

# The Ungovernables

The New Museum, New York  
February 15 to April 22, 2012

by Shannon Anderson



This past spring, the New Museum in New York mounted its second triennial. As with the first, the scope was international and focused on artists born between the mid-70s and mid-80s. Fifty artists participated, with only a small fraction born in North America. And while most of the more predictable locales were represented, such as Beijing and London, the roster also comprised artists from Beirut, Bogotá, Johannesburg and Manila. This year, the triennial's theme adopted the descriptor "The Ungovernables" to suggest, as curator Eungie Joo describes, "both anarchic and organized resistance: protest, chaos and imagination as a refusal of the extended period of economic, ideological, sectarian and political conflict that marks the generation's inheritance," while focusing on "the energy of that generation's urgencies."

It was all-too-easy to feel overwhelmed in the midst of five floors of works that shared a density of contextual and conceptual layers, but the strongest works in the exhibition—the ones that also most vividly fell into line with Joo's curatorial framework—held the exhibition together. For instance, Pilvi Takala's installation, *The Trainee*, documents the artist's infiltration of accounting firm Deloitte as a marketing employee at the firm. In various videos and e-mail correspondence by this Amsterdam/Istanbul-based artist, viewers track her interactions and "performances" within the company as

staff gradually become aware of the new employee's odd behaviour. Takala's actions embrace the escapist behaviours that all corporate employees are guilty of from time to time, offering them up to exaggeration. In one instance, she spends the entire day riding the elevator; in another, she simply sits and stares out from her desk. As such, she hides in plain sight, openly informing curious colleagues of her (non)activities with every sense of legitimacy. The exposed accumulation of written and recorded reactions to her behaviour make for intriguing voyeurism as her subtle interventions into the workplace are, in fact, empowered actions that meddle with the core of social and institutional norms. Another interventionist approach was adopted by the Propeller Group, a Ho Chi Minh/Los Angeles-based collective that hired a high-profile ad agency in Vietnam to, literally, re-brand communism. The business meetings that ensued comprise the content of the installation and were presented via five synchronized monitors arranged in a circle, each one focused on a different team member. The circular setup thus positions viewers in the middle, as though they are active participants in the group. However, at nearly six hours in length, visitors can realistically only view the interactions in parts, making them occasional witnesses to the bizarre happening of political ideology blatantly re-cast within a marketing framework.

The utter earnestness of the discussion renders what might otherwise be an absurd (or, in slightly adjusted conditions, comic) scenario into one that is quietly loaded and unnerving.

Eungie Joo's energy/urgency curatorial structure also finds a thread in less provocative works that lean toward the poetic and tactile. Beijing-based Hu Xiaoyuan's sculptures consisted of planks of white-washed wood, easy to overlook given their casual placement against a wall as though they were leftover installation materials. Intimate inspection of the work and the material description, though, reveals that what initially appears as raw lumber is, in fact, a reproduced "painting" on top of the wood. Xiaoyuan's process consists of covering her planks in white silk and then tracing the wood's natural grain in ink. Finally, she paints over the wood to cover the grain, and re-applies its silk reproduction. The end result is exquisite. A like-minded sensitivity to materials is found in Mariana Telleria's ready-made sculptures, which were displayed like curios on a series of shelves. The Argentinian artist's practice resides in pairing contrasting objects in ways that shift our perceptions and enrich our associations through their co-mingling. A stuffed white plastic bag encased in thorns (reminiscent of a blowfish), a butterfly held down like a paperweight by a circular slice of wood, and a basketball entwined in yellow-flowered branches are a few of the suggestive sculptures that comprised Telleria's *Days of Truth*. Minam Apang's drawings are also worthy of mention. The Mumbai-based artist's works in ink reference the rich terrain of mythological narratives but are used as launching off points for her own fictional elaborations. Her intricate brushwork renders forms that only fully reveal themselves upon close inspection: smaller scenes wrapped within larger ones, some remaining as obscure and as open to interpretation as Rorschach drawings. Lush and layered, her drawings capture the rich complexities that must exist around stories that have endured centuries of re-telling and re-imagining. These works by Xiaoyuan, Telleria and Apang share a sense of resistance through self-determination, as the artists take hold of existing materials and narrative frameworks and re-configure them within new confines of their own making.

