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GROUP THINK

Alex Kitnick on “Lifes”



View of “Lifes,” 2022, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Floor: Charles Gaines, *Falling Rock*, 2000. Wall: Morag Keil, *The Vomit Vortex*, 2022. Photo: Joshua White.

THE GESAMTKUNSTWERK is one of modernism's most telling inventions. Built from dance, music, theater, and poetry, it sought to stanch the crisis of modernity with a multisensory experience: If life was breaking up—split between public and private, work and leisure—the “total work of art” promised to bind disciplines and audience together to create something like community. Beginning in 1876 under the patronage of King Ludwig II of Bavaria, Richard Wagner launched a festival to stage his epic operas in Bayreuth, Germany, inspiring a devoted, at times fascistic, cult as well as fierce critics (Adorno once described him as “a revolutionary who conciliates the despised members of the middle class by recounting heroic deeds now past”). If Wagner's work was archaic and artificial, the composer also thought of it as a “drama of the future,” so it's interesting to consider the Gesamtkunstwerk again today, 150 years later, when life's components are ever more linked and animated by a web of ostensibly smart devices. This is the question at the heart of Aram Moshayedi's “Lifes,” at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, and while the exhibition may be largely symptomatic, it leads us to places from which we might begin to think the present.

The scene of “Lifes” feels less like a gallery than a stage, if not a fun house or a discotheque. The space is cavernous and vast—there are no partitions or dividing walls—and the floor has been carpeted so as to highlight the presence of the viewer's body in the space, alongside the artworks. Entering the exhibition, one steps not into a white cube but a managed environment, the space is more timed than timeless. It has been suffused with a purplish glow and outfitted with projectors and speakers (a handout tells you of various diversions taking place minute to minute), and one imagines a massive hard drive somewhere controlling the lighting, the projection of the videos, and the playing of the soundtracks that produce the ever-changing—and seemingly very expensive—mise-en-scène. Many different types of professionals pumped life into this project, including musicians (Pauline Oliveros), actors (Aubrey Plaza), artists (Rosemarie Trockel), choreographers (Andros Zins-Browne), critics (Greg Tate), dramaturges (Adam Linder), and poet-painter-pianists (Wayne Koestenbaum), but what is striking, and somewhat surprising, is that most of these figures work in rather traditional, or at least discrete, media. It is the curator who created this multimedia collab. (The old critical bogeyman spectacle feels too dated a word.)

One of the things that first intrigued me about “Lifes”—in addition to the show's advertisements, their receding gridded plane reminiscent of Superstudio's Endless Monument—is that its various contributors share equal footing on the lengthy artist list, which suggests an exhibition much larger than what one actually encounters in the gallery. This horizontality challenges established hierarchies—between artist and critic as much as between artist and Hollywood actor—but it also makes equivalences between things that might actually be dissimilar; moreover, while pointing to a collective project, it invites fascination with personalities and proper names at the expense of what used to be called the work. In this sense, “Lifes” is not unlike a party-guest list for which Moshayedi served as host. He is an *Austellungsmacher*, or “exhibition maker,” in the tradition of Harald Szeemann (who himself made a major exhibition about the Gesamtkunstwerk in 1983) and Nicolas Bourriaud (whose 1996 exhibition “Traffic,” which launched Relational Aesthetics, is an important precedent here given its conception of the exhibition as an event, or aggregate, made of both seen and unseen forces). This *meister* style is no longer fashionable today, and so it feels rare and exciting—amid a field of dutiful and responsible exhibitions—to find a curator who is trying to think about contemporary life with contemporary art and vice versa. Kudos, too, to the institution willing to take a risk.

The artist is a processed good, a leftover, passing through the system.

Despite the feeling of unity that pervades the space, certain works stand out: The biggest is Morag Keil's *The Vomit Vortex*, a pneumatic tube system that curves through the galleries and every now and then sends a canister of fake artist vomit surging through the exhibition. It is a silly and somewhat sophomoric work (*Double Dare* at the museum), but I mean this as high praise—being droll might be the only way to be serious these days. The large clear tube enters corners and penetrates walls, hinting at an infrastructure behind, and attached to, the institution's managed surface. Surrounding each aperture is a large adhesive image of the supposed insides

