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UNDER THE SKIN OF NEWNESS

Domenick Ammirati on the New Museum's 2021 Triennial, Greater New York 2021 at MoMA PS1, and Rosemary Mayer at Swiss Institute

Still from Thao Nguyen Phan's *Becoming Alluvium,* 2019, 4K video, color, sound, 16 minutes 40 seconds.

1

IN A WORLD WHERE CONTINGENCY has never loomed larger, why not begin with a book found lying on the street? At the beginning of autumn, which seemed like nothing but an extension of a hot, dread-filled summer, I came across a copy of Theodor Adorno's *Minima Moralia* on the sidewalk. When I began flipping through it that evening, I found something completely different from what I had expected. Far from page after numbing page elaborating theoretical constructs, *Minima Moralia* is a collection of hot takes: short, numbered prose pieces, rarely more than a few pages, that are sharp, grouchy, riddling, indulgent, seemingly self-reversing, veering from dire world-historical pronouncement to Larry David–esque one-liner, and devoid of any context that would make the various complaints comprehensible to anyone not already in the know. All in all, it was a mode thoroughly familiar from Twitter.

Adorno makes plenty of great points in the book, of course. His classics: The Enlightenment's regime of reason contained the seeds of its own destruction; the logic of commodification poisons all social relationships; we're all fucked. The book bristles with bons mots, from the refined to the ridiculous. On the one hand, we have the kind of critique that has made the "Franklin School" (to quote right-wing propagandist Mark Levin's malapropism for the Frankfurt School) a target of the GOP thought police: "The practical orders of life, while purporting to benefit man, serve in a profit economy to stunt human qualities." On the other, we have pseudo-Wildean aphorisms: "The talk about early and late maturers, seldom free of the death-wish for the former, is specious." In between, we have the unintentionally comedic fruit of *Kulturkritik*: According to section 21, titled "Articles may not be exchanged," the custom of gift giving has declined, and per section 75 ("Chilly hospitality"), hotels these days just aren't what they used to be.

Still from Thao Nguyen Phan's *Becoming Alluvium,* 2019, 4K video, color, sound, 16 minutes 40 seconds.

Adorno might be forgiven for having been a little sick of hotels. "The major part of this book was written during the war," he explains in the dedication—that war being World War II. Hitler assumed power in 1933; Adorno, a German Jew, left in 1934 for England and eventually the United States. He wrote *Minima Moralia* largely from 1944 to 1948 while residing in Southern California, where many of his compatriots (e.g., Bertolt Brecht, Thomas Mann) had gathered. He was stressed out, to put it mildly, trying to make sense of an insensible moment. In *Minima Moralia*, this situation resolves into anguish and a seemingly terminal dyspepsia, a bending of perspective of which Adorno himself is not unaware. In a section titled "Baby with the bath-water," he points out the flaw in lensing the world through the one concept I associate with him above all else, that culture is ideology. "Comforting and lulling," he writes, culture "serves to keep alive the bad economic determination of existence. . . . But to act radically in accordance with this principle would be to extirpate, with the false, all that was true also."

For Adorno, rationalism led inevitably to the irrational. More than knowing it, we all feel this now. We share his horror. Under the circumstances, "high culture" can appear a trifling business. It's purely anecdotal—who would poll such a thing?—but people seem not

terribly excited by much they come across in galleries these days. It appears that, per the logic of commodities, art consumers, like those in other realms, want relief and distraction in the form of something new.

View of the 2021 Triennial: "Soft Water Hard Stone," 2021–22, New Museum, New York. From left: Ann Greene Kelly, *Untitled (Polka Dot Sofa)*, 2021; Ann Greene Kelly, *Untitled (Column)*, 2021; Alex Ayed, untitled, 2021; Blair Saxon-Hill, *Emergency Contact*, 2021; Kahlil Robert Irving, *Routes&Roots[(SaintLouis<<NewYork(returnflight)]MEMORY MASSEST*, 2021. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

2

A harsh yet lovely line from *Becoming Alluvium*, a 2019 video by Thao Nguyen Phan in the New Museum Triennial, goes as follows: "It is not so much by the things that each day are manufactured, sold, bought but rather by the things that each day are thrown out to make room for the new. So you begin to wonder if the city's true passion is really the enjoyment of new and different things, and not, instead, the joy of expelling, discarding." The text is adapted from Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1972); Phan's video ranges broadly around the Mekong River, collapsing present, past, and dream time, from Khmer myths to the

deadly 2018 buckling of a Laotian dam. The Calvino line leads into depictions of trash-strewn shores.

