

Knut Åsdam's Recombinant Place: Cloaked Mirror Body

By Miwon Kwon

To see one's own sight means visible blindness.<sup>1</sup>

—Robert Smithson

Facing the School of Architecture building in Oslo, Norway, on a patch of greenery adjacent to the berm that demarcates the edge of the park along the Akerselva River, a strange U-shaped structure rests embedded in the hillside. Despite its large size, the overall shape of the 10m x 4.5m x 1.25m structure seems obediently responsive to the gentle contours of the sloping topography. Following the logic of landscape instead of architecture, it is tucked into the ground, or rather laterally assimilated into the ground to become another kind of ground in itself. But this 'ground' is also very shiny, very black, and composed of a harsh geometry. That is, the assimilation is not so inconspicuous. Depending on one's point of view and imagination, in fact, this odd structure/ground that is neither structure nor ground conjures an array of associations. It might, for example, remind one of the sleek yet deadly sexiness of a Stealth Bomber, or the slick cockpit of an alien spaceship that crash-landed some time ago, a futuristic ruin. Or, even as it alternately recalls Minimalist sculpture and corporate architecture, it also looks like a gigantic insect or crustacean with mutant

wings or limbs of enormous proportions. Then again, from an aerial view, it might appear to be the flattened helmet of Darth Vader, or more abstractly and simply, an oddly geometric rock formation peeping through a verdant field of green.

For those familiar with Knut Åsdam's body of work, such disparate associations – from science fiction, Minimalism, corporate architecture, and mutating bugs, to warping sense of time and space, and threats and pleasures of potential danger – are not unfamiliar points of reference. But his projects involving audio, video, photography, and installation are usually contained within the controlled, artificial environment of a gallery or museum, even as they might depict or construct their own 'heterotopia' or 'dark space' within it (i.e., Psychasthenium, (1998); Psychasthenia 5, (1998); Psychasthenia: The Care of Self, (1999)).<sup>2</sup> Relatively speaking, Recombinant Place: Cloaked Mirror Body contends with a less controlled, natural environment, an open-ended and ambiguous spatial, climatic, and social framework, whose unprogrammable variables include an un-captive, non-art audience and plenty of daylight. As such, this 'public' work carries into an outdoor setting many of Åsdam's ongoing concerns regarding the organization of what the artist calls 'contemporary subjectivity' as a function of the physical and psychological effects of spatial and visual perception.

Basically, Recombinant Place is a U-shaped bench; it provides seating along the central portion of its inner perimeter. Per Gunnar Tverrbakk, curator of the project, describes the bench as "an inclusive and engaging element that invites physical usage. The intention is that the bench will function as an assembly place for the school's users, employees and the public that passes by along the Akerselva River."<sup>3</sup> And this useful aspect of Recombinant Place is viewed as a democratic and socially conscious gesture that undermines the severity of the work's geometric abstraction (read aesthetic inaccessibility). But this is no ordinary park bench. While it does provide some respite for visitors of the nearby park or students of the architecture school, and while its U-shape diagrams a familiar motif of collective social gathering, other aspects of the work offer a less benign, more discomfoting vision of a subject's relation to social/public space.

The dark and highly shiny surface of the symmetrical bivalve form (made of a glass fiber sandwich) is broken into sharply angled and/or triangulated planes, with edges as crisp as origami folds. These surfaces in turn reflect and refract the surrounding environment – grassy hillside, sky above, bodies that pass, trees nearby, etc. Paradoxically, this reflective quality makes the structure 'disappear' into the context even as its highly visible

black shape remains noticeably distinct from it. The refraction, on the other hand, not only breaks up the form into various facets but also fractures the continuity of the space surrounding it into a myriad of partial and reversed views. One effect of this fracturing is the muddling of the distinction between space and image, depth and surface, and volume and flatness, which reinforces the blurring of interior/exterior, object/space, and structure/landscape that the form and disposition of the work already enforces. As such, the user is left in an awkward and nebulous zone, quite ungrounded in relation to the space that the work creates and mirrors.

An instructive point of comparison is Maya Lin's Vietnam Veteran's Memorial in Washington, D.C., another abstract public work of Minimalist descent that is embedded into the landscape. Its dark reflective surface is not dissimilar to the liquid blackness of Åsdam's Recombinant Place. Yet the Memorial's surface, layered with the long list of engraved names of dead soldiers, is a continuous tableaux; it positions the viewer within an expansive panoramic field physically and metaphorically. That is, as the viewer looks at the texture of names, overlaid on top of the reflected space of the Washington Mall adorned with monuments and flags, she sees the image of herself implicated as part of the coherent, if ambivalently patriotic, 'picture'. Thus, Lin's Memorial, even as it

bespeaks a certain rupture (as a gash in the ground), stabilizes the viewer as a unified being, as a subject safely situated within the continuity of space and time (history).

