

Biennale de l'Image en Mouvement (Biennial of Moving Image) '21

A Goodbye Letter, A Love Song, A Wake-Up Call

Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève, Geneva, Switzerland

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Unlike a blockbuster biennial in which numerous pre-existing works are exhibited across several sites and/or venues, the Biennale de l'Image en Mouvement (BIM) is produced by and shown in one institution, the Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève (CAC). Initially called 'International Video Week' and founded by André Iten in 1985, BIM acquired its current moniker in 1999 in acknowledgement of the expansion of artists' film and video in relation to digital technology and the cinematic. In 2009, when CAC inherited BIM from the Centre pour l'Image Contemporaine in Saint-Gervais where it had been hosted since 1999, the focus shifted to emphasise production,¹ a different team of curators being nominated on each occasion to commission new works, especially by younger artists, that would be funded by and debut at the biennial.²

Postponed from 2020 due to COVID-19, BIM '21 is curated by CAC's Director, Andrea Bellini, and DIS, the New York collective comprised of Lauren Boyle, Solomon Chase, Marco Roso, and David Toro, whose collaborative practice involves establishing online platforms for the commissioning and dissemination of creative content *about* art, design, technology and cultural issues. Associated with 'post-internet art', a movement which some claim ended prior to 2016 (Quaintance 2015), DIS do not claim the term for themselves saying: 'Politically, "post Internet" is just a reinforcement of the good ole dominant modes of history— linearity, subjectification, imperial omnipresence. Poetically, the phrase just sounds lame' (DIS in Davies-Crook 2012). However, Boyle, who seems to be the collective's spokesperson, has referred to the collective's 2016 curation of 9th Berlin Biennale, 'The Present in Drag', as also the end of an era, not of a supposed post-internet art movement, but of the sustainability of online publishing in an age of 'type and swipe' (Boyle, 2019). Hence the

¹ This focus was further developed when Bellini became Director in 2014. He states: 'Today, we can see moving images everywhere, using low-budget personal devices like computers, smartphones, etc. I told myself it would have been anachronistic to ask an international audience to come to Geneva just to see existing artworks they could actually see everywhere, even at home. That's why I decided to focus on production' <https://www.on-curating.org/issue-39-reader/questionnaire-andrea-belliniasked-by-kristina-grigorjeva.html#.YcnCKmiP3IU> Accessed 27 December 2021.

² For further information about the history of BIM, see <http://biennaleimagemouvement.ch/information> Accessed 13 December 2021. Previous editions have included many UK- or previously UK-based artists such as James Richards, Sophia Al-Maria, Lawrence Abu-Hamden, Ed Atkins and Emily Wardill.

discontinuation of *DIS Magazine* (2010-17),³ their online lifestyle and fashion magazine influential with millennials, and the founding of dis.art, a video streaming subscription service akin to Netflix that commissions and streams original series and documentaries by artists and critical thinkers about contemporary issues from the future of global food sustainability to the intersections of sexuality, race, and the environment. dis.art forms the locus of BIM '21.

How does an exhibition of moving image fit with dis.art's online *modus operandi*? A cynical answer might be that it acts as a showcase for future sponsorship: many of the works in BIM are pilots for or episodes of series yet to be made, presumably for dis.art which will stream a few of the exhibited films during 2022. However, it is notable that dis.art launched in 2018 as a multi-media exhibition, 'Genre-Nonconforming: The DIS Edutainment Network' at the De Young Museum in San Francisco, the collective situating gallery exhibitions as part of an ecology that includes new protocols of spectatorship based on surf, click and swipe, gestures which become perambulatory in the gallery.

DIS's curatorial rationale for BIM's exhibition design was to create a kind of 'fun house vibe' (Boyle, 2021),⁴ as if each of the fifteen installations – a few by collectives or artist duos, most by single artists or filmmakers – was a room in a boutique hotel. My overall experience of perambulating through the self-enclosed gallery spaces, accessed via a porthole-windowed, soundproof door, was akin to being in an amusement arcade or on a ghost train, a sense which was heightened by the pulsating red or blue illumination emitted by GRAU's four light sculptures, *Fire* (2021), located at key bridging points between the galleries of CAC's three floors. A throbbing red glow from one of their floor-based configurations of lozenge-shaped lamps accompanies the viewer (or visitor) as they blunder into Will Benedict and Steffen Jørgensen's installation, *The Restaurant, Season 2* (2021).⁵ Episodes 1 and 2 of the season were projected full-scale onto the wall containing

³ Other projects include DISimages (2013), a project producing stock imagery and giving them new taglines, and DISown (2014), a now-closed concept store featuring work by over 30 artists.

