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Sauna as Cultural Practice: Two Art Projects and a Video

Pia Lindman and John Christ

Hybrid Sauna at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA, U.S.A, 1999
Public Sauna at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, NY, U.S.A, 2000
Sawnah, video, 2000

I strive to make artwork that is socially and politically transformative. Thinking and knowledge do not always develop by intellectually integrating information from outside sources, but rather from personal experience in physical reality. My aim is to create moments in reality where the viewer must encounter and re-evaulate her thinking, her attitudes and accepted values regarding everyday life. These created moments have to be poetic – art – without which they would be mere intellectual exercises.

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"I feel like the embarrassment about nakedness is not so much of Puritanism as it is of shame. Like a shame of your body, [more related] to consumerism, and advertisement and also a lot of painful emotional relationships . . . Capitalism, and even a culture that's an immigrant culture, where nobody really feels that this is theirs, nobody really belongs . . . and there's an enormous amount of economic oppression in this country. Class and race and everything; a lot of people are not taken care of at all. And I think that just creates a feeling of insecurity." *Clare Ellis*, bather

In Finland everyone grows up bathing naked in saunas with their families, relatives and friends, the sexes often mixing together. Having been born and raised in Finland, my understanding and experience of bathing in a public sauna is very different from the cultural practice in most parts of the U.S. As with most Finns, sauna bathing is a significant part of my cultural identity, including my relation to my body, sexuality and to men and other women.

When living in Cambridge MA, between the years 1997 and 1999, I joined Healthworks, a female-only health club, and had my first experience in a sauna in the U.S. At Healthworks, the wet area was separated from the locker room with a rippled glass wall that obstructed the view both ways. Likewise, the showers were separated from each other with frosted glass. Yet strangely, the sauna was separated from the rest of the wet area only by a clear glass wall. In Finland, bathers are usually in the same visual space, while non-bathers do not see inside the sauna. The sauna is a

Bodies in Heat:
A Discussion of Pia Lindman's Sauna Projects by John Christ

My unclothed body drips with sweat. I ladle water on the scorching hot coals releasing a burst of birch-infused steam. I splash cool water on my skin as the heat becomes almost unbearable. My thoughts turn from the interpretation of art objects to the negotiation of nudity and heat with another bather. In Pia Lindman's hybridized sauna, these are the highly personal experiences upon which art is built. Sensual pleasure and social investigation mingle.

As expectations rise to enjoy a refreshing sauna, the artist instructs the bathers in its use. She also describes her experiences in her native Finland where bathing in a sauna is a social and collective event and contrasts them to the anxiety-ridden and socially isolating conditions she finds in saunas in the U.S. One enters this structure

liminal space, closed off to the outside, where normal social rules reign; inside another set of rules is in effect. Finns perceive the sauna as a sensual yet non-sexual space, where corporeality is accepted as a shared human condition, existing without sexual politics. Bathers share the vulnerability of nakedness and therefore nobody wishes to bring sexuality to the experience. Relaxation cannot occur unless all socially constructed positions are left behind with the clothing in the locker room. Furthermore, saunas are perceived as truly democratic public forums where corporeality is included as part of public discourse.

I noticed that the women at the club seemed to be uncomfortable with their own and other's bodies. Several bathers told me that being naked in front of other women was more awkward than being naked in front of strange men because, as one woman put it, "at least with a man I can play the sex card. With a woman, it's all competition." I suspect that this is both a symptom of and a cause for social isolation among women. Rather than sharing a sisterhood, that could be transformed into political power, women look at each other as rivals, judging and defining themselves and each other according to standards established by the male gaze.

