

# ARTWRIT

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## *The Ungovernables* at the New Museum, New York

*by Jody Lee*  
*March 2012*

*The Ungovernables*, the second New Museum of Contemporary Art triennial, gathers thirty-four artists and collectives from visits to twenty countries by curator Eungie Joo. The artists came of age between the mid-1990s and the mid-2000s, in a time characterized by “economic upheaval, changes in the geopolitical landscape and urgency about cultural practice,” as Joo’s essay notes.

The title *The Ungovernables* is a play on the derogatory colonial description of a people as thwarting domination, as well as an official strategy adopted in 1986 by the African National Congress aimed toward ending apartheid rule. “Ungovernable” also references James C. Scott’s book *The Art of Not Being Governed*, in which he describes a group of people that inhabit a Southeast Asian massif to place themselves out of reach of the “monetizing, confiscating, taxing” nation-states in which we all live.

Jonathas de Andrade, born 1982 in Brazil, shows two works. For *4000 Shots* (2010), he photographed 4000 men in the streets of Buenos Aires with a super-8 camera. The secretive, oblique images are projected in a rapid-fire, continuous bloom coming milliseconds apart. One of the show’s fascinating and relevant aspects is the manner in which time is invoked and shaped by certain artists. As if emanating from a secret police archive, the faces refuse to be still long enough to surrender their identity. As the eyes and faces appear in various places in each shot, the viewer tracks a frenzied center that wings around the frame. Faces and the liquid absence between them accrue so furiously that ghost images not supplied by the camera pool in the space between them. *4000 Shots* thus coins a new kind of time awareness as a

kind of harassed and on-the-verge present tense through its melting flurry of glances, heads, eyes, clothing and movement.

Cinthia Marcelle gives time a more operatic staging in her work *O Século* [The Century] (2011). The video (one wants to say “film”) begins with an aerial, stationary view of an empty street below. Awkwardly, slowly and inevitably, it seems, debris like that leftover from an aborted construction is hurled onto the street from somewhere to the right off-camera. Hard-hats, bent rims from bicycles, unburnable tires and chairs among other items crash slowly in a cascade of negation, scraping on the pavement as dogs bark somewhere nearby. Afterward, in a movement as elemental as the sun lifting and setting, the cascade begins again, moving this time from left to right. The piece is a powerful, mute summary of time suffused with dread, communicating deep incredulity about communal accomplishment and human purpose.

In The Propeller Group’s *TVC Communism* (2011), group accomplishment is the structure and subject, where the employees of one of the world’s foremost advertising agencies, TBWA’s Ho Chi Minh office, work to re-brand communism. Sitting around a table and brainstorming in a meandering fashion, the employees are filmed by five unmanned, overlapping stationary cameras. This footage is shown on head-height monitors arranged in a circle surrounding the viewer. The film’s slow pace and lightheartedness, as well as the youth of the TBWA employees places their campaign in a strangely open-ended present, where even communism can be transformed into an ideological Happy Meal. Unfortunately, the artists also chose to show the fruits of TBWA’s labor, whose bland ahistoricity though deliberate, is much duller than it needed to be.

Pilvi Takala’s priceless documented intervention *The Trainee* (2008) exposes another sort of groupthink altogether. In it, the artist ensconces herself in the false role of new marketing trainee at Deloitte in order to draw the venom of corporate self-definition toward herself. In videos Takala sits at her computer-less desk engaging in what she tells the other employees is “brain-work.” She spends a full day in the company elevator, parrying conversation with Deloitte employees who are awkwardly curious and soon maddened by this supremely opaque non-doer. *The Trainee* “work” forms one of the most audible spikes of resonance with ungovernability. Takala’s “work” as a trainee is non-existent, her value unassessable, and her presence off the familiar grid of time=money, is disturbing and illegible.

That Joo herself has an ungovernably light hand toward the artists’ work in the show is one of its many strong suits. Another is that the political dimension of the work is treated as actual rather than as transparent conveyance. The overall stance and tone of *The Ungovernables*, more than in many summary exhibitions, delicately wrangles time away from the viewer. It does this through presenting difficult work non-reductively, and rewards the fine-fingered attention it compels with a sense of newly inflected curiosity and productive disquiet.

*The Ungovernables*  
15 February—22 April, 2012  
New Museum  
New York