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This misery of light – light as destruction in the work of Lina Selander

Keywords

Lina Selander light photography unfolding destruction archive

Abstract

In this article I look at two works by Swedish video artist Lina Selander and explore how underlying visual patterns unfold in these works that are connected to certain worldly phenomena. Borrowing from Jacques Derrida, I describe the tendency of being en mal d'archive as an obsession to structure the world into particular recognizable patterns. I argue that Selander's works can be understood as the unfolding of such structures, the result being that the very impulse itself, the obsession Derrida speaks of, comes to the forefront. In several of Selander's works, light is explored both as a basis and prerequisite for photography and as a metaphor for this potentially destructive desire for all-encompassing knowledge and structure. As such, I argue, the unfolding that takes place in her works can be understood as paradoxically increasing the shadows – as a way of undoing the totalizing effect of light and articulating modes of not knowing or mystery in relation to the phenomena explored.

In *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1996) Jacques Derrida describes the condition of being *en mal d'archive* as an obsession to compulsively repeat, re-produce and re-impress versions of the past. This is not just a longing to repeat a particular version of the past, but a compulsion to confirm identity in the present; a longing for familiar structure and order, of recognizable identities and boundaries in a world where these are often experienced as being under threat. Through her explorations of light and visualizing technologies, Lina Selander engages with this impulse to sustain a certain informational structure, and to confirm versions of the past and identity in the present. In this article, I argue that Selander's video works carry out a profound process of the *unfolding* of such structures, the result being that the very *impulse* itself – the obsession of which Derrida speaks – is brought to the fore. The article sets out to explore how this unfolding can be understood as a paradoxical process of *increasing the shadows* that undoes the totalizing effect of light and articulates modes of not knowing or mystery in relation to the phenomena explored. It draws on non-representational approaches to thinking about photography in order to understand how light as the basis and prerequisite for photography, but also as a metaphor for an ideal of all-encompassing knowing, is unfolded in two works by Selander that find their source material in different archives.¹

Unfolding experience

The title of this article ('This misery of light') is taken from one of Selander's exhibitions.² As with several other works in this exhibition, *The Ceremony* (2016) is projected onto a large transparent screen. Other works are partly visible to the side of it. At certain moments the images on these screens merge with each other in the larger dark of the exhibition space and are also reflected in the tiled floor. As a perceiver one participates in editing these projections by moving within the room. The Ceremony consists of a montage of still and moving images of seemingly very different origins. Images and clips of Tutankhamen's crypt and unbroken seal are combined with Caspar Hauser's grave and the entrance to the old Stasi headquarters in Berlin. Most of the material used in the film, however, relates to the area of Bredäng outside of Stockholm, where the artist lives with her family. Throughout the film, moving images showing high-rise buildings in Bredäng return (Figure 1). To Swedes, these buildings are easily recognized as belonging to one of several so-called million programme' areas found mostly in the suburbs of major cities in Sweden.³ In Swedish political debates, the large multifamily buildings resulting from these projects are stigmatized and frequently associated with a range of problems, often connected to debates around the integration of immigrants in Sweden. Before seeing the images of Bredäng, however, at the very beginning of the film, the title page of Olaus Rudbeck's Atlantica is shown accompanied by a ripping sound.⁴ In the image, Rudbeck reveals Sweden as the sunken Atlantis by unfolding a piece of the earth's crust (Figure 2) In a similarly unrealistic way, in the social imagination associations with areas such as Bredäng are covered by layers and layers of mediated images and

- 1. This article draws closely on the more extended discussion of similar issues developed in my book, *Photographic Engagements, Belonging and Affective Encounters in Contemporary Photography* (Larsson, 2018).
- 2. This Misery of Light was shown at Göteborgs Konsthall, Gothenburg, 8 October 2016–29 January 2017. All references to Selander's works made here are to their installation in this exhibition.
- 3. The million programs describe a number of projects carried out by the Swedish government between 1965 and 1974 to build a million new homes in areas close to major cities in Sweden. It remains the most important housing project to date in Sweden.
- 4. Olaus Rudbeck was a Swedish seventeenth century scientist and writer. As part of his project of historicallinguistic patriotism, he wrote a 3000-page treatise in which he claims that Sweden was the location of the sunken Atlantis.



