

**Archives of Knowledge and Endangered Objects in the Anthropocene – From Chernobyl to Polar Landscapes in the Work of Lina Selander and Amy Balkin**

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In what ways can art portray “the violence of delayed effects”? (Nixon 2011: 2-3) a phrase used by Rob Nixon in his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor?* (Nixon 2011: 2-3) How might it do so in a way that goes beyond the socio-political phenomena in question to address the emotional disturbance of living amidst these delayed effects? In what ways can environmental and climate change that still can't be seen or felt introduce an age of dread and change our perceptual habits much as, say, Marshall McLuhan felt that new technology such as the telegraph did in an earlier era?

This article focuses on environmental work by artists and filmmakers that attempts to visually address new forms of art, seeing, feeling and sociality that are coming into being in the age of the Anthropocene.<sup>1</sup>In what follows, I bring together issues in ‘critical climate change’ scholarship to examine aspects of feminist and environmentalist art from Chernobyl to Polar landscapes in the work of Swedish artist Lina Selander and US artist Amy Balkin.

Compared to the scientific communities, artists’ communities tolerate and even encourage eccentric practices and even aesthetic extremism in the name of innovation. Though the art world has not engaged fully with these critical global issues, some artists around the world are working on these problematics that are so critical to our times of how to represent the delayed effects of these environmental disasters that are at once intimate yet far-off in time. The two artists that I discuss focus on the debris left behind in the wake of extreme industrialization and

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<sup>1</sup> This article builds on research from my first book *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions* (Bloom, 1993), a special issue of a journal, *The Scholar and the Feminist*, at Barnard College co-edited with Elena Glasberg and Laura Kay (Bloom, Glasberg, and Kay, 2008), a more recent article written collaboratively with Elena Glasberg in 2012 titled “Disappearing Ice and Missing Data: Visual Culture of the Polar Regions and Global Warming,” (Bloom and Glasberg, 2012), and a book project that is tentatively titled *Contemporary Art and Climate Change of the Polar Regions: Gender After Ice* (Bloom 2016). *Gender on Ice*, invited us to think how conventional narratives about science, travel, gender, and race, as well as concepts of nationhood, attitudes towards nature, technology, and the wilderness were being reimagined during the late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century. Springboarding from the earlier study, the new book draws on a range of representations within contemporary art production to rethink these narratives as the polar regions have shifted from the last space of heroic exploration to the first place of global decline.

modernization, and are linked by a shared interest in the archive as a product of both earth and culture transformed by environmental and climate change. Selander's black and white silent film titled "Lenin's Lamp Glows in the Peasant's Hut" (2011) draws from specific methods of montage in the history of cinema, characteristic of Soviet montage (Vertov and Eisenstein) a to create an aesthetically rich and provocative film and art installation. Balkin's ongoing work "A People's Archive of Sinking and Melting" by contrast is anti-aesthetic and more conceptually driven and is preoccupied with questions of time, perception, and shifting notions of nature and mobilizing citizens around climate change. Both Selander's and Balkin's work is about archives, debris and endangered objects and create messages from a feared future that is almost now. Both works suggest that places like Chernobyl, Kivalina, Alaska, and Antarctica are utterly transformed from what they used to be and are constantly in flux, as a result of the terrifying side effects of the current extreme state of industrialization.

**Lina Selander's "Lenin's Lamp Glows in the Peasant's Hut" (2011): Remnants from an Industrial Dream that has Gone Awry**

Lina Selander's film and art installation "Lenin's Lamp Glows in the Peasant's Hut" (2012) deals with the 1986 nuclear disaster in Chernobyl, Ukraine and the present and future force of that disaster's ongoing perculations.<sup>2</sup> Time is used in a haunting way

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<sup>2</sup> This work has been exhibited at The Swedish Contemporary Art Foundation, Stockholm (2011); Manifesta 9, The European Biennial of Contemporary Art. The Deep of the Modern, Genk, Belgium (2012); Kalmar Konstmuseum, Sweden (2014), The 8th Seoul International Media Art Biennale, Seoul (2014). It will appear at the Venice biennale 2015Arsenale, 9 May - 22 November 2015. The film can be seen

in her work as she wants us to see that the history of electricity, as well as the role of the mediums of film and photography, have a host of potent valences at different points in history including their connection to a utopian dream of the future that started with the first decade of the Soviet state. Selander's montage approach explores the gaps and absences drawn from these historical and technological shifts, and makes us notice how conditions shift according to the medium. As, for example, how the scale of the production of electrical energy changes from the monumental dam project of Dziga Vertov's film that she references into the nuclear power plant in her own. She also wants us to see how she is doing something radically different from the Soviet filmmakers that she cites in her cinematic work in light of her environmentalist perspective. This comes through in the way she uses radiation as a metaphor for the archive she creates. Whereas her art installation gives centrality to radiation's traces literally taking the form of black shadows on a series of light sensitive white developing paper exposed to uranium rocks; her film creates a wider context for the cinematic and historical visual inscription of the history of electricity and how it is linked to the history of cinema, photography, as well as extreme industrialization.

