

New Museum's Generational Triennial: wired for the future

The 51 young artists in the New York gallery's show are exploring the frontiers of digital technology, from the surveillance state to gaming culture

Charlotte Burns

“Almost everybody wakes up and does something they don't like – we can do better than this! ... You are going to die: Make something beautiful before you die!” Screaming manically, alone in a damp Maine forest, the euphoric intensity of internet poet [Steve Roggenbuck](#) is balanced with humour in his 2012 video *Make Something Beautiful Before You Are Dead*. Roggenbuck embraces the cosmos and encourages us to do the same: “Back in my grandfather's day they didn't have #yolo! We have #yolo! We have to harness this gift,” he yells.

He is one of the 51 artists and collectives included in [Surround Audience](#), the New Museum's third Generational Triennial, which opens on Wednesday. The exhibition is hotly anticipated, largely because of its two curators: [Lauren Cornell](#), a former director of [Rhizome](#), a New Museum-affiliated organisation that has been promoting digital art for almost two decades, and [Ryan Trecartin](#), the artist wunderkind whose work has been received rapturously by critics since he emerged on the scene in 2006.

Because of their shared engagement with new digital technology, the exhibition is expected to be future-focused (“predictive, rather than retrospective”, according to New Museum director Lisa Phillips). People are eagerly awaiting the outcome of Cornell and Trecartin's shared endeavour, which brings together artists from countries including Jordan, Qatar, South Korea, China and India, as well as Europe and America: “We're expecting to be wowed by the breadth of interesting new work,” says collector [Mihail Lari](#),

who, together with his partner Scott Murray, has provided support for the exhibition.

“I think we are lucky to have a lot of artists in the world right now who are truly trying to invent and establish a unique creative freedom. Artists are reaching,” Trecartin says. Most of the artists in the exhibition are digital natives, born into an age of rapid technological change. While artists have always used the tools available to them, those in the triennial are particularly agnostic about medium. Their work is a mash-up of different materials and digital platforms, from PVC, nail polish, jade powder and oil paint, to works incorporating 3D printers, Google Earth and HD video.

For many of the artists, the medium is merely the means of expression, not the subject. The exhibition focuses on artists who, Trecartin says, “are creating new realities through their transformative thinking. They aren’t concerned with the somewhat parochial thinking about what an art practice can or should encompass right now. It’s hard to meditate on potential futures when we are still transitioning out of a period that has been culturally obsessed with defining the past through acts of rejection or fetishization. There are many artists today who are not only looking past older entrenched ways of thinking about art, they are actually *behaving* past it.”

The wired ways in which we receive information today – a lot of it all at once – is suggested both by the kaleidoscopic range of influences evident in the exhibition, and their compression. The artists eddy around a swell of subjects from art history to sci-fi fiction, from the surveillance state to gaming culture, from racism in America to issues of self-identity – with their evident paranoia tempered by a healthy dose of humour.

Many of the artists in the show express a sense of invasion, whether by technology, political systems or the effects of late capitalism. Several deal with the environment, such as [Lisa Tan](#)’s Waves, which uses Skype footage, HD video and Google’s virtual Art project. Taking Virginia Woolf’s experimental novel as its cue to explore language and consciousness, the work is also “a poetic imagination of how technology affects the planet,” Tan says. Meanwhile, Australian artist [Nicholas Mangan](#)’s Nauru, Notes from a

Cretaceous World is based on his expeditions to Nauru, a once-booming, phosphate-rich Pacific island that has been mined to the point of destitution. “A lot of my work is about finding materials that open up stories – stuff to do with our human mark on the world,” he says. His work is far removed from digital technology. “I’m totally against social media. I find it exhausting. I guess I’m making a considered decision to move in the opposite direction. I’m much more interested in tree-ring dating – it’s like Google in reverse.”

Other artists use new media to address centuries-old concerns, such as German artist [Peter Wächtler](#). His work, whether stop-frame animation, charcoal or video, centres around the existentialist problems of being human. Sweetly melancholic and slightly absurdist, Wächtler’s art deals with “change and the impossibility of it, the lie of it and the idea of another self”, creating “a looping environment with characters fixed and paralysed by the wish for personal change, unable to perceive that you are still the same idiot watching a different sea.”

The search for self, or loss of self, manifests in different ways: the intricate still-life works by Nigerian artist [Njideka Akunyili Crosby](#) speak to the liminality of the immigrant experience; [Avery K Singer](#)’s figurative paintings of robot-like people created with a Sketch-Up animation program suggest a sense of disassociation with the body; the avatars in [Ed Atkins](#)’s videos point to the post-human possibilities long imagined by the sci-fi fiction community.

Gender identity and body politics are the focus for artists including [Frank Benson](#), showing a 3-D sculpture of the transgender DJ and artist [Juliana Huxtable](#) (who is also a Triennial artist), or trans dancer [Niv Acosta](#) whose [Discotropic](#) performance will deal with race and queer identity.

Other works simply ask us to imagine being somebody else. A twice-daily performance piece by [Luke Willis Thompson](#) will take visitors on walks, pursuing one of his cast members and collaborators through New York in choreographed routes. “You never really know which narrative you’re going to be immersed in,” says the New Zealander. “Some of them lead home, or to an idea of home, while others are designed to disorientate the audience.” The work emerged from time spent visiting New York. “When I first came Michael

Brown was still alive and when I left he wasn't, so there is this sense of social change the cities are going through which I felt strongly had to be part of the work.”

The quest for meaning leads to new connections, and this is really what the show is about. Bringing together scores of artists from around the world, the meshing of so many ideas and intentions mirrors the way in which we consume information and create meaning. Indian artist [Shreyas Karle](#), who is creating a museum-within-a-museum dedicated to fetish objects, which is about the impact of cinema on Bombay (and vice versa) and the idea that censorship and licentiousness are “two sides of the same coin”, is looking forward to the exchange. “My wife keeps telling me to focus on my own work, but I'm not really like that. Being asked to exhibit in the triennial, it's less about me than it is about being part of something dynamic.”