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CONTEMPORARY ART AND CULTURE

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USA THE UNGOVERNABLES: 2012 NEW MUSEUM TRIENNIAL New York

The UNGOVERNABLES, the New Museum's second triennial, is technically not a response to the two key political movements of 2011: the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street. Instead, its curator, Eugenio Joo, carefully distils 2011 as an exhibition about a generation formed by the instability of a period marked by military dictatorships, the fall of states in the 1980s and 1990s, the spread of global capitalism and the rise of fundamentalism. The triennial – which Joo spent 18 months researching, and the basis of which was presumably in place before the start of 2011 – is described as addressing the urgencies of a generation who came of age after the independence and revolutionary movements of the 1960s and 1970s. But it can also be read as emphatically pro-revolutionary, dealing with the conditions that led to the uprisings across the Arab world or a social movement like Occupy.

While about half the works in the triennial was made prior to 2011, the UNGOVERNABLES often echoes the visual and ideological language from last year, whether it's the programme of public debates and demonstrations staged by the Israeli collective Public Movement, or the post-11/9 street debris in Cynthia Marcelle and Togo Matis Machobane's video *O Seculo* (The Century, 2011). It is hard to see the myriad of mixed rubble in the latter and not think of 9/11. The filter generalizes the context, and was the meaning of the image.

That same filter gives the triennial the sheen of present-day urgency, but it's worth questioning whether this is ultimately in the service of either the triennial or the selected works. Similarly to this premise is that it is muzzled by the need. In which the works are for the most part the serious, serious come into play in the production of *O Seculo*. For example, was the Pinchuk Art Centre, the site of contemporary Ukrainian art (Pinchuk), and although it has been founded with 350,000 artists outside of the 34 artists and artists are based in the US, and only partially – much of the just as easily in the Whitney show. In the two exhibitions in total, the US-based 'Art Triennial' and 'Art Triennial' are both placed in a certain modesty of scale and of them feature a rotating programme of performances, and objects that are associated with impermanence,

no measurements in a few hundred years' is seen as evidence not only of our no consumer habits, only – of art today – and also not further.

THE UNGOVERNABLES: 2012 NEW MUSEUM TRIENNIAL New York



Slavs and Tatars

o If you could live with only one piece of art what would it be?

o The real – a book stand used for holy Muslim books, traditionally made out of a single piece of wood.



Book Stand, Slavko Goldstein

Slavko Goldstein's *Book Stand* (2011) is a sculpture made of a single piece of wood, traditionally used for holy Muslim books. The work is a testament to the artist's skill and his ability to create a functional object that is also a work of art. Goldstein's work is a perfect example of how art can be both functional and beautiful. The book stand is a simple, elegant design that is both practical and aesthetically pleasing. It is a work that is both functional and beautiful, and it is a testament to the artist's skill and his ability to create a functional object that is also a work of art.

Goldstein's *Book Stand* is a sculpture made of a single piece of wood, traditionally used for holy Muslim books. The work is a testament to the artist's skill and his ability to create a functional object that is also a work of art. Goldstein's work is a perfect example of how art can be both functional and beautiful. The book stand is a simple, elegant design that is both practical and aesthetically pleasing. It is a work that is both functional and beautiful, and it is a testament to the artist's skill and his ability to create a functional object that is also a work of art.



captures the mundane oppression of the work environment, both physically and ideologically.

Somewhat less successful are the installations that use sculptural forms to loosely reference a political state or ideology. Anish Kapoor's *Everlasting (Version #2)* (2011), a wall relief with dime-store glasses, successfully evokes cultures of surveillance out of humble materials. But ultimately the bright colours and domestic aesthetic creates a gap between the art work and the politics, despite its intent to invoke the meaning of which it uncovers. Similarly, Damien Hirst's *THE PEOPLE* (2011), a striking installation featuring shards from a life-size copper replica of the Statue of Liberty, makes bold reference to the failures of Empire without offering particular insight into the actual nature of those failings.

