

## NEW YORK: AFTER SANDY

By Gema Álava

Photos by Arne Svenson, Gema Álava and Chriss Cobb

7 pm. Tuesday, November 6<sup>th</sup>. Queens, New York. The neighborhood gas station must be out of gas because the cars that were in line for more than four hours have disappeared from Alderton Street along with their honks made in the USA. The police had to intervene twice. At the kitchen window, Sara told me an hour ago how two drivers—who were not at the wheel—were throwing fists around.

-Why are they hitting each other, mom?

-Because people are a little hysterical these days with the mixture of the storm and the elections. They don't know what to do with all the accumulated tension, and they think that they're going to fix it by giving punches, but if they punch the policeman, they are going to get such a ticket...

-Why would they hit the policeman?

-They don't want to, but when fists begin to fly, especially if you are very upset, after a while you don't see where they go. Besides, the policeman must be even more tired than the drivers, and he only has one more hour to vote.

The fact is, there is a lot of tension in the air and we New Yorkers don't know what to do with it. Hurricane Sandy surprised us because what we see doesn't appear only in the newspaper but also around the corner, and when important things appear so suddenly and closely we react in contradictory ways in order to move forward, only later to question ourselves: Is this what I should have done?

"Without tension there is no sound," artist Roberto Lange told me inside a subway car on our way to the Lehman College Art Gallery in the Bronx, a year ago, while he was holding a small suitcase filled with microphones surrounded with white fluff, which would soon be recording the sounds of my hammer on a 20 foot high wall, from the top rung of an orange ladder. (At the top of a ladder any goat becomes an artist.) I did not perform any summersaults or mortal jumps that day but still got scared – very scared – but I hid it. From this great height, I wondered if Roberto could also record my feeling of vertigo with his sheep-looking microphones from the safe area. Without tension there is no sound, but nor is there awareness sometimes, and we say that we want to help when we just don't know what to do with ourselves.

### Clouds

I left Madrid on Saturday, October 29<sup>th</sup>, and when I arrived in New York the storm came with me and swept us all (most of us). On Sunday night I played music in my kids' room before going to sleep so that they would not hear the steps that Oscar Wilde describes so well in his tale *The Selfish Giant*, when Frost

and the North Wind would tap dance on the roof. (The mind thinks of recondite things when fear approaches.) The wood beams creaked and the centennial tree in the backyard, I thought, would be too stubborn to fall down, but I wasn't sure. In the end, the tree did not fall down; it only lost a couple of its foot and a half wide branches.

At 8pm I plugged myself into Facebook. I imagined that in such situations, those who could or had electricity would be connected. At 8:26pm, Maria Yoon, a Korean-born New York artist who claims the right to get married whenever a woman wants—or doesn't want—in her natal country, left a half-way written message. Maria is strong-minded. She lives on the twenty-eighth floor of a tower near the Hudson River, in Flood Zone A, in the neighborhood which had been evacuated. Since she had stoically endured the events of 9-11 in her apartment, I assumed that she hadn't moved this time from her nest either. I called her cell phone. She had a candle, an empty fridge (full of spices) and an uncharged cell phone. She had been editing her new film during the previous week, "with no time to think of anything else." I offered that she should stay at my place but then remembered that there was no subway, there were no taxis, buses, tunnels or bridges. Mayor Bloomberg had instructed those of us who had not been evacuated to remain at home during the twenty-four hour period prior to Sandy's arrival.

A couple of blocks below, photographer Arne Svenson decided to go outside as the storm was approaching, and hid behind a bush with his neighbors as the police asked pedestrians to return to their homes. "When we saw that the sea had risen to the level of the road, we turned around." Back at his loft, from his dining room window, he watched, incredulously, as small waves ran across the highway and slipped down through Canal Street. Being a photographer—he could not resist—he hung his camera around his neck and went back downstairs, "because it was a surreal scene." At first there were children playing in water up to their ankles; later the washed-away traffic signs arrived, dragged down by the current, followed by the mattress-raft. The tide was increasing at the speed of the movie *Titanic*, "when the water gets into the corridors and they get trapped. It seemed like it wasn't going to stop rising." The situation changed from comic scene to horror film. "The ocean was sneaking in like a thief, making it difficult to recognize the present danger," and what would be lost in the aftermath. At 8:26pm there was an explosion, Manhattan was outlined in blue, and the blackout arrived. The four metallic steps that separate Arne's doorway from the Watts Street sidewalk disappeared within a couple of minutes. Mickey Mouse came to his mind, with his wizard's hat and his buckets overflowing with liquid. With the sequence from *Fantasia* roiling in his head, Arne said goodbye to his neighbors with the sentence: "We all live in a Disney World now."

