art" (certainly no variety that could be defined by the machines it's made of and through), only art that might be inscribed with its ethos. And while the show includes a tad too much arty-adolescent apocalyptic dystopianism, there's, happily, no annoying, New Age-y, utopian-Zeitgeist babble.

More important, it is full of artists thinking past objects of the digital era and addressing the much weirder experience of actually living in it and recognizing, all the while, that this landscape is already authored by and is us anyway, that there's little distinction anymore between inside and outside, and that engaging with technologies doesn't have to involve a computer, mouse, or iPhone. Even William Gibson, the man who invented the term, recently wrote, "Cyberspace, not so long ago, was a specific elsewhere ... Now cyberspace has everted. Turned itself inside out. Colonized the physical."

I knew only a small percentage of the 51 artists and artist-collectives on hand, which is refreshing when many exhibitions look like they've been concocted in the curator-industrial complex, where all shows are made to look similar. Cornell and Trecartin

abandon the lockstep curatorial love of preapproved, postconceptual academic practice, meaning installations with a little text, possibly photography, video, a sound file, booklets, and/or found objects displayed haphazardly or carefully in a vitrine or on a shelf. (This default international curatorial style not only marred the 2012 triennial, it infects most museum shows of contemporary art.) In many of the artists they've chosen to highlight, we glimpse a generation coming to terms not just with technologies that they've been immersed in since childhood, but with what it means to try to create change from within a system only to see that system closed back down again. These are artists comfortable with reconfiguring information and refusing refuge in vaunted Romantic terms like timelessness or cynicism.

Take Josh Kline's epic third-floor installation, which includes replicated elements of Zucotti Park, benches, *Teletubbies* riot police standing guard, and communication towers, which suggest that all of this is being monitored and broadcast at all times. The work is titled *Freedom* and contains one of the most far-reaching videos I've seen in some time — a digitally manipulated President Obama delivering his first 2009 inaugural address, as reimaged by Kline and former Obama administration speechwriter David Meadvin. In this version, the words heard are those dreamt of by tens of millions of people for the two years leading up to Obama's 2008 election, and we see Obama sharply taking aim at those who deny global climate change and calling for immediate action, pointedly holding corporations responsible for the financial collapse, calling out cynics and pundits who profit from fearmongering, and challenging bigots, homophobes, racists, and sexists. On the night of Obama's 2008 election, thinking about how the politics of "hope and change" might be gutted by governmental dysfunction and pragmatism, I wrote on my Facebook, "A generation must now learn to be disappointed in new ways." That did not happen.

After this vertex, don't miss Lawrence Abu Hamdan, who enlisted Cairo sheikhs to deliver real sermons about noise pollution; it's fantastic to listen to the religious tenets of the Koran used to understand adverse effects of noise. (A sub-theme of the show is how the organism of the internet landscape allows old systems and filters to be adapted.) Also excellent are Lena Henke's large, three-dimensional JPEGs, which make you grasp how artists are using old tools to dig deeper into new ones. To see a steel frame wrapped in a transparent photo, and have that clunky thing become a thing with no dimensions at all, titillates. Casey Jane Ellison takes the old form of stand-up comedy or talk shows to explore states of hypervisibility on social media and the earnest failed ways we try to communicate; Frank Benson presents a hyperreal rendition of the trans body of one of his fellow "Surround Audience" participants, Juliana Huxtable, which includes her breasts and penis. To be both bodies at once, to unveil the enigma and beauty of both, is radical vulnerability, while the new sculptural persona achieved via scanning and what looks like 3-D printing turns this most physical thing vividly, paradoxically immaterial.

Speaking of which, also get a load of Steve Roggenbuck's mad poetic video ramblings of a self looking inside and outside at the same time.

As probing as these and other works are, I won't recommend seeing this show without a serious warning and complaint. As with the last triennial, "Surround Audience" has way too many lengthy wall labels explicating multi-level backstories, histories, sciences, rationales, philosophies, various lores, myths, art history, and personal narratives. Wall labels like these are epidemic in museums. The problem isn't reading. It's that what the text claims the work is "about" is rarely actually in the work itself, and is only on the wall label or in the artist and curator's flimsy imaginations. The label next to Velázquez's *Las Meninas* is a tiny fraction as long as those accompanying most contemporary art in museums. Long labels like these are a triumph of pedagogy over the object, a breaking of faith with art and its audiences. Worse, they evince institutions and artists armoring themselves in ridiculously obtuse, implacable language to hide the fact that their ideas are skin-deep, masturbatory, lazy, and banal.

And it's not just labels. The art world as a whole is enamored with work that withholds some backstory — intellectual, biographical, material, or influence-based — to be delivered only upon request, through conversation with a gallerist, a curator, or the artist him- or herself. It's really elitist. When one is told the secret, we are meant to feel a tingle of personal insight ("I see. His mother was kidnapped."), even when the story doesn't add up to much or seem to be actually present in the work. While the phenomenon isn't entirely new, it does connect with the logic and language of the internet, which is this triennial's subject. Namely, the way the internet prizes secret or arcane understandings — links that only you've found, cults that you visit while still in your bedroom — even while making all information instantly accessible, though often without real understanding. The internet may radically flatten hierarchies of knowledge, but it also builds little tribal moats around particular ideas. Most important, it doesn't even recognize either of the paradoxes or contradictions contained in that approach. (See most Zombie Formalism, and much of the above-mentioned neo-conceptual practice.) As good as it is in places, I left "Surround Audience" convinced that museum labels shouldn't be longer than three inches. With that in mind: Only read the last two lines of any label, rejoice in curators gleaning the digital as a new landscape, garner activism inside disappointment, and don't miss "Surround Audience."