

New Age Thinking

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The elusive state of relevance, in which art becomes worthy of attention, is informed by intergenerational tension. Practices of emerging artists call older or less-well-known ones into prominence. People hit their so-called strides when receptive forces are favorably aligned, and artists, in general, glean and reject ideas from different movements and moments. Therefore, bracketing artists along lines of age alone is, from the outset, a narrow proposition, but one that serves to push important concepts, histories, and positions into a larger conversation, and throws the complex evolution of contemporary art into relief.

The generation in question—"Gen Y"—is born somewhere between 1976 and 1980 (exact year pending the source). Hence this exhibition presents artists born after 1976, to look at a demographic currently being scrutinized by marketers, sociologists, and educators alike. Key issues from the time in which they (and I) came of age—the '80s and '90s—resonate contextually within the exhibition: American dominance in global relations, the saturation and increased importance of the media, and the strengthened role of technology and innovation on an international scale. This was a time in which overly simplistic terms like "global village" became common parlance, and the advent of "new media"—a.k.a. the Internet and its attendant devices—seemed to signal an incoming transformation in industry and communication.

These have now lost their Utopian sheen: global village, or the idea of a citizenry united across geography and nationality, for its overlooking of critical differences related to economics, culture, and religion, and for its underlying tie to American imperialism; and, new media for its inability to, alone, deliver an entirely new social order.

It is logical then that, in 2008, a distancing from such concepts is broadly evident as is an embrace of more complicated notions of identity and national boundaries—most aptly expressed in the election of Barack

Obama. In an effort to describe this new outlook, philosopher and cultural theorist Kwame Anthony Appiah offers the term of “cosmopolitanism.” He writes: “People are different, the cosmopolitan knows, and there is much to learn from our differences. Because there are so many human possibilities worth exploring, we neither expect nor desire that every person or every society should converge on a single mode of life. Whatever our obligations are to others (or theirs to us) they often have the right to go their own way. As we’ll see, there will be times when these two ideals—universal concern and respect for legitimate difference—clash. There’s a sense in which cosmopolitanism is the name not of the solution but of the challenge.”¹

This challenge underlines this exhibition and our curatorial process. Our intention was not to present a global picture but, instead, to look for shared practices and perspectives among the hundreds of portfolios recommended by an informal network we organized—a network that doesn't reflect the art world in total but our own professional limits and reach. The resulting exhibition glimpses a generation that is diverse, and deflects a rigid age-based determination by pulling in a myriad of influences across history, territory, and art to present a multifaceted picture of artistic practice, one that is cross-disciplinary and fluid. This corresponds with the aforementioned challenge but also the strength of art world in the '00s, which enabled a plethora of young artists to emerge. Showing artists with varied exhibition histories, but all at the start of their careers in early 2009, when this flush and fertile moment has ended, turns this exhibition into a bridge from one reality in art to the next, which as of this moment is completely uncharted.

This exhibition is underpinned by many loose themes: some representing emergent directions in contemporary art, whereas others reiterate or engage extant art practices. I outline three below.

Directing Collective Action

One trend in recent years that resounds with Appiah's notion of cosmopolitanism is a new kind of localism, with groups of likeminded artists working collectively, around ideas and across borders, while maintaining individual practices. Artists in this show have worked in collectives, including Das Institut (Kerstin Brätsch), LTTR (Emily Roysdon), Barr (Brendan Fowler), Nasty Nets (Guthrie Lonergan), AIDS-3D (Daniel Keller and Nik Kosmos), and the list goes on. Each one has an entirely different structure and purpose, but shares the ability to resist quick commodification and to project a vision larger than one individual artist's. It is unsurprising then, given this surge towards collaboration, that artists have moved towards the theatrics of collectivity and work as producers, either of open-ended content or tightly directed works, to examine identity.