## **Island**

On the third day of darkness and boredom, Maria Yoon made her way downstairs, groping in the dark with a suitcase in her hand (it took her forty minutes); she went out through the lobby of her building, now a fish tank of salty stagnant water, and step by step arrived at the illuminated part of the city, above 40th Street. On this same day, Arne escaped to his house upstate, only to find out a week later

that his neighborhood was still without power and one of his studios had been flooded. “The only thing that fancy Tribeca was lacking was a moat and look, it has succeeded in getting one.”

Isidro Blasco, a Spanish artist residing in Jackson Heights, Queens, commented once the storm was gone that one of the first impressions of the “Sandy Effect” was to recognize that in New York City we live on islands and that when the bridges are closed it is like raising the drawbridge on the castle. “Without bridges we cannot get in or out, we are stuck. In Manhattan it’s as if they are in Venice but cannot go outside. We believe we are all connected but when the electric supply is cut, loneliness hits us.” I thought of Maria -surrounded by canals without gondolas until her computer’s battery died- and Arne’s photographs taken from his imposed Disney World.

Kevin Rodriguez, a New Yorker born in Miami Beach and a designer of products and interiors, compared Sandy’s destruction to Japan’s earthquake of 2011, “We were warned, but in Fukushima they were caught by surprise and, afterwards, the tsunami came. This infrastructure is in terrible condition. Look at Venice: their streets get flooded; they put on their rain boots and go for coffee.”

Mari Lu Aguilar, a mother of three who lives in Bushwick, Brooklyn, commented that the situation in New York did not scare her because in El Salvador the situation was worse. “There, when the earth rumbles, you tremble.”

The anecdotes of the previous night were soon forgotten when, the next morning, we realized how fortunate or unfortunate we had been. Not knowing how long the isolation would last made us more aware of things that -until then- we had taken for granted. Not being able to move from our trenches drove us to open our homes, our showers with hot water, and cans of food for strangers. Sandy put our world in perspective. No one expected the seas to swallow our Big Apple. The feeling of vulnerability was not like 9-11. Terrorists can be chased. Mother Nature must be respected.

Two years ago our neighborhood was devastated by three tornados that ripped down half the trees. We told our kids then to not worry; that these phenomena occurred every fifty years. Today we walk once more between uprooted trees and fallen branches which have flattened facades, blocked sidewalks, crushed fences, cars, windows... We are getting used to the landscape as we think about those who live in a consistently excruciating reality. Now we are more like them.

### **Awareness**

When news of a material and psychological apocalypse in one of the most iconic cities of contemporary life is accompanied by the most competitive presidential election campaign in American history, it is normal that the worldwide media is flooded, in addition to the already altered U.S. homes and minds.

As a result of this amalgam of feelings that cannot be well explained—perhaps due to a lack or paucity of words, or because we ignore what is happening to us, or due to trauma, stubbornness, indifference, or simply because we do not want to think—all wanted to help. (Without power there is neither sound, nor consciousness at times, and we say that we want to help when we do not know what to do with ourselves).

Obama was gaining votes by sending quick aid to the areas declared a national disaster, while New Yorkers were being asked to remain inside, to leave the streets clear for emergency vehicles and personnel, and in so doing prevent more branches from falling on our heads. We started then to fill boxes with food and water, the purchase of which had created a bit of a shortage the previous week (when we left the supermarket shelves empty); we shared gasoline with those who had generators so that the children were not cold (snow was falling); we offered our electrical outlets to recharge pocket appliances, and even offered car trips so that others could vote. No one complained. In fact it was the opposite – you would hear: "I wish I could do more, there are so many people in worse condition than I."

Are you one of the affected or non-affected? Are you above or below 40th Street? Zone A or B? You would recount and divide known and unknown individuals not by good or bad neighborhoods, because losing all or nothing depended on the direction the wind had blown. Meryl Streep and Gwyneth Paltrow were left *homeless*, but could afford a good hotel room. The people who are in the shelters, no one knows. Regarding those who lived in Breezy Point or Coney Island, you were afraid to ask.

The city was divided. The media spoke about areas of light and shadow. Not only did politicians see their ambitions disrupted overnight; one hundred people lost their lives; ten million households were left without electricity, water or gas; thousands of families became homeless; and the children of New York were forced to miss a week of school, among other things. But the real transformation was not any of this, because tragedies occur anywhere in the world. What happened, and still is happening, is something quite different. It's not the same thing to read bad news that to suffer them, regardless of how hard one tries to understand or support the cause; nor can we convince someone to trust us if they don't feel that trust.

