

Askance at the Past, Askance at the Future: Alona Rodeh

DARK AGES 2020 at Salzburger Kunstverein is a new sound and light installation by Alona Rodeh, a part of her ongoing “Safe and Sound” meta-titled project. With black walls and flooring throughout the gallery space, the visitor encounters eight sculptural figures installed in a grid formation. These objects resemble hybrids of street lamps, oversized bollards, life-sized columns, chess pieces, or even futuristic totems. A variety of LED lights— themselves products of the booming industry producing vehicular lighting – are embedded in these vertical architectonic sculptures.

The entire installation has deliberate associations with clubbing, fashion, theatre, and architecture. Nocturnal architecture or “architecture of the night” (*Lichtarchitektur* in German) is a key reference. Rodeh has paid particularly close attention to early modern civic and architectural designs that utilized light – from light festivals and commercial usages in France, Germany, and the US, to the dramatic floodlighting employed by the Nazis, such as that Albert Speer created for rallies at Nuremburg using rows of searchlights.

Design-wise, these references merge in the bollard-like sculptures, themselves associable not only with traffic control, public safety, and urban design but also with homeland security (as per the American Bar Association’s definition) and contemporary counter-terrorism strategies. Overall, we can sense several emergent themes on the relationship between architecture, humanity, behavior and greater socio-political topics; architecture and its effects on sex, for example, also serves a backdrop, albeit a more subdued one, to the exhibition.

Rodeh configures the gallery space into a set of technological and material performances without performers, programmed with original soundtracks, bringing life to objects in their own newly oriented ontology. These objects – as programmed participants within an overall orchestrated, electronic performance – illuminate intermittently, along with LED roadworks lights placed in an orderly arrangement across the grid. Seen together, they appear to behave as coded signals communicating with one another. The different forms of lighting blink together in a choreographed chain reaction, a seven minute sequence of lights flashing through different, sometimes alarming patterns, backdropped by a sculpted sound filling the entire space. These moments are followed by brief periods of complete darkness and stillness, which immediately return the visitors to ground zero: a kind of spatial and liminal blindness.

The title of the installation itself speaks pessimistically of an approaching future, one perhaps already discernible. It also immediately, if unintentionally, beckons forth Jane Jacobs’ final book, *Dark Age Ahead*.¹ In it, Jacobs warned of the dissolution of civilization through the loss of a mindful relationship with culture and history. Although bleak in tone, the book, written few years before her death in 2006, is nonetheless a powerful call to future generations (Jacobs wrote the book a few years before she died) to take up the responsibility of preserving larger swaths of human dignity and humanity itself.

¹ Jane Jacobs. *Dark Age Ahead*. (Chicago: Vintage Books), 2005.

This, she argues, is necessary through actively protecting five central pillars: community and family, higher education, science and technology, taxes and government responsiveness to citizen's needs, and self-regulation by the learned professions. According to Jacobs, these pillars are all under threat due to an overall decay of memory and knowledge that threatens to bring on another dark age unless such trends are reversed. Jacobs characterizes this dark age as a "mass amnesia", where even the memory of what was lost is *itself* lost.² Jacob's points are all the more relevant today given the hyper-escalation of international capital and the related human-caused trends towards global environmental catastrophe.

This gloomy, already tangible – although not necessarily irreversible – future for humanity is certainly a central backdrop to Rodeh's installation. On the other hand, though, the title also contains within it a reference (again, perhaps unintentionally) to the English expression "hindsight is twenty-twenty". This saying effectively means that it is easy enough to know or understand the right thing to do *after* something has happened, but on the other hand, it always remains difficult to predict the future. Here a prognosis of the future is presented within the space of the exhibition and within its actual title. With the entire space dominated by inter-connected machinery and jarring electronic buzzing – that is, lacking much in the way of a human frame of reference – a human-less, future world is depicted.

But the references in the exhibition do not simply end here in a murky sense of despair with regards to possible futures. Notions and realities of blackouts are also clearly present. As a term, "blackout" can refer to a cultural wipeout as much it can as a large-scale power outage. Both these points of reference also converge in the exhibition. The artist herself has researched various histories of blackouts, including parallel six-year-long civic blackouts in German and British cities during the Second World War.³ Not unrelated to these examples is the unspeakable cultural and ethical blackout wrought during the Nazi period, itself an interregnum of cultural amnesia of the worst kind and which is also enunciated in the installation. To be modern, indeed to be German, as author Marc Patrick Wiggam reminds us, is a Janus-faced dilemma: one must always be aware of the profound consequences of the modern and industrial era,⁴ while at the same time remain mindful of today's burgeoning political climate that may indeed lead to another dark age. This is as true today as ever.

