

Them

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One generation got old

One generation got soul

– Jefferson Airplane, "Volunteers"

I am a visitor to this new Millennial Generation, a generational tourist, come from the far end of the previous generation, which is now pretty well on in years, and also studied, packaged, targeted, and even historicized. I've come to gawk, I've come to praise, and I've come to question how we correlate generalizations about generations with the visual culture that emanates from them. Not in by asking "Can we?" (Of course we can!), but more specifically: *How* can we see the relationship of a work of art to the time that it is made, or more to the point of this exhibition which focuses on a particular sociological demographic born after 1976, to the period in which the maker comes to maturity.

A cursory Web search of the vast amount of data that describes the Baby Boom Generation (b. 1946–64); Generation X (b. 1965–76); and the Millennials (b. 1976–) finds the following:

Baby Boomers are: optimistic, techno-savvy, focused on self, value higher education, believe in the ownership society, and are devoted to freedom of choice and instant gratification.

Generation X are: dislocated, but still optimistic, techno-savvy, self-absorbed, highly educated, devoted to ownership, choice, and want what they choose to own immediately.

The Millennials are: very optimistic (!), totally wired, self-absorbed but socially conscious, presume wealth and are born consumers, and want what they consume immediately.

In other words, in the general constructs of pop analysts, there isn't a whole lot of difference between you, the Boomer, you the Slacker,

or you the person under thirty-three who is curiously flipping through this book to see if you might find the visual-culture equivalent of yourself somewhere in these pages. Like reading daily horoscopes in which the predictions for Libra can just as easily signify for Leo, descriptions of the postwar generations seem suspiciously nonspecific, although we long for them not to be. It is a truism that every generation believes itself utterly different from the generation that has come before it, and in visual culture, in this century, even more than in the last, artists have wrestled with the past sometimes with murderous intent, sometimes with contempt, and lately, with something closer to sympathy, if not appreciation.

It can be argued that in the first two thirds of the twentieth century there was an obsession in visual arts with discovery and creation of new forms that had no precedent in anything that came before them. Towards the end of the century, the belief in the new was rejected by some, replaced by a sometimes-bitter nostalgia often manifested as ironic appropriation of the dated and obsolete. In this first decade of the new millennium, the Oedipal competition and anxiety might well have dissipated to an extent, replaced by an inclusive embrace of history, an absorption with the visionary, and a romance not so much with the future, but with a kind of futurological fantasy, cinematic in its detail.

In this exhibition, a number of artists manifest a fascination with obsolescence, but with a disinterest in appropriation and an absence of irony. Icaro Zorbar of Bogotá, a kind of Rube Goldberg with a romantic edge, and Cory Arcangel, American avatar of the nexus between contemporary art and the Internet, look back on a mechanical past, and a clumsy digital one, respectively, not with scorn but with affection for the element of hope that is embodied in every invention, every innovation, artistic and otherwise. Zorbar's elegant

46 contraptions constructed out of magnetic tape and stereo turntables

playing records are essentially music boxes. Marrying this eighteenth-century technology with recorded sound on vinyl—a mid-twentieth-century one—Zorbar shows his aesthetic appreciation of the notion of progress, but also delights in the repetitive rhythms of failure that always dogs its ascent. A single song plays on the multiple turntables, but un-synched, so that the results are part round, part echo. Significantly, Zorbar's works can only function with assistance; the multiple arms of the record players must be positioned by human intervention once every three minutes or so. This can be seen as an enormous flaw in the carefully designed system, or a caveat to the will to perfection.

Arcangel is a connoisseur of technological limits as well, but his specialty is the extraction of found modernism in the extraordinary technologies emanating from the integration of the computer in to daily life. With the patience of a craftsman replacing tesserae in a mosaic and the loony concentration of a mad scientist tapping at multiple computer screens, Arcangel digitally recreates the visual monuments of the avant-garde, from structuralist films to hard-edge abstraction. He does this neither to denigrate, nor recreate the epiphany that comes with the discovery of something genuinely new, but rather to describe its newness in the most contemporary language possible, and, in the end, remember it with love. Like Zorbar's sculptures, Arcangel's objects require ingenuity and much labor in their re-creation. They are not jokes at the expense of the hope of discovery, but in a humorous way, homages to it.

