

The New Museum's 'Surround Audience' Delivers the Same Old Same Old

By **Christian Viveros-Fauné** *Wednesday, Mar 4 2015*



Courtesy New Museum, New York/Photograph Benoit Pailley
Got junk? Frank Benson's 3-D *Juliana*

When violent revolutions struck Europe and Latin America in the 1840s, a French newspaper editor named Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr summed up the craze for newfangled social, political, and cultural forms with an enduring phrase: *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* — the more things change, the more they stay the same.

That saying applies to our digital revolution (as well as to its wildly inflated byproducts like Google Glass and atemporal painting). The latest instance of starry-eyed cultural hype is "Surround Audience," the much-anticipated, digitally inspired 2015 New Museum Triennial.

If a few optimists thought the exhibition would finally shift the artistic conversation away from market chatter and toward real-world subjects, the actual results register yet another disappointment.

A display of work by 51 artists from 25 nations that (according to the exhibition literature) probes "the social and psychological effects of digital technology," the show represents a grab bag of trendy ideas. One explanation for the exhibition's manifest immaturity is the Triennial's insistence on only featuring artists 35 and younger — there's nothing more conservative in our time than youth culture. Another indicator of its artlessness: Most works were commissioned specifically for this youthennial. A curatorial and artistic gamble, the strategy risked callowness and incoherence — and that's mostly what it yielded.

Organized by curator Lauren Cornell and filmmaker Ryan Trecartin, "Surround Audience" takes as its starting point Trecartin's Smurfs-meet-Michael Alig videos. These, we are told, are expressions of "a world in which the effects of technology and late capitalism have been absorbed into our bodies and altered our vision of the world." Perhaps a better way to trumpet Trecartin's presence at the helm would be to declare that his is the "Extreme Diet Coke & Mentos Experiment" that fizzes the venting of this arty generation.

Despite the curators' attempts to justify the inclusion of related artworks that deliberate "politically about the issues of our times" — Onejoon Che's photographs of Third World Soviet-style monuments built by a contemporary North Korean art studio, for instance — most of the work intersects not with life but with its highly attenuated, alt-bourgeois, digitally enabled avatar.

One example is Daniel Steegmann Mangrané's virtual rainforest environment; another is the show's flagship sculpture, *Juliana*, Frank Benson's hyper-realistic, life-size 3-D print of the transgender artist Juliana Huxtable (who's also represented in the exhibition by photographic self-portraits in far-out purple and green). After one is done considering the gee-whiz technology that produced Benson's LGBTQ-era mannequin, there's not much left to do but gawk. Insert emoji here.

Other works that confuse high-tech vacuity and convolutedness for real commentary: Josh Kline's installation *Freedom*; and Casey Jane Ellison's digital animation of her "self-objectifying" persona as the host of Ovation TV's "all female, no explanation" talk show *Touching the Art*, episodes of which welcome viewers via a flatscreen on the first floor. If Kline's immersive sculpture and video installation circles global techno-political shifts it never nails — in his words, "the digitization of identity, the voluntary and involuntary dissolution of privacy, and the political consequences of this way of living" — Ellison's flat affect and Valley Girl whine bowdlerize the sincerity necessary for most audiences to actually care.

"Surround Audience" does much better with painting and collage, as well as the odd installation. In that last camp there's Eva Kotátková's *Not How People Move but What Moves Them*, a Surrealist-inspired tableau that includes drawings, furniture, and female performers who put their heads or feet in metal cages. In the 2-D realm are excellent grayscale paintings by Avery K. Singer — SketchUp-aided de Chiricos — as well as gorgeous mixed-media mash-ups by Njideka Akunyili Crosby. Finally, consider Antoine Catala's newly rebranded symbol for "empathy." The best of the Triennial works that insert themselves into real-life circuits, Catala's logo is presented in a fish tank covered in live coral, yet also exists outside the museum as a communication campaign, a website and a GIF.

Viewed soberly, the proliferation of "free" information and endless commercial gadgetry that "Surround Audience" celebrates has come at a cost of millions of real-world jobs and a hollowed-out collective imagination. This Triennial, barring a few works, is proof of that. Change in our time does not necessarily produce cultural revolutionaries. Sometimes it just manufactures new opportunities to cement the status quo.

Correction published 3/5/15: *The original version of this article misidentified the creator of the Juliana sculpture as Frank Webster. The above version reflects the corrected text.*