

THE NEW YORKER

THE ART WORLD

THEIR GENERATION

"Younger Than Jesus" at the New Museum.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

How will upcoming artists respond to the down-going economy? They will make a point of entertaining themselves on the cheap, often in groups, and self-consciously, as members of an ingenuity- and drollery-loving generation that was weaned on the Internet and is game for the bust of the boom in which it was reared. So testifies "The Generational: Younger Than Jesus," the New Museum's arduously titled, newly instituted triennial, which presents work by fifty artists, from twenty-five countries, who have yet to blow out thirty-three candles on a birthday cake. The show is low-budget bubbly fun, for the most part—and noisy, what with all the videos and sound pieces. Its star, for me, is Ryan Trecartin, an American artist based in Philadelphia, who orchestrates a shaggy installation in which scripted, digitally eventful videos (catchable on YouTube) feature madcap, often sexually ambiguous performers enacting phantasmagorical dramas in squeaky voices at very high speed. The plot, if it can be called that, of one video concerns quadruplet girls whose father has told them that he wanted only triplets; two of the sisters resolve the familial anxiety by merging into one. Another winner is a Frenchman, Cyprien Gaillard, with a spectacular video, accompanied by a soundtrack of ghostly anthems, of brutalist apartment blocks in Ukraine (aerial views), Russia (the scene of a gang fight involving hundreds of young men), and France (a building at night spewing a lovely fireworks display before imploding—the occasion is a planned demolition, it turns out—in clouds of dust pierced by searchlights). One probably could tease political implications from Gaillard's architectural travelogue, but its pith, in the context of the show, is sheer youthful alacrity. What is being done in new art? Whatever the hell anybody feels like doing.

Unsurprisingly, "Younger Than Jesus" has dicey aspects. Start with the idea of sorting artists by age. One of the show's crew of staff curators, Laura Hoptman—writing in a catalogue packed with sociological essays, including charts of trends in substance abuse and sexual behavior—admits that generational analysis is akin to reading horoscopes, which are "suspiciously nonspecific, although we long for them not to be." In the abstract, every new generation is pretty much like the one that came before it: struggling Oedipally with its forebears, embracing the Zeitgeist, and otherwise reactivating stock patterns, meanwhile being fawned upon by marketers. If there is anything unique about today's young, it may be a precocious alertness to how such rhetorical typecasting and economic targeting work. This generation even usurps the process, by innumerable online means. Gone are the days, in the nineteen-eighties and nineties, when deconstruction-smitten academics and artists toiled to share their discovery that media and institutions are—get ready—manipulative. Viscerally sophisticated young artists are more interested in playing with materials and contexts that are purely gratuitous, or, at least, too anarchic or too desultory to be marshalled for or against any commercial interest or political tendency. It's a timely shift, given that, this year, sales of almost everything, very much including art, are down, and that, last year, theoretical politics were obliterated by the real thing. The only sorting system for artists that matters—according to individual quality and influence—will prevail, in time, over fashion. Not that there's anything wrong with fashion. Novelty keeps us spry, and it cleans up after itself by being gone in a minute.

For a sense of how fast and erratically the current art culture is moving, con-

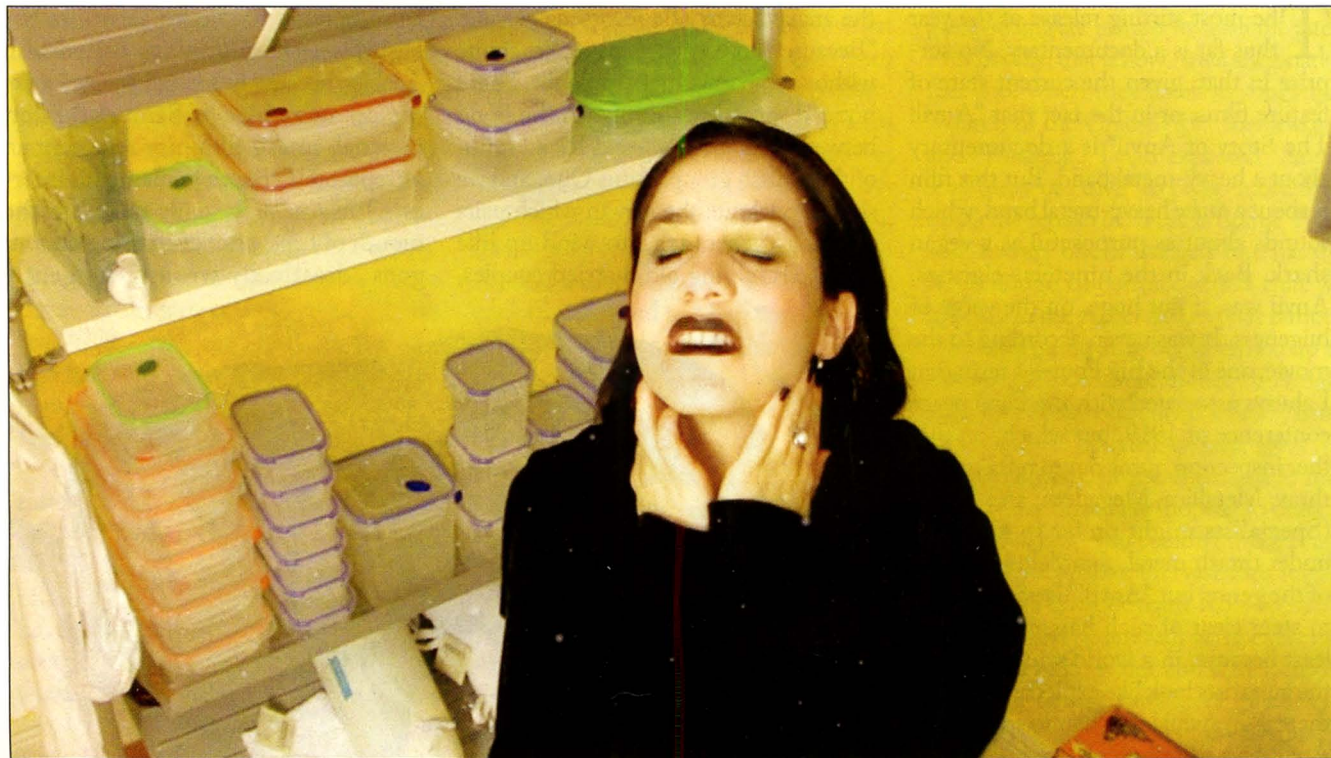
sider that just last summer the New Museum mounted another international roundup, "After Nature," selected by one of the "Jesus" curators, Massimiliano Gioni, which heralded a revival of humanist sentiment and existential anguish, notably in figurative sculpture and staged photography. We were led to expect a darkly serious trend in art. What happened to that? Partly, the contrast involves mere repackaging. Gaillard's imploding building, a whoop in its present company, would likely have seemed apocalyptic in proximity to a film in the earlier show, by Werner Herzog, of burning Kuwaiti oil wells. But the museum's side step to upbeat theatricality doesn't feel arbitrary. It is at one with the distinctly fresh attitude of much of the work on view, which may be regarded as either laudably nimble or deplorably spineless. Remember Gilda Radner's character Emily Litella, on the old "Saturday Night Live," who chirped "Never mind!" when misunderstandings that had sparked her angry rants were pointed out to her? Thinking of that joke helped me focus on a quality of whipsaw humor that is rife in "Jesus." Call it "never-mindedness," a sort of booby-trapped cocksureness, foreseen by Nirvana. In Trecartin's work, soulful sincerity may own up at a moment's notice to being bedevilled nihilism, or just a manic hedge against boredom. The different tones flicker rather than blur. All are in force, all at once. You wouldn't think that a state of mind so self-sabotaging is sustainable, short of clinical insanity. But there it is, brightly and breezily.