This inspired use of the obsolete finds its complement in a strain of exuberant fantasy futurology that includes the envisioning of entire parallel universes, poised precariously in some tense neither past, present, or future. Artists like Ryan Trecartin, Keren Cytter, and Emre Hüner are focused squarely on the future conditional—what could be. Trecartin's multitude of films chronicling the life and times of an entire community of characters seem to

ask, What if we comported ourselves as if we were the authors of our own universe—as if we were in a movie? What if we created our own religions, our own political movements, our own countries, even? In Trecartin's world all boundaries—between genders and sexual proclivities, between humor and horror, home and some alien dream scenario—evaporate. What is wishful thinking and what appears to be are conflated, so that we are unsure whether we are watching a performance of a fantasy or the actual fantasy itself in real time. Offering us a window into this other world embedded in a three-dimensional version of that world, as he does in the present exhibition, is an act of generosity on Trecartin's part, as well as an act of faith in the inclusivity of a created environment that is in startlingly free opposition to all norms.

Cytter's films succeed in building a similar parallel world using a completely different strategy. Although not as ecstatic, it is possible to see her stark universe as a kind of ideal. Stripped to a minimum of characters who speak in terse, God-gardian statements in a number of languages, Cytter's narratives are purposefully generic setups in which profound and epic encounters occur, normally, almost off-handedly, with a minimum of theatricality. Hüner works in animation, a discipline more clearly suited to the minute description of imaginary worlds. This he does with the close attention and the sure draftsmanship of botanical illustrator. *Panoptikon* is a work that offers an all-inclusive view of an ecosystem—or a civilization—populated by what seems to be hybrids of flora and fauna. Whether that view is from the inside or outside, though, is open to question. As its title suggests, the artist's pen is omniscient, but peculiarly able to simultaneously explore and describe both microscopic and macroscopic landscapes.

Art history is a discipline whose structure is based on periodization,
the building of progressive histories or teleologies of visual culture
48 through the chronological comparison of one kind of art with another.

Being an Enlightenment discipline with a Hegelian cast, art historical comparisons tend to be starkly definitive, and quite often dialectical: classicism versus romanticism, romanticism versus realism, realism versus the tendency towards abstraction, and so forth. Most importantly though, these tendencies emanate from the evidence of objects.

For marketers the differences between generations lie in the details (no doubt available for a fee, on the Web sites that I consulted); all of us postwar types are optimistic, but where does our particular brand of optimism lie? All of us are part of the ownership society in search of instant gratification, but what kind of things do we want to own? And once owned, what would be most instantly gratifying? Unlike art historical divisions that are based on the analysis of artistic production, generational divides are most often defined through patterns of consumption. It should surprise no one that most analytical research available on generations is focused squarely on the common characteristics of its consumables, rather than on the political, ideological, social, and cultural commonalities of what common experience produces. Consumables—picture perfect and in Technicolor—are the putative subjects of Elad Lassry's small format photographs. Even-featured youths with Pepsodent smiles as bright as their primary colored outfits, and foodstuffs with colors so perfect they could not possibly be found in nature are both pictures of luscious objects and luscious objects themselves. That Lassry's photos have about them the whiff of the old fashioned, paradoxically, also gives them a youthful aspect. However ersatz they are beguilingly naïve. Mute and perfectly composed like a Lifesaver candy, you know you want one. Adriana Lara's interventions also recognize art's indubitable identity as a consumable, but, in contradistinction to Lassry, the works themselves are kind of booby traps to frustrate consumption. Whether it is the simple and hilarious gesture of placing a banana peel in just

the spot where it would most likely be stepped on by viewers, or the more complicated one of creating an invisible work that consists of all the hours that the exhibition in which it participates is open, Lara's works are not meant to be experienced, but rather, understood.