On the face of it, the title of the exhibition, "Soft Water Hard Stone," would seem to have an optimistic slant: small gestures adding up to something great, persistence being rewarded, the invincible being defeated by a weaker force. You know, like in *Star Wars*. But the exhibition itself is hardly uplifting. Its dominant formal trope is the ruin. The first thing one encounters on exiting the elevator is a set of ten works by Kahlil Robert Irving, ceramic objects that look a bit like core samples from archaeological sites, rough-hewn agglomerations of items such as coffee mugs, pieces of girder or siding, takeout containers. Set on plinths, they call to mind the desuetude of excavated classical sculpture; they bear signifiers of the present or the recent past, like photographic decals of such subjects as Sarah Huckabee Sanders. Nearby, curators Margot Norton and Jamillah James (who worked with curatorial fellows Jeanette Bisschops and Bernardo Mosqueira) have placed *Untitled (Column)*, 2021, a sculpture by Ann Greene Kelly. While it's no Temple of Olympian Zeus and is more a duct than a column, it alludes to classical antecedents despite its stained white metal mesh, its lumpy gray and randomly punctured rectilinear surfaces. Half the bottom has been cut open to reveal female legs and feet. Behind all these works stands a wall of flattish mask- and figurelike forms by Blair Saxon-Hill assembled from detritus—a plastic lemon juicer as an eye, a squeegee as a cheekbone, and so on. Thus the show announces a desire to transport us somewhere, possibly into a future anterior, possibly sideways, to a place a little dreamy, a little beaten down.

View of the 2021 Triennial: "Soft Water Hard Stone," 2021–22, New Museum, New York. Foreground: Nadia Belerique, HOLDINGS, 2020–. Background: Cynthia Daignault, As I Lay Dying, 2021. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

At times, "Soft Water Hard Stone" evokes the makeshift architecture that served as an armature for the art in Molly Nesbit, Hans Ulrich Obrist, and Rirkrit Tiravanija's "Utopia Station" at the 2003 Venice Biennale. Norton and James cleverly use a couple of works to form ad hoc walls that help them deal with the New Museum's notoriously awkward gallery spaces—it's almost a form of institutional critique. In one large gallery, Nadia Belerique's *HOLDINGS*, 2020–, comprises dozens of white plastic shipping containers converted into sculptural vessels stacked on their sides. In another, a work by Laurie Kang features large sheets of sticky brown photo film over metal framing to split the space in two. The construction, *Great Shuttle*, 2020–21, looks neither in progress nor abandoned but stalled.

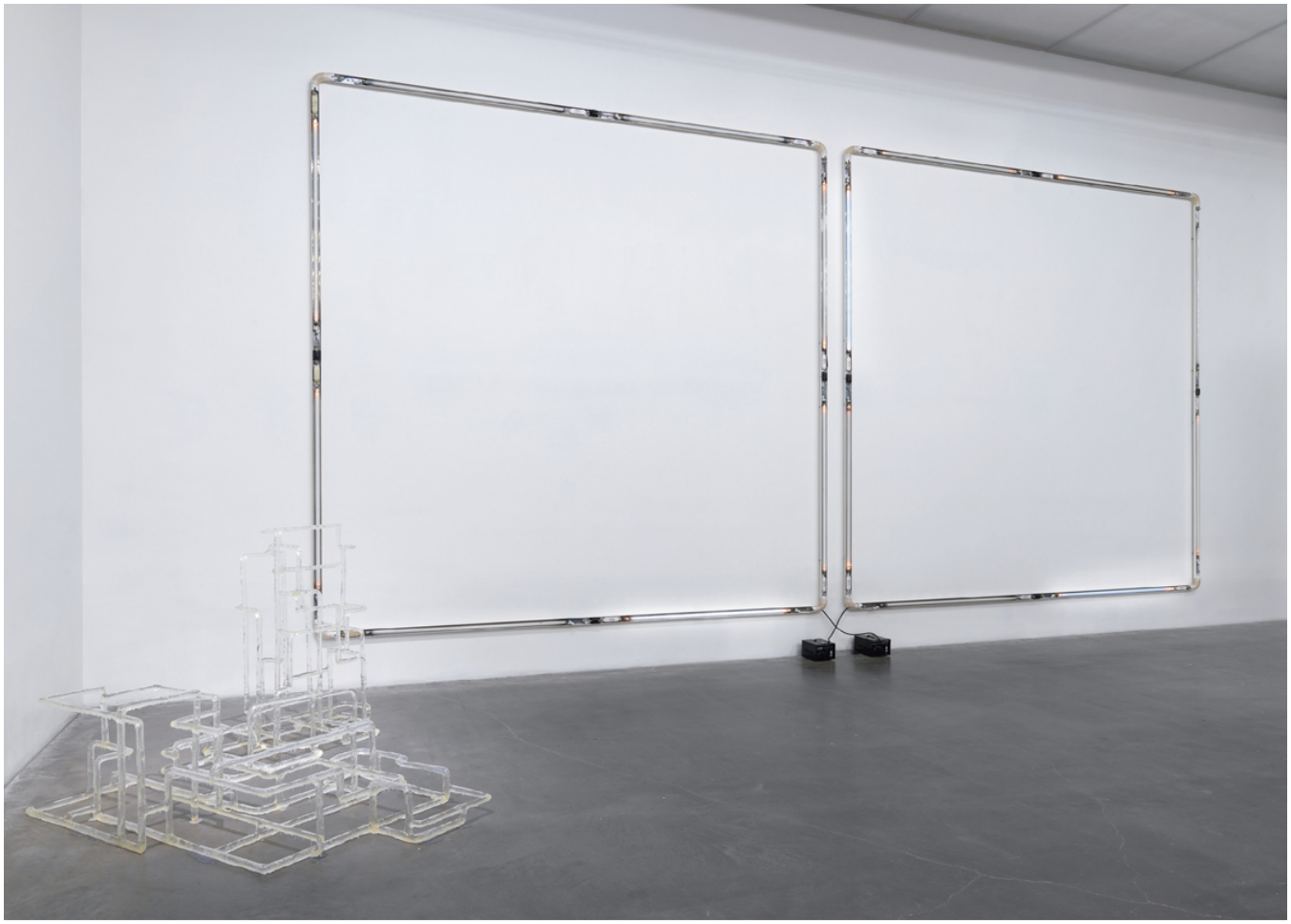
The Triennial announces a desire to transport us somewhere, possibly into a future anterior, possibly sideways, to a place a little dreamy, a little beaten down.

