↑ *Comfortably Numb* (detail), wall installation with found printed matter, 4 x 6 inches each, 2012–17.

Mapping the Viewer's Perception

Jessica Santone

Nayda Collazo-Llorens's *Comfortably Numb* (2012–17) is a large wall-based installation, comprising over 2000 collected and prepared samples of print media, each individually framed. Colorful images from popular culture or news are interspersed with bold words and phrases in clean fonts, set against brightly colored backgrounds of orange, pink, turquoise, red. The composition is complex, owing in part to the uniformity of 4 by 6 inch black frames that divide the collage into so many little pseudo-screens and in part to the close cropping of these words and images by the artist. Standing in front of the sprawling work, one is easily seduced to come closer to investigate an individual fragment and subsequently repelled by the frequently horrific contents. At a distance, the whole work is too much to take in. Stretching more than 40 feet long, the work overwhelms.

In assembling materials for the installation, Collazo-Llorens focused mainly on media representations of disaster, including graphic depictions of bodily harm, state violence, disease, explosion, contamination, and underwater scenes that suggest submersion. Also incorporated in the installation are more benign images of animals, advertisements, or illustrations from popular culture. Faces are mostly avoided and any groups of people are cropped to suggest either fragmentation or the gathering of a mass. The texts appearing alongside these images relate to disaster, some of them alarmist in all-caps, some featuring numbers of deaths or injuries experienced in natural, biological, or political disasters. Collazo-Llorens altered some of the numbers to exaggerate them, following from her research on "psychophysical numbing" which motivated the work's early development.

Psychophysical numbing is the phenomenon in which we anaesthetize ourselves to the magnitude of disasters and tragedies as a mechanism for coping with the inundation of such news items in the contemporary media world. One study on the importance of affect for decision-making describes the problem this way:

> Our cognitive and perceptual systems seem designed to sensitize us to small changes in our environment, possibly at the expense of making us less able to detect and respond to large changes. As the psychophysical research indicates, constant increases in the physical magnitude of a stimulus typically evoke smaller and smaller changes in response.[1]

Consequently, disasters that are not proximate to us, and which are much larger than phenomena we typically encounter, are difficult to comprehend in their actual scale and do not have the same emotional or psychological impact as tragedies near to us.

While some psychologists are interested in the implications of an absence of affect in relation to global responses to mass atrocity, in Collazo-Llorens's work we are confronted with psychophysical numbing as just one aspect of our individual media consumption — consumption which is as much characterized by the speed and distractedness of our navigation as it is by our messily affective responses to stories through likes, retweets, and emojis. With *Comfortably Numb*, the viewer is confounded, initially rendered "numb" through her inability to take it all in, but no amount of waiting will make the work resolve into a clear pattern. That is, when one walks closer to the work and sees the cut off numbers and images of atrocities, the artwork is horrifying, but when one steps closer and sees nothing it is more horrifying still. Like other installations and paintings in her body of work, *Comfortably Numb* expresses the artist's concern for mapping the cognitive or perceptual work of the viewer. Her compositions test the viewer and speak to our twenty-first century predilection for information architectures, data visualizations, and other types of pattern making. But unlike other artworks she's completed to date, *Comfortably Numb* uniquely resonates in 2017. The work's optical effect serves as a blunt metaphor for our capitulation to a dangerous mediascape rife with misinformation and bigotry.

