

Carroll / Fletcher: Art Beyond Medium

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Number 101, February–June 2014

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/71248ac>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

2368-030X (print)

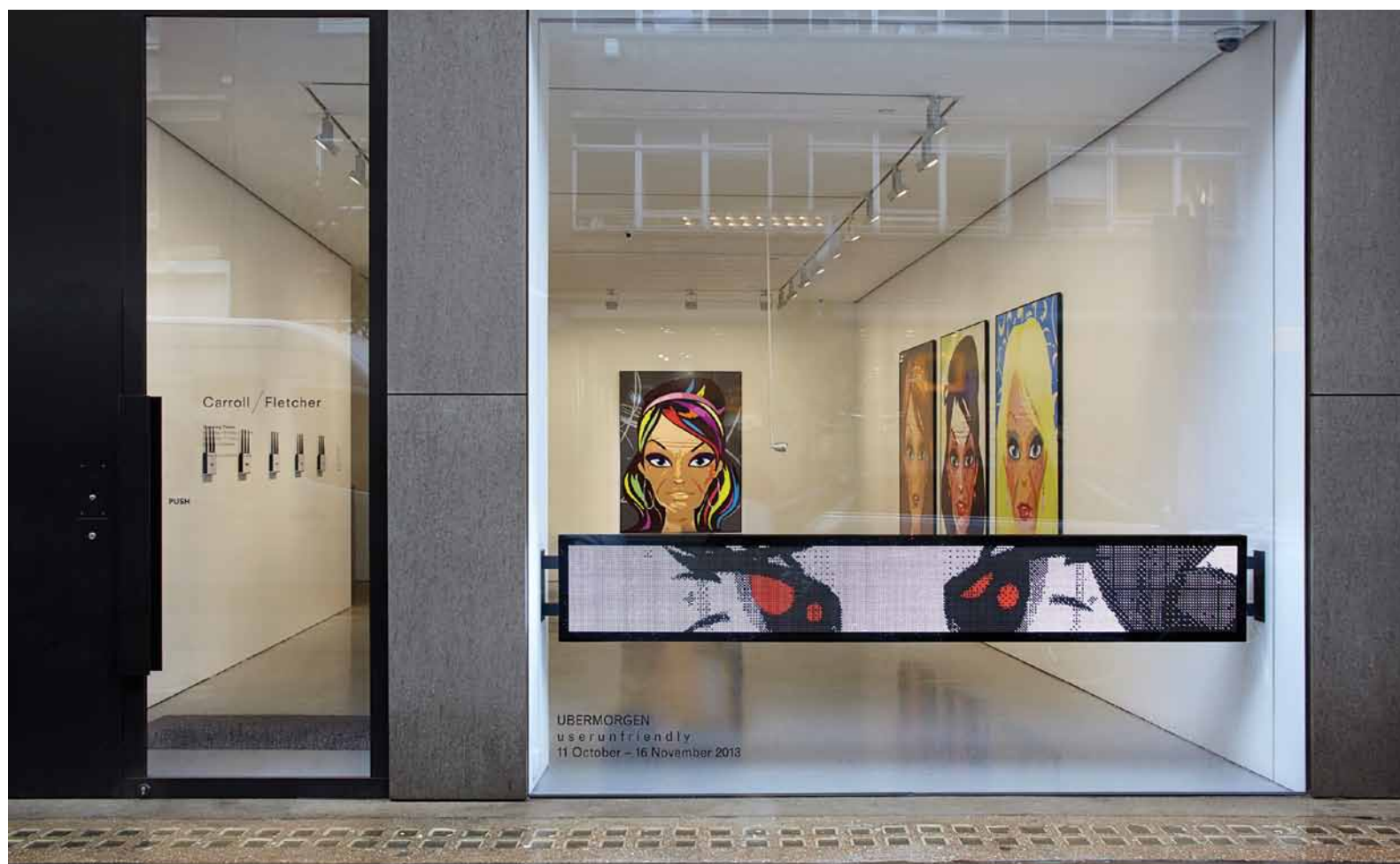
2368-0318 (digital)

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Cite this review

Waelder, P. (2014). Review of [*Carroll / Fletcher: Art Beyond Medium*]. *ETC MEDIA*, (101), 35–39.

CARROLL/FLETCHER: ART BEYOND MEDIUM



Nowadays, both emerging and established artists increasingly incorporate digital media in their work and make reference to our technologically driven culture. Some galleries respond by supporting these artists without necessarily adopting the “new media art” label: everything is contemporary art regardless of the medium or content. In 2012, Jonathon Carroll and Steve Fletcher co-founded Carroll / Fletcher,¹ a contemporary art gallery, which opened in a 400sq/m architect-designed space on Eastcastle Street in Central London. This gallery works with artists who use a diverse range of media to explore contemporary socio-political, cultural, scientific and technological themes.