Her installation, "Lenin's Lamp Glows in the Peasant's Hut" (2011) is borrowed in its entirety from an intertitle in the Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov's 1928 film *The Eleventh Year*. She also uses other Vertov intertitles throughout such as "Half way between Dniepro-Petrovsk and Zaporozkie the Wild river rushes over the rocks", "We construct", "Here electrical energy emerges," to remind us that in Vertov's film "man" has successfully brought nature to heel through iconic structures of monumental modernity. The footage that she uses from *The Eleventh Year* presents

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online at: <https://vimeo.com/28228797>. For the catalogue on this work, see Holmberg, Helena (2013).

an optimistic celebration of the achievements and glories of the USSR in the eleventh year of the revolution, notably innovations in hydroelectricity (dams), irrigation, and electrification. One is instantly put in mind of Lenin's famous claim that "communism is the government by the Soviets plus the electrification of the whole land". (Lenin, 1920)

Juxtaposed to the images from *The Eleventh Year* are a number of shots that record the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster, an event that precipitated in part the fall of the Soviet Union. There is contemporary footage of the abandoned city of Pripyat where Selander photographed the contaminated zone (Image #1); images from the rescue efforts of the Ukrainian coal miners who helped with the remediation work at the disaster site and later lost their lives from their exposure to the radiation; and artifacts from the Chernobyl museum in Kiev that administered the historical heritage of the accident where we see photos of the workers from memorial displays and photographs. (Image # 2)

Selander's montage by virtue of this simple juxtaposition moves us away from a celebratory modernity of political utopias from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that Vertov's film documents. It exemplifies a more reflexive modernity where we think about the environmental impact of human, technical, and industrial actions and disasters like Chernobyl in terms of conditions where health, safety, and environmental regulations were absent, lax, or poorly enforced. However, her focus is less on sending a 'message' but drawing us in to her fascinating set of images to notice unexpected aspects of the meltdown, such as, the out-of date machinery in the control room of the reactor that might have contributed to the disaster taken during a reconstruction of events leading to the accident, (Image # 3) or, that the Ukrainian workers who died were given medals for their work that were displayed at the Chernobyl museum. (Image # 2) One of the eeriest and most unexpected moments in her montage is when

the silence of the film is disrupted half-way through with the sudden outburst of a symphony orchestra from Vertov's film, and the accompanying kitsch celebratory footage of a model of Chernobyl presented as if it is a sacred achievement from when the nuclear plant first opened. (Image # 4)

Selander's own work borrows from this earlier history of modernity and in a certain way she has not given up entirely on some aspects of it, such as regarding the film medium as an important tool. Vertov's famous statement, "I am an eye. I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, I am showing you a world, the likes of which only I can see" introduces the new technology of the camera as the promise of a radically new way of seeing, or even existing. (Vertov: *Kino Eye*, 1924) For Selander, the camera is less a propaganda tool in the service of a 'simple modernity,' but more a critical apparatus that enables her to tell a layered and provocative story of eerie remnants from an industrial dream that has gone awry. By re-editing sequences from Dziga Vertov's film celebrating the technologies of the future from the first decade of the Soviet state with contemporary footage that details the failure of that dream, Selander turns the history of photography and cinema into an archive of knowledge and disappearances. This, too, is important to Balkin's *A People's Archive of Sinking and Melting* which is a collection of potential disasters and disappearances. Yet, Selander, is more interested in how to represent the failure embedded in the old archive of modernity using cinematic montage to tell the dark side of Chernobyl. Throughout her film there are a number of images that register an eerie feeling of dread.; such as her footage of the cold deserted industrial landscape of Priyat with a focus on its strangely beautiful empty buildings, landscapes and decay, (Image # 1) and of a former abandoned archive with paper and documents chaotically scattered all over the floor (Image # 5) and an image of boxes falling down that in itself is an extraordinary image of what was once an otherwise neatly ordered museum archive coming apart. (Image # 6) Throughout her film and installation there is a contrast between still and

moving images, between the cinematic and the photographic, and between the positive and the negative. Her film abandons the machine-like perspective of Vertov's camera movements and slows down the sequencing of images, using still images to emphasize the decay and death of environmental ruin in photographs of buildings, fossils, x-rays, and fossils.