By contrast, Egyptian artist Hassan Khan's film *JEWEL* embodies Joo's concept of energetic resistance in a much

Hu Xiaoyuan, *Wood*, 2009–2010, thirty-one pieces of wood, silk, Chinese ink, white lacquer, courtesy of the artist and the Beijing Commune, Beijing  
IMAGE COURTESY OF BENOIT PAILLEY



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

more direct manner. Two men, dressed in off-the-street garb, dance across from each other in an otherwise empty room. The music's intensity—a beat-heavy, rhythmic Bollywood-style number—drives the whole piece and seems to hold a direct line to the viewer's body, teasing it not to move. Although the film projection was enclosed within its own room, its music (composed by the artist) spread out into the main gallery space. And while that kind of infiltration is often an

unwelcome by-product, in this case the overspill served to lure people inside the room, mimicking the sense of anticipation that comes from entering a dance club. The music also seemed to act as a respite from the seriousness of the whole exhibition, evidenced by the two on-duty security guards who broke out into dance during my visit, something that was probably a regular occurrence and one which I hope the artist had a chance to witness for himself.

If the driving force behind these increasingly common biennials and triennials is to define the artistic “pulse” of the moment (however loaded that task may be), *The Ungovernables* managed to locate a cohesive sense of purpose and drive behind a particular generation of contemporary practices. By happenstance, *The Ungovernables* was showing concurrent to the well-established Whitney Biennial. While the Whitney's mandate is rather different—showcasing current production in American art—it was difficult not to engage in drawing comparisons between the two exhibitions. In weighing the scales, the New Museum's survey came out on top, in large part for its ability to convey the very sense of energy and purpose that defined the curatorial thesis. In viewing the Whitney Biennial in close succession, I felt a surprising disappointment at its relative lack of enthusiasm. A comparison between these two survey exhibitions is the topic of another review altogether—and perhaps not even a fair endeavour—but if both represented an effort to locate the pulse of an artistic moment, then Eungie Joo's rhythm is the one I'd much rather dance to. ×

*Shannon Anderson is an independent curator, writer and editor based in Oakville, Ontario.*

## Rory Middleton: Steady Water

Fogo Island Arts Corporation, Fogo Island, Newfoundland  
February 2012

by Kay Burns

While naysayers may claim that modernism is dead, the work of Edinburgh artist Rory Middleton (b. 1977) denies it. It may not be *modernism* as understood by that guru of modernism Clement Greenberg, but its fundamental ideas have been revisited and recontextualized through Middleton's work.

As evidence, Middleton's recent project, called *Steady Water* and produced on Fogo Island in Newfoundland during a three-month residency with the Fogo Island Arts Corporation, includes a structure that alludes to the wood/glass houses designed by modernist architect Arthur Erickson (Smith house, 1964; Graham House, 1962; Baldwin House, 1963). However, unlike the habitable intent of Erickson's work, Middleton's timber-framed structure with walls of ice was situated on a frozen pond in the interior of Fogo Island and functioned as a projection screen for a slow-paced video. (An abstraction of a Fogo Island sunset, filmed from the highest point on the island, the video's colours echoed those of the surrounding dusk sky when Middleton's event began at 5:30pm on Feb. 18, 2012.)

*Steady Water* also referenced the familiar structures of parking lots at the edge of towns across North America: the drive-in



theatres of the 50s and 60s. But at Middleton's “drive-in” on a winter's night, the screen sits far away from any community and is not accessible by car. However, the rural silence is broken by the distant drone of arriving Ski-Doos carrying helmeted riders who bring an other-worldly sci-fi ambience to the site as the screening begins and the sounds of field recordings (wind, birds, cracking ice) are delivered through speakers. A mobile hot-apple-cider and hot-rum bar provides refreshment, and farther away, a bonfire burns for those who wish to warm up.

This minimalist installation has the earmarks of modernism. In a 1958 essay, Greenberg writes: “There is an attempt to overcome

Rory Middleton (assisted by Jana Matejkova), *Steady Water*, 2012, installation view, ice, timber, mesh, projector, laptop, 2x generator, halogen work lights, PA system, frozen lake, 9.75 m × 2.4 m × 2.4 m  
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST