

# 'New Humans: Memories of the Future' at the New Museum, New York

Frances DeVuono

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'New Humans: Memories of the Future', New Museum, New York, 21 March 2026 – ongoing

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Tau Lewis, *The Handle of the Axe*, 2024, installation view in 'New Humans: Memories of the Future', 2026, New Museum, New York, courtesy of the artist and the New Museum, photo by Dario Lasagni

After being closed for two years, New York's nearly fifty-year-old New Museum, a non-collecting institution dedicated to contemporary art, has completed its expansion. It reopened on 26th March 2026, with an exhibition titled 'New Humans: Memories of the Future' spread across three floors, which have now doubled its space.

The title alone forewarns of a big and in many ways inchoate exhibition. The unlikely pairing of the two nouns in the subtitle, 'Memories of the Future', intimates its poetic intent as well as any confusion viewers might have. And the 'new humans'? That subject alone might justify the 732 objects on display.

The walls of ‘New Humans’ host various sub-themes throughout – such as ‘Reproductive Futures’, ‘Mechanical Ballets’, ‘Prosthetic Futures’, ‘Leviathans’, among others. As a method of creating order, they are not inordinately helpful. Whether ‘New Humans’ is a perfect inverse of ‘the whole being greater than its parts’, or whether it simply reifies that old saying is unclear. ‘New Humans’ has many parts, and the wall rhetoric does not always align with what is shown. But as a walk-in Cabinet of Curiosities, a crazy *kunstkammer* of over a hundred years of collected objects, it is inordinately fun. And informative.

The exhibit starts on the second floor going up through the fourth. Each of the walls outside the three floors are covered with work by a different artist, beginning with Tishan Hsu’s vinyl print of various body parts distorted and morphing against a metallic-looking set of enlarged dot print matrices. Signage quotes the artist as saying, ‘I consider myself a cyborg. Google is my memory.’ It is a good start to an exhibit whose unstated, and stated, focus on technology from the early twentieth century to the present underpins much of what is shown. In the first room, the curators have placed a 1937 lithograph by Marcel Duchamp titled *La Mariée* [The Bride], across from a series of five ink drawings by Wangechi Mutu commissioned for the exhibition that were inspired by science fiction writer Octavia Butler’s short story, *Bloodchild*.<sup>1</sup> In another room they place a Simon Denny sculpture that likens Amazon warehouse workers to caged birds through an augmented reality app. And across from Denny’s sculpture is *Soft Materials*, a video



Tishan Hsu, *ears-screen-skin*: New York, 2025, installation view in ‘New Humans: Memories of the Future’, 2026, New Museum, New York, courtesy of the artist and the New Museum, photo by Dario Lasagni

<sup>1</sup> Octavia Butler first published *Bloodchild* in 1984; see *Bloodchild and Other Stories*, Seven Stories Press, New York, second edition, 2005

by Daria Martin of dancers moving with robotic devices that were developed at the Artificial Intelligence Laboratory in Zurich. In a time where Amanda Askill at the AI development company, Anthropic (a competitor to the US company Open AI), has ‘likened training the large language model [*Claude*] to the role of a parent training a child’,<sup>2</sup> the soft, gentle interactions among Martin’s human dancers and robots makes sense. This is apparently how Anthropic and other artificial intelligence companies see the future. But viewing both Denny’s and Martin’s pieces together suggests two current but different views about the technology in question: a way to optimise labour – or a way to share space with a new kind of life.

‘New Humans’ gives us a history for all this. In the same room are early twentieth-century, black and white photographs of work by time-and-motion efficiency experts Frank Gilbreth and Lilian Moller Gilbreth, showing (among other things) a clock, timers, physicians in an operating room, a woman’s high-heeled shoes on some kind of treadmill.<sup>3</sup> The images appear sweetly old-fashioned in their particulars, while affirming a long history of capitalism’s desire to heighten output.