Selander is also interested in the complex history of visibility connected to the elusive phenomenon of radiation and what one cannot see as the negative effects of the triumphant industrialization from an earlier era. Such as the fallout of cesium - the lethal radiation that was released but can not be captured on film, but lives on in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, where she filmed abandoned horses whose survival eerily suggests life in the future, but in a contaminated environment bereft of human life. (Image # 7)

A strong component of Selander's work is the aesthetic experience of viewing these disturbing juxtapositions of debris and waste that are made to disappear in the larger context of other extinctions, many of which persist in the form of fossilized remains. For this reason, it is not surprising that the centerpiece of her exhibit are shadow-like traces on white developing paper from uranium rocks, a method that recalls how nuclear radiation was discovered by the French scientist Henri Becquerel during his experiments with photographic plates. (Images # 8-9) Here the photographic image is connected to the scientific discovery that made it possible to make visible and catch power and harness it as an energy source. But, in this context it is the way that these black images are both aesthetically pleasing and at the same time have a disconcerting history that pricks the viewer. These black traces evoke prior historical eras and prior extinctions referencing Chernobyl as a near present extinguishing event. They share a kinship with the ghost-like fossils, skeletons and the x-ray photographs in her film in which we are drawn into seeing the beautiful contours of

plants and a skeleton (taken from Vertov's film) that belongs to a 2000 year old Scythian from another geological age or the bone structures and internal organs of animals, fish and birds. (Images #10-11)

### **Amy Balkin: What will be the Artifacts of our Age of Climate Change?**

There is a surreal aspect to the premise of Balkin's work as well, but as a conceptual archive project it draws on a different tradition than Selander's as it projects the high cost of modernity through a future map of risk. Unlike Selander who has us look at the relationship between the history of technology and its visual inscriptions in relation to its ruinous environmental repercussions, Balkin's work takes another turn and tackles the issue of environmental risk directly. The focus of her work is rather how to represent environmental damage yet to come, a task that has often been relegated to the realm of science fiction writers, often with powerful results. Balkin complicates in her work this notion of the future through rethinking the genre of the post-apocalyptic. There is a jarring aspect to the premise of Balkin's "A People's Archive of Sinking and Melting" which is a growing collection of items contributed from places around the world that *may* disappear due to the effects of climate change. Her archive is comprised of things that in her words "are intended to form a record of the future anterior, prefiguring foreseen or predicted disappearance and related displacements, migrations, and relocation." (Kopel, 2014)

One of the problems in trying to communicate the threat of global climate change is that it still can't be seen or felt – since the violence in some cases is delayed, the argument goes. Climate change is only recently starting to impose itself as a practical problem for most of the US population and its leaders, but for decades parts of Alaska and other areas in the Arctic and Antarctic have been sinking and only recently have extreme weather events such as Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy manifested a dramatic

change in climate and geological structure in the Continental US for both the Gulf Coast and the Northeastern and Southeastern Atlantic coastlines.

The work of Amy Balkin's "A People's Archive of Sinking and Melting" is an archive literally of 'debris' – the things that are already left or *will* be abandoned in the wake of environmental destruction. The collection contains objects from the Arctic and Antarctic as well as other parts of the world like Mexico City that is famously sinking as it is built on a swamp. *A People's Archive of Sinking and Melting* is actually one of a number of conceptual archives made by artists in the US for public use.<sup>3</sup> Balkin's project's particular focus is on the slow-motion violence of climate change often discounted by dominant structures of perception but one that is relayed by ordinary people who as non-experts or non-scientists are often not seen as authoritative witnesses. In this conceptual work, emphasis is put on documenting, analyzing and archiving everyday occurrences often dismissed from memory and policy planning by framing them as accidental, or random. The archive focuses on the inequitable exposure to climate –related losses for diverse communities and is displayed at libraries, galleries and online.<sup>4</sup> (image #12) It is comprised of both statements by the contributors that provides an explanation of why they contributed to the archive and the significance to them of the artifacts they donated. For the purposes of this paper I am focusing on two of the contributors from the Arctic and Antarctic. In all, this is a small sample of the contributors to this ongoing project from

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<sup>3</sup> Some of the more well-known ones include the Archive of the Center for Land Use and its Interpretation's digital Land Use Database, and the Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles.

