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## Geopolitics in HD at The New Museum Triennial

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*Surround Audience*, as is titled the 2015 New Museum Triennial, closes later this week after a three-month run full of reviews, performances, lectures, screenings, and a quirky ad campaign. It addresses a digital world that has new, blurred lines between audience member and showrunner. While the aggregated, critical response seems to be something like "Not The Worst," I wanted to underscore something specific I haven't read much about. The especially wide, international net cast by the curators (51 artists from 25 countries) has certainly been addressed, but I noticed something peculiar about its global edit. After spending the 3+ hours it takes to consume all of the video in the show, I found that in particular, nearly every artist working in video had brought their geopolitical baggage to the Bowery, and slammed it on the counter. Leveling with the show's premise, the inclusion of geopolitically charged video may be addressing a gap in other common sources of video that boast a wider, and perhaps more surrounded, audience: mass media. The democratization of video has long since been used and abused by artists, and social media has only fueled that. Artists today can now cheaply and easily produce HD video that can just as easily slide through your Facebook feed as it can hang on a museum wall. Although it's certainly varied in style and affect, most of the videos in the show address some geopolitical issue, accumulating into a set of complex, visual essays.

The geographic distribution of the nations included skews east, primarily in Africa and the Middle East. Regions that are consistent cable news targets, yet it's unlikely that much of what's discussed in the Triennial video would make the cut for neither a FOX nor an MSNBC segment. The matter of each Triennial video work is not breaking news, but nonetheless current and pressing for a region or a people. What's at stake for these artists is not objective reporting or thorough analysis, but activism -- frequently demonstrating a fervent opinion. The latent calls to action in these works are not something simply discussed in a crossfire interview or even a standard documentary film. What sets this type of video apart is its transgressive mutability. Video art doesn't attempt to tie up loose ends nor does it cater to a league of executive producers. It employs the vigor of street activism but reaps the versatility of new media (and if it's lucky, the credibility of a museum spot).

Moving top-down through the museum, one of the first videos you encounter is Lawrence Abu Hamdan's piece *The All-Hearing*. The video is produced in a fairly traditional documentary form, while what it contains is a calculated, instigated performative work. Hamdan asked two sheikhs in Cairo to deliver sermons denouncing noise-pollution, simultaneously blasting the sermons live from loudspeakers outside the mosque. The nature of this seemingly simple act is indeed quite complex, and made so by the context of Egypt's current militarized state. The authorities in Cairo have attempted to suppress oppositional speech through policy -- firstly by dictating what topic every sermon in Cairo should be each week, and secondly through the guise of anti-noise pollution legislation in order to prevent anti-government sentiments from spreading through loudspeakers, which are commonly found around the city. Herein Hamdan makes a political paradox: the sheikhs become symbolically complicit with both the government agenda and the same activities this agenda attempts to quell. This is not simply a documentation, or even a story, of two sheikhs delivering two sermons, but a clever act of civil disobedience, using religion and public space as a conduit.

Passing down a narrow stairwell to the next floor of the museum, you find a video of a performance by South African artist Donna Kukama titled *NOT YET (AND NOBODY KNOWS WHY)*. In the video Kukama stands in front of a crowd gathering for an event commemorating the Mau Mau Rebellion in Kenya against the British between 1952 and 1960. She stands still, except for applying red lipstick to her entire face until it's completely covered like a mask. The opinion of the Kenyan population towards the Mau Mau rebellion is polarized, some condemning their violent guerrilla tactics. Thus, an event such as this is not a unanimously celebrated one in Kenya. This polarization makes Kukama's video perhaps the most ambiguous piece in this selection. The visual signifiers of the performance register as political, stirring up loose associations of other, far more transgressive acts such as self-immolation in crowded, public spaces. Despite this, it remains unclear and we're left in the dark on Kukama's personal views on the Mau Mau Rebellion. Works of video like this are important in this geopolitical canon -- they don't fit neatly into a political dialogue, and because of this, they call for us to question both points of view on an issue. Furthermore, they ask us to question the origin of the issue at all, in this case, the divided views of a population, representing another lasting condition of post-colonialism.

Found on the following floor is another personalized account of a symbolic journey. Shadi Habib Allah's untitled video work is an 18-minute montage of first-person footage. The video serves as the artist's account of several trips crossing the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt. The peninsula is a symbol of contention for Egypt, as the region's native people, the Bedouin people, are considered to be neglected by the Egyptian government. The process of the trips is a political one, as the peninsula is used as routes for illegal smuggling, despite military surveillance of the region. The turbulent nature of the camerawork and editing indicate a perilous, very real, lived experience. It is one of the most compelling works in the show, as the danger is palpable, and the thrill of watching real footage is more acute here than anywhere else in the exhibition. It's dull placement on a wall in a crowded, well-lit room, without headphones, make it clear that this acuity was lost on the curators. In any case, this video may appear at first like the most likely candidate here for a traditional run-and-gun style documentary, yet, much like Donna Kukama's work, the video does not afford the viewer with any transparent commentary or supplemental materials like interviews, title cards, or introductions. It is a diaristic, nonlinear account of real experiences, existing on its own as a final product. This lack of bookended-ness defies the laws of traditional documentary form, and permits us to experience his journey in a far more unmediated way.

The exhibit continues, and boasts another half-dozen works of video that all fit into the current geopolitical landscape, each certainly worthy of your attention. From Micronesia to North Korea, there are stories abound in the museum -- many you may be surprised you hadn't already heard of.

Experiencing the video of *Surround Audience* is like discovering a premium cable channel you didn't know you had -- or could even exist. It's informative but enlightening, well-crafted but sincere, fragmented but not click-bait, current but comprehensive. Most importantly, it's only up for another week -- so climb out of your news feed, and surround yourself with a new audience.

*Surround Audience*, at the [New Museum at 235 Bowery](#), closes this Sunday, May 24th.

Above photo of "Untitled," © Shadi Habib Allah.