

The New Criterion

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A thousand words

by Joseph Regan

As a curator at the Whitney Museum in the '70s, Marcia Tucker was dissatisfied by the scarcity of new work by living artists in conventional exhibitions and traditional art museums. So, on January 1, 1977, Tucker founded the aptly named "New Museum" in a small office space on Hudson Street, taking as its mission the exhibition of "contemporary art made within a period of approximately ten years prior to the present." (At least, that's her version of the story; most believe that Tucker was fired from the Whitney after her 1975 Richard Tuttle retrospective was met with universal derision. Hilton Kramer's acerbic review in *The New York Times* can be found [here](#).)

It was a peripatetic first couple of decades for Tucker's fledgling institution. In July 1977, the New Museum moved to a small gallery and office at the New School for Social Research at Fifth Avenue and Fourteenth Street; in 1983, it relocated to a much larger gallery at 583 Broadway. In 2007, the museum moved to 235 Bowery on the Lower East Side, where it still resides. Current facilities include a theater, five floors of cramped gallery space, and a "Skyroom" that offers a panoramic view of lower Manhattan.

These successive moves to larger venues suggest that the "contemporary art" the New Museum was founded to champion is thriving. And yet, "contemporary art" has grown to mean more than simply "new art." From repeated visits to the New Museum, and to other institutions of similar sensibility, I have received the impression that "contemporary art" means postmodern art, and that postmodern art means odd works of ambiguous meaning and disorienting design.

Until May 13, the Fifth Floor Gallery of the New Museum is the domain of the contemporary artist Anna Craycroft. There, she is filming a stop-motion animation.

Craycroft's career as an artist is full of questions. At the Tracy Williams Gallery in 2011, the exhibition "Drawn to Repeating Patterns" wondered if understanding the mineralogic geometries of crystal development "was a way to understand ourselves." In 2013, at the Portland Museum for Contemporary Art, Craycroft's "C'mon Language" exhibition asked, "how do we make ourselves understood?" Now at the New Museum, "Motion into Being" ponders, "what is it to be human?" and "how do we understand nonhuman forms and beings?" Most artists respond to the timeless

questions pertaining to the human experience by making art. Craycroft responds by asking the question again, but “artistically.”

“Motion into Being” pairs the color palette of a Tim Burton film with the sensibility of an erratic minimalist. Each object and surface of the room is white, black, or gray—aside from the floor and animation, which are all three. In the front of the room hangs a projector screen, across which the animation flickers and flashes like a rush of zebras viewed through a kaleidoscope. Captions elaborate on the mystery of “personhood.” Sometimes a black net crumples or unfurls on the screen; sometimes a white, frilled paper parasol does the same. The nets and parasols hang on pegs that protrude from the back wall. In front of them are two black tables, and three white wooden blocks. These stark objects are also the subject of the ongoing stop-motion animation on the screen, albeit manipulated to create the effect of stylized television static. Each week, the animation will grow longer, as the arrangement of the objects of the room is determined by where Craycroft leaves them when she finishes filming for that day. Unchanging only will be the wall text, as well as a pile of leaflets, which hope to clarify the thematic thrust of Craycroft’s display.

Craycroft purports to explore “personhood” with this exhibition. Apparently, a black, white, and gray room and animation is what it looks like to explore “personhood.” Two chunky paragraphs of wall text, as well as the pile of leaflets below them, filled the experience of walking through this exhibition with ideology. Craycroft, one is told, is inquiring “into animation in all its valences” in order to “reconsider our assumptions—frame by frame” of “personhood.” I read the words, and then was compelled to interpret Craycroft’s art as I had been instructed. Only before reading these postmodernist screeds was I able to enjoy the zaniness of the exhibition itself.

There was a faint thrill to the collapse of observer and observed into one room. One may simultaneously watch the film, look at the subject of said film from any angle, and feel like an interloper on an abandoned movie set. The presentation seemed, at first, a novel approach to making visitors confront the subject of the film by surveying the objects that had been used to create it absent the filmmaker, or any cameras. Craycroft accomplished that, but the wall text ruined it. The “exploration of personhood” taking place, the argument that “in our lifetimes, the concept of the human as evolved . . . is crumbling,” burdened the exhibition with ideology it did not support. Exploration in art aims to create the possible by doing the improbable. Craycroft and the curators seemed more interested in confirming their own beliefs than in exploring the truly “new.”

One of the wall text’s suggested arguments is that “when we watch a shape—whether abstract or not—move and respond to its environment, we cannot help but ascribe sentient properties to it.” My experience watching cartoons tells me otherwise. If Jerry drops an anvil on Tom, I laugh; I do not consider the anvil humanlike as it falls toward its target. On the animation screen, the movement of the nets and parasols is sudden, and it is transient. The effect is that of a series of shapes contorting on a screen in a dimly lit room. I did not respond to the animation, perhaps because the animation does not respond to itself. Its eclectic mix of stimuli prompts a series of

separate thoughts on the same theme lacking cohesion or coherence.

“Motion into Being” has no feeling. The colors and shapes do not coalesce into a single work of art. The exhibition feels like a workshop of unfinished art and half-baked ideas that benefitted from a wily publicist. If Craycroft wants visitors to grapple with the questions supposedly explored by this exhibition, perhaps she should become an essayist. As it is, the curators all but did so on her behalf.

My preoccupation with what I read is due to Craycroft’s seemingly deliberately opaque handiwork. Museums are, by definition, spaces for consideration. Craycroft’s engagement with her questions should be palpable, not explained. The wall text made the exhibition a cerebral exercise. The text made me incredulous where I had at first been baffled but curious.

Craycroft’s exhibition makes you think, but it does not make you feel. The goal of the New Museum is to create, “a broad dialogue between artists and the public.” Craycroft is all monologue.

Joseph Regan is an Editorial Intern at *The New Criterion*.