

“Meta-montage” of the Pavilion



An Interview with Swedish artist Lina Selander

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Now in its 56th edition, the Venice Biennale remains one of the high-points of the international contemporary art calendar. This year's installment, entitled *All the World's Futures*, sees Okwui Enwesor at the helm, curating an exhibition that is informed by a layer of intersecting *Filters* rather than one overarching narrative. With 89 countries exhibiting in the national pavilions at the Giardini, the Arsenale and around the city, this 'World Cup of Art' provides the visitor with a glimpse of practitioners from the worldwide scene.

Located in the Arsenale's Artiglierie, the Swedish Pavilion presents the work of Stockholm-based artist Lina Selander. The installation, *Excavation of the Image: Imprint, Shadow, Spectre, Thought* encompasses a body of work developed over the last four years. With an exhibition history that can boast of previous exhibitions at London's Iniva, and at Index and Moderna Museet in Stockholm, Selander creates a confident exhibition in which the viewer is drawn into a crepuscular chamber. Inside this space designed to both reveal and conceal simultaneously, video works are placed alongside a wall plaque and vitrines that allude to the images on screen. Amongst her many references, Selander draws upon well-known world events, the history of film making, antiquity, natural history and the sciences, creating works that examine relationships between memory and perception, photography and film, and language and image.



Installation view, the Swedish Pavilion at the 56th International Art Exhibition of la Biennale di Venezia: Lina Selander, *Excavation of the Image - Imprint, shadow, spectre, thought*. Commissioned by Moderna Museet, 2015. © Lina Selander. Photo: Andrea Rossetti

For those who are unable see the work in Venice, I spoke to Lina Selander about her practice and her approach to the installation at the Biennale.

Firstly, congratulations on your wonderful installation in the Arsenale. What was your starting point when conceptualizing the pavilion for the Venice Biennale? How do you approach something of its magnitude and the idea of representing your country?

Thank you very much, Sheena! It was lovely to meet you last week in Venice. My starting point was the room, which is very beautiful and powerful in itself. But it needed editing, to be intersected with several cuts. My aim was to create a kind of meta-montage in the room where, from certain points, the visitor will be able to see several projections or screens, and so that as one moves in the room, one becomes aware that the act of viewing is also an editing process. The visitors will encounter my works in a cinematic installation – spatially held together and divided by curtains that correspond beautifully with the brick walls – and they will hopefully become aware of a similarity, a common montage technique between the works themselves and their installation. The room becomes a “vision machine” in itself. I collaborate with the Swedish/Norwegian architect duo Studio Nāv to find solutions, not least for the enormous flow of visitors and the necessary maintenance.

I saw some crazy things during the opening days: visitors trying to force the curtains, leaning on the vitrines, and even leaving water bottles on them. There are also many rules and regulations concerning the installation, e.g. you may not damage the walls and ceiling at the Arsenale. There was a lot of planning that had to be done beforehand, logistics to take into account... basically, it was a bigger production than I am used to.

To represent my country is the general form of the Biennale. I don't think much about it, but I'm honored, of course.



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The format of the Biennale can be very tough on the viewer, and also on the artist and the artworks. The visitor is engaged in a visual marathon while battling a contemporary version of Stendhal Syndrome, while sadly, artworks that reveal themselves slowly can be overlooked in favor of immediate spectacle. Is this something that you have to work with, or is it possible to avoid this aspect and make the work you would make anyway?

That's the way it is. Someone told me that the average Biennale visitor stays for two minutes in each pavilion. I noticed a lot of people in a hurry running through the room. But I do think that even if just passing through, the visitor will get some sense of my works; enough to invite some of them to return for a longer stay. When I was invited, I was asked to make a retrospective, and it is not possible to change the way I work. Some meanings take time to form. Of course, I sometime feel sad watching people just passing by because I know that if you stay for a while, then the films will give you so much in return. I also noticed people coming back several times.

The works in the exhibition span a period from 2011-2015. While they all retain their own identity, they work in harmony to create an installation as a whole – with sounds and images from the different pieces overlapping in the space. Was this immersive installation a conscious decision on your part from early on in the process?

It was a very conscious decision. In the previous year I had done several solo exhibitions, and I had the possibility to study how each work reacts to the others. All the films and vitrines are closely connected. I think they grow when they bleed into and read each other. There is a lot of cross-pollination. The whole installation is almost like a sound installation, too – long parts of silence and only one of the works contains a voice, a female voice reading a short text. I really like it when she says “Image” because it refers to all the screens at the same time. The sound creates a presence and you never experience the same room twice. The sound is un-synced to the whole, yet it forms the impression, together with the images and the objects, of the internal movements in a complicated clockwork that is measuring some unknown quality.