The subject of superstitions appeared in another of the artist's installations, the multi-part *Unfolding the Triangle: Lake Michigan* from 2012, in which Collazo-Llorens mapped her current geographical location in Kalamazoo, Michigan in triangulation with the Bermuda Triangle and her birthplace in Puerto Rico. Similar to other contemporary artworks that use strategies of mapping and archiving to study cultural marvels, like Mark Dion's *The Davy Jones Locker* (2011), Collazo-Llorens merges research and fiction.[2] She visualizes a scientific process of mapping a territory through anamorphic topographical lines that wrap around the walls of the installation. These lines form a backdrop for a collection of more subjective "data," including mythological stories of strange phenomena, like the missing ships and airplanes of the so-called Lake Michigan Triangle[3], and her own abstract drawings from a personal archive of daily observations. Unlike Dion's more curatorial project of remixing existing collections, Collazo-Llorens's own inventions play an important role. The resulting work requires the viewer to assess the various kinds of information presented, to discern connections between these, and to evaluate the status of abstract drawings intermixed with news reports — all this while navigating the complex installation, telescoping in and out to read details and see the map, or meandering through the mirrored video room that seems to extend the entire installation infinitely in a mesmerizing simulation of an underwater tunnel. The kind of mapping at stake for the viewer of this work is largely cognitive, a matter of understanding connections between the seemingly disparate parts and strange objects in the collection.

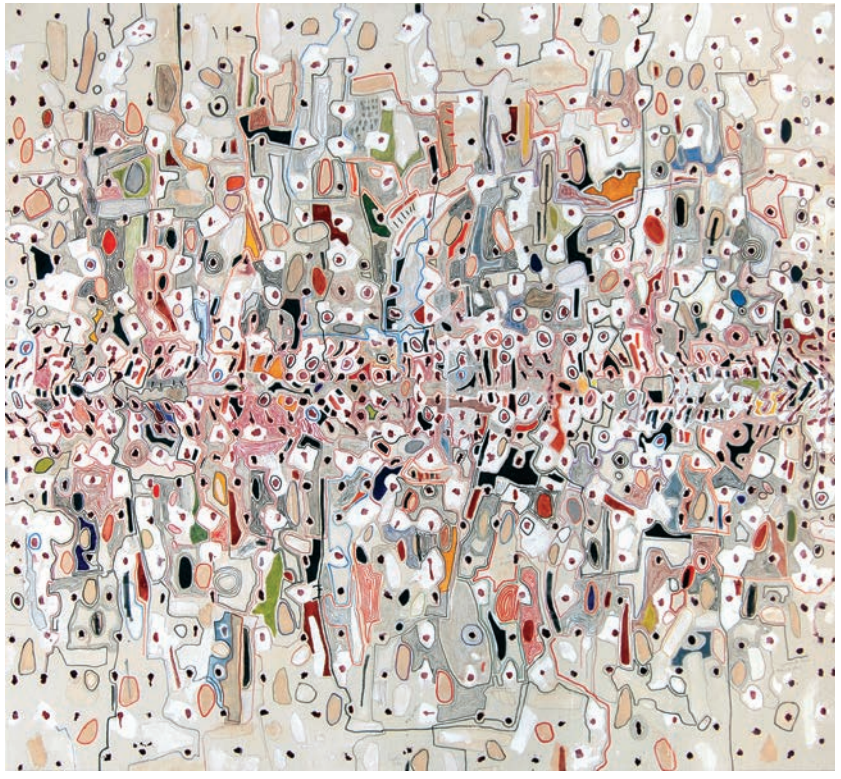
[1] Paul Slovic, David Zionts, Andrew K. Woods, Ryan Goodman, and Derek Jinks, "Psychic Numbing and Mass Atrocity" (14 April 2011), *The Behavioral Foundations of Policy*, E. Shafir, ed., Russell Sage Foundation and Princeton University Press, 2011; NYU School of Law, Public Law Research Paper No. 11-56. Available at SSRN: ssrn.com/abstract=1809951.

[2] Mary Rinebold, "Mark Dion's Historic Deep Sea Dive," *ArtinAmericaMagazine.com*, April 25, 2011, artinamericamagazine.com/news-opinion/news/2011-04-25/oceanomania-mark-dion, accessed December 4, 2016.

[3] Linda S. Godfrey, *Weird Michigan* (New York: Sterling Publishing Co., 2006): 75.

