

With a Display of New Work from Its Collection, MoMA Takes a Political Turn

BY *Alex Greenberger* POSTED 03/17/17 5:47 PM



Erik van Lieshout, *Untitled*, 2014, Conté crayon, synthetic polymer paint, felt-tip pen, and vinyl on paper.

©2017 ERIK VAN LEISHOUT/THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK, ACQUIRED THROUGH THE GENEROSITY OF THE CONTEMPORARY DRAWING AND PRINT ASSOCIATES OF THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART IN MEMORY OF RIVA CASTLEMAN, 2015

What can “Unfinished Conversations: New Work from the Collection,” the Museum of Modern Art’s show of recent acquisitions by 15 contemporary artists, tell us? For one thing, MoMA wants to position itself, at least in part, as a political institution. The issues the show addresses make up a litany of what many Americans are thinking about in 2017: racism, sexism, intersectionality, censorship, surveillance, and, of course, resistance. It’s a calculated move on the museum’s part, and a fairly successful one.

The exhibition, the latest in a series of hangs of the museum’s contemporary holdings, takes its name from John Akomfrah’s elegant video installation *The Unfinished Conversation* (2012). This three-screen work is about the life of Stuart Hall, a theorist in the UK who pioneered the field of cultural studies with a Marxist and identity-minded bent starting in the 1960s, but it’s more of an essay film than a biopic. World events are paralleled by Hall’s personal life, with footage of Vietnam War-era tumult shown next to pictures from Hall’s marriage to a white woman, among many other poetic comparisons. It’s about the personal becoming political and vice versa.

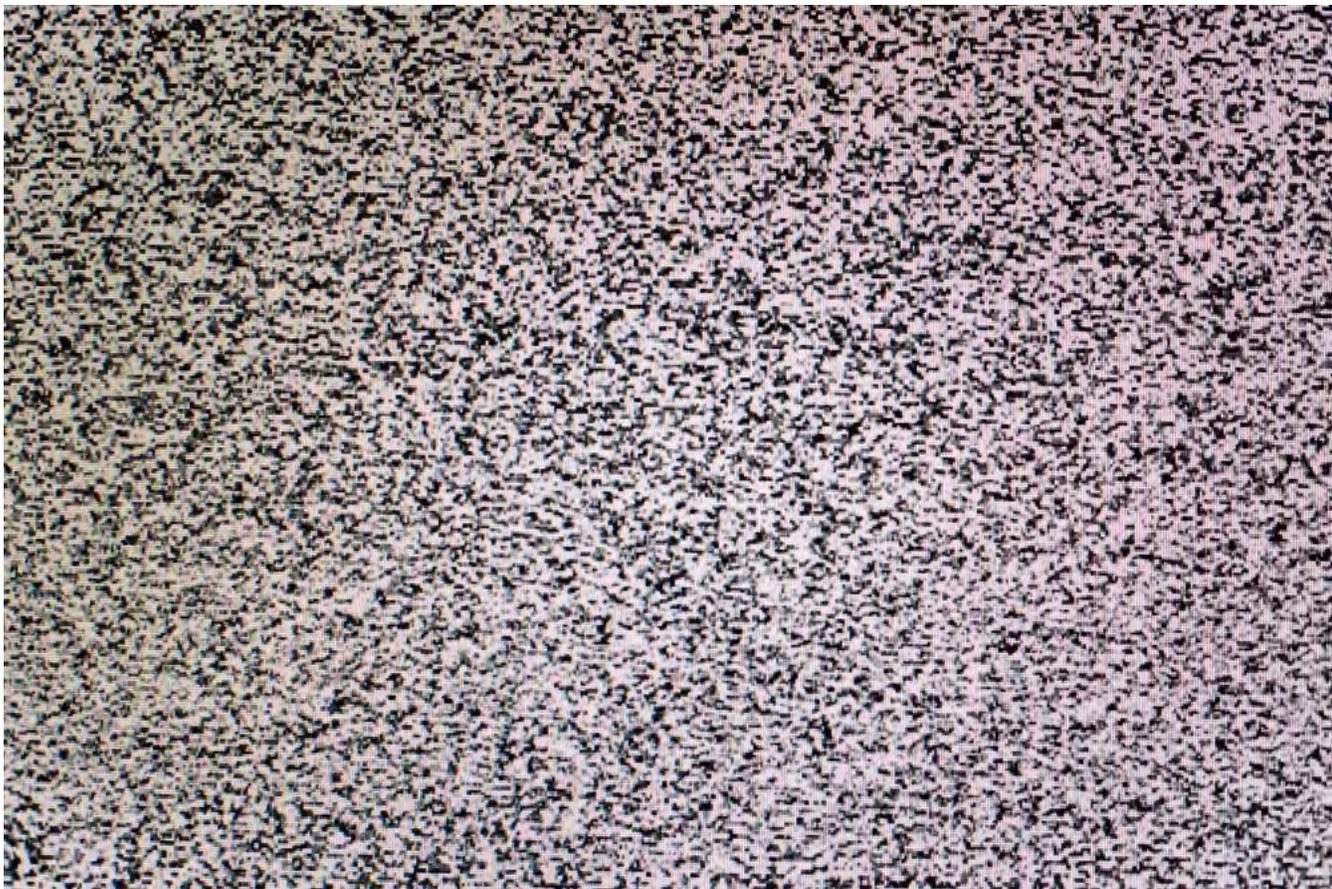
Some work in the exhibition turns to the past as a means to reflect on the present. Kara Walker’s fire-breathing charcoal drawing *40 Acres of Mules* (2015) is a history painting for our times—a chaotic tug-of-war between black Americans and white oppressors. A smiling Ku Klux Klan member lurks in the background, suggesting that the fight for equality is hardly over. It plays nicely—if a Walker piece can be said to play nicely—against a more optimistic Erik van Lieshout painting of a 2014 protest in the Hague.

