

## Cutting Modernism's Big Cube Down to Size

Klara Liden, born in Sweden in 1979, makes her solo New York museum debut in the Museum of Modern Art's Projects series with a pointedly MoMA-resistant show, one that delivers a cool shipment of bulk and grit to the home of lean and clean.

**HOLLAND  
COTTER**  
ART  
REVIEW

At the center of her installation in a narrow gallery with tall windows on the museum's second floor, Ms. Liden has placed a big blank box made of the same sheetrock as the gallery walls. Painted white, it takes up most of the room, leaving only narrow passages on two sides.

The reference is to a 1976 essay by the critic Brian O'Doherty titled "Inside the White Cube," in which he used the term "white cube" to describe the stripped-down look of the contemporary exhibition space. He interpreted that look as calculated to give art value, to set it apart as something pure and timeless, function free and above it all in a universe of used and used-up things.

Ms. Liden plays with these ideas. Her "white cube" is a rectangle, and you are outside it with no way in. Its whiteness is less than pristine; there are already scuff marks along the base. For good measure she has sullied the white-box gallery around it by covering the floor with black tar paper.

Nor does she let her cube just sit there being monumental. She makes it work; she turns it into shelving. Stacked on top of it are bundles of flattened cardboard boxes, the kind supermarkets dispose of daily, held in place by industrial scaffolding. Anyone who has lived in a cramped New York apartment knows the sight: urban pack-rat storage.

Finally, to dispel any sense of timelessness, there's entertainment. A video monitor sits on the floor in a corner, and a short video, around three and a half minutes, plays. In it a lone figure, Ms. Liden, stands on the Manhattan bank of the East River near the

Williamsburg Bridge. It is morning, maybe dawn. Casually, repeatedly, she skips small stones across the water to a soundtrack of trancelike music by the Stockholm duo Tvillingarna (Paul Siegerhall and Andreas Nelson).

After a minute or so, with a subtle quickening of pace, her activity changes. From off camera she brings in larger stones, too heavy to skim the water's surface, and tosses them in. Then, one after another, she is pitching in other things: slabs of what looks like wallboard; a length of piping; then, with a heave, a piece of something very heavy, like a section of steel beam. It hits the water with a splash. The music stops; the video abruptly ends.

Like the installation it's part of, the video feels purposefully unprepossessing. Artlessly low-tech, it records a slice of life — a staged slice — in the city outside, seen through the gallery windows. The mood it sets up isn't rarefied or elevated; it's romantic, whimsical and poppish, like a rock song. It invites you to sit down on the floor and soak it in.

At the same time there's a counterbeat of tension. After the

### Some scuff marks in a citadel of the artistically pristine.

relaxed opening sequence we watch Ms. Liden throw out — with increasing effort and vehemence, and for no given reason — all kinds of unidentified things, possibly with personal associations, and with no hope of recovery. On one hand it's a performance. But it also feels like a ceremony of disposal, of a kind you might undertake after the breakup of a relationship, or if you're leaving a place for good.

I first saw Ms. Liden's work in 2004, when Art in General, the nonprofit space in TriBeCa, handed over its street-level gallery to the queer feminist collective LTTR for a workshop-style show. There was lots of activity: poetry reading, poster making, zine pub-

lishing. Ms. Liden's contribution was a piece of furniture, a plain bench of scrap wood that she hammered together on the spot and placed across the street from the gallery.

The idea, as I read it, was to keep a piece of the show outside the art space and in the world, which meant incorporating the world — whoever happened to sit on the bench — into the show. Over the years she has negotiated similar transactions between art and life in other places, in other ways.

In Berlin, where she now lives, she built a squatter-style public shelter, which doubled as a sculpture, and left it for anyone in need to use. On a Swedish commuter train she broke into a fearsome improvised dance for an audience of startled fellow passen-

### Klara Liden

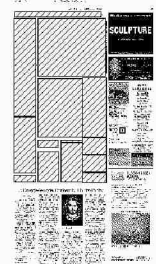
Museum of Modern Art

gers. (You can see the performance elsewhere as a video titled "Paralyzed.")

For her 2005 solo show at Reena Spaulings Fine Art on the Lower East Side she built, from scavenged cardboard boxes, a small tower with an elevated room in the storefront gallery. A combination playhouse, retreat and gallery within a gallery, the tower was made of the same material that the neighborhood's homeless people used for protection and bedding.