Ryan Trecartin's films require mass collaboration and feature hysterically idiosyncratic characters that are mutable and interchangeable at the same time, appearing with different personas, sexual tendencies, and opinions in varying contexts, continually vulnerable to identity theft and transformation. A new brand of selfhood is at play in Trecartin's work, in which stable preferences are a thing of the past, and personas can be picked up, played out, and tossed aside on a month-to-month or moment-to-moment basis. These personalities reflect an emergent, international queer politics that are interested in liminal, permanently transitioning identity. In Trecartin's work, these tendencies collide with the pluralism of the Internet and the ubiquity of technology. His characters juggle in-person conversations with chat room encounters, YouTube-style confessionals and cell phone calls, all in real time, in a way that dramatizes the concurrent multiple contexts and calls to order that surround us. **21**

Similar to Trecartin's work, in which identity is a continual, negotiated performance, Emily Roysdon's practice includes both small- and large-scale productions that overturn notions of static identity through what the artist describes as "social choreography." *Four Screens as Dialogue (pioneering, devotional, familiar, invasive)* (2008) includes four large, movable screens, each imprinted with partially rendered images: a picture of an artist's studio, hands probing the inside of a mouth, an inflatable dildo. The screens function both as stand-alone sculptural objects and integral parts of performances, in which they are continually repositioned by actors, while Roysdon gives prompts to the audience such as "when an image looks familiar say 'again.'" This live chorus punctuates the performance to create an evolving series of photographic tableaux that evokes the negotiation between individual agency, language, and collaboration.

In the tradition of Franz West's "Passstuecke" sculpture or Yayoi Kusama's performances within her installations, artists' direct action upon staid objects can activate them or open them up to chance encounters. Both Mariechen Danz's *Fossilizing the Body Border Disorder* (2008), a three-dimensional diorama that blends science fiction fantasy with what looks like an archaeological dig, and Kerstin Brätsch's large-scale paintings are enlivened and altered by performances in the gallery. Liz Glynn's *The 24 Hour Roman Reconstruction Project, or, Building Rome in a Day* (2008–09) is a different model: a participatory project that is built by the artist and an army of volunteers in twenty-four hours, and then exists as ruins throughout the run of the show. These works point to the recurrence of ancient orders and the fragility of our own social fabric.

Mohamed Bourouissa stages more contemporary portraits of delicate social orders: young people hanging out in the *banlieu* of Paris. His photographs depict intimacy, camaraderie, and minor conflict, each one a mundane moment tinged with volatility evident in the characters' expressions—

or more literally with fires or fights breaking out at the edge of the frame. The tension of an individual within a group is at work here, but Bourouissa's deft merging of personal situations with contextual details brings the larger socio-economic context in as a player within a larger drama.

Media is Everything and Nothing

As I write this, I've just received notice via e-mail that students with clear demands of their administration are occupying the New School's graduate facility. There are riots in the streets of Athens. And, Mumbai is recovering from what has been crassly termed "their 9/11." Above my desk is a stack of the "fake *New York Times*," an artist-designed and -distributed copy of the original with a headline—"IRAQ WAR ENDS"—that stirred hope and possibility among those who picked it up on the morning of November 12, 2008 and believed for a moment that it was true. This week, I received invitations to join four Facebook groups: one for those against Prop. 8; another called "I Still Think Marriage is the Wrong Goal"; another for W.A.G.E., an activist group "formed to address the growing inequalities in the arts, and to resolve them"; and one inane plea for Facebook users who protest the current Facebook design—which had the highest amount of registered advocates. This small snapshot reveals not only my own position but also the range of forms contemporary politics take, from wide-scale protest to more strategic, temporary alliances around goals, all tied inextricably to media. This connection is significant to the way artists engage politics today, particularly in regard to appropriation.

Appropriation is nothing new or specific to this generation; it has a rich history that runs back to the use of stock footage in the first decade of the twentieth century and up through the Internet mash-ups of

today.² What is new is the way media's production and distribution has become radically democratized. Today, media is everywhere and nowhere, of the utmost importance and totally meaningless, in a constant state of flux and endless tweaking. Curator and critic Ed Halter wrote: "When artists use appropriation now, they do so in greater context of re-editing as a popular amateur pastime, e.g. *Something Awful*, *Hillary's Downfall* and its imitators, *LOLcats*, etc. In some cases artists' work may circulate within these contexts 'natively'—in a sense as full participants, rather than ironic interlopers."³ Media's ubiquity and this coexisting lack of ironic distance marks a distinct break in the history of appropriation; now, artists and activists are required to work tactically, navigating between participation, embrace, and also criticism of larger media systems, in order to locate stakes or ascribe meaning.