Figure 1: Lina Selander, The Ceremony, 2016. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2: Lina Selander, The Ceremony, 2016. Courtesy of the artist.

connotations that often have little or nothing to do with the actual area itself. As I will show, in *The Ceremony*, Selander unfolds a number of unexpected juxtapositions that reveal commonly repeated associations around Bredäng to be slivers of intricate code that connect it to all other areas of the globalized world, and eventually the whole universe.

In the initial shots of Bredäng, the camera travels at a fast pace along the area's many high-rise buildings, which are cwoloured in two different shades of grey and blend with the cloud-filled sky behind them. Snowflakes falling between the camera, buildings, trees and sky exacerbate this blending effect. This is followed by further still and moving images taken from the same area. Some show the same buildings framed by a public artwork or blurred by rain and fog. Some show gardens and green spaces or children's drawings of the area. Others show interiors with torn wallpaper or intact interiors dating from the 1970s. Interjected between these different ways of depicting the area are a number of seemingly random still and moving archival images drawn from starkly different sources; the unbroken seal of Tutankhamun's grave and people descending into and exploring underground spaces; animated film clips in which one of the characters is asked to repeat the word nothing; a gathering in which crowds joyously tear up their Soviet passports and throw them like confetti in the air. Towards the end of the film, these are joined by images of animals and natural phenomena; a tiger, a butterfly, an erupting volcano and clouds in different formations. These apparently random images point to a certain order of things, while at the same time suggesting the possibility of breaking with and going beyond it. The shots of the joyous ex-Soviets bring out how one world order can be swiftly replaced by another, how we shift from being on one side of a seemingly world-defining border to the other, and how one set of information order can be replaced by another. As the camera travels across a blue digital grid on a black background a voice once again relates this to Bredäng and asks Bredäng – why does it have to be a mystery? – seemingly referring to the order that encourages us to believe that we know something about this place by dint of the mediated images and associations that surround and cover it. In the end, here, any apparent order that emerges turns out to be empty of meaning. What remains, however, is a sense of the compulsion to create some kind of structure and to repeat this process of ordering, which resonates with Derrida's reflections on the condition of being en mal d'archive'. In reflecting on the archival, Derrida describes his contemporary era as one that is particularly obsessed with the idea of returning to some kind of origin from which an order can somehow be constructed. He describes this as an obsession, a desire, but also a sickness that in the end threatens to annihilate itself:

(being) en mal d'archive [...] is never to rest, interminably, from searching for the archive right where it slips away. It is to run after the archive, even if there is too much of it, right where something in it anarchives itself.

(1996: 91)

In this way, being 'en mal d'archive' – a desire that turns into a compulsion that turns into a sickness – threatens to obliterate the very thing it seeks to understand.

In the beginning of the work, between the image of Rudbeck's *Atlantica* and the first images of Bredäng, one sees two photographs of people who have been tied to poles and killed by firing squad in Russia.⁵ The photographs are black and white and intensely visceral. One can feel the weight of the lifeless bodies as they strain the ropes that stop them from falling to the ground, and sense the contrast between the doubled over corpses and those living bodies that presumably stood facing the guns a moment earlier (Figure 3). The intense physicality of these images of dead bodies stands as a reminder about the dangers of attaching too dogmatically to particular ideological patterns. Towards the end of this series of images the voice that returns throughout the film tells us that *description is vandalism* and how in fact, *pictures too are mistakes*. Engaging with Bredäng, its mediated images and their associations, makes clear that these different depictions tell us everything and nothing at once. In a frenzy of archival fever, they give us a world of associations traversing the human, animal and mineral, while telling us nothing of the space explored; the space where life is lived and where we walk through the snow – between the million programme buildings in wintertime.

