

## Drawing on the City

By Ben Borthwick

It is entirely appropriate that one of Knut Åsdam's pivotal works, the graffiti project Picnoleptic City: hysterical time (1997) took place in Vienna, faded capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Laced with Baroque, Medieval, and nineteenth-century bourgeois architecture, this is the city where Freud sketched out his theories of the unconscious. Well-appointed, well-ordered streets are kept silent by the repressive weight of the city's self-image as one of the homes of bourgeois Modernity. The beige and grey uniformity of painted walls stifles voices that usually breakout onto the surface, muting the incessant scrawl that mutters incoherently at passersby in other towns and cities. This babble is part of what makes up the urban unconscious, and Picnoleptic City points to many of Åsdam's concerns by giving literal linguistic definition to this notion that in subsequent work is more refracted. By urban unconscious I mean a quality that equally determines, and is determined by the users of the city, its energies, cycles, and history, a quality that gives rise to simultaneity and draws connections between disparate phenomena. On a series of visits to the city in the mid-

1990s, before the Haider government galvanised people into animating the streets, the vibrancy of Vienna's music and art scenes was in no way reflected when walking around at street level. It was as if both the architectural spaces and the people walking in the city asked for a nineteenth-century citizen.

Produced for Do It Yourself: Mapping and Instruction, a group exhibition curated by Simon Sheikh, the graffiti writing was augmented by an incomplete set of snapshots of the pieces and a 'discussion' on ORF, the State radio station [CONFIRM]. The discussion was not entirely successful as the host station was resistant to shifting the emphasis from a generic 'shout-outs' formula to an in depth discussion of issues affecting Vienna's youth and how they might engage themselves within the city – confirmation that popular culture often resists theorising its present. The attempt, nonetheless, to produce a project across different media in the public domain is significant. Prior to this piece, Åsdam made reference to spatial and cultural structures, focusing on the relations between architecture, subjectivity, and sexuality, but these had mostly been located within interior space. Around 1997 there was a clear shift in his work that continued his investigations

into delineations of space but was expanded to include to the relations between the self, architecture, and public space. Picnoleptic City is a key piece for understanding this shift and within the context of Åsdam's work it functions as the unconscious to the Psychasthenia series that followed. As if to compensate for the self-consciously calculated and deliberate strategies of his work with architecture, photography, or the spoken word works, Picnoleptic City is a space where possibilities mapped out in later installations are intuited, improvised and spontaneously enacted by moving furtively through the darkness and leaving imprints on the city's surface. Many of the themes embedded deep within the Psychasthenia series, such as the relations between subjectivity and the State, along with the dialectic between public space and private property, are laid out there. Graffiti becomes the temporal activity that places a body in the city at a particular moment in time – usually the darkness of night – with something particular to say.

The simplicity of the means of production makes Picnoleptic City very different from most of Åsdam's work addressing the above themes. No permissions were required, no funds needed to be raised, no post-production facilities nor

crews were hired; there could be as many or few pieces as time allowed. There are parameters within which the piece functions - a consistent writing style and a limited lexicon and of four words: Picnoleptish, Fluctlinien, Angleichung or Assimilerung. Everything else was determined by the specificity of the moment in which it was made. Even when a word was repeated the conditions of production determined both the experience of writing and its meaning, both of which depended on the amount of time the location could sustain for painting. These considerations are equal to the determinations of the space both at night during its production and the day after when it generates its own meanings in relation to its environment. Only an incomplete set of photographs remains. Documentation was so much an after-thought that not all the pieces could be found. Indeed, in some instances, Viennese security guards thought stopping to look at new piece of graffiti on their building was enough of a direct provocation even before the camera was produced.

On an office wall, Picnoleptish edged around a corner as if unable to control its own relation to space, trying to escape one surface for the next. Picnolepsia is a condition in which there are periods of cognitive absence

where consciousness is blank. The subject is unaware of this lapse unless there is discontinuity between the contexts that bracket the lost moment – the hand that held the cup is empty but the floor is now covered in china and coffee – in which case an inexplicable rupture in temporality faces the subject. A segment of time disappears and in the moment before its reappearance reality has shifted. Sure enough, within 24 hours the existence of Picnoleptish was in question, the only evidence of its existence a freshly painted brown surface and the rogue "c" on the perpendicular wall. The moment of lapse has been all but rationalised and repressed out of existence, recoverable only through the fresh brown paint and remaining fragment standing in for a broken coffee cup and announces that something happened here.