New additions to its roster of artists include Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme and Michael Najjar. As the gallery prepares its participation in the upcoming art fairs ARCO Madrid (February 19 – 23, 2014) and Art Basel Hong Kong (May 15 – 18, 2014), Jonathan Carroll reflects on the gallery’s current activities and his perspective on the art market.

Carroll / Fletcher is a recently established gallery that already stands out for its innovative approach to contemporary art. How did the gallery come into being?

I have a background in economics and I worked as a financial trader for thirteen years at CSFB and Nomura. I wasn’t exposed to art

Ubermorgen, Userunfriendly.
Exhibition view at Carroll / Fletcher contemporary art.
Courtesy of Carroll / Fletcher contemporary art.

while I was growing up, but during my career in finance, my travel schedule provided me with that opportunity. My international travel meant that my early experiences of art were of visiting museums, which soon prompted me to explore galleries and as a consequence, I began to collect art in the early to mid 1990s. Looking back, this narrowly focused perspective inevitably led me to start collecting what I refer to as traditional media. Having decided to end my career in finance, I moved to New York. It was here that I was exposed to new spaces and galleries, and I met artists who used media and/or had a focus that resonated with me. In 2002 specifically, I visited Rafael Lozano-Hemmer’s solo exhibition at bitforms gallery² and that was the first time I engaged with artworks that used non-traditional formats or media. These representations did not in any way appear alien to my (perhaps ignorant) art sensibility: they made perfect sense to me and felt quite naturally like the art of today. I started looking at more of this type of art, which was taking advantage of, or expanding the boundaries that new technology was making visible and viable, and eventually I began collecting it. Through my collecting, I developed strong relationships with a number of artists. I considered establishing a foundation to support these art practices but ultimately I realized it made more sense to commit myself completely and open a gallery. As risky as it seems in the current environment, particularly given the multi media nature of many of the gallery artists’ work that (for now at least) makes the difficult job of engaging with collectors even more difficult, I continue to believe passionately in the gallery’s vision.

The gallery represents several artists whose work involves technology and digital culture. Would you say, then, that the gallery promotes “new media art”?

No, I don’t like labels, and “new media” specifically leads people to make assumptions based on preconceived ideas about the nature of this work, and can often dissuade some people from even looking at it. This is nonsense. When you talk about painting, sculpture or photography, these generally are clearly defined terms but when you say “new media” then to me it becomes meaningless and indefinable... I’m bound to ask: where do you draw the line? I tell my artists: “don’t call yourself a new media artist, you’re simply an artist.” Perhaps a decade ago artists thought this was necessary, that it had value. But I don’t agree: great works of art can hold their own irrespective of the format or medium.

Fortunately, newer generations of artists are much more aware of narrow categorizations;



Manfred Mohr, *One and Zero*.
Exhibition view at Carroll / Fletcher contemporary art.
Courtesy of Carroll / Fletcher contemporary art.

therefore, they don’t want to be seen as new media artists because this potentially devalues their work in the wider contemporary art world and the market. If they are seen as conceptual artists who use certain media, which is actually the same thing, they shed the label and their work gets the appropriate focus for what it is rather than primarily for the medium that is used.

How do you present the work of these artists when you participate in an art fair? Do you think that

having separate sections for media art (such as black boxes, etc.) is positive?

Getting the attention of collectors at art fairs is always a problem. If you consider, for instance, the size of an art fair like Miami Basel, which takes nearly four days just to get around the space, the chances of someone stopping to see the work are limited, regardless of whether you are in a black box or not. With screen-based works you have the additional problem of having

to keep the collector’s attention for a period of time. But then there is the way in which the work is displayed: many galleries just show the artworks on an unmodified flatscreen with the manufacturer’s logo in front of it, so it is just a TV on the wall with something on it. In a world where we are constantly bombarded with screen-based content, if you say “this is a work of art” but it looks like a documentary that is placed on a TV then you’re not doing a service

to the artist’s work. I think the presentation, the manner in which the artwork is displayed, has not been thought about enough until now.

At Art Stage Singapore, ³ I decided to show only screen-based works in various types of displays. It was intentional and, to some extent, it was also a way to make a statement: we need to re-think the way screen-based works are shown, so that collectors can see that they are serious works of art, and that they are not automatically

diminished by being screen based and therefore quasi TV. By showing all these screen-based works together, I was trying to demonstrate in some small way that screen-based works have just as much potential to make a statement as painting or photography. I think the best way of showing the quality of multi media works is to present them alongside other mediums.

