

Being and Origin – A presentation of Pia Arke's exhuming gesture

Time has perhaps come, when we can deal with Pia Arke's work in a more transversal way than it was the case after her death ten years ago. At that time there was an important archaeological work to do to prepare for the curatorial interpretations made by Tone Olaf Nielsen and Frederikke Hansen of Kuratorisk Aktion later joined by Mirjam Joensen. There was an archive to order and shows to organize and Kuratorisk Aktion even created a structure that made extensions of collaboration possible to translators, family, friends, art historians and visual artists: The Pia Arke Society.

After the shows in Scandinavia and Greenland Kuratorisk Aktion collected the interventions from the conferences that had taken place in Copenhagen or Nuuk and asked for supplementary contributions. The result was the publication of a real Pia Arke "companion" of 400 pages with enclosed a DVD with "Selected Video Works": *TUPILAKOSAURUS – An incomplete(able) Survey of Pia Arke's Artistic Work and Research*, Copenhagen: Kuratorisk Aktion, 2010. And containing an until then complete bibliography by Mirjam Joensen. This is by far the best tool for anybody interested in understanding the work of Pia Arke.

Previously Kuratorisk Aktion had republished Pia Arke's two books with translations into English and Greenlandic: *Etnoæstetik/Ethno-Aesthetics* from 1995 (now also in *Tupilakosaurus*, pp.335-343), which is a mixture between a statement about theories and a pamphlet, and *Scoresbysundhistorier/Stories from Scoresbysund* from 2003 which is a synthesis of her research from East Greenland over several years. It was co-edited with the Swedish author and critic Stefan Jonsson: *Scoresbysundhistorier* remains a central publication if somebody wish to understand the late-colonial conflicts around the arctic hemisphere. Jonssons chapters are about cartography and central political issues, while Pia Arke's chapters and photos are about the history of her Greenlandic family – her grandfather and grandmother – moved together with other 98 Greenlanders from Angmagssalik to create Scoresbysund in September 1925.

Scoresbysundhistorier is a book of documentation and witnessing written without any real rancour, even if these 100 Greenlanders were left much alone, once the Danish state was able to establish its sovereignty over North-East Greenland, a sovereignty which was not evident back in the 1920ies. But even if it was not a deportation to Scoresbysund against the will of the 100 Greenlanders, they were placed in very bad conditions to survive by their own means while they had been convinced to participate in this migration movement of 1000 kilometres Northwards by a promise of being established in a land with optimal hunting and fishing possibilities. So, what is witnessed by Pia Arke in this part of her visual and theoretical research, is a case of desubjection of an already subaltern people in the context of Danish colonial history, more than a case a dispossession, and it is documented through what was told or could be found in the history of her own family: Indeed, she took things *personally*, as she some times said in her typical severe and non-rhetorical tone of voice.

In fact, it would be possible to choose an approach to Pia's work, where her writings and her use of language constituted a key to the interpretation of her artistic intentions. Stefan Jonsson has done an important work in this direction and situated Pia Arke in a context of literature; and done so not only in the *Tupilakosaurus* companion but also more recently in his fundamental essay "Disclosing the World Order – Decolonial Gestures in the

Artistic Work of Pia Arke", in *Third Text*, vol.27, No.2, pp.242-259, Routledge, 2013. Such an approach has to do with how intentionality manifest itself in language and expression, and intentionality is also at stake in the enormous work of exposition and archive-making done by the Kuratorisk Aktion-team: this work inscribes Pia in a sort of postcolonial-dissident position based upon artistic research but also transcending the question of art. Kuratorisk Aktion in fact started their work of dynamic critique some years before the Pia Arke-project "Tupilakosaurus" became necessary and had her participate in their previous curatorial work called "Rethinking Nordic Colonialism" (March to November 2006). A very important work too, which was able to recapitulate this forgotten or removed parts of Scandinavian and Northern history.