The darkly reflective surface of Åsdam's Recombinant Place also externalizes meaning, but space, time, image, and bodies do not cohere like at the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial. Åsdam's reflections do not throw back a unified representation of space or image within which the viewer/user can be easily situated. First, the slanted surfaces of the work do not allow one to see oneself reflected in what one is looking at; there is a distortion of relations, if not a total disconnect, between the space where one stands and the reflected space one sees. Second, the horizontality of the work also flips one's sense of space along an invisible vertical axis, where the sky above becomes (is reflected as) the ground below. Finally, even though the hard shine of the work's surface looks impenetrable, it also hints at a depthless interior so that to look at the work is not unlike looking down at a dark body of water whose bottom reach cannot be guessed by the eye. One could fall down into the sky in Åsdam's Recombinant Place.

As noted earlier, the unreliability of vision and the instability of spatial orientation that results from it,

especially in relation to the condition of darkness, is a problematic that Åsdam has dealt with in many prior projects. The video projection Psychasthenia 2+2 (1997-98) is a good example. Here, despite the flatness of the projected image of banal corporate building facades, the tight cropping and mirrored doubling of the image agitate the eyes into seeing a spatial transmogrification – the facades seem to project forward while sinking back at the same time. It might be in this sense of transmutability of space and disorientation of self – in which a subject cannot be certain of its boundaries, location, and spatial orientation – that Åsdam's bench in Oslo might be thought of as proposing a recombinant place.

Clearly, the artist is invested in the idea of spatial and visual recombination as an analogue of social and political recombination.<sup>4</sup> But Åsdam's displacements utilizing mirror-like doublings remind me, intuitively, of the spatio-temporal mirror displacements of Robert Smithson, and not just because the form of Recombinant Place recalls Smithson's sense of the crystalline. The dystopic dimension of the elder artist's experiments sometimes led to a non-place for the subject, to its disappearance.<sup>5</sup> And the mirror had a special place in Smithson's thinking. We might as well end with his words to unravel my own reading of Åsdam's work: "Why do the mirrors display a conspiracy of muteness concerning their very existence? When does a

displacement become a misplacement? These are forbidding questions that place comprehension in a predicament.... Mirrors thrive on surds, and generate incapacity. Reflections fall onto the mirrors without logic, and in so doing invalidate every rational assertion."<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Smithson, "Interpolation of the Enantiomorphic Chambers," in Nancy Holt, ed., The Writings of Robert Smithson (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 39.

<sup>2</sup> Heterotopia is a concept forwarded by Michel Foucault in his essay "Of Other Spaces," Diacritics (Spring 1986): 22-27. "Dark Space" is an idea forwarded by Anthony Vidler in his book The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992). For a complex and rich interpretation of Knut Åsdam's work via these concepts as well as Jacques Lacan's notions of the stain and the gaze, see George Baker, "The Space of the Stain," Knut Åsdam: Works 1995-2000 (Copenhagen: Gallery Tommy Lund, 2000), 20-43.

<sup>3</sup> Statement by Per Gunnar Tverrbakk on Knut Åsdam's website, [www.knutÅsdam.net](http://www.knutÅsdam.net).

<sup>4</sup> See the artist's brief statements regarding this project on his website: [www.knutÅsdam.net](http://www.knutÅsdam.net).

<sup>5</sup> Smithson's Enantiomorphic Chambers (1964) is exemplary of this point. Interestingly, a consistent touchstone in Åsdam's thinking about contemporary subjectivity has been Roger Caillois's allegorical theorization of "legendary psychasthenia" (1935), a psychic and perceptual disturbance of a subject unable to locate itself in relation to and in opposition to space. It is described as a drive toward the "assimilation to the surrounding," giving in to "temptation by space," toward formless indistinction, disappearance, and ultimately death, a condition "necessarily accompanied by a decline in the feeling of personality and life." There might be a productive connection to draw between the disappearance of Smithson's subject and Caillois' notion of legendary psychasthenia, which is beyond the scope of this brief text. See Roger Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," trans. John Shepley, October, no. 31 (Winter 1984). The English translation is from the version of the essay as it appeared in the publication Minotaure in 1935. A longer version of the essay was published in Le mythe et l'homme (Paris: Gallimard, 1938).

<sup>6</sup> Robert Smithson, "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan," in Nancy Holt, ed., The Writings of Robert Smithson (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 97.