1 Robert Rauschenberg
Time for Great, 1969,
negative with
effect lithography
20x41 cm

2 Walter Dillman
United #25, 1964-76,
single negative
photographic image
cut-out, 20x20 cm

3 'The Ungovernables',
installation view,
from left to right:
Adria Viller Rios
A Pessa (Last Me),
2012; Anish Kapoor
*Everlasting (Version
#2)*, 2011;
Dank Vo
WE THE PEOPLE, 2011

4 Cynthia Marcelle and
Togo Matis Machobane
O Seculo (The Century),
2011, DVD still

transnational state. The New Museum's 2011 'Open' show, for example, featured contemporary work that spoke a distinctly different aesthetic and political language to that typically produced on the biennial circuit. Some of the best work in the triennial makes reference to political specificity. For example, Mumbai-based collective CAMPA's *Act: Swearing in Whispers* (2011-12) and Act in Mum Cages (2012), draw from the tapped telephone conversations between the Indian political lobbyist Mira Rajot, and various journalists and politicians. The recordings can be accessed via a New York telephone number, while the transcript is publicly referred to as a screenplay (the latter is available for download at computing.screenplay.it). It's a crash course in Indian politics, and intrinsically a comment on political theatre.

Another work grounded in specificity and location is José Antonio Vega Macote's *Time Exchange* (2008-10). Over four years, Vega Macote performed for mad tasks at the request of various prisoners in Mexico, ranging from throwing a birthday party to reading letters aloud to a relative, in exchange for the prisoners named out actions created by the artist, such as cataloguing cigarette cuts or mapping the route of a couple of cash within the prison. Those actions are in turn exhibited as art objects and attributed to the prisoners.

Locating an action in a real world place is one of the reasons why *Pinchuk's* *Art Triennial* (2008) succeeds in its two-pronged critique of capitalism and the work piece. The installation documents the Finnish artist's month-long employment at the financial services firm Deloitte, which she spent in a state of almost total withdrawal. Her definitely unengaged presence

KATIE KITAHARA

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THE UNGOVERNABLES: 2012 NEW MUSEUM TRIENNIAL New York

'The Ungovernables', the New Museum's second triennial, is technically not a response to the two key political movements of 2011: the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street. Instead, its curator, Eungie Joo, carefully describes it as an exhibition about a generation 'formed by the instability of a period marked by military dictatorships, the IMF crises of the 1980s and 1990s, the spread of global capitalism and the rise of fundamentalism'. The triennial – which Joo spent 18 months researching, and the basis of which was presumably in place before the start of 2011 – is described as addressing the 'urgencies of a generation who came of age after the independence and revolutionary movements of the 1960s and 1970s'. But it can also be read as emphatically pre-revolutionary, dealing with the conditions that led to the uprisings across the Arab world or a social movement like Occupy.

While about half the work in the triennial was made prior to 2011, 'The Ungovernables' often echoes the visual and ideological language from last year, whether it's the programme of public debates and demonstrations staged by the Israeli collective Public Movement, or the post-riot street debris in Cinthia Marcelle and Tiago Mata Machado's video *O Século* (The Century, 2011). It is hard to see the image of street rubble in the latter and not think of Tahrir Square; the filter generates the context, and also the meaning of the image.

That same filter gives the triennial the sheen of present-day urgency, but it's worth questioning whether this is ultimately in the service of either the triennial or the selected works. Similarly, its title promises a spirit of unruliness that is muzzled by the institutional context in which the works are shown (not to mention the various sources of funding that come into play in the production of the art – *O Século*, for example, was co-produced with the Pinchuk Art Centre, the private museum of controversial Ukrainian oligarch Victor Pinchuk). And although 'The Ungovernables' has been curated with a laudable emphasis on artists outside the US – only six of the 34 artists and artist groups included are based in the US, and some of them only partially – much of the work might sit just as easily in the Whitney Biennial across town (the two exhibitions in fact share an artist, the LA-based Wu Tsang). With a few exceptions, both shows place an emphasis on a certain modesty of scale and material: both of them feature a rotating programme of performances, and objects that are concerned with impermanence. Indeed, there are perhaps no manoeuvres in 'The Ungovernables' that are even relatively unfamiliar. This could be seen as evidence of the globalized nature not only of our economies, ideologies and consumer habits, but also – more specifically – of art today.

