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"Younger than Jesus" curators Massimiliano Gioni, Lauren Cornell and Laura Hoptman at the New Museum, Apr. 7, 2009



Installation view of Dineo Seshee Bopape's work in "Younger than Jesus"



Paintings by Tala Madani in "Younger than Jesus"



Mohamed Bourouissa
Ring road
2007
New Museum

JESUS COMPLEX

by Ben Davis

The New Museum's just-opened triennial is a pretty good show. It's lively and likable, with lots of interesting work, and a scrappy, with-it sensibility. It's worth seeing. Just don't think too long about the premise.

Dubbed "The Generational: Younger than Jesus," and curated by Lauren Cornell, Massimiliano Gioni and Laura Hoptman, this ambitious exhibition promises to take the viewer on a tour inside the minds of the "millennials." And not just here in the U.S. -- "Younger than Jesus" promises to profile the *entire worldwide generation* of people under 33. A press release ever-so-briefly acknowledges that some geographical distinctions might be in order, then brushes quickly past the issue. At the preview last week, at any rate, the curators were only mentioning common themes they had uncovered: "a romance with obsolescence," "picturing the future," "a return to abstraction" and "globalization."

The internationalism of the show is a virtue in itself. It is exciting to discover South African artist Dineo Seshee Bopape's mirrored nook stuffed with fake plants and disco balls, where a flickering black-and-white film plays of the artist doing a kind of shaman/drag act. Or Iran-born, Amsterdam-based painter Tala Madani's intimate, sinister images of patriarchal figures engaged in perverse activities. Or Algerian-born Mohamed Bourouissa's sober photos of life in Paris slums, classic social documentary reportage with the meticulous clarity of Jeff Wall.

It's just kind of a stretch to believe that this is anything like a coherent picture of a global generation (the curators take this premise seriously enough that they ceded the fifth floor to critic Brian Sholis to create a lounge where people can research this mysterious demographic). The topic of, say, the influences on young Chinese artists -- the one-child policy, the repression of the "China/Avant-Garde" show, "to grow rich is glorious," etc. -- really deserves an exhibition all its own (though China expert Barbara Pollock opined that the Chinese artists in "Younger than Jesus" were "beyond terrible," so maybe not).

The overreach seems to result from a kind of little brother complex. The New Museum Triennial is quite clearly a rival to another show, the supposedly moment-defining Whitney Biennial ("Jesus" also has cumbersome, Biennial-esque wall texts, capsule CVs telling you what concepts and even adjectives apply to the artists on view, already the subject of much mockery). Strip the misplaced pretensions away, however, and you get something different. Rather than viewing "Younger than Jesus" as an incoherent attempt to speak for the Concerns of a Generation, you can view it as a more modest, but coherent, essay on the concerns of the art world during a very specific moment -- the period when most of this art was actually made, in fact -- 2000-2009, the "naughty oughties." And that's interesting.



The Brian Sholis "Live Archive" on the fifth floor of the New Museum



Wall label for Loris Gréaud, in "Younger than Jesus"



Cory Arcangel
Photoshop CS: 110 by 72 inches, 300 DPI, RGB, square pixels, default gradient "Spectrum", mousedown y=1416 x=1000, mouse up y=208 x=42
2009
New Museum



I'm guessing that this period will be remembered as an idiosyncratic one for art, bookended by the dot.com bust of 2000-2001 and the property crash of 2007-ongoing, with a giant credit bubble and turbo-charged round of globalization there in the middle. This was the period when art fairs went supernova, with the rise of Art Basel Miami Beach and Frieze in London, when the talk of "hedge-funders" and "emerging market artists" became omnipresent. It was the era of "complicity," as Johanna Drucker termed it, when artists were generally content to position themselves as part of the broader rainbow of fashion, advertising, branding and youth culture, and not against it [see "[Commerce and Consciousness](#)," Jan. 11, 2008].

