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Daniel Birnbaum, Michelle Kuo)

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- 1 Virtual reality is becoming a rather concrete possibility for contemporary art. This is a standpoint shared and problematized by the diverse contributors to *More than Real: Art in the Digital Age*, a volume edited by Daniel Birnbaum of Moderna Museet in Stockholm and Michelle Kuo of the New York MoMA. This collection comes from the 2018 Verbier Art Summit, where the contributing writers, artists and curators met in order to discuss how the VR technology “manipulates the very meaning of coming together.” What is at first glance unusual about this effort is how early these sophisticated reflections on a still nascent technological form arrive: the cultural conventions for using a VR headset, or for the kind of content that goes into it, are still very much being determined. However, contemporary art, and its corresponding museum institutions in particular, have been at the forefront of this discussion. From this stem both the strengths and the weaknesses of *More than Real*. The book probes its subject through critical lenses familiar to scholars of art. Daniel Birnbaum recalls Walter Benjamin’s idea of “prophetic power” exhibited by artists who make works suitable for mediums that do not yet exist (examples include Emily Brontë’s 1847 novel *Wuthering Heights* as presaging a film script, or the branching prose of Jorge Luis Borges as a premonition of hypertext). According to Birnbaum, recent artists such as Philippe Parreno or Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster can be seen to prefigure VR works before the advent of the actual technological form. In this sense the book sometimes feels anticipatory: how will the medium of virtual reality affect the (genealogical) writing of art history? The contributing artists offer reflections on their own practice as they engage issues of virtuality in the digital age: Olafur Eliasson problematizes the embodiment of users and museum visitors alike; Pamela Rosenkranz and Anicka Yi connect the dots between the Amazon corporation and the Amazon rainforest; Ed Atkins illuminates how the concept of “loss” changed in the digital context; and Douglas Coupland discusses the entwined history of escapism and media theory in an interview with Birnbaum. Besides the usual

discourse-producers in the art world, the readers of this volume will also find thoughts from the VR specialist Dado Valentic and the neuro-science professor Paul Verschure. Perhaps the most openly sceptical account of VR comes from John Slyce of London's Royal College of Art, who concludes that VR after all only brackets reality. In his view the key issue is to develop practices in which VR "might not simply take us elsewhere but return us to the life-world in order to enhance our lives and transform our relation with an analogue bio-sphere, for which we need to care better." Unfortunately, the "life-world" which produced this book is not approached as reflexively as VR technology. The volume's creative design with artist sketches, its format of very short think pieces, and the framing of Verbier Art Summit as a platform for "connecting thought leaders to key figures in the art world" in the context of VR becomes indistinguishable from a tech start-up conference. Nevertheless, readers willing to go past the branded veneer and to engage with the multiple perspectives on virtual reality offered in this book are bound to find a way of grasping this novel artistic and technological territory.