

**Matter and Memory:  
The Sculpture of Adrian Lohmüller**  
T.J. Demos: 25 October, 2011

In the Temporäre Kunsthalle Berlin, Adrian Lohmüller dug an L-shaped hole in the large white-cube gallery, piling the dirt next to the cleanly cut cavity in the concrete floor. Entitled *Relocation and Amnesia (RONGELAP)*, the 2010 installation also included a mobile compartment containing card files of envelopes stamped RONGELAP, along with the rubber stamp, a postal scale, and a bucket of dirt, stationed nearby. Rongelap, whose name literally means “large hole,” is one of some thirty atolls that make up the Marshall Islands, a North Pacific geography originally formed by a sub-oceanic volcano. It is also known as the site of US nuclear testing during the Cold War, with 67 bombings carried out between 1946 and 1958, which led to subsequent decades of negligence toward the now exiled people who to this day are unable to return to their still-toxic homeland. Lohmüller’s piece references that historical and geopolitical context by inscribing the name of the island on the cards, as if preparing for a mass mailing and political consciousness-raising mission (the major reparation that the Marshallese are fighting for is the removal and replacement of the toxic top-soil with new soil imported from the main land). Constituting a refusal to forget the tragic history of the Marshallese people, the artist’s *relocation* counters a general *amnesia* (the artist became interested in the islands several years ago after visiting friends on Majuro atoll, where many Rongelapians currently live). By digging the hole in the first place, Lohmüller’s excavation of the subterranean layers beneath the Kunsthalle came to double for a geographically displaced historical excavation, which, in creating a mound of dirt floating on a sea of concrete, provided an image, however distant and transformed, of the Marshall island itself. The piece thus relates form, materials and artistic process to history, geography and politics.

As such, *Relocation and Amnesia (RONGELAP)* brings to the foreground many of the central concerns of Lohmüller’s practice, which exemplifies sculpture after the rise (and demise) of site specificity. Instead of the immovable locatedness of that model, we encounter with his work mobile sites and plural mediums, each with multiple references.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, it builds on the model of the “functional site,” as theorized by James Meyer, which constitutes “a process, an operation occurring between sites, a mapping of institutional and textual filiations and the bodies that move between them (the artist’s above all).” As Lohmüller also makes drawings and videos in relation to his projects, his work suggests “a locus of overlap of text, photographs and video recordings, physical places and things,” which further characterizes the functional site.<sup>2</sup> Still, “functional” may be slightly misleading: for Lohmüller’s projects are often more symbolic and experimental than pragmatic, linking material processes to psycho-social interventions (short-circuiting the registers of memory, political engagement, and ecology) in ways neither useful nor simply “functional.”

But rather than some conceptualist dematerialization of the work of art, Lohmüller’s practice has a clear basis in the craftsmanship of sculptural procedures: it mobilizes quasi-industrial techniques such as metal work, drilling, digging, and plumbing, and uses heavy machinery to do so. In this regard, and by producing a material intervention in the Kunsthalle, *Relocation and Amnesia (RONGELAP)* recalls post-minimalist precedents, including Gordon Matta-Clark’s cuts and excavations into the architecture of buildings (what he termed *anarchitecture*, an architecture of negation as much as construction), and Michael Asher’s conceptualist removals of walls to bring sensitivity to the institution’s physical container. But rather than this analysis of the functions of institutions (as in classic forms of institutional critique, like Asher’s), Lohmüller’s work links wider sets of political concerns to psycho-sexual engagements. It creates an expanded field that builds on post-minimalists’ referencing of personal histories, bodily processes, and political issues (consider,

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<sup>1</sup>Perhaps Lohmüller’s model approximates what Miwon Kwon terms “discursive site specificity,” directed more toward an informational and socio-political matrix, rather than a geographical siting. See Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 2004).