⁴ Exhibition tour, accurate to author's notes, 11 November 2021.

⁵ Season 1 of the TV cooking show hosted by interspecies chefs in a skyscraper filled with eateries premiered on dis.art in 2018.

the entrance door so that viewers appeared 'on stage' on entry. The rude awakening of being lit by the projection and gazed at by others already in the space is relieved as one takes up a position facing the screen, but, unbeknownst to oneself, one's back is visible to spectators in an adjoining space only accessible from the corridor. This adjoining chamber was fitted out with a desk, two chairs and a two-way glass window through which the film (and its spectators) can also be watched, the set-up mirroring the police interrogation room in *Café What?*, the weird eatery in one of the episodes in which a female detective's campy interrogation of another woman absurdly revolves around eating habits and menus instead of crime. This episode oscillated with one of a radio show hosted by a pair of humanoids, Earface and Blue Chicken, and their special guest, an animated cockerel, in which they impart semi-educational information on gut health and the microbiome. Their bizarre appearances, big black ears adorning the eyes and a cerulean blue egghead respectively, captivate while they discourse on the wellness industrial complex. This is how media works: colours and shapes attract our attention, while messages are subliminally imbibed.

The question of how the aesthetics of glamour might be used for pedagogical good is explored in Mandy Harris Williams' performative video *Couture Critiques* (2021) in which the artist models herself as an intellectual using the filmic language of MTV's 1990s hit show *House of Style*. Billed as an updated reinterpretation of Edward Said's 1993 Reith Lectures 'Representations of the Intellectual' in which he speaks about the power of the intellectual's critical voice, Harris Williams, who has been a teacher and a social media influencer, uses the glamour techniques of the latter to flirt with ideas about social justice in realms that seem immune to it such as fashion catwalks and advertising. A freely available booklet, displayed in the installation's 'foyer', included short extracts by Said, journalist Abigail Bassett and Harris Williams' essay 'Re Modelling' (2021) that clarified her agenda of de-hierarchizing access to education.

A lengthier and more haranguing lecture was presented in *Penumbra* (2021), a screen development of Hannah Black & Juliana Huxtable's performance *Penumbra*, which premiered at

Performance Space in New York in 2019. Based on a kind of court melodrama inspired by criminal trials for animals in Europe in the 13th and 18th centuries as well as twentieth-century ideas about evolution,⁶ this longer iteration of the original script is performed by avatars of the artists. They reprise their original roles as prosecutor and defence attorney of, in this case, a pangolin, in an immersive virtual environment designed by And Or Forever (Carr Chadwick and Katie Hawkins), a New York-based creative studio who produced the set for the original performance. And Or Forever is rightly attributed with equal authorship here given that it is their phenomenal rendering of the animals and insects that keeps one watching in the face of the avatars berating, at times nonsensical, arguments, not to mention the uncomfortable courtroom benches provided for viewing.

DIS's *Everything But The World* (2021) comprises a number of vignettes directed by different artists, including frequent DIS collaborator Ryan Trecartin and his long-time artistic partner Lizzie Fitch, whose contribution was surprisingly low-octane by contrast to their earlier frenetic videos. Taken together the vignettes enact an allegorically designed 'natural history' ranging from fossil life (Trecartin's and Fitch's reality TV show) to issues such as climate change, and property and land ownership, the latter obliquely referencing Silvia Federici's writing. DIS make bombastic claims for their film, stating in the press release that it aims: 'To invent the history that will lead us out of this world'. This world would seem to be the Capitalocene and its linear narrative of progression and exploitation, the way out being to scramble its dominant modes of mediation by means of 'edutainment', a blend of education and entertainment that attempts to reroute the attention unthinkingly given to corporate media platforms daily. For example, in a previous DIS film, *A Good Crisis* (2018), Night King from the hit HBO series *Game of Thrones* delivered a speedily edited speech on subprime mortgages, the allure of the popular humanoid character attracting attention to an issue that might be perceived as dull economics but is foundational to recent global debt and ensuing governmental austerity policies.

⁶ For example, the play *Inherit the Wind* (1955), a fictionalized account of the 1925 Scopes 'Monkey' Trial in which a Tennessee high school teacher was tried for teaching evolution in a science class.