The architecture at Healthworks did not facilitate sociality, but served only to further alienate these women, making it all the more difficult for them to relax. At least not the way I relax, sitting in a public sauna in Finland, surrounded by chatting and laughing women of all ages and sizes, scrubbing each other's backs. The situation at Healthworks was like a foucauldian play of surveillance. The bathers averted their eyes, as if afraid to be seen looking at another woman's body. One told me that

understanding that it is a compromise. The traditional sauna has been transformed to facilitate a more comfortable situation for U.S. participants but also to create an environment in which accepted values and practices can be questioned. A crimson curtain severs the space leaving each bather in a solitary chamber. These bathers are protected from one another's peering eyes but also prevented from assisting one another in bathing. This curtain is at once an act of cultural conciliation allowing the traditions of two cultures to meet and an act of social violence cutting off two bathers from an otherwise shared experience.

The presence of the other bather is evident in mediated sensations that the crimson curtain does not permit to become whole. The occasional sound of splashing water or skin sliding against the wooden platform or the sudden wafts of hot steam provide only elusive indications of this other person. Frustrating glimpses of body parts are seen where the curtain has been pulled back over the coals but they cannot be pieced together into anything corporeally or psychologically coherent. Apprehensively, brief comfort is found in the sensation of physical contact through the curtain. This other bather nonetheless remains a fractured entity of detached sounds, glances, and impressions. The bather is impelled to ask if this sense of fragmentation results merely from a peculiarly constructed situation or if it has been there all along in the seemingly smooth functioning of everyday life.

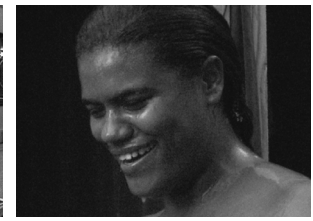
It would be difficult to argue that the fracturing of identity and the illegibility of the body are not integral to everyday life. How often one hears about someone's discontentment with his career, how he wishes he could be doing something else,



"Many high schools have closed down their shower rooms because no-one wants to take showers in public and the boys do that at home." *John Diehl*, bather



"When I did the sauna, and I see a lot of the women that come out of there . . . they're very slender, nice shape . . . and then when I went in I felt like, wow, how do people react to my person or my body. But then when I came out, I was like: they don't have to look, if they don't like it, they don't have to watch." *Tamar Osorio*, bather



taking a shower makes you especially vulnerable, because while washing, you have to touch yourself. In this culture, neither architecture nor dodging eyes can eliminate the gaze: its existence is implied precisely by its denial. Therefore, the women wrapped towels around their bodies, even while sitting in the sauna. They changed their clothes in hiding. Some wore bathing suits everywhere they went. Silence and paranoia dominated the space.

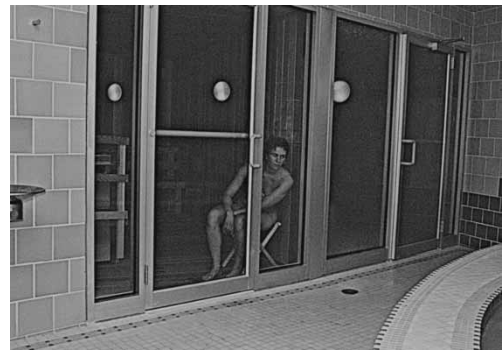
In response to my observations at Healthworks, I did the following performance: For five consecutive days for two hours a day I sat naked in the sauna in a folding chair, by the glass wall, looking through it into the wet area. I acted out a dynamic of gazing that was already built into the architecture. Most bathers felt compelled to address me, breaching the paranoid silence. However, the management became alarmed and eventually asked me to stop "posing or whatever it is", or be expelled. I had also made a diaphanous mesh body suit, *The Survival Dress for the Puritan*,

how he is only truly himself when at home and in private. People's public lives are often constructed in opposition to the person they wish to be, more aligned with financial imperatives than personal desires. In the capitalist marketplace, the public good is sacrificed to what are often socially devastating private interests. This situation, which is particularly acute in the U.S., produces among individuals a perception of insecurity and has the effect of frustrating their private lives from larger significance. The naked body, when stripped of its garb outside the sanctity of the home, is left powerless and vulnerable.

