

metropolis

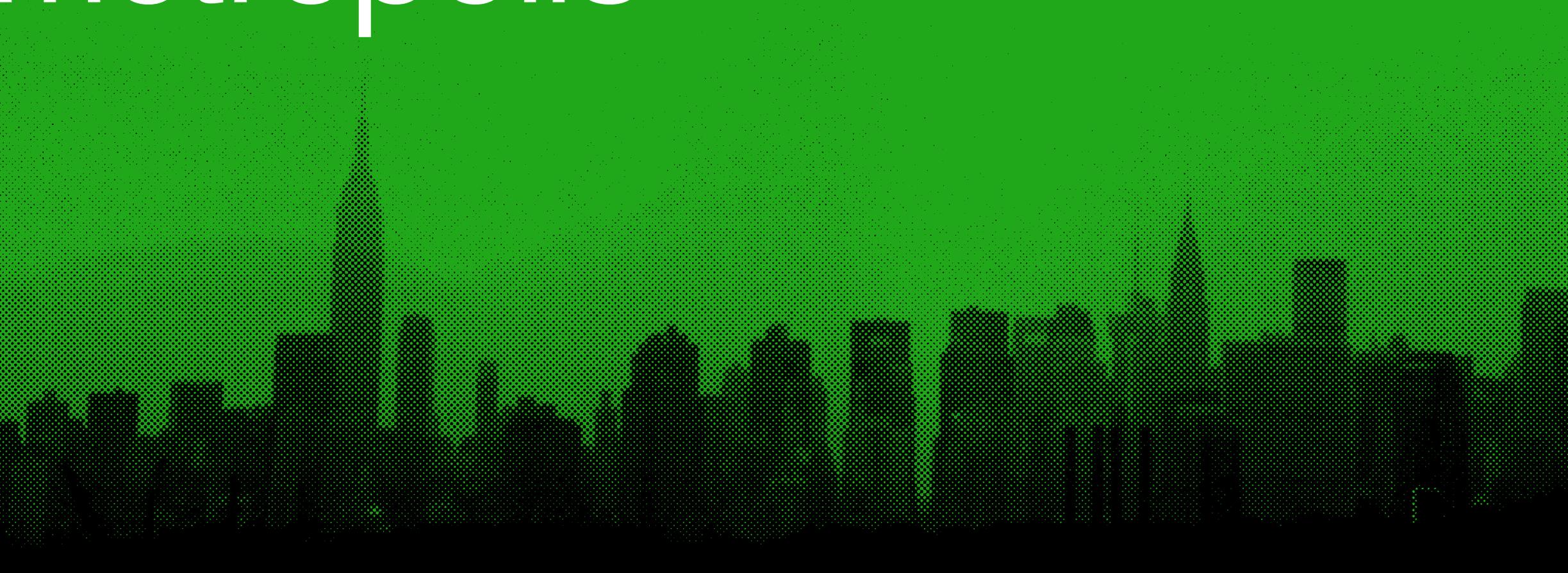




Fig. 1 Beat Streuli *Pallasades 05-01-01 2001*

metropolis

A place exists as both a physical and geographic entity with defined relationships between various inanimate components and also as a location where lives unfold and phenomena transpire, sometimes leaving a permanent imprint on the environment. When reminiscing we often speak not only of what occurred but also of where it happened. It is as if this information enriches the story, providing the listener with a way to understand the narrative. The place invariably impacts on the event.

Metropolis is about the city and the way that artists tell us about it without recounting statistics or scientific data. Rather, they give us a glimpse into aspects of lives in the city. These places may not be neatly encapsulated by descriptions of discrete variables. The volume of activities, the diversity of inhabitants, the architecture of the spaces and the interactions between all these elements can make cities simultaneously unique and universal.

Some of the earliest recorded cities existed from 4000 BC in Mesopotamia, a place that is now a centre of world attention as present-day Iraq. Athens has been known as the seat of democracy, wisdom and learning, while Sodom was renowned for conflict and disaster. However, current-day New York City solicits and cultivates ambivalence. Most of the works in this exhibition are set in New York, a place known on certain levels to us all, even if we have never been there. New York functions in this context as an exemplar of its class, emblematic of global culture and dense enough to provide instances of life that can be extrapolated to many other cities in the world.

The video projections in this exhibition touch on many aspects of city life. The works have been created since the turn of the century by artists at all stages of their careers. They do not tell all there is to know; rather they provide glimpses of life in cities. The exhibition does not draw neat conclusions, instead it provides ways in which we may choose to comprehend the idea of a city.

