May 29, 2012

BLOUIN ARTINFO

The Try-Again-Ennials? Political Theater at the Whitney and the New Museum

Photo: Benoit Pailley

View Slideshow

An installation view of the 2012 New Museum Triennial, "The Ungovernables"

by Adam Kleinman, Modern Painters

Published: May 29, 2012

Modern Painters June 2012

Branded like an edgy cowboy thriller, "The Ungovernables," the second iteration of the trademarked "generational" survey of young artists at Manhattan's New Museum, should have come with the tagline "Politics makes strange bedfellows." Adding pluck to this uneasiness, the exhibition's curator, Eungie Joo, cloaked the show in intentionally unstable means, suggesting a "double-edged sword" wherein being "ungovernable" can be a rallying cry to "justify violent repression" or an "affirmative call" by the oppressed to turn toward "civil disobedience." In many ways, however, the triennial's political underbelly was not just the ambiguous use of a political slogan but a more ambivalent policy of realpolitik hiding in the far corners of the exhibition.

For whatever reason, be it lack of space, key partnership demands, or other, more mundane practicalities, the exhibition was also manifested in a few off-site locales. Among them was Lower Manhattan's World Financial Center, whose outdoor plaza hosted Adrián Villar Rojas's installation "Before My Birth," 2012, an austere and crudely constructed collection of concrete blocks with off-the-shelf wood beams. Apples were embedded in these bricolages and left to rot or be scavenged.

Was this allegory of decay meant to elicit a sense of empathy in passersby as they contemplated the fleeting nature of life and existence, or was it a critique of excess, and possibly the use of the wrong tool for the wrong job? Metaphors aside, it is worth noting that the plaza is owned and operated by Brookfield Properties, whose own public art agency, Arts>Brookfield, is charged with jazzing up its rather bland corporate-bonus outdoor spaces. Brookfield itself might ring a bell, as another of its plazas, Zuccotti Park, festooned with art by the same agency, sits nearby and was the uncomfortable host of the 2011 Occupy Wall Street protests — which Brookfield and the New York City Police Department later disbanded for being ungovernable.

What does this context imply for Rojas's work, for the New Museum show, and for the role of art and art institutions in general? Was hosting Rojas's piece a way for Brookfield to deflect flack by participating in edgy philanthropy? Is the New Museum more on the side of "violent repression" through its collaboration with an agent that used actual force to try to quash one of the most visible public protests in the last 20 years — a period generally used to measure a generation? And for that matter, where do the artists and the artworks sit on this continuum? Without the adoption of a pragmatic position in which the actualities of production trump, or at least defer, any ideology, these questions hold no easy answer. Something must be in the air, since Andrea Fraser's essay in the Whitney Biennial catalog — which was her artistic contribution to the show — peppers this very debate further by asking what role art plays in relation to recuperation.

Fraser's essay "There's No Place Like Home," draws attention to a gap between art's actual function in the world, as an object of trade and spectacle often controlled economically by the well-to-do, and its purported intellectual goals as stated by critics, curators, and even the artists themselves — often in the hands of another elite group of intellectuals and academics. In Fraser's assessment, this divide is a structural issue created through the agendas of various institutions, be they galleries and auction houses, the proliferation of art magazines and degree-granting arts programs, or museums and biennials. Conflating this further, Fraser notes that this cleft has been widening in lockstep with the ever-growing disparity between the haves and the have-nots of the neoliberal global economic system — a more direct analysis of which can be found in a second essay by Fraser, "L'1% c'est moi," published in Texte zur Kunst and available for download on the Whitney's Web site.

Bleak as this canyon may be, Fraser figuratively stretches a tightrope across these poles to state that artists should not be disjointed by trying to play up to both masters. Instead of boycotting such institutions, which is a position acknowledged by Fraser, she intimates that the artist's role today should be to make a stand within both poles as implied by the word "home" in her Whitney essay title, so as to speak truth to power to either subvert or satirize the current order. In other words, as both artists and spectators, we cannot separate ourselves from the realities of the world, but through art and discourse we can propose new potentialities that foster vantage points from which to imagine a better future reality. Whether or not Fraser's text actually does that or not is another question. However, on a theoretical level, her statement does provide an introductory first step toward a method of practice that attempts to reconcile actuality with ideology.

The question of utility and social good could be posed directly to the Whitney exhibition itself, and not just because it was the target of an Occupy Museums protest and a Web site hack that lamented the museum's ties to various labor disputes and banking interests. Unlike Joo, Elisabeth Sussman and Jay Sanders, the curators of the Whitney Biennial, presented a rather formalist argument — though like the Fraser piece, the show was chock-full of socially charged artworks — that the show was about the "breakdown of boundaries between art forms." True though that may be, the idea of inter- and cross-disciplinarity has been around for decades, if not time immemorial. A better argument could have been not that art crosses boundaries, but that knowledge does, as evinced by Fraser's text, which is more about economics than any field typically moderated by normative notions of aesthetics. Sanders and Sussman's statement was also the justification for the show's radical shift away from objects and toward performance. So as to allay any public anxiety regarding this move, or the perceived threat of such, the Whitney's director, Adam Weinberg, went on record during an NPR interview to say, "We're not turning our back on [visual art] at all; it's part of the show, and it will be ongoing."

Despite Weinberg's assurances, most of the building's fourth floor was transformed into a performance space for daily events, most notably a series of performances by the Scottish dancer Michael Clark. Refreshing as it may be to visit an exhibition that is activated on various registers, with Fraser's essay in mind, the visitor had to ask, Is this one of those moments in which the curators have chosen to make a statement about performance over painting and sculpture to advance their own political agendas? Bear in mind that the 2008 biennial had an

extensive performance program at the Park Avenue Armory, but that legacy was never mentioned outright and was later downplayed.