One of the dangers then, of placing generational parameters on contemporary art is the temptation to treat it like the consumable that it is, by extracting generalizations about it through its most popular manifestations. In terms of the Millennial Generation in particular, there is no need for a museum exhibition to do this; the contemporary art market has done it for us very thoroughly over the past decade. The history of art has reminded us though, again and again (Bouguereau! Buffet! Thomas Kincaid: Painter of Light©!) that the most popular visual artists are not necessarily those that produce the icons of their age. In fact, since World War II, at least in the US and in Europe, cultural exemplars of one generation or another have come from the *genuinely popular* arts—from the worlds of jazz and rock and roll, film, even comics, and rarely from traditional non-mass-reproducible mediums like painting, sculpture, drawings, prints, etc. One of the most notable developments in contemporary art at the end of twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first is steady erosion of the divisions between popular culture, mass culture, and “high” culture. In the past decade, the explosion of affordable and accessible technologies has created entire subgenres of artistic expression that can have real-world applications and also exist as fine art. Mark Essen is a designer of video games that are also visually and conceptually exciting abstractions, their visual complexity abetting the high level of difficulty they offer to the sophisticated gamer. Cao Fei has recognized the epic grandeur of role-playing fantasy games, in virtual settings like Second Life, as well as in real-world ones. Her color photographs of

50 costumed participants in role-playing games succeed in blurring the

boundaries between the fantasy and reality, allowing us, the viewers, a taste of the thrill of competing in such tournaments in an actual urban landscape. Both of these artists do not simply mine popular cultural forms for inspiration—they participate in those forms with such virtuosity as to elevate them, inarguably, to the level of art.

There have been attempts to sum up generations with contemporary art—with Jackson Pollock and the so-called “Irascibles” of the New York School touted as the testosterone-fueled poster boys of the American century, or with the “Frieze” or “YBA” toughs of London, at the beginning of the 1990s, who were called the face of a newly democratized art world. But rarely do these stylistic or regional affinity groups conform chronologically, or even, for that matter, ideologically, to the generations mapped out by the sociologists or market analysts. More importantly, artistic production is not an adequate replacement for a worldview based on common lived experience. World War I, for the Generation of 1914 who fought in it, was such an experience, but out of that generation came not only Dada—which can legitimately be linked to the absurdities and depredations of war—but also Cubism, which decidedly cannot. There is a crucial gap between experience and a work of art made in its proximity. Artists are not reporters, and their works are not always mirrors that reflect context of their making. Just compare still lifes painted by Pablo Picasso in the early 1940s in Nazi-occupied Paris with still lifes by Giorgio Morandi from the same period painted in Fascist Italy. Both artists were living in the depth of the world’s greatest depravity, but relatively removed from direct involvement. Picasso used the tradition of the still life as a memento mori, as a stealth strategy to make a seemingly benign subject matter relevant to the terrible period from which it was conjured. *Guernica* they were not, but his series of still lifes utilizing a black-and-gray palette and often a human skull placed prominently

among more benign comestibles and utensils was a unambiguous reference to the inevitability of and ubiquity of death and dying, and clearly communicated the sense of dread that permeated even the most quotidian activities during that period. Morandi's meticulous arrangements of bottles, vases, cans, and other receptacles painted during wartime are virtually unchanged from the work he undertook before the war or after it. In Morandi's work, there is a refusal to engage with, or even acknowledge contemporary circumstances, a willful hermeticism that was purposefully and unquestionably out of sync with the period of its making.