Tucked around the corner from *Great Shuttle* is one of the strongest pairings in the exhibition. A tableau by Harry Gould Harvey IV centers on two charred-looking doors taken from an abandoned church, accompanied by an altarlike two-part display, one half of it thick with melted red candle wax. The metaphysical overtones might have made Adorno nervous (the longest section of *MM* is titled "Theses against occultism"), but Harvey implies we shouldn't take the mysticism too seriously. Two flanking, diagrammatic, easel-size drawings burlesque the high-modernist notion of art museum as secular church: Each depicts a space with a cathedral on top and, below, a sparse white cube housing spindly assemblages and kitsch putti museumgoers. The rendering is funny, and there's a satirical bite thanks to Harvey's wry allusions to class struggle. One of the drawings is titled *An Appeal to the Young After Kropotkin Maquette for a Thought Form*, 2021. (The other, with a reference to the Book of Revelation, is called *St. Michael of the Apocalypse Slaying the Instinctual Serpent*.) The drawings' frames are made of wood scavenged from abandoned mansions in Newport, Rhode Island, the fabled resort of an earlier era's robber barons, and the altars feature scrap metal from Whole Foods. The candle wax was melted by one of the job-site heaters that form the altars' supports. The materialism doesn't preclude an occult significance, of course. Perhaps some leftist occultism is necessary to combat meme magick.

Harry Gould Harvey IV, *An Appeal to the Young After Kropotkin Maquette for a Thought Form*, 2021, colored pencil, charcoal, Xerox, and Time Life mailer on matte board, MDF, walnut from Newport mansions, 35 × 34"

The wall adjacent to Harvey's work is occupied solely by Iris Touliatou's *Untitled (Still Not Over You)*, 2021. Two large squares, roughly ten feet a side, are marked off by fluorescent tubes taken from disused offices and storefronts in the artist's native Athens. There's nothing there but the blank, dim field of the wall and the dingy, scorched bulbs in their sockets, glowing a miserable shade of peach at their butt ends. Athens has never really recovered from the economic crisis of 2007–2008, and the recovery, such as it is, has been dominated by the same toxic real-estate dealings and skyrocketing rents that afflict New York and every other major metropolis (and every minor one too, really). At the end of *Minima Moralia*—shades of his friend Walter Benjamin—Adorno adopts a quasi-religious tone: "Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light." Rather than with a messianic light, Touliatou's work flickers barely and

erratically with the ghosts of jobs. The unexpectedly intimate title seems addressed not to a person but to a city.



View of the 2021 Triennial: "Soft Water Hard Stone," 2021–22, New Museum, New York. From left: Jes Fan, Networks (for Rupture), 2021; Jes Fan, Networks (for Expansion), 2021; Iris Touliatou, Untitled (Still Not Over You), 2021. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

3

In section 150 of *Minima Moralia*, near the book's conclusion, Adorno discusses the idea of the new; the term he fixes on is *sensation*. He moves from the cult of novelty and the commodity through addiction, sadism, and masochism, then heads into a discussion of a subject never far from his mind in the book—fascism. Adorno sees it as the ultimate expression of capitalism's mentality of absolute competition. Elsewhere in *MM*, he writes, "The fixed, inspecting, hypnotic and hypnotized stare that is common to all the leaders of horror has its model in the appraising look of the manager asking an interview candidate

to sit down, and illuminating his face in such a way as to divide it pitilessly into bright, utilizable parts. . . . The last stage is the medical examination to decide between capacity for work and liquidation." He likens the new, the sensational, to a drug blotting out the horror of alienation and social conditions: "Newness in collective form . . . is in fact a stimulating and paralyzing narcotic extract hailed out of external life." And, crucial to the idea of novelty, any drug will do: "Compared to its stimulus-value, the content of the shock becomes really irrelevant." In this environment, politics of a particularly virulent sort becomes a kind of stimulant: "Fascism was the absolute sensation: in a statement at the time of the first pogroms, Goebbels boasted that at least the National Socialists were not boring."

