Trzy Miasta, Rzeki, Pomniki

Usunięcia w sferze architektury
w Nowym Jorku, Berlinie i Warszawie

Three Cities, Rivers, Monuments

Architectural removals
in New York, Berlin, and Warsaw

Pia Lindman

a-i-r laboratory, Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Zamek Ujazdowski, Warszawa, 2007

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New York

Pia Lindman: The Politics of Grieving

Nico Israel

The witness usually testifies in the name of justice and truth and as such his or her speech draws consistency and fullness. Yet [when confronting the Nazi-run death camps] the value of testimony lies essentially in what it lacks; at its center it contains something that cannot be borne witness to and that discharges the survivors of authority. [What Primo Levi calls the] 'true' witnesses, the 'complete witnesses,' are those who did not bear witness and could not bear witness.

Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*

Agamben suggests that, in the apparently exceptional case of the concentration/annihilation camps of the Second World War, bearing witness does not mean simply testifying in a court of law. In the Nuremberg (1945-1949) and Eichmann trials (1961-1962) in which a total of 23 men were tried, twelve men were eventually executed; by no means can the trials or the executions themselves exhaust the question of justice. Rather, the very extremity of the situation, the sheer number of the murdered

Viewing Platform/Platforma widokowa, video, 2002

and indirectly killed, exposes a gap between the juridical and ethical realms. Moreover, it points to the crisis at the heart of witnessing: The "true" or complete witnesses, those who were annihilated, could not speak in their own names and thereby ensure an ethical reckoning. How then, Agamben asks, can their annihilation ethically be borne witness to?

Pia Lindman's art illuminates a similar crisis of witnessing, which is also a crisis of modern ethics. Her projects, usually focused on particular *localities*, acknowledge historical traumas by addressing the grief that they cause among the survivors in those places. But Pia is careful never to presume to represent that grief directly; to do so would risk cheapening or exploiting that suffering. Rather, in Pia's work, grief is rendered at once political and ghostly, political *as* ghostly remnant.

My task here is to talk about those artworks or projects of Pia's that revolve around New York, the city where I live, the city which is, as the poet John Ashbery writes, "a logarithm of other cities." More specifically, I will address those "New York" works created after September 11th, 2001: The *World Financial Center Project* (2002), the *Shea Stars Flash* video (2004), and, especially, the extraordinary multi-media *New York Times Project* (2003-ongoing). But each of these projects (and perhaps the last of them most of all) demonstrates that in the era of globalization, New York cannot help being shaped by external forces and cannot help emanating outward into the world. (This fact was not lost on the destroyers of the Twin Towers: It is precisely what made the towers such an obsessively attractive, iconic target).

Each of these New York projects involves or expresses a response to the traumatic events of September 11th, events whose shadow is (still, five years later) cast over everyday life in the city, indeed so much so that, as with the events of the Holocaust, they call into question the very nature of "events" and their aftermath. As trauma, they are never quite experienced directly, at least not by the survivors, but the affect they engender returns, cycles back, wounds—unless, of course, that affect is covered over with recourse to narrative: American flag, declaration of war, return to consumer-

driven normalcy. Pia's work exposes what this attempt to repress or distract leaves behind.

