

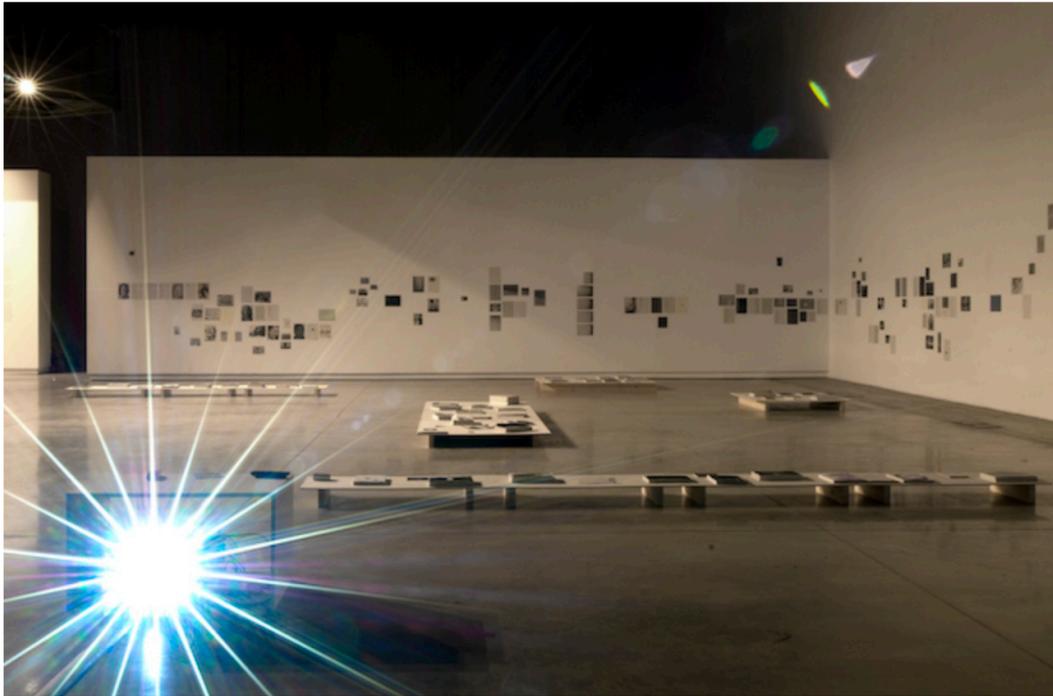


ART

Annika Larsson's Bodies Politic



Mostafa Heddaya September 19, 2014



Installation view, Annika Larsson, 'Introduction' (all images © Luis Felipe do Rosario and courtesy MACRO Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rome unless otherwise noted)

ROME — In Annika Larsson's *Introduction* at the Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Roma (MACRO), the recent political unrest in Europe is cast between the historical and the personal, with two video works accompanying a vast arrangement of printed matter. Inside the cavernous gallery, the exhibition, curated by Benedetta Carpi De Resmini in collaboration with the German Academy of Villa Massimo (where the artist is in residence), folds headlines and footage of looting and riots in with found pictures and internet clips, a potent mixture that veers from public chaos to private fetish.

The show is grounded in Georges Bataille's novel *Blue of Noon* (*Bleu du Ciel*), written in 1935 but only published towards the end of the author's life, in 1957, due to its memoiristic eroticism and abjection. For Larsson, the novel, which grounds its events against the backdrop of

political violence in Barcelona and Europe's broader descent into fascism, bears direct links to the present. The artist's affective entry point came from Bataille's sensuous yet jarring rendering of the effects of political trauma on the physical person. These passages, highlighting by turns the laughter, crying, throbbing, and other tribulations and ecstasies of the body, are underlined by the artist in a cryptically annotated anastatic reproduction of the novel, several copies of which are presented for perusal on a shelf in the exhibition space.



Installation view of "Blue" (2014) video projection
(photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

Accompanying this text is a shorter publication comprising an interview between the artist and the curator, in which the relationship between Bataille's novel and the present situation in Europe is discussed. This idea of "sordid realism," to use De Resmini's term, frames the installation's material, consisting of printed artifacts arrayed on the gallery's walls and five low-slung tables accompanied by two videos, the 60-minute loop "[Blue](#)" (2014) and the shorter "[E.A.V.](#)" (2011). The printed materials, ranging from photographs to newspaper

pages and metatexts assembled by the artist (lists of video clip titles as they might appear online, for example), represent a sort of gonzo archivalism that's less interested in presenting an historical (or historicist) array of documents (despite the relatively structured format) than a rhizomatic collage, a disorienting field of experiences and events.

The same logic continues in the video works, the longer of which, “Blue,” is projected on one wall. Consisting of video clips united by an unfolding of perverse scenarios, from political demonstrators to lonely dancers to drunks in a hotel room laughing maniacally in the middle of insensate destruction, the video displays the individual and mass manifestations of alienation in an anguishing montage. Presented on a smaller monitor adjacent to the larger projection, “E.A.V.” concerns itself more directly with the realm of the non-explicit fetish: variously disposed legs and feet, crushing toy trucks and grapes alike; low-fi footage from a documentary depicting the moment when a highly realistic sex doll is shipped off by its owner for limb repair; and so on. The duality of compassion and alienation behind the seemingly irrational urges of the protagonists comes into relief in its first and last clips: at the beginning, a group of unseen speakers playfully name a caterpillar they find on the street, and at the end, a similarly disposed snail is unceremoniously crushed underfoot.



Installation view, Annika Larsson, 'Introduction'

This gap between what is seen and understood is a cognitive uncanny that embodies the encounter with destabilizing conditions, the same kind of helplessness in the face of unseen forces that unites the fetishistic with the political. In the exhibition text interview, Larsson asks:

How do we, and our bodies, move, behave and respond to our time (late capitalism, crisis, increasing nationalism, xenophobia, homophobia)? But also: What political potential, force or threat lies in gestures and acts that are considered abnormal, transgressive or that have lost control?

Introduction offers a meticulous engagement with the former question, whose evidence is always at hand (or rather, perhaps, at foot). But the latter remains open, framed as it is by a broader unseen force whose effects operate less cleanly outside of the purview of aesthetics. The various activations of bodies within and without society that Larsson assembles (“bodily expressions, strong emotions, transgressive acts or total apathy,” per the published interview) nevertheless occur within the context of a broader bodily peril to Western democracy, between public demonstration and private fetish. This is the “democracy without a *demos*” highlighted by Peter Mair in an [influential article in *New Left Review*](#) (and a [posthumous book](#)), an empirical observation about participatory impotence and the retreat of Western European politics into the private sphere. Though hinted at by the tension between public and private expression that Larsson addresses, this structural condition lurks beneath the surface, a powerful and unique undercurrent to the contemporary condition from which Larsson recoils. This salient dimension places a limit on the political potential of the sense of bodily destabilization invited by *Blue of Noon*.

[Annika Larsson: Introduction continues at MACRO \(Via Nizza, 138, Rome\) through September 20.](#)