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## ‘New Humans: Memories of the Future’ Review: The New Museum’s Maximalist New Chapter

Reopening after a high-profile expansion, the institution stages a sprawling and enthralling inaugural show that examines how technology shapes ideas of what it means to be human.

By Brian P. Kelly

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An installation view of ‘New Humans: Memories of the Future,’ the first exhibition at the expanded New Museum. DARIO LASAGNI

### *New York*

From the time a prehistoric ancestor harnessed fire, pulled a lump of charcoal from the smoldering ashes, and etched primitive figures on the wall, art has been tied to technology and the question of what it means to be human. The New Museum, the sole institution of its kind in New York entirely dedicated to contemporary art, doesn’t look at deep history in its current exhibition, but it nonetheless reveals the universal ways artists have reacted to innovations by exploring ontological questions.

“New Humans: Memories of the Future” is the inaugural show at the freshly reopened museum, which just concluded a decadelong project that joined a new building by OMA/Shohei Shigematsu and Rem Koolhaas with the existing SANAA structure, a stacked-box assembly that is a now-iconic part of the Bowery landscape. This expansion adds more than 60,000 square feet to the museum, greatly expanding its exhibition space—an augmentation that has been put to full use for this maximalist show.

Prodigious is an understatement for the display, which was curated by the museum’s Massimiliano Gioni, Gary Carrion-Murayari, Vivian Crockett and Madeline Weisburg with Calvin Wang. In the introductory remarks at the museum preview, Mr. Gioni noted that the show includes 732 objects whose labels stretch to 65,000 words. Needless to say, it’s an exhibition that will require multiple visits to take in its full impact.



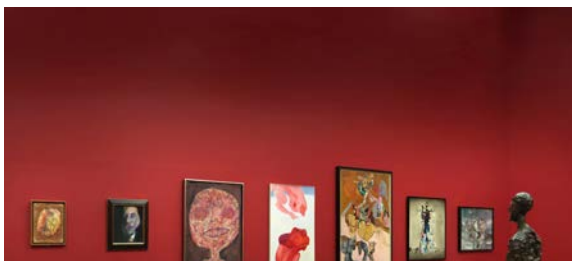


The section of the show dedicated to architecture and cities of the future. DARIO LASAGNI

But the initial impression is one of wonder. It can feel overstuffed, and some sections of this thematically arranged presentation can feel tenuously connected to the central idea of “what it means to be human in the face of sweeping technological changes.” But every gallery contains surprises, and for a show with such an expansive purview and so many artworks, the result is surprisingly cohesive.

One of the best (and most straightforward) sections here is dedicated to architecture, and the way people have envisioned the city of the future. Common throughout the show is the juxtaposition of art that holds out optimistic visions of technology’s possibilities with works that put forward more depressing perspectives about the harms it can entail. Illustrations by Albert Robida from the late 19th century predict a rosy future with imagined advances that proved prescient (television and live news reports) and still out of reach (flying personal transportation). Architectural models from the 1950s and ’60s by the Dutch artist Constant offer plans for a utopian city he called New Babylon that would be multicultural, multilingual, borderless and—thanks to technological advances—free of the need of its citizens to work. These idealized projects are countered by drawings for the Norwegian Hariton Pushwagner’s graphic novel “Soft City” (1969-75), which recounts an average day in a mind-numbing future in which people are merely corporate drones, all living the same life, who rely on medication to wake up and fall asleep.

The curators’ embrace of work from the past is unconventional for a New Museum show, but this risky move proves brilliant. It would have been easy to collect a surfeit of recent creations that speak to tech’s promises and perils. Certainly AI, cryptocurrency, the NFTs, digital surveillance and dozens of other subjects have given today’s artists plenty of fodder to consider. But by extending their vistas into the past, Mr. Gioni et al. give us a greater appreciation for the dual nature of innovation, renewing our awe at—and trepidation about—advances that were revolutionary at the time but today are barely given notice, so ingrained are they into modern existence. Nuclear power, personal computing, automation, reproductive medicine and supply-chain logistics are just a few areas this show explores.





The section dedicated to the human figure is especially haunting. DARIO LASAGNI

Especially haunting is a section dedicated to the human figure, in which much of the art is shaped by tragedy and the violence man commits against man. Zoran Mušič reflects on the horrors he experienced in Dachau after being arrested in Italy on suspicion of antifascist activity: The emaciated figure in his canvas stares skyward with its mouth agape, as if calling out to a God who has turned a blind eye to his suffering. Uche Okeke memorializes the Aba Women's War of 1929, one of the first major anticolonial uprisings in Nigeria, with a throng of seething figures, their strength and determination reflected in vigorous brushstrokes.

The variety here is staggering. Jeremy Deller deploys a wearable computer terminal as contemporary readymade to investigate the dystopian aspects of modern warehouse work, where every moment is tracked for productivity, while works by Constantin Brancusi and Francis Picabia espouse the benefits of the Machine Age and the bright future it offered a new generation. Prosthetics populate one gallery; propaganda another. Plans for techno-Xanadus contrast with Arcadian proposals that hope to return humans closer to nature. Advances in robotics present new possibilities for medicine, but also portend a system that could leave millions of its human workers unemployed.

"New Humans" refuses to condemn innovation for its harms, but also doesn't portray any step forward as an unalloyed good. This perspective, that it is in our power to use advances for good or for evil, serves as a sprawling reminder of mankind's fragility—what Lord Byron called the "precious porcelain of human clay"—and encourages us to embrace new technology thoughtfully. It is an unusually nuanced take on a subject that too often generates reflexive fulminating or fawning, and a truly auspicious start to the New Museum's new chapter.

## **New Humans: Memories of the Future**

*New Museum*

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