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Aura Rosenberg, *Ann Craven/Chelsea*, 1996-1998. Inkjet print, 116,8 × 91,4 cm © Courtesy the artist

Humansplaining

An extreme amount of things alongside an extreme amount of words make it difficult to glimpse (and apply) the creativity in Louisiana's latest themed exhibition.

By Nanna Friis 19.01.24 Review Artikel på dansk

One of the most human things of all must be the ability to get an idea. Unlike animal instincts, machine settings, or algorithms, the human brain produces ideas. And when such ideas resemble questions rather than answers, we are presumably looking at creativity. Louisiana's new exhibition, *The Irreplaceable Human*, is truly an idea. Conceptually, it belongs in a category that has become a Louisiana trademark: large-scale themed exhibitions that mix contemporary and older art, perhaps adding dashes of relevant natural/social science, perhaps some archival material, possibly some fiction or news, and plenty of text to guide audiences safely through the thematic considerations – all of it wrapped up in a (too) delectable exhibition design which is usually allowed to play a leading role.

The idea behind *The Irreplaceable Human* sounds less clear-cut than those of its earlier, more subject-defined sister exhibitions (about, for example, moons and mothers). First of all, a number of different ideas appear to have come together in a desire to investigate the phenomenon of creativity, its potential for unfolding itself in an AI-infected reality, and anxieties about that very same reality and its effects on art and labour.

The exhibition's first three "chapters" – Childhood, Work, and Artificial Intelligence – are followed by a more diffuse second half which seeks to offer suggestions on "how we might create the conditions for a more creative society," for example, by zooming in on cross-aesthetic practices in the chapter Cross-Pollinations. It all sounds wildly comprehensive – and, indeed, it soon turns out to be.

Being vast, gaudy, and richly varied need not be a bad thing for an exhibition project, and this museum's generous setting is probably among the best equipped for the explosion of things that comprise *The Irreplacable Human* – as are its visitors, who often have the ample time frame of an excursion available to them. But this themed exhibition also suffers from an overabundance of things.

More than sixty artists are presented here, and while the large rooms have plenty of cubic metres to accommodate them, the quantity is still massive. Several works are shown in their own rooms – for example, Ryan Gander's robot gorilla (*School of Languages*, 2023) sits in a beige-grey ever-so-municipal office, being all spooky and mechanical. Assisted by a wealth of collaborators, Chicks on Speed has decorated a bedroom (*Sleep Synthesis*, 2013/2023). Trevor Paglen has covered four large walls with image recognition algorithms: photos of apples, Jesus, mirrors, lipstick, and colonists from floor to ceiling, standing five metres high (*From 'Apple' to 'Abomination'*, 2023). The works need the space, and it is a successful display of quantity and drama. However, this only makes the other rooms – the ones where pictures and screens and light boxes and installations are arranged shoulder to shoulder – feel all the more cramped.

A video by Dutch artist Joost Conijn typifies the show's overall ambition: to zoom in on creativity as something distinctly human. Over the course

of a year, a hand-held, neutral, and admirably gentle camera follows a group of seven siblings who live in a run-down suburb of Amsterdam. Their freedom seems ultimate, clearly for socially at-risk rather than resourceful reasons, but the work deals with this aspect in an undramatic manner. Conijn films the children's unbounded play (with bonfires, axes, hot asphalt, smashed mopeds), their skilled shoplifting, how they share and take care of each other without much argument, but never gets sentimental in the way of Francis Alÿs; these are just simple, beautiful, and undoubtedly also hard days of human behaviour. All the aimless, yet creatively important things you can do – trying tirelessly to cycle across a miserable little ramp, for example – are surely distinctly human characteristics, things that machines and algorithms fail to master in their reliance on optimising functions.

Conijn's video feels central. Just imagine if it had been allowed to form the Childhood chapter all by itself, or perhaps alongside **Aura Rosenberg**'s photo series of children from the creative class, and Flavia Gandolfo's ghostly eyeless portraits of anonymous students in school uniforms. Of course, it would not be a Louisiana exhibition if this were the case – here, visitors need to get bang for their buck. But just imagine if the precision that good works of art possess were actually given the opportunity to be left alone for a bit, quietly demanding the audience to, well, get creative.

In the chapter on Work, Finnish artist Pilvi Takala's dryly witty videos, so permeated by start-up aesthetics and business consultant lingo, suffer a similar fate. The works' diagnosis of workplace dynamics and growth-optimising corporate culture is perfectly incisive; in fact, I think they criticise and fear some of the same things that the entire exhibition

criticises and fears. But Takala has only been given a couple of small televisions and some headphones, leaving the work fairly powerless against other presentations, such as Simon Denny's metres-tall delivery drone or Andreas Gursky's boring flashiness (aren't we over him by now, anyway?).

Obviously, taste is and always will be taste (and, therefore, unimportant for criticism). And besides the fact that Nick Cave's pseudo-couture *Sound Suit* (2006) and Marguerite Humeau's techno-romantic flower windmills really look like average sculptural showpieces rather than examples of "thinking and acting outside the box," as promised by the accompanying text, my own puzzlement at many of the curatorial choices is, of course, of lesser importance. However, it seems unintentional and unfortunate that an exhibition about creativity should actively prevent the art from inducing creativity in the audience.

My problem with institutional over-communication is profound and never-ending, but that aside: imagine if the artworks were allowed to be the kind of gentle hints they are at best. Imagine if viewers had to stumble their way around different kinds of creative discharges and use their own creativity to create connections, stitching things together to form a perhaps slightly strange quilt. I believe that creative impulses directly oppose the impulse to explain, and this opposition poses particular problems for a hyper-didactic themed exhibition about creativity. "Logic paralyses the heart," American artist Lynn Hershman Leeson once said. I think about that almost every time I look at art, and especially this time. Insofar as anything is irreplaceably human, it must be the heart's ability to process the inconsistencies that the brain does not accept.