Not too long ago, Jerry Saltz riffed on a quote from Jasper Johns -- whose deadpan appropriationist innuendo is clearly an influence today -- about how to make art: "Take an object. / Do something to it. / Do something else to it." "Much contemporary art fails," Saltz added, "because it never goes beyond Johns' second sentence." This seems particularly relevant to a hopped-up, hyped-up environment in which novelty itself is enough to float art on. In "Younger than Jesus," it is as true of Cory Arcangel's recontextualization of a Photoshop color spectrum as an abstract painting as it is of Armenian artist Tigran Khachatryan's black-and-white video that recuts skateboard videos to look like Eisenstein's *The Strike*. Once you realize that two codes are being slapped together, there is just not that much more there (though Khachatryan's image of a young dude masturbating, photographed from below in the style of the heroic proletarian worker, is at least noteworthy).

"Younger than Jesus" also has a surplus of the kind of glib neo-Situationism popular at art fairs, publicity stunts clad as critique. There's Mexican artist Adriana Lara's gesture of having a guard eat a banana each day and deposit the peel on the floor; Ryan Gander's gesture of dictating that one museum staffer wear a tracksuit instead of a uniform in the galleries; Chu Yun's gesture of paying various women to sleep, with or without the aid of pills, in a big fluffy bed on the second floor.

Also characteristic of the period: the conceit that a dash of self-reflexivity is enough to transform personal obsessions into artistic gold. This formula fits Brendan Fowler (a.k.a. BARR, the one-man-art-band) to a T. In "Younger than Jesus," he contributes a screed on his personal debate with another obscure band, formatted to look like a rock-and-roll poster. It's also the flavor of Matt Keegan's works, panels with the words "Barbara Kruger" in the style of Barbara Kruger, or casts of the hands of mayors from towns along the route of "Hands Across America." The pleasure of these works lays in the fact that they are so minor and self-referential that you feel like the artists are inviting you into their world. They are conceptual "friend" requests.

Which relates to the other, more promising side of recent art that the New Museum captures. The excesses of the "oughties" have always been combined with a queasy sense, the feeling that it was all built on sand, that monsters were lurking at the door (it was also the era of twin conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, after all). Both Scotsman Luke Fowler and Frenchman Cyprien Gaillard capture the sense of being poised between grandeur and tragedy. Fowler offers *What You See Is Where You're At*, a shaggy video essay on charismatic '60s therapist R.D. Laing, product of a very contemporary combination of fascination and disillusionment with counterculture. Gaillard has a heart-stopping montage putting together footage of a "fight club" on the streets of Russia with housing blocks being demolished in France -- pan-European social disintegration set to a techno beat.

It's against such background intimations of instability that the increasingly touchy-feely tone of the art world's romance with

A banana peel in "Younger than Jesus,"
courtesy Adriana Lara



New Museum staffer wearing a tracksuit
in "Younger than Jesus," as part of
Ryan Gander's *This Consequence*



Woman sleeping in the New Museum as
part of Chu Yun's performance in
"Younger than Jesus" (with visitors
playing Mark Essen's *Flywrench*, in the
background)



Poster by Brendan Fowler, in "Younger
than Jesus"

collectivism takes its meaning -- which, in turn, makes a lot of the rest of the art in "Younger than Jesus" fall into place. Most obviously, up on the fourth floor, Czech artist Katerina Šedá presents a wall-filling grid of drawings by her grandmother, representing the elder woman's vanishing memories of the hardware store she once managed, while Scotland's Ruth Ewan offers a jukebox full of 600 songs with progressive themes, free to play, in the lobby. More subtly, a sense of free-to-be-you-and-me tribalism is what gives purpose to the weirdness-for-weirdness'-sake feel of works ranging from Irish artist Mariechen Danz's videotaped performance -- in which noises made by strangely costumed people slowly converge into a kind of New Age a capella rave-up -- to Ryan Trecartin's giddy, gender-bending videos, quick-cut combinations of gay culture and sci-fi that would give David Bowie a headache.

The best is the simplest, however. Filmmaker Ziad Antar (part of Lebanon's thriving experimental video scene, according to *Bidoun* magazine) has two videos sited in a nook on the long stairwell between the third and fourth floors. *Wa* features two children, "Nathalie" and "Mohamed." They sit before a synthesizer. As it taps out a beat, they listen solemnly, then break into a song consisting entirely of the repeated word "wa." Others have pointed out that *Wa* is perfect YouTube art, compact and adorable; it will make you smile. Yet coupled with Antar's other work -- a black-and-white clip of hands playing a silenced piano, a metaphor for dreams suppressed -- *Wa* comes off as a basic cry of humanity from the Lebanese artist, highlighting his subjects' innocent ability to work together and spin something wonderful from limited means.

