

ONLY CONNECT

2015 Triennial: *Surround Audience*

by Sue Scott

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Comprising 51 artists from half as many countries, this sprawling third triennial, *Surround Audience*, occupies just about every inch of the New Museum, including the stairwell and foyer. With one work spilling into another and often competing for space, it is difficult if not impossible to wrangle the show into some kind of visual, let alone overarching critical, holding pen. The exhibition, like the excesses of the Information Age, bombards from every direction.

How to thoughtfully write about such a massive multidisciplinary exhibition where one of the driving criteria was to be under 35 years of age? The exhibition purports 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.” I took this to mean that the curators included artists who most effectively used technological advances, social media, and the Internet as a lens or filter to extend notions of what art is or can be while injecting aspects of self and identity.

How well did they succeed?

Frank Benson’s hyper-lifelike sculpture of his friend, the transgender artist Juliana Huxtable, is strategically placed so that visitors coming off the second floor elevator see it from the back. Benson references the famous Green sculpture “The Sleeping Hermaphroditus” (1620) as well as Etruscan sarcophagi, conjuring a temple-like setting with the tomb of a goddess or queen endowed with sci-fi overtones. The odalisque is a trope used throughout the history of art from Titian and Giorgione’s notions of the ideal woman; Manet riffed on it by presenting his reclining “Olympia” (1863), as a lady of the night. Benson brings this idea fully into the present, not only with a high gloss iridescent figure made from a 3-D modeling program, but by the shock elicited upon walking around the figure to discover a penis. I loved the art historical progression, but wanted more transformation in the sculpture itself. 3-D printing can be used to make semi-automatic weapons and appendages. We walk by mannequins in shop windows daily. Is verisimilitude enough? Patricia Cronin’s marble “Memorial to a Marriage” (2002), a sculpture of two women entwined amidst the bed sheets, is much more effective at conveying, as the artist has noted, 21st-century political beliefs in an 18th-century manner.

Projected behind the sculpture is Ed Atkins’s video “Happy Birthday!!” (2014). It hits on all notes. A man with changing dates stamped on his forehead is shown closely cropped in the frame. Images move, his face morphs, he cradles the head of another man. Graphics break up the imagery with a staccato-like effect. In one sequence, liquid streams from the man’s mouth like water from a hose—the video is in black and white so we don’t know if the liquid is blood or green bile—but the sense of anxiety conveyed by his face and the schizophrenic pacing of the editing says it all. Elvis’s “You Were Always On My Mind” manages to soothe the auditory part of the brain while assaulting the visual.

Lisa Tan’s video “Waves” (2014) is tucked away in one of the alcoves leading to the stairway. With a slow moving cadence and long shots of the ocean, you are lulled into the rhythm of the waves only to abruptly switch to an image of waves painted by Courbet. There is something about that juxtaposition of the real and the made, the artist’s hand and nature (of course I was seeing the ocean through a lens) that is at once poetic and disarming. The viewer follows Tan on her Internet search to find out more about Courbet’s painting. Along the way she muses about connectedness, how millions of bits of information flow beneath the ocean, and how the ocean cools the Google servers on the coast of the Baltic Sea. She makes connections for the viewer/listener even as she talks about her feelings of disconnectedness. In terms of the curatorial premise, this was a brilliant piece.

Personal preference would have been for more painting, but given the theme of the show I was lucky to encounter a few that stood out, particularly the work of Avery K. Singer. Using Google Sketchup as a drawing tool, Singer projects the images on canvas and then uses spray paint to create patterns and shadows that are somehow both digital and romantically reference the artist's hand. There is a Cubist break up of the surface with a movement that brings to mind Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase" (1912).

Though strong, Njideka Akunyili Crosby's paintings were a little too close to early Kerry James Marshall. I appreciated Sasha Braunig's take on abstraction—the imagery had a computer-generated feel but with the richness and definition one can only get by hand. Many of the paintings set alien heads and figures against collapsing grids or nets, both references to the minimalist grid and the World Wide Web, but the works suffered from their crowded and seemingly haphazard placement in the gallery.

Finally, what would an exhibition like this be without installations that remind us of the dystopic world we do and/or will inhabit? This is one of the more challenging areas posed by the Triennial's premise, simply because I don't know how any artist could replicate the same feeling of dread I felt initiating my thumb scan when I bought my new iPhone 6. Nadim Abbas's bunkers, housing for victims that might be quarantined, were sufficiently creepy and formally engaging. Josh Kline's multi-media installation "Freedom" (2015), commissioned for the triennial, was equally effective in the way it collapsed recent events like Ferguson, Occupy Wall Street, and Obama's election into an immersive environment that combines seemingly benign cyborg creatures, face recognition video, and scripts read through the language of tweets.

Numerous works in the exhibit were either not very interesting or disconnected from the theme. Eloise Hawser's found and then framed lithographic plates, each with a single ghostly image that printed together would have made a complete advertisement, was just bland, both visually and conceptually. DIS's collaboration with Dornbracht, the German manufacturers of high-end bath and kitchen fixtures to make the perfect kitchen, was visually uninspired. As a platform and magazine, DIS has been largely influential for younger artists in their convoluted celebration and adulation of consumerism and, more importantly their questioning of traditional education, particularly with so much information now available online. This philosophy infuses much of the show, though not always to great effect.

Though I wanted to like the colorful geometric structures of Jose Leon Cerrillo, remnants of performance backdrops that were intended to frame and define the space of the gallery, all I could think about was the poetic and elusive way Richard Tuttle made us think about space and architecture more than three decades ago.

With the entire museum to work with, it seems the curators gave into their *horror vacui*. The show, the theme, and the artists would have been better served with enforced editing. Too many of their selections may have been "connected" but they were disconnected from the history of art. But maybe that's by design.

I left the museum to see Malcolm Morley's show down the street at Sperone Westwater. In one of his signature tankers piled high with brightly colored containers, building blocks of Cubism, the ship forges through the ocean churning white, Courbet-esque waves. The painting made me think of Tan. I liked the connectedness.

Morley once said to me something to the effect that he wanted to be a part of the river of art history, not a tributary. *Surround Audience* is too big and too distracted to really give the viewer a sense of anything. It remains to be seen which artists will enter into that river and which ones are destined to languish in the tributaries.