All of the works revolve, in one way or another, around the status of the image – as representation, memory, object, imprint or surface – and our relationships to it. They examine the official representations of historical events, as well as the visual languages and apparatuses that produce them, thereby underlining that history, in many respects, is the history of recording devices and technologies. Also, the works share a relation to the desires and failures of modernity. For instance, through the disasters of Chernobyl and Hiroshima, or the exploitation of natural resources, or economic inequality – all of which are juxtaposed with images of nature, thereby cross-referencing the visual effects of the processes connected to these events. All of this was done in an effort to create new sedimentations of meaning.



Silphium, 2014 (film still)

Working Archive (2015) – a vitrine including photographs, an ancient coin with the image of the Silphium plant, and a stone containing uranium – occupies a central position in the space, perhaps providing the point from where the show radiates and a genealogy for some of the themes in the show. This vitrine also contains an iPad showing *Anteroom of the Real (2011)*, a film that challenges our notions of film by telling a story through a series of still photos which two hands flip over, showing them to the camera. With your employment of this method, we are constantly reminded of the selection process necessary for the creation of the artwork. Do you feel that this is something that we are in danger of forgetting when we encounter other material, whether it be artistic, journalistic, academic, scientific, etc.?

Anteroom of the Real raises the question of what an editing room is. What is editing? I think it is often forgotten. The work is about the editing process, and a play between the still and the moving image. But also about the act of selection, the choice of information, the editing of the events that will become, or are supposed to become, the official history. The hands show this in a concrete way – that it is actually somebody's decision as to how history is created. It was commissioned for the public library in Gävle, a city in the part of Sweden that was most affected by the radioactivity from the meltdown in Chernobyl. And it was actually from the Forsmark nuclear reactor, in the vicinity of Gävle, that the world was alerted about the Chernobyl disaster. They discovered unusually high radioactivity there and first thought something had happened to their own reactor. But soon they found that all evidence was pointing towards somewhere in the Soviet Union. They called them, but were told that everything was fine and under control.

Your exhibition investigates methods of image making – from imprints of fossils in rock, radium reactions on photographic paper, the flash of the atomic bomb and analogue imagery, to the image in the digital age. Also, you juxtapose these images alongside layers of time and layers of distance from the image being shown. As a viewer, I found I was constantly forced to reconsider my perspective...

I'm interested in extreme time differences that are not possible to grasp, and also in images made without a human hand. The plant fossils are beautiful images, 300-500 million years old. And the Cruziana trace fossil, the imprint made of a moving trilobite, can be seen as the first image of movement.

Thinking about the indexical nature of fossil imprints, I placed stones containing uranium on photographic paper, and then kept them in solid black boxes in a storage room for a couple of weeks; I then developed them in my bathroom at home. These are images made without light, where something invisible becomes visible as the radiation reacts with the silver in the photographic paper. This also points to how nuclear radiation was discovered, as a photographic event, by Henri Becquerel during his experiments with photographic plates. So, the elements of the installation are both material witnesses to the experience of modernization and agents of the very same history – a propaganda tool in the service of modernity, but also directly connected to the scientific discovery that made it possible to harness nuclear power as an energy source.

Then Trond Lundemo recommended that I read the book *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)*, by Akira Mizuta Lippit, and that led me to pursue “the visual inscription's invisible centre,” the non-visibility of film and the photographic image, and the uncertainty regarding our visual access to reality. And the detonation of the atomic bomb over Hiroshima is like an original event here, itself a photographic event, an extreme light that exposes darkness, shadow and invisibility at its core. As Lippit writes:

“... a form of total photography that exceeded the economies of representation, testing the very visibility of the visual. Only a negative photograph is possible in the atomic arena, a skiagraphy, a shadow photography. The shadow of photography. By positing the spectator within the frames of an annihilating image, an image of annihilation, but also the annihilation of images, no one survives, nothing remains...”



Silphium, 2014 (film still)

So, in short, these ghosts and imprints of ultimate destruction uncover a lot of trails to follow. They are brutal, poetic, unintentional – a kind of true photography, more photographic than the photographic image.