←↑
Unfolding the Triangle: Lake Michigan, installation work with anamorphic lines, found text and images, drawings, found objects, video projections and mirrors, installation views at the Richmond Center for Visual Arts, Kalamazoo, MI, 2012

If navigating the multiple dimensions and temporalities of an installation was important for *Unfolding the Triangle*, making connections between the symbols of abstract compositions is required of the viewer of her paintings. Her *Test 20* (2007), somewhat like *Comfortably Numb* but on a smaller scale, features a visually complex grid, which might be said to "test" the viewer's ability to cohere these symbols into a picture. The diverse markmaking in the *Test* series of paintings renders it difficult for the viewer to tell where to focus. While the media used are very different — printed graphics in the case of *Comfortably Numb* and ink, marker, and acrylic paint in the *Test* series — the perceptual effects are similar. So too with *Locus Rackets Hypnotic 3* (2012), also part of a large series of paintings, which likewise prompts awareness of the function of visual attention.



The ability of the brain to process complex scenes is a question that neuroscientists and psychologists have not fully resolved, but scientists agree about the importance of attention to this process. Early stages of visual processing which establish awareness through the parallel processing of different features in different regions of the brain — motion, color, texture, shape — give way to the assembly of these features through selective attention, which is determined by more complex factors, like memories of patterns. At first glance, the non-compositional *Comfortably Numb* seems to resist selective attention entirely. With no clear pattern of colors, texts, or shapes, it is not surprising to learn that the artist assembled the components randomly. Other non-compositional artworks, like for example, Ellsworth Kelly's *Spectrum Colours Arranged by Chance IV* (2012) or more familiarly, Damien Hirst's spot paintings, such as *L-Tyrosine-15N* (2001), similarly situate the

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Locus Rackets Hypnotic 3
mixed media on canvas,
50 x 70 inches, 2012

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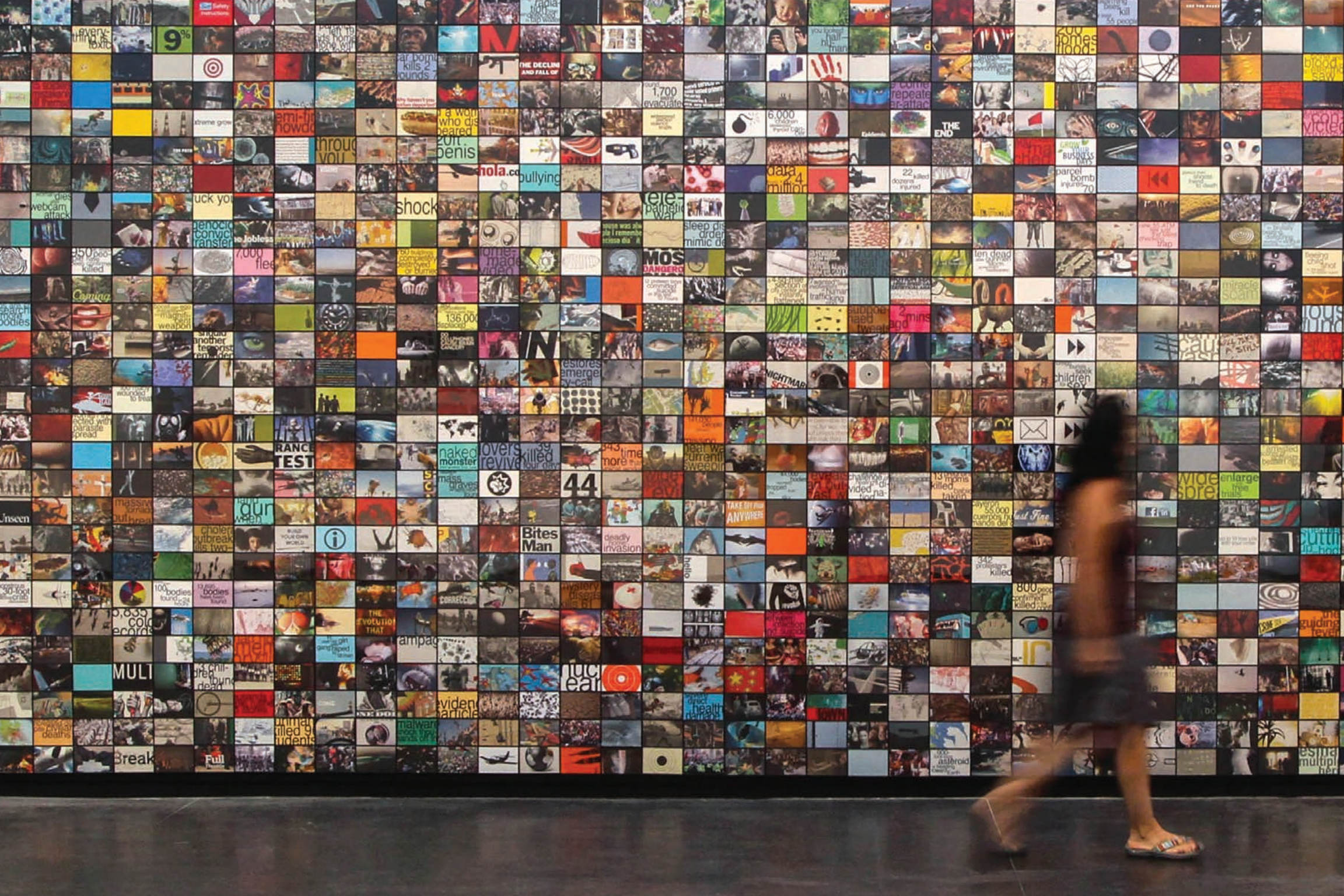
Test 20
mixed media on canvas,
50 x 52 inches, 2007