We are reminded that the glorification of industrialisation, and even the imagined potential of machines, crossed ideological lines. There are lithographs by the Russian Suprematist El Lissitzky, from 1920–21, in response to the opera, *Victory over the Sun*, a Cubo-Futurist piece where humans ‘replace the sun with a fully man-made energy source thus ushering in a technologically advanced Utopia’.<sup>4</sup> These prints were part of the artist’s (unrealised) plan to remake the opera using mechanised puppets. Equally influenced by the potential of man-made machines, but inspired by Italian fascism instead of Russian communism, is the 1931 photo still of dancer/choreographer Giannina Censi miming an airplane in her dance *Danza Aerofuturista*, *Aerodanza2*, performed while ‘[Filippo Tommaso] Marinetti recited poetry that gloried war’.<sup>5</sup>

Hito Steyerl’s 2025 installation and film, *Mechanical Kurds*, is less ambiguous and more chilling. One enters a space dotted with brightly coloured boxes that mirror the screen icons outsourced Amazon workers use to identify people and objects for the company’s artificial intelligence. Steyerl shows Kurdish workers at a refugee camp in Iraq. We see them on a desolate street, in groups talking, and hard at work sitting at computers tagging images of humans, cars, animals, and more, marking each with a differently coloured box, so that the world’s largest shopkeeper can better market his goods.

‘Dream Machines’ is an odd, narrow hallway, painted bright blue, that continues the examination of technologies. Images line the walls and objects are placed on shelves, such as Samia Halaby’s *Foldgrow*, a kinetic painting programmed on an Amiga computer in 1984, and

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<sup>2</sup> Jill Lapore, ‘We, The Robots’, *The New Yorker*, 30 March 2026, p 20

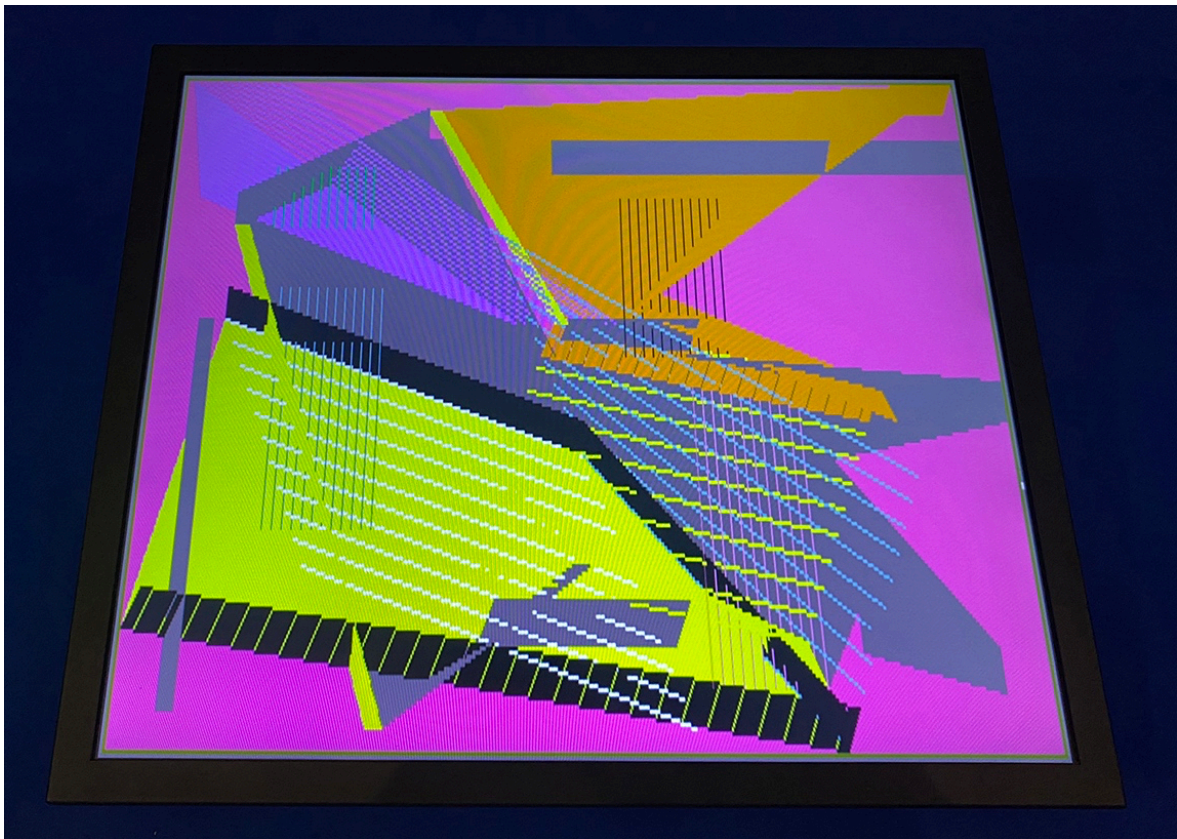
<sup>3</sup> Although serious in their efforts to heighten productivity the couple are often best remembered by the book two of their children wrote: *Cheaper By the Dozen*, published in 1948, which did much to soften the ideas of efficiency experts in the mid-twentieth century.

