

Art in America

ProBio

NEW YORK, at MoMA PS1

by William S. Smith



View of "ProBio," 2013, showing a video by the artist collective Shanzhai Biennial and sculptures by Josh Kline (left wall), Dina Chang (foreground) and DIS (on floor); at MoMA PS1.

In a 1966 essay, artist Robert Smithson criticized the persistent link between art and biology that he saw in everything from Renaissance anatomical drawings to biomorphic abstraction. The history of art itself, according to Smithson, was mired in a "biological-fiction" that accounted for aesthetic change as a process of natural development. If for Smithson these metaphors smacked of sentimental humanism, the artists in "ProBio" reengage biology on terrain that has shifted radically toward what Josh Kline, the artist who curated the show as part of MoMA PS1's EXPO 1 initiative, describes as a post-human condition.

For decades, theorists of media and digital culture have anticipated a future in which the human body will be inextricable from the technologies that wire and augment its faculties. Indeed, the term "post-human" has the dated ring of an academic buzzword, an artifact from past speculations about what will come. This temporal indeterminacy may be deliberate on Kline's part. His aim is not to reignite a theoretical debate but to map an aesthetic sensibility that has emerged among a relatively close-knit group of artists, many based in New York (and more than a few, including Kline, associated with the gallery 47 Canal). The structuring of time—particularly as capital-driven cycles of obsolescence—is key to this sensibility.

Much of the work in "ProBio" employs "new" media and has a "futuristic" look. Yet the hyper-technological world it seems to anticipate is also part of our banal present.

Some of the sculptures figure the possibilities of biotechnology as they might be applied in a consumer society. Dina Chang's *Flesh Diamonds* (2013) are angular 3-D-printed gemstones that appear to be made of moist, hairy skin. This grotesque equation of designer genes with luxury objects rings depressingly true. Alisa Baremboym's assemblages of flesh-textured ceramics and tech accessories suggest processed creatures: hybrids of living organisms and spare USB cords.

If previous generations of artists signaled an engagement with information technology by circulating their work online, the artists in "ProBio" register the material outputs of a culture supposedly defined by "immaterial" data flows. With the exception of Georgia Sagri's derelict urban garden, *Williamsburg* (2013), none of the work looked like it would biodegrade anytime soon. Extruded plastics and toxic stuff prevailed. Rather than being representations of the post-human body, some of the strongest work seemed designed to stage a corporeal encounter with the viewer. In the case of Baremboym's all-too-human sculptures, that encounter can elicit an uncanny effect that has been compared by some critics to that of Surrealist objects. Even the pieces that primarily employ digital media, like Tabor Robak's and Antoine Catala's looping videos, are most remarkable for the distracted modes of perception they induce in viewers, who in any case may be taking in the entire exhibition through the lens of a smartphone.

Smithson's antihumanist notions of nature and time also find renewed expression in a post-human world. Ian Cheng's *Entropy Wrangler* (2013) comprised a tank filled with assorted smartphones, a mechanical hand and a vibrating dildo. Submerged in a bath of nonconductive mineral oil, these devices twitched, blinked and eventually powered down over the course of the exhibition, enacting the "life" cycle of an inorganic ecosystem. A flat-screen monitor, also submerged, ran what the artist calls an "infinite simulation" of eroding 3-D animated forms that will, theoretically, continue to stutter and fragment forever, whether humans are present to witness them or not.

If digital culture has unsettled classical ideas about nature and the body, then post-human art can hardly claim autonomy for itself. Kline's own work includes 3-D-printed portraits of designers and architects, key players in a hard-nosed "creative economy" that overlaps with the art world of PS1 and 47 Canal. "ProBio" examined a shared set of aesthetic concerns, but it made no claim that these developed "naturally" out of the zeitgeist. In the past, artists exhibiting together, debating ideas and sharing skill sets might have been called an avant-garde; here they are more like a LinkedIn network.