Elsewhere, the graffiti outbursts exposed ideological contradictions inscribed into the architecture of institutions whose compulsive reaction is to repress the possibilities they proposed. A prison in the city centre could not tolerate the brutal honesty of the word Assimilerung, meaning assimilation by integration, where one entity is absorbed by, and loses one's identity to a more powerful other. Chemical removal of the word

overcompensated and bleached the stone surface, perfectly capturing the heterotopic potential of both the act of writing graffiti and the word itself to figure crisis in relation to the city. These possibilities are too traumatic, and the heavy handed use of chemicals draws attention to itself by literally over-reacting with the stone, failing to create a white stain of negation which was itself stained by a faint but legible trace of the spray paint. As if making a deliberate metaphor for the unconscious, the surface of the city holds the meaning regardless of the efforts to eliminate it, leaving fragments from which to reconstruct the repressed narrative.

On less conspicuous surfaces, however, the city seemed to hold the pieces in an embrace. On a cycle path along the river Fluctlinien, meaning 'lines of flight', is barely visible beneath the fallen leaves, bringing together a number of Åsdam's themes with considerable poetic force. This is a term consistently used by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari to describe a counter movement that articulates the entity from which it escapes. These are things "attributed to a 'change in values', the youth, women, the mad, etc.," such that Deleuze and Guattari write

"that is why power centres are defined much more by what escapes them or by their impotence than by their zone of power."<sup>1</sup> The lines of flight are both literal and figurative: the long stretch of path through a park leads into and away from the city, a destination between destinations, but also a point at which the bodily pleasure of cycling through the city at speed becomes seductively cinematic.

On each side of a vast Third Reich lookout tower [CONFIRM THIS] Lawrence Weiner has written 'As long as it lasts' in massive letters. At its base, layers of tags and other graffiti pieces form the final stanza in an exquisitely balanced piece of concrete poetry. This is a place to congregate and exchange greetings in absentia, a graffiti writers Speaker's Corner. A large Picnoleptish that is outlined and half filled-in chatters with everything around it, unable to assert itself because its letters are so unstable, seemingly caught in a moment of stasis before they lose their form. Where a nearby residential street hits the commercial district there is a bus stop, a non-place encountered daily in transit and integrated into the unconscious habits of locals. This spot, chosen at random for the painting of a large Angleichung - meaning

assimilation by synthesis, to become similar but not identical, where each element retains a distinct identity – is already busy with words unseen in the darkness of the previous night's writing. The piece has already assimilated itself to its environment and entered into multi-lingual dialogue with previous residents:

**Tschernobyl für Alle** [Chernobyl for Everyone]

Learn to burn!

**ANGLEICHUNG**<sup>Sorry</sup>

**Iron Maiden**

I have already alluded to the logistical simplicity of this project as well as its thematic connections to subsequent works dealing with architecture and public space, not to mention the importance of the introduction of the themes of darkness, space and subjectivity. However, the handmade quality of Picnoleptic City gives it a different trajectory than most of Åsdam's other work. These pieces bring together two usually distinct strands of graffiti writing: the informational painted political slogan and the delirious excitement of bubble writing. It is impossible to ignore the fact that these drawings exude a desire to inscribe the self onto the surface of the city through the act of drawing while simultaneously wanting to mark that



act as political, both in language and as a process. Specifically, it is to inscribe that political meaning with the pleasures and desires of putting up a Baroque, multi-colour, twelve-letter piece, although one not so ornate as to exclude everyone but other graffiti writers. Rendered legible, the potential for the word's meaning to infiltrate, add to, and perhaps even stand out from the rest of the visual noise it competes with remains beyond the writer's control. All graffiti simultaneously participates in, and proposes a line of flight from, the economy of signs that sell commodities and persuade us to make lifestyle choices. Once it is absorbed into the urban matrix it is consumed consciously or unconsciously by all who see it regardless of the aggression, indifference, or pleasure they may take in its meaning and the fact of its existence. Each piece takes its place alongside the tags, swastikas, slogans, and sound bites already there, hustling for attention like the bastard offspring of corporate advertising. These words become part of the dialectic of everyday imagery, constantly constructing random meanings and presenting new possibilities, reordering themselves into new formations for every passerby in attempts to access desires that rupture Vienna's bourgeois conformity.

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<sup>1</sup>Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, (London: Athlone Press, 1987), 216-217.