The curtain separating the two bathers is not impenetrable. Through exploration, the bather began to find seams and openings in the curtain through which access was found to the other participant. The threat of personal violation loomed over this anticipated act but so did curiosity. Cautiously, the curtain was pushed aside to partially open up the space. Rather than the nervously self-conscious situation that

through which soap and water could pass. It covered the whole body, including head and hands and could be worn in the sauna, hot tub, and shower. I planned to manufacture a number of these and place them in all the lockers. However, with the management already alarmed, I could not realise the plan.

Attempting to further address issues of nudity and morality that had arisen at Healthworks, I designed *Hybrid Sauna* for M.I.T. and later the *Public Sauna* for P.S.1. The traditional Finnish sauna could not be transplanted into American society; it would not be possible to replicate the social interactions in a Finnish sauna that are so integral to all social relations in Finland. I needed to redesign it to take into consideration American sensitivity to nudity. My sauna had to reference the dynamics of the Finnish sauna while creating opportunities for new social and cultural inventions and interventions.



Above: performance at Healthworks

I divided the sauna into two compartments with a crimson velvet curtain, a material with various associations, from the theater to bordellos to the Catholic confession. Cutting through the



Above: Pia Lindman attending *Public Sauna*

elemental architecture of the sauna the curtain highlighted the conflict between a Finnish ideal and the impositions of another culture. The most common question about the curtain was: ". . . so, women on one side and men on the other?" However, as the compartments were so small that they housed only one bather at a time, separation of sexes was not an issue. The mental tranformation I was hoping to facilitate via the physical relaxation in a sauna involved the interaction of the two bathers on each side of the curtain. This interaction happened in spite of, through, across and with the help of the dividing curtain. I designed my saunas so that the elements of heat, steam and fresh air were necessarily shared by the bathers. The steam would enter both compartments on either side of the curtain. The bathers had to negotiate the amount of steam they were willing to share, as well as the amount of cooler air allowed in through a vent.

I participated in the performance as the attendant. Wearing a white uniform

was anticipated, the parted curtain revealed a surprisingly comfortable experience. A bather at P.S.1. noted in an e-mail to the artist: "While I appreciated the dividing fabric the 1st time I took the sauna, the 2nd time I took the sauna I took it with a close friend that I have known for years and I felt that the fabric was a barrier that prevented us from fully sharing the experience together. I wanted to be able to see him while we talked." The curtain, however, did remain and served an important function. No longer acting as a protection to his nudity, the curtain remained a persistent obstruction, a barrier to open communication, a constant and almost absurd reminder of the intersection and non-identity of two cultures and at least two selves.

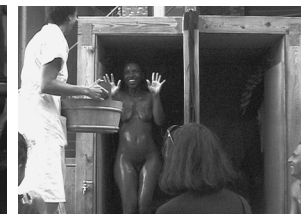
Ready to cool off, the bather stepped beside his usual identity with surprising ease, publicly striding his naked body. As one bather remarked: "I had read about the sauna in the voice review and loved the idea, but the reviewer said that we

"So, oddly enough, when the sauna was first put up, I was taking a course at NYU, in law and the visual arts and the sauna installation became an example [of how to deal with such a piece] if you're a visual arts administrator [so] that you are not threatened by litigation. Knowing that there's a pool next to the sauna where there are children playing, sometimes in the nude, while there're nude men, coming outside of the sauna: there's a possibility that there could be a photograph of a nude man and a nude child in the same picture frame. This could pose a huge legal issue." *Juliette Cook*, P.S.1. Press Office









"I could say Caucasians, they are more liberal, they don't have stereotypes hit, thrown at them every other day. Us African Americans and Latinos, we throw at each other, we stereotype each other, we downtalk each other. It goes vice versa with the Caucasians also, but it's more along the lines of us abusing ourselves." *TO*

similar to that of a nurse or washing-room attendant I exuded an air of professionalism and authority. To assuage any feelings of apprehension or anxiety, I first gave each bather a 'walk-through' of the sauna, during which I explained how the sauna works and how one should bathe.

