

# ARTFORUM

## 2015 New Museum Triennial

NEW MUSEUM, NEW YORK

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DIS, *The Island (KEN)*, 2015, mixed media. Installation view. Photo: Heji Shin.

**THE NEW MUSEUM TRIENNIAL** is an exploration of culture's future through the art of today. And this futurity is the province of curating and marketing alike: The traditional retrospective survey is here replaced by a *predictive* model, going for broke rather than for taste, for speculative investment rather than accrued aesthetic value. As one of the more recent kids on the New York block to inhabit a brick 'n' mortar architectural logo, the New Museum has made a triannual wager on art that relies on bankability. The first two go-rounds, in 2009 and 2012, laid some notable groundwork. The first minted the institution's specific spin on what is commonly understood as emerging art—which is to say young, loud, and tech-savvy—while the second distinguished the museum's willingness to serve as an international platform for contemporary art situated in a global cultural and financial center. Would it be too much to say that tragedy begets farce? The current iteration, titled "Surround Audience," casts two figures from the first exhibition—its breakout artist, Ryan Trecartin, alongside now in-house curator Lauren Cornell—as the arbiters of today's currency. And the currency in which they specialize is the audience itself, whose likes, sensibilities, and styles run in, through, and out of the artwork on display like the cyclical streams of DIS's shower installation in the museum lobby.

To imbricate an exhibition with its audience suggests that the curators have imported the marketing technique of the focus group. Not so much that of the carefully assembled, nearly high-modernist, shot-in-the-dark, closed-door focus groups of yesteryear, but that of the contemporary social-media-enhanced market research platform, in which constituencies of self-aware consumers generate feedback that is constantly refreshed—ultimately yielding, well, more consumers. The result is not a culture industry but a culture miasma—not a top-down domination of the masses but a continuous, self-generating individual feed, a consensus-engineered trough of informatic slop that gushes right back into itself. The surround audience pushes this to its

logical limit: It is not a public but an all-encompassing field of consumption. So, beholden to these technically mediated once-publics, now-audiences, what remains for those who engage in the historically rarefied calling of artistic production? Is artistic possibility now fully subsumed by the audience-oriented demands of global, contemporary, crowdsourced cultural production? With these questions in mind, either intentionally or incidentally, the exhibition certainly delivers a veritable circus of globally operative contemporary art, which falls into roughly two categories: on the one hand, those works that seem to amplify the notion of the “surround” put forward by the show, mimicking the supposed omnipotence and immersiveness of digital technologies; and on the other, works that evade or undermine this surround. The first were, naturally, the loudest works in the room: Casey Jane Ellison’s Ovation Web series, *Touching the Art* (2014–), screened on monitors by the reception desk; the powerful streams of DIS’s horizontal shower, *The Island (KEN)*, 2015; Steve Roggenbuck’s screamo YouTube poems in the basement; Ed Atkins’s looping, “accelerated” video mural, *Happy Birthday!!*, 2014, on the second floor, competing with an installation of Charles Ray adulation that also happens to be Frank Benson’s interpretation of Bernini’s *Sleeping Hermaphroditus* (itself a portrait of the triennial’s promotional icon, participating artist Juliana Huxtable—but more on that later); Josh Kline’s police state of an installation—*cum*—solo show nested, *matryoshka* style, on the third floor; Oliver Laric’s maudlin montage of prelapsarian pop idols spirited into oblivion; Ashland Mines’s *promise echo*, 2015, sonically amplifying one’s passage through the museum’s main stairwell (regrettably, his basement bathroom sound installation *successful shit*, 2015, falls victim to Roggenbuck’s screeching dorm vids); and, finally, Lawrence Abu Hamdan’s complementary projects *Tape Echo*, 2013–14, and *The All-Hearing*, 2014, which occupy the fifth floor self-reflexively, as media analyses of sound pollution.

