(2013) appears as both the conceptual linchpin and a respite from the chaos, delighting in serendipitous connections as it suggests the futility of comprehensive categorization. Another central work is Ryan Trecartin’s A Family Finds Entertainment (2004) with its manic, intimate, made-for-YouTube performativity. The exhibition reminds us that a double sense of being both watched and constantly watching is not a recent phenomenon: consider the roving, motion-sensing eye of Rafael Lozano-Hemmer’s Surface Tension (1992), which presages NSA-driven paranoia, or Lynn Hershman Leeson’s interactive Lorna (1979–83).

Amid all the monitors, headsets and outdated platforms, what seems most obsolete in “Electronic Superhighway” is optimism. This may be strongest in Nam June Paik’s Good Morning, Mr. Orwell (1984), a celebratory refutation of the titular British author’s famous dystopian vision. And so the abandon with which artists once romped through novel platforms appears to give way to self-aware complicity in an age of a militarized, corporatized Internet. Subversion becomes as important as enjoyment, and the motif of the millennial as a wily, system-literate participant is characterized by Amalia Ulman’s finely constructed selfie artwork, Excellence & Perfections (2014). “We can’t work on the assumption that immersion has no consequence,” said John Akomfrah recently of our all-encompassing relationship with the digital. “Electronic Superhighway” comes to tenuous terms with the pleasures, dangers and uncertainties of our present moment.

—ALEX QUICHO

MICHEL DE BROIN
BMO PROJECT ROOM, TORONTO

There is no beginning and no end to Michel de Broin’s Castles Made of Sand (2016). Installed high above the Toronto financial district as the most recent commission for the BMO Project Room, de Broin’s hulking installation pivots on a simple conceptual proposition: how to construct a machine that builds and rebuilds sandcastles. Yet what might seem like child’s play is in fact deceptively complex. Months of consultation with engineers, scouring scrapyards and custom-designing parts, and testing the granular composition of various sand types all had a part in this feat of mechanical improvisation. A spat at one side of de Broin’s machine pours precisely 10 litres of hydrated sand (sourced from Sandbanks Provincial Park east of Toronto) on to a conveyor belt. The pile is carried to a stainless-steel mould, and, with a massive 4,000 pounds of pneumatic pressure, shaped in a few seconds into a castle. That castle—a coincidental replica of the Royal Canadian Mint, according to de Broin—continues along the conveyor, stopping at the end of the belt where it dries and cracks until the next turning of the tide (the machine is timed on lunar cycles) when it’s tipped over the edge and the circuit repeats, ad infinitum.

Castles Made of Sand is more than just an infernal machine of sorts; it’s a metaphor ripe with contradictions. Consider the reversal of economic hierarchies in embedding an industrial-scale machine at the heights of white-collar
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capital, or the parallels between the unseen hand of tidal gravity and the
mysterious market forces of financial ruin and rent. There are odd ironies,
too: the complex design and absurd amount of power needed to form a
simple sandcastle, and the fact that, despite its imposing presence, the
machine sits static during office hours waiting for the next tide (though it
can be set in motion on demand by a "privilege key"). From its vantage point
atop the skyline at the edge of Lake Ontario, the work looks out over an
ever-changing cityscape of brinks and mortar and glass facades—all in essence
made of sand. De Bruin’s castle becomes a temporary fixture in that view but,
like all things subject to an ephemeral existence, it and the city and society
that surround it remain perpetually on the brink of collapse and repARATION,
no matter how seemingly dominant or eternal. —BRYNE MCLAUGHLIN

DAVID MALJKOVIC
VOX, MONTREAL

To enter David Maljkovic’s recent exhibition at VOX, the Zagreb-based artist’s
first solo show in Canada, is to step inside the concept of projection. Not just
projection as generated by a cinematic apparatus, but also those ideological
projections that so adeptly deployed the flicker of the moving image through-
out the 20th century. In an assemblage of support structures, including a
microphone and stand, guitar amp and potted plant, as well as slide, 16-mm
and digital projectors and the images they project, the installation continues
in the vein of previous exhibitions, in which earlier projects are reworked to
allow the latent institutional histories of their former display to haunt their
present contexts. Where works such as Display for Lost Pavilion at Metro Pictures,
New York (2009–11) and Untitled (2003–14) re-evaluated the spectre of moder-
nity, the plinths into and onto which the installation’s elements are built are
left unfinished at VOX, revealing the means of their construction and denying
their perceived neutrality. This revistation is further manifest as a series of
large-scale ink-jet prints pasted to the gallery walls and displaying images
of previous Maljkovic exhibitions culled from Instagram. This pix-
elated presence operates as a reminder of the hand-in-hand
decline of modernity alongside its own most ubiquitous descrip-
tor, film, which has been supplanting in the 21st century by
digital modes of documentation and dissemination.

In Steven Shaviro’s essay “What is the Post-cinematic?” he asks,
“What happens to cinema when it is no longer a cultural dominant,
when its core technologies of production and reception have
become obsolete, or have been subsumed within radically differ-
ent forces and powers?” Maljkovic adroitly reconfigures this question
to implicate the act of exhibition making. In his work, however,
the “Post” never truly arrives. Instead these histories play out in
a loop, oscillating between what is projected and what is
hidden at the interval, with that exchange in turn producing a
persistent after-image on our collective gaze.

—ARYEN HOEKSTRA

OLIVIA LAING
THE LONELY CITY:
ADVENTURES IN THE ART
OF BEING ALONE
PICADOR, 336 PP, $26.00

New York—proper has transformed into New York—the-idea: the real-
ity of the modern urban, with its poverty, anomie, race tensions and
danger, repackaged as a touch of love, contemporary means of con-
templation and actualization for the privileged. British critic Olivia
Laing moved to New York to be with the love of her life, but he dumped
her, leaving her adrift. This is the occasion for her book, The Lonely City,
a study of several (more or less) New York artists (Hopper, Wojnarowicz,
Warhol) pitted loosely as a memoir. Laing finds a community by studying
and writing about these figures. For her, loneliness “does not mean one
has failed, but simply that one is alive.” While the city alienates us, at
beckons. Yet Laing’s friendships are imaginary and one-sided. (You will
be hard pressed to find another portrait of Warhol this sympathetic. And
would Laing do heroin with Wojnarowicz?) Can we not learn something,
indeed more, from accepting that art often pushes us away, even
traumatizes us, at the very moment it draws us near? Now that cities like
New York are “safe,” art’s risk seems more vital than ever. —DAVID BALZER