

‘New Humans’ and the Strange End of Contemporary Art as We Know It

The New Museum reopens with a show that's a disguised manifesto for a post-contemporary museum.



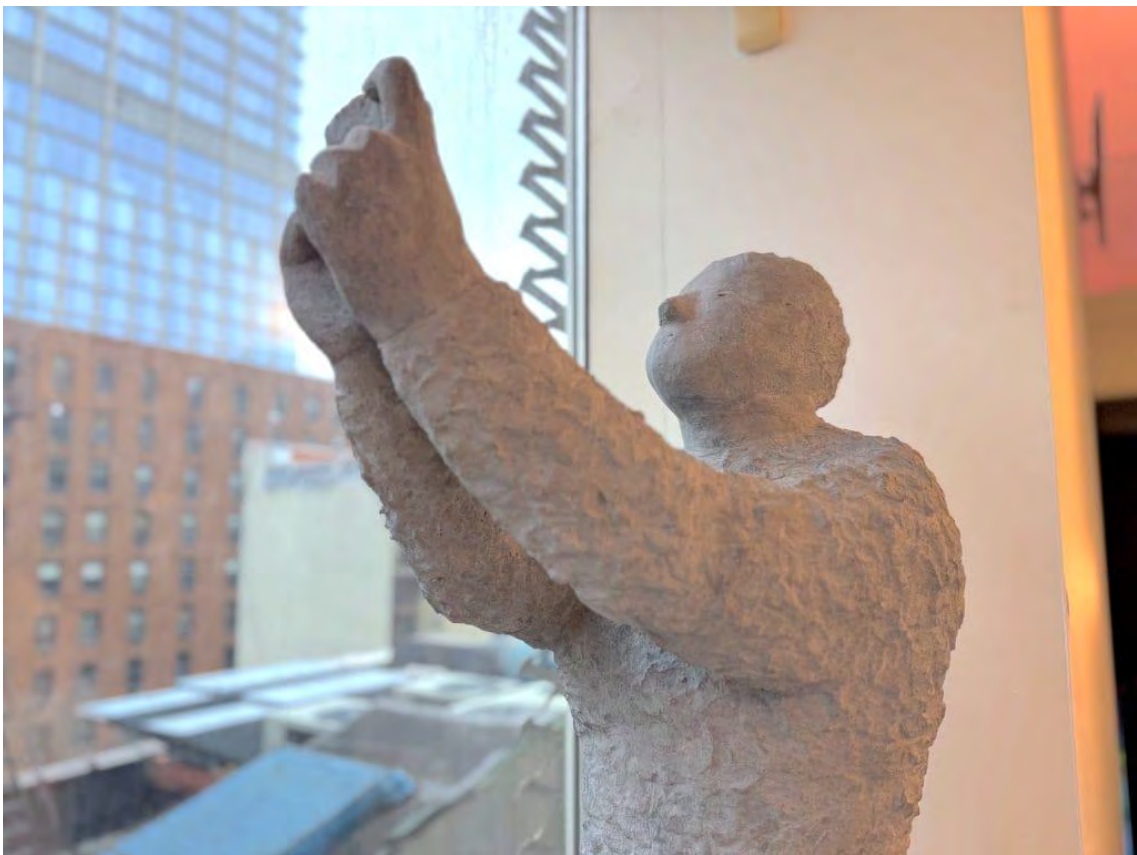
Precious Okoyomon, *When the Lambs Rise Up Against the Bird of Prey* (2024).

by Ben Davis March 19, 2026 [Share This Article](#)

My takeaway from the opening of “[New Humans: Memories of the Future](#)” is that the project of “contemporary art” may be ending.

Sorry, that's a big statement for a piece that's just meant to be a first reaction to this giant exhibition, which is designed to show off the newly expanded **New Museum**. I have to spend more time there, but I enjoyed the new NuMu's spiffy addition from the firm **OMA**.

As for the show, it's a trip, and not at all what I had expected. It has a lot of highlights, just a few dead spots, and much to chew on.



Judith Hopf, *Phone Use 5* (2021-22). Photo by Ben Davis.