<sup>4</sup> The archive is available online at [www.sinkingandmelting.tumblr.com](http://www.sinkingandmelting.tumblr.com); it is or has been exhibited at the Prelinger Library, San Francisco; Ballroom Marfa, Texas; the Museum für Neue Kunst Freiburg, Germany; the Rauschenberg Foundation Project Space, New York; Southern Exposure, San Francisco; Science Gallery, Dublin, Ireland; Anderson Gallery, VCUarts, Richmond VA, Austrian Cultural Foundation, New York. This interview project was initiated as part of the Maldives Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale.

diverse locations around the world such as New York City, New Orleans, Mexico City, Huaraz, Peru, Nepal and Senegal, Greenland and Tuvalu, Australia, Cape Verde, Cuba, Germany, Italy and Panama.

### **Antarctica:**

As is well-known, Antarctica sits on the forefront of climate change. As of May 2014 when the announcement was made that the retreat of ice in the Amundsen sea sector of West Antarctica was unstoppable, there has been much concern about what this disappearance will trigger and what it will mean for rising sea levels worldwide. Balkin's project focuses on the complex ecology of spectatorship in local situations and what is often dismissed from memory from the ongoing damage inflicted by climate breakdown. Micaela Neus, a contributor to Balkin's archive from Antarctica, addresses the disturbances of living amidst the ongoing effects of the melting as a worker in Antarctica:

Everyday sees a little loss, if you know how to measure it. Some of my co-workers remember when the sea ice grew so thick every winter, they could ski out to neighboring islands on their day off. Others have to spend hours chipping away ice-melt from under buildings because the snow pack actually thawed enough to flow as water into the wrong places before refreezing. That's what we see as workers. The scientists say the same things except they get grants and make graphs.<sup>5</sup>

Micaela comments on the everydayness of the loss and how what she notices as disappearing is now part of her daily life and routine as she notices that more time is spent dealing with the changes and the ways her activities are curtailed because of the loss of ice. She chooses for the archive abandoned tools such as a discarded wrench, a nap hook that came from a boat when collecting specimens, and used

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<sup>5</sup> See Micaela Neus' contribution to Balkin's archive available online at [www.sinkingandmelting.tumblr.com](http://www.sinkingandmelting.tumblr.com)

scientific sample bottles that are unremarkable in themselves as they are used by the hundreds in Palmer Station on Anvers Island (one of the research sites where scientists are building up a detailed knowledge of phytoplankton, one of the microscopic food webs in the Palmer Deep). (Image #13) It is significant that the objects she has chosen for Balkin's archive are utterly replaceable objects from the collective scientific community that she is part of whose job is to document everything:

These objects come from daily life around the station; they are things commonly encountered by workers and scientists alike. None of these objects were "mine" in the conventional sense, and yet they were because so much of our living is communal by necessity. These particular objects would otherwise have been discarded but the same goes for their replacements.<sup>6</sup>

For Micaela these ordinary objects since they were replaceable, and not noticeable as missing, were beyond our sensory ken, but by choosing them for the archive she offers us a different kind of status of unseen objects as crucial witnesses to our inhuman future.

### **Kivalina, Alaska**

Kivalina lies approximately 120 miles north of the Arctic Circle, on the tip of a thin, 8-mile long barrier reef island in Alaska. The population of about four hundred residents is primarily Inupiat. There is an urgency in Kivalina – since the village is just one of thirty-one Inuit settlements that scientists believe will be destroyed by the effects of climate change within the next 10 years. The army corps of engineers built a sea wall in 2008 to defend it against the storms, but that hasn't protected the island

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<sup>6</sup> See Micaela Neus' contribution to Balkin's archive available online at [www.sinkingandmelting.tumblr.com](http://www.sinkingandmelting.tumblr.com)

from flooding. Caught within gray areas of US and tribal political representation, Kivalina has been struggling to relocate for almost two decades with little success, as climate change comes more quickly and severely, putting the entire village in danger. The residents are living in a slow-motion disaster that will end, very possibly within the next ten years or sooner, with the entire village being washed away.

