

# We Are Too Many

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In his classical study on generations, sociologist Karl Mannheim constructs a mental experiment that has almost a dark, science-fiction tone to it:<sup>1</sup> What would our societies look like if one generation would live forever? What would we remember? How would we forget? How would we expand our knowledge? And who would fight our wars or pay for our peaceful retirement?

In some countries, Mannheim's prophecy might have already come true: Stuck at negative growth, Italy, for example, seems completely unable to even imagine a future. Elsewhere though, this new century has marked the emergence of a new social actor, the coming of age of a new generation onto which sociologists, marketing experts, prophets, and priests seem to project high aspirations. Born roughly around 1980, this generation has already been scrutinized, categorized and labeled: Generation Y, iGeneration, the Millennials, and Generation Me are just a few of the terms that attempt to describe these new demographic ranks. In the US this is the largest age group since the days of the baby boomers, and yet this demographic transformation is not just an American phenomenon. China and India—two of the new global superpowers—are also caught up in an explosion of curiosity regarding the generation that is shaping this new century. In these countries this generation's influence is overwhelming: Just consider the fact that over half the Indian population is under twenty-five years of age and you will see that this is a veritable sea change, not just a matter of fashion.<sup>2</sup>

But then again, much of the flexing of analytical muscle that seems to be stimulated by this generation is driven precisely by economic interests and marketing strategies. More than any other generation before them, the Millennials seem to have piqued the interest of sociologists and experts above all because they have started spending sooner than their elder siblings. After all, today's Millennials are the tweens of a few years ago, an immense

reservoir of consumers who have already transformed the entertainment industry over the last two decades.

Browsing through the articles, essays, and books that try to explain this generation, an absolutely new anxiousness of interpretation comes to the surface: It is not the portrayal of a generational conflict, as in the literature of the '60s, nor is it about coming to terms with the astonishment at the outlandish behavior of the so-called Generation X. Instead, it looks like the pundits are trying to construct an equation, a secret formula that might explain the tastes, preferences, and habits of the Millennials, in the hope of selling them something. A special literary genre has taken form to sort out this generation, a blend of tabloid sociology, self-help manuals, and advertising. A sort of sociological soothsaying that seems to be more interested in this generation's wallets than its anthropological metamorphoses and related cultural transformations.

After all, many European nations today are elderly societies and compensate for their doddering majority by indulging in an almost morbid fascination with youth—an appeal that is also ironically addressed by the title of this exhibition. The focus on the Millennials might also be the result of this senescence of the Occident, which tries to revive itself through an act of vampirism.

This generation, in the end, seems to be more of a problem for its parents and siblings than a real vexation for its own members. But maybe that's the paradox of any generational turnover: Parents are plagued by the desire to understand their offspring, while the latter just try to escape, proudly declaring themselves extraneous, different. If we read between the lines of the pages and pages of prose on every tremor or hiccup of the Millennials, the curiosity seems to be mixed with fear. But maybe that same combination is always there, in the passage from one generation to the next.

The idea of looking at art in terms of generations is certainly nothing new: It's been with us since the days of Vasari, with his model of biological development, from childhood to maturity, and the intuition that those who belong to the same period share a tradition that must be endlessly enriched and improved upon. The very idea of "manner" is an expression of generational synchronicity: The manner is the sharing not only of a style, but also of a certain knowledge that is destined to be refined with the passing of time and the arrival of new generations, wiser than their predecessors.

In the twentieth century the Oedipal complex, with its generational clash, becomes the model of reference for art history. The artist is the eternal adolescent who has to kill the father. The history of art is transformed into a history of revolutions. The avant-garde is the fountain of eternal youth.

In more recent times things have only apparently become more complicated. In the narration of the postmodern, with its anti-Oedipal philosophy and movements toward deterritorialization, space takes the place of time: Where you come from, the community to which you belong, counts more than any generational distinction, as artists shape their identity on the figure of the foreigner rather than on the model of the young. But actually statelessness and youth are not so different: Both speak a foreign tongue, a jargon comprehensible only to their peers.