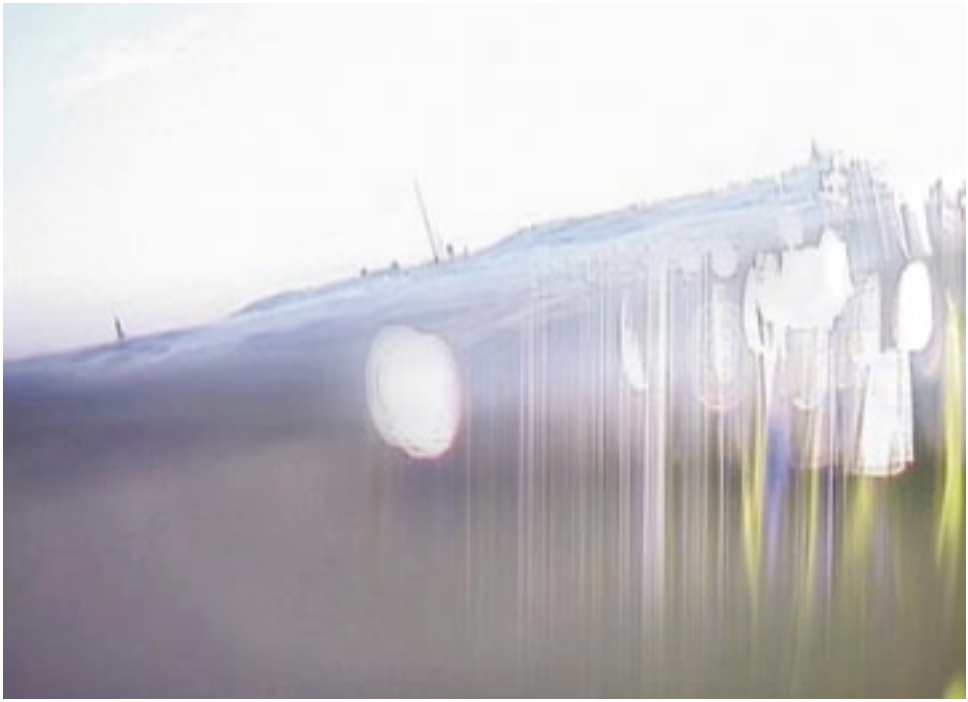
To refer to Agamben's work on the ethical necessity of bearing witness, and to assert art's crucial role in witness bearing, is by no means to *equate* either the events themselves or their aftermath with those of the Holocaust. Yet to fail to compare the Holocaust with anything else is to succumb to a dangerous exceptionalism that effectively puts the Holocaust outside of history. And Pia's work concerning the politics of grief places trauma firmly in the center of history. Like Walter Benjamin, the philosopher to whom Agamben owes the greatest intellectual debt, Pia recognizes that the responsibility of the artist or thinker concerning history is to account for the *Namenlos*, those nameless human beings who die apparently without a trace. In this sense, bearing witness means speaking for the *Namenlos*—and by no means only the *Namenlos* who died "inside" the towers.

The *World Financial Center Project* continued Pia's pre-2001 investigations of public space, architecture, and collectivities—for example, the brilliant installation in which she placed a sauna in the courtyard of P.S.1 Center for Contemporary Art—but simultaneously introduced a new aspect of absence or removal. No doubt this owed at least in part to the proximity of the World Financial Center (which sponsored a number of art projects, including Pia's) to the site of the fallen World Trade Center towers, whose very vacancy Pia regularly had to observe, ponder, and endure while creating the work. The videos she produced confront this vacancy by turning, on the one hand, to the sea.

For *Waterline* (2002) part of the WFC project, Pia lowered a camera into the Hudson River from a pier in North Cove Harbor next to the World Financial Center at the very southern tip of Manhattan, directly adjacent to the disaster site. The video camera, resting on the very top of the water, acted like a restless buoy, recording fleeting images of lower Manhattan and the surrounding landscapes of Staten Island and New Jersey (suburban areas whose populations were diminished by over a thousand souls), but also

Waterline/Linia wodna, video, 2002

Waterline/Linia wodna, video, 2002



recording its own undulations and sounds. *Viewing Platform* (2002), the video Pia produced to accompany the water-level images, concerns the large viewing stands that were constructed across from the WTC site by the architects Diller and Scofidio immediately after the tragedy. These stands were, for the most part, used by tourists who, after obtaining tickets and then standing in line, flocked to see the holes in the ground, newly dubbed "Ground Zero." The camera holds a shot of the stands as viewers enter, look for the maximum-allowed-five-minutes, and exit. Condensing one hour of video into one minute, Pia makes the pictured viewers' features indistinct, indeed transparent. This very transparency allows us to see the tombs in the graveyard of Trinity Church, which was first chartered in the seventeenth century, while also sensing other ghosts: The African burial ground, hous-

Waterline/Linia wodna, video, 2002

ing several hundred African-Americans banned from burial at Trinity and segregated in their own graveyard nearby (and only discovered in the early 1990s).

In viewing the shots of the sea in conjunction with the images of the viewing stand, the beholder senses a different framing of time: From the perspective of the flowing water, the event-driven urgency of human history might seem quite alien. What, one might wonder when watching and listening to the lapping of the waves and sound of the wind, did the sea think of New York's earliest inhabitants? The legendary "purchasing" of Manhattan by European settlers for trinkets? The arrival of hordes of immigrants and slaves? The eventual loading down of almost every inch of the island with brick and

steel? The explosions and black billowing smoke against a crystalline blue sky on that September day?

