

## Review: "Smart New World" at Kunsthalle Dusseldorf

by Thea Ballard, Modern Painters  
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DUSSELDORF, Germany — In an essay published this April, media theorist Geert Lovink asserts, “The Snowden revelations in June 2013 mark the symbolic closure of the ‘new media era.’ The NSA scandal has taken away the last remains of cyber-naivety and lifted the ‘Internet issue’ to the level of world politics. The integration of cybernetics into all aspects of life is a fact.” And yet, simultaneously, a group of primarily New York-based artists and critics debated the validity of the term *post-Internet* and the quality of the work produced under its auspices in a rather insular conversation that took place primarily on Facebook, Twitter, and Gchat. The two conversations are not closed off from one another but differ in their urgency and their sense of scope.

“Smart New World” (through August 10), an exhibition at Kunsthalle Düsseldorf curated by Elodie Evers and Magdalena Holzhey as part of the program for the third Düsseldorf Quadriennale, draws from a young base of Internet-engaged artists: Tabor Robak, Xavier Cha, Aleksandra Domanovic. Their work is cast in a distinctly post-Snowden light—literally, the Kunsthalle’s interior swathed in ominous gray shadows for the occasion. The show is indebted to an arguably very justified sci-fi-inflected political paranoia, as its *Brave New World*-referencing title suggests, that’s frequently reflected in the works. The museum ticketing desk, for example, has been transformed into an interactive performance of sorts by the International Necronautical Society (INS) collective, who require that visitors sign a contract whose terms include “The Visitor’s being is not individual but dividual” and “Illusion is a revolutionary weapon.” The piece, and the relative humorlessness with which it’s carried out, is both opaque and heavy-handed, but it certainly sets the tone.

Indeed, much of the work deals explicitly with state organizations, especially the American military. Some of the artists experience very real anxiety at the hands of these institutions. Snowden contact Laura Poitras is on a Homeland Security watch list, thanks to her post-9/11 filmic examinations of U.S. counterterrorism programs. Her chillingly banal video *Mission Data Repository, Utah, USA*, 2014, documents the construction of a \$1.7 billion, 1 million-square-foot NSA surveillance warehouse. Similarly, in *Every Picture Is an Empty Picture*, 2014, one of an excellent trio of longer films set in black-box spaces, German artist Christoph Faulhaber catalogs a decade of his often-eccentric experiments, which involve impersonating private security personnel and circulating portraits of high-security prisoners of the war on terror. As we see in the film, these actions place him on watch lists and cause him to lose the sponsorship of European art institutions. They also appear at moments to wreak havoc on his psychological well-being. Exaggerated as these events seem, they’re versions of conditions all citizens of this image-saturated surveillance society are susceptible to.

Particularly in the context of the Quadriennale, which has selected “utopia” as one of the group of buzzwords describing its theme, this dark assortment of works feels refreshing, if not reassuring. Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Papers from Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, 2014, is a particularly well-placed twist—his attempt to print out 33 gigabytes worth of academic papers from JSTOR, downloaded from Pirate Bay, is utopian in its reach toward the free transmission of knowledge. But the installation doubly serves as a monument to deceased open-source activist Aaron Swartz, a bittersweet reminder of the legal and corporate limits placed on such gestures. An educated audience could take anxiety about the surveillance state for granted, but this exhibition groups artists who are willing to approach systems so vast they seem impossible to conceive of, let alone resist. Not quite activist art in any traditional sense, nor aligned with the au courant smartass breed of Net art, what’s assembled here at its best borrows the respective urgency and sense of humor from these two genres, generating art that resonates outside the post-Internet echo chamber.

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