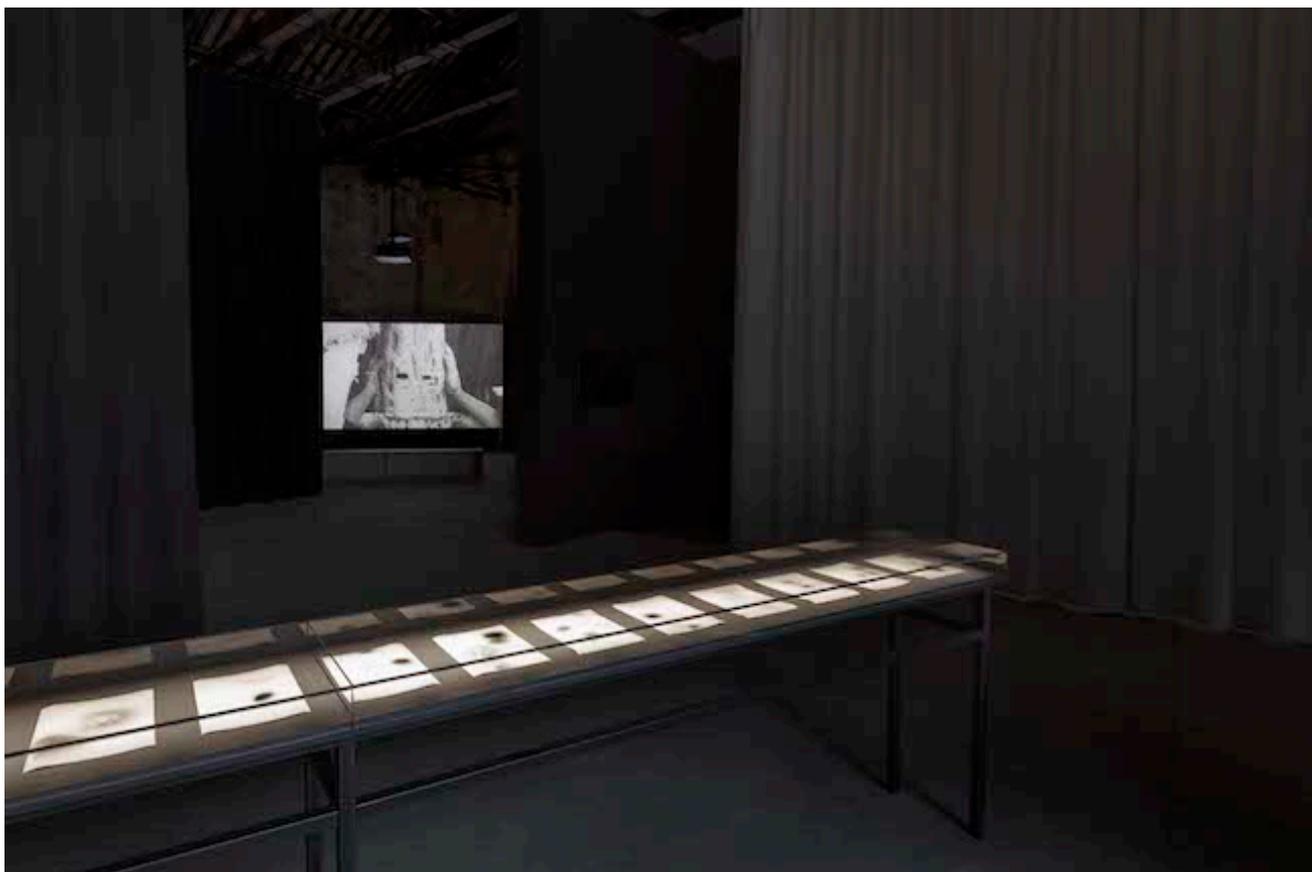
In *Model of Continuation*, one sees the earlier work, *To the Vision Machine*, being projected on the wall. The screening of a film within a film creates a stunning and strange stratification of different image- and time-spaces. In the same film you see the room of the film, the studio room (which is like a still image with books and plants), and you also see the outside, with vegetation and two gardeners trimming the bushes. The cameras shift viewpoints, and you become aware of your own gaze, as well as of the technological apparatus enabling the flow of images on the screen.

This return of (part of) the material to its place of origin – which was performed to re-examine and question it again – opened it up for a new way of viewing the material. The room became a perfect container – it showed three different layers of time and images at the same time: outside the window, with the gardeners and the vegetation; the room with ordinary objects, e.g., the plant, books, etc., almost as a still image; and then the projected film itself.

In creating a rather static position for the viewer, a kind of locking of the gaze, a calm evaluation of these different image spaces, their interaction as well as their common surface or interface becomes possible. The fusion of producing and consuming (viewing, reading, interpreting, recognizing) images – the vision machine – becomes visible, perhaps. I dreamed of a closed circuit between projector, computer and the film... a detachment, a weakening and drainage of the meaning of the images.

