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## The Ungovernables: 2012 New Museum Triennial

By *Daniel Rothbart*

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Pilvi Takala, *The Trainee / February 25, a Day at Consulting & February 26, a Day at Tax & Legal*, 2008, Video, color, sound; 4:13 min, 2:06 min (loop), courtesy the artist and GalerieDiana Stigter, Amsterdam

Younger The Jesus was the first installment of the New Museum's triennial and, true to its title, featured only artists younger than thirty-three years of age. The current triennial, *The Ungovernables*, by association calls to mind a group of restless young artists who produce new and transgressive works of art. To my mind the exhibition falls short of this aspiration. Much of

the art is derivative and relationships between featured works are obscure enough at times to suggest curatorial anarchy on the part of Ungovernables commissaire Eungie Joo.

Critic Holland Cotter points out that *The Ungovernables* is also conceived with a focus on international artworks (only four of the approximately fifty artists whose works are exhibited were born in the United States). This puts it in natural counterpoint to the Whitney Museum of American Art's biennial, scheduled to open in March 2012. Numerous artistic collectives are represented in the exhibition, reflecting a spirit of international collaboration facilitated by online social media. The Occupy Wall Street movement also seems to be a subtext of this exhibition – reflecting near universal discontent with the broken financial system and its impact on people's lives.



Danh Võ, *WE THE PEOPLE*, 2011, pounded copper, courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, photo credit: Benoit Pailley

Though uneven, *The Ungovernables* does include wonderful surprises. Among these is *The Trainee*, a video piece by Finnish Artist Pilvi Takala. Takala spent a month at Deloitte accounting firm as an intern and documented the experience with a hidden camera. Over the course of this time she did no accounting work, to the chagrin of her colleagues, but occasionally rode the elevators up and down for sport. I recall a humorous moment in the video when a Deloitte team member exhorts her to be excited. Anyone who has ever worked in a corporate environment, with its dehumanizing cubicles and violence toward language, can appreciate the absurd art-worthiness of her project.



Pilvi Takala, *The Trainee / Working at Deloitte for a Month*, 2008, PowerPoint presentation, color; 2:00 min (loop), courtesy the artist and Galerie Diana Stigter, Amsterdam

In a work called WE THE PEOPLE, Berlin-based, Vietnam-born artist Danh Vo fabricated fragments of The Statue of Liberty in copper and to scale in China. Installed as an abstract sculpture might be, these elements seem pleasing and familiar in some way but also unrecognizable. Once Vo's conceptual premise sinks in, their meaning assumes a darker aspect. Is Liberty so fractured today as to be unrecognizable – reduced to abstract elements in a museum? This disturbing metaphor aside, it is interesting to relate to the statue from the Lilliputian perspective of a viewer in this gallery space. When displayed out of context and in intimate surroundings, a colossal sculpture of the French academy is completely transformed and unrecognizable.



Slavs and Tatars, *PrayWay*, 2012, silk and wool carpet, MDF, steel, neon, courtesy the artists, Kraupa-Tuskany, Berlin, and The Third Line, Dubai, photo credit: Benoit Pailley

Something between a lectern, flying carpet and airport is *Prayway*, a new sculpture by the Berlin-based artist collective Slavs and Tatars. Like a gigantic plinth, crafted for an enormous Bible or Koran, *Prayway* occupies the center of a gallery but, rather than supporting a tome, a Persian carpet drapes over its wings, seeming to levitate like something out of *One Thousand and One Nights*. Bright blue LED lights, mounted below the *Prayway* illuminate the floor below suggesting that the structure may indeed take flight. Visitors are invited to sit on *Prayway* and, as the sculpture had just been vacated by two museum-goers during my visit, I decided to experience the piece from within. No sooner had I stepped onto the carpet, however, than a security guard warned me that, though I was welcome to sit on the carpet, I couldn't traverse it with my feet. How my predecessors ascended the carpet I haven't any idea.



Cynthia Marcelle and Tiago Mata Machado, *O Século* [The Century], 2011, video, color, sound; 9:37 min (loop), coproduced with Pinchuk Art Centre, Kiev, courtesy the artists and Galeria Vermelho, São Paulo, photo credit: Benoit Pailley

This notion of defying gravity is further extended in *O Século* by Brazilian artists Cynthia Marcelle and Tiago Mata Machado. The video work appears to depict the force of some dreadful, ongoing explosion, which occurs off camera. Symptomatic of the zeitgeist and struggles between East and West, religious and secular, impoverished and affluent, this work draws us into the fray, compelling us to witness the detritus of conflict. Gasoline barrels, bicycle rims, tires, milk cartons, crates, propellers and nondescript plastic objects fly into a concrete space that is cordoned off with barbed wire. Trash projectiles are followed into the frame by billows of poisonous-looking yellow smoke. War, that most ungovernable of human endeavors, certainly defiled our 20th century. May the international creativity of artists, who so often work in collaborative space today, help encourage a healthier approach to global cohabitation.

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Writing Credits: Daniel Rothbart is an artist and writer. A former Fulbright Scholar, Rothbart is the author of *Jewish Metaphysics As Generative Principle in American Art (Ulisse e Calipso)* and *The Phoenix (Ulisse e Calipso)*. His work can be found in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Orsini Foundation in Milan and numerous public and private collections.