The discarded objects used for scientific experiments from Antarctica collected by Micaela Neus contrast markedly with the very specific hand-carved whale vertebra that Christine Shearer contributed to the archive from the village of Kivalina where she spent time researching her book *Kivalina: A Climate Change Story* (2011). (Image # 14) Whereas objects connected to scientific work are fitting artifacts from a continent with no native population that was designated in 1959 as a space for “peace and science,” they would be inappropriate for Kivalina. As Kivalina’s Alaskan history has to do with a more complex history of native peoples that goes back thousands of years to some of the first settlements in the Americas. Christine Shearer has chosen a whale carving for the archive and explains her choice this way:

I purchased this whale bone carving from Russell Adams Jr., a Kivalina resident in his 40s whose family has lived in the area for generations. I was in Kivalina to do research on the Native Village of Kivalina v. ExxonMobil et al. lawsuit. But after talking to residents like Russell I realized the full extent and immediacy of the danger they face from climate change — not just the threat of losing their homeland, but their entire culture and way of life. The whale bone for me symbolized this way of life and the thousands-year Arctic culture the people are striving to preserve, which I describe in the book *Kivalina: A Climate Change Story* (2011).<sup>7</sup>

Here we have a different perspective on the specific loss of the native village of Kivalina from the point of view of an outsider who wrote a book about Kivalina’s climate change induced erosion and the larger history of how Kivalina residents have

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<sup>7</sup> See Christina Shearer’s contribution to Balkin’s archive available online at [www.sinkingandmelting.tumblr.com](http://www.sinkingandmelting.tumblr.com).

been struggling to relocate for almost two decades with little success.<sup>8</sup> Here Shearer emphasizes the perverse unintended consequences of the eroded coastline of Kivalina. She is concerned about the displacement of indigenous peoples and the erasure of ways of life that has been sustainable for millennia. Like many Alaskan Native villages, Kivalina has retained a largely subsistence lifestyle that is now changing. Eating and hunting whale meat, was part of that legacy. That is why her contribution to the archive of a hand-carved whale bone as an artifact seems significant but also again somewhat ordinary, as part of an everyday life of subsistence that no longer exists.

For such an Inupiat community, environmental sensibilities and practices have always existed, but they were often directly entangled with ongoing, everyday struggles for survival including hunting whales in the past. The inclusion of such an object into the archive brings into the discussion a different more intimate perspective on witnessing and a way to address changing indigenous ways of life, community displacement and climate change in the context of a poor island native experience. But how does a small island like Kivalina which has contributed very little to global warming emissions, and has very little money or power, come up with the resources to make visible the slow violence that is destroying their island? Kivalina's extreme plight speaks to the representational challenges posed by slow violence, the focus of Balkin's archive. It was once widely assumed that native or tribal societies were

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<sup>8</sup> See Christina Shearer (2011). According to Shearer, what is currently happening in the Arctic is essentially a question of environmental, and, more specifically, of climate justice. To get attention for their predicament in 2008, the village sued 24 oil companies, including –ultimately unsuccessfully- Exxon Mobil in US district court in 2009, arguing that their emissions were responsible for climate change and that they knowingly misinformed the public about this fact. The village of Kivalina was denied legal standing to bring the case, because the judge argued that global warming is too ubiquitous to be 'fairly traceable' to the defendants' emissions, as required for standing.

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destined to disappear. But it is not just economic and political forces that are completing the work of destruction but rather climate change itself.

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Amy Balkin's archive refers to our present as well as future disasters. These collected objects are messages from a feared future that redraws the map and redraws the present. While this project might look like another memorial project, conceptually it is more provocative and more original. Instead, it draws our attention to what it means to think beyond normal human time frames and remap cultural memory in order to generate urgency in a different present tense. Her project brings about a perceptual awareness in the present about a shift in how we perceive and inhabit environmental time by producing connections between different parts of the globe to better understand disasters that are impending and those that are still far in the future, between those areas that are most in danger now and those that still have more time. Her archive that consists of people noticing and documenting changes already happening due in part to climate change is also designed for a culture that isn't good at facing the distant future and distant problems. It shifts our awareness in the present to makes us understand that we're faced with a time-short problem of climate change where we have a very limited window to act that's steadily closing.

### **Conclusion**

Selander's and Balkin's viewpoints suggest some important new directions in contemporary art, and in the process, their work makes us think about how to represent environmental crises discounted by dominant structures of perception. Both deal with threats that can't be seen or felt, and in the case of climate change the final

full catastrophic violence is delayed. These events, like the poison itself from the radiation of Chernobyl, or, the potential damage from climate change are suspended in a state of environmental, political, and ecological irresolution. Both works focus on remnants or debris – the negative matter produced in these disasters’ wake –and question who bears the social authority of witnessing. In each case, neither are about single events that can be told from one narrative perspective. Yet, their innovative approaches are directly pertinent to bringing to the forefront a transformed aesthetic and political sensibility of how to render visible the ongoing damage inflicted by environmental and climate breakdown.

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