In *Everything But The World*, various protagonists – an androgenous model solely wearing all-over body make-up designed by artist Donna Huanca, latex-suited avatars, characters such as a lawyer and staff and customers at a fast-food takeaway called White Castle – enter and exit through green screen doors or give mini-philosophical lectures, the overall experience being one of stupefaction, aided by the installation design. Ceiling fans’ circulated cold air that necessitated ramping up the temperature of the heat adjustable white blankets - the seating - laid out in a grid of four in front of the screen. The conflictual combination of warmth and chill was physiologically numbing: a phenomenological allegory of climate catastrophe perhaps, a sense accentuated by the hue of the orange transparencies on the room’s windows. I was reminded of Tom Gunning’s term ‘the cinema of attractions’ (2006, 382), which refers to the links between the exhibitionary thrills and animated techniques of early film and amusement parks or fairgrounds. While the biennial is obviously not a pre-cinematic attraction, it might be said to be a post-cinematic attraction in what business consultants B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore call the ‘experience economy’. They argue that the kinds of ‘memorable experiences’ (1999, 4) valued by customers, consumers and clients is made up of an integration of four realms of experience: ‘entertainment, education, escape, and estheticism’ (1999, 31). While Pine and Gilmore’s book is mostly a manual for businesses seeking to design such ‘experiences’, many of their terms could easily be applied to art exhibitions in an ecology of leisure and creative industries. For Pine and Gilmore, a memorable experience needs to hit the sweet spot on a continuum between absorption and immersion, and between being passive and active (43). The rollercoaster hits and misses of *Everything But The World* seemed to run the gamut of such tangents.

It is unsurprising that many of the artists in BIM ’21 are also frequent DIS collaborators, but for me, some of the outlier works to the DIS network offered more reflective film installation experiences: e.g., straddling opposite ends of the durational spectrum, Simon Fujiwara’s 4-minute, 48 second animation *Once Upon a Who?* (2021) and Theo Anthony’s *Neutral Witness* (2021) which clocked in at over 249 minutes. Anthony’s three-channel film, aside from overtly addressing a politics

of representation, also unwittingly harked back to late 1990s/early aughties gallery film installations by artists such as Johan Grimonprez and Stan Douglas that experimented with timeframes beyond gallery visitors attention span, the works being more conceptual and performative than soliciting the gaze. Distributed across two adjacent large-screens and a small LED floor monitor between them, *Neutral Witness* is a real time recording of a body-camera training seminar Baltimore police officers were required to take before receiving their cameras. It was adapted from Anthony's feature length documentary *All Light, Everywhere* (2021), which explored the company headquarters of Axon, who manufacture the police cameras as well as tasers and drones. (*All Light, Everywhere* was screened at Frames of Representation at the ICA, London in December 2021.) In an exhibition in which other works are competing for attention, a viewer is unlikely to watch *Neutral Witness* from beginning to end, but its point about how surveillance technologies can be both preventative of and incitements to criminal violence is apparent from the get-go via the screens' contrasting perspectives and the expressive camerawork homing in on gestures and responses to the side of the instructor's performance. The role that visual technologies play as evidentiary tools becomes especially palpable in a sequence in which the instructor shows a police video of a suspected perpetrator who is heard asking his 'homie' to record the arrest on his phone. Anthony, who is occasionally glimpsed filming the seminar, is instructed not to record the police video – the screens go black, but he is given permission to continue recording the sound in which we hear the instructor explain how the phone footage exonerated the police when the suspect made a claim against them. While the instructor confidently states that the camera tells the truth, Anthony's camera shows how recording relies on interpretative perspectives.

Fujiwara's film was housed in a kind of Rachel Maclean 'I heart you' interior replete with a baby blue carpet patterned with big yellow hearts and a pink-lipped sofa. Unlike other rooms, it was brightly lit. (That the room's exit door doubled as the entrance to Benedict and Jorgensen's installation added to the exhibition's ghost-ride atmosphere.) *Once Upon a Who?*, a stop-frame animation, featured a cartoon character *Who the Bær* created by Fujiwara during the 2020 lockdown

and used as the locus for his solo exhibition at Fondazione Prada in Milan earlier in 2021. A blend of Rupert and Poo bears, yet being neither, *Who the Bær* surfs the multiplicity of identity categories available online. Like most cartoons, the film was endearing, but subliminally violent – the character’s body implodes under the pressure of choices available, but Fujiwara’s cloyingly soothing voiceover narration suggested that not having a core identity is as authentic a position as any.

Fujiwara’s animation was, I believe, made for BIM, but a few other works are contrary to the biennial ethos to commission and premier new work. Camille Henrot’s *Saturday* (2017) was one of a series of films each taking the title of a day of the week that comprised her 2017 solo exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. The film, mostly shot in 3D, and viewed wearing 3D glasses, had an experiential proximity to a post-cinematic ‘attraction’: a hallucinatory stream of ticker tape reporting global news events ran along the bottom of the screen, while scenes of the immersive baptisms of adults in the Seventh-day Adventist Church extended haptically into deep space. Oscillating between cynicism and hope - evangelistic reality TV shows peddle prayer for a price, yet religious rituals provide comfort in the face of global and personal anxieties, the film hits a sweet spot between criticality and absorption.