I learned from my experience as the sauna attendant that Puritan morality is merely a convenient excuse. Americans use it to explain their modesty so that they do not have to address more difficult issues



Above: *Survival Dress for the Puritan* at Healthworks

would be sitting outside on benches naked. I didn't like the sound of that, and I brought robes for me and my friend Karen. So your piece was literally transformative: After we waited for our turn in the sauna, chatting a bit with the participants inside and especially after a while in the sauna, blissful and sweaty, we didn't give a second thought to scooting out naked for you to dump a bucket of cold water on us. I remember being one of the clothed onlookers wanting to be in the sauna but also curious about the people inside and then I remember the feeling of being naked and flushed from the heat and the pleasure of the cool wet air and the cold water and seeing the onlookers looking at me but not minding at







"Minority men in general... they are so uptight about society and the way that they're being viewed. Minority men always wanna be in control . . . And by they going in the sauna, is representing out of control – in the smallest sense – but to them it seems that way. If they take off their clothes, they feel like losing control and they can't control the situation and other people's reactions about them." *TO*

"What is there in catholicism that says it's bad to get naked in the locker room? . . . I think it's a class thing and a cultural thing. I think religion is a part of that, but I don't think it's the dominating factor." *Sarah Nolan*, bather

of race, class, and economic functions. I discussed womens' scruples about nudity earlier. Many of my male bathers – across class divisions – showed anxiety about exposing themselves as vulnerable and incapable of self-defense. As one bather put it: "We're still the cowboys, the freedom fighters and individualists, and we have to have our guard up all the time." According to the American myth, men are expected to be able to fight alone for their freedom and happiness. Today most of these battles are fought in the corporate market



Above: Pia Lindman attending *Hybrid Sauna*

all." The conversation of bodies and sometimes voices that began on the inside continued on the outside, on the public stage. For a moment, nudity was not merely erotic, private, and vulnerable but also something publicly communicative.

The physical sites in which the saunas were placed, Hybrid Sauna *at M.I.T. and* Public Sauna *at P.S.1, played a significant role in how they mediated the relationship between public and private. The sauna's*





"When I think about naked, it has to do with something sexual . . . The sauna just fucked up my whole perception of being naked. It didn't bother me, maybe I felt a little uncomfortable, at first . . . like, seeing men AND women . . . I think that a woman standing there naked, she can tell a man whatever she wants, and he'll do it. That makes them more powerful. As far as men goes, it strips away everything . . . I'd say that the problem with it now, or always, has been the perception of being weaker. If you show any sort of kindness or anything towards anybody, that's portrayed as a weakness. So, if you come over weak, you sort of get pushed to the side, bullied." *Edmund Ortiz*, supervisor of guards at P.S.1.

economy, in both white-collar and blue-collar jobs. Fears related to these battlefields are ultimately embedded in the body: the body that does not tick like a machine making the buck for its owner, but instead fails to be emotionally detached, stay awake, be healthy, and keep clean. This structural violence towards the body is manifested in personal relationships, self-image, violence towards others, and self-destructive behaviours. It is in this context that the issue of race becomes particularly



architecture of exhibition disrupts routine activities regardless of its geographic placement. Superficially, the situation at M.I.T. was less successful. Bathers' openness to discussion and public nudity came with greater reticence. The field in which Hybrid Sauna *was erected, adjacent to a number of non-academic*

Left: *Public Sauna* consisted of two boxes joined together. The curtain was the seam. Swing doors led to two separate dressing rooms. The two steam room compartments were behind the dressing rooms.

complex, because the surface of the body is the contested area where the fears, battle, and violence is inscribed. Tamar Osorio and Edmund Ortiz describe this acutely in the *Sawnah* video. (See video transcripts above).

Bathers coming out of the sauna cooled off on the outside benches. Their relaxed steaming bodies punctured the boundary between public space and that of the sauna. They were dynamic insertions in public space, expressing corporeal discourses of openness, pleasure, nakedness, and intimacy.

