

Have At It: A Post-Trump New York Looks at How Images, Ideas, and Resources Circulate

BY *Liz Hirsch* POSTED 05/17/17 4:58 PM

On MoMA's collection rehang, CAPTC, Mary Beth Edelson, Vikky Alexander, Lynn Hershman Leeson, Graham Anderson, Jason Loeb, Raymond Pettibon, A. K. Burns, and more



Siah Armajani, *Elements Number 30*, 1990, diamond-plate aluminum, painted steel, and mirrors stained with translucent color, 9' 5" x 53 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 7'. Museum of Modern Art.

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, GIFT OF AGNES GUND, ANNA MARIE AND ROBERT F. SHAPIRO, JERRY I. SPEYER, AND THE NORMAN AND ROSITA WINSTON FOUNDATION, 1991

This past February, two prominent New York institutions announced moves within days of each other that respond to the status of the public domain and the political economy of people and goods under the shadow of an accelerating so-called isolationism on the national stage. On February 3, on the heels of the contentious and

protest rehang of its fifth-floor permanent collection. Although such presentations are often premised on narratives and artifacts of Western modernism, the museum chose to respond swiftly to the administration's directive with a counter geography highlighting seven works by artists hailing from those nations targeted by the travel ban. An eighth work, Iranian-American Siah Armajani's *Elements Number 30* (1990), was positioned prominently in the museum's entrance foyer. Armajani's arrangement of slender steel and aluminum fixtures balanced in a tentative equilibrium gives a quixotic nod to vernacular building construction. Slightly beyond human scale, it resembles an impromptu shelter, or a rampart: stable but tinged with the aura of imminent collapse. Visually and structurally the work embodies extemporaneity.

Within a week of MoMA's reinstall, the **Metropolitan Museum of Art** unveiled "Open Access": a shift toward becoming an ostensible museum without borders, wherein the digitized catalogue of all public domain artworks from its collection, totaling more than 375,000 images—from Japanese woodblock prints, to studies by American modernist painter Arthur Dove, to Eugène Atget's gelatin silver prints of a Haussmann-izing Paris—are now accessible and downloadable to anyone with an Internet connection, anywhere, at any time. Made possible under Creative Commons Zero (CC0), this initiative represents yet another techno-utopic step toward the re-materialization of art objects (and "objects" feels like the operative term, given that so many of the CC0-friendly works consist of pottery, textiles, costumes, and other functional objects often individually unattributed and classified as decorative arts) as virtual assets, freely shared and distributed. "We're privileged to serve over 30 million visitors on our website each year," writes Chief Digital Officer Loic Tallon in the museum's news release, adding, "but if we want to connect the collection to three billion individuals around the world, we know that they're never all going to come to metmuseum.org." Hence, the museum announced related partnerships with platforms such as Wikimedia, Artstor, Pinterest, and the Digital Public Library of America. The democratizing gesture amounts to a considerable gain for audiences and researchers worldwide, while it simultaneously raises questions about the wholesale translation of artworks to data streams.

Not long afterward, art dealer **Andrea Rosen** announced that she would close her eponymous Chelsea gallery after 27 years in the business, and share representation of the Felix Gonzalez-Torres estate—which she had overseen since the artist's death in 1996—with the much larger David Zwirner gallery. Rosen's news shocked the art world here not only because of the high esteem in which the gallery is held by so many, but also because of what this signals about the possible fate of the mid-level gallery in the wake of other recent closures

formulated a brilliant theoretical approach to the circulation of images, objects, and ideas, based on a model of virality, that incisively responded to the horrors of the AIDS crisis while accurately predicting the terms of our current cultural epoch. Gonzalez-Torres—continuing to interrogate in the 1990s the power of ideological packaging as his appropriation-era forerunners had done during the 1980s—tested the possibility of releasing biting social commentary into the routine channels of American consumer society, attuned to the manner in which social transgression can gain traction and circulate just below the level of consciousness. He wanted his ideas to travel. At the same time, his theory of dispersal was predicated on carefully considered conditions, which his estate has taken pains to maintain in the two decades since his death, and which we can only hope will remain safeguarded.



Installation view of “Cercle d’Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise,” 2017, at SculptureCenter, New York.