Adding weight to the question was the staging of the exhibition itself. Immaculately laid out, the Whitney galleries were subdivided into discrete little apartments, as if in a mansion. Most successfully, the third floor was cut up into a neat procession that led through a framed passageway positioned axially to the elevator entrance. Once inside, a large and effective trompe l'oeil tapestry by Nick Mauss surrounded the visitor in a makeshift three-walled installation-cum-room. Just beyond, a strange bit of organ music played, and upon turning the corner, the visitor was met by Lutz Bacher's "Pipe Organ," 2009–11, an installation comprising a Yamaha organ outfitted with pipes from a rusted acoustic model and playing a random tune composed by a computer program. A eulogy for antiquation and simulation, perhaps? This ducking and weaving continued throughout, with Dawn Kasper's outfitting of another discrete space into an active studio utilized by the artist nomadically as a temporary respite from the continual struggle to find sustenance in the current economic milieu of outsourcing and freelancing known as "precarious labor." Activated by the strong sense of place that each work held down and coupled with the surreal vibes of the organ music, this walk managed to escape the foil found in many large exhibitions, wherein the space given over to the artist has the secondary effect of an art fair or some other antiseptic, booth-like setup.

Moving to the floor below, one found a didactic example of the so-called trans-boundary aspects of the show: Werner Herzog's "Hearsay of the Soul," 2012. For this multichannel installation, the filmmaker scanned various details of landscapes etched by Dutch Golden Age artist Hercules Segers, edited them together, and paired them with a soundtrack composed by Ernst Reijseger. Most likely intended as a paean to Segers, the overly directed cropping of the artworks pedantically forced the viewer's eye in an episodic now-see-how-great-this-is fashion instead of letting the expansive pieces unfold for the visitor in their own time — something that works in theater but is almost impossible to pull off in cinema. This trite reflection was made even more saccharine by Reijseger's overly emotive score, which suggested that we were all sharing some form of aesthetic epiphany through Herzog's mediated and reductive take on another artist — unless this was really a deadpan parody in which any secondhand knowledge about Segers was the very "hearsay" of the title. Turning back to the play of the floors above and Fraser's thoughts on how art is made instrumental, one has to wonder if the scripted and scored stage of the exhibition — like the performance program, many artworks turned on and off on cue, e.g. Bacher's organ turned off, as if on a timer, when Kasper was activating her work by being in her studio — was an attempt to transform artworks into props for use in a larger game, not of curator-as-critic, but of curator-as-artist-and-dramaturge.

Heading back downtown for a moment, it's worth revisiting the mise-en-scène of "The Ungovernables" to see what can happen when a curator puts greater emphasis on the conceptual aspect of an exhibition. Unlike the wide-open spaces at the Whitney, the galleries of the New Museum were tight and over-packed and could have used more editing. For example, Joo chose to include a massive artwork, much of which the museum couldn't house, in Danh Vo's *We The People*, 2011, a 1:1 facsimile of the Statue of Liberty done by hand by the artist in his studio but fractured into various parts as if to suggest that the missing scaffold that binds and supports the iconic symbol is akin to a lack of social bonds today. (The artist was still furnishing parts for this

work when the show opened.) Here, only about three of several dozen fragments were included, as if they were footnotes to the missing larger artwork, a move that completely defaulted on the Sisyphean monumentality of the project. To really grasp the scale, a visitor would have to read the wall text or the catalogue to get a sense of it.

Following this trend of working better on paper than in practice, the multi-work installation by the Indian collaborative CAMP, which featured a video screened in the gallery space and a set of telephone headsets on a nearby shelf, was drowned out by the sounds of neighboring video installations. Ironically enough, the video and telephone voices overlapped themselves to the point of being hard to follow. Each centered on leaked phone taps between Indian politicians and lobbyists that were billed as "essential listening for anyone trying to be a journalist." Visitors were asked to dial up one of these conversations on a provided phone so as to eavesdrop. However clever this form of playback might be, any voyeuristic pleasure, and the content of the messages themselves, was lost to the overall din of the exhibition. Transcripts of the conversations were also provided, but there was little head space for reading in that environment.

A completely radical reading of the show could be that the size of the New Museum and the lack of relationship among the artworks makes the exhibition and the museum itself truly ungovernable. Like the Vo piece, which was shown last year at the Kunsthalle Fridericianum, in Kassel, Germany, other works in "The Ungovernables" were recycled from other biennials, including Amalia Pica's "Venn Diagrams (under the spotlight)," 2011, which may have indicated a need to cut corners.

What was slightly disheartening about this exhibition was that, like Fraser's essay, much of the art righteously attempted to give voice to some form of oppression, but the very real politics of the show's confines were the larger and more embodied concern within this setup. The New Museum has been embroiled in questionable exhibitions and financial dealings of late, not limited to its mounting of the 2010 "Skin Fruit: Selections from the Dakis Joannou Collection," which ostensibly turned the museum over to one of the biggest art speculator/collectors in the market today. This show's overtly political works are a more welcome move. And yet a greater investment in them as art and not as referential demos and signs—visitors to the show can buy an "Ungovernables" T-shirt at the museum gift shop as if it were a souvenir from a hard-rock concert — would have been appreciated.

Otto von Bismarck, a key developer of modern realpolitik, once said, "Laws are like sausages — it is better not to see them being made." And yet sausages, like laws, are cooked up for the public, and as such, the question of how they were made determines whether or not they are proper nourishment. Whatever good claims or devices they use, both exhibitions beg a larger social question: Are the constituents of any large group show ever completely palatable?

To see works from the 2012 New Museum Triennial and Whitney Biennial, click the slide show.

This article originally appeared in the June issue of Modern Painters magazine.