
curating moving images

: where curators write.

Apr 20, 2015

Exhibition Evaluation: Moving Image Works in “Surround Audience” at the New Museum

“Surround Audience,” the third iteration of the New Museum Triennial, opened at New York’s New Museum of Contemporary Art on February 25, 2015 and runs through May 24, 2015. The Triennial, inaugurated shortly after the opening of the museum’s current location at 235 Bowery, is based upon what the museum calls a “predictive, rather than retrospective” exhibition model, intended to point toward the future of art by highlighting works from artists in the early period of their careers rather than lauding firmly established artists.¹ In the past two Triennials, this curatorial directive has taken the artist’s age as a delimiting parameter: 2009’s “The Generational: Younger Than Jesus,” included only artists born after 1976, and 2012’s “The Ungovernables” featured participants born between the mid-1970s and mid-1980s. “Surround Audience” does not impose an age limit but emphasizes “emergent” as a defining characteristic of the artists and artist collectives included in the exhibition. Curated by New Museum curator Lauren Cornell and artist Ryan Trecartin, with New Museum Assistant Curators Sara O’Keefe and Helga Christoffersen, the exhibition includes more than one hundred works by fifty-one artists from over twenty-five countries.²

Though the show includes works in a wide variety of mediums—sound, performance, text, installation, sculpture, painting, on-site and online video, and an ad campaign—my exploration focuses on the on-site moving image works, of which there are approximately twenty-three.³ The scope of this report does not encompass special screenings that occurred outside of the exhibition as installed. In the museum, the works are presented on a variety of screen types, and the viewable image areas range in size, including DVDs playing on 21-inch CRT monitors; computer files digitally projected onto walls, with viewing areas spanning 96 inches to an entire wall (which I estimate to be at least 30 feet wide) and back-projected onto vertically oriented hanging screens; DVDs displayed on wall-mounted, 24- to 55-inch LED monitors; and mobile devices including what appear to be an iPod touch, an iPad, and four 8-inch LED tablets mounted onto sculptures.⁴ All of the videos, with the exception of those displayed on CRTs, have a 16:9 aspect ratio. When included, audio is delivered via monitor speakers, external speakers, or headphones. Audio content comprises diegetic and non-diegetic sound, voiceover narration, and musical accompaniment. In addition to

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museum-supplied wall text, which appears alongside each work, related texts include standard titles and credits, subtitles as translation, and superimposed narrative titles. As not all works include on-screen titles and/or credits, it is not always evident when a work begins or ends. The physical spaces in which the works are presented—upon which I will further elaborate when considering individual works—also vary, to an extreme degree, with regard to the amount of viewing space, available seating, insulation from unrelated audio, and visibility due to lighting and sightline factors. As befits an exhibition that includes works from over fifty artists, a variety of content creation techniques were also employed. Stop-motion, digital, and traditional animation, scripted performance, surreptitious taping, appropriated internet-sourced footage, performance documentation, screen capture, contemporary 16mm, archival material, and edited interview content are all in evidence in “Surround Audience.”

There are several ways, among a myriad others, in which I could have approached this assignment: as an exploration of the exhibition as a whole, with emphasis upon the moving image works; as an assessment of the moving image works which function solely on the screen, eschewing those included as part of an installation; or as an extremely selective viewer, visually and mentally engaging only with those works which fall under a relatively broad definition of moving image. I chose the latter, focusing solely on the moving image works, whether they were stand-alone works or part of a larger installation. Over the span of two visits—on Saturday, February 28, and Sunday, March 8—I spent a total of seven hours viewing the exhibition. While this was not enough time to view each work in its entirety it did, I believe, provide for a more engaged experience with the moving image works on view than that of the average viewer, who would most likely attempt to take in the entire exhibition. I assume that many of the visitors to the New Museum are from out of town or are locals who spend limited time visiting museums, seldom attending the same exhibition more than once, and that, therefore, the time I allotted was fairly generous. However, I acknowledge that my attention to only one facet of the exhibition necessarily limits this assessment to a spectrum of engagement different to that envisioned by the curators.