Well, what *did* I expect? The pitch for “New Humans” was that it would confront us with “what it means to be human in the face of sweeping technological changes.” That might suggest a zeitgeist-chasing show of art trying to capture tech anxiety about the topics of the day: chatbots and brainrot, AR glasses and Polymarket. There are the barest traces of that sort of subject matter here, and it feels as if the show has hit them with a petrification ray. I’m

thinking of **Judith Hopf**'s statue *Phone User 5* (2021–22), a blobby concrete selfie-taker, and **Simon Denny**'s all-white sculpture based on an idea for an alarming cage-like workstation for warehouse workers that Amazon patented. (Mercifully, the mega-corp abandoned the idea.)



Simon Denny, *Amazon worker cage patent drawing as virtual King Island Brown Thornbill cage* (US 9,280,157 B2: "System and method for transporting personnel within an active workspace", 2016) (2019). Photo by Ben Davis.

It's probably for the best that "New Humans" is not a show clapping back at *au courant* tech clichés—but, then, what *is* it doing? The show proves to be about "visions of the future" in a sense so broad that most art involving *imagining things* could be here. There's a gallery about architecture; there's a gallery about becoming an animal. There's an awful lot of surreal-ish contemporary painting, which feels like it's just there. And then, to a startling degree, "New Humans" is about Modernism. The "new humans" are actually the old humans, and ever-present here is art's 20th-century "tradition of the new," of

artists trained in painting, and sculpture, and performance, responding experimentally to changing forms of life 100 years ago as a parallel to changes we are grappling with now. (That explains the “Memories of the Future” subtitle.)



Constantin Brancusi, *The Newborn* (1920). Photo by Ben Davis.

There's a room with works by **Constantin Brancusi**, **Salvador Dalí**, **Marcel Duchamp**, and **Elsa Baroness von Freytag-Loringhoven**. There are tributes to Constructivist and Situationist architecture. There's a packed gallery re-staging and judiciously expanding the **Museum of Modern Art's** 1959 "New Images of Man" show, showcasing examples of Modern art trying to capture the intensity of the nuclear age and the struggles of decolonization through violent abstraction, from **Alberto Giacometti** to **Ibrahim El-Salahi**.

Fans of New Museum curator **Massimiliano Gioni** will recognize the poetic mixing of scientific images, and curiosities, and fine-art faves from different eras. “New Humans” may be about all kinds of things—the future or technology or the body or the post-human condition—but before anything else it is about this piquant form of contemporary taste-making. Defining itself by sly indifference to historical and genre categories, it maintains a sense of refinement through an eye for the specific and the special, plus attention to overall mood. It’s hard to pull off. When done right, as it is here, it’s hard to top.



The “New Images of Man” gallery in “New Humans.” Photo by Ben Davis.

Because this is a Gioni signature, you might not even notice how striking it is that *this* is the mode that *this* institution adopts to make its refreshed case for itself to the world. When legendary curator **Marcia Tucker** launched the New Museum in 1977, it defined itself against a Modernism become staid and institutional. It was, above all, a space for art whose history was not yet written

and whose rules were still in formation. Today, the New Museum sells a line of merch that says “New Art, New Ideas” and bills itself as “Manhattan’s only dedicated contemporary art museum.” But the pitch of “New Humans” is to look *beyond* both the “contemporary” (as in: the art of the present) and “art” (as in: stuff made for art spaces) for inspiration.

In Gioni’s catalogue essay, he argues that the show’s historical-collage style is, paradoxically, the very thing that makes it most relevant for now, mirroring the networked thinking defined by technology. “New Humans,” he writes, “envision[s] the museum less as a space of purity and contemplation and more as a dynamic research lab or a device for distributing images, with an endless series of tabs and desktop windows all open at the same time. Accessible and inherently nonhierarchical, the exhibition recasts the museum—so often an ivory tower—as a control room.”

Yet neither the tempo nor the tonality of “New Humans” evoke the clicky rush of current screen life. Its aura is serious, its juxtapositions deliberate.



Anicka Yi's *In Love With the World* (2021), Hariton Pushwagner, Drawings from *Soft City* (1969-75), and Bodys Isek Kingale, *Villa fantôme* (1996) in "New Humans." Photo by Ben Davis.