Novelty, of course, is about the unchanging logic of the commodity. Decrying "the cult of the new," Adorno writes, "The never-changing quality of machine-produced goods, the lattice of socialization that enmeshes and assimilates equally objects and the view of them, converts everything encountered into what always was." No wonder you're bored; under the skin of newness lies the same old hardware.

Yuji Agematsu, *zip: 01.01.20 … 12.31.20*, 2020, mixed media in cigarette-pack cellophane wrappers on acrylic and wood shelves, latex paint. Installation view, MoMA PS1, New York, 2021. Photo: Steven Paneccasio.

4

Greater New York has always seemed to labor under the imperative of novelty more than its cohorts the Triennial or the Whitney Biennial. Unlike those shows, it seems to be construed as a venue that gives artists their first big breaks—not a drip-drip-drip on stone but a hammer to the wall separating them from commercial success. *Vanity Fair* dispatched its art reporter to MOMA PS1 and devoted an entire column to the exhibition, but only for the purposes of discussing its market-goosing properties. When the Triennial's turn came for the Condé Nast treatment, it rated only a couple of paragraphs of scene reportage tacked on at the end of a long column mostly about a few artists smoking a joint at the opening reception.

The current edition of Greater New York has old things on its mind; it is more or less a love letter to the city whose name it bears, to New York's status as a physical place that inflects the art made there and as the incubator of a number of avant-gardes. There's an inherent tension here with the emphasis on the "emerging" that is typical for Greater New York and other periodic showcases. As Touliatou's work at the New Museum suggests, to love a city (at least in an era whose metropolises are beginning to make the urban dystopias of twentieth-century sci-fi look positively charming) is to love the past. To its credit, Greater New York 2021 (curated by a team led by Ruba Katrib, with Serubiri Moses, in collaboration with Kate Fowle and Inés Katzenstein) thematizes and makes good use of this tension. The exhibition's overarching concern is the importance of the past and its existence in the present and, in a subtextual way, the preciousness of what has been. Do you like New York—whatever that ambiguously means that isn't simply about money—or do you like throwing things away, like the residents of the unnamed city in Phan's *Becoming Alluvium*?

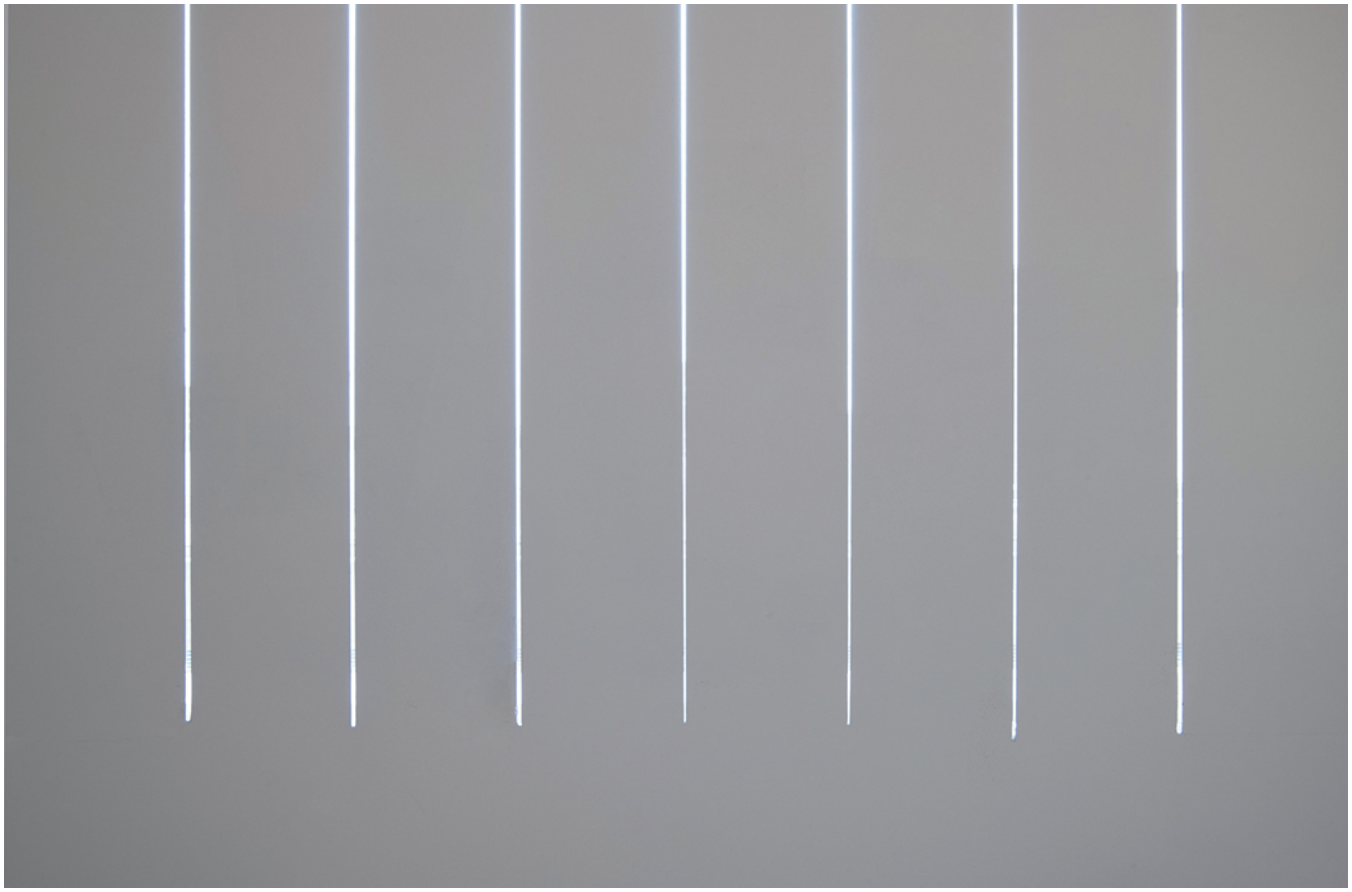
View of Greater New York, 2021–22, MoMA PS1, New York. From left: Steffani Jemison, *Tumbler*, 2021; Steffani Jemison, *Tumbler*, 2021; Steffani Jemison, *Tumbler*, 2021. Photo: Martin Seck.