Beat Streuli, who is known for his photographs that investigate the subject through portraiture, adhered to his personal belief in *Pallasades 05-01-01, 2001* (fig. 1), that 'a wide reservoir of possibilities is best and most easily encountered in the centre, the meeting point of the city'.¹ In this instance, the place is a popular city shopping centre in England. Streuli employs particular techniques such as the use of a telephoto lens that ensures the impression of proximity without arousing suspicion among his subjects, who are not of interest to the viewer because of who they are but for what they represent through their cultural diversity, age, gender and adopted guises. Streuli states: 'I believe the broad reality of people like you and me is a worthy subject'.²

In this work we see a city that is composed of people of many different cultural heritages, a not uncommon phenomena of the twenty-first century. The composition of the work gives the impression of a gentle onslaught as people edge towards the viewer before disappearing from view. Rather than being threatened by this mass of strangers, any potential nervousness we may feel is dissipated by our curiosity. Human nature dictates that we are enchanted by faces and we are drawn into the work through this instinctive fascination.



Fig. 2 Tom Otterness *Nine eleven* 2003

Tom Otterness has observed that '[New York] still seems to be the great predictor'³ The city is both growing and dying; it is subject to continuous change. The adaptive prowess of both the physical structure and the inhabitants make New York a city that leads the world in economic and cultural activities. The events that occurred in the United States on September 11, 2001, were world-changing.

In a very short animation Otterness refers to some of the mass media images of the day that evoke a sense of the utter pointlessness of the event. For example, one scene in Otterness's work depicts two people who clasp hands and then leap from the top of a disintegrating building in a direct simulation of what actually occurred in 2001. Drawing on influences common to his past work, Otterness uses fairy tales and stories as a context to create parables for modern life. In *Nine eleven*, 2003 (fig. 2), the reclining figure of the Jonathan Swift character, Gulliver, represents the city of New York, with his bulbous feet being the twin towers of the World Trade Center. As in the story on which Otterness has based his work, it can be read on a number of different levels.⁴ While it is imbued with all the hallmark characteristics of a children's television cartoon (seductive colour and simplified characters), Otterness guarantees 'there's a dark edge underneath a lot of the work. You can never predict what is going to happen day-to-day, so this work is all kind of disjointed vignettes, like small chunks of meaning'⁵

For many people those events of 2001 continue to evoke a sense of utter sadness and anger, and a suspicion of those we do not directly know. Today on the subways of New York, administrators have placed posters that request: 'If you see something, say something', inciting us to move through the space with a heightened sense of suspicion. Finding humour within the dystopian reality of American life – where more than eight million people live in gated communities and the fastest growing form of public space is the prison – is extremely difficult.

Andy Diaz Hope has created a work that takes a comedic view of a society under threat. Since 2001 the social perception of threat has a power almost equivalent to that of the threat itself. This power provides leverage for some authorities to argue for the restriction of individual liberty. Diaz Hope asks, 'As the government continues its War on Terror, who will fall under the scrutiny of the government as traditional terrorists become harder or more difficult to find?'⁶

In *Financial district infiltration: Everybody is somebody's terrorist*, 2004 (fig. 3), the artist has focused on the xenophobic aura of the present, but with a twist. Imitating public warnings, the protagonist of this work wears a peculiar, hand-knitted mask with features that mimic the bland nature of the suited brigade of corporate workers who frequent city spaces. At the start of the video the character's intention is unclear, he appears to have a goal and we are inclined to be suspicious because he looks so odd. Events of recent years have taught us that the key strength of terrorists is the unexpected nature of their activities – the traditional boundaries of warfare have dissolved and a seemingly mild-mannered office worker may have ulterior motives. Following the man, who undertakes a series of routine activities that culminate in retrieving cash from an ATM, we are left feeling deflated, amused and slightly guilty for having been so paranoid without due cause.

Suspicion of strangers can be unhelpful in cities where the majority of the people encountered on a daily basis are unknown to us. Cities are referred to as urban jungles, places in which people pursue their lives within a regulated and densely constructed environment. In this space strategic activities ensure survival of the fittest, with those most suited to the climate flourishing. Ongoing survival of the species is only guaranteed by people procreating, but with the 'stranger danger' warning ringing in our ears, the actual act of finding a suitable partner is fraught with risk.