Shea Stars Flash extends this set of questions about events and witnessing into urban spaces a few miles removed from "Ground Zero." Shea Stadium, named after William Shea, the civic booster/attorney who spearheaded its construction, is the home field of the New York Mets (originally Metropolitans, odd name for this most cosmopolitan of cities), a team that was created in 1962 in part to replace the departure of the beloved Giants and Dodgers, both of which had fled to California in 1957. The stadium was built in the expanding borough of Queens at the time of the World's Fair of 1964, an event whose Space Age ideas and architecture were thoroughly inflected by Cold War politics: Anyone who has seen the Unisphere sculpture, one of the few remnants of the Fair, can attest to this. Queens is often thought of as a rump borough; most tourists (and many Manhattanites) don't even recognize that it is part of the city. But over the past two decades, it has become home to hundreds of thousands of immigrants from all over the world, the vast majority of them working class.

The Queens Museum of Art sponsored Pia's project, but initially the Mets, like every baseball team highly proprietary about their image and logo, balked at her proposal to film during a baseball game. Ultimately the use of images was strictly circumscribed—no player faces or names could be used—which suited Pia's project perfectly. She was less interested in the game itself than witnesses to the game, and the odd architectural bowl that temporarily housed those witnesses. The resultant video immediately brought to mind the brilliant 1923 William Carlos Williams poem "At the Ballgame," of which an excerpt will have to suffice:

The crowd at the ball game
is moved uniformly

by a spirit of uselessness
which delights them —

all the exciting detail
of the chase

and the escape, the error
the flash of genius —

all to no end save beauty
the eternal -

So in detail they, the crowd,
are beautiful

for this
to be warned against

Like Williams, whose poetry always had a strong link to the visual arts, Pia recognizes the crowd's stupidity and its incipient violence ("It is the Inquisition, the/Revolution," writes Williams), yet also its beauty, a beauty that resides in the "uselessness" of the entire enterprise it is witnessing. Unlike Williams, Pia shows us no trace of human faces; instead she abstracts the crowd further. Her looped video features time-lapse photography that only reveals bright flashes from cameras in the crowd, flashes that respond to "flash[es] of genius" on the field that remain obscure to the viewer.

The effect is at once further to alienate the viewer of the video from the now-long-completed spectacle, perhaps thereby reminding the viewer of "lapsed" political events that have occurred in sports stadiums all over the world from Nazi Germany in the 1930s to Chile and Argentina in the 1970s—and, when taken in the context of the then-two year old "events" of September 11th, to commemorate the dead (via ephemeral incandescence, like lighting candles) in a collective space in which the fans have assembled in part to *forget* politics. And yet… every ball game in the US begins with a singing of the national anthem, "The Star Spangled Banner." After September 11th, some teams added a second song for the break in the game

Shea Stars Flash, video, 2004

called the Seventh Inning Stretch in which the audience is supposed to stand up and sing; the happy drinking song "Take Me Out to the Ballgame," celebrating delightful uselessness, was replaced by Irving Berlin's rousing patriotic ditty "God Bless America." Stars—and stripes—flash up in moments of danger.

The *New York Times Project* allowed Pia to return to her earlier interests in both performance and drawing. A year after September 11th, she began to collect photographic images printed in the *New York Times*, the self-proclaimed US "paper of record," in which grieving bodies were portrayed. Predictably, given the preponderance of grief in the world on any given day—in response to bombing or an invasion or public funeral interrupted by gunfire, but also to a flood, earthquake or *New York Times*-worthy "natural disaster"—by the end of one year she had collected hundreds of images, of men, women, and children – furious, dejected, abandoned, or utterly beside themselves. From this corpus of images now removed from their adjoining news articles and captions, Pia made some 400 drawings—not interpretations but actual tracings. As tracing tends to efface details, the drawings served further to abstract the "original" photojournalistic framing of grief. Then, during a series of public performances, Pia acted out versions of her own drawings, always attentively *re-presenting*, as opposed to merely representing, the images of grief. The viewer, (at least) three degrees removed from any original gesture, witnesses the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* of the tragic-theatre of the newsworthy, and is further encouraged to consider whether even the original expression of grief is beyond or outside of language.