The show's tone is set in the lobby with a display of bootleg and nonbrand T-shirts collected by the duo Shanzhai Lyric, who in January 2020 set up the Canal Street Research Association in a storefont that served as both their office-studio and a venue for small exhibitions, screenings, and other activities. The text on these shirts is frequently garbled, often inexplicable, and occasionally quasi-poetic; idiot world hangs high on the metal support structure; a black tee sporting a sequined Garfield bears an ode that begins, AND THE / SCREEN / THAT CIRCLE / YOU LIKE / NUTERFLIES. With this tableau, Shanzhai Lyric acknowledge New York's role as a node of globalization even as they bring the city into the museum. Upstairs, Steffani Jemison's droll, pointed video shows a mime wandering the streets and mirroring various individuals' gestures—a man exercising in a park, for instance. A couple of rooms later, Jemison appears again with a trio of rock tumblers turning street detritus into smooth little objects. Laid out on a small riser, they convey a sense of the hustle, the spinning of garbage into gold. That work foreshadows the presence one floor up of the show's pièce de résistance, a wall-long display of Yuji Agematsu's miniature sculptures made of bits of trash nested inside the cellophane casings that surround packs of cigarettes. A crumpled straw's wrapper, an autumnal leaf, thread, wire mesh: Sometimes the works look like abstracted landscapes, sometimes like figures; all reflect an extraordinary delicacy and a seemingly inexhaustible ability to create while staring at the pavement.

Curtis Cuffie, *Every House Deserves a Happy Home, Every Home Deserves a Happy Family* (detail), 1996, dollhouse, fabrics, basketry, metal frame, 60 × 23 × 23".

One of the numerous older and underrecognized artists in the show performs a similar indexing of city life on a slightly larger scale. Curtis Cuffie, who made streetside assemblages (and for a long time lived on the street), died in 2002 at age forty-seven. Cuffie is represented by six sculptures, not quite figurative, made out of cloth scraps (blankets, garments) and cast-off items like a toy house, a fake rose, and a painting of what might be Venice. The curators here adopt a tactic that becomes familiar as one travels through the exhibition: mounting a selection of documentary photos. They do likewise with Luis Frangella, who created bold *en plein air* paintings on the West Side Piers in their heyday while palling around with Peter Hujar and David Wojnarowicz. Bodies of street photography from the ’60s, ’70s, and ’80s elsewhere punctuate the show. Bettina Grossman, Hiram Maristany, Marilyn Nance, Robin Graubard: Each of these artists contributes a

display of images that insist on a sense of what things used to be like, implicitly demanding comparison with the present.



Diane Severin Nguyen, *Artist intervention in wall*, 2021, cuts in gallery wall. Installation view, MoMA PS1, New York. Photo: Martin Seck.

The counterpoint to all this gritty history is a retreat into fantastic individual worlds. (Adorno might even call it a dialectic.) We see interior landscapes from Julio Galán, E'Wao Kagoshima, Ahmed Morsi, Nicolas Moufarrege, and others. In hands down the weirdest work in the show, Bill Hayden presents a dark swampscape featuring an impaired-looking marijuana leaf with a face, enclosed by a brassy department-store frame and titled *WEED*, 2021. It would be some kind of dumb meme art, a joke, except for the fineness of its inking and the eerily relatable quality of this vegetable, all alone in the dark, consuming itself, coping as best it can. Stationed nearby is another of the show's notable oddballs, Paulina Peavy, a kind of second-generation Agnes Pelton who moved from California to New York City to paint her dreamscapes. Peavy viewed her work as a channeling of her

communication with an extraterrestrial named Lacamo, hardly something that would seem to require residency in the tristate area. Her desire to be in New York—or need, given that she seems to have been encouraged to move by her commercial reception here—was counterpoised by her impulse to escape.