The New Museum itself has contributed productively to the recent vogue for community-minded art -- in particular via its long sponsorship of Rhizome.org, the web-art advocates (the two organizations partnered in 2003). Rhizome is definitely the New Museum's secret weapon. No other major institution has a comparable resource -- its very own online community with a committed following, devoted to showcasing, discussing and otherwise exploring experimental art. Rhizome director Lauren Cornell is one of the most articulate spokespeople for everything that is actually new in new art -- and much of what feels most adventurous in "Younger than Jesus" appears to come via this connection.

For instance, Mark Essen's installation, *Flywrench*, is not just an arty riff on video games. It's an actual product of the "indy gaming" community. Using an old-school Nintendo controller, you pilot a spaceship that must change colors to get through obstacles in a maze of simplified, geometric space-tunnels. It's *Wing Commander* meets *Flatland*. My guess is that the best present creative activity is likely to be found on such frontiers (back when I was contributing to Rhizome, I remember writing up everything from Janet Cardiff's *Eyes of Laura* -- a blog-as-murder-mystery -- to 20Q, the online artificial intelligence program).

It's not just that Rhizome.org gives the New Museum an organic plug-in to new media experimentation, though. One of the best things about the web-art scene is its anarchic utopianism, its commitment to inclusiveness. Perhaps the overall positive vibe I get from "Younger than Jesus" comes from the fact that some of this spirit seems to be seeping sideways into the staid survey format more generally. The whole premise of this Triennial, after all, is that the selection process was partially "networked," with recommendations solicited from a wide variety of experts around the world. Even if this just means that the New Museum curators solicited ideas from their professional contacts, the result is that the show feels like a much more authentic nod to "social networking" than the Whitney's 2008 "Facebook Biennial."



Installation view of works by Matt Keegan, in "Younger than Jesus"



Installation view of Luke Fowler's *What You See Is Where You're At* (2001) in "Younger than Jesus"



Installation view of Cyprien Gaillard's *Desniansky Raion* (2007) in "Younger than Jesus"



Installation view of Katerina Šedá's *It Doesn't Matter* (2005-2007) in "Younger than Jesus"

At the Whitney, "artistic communities" and "interactivity" seemed like buzzwords, tags to categorize a variety of distinct practices. At the New Museum, the "networked" logic, taken more fully into the curating, is actually a way to add to the texture of the show, not smooth things out. At the press opening, Jersey-based LaToya Ruby Frazier told me that she didn't think she would be there at all if it weren't for the "crowd-sourced curating" conceit. Reviewing her suite of black-and-white photos -- lonely images of family claustrophobia -- you have to admit that it's not a particularly hip idiom, about as far from trendy nomadism as possible (incidentally, Frazier's photos correspond to none of the four concerns the curators laid out as characteristic to the current "generation"). Yet at the same time, at a moment when everyone is talking about the "return of content," Frazier's sobriety might just be the closest thing in "Younger than Jesus" to the look of the future.

This kind of low-key democratic spirit is really the best of what art has produced in the last few years, and the New Museum certainly has more of a claim to it than the Whitney. Consequently, I'd say that the New Museum's task is really just to ditch its little brother complex and realize what it already has. A "Rhizome Triennial" -- that's something I'd want to see.

"The Generational: Younger than Jesus," Apr. 8-July 5, 2009, at the New Museum for Contemporary Art, 235 Bowery, New York, N.Y. 10002

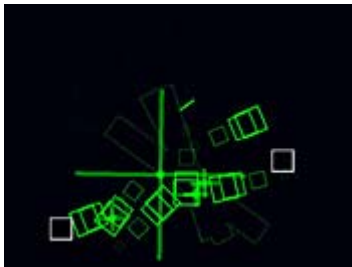
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Installation view of Mariechen Danz's *Complain the Explanation* (2008) in "Younger than Jesus"



Installation view of Ziad Antar's *Wa* (2004) in "Younger than Jesus"



Mark Essen
Flywrench (still)
2007
New Museum



Artist LaToya Ruby Frazier at the press preview for "Younger than Jesus"



LaToya Ruby Frazier

Me and Mom's Boyfriend Mr. Art

2005

New Museum