Today, Kuratorisk Aktion is still run on the ground of combining global issues and a Scandinavian presence with a profound and internationalist critique of capitalist world order. The name of this combination is CAMP, "a nonprofit exhibition venue for art discussing questions of displacement, migration, immigration, and asylum. The center produces exhibitions on displacement and migration with renowned international artists as well as less established practitioners, prioritizing artists with refugee or migrant experience." So according to their own statement at the Camp gallery or center, which is placed in the Trampoline house in the north west part of Copenhagen, an ancient proletarian suburb to the capital.

Kuratorisk Aktion is an offensive arrangement of art and culture, and it could be seen during a recent meeting at the National Gallery of Denmark, Statens Museum for Kunst: The director, Mikkel Bøgh, had invited his British counterpart from Tate Modern, Frances Morris. At a certain moment the discussion was about the main stream integration of dissident artists in the curatorial work of the museums in the West, as it has been done for years now by some museums after that this "poetical/political" strategy was introduced by Catherine David at the Documenta X in 1997 and confirmed by Okwui Enwezor at the post-September Eleventh Documenta XI in 2002 which enlarged the "platform" of Documenta to include and publish examples of political theory called *Platforms 1-4*, reducing the actually held exposition in Kassel to a last, visual "platform". Now, some artists have been very present in this turning dissident of art institutions ever since, and one of them is Ai Weiwei. And as Ai Weiwei is having an important exhibition in Copenhagen right now, and important from every point of view, Frederikke Hansen from Kuratorisk Aktion made a defence for a more alternative and underground curatorial politics in her intervention at Statens Museum for Kunst. An alternative curatorial politics which in fact, I suggest, has to do with documentation and witnessing, and which of course will be less "auratic" and more complex to watch because it is not directly impressing the senses and instead asking for reading or listening while perceiving. And often during a rather long period of time like it has been the case in some of the video works exposed in Kassel during the Documentas. What is done since then is – one could say – a juxtaposition of activist subjects with conceptual means of expression: the text is the form, the form is telling something, and behind the formal narration an idea, a signification or a meaning is showing up in a more or less spectral way. Cf. "Art As Idea As Idea" in the work of Joseph Kosuth: It is a curatorial strategy which is really anti- or unspectacular.

Now, Frederikke Hansen got a very interesting answer from Frances Morris, who felt herself provoked by the critique of showing main stream dissidence according to the reporter Camilla Stockmann in the Danish daily newspaper *Politiken*, June 23rd, 2017. Frances Morris stated that she had to take into account the public of the Tate Modern galleries around

in the UK: in London the public was European minded, while it was very pro Brexit in other parts of the country... At best this statement contains an educational engagement advocated for museums of the importance of Tate Modern. At worst it is an opportunistic statement saying that Tate Modern has to adapt to the expectations of its public.

In this context of art, Pia Arke is still exposed, and if there is a scale going from alternative conditions to institutional ones, her work is exposed under both. So, curator Katarina Stenbeck in her project of research into "Slow Violence" is showing right now dummies from the book *Scoresbysundhistorier/Stories from Scoresbysund* together with works of Mia Edelgart, Harun Farocki, Basia Irland, Runo Lagomarsino and Zoe Todd (Kunsthal Charlottenborg, Copenhagen, June 18 – August 13, 2017), while the Danish magazine of literature *Texas Langhorn* in issue nr.7, 2017 is bringing an extract from *Scoresbysundhistorier* of eight pages (pp.28-35) with a very empathic introduction by the editor himself, Hans Otto Jørgensen (as the title of the magazine tells us, it has the intention to combine literature with parody). On the institutional "side", the most important museum of contemporary art in Scandinavia after the Moderna Museum in Stockholm, Louisiana in Humlebæk outside Copenhagen, has finally acquired and is showing the photos *Imaginary Homelands alias Ultima Thule alias Dundas "The Old Thule"*, made by Pia Arke in 1992. Louisiana has also acquired a real central work to understand the research of Pia Arke: *Legende I-IV/Legend I-IV* from 1999, a synthesis in form of four collages unifying several registers of hers and producing an effect of abstract construction out of figurative elements. At last Louisiana has been donated the most orphic of Pia's works, the *Artic Hysteria*-video from 1996. I shall come back to this piece.