Others rely on history for inspiration. Lynette Yiadom-Boakye and Samuel Fosso both revise classical notions of portraiture to include black sitters. In his photographs, Fosso dresses like Angela Davis, Langston Hughes, and others, but markers of his own identity are clear, creating a complex statement about how truthfully a picture can capture a person, if at all. Iman Issa takes a more meta approach, offering Minimalist-minded objects—one seems like a sharpened double-sided pencil—that are actually based on ancient objects from the Middle East. Art history, these artists propose, is an unfinished conversation indeed.



Samuel Fosso, *Untitled* from the series "African Spirits," 2008, gelatin silver print.

©2017 SAMUEL FOSSO/THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK, THE FAMILY OF MAN FUND, 2016



Wolfgang Tillmans, *Sendeschluss / End of Broadcast I*, 2014, pigmented inkjet print.

©2017 WOLFGANG TILLMANS/THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK, CAROL AND DAVID APPEL FAMILY FUND, 2015

Abstraction rears its head here, with less success. A gigantic Wolfgang Tillmans photograph—hung, in typical fashion for the artist, by clamps that rest on nails—looks at first glance like a pixelated Jackson Pollock, but a wall text reveals that it's television white noise that the artist photographed while in Russia. For Tillmans, the image signifies resistance on his part to making clear images, but without the text its ostensibly radical nature would not be known. Similarly, a Kim Beom painting with a maze-like pattern doesn't make much sense in the exhibition's context.

MoMA has made a more concerted effort of late to be political with its collection. Last month, the museum hung works by Siah Armajani, Ibrahim el-Salahi, Tala Madani, and others alongside mainstays of its permanent collection to highlight artists who would have been affected by the travel ban. But behind the scenes, the museum, like many institutions of its size and scale, has political contradictions to contend with. As the collective Occupy Museums made clear recently with a protest against MoMA in the museum's own lobby, the institution's board includes Larry Fink, the BlackRock Inc. CEO who has been advising President Trump.

One of the more intriguing works here takes a slyly critical approach. Cameron Rowland's display of rings used to install manholes on city streets enlists real products made by Corcraft, a company notorious for exploiting prison laborers to produce furniture and other items. Displayed on a pallet and piled on top of each other, the rings are some of the only objects here not officially owned by MoMA. They are instead being rented by the museum for five years, for the price that Corcraft normally charges. By forcing the MoMA to rent the pieces, Rowland has implicated the museum, making it an accomplice to a crime.

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