These sentiments and the various associations that resonate with the term "blackout" are a constant presence throughout this exhibition. During the WWII blackouts in Germany, for example, it was not uncommon, for the authorities to display bombs on

² On this profound notion of cultural amnesia (forgetting what was even lost), Alona Rodeh points out that many early lighting technologies, for example, have been lost and then some reconstructed via other technologies. This technological amnesia naturally also applies to many software programs, for example for design and architecture, as well as to issues around storing and preserving technological artwork for example, where technologies become obsolete and then altogether forgotten.

³ For further reading, see: Marc Patrick Wiggam. "The Blackout in Britain and Germany during the Second World War," (University of Exeter: Doctoral Thesis), 2011.

⁴ Ibid, pg 12. The artist, born in Israel and currently living in Berlin, would have a particular sensitivity to this history.

plinths as a warning to compel citizens to remain vigilant, thus ensuring a total blackout. The eight sculptures and the space they occupy in this exhibition, while clearly conveying the aforementioned references to bollards, raves and nocturnal architecture, are also reminiscent of these other historical anecdotes.

In the exhibition we can also ascertain clear elements of a fading counter-culture: the rave scene. First starting in the 1980s during (and perhaps even as a partial reaction to) a more conservative and global trend of accelerated capitalism, raves eventually morphed into a form of staid, commercial leisure and have now all but lost their once counter-cultural energy. Recently, rave culture has been retrospectively analyzed by cultural critics. One such notorious proponent is Timothy Morton, who in his most recent book, *Being Ecological*, references – among many others – science fiction, Tibetan Buddhism and German philosophy to propose a paradigm shift in our relationship to the world as a means of avoiding global annihilation.⁵ In his 2016 book *Dark Ecology*, he theorizes an “ecology” of rave culture, expounding the idea of the rave as something that brings people together in the “symbiotic real”. According to Morton, we are always situated within this, even if not consciously so, and consequently ever ready to experience an “ontological shimmering.” The bringing together of bodies within an enclosed, shared ecstasy (irrespective of whether one decides to take an ecstasy pill or not) is an active form of “becoming”, one that emancipates those participating, Morton argues. This leads, he continues, to a greater and embodied awareness for a complete consciousness that asserts: “I’m ... part of an entity that is now a *geological force on a planetary scale*.”⁶ Ultimately Morton says that the rave is a space not only of performing revolutionary thinking, but indeed one for intensely embodying it in a pre-lingual, anti-ideological and actualizing manner. He makes comparisons with the radical ideas of “becoming” as courted by Deleuze and Guattari, who in various texts, call for new forms of revolutionary bodies to amass without the trappings of what they argue to be a number of failed radical, modernist notions. Essentially, what is at work in the rave, says Morton, is an anti-essentialization of individuals’ identities as they amass together within ecstasy, trance and dance.

In a rave, you are not an ethnic particularity nor an individual with clear cultural boundaries; you are rather an active blend within a collective experience tending towards, as Deleuze and Guattari might say, something more schizophrenic. This is mystical rapture and simultaneously collective euphoria encased in a morphic kind of non-identity and spiritual awakening, even if temporary. Thus, it breaks one’s normal perception of the world into something that is characterized by an enhanced sense of empathy and critical understanding. This is the revelation Morton refers to as “dark ecology”, that paradigm shift that may happen collectively, in the same vein as that urged by the counsel of Jane Jacobs: to prevent an irreversible, global blackout of humanity. No Dark Ages 2020 please and thank you. No regressive politics and no essentialist nationalism, not only because they are untrue, but because they lead only to catastrophe. A political dark age of this nature can be averted if this collective

⁵ Timothy Morton. *Being Ecological*. (New York: Pelican, 2018).

⁶ Timothy Morton. *Dark Ecology*. (New York: Columbia, 2016), 75, 11. Emphasis added?

consciousness arises, argues Morton.

The fact that, at time of writing, 2020 is only a year away makes these notions (and realities) all the more urgent. It is not an exaggeration to assert that humanity has underestimated not only its own destructive impact but also how finite, fragile and inter-connected the greater, singular ecosystem that we are embedded within and responsible for is. There is no question that a global ecological shift is finally underway, but we can actively hope that it is not too late. Thus the shift must accelerate as swiftly as has our own destructive impact with the progress of modernity, to avoid a foreseeable but overall preventable blackout.

Text by Seamus Kealy, Director, Salzburger Kunstverein