Furthermore, as Mannheim reminds us, one belongs to a generation whether one might like it or not. Mannheim compares generations to classes: Belonging to a class doesn't imply having a class consciousness, but both our class and our generational location will always impart a series of limits, a set of values, and an array of potential resources. Which neither means that generations are enclosed systems nor that anybody born in a certain time will always behave in the same way. One has to image the relationship between generations

and individuals as something similar to the relationship of language as an abstract set of rules on one hand, and language as speech, as its actual use on the other. Speaking the same language means participating in a community that shares the same rules and values, but it also means having the absolute freedom of transforming and innovating, the freedom of creating and finding one's own personal voice, or of learning a foreign tongue. Paraphrasing linguist Roman Jakobson, one could say that generations function like languages do: They distinguish themselves not so much on the basis of what they can do, but more on the basis of what they can not avoid doing.<sup>3</sup>

Quite significantly, a new obsession with language seems to emerge precisely from the works of many artists born in and around the '80s. There is a linguistic explosion on all sides, an unstoppable flow of words. A hypertrophic growth of language seems to flourish from the works of very different artists like Keren Cytter, Patricia Esquivias, Luke Fowler, Ryan Trecartin, and Tris Vonna-Michell. Each in their own way, these artists construct works and narratives that are perpetual motion machines, in which narrators and characters hold forth in bizarrely elaborate descriptions, reckless monologues, intricate dialogues. Though highly various in form and content, all these works—and many others produced today—seem to have been rushed into velocity: They chase vitality at all costs. It is something akin to what the literary critic James Wood has called “hysterical realism”: a form of narration peculiar to our time, based on an excess of storytelling and on a hyperconnection between characters, stories and substories.<sup>4</sup>

These works reflect the flow of unconsciousness of chat rooms and blogs, the avalanche of words that shakes our millennium based on idle talk. Stillness is abolished, silence shameful, and information has become a character in itself.

Naturally, important differences do exist among these artists. Trecartin draws liberally on digital culture and, in a certain sense, appears to be the artist who most clearly embodies the stereotype of a new, constantly connected generation. Fowler, on the other hand, focuses more on psychiatry and psychoanalysis than Web culture—for him, language is a riddle that offers access to the unconscious. Cytter seems to be fascinated by the utterly European tradition of chamber theater, while Vonna-Michel mixes the legacy of Fluxus with film noir atmospheres. Esquivias rewrites history in a minor key. With their spewing flow of verbiage these artists wind up creating narratives that have something of the melodrama: They are visceral but at the same time carefully staged, maniacally affected. They are drama queens.

Strangely enough, all these artists use the first-person singular. The desire to say “I” again seems to arrive from multiple sides of this generation. But of course the “I” used by these artists and their contemporaries is a completely transformed first person—it is already a collective “I.” Without indulging too deeply in technological metaphors, we might say that for this generation of artists “I” is better written in the lower case, as it is appears in the prefix of the iPhone and the iPod. It’s an individual voice, but one that is thought of as immediately sharable, interchangeable, highly compatible and, as such, hopelessly compromised, alienated, massified. It is an “I” that performs for the entertainment of others.

In his acute analysis of life in post-Fordist society, Italian philosopher Paolo Virno has described today’s prevalent mode of being as that of a multitude: The multitude is born out of the complete erasure of any distinction between the collective and the individual. Speaking in the first person today is a form of fiction, of performance, not only because it is impossible to say where collective experience ends and private experience begins, but also because

talk is the ultimate commodity in a society that is based on the production of communication by means of communication.<sup>5</sup>

This fluid overlap between the individual and collective dimensions also seems to be reflected in a certain lack of stability in the status of the object. For many young artists today, an artwork should not be a finite, concluded object. Or better, it may be a precise physical object, with relatively clear borders—after all, many young artists seem to be completely comfortable with paintings and sculptures—but it is also an object that can play a variety of roles, taking on the guise of a set, a theatrical prop, the incipit of a story, the platform for a performance.

The object and the artwork are not the residual result of an action. Instead, it is the object that triggers an action—the action unfolds from the object, not vice versa. As a formula, we might say that today's artists seem to be interested in inverting the slogan of process art: not attitudes that become forms, but forms that become attitudes.

This exhibition contains many examples of this strategy, and many other examples can be found in the output of other artists at work today. The recent art world crush for anything that has to do with dance and performance is probably a clear symptom of this paradigm shift.<sup>6</sup>

And it is significant that many artists who operate in this way do not seem to worry at all about the distinction between individual work and collective practice. Among the artists in the show, for example, AIDS-3D, Kerstin Brätsch, Mariechen Danz, Faye Driscoll, Liz Glynn, and Emily Roydson work both individually and as part or catalysts of groups, which may be structured as more or less fictitious enterprises—as is the case of Kerstin Brätsch and her Das Institut—or as informal social networks.

Besides making works and installations that are relatively traditional, these artists—to whom we could add Dineo Seshee Bopape and Chu Yun—also operate as directors of performances and situations that unfold inside their works or make use of their works as sets or props. The result is an intriguing form of lived-in art, where the performance is not the climax of the work, but a moment that can be stretched out in time, postponed, enacted before the opening of the exhibition, or repeated at more or less random intervals throughout. This stretching and fragmenting of the drama of performance may be one of the most typical aspects of this generation of artists, who seem to be fascinated by the search for new forms of distribution and packaging.