The exhibition and its lines of inquiry are summarized by the wall text, which is repeated, accompanied by varying excerpts of a poem written by Trecartin, on each floor:

“Surround Audience” explores 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. The exhibition looks at our immediate present, a time when culture has become more porous and encompassing and new considerations about art’s role and potential are surfacing. Ours is a paradoxical moment defined equally by greater means for self-expression and incrementally invasive forms of power. Artists are responding to these evolving conditions in a number of ways, from calculated appropriations to critical interrogations to surreal or poetic statements. . . . 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? A number of the artists in the exhibition are poets, and many more use words in ways that connect the current mobility in language with a mutability in form. The exhibition also gives weight to artists whose practices operate outside of the gallery—such as performance and dance—and to those who test the forums

Upon consideration the exhibition's title, I immediately recalled the phrase "surround sound." Is the artist surrounded by the/an audience or the audience surrounded by the art? Are we all surrounded by an audience at all times? Command or quality? Feature, option, or fact?

The press release lists the exhibition span as "building-wide," and the website gives the locations as "Second Floor, Third Floor, Fourth Floor, and Fifth Floor." When I asked the desk attendant and guard which floor I should start from, I was told that it didn't matter. During other visits to the New Museum I have been instructed to start on the fifth floor, so I chose to do so this time as well. Accidentally and serendipitously, I got off of the elevator on the fourth floor, and when the doors opened I was greeted by music emanating from overhead speakers. The audio accompanies an untitled animation from 2014–15 by Oliver Laric wherein the artist takes snippets of existing animations that depict shifting forms on a white background, isolated from any previously existing narrative context, and redraws them so that each separate animation segment then morphs into the succeeding segment.⁶ The six-minute color video is a transfixing study in mutation that is rendered poignant by the both the familiar nature of the selected clips and the moody strains of piano music. The piece is looped, with no titles or credits, musical or otherwise, either in the video or on the wall label. Though the omission of attribution emphasizes the fluid and anonymous-in-omnipresence nature of common visual culture and underlines issues of authenticity, originality and authorship, I found it problematic. At the least, I wanted to know if the music seemed evocative because I associated it with something I had previously heard but could not place. With its fairly loudly amplified audio and eye-catching colors, the relatively small projection dominated a space that was otherwise filled with static works. One of the exhibition's few non-moving image works upon which I briefly focused was José León Cerrillo's *The New Psychology* (2015), floor-mounted metal passageways which the viewer must carefully navigate in order to get closer to the area of the wall upon which Laric's work is projected.

Shortly after I had first arrived at the fourth floor space I spoke with one of the security guards about the exhibition. When asked which works in the exhibition were the most interesting, she opined that the video works were her favorites, and added that she had observed that both the Laric piece and a work by Shadi Habib Allah on the floor below—which I will later discuss—were consistently holding audience attention. Around the corner from Laric's animation, facing the opposite direction, is Lisa Tan's *Waves* (2014), a 19:24-minute sound and color HD video which screens on a 52-inch monitor. One chair, facing the wall on which the monitor is mounted, is available on each side of the space and a pair of headphones hangs from the wall beside each chair. I waited for several minutes until one of the two seats was vacated and then sat back to watch and listen. Directly behind the chair I occupied is a door that leads to the stairwell from which visitors can access most of the museum's floors. The stairway access doors are used continually and do not close quietly. Between the continual slamming of the door and the self-imposed pressure to give my seat up to awaiting viewers, I was not able to focus on the video that day. The next time I visited the museum, I arrived at opening time and though there were already over twenty viewers lined up for entry, I was able to claim a seat and to view Tan's piece in its entirety, which is fortunate, as I consider it one of the most successful moving image works in "Surround Audience" both as a stand-alone work and in the context of the

stated curatorial direction. Tan interweaves atmospheric footage of waves; over-the-shoulder documentation of her own hands (I assume) typing and editing, both on the visible computer screen and aloud in the voiceover, the text that forms the narrative of the piece; surf videos playing on the back of an airplane seat; and screen capture of a Google “Street View”–powered virtual exploration of the Staatliche Museum in Berlin. In doing so, she combines the poetic and the digital in order to explore the interconnectedness, virtual access, and transcendence provided by digital culture, then ties it all back in with the ultimately inescapable physical realm.