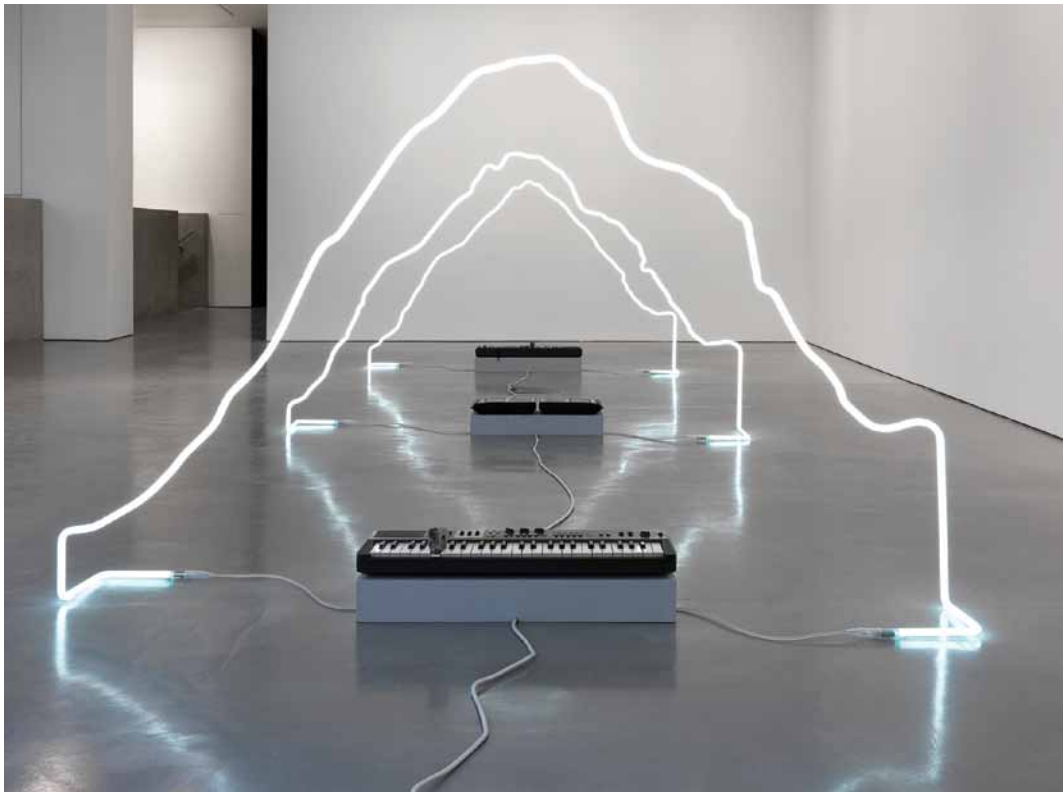
Why did you decide to include an online shop on the gallery’s website?

Well, in the online shop we are selling books for five pounds, posters for ten pounds and so on. It basically is directed at people who like the work of an artist but cannot afford it. It’s a point of access. I see young people who are interested in the art world but they think they can never be part of it because everything costs thousands or millions, so I think that the online shop is a way of making the gallery and the art more accessible. When I first started going to art galleries, gaining access to them was intimidating; I was looked upon very suspiciously. So in my gallery, I want to be open to everybody, every age group, every income category, it should be a way of entering into the art world. The first thing I focused on when I started the gallery was to make it as accessible as possible, so nobody would feel intimidated when they walked in: I wanted to avoid the usual highly exclusive, elitist atmosphere. I think both the gallery space and the online shop contribute to breaking down the barriers that discourage most people from even thinking of becoming a collector.

Pau Waelder

¹ Carroll / Fletcher art gallery. <<http://www.carrollfletcher.com/>>
² bitforms art gallery. <<http://www.bitforms.com/>>
³ Art Stage Singapore contemporary art fair. <<http://www.artstagesingapore.com/>>

Richard T. Walker, *In Defiance of Being Here*.
Exhibition view at Carroll / Fletcher contemporary
art. Courtesy of Carroll / Fletcher contemporary art.



Richard T. Walker, *Outside of All Things*.
Exhibition view at Carroll / Fletcher contemporary art.
Courtesy of Carroll / Fletcher contemporary art.

Thomson and Craighead, *Belfef*. Exhibition view at Carroll / Fletcher contemporary art. Courtesy of Carroll / Fletcher contemporary art.