Last spring she took over Spaulings's large-windowed new space on East Broadway, sealed off a small section of it and left the rest open to the air. As you sat in the enclosed interior at the end of a passageway, you could hear the sound of pigeons cooing and scratching on the other side of the walls around you.

The MoMA installation — organized by Eva Respini, an associate curator of photography at the museum — adds to these space-claiming, space-changing interventions in a less dramatic, more distanced and, one might



say, more MoMA-esque way. Once more Ms. Liden intertwines art with its calculations and life with its accidents, but now in an august setting, a seat of power, the great White Cube of them all.

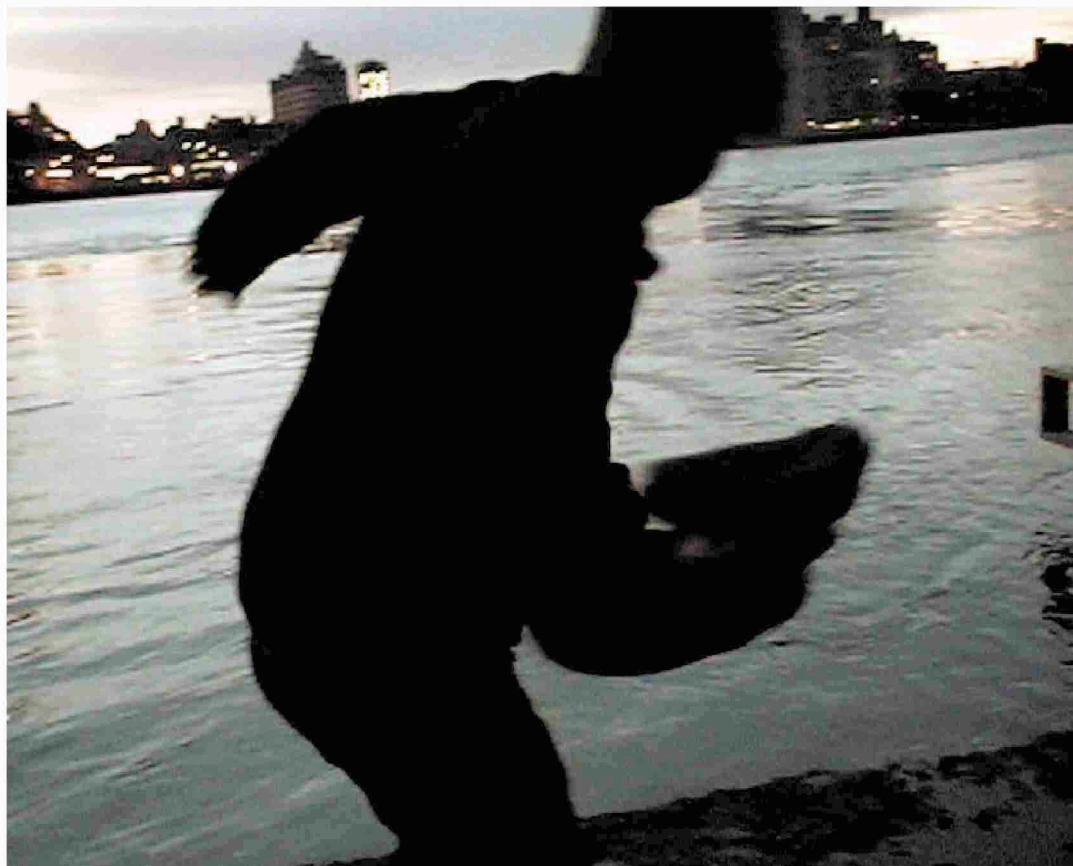
Within so determined a setting she is unable to generate the concentrated toughness and tension of some of her earlier work, and she doesn't try. She goes instead

for other effects: plainness, uncompetitive obviousness, humility.

She turns a MoMA gallery into a new-style old-style high place: a tar-papered tenement rooftop. She shows a video that is not about collecting precious things but about throwing things away, whether precious or not; who is to say? She relegates Modern-

ism's monumental, value-shaping cube to a functional supporting role, making it a pedestal-base for a different kind of monument, one to life recycled as art, which circles back into life.

*"Projects 89: Klara Liden" continues through June 8 at the Museum of Modern Art; (212) 708-9400, [moma.org](http://moma.org).*



KLARA LIDEN/REENA SPAULINGS GALLERY

A video made by, and starring, Klara Liden, is part of her show at the Museum of Modern Art.



JASON MANDELLA

The centerpiece of “Projects 89: Klara Liden”: a big white box with flattened cardboard boxes stacked on top of it.