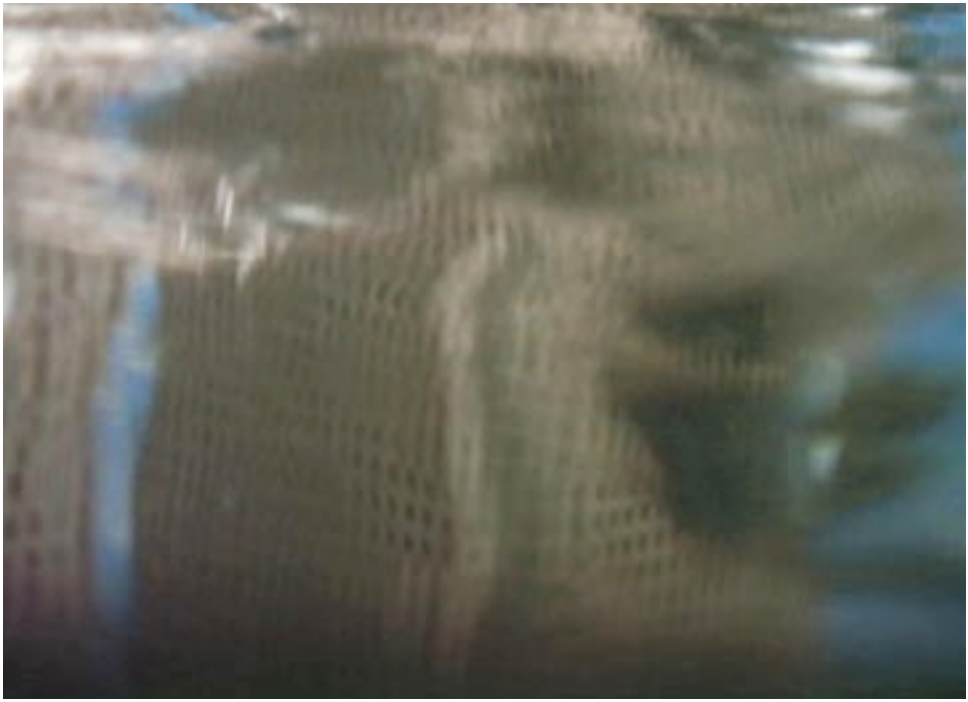
Live, theatrical performances are always singular, but Pia often changes the context of her performances, thereby accentuating their status as "events" produced by actor and audience. I saw the *New York Times Performance* at *the lab* gallery on the corner of 47th Street and Lexington Avenue, not far from the once-bedraggled, now-Disneyfied Times Square, on an autumn evening only two years after 9/11. I watched Pia as she stood in the window facing the street, and watched as people from the street watched as

she, donning a grey worker's uniform conspicuously ungendering her, held shriekishly horrid poses for a few seconds, stopped, turned the page from her book of traced drawings, calmly composed herself, and worked her way into a new grief-drenched pose, glancing in the mirror to make sure she "got it right." Few besides her friends, the gallery workers, and a few art aficionados could or would bear to watch for more than a few poses. Most of the audience—in that part of town, there are many tourists, but also people coming to and leaving work—may have felt, as they often do when encountering challenging contemporary art, that some sort of obscure joke was being played on them, and they moved on sheepishly. But in ignoring the spectacle of suffering, they were inadvertently participating in Pia's piece.

Watching the performance, I was reminded of W.H Auden's poem "Musée des Beaux Arts," concerning how suffering "takes place/ while someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along," and felt that this is precisely the way the vast majority of the world responds to the grief of others: Quickly consuming it, feeling something for a moment (perhaps some confusion), and moving on to the next repulsive spectacle. And Pia's *New York Times Performance* would be remarkable enough for demonstrating this process. But it occurs to me now that this observation itself does not go far enough in penetrating the network of meanings amid the dispersal of grief. As Susan Sontag, in her last work, "Regarding the Pain of Others," notes, "No 'we' should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people's pain," and this is equally true of observing others observing the pain of others: By no means is Pia, or am I, or are you, exempt from this process of witnessing and gesturing and standing by.

Is grief, then, merely a spectacle that art can only gesture vainly toward? Clearly not. Grief happens, and when it happens in response to political events (and most natural disasters have a political component), it can't help being a form of political expression—perhaps, given the history of the political, which is to say the history of history, grief is the purest form of political expression. By allowing no one to be a "complete" griever, and exempting no

Waterline/Linia wodna, video, 2002



one from the responsibility of grieving, Pia opens a new space for political art. If art can never unearth the ground zero of suffering, it can at least bear witness to the impossibility of witnessing. And this, according to Agamben, is precisely where art's promise lies. Art cannot in itself "wake the dead and make whole what has been smashed," Benjamin's famous description of the Angel of History expressed in Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus*. But, as in Albrecht Dürer's etching, *Melencolia I*, which Agamben views as the Angel of Art, it can powerfully demonstrate that "knowledge of the new is possible only in [confronting] the nontruth of the old."

Waterline/Linia wodna, video, 2002

New York Times Performance, at/w the lab, NYC/ Nowy Jork, 2004

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