Akeem Smith’s large scale three-panel projection *Social Cohesiveness* (2020) – the central panel a bas relief of the Jamaican flag geometry - premiered at his solo exhibition ‘No Gyal Can Test’ at Red Bull Arts in New York in 2020. A fashion designer, stylist, and, more recently, visual artist, Smith’s work triggered a deeply ambivalent response in me. I could not square up his juxtaposition of 9/11 footage of the planes exploding into the Twin Towers with footage of his family archive of women in Jamaican dancehall communities from the mid-1960s up to, and sometimes timestamped, 2001. The women’s intensely physical exuberance was celebratory by contrast to the pure violence of the terrorist attack. In a recent copyright case involving the use of photojournalist Anthony Fioranelli’s infamous footage in mainstream films and documentaries, the judge ruled that, rather than the amount of time on screen which is a usual determinant of copyright infringement, this

footage can be shown in films in which it is deemed to be educationally transformative.⁷ I'm not saying that Smith is in breach of copyright, but that his use of the footage was pure spectacle. While millennials such as Smith may consider this footage as part of their personal media image-repertoire much as the 1990s cartoons that also feature in his montage, it is evidence of real people being killed as well as being symbolic of US imperialism and the invasive wars in Iraq in which millions of civilians lost their lives. To equate death-bearing destruction, both symbolic and real, with the sweaty life-affirming female black bodies whose pleasures were autonomously embodied in a way that is rare in visual culture reiterated the media sublime absorption of the former and vitiated the potency of the latter.

One exception to CAC's going solo is the MIRE project. Launched in 2017, as a collaboration with the Office de l'urbanisme and CAC, the project deploys audiovisual works by contemporary artists in urban space, two films from BIM '21 being produced for stations on the Léman Express regional rail network. While a 27-minute version of Giulia Essyad's *BLUEBOT: Awakening* (2021) is presented at CAC in a gallery space designed as a cinema with plush seating and advertising placards at the 'foyer' entrance, a 9-minute version is installed in an open enclave at Chêne-Bourg station. In keeping with BIM '21's curatorial ethos of the 'episode', the video is a new chapter in Essyad's BLUEBOT saga based on an *Avatar*-blue, female doll, a Bot, which she has used in previous sculptural work.⁸ *BLUEBOT: Awakening* is a speculative fiction about a matriarchal future where female reproduction is assisted by emotionally intelligent bots. Its DIY compositing and disparate video techniques — including stop-motion and 3D renderings — contribute to a patchy narrative, Essyad's warrior avatar emerging through the glitches to reclaim bodily autonomy in the face of implied

⁷ See Eriq Gardner's article 'In Copyright Case, Judge Evaluates Use of 9/11 Footage in 16 Films', *The Hollywood Reporter*, 5 August 2021, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/9-11-footage-copyright-lawsuit-1234993277/> Accessed 2 December 2021.

⁸ See her solo exhibition at Fri Art Kunsthalle in Fribourg, Switzerland (2020–21) <https://artviewer.org/giulia-essyad-at-fri-art-kunsthalle-fribourg/> Accessed 25 November 2021.

trauma. A nice synchronicity occurs when trains screech to a halt during the scenes in which a group of women including Essyad are screaming silently.

The synchronicity of urban space also adds to Riccardo Benassi's *Daily Dense Dance Desiderio (DDDD)* (2021), a site-specific work created for the LED wall of the Genève-Champel station. A 365-day durational sound work, every 24 hrs a different text message is flashed intermittently on the electronic green, pixelated screen, the footage digitally recomposed from pre-digitally shot video of what looked like a rave. To create the messages, Benassi put his diarist writing through Gp3d technology which is used to generate the automated voices used in customer care. The combination of human and machine created a surprising emotional charge reminiscent, on the day I visited, of Charles Baudelaire's musings on love at last glance characteristic of 19th century urban flânerie. The message, repeated in Italian, French and German, Geneva's dominant languages, read: 'In the world there is a single yawn that continues by contagion to spread in search of another yawn to fall in love with'.

Albeit dominated by US artistic sensibilities and looking like the kinds of moving image art that might attract Silicon Valley-type investors – cool, slightly risqué, alluring, DIS's curatorial mediation of Internet worlds and their related televisual cultures through the exhibitionary format of large-scale moving image installation was nonetheless a lively rerouting of images and texts. Creating three-dimensional memorable experiences out of digital content, *A Goodbye Letter*, *A Love Song*, *A Wake-Up Call* entrained entertainment in ways that might serve the pedagogical needs of at least some of the world.

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