Nature's daughter…Come now to view the pains, to mitigate the calamitous work, to remove the pains. Great pains are penetrating here… The sky is penetrating up above while the sufferer is crying out.

--A fragment from and English translation of the *Kalevala*

What happens when a Romantic-era European national epic is performed in an international modernist architectural space in North America in the era of neoliberal globalization? Artist Pia Lindman and the Buffalo-based contemporary music ensemble Wooden Cities raised and addressed this question in their haunting performance "A Kalevala Duo, Playing Bones," in the Eliel and Eero Saarinen-designed Kleinhans auditorium in Buffalo, as part of FinnFest USA 2015.

The Kalevala is best known as an ancient Finnish heroic epic story cycle collected in parts of greater Finland in the mid-nineteenth century by academics from thousands of oral folk-tales and sayings provided by illiterate local informants both male and female. This collection activity, resulting in eventual publication, was double-edged: on the one hand, the academics were saving the stories and information from likely oblivion, as Finland, like much of Europe, underwent rapid change from a thoroughly rural to a partly urbanized society. On the other, in their recovery efforts the researchers (like many nineteenth century folk story collectors from the Brothers Grimm in Germany to W.B. Yeats in Ireland) tended to emphasize and amplify the story of heroes, especially male heroes, in order to help establish a specifically national epic story, and to leave aside much of the other, more "feminine"-associated information contained in the Kalevala's thousands of entries. This Romantic, nation-building idea was hugely

important for Finns, a people long dominated by their larger and militarily more powerful neighbors, as they sought to assert their independence and national sovereignty, but by the 1920s and 30s such nationalism tended to have a distinctly right-wing valence. When internationally known and politically conservative composer Jean Sibelius drew repeatedly on the Kalevala to create music (especially in his symphony *Lemminkäinen*, named after the primary hero of the Kalevala), he sought to proclaim, to Europe, a proud Finnish identity later also promoted by the political group he admired, the Lapua, who not incidentally were also supported by the German National Socialists as a bulwark against the Soviet Union.

Lindman's original idea for FinnFest was to have the Buffalo Symphony Orchestra perform Sibelius's *Lemminkäinen*, accompanied by herself on stage practicing (on a local volunteer) healing rituals also contained in the Kalevala's pages but generally ignored. This performance would have challenged the masculinist nationalist ideals espoused by Sibelius, and which persist today in the pronouncements of far-right political groups in Finland, still one of the most ethnically homogenous nations in Europe. When this initial idea proved unrealizable, curator Claire Schneider proposed a collaboration with Wooden Cities, a collective of performers and composers based in Western New York**.** After visiting Buffalo in early 2015 and meeting members of Wooden Cities, Lindman asked Wooden Cities to create a new musical composition, with a libretto based on a section in the Kalevala in which spells for summoning healing spirits are incanted; accompanying the music and incantations, Lindman would perform a "bone setting" massage ritual known by only a few hundred Finns. The music, to be composed by Brendan Fitzgerald and Nathan Heidelberger, would bounce off of the

exchange of energy of the massage practice, and would start bass-heavy as the massage began at the volunteer's feet and become higher pitched as Lindman moved up his body; further, the melodies would echo field recordings of traditional Finnish folk songs, with varying degrees of layering, distortion, and fragmentation. In preparation for the performance, over the course of summer, 2015, Lindman gave each of Wooden Cities' seven performers the bone setting described in part of the Kalevala.

The resulting collaboration, "A Kalevala Duo: Playing Bones" transformed the initial idea of interrogating the implications of Sibelius's nationalist composition into a more subtle, collective and international experience. Instead of using the entire 900-seat Kleinhans auditorium, a stunning organic-modernist space designed in the late 1930s by the father and son Saarinen team, a smaller audience, about 150 people, could be brought up on stage and experience the space from the perspective of a performer.