Luis Frangella, *Untitled (Torso y lira)* (Torso and Lyre), 1985, acrylic on vinyl canvas, 110 1/4 × 56 1/4". © The Estate of Luis Frangella and Galería Cosmocosa.

With the show so focused on the city, one work that links the museum and its urban context takes on particular power. Diane Severin Nguyen has contributed a suite of mysterious, tissued, decidedly inorganic abstract studio photos in a long passage on the third floor. Across from them are what I first thought were a series of seven iridescent blue filaments. Their width seemed to shift on approach. In fact, Nguyen cut seven slits in the wall to afford a slender view out the window that the temporary wall occludes. It's an optical effect that would please James Turrell, whose permanently installed sky-viewing

room *Meeting*, 1980–86/2010, is down the hall. The effect is glorious but melancholic, drawing in the history of the institution, because of what Long Island City has become in the past decade. With myriad condo towers hemming in the once-radical and still-vital ps1, it's a materialization of everything that has gone wrong. The wide-open has shrunk to the size of a jigsaw blade. But at the right hour, the light can still create magic.

Bill Hayden, *WEED*, 2021, ink on paper, 12 × 9 1/2".

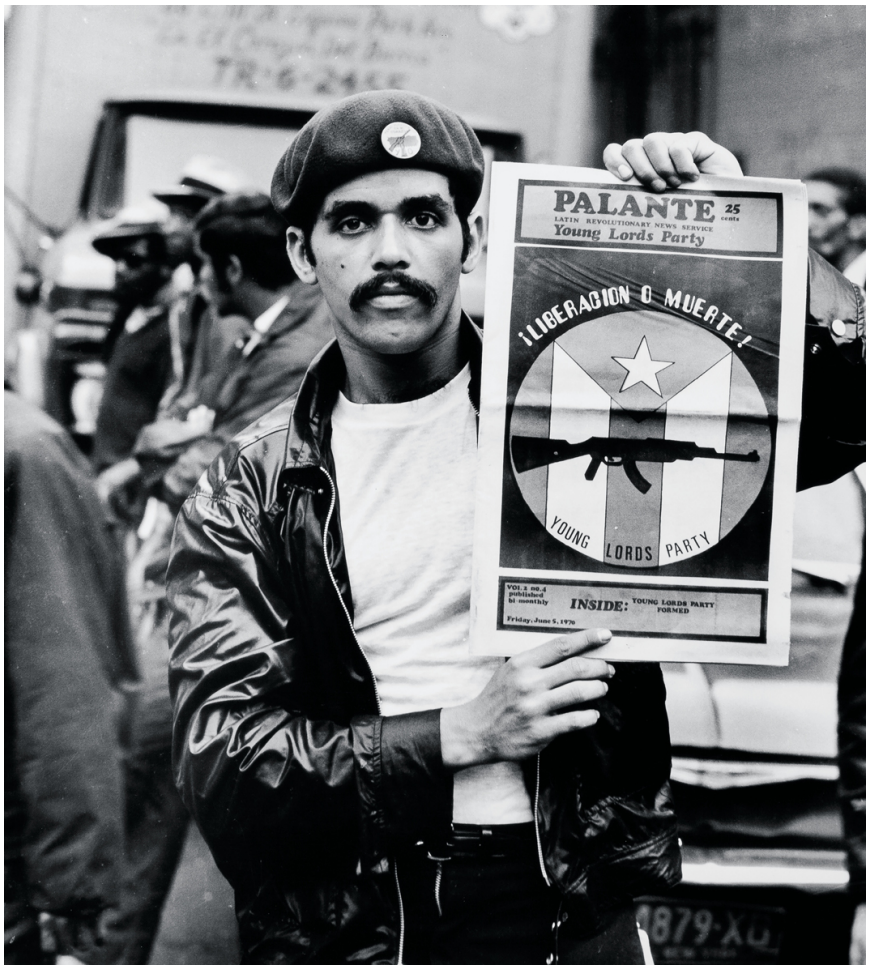
5

The Triennial and Greater New York don't have all that much in common—not enough to confidently triangulate a zeitgeist, anyway. One interest they do share, however, is in the lattice of socialization, as Adorno calls it: social architecture.

One of the Triennial's best works takes the form of tens of thousands of tiny colorful beads. They appear throughout the New Museum in crevices, in gaps between concrete floor and wall, and, in an homage to Felix Gonzalez-Torres, piled in a corner. The total weight of the beads equals that of artist Jeneen Frei Njootli. A Vuntut Gwitchin First Nations artist, Njootli literalizes the experience of marginalization—falling through cracks, or being stuffed into them—in a way that belies the work's bright colors and festive strewn quality. It seems almost too visually attractive to be as pointed as it feels. Punning on the architecture, the critique broaches not only large issues of structural injustice but also institutional treatment of artists from Native communities and other underrepresented groups—when not invisible, used as a kind of decor. The work's title is *Fighting for the title not to be pending*, 2020, which suggests a desire for self-definition that is constantly opposed.