One scene from *To the Vision Machine* that is shown, but was not projected in the room in *Model of Continuation*, is a model of the Peace Memorial Museum in Hiroshima. There the auto-focus of the camera finds a reflection of a window on the other side of the model (which becomes blurred), and on the outside of the museum we see a person walking by, some cars and trees, all accompanied by the sound in the museum – the voice and music form a dramatic documentary. (The museum plays an important part both in Alan Resnais' *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959) and

in *Children of Hiroshima* (1952) by Kaneto Shindo.)



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There is a saying that “history is written by the winners”, but are images more autonomous, and do they allow a more objective view?

Perhaps they are more autonomous, in a sense, but also less so. I recognize that word and image are tied to one another in an endless battle, and perhaps I love the image more. The history of the winners is just a thin outermost layer, covering processes that can be uncovered in parts, resting in the fractured underground of time.

There is also a strong thread of visibility/ invisibility throughout the exhibition. While we can see all the works, the text plaque is difficult to read in the room. Radiographs are made without light, and are invisible to the human eye through this process. The Stasi surveillance technology was designed to reveal and conceal simultaneously...

I think there is a quality of the image that must be captured in its very emergence, as it appears. As if the transition from invisibility to visibility was a sensitive and delicate process in which the transfer, if done right, can set in motion a rhythm, other images, other transitions.

In terms of the room, there is also the factor of the light coming in from the outside. I don't know if you noticed the filtered light coming from the outside, which is similar to the light during an eclipse. The filtered light from the grid in the windows moves during the day and creates an animation on the floor and the curtains. This, too, plays a part in the exhibition as a vision machine in itself.

You can only read the text on the plaque when it reflects the light of the brighter images being shown on the screen. And when it does, you see that the plaque is a map or index of the film, ordered typographically like mine shafts. The upper line contains all the places from which I collected materials, and then listed vertically are the images or scenes in the film. One idea with the text plaque was also to let the room of the spectator and the room of the film melt together into one surface. But the eye still has to adapt as a camera lens, either to read the text or to look at the reflected images.

And the Stasi, which figure in *Silphium*, were obsessed with documentation. There is no other archive that can ever match it. What Oscar and I found particularly interesting was the sense that they were actually documenting even their own downfall, their own suicide, in a way. There's something extremely fascinating about that. Mnemonic technology meeting disaster, with total mutuality, like a self-recording, like disaster recording itself. It's very concrete I think, in the sequence with the hidden camera in the stub with two round holes – like eyes, and in the birdhouse with a camera lens.



The Offspring Resembles the Parent, 2015 (film still)

You look at big events in history. For example, in your work you handle Chernobyl and the atomic bomb attacks on Japan. You have also visited these places. What was it that first drew you to these locations, and, given that so many people alive today have been affected by these events, how do you begin to handle such charged subject matter?

I am generally interested in over-documentation – places and events and such that are really well documented, for which there exists an abundance of texts, stories and images that are seen as historically important and are part of a collective memory. So I guess the archive, in the sense as an encounter between history and media, becomes an important and decisive place. Even more so, of course, if the historical moment in question is itself connected to topics, such as photography, image, referentiality, indexicality, editing, surveillance, control, etc., as it perhaps always is, through the archive.

I like working with the official representations of events mainly because there has already been a process of editing, a disposition or montage that also defines its parts, and which has a resemblance to film. The official story can unfold together with the work I'm making, but as another story; neither fiction, nor fact. Rather than endless reinterpretation, it is perhaps endless re-disposition. The open structure of a film of mine is the convergence with this endlessness, the coincidence of history. But just as the museum presents events as related parts of a story, my work also finds its final form while being conscious of the fact that it is just one of many possibilities. One might say this is a play between the archive and the museum, the possibility of connections and a specific actualization of some of them. The fact that history, in many respects, is the history of recording devices and technologies (some of which I try to examine and disassemble in my films), could be another convergence point between my work and the writing or recording of history.

Whereas your films describe man-made systems that chart progress from their utopian potential to ultimate collapse. The modern world's need for constant growth, constant progression and perceived improvement. However, I find it interesting that we are also shown an image of the stag beetle in *Model of Continuation* (2013), a creature that has changed very little since prehistoric times. Is our desire for constant progress misplaced?

There is a scene in *Hiroshima mon amour* where, some time after the detonation, certain species begin to crawl from the earth. This scene is in *Model of Continuation*, one of the scenes that was actually not in *To the Vision Machine*. I filmed a full moon in Hiroshima – it's in *Model of Continuation*, reflected in a horizontal lightbox (a table used to examine photo negatives), and it's juxtaposed with the clip of the beetle. So I guess these two are connected as representatives of the unchanging or ever-returning. I also thought of a hidden similarity between the beetle and the digital camera that I disassemble in the film, as compact, black beings, unwilling to reveal their secrets.