The bathers, other people joining the crowd affiliated with the sauna, and I became a spectacle. We answered inquiries with our own temporarily assumed roles and social rules of sauna practice. We played the part of the strange, weird and dangerous other.

Larissa Harris writes about her experience bathing in *Public Sauna* at P.S.1

For a year, when you walked through the courtyard to enter P.S.1, you passed one or two steaming brown or pink people in towels sitting at a boxy silver sauna, attended by the confidently moving, rubber-booted, white-coated Pia, who radiated unpretentious positivity like a figure in a socialist realist painting. This raw, sloppy tableaux-vivant occupied the center of P.S.1's crunchy gravel courtyard without a label or a warning.



Above: One of the two steam room compartments in *Public Sauna*

buildings, is used most often as a space of passage or a place where on a pleasant day can be found students enjoying lunch or a coffee. In this context, most bathers were simply passersby intrigued by the spectacle of a sauna on the M.I.T. campus and the pleasures that awaited. Hybrid Sauna*'s function as a work of art was secondary to its role as a bath and arbiter between cultures. To expose oneself in this space was to put oneself on view, to exhibit oneself for otherwise 'innocent' bystanders for some of whom this nudity may have been liberating, but for others may also have seemed exhibitionist or even obscene. Thus, while the* Hybrid Sauna *did not facilitate public nudity and communication as fluently as did* Public Sauna*, this was only because the former was more directly antagonistic in a repressive institutional context.*

Public Sauna at PS1 interrupted the normal expectations of museum visitors

I had just finally taken a sauna myself. I was sitting in a towel in its informal forecourt—a few feet of gravel, itself steamed and soaked over and over—where post-sauna patients sat out their exaltation on wet birch benches. I was in that special wrung-out state of mind . . . a sort of post-therapeutic flex, a temporary transformation of knotted into something looser, with more gaps. It was March, still quite cold, and I steamed like a meal taken out of the oven.

People crunched past on their way to the entrance, staring from their good spring coats at the fleshy tableau seven feet to the left. Then a man stepped off his path—he must have felt he was breaking the fourth wall; to me he was from a chilled, bundled planet I barely remembered—and poked me on the shoulder, as gentle and clinical as if he was putting a fork into a turkey. Then he asked me if I was naked under my towel. I told him that yes, I was, and then asked as if from a dream if he himself was not naked under his clothes. In my state of having been steamed open like a clam, this response suggested itself to me as a profound parallelism.

through its encouragement of public nudity and its highly interactive design. However, contemporary art museums have accepted a certain degree of controversy and self-critique as part of their institutional mandate. The viewer expects to be challenged. Nudity, in the museum context, cannot be separated from a long history of performance and body art in which it has an established symbolic tradition with particularly strong roots in feminist social critique. The rules were somewhat altered in that the artist kept her clothes on while the audience got undressed to perform, but the bather's nudity was nonetheless sanctified, institutionalized by the museum context. For this reason, nudity, even in the legally dangerous context of children, was also already a part of an artistic language in which it could be interpreted. Furthermore, the sauna as an architectural object claims lineage in a trajectory of modern art that has incorporated its physical relationship to the viewer's body.

This tradition, although its origins date back quite far, has claimed an increasingly

"Even if a parent gave permission for a child under the age of eighteen to use the sauna, [or] having children who are clothed in the vicinity, and exposing them to a nude adult is considered pornography and could cause litigation. When the administrators at P.S.1. became aware that the sauna could cause legal issues for the organization, there was a decision that the nude bathers should be kept within the parameter of the art piece itself, so that the piece would be protected under the first amendment." *JC*





important role within the mainstream of artistic practice since at least the 1960s with the emergence of Minimalism and has continued to develop since then through the work of such artists as Dan Graham. Public Sauna *also has a relationship to the work of artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija, whose practice brings audience members into social situation where their interactions become the content of the work.* Public Sauna *expanded and transformed an existing discourse in innovative ways; it did not open up a dialogue where little to none had previously existed as* Hybrid Sauna *had done at M.I.T.*

