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The New York Scene

Visions From Nigeria and India and a Van Searching for Utopia

By HOLLAND COTTER

ANOTHER season of griping and cheerleading. Art fairs bordering on sales conventions were promoted as the most fabulous things. Aggrieved voices complained about the politics of hype, and about new art looking tiny and shiny and thin. A few old-time idealists dared to wonder if the art world shouldn't, maybe, offer a noncompliant critical alternative to the real world, of which it is at present an indistinguishable (and, let's face it, inconsequential) part.

At the same time, there were a few non-industry models to consider. Most were delivered by artists, including a few making long-overdue New York debuts. The sculptor El Anatsui, who lives in Nigeria, appeared in a two-gallery solo show of glowing, fabriclike wall hangings assembled from thousands of liquor bottle caps. These coats-of-many-cultures referred to traditional African, colonial Africa and a contemporary Africa that is neither and both. (One of the two exhibitions, at Skoto Gallery in Chelsea, is on view through Jan. 21.)

An enchanting first New York show by the Indian artist Ranbir Kaleka melded painting, video and digital art in surreal tableaux that brought visionary encounters to life with a magician's hand. Mr. Kaleka also appeared in "Edge of Desire: Recent Art in India" at Asia Society and the Queens Museum of Art, which spun off fine solo debuts by Subodh Gupta and Raqs Media Collective (Monica Narula, Shuddhabrata Sengupta and Jeebesh Bagchi). Together they radically expanded the conventional definition of Indian art.

From ever-expanding China came work by the Beijing-based photographer Liu Zheng. His series "The Chinese" combines the psychological and social acuties of Diane Arbus and August Sander in a documentary sweep across a powerful ancient culture writhing under the pressure of modernization. In Mr. Liu's magnetic and repellent pictures, China's present and past, its living and dead, are often hard to tell apart. We would do well to become acquainted with them all. The future is theirs.

After conspicuous absences, two midcareer artists, Sam Durant and Isa Genzken, showed new bodies of work that were a logical development of what came before and a revelation. Both artists were everything they had been, and more. Rirkrit Tiravanija's Hugo Boss Prize solo at the Guggenheim Museum was a mind-widener that extended beyond the museum's walls. It consisted of a radio transmitter for broadcasting uncensored news, along with a handout sheet instructing visitors how to build one of their own at home.

Three established figures - Carl Andre, Andrea Fraser and Martha Rosler - published collections of writings, each a gold mine of against-the-grain thinking. And, speaking of extending institutions, the opening of temporary space in the Hotel Chelsea by the dealer Daniel Reich for performances and experimental work, planted the seed for an Other Chelsea.

Certain artists, some very young, most with first shows, quietly rethought the way art looks or works. Among them, let me mention performers like Ei Arakawa, Brendan Fowler, Kalup Linzy and Tara Mateik; the sculptors and installation artists Anya Kielar, George Ferrandi, Klara Liden and Johannes VanDerBeek; painter-sculptor-conceptualists like Michael Queenland and Max Schumann; and such indescribables as a five-woman collective named for a project that brought them together, "J. D.'s Lesbian Utopia."

The quintet (J. D. Samson, who is a member of the rock group Le Tigre, Cass Bird, Lex Vaughn, Dusty Lombardo and Sasha Anthome) traveled across the country in a van, sharing resources, talking to people, and creating art - photographs, videos, music - all the way. In the process, they found the utopia they were after: they were it. They have since produced a great full-color calendar documenting the experience, symbolically making 2006 an extension of their trip, and a wide-open alternative year.

