

## UNDER THE SKIN OF NEWNESS

Domenick Ammirati on the New Museum's 2021 Triennial, Greater New York 2021 at MoMA PS1, and Rosemary Mayer at Swiss Institute

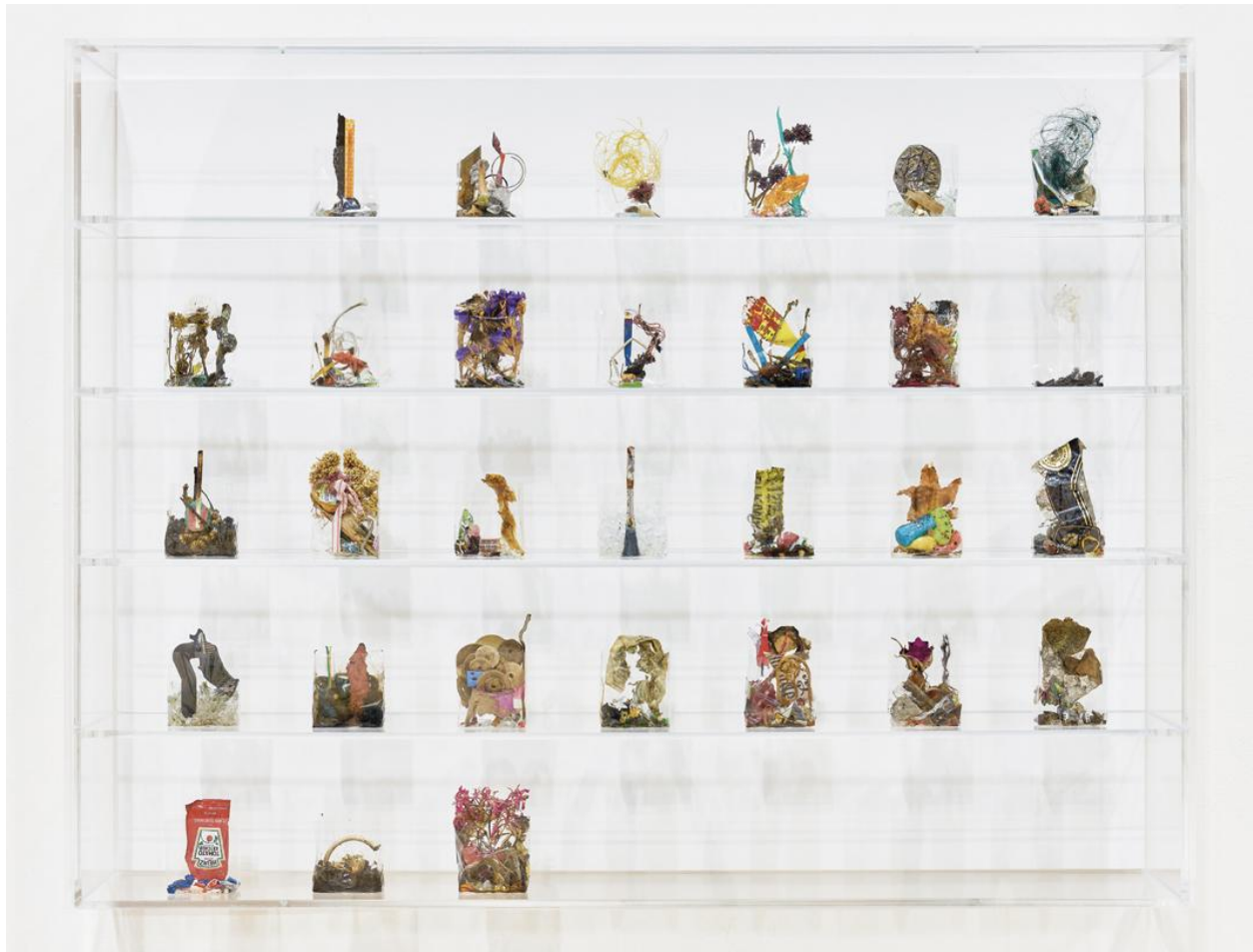
**IN A WORLD WHERE CONTINGENCY** has never loomed larger, why not begin with a book found lying on the street? At the beginning of autumn, which seemed like nothing but an extension of a hot, dread-filled summer, I came across a copy of Theodor Adorno's *Minima Moralia* on the sidewalk. When I began flipping through it that evening, I found something completely different from what I had expected. Far from page after numbing page elaborating theoretical constructs, *Minima Moralia* is a collection of hot takes: short, numbered prose pieces, rarely more than a few pages, that are sharp, grouchy, riddling, indulgent, seemingly self-reversing, veering from dire world-historical pronouncement to Larry David–esque one-liner, and devoid of any context that would make the various complaints comprehensible to anyone not already in the know. All in all, it was a mode thoroughly familiar from Twitter.

Adorno makes plenty of great points in the book, of course. His classics: The Enlightenment's regime of reason contained the seeds of its own destruction; the logic of commodification poisons all social relationships; we're all fucked. The book bristles with bons mots, from the refined to the ridiculous. On the one hand, we have the kind of critique that has made the "Franklin School" (to quote right-wing propagandist Mark Levin's malapropism for the Frankfurt School) a target of the GOP thought police: "The practical orders of life, while purporting to benefit man, serve in a profit economy to stunt human qualities." On the other, we have pseudo-Wildean aphorisms: "The talk about early and late maturers, seldom free of the death-wish for the former, is specious." In between, we have the unintentionally comedic fruit of *Kulturkritik*: According to section 21, titled "Articles may not be exchanged," the custom of gift giving has declined, and per section 75 ("Chilly hospitality"), hotels these days just aren't what they used to be.

Adorno might be forgiven for having been a little sick of hotels. "The major part of this book was written during the war," he explains in the dedication—that war being World War II. Hitler assumed power in 1933; Adorno, a German Jew, left in 1934 for England and eventually the United States. He wrote *Minima Moralia* largely from 1944 to 1948 while residing in Southern California, where many of his compatriots (e.g., Bertolt Brecht, Thomas Mann) had gathered. He was stressed out, to put it mildly, trying to make sense of an insensible moment. In *Minima Moralia*, this situation resolves into anguish and a seemingly terminal dyspepsia, a bending of perspective of which Adorno himself is not unaware. In a section titled "Baby with the bath-water," he points out the flaw in lensing the world through the one concept I associate with him above all else, that culture is ideology. "Comforting and lulling," he writes, culture "serves to keep alive the bad economic

determination of existence. . . . But to act radically in accordance with this principle would be to extirpate, with the false, all that was true also."

For Adorno, rationalism led inevitably to the irrational. More than knowing it, we all feel this now. We share his horror. Under the circumstances, "high culture" can appear a trifling business. It's purely anecdotal—who would poll such a thing?—but people seem not terribly excited by much they come across in galleries these days. It appears that, per the logic of commodities, art consumers, like those in other realms, want relief and distraction in the form of something new.



Yuji Agematsu, *zip: 01.01.20 ... 12.31.20*, 2020, mixed media in cigarette-pack cellophane wrappers on acrylic and wood shelves, latex paint. Installation view, MoMA PS1, New York, 2021. Photo: Steven Panecasio.

Greater New York has always seemed to labor under the imperative of novelty more than its cohorts the Triennial or the Whitney Biennial. Unlike those shows, it seems to be construed as a venue that gives artists their first big breaks—not a drip-drip-drip on stone but a hammer to the wall separating them from commercial success. *Vanity Fair* dispatched its art reporter to MOMA PS1 and devoted an entire column to the exhibition, but only for the purposes of discussing its market-goosing properties. When the Triennial's turn came for the Condé Nast treatment, it rated only a couple of paragraphs of scene reportage tacked on

at the end of a long column mostly about a few artists smoking a joint at the opening reception.

The current edition of Greater New York has old things on its mind; it is more or less a love letter to the city whose name it bears, to New York's status as a physical place that inflects the art made there and as the incubator of a number of avant-gardes. There's an inherent tension here with the emphasis on the "emerging" that is typical for Greater New York and other periodic showcases. As Touliatou's work at the New Museum suggests, to love a city (at least in an era whose metropolises are beginning to make the urban dystopias of twentieth-century sci-fi look positively charming) is to love the past. To its credit, Greater New York 2021 (curated by a team led by Ruba Katrib, with Serubiri Moses, in collaboration with Kate Fowle and Inés Katzenstein) thematizes and makes good use of this tension. The exhibition's overarching concern is the importance of the past and its existence in the present and, in a subtextual way, the preciousness of what has been. Do you like New York—whatever that ambiguously means that isn't simply about money—or do you like throwing things away, like the residents of the unnamed city in Phan's *Becoming Alluvium*?



View of Greater New York, 2021–22, MoMA PS1, New York. From left: Steffani Jemison, *Tumbler*, 2021; Steffani Jemison, *Tumbler*, 2021; Steffani Jemison, *Tumbler*, 2021. Photo: Martin Seck.