<sup>4</sup> From one of the exhibition wall texts.

<sup>5</sup> Massimiliano Gioni, Gary Carrion-Murayari, Madeline Weisburg and Calvin Wang, eds, *New Humans: Memories of the Future*, Phaidon in association with the New Museum, New York, 2026, p 399



Hito Steyerl, *Mechanical Kurds*, 2025, installation view in 'New Humans: Memories of the Future', 2026, New Museum, New York, courtesy of the artist and the New Museum, photo by Dario Lasagni



Samia Halaby, *Foldgrow 5*, 1987, in 'New Humans: Memories of the Future', 2026, courtesy of the artist and the New Museum, photo by the author

Channa Horwitz's *Sonakinatography*, the artist's visual system of notation for music, dance and other time-based arts. Mika Rottenberg's video, *Dough*, was also included in this space. Visitors have to crane their necks to view it as it is hung high above the entrance door, which is unfortunate because it is a wonderfully surreal piece on female labour. The women in it are clothed in beige service uniforms and are all hard at work making bread that appears to be moistened with their tears and sweat. The dough moves from floor to floor on conveyor belts and chutes in a space that looks as much like a home as a home-made factory.

Nestled into a niche on a stairway leading to the third floor is *When Lambs Rise Up Against the Bird of Prey* by Precious Okoyomon. It is an intimate piece, a small animatronic sculpture of a woman in a lace negligée with lamb's ears and cloven hooves for hands, surrounded by what looks like the pink insulation material used in housing.

Human psyche and psychology are given their due. On entering the first room on the third floor, viewers are confronted by an enormous soft-sculpted figure by Tau Lewis, titled *The Handle of the Axe*. Part guardian, part totem, it signals the exhibition's approach to objects that are as concerned with the mystical as much as the physical. To the left, one can hear and see a beautiful video by the musician and artist Julien Creuzet singing about a seventeenth-century Afro-Brazilian resistance fighter against a field of moving, abstracted imagery in shades of blue. In another room is a both beautiful and righteously angry mural-sized painting of the crisis in the Amazon by Santiago Yahuarcani, a self-taught artist, activist and member of the Uitoto people of Peru. Vivid and passionate, it is oddly positioned directly across from a glass cabinet filled with delicate paintings and sculptures by Ovariaci, a Danish painter who underwent gender-affirming surgery in the 1950s. While both are provocative, and visually rewarding, it is a bit like being in a cluttered attic; connections are not easy to figure out.



Santiago Yahuarcani (Uitoto), *Sequía en el río Amazonas II*, 2024, courtesy of the artist and the New Museum, photo by Dario Lasagni



Christopher Kulendran Thomas w/Annika Kulendran, *The Finesse*, 2022, installation view in 'New Humans: Memories of the Future', 2026, New Museum, New York, courtesy of the artist and the New Museum, photo by Dario Lasagni

Throughout – amidst all this material and its many sub-themes – by combining artists' work from the last hundred years to the present, 'New Humans' effectively reminds us that many of our current concerns are lodged in the past. In Christopher Kulendran Thomas's large, multimedia installation, *The Finesse*, several hulking, ten-foot figures dressed in camouflage gillie suits are interspersed throughout the space. One wall is filled with projected nature imagery; the opposing wall consists of mirrors with another video projected onto it. *The Finesse* highlights interviews with a Tamil soldier fighting for independence from the Sinhalese state, and a Tamil dancer. Signage for the piece posits the artist's work as a 'critique [of] the philosophical foundations of the nation-state'. It echoes the questions Columbia University professor Mahmood Mamdani raises about state violence in his book *Neither Settler Nor Native*.<sup>6</sup> Extrapolating from Sri Lanka, to the South Asians expelled from Uganda in the 1970s, the questions facing South Africa in the wake of Apartheid at the end of the twentieth century and the longstanding issue of the Palestinians, as well as the increasing mass of global migrations from climate change and war, this critique is much needed.