All art is part of its contemporary circumstances whether the artist chooses to engage directly with history or the headlines or not. Although they have grown up in a time of political realignments, unrest, and all-out war in many parts of the world, in the group of Millennials in this exhibition, none make work that refers directly to historic events like the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the attack on the World Trade Center, or America's wars on the Muslim world. Some seem to take a wider view of the history that has formed them. AIDS-3D, a Berlin-based collective, and Brendan Fowler both embrace the phenomenon that marked the birth of their generation—the worldwide AIDS pandemic. Without pretending to have experienced it, their references to it is their way of owning the circumstances that formed them. Similar to European artists and writers born during and immediately after World War II, the very act of integrating generational disaster in to their work is provocative, although there is no question of being “for” or “against” the disease and its ravages. This said, their take on the invocation of the AIDS crisis in visual art is entirely at odds. In their primitivistic monuments featuring piles of fabricated body parts, torches, and ominous neon portents, AIDS-3D's installations both capture the air of doom that has marked much of the past thirty years, and renders it part of the fabric of popular culture. Fowler would not approve. His performance works as well as his

objects take the form of oral histories, often personal, but always aimed at a more general resonance. The work he has included in the exhibition chronicles his fight to publicly censure a rock band that provocatively calls itself “AIDS Wolf.” For Fowler, recent history, especially one so tragic, sexually and politically fraught as that of the progress of the international AIDS epidemic, must be chronicled, historicized, owned, but not taken lightly, or in vain.

This desire to understand the period in which one was born in a broader, more nuanced way, and with that understanding, shape one’s own historical context is married with a fascination with the recent past in Matt Keegan’s multipart project to research and document Hands Across America, a 1986 national fundraising effort to help the homeless. Taking the form of a human chain that was supposed to reach from coast to coast, Hands was both an ambitious, but purely symbolic effort to bring the country together around an important social issue, as well as an example of the corporatization and spectacularization of activism that began in the mid-1980s, just as the American government began to back away from a broad array of social programs. Keegan’s appreciation for the Utopian aspects of the Hands project evinces a kind of incredulity but never devolves into anger. Similarly, Carolina Caycedo’s banners, which include *Ni Dios Ni Patrón Ni Marido* (which translates to “Neither Gods Nor Boss Nor Husband”), *Don’t Pay Taxes*, and *Trust Each Other* don’t call for struggle, although formally they evoke the militant banners of myriad protests of the past. In fact, they don’t even really complain, but exhort us rather, towards an ideal society broadly based on individual responsibility and mutual respect. Keegan and Caycedo make work that has a definite activist cast; although opinionated, notably, it is neither militant nor proselytizing. Neither are Adam Pendleton’s recent paintings, though they seek to renovate a supposedly revolutionary moment in art history to reflect the realities of the new millennium. Reaching

back to Dada, and melding it with the portentousness of postwar high modernism Pendleton's paintings are mash-ups that completely re-interpret—or perhaps more accurately, creatively misinterpret two canonical and opposing art historical periods. Elegantly composed of vast areas of monochromatic black alternating with white, they refer not unironically to both to the supposed neutrality of abstraction, as well as to the tendency to read too much into colors already freighted with meaning. By calling this group of works “Black Dada,” Pendleton may be claiming a potently anarchic historical movement for today's artists of color, or simply making punning comment on black, the symbolic color of choice for the anarchist movement.

There is no doubt about it: Generational parameters are flawed, even arbitrary tools for the analysis of contemporary art. In terms of art, a generation, particularly on a global level, cannot be defined by the visual culture it consumes, but only by what it produces. Scrutinizing the most contemporary material for stylistic or narrative connections between objects and equivalencies—objective and metaphoric—with contemporary philosophical, religious, or political developments, or resonance with contemporary experience, is imprecise, quixotic, and highly mediated by the analyzer(s). But it also yields results that describe a narrative connected to, but subtly different from those that came before it. In work from this latest generation, the Millennials, still younger than Jesus at least until next year, we can begin to discern these differences, perhaps even historicize a bit. But at the same time we also feel a cool hand that gently but firmly pushes us away with a whispered, “Not yet!”