Fig. 3 Andy Diaz Hope *Financial district infiltration: Everybody is somebody's terrorist* 2004



Fig. 4 Abbey Williams *YES* 2002

Abbey Williams looks at this issue and draws on ‘personal drama and neurotic trivialities’ in a video titled *YES*, 2002 (fig. 4).⁷ The viewer is the protagonist and we see the world through the eyes of the artist. The work touches on the predatory nature of seeking a mate in a city. While television and the written word bear responsibility for romanticising relationships in New York City, Williams reduces the mating ritual to the basics. The words ‘yes’ and ‘no’ float over the images of men on the screen, indicating the initial judgement the artist has made about their appropriateness as potential suitors. The process of assessment is harsh, brutal and, for the most part, unwavering. There is no time to be wasted on someone who is not up to par. Williams states that through her work she traces ‘the line between ecstasy and the constraint of my consumption as an attempt to break down the fuzzy binarism of our yes-or-no culture’.⁸

In early 2004 Ohio State University released the results of a study which concluded that within the first ten minutes of meeting someone, we have determined their role in our life on a sliding scale ranging from acquaintance to close friend.⁹ In a video by Cristian Alexa titled *Ten-second couples*, 2000 (fig. 5), the decision is made in a fraction of the time. Alexa observes, ‘I was interested to explore the contingency aspect of relationships. What does a chance encounter entail?’¹⁰ The work unfolds as we follow a glamorous woman striding confidently down a city sidewalk, interacting with people through the clasping of hands for just ten seconds before parting ways. A sidewalk can be an equalising place where people are forced to mingle, however briefly, with other occupants of the city, irrespective of gender, class and occupation. It is a place where both predetermined and involuntary interactions occur, sometimes in stifling proximity.

Ten-second couples may read as a metaphor for the fleeting and accidental nature of the contact we have with others. When encountering people for the first time, we do not always have an idea of how their presence may impact on our lives or how this meeting will be remembered. Alexa has deliberately executed this work in one long take and it bears relevance to other works he has created that have an integral performative element. The artist questions the unwritten, unequivocal nuances of ‘acceptable’ behaviour that determine how individuals conduct themselves in public, such as moving along a sidewalk. If seen in real life, activities such as those witnessed in Alexa’s video would be considered a startling deviation from the norm, but in this work we experience them as curiously intriguing.

Many people migrated to New York from Europe in the 1900s. Within the city’s boroughs are several distinct communities that flourish independently, each with its own unique cultural style, be it Chinese, African American or Latin American. Brooklyn is the most culturally diverse of all and the largest concentration of Polish Americans in the United States exists in the Greenpoint neighbourhood. It is here that Nicholas Golebiewski has set *This is where I live*, 2003 (fig. 6).

His work is a personal exploration and as it unfolds the artist takes us on an edited, commentated tour through the space in which he lives. Common to the lives of many New Yorkers is a grudgingly tolerant acceptance of the necessity of living in exquisitely compact residences in a densely populated city. Using humour as a way of coping, Golebiewski cites the standing joke: ‘The only place to go for privacy is an uninteresting art exhibition’. However, his motivation for creating the work stems not only from a desire to diarise the way he lives but also from his interest in notions of the stranger, the foreigner and the outsider. He asks us to contemplate integration and the mechanisms by which ideas about nationality are formed. At which point or in what generation does an individual have the right to feel they belong to a place with all the responsibility, pressures and pleasures that this entitlement may entail?



Fig. 5 Cristian Alexa *Ten-second couples* 2000



Fig. 6 Nicholas Golebiewski *This is where I live* 2003



Fig. 7 PHAT *Harlem: The ghetto fabulous* 2004

Harlem is a part of New York that has mythic status relating to its concentration of African American inhabitants and associated cultural life. In the past one hundred years Harlem has changed a great deal, both in structure and character. The work titled *Harlem: The ghetto fabulous*, 2004 (fig. 7), produced by a four-member group known as PHAT (Nathaniel Belcher, David Meslin, Stephen Slaughter and Adam Wheeler), documents the fluctuating fortunes of Harlem from settlement in the late 1800s (when plans to extend existing railway structures lead to a frenzy of real estate development) to the present day when proximity to mid-town Manhattan has again stimulated interest in real estate development. It was in the 1920s that Harlem achieved iconic status as the place to visit and experience the finest jazz, produced almost exclusively by African Americans. Ironically, at the time many local inhabitants were refused entry to the clubs of renown because of the colour of their skin as venues enforced a 'white-only' policy for their audiences.