By now, it is a given that we see the artworld as a global endeavour in terms of both markets and ideas. But debates about the reach of modernism were rife at the turn-of-this past century. Essays by Apinan Poshyananda, Geeta Kapur and Okwui Enwezor have discussed whether the phenomenon of 'Modern Art' was the result of colonial impositions, or whether it was a

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<sup>6</sup> In *Neither Settler Nor Native* (Belknap Press, 2020), Mamdani differentiates between settlers and immigrants, arguing for a new definition of the state in a time of postcolonial mass migrations.

something altogether different.<sup>7</sup> Yet throughout ‘New Humans’, and especially in the section titled ‘New Images of Man’, the geographical reach and connections of modern ideas are made eminently clear. The section’s title is a nod as well as a corrective to New York MoMA’s 1959 exhibition of the same name, which consisted solely of European and US artists, of which only one was female.<sup>8</sup> Lined up around deeply coloured crimson walls are figurative abstractions by artists ranging from F N Souza, Eva Hesse, Jorge de la Varga, Demas Nwoko, Leon Golub to Ibrahim el Salahi and others, linking a number of different international art movements from the mid-twentieth century.

Aside from Seth Price’s three large LED screens of close-up images of human skin which shimmer with life, the uppermost floor largely has a dual focus on robots and the city. The room filled with robots has nonfunctional models by H C Westerman and a lovely one of a jogger with a video in its chest by Shigeo Kubota. Both *Future Ancestral Technologies* by Cannupa Hanska Luger (Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara, Lakota) with its tightly bound fabric and steel construction, as well as one of writer/performance artist Rammellzee’s Gothic Futurism costumes nearby, offer more organic possibilities of what is to come. Other examples of imagined technology can be seen in Stephanie Dinkins’s interview with Bina48, a chatbot created by entrepreneur, transhumanist and LGBTQ activist Martine Rothblatt. They uploaded data from and about their wife (whose name is Bina) to create a bot of her mind. One of Rothblatt’s foundations’ websites, the LifeNaut project, allows you to do the same.<sup>9</sup>

The exhibition’s visions of cities range from dystopian to utopian, to prescient, to simply our present. A 24-foot-long portion of architect Arata Isozaki’s *Electric Labyrinth*, his 1968 installation on the effects of the atomic bomb, is reconstructed here as *Re-ruined Hiroshima*. One of Bodys Isek Kingelez’s maquettes of idealised cities is in the space behind it. And spanning two walls of the entire front room are leaves from the 154-page graphic novel titled *Soft City* by Hariton Pushwagner. Made during 1969–75, it follows a day of family life, with images of women holding children seen from apartment windows, to a street jammed with men getting into cars on their way to work. It is an outline of sexism and the alienation of urban life then (and now), done in simple contour drawing. Sophia Al-Maria’s short video, *The Future was Desert*, which explores the economic and ecological developments in the Gulf states, brings us sharply to the present.

‘New Humans’ is far from perfect, and the museum expansion itself has been criticised for its paucity of seating. As an exhibition, it is overly stocked with artworks and accompanying wall texts that confuse as often as clarify. There is no singular focus that makes for easy viewing.

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<sup>7</sup> See Geeta Kapur, ‘Dismantling the Norm’ (pp 60–69) and Apinan Poshyananda, ‘Roaring Tigers, Desperate Dragons’ (pp 23–53), in *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions*, The Asia Society Galleries/Harry N Abrams, New York, 1996; also see the Introduction by Okwui Enwezor in *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945–1994*, Prestel, New York, Munich and London, 2001, pp 10–16

<sup>8</sup> See the PDF of the 1959 exhibition catalogue, ‘New Images of Man’ in New York MoMA’s archive: [https://assets.moma.org/documents/moma\\_catalogue\\_2907\\_300062198.pdf](https://assets.moma.org/documents/moma_catalogue_2907_300062198.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> See <https://lifonaut.com/mindfile/faqs/>



**Foreground:** Bodys Isek Kingelez, *Ville fantôme*, 1996; **back wall:** Hariton Pushwagner, drawings from *Soft City*, 1969–75; installation view in ‘New Humans: Memories of the Future’, 2026, New Museum, New York, courtesy of the New Museum, photo by Dario Lasagni

But it is these very things that make it exciting. This is not the kind of exhibition where one is easily led from section to section; it is an opportunity to get lost. In its attempt to link the last century’s modernism with the present, ‘New Humans: Memories of the Future’ is as messy as our understanding of ourselves and our histories. It demands multiple visits. And the New Museum must know that, because, as of this writing, neither the catalogue nor any of the press materials have given the exhibition an end date.

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**Frances DeVuono** is an art writer, artist and former Associate Professor of Art at the University of Colorado Denver. She was a Contributing Editor for *Artweek*, and her reviews and articles have appeared in magazines such as *Art in America*, *Arts*, *Art Papers*, *Sculpture Magazine* and *New Art Examiner*, among others, as well as here in **Third Text Online**. She lives in Berkeley, California.