The intuition in Katarina Stenbeck's project about "Slow violence" is really pertinent to Pia's work. Pia was often and laconically saying about the inuit people of Greenland that the Danes did not torture or massacre them, so the domination of the colonial power was calibrated in another way, which also had to do with the huge extension of the place, the nature of it and the amount of people involved from both sides. So Pia Arke's work can be seen as an archaeology of the Greenlandic and to a certain degree of some more general, artic conditions of domination.

There is of course a biographical dimension from the start, because she had been living several places in Greenland during her childhood and conditions were and still are very different on this enormous island. So she had an impression of the complexity of the research to be done from the start. The second dimension was that of discovery. She felt very strongly that the inuit were a people discovered recently and that this discovery had to do with the modern means of exploration. This meant among other things that photography was a part of the process nearly from the start and that the image making of something unknown would follow pre-existent notions of form or at least try to adapt to them when the aim was one of documentation. So a major project from the 90ies was the interpretation of American explorations of the artic zones of North America: Pia was in New York in 1995 and consulted the archives of the Explorers' Club. There is an important interview with her about this research by Danish critique Synne Rifbjerg brought in the Copenhagen weekly *Weekendavisen* April 29th-May 6th, 1999 (cf. *Tupilakosaurus*, p.75). In the Explorers' Club she found a proof of the atrocities committed by exploring photographs when forcing indigenous women to denude and taking photos of them against their will. On the other hand she also found examples of a kind of observation made by the explorers during their field work, which had to do with beauty and art history. The work *Artic Hysteria* alias *Artic Hysteria IV* (1997) is the result of this investigation of hers and was based upon Robert E. Peary's book *Northward over the "Great Ice"* from 1898 (cf. *Tupilakosaurus*, pp.86-87 and p.72 with an image of the lost

original collage). Peary's work delivered primordial pieces of information to her about how explorers were integrated in Inuit life, information confirmed 20 years later by Knud Rasmussen during his five Thule Expeditions. But the difference was the historical eye of the explorer. While Peary and his photographer had portrayed the Inuit woman in the nude and in positions recalling the positions of ancient statues from Western art history, Knud Rasmussen did not follow any regulatory iconicity from the history of art in his photographic documentation, but tried to apply an ethnographic or naturalistic eye when portraying the Inuits' customs and behaviour. Peary's book delivered a sort of visual palimpsest to the ideology of Western colonialism: The members of Peary's team – all men – wore the totally covering battle-dress of Arctic explorers, while their Inuit girl friends were reduced to incarnations of "bare life", even if aesthetically arranged incarnations of it.

In a later work, Pia continued this investigation into the conflict between the body of "bare life" and the image of a Greenlandic landscape to conquer. But there is a preliminary story to be told, necessary for understanding the consecutive analysis: For a period of time at the very end of the 1980ies Pia Arke had tried herself to explore and reproduce the Greenlandic landscape, but in the meditative image of the pinhole camera photograph, where she sat in the box of the camera. Kirsten Thisted, a specialist of the postcolonial situation in a Scandinavian context, writes about this huge plywood box: "There was no lens in this very basic camera, but in one of the walls there was a thin metal plate with a very small hole. The hole was covered until the picture was taken. On the opposite wall, the black-and-white film was mounted. When the picture was to be taken and the light poured in through the hole, it hit the film on the opposite wall of the camera box. The exposure time was more than 15 minutes, and by sitting inside the camera while the picture was being taken, Arke could watch it forming. It was also possible for her to shade the light with her body, thereby producing a very direct bodily influence on the result." (*Tupilakosaurus*, p.283). Back in 1996, Pia's brother, cinema-theorist Erik Gant, wrote a central essay about "The 'Arke'typical Motif" (now also in *Tupilakosaurus*, pp.253-54), i.e. the meeting between Greenland and the *camera obscura* as an *archè*, an original meeting. Or perhaps as an *arcanum*, which is so present and so secret at the same time, that it can only be experienced in the intensity of the total night in the Arctic North. Now, Pia tried to make an image out of this total night for years and even outside her Arctic *arcanum*, perhaps because Greenland is a sort of geological Pompei with fossils and formations to study nearly everywhere, so time is perhaps too present to be represented in an image of a local site; and the *camera obscura* is mostly a question of time and light. And that is surely the reason why she made a parody of such efforts in her video-installation *Tupilakosaurus: An Interesting Study about the Triassic Myth of Kap Stosch* (1999: VHS-video made together with Anders Jørgensen, duration: 9,18 min.), where she identifies a narration from Knud Rasmussen about the Eskimo myth of the Tupilakosaurus with the fossil of a salamander studied by Eigil Nielsen in his book *Tupilakosaurus Heilmanni – An Interesting Batrachomorph from the Triassic of East Greenland*, Copenhagen, 1954.

