

Andrea Lange, "Continual Shooting with Cannon", catalogue 48 pages, text by Juliana Engberg, ISBN 2-912491-03-7, 2000

Dormez-vous, dormez-vous?

by Juliana Engberg

Andrea Lange's works are involved with the human drama of community. For her, issues of displacement, assimilation and difference revolve around the central point of communication, inclusion and understanding. In a range of profound projects over a number of years she has investigated the situation of confrontation, incarceration, and commemoration to reveal the complexities inherent in the idea of placing the self inside the system of the other.

Hers is an on-going project written in the margins of the large historical moments of the twentieth century. Where there has been major war, she has isolated and studied the personal and intimate tragedy. Where we witness mass exodus, she has concentrated on the flight of a few. Where there are the refugees in hundreds of thousands, she has welcomed the individual.

There is a great deal of humanity apparent in Lange's approach. Empathy too. Not cloying, nor overtly sentimental, her works are nevertheless profound and deeply moving for the attention they bring to the plight of the 'person' against the overwhelming encounter of the mass circumstance. Her works are also intensely situational. In this way she often utilises the point or place of reception as a major part of her work.

One such project of great personal and political poignancy was *Wer immer Du auch bist (whoever you may be come in and be my friend)* 1997 in which Lange collaborated and cooperated with shop-keepers in Kiel, Germany, who she asked to place notes with the above handwritten inscription on them on their shop doors and windows. Referencing and commemorating a distant member of her family who was imprisoned and then murdered by the German army during World War II, Lange's project works on a range of emotional and political levels.

In participating in such a project the citizens of Kiel, some who may even be old enough to remember the events of WWII, are compelled to think through the actions of betrayal which led to the mass murder of Jews under the Nazi regime. But the project is much more than merely seeking retribution from or a rebuke to the German people. And it is not only about Jews. The simple message "*whoever you may be come in and be my friend*" humanises the point and speaks of friendship, community, and mutuality. These are the things betrayed and cast aside in the transactions of war. Friends become foes. Community disintegrates, and mutuality is abandoned for prejudice.

Such a project cuts through rhetoric and it becomes timeless. For the same message holds sway for the people who entered into these shops during the project in this time and place: not in history, but in the present. The message remains the same in perpetuity: '*be my friend*'.

Community in this context is of course a several headed creature. And the invocation of the individual further confounds our easy comprehension of the idea of communality. In the context of this project we are led to contemplate the fact of the existence of multiple 'communities'. One is of Nazism being a community of persons joined by common beliefs and goals. Another is the Jewish community joined by other philosophies and ambitions. Still another is the utopian concept of the community of the common good which has little tangible evidence in the hard facts of history. With the exception of the later category, the concept of community by its nature, or construct, to be more precise, breeds the outsider as well as the insider. And so we must concede, as Lange's open-ended dialogue encourages, that the concept of good community is a highly qualified state.

In particular this simple project demonstrates the extent to which Lange's purpose is concerned not only with the issue of community, but also with the way communication leads to community. In the instance of the shop sign, once again, the text written in German, by a person in fear of persecution by Germans, gives emphasis to the ways in which communication even in a shared language will not necessarily achieve communality if the accent is wrong.

Lange's projects are a form of direct address. She uses the methods of communication which have held sway in public life for time in memoriam. In this way her projects resemble the 'prompt language' which Walter Benjamin refers to when he says:

*'Significant literary work can only come into being in a strict alteration between action and writing; it must nurture the inconspicuous forms that better fit its influence in active communities than does the pretentious, universal gesture of the book — in leaflets, brochures, articles and placards. Only this prompt language shows itself actively equal to the moment. Opinions are to the vast apparatus of social existence what oil is to machines: one does not go up to a turbine and pour machine oil over it: one applies a little to hidden spindles and joints that one has to know.'*¹

The shop sign immediately reached its audience of shoppers and passers-by, and swiftly became a part of the public space dropping a little oil on the memory apparatus. In this way it fulfils another element of Lange's approach and that is the commemoration, or monument. Even though it was not cast in bronze or carved in stone, and despite its short exhibition in the public space, the little sign inscribed *Wer immer Du auch bist komm herien und sei mein freund* enters memory and calls for reminiscence.

Another project, equally commemorative and also located in the public realm, which Lange prepared for Swedish radio, was *One Minute of Silence* 1996. Lange randomly selected a number of people from the Swedish telephone directory, rang them and asked them to contemplate what they would like to memorialise in a minute of silence. A recording of the people speaking about their tribute was then followed by one minute of silence on Swedish public radio. The idea itself seems simple enough but the effect is dramatic. In an arena which is generally a cicada of noise —

¹— Walter Benjamin, 'One-Way Street', *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed.

radio — a minute's silence is a radical rupture in transmission. Again Lange's project entered into space in challenging way to disrupt the fast, virtually seamless stream of consciousness which is media. Each person's commemoration — for the people of Bosnia, for children, for world peace, for understanding, for drug addiction, for the economy, and so forth — gained the weight of solemnity and poise by virtue of its vacancy. In that empty space it was possible for listeners to fill in their own thoughts.