<sup>2</sup>James Meyer, “The Functional Site,” *Documents* 7 (Fall 1996), 21.

for instance, Rachel Whiteread's and Mona Hatoum's personal and political employment of industrial forms). As well, it suggests a connection to more recent models, such as that of Michael Rakowitz, a teacher of Lohmüller's at the Maryland Institute College of Art, whose work also connects artistic materials to political histories (as in *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist*, 2007, his installation of sculptural reconstructions of lost Iraqi archaeological objects pillaged from the country's museums during the recent war). Yet Lohmüller's work also avoids the earnest political position of certain of these models, instead opting for a zany DIY aesthetics, and employing an amateurish and idiosyncratic artisanal practice that also reveals an affinity with the theatrical-sculptural aesthetics of a figure like John Bock (with whom Lohmüller has worked and performed). These diverse references identify a complex network of resonance conflict that informs Lohmüller's practice: open to unconscious processes, unspoken desires, and bodily experiences, *Relocation and Amnesia (RONGELAP)* nevertheless suggests a critique of the geopolitics of international relations, American militarism, and ecological disaster—but any such political intent is also complicated by the ambiguity of a pile of dirt on the gallery floor.

It's necessary, in other words, to consider further the relation between matter and memory, sculpture and geopolitics, that Lohmüller's work sets up, for it is by no means obvious or simple. As we've seen, his use of soil, his materials and excavation procedures, carry various thematic resonances, which spill over into the psychic, the archaeological, and the ecological terrains. By stressing "matter and memory" in this way, I mean to reference French vitalist philosopher Henri Bergson's late nineteenth-century text *Matter and Memory*,<sup>3</sup> and particularly its creative deployment in the work of Gilles Deleuze. For Bergson, memory divided into "habitual memory" (as in replaying and repeating past actions via automatic, bodily processes, and defining a practical knowledge based on mechanical repetition stored in brain), and "pure memory" (as in the contemplative, spiritual, free "image-remembrance" that is not internal to the body, but stored in consciousness). To simply remember in habitude (e.g. digging a hole) represents an unconscious, non-reflective act, but the more one's "spirit" goes into the past (e.g. the fraught history of the Marshall Islands), the more the act becomes conscious, bringing spirit and body into union, transcending the automatism of physical routine.

Deleuze's *Cinema 2* develops Bergson's insight in relation to what Deleuze termed the "crystal image," which unites the "movement-image" (matter) and the "time-image" (memory). With that cinematic combination, the pastness of recorded events merges with the presentness of their viewing, as virtual and actual join, producing a complex temporality.<sup>4</sup> Deleuze complicated Bergson's scheme further by adding a third type of memory, likened to the Proustian "involuntary memory," which reveals "the disturbances of memory and failures of recognition."<sup>5</sup> It is this type of *dysfunctional* memory that, for Deleuze, characterizes European cinema, particularly where it explores amnesia, hypnosis, hallucinations, madness, and nightmares, all of which indicate "a mystery of time" integral to memory and its image.<sup>6</sup> This complex, dysfunctional conceptualization of memory can usefully be placed in relation to the opacity and ambiguity in Lohmüller's work—even if it entails a challenging translation from the cinematic to the sculptural (though Lohmüller's practice does often utilize both sculpture and video). In similar fashion to the dysfunctional time-image, *Relocation and Amnesia (RONGELAP)* joins memory to indeterminacy. For instance, by producing a vacant hole, the piece suggests the historical oblivion that has been the fate of the islands. The work thus repeats the historical destruction and the radical interruption of Marshallese cultural continuity in the realm of sculptural abstraction. Perhaps in this regard the piece explores the

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3Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1988).

4Cf. D. N. Rodowick, *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 79-118.

5Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 55.

6Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 55.

viewer's uncomfortable desire to bury such political urgencies in the pleasures of a sculptural experience. It's as if Lohmüller asks, how can we navigate such difficulties of geopolitical history but by acknowledging its repression?

His recourse is partly to develop an artistic practice around precisely such complex thought-processes as these, turning, for instance, to the practice of drawing, as in his *Wave Image Collages*, 2010, to explore these quandaries and propose further means for their consideration. As he states, "My drawings are often a way of channelling ideas or fragments of my research onto paper. My pieces are usually based on a lot of influences, readings or experiential research, and the drawings offer a chance to hold on to latent meanings within my projects."<sup>7</sup> The *Wave Image Collages* investigate the visually striking topological and maritime maps made by the Marshallese for navigating their watery surrounds for fishing and travelling between islands. Their original "stick charts" represent complex systems, geometrical calculations of aquatic flows, which, traditionally, are studied and memorized prior to a voyage. Within Lohmüller's versions, matters of complex navigation are creatively spatialized, which figures as an homage to these local customs. In addition, Lohmüller's collages develop the Marshallese charts allegorically, suggesting a visual analogue to the necessary—but still unfulfilled—negotiation of the complex waters of the politicized history of the destruction of the islands.