This seems a shame – and also not reflective of the reality of our fractured,



transnational state (the New Museum's own 2011 'Ostalgia' show, for example, featured contemporary work that spoke a distinctly different aesthetic and political language to that typically produced on the biennial circuit). Some of the best work in the triennial makes reference to political specificity. For example, Mumbai-based collective CAMP's *Act I: Swearing in Whispers* (2011–12) and *Act II: Hum Logos* (2012) draw from the tapped telephone conversations between the Indian political lobbyist Nira Raida, and various journalists and politicians. The recordings can be accessed via a New York telephone number, while the transcript is pointedly referred to as a screenplay (the latter is available for download at computer.org/screenplay). It's a crash course in Indian politics, and intrinsically a comment on political theatre.

Another work grounded in specificity and location is José Antonio Vega Macotela's *Time Exchange* (2006–10). Over four years, Vega Macotela performed tasks at the request of various prisoners in Mexico, ranging from throwing a birthday party to reading letters aloud to a relative. In exchange, the prisoners carried out actions dictated by the artist, such as cataloguing cigarette butts or mapping the flow of a bundle of cash within the prison. Those actions are in turn exhibited as art objects and attributed to the prisoners.

Locating an action in a real world place is one of the reasons why Pilvi Takala's *The Trainee* (2008) succeeds in its two-pronged critique of capitalism and the work place. The installation documents the Finnish artist's month-long employment at the financial services firm Deloitte, which she spent in a state of almost catatonic withdrawal. Her defiantly unengaged presence

captures the mundane oppression of the work environment, both physically and ideologically.

Somewhat less successful are the installations that use sculptural forms to loosely reference a political state or ideology. Amalia Pica's *Eavesdropping (Version #2, large)* (2011), a wall affixed with dime-store glasses, successfully evokes cultures of surveillance out of humble materials. But ultimately the bright colours and domestic aesthetic creates a gap between the art work and the political context it's meant to invoke, the meaning of which is unclear. Similarly, Danh Vo's *WE THE PEOPLE* (2011), a striking installation featuring shards from a life-size copper replica of the Statue of Liberty, makes bold reference to the failures of Empire without offering particular insight into the actual nature of those failings.

Hassan Khan's video installation *Jewel* (2010) also stages no precise critique, but it condenses issues of male intimacy, performance and ego to mesmeric effect. Featuring two men dancing to a rousing track (by Khan), the video had the gallery invigilators dancing along. (In another exhibition, they might have been part of an intervention by Tino Sehgal.) Bona Park's performance *The box in a plastic bag (la boîte-en-sac plastique)*, *New York Version* (2012) made reference to the lives of these and other museum employees, but was sadly under-represented in the gallery itself – the performance took place on the opening night.

'The Ungovernables' could easily have withstood a little more institutional critique, particularly given the themes of the exhibition and the New Museum's own complicated history with regard to corporate and private support. If only the New Museum website had been subject to the same hack as that of the Whitney Biennial, in which a fake press release stated that the museum had renounced its corporate sponsors, citing 'the reckless and even fraudulent behaviour' of banks, including sponsor Deutsche Bank. As it is, what currently appears to be most ungovernable, and also the most enduring context for art, are the forces of the market and global capitalism.

