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ART

Unspooling Time Loops

By [ROBERTA SMITH](#)

To glimpse the future of contemporary art, or at least a slice of that future, spend some time at the X Initiative in Chelsea. Real time. The solo shows on view provide in-depth exposure to the efforts of three young artists who work in film, performance, sound and other time-based mediums, and suggest some exciting new approaches to reinventing and recombining Post Minimalism's diverse strains, especially the emphasis on language and the use of dispersed, decentered installations. Taken together they say more about art today, more clearly, than most biennials.

The manipulation of time — fractured, layered, circular — ties together the work in these shows. So does a desire to achieve the physical presence of art objects, but without their fixed materiality. Here the materials of note are narrative, spoken words and images moving and still, as well as experience filtered through the framework of psychology and anthropology.

It is worth noting — and a mite depressing for the home team — that none of the artists at X are American. Luke Fowler, who extravagantly distorts the conventions of documentary filmmaking in the four works on view here, is Scottish and based in Glasgow. Keren Cytter was born in Tel Aviv and now works in Berlin; her eight films, made since 2000, reveal a voracious appetite for all cinematic genres and a few from television. The British-born Tris Vonna-Michell for the moment lives a mostly itinerant existence, giving performances and setting up his pieces, which usually involve parts of previous works. His installations at the X Initiative consist of slide projections of his own and found photographs, or recordings of performances in which he tells and retells, to an almost obsessive degree, a tale that weaves together his incessant travels, personal experiences and haphazard pursuit of history.

These artists — all younger than 33 — have been seen in New York before. All were included in the New Museum's "The Generational: Younger Than Jesus" triennial this spring. Mr. Fowler and Ms. Cytter have had small solo shows in galleries and alternative spaces, and Mr. Vonna-Michell performed on the opening weekend of "Plot/09" on Governors Island in June.

But at the X Initiative, Cecilia Alemani, the curatorial director, has given each of them the run of a spacious floor in the large West 22nd Street loft building that once housed the [Dia Center for the Arts](#), and they have made the most of it. The immersive experience of images, sounds and personalities that each has created blurs fact and fiction, medium and message; the contrasts and similarities among their efforts ultimately form a kind of loop.

"Warriors: Four Films by Luke Fowler, 2003-2008" showcases the most grounded of these three artists. But

while Mr. Fowler makes documentaries about artists and eccentrics marginalized by society, his background in music and his fluency in the history of underground film inspire him to take dizzying liberties with the documentary form. He mixes existing footage with staged and new film, segues into passages of nearly abstract sights and sounds, and sometimes — as with “The Way Out,” a film made with Kosten Koper in 2003 — loses his subject altogether.

These strategies help Mr. Fowler’s films expand beyond their subjects in a thrilling way. “Pilgrimage From Scattered Points” (from 2006 and shown that year at White Columns) is a poignant study of the British composer Cornelius Cardew (1936-81) and the Scratch Orchestra (1968-73) that he helped found, as well as the radical notions of music and performance it lived by. But it is also a study of the ideals and disappointments of the 1960s. “Bogman Palmjaguar” (2007) is both a portrait of an eccentric self-taught naturalist consumed by his fight against being classified as a paranoid schizophrenic and a lyrical meditation on the peat bogs of Scotland, with which he is equally obsessed.

There is no central character in “An Abbeyview Film” (2008), a short tribute to a Scottish village that evokes [Dan Graham](#)’s 1960s photographs of suburban New Jersey. Its stark views of subdivisions, traffic, parks and younger residents are enhanced by a haunting soundtrack: an a cappella lament titled “Warriors,” written and sung by the Glasgow musician Richard Youngs. It suggests that alienation, while not exactly pleasant, may not be a modern invention.

