

Ulla von Brandenburg

Sink Down Mountain, Rise Up Valley

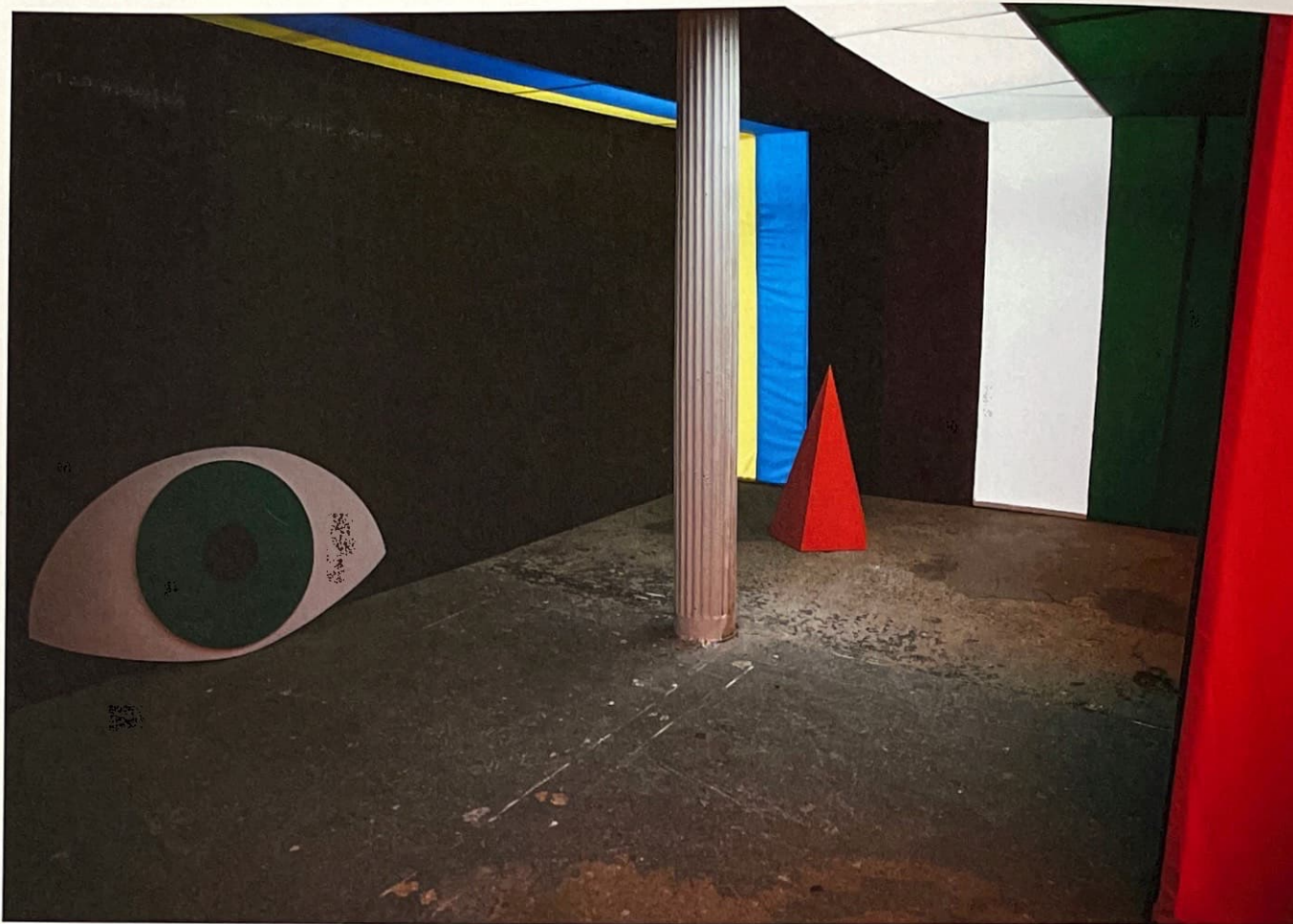
Performa Hub

Charles Aubin

Produced by Performa in association with Lafayette Anticipations

The Saint-Simonians were a complicated lot with an equally complex history. Their leader, Frenchman Claude Henri de Rouvroy, or Count Saint-Simon (1760–1825), was an ambitious man with interests in social reform based on the belief that a highly productive society stems from highly organized labor harnessed to maximize productivity and thus social and economic progress. After Saint-Simon's death, his philosophy took visible shape in a small community in Ménilmontant, today a neighborhood in northeastern Paris. Saint-Simon's founding ideologies, however, were quickly eclipsed in the movement by the philosophy of a banker named Barthélemy Prosper Enfantin (1796–1865), who became known as "Le Père." Enfantin introduced a proto-feminist perspective centered on the idea of a female Messiah, shifting focus from Saint-Simon's theoretical views on social economics to the pursuit of a mystical doctrine related to humanity's dependence on the male-female couple as the foundation of all social organization. In Ménilmontant, the Saint-Simonian order undertook a life of celibacy and ritualistic performance of daily work that included tending to gardens and domestic chores, along with sharing personal care, such as dressing one another, all under the watchful eye of French authorities and a curious public.

