

At first and second glance

27 April 2015

Last weekend at this year's New York Triennial exhibition entitled [Surround Audience](#): The elevator deposits me on the second floor of the New Museum, where my gaze is immediately drawn to the [double installation "Freedom"](#) by artist Josh Kline (born 1979 in Philadelphia).

Standing in the room are four life-sized, uniformed and helmeted Robocop figures, with monitors installed at stomach level. The screens show videos of people being interviewed on current issues like domestic violence against women, surveillance, racist police attacks and the resultant counter-protest. A speech by Barack Obama is projected on a screen on the opposite wall. It looks like his inauguration speech from the steps of the Capitol in January 2009.

The Change and Hope proclaimed by Obama were shattered a few short years later, scuttled by the kind of brutality embodied by these police figures in military garb – at least that's my reading of the piece, perhaps because of the frame of mind I'm in after ten days in Washington and New York.

But Josh Kline had something more subtle in mind. It's not Obama's speech but instead a re-enactment that's playing on the wall. The video shows a re-imagined President delivering the speech he *could* have given. A passionate appeal to social movements to bring about changes outside and beyond the established political institutions. But this is far from the current reality in the USA. The stubbornly entrenched two-party system is described to me by a lawyer-journalist friend in these words: "The lunatics and the neo-fascists within the Republicans have lost all hold on reality. And the Democrats have shifted so much to the right they'd probably see Angela Merkel as far-left."

The people speaking in the videos are not social activists as I had first thought. The interviews are with police officers, former or retired, describing how they identify and monitor protesters with the help of social media. The protest movement of the last few years, the Obama campaign and Occupy Wall Street – all totally absorbed into the US political system without bringing any real change.

In an interview in the exhibition catalog, Kline says that America's artists have much greater access to the problems of the 21st century. They are closer to the disaster and feel the effects of globalization and social inequality more keenly than the Europeans. The pieces by the other artists in the exhibition address some of these issues, such as migration and interculturality. As I watch Nicholas Mangan's film on environmental destruction in the Pacific island of Nauru – setting out a triad of colonialism, western consumer habits and ecological disaster – I hear in the background the voice of Sophia Al-Maria. Singing Arabic songs, she embodies the sense of being torn between the Arab Gulf, where her family are from, and the US Northwest, where she was born. In the end I'm struck by the words of Donna Kukama, who looks at the production of art as a process of ongoing questioning: Where do you stand as a person and do you operate in full awareness of society as a whole?