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ART REVIEW

A Show Is All Cyber, Some of the Time

By KAREN ROSENBERG

It may seem like a stroke of morbid journalistic humor that the New Museum's "Free," a show exploring the Internet as a public art space, coincides with another exhibition titled "The Last Newspaper." On the third floor, artists are toiling in a makeshift newsroom; on the second, they're dismantling the last traces of print culture. Or so you might think. In reality, the shows offer similar experiences — lots of reading, supplemented by video, photography, performance and multifarious conceptual object-tweaking.

Certainly the organizer of "Free" — Lauren Cornell, the executive director of Rhizome.org and an adjunct curator at the New Museum — deserves credit for thinking off-screen. "Art engaged with the Internet does not require it to exist online," she writes in her essay in the virtual catalog.

So sculptures that make use of objects found on eBay, by Hanne Mugaas and Amanda Ross-Ho, are fair game. So are Rashaad Newsome's collages of Web-based images, though these don't feel substantially different from the print variety. Meanwhile, some significant platforms go ignored; none of the 50 works on view engage Facebook, YouTube (for that, you'll have to go to the Guggenheim — see Roberta Smith's review of "YouTube Play" on Page 29) or Twitter. (Tumblr, a Twitter competitor, does play a significant role.) These omissions feel like a missed opportunity.

In many ways "Free" is most interesting as an exercise in open-source curating. In her essays and labels, Ms. Cornell makes frequent references to the Creative Commons co-founder Lawrence Lessig's 2004 book "Free Culture" and the artist Seth Price's 2002 essay "Dispersion." Mr. Price's "Dispersion" is particularly relevant because it talks about the Web's superseding of physical public space.

"We should recognize that collective experience is now based on simultaneous private experiences, distributed across the field of media culture, knit together by ongoing debate, publicity, promotion and discussion," he writes.

True to its argument, "Dispersion" exists in multiple forms — one of which is a screenprinted-polystyrene wall sculpture titled "Essay With Knots" (2008).

But the art in "Free" doesn't always rise to the level of the dialogue. It's also darker and more cynical — or maybe it just looks that way, weeks after a Webcam prank made one teenager distraught enough to jump off the George Washington Bridge.

"LEAVE ME ALONE" says a giant T-shirt by Ms. Ross-Ho, despite the mellow associations of its tie-dyed rainbow spiral. The message is reinforced by three Northern Irish teenagers making an obscene gesture to a Google Street View camera, in one of several images painstakingly recovered and isolated by Jon Rafman.

Even projects rooted in creative problem-solving have a way of becoming dystopian. At last year's "Seven on Seven" conference, initiated by Ms. Cornell, artists were paired with Internet entrepreneurs and asked to innovate under strict time limits. The Internet-video

artist Ryan Trecartin teamed up with David Karp, founder of the microblogging platform Tumblr. Their brainchild, “River the Net,” is now projected on a large screen in the museum. Essentially it’s a stream of video clips uploaded by visitors to their site, with tags that allow the viewer to toggle from one 10-second clip to the next. In an interview on an art blog, Mr. Trecartin described it as “a movie made by everyone and the plot arc is the life of a tag.” With its attention-deficit pacing, it shares some of the qualities of Mr. Trecartin’s own videos. It also looks a lot like the site Chatroulette, and has some of the same problems — becoming, at times, a vehicle for pornography. (The museum version, like the Web site, isn’t censored.) But the real thrill is in the often odd coupling of words (each clip has three tags) and moving images.

An intense desire for communal experience underlies many of the works in “Free,” whether or not they exist or were produced on the Internet. Aleksandra Domanovic’s “19:30,” a split-screen video installation, combines introductory graphics from local news programs from the former Yugoslavia with footage of techno-raves.

Similarly, Lisa Oppenheim’s series of slide projections, “The Sun Is Always Setting Somewhere Else,” mines the Flickr posts of United States soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan for postcard-worthy photographs of sunsets. The Flickr images, printed out and held up to actual skies, transcend banality with a nagging sense of homesickness.

Other artists cleverly subvert the protocol of online communities. Using Yahoo! Answers, Joel Holmberg aims profound, existential inquiries at an audience more accustomed to supplying practical knowledge. It’s amusing to see people struggle to field questions like, “How do you occupy space?”

Martijn Hendricks, meanwhile, infiltrates an online forum on the video of Saddam Hussein’s execution. His “Untitled Black Video” (2009) shows the comments only, in white text at the bottom of a dark screen. Some cheer and others express outrage, but a sizable number simply complain about the poor video quality.

Technical difficulties inspire Andrea Longacre-White, who repeatedly reshoots low-resolution photographs of car accidents until the images themselves become blurry wrecks. Working in black and white, she’s a Weegee for what we used to call the information superhighway.

Not everything in the show is gloomy, suspicious or sinister. The tone of Alexandre Singh’s “School of Objects Criticized,” a quirky and compelling sculptural tableau, is defiantly antic. Using spotlighted pedestals and a soundtrack, he transforms toys and household items into characters in a lively comedy of manners (after Molière’s “School for Wives”).

A feminist Slinky toy and a “neo-post-Marxist” bottle of bleach, among others, engage in dinner-party discussions about Duchamp, Woody Allen and other cultural touchstones. On paper it’s childish, but in practice it skewers the chattering class and shows off Mr. Singh’s excellent ear for dialogue (also flaunted in his lecture-style performances).

“School of Objects Criticized” has a room to itself, at the end of the show, and in many ways it stands apart. It doesn’t seem to have much to do with the Internet, or “free culture”; in fact, an analog tape recorder is among the anthropomorphized items.

That’s the problem with “Free,” in general. It’s a conversation and an exhibition that aren’t quite on the same page.

“Free” continues through Jan. 23 at the New Museum, 235 Bowery, at Prince Street, Lower East Side; (212) 219-1222, newmuseum.org.