Simple actions are sometimes most powerful as connectors. *Kiss me*, 1995/ 98, a somewhat cheekier, more demonstrative project which Lange pursued, resulted in a sequence of situational photographs of the artist being kissed by strangers in various European locations. *Kiss me*, is both performance and ritual, connecting to the ancient intimacies of greeting and love.² Like all of Lange's projects it has a deliberate ambiguity. For while kissing connotes trust and love it can also sometimes signal hate or betrayal as we know from the Bible, Shakespeare and spy thrillers. In asking a stranger to kiss you, you are asking for their immediate, unquestioning intimacy and in doing so you are also asking for them to betray that intimate gesture which they designate exclusively to loved ones. You are, as well, placing yourself, as protagonist, in the strangely precarious position of powerlessness. Once you have asked someone to kiss you have also offered them your intimacy. Lange reports that most participants in her series of situations seemed to grasp the symbolic significance of the request and their action became one of strict formality in an attempt to distance themselves from the romantic connotations of the conduct. In this way, once more, Lange's project revolved around the idea of communality and greeting— friendship — while making a case for the individual circumstance. But it also pivoted on the point of rejection. For Lange to proposition strangers is also to place herself open to scrutiny. For what is she soliciting? Is this prostitution? Is this a set-up. Will there be the need for on-going commitment. Once more in *Kiss me* we are forced to reflect upon the transactions which make up the complexity of communication and encounter the issue of mutual circumstance.

Of course Lange's *Kiss me*, like the two previous projects *Wer immer Du auch bist* and *One Minute of Silence* regenerate the genres of art and its history, particularly that history which links iconographically through art and the religious symbolism of the Old Testament. And her preoccupation with issues of exile and migration also falls within this modern reflection upon ancient historical actions and events.

The project presented here in Chapelle St. Jacques in Saint Gaudens links to a recent project, *Refugee Talks* 1998. This video documented the situation of a number of residents who found refuge at a Norwegian 'state reception centre' while they awaited residency status. Lange spent many months interviewing people who have all sought asylum from their various homelands. For her the process was an intimate and highly personal engagement. The outcome of her research and

² for Kissing and other intimate acts see: Diane Akerman, *A Natural History of the Senses*, Vintage, New York, 1991, pp. 110 -116

visits resulted in a 33 minute video in which participants sing a song of importance to them in the language of the home they have left behind.

By asking her collaborators to sing their songs, Lange acknowledged the importance of oral traditions in the diaspora cultures of displacement and migration. Songs, especially those which relate traditional stories of nations and their peoples are, unlike written literature or artefacts, virtually impossible to police or compound. A song, even if it cannot be sung remains in the mind, and with it remains the memory of origin. As Stephen Blum and Amir Hassanpour have remarked: 'Those who tell Kurds that their language does not exist create conditions in which singing or listening to a popular song are a sign of life.'

Edward Said has written about the differences between exiles and refugees, distinguishing the exile as part of the history of banishment: an individual who might obtain an almost romantic attitude of solitude and spirituality. He contrasts and defines the refugee as 'a creation of the twentieth-century state. The [word] 'refugee' has become a political one, suggesting large herds of innocent and bewildered people requiring urgent international assistance'.³

Lange's video *Refugee Talks* individualises the people who would otherwise be just another face in a crowd or line. She presents her video as a life size projection and encourages the viewer to adopt a one-on-one position with these people who sing for themselves, for Lange and for you, if you will listen. Because the songs are not translated into English, or even Norwegian where *Refugee Talks* was first shown, the viewer may even find themselves feeling a sense of frustration or alienation, however, it is possible that empathy might be achieved instead.

In this new project, *Continual Shooting with Cannon 1999*, Lange continues her use of music as a metaphor for communication, and returns to the site and occasion specificity which she explored in *Wer immer Du auch bist*. The project has been made for exhibition at the Chapelle St. Jacques in Saint Gaudens, which was originally a chapel: the Chapelle St. Jacques. Lange builds upon the history and naming etymology of the church creating an installation and intervention. Named after the Spanish Patron Saint, St. Jacques — who was also called The Matamoros — loosely translated as 'the one who kills moors' Lange explores the complexity of assimilation and obliteration of the colonised peoples of Arabic and African nations which became a part of French imperial behaviour.

Using the innocent childhood song *Frère Jacques* which is commonly sung as a round by infants learning the French language, Lange has two young boys of Moroccan origin perform to a camera. As the song is sung over a seven minute period the harmonious accord of the round becomes disturbed and distorted until the assimilation breaks down into chaos and disunity.

³ Edward Said, 'Reflections on Exile', *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, Eds. Russell Furgeson, Matha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Cornell West, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1990, p.362

Once more Lange, with great simplicity and clarity of approach enters into the debates of displacement, power and communication to show that reception and assimilation has its destructive side even if it comes wrapped in the guise of the religiously oriented nursery rhyme — often the first colonial intervention towards radical obliteration of the Other's culture. By citing the song *Frère Jacques*, Lange makes reference to the site of the project — the church — but also the role of the church in its disguise as benevolent paternalism in respect of the imperial submergence of colonial identity. The eventual violence of the cacophony of sound is surely Lange's own way of suggesting — as the song does — that the easy sleep of the old order must be awoken by new voices making new noise.

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