This tendency is a significant one in contemporary art and underlines important works not included in the show: the media activism of the Yes Men (co-creators of the "fake *New York Times*"), and the more formal interventions of artist Michael Bell-Smith, whose painterly digital landscapes, sewn from images sourced from the Web, ascribe meaning where there was none to found imagery. Within the show, there are several distinct approaches to media. Ida Ekblad's collage points to the copy-and-paste culture of the Web, in which divergent histories and culture are often offered up without context, and images pass through so many virtual hands that their original meaning gets lost. Works, such as the "On Otherness" series (2008), which pairs found images of half-clothed men and women with hand-painted words in the style of graffiti that read "primitive" or "multicultural," illuminate this kind of free-form appropriation in relation to style, and question its integrity. In *Untitled (M)* (2008), Ekblad plays with the iconic McDonalds logo, ripping it out of context, repeating and re-framing it to explore whether its meaning can be lost or

changed. In soft colors amidst an eight-panel grid, interspersed with abstract patterns, the “M” logo fades in and out of recognition. Patricia Esquivias exploits this same careless circulation of cultural artifacts, but with an emphasis on history. Her lectures and installations create irreverent timelines through appropriated documents, in which she takes the liberty to tell the story of a country through the life of a superstar or a personal incident, mixing fact with her own highly subjective opinion, taking the forgetfulness and bias in the media to a comic, and hyper-personal, extreme.

Artists’ work also reflects the breadth of cultural material available, often working to distill bigger stories through the hundreds of fragments they find. Tigran Khachatryan and James Richards curate found footage into psychologically dense narratives, each one pulling out shared cultural tendencies latent throughout the footage they find. In Khachatryan’s case, it is violence, recklessness, and undirected fighting among men evidenced in hundreds of intertwined clips edited together à la Sergei Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* to demonstrate the daily reverberations of war and conflict. Richards’s *Active Negative Programme* (2008) highlights the presentation and control of images. The work opens with an advertisement for a new kind of image technology that allegedly allows people to control what they see on a computer through eye movement alone, and then proceeds through a collage of video, largely pulled from instructional videos, that is at once pedagogical and, due to the material’s lack of context, completely unreadable. Both artists trace a narrative through a media world that seems to have exploded into short clips, and create cinematic environments to present and elevate works made out of detritus to a more auratic screening context.

Escaping the Innovation Trap

In an essay entitled “The Innovation Trap,” curator David Ross writes about how the glorification of innovation can create negative expectations on artists working with technology: “We privilege those artists for whom innovation is central, and generally consider someone who consistently innovates a genius. This kind of innovation worship, like other belief systems and similar to most formalist strategies, has its value, but also has its limits. Of course we should value significant innovation, but similarly we should value and honor those who seek to expand upon and deepen (or transform) our understanding of existing structures and systems.”⁴

Among this generation of artists, who have come of age in tandem with the Internet’s broader assimilation, experienced globalization, and now wade through the hype, possibility, and limits of phenomena like the Web 2.0, a term used to describe evolved forms of participation online, there is a healthy skepticism towards innovation. In line with artists such as late video pioneer Nam June Paik or computer artists JODI, whose goal was—and is—to transform new technologies into art. While the history of technology has often been, and continues to be propelled by artists, there is also a healthy skepticism of the cultural privileging of innovation and a conviction that some of the most revealing aspects of technology are found at its edges, in its glitches or history. This skepticism is most iconic as expressed in *OMG Obelisk* (2007) by AIDS-3D, which features a large plinth emblazoned in neon with the letters “OMG” and surrounded by burning stakes. A mock shrine, the work criticizes technological Utopianism by substituting religion for an empty sign of technological progress: OMG, the ubiquitous acronym for “Oh My God” hatched out of the abbreviated communication of chat and text messaging, which appears in the place of a god or saint.