This exploration of the interlinking of matter and memory, material process and political history, also occurs in *The Tongue Ever Turns to the Aching Tooth*, 2009, an excavation the artist made in the middle of the Uferhallen parking lot in Berlin's postindustrial area of Wedding. Captured in the nearly twenty-minute video of the same title,<sup>8</sup> Lohmüller's digging once again engages the subterranean. In this case, the hole "creates a fleetingly undefined public space," as the artist explains, and "provides potential refuge to anyone seeking privacy in the public sphere."<sup>9</sup> While less specific and referentially complex in terms of subject matter than *Relocation and Amnesia (RONGELAP)*, this piece still moves beyond an otherwise abstract, non-representational sculptural intervention, accumulating metaphorical possibilities along the way. In addition to revealing layers of historical sediments, war debris, construction rubble, and burnt roof material, which the artist discovered upon performing the labour, its psycho-archaeological, sexual implications are indicated by the bodily references contained in the title, and in the artist's description of the piece: "The idea of sexual sweat is doubled by the introduction of salt lick stones" placed at the base of the hole, as Lohmüller notes. In this sense, the piece represents a transgressive crossing of sexual flows with the construction of a disjunctively intimate architectural body in a parking lot, as the intimate den provocatively blurs boundaries between the domestic, public, and personal spaces.

A related work that similarly links a minimalist sensibility with a surrealist-like transgression is *Fundament I & II*, 2011, which Lohmüller constructed on private land on the Baltic island of Rügen. Its flat concrete base might be seen to revisit Carl Andre's exploration of horizontality as an axis of sculptural experience, but with the structure's steps that descend from the platform, Lohmüller added the evocation of another subterranean space that here doesn't physically exist as the steps' descent is interrupted by the ground. As such it indicates the subterranean as a realm of sculptural unconscious, related loosely to the idea of a bodily unconscious. What is contained within it, we don't know—with this piece there is no stated metaphors or explicit field of reference. Is it a space of horror, or pleasure? Could it relate to the burial of Germany's dark history of the Nazi era, given the piece's proximity to the massive, concrete Prora buildings nearby, which were built in the

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<sup>7</sup>Email communication with the artist, 11 Oct, 2011.

<sup>8</sup>As Lohmüller explains: "The videos have a life of their own. sometimes they emerge through the work on other projects, but I tend to deal with them in their own respect. Meaning, I try not to do videos as documentations of other works, but rather as their own entity. Of course the medium and the lapse of time allows for a whole different range of possibilities." Email communication, 11 Oct, 2011.

<sup>9</sup>See Lohmüller's website: <<http://www.adrianlohmueeller.com/>>.

1930s by the *Kraft durch Freude* ("Strength through Joy") welfare organisation to accommodate up to 20,000 vacationing Germans at a time? Once again, Lohmüller's work brings public space and intimate privacy, matter and memory, into provocative but ultimately indeterminate correlation.

Insofar as *The Tongue Ever Turns to the Aching Tooth* constitutes a refunctioning of space, it can be seen to parallel the recent transformations of former industrial geographies—specifically of the Uferhallen complex—into zones of cultural production and consumption, insofar as the erstwhile main garage of Berlin's municipal transport services (BVG)—Uferhallen's previous identity—has been recently redesignated as a privately funded cultural centre, which now serves as a common platform for painters, musicians, dance productions, exhibitions, artist residences, sound studios and rehearsal rooms. Yet his project is not so much a critique of the process of gentrification,<sup>10</sup> as an intervention into the ephemeral space of creativity before the likely collapse of this space into a full-blown market logic. His work momentarily freezes the positive aspects of the early moments of post-industrialization before the appropriation of such spaces by the culture industry, in a way similar to Matta-Clark's "marking" of derelict buildings as "temporary autonomous zones"—to invoke the concept of Hakim Bey—before their destruction.<sup>11</sup>