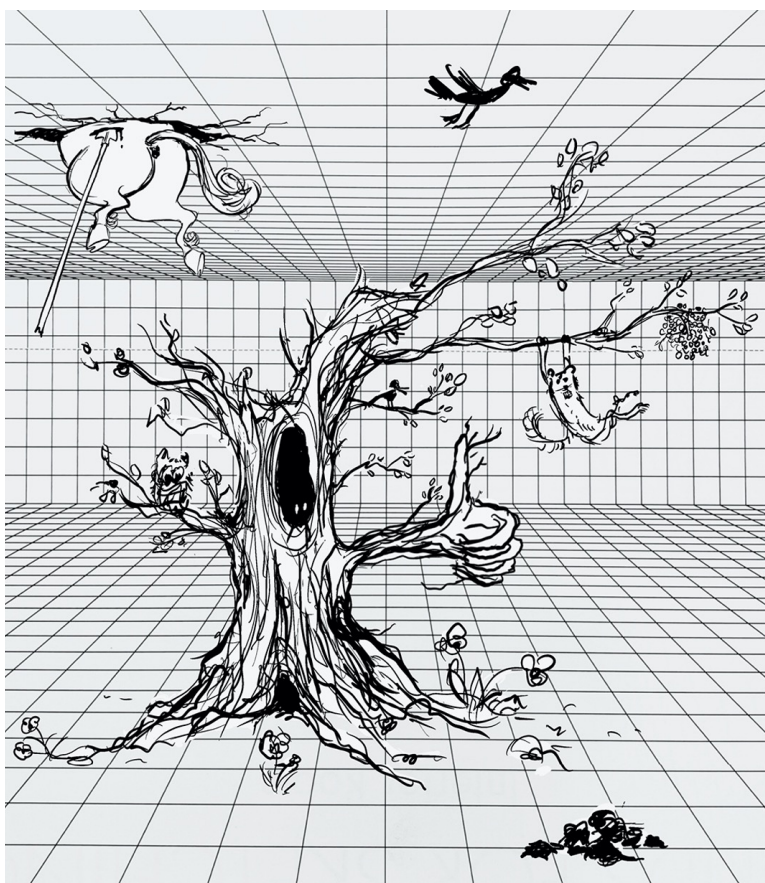
of the museum, and while some look like fleshy wounds and old-fashioned brick, others offer glimpses of proximate attractions, such as the museum café. It's telling that the reveal itself is an illusion. The work calls to mind Robert Smithson's 1972 injunction to artists to investigate "the apparatus the artist is threaded through," but some fifty years later threaded doesn't suffice to describe the relationship. Processed and pulverized? Chewed, digested, and spit out? The artist is no longer capable of dexterously negotiating the art world in all its complexity. She's a processed good, a leftover, passing through the system.



Nina Beier and Bob Kil, *All Fours*, 2022. Performance view, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, 2022. Photo: Gabriel Noguez.

What I've described thus far, of course, is just one part of "Lives," really just a part of a part. The exhibition also includes a polyurethane log (Piero Gilardi); nine marble lions occasionally mounted by dancers (Nina Beier and Bob Kil); a neo-Constructivist monument to interspecies intermingling (Fahim Amir and Elke Auer); and multiple works about Pimu, aka Santa Catalina Island (Rindon Johnson, Kite, and L. Frank). There's also the catalogue, copies of which are tossed here and there across the gallery floor. More like a manual or reader, the volume contains no images of artworks but lots of conversations among artists as well as a beautiful text on color by philosopher Amir; incisive analyses by Tate and the scholar Shannon Jackson; and rather stoned-looking marginalia by Olivia Mole. From February to May, the exhibition also hosted a series of performances, talks, screenings, collaborations, and concerts—it was a festival networked across time and space (and it is perhaps worth mentioning here the glaring f in "Lives," which seems to point to the soldering of the physical and virtual, suggesting the ways in which not only a second life has become real, but a third, a fourth, and a fifth life as well). This is typical of a contemporary mode of exhibition making that gathers so many moving parts that no one person can ever really grasp it. In a way, it's impossible to review such projects for there is always something in excess, some beyond that cannot be seen, but if this abundance threatens the critical function (I'll live), it also turns away from public (which is to say discussable) life toward that which is private and affective (toward a coterie, perhaps). Obliquity is held up as a value here. The catalogue's epigraph, setting the tone for the show, is a quote from the artist Charles Gaines, who is represented in the exhibition by a sculpture featuring a chained boulder periodically dropped onto panes of glass: "The art work, total art work, involves many aspects of myself, not just one, and they all want to participate in the work. But when the work is done they all disappear, claiming ignorance of the whole affair, and documenting alibis."

The idea seems to be that while an artist's life goes into the making of an artwork, their labor (and its affects) is obscured once the work is finished and sent off, but this is no big claim, really: Contemporary art no longer requires the death of the author so much as it turns them into an intriguing specter.



Olivia Mole, *The Lowlifes*, 2021, digital image, dimensions variable.

What struck me, though, is how the exhibition—despite its intentions—works in the opposite direction. It is not the lives or identities of the artists that are interesting, though the social web they form, charted by a network diagram on the exhibition's opening wall, is seemingly meant to compel us. Rather, it is our lives, the viewer's life (or perhaps simply our heat and energy, as suggested by Cooper Jacoby's thermochromic benches-cum-thermostats), that the exhibition wants. "Lifes" is not simply something to visit, but, per Smithson, an apparatus to join—and, as such, it's most incisive as an allegory of the contemporary art world writ large. Rather than resist the interconnectedness of contemporary art—let alone contemporary life—the exhibition intensifies it, choreographs and aestheticizes it, makes it beautiful. And so we are put in a funny position. We can go with the flow, feel the atmosphere, and learn all the references—or we can push back, turn away, avoid being sucked in completely. There is pleasure in "Lifes," but there is also pleasure in wanting more—or less.

"Lifes" is on view at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, through May 8.

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