The digital is the most stereotypical marker of what makes recent culture feel recent, a main way the marketers explain generational differences of sensibility. Yet digital art is a notably minor thread among the 150-plus artists. There's a **Cao Fei** digital video of a body perforated by tentacles, and **Vitória Cribb's** *BUGS* (2023), an animation showing a waxen digital female body encrusted with barnacle-like eyeballs.

There are video-essay installations by **Hito Steyerl** and **Christopher Kulendran Thomas**, where A.I.'s impacts on the world are examined, brought out of the realm of the immaterial through documentary investigation.



Installation view of Christopher Kulendran Thomas, *The Finesse* (2022). Photo by Ben Davis.

In the Modern period, photography was important as an artistic technology, creating new connections of human and machine. In this show, notably, still images all but vanish as an art medium as we approach the present. I only saw one project that might count: **Aneta Grzeszykowska**'s 2018 color photo series, *Mama*, which shows the artist's daughter playing with a life-like doll she made of herself.

Digital images are the defining medium of the smartphone age, so ubiquitous that they flow as constantly as speech—and because they are so much a part of contemporary life, their ability to stand on their own as art, it seems, has collapsed.



Cato Ouyang, *Otherwise, spite: 1. whores at the end of the world / 2. from every drop of his blood another demon arose (1829-1840)* (2020). Photo by Ben Davis.

The most-remembered contemporary-art moments of this show, by contrast, will almost certainly be works that activate your sense of being a body in the presence of another body: **Cato Ouyang**'s violent sculptural tableau of a monstrous figure gouging the eyes out of a prone woman with scissors; **Precious Okomoyon**'s animatronic faun shifting around in a pink grotto hidden in the stairs; even **Anicka Yi**'s drone-powered jellyfish floating above your head in the airy double-height fifth-floor galleries.

The show's climactic moment comes in the pink-carpeted "Hall of Robots" gallery on the fifth floor, full of funky humanoid sculptures by a variety of artists, each more captivating or unsettling than the last, all playing off one another. Truly, there are too many highlights here: **Franz Tshakert**'s 1935 anatomical dummy with glass skin; **H.R. Giger**'s obsidian xenomorph, ready to pounce; **Andro Wekua**'s surreally levitating jogger with its

intermittently twitching cyborg arm. If the show was just this room, it would be a “tell-your-friends” event.



The “Hall of Robots” in “New Humans.” Photo by Ben Davis.

At its center sits special effects designer **Carlo Rambaldi**’s animatronic body for beloved film creature E.T., from Steven Spielberg’s 1982 blockbuster of the same name. The lovable alien sits there, frozen under glass, stripped of its fake flesh down to its metal skeleton, but still reaching out to you with his long magical finger.

The curious emotional charge of this artifact, here, makes the best kind of case for Gioni’s post-contemporary vision. In the “New Humans” context, you see the expressive robotics of Rambaldi’s E.T. as a work of skilled craft on its own, while also seeing it in a way never originally intended, as a spooky work of sculpture. The sight of it taps a reservoir of sincere pop-culture affection, even as its deconstructed form makes you reflect on how much emotion

you have embedded in a purely manufactured thing. That little moment of critical self-reflection is, in turn, relevant at a moment when corporations are pounding people's psychic defenses with new forms of emotional technologies.



Carlo Rabaldi, *Model for E.T.* (1981). Photo by Ben Davis.

How to think about what it means to make, show, or see art in the face of today's "sweeping technological changes"? The signal cultural condition of the present is that every experience is always competing with trivially available, infinitely new, super-cheap digital content, dragging the value of everything it touches toward zero. This is particularly relevant in the case of the New Museum now, as it opens an \$82 million expansion. Physical space is expensive and much less changeable than the digital world, giving the former a permanent disadvantage when it comes to being the center of a conversation about "the contemporary."

“New Humans” proposes a museum program as open and adventurous as digital culture, but it also shows art running away from digital culture. It has to meet it but also match it. All art institutions have to do both at once. Cultural objects with real pasts and works that uniquely activate your sense of being a body in physical space with others: These are what feel most like “art” right now.

“New Humans: Memories of the Future” is on view at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, 235 Bowery, New York.