KYLE KNODELL

These three New York stories, happening in quick succession, touched on larger questions of how images, ideas, and resources are contained and circulated in the new millennium, both within and without the art world. Such questions were front and center in **SculptureCenter’s** presentation of works by members of the **Congolese Plantation Workers Art League** (CATPC), a collective of worker-artists based in Lusanga, in the

sculptures by artists Cedrick Tamasala, Mananga Kibuila, Djonga Bismar, and Thomas Leba, positioned on raw MDF plinths. Sculpted by hand from local clay, the works had been 3-D scanned in Africa, 3D printed in chocolate in Europe (I am reminded, particularly within the SculptureCenter's cavernous postindustrial setting, of Kara Walker's "A Subtlety," her 2014 monumental sphinx made of sugar, sited within the disused Williamsburg Domino Plant), and shipped to the United States. Appearing at times in duplicate or even triplicate, they had migrated great virtual and actual distances.

"The art must be able to leave the DRC," writes the exhibition's curator, Ruba Katrib, in a recent Sternberg Press monograph on CATPC, "even if the artists can't." Dutch artist Renzo Martens, who initiated the project alongside local Congolese social activist René Ngongo, claims cognizance of the ethical quagmire he's elicited. His ambitions to "gentrify the jungle" have caused critics to liken him to the madman played by Klaus Kinski in Werner Herzog's 1982 film, *Fitzcarraldo*. His initiative strives to address the violence of economic oppression through resource extraction wrought by the historical Belgian presence in the Congo; through redirecting art sale earnings to support workers and worker-owned cacao gardens, the project incrementally reverses control of the means of production and materially re-invests in the local Congolese economy, with some success thus far. Plans are now in place for OMA, the firm of architect Rem Koolhaas, to design a white cube CATPC museum for the Lusanga rain forest. Despite the undeniable quality of some of the work on view in the exhibition, particularly the drawings, one struggles to read the project as post- rather than neocolonial, a reenactment rather than a reversal of colonial power despite the directional flow of global capital.



Mary Beth Edelson, *Red Kali*, 1973, oil, China marker, and ink on gelatin silver print, 10" x 8". David Lewis.

MAX YAWNEY

David Lewis gallery on the Lower East Side offered the opportunity to consider power imbalances as perpetuated or refuted by image economies in relation to the oeuvre of under-recognized artist **Mary Beth Edelson**, a pioneer of the 1970s feminist movement. The show opens with "Woman Rising," a 1973 suite of gelatin silver prints that portray the artist

artist in various guises drawn from a range of cultural sources: Wonder Woman, the sculptor Louise Bourgeois, the Hindu goddess Kali, and the Irish Sheela-na-gig, among others.

Similarly capitalizing on shared visual tropes, an ongoing series of collages begun in 1973 wound across the walls of the spacious main gallery, highlighting the malleable potency of female subjectivity as well as Edelson's approach to mass-media representations as a resource for extraction. In these collages, printed images of serpents, insects, bats, and birds, together with portraits of Edelson and people from her artistic milieu, are severed from their original contexts, multiplied, and recombined into intoxicating spirals that here ebbed and flowed rhythmically around the perimeter of the room. The pieces commanded varied registers of viewing: taken in together from a distance so as to comprehend them as an absorbing panorama, yet inspected almost microscopically to appreciate the intricacy of their facture. The individual likenesses (artist peers like Faith Ringgold and Nancy Spero were joined as the decades progressed by icons of pop culture such as Yoko Ono, Grace Jones, and Faye Dunaway) dissolved into a complex biomorphic hallucination. As emphatically analogue and even vegetal as it appeared, the installation also spoke to the digital lifestyle; the viewer was surrounded by clusters of images that scrolled and meandered without fixed starting or end points.

Edelson's solo show coincided with two nearby gallery presentations designed to recover and re-situate work by less well-known practitioners of photo-conceptualism since the 1970s: prints by **Vikky Alexander** at **Downs & Ross** simulated the commercial advertising trope of the white female seducer, while **Lynn Hershman Leeson's** generous survey at **Bridget Donahue** blended examples of her video/sculpture hybrids, among them the tenderly appointed living room from her work *Lorna* (1979–84). Each artist contends with the implications of female embodiment and social perception, and they share an overarching contention that public persona as commodity, however you value it, is regularly exchanged in the contemporary marketplace.