9%
THE DECLIN AND FALL OF
1,700 evacuate
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penis
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MOS DANGERO
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44
Bites Man
MULT
Break
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← (Opposite)
Comfortably Numb, wall installation with found printed matter, 4 x 6 inches each, 2012–17

viewer with a lack of focus; but their effects more commonly delight rather than frustrate the eye. Kelly's and Hirst's paintings appeal to color-sensitive areas of the brain, without the complications of finely detailed contours or fragmented forms that the brain must "fill in" to make sense.

How do the raw data available at the early stages of visual processing quickly become the shapes and forms that we think we see? Feature Integration Theory suggests that an overlapping series of maps are linked through their relationship to an object of focal attention. But focal attention can be difficult to determine with a complex image like *Comfortably Numb* or *Locus Rackets Hypnotic 3*. In both works, the eye darts around looking for a place to land. Textural variations complicate the selection. In *Test 20*, the artist breaks down different features, splitting these along a horizontal axis, rather than layering them more densely in an allover pattern, while also using the approximate structure of a grid to stabilize the work. There is a loose "grid" in *Locus Rackets Hypnotic 3* too, although it is less consistent at the periphery and further complicated by a pattern of color blocks. In each of these paintings and in the mixed media *Comfortably Numb*, it is difficult to view both individual components and the overall forms as an integrated whole. They challenge perceptual attention in their density and scale.

Such large, dense work brings to mind other contemporary painting that visualizes information networks or perceptual connections. The multi-focal composition of Mark Bradford's *Los Moscos* (2004) resists attention through his layered use of materials taken from print media in urban environments (lacerated posters and signage). References to maps, grids, and architectural features in Julie Mehretu's *Black City* (2007) are overlaid in a spatially complex imagined environment with chaotic lines of flight that actively resist her background grid. Art historian Kathryn Brown has described through Mehretu's work how "the dynamism of the underlying grid thus mirrors the movement of the restless eye that seeks to take in the broadest possible range of aspects on the space before it."[4]

[4] Kathryn Brown, "The Artist as Urban Geographer: Mark Bradford and Julie Mehretu," *American Art 24*, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 108.

Mehretu's work both illustrates a semi-concrete space through mapping and prompts the viewer to process a dizzying relationship of drawn elements against the grid that partially grounds them. Critics of Mehretu's work have often noted their visceral responses, as when Peter Eleey remarks:

> I find myself woozy in front of her paintings – unable, really, to focus on any aspect of them too closely or for long enough to get very engaged. [...] Surprisingly quickly, my imagination generalizes and stagnates into a kind of enforced passivity, despite all that visual information. I'd say it feels similar to how I respond to overstimulation. The result is that I feel undeservedly lazy and a bit exhausted, but not guilty for it – which is more or less how I feel every time I pass a television, newsstand or bookstore.[5]

Fast-forward a decade and the problem of overstimulation by visual media grows ever more intense. Over the past decade attentional load, or the capacity to discern greater visual information, has received considerable interest from scholars. Cognitive neuroscientist Nilli Lavie has argued that attentional resources have limited capacity, so that situations with high *perceptual* load (a large display) make it difficult to discern "distractors," while those with high *cognitive* load (with greater demands on working memory) make it possible to see those distractors.[6] Further studies have refined and developed the initial findings to suggest that under high perceptual load conditions, the brain is effectively blind to distractors.[7]

In the case of *Comfortably Numb*, the brain's attentional resources are overtaxed by the complexity of the installation, making it difficult, or initially impossible, to bind the 2200 separate streams of equivalent visual intensity. Internal

5 Peter Eleey, "Julie Mehretu's 'Perfect' Pictures," *Afterall* 14 (Autumn/Winter 2006): http://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.14/julie.mehretus.perfect.pictures, accessed December 4, 2016.

[6] Nilli Lavie, "The Role of Perceptual Load in Visual Awareness," *Brain Research* 1080 (2006): 91-100.

[7] James S. P. Macdonald and Nilli Lavie, "Load Induced Blindness," *Journal of Experimental Psychology* vol. 34, no. 5 (2008): 1078–91.

features act like distractors here as the viewer searches in vain for any focal point. The scale exceeds the classical receptive field and the composition is detailed in contours (frames); thus, as the brain attempts to devise an overall map of the artwork, some of these details become distracting and are not included in the initial perception. By not simplifying into an overall pattern, it is difficult to quickly build a functional map of the work that merges colors, grid, interior contours, and text. The work is noisy.

The neurological phenomenon of crowding, or the inability to recognize objects in a mass of clutter at the periphery, also offers some important insights on the difficulty of Nayda Collazo-Llorens's *Comfortably Numb*. We typically see objects in a mass as smoothed over into indiscriminate texture at the edges. Those images that are crowded are not lost information, however. As Anirvan Nandy and Bosco Tjan have demonstrated, an overlap between the time of spatial attention and saccade displacements exists in peripheral vision only; those saccade displacements leave behind

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Comfortably Numb (detail), wall installation with found printed matter, 4 x 6 inches each, 2012–17

traces of overestimated patterns, enhancing crowding at the periphery.[8] The effect is thus meaningful for a dense painting like *Test 20*, with its expansive spacing of the fragments above and below the organizing horizon, or seen in the blur of the grid at the periphery of *Locus Rackets Hypnotic 3*, but crowding has even more impact with a uniformly dense installation that stretches the full length of a wall.

In *Comfortably Numb*, the inability to "see" derives from the work's features that resist our attention and complicate our ability to process. Thousands of pictures flicker before us and there is nothing we can do to make sense of the overall effect. The impact of this "numbness" to visuality is further enhanced by the work's subject matter. The tragedy of not being able to see the scope and repetition of tragedy is compounded by the confusion about what is seen as true amidst the noise. Five years worth of disaster on display, where we play endlessly the roles of blind and blithe consumers, is too much. In November 2016, in the aftermath of the US presidential election of demagogic right-wing populist, media scholars and information theorists have just begun to unearth a plague of "fake news" that helped produce this election result. Journalism professor Jonathan Albright's "big data" analysis of the mediascape that facilitated the spread of fake news is alarming: a network of websites produce and spread false or strongly biased "information" that accrues enough force through peer sharing to "target" mainstream media sites, which in turn, problematically, help to legitimize the original sources to search engine algorithms.[9] Interestingly, the network graph Albright produced from his data shares some characteristics

[8] Anirvan S. Nandy and Bosco S. Tjan, "Saccade-confounded Image Statistics Explain Visual Crowding" *Nature Neuroscience* 15, no. 3 (March 2012): 463.
[9] Jonathan Albright, "The #Election2016 Micro-Propaganda Machine" *Medium*, November 8, 2016, https://medium.com/@d1gi/the-election2016-micro-propaganda-machine-383449cc1fba#.dk1xtve92, accessed December 4, 2016.

of density and peripheral texture of the artworks discussed in this essay. Looking at *Comfortably Numb* (or trying to) in our present state means accounting for the circulation of fakery amidst the onslaught of visually seductive imagery — in this case, can the viewer discern both benign illustrations and traumatizing photographs? And, even after accounting for that, what do we make of media sources that perpetuate white supremacist storylines of disasters, violence, and pain to mostly black and brown bodies globally — regardless of whether these are presented with misleading statistics as irrefutable facts or to satisfy a desire for moral outrage and to assuage white liberal guilt.[10]

Nayda Collazo-Llorens powerfully and subtly assembles these different problems in her artwork. A painting with complex patterns is never just that, but also an effort to map visual cognition. And an installation might seduce the viewer from a far distance with colorful images and textures, but there's more to see up close. And in the space between, where we stand "comfortably numb" to the works' details and composition, the artist locates the crux of our media problem in the viewer's blind complicity.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jessica Santone is Assistant Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art History at California State University East Bay. She specializes in histories of contemporary performance and social practice as well as visual and critical studies. Ongoing research projects address Fluxus, participatory audiences of performance in the 21st century, and pedagogical art practices. Her publications include essays and reviews in Performance Research, Art Journal, Leonardo, Visual Resources, *and several edited volumes.*

[10] For more discussion on the role of white liberal media in perpetuating narratives of docile black bodies, see Martin A. Berger, *Seeing Through Race: a Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2011): 9-57.

Nayda Collazo-Llorens

Stuart B. and Barbara Padnos
Distinguished Artist-In-Residence
2014–2017

Nayda Collazo-Llorens, born in San Juan, Puerto Rico, is a visual artist engaged in a multi-disciplinary practice that includes drawing, printed matter, installation work, video, and text-based work, among others. Incorporating a variety of strategies, she examines the way in which we perceive and process information, dealing with concepts of navigation, memory, language, hyperconnectivity and noise. Her work has been exhibited at the Bass Museum of Art in Miami Beach, Richmond Center for Visual Arts in Kalamazoo, Museo Universitario del Chopo in Mexico City, The Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh, El Museo del Barrio in New York City, Art Museum of the Americas in Washington DC, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Juan, Puerto Rico, among other national and international institutions. Her work was included in the 3rd San Juan Poly/Graphic Triennial in San Juan, Puerto Rico, the 9th Havana Biennial in Havana, Cuba, and the 12th International Media Art Biennale in Wroclaw, Poland. Collazo-Llorens received an MFA from New York University and a BFA from Massachusetts College of Art and Design. She was a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Fellow in 2012, and a Visiting Fellow at the Arcus Center for Social Justice Leadership in 2014. Her work has been reviewed in The New York Times, Art Net, Art US, Art Nexus, Art News, Arte al Día International, BOMBlog, and Newcity, among others. Her work is represented by LMAKgallery, New York.