The notion of unfolding that I make use of to articulate and explore these themes is borrowed from Laura Marks' aesthetics of enfolding/unfolding as developed in Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art (2010). In this book Marks describes how images and artworks are able to function through a process of *unfolding* meanings within a particular space and the relations that this space holds and that would remain *enfolded* if it were not for the particular intervention carried out in the making of the work. She writes of an underlying code which generates what we see in contemporary media culture and points to the databases and algorithms that make up the processes that create what we see and hear. In order to articulate this, Marks borrows terms from medieval Islamic aesthetics to describe how both classical Islamic art and contemporary new media art unfold the underlying structures of societal and material codes and/or reveal the code as an interface with the infinite. Marks's notions of image, code and the infinite are drawn from the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze as well as medieval Islamic aesthetics. The conception of the infinite in medieval Islamic philosophical and theological thinking denotes eternal and a-temporal truths that define the divine. Marks takes inspiration from Deleuze to articulate an idea of the 'immanent infinite' that would stand as a contemporary, worldly and secular alternative to the religious concept of the infinite, and which she glosses as 'an infinity that cannot be reduced to unity' (2010: 21). From this perspective, infinity parallels the notions of experience and reality. Considered in terms of the metaphor of light, one might say that experience can never be entirely elucidated, but always remains full of shadows and obscurity. The image, on the other hand, in worldly as well as religious understandings of the relation between infinity, experience and reality, describes the actual sensible and physical forms that can be directly perceived by the senses and defined by the intellect. The concept of Details of the origin of these images have been learnt through conversation with the artist.



Figure 3: Lina Selander, The Ceremony, 2016. Courtesy of the artist.

code or information is used to describe, for instance, the mathematical formulas (or digital codes) recognized as being able to translate infinities into actual images.

In relation to the works in question here, this aesthetics of enfolding/unfolding enables one to bypass questions of correspondence and to bring to attention how code is constructed through continuously (actively or passively) sustaining a particular informational pattern, as well as how new elements can become visible through *unfolding* new patterns to be perceived. Marks collaborated in an online project called *Vectors*, the aim of which was to visualize the processes of enfolding/ unfolding and how these processes relate to notions of experience, code, and image.⁶ In the text accompanying visualizations on the project's website, Marks describes photographs as 'those rare moments where a 'peak' of experience/reality gets pulled up into an image', bringing attention to the effective infinity of experience that is *not* 'pulled up' at any one time. On this website, Marks analyses one of her own family photographs and describes the contents of experience that unfold to become image, and those which do not:

the expanse of sand (but not each grain, and not the texture of sand on your feet), the sky (but not the wind), my father, brother, niece and nephews (but not how they were feeling), watermelon (but not the taste of the watermelon).

(2007)

What she brings attention to is how images, and how photographs in particular, do not give us experience, reality or infinity, and how mistaken we would be in thinking they do. But at the same time, as we see in Selander's works, photographs retain the capacity of pointing towards the realm of experience. One photograph seen towards the end of The Ceremony seems to contrast with the images that surround it in terms of both its personal and sensuous resonances. The photograph, which shows a little girl holding a cat, is taken from an archive, but could just as easily be interpreted as a portrait of the artist herself (Figure 4) It evokes the physical sensation of the cat's warm fur against skin. While her face is partly covered by a shadow and we can see little of her facial expression, the way the girl holds the cat and the way she stands, looking up at the camera, suggests a feeling of excitement and of trust towards the person depicting her. The photograph is highly charged with affect. It is, as Selander describes it, an'image of love'. The voice that follows this image moves from describing how'the signs [...] are questioned' and 'the predator becomes its prey, to eat its fill'. The voice seems to describe the image world more generally and how the associations through which we presume to know something entail the risk of devouring everything, up to and including reality itself.8 The voice continues to describe how 'rhythm is originally the rhythm of feet [...] the long shared wanderings, the shifting terrain [...] rhythm is also the origin of writing [...] which is the trace of animals moving'. We come to sense how the origin of the symbol, like that of the

- Here, Marks uses the notions of *experience* or reality as interchangeable with the notion of infinite.
- 7. From conversation with the artist.
- 8. In a literal and material sense, light means destruction for the photographic archive, which needs to remain in darkness in order not to be erased over time. In this context, the limit case of the atom bomb destroys in a fraction of a second what light otherwise threatens to do to archival photographs as time passes.