While capital and memory are somehow entwined, capital, of course, is also linked to abundance, fertility and affluence. I found a nice irony illustrated by the image of the silphium, a plant that was described by Pliny as having contraceptive qualities (the opposite of abundance, fertility and affluence). It was not only featured on the coins of ancient antiquity, but it eventually became extinct due to its popularity and its inability to reproduce in response to the high demand for it.

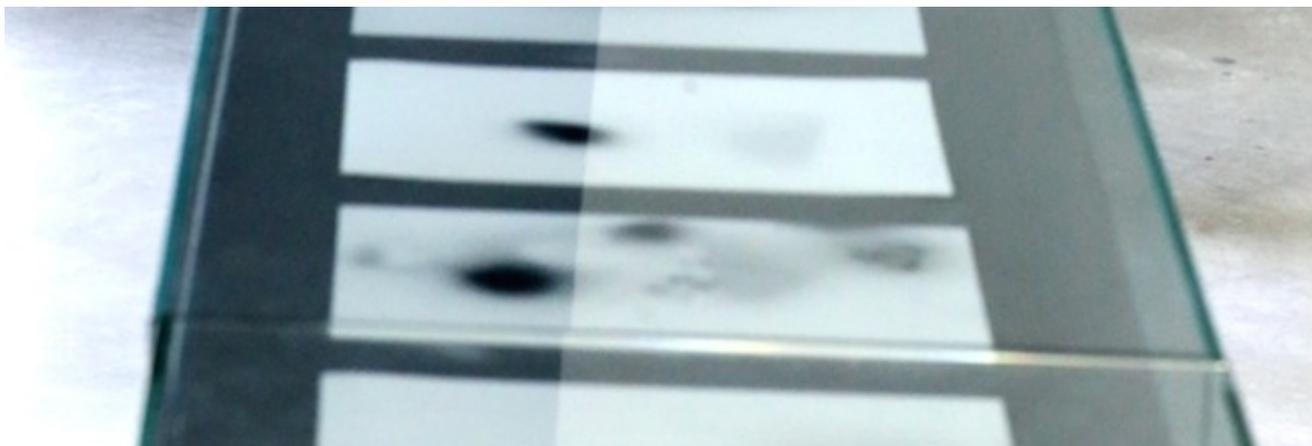
Yes... Exactly. And this nice irony also refers to the image and image-making. The coin has two sides.

For two pieces in the exhibition you have collaborated with Oscar Mangione. As an artist, how do you find the collaborative process?

I have been having an ongoing discussion with Oscar Mangione about my work since 1999. In the last couple of years the conversations have become more and more practical in scope, extending into the actual work. We are very close, and the films have ultimately become embodiments, projections or manifestations of our conversations on the problems and possibilities of the image. The film-work is, so to speak, a continuation of the conversation by other means.

I usually collect all the material and then Oscar and I work together with the text and editing. It is also a very practical way to make our marriage more effective – we can eat lunch together.





Lina Selander in Arsenal. Photo: Mats Holmertz

Later this year you will present this exhibition at Moderna Museet in Stockholm. How will that installation differ from the current one at the Arsenale? Are there different things to consider?

The rooms are very different. I think my installations work very well in the Arsenale space, with its rough brick walls and wooden beams. Manifesta 9 in Genk, in which I participated, was set in a similar industrial environment. My interest in materiality, and the issues of history, layers and time in my films, correspond to the scenery and atmosphere of the building. The two rooms at Moderna Museet are smaller and they don't carry that kind of historical presence. My goal is, nonetheless, to make it into one complex but uniform installation; however, it will be very different. It will be interesting to study how the works behave and react to those rooms.

And finally, once you recover from the hectic pace of the Venice Biennale, what are your plans for the future?

At this very moment I'm sitting on my balcony in Bredäng (a suburb south-west of Stockholm) and trying to catch my breath by contemplating and analyzing what actually happened in Venice.

I'm hanging out with my kids now; they are happy that I'm home and that spring has finally come to Stockholm. Very soon I must get back on track and go to Naples for a solo show at Galleria Tiziana Di Caro; then to L'Été photographique de Lecture in France in July; in August I'm off to the Kiev Biennale; and in September, I'm having a large solo exhibition at VOX - Centre de l'image contemporaine in Montréal. Oscar and I are planning a new work for the retrospective exhibition at Göteborgs Konsthall in February 2016, and before that I will, of course, do the exhibition at Moderna Museet in November of this year.