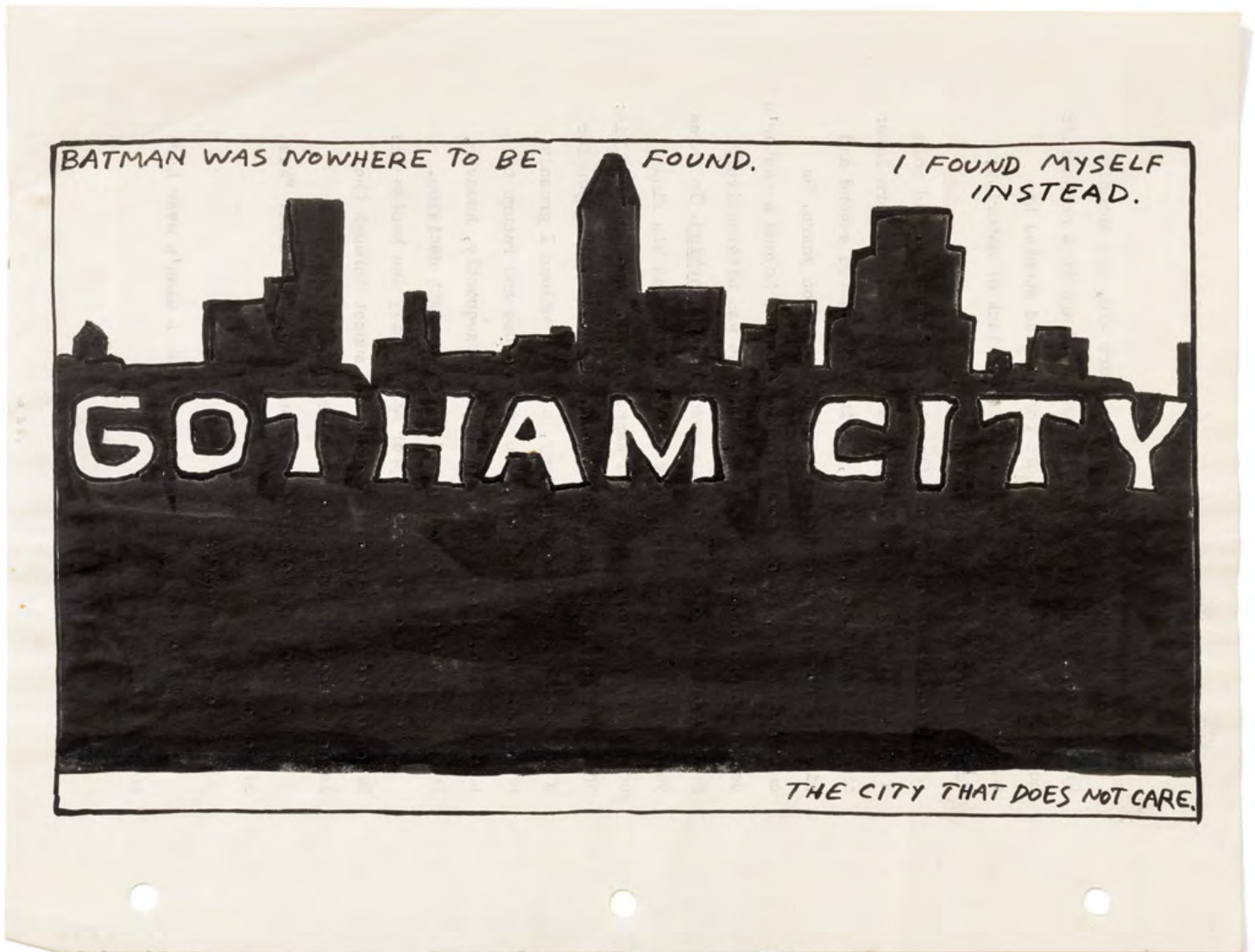
Vikky Alexander, *Portage Glacier*, 1982, digital print on Moab Slickrock metallic pearl acid-free paper mounted on Dibond, 18" x 40". Downs & Ross.

FRAN PARENTE/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND DOWNS & ROSS, NEW YORK

While Edelson, Alexander, and Hershman Leeson focus largely on the female body, **Graham Anderson**'s figurative paintings, which were on view at **Klaus von Nichtssagend**, dissolve the nude male into a decorative abstraction. Anatomically, these specimens resemble the idealized physiques of Robert Mapplethorpe's bodybuilders; but Anderson's compositions are de facto de-compositions: dissecting both physical anatomy and the deeply ingrained cultural convention that limits the display of vulnerable male bodies for public consumption. Stylized musculature emerges through an alternation of solid shapes and contours, and patches of dotted color, more Ben-Day than pointillist. Simple, handcrafted "viewing devices" constructed from birch plywood confined two of the paintings. Like filigreed screens or vertical blinds, these handsome accompaniments offer distorted and partial views of the canvases through identical vertical slats. Outfitted also with operable drawers, these devices transcend visual primacy and become functional storage for personal items, quite literally objectifying the silhouetted male forms.