At this point in history we meet the Saint-Simonians in Ulla von Brandenburg's film and installation *Sink Down Mountain, Rise Up Valley*, the title of which refers to a popular song sung by the Saint-Simonians as part of their daily rituals. The film was commissioned by *kim?* Contemporary Art Centre in Riga, Latvia, and the installation by Performa in collaboration with Lafayette Anticipations, Fondation d'entreprise Galeries Lafayette, Paris. The 18-minute, black-and-white film—composed as a single shot punctuated intermittently, and dramatically, with sound—was shot on 16-mm film in The New Riga Theatre in Latvia. A cast of four men and one woman, all actors from The New Riga Theatre, communicate to each other in an audible soundtrack of song with lyrics written by von Brandenburg. Dressed in smocks resembling the simplicity of monks, the characters move fluidly



through the interior of the theater in a highly choreographed performance encompassing both the public sphere of the theater's formal stage as well as more private spaces, such as staircases and the mezzanine, areas often beyond the public view.

Von Brandenburg eschews easy interpretation of exactly what the performance is. Indeed, viewers of the film first encounter the *Enfantin* character in a sunlit stairway, not onstage, as he caresses the leaves of plants. He is warmly yet deferentially greeted by a fellow Saint-Simonian, then another and another. *Enfantin* and his group of acolytes proceed to walk through the building speaking inaudibly to one another. It is unclear in which world we encounter the Saint-Simonians—are they specters haunting the theater, actors in a performance, or participants in a rehearsal of sorts? The past and present are not easily delineated. In this complex yet graceful choreography, viewers observe the father figure *Enfantin* ceremoniously dressed by his followers (“*Le Père*,” as identified by the name on his undergarments). The action in von Brandenburg’s film radiates around the unifying theme of garments, from the dressing of *Enfantin*, to his first spoken statement, to the lyrics sung by the chorus.

The meandering performance of the five Saint-Simonians through the theater building culminates in the auditorium where a few audience members in contemporary streetwear sparsely dot the rows of seats. Onstage, the Saint-Simonians prepare fabric ribbons, seemingly crafting a ceremonial garment for the female character and uniting worlds of past and present. The woman lies motionless on the floor. The four men carry three-dimensional forms: an eye, compass, stairs, millstone, pyramid, propeller, and box of ribbons, circling her with these objects in a ritualistic manner that shifts the film’s focus to the woman, elevating her status to that of a saint-like figure. The objects all carry symbolic value associated with making order, passing borders, measurement, illumination, motion, the rational united with the spiritual. The men remove the woman’s shoes and exchange her standard-issue garment for a full-length vestment patterned with surface designs of the objects described above, parading and placing the robe upon the woman in a manner that accentuates its geometric design. This choreographed ceremony majestically crescendos as the woman rises to her feet, lifts her hands in the air, and looks skyward. She sings a short, repeating French text in triumphal tones as the tracking shot circles her and fades to white. The Saint-Simonians’ female Messiah, envisioned by *Le Père*, has arrived.

Von Brandenburg’s spatial installations often combine film, textiles, drawings, watercolors, and sound to mine idiosyncratic cultural and social moments in history, such as the Saint-Simonians. Her skills with materials







Ulla Von
Brandenburg,
Palms, grim-
aces, Leleja,
2005,
film still

and attention to the nuances of space have brought a range of subjects, from occultism, psychoanalysis, expressionist theater, and shadow plays to modernist architecture, Hollywood cinema, and color theory, into contemporary contexts. Von Brandenburg's immersive architectural environments position spectators in situations where the objects encountered in the physical realm of exhibition are the same objects visible in her filmic spaces, eschewing space and time while implicating the physical bodies and sensibilities of spectators as performers in the overall work. Such was the case at *Performa*, where visitors descended a flight of stairs into a passageway paneled with colorful fabric—the colors withheld in the black-and-white film—amid a floor arrangement of propeller, compass, millstone, pyramid, and other props from the film. As spectators moved farther into the installation and turned a corner, they encountered the film, experiencing the conflation of spaces and time—an entwined relationship of film and environment prompting a deeper consideration of what they see and where they stand.

James Voorhies