Harlem: The ghetto fabulous affords an alternative view of the current regeneration process. According to the artists, the work 'explores one possible outcome of the collision of marching market forces (gentrification) and an existing cultural heritage that has survived the most aggressive oppression ... [it] celebrates the physical, cultural, and aesthetic sensibilities of people of African descent living in an urban-American context'.¹¹ Unlike past proposals to reinvigorate Harlem, the proposition of this work is that any development should celebrate rather than obliterate the existing vibrant and tenacious African American culture.¹² Set to an energetic musical score, it traces the history of place, arriving at the present with a vigorous endorsement of the merits of Harlem as it exists and thrives today.

It is widely acknowledged that change is integral to the life of a city. Within New York this is amply illustrated through the destruction of the stately private mansions that once lined Fifth Avenue to make way for the now emblematic skyscrapers of the city. There are certain types of structures that differentiate cities from smaller towns; they include towering office blocks, commuter transit zones, large-scale sporting arenas and industrial zones. It is these built-up places that are of interest to Brian Alfred. He is enchanted by 'the visual experiences we encounter in our everyday global, corporate, natural, urban and technologically-enhanced environments'. He relishes the ambiguity of the tenuous separation of 'control and chaos ... comfort and anxiety' that constitute the human experience when living in a city.¹³

In a work titled *Overload*, 2004 (fig. 8), Alfred has utilised a range of construction techniques, from slick computer manipulation to dextrous hand-cutting, to render a range of animated scenes recognisable to us as distinctly generic urban spaces. While the environments he portrays are all man-made, for most of the work, the presence of humans is implied rather than illustrated. The detritus of human life exists in the corporate logos stamped onto the environment, the inane clutter of electrical cords in a deserted room and technicolour balloons remaining from an office party. Much of Alfred's source material comes from mass media, via the Internet or print. Through these scenes we derive some comfort in the familiarity of the vistas, yet simultaneously experience a sense of unease as we recognise the biohazard logo alerting us to potentially perilous environments.¹⁴

A particularly frenzied view of city life was recognised by the artist Shoba when he used Times Square as the location for his work. Describing the place, he recalled 'thousands of people are stepping over your feet, pushing you around. Noise is unbearable, smell of burned meat from nearby food stands, hundreds of advertising panels decorated by millions of flashing lights, outbursts of shopping hysteria'.¹⁵ In *Blowing Zen*, 2003 (fig. 9), Shoba has removed all the people from one of the busiest



Fig. 8 Brian Alfred *Overload* 2004

places on earth and replaced them with a meditative Buddhist-flute soundtrack. The flashing lights of obscenely excessive advertisements are diminished, with the hectic agitation of Times Square being reduced to a zone that provides space and time for thought rather than inciting consumption.

The work could be interpreted as a foreboding of an imminent apocalypse that will inevitably ensue should life in cities continue without unbiased, thoughtful censure or soundly reasoned arguments for certain types of future development. Alternatively, it may be that through obtaining distance from Times Square via the eyes of the artist, we can appreciate the beauty of the constructed environment in a way not possible if our feet were firmly planted in the middle of the artificial fervour of the city.

The artists

Cristian Alexa was born in Romania in 1968 and has been living in New York since 1994. His work ranges from performance and happenings to drawing, photography and video that have been displayed at venues in the United States, Asia and Europe.

Brian Alfred was born in Pittsburgh in 1973 and currently lives in New York. He studied at Yale University and has been awarded the prestigious Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant. His works have featured in exhibitions in the United States and have been written about in both a fine art and architectural context.

Andy Diaz Hope was born in the United States in 1967 and lives in San Francisco. He trained in both engineering and design in California and West Berlin. He has won numerous design awards and has participated in group shows in the United States as an artist and a designer.

Nicholas Golebiewski was born in Buffalo, New York, in 1980 and lives in Brooklyn. He works across platforms in video, performance and installation. He completed his education in the United States and Italy and has participated in numerous exhibitions in New York State.

Tom Otterness was born in Wichita, Kansas, in 1952 and has exhibited widely in the United States and Europe and is well represented in public and private collections. He has undertaken numerous public commissions, including one for the New York Botanical Garden (scheduled to open in 2005) and a major commission for the NYC subway system in 2002.

PHAT is a group of four artists (Nathaniel Belcher, David Meslin, Stephen Slaughter and Adam Wheeler) that was founded in 2004. Belcher, Slaughter and Wheeler have backgrounds in architecture and Meslin specialises in graphic design. Belcher is based in Florida, while Meslin, Slaughter and Wheeler live in California. Collectively they have published and lectured widely in the United States.