However, her Greenlandic original, the Nuugaarsuuk Point outside Narsaq, continued to haunt her imagination, and so she had to transform the conflict between the bare life and the Arctic wasteland into an art work, a performance filmed in the video already mentioned: So, in *Arctic Hysteria* from 1996, a VHS-video of 5,55 minutes, the artist in the nude is crawling over the pinhole image of the Nuugaarsuuk Point in the large version of 165 x 140 cm. And she is tearing it a part into small pieces that form small cylindrical rolls of film (see *Tupilakosaurus*, pp. 190, 205, 279), and the cylindrical rolls are nearly as lightning as the skin

of Pia's own back in the film. It is no doubt a parody of her plastic efforts, but she was also very serious about this, I believe: The huge pinhole image really deserved everything it could get from its author, even its destruction. And the body of the artist has always a potential that remains partly unknown, obscene and secret. But it was shown here: The artist as a trickster or as an amphibian in the sea of images like in her fiction about the Tupilakosaurus.

In 1995, Giorgio Agamben published the first book of his study in nine parts *Homo Sacer*. The last volume, *The Use of Bodies*, was published in September 2014. The investigations of the Italian philosopher start with the problem of exclusion of the bare life and how this exclusion is formative for the position of sovereign power, and they end with the interdependence of life and being in a version of political ontology which owes its autonomy to the baroque philosophy of the monads and its daily existence to a practice of destitution of power. This also means that life is bound to a critical potential in the body, which in fact incarnate something, namely an alternative to the bio-politics of institutions. If life has a foundation, this foundation is not bound to any metaphysical truth, but to an incongruent relation between language as text and violence as force. And that is what Pia Arke was finally dealing with in one of her works, all crucial but this one crucial in an explicit philosophical manner: *Side by Side* from the early 1990ies according to *Tupilakosaurus*, pp.166-167.

As the title says, it is a diptych: One side is a pinhole camera photograph with Pia's "ur-motif", the Nuugaarsuuk Point near Narsaq. The other side is a colour-toned photograph of the interior in an abandoned American military installation in the middle of the ice sheet of Greenland. The photos are mounted upon white cardboard with pencil annotations in Danish on both sides. The text is in Pia's handwriting. The English translation of the text on the left reads: "Fishing out skulls and bones I place them in a row – side by side – it is not popular but it looks entertaining". And under the image of the military instalment the text reads in translation: "Sound and smell of men with crew-cut hair and big hairy buttocks strapped in blue trousers two stories down in the spermafrost the smell of fox piss fills my nose Hello Dolly this is where the rocket stood". – There is also a Danish inscription on the back, in fact a dedication to two friends and to Pia's goddaughter. It reads: "– what the image contains of dream and repression – an image to be followed".

In ancient times, orphic aesthetics was parodic and severe; against both sacrifice and tragedy, it tried to find another tune for poetry and power: A consistency that was open and intense at the same time.