Mr. Fowler’s films are screened in a small theater built in the middle of the otherwise empty third floor, which concentrates their psychological and aural impact. Ms. Cytter, meanwhile, lays siege to the second floor, with multiple screens and monitors and large drawings in her show “Keren Cytter: The Mysterious Serious.” All is revealed — the videos projected, the drawings illuminated — in a timed sequence that forces movement. And the films and images have a roaming quality themselves, moving through documentary, film noir and soap opera while rehashing Roman Polanski’s “Repulsion” (a three-screen surprise) or conjuring up Godard or Hitchcock.

The entire medium, in fact, is in flux: scenes repeat, actors change character, the camera wobbles, music encroaches, voices and mouths are out of sync. But against such self-conscious structuralism there is Ms. Cytter’s wild sense of cinematic beauty and the intensity of her churning narratives, which focus on sex, violence and family life, and the vicissitudes of memory and dreams. The work is not all of equal quality; I recommend “Something Happened” (2007) and “Four Seasons” (2009). But Ms. Cytter’s talent is formidably apparent.

On the fourth floor Mr. Vonna-Michell’s installation reaches to all four corners, feeling stretched and a little barren. But move around, and it comes quietly to life. Short sound pieces trickle from speakers around the space. Altered photographs of a previous, similarly austere exhibition are displayed on tables under glass. Black-and-white images of urban settings click past on slide projectors.

The glue is the spoken word. Headsets play different accounts of a nomadic existence that takes Mr. Vonna-Michell from Japan (where he was a homeless teenager), to Detroit, to Berlin, to New York, detailing strange encounters, lost cameras and personal quests. And in “Monumental Detours/Insignificant Fixtures,” a continuing work that he started last year, he struggles to make sense of torn and stained paper

on which he wrote a long forgotten dream, his words exquisitely calibrated to the images from two slide projectors.

Mr. Vonna-Michell speaks at something like the speed of thought, in a way that reflects the brain's very synapses, hiccups, repetitions, sudden shifts and reflexive filing system. As he recounts his experiences, jumping from track to track, he might easily be the subject of one of Mr. Fowler's films. It is amazing to enter his neural pathways, if you let yourself.

All three exhibitions, and the art in them, have a transitory quality, both in their subjects and their presentation. Nothing seems really fixed. "Today and Everyday," a small show of nine artists that is in the garagelike structure on the building's roof, maintains this mood, although it is far more object oriented. The show was organized by the artist and independent curator Margaret Lee, who contributed a photograph resembling an oversize postcard that depicts elements from the other participants' work arranged in a handsome still life. The other artists then reclaimed these elements and made works with and around them.

For Josh Klein this meant taking a clumsy red-glazed ceramic desk caddy and placing it on an office desk complete with chair and computer, all of which he "glazed" with shades of light-beige (clay-colored) paint. Donna Chung's painted cardboard sculpture of a big slice of watermelon was returned to her wrapped in semi-transparent paper, and it remains so, figuring in an ephemeral installation of rope and cut paper. The ensemble echoes the tan cardboard and white paint of the watermelon slice, which are only really visible in Ms. Lee's photograph. Olaf Breuning, Sam Wilson, Anicka Yi and Maggie Peng, Piet Houtenbos and Carissa Rodriguez are also represented twice; the props in Ms. Lee's photograph are yeast for the art.

Like its shows the X Initiative is also nomadic. A loose alliance of art dealers, collectors and curators led by the dealer Elizabeth Dee, it was given use of the old Dia building by the new owners for one year starting in March. In a sense X occupies ex-Dia like a hermit crab set up house in an empty shell. Opening with an overlarge retrospective of the filmmaker [Derek Jarman](#), followed by "No Soul for Sale," a performance-heavy do-it-yourself art fair, the group has gradually revived the building as an alternative space. The new shows, collectively known as "Phase Two," are the most impressive so far. They remind us how important Dia once was to New York as a curatorial example and how much it is missed, but they also surpass Dia in their commitment to the new.

At X we see young curators and artists working without much interference from above, which doesn't happen nearly enough in New York museums these days. That's a strange thing: the relationship between freedom and quality.

"Phase Two" is on view through Oct. 25 at the X Initiative, 548 West 22nd Street, Chelsea; (917) 697-4886, x-initiative.org.