Shoba was born in Sarajevo in 1968 and moved to New York in 2002. He has worked across many mediums including installation, video, performance and photography. He has had solo exhibitions in Europe and has participated in group exhibitions in the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States.

Beat Streuli was born in 1957 in Switzerland, where he lives. He conducted tertiary studies in both Germany and Switzerland and has undertaken residencies in France, Italy, Switzerland and London. He has held solo exhibitions at numerous venues in Europe, Japan, Korea, Australia and the United States.

Abbey Williams was born in Ohio in 1971. She trained as an artist in New York and has participated in numerous exhibitions in Europe and the United States. She held her first solo exhibition in 2003 after graduating from Bard College, New York State, and is represented in private collections in the United States and Europe.

Anonda Bell



Fig. 9 Shoba *Blowing Zen* 2003

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Research for this exhibition was conducted while Anonda Bell was undertaking professional development placement at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.



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Notes

- 1 Beat Streuli, 1999, from the artist's website: www.beatstreuli.com
- 2 *ibid.*
- 3 Tom Otterness, quoted in J. Kopelman, 'Tom's treat. Finally! Public art with punch – public artist Tom Otterness', *Interview*, August 1996.
- 4 With a subtext touching on ideas about the British Empire and Christian religions, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, first published in 1726, was recognised by some as being a study in political science and a satire on morals and behaviour of the time.
- 5 Tom Otterness, quoted in J. Kopelman.
- 6 Andy Diaz Hope, artist's statement, 2004.
- 7 Abbey Williams, artist's statement, 2004.
- 8 *ibid.*
- 9 See M. Sunnafrank, *Journal of Social & Personal Relationships*, vol. 21, (3), 2004, pp. 361–79.
- 10 Cristian Alexa, artist's statement, 2004.
- 11 PHAT, artists' statement, 2004
- 12 PHAT cites a 1967 exhibition initiated by New York City mayor John Lindsay in collaboration with the Museum of Modern Art which consisted of solicited proposals from leading architects of the day for the redevelopment of the Harlem neighbourhood. None of the four submissions that were presented acknowledged the place as it existed and instead focused on the site as a tabula rasa onto which any form of establishment could be inscribed.
- 13 Brian Alfred, artist's statement, 2004.
- 14 Alfred is particularly interested in the biohazard symbol invented in 1967 by engineer Charles Baldwin who was working for the Dow Chemical Company at the time. The symbol was chosen for its status as being both unique in composition yet readily memorable.
- 15 Shoba, artist's statement, 2004.

Cristian Alexa

Romanian 1968–, worked
United States 1994–
Ten-second couples 2000
single-channel video
projection, 6 min 38 sec
Collection of the artist
© Courtesy of the artist

Brian Alfred

American 1973–
Overload 2004
Flash animation; DVD,
2 min 49 sec, ed. 6/10
Purchased, 2004
© Courtesy of the artist

Andy Díaz Hope

American 1967–
*Financial district infiltration:
Everybody is somebody's terrorist*
2004
single-channel DVD projection,
11 min 7 sec
Collection of the artist
Courtesy Yoo Projects,
San Francisco
© Courtesy of the artist

Nicholas Golebiewski

American 1980–
This is where I live 2003
black and white Super 8 film
transferred to DVD,
3 min 20 sec
Collection of the artist
© Courtesy of the artist

Tom Otterness

American 1952–
Nine eleven 2003
Flash animation; DVD, 40 sec
Collection of the artist
Courtesy Marlborough Gallery,
New York
© Courtesy of the artist

PHAT

est. 2004–
Nathaniel Belcher
American 1965–
David Meslin
Ethiopian 1973–, worked
United States 1988–
Stephen Slaughter
American 1967–
Adam Wheeler
English 1969–
Harlem: The ghetto fabulous 2004
single-channel DVD projection,
7 min 42 sec
Collection of the artists
© Courtesy of the artists

Shoba

Yugoslavian 1968–, worked
United States 2002–
Blowing Zen 2003
single-channel DVD projection,
3 min 59 sec
Collection of the artist
© Courtesy of the artist

Beat Streuli

Swiss 1957–
Pallasades 05-01-01 2001
two single-channel DVD
projections, 4 min 3 sec
Collection of the artist
Courtesy Murray Guy,
New York
© Courtesy of the artist

Abbey Williams

American 1971–
YES 2002
single-channel DVD projection,
4 min 3 sec
Collection of the artist
Courtesy Foxy Production,
New York
© Courtesy of the artist



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