Figure 4: Lina Selander, The Ceremony, 2016. Courtesy of the artist.

photograph itself, is not found in the nothingness of once-and-for-all deconstructed space, but in the thickness of experience, from which it was never, and never could be, entirely disconnected. As layers and layers of information and associations unfold, including those that ultimately lead to violence and barbarism, this is where we end up; in the unlit murkiness of experience itself.

Increasing the shadows

As mentioned above, the thematization of light as phenomenon and as concept returns in most, if not all, of Selander's work. It is explored in general in relation to visualizing technologies and, in certain works, to photography in particular. As a concept, light returns in the guise of a metaphor for the impulse to order, structure, universalize or unify. In many of her works it is the predominant theme. In the work Lenin's Lamp Glows in the Peasant's Hut (2011), it is investigated in its most concrete materiality through a series of photographic compositions. In this series, Selander exposes photographic paper to uranium-containing rocks (Figure 5). As Helena Holmberg describes in the text accompanying the piece, the black spots that result from this exposure are reminiscent of the after-images that appear when one looks into a bright light for a long time. In *The Ceremony*, the metaphor of light is less overt but returns in some of the visual material included and, most obviously, in some of the sentences encountered in the film. For example, at one point the voice that returns throughout the film tells us how, 'for a time light must become darkness', referring to a movement that goes against the compulsion to archive and that grants a sense of not-knowing to the phenomenon at stake. In Atomic Light (Shadow Optics) (2005), Akira Mizuta Lippit develops further Derrida's reflections on all-encompassing archival energies, or the obsession to compulsively repeat, re-produce and re-impress versions of the past. With reference to Jorge Luis Borges' idea of the universal library, Lippit describes how archival energies take up all space and continue to expand, but nonetheless also always leave over a remainder of space. It is that which is left behind after the universal library has archived everything, which Lippit refers to as the shadow archive. It is in, or as, this shadow that the possibility to create something new from all that has already been put in place exists. The task of this other archive (the shadow or anarchive, as Lippit has it) is to go against the archive: 'to protect the secret, its heterogeneity, and divide the archive from itself' (2005: 7). The shadow archive is there as a remainder. It is that which is not put in place by the archive; the un-archivable. The task of the shadow archive is to undo the totalizing, unifying tendencies of the archive.9

Lippit uses the atomic bomb as a metaphor for the potentially destructive archival energies at their most extreme. In relation to the atomic assaults on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Lippit describes how the heat and light of atoms threatened to 'destroy the trace, to destroy even the shadows' (2005: 25). Borrowing from the terminology of Jun'ichiro Tanizaki, Lippit talks of the 'mansion of literature' as that which is threatened by the intense light of a bomb, rather than the material destruction of its

9. Significantly, the title of the piece is also the title of Paul Virilio's (1994) well-known book on the subject. By vision machine Virilio refers to visualising technology that has no embodied human viewer behind it and which is programmed to see in a particular way, such as the Cruise missile.

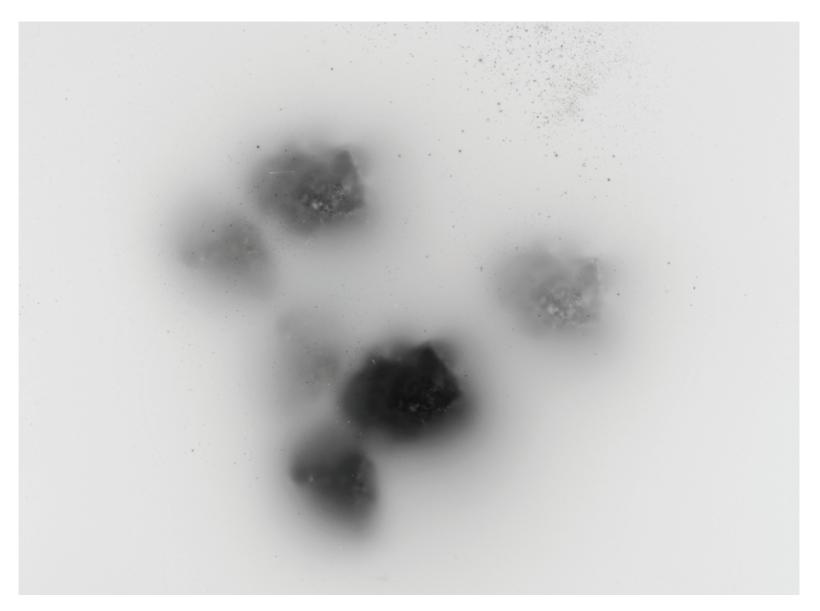


Figure 5: Lina Selander, Lenin's Lamp Glows in the Peasant's Hut, 2011. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 6: Lina Selander, To the Vision Machine, 2013. Courtesy of the artist.

explosion. The task of the artist in the wake of such events becomes to 'increase shadows, to introduce a visible darkness without light' (2005: 25). The archive, then, in its destructive function but also in its destruction, burns in a distinct manner peculiar to archives. It burns both internally and externally: engulfed by flames from the outside, passion and fever on the inside. A place at once interior and exposed, imaginary and material' (2005: 9). In this way, light as a prerequisite for any kind of photographic documentation, and light in its most extreme form as the source of the atomic bomb, combine in a metaphor to stand for the impulse to archive, order and understand everything. Light becoming darkness, or increasing the shadows, becomes a way of counteracting the all-encompassing energies this metaphor reveals by way of foregrounding not knowing or mystery in relation to whatever event or place is explored. The Ceremony can be seen as an act of resistance against the impulse to archive or gain ultimate knowledge of something. Selander describes it as 'a tentative breaking out of an order where the maximum speed and movement's hype synchronised time cannot be expressed other than in a stagnated and timeless flickering present' (Mangione and Selander 2016: 25–26, emphasis added). This 'tentative breaking out of' a particular order is what makes possible, 'another rhythm [...]; an alien, unknown time, incompatible'. As noted above, this other rhythm can be understood as the rhythm of feet in long wanderings, a rhythm of another dimension which is always already here but which is normally not perceivable because of the pervasiveness of a particular order. What is left in the wake of this breaking is a shadow, a darkness, an anarchive that is able to undo the totalizing, unifying tendencies of the archive, and still to protect its secret.

Atomic energies and the atomic bomb in particular, reoccur across several of Selander's works. They are often explored in connection with visualizing technologies, and photography in particular. The film, *To the Vision Machine* (2013) is shown on a small video screen placed on the floor. The work begins with a white screen and the sound of a whistle that is taken from the film *Genbaku no ko* (*The Children of Hiroshima*, 1952), by Japanese director Kaneto Shindo – a documentary about the Peace Memorial Museum as it was constructed after the end of US occupation. In the work, clips from the film as well as a montage of still and moving images from the museum and other sites are shown together with long takes of Selander taking apart the camera with which these shots were taken (Figure 6). The montage includes images from the Peace Memorial Museum (as well as other museums in Tokyo), of damaged bodies and objects left behind after the detonation of the bomb, human skeletons, a drawing of hand seemingly about to burn-up, and several images of insects, including large-scale models of the types of insects that actually survived the atomic explosions. One shot that returns at several points is of a child's hand touching one of these large-scale models (Figure 7).

Text that intersperses the images describes how the impulse to expand light to all parts of the world in the end destroys itself:

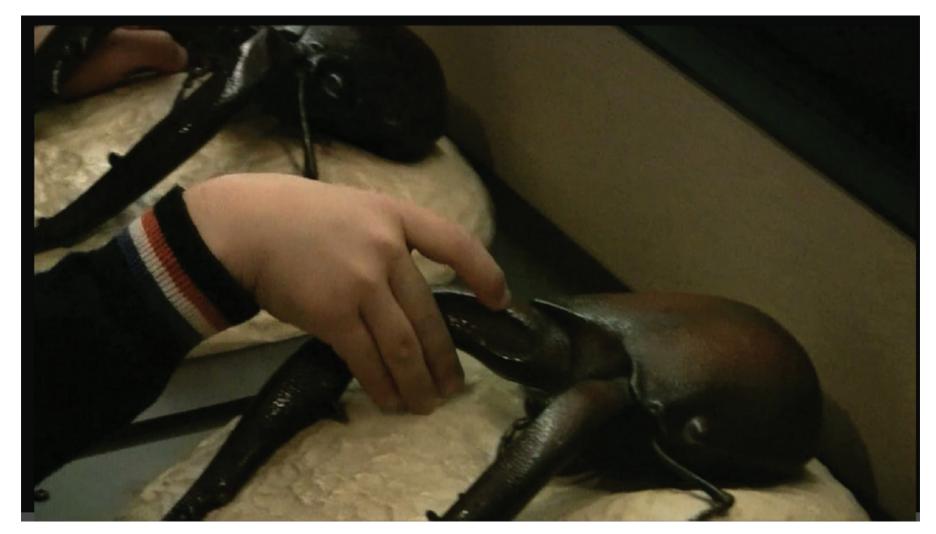


Figure 7: Lina Selander, To the Vision Machine, 2013. Courtesy of the artist.

The speed of light will win eventually, and everyone will be equal before the image [...] Blind, in a sense. Excluded from anything not our own. The illusion is this [...] We would talk only about the abstract qualities of images [...] Lanterns burning in broad day light.

Rather than an all-encompassing vision what we get is its opposite: blindness, or an inability to see anything but the light itself – a complete annihilation of those shadows within which the possibility of something new – something not our own – exists. This inability is what makes us blind to anything other than the abstract qualities of images, and is what encourages us to ignore the possibility of seeing life itself amongst them. In a text accompanying the film, the investigation is said to begin with the atomic bomb over Hiroshima, or more precisely: 'the detonation of the atomic bomb as a photographic event' (Mangione and Selander 2016: 24). The text goes on to describe how a light was created that lasted one-fifteenth of a millionth of a second and how this light 'penetrated every building and shadows of objects and bodies were exposed and burned into the city's surfaces'. Perception of this light came at the cost of one's life. Selander's disassembly of the camera becomes a literal and material deconstruction of the imaging technology that promises to get close to the event, but which only results in destruction. As we were told in *The Ceremony*, 'the predator becomes its prey, to eat its fill'. In trying to reach the core of the event, the compulsion for all encompassing light inevitably destroys itself.

Conclusion

The works discussed here are dense with connotation. Many of the connections I have dwelt on are not immediately perceivable, but require the work of research. But even without this, I argue, this body of work is suffused with a sense of being *en mal d'archive*, of that impulse to repeatedly structure and order the world as we know it. In the works of Selander, light – and the visualizing technologies that depend on it to act as tools of objectification – becomes a metaphor for this impulse. As such, light comes across as both the foundation and precondition for visualizing technologies, and as a metaphor for an ideal of all-encompassing knowing. I suggest that these works also develop modes of darkness and shadow that evoke a space from which it is possible to unfold different perceptions of the world. *The Ceremony*'s unfolding of layers of mediated images of the area of Bredäng leaves us with a sense of the thickness of experience itself. The image of the little girl, the wild animals, natural forces, as well as the sentences describing the origin of writing in the rhythm of feet all seem to point to spaces that have not been penetrated by light, but where mystery and shadow still remain. In *To The Vision Machine*, the documentation of The Peace Memorial Museum in Hiroshima is deconstructed through the technology that recorded it. Deconstruction of the camera completes the cycle of destruction, leaving nothing to be seen, nothing from which anything new can unfold. But the

images of left-behind objects from the museum suggest differently. The materiality of the insects that the bomb left behind, the human bones and the child's hands moving across the sculptures of insects, suggest that even in the limit-case of the atomic bomb it is impossible for light to devour everything. There is always a trace of shadow, or darkness, of *unenlightened experience* from which new perceptions are able to unfold.

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