The strength and positive energy generated by the desire to help is powerful, intense. Maybe we New Yorkers were also scared by this our passionate reaction since we had never opened our homes to strangers with such enthusiasm, in an effort to reconstruct what no one in particular had shattered. This also caught us by surprise. The world is filled with zones A, B and C, not only our neighborhoods. Sandy will be remembered in our history books, but in New York (USA), Madrid (Spain), or Golinga (Ghana), millions will remain homeless, without generators, without electricity, without canned food, without water. No one forces us to help each other, that may be true, but we are becoming aware of what can really compete with the future *Sandys* that might be already enroute: greatness of spirit, compassion. We have found that we can work together despite our differences if we choose to, or if nature imposes it on us.

Hideki Takahashi, a Japanese-born artist residing in Brooklyn who prints imagery from both the art and fashion world on jeans, told me that New Yorkers were depressed after Sandy. Maybe it's not depression exactly. Maybe it's something more complex, perhaps it's a certain kind of *awakening*, a "swallow your pride" and limit the "let's help each other in exclusivity" with the excuse of maintaining

our roots firmer and stronger. We can all help one another because—despite our differences—together we can also be effective, even stronger. After Sandy we have more rather than fewer things in common. It is becoming an obsolete response to protect or defend ourselves in small groups when we have to face superior forces, universal forces. After Sandy, above all, we cannot help thinking that, since long ago; millions of people have endured the reality that we breathe in today.

### ***Newyorkcentrism***

Soon after my daughter Sara was wondering aloud why the drivers that had been impatiently queuing for four hours were hitting each other, I read a message that came from Spain via a social network: "I'm fed up with Sandy. I'm bored with this informative newyorkcetrism. Hollywood and NY have mentally colonized us, and the New York Times."

I contact the journalist Agustín Alonso from Madrid. He asks me if I am as affected by the hurricane as the media is making people believe. I reply, "Well ... we're incommunicado, the kids' school has been closed for a week, the supermarkets remain empty, we can't go to work ... but, well, we're also thankful that our house is in one piece, and we're trying to help those who are going through hell these days." He tells me that he is more interested in what I'm telling him than in twenty stories he can read in the press because, "We journalists have lost credibility. It seems like anything can be turned into spectacle. It's hard to distinguish if what is being said is serious or not. Each time I trust more what I'm being told via social networks".

That which is deeply felt is serious for the person who feels it. A quotidian disaster does not make the news; a disaster in a big city makes headlines in every paper. (No tension, no sound.) Death is always a serious matter whether it's covered in the paper or not. I wonder if this New York tension will help us talk about this "awareness." After all, it is November, 2012, and we all are in the same boat.

### **Tunnels**

1PM. Monday, November 5<sup>th</sup>. Manhattan. Art museums are also divided. The Metropolitan Museum, at 182<sup>nd</sup> Street, maintains its schedule of meetings. The museum educators who live in Brooklyn share taxis in groups because their tunnels to the city remain out of service. The Morgan Library, at 36<sup>th</sup> Street, opens for the first time that day to the employees. "What are you doing here? How did you arrive?" the security guards ask me. Electric power finally arrived less than twelve hours ago. Their computer system's server is down and therefore they have not been able to notify me of the reunion's cancellation. I don't mind.

The best way to understand New York City's spirit is to observe the faces of those who are seated in the subway cars. I decide to go underground. The newspapers have not yet announced the opening of the lines below 42<sup>nd</sup> Street.

We move through the tunnels in the direction of the curve's inertia. As we move forward, the platforms look emptier. By 14<sup>th</sup> Street, the gentleman who has been sitting opposite me—sixtyish, hair cut to number one, striped polo shirt, black raincoat and round belly—asks me:

- Where are you going?
- As far as this goes, I reply.

He has a handkerchief in his right hand and two cuts near his upper lip that are bleeding. He says that he shaved with a blade that morning instead of with an electric shaver and has destroyed his face. I'm embarrassed to ask his name because I've been taking photos of him during the trip and he doesn't know it. He lowers his head and continues reading his New York Post article: "*100,000 Customers still without power. Plenty of bad weather, low on gasoline. When will their nightmare end?*" We arrive to Spring Street station. He leaves without saying goodbye.

The journey ends at Brooklyn Bridge station. Tourists are usually crowded into this area. It's almost two in the afternoon and there isn't one soul present. Most entrances are locked with red and yellow police tape that reads: "DO NOT CROSS—CRIME SCENE," as if the hurricane had been a criminal act. A policeman patrols the tunnel entrances. I think: there's no need for tape, there's no one here. It smells like mold and scorched cable. I walk to the Brooklyn Bridge and I see couples pushing shopping carts toward Manhattan.