From inception to performance, the Lindman-Wooden Cities collaboration exposed what French philosopher Jacques Rancière calls "la partage du sensible," a phrase often translated as "the distribution of the sensible," yet which also implies "the partition of sensitivity." Rancière defines "la partage du sensible" as "the system of… forms determining what lends itself to sense experience." Put simply, Rancière asks why something becomes perceivable or "feel-able" in a particular way at a particular time, and how that sensibility marks off (and is itself marked by) ideas of expertise and social class—to which Lindman might add national identity and gender. Rancière declares, and I think Lindman would agree, that there is "aesthetics at the core of politics"--and perhaps vice-versa--and that the distribution (or partition) of the sensible

“simultaneously determines the places and the stakes of politics as a form of experience.” By engaging vision, sound and touch, Lindman and Wooden Cities at once revealed some of the exclusions that produce knowledge (the amplification of male heroism and diminishment of the domesticity) and offered a shared space for reflection and action.

In pursuing this set of questions around aesthetics, politics, and exclusionary sensibility or sensitivity, Lindman returns to the proposition--elaborated in her previous site-responsive art like her well-known project at PS-1’s Greater New York exhibition in 2000, in which she installed a working sauna; and her astonishing series of interpretations of images of bodily suffering presented in New York Times photographs —that, like politics, art is or at least can be a collective, bodily experience.

On the evening of the performance in mid-October, 2015, the on-stage audience witnessed Lindman methodically kneading the body of Finnish-American volunteer Timothy Oefelein, while also observing the musicians play and, at times, sing lines from the libretto, which followed the rhythm of the heroic “Kalevala meter,” a regular form of trochaic tetrameter, emphasizing four beats per line, with every-other syllable stressed. Although the Finnish words, sung by American performers (with pronunciation help from Christina Saarinen, the architects’ great/granddaughter) were (for an English speaker) nearly impossible to decipher, as the one-hour performance proceeded, it became evident through the music and through the libretto, a part of which is quoted in the epigraph, above, that Wooden Cities’ performers and Lindman were both “Playing Bones”: not only were they playing wind and string instruments and manipulating bodies, ostensibly to do away with physical pain in suffering bodies, but also invoking

the countless suffering and dead bodies that the historical turn toward (and away from) nationalism produced.

As she attended to Oefelein's body, Lindman illuminated some of the ancient origins of art as shamanistic or healing practice. (After all, the vaunted ancient Greek "catharsis" was never intended merely to make particular listeners cry and thereby feel better, as in the now-common understanding, but to serve a public function of expunging horror for the health of the collective.) But she did so casually, without the overblown masculine boldness associated with twentieth century artists who advertise their shamanic artistry. Although she worked up a fierce sweat during the massage, enough to have to towel herself off several times, Lindman's demeanor was decidedly untheatrical.

Still, Lindman's project, like almost all of her art over the course of the last fifteen years, puts pressure on the very idea of *gesture*, demonstrating the political responsiveness and potential of gesturality. In the essay collection *Potentialities*, Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben defines "gesture" neither as a pre-linguistic phenomenon nor in the classical philosophical sense as something external to language, added to emphasize language in order to convince a listener. Instead, he associates gesture with "the muteness inherent in humankind's very capacity for language" and asserts its "speechless dwelling in language." By identifying gesture with speechless dwelling, Agamben, in this marriage of early Benjaminian and late Heideggerian thought, contrasts the idea of gesture (which has little to do with the emphatic gesturings of the Abstract Expressionist's brushstrokes) with that of image, a term that is often associated with contemporary artmaking, and he argues that it is gesture not image that is crucial

to artistic practice. Moreover, he argues that “because [art] has its center in the gesture and not in the image, it belongs essentially to the realm of ethics and politics (and not simply to that of aesthetics).”

The implications of Agamben’s relatively unexplored argument, which is in fact integrally related to his better-known claims about the *homo sacer* and the biopolitical state of exception, are immense, in that Agamben imagines an art (and literature and theater and cinema) grounded essentially in the political and ethical. Pursued in this way, Lindman’s art is, in this sense, not “simply” aesthetic, which doesn’t mean that it is not, in its own way, beautiful. Yet it is not content to reproduce images—as so much contemporary art still does. Nor does it seek to score easy political points, as did an earlier generation of performance art. Rather, her performative collaboration with Wooden Cities demonstrated both that “great pains are penetrating here”—which is to say, everywhere--and that collectivities can also bear witness to the potential for alleviation.

Nico Israel, 2015