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Kulturkritik

On Lina Selander's 'Lenin's Lamp Glows in the Peasant's Hut'Posted on [juni 18, 2013](#) by [Axel Andersson](#)

Lina Selander's video installation at Index in Stockholm approaches the contemporary conceptualizations of nature and the techno-visions that have shaped our history in full consciousness of the subject's complexity. From a starting point in the instantaneous she launches towards time lines that instil vertigo in the spectator. The exhibition is an example of art as anamnesis, an individual participation in a collective reminiscence. The art of Selander internalises the present and the past, nature and 'technics' (techne), and makes them participate in constructive dialogues. At the same time she raises questions about what it really means to 'remember'. The notion of an individual backward gaze is fused with the idea of memory as technical or technological. This external memory, hypomnesis, will prove to be an important tool in the creation of an image of the past event.

As technical and technological creatures we require the external memory of the technical aids to reconnect to the long time spans or processes. In the first room of the exhibition we encounter a glass case with photographic imprints of radioactive rocks like spectral representations or traces of what appears to be an eternal power. This is the potential of nature, dunamis, which shall, with the technological human interference, be transformed into instantaneous energy. The generation of energy also becomes an allegory of a human condition where our existence creates the tension between nature and technics. The writings of the French philosopher Bernard Stiegler can be traced in the work of Selander. For Stiegler technics is an integral part of how we create our world and ourselves. We are technical, and now technological, creatures.

The video installation of Selander is primarily centred on the theme of nuclear power and the Chernobyl accident. The title is a reference to Lenin's idea that an 'electrification' of the Soviet Union was a precondition of the socialist utopia ('Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the entire country' as he said in 1920), a thought that made the lamp of Lenin seem in every way as magic as that of Aladdin. The [montage](#) of moving images brings together parts of a propaganda film by Dziga Vertov about the construction of a power plant in the Ukraine in the end of the 1920s with images of fossils from the Swedish Museum of Natural History in Stockholm as well as video recordings from the Chernobyl accidents and from the close-by evacuated ghost city of [Pripyat](#) where Selander has filmed herself. In these sequences from Pripyat Selander manages to exit the romantic image of the ruin as a memento mori. The atomic ruin is made to seem much more complex. It represents something that will never go away as it has been contaminated of a quasi-eternity by the material that has been created when radioactive potential was transformed into energy. The physical constructions may be ephemeral, but the area stands as an injured memorial to the fact that what man creates in a lifetime does not go away in a lifetime. In the meeting of the two notions of time, the graspable human and the unfathomable fossil, a new image is created of Chernobyl that in a visionary manner looks beyond emotional laments and secretly enjoyable fantasies about the apocalypse.

The photographic medium is the technical memory that Selander describes as fundamental in the construction of the utopian energy of the Soviet Union. She traces the mimicry of the imprint and there is a clear line from the radioactive traces on the photographic paper and the fossils in the rocks of the museum. There is also an anamnesis through technology when Selander's moving images appear to be in communication with the cinematic art of Vertov. There is much more 'video' than 'cinema' in Selander's installation. The language of the images makes the connection of a contemporary pronouncement on the death of cinema and its replacement by the video montage. This is a change that also has considerable consequences for our notion of time. The time of cinema with its psychological [realism](#) is in dialogue with the slow time of nature. Video and its instantaneous montages, short-

circuits, and reflexive addresses reaches for the present. In the anamnesis of Selander the montage of Vertov appears as a proto-video and it is possible to draw parallels to earlier debates between the formalist modernism of Eisenstein and Vertov and a the more cinematic tradition primarily represented by classic Hollywood productions.

In some passages Selander's interest in representation becomes slightly too literal. She is fascinated by the texture of celluloid and freezes the image when it shows a scratch in Vertov's reel. When the images from the rescue work at Chernobyl show a television, she films the television with the image and then her camera that records the television with the television inside. It would have been interesting to see Selander discuss the difference between the reflexive and the recursive gaze. Recursivity appears as a paradoxical cul-de-sac where the instantaneous is forced into a projection of eternity. What is in any case sure is that energy disappears through entropic processes. There is the time of the fossil and the time of the human and the two meet in technics and energy, but there are also processes that can affect the energy generated. Sometimes we are only able to connect a low current to Lenin's lamp.

The video installation ends with an intertitle from Vertov's film: 'Echo'. It is a fitting end considering the Greek myth with the same name. Narcissus and the nymph Echo did not manage to communicate with each other and instead of receiving the love of Echo, Narcissus disappeared into a reflection of himself. Echo was petrified, made into a mountain; a mountain that forever would create echoes. She is like the radioactive material a highly living fossil. If only Lenin had loved material and its potential as much as its energy he would have extracted energy from nature in a manner that had not sacrificed people as a means to an end. The blood of Narcissus became a flower. The blood spilled in Lenin's project became Pripjat.

The most moving parts of Selander's work come when she highlights how a highly human potential was destroyed in the utopian project. Vertov's film shows that it was humans who built the technical dreams of socialism. Chernobyl stands testimony to the fact that the dreams became nightmares. Instead of creating a socialist future for humans the machines and power stations were transformed from means to ends. Selander's art shows clearly that this process can neither be understood nor fought against if we reject the technics that construct the foundations of our memory. In difference to the shallow technology debate that we can find in today's society Selander dares, without blinders, to discuss our human existence in an irreversible technological modernity.

Axel Andersson, this is a translation of a text that was published in [Konsten.net](#) 15 November 2011

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