The fact that an intrusive crimson curtain was necessary to create a situation in which nudity was perceived to be safe and even comfortable must be central to any interpretation of this sauna. For this reason, the topics of sexuality and the body in U.S. culture, even if overdetermined and complex, must also be broached. Although the Puritan origins of U.S. culture are an obvious point of reference for many people interested in American mores, the manner in which the body has become embedded in the economy and institutionalized racial, gender, and class relations is far more decisive at this moment in history. The difficulty of private citizens to express themselves publicly is bound up with the market economy and leaves nudity to flaunt itself only in protected private situations or under the influence of alcohol or other substances. Also crucially important is the role of the image of the body in advertising where it functions as an agent in the flow of capital and the production of desire for commodities. The shame and fear of nudity in U.S. culture are inextricably bound to the body's oversexualization and overcirculation. It is an eroticized body that the advertising industry has stripped of its anus, its vagina, its penis, its hair, as well as its lumps, odors and secretions, in order to function in the continuation of consumption. The sole function of the body as image is the production of unfulfillable desire and the creation of a culture of corporeal maintenance in which the body is subjected to endless regimes of creams, diets and exercise machines. The taboo of the real body is the other side of the endless reproduction of its abstracted image.

The sauna provides a means of exposing the shortcomings of U.S. society and in so doing may raise objections from some that the artist is proposing Finnish society as a more ideal model. The situation brought about by the bisection of the sauna by a curtain is not this simple, nor do I believe that Pia Lindman intends such an easy verdict. Two cultures come into contact, into a dialogue. Neither one comes out whole or as it entered. Questions regarding traditions, habits, and social practices are raised. Not only is the safety of U.S. privacy violated but so is the sanctity of the Finnish sauna. The latter is easily overlooked by the U.S. bather. For many Finns, however, the severing and hybridizing of the sauna space to accommodate U.S. participants is a disfigurement of a key symbol of national identity. The venerated





Above: preparing *Hybrid Sauna* for the day. Eero Saarinen's All Faiths Chapel in the background

Finnish sauna is transformed and in the process shown not be an absolute architectural space capable of transcending the barriers of history and geography. The question of Finnish national heritage was particularly acute at M.I.T. where it was placed in an architectural context adjacent to a chapel and performance hall by the modern Finnish architect Eero Saarinen and within relative proximity to Baker House by another Finnish architect, Alvar Aalto. Strategically placed alongside these buildings, Hybrid Sauna *both claimed their Finnish heritage and challenged it.*

Although I have described Lindman's sauna projects in terms of the fracturing of identities, glimpses of totality and brief moments of slippage across the barriers between public and private life also expose themselves. Like the Finnish sauna, Pia Lindman's hybridized sauna never rests firmly in the private or public, the personal or social. The possibility of communication, of a social experience, if circumvented, exhibits itself all the more persistently and unmistakably through its very absence. Conversation, when it does occur, is perhaps sparked through the negotiation of the amount of steam, through a moment of playful but apprehensive curiosity, or through inadvertent physical contact. This communication is uncannily open, stripped of many of its vestiges of class and status. A critical situation is set up in which two strangers can together explore the issues of the oversexualization of nudity, the relationship between race and the body, and the separation of our private and public lives. Even if the two bathers do not directly discuss these issues, they are nonetheless forced to work through them. In so doing, that ideal public sphere of private citizens come together in open and undistorted discourse begins to make brief sense as a real possibility before it shatters upon contact with the social realm outside the sauna.





Above: *Hybrid Sauna*, inside the dressing room. Ladder leads to the steam room.

Although I have attempted to represent the experiences of other bathers, this text remains to a large extent personal and particular, a response to my own sessions of bathing. Other participants certainly brought with them their own values and bodies and therefore their own interpretations of this artwork. In the sauna, it is this individual experience that struggles, however incompletely, for public and collective significance.

"Bodies in Heat" is an expanded version of John Christ's "Reflections on a Sauna", 2000 website: http://www.PS1.org/cut/java/writers.html



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