Jeneen Frei Njootli, *Fighting for the title not to be pending (detail)*, 2020, beads. Installation view, New Museum, New York, 2021. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

The Triennial takes one firm stab at institutional critique in an almost neoclassical vein, in a work by Clara Ianni titled *Labor Drawing (New Museum)*, 2021. Ianni surveyed New Museum staff about how they got to work and created sparse, gridded mappings of their commutes, labeling them by position and department. The director of exhibition management arrives in ten to fifteen minutes by running (!) or biking. The artistic director arrives in five minutes by foot. The wall label tartly notes that Ianni had intended to include the employees' incomes, but "only a few" provided the info. Of course, we know how much the museum's director, Lisa Phillips, was making prior to the pandemic—$768,000 per annum, far exceeding the salaries of directors at comparably sized institutions, a rate maintained in the face of the staff's eventually successful attempt to unionize in 2019. (As a result of the pandemic, Phillips's salary did drop by 30 percent in 2020, when the museum's budget was slashed from $14 million to $11 million.) As of this writing, a complaint is pending before the National Labor Relations Board over the museum's allegedly retaliatory layoffs during the pandemic. The director's commute is, for whatever reason, not among those Ianni depicts.



Hiram Maristany, *Young Lords Member with Pa'lante Newspaper*, 1970, gelatin silver print, 20 × 16".

At Greater New York, questions of structural discrimination are raised by the presence of artists like Cuffie, G. Peter Jemison, and Diane Burns, a poet whose brief 1989 spoken-word spot for public television is delivered with such vigor that it dominates the largest gallery in the exhibition. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the street photography carries a great deal of similar freight. Maristany, for example, was the official documentarian of the Young Lords, a Puerto Rican parallel to the Black Panthers. Nance's photos include protesters confronting police but also address the strangeness of urban life, its unpredictability, with images like those of circus elephants plodding down night streets.

Greater New York's overarching concern is the importance of the past and its existence in the present. Do you like New York—whatever that ambiguously means that isn't simply about money?

One of the most singular works in Greater New York takes on social architecture in a different but no less real sense; it also seems widely misunderstood. Marie Karlberg's *The Good Terrorist*, 2021, is a narrative video that over the course of an hour dramatizes the lives of some inept leftist radicals whose plan to bomb something or other goes awry. One can detect the doom from the moment Karlberg's Alice and her repellent boyfriend, Jasper (flatly but effectively played by Tavish Miller), come across a numbskull drumming on a construction bucket in an empty room. The work's plot is drawn from the eponymous 1985 novel by Doris Lessing, but as moving image it plays as a reprise of Godard's 1967 *La Chinoise*, in which a similarly youthful, attractive, and abstruse bunch of Maoists plot an assassination that kills the wrong guy. Karlberg acknowledges the debt in a manner befitting her ultra-low budget, with some sloganeering silk screens paying homage to Godard's palette of red, yellow, and blue.

Marie Karlberg, *The Good Terrorist*, 2021, HD video, color, sound, 62 minutes 40 seconds.

The medium of *The Good Terrorist* is, however, neither cinema nor video. Rather, its medium is its cast. The players have been selected not for their abilities to act but rather for

their social status as figures in the art and literary worlds, in the "downtown" sense. The film is not a film; it is actually a piece of process art rooted in the notion of the social as a medium. *The Good Terrorist* is the successor to Karlberg's project, several years in the running, of making short videos enlisting every art-affiliated person at hand, mostly in uneventful plots about the art world itself. (Your author is among those previously featured; I played a critic, poorly.) A number of them screened to impressive and comic effect in a multiroom installation at Tramps gallery in New York in 2019–20, their clashing against one another in the strange flea-market-like space creating an artificially social buzz. Inviting someone to be in a one-shot, DIY movie is flattering, even more so when the invitee knows they have no talent for it, or when they secretly believe they do. It's a good way to make friends—they show up, do very little in a contrived ambience of gamelike tension, then get drunk. With each friendship, you build your network; the larger the network, the more supporters you have; the more supporters you have, the more likely you are to be taken seriously; and the next thing you know, MacArthur geniuses will be willing to wail over their fictive dead loved ones in front of your camera.

Rosemary Mayer, *Some Days in April* (detail), 1978, balloons, helium, paint, fabric, rope, wooden rods. Installation view, Hartwick, NY.

6

After all this, among these ruins, in a present too blithe or disoriented for its pasts, we find the New York artist of the moment. Her name is Rosemary Mayer, and she died in 2014.