KATIE KITAMURA

1
Robert Heinecken
Time (1st Group), 1969,
magazine with
offset lithography
28×41 cm

2
Wallace Berman
Untitled #126, 1964–76,
single negative
photographic image
cut-out, 20×20 cm

3
'The Ungovernables',
installation view,
from left to right:
Adrián Villar Rojas
A Person Loved Me,
2012; Amalia Pica
*Eavesdropping (Version
#2, large)*, 2011;
Danh Vo
WE THE PEOPLE, 2011

4
Cinthia Marcelle and
Tiago Mata Machado
O Século (The Century),
2011, DVD still

Slavs and Tatars

Q

If you could live with only one piece of art what would it be?

A

The *rahlé* — a book stand used for holy Muslim books, traditionally made out of a single piece of wood.



A *rahlé*, from Kokand, Uzbekistan, 2012

What was the first piece of art that really mattered to you?

A work which no longer exists: the Dia Sufi mosque on Mercer Street in SoHo, New York. Its heady mix of commissioned pieces by Dan Flavin, mystical Islam and downtown 1980s New York will be the point of departure for our first film, *Underwater Prayers / Overwater Dreams*, due to be completed next year.

What images keep you company in the space where you work?

The spines of our books provide shelter from the severity of images.

If you could live with only one piece of art what would it be?

The *rahlé* — a book stand used for holy Muslim books, traditionally made out of a single piece of wood. The one pictured here is essentially the Bugatti of book stands, with more than 15 different possible positions, and is found in the Ferghana Valley of Uzbekistan.

What is your favourite title of an art work?

Even Dwarves Started Small (1970) by Werner Herzog.

What do you wish you knew?

How to speak Turkish, the missing link in the linguistic trifecta of our regional remit. With Russian and Persian under our *peshmerga* belt (not to mention Polish as a mediator between the two former empires), we are interested in Turkish not only for Turkey but for the Turkic-speaking peoples of the Caucasus and Central Asia.

What should change?

'No'.

What should stay the same?

'Yes'.

What could you imagine doing if you didn't do what you do?

The same things, simply not as artists, and for money.

What music are you listening to?

Kino for Viktor Tsoi's haunting deep-set voice, which reminds us of the cyclical, almost mystical nature of protest. And the genres of *noheh* and *rozeh*, essentially chants of mourning linked to various stories surrounding the martyrdom of Imam Hossein, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. An MC

or bard half-sings, half-recounts maudlin stories to music while hundreds, sometimes thousands, of wailing men provide the back-up vocals, in the form of an audience. It's an almost cosmic story of injustice, performed once a year in a kind of inverse carnival called Muharram and is the premise of our work *Reverse Joy* (2012).

What are you reading?

We like to read across an ensemble of texts at once: at the moment, for our third cycle of work called *The Faculty of Substitution* (2012–ongoing), we are reading the Russian Futurist Velimir Khlebnikov, *Parole Donnée* (1962) by Louis Massignon, *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis* (1991) by Norman O. Brown, the 11th-century Illuminations philosopher Suhrawardi, and *To Begin Where I Am: Selected Essays* (2001) by Czesław Miłosz, among others.

What do you like the look of?

A plate full of *sabzi khordan* (fresh herbs) — tarragon, coriander, watercress, chives, mint, radishes, spring

onions — to accompany breakfast, lunch and dinner.

What is art for?

To 'quit this world, quit the next, and quit quitting' as Thomas Merton, a best-selling author and Catholic monk who taught Sufism to his disciples in the monastery, once said.

Slavs and Tatars have exhibited at *SALT, Istanbul, Turkey*; *Tate Modern, London, UK*; the *10th Sharjah Biennial, UAE*; and the *3rd Thessaloniki Biennale, Greece* (all 2011). Their publications include *Love Me, Love Me Not: Changed Names* (onestar press, 2010) and *Molla Nasreddin: the magazine that would've, could've, should've* (JRP | Ringier, 2011). The artists' latest cycle of work, *The Faculty of Substitution*, is included in *'The Ungovernables'*, *New Museum, New York, USA*; *'Régions d'Être'* at the *Asia Pacific Triennial*; and solo shows at the *Secession, Vienna, Austria*; *MOMA, New York*; and *Künstlerhaus Stuttgart, Germany*.