Lisa Tan, *Waves* (2014) at the New Museum

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the stairway between the third and fourth floors (not the stairwell that connects all of the museum’s floors) are two exhibition spaces that might escape the attention of a less experienced or less observant New Museum visitor. Located in the approximately 5 x 7-foot alcove closest to the third floor is a work that stands out both for its direct connection to the curatorial focus and for its levity. *It’s So Important to Seem Wonderful II* (2015) by “bi-coastal and bisexual” artist and comedian” Casey Jane Ellison presents the artist’s digital avatar, who drolly delivers lines based on her live stand-up sets.⁷ The video is displayed on the rear wall of the black-painted space on a 48-inch monitor whose built-in speakers supply the metallic-sounding audio. Visitors must cram into the space to avoid blocking the stairwell, and at the time I viewed the work nearly a dozen people were vying for space. This created a fittingly clubby atmosphere and laughter (sometimes uncomfortable) was contagious. WNYC’s art critic, Deborah Solomon, labeled the work a “revelation” and asks “Will the real Casey Jane Ellison please stand up? I think that is somehow how we feel everyday in this culture. Do we exist or are our lives on the screen more authentic than what takes place everyday in our kitchen?”⁸ This play between the real and the projected self is further enhanced by the flawed nature of the video’s animation: the body of Ellison’s avatar is poorly constructed, with wireframing visible in her face, holes in skin and fabric surfaces, hair that moves in a non-existent wind, mouth movements that do not relate to the spoken monologue, and unnatural limbs that don’t always point in the correct direction. The single, bright overhead light shining down into the alcove emphasizes both the idea of performance and the artificiality of the constructed space both within the video and the exhibition itself. *Touching the Art* (2014–ongoing), an online video series for which Ellison serves as the host of a panel that invariably consists of three “female-identified” guests, is also screening, as part of “Surround Audience,” on a large free-standing monitor in the museum lobby. Three new episodes created for the exhibition address, among other art-related issues, the subject of biennials and triennials. According to series producer Ovation TV, “Ellison’s blunt, reductive line of questioning takes aim at the barriers between the uninitiated viewer and the contemporary art world,

and the show creates a platform for her panel of art world professionals to demystify, in their own words, the most fundamental issues surrounding art and its place in broader society.”⁹ Ellison’s work, somewhat slyly and somewhat self-consciously, uses both staged and digitally constructed selves to explore the aspects of the non-digital, the inescapability of human insecurity and the raw need for affirmation and approval, that is unspoken and often glossed over in this age of ubiquitous and endlessly editable self-portraits. GPOY indeed.¹⁰



Casey Jane Ellison, *It's So Important to Seem Wonderful II* (2015)
at the New Museum

Returning to the fifth floor on my second visit, I watched Lawrence Abu Hamdan’s *The All-Hearing* (2014), which I had previously skipped over because neither of the two sets of headphones was available. The 13-minute sound and color video is projected onto the wall as part of an installation that includes two sets of the loudspeakers, intermittently blaring the same music that appears in the video. The work probes the Cairo military’s use of anti-noise pollution measures as a means to control anti-government sentiment. In the low-ceilinged space, the work seems somewhat disconnected from the rest of the exhibition. However, focused on auditory issues, *The All-Hearing* directly engages the “Surround Audience” theme. According to the artist, “A lot of my projects are geared towards the questions of ‘How do we listen?’ and ‘How are we being heard?’ They are, for me, fundamental questions around understanding politics: How technology changes the types of ways that we speak to each other, but also the ways that we speak out. . . . I often think about this idea that there’s too much freedom of speech and not enough right to silence, and this exhibition has shown me that there’s quite a few artists who are thinking along similar lines.”¹¹ Directly above Lisa Tan’s *Waves* on the fourth floor and in the same type of space is Exterritory’s *Image Blockade* (2015), a 48:45-minute sound and color video documenting a complex experiment that uses MRI technology to explore neurobiological reactions to clips of anonymous interviews with dissident members of Israeli Army Unit 8200, who signed a letter that declared their refusal to continue taking action against Palestinians and condemned a surveillance-based information-gathering policy. While it is an ambitious and fascinating work that dovetails nicely with the exhibition’s curatorial statement and deserves more than the 15-odd minutes I had the time to devote, *Image Blockade* lacks visual interest, drawing and holding the attention of only one of the couple of dozen viewers I observed.

While the third floor is largely devoted to painting, drawing, and sculpture,

one of the moving image-based works fills an entire room. The work, Josh Kline's 2015 installation *Freedom*, combines video played on a large flat-screen monitor surrounded by brightly lit white panels, audio streaming loudly from overhead speakers, two tree-like sculptures, and four life-sized, Teletubby-faced security force mannequins. In a general review of "Surround Audience," Andrew Russeth of ARTNews wrote that "[t]he coup de grâce is a 17-minute video of an impassioned President Obama (video mapped onto the face of an actor, not altogether seamlessly) giving an imagined 2009 inaugural address, the one that liberals were praying for but never received. Kline captures today's infantilized, entertainment-saturated unreality, while suggesting, ominously, that political change—to say nothing of political salvation—exists only as a fantasy."¹² While the work is ambitious, requiring complex software, motion graphics, and a large production team, I do not agree that it is either the best or the defining moving image work in the exhibition, as it sounds only a couple of notes, a bit too loudly.

