

The New York Times



Quiet Disobedience

By HOLLAND COTTER

The debut edition of the New Museum Triennial in 2009 was called “Younger Than Jesus,” signaling that the show was very much about age: Everyone in it was under 33. The title of the 2012 Triennial, “The Ungovernables,” shifts the emphasis to attitude. The artists are not only young, the idea is, but they’re also disobedient, mutinous infants terribles.

How true this is of their art turns out to be highly debatable, but the show does look and feel different from its moody, jangly predecessor. Writing in the catalog, the curator, Eungie Joo, director of education and public programs at the New Museum, sets the 2012 triennial in the context of, among other things, the recent Occupy movement. The reference is getting old now, but you can see its point.

The exhibition that she and her assistant, Ryan Inouye, have assembled is appealing in the way the human megaphone is. Almost throughout, it’s a thing of small, light formal gestures, unemphatic in tone and socially engaged, though in an unperturbed way that accommodates friendliness and wit.

This triennial is distinctive too in its global reach: only 4 of the 50 or so artists were born in the United States. In this way, if no other, it serves as a natural foil to the mostly American Whitney Biennial, which opens next month. And it declares its internationalism right away, in the lobby gallery, with work by two collectives, one from Africa, the other from the Middle East, and a single artist, Gabriel Sierra, from Bogotá, Colombia.

Mr. Sierra’s installation is ultra-discreet: a few tall, deep incisions in a wall, into which he’s inserted contractor’s tools — a ladder, a level, a drafting table — of a kind that he, or someone, might have used when making the incisions.

The Middle Eastern collective, led by Ala Younis, from Jordan, has six members, and their collaboration seems quite loose. They share a theme, militarism, but use different mediums (drawing, photography, film) and very different approaches (approving, disapproving, hard to read) to address it. By contrast Invisible Borders Trans-African Photography Project is the real shoulder-to-shoulder collective thing. It’s made up of artists and writers from Nigeria

who, once a year for the past three years, have driven in vans from Lagos to other parts of the continent. Although they have fixed destinations on these trips, namely art events in Senegal, Mali and Ethiopia, their real goal is to cross as many national borders as possible and become, collectively and by default, pan-African.

These adventures must be fun, but they've had their sobering moments, with car breakdowns, border hassles (the group refuses to pay the standard bribes) and some arrests, all captured on video by two of the artists, Lucy Azubuike and Nana Oforiatta-Ayim.

Video, along with film, has a positive, disciplined presence in the show's four floors of galleries. Some artists, like Jonathas de Andrade from Brazil, treat the medium expressively, like painting. In a piece by him on the second floor, 4,000 black-and-white male headshots flash by in 60-minute loop, giving your eyes the equivalent of whiplash.



Installed nearby a film called "Jewel" by Hassan Khan, a British artist living in Cairo, packs an aural as well as visual punch. The focus is on two male performers, one in working-class clothes, the other in office attire, each representing aspects of Cairo's social history. Throughout the film they stand facing each other, making fiercely wafting arm gestures to a booming Shaabi beat. Their interaction feels combative, but also erotic, like a sensuous pas de deux.

And a third video piece, by the Finnish artist Pilvi Takala, is a triennial highlight. She made it in 2008, after taking a job at an accounting firm. After some training she took her assigned desk and sat there for a month, doing not a lick of work, just staring off into space, breaking the routine only to ride the company elevator repeatedly up and down.

Her fellow employees were friendly at first, and curious, but soon grew wary, then hostile, as it became clear that her spaced-out behavior was going to continue and that she wasn't going to explain. How Ms. Takala managed to tape all this, I can't imagine. But her mute, unnerving occupation of corporate space is something to see.

In line with trends of the last three years the show includes a fair amount of performance. Ms. Takala's video qualifies as such. So do events taking place off site. Nicolas Paris, from Colombia, will run art workshops for high school students. An Israeli collective, Public Movement, will stage topical debates around town. Yet another collective, House of Natural Fiber, from Indonesia, plans to demonstrate technology for producing alcoholic beverages and electronic music simultaneously.

Along with all the action the show has plenty of objects. Most have a kind of finessed scruffiness that's popular these days: casual, but with intent. A sculpture by Adrián Villar Rojas on the fifth floor, however, is a real grandstander. Titled "A person loved me" and molded from gray clay, it towers floor to ceiling, like some monstrous fungus bristling with clublike growths.

Mr. Villar Rojas, who represented Argentina in last year's [Venice Biennale](#), created the piece at the museum. And though he finished it very recently, it already seems on the road to decay, which is precisely the effect that this young artist, fixated on the magnitude of worldly impermanence, is after. (In March he will install a second sculpture at the World Financial Center Plaza in Lower Manhattan.)

Impermanence, whether it means falling apart or failing to cohere, is also a recurrent theme for Danh Vo, who was born in Vietnam, lives in Berlin, and is one of the most stimulating figures on the international scene. The five copper sculptures that he calls "We the People" look like generic abstraction. But they're fragments of an immense figure, a full-size replica of the [Statue of Liberty](#) that he had cast, piecemeal, in China.

Will he ever be able to assemble the already-large pieces into a grand whole? Will the American people ever be a "we" instead of an "us and them"? Uncertainty is an existential searchlight that Mr. Vo, and many of his peers, hold high on a hunt for new ideas and procedures.

Two New York artists make good use of it. One is Abigail DeVille, who has created a kind of squatter's cave from street junk and family ephemera in an alcove on a museum staircase. The other is Julia Dault, whose sculptures, made of string-tied, stacked-up rolls of plexiglass, look substantial enough but require the support of a gallery wall to stay upright. Operating within self-assigned strictures, Ms. Dault created each sculpture in a single session, bending and securing the unwieldy materials herself. The final form will depend on the physical strength she's able to muster on a given day. The result: contingent Minimalism; Fluxus with muscle.

Unsurprisingly, certain other artists — Rita Ponce de León, Mounira Al Sohl, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Lee Kit, Kemang Wa Lehulere — favor more conventional media, like drawing and painting, while still others put ideas before all. Maybe Ms. Joo's role as an educator explains the inclusion of a fairly high quantity of art that reveals itself only after a viewer has done some homework.

You have to know what a Venn diagram is (two circles that share a point of intersection), and further know that such diagrams were banned as subversive by dictators in Argentina in the 1970s, to grasp the full import of a pretty light projection by Amalia Pica.

Even without these details the piece is familiar because it has so many art-historical precedents, near and distant. Almost everything here does. As you move through the galleries, you find yourself writing looks-like lists in your head, which brings us back to the triennial's title.

How ungovernable can artists be who have all, so to speak, attended the same global art school, studied under the same star teachers, from whom they learned to pitch their art, however obliquely, to one world market? It's good to keep in mind that in this case age really is a factor. This is a young person's showcase. If even just a few of these artists manage to discover, as they grow and change, what ungovernable really is, and *be* it, future generations will owe the New Museum a debt of thanks.

"The Ungovernables: 2012 New Museum Triennial" remains through April 22 at the New Museum, 235 Bowery, Lower East Side; (212) 219-1222, newmuseum.org.