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-evaluate 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.
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
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.

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: performance at Healthworks

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 transformation 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...
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

"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
"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.” 

Sarah Nolan, bather

"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.”

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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 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

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 tableau-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*
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.

"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
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.
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

Above: Hybrid Sauna, inside the dressing room. Ladder leads to the steam room.
Selected bibliography on the Finnish sauna

Quotes from Sawnah video transcript by: John Diehl, Clare Ellis, Sarah Nolan, Tamar Osorio, Edmund Ortiz
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