On the same floor is another work which appears to be a crowd pleaser, Geumhyong Jeong's *Fitness Guide* (2011), a 49:13-minute sound and color video displayed on a 24-inch monitor, one of the exhibitions smallest, non-installation-related screens. The work shows a series of performances wherein the artist interacts with various exercise machines—some of which she has anthropomorphized by attaching prosthetic heads—increasing the intensity of her involvement with the equipment until it becomes obsessive and sexualized. Although the machinery is usually on display alongside the video, it was not there when I visited; it was still downstairs in the museum's theatre where, in a sold-out event held on the previous evening, the artist had recreated her durational performance, "feeding her own energy back into a cyclical machine, [the artist] posit[ing] the female body as the locus of reproductive responsibility within a gendered, exploitative economy."¹³ As with Kline's *Freedom*, I found *Fitness Guide* a bit simplistic. I certainly did not feel compelled to watch almost an hour of what is essentially a single performance conceit reenacted upon various machines.

Shadi Habib Allah's untitled work from 2015, highly recommended by the guard with whom I spoke during my first visit, is located on the third floor as well, within sight of *Fitness Guide*. Screened on a 48-inch monitor, the work is unfortunately sited, as the viewer must stand sandwiched, with sculptures at her back and a busy passageway, which forces other visitors to pass by, intermittently blocking the screen in front. Even more distracting, the footage contains many nighttime scenes and the light reflected from overhead turns the screen into a mirror. The audio volume is low and it is difficult to tell whether or not the subtitles correspond to the action on the screen. However, watching this work is worth the effort. There are many compositionally beautiful shots, and the subject matter—Habib Allah recorded the footage during journeys in which he was smuggled through increasingly remote areas of the Sinai Peninsula by Bedouin networks who use their knowledge of unmarked terrain to avoid governmental surveillance—certainly reflects the exhibition's curatorial concern with the Internet-enabled connectedness which "afford[s] an empowering visibility to communities that are otherwise marginalized," while "the darker side of our technologically dependent society comes into view as artists tackle the issues of state and corporate surveillance and data tracking, disguised, denied or hidden as tools used to safeguard us or market to us more effectively."¹⁴

Ending both of my visits on the second floor, the exhibition's most heavily moving-image laden level, I began to experience art-intake fatigue and no

longer had the energy to read and comprehend paragraphs of explanatory text prior to viewing a work. Directly across from the elevator doors is a projected grayscale animation, *Happy Birthday* (2014) by Ed Atkins, which fills the entire wall. The 6-minute work is accompanied by cryptic audio that emanates from overhead and, along with the oversized projection (it is difficult to back up far enough to take in the entire picture plane) places the audience squarely onstage, face-to-face with the artist's unsettling CGI-constructed meditation on memory and loss. Also on the second floor are two works that seem to speak to each other more so than other moving image works in the exhibition. Basim Magdy's *The Dent* (2014) and Nicholas Mangan's *Nauru, Notes from a Cretaceous World* (2009) both present narratives based on what appear to be mythical spaces (although Nauru is in fact a small island nation in Micronesia). Both works are presented in the same manner, separated from the surrounding works in alcove spaces with dark walls upon which the work is projected, and both works seem more traditionally filmic—in the sense that, for me, the visual content is sufficiently engaging enough to counteract the lack of wall text-informed context—than other works in the exhibition. In one of only two of the show's indications of production technique, the wall label text lists the medium for Magdy's work as "super 16mm film transferred to full HD video," further explaining that the artist works exclusively with film, experimenting with light leaks and double exposures to create unusual colors and textures. I feel that these more traditional works, along with the seemingly off-the-cuff contributions by [Steve Roggenbuck](#) (which I almost overlooked since they play on a monitor located in the stairwell on the way to the basement restrooms), fit nicely into the curators' stated embrace of the poetic.