Something similar also happens in the works of Loris Gréaud, who has choreographed entire exhibitions as if they were opera libretti. To Gréaud an exhibition is not just an immersive experience that resembles a vaguely futuristic total work of art, but also something akin to a musical score, a composition that can be played with different instruments in different settings, radically changing each time, but without losing its intensity.

Ryan Gander's work doesn't rely on a completed form with a strong center either. This fluidity is also evident in the freedom with which Gander passes from the role of the artist to that of the curator and organizer of spaces and events. In his artworks Gander has often used references to detective novels and crime fiction: He proceeds by leaving clues and traces the viewer must follow and reconstruct in meaningful unity. In *This Consequence* (2005), Gander plays with these elements in an even more explicit way, having his work—a track suit with carefully embroidered blood stains—worn by a museum guard, who is thus both a protagonist and an extra in the show's narrative.

This focus on what happens at the edge of the action is another recurring factor in the work of many artists of this generation. A sizeable number seems to be interested in proceeding by means of lateral shifts, developing their work like a fugue, an infinite variation on a theme that finally contradicts the very notion of a center. This attitude is particularly evident in the work of certain painters, like Tauba Auerbach, Kerstin Brätsch, and Josh Smith, for example. Each one, in a very personal way, has absorbed the vocabulary of abstract painting, recovering precisely those traditions that have been forgotten and repressed because they were considered too commercial, compromised, cheap. Op Art, a certain abstract lyricism completely demoted to the level of kitsch, a kind of materic painting that contains grafted memories of feminist art and Art Brut, are some of the legacies these artists incorporate in their production. New energy is injected into these references, in a form of recycling of a minor past that doesn't exactly function as a tribute. By persisting with repetition and by working in series, by painting with obstinate precision, as in the case of Auerbach, or with a carelessness bordering on the mindless, as in the case of Smith, these artists take painting to a new level of inflation, as though they were to compete with the industry of digital imagery.

A profound metamorphosis has happened in the DNA of images. When over three billion photos crowd the pages of Flickr and hundreds of millions of users click on the same video on YouTube, it becomes clear that art has lost any central role with respect to the image-making machine. Redefining the role of the artist in relation to this radical transformation of the image will not be a job only for this generation: It will be one of the most important challenges for the new century.

**38** Some younger artists try to come to grips with this change through a mixture of irony and lightness. Cory Arcangel, Mark Essen, Guthrie

Loneragan, and in some ways also Cao Fei and Shilpa Gupta, rather than discussing the status of the image seem to be interested in amplifying the symptoms of this cultural mutation. In Cao Fei's portraits or in Lonergan's do-it-yourself videos, for example, a humanity emerges that has almost been reduced to a caricature of itself: Confused between reality and representation, these characters surface from screens and dreams in Technicolor, with the immateriality of a poltergeist. In his video essays, on the other hand, James Richards seems to explore the relationship that links our gaze, the technology of the image, and the representation of death. His characters too have something ectoplasmic about them, as if our gaze had sucked the life out of them. Rather ghostly are also the portraits of Elad Lassry. His photos, recycled icons, and appropriated materials speak of a hyper-artificial universe in which images exist in a vacuum, without oxygen and without any relationship to life—the sex appeal of the inorganic.

Elsewhere, artists are still pursuing the possibility of an authentic, intimate relationship with their subjects. After all, digital technology has also paved the way for a candid immediacy that seems to inspire a number of young artists. This is almost the opposite of hysterical realism, but a complementary opposite: a kind of micro-emotional realism. Artists like Ziad Antar, Ciprian Muresan, Ahmet Ögüt, and Alexander Ugay use video and photography to construct situations and stories that narrate little gestures and everyday epiphanies. We can also see a renewed interest in photography in the work of other young talents. In very different ways, Mohamed Bourouissa and LaToya Ruby Frazier return to the tradition of reportage, but in a version that is carefully composed, with clear references to cinema and theater.

The works of these artists are also concerned with the representation of the family, which is another of the central subtexts of this exhibition.

This insistence on family relationships is a generational factor, perhaps, or maybe it is simply a theme that has greater impact on younger artists. Certainly the idea of family portrayed by today's artists is quite varied, ranging from the alternative tribe in the videos of Ryan Trecartin to the barbarically patriarchal society imagined by Tala Madani in her paintings. In her smaller canvases, painted with cursive gestures, abuses of power and acts of violence are perpetrated by paternal, masculine figures of questionable moral fortitude.