Apropos of insanity, a video by the Scotsman Luke Fowler, one of several "Jesus" works that channel nostalgia for radical art and culture of the past, incorporates documentary footage from the psychiatrist R. D. Laing's notorious Kingsley Hall, a therapeutic community that he operated in East London from 1965 to 1970. Laing treated schizophrenics by encouraging them to develop, rather than suppress, the cracked logic of their thoughts. One may reject the notion that madness is somehow liberating (I do), but it's a fact of experience, familiar from Outsider art, that painful dissociation can produce impressions of aesthetic cogency. Fowler has fashioned a fugue of lin-

guistic non sequiturs that weave an unsettling spell. Another video montage, by Tigran Khachatryan, an Armenian, intercuts rushing crowd scenes from classic Soviet films by Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov with news coverage of political riots and shots of contemporary skateboarders and other incautious youths engaging in “Jackass”-

boring pictures, evocative of Francis Bacon and Philip Guston—that postpones judgment. The show offers photographs, too, in social-documentary and conceptual veins—the most impressive are staged street scenes, in woebegone Paris suburbs, by the Algerian Mohamed Bourouissa—and some sculpture of the jury-rigged-junk vari-

show, and about four hundred and fifty others who didn’t make the cut, each get a page of reproductions and description. All were recommended by an advisory cohort of roughly a hundred and fifty curators, critics, and artists from around the world. Phone-book bulky, the tome is an instant memorial to today’s international art network. In



A still from the video “Re’SearCh Wait’S” (2009), by Ryan Trecartin, an artist based in Philadelphia.

style, at times plainly bone-breaking behavior. It ends with a young man, naked, masturbating to orgasm while maintaining a facial expression of unruffled calm. The shock of ultimate excitement coextensive with disinterested detachment is never-mindedness in spades.

So far, I’ve mentioned only works in video, for a compelling reason—video is by far the predominant medium of adventurous young artists today. There are a few paintings on hand in the show; the best are by a Pole, Jakub Julian Ziolkowski, whose surrealistic imagination and formal inventiveness invite, and actually survive, comparison to Picasso. “The Great Battle Under the Table,” a summary in minuscule detail of the Napoleonic wars, teeters on the verge of mere comic illustration, but there is a demonic oomph about it—endorsed by neigh-

ety that the New Museum celebrated in its inaugural exhibition, “Unmonumental,” in 2007. But, four decades after the first portable videotape recorder became available, video has become a studio tool that’s as second nature as pencils. Little by little, it has stolen fire from film, photography, theatre, concert performance, painting (with projections as murals), drawing (with animation), and, of course, television, exhaustively unpacking the history and the semiotics of the home screen. Video’s only weakness has been commercial, as a product hard to commodify. But that handicap may be barely noticeable in the present art market.

One other work must be noted: a book, “Younger Than Jesus: Artist Directory,” edited by the show’s curators, and published by the New Museum and Phaidon Press. Artists in the

coming years, it will likely serve curators, dealers, and collectors as a Sears catalogue of inexorably older-than-Jesus talent. There’s something sickening about the scale of the art-mediating infrastructure that the book represents, advertising more stuff than one might ever get around to looking at, let alone valuing. Out there in the night, while we sleep, incredible quantities of art are being carted around, archived, and so on, because it is somebody’s job to do those things. Can we please not think about that? ♦

CONSTABULARY NOTES FROM ALL OVER

From the Lancaster (N.H.) Coös County Democrat.

On Oct. 12, State Police responded to a report of a theft of three quilts from a motel in Jefferson. The quilts were later found to have been folded and put in the closet by the tourists.