This trend away from innovation is also at play more subtly in works that address the Web and outdated technologies. The practice of Los Angeles-based artist Guthrie Lonergan entails surfing the Web, collecting, sharing, and pointing to material he finds online, instead of the creation of original material. Of this practice, he writes: “Part of it is the feeling that there's so much stuff out there already that it seems pointless to make something new, from scratch—which is perhaps a bit of a cliché response, but not untrue. The ephemeral nature of the Internet inspires a kind of disrespect for objects—for whole, perfect, ‘created’ things... I'm pretty skeptical of the goals of Web 2.0, the almost religious obsession with freedom, all the utopian democratic nonsense.”⁵ His work is concerned with the tension between creativity and the platforms that dominate the Web, in places like YouTube, MySpace, and Twitter, to name a few. His *MySpace Intro Playlist* (2007) is a presentation of twelve video “intros,” or short personal documentaries the artist found and selected, uploaded to individual MySpace pages. The work highlights new forms of confession, privacy, and self-disclosure, as well as a way of working in which artists are organizers, not creators, of visual material.

With the rapid turnover of technology, artists increasingly work like historians or archaeologists to present powerful statements about technology's current and future status by turning to its recent past. Artist and game designer Mark Essen creates wildly imaginative, intentionally frustrating games out of the program Game Maker, which was developed in 1999 but, in its palette and graphics, seems eons away from contemporary games like *Grand Theft Auto* or *Second Life*. In *Flywrench* (2007), a player escalates through spare worlds in which abstract, geometric patterns animate at less-than-hi-def resolutions. Here, Essen makes use of inexpensive software available to him by pushing the game's limited palette and interactive capability outside of its intended

range—turning an obsolete commercial technology into art. Other artists comment on the passing of technological protocol. Featured prints by Tauba Auerbach’s capture signals from an analog television, a broadcast format that will cease to exist before this exhibition opens, and makes them unrecognizable by blowing them up large and reframing them. Two works by Cory Arcangel extend his interest in the life cycle of technologies, while taking formalism and media specificity to the extreme. One work, *Panasonic TH-42PWD8UK Plasma Screen Burn* (2007), an inactive screen which presents an image of the work's title, edition number, and the contact information for the artist’s gallery, points to this popular presentation device’s vulnerability to burning, i.e. the ingraining of a static image onto a screen if left on too long. The work is a showcase for current screen technology, though points to its own soon-to-be-realized obsolescence. On a different note, works by Wojciech Bąkowski, films that animate watercolor drawings, turn away from new and networked technologies to capture contemporary states of anxiety, dissolution, and melancholy in earlier forms.

The book *AMERICAMERICA* (2008) by Matt Keegan bridges generations in art, and illuminates issues across the aforementioned themes. Using the 1986 charity event Hands Across America, in which seven million people held hands for fifteen minutes to raise money for hunger, the book combines interviews conducted with New York artists working at that time with cultural material—reproductions of their art, advertisements for satellite space innovation, cartoon renderings of “the kontras,” mainstream coverage of the AIDS crisis, and the oppositional iconography of activist organization ACT UP—to represent the time through the artist’s vantage point and through material around him. In a related installation featured in the exhibition, he pairs objects evocative of this material with a series of color photographs entitled *23 portraits of 22 year-olds* (2008), actual portraits of New York-based

students, to emphasize the negotiation and muted legacy of this recent political moment.

Like other works in this exhibition, Keegan's project looks back to craft a more nuanced picture of the present. How do twenty-two-year-old artists born in 1986 inherit the muted legacy of the AIDS crisis, the stratification of Cold War politics, and the challenges laid down by earlier generations of artists? Keegan's multifaceted project implies that it is a nonlinear inheritance, in which certain histories get amplified and others fall away. The works in this exhibition look forward; in them are different appearances of the future in contemporary art, but they are also carrying the challenges and aspirations of all that came before them, well aware that while the urgency or significance of their work may last, steadily or in waves, its newness is both powerful and fleeting.

¹ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006).

² See Ed Halter, "Recycle It," *Moving Image Source*, July 10, 2008 <<http://www.movingimagesource.us/articles/recycle-it-20080710/>> (accessed December 22, 2008).

³ Quote excerpted from an e-mail exchange with the author.

⁴ David Ross, "The Innovation Trap," *Rhizome.org*, August 9, 2007 <<http://rhizome.org/events/tenyear/>> (Accessed December 22, 2008).

⁵ Thomas Beard, "Interview with Guthrie Lonergan," *Rhizome.org*, March 26, 2008 <<http://www.rhizome.org/editorial/5/>> (accessed December 22, 2008).