In "Private Matters" at **Essex Street**, **Jason Loeb**s took on the issue of eminent domain. The artist filmed three separate sites of government land seizure for the purposes of corporatized development, including the nearby megaproject under way at Essex Crossing; the resulting smartphone footage was shown on three elegantly assembled AV setups on low pedestals. Real-time recording of the playback by another phone (notably in each case the "source" phone is a Samsung while the secondary "feeder" is an iPhone; two different makes corresponding to distinct proprietary controls in their settings) was projected onto the walls at relatively close range. This light stream, ostensibly the vehicle of the work's content,

polluted the immediate optical field, so that the “feeder” camera struggled to calibrate its mark. The resulting video image was poetically displaced and refracted through a chain of reframings, a metaphor for the destabilization of the commons under neoliberalism. The visitor was welcome to take a rest in any of the six Herman Miller wheeled Aeron chairs placed around the gallery in pairs (three sculptures total, each comprising two chairs). Not unlike New York’s CitiBikes, their quasi-public counterparts, they had predetermined operating specificities, tethered in each instance at the arm rest by plastic zip-ties, each rotated in a different orientation with respect to its neighbor. Bodily comportment thus became another dramatized element in a room of semi-inert negotiation. The choreography of objects and images, echoing and amplifying discursively, created a visually and acoustically interesting environment. Regrettably, though, technology found its Anthropocene other in a large sculpture of a phallus, a copy of a Paleolithic fetish, cast from local dirt and displayed as though it were a relic.



Raymond Pettibon, *No Title (Batman was nowhere...)*, 1986, ink on paper, 8½" x 11". New Museum.
COURTESY DAVID ZWIRNER, NEW YORK

At the **New Museum**, **Raymond Pettibon**'s retrospective showcased his prolific and singular graphic style over the last three decades. The undertaking was extraordinary, spanning three floors and spilling into the lobby with pictures and texts partly painted, partly scrawled across the

surface of the elevator banks. An introductory section dedicated to reworked drawings from Pettibon's childhood was a special treat, rendering the frequent museum survey teleology of the evidence of childhood "genius" into a perverse yet satisfying exaggeration. The gallery dedicated to a salon-style tiling of the artist's "surfer" drawings amounted to the Rothko Chapel of Pettibon, but the museum faltered in its lumping of motifs. Themes that surge and coalesce over decades appear repetitive and routine—valueless, in other words, in the economy of viewer attention—when rationalized. Walls of mushroom cloud after mushroom cloud, Gumby after Gumby, numbed the senses to Pettibon's variegated critique of pop culture. Instead of the variances or evolutions of each iconic fragment (a riposte to the consumer dogma of logo or brand consistency) we were offered a monotone. This pseudo-algorithmic sorting—not so distant from the filtered metadata of the Met's "Open Access"—presented the work in a way that feels contrary to the artist's modus operandi.



A.K. Burns, *Living Room* (production still), 2017–, two-channel HD video, 36 minutes. New Museum.

EDEN BATKI/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CALLICOON FINE ARTS, NEW YORK

On the New Museum's fifth floor, elevator doors opened directly onto "Shabby But Thriving," a commission by **A. K. Burns**. The project premiered the 2017 video *Living Room*, which weaves scenes of physical and affective labor, adolescent surreality, and a subterranean dance sequence by choreographer NIC Kay together with Geo Wyeth's soundtrack; the images adroitly conjure personal metamorphosis alongside apocalyptic dread. In one scene, the artist A. L. Steiner makes a bathtub cameo as a present-day revolutionary à la Jacques Louis David's legendary painting of Marat. Dilapidated architecture and furnishings that appear within the film were matched by sculptural elements outside it; visitors pushed the entropic register as they tracked dirt from leaking bags across a carpeted floor. The space felt enlivened by an energy that seemingly couldn't be contained by infrastructure—neither physical nor social. In the adjacent Fifth Floor Resource Center, a zone separated from the main exhibition space by a glass wall, a punching bag hung from the ceiling. The visitor was invited to strap on a pair of gloves and have at it.