The show's tone is set in the lobby with a display of bootleg and nonbrand T-shirts collected by the duo Shanzhai Lyric, who in January 2020 set up the Canal Street Research Association in a storefront that served as both their office-studio and a venue for small exhibitions, screenings, and other activities. The text on these shirts is frequently garbled, often inexplicable, and occasionally quasi-poetic; idiot world hangs high on the metal support structure; a black tee sporting a sequined Garfield bears an ode that begins, AND THE / SCREEN / THAT CIRCLE / YOU LIKE / NUTERFLIES. With this tableau, Shanzhai Lyric acknowledge New York's role as a node of globalization even as they bring the city into the museum. Upstairs, Steffani Jemison's droll, pointed video shows a mime wandering the streets and mirroring various individuals' gestures—a man exercising in a park, for instance. A couple of rooms later, Jemison appears again with a trio of rock tumblers turning street detritus into smooth little objects. Laid out on a small riser, they convey a sense of the hustle, the spinning of garbage into gold. That work foreshadows the presence one floor up of the show's pièce de résistance, a wall-long display of Yuji Agematsu's miniature sculptures made of bits of trash nested inside the cellophane casings that surround packs of cigarettes. A crumpled straw's wrapper, an autumnal leaf, thread, wire mesh: Sometimes the works look like abstracted landscapes, sometimes like figures; all reflect an extraordinary delicacy and a seemingly inexhaustible ability to create while staring at the pavement.



Curtis Cuffie, *Every House Deserves a Happy Home, Every Home Deserves a Happy Family* (detail), 1996, dollhouse, fabrics, basketry, metal frame, 60 × 23 × 23".



One of the numerous older and underrecognized artists in the show performs a similar indexing of city life on a slightly larger scale. Curtis Cuffie, who made streetside assemblages (and for a long time lived on the street), died in 2002 at age forty-seven. Cuffie is represented by six sculptures, not quite figurative, made out of cloth scraps (blankets, garments) and cast-off items like a toy house, a fake rose, and a painting of what might be Venice. The curators here adopt a tactic that becomes familiar as one travels through the exhibition: mounting a selection of documentary photos. They do likewise with Luis Frangella, who created bold *en plein air* paintings on the West Side Piers in their heyday while palling around with Peter Hujar and David Wojnarowicz. Bodies of street photography from the '60s, '70s, and '80s elsewhere punctuate the show. Bettina Grossman, Hiram Maristany, Marilyn Nance, Robin Graubard: Each of these artists contributes a display of images that insist on a sense of what things used to be like, implicitly demanding comparison with the present.

The counterpoint to all this gritty history is a retreat into fantastic individual worlds. (Adorno might even call it a dialectic.) We see interior landscapes from Julio Galán, E'Wao Kagoshima, Ahmed Morsi, Nicolas Moufarrege, and others. In hands down the weirdest work in the show, Bill Hayden presents a dark swampscape featuring an impaired-looking marijuana leaf with a face, enclosed by a brassy department-store frame and titled *WEED, 2021*. It would be some kind of dumb meme art, a joke, except for the fineness of its inking and the eerily relatable quality of this vegetable, all alone in the dark, consuming itself, coping as best it can. Stationed nearby is another of the show's notable oddballs, Paulina Peavy, a kind of second-generation Agnes Pelton who moved from California to New York City to paint her dreamscapes. Peavy viewed her work as a channeling of her communication with an extraterrestrial named Lacamo, hardly something that would seem to require residency in the tristate area. Her desire to be in New York—or need, given that she seems to have been encouraged to move by her commercial reception here—was counterpoised by her impulse to escape.

With the show so focused on the city, one work that links the museum and its urban context takes on particular power. Diane Severin Nguyen has contributed a suite of mysterious, tissued, decidedly inorganic abstract studio photos in a long passage on the third floor. Across from them are what I first thought were a series of seven iridescent blue filaments. Their width seemed to shift on approach. In fact, Nguyen cut seven slits in the wall to afford a slender view out the window that the temporary wall occludes. It's an optical effect that would please James Turrell, whose permanently installed sky-viewing room *Meeting, 1980–86/2010*, is down the hall. The effect is glorious but melancholic, drawing in the history of the institution, because of what Long Island City has become in the past decade. With myriad condo towers hemming in the once-radical and still-vital ps1, it's a materialization of everything that has gone wrong. The wide-open has shrunk to the size of a jigsaw blade. But at the right hour, the light can still create magic.