In the work of Kateřina Šedá, on the other hand, parents and grandparents are the keepers of a knowledge that must be preserved at all costs. This is just the opposite of the Oedipus complex: Instead, we see the artist willingly self-sacrifice to the anxiety of influence and try to bridge the gap that separates generations. Her total abnegation is aimed at conserving the memories of her predecessors before they are lost forever. In *It Doesn't Matter*, Šedá's most ambitious work, composed of 600 drawings made by her grandmother as an exercise to react against a form of depression and apathy, the artist creates a family saga of touching simplicity, a sort of archaeology of the soul.

Every new generation imagines the future while also rewriting its own past. In her films and collages Haris Epaminonda restages fragments of memory and flashbacks from a past she is too young to have experienced directly. It is an imaginary rewriting of history that is also tinged with nostalgia, a sentimental yearning all the more tragic because it has never really possessed what it misses.

This recovery of a simultaneously unknown and longed-for past also appears in the videos of Anna Molska, who tries to rediscover the aesthetics of early twentieth century Soviet modernism, and turns it in a contemporary version that is tinted with neo-Futurist overtones, as in the video *Tangram*.

**40** Another Polish artist, Jakub Julian Ziolkowski, revisits both folkloric

atmospheres and that peculiar combination of abstraction and fairy tale symbolism that defined early twentieth-century art, particularly in Eastern Europe. Stephen G. Rhodes storms the backyard of American history, unearthing a demented past permeated by Civil War cruelties and dark moods that also recall the most psychotic works of Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy. Kitty Kraus, instead, confronts the grammar of Minimalism and reveals both its inherent violence and its latent fragility.

In his videos Cyprien Gaillard portrays buildings of the '60s as if they were the submerged ruins of ancient civilizations. In *Desniansky Raion*—his best-known piece—Gaillard juxtaposes these sublime landscapes with scenes of violence among hooligans. Seen in this context, they are transformed into strange rituals of an extinct people.

Ruth Ewan conducts an equally systematic research on memory, with the persevering care of an archivist who has collected hundreds of songs of protest and dissent for many years. This is a form of political activism based on a spontaneous, destructured aggregation, a form of choral participation—once again, a multitude.

Glimpses of the possibility to define a political dimension for this generation are also found in the very disparate works of Carolina Caycedo, Liu Chuang, and Matt Keegan. Caycedo stages a carnivalesque form of engagement in which political slogans are camouflaged behind festive situations, while Keegan tries to reconstruct the events that have marked his generation in an attempt to shape a sense of commonality. With his compositions of objects acquired by immigrants, students, and passersby, Liu Chuang creates portraits in absentia—portraits without subjects—that possess an almost sacred dimension, composed as they are only of relics. His installations of private belongings, clothes, and objects are also generational cutaways that narrate habits, behaviors,

dreams, and fears of his age group. Like the sociologists, scholars, and marketing experts who strive to formulate theories and forecasts of the desires of the Millennials, Liu Chuang reminds us that we are what we buy. But with their touching simplicity, their almost funereal austerity, the portraits of Liu Chuang capture a subtle tension no schematic sociological theory will ever be able to convey in all its complexity: These portraits are reminders of the paradox that each of us inhabits, of being bound to the particularity of an individual while also taking part in a universal condition.

1 Karl Mannheim, "The Problem of Generations" (1928), *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 1952 and 1957). See p. 159.

2 For the statistics and the demographic data in this paragraph see the CIA, *The World Factbook* <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html/>> (accessed December 19, 2008).

3 Roman Jakobson, "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation," in *On Translation*, ed. Roman A. Brower (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959, 232–39).

4 James Wood, "Hysterical Realism," in *The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and The Novel* (New York: Picador, 2005, 178–94). Wood coined the expression "hysterical realism" in 2000 as a pejorative description of the literary works of Salman Rushdie,

Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, David Foster Wallace, and Zadie Smith. Though its final assessment is negative, Wood's essay remains one of the most accurate descriptions of the new American novel at the turn of the millennium.

5 Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004). Also see Daniel Birnbaum, *Under Pressure. Pictures, Subjects, and the New Spirit of Capitalism*, ed. Isabelle Graw (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2008).

6 Many exhibitions and texts could serve as evidence of the recent explosion of interest in the relationship between contemporary art, dance and performance. See for example: Catherine Wood and Jessica Morgan, *The World as a Stage* (London: Tate Publishing, 2007) and Melanie Gilligan, "The Beggar's Pantomime," *Artforum* (Summer 2007, 426–33).