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NEW MUSEUM'S TECH-Y THIRD TRIENNIAL GETS IT (MOSTLY)

Posted by Cassidy Dawn Graves in City

Everyone's done a retrospective lately—just ask Björk. Biennials are for the Whitney, and Miami has Basel. What about something new? Enter the New Museum's Triennial, an exhibit seeking to be “predictive” rather than retrospective. Focused on younger and recently-established artists, this year's third annual Triennial is titled *Surround Audience*. Curated by Lauren Cornell and Ryan Trecartin, it seeks to “explore the effects of an increasingly connected world both on our sense of self and identity as well as on art's form and larger social role.”

When you're in a semi-public space, anything can happen. Sometimes this works strangely well with the art on display. This was proven accurate within ten minutes of arriving. While trying to listen to a video piece about noise pollution in Cairo, a flood of about 30 tourists came in and started being loud. The irony was not lost on me, and I hope some people thought it was part of the piece itself.

Curator Ryan Trecartin, an artist with a penchant for video pieces resembling reality TV on acid, has a clear presence in the exhibit, despite not blatantly featuring his own work. Each floor is prefaced with a different text piece he wrote, each more erratic and surreal than the next. When moving between floors, the stairwell is filled with neon green light and spacelike accelerating sonic noises, turning a museum trip into an otherworldly journey.

These artists are aware we are living in a virtual age: the body is continually deconstructed in every which way, from prosthetic limbs and forms made from wire frame to 3D printed replicas of humans and face substitution software. The latter is manifested particularly well in US artist Josh Kline's installation, featuring a video reenactment of Obama's inaugural address using face-substitution software, while police in riot gear with Teletubbies for heads stand equal parts menacing and childish.

Another fine example is Israeli puppeteer and artist Shelly Nadashi's work, typically presented in performance form but stands alone here, letting us question and examine the visual component to a performance when the performer itself is absent. The puppet, typically a performer, becomes a piece of visual art. Similar is Argentine artist Eduardo Navarro's large turtle suit designed to be worn by a dancer but here hangs on the wall. According to the artist, “in a wide way ... Turtles are the opposite of the Internet.” I'll take his word for it.

The body is not just deconstructed, but it's potential is celebrated: Juliana Huxtable, NY nightlife figure and artist, proudly asserts her presence in a Venuslike sculpture presenting her nude trans body proudly on display, gleaming metallic blues and greens with long daggerlike nails. The artist's inkjet self-portraits go from yellow hair to green skin and beyond, presented alongside her poetry. Huxtable is whoever and whatever she wants to be, but she is also unafraid to fully inhabit her true form. However, Huxtable's pieces were placed in the same room as an unrelated massive video piece, and at points the two appeared to be competing with each other.

Within a claustrophobic corner is Casey Jane Ellison. Center stage is a screen playing the comedian's deadpan standup. We hear her talking about bizarre things like locally sourced dolls while a 3D-rendered animation of her flips about illogically, her pixelated face equally-deadpan. Next to the screen is a glass case displaying a 3D printed USB drive made of her body and a wig resembling her hair, but the wig sticks blatantly out of the glass, disrupting the tradition that art pieces encased in glass are precious and untouchable.

A clear highlight of the exhibit was a usable Oculus Rift. Wearing the device was thrilling and fantastically disorienting, transporting the subject to a dreamy forest environment. All that you can see when wearing the Oculus Rift is whatever's on the device, meaning you can wave your hands in front of your face and not see them at all. It's the ultimate divide between the physical and the virtual. Plus, watching people react to using the apparatus felt like spontaneous performances in itself.

Though these artists were typically exploring large and complex subjects, humor was not lost on them. Just look to Berlin-based Lisa Holzer's punny ode to the strange names of nail polish colors, or a video where exercise equipment becomes sexualized when you attach prosthetic heads to it.

Speaking of humor, artist and poet Steve Roggenbuck is the star of the museum's cellar. Multiple videos of his play, all featuring manic vlogger persona 'Livemylied.' I like his work the way I like a YouTube star or comedian's, and it's significant that work such as this can find its way into an acclaimed New York museum.

There are no statements from artists displayed, but rather typically pretentious scholarly analysis of each artist's work. Most of these were excessively dense and included gratuitous use of the word "aesthetic." In an exhibit celebrating young up-and-coming artists focused largely on "our immediate present" and future, presence of only lofty analysis is puzzling and frustrating. This is a time and generation where creators' posts, photos, tweets, and everything in between are shared to the public constantly—why can't this also be reflected in the art world? The exhibit's massive catalogue also costs \$60. Not exactly in the price range for the sort of emerging artists the exhibit seems to encourage.

Overall, *Surround Audience* presents a wide variety of art and artists that is largely exciting and relevant, but still inevitably manages to fall into some of the traps of the stuffy old art world.

Surround Audience is on view until May 24. The New Museum is located at 235 Bowery. Free admission with an NYU ID.