Aside from Abu Hamdan’s contributions, these high-volume (and, save for Roggenbuck, high-fidelity) works thoroughly reiterate a set of aesthetic values that have been consolidated by an increasingly technically optimized art market in the years since the first triennial. This is a market born of a technological “prosumerization,” a dual de-skilling and distribution of digital artistic tools (creative suites enabled via accessible interfaces) that has turned the readymade into software, into presets and pro tools, into a paradoxically high-tech but highly accessible form of technological consumption. In this scenario, it is the market testing of commercial software that defines how “contemporary art” gets made. The (now-archaic?) clarion call of postmodernity, “Nothing is true, everything is permitted,” gains a stranger valence in the current artistry of creative suites. This is not to say that any of the works enumerated thus far are produced in a manner that would render them traditional readymades, stamped out like industrial series. In fact, the majority of such high-volume productions represent Herculean acts of customization—which, indeed, is the demiurgical twin of the prosumerization of artistic labor. Cultural products, be they luxury bathware, Google SketchUp, or Teletubbies, are appropriated as the materials of a contemporary art proffered by artists (and their constituent markets) who situate their techniques within an aesthetic pastiche seamlessly outputted thanks to creative software.

What do such techniques yield? The answer, I’d say, is an involution, an art (and an audience) that collapses in on itself. Be it Verena Dengler’s art-world-optimized recursive self-portraiture; Kline’s forceful rendering of social justice’s tragic devolution into an echo chamber of high-budget police avatars; Atkins’s eternally recurring (as long as the electricity lasts) computer-animated transfiguration of a long-extinct “man,” who presents his Maya-addled lamentation as a Maya-addled prophecy; or DIS’s ahistorical reboot of utilitarian art that luxuriously packages hygienic care as a “relational” conversation platform.

But there are also works that slip out of the surround, hang back from the immersion. Beyond the reach of the prosumerized sound bleeding into much of the exhibition, there is a wealth of art that is seemingly at odds with a network-optimized attention economy. These are artistic propositions founded in the techno-political conditions of contemporary culture that nevertheless do not simply merge back into culture’s double bind, its all-consuming fold. They are not ecstatic, aiming to suffuse or overwhelm. Rather, they give rise to invisibility and trade in insufficiency while trying their best to evade the imperatives by which society affords, allots, and, most important, identifies life and its social necessities. These works are quite literally emerging or emergent art—most

notably, perhaps, when their relative emergence, their broadened cultural visibility (and their instrumentalization as part of a distinct art-market niche), leaves them peculiarly unresolved in comparison with their peers.

One such artist is hiding in plain sight: Juliana Huxtable. The icon of the exhibition's initial ad campaign, the muse of the exhibition's most ridiculously classical sculpture, and an artist who is exhibiting what might in fact be her first artworks—a series of fashion editorial—*cum*—Michael Whelan—esque science-fiction tableaux paired with quasi-poetic screeds that take the self and its potential becoming as their primary material. Whatever marketable, “emerging” status may be conferred on Huxtable's presence by whatever powers that be, her use of language insists not only that this work's visibility is a work in progress but also that this work will always be in progress. Which is to say that, as an audience, we bear witness to a process, a process of becoming in which much remains to be seen—or perhaps nothing at all.

Luke Willis Thompson also plays with visibility, but the implications are more sinister. For his *Eventually they introduced me to the people i immediately recognised as those who would take me out anyway*, 2015, museum visitors are asked to follow one of three performers enlisted by the artist on a silent *dérive* through the city until he or she ultimately disappears. A knowing update of Vito Acconci's notorious *Following Piece*, 1969, the work constructs an audience to trail the performer, who notably doesn't share Acconci's racial profile. No words are uttered, and I must say I find the work's humorless disposition oddly compelling, as it perverts the viewer's aesthetic curiosity into suspicion, surveillance, and a pursuit that goes unfulfilled. When it comes to disappearing acts, though, perhaps none is more potent than Shadi Habib Allah's video *Untitled*, 2015. Commissioned in part for the exhibition, Allah's piece follows a ring of illicit trade routes throughout the remote and heavily militarized desert region of Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. The work is a rare visualization of a shadow economy, whose system of exchanges can only hint at the “infamous” lives it funds. And yet that visualization is halting, partial, delimited by the clandestine network's requisite discretion—a stark contrast to the social transparency, the high-def, that informs most documentary modes. This restriction on production yields scattered, poetic images that might as well be smuggled goods in and of themselves; an occulted, near-oneiric art realized by the transactions of an invisible community.

*“Surround Audience” is on view through May 24.*  
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