Mayer's work echoes themes found in Greater New York and the Triennial: the slight, the ephemeral, the ruined; the passing of time, history and how we mark it. Working primarily in the 1970s, she made sculptural installations of rods and draped fabrics that spread colorfully diameter-wise or rise more abruptly like a wall hanging, all in a delicate balance. The Swiss Institute has turned its main gallery over to *Galla Placidia*, 1973, a ceiling-hung ovoid form outlined in sheer lavender rayon with pink and yellow satin crumples nested inside it, on either side of a thicker lavender curtain. This piece is nine feet long, ten feet tall, and five across and despite the flimsy materials feels durable; the way it marks out

space gives it a sense of something like monumentality, and it reflects the true sculptor's ability to work in 360 degrees. I often feel that sculpture, like opera or literary fiction, is a dying art, and indeed, in a gallery you are infinitely more likely to run into an unconventionally attired mannequin than a work like *Galla Placidia*, which not only accounts for a rotational experience but does so in a way that doesn't track along the smooth lines of something pre-rendered. It takes up space by being almost nothing. It can conjure a narrative—is it I for whom the curtain has dropped? Which side of it am I on, that of the performer or the audience?—but it also remains obstinately nonrepresentational. *Galla Placidia* is kind of spectacular once you engage with it; if you just stare at it and expect it to tell you something, you will be disappointed. As Adorno would say, "Cultivated philistines are in the habit of requiring that a work of art 'give' them something."

Galla Placidia accounts for a rotational experience but does so in a way that doesn't track along the smooth lines of something pre-rendered. It takes up space by being almost nothing.

Mayer's Swiss Institute retrospective, curated by Laura McLean-Ferris with Alison Coplan, contains only a few such works: Mayer stopped making them around 1974, and they were unappealing to institutions—unsurprisingly, given her gender, the gender coding of her chosen materials, and her works' fragility. Her art changed over the years and never quite settled. She had begun by making text-based and Conceptualist works, some of which appeared in *0 to 9*, the avant-garde journal edited by her then-husband, Vito Acconci, and her sister Bernadette. (Bernadette wrote of the pairing, "Rosemary eventually married Vito Acconci . . . I don't know why.") Later in the 1970s, Mayer moved more decidedly into outdoor events, often choreographing tributes to friends. *Some Days in April*, 1978, for example, used inscribed weather balloons to create an homage to her late friend Ree Morton (with whose work hers shares affinities), as well as to the artist's own parents. In photos, the balloons just hang in the sky near a gorge, orange, yellow, and white orbs whose discordant appearance reflects Mayer's subtle sense of humor. The show is replete with sketches—the drawings of knots are especially beautiful—as well as photos and

printed matter. There are "calendars" that combine abstractions with prose, family photos, names of friends, and flowers. At PS1, similarly errant calendars take the form of grids with colored-in boxes charting sounds outside Mayer's apartment in summer: CRUNCH, CLANG, SIREN, HUM.

The values of the institutions that ignored Mayer's work were the very ones she fought to overturn—monumentality, permanence, a kind of traditional masculine imperative. Seeing the Swiss Institute show now and contemplating its too-modest scale, you can't help but muse on the irony: Her embrace of the transient created an obstacle to the passing-on of her ideas and her work. Of course, today, in a hyperdocumented era, no one faces precisely the same problem. Forgetting comes less from the lack of an institution that might preserve such work than from the overproduction of "memories," which results in those very memories' being erased.

View of "Rosemary Mayer: Ways of Attaching," 2021–22, Swiss Institute, New York. From left: *Galla Placidia*, 1973; *The Fifth Angel Sleeve*, 1973; *Hypsipyle*, 1973. Photo: Daniel Pérez.

One of the more productively wrongheaded criticisms I heard voiced about Greater New York is that it looks too much to the past. The work it presents isn't new or current enough. It has seemed strangely difficult for some to comprehend that the past-as-present is the point.

In section 94 of *MM*, Adorno writes, "The coming extinction of art is prefigured in the increasing impossibility of representing historical events." His outlook on his moment was endlessly dire. This mood is what makes him feel like a kindred spirit today; it also distances him from us, in that it seems a bit absurd to be upset rather than blasé. Today's downcast quality is different. At times, it has a seltzery ironical aspect, vigorous and briefly refreshing but bubbling into dissipation; else it seems horse-tranquilized into dissociation.

Adorno was looking at his present in a way that was heavily informed by the experience of having recently lived through monumental historical events. For him, the present *was* the past. For us, the present is the future, one that we simultaneously obsess over and deny. Any mapping of the zeitgeist is in fact an implicit prediction. Within art, we can still be excited that something new may appear; we retain the ability to hope. In a world-historical sense, the trends are pretty easy to forecast. And so the memory fog we all seem to suffer may be not the product of technology, as it's so often framed, but rather the expression of a mass desire to get on with things. The crises of today have such radical and awful ends that, subconsciously or otherwise, we can only see what's happening today as plot-point byways. We want to know what happens, how it all turns out. Or we at least want to get to the end of the story, to get it over with, so we can set aside the book, turn off the movie, stop the scroll, turn out the lights.

The 2021 Triennial is on view at the New Museum, New York, through January 23; Greater New York 2021 is on view at MOMA PS1, New York, through April 18; "Rosemary Mayer: Ways of Attaching" is on view at Swiss Institute, New York, through January 9.

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