

2015 Triennial: Surround Audience at the New Museum

by Lia Wilson
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Surround Audience, the latest triennial exhibition at the New Museum, surveys fifty-one emerging artists, from twenty-five countries, whose practices are informed by their lived experience immersed in the digital landscape. The triennial has always billed itself as a predictive rather than reflective survey, and this iteration is no exception, with a focus on the culture of the immediate present and where it's hurtling. Though the show's description never uses the word *digital*, all of the works are made by a generation of artists whose lives have been marked by the unprecedented proliferation of digital technology over the past three decades. The exhibition claims to address such lines of inquiry as: "What are the new visual metaphors for the self and subjecthood when our ability to see and be seen is expanding, as is our desire to manage our self-image and privacy? Is it possible to opt out of, bypass, or retool commercial interests that potentially collude with national and international policy? How are artists striving to embed their works in the world around them through incursions into media and activism?"[1]



Josh Kline. *Freedom*, 2015; installation view, 2015 Triennial: *Surround Audience*, New Museum, New York. Courtesy of the Artist and 47 Canal, New York.

The triennial is co-curated by Ryan Trecartin, an artist whose own practice wrangles with these questions. What no longer exists for Trecartin, the artists in *Surround Audience*, and those who choose to categorize their work as post-internet art is the idea of an online/offline boundary; offline existence is impossible, as is privacy. Whereas earlier internet artists often made work that could be seen solely online and explored the implications of the new, widespread accessibility and audience, post-internet artists mine the state of mind they grew up with, a consciousness built to utilize the systems of online networks that define and organize daily life. A recent International Data Corporation (IDC) study found that the average person in the United States between 18 and 44 years of age checks their Facebook status fourteen times per day; 62 percent of these 18-to-44-year-olds check their smartphones immediately upon waking up.[2] What does being constantly plugged in, visible, interactive, and trackable do to one's sense of self? Questioning the effects of a rapidly evolving culture on "our sense of self and identity as well as on art's form and larger social role"—as the exhibition claims to do—has been a concern of varying degree within the arts since the early modern period and will likely continue to have new permutations every generation. What *Surround Audience* frames successfully is the shift in focus from understanding the internet as a tool to instead understanding it as an exponentially developing biosphere that we exist in and are helping to shape.

This awareness doesn't mandate that the artwork have any particular form or reliance on digital intervention or gadgetry. Many of the works in the show have no technological components. The show rightly avoids preoccupation with digital objects; instead, its thematic undercurrent is the struggle to address this strange new experience of living within a digital landscape and the reality that we are all constantly engaged with digital technology whether we want to be or not. This realization engenders some dystopian moments, as several artists highlight the dark truths of surveillance and the extinction of privacy in a post-Snowden era of instant geotracking and mass data collection.[3]

Josh Kline's immersive installation, *Freedom*, addresses the sense of widespread disillusionment and upheaval in a climate of surveillance and builds a critique through samples of digitally archived political-media content and references to mass data tracking and social unrest. Its floor is a replica of Zuccotti Park, the 2011 hub of the Occupy Wall Street movement. Reconstructions of data towers, with credit cards clipped to them, stand in the space. One wall is a video installation called *Hope and Change*, featuring a digital manipulation of President Obama delivering his 2009 inaugural address. Kline hired a former political speechwriter, David Meadvin, and together they rewrote the speech, imagining Obama taking decisive action and living up to many of the progressive goals that he conjured in his first campaign. Also included in the space are life-size Teletubby police figures in SWAT gear, each with a screen in its abdomen playing videos of off-duty police officers reading transcripts of social-media feeds. The artist's layering of media and reinterpreted content creates a dense, hyper-stimulating environment, one that highlights the hypocrisy of the government's claims of a free citizenry when its powers of observation and control are absolute.

Some of the stark and catastrophic viewpoints featured in the exhibition avoid such definitive political stances. Nadim Abbas built three biohazard bunkers, each outfitted with a bed and other cozy domestic objects. Rubber gloves are built into panels on each bunker so visitors can reach into the spaces, as if to touch a quarantined person. Loaded with an Ebola-era anxiety, the details of each structure lend them a particularly wrenching effect, conveying the desperation of feeling trapped and oppressed. Eduardo Navarro's work *Timeless Alex*, in which a performer meditates for days to enter the mindset of a turtle and then dons a handmade turtle shell and creeps across the city, is almost like an oppositional response to the totally plugged-in world, imagining a conception of time and mind space that few can fathom in the digital biosphere.

Several artists focus on the expansion of visual forms that the digital world has enabled, often incorporating digitally sourced or manipulated images with more traditional mediums like painting and sculpture. Lena Henke stretches large transparent photographs over a steel frame, creating a three-dimensional object that seems like a literal version of a big jpeg. Avery Singer also utilizes old and new techniques in two-dimensional oil paintings based on figures she draws with Google SketchUp.

Njideka Akunyili Crosby's two paintings both foreground a female figure, each body layered with prints of many smaller photographic images. This compositional strategy materializes and visualizes the digital archives that everyone with an online life accumulates, and it syncs nicely as a metaphor for collected experience and a kind of concentrated evidence of personhood.

There is a lot to see in *Surround Audience*, but not all of it harbors great depth; much of the work doesn't critically investigate the implications of a changing digital landscape but rather remains in a superficial and descriptive position. Perhaps it's fitting, though, in an exhibition focused on analysis of the present, for some works to feel as though their makers haven't gained the distance needed for potential revelation. The illusive nature of the digital world is generated by its speed, ubiquity, and constant evolution, which makes having a sense of perspective—while observing it change your life every second—a daunting task. But within the exhibition's vast survey of artistic practices—including sound, dance, comedy, poetry, installation, sculpture, painting, video, an online talk show, and an ad campaign—is a record of a current pulse, its energy, and important questions. It underscores the agility of the visually and critically engaged to call attention to cultural shifts as they happen—and the importance of listening.

The 2015 Triennial: *Surround Audience is on view at the New Museum through May 24, 2015.*

[1] New Museum, "2015 Triennial: Surround Audience," accessed March 30, 2015, <http://www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/view/the-generational-triennial>.

[2] Lauren Mackey, "Average Time a Person Checks Facebook Might Surprise You," *CBS*, April 1, 2013, accessed March 30, 2015, <http://wtvr.com/2013/04/01/average-time-a-person-checks-facebook-might-surprise-you/>.

[3] Lee Rainie and Mary Madden, "Americans Privacy Strategies Post-Snowden," *Pew Research Center*, March 16, 2015, accessed March 30, 2015, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/03/16/americans-privacy-strategies-post-snowden/>.