

Monuments of Obstruction and Resistance:

Responding to Crystal Z Campbell's film *Viewfinder* by Christina Beatty



Crystal Z Campbell, film still from *VIEWFINDER*, 2020; digital video with stereo sound, time: 18:53; Courtesy of the artist.

In a moment of public confrontation, Danuta Danielsson swung her handbag in protest. Even without knowing she was the daughter of a holocaust survivor, one could imagine why she might strike a neo-Nazi demonstrator. Predating today's ubiquitous potential for any moment to be captured and live on forever, she may not have bargained for the public attention that would follow. Somehow, Danielsson's act of resistance would be construed as more problematic than the violently racist ideology she opposed.

In his essay "Civil Disobedience," abolitionist Henry David Thoreau writes: "Law never made men a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made agents of injustice." Societies depend on social contracts. Truth and justice are not required terms; on the contrary, lies of omission and oppressive violence can just as easily serve as societal keystones so long as enough participants are willing to uphold them. Few lures are more seductive to the human ego than the chance to believe one is superior.

Just shy of seven minutes into Crystal Z Campbell's *Viewfinder* (2020), filmed entirely in Sweden, the sound of clapping ushers the viewer into a seemingly ancient rock formation. After panning across the moss covered surface, the camera slows down and pulls back, revealing the source of the smaller image superimposed over the shot: a large stone wedged between two ridges. In the smaller, static image, the boulder has been removed, creating a frame to peer through as if beckoning us to consider what we might be able to see in the stone's absence.

Local folklore warns that when the boulder falls out, the last person on Earth will die. While the weight of this cautionary tale may feel unsettling, ascribing symbolic meanings to the natural world is a time honored method of making meaning and reinforcing social mores and norms. The underlying fear of the fragility of society may lend a clue about why a woman confronting racism would be considered too taboo to publicly commemorate.

The Swedish government's efforts to create a progressive state centering the welfare of its citizens were quite conditional, guided by incredibly narrow definitions of who deserved to benefit. In an effort to weed out misfits and mixed bloodlines, [a state sanctioned program rooted in the study of eugenics sterilized tens of thousands of Swedes](#) for much of the 20th century. This campaign to engineer a superior race didn't end until 1974.

The mere existence of the black and brown bodies featured throughout the film are monuments of resistance in a society that could have prevented their mothers from ever giving birth. In *Viewfinder's* opening scene, drumbeats announce the decent of strong, graceful male dancer. After examining the stuffed creature greeting him at the ladder's base, he mirrors the cat's ferocious expression, asserting his own presence. The dancer is revisited throughout the house at different points; in each instance, his controlled movements are evidence that rigorous training has replaced natural gestures with new ways of moving through the world.

Three young women make their way down a pier, ricocheting from side to side as if being tossed about on a boat weathering stormy seas. Layered, non-verbal vocals contribute to the sense of confusion and uncertainty. The pier connects the water with a bathhouse meant for leisure and relaxation, but these women's bodies appear more in danger than at peace. When they encounter *The Woman with the Handbag*, the young women amplify her protest with handbags of their own. Silently, they link her past resistance to present sentiments. Though the monument itself has been physically relegated to a private space, the surrounding controversy and makeshift expressions of solidarity echo across the landscape further cementing its presence and legacy in Swedish public discourse.

Filmed a year ago and an ocean away, *Viewfinder* feels startlingly relevant. The faulty terms of our own social contracts are more difficult to ignore as a global pandemic rages on in the midst of a divisive presidential election year. With society under such crushing pressure from all sides, perhaps removing the stone is precisely the act of preservation that will save us.