"Younger Than Jesus," the first iteration of the New Museum Triennial received mixed reviews, at least partially because of its controversy-courting title. While "Surround Audience" has also garnered widespread attention, many reviews, the majority of which examine the curatorial focus on digital technology, present positive commentary. According to Hyperallergic's Benjamin Sutton, "Cornell and Trecartin succeed in making sufficient space for some of Surround Audience's strongest works, which examine the strange, funny, uncanny, and scary effects of digital technologies on our lives." He points to Kline's installation as an example, then goes on to say that other video works, such as Lisa Tan's and Geumhyong Jeong's, "offer divergent and disarming takes on how we have humanized technology, all the while becoming more computer-like in our ways of thinking and being."¹⁵ The New York Times has reviewed all three iterations of the Triennial. In an interview, "Surround Audience" curator Lauren Cornell stated, "I think there is this kind of expectation, because Ryan and I are the curators, that the show is going to be all holograms and that we're going to fly in on U.F.O.s. But it's because there are still pretty simplistic ways of thinking about art in the digital age. That kind of online-offline binary that used to exist about art made with technology or the Internet as a factor doesn't really exist anymore."¹⁶ For me, this statement clearly expresses one of the themes that most clearly ties together the divergent visual styles represented in the exhibition's moving image works—the fact that we are in a post-Internet world does not mean that technology is any less frequently employed, just that it is not a topic that needs to be further discussed in and of itself.¹⁷ Our networked, interconnected, hyper-visible environments and selves have moved past the need to query the validity or the value of our technologically enabled current condition, and contemporary art and its emerging artists and its future artists do and will continue to circle back around to age-old issues—self, place, some place, the same old place, but somewhat different.

1. "2015 Triennial: Surround Audience," New Museum of Contemporary Art (hereafter cited as New Museum) exhibition page, www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/view/the-generational-triennial.
2. Trecartin is known for his video work and was included in the New Museum's first triennial exhibition.
3. This number is based on the New Museum's undated exhibition checklist, which includes a couple of works that I did not see during my visits to the museum. The museum staff members with whom I spoke were not able to give me a count of the works in the exhibition. I attribute this lack of specificity to the unconventional nature of some of the artwork. In K-Hole's ad campaign, for example, is the entire campaign one work or is each advertisement a separate work? With Josh Kline's installation Freedom, I was unable to ascertain whether all four of the screen-equipped sculptures were playing the same video or similar but modified and therefore separate versions of a single video.
4. All measurements represent the diagonal screen dimension and are approximate.
5. "2015 Triennial: Surround Audience," New Museum main text panel.
6. Video clip available at <http://newmuseum.tumblr.com/post/112724185179/excerpt-from-oliver-larics-untitled-video-on-view>.
7. New Museum wall label text.
8. Giselle Regatao, "Screen Versus Self in the Museum," WNYC News, Feb. 26, 2015, www.wnyc.org/story/triennial/.
9. Ovation TV website, where Touching the Art episodes are available for viewing, www.ovationtv.com/program/touching-the-art/.
10. Acronym for "gratuitous picture of yourself" or "good picture of yourself."
11. Jessica Holland, "Artist Lawrence Abu Hamdan Demands the Right to Stay Silent," Vice, Mar. 3, 2015, www.vice.com/read/artist-lawrence-abu-hamdan-demands-the-right-to-stay-silent-981.
12. Andrew Russeth, "The 2015 New Museum Triennial Is a Pointed, Bracing Survey of Now," ARTNews, Feb. 25, 2015, www.artnews.com/2015/02/25/the-2015-new-museum-triennial-is-a-pointed-bracing-survey-of-now/.
13. New Museum events listing, <http://www.newmuseum.org/calendar/view/fitness-guide-by-geumhyung-jeong>.
14. Natalie Hegert, "Elusive Personae and Embedded Critiques: 'Surround Audience' Opens at the New Museum," Huffpost Arts and Culture, Feb. 26, 2015, www.huffingtonpost.com/mutualart/elusive-personae-and-embedded-critiques-_b_6760200.html.
15. Benjamin Sutton, "The New Museum's Triennial Surrounds the Audience with Too Much Art," Hyperallergic, Feb. 24, 2015, <http://hyperallergic.com/185373/the-new-museums-triennial-surrounds-the-audience-with-too-much-art/>.
16. Randy Kennedy, "Where Virtual Equals Real: New Museum's Triennial Is All About Being Wired," New York Times, Feb. 5, 2015.
17. Karen Archey and Robin Peckham, "Art Post-Internet," Ullens Center for Contemporary Art exhibition statement, <http://ucca.org.cn/en/exhibition/art-post-internet/>.