Back at home, my kids give me a letter from school, from the Department of Education: "Fifty-seven schools have suffered severe damage. Students will begin classes in new locations this Wednesday, November 7<sup>th</sup>." I call PS9, an elementary school in Queens, and tell them that, even though their museum visit has been cancelled, I have gas in the car and can make it to their class that Wednesday. We will talk about "real and imaginary places."

The visit to PS9 is quite emotional. Pilar Cubeito, a Galician-born American teacher and daughter of parents from a small village in Lugo, Pontevedra, introduces me to the classroom: "We have to thank the museum for coming all the way here." I distribute images of *Starry Night*, by Vincent Van Gogh. One of the children points to "the huge blue wave that is about to flood the city." I take a close look and realize that he is right. "The wind and the sea turn and turn," concludes Jason while drawing swirls in the air with his index finger. The landscape is, in reality, Saint-Remy-de-Provence, in France, but Alison says that it's New York and, "the Statue of Liberty is hidden behind the tree."

The following day, a couple of meters away from the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), I run into Riva Blumenfeld, another museum educator. She says she is fine and asks if I've been affected by the storm. I tell her that it's going to be interesting to walk over marble as if nothing had happened. She confesses that she feels the same way. We say goodbye. I bump into a couple that is taking snapshots of the red sculpture entitled LOVE, by Robert Indiana. She huddles under the big O and he blows her a kiss.

My group arrives on time. It is formed of four VIPs and they want a conversation about Modern Art. Within fifteen minutes, in the galleries, we face *The Scream*, by Edvard Munch. It's the first time that I talk about this piece. The noun "solitude" emerges as we describe the painting. By the fifth sentence, one of the ladies blinks and two round tears roll down her cheeks. The friends look at her and remain in silence. Three seconds pass by and they still remain in silence. I think: "I don't have a VIP group anymore. This is a Special Needs moment. No problem." I lay my hand on the shoulder of the woman who is crying, and tell her, "Don't worry, it's ok, that's what *The Scream* is for... More than one would like to cry but they can't."

I realize at that very moment that her friends are some of those individuals who would like to cry and can't. I propose that we all proceed to *The Dance*, by Matisse. They like the idea and we move to the next room. We talk about the circle that is formed by five nude women who are playing "Ring Around the Rosy". One of them seems to be about to fall because her hand has disconnected from her partner's nearby hand, but the centrifuge impulse of the turn lifts her up.

## Taisha

In one of the shelters for evacuees of Hurricane Sandy four hundred cots have been placed which function as beds, tables and chairs. People with uniforms of different designs and colors walk up and down the aisles: Red Cross volunteers, Disaster Relief Corps, Peace Corps, Conservation Corps, police officers, nurses, army officers... Sam Jumper, a volunteer from Minnesota with blue rubber gloves and a ball cap, informs the families that the "art class" is about to begin. A young woman with a colorful scarf around her head points at the postcards that I am carrying under my arm, copies of the painting *The Sleeping Gypsy*, by Henri Rousseau.

- This is Africa, she says, convinced.

- How are you so sure? I ask.

- Because I'm from Africa, she tells me matter-of-factly. The clothes that she is wearing are from Africa, that landscape is African- she adds with a beautiful and contagious smile. I was born in Burundi. I am a Tutsi- and proudly raises her voice when she reaches the t.

I do not know what to say. Her name is Taisha. Her eyes and skin shine, she has long eyelashes and an attractive nose. Taisha means "alive, she who lives." She left her homeland, pulled out by her father's hand, when she was nineteen years old, a refugee of the "civil war." She had been living in Coney Island for the last fifteen years until last week. Her house was one of those that had been literally wiped off the map.

"We've lost everything but our lives. We'll build it back up again, but far, far away from water. I thought these things only happened in movies..."

We start the group conversation. Dan Drazon, a Conservation Corps volunteer who is wearing a fluorescent yellow vest and firefighter style suspenders, tells us that the woman in the painting is sleeping because she is exhausted. Taisha says that the vase is made out of calabash; that it is not made of mud. "The calabash is a plant that can keep water cold in the middle of the desert." She laughs, making us all laugh. "Look, it's like home."□

© Gema Álava, 2012

The original text in Spanish was published in FronteraD Magazine on November 19, 2012.

<http://www.fronterad.com/?q=nueva-york-despues-sandy>