

Private Publics: Jenna Bliss
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Jenna Bliss's practice crosses film, photography, publishing, and installation. Intervening in and addressing the public sphere, her most recent body of work slices and displaces her own ambulatory experience of New York's Financial District.

An occasionally discussed truth of the Occupy Wall Street movement is that Zuccotti Park was well suited to serve as the protest's epicenter due to its status as privately owned public space (POPS). Unlike municipally managed parks, the Goldman Sachs-owned plaza had no seasonal access hours and so could be the staging ground for continuous activity and organization—until then-mayor Michael Bloomberg insisted Zuccotti be cleared at night for the sake of sanitation. It is worth remembering, in this moment of the COVID-19 pandemic, that fear of contagion and property ownership are historically linked phenomena. New York-based artist Jenna Bliss keeps this binding of the protected public body and private wealth under scrutiny.

At FELIX GAUDLITZ in Vienna, Bliss's recent solo show *Late Responder* (2020) includes wall-based architectural interventions that expose the gallery's wiring and a series of framed gelatin silver prints and lightboxes. The people, buildings, and corporate signage pictured in the photographs and lightboxes are cut from an 8mm film shot by Bliss over the past twelve months while on regular, ritualized walks in Downtown Manhattan. As Bliss writes in her press text, the exhibition is formed of "preliminary materials for a motion picture, a critical history of Wall Street starting with 9/11 and unfolding in chapters." Isolated from the sequential movement of rolling film, the cropped and abstracted shots appear as staccato, abbreviated scenes from a larger but incomplete narrative.

Voyeurism is a perversion that requires its equivalent set of exhibitionists. And in the spatially compressed urban day-to-day and in temporarily accelerated online life, we're all both voyeurs and exhibitionists. Filmed through chain-link fences and shop windows, *Late Responder's* reportage-style vignettes recall Walker Evans's 1930s photographs taken on New York subways, in which Evans used a hidden camera to make portraits of his fellow citizens. They are even more reminiscent of Paul Strand's 1915 photograph *Wall Street* showing anonymous businessmen streaming past the oppressive architecture of a bank. One of Bliss's lightboxes shows its subject hunched over, staring at his phone: on his lunch break, waiting for a car, looking at whom, shopping for what? *Late Responder* reminds us that getting up close to something doesn't necessarily make the image any clearer.

Bliss's earlier documentary work on the history of New York includes her film *The People's Detox* (2019), which focuses on Lincoln Hospital in the Bronx, a revolutionary drug rehabilitation center occupied and run by members of the Young Lords and the Black Panthers between 1970 and 1978. Operating before the height of the New York crack and cocaine epidemic of the 1980s, these two groups were already committed to methods and techniques of rehabilitation, such as acupuncture, that operated outside of the medicalized and pathologized apparatus of addiction and recovery. Told through interviews, reenactments, and found documents, *The People's Detox* reactivates a

recent but suppressed history of working-class minority groups providing for themselves in spite of, and ultimately against, the corporate (dis)interest of the state.

While *The People's Detox* is Bliss's most conventionally documentary film to date, the inclusion of specially staged scenes of acupuncture and martial arts, visual montage and diegetic music, brings a sense of conjuring to the work. The same feeling of latency is present in *Late Responder*, the title of which inverts the moniker of "first-responder" given to paramedics, police, and others who arrive at scenes of public disaster. The title could be a nod to the industrial quantity of academic, artistic, and cultural response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11—which Bliss cites as a marker in a yet-to-be-made film—acknowledging that her participation in the production of that material is not prompt.

Bliss re-references her own belatedness in her press text when she discusses her use of celluloid film: "Though it may be naive, it's not necessarily nostalgic to use nearly abandoned technology as a weapon of resistance." The final tripping stone of temporal displacement Bliss offers is also the most obvious: the promised future existence of a feature-length film, shown in a pre-edited form in the gallery. Indeed, her practice has an awkward and fragmented aspect: it turns up in weird places at the wrong time and reflects back a partial view of her engagement with public life. In doing so, it creates its own economy of image production and circulation. And asks the viewer to think of our daily experiences as materially contingent and externally formed.

143 Jenna Bliss, *Western Union #2*, 2020. Courtesy: the artist and FELIX GAUDLITZ, Vienna. Photo: kunst-dokumentation.com

144 Jenna Bliss, *Late Responder* installation view at FELIX GAUDLITZ, Vienna, 2020. Courtesy: the artist and FELIX GAUDLITZ, Vienna. Photo: kunst-dokumentation.com

145 Jenna Bliss, *The People's Detox* (stills), 2019. Courtesy: the artist