This concern with the reconfiguration of architectural and urban space ultimately correlates with what Lohmüller calls "psychoarchitecture," by which he links buildings and psychic systems. Accordingly, buildings become bodies, with pipes like so many arteries circulating fluids, while the body becomes architectural, capable of being refitted and restructured according to a creative and transformative political and social orientation. For instance, consider Lohmüller's *The Resilient-Self System*, of 2011, which compromised the placement of a large funnel on the roof of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (House of World Cultures) in Berlin during the summer as part of the city's *Festival Über Lebenskunst (Perspectives of a Sustainable Way of Living)*. The funnel—a space-age-like aluminium object the artist custom-built that mimicked the stream-lined futuristic design of its host building—was oriented in a way to collect rainwater and direct it through a system of copper piping and rubber hoses, on to a reverse osmosis filter where the water was purified, and finally to a communal shower stall on the ground. The single stall contained two showers (as if for a couple) with semi-transparent curtains, making any act of public bathing, available at any time during the five-day run of the project, a transgressive social experience with the potential for sexually experimental and exhibitionist elements. For the artist, "the resilient-self system refers to the principle of the resilience and elasticity of environmental and social systems that themselves absorb serious disruptions and continue to function."<sup>12</sup>

As such, the piece recalls the history of systems aesthetics, going back to experiments with ecology and cybernetics during the 1970s, as in the *Rhinewater Purification Plant* of Hans Haacke, though Lohmüller's sculpture is situated in a different historical phase of environmentalism, one defined by the logic of recycling and the creative re-use of resources in order to redress the crisis of climate change and over-production. Also, by adding references to bodily functions, Lohmüller brings out the psycho-topological elements that, in linking sexuality and architecture, evokes former artistic models such as Vito Acconci's (such as his infamous piece, *Seedbed* of 1972). *The Resilient-Self*

<sup>10</sup>For further consideration of art and real estate development, see Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel-Ryan, "The Fine Art of Gentrification," *October* 31 (Winter 1984), 91-111; and Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge: MIT, 1996).

<sup>11</sup>Hakim Bey, *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (New York: Autonomedia, 1991). Lohmüller's hole is actually still located on-site, presently covered over with boards.

<sup>12</sup>See Lohmüller's website. He reports that "The piece was used by some of the students who were staying at HKW for workshops connected to the festival. also visitors and workers used the showers but not as much as I was hoping. It wasn't the same kind of hot summer as last year and the piece demanded some courage to use as it was somewhat exhibitionistic and the two showers in one room were alluding to communal use. so in a way that was part of the experiment if people are willing to overcome their hesitation and enter this new model of living...using a public shower." Email communication, October 2011.

*System* also connects to the artist's *Triple Blind Study* (2008), for which Lohmüller set up a large green water tank along with a system of three single showers during the Artscape festival in Baltimore in 2008 (the piece then remained active for approximately one year). The idea was to provide a resource for homeless people who might not otherwise have access to bathing facilities. Yet more than merely pragmatic, the piece joined function and representation, as the showers turned into a politicized sign system signalling the existence of this social group that is often rendered invisible in the public sphere (which connects ironically back to the scientific method of the "blind" study, to which the title refers). Much like Michael Rakowitz's *ParaSITE* project (1997-ongoing), the customized, collapsible and portable sleeping shelters provided to homeless people, Lohmüller's work was not meant merely to provide a social service, but also to form a visible intervention in public space, one that made the recognition of Baltimore's social and economic inequality unavoidable.

The phantasm of the socially disenfranchised body shows up in yet another related piece, *The House Remains Still*, commissioned for the 2010 Berlin Biennial. For that work Lohmüller developed an extensive installation of copper piping that snaked throughout the postindustrial building at Oranienplatz 17 in Kreuzberg (one of the exhibition's principal venues), delivering a stream of water to the artist's sculpture: A bed with a white duvet and pillows lay on the ground next to a block of salt that received the slow drip of water, which, heated by a camping stove, pooled around the bed, drying into a sparkling surface of saline crystallization. The piece thus offered a mysterious image of squatting, which, in a poetic vision of a bizarre circulatory system of fluids and salt, joined social, psycho-sexual, and architectural-hydraulic systems. Like much of Lohmüller's work the piece suggests a politics of social, sexual, and environmental ecology, asking who ultimately benefits from such systems, and what kind of creative, subversive appropriation is possible.