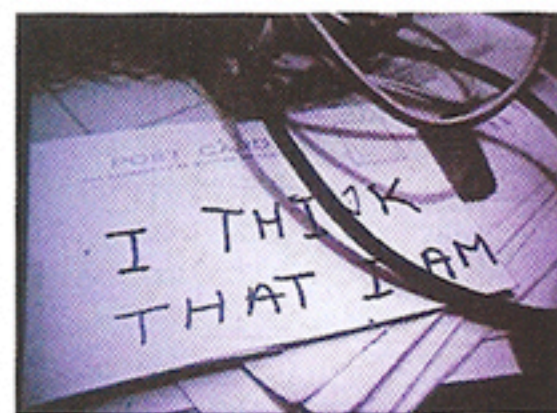




Left: View of "The Generational: Younger than Jesus," 2009, New Museum, New York. Foreground: Icaro Zorbar, *Golden Triangle*, 2006. Background, from left: Brendan Fowler, *Poster for Dialog with the Band AIDS Wolf*, 2009; Brendan Fowler, *Untitled (Spring 2007–Fall 2008)*, 2009. Photo: Bendoit Pailley. Right: Luke Fowler, *What You See Is Where You're At*, 2001, stills from a color video, 24 minutes 40 seconds.



"The Generational: Younger than Jesus"

NEW MUSEUM, NEW YORK

Gene McHugh

ONE OF THE STANDOUT PIECES in "Younger than Jesus"—the New Museum's inaugural triennial for artists under the fateful age of thirty-three—is Luke Fowler's *What You See Is Where You're At*, 2001, a video documenting schizophrenia treatments developed in the 1960s by psychiatrist R. D. Laing. The video begins with an overview of Laing's experimental protocols, which are premised on the notion that schizophrenia is not an illness and therefore needs no cure, but the narrative quickly begins to derail. Shots of disoriented patients and their equally disoriented doctors are interspersed with close-ups of poetically illogical graffiti in an anarchic montage that mirrors the increasing chaos at Kingsley Hall, the London community center where Laing's program was headquartered. And to the extent that it was a community in which meaning became a casualty of radical equivalence—everyone was empowered, everyone was powerless; madness was sanity and vice versa—Kingsley Hall comes to seem like a synecdoche for "Younger than Jesus."

Curators Lauren Cornell, Massimiliano Gioni, and Laura Hoptman arrived at the list of participants via a Facebook-era crowdsourcing methodology, soliciting some five hundred recommendations from curators, critics, and artists from around the globe. All of the recommended artists are listed in a directory accompanying the show, while 145 works by the fifty who made the final cut are displayed in the museum's relatively cramped quarters. The installation is marked by juxtapositions

that undermine, rather than facilitate, the viewer's ability to find through-lines. For instance, as you step away from Fowler's video, you're confronted by a rapid-fire succession of contrasting styles and subjects: Liu Chuang's installation of items she procured from random passersby who agreed to sell her everything they had on them at the time (clothes, documents, cell phones, etc.); Tala Madani's small, surreal oil paintings of balding Middle Eastern men; Tigran Khachatryan's video mash-up of classic Soviet film montage with skateboard videos; Mohamed Bourouissa's dynamic color photographs depicting a gritty Algerian social reality; rock posters by Brendan Fowler (no relation to Luke) critiquing the impudence of a pointedly *non-HIV-infected* rock band calling itself *AIDS Wolf*; and, finally, Icaro Zorbar's sculpture consisting of four interconnected turntables. Around the corner is another batch of social, political, and aesthetic contexts that have little to do with the previous ones, and so on, through all five of the museum's floors. There's plenty of good work, to be sure—with Patricia Esquivias, Cyprien Gaillard, and Adam Pendleton being especially deserving of name-checks—but without a strong curatorial premise to help you sort through everything you're seeing, the show never reaches critical mass. You just kind of float along, never totally crashing, never feeling transported, and never quite able to make sense of it all. In a perfect world, this would be fine (yay, we're all special in our own way!), but in our own slightly messier one, the show's unbridled pluralism ends up working mainly as a portrait of a marketing demographic, and strategy.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the works that speak most directly to a condition of databased glossolalia emerge as the critical orientation points. The polestar here is Ryan Trecartin, whose presumed access to a post-IM identity consciousness lends him a sort of idol status within this generational context. His videos—depicting a borderline schizophrenic youth culture's shuttling between genders, states of consciousness, and worlds online and off—are definitely unique and new in a way that, for instance, Josh Smith's postconceptual, production-line abstract paintings are not. But ultimately, for all their deeply sincere energy, Trecartin and his collaborator Lizzie Fitch's

videos and installations appear frustratingly naive with respect to their own relationship to the system of artistic production they often seem to want to explode. What Smith, with his ironic expressionism, appears to understand is that the art system feeds on mad-genius enfants terribles. Flickering across an expensive flat-screen monitor in a museum as fully entrenched as any in global capital streams, Trecartin has no more hope of being subversive than a mad person in Kingsley Hall. Within any radically equalizing frame, subversion becomes effectively impossible.

Offering a counterpoint to Trecartin is Los Angeles-based Guthrie Lonergan, whose *Myspace Intro Playlist*, 2006, recontextualizes twenty-seven videos produced as "intros" to twenty-seven MySpace pages. While the video makers may avail themselves of numerous digital bells and whistles to vary the "What's up, my name is ___" format familiar to users of online social networks, the videos all end up maddeningly, sadly similar. They're touching in a goofy way—everyone seems earnest and excited, inviting contact from their anonymous fellow users and promising contact in return—but after you've watched twenty-seven of them, they flatten into a blur, each one destined to be boxed into a flashing, advertisement-saturated interface. Lonergan's insight is that the users of the network are unaware that the system relies on attempts at individual expression, just so long as those expressions happen within the control of the system. No matter how much users try to "express" their "true" selves, each becomes just one more piece of information, one more lonely avatar. And in the end, the avatar doesn't express itself—MySpace does.

Like these social networks, "Younger than Jesus" at times feels like a postmodern meat market. But perhaps the informational sensibility evinced by the whole show paradoxically works as a self-reflexive position vis-à-vis the informational quality of contemporary experience. If it feels like what "Younger than Jesus" is really inaugurating is the era of the exhibition as status update, then maybe that alone tells us something about where we are. □

"The Generational: Younger than Jesus" remains on view through July 5.

GENE MCHUGH IS A WRITER BASED IN BROOKLYN, NY.