

Luxury

By Denise Robinson

The night of our cities no longer resembles the howling of dogs of the Latin shadows, or the wheeling bat of the middle ages or that image of suffering which is the night of the Renaissance...the blood of the modern night is a singing light.

—Louis Aragon<sup>1</sup>

Knut Åsdam calls it 'temporary architecture' but it is architecture that creates in its wake the features of an incantatory environment. Cluster Praxis, provisionally defined by a drop of black curtains suspended from the ceiling, hovering just off the floor, cuts a hole. It is a way to make the gallery architecture disappear, to create darkness, and perhaps to make a place for what Roger Caillois called 'sympathetic magic'. Imbued with fragments from the city's limitless cache of signs — like tattoos on the edge of our new consciousness — the work echoes Gordon Matta-Clark's 1970's urban interventions into that prescient moment before the destruction of a building, by cutting into them.

Caillois' 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia' has functioned as a kind of reprise in Åsdam's work — largely due to Åsdam's negotiation of Caillois' fascination with the compulsion for beings to freely lose what would be assumed to be the most precious of things: the distinction between themselves and their environment. Described also as a 'temptation by space', it has its apogee in the night. It is what Freud would describe as the victory of the death drive; risky and possibly sutured to suffering, this profound desire for something that exceeds our need through the operations of mimicry, is also what Caillois called 'a luxury' even 'a dangerous luxury'.

Yet Åsdam's incorporation of sound in Cluster Praxis intervenes into Caillois' visual world. Sound, the first encounter inside the entrance to Cluster Praxis, makes the beholder not so much a listener, as a receiver of ambient sounds, of music and a woman's voice speaking, of Julia Kristeva's words amongst others. Words so attuned to the problem of the 'transcendental illusions' of language in this instance are run through by a voice, "for the speaking being life is a meaningful life..." It is a voice also run through by the technologies of recording and transmission: "when meaning shatters, life no longer matters."

A woman's voice so often reduced to its materiality, stripped of its language or perceived as involuntary, here acts as a vehicle to isolate a kernel of language from within the body of history. The anonymous graffiti from the streets of Paris in May 1968 - "order in the street makes for disorder in our minds" - if by now a hyperbolised moment of social resistance, survives with all the plenitude of a ruin, and precedes De Certeau's words, "Social despair restores imagination to power with solitary dreams," and loops back over the implications of the graffiti text without interpreting it. Fragments from the body of the social are set adrift, followed by the last, long, ambling text by the artist. A woman's voice again assumes the space: "assimilated as before, I'm speaking of the city...to cast a spell on the city a secret path for the city's unconscious." Cluster Praxis shows the city becoming both a mimicry of any subject that speaks it, as well as a city and subject yet to come.

These voices mix with ambient city noises, dance music, car radios. Having already mapped memory, in the second cubicle of Cluster Praxis the sounds take purchase against the image that 'sourced' them

in an endless dérive. Having been led into an unlikely space of intimacy – one filled with contradictory energies – the beholder is engaged by projected surface effects and prosaic images of an urban street scene: one at street level, with no iconic city skyline, shot from a hand held camera that wanders off, not to a horizon that might locate an event but to a wide hole, a construction site. Projected on a screen just the right size and height to escape any cinematic reference it is one more stage in an environment where the horizon of the beholder is at issue. People are dancing, strangely dislocated by the technology: the rule of frames-per-second uncannily broken as their movement is staggered, yet somehow they stay in synch with that familiar sound of techno-heart-beat music – the beholder so near, yet so far away from their own embodiment. The work keeps breaking up, images fall away to dim blue-green, enveloped in a strobe effect, and all the while these voices speak with the very genesis and address of speech in doubt. This is no rationalised cyborg compromise, like all recorded traces it is an ontological risk.

Antonin Artaud's deep distress at the violent censoring and refusal of his work for radio broadcast says something of what our culture expects from a disembodied voice – that it should sustain the illusion of a fixed point of origin. Broadcast radio was for Artaud unique and full with the promise of manifesting, "a stolen voice that returns to (one) as the hallucinatory presence of the voice of another."<sup>2</sup> A profound recognition of the value of a psychasthenic experience for Artaud, in this instance the stolen voice is an expression of the repression of the significance of that which sits at the edge of consciousness.

In Cluster Praxis a dance club is scanned and recorded from its midst. Nobody here is to be gazed

upon, or to gaze at each other, we don't see their faces but we know their eyes are closed. They move, dance, wander, imaged in a hazed silhouette, their bodies strafed with culture: if there is any gaze it is inward. Åsdam has filmed the very opposite of a witnessed scene and buried both it and the beholder within the partial perception of technology's recording machines, for there is no way to image a voluntary lostness.

The technology that bends and shapes the speech is a technology that already had its say in the formation of language: a loop with no return. Like a regurgitated and crushed complaint of love without an object, the speech continues somewhere between the precision of a Burroughs-like paranoia and the beholder: "assimilated as before, I am speaking...city no one knows yet, simultaneity of the body, six times over I think I have cast a spell, you were there I heard your funk talk ...but I am not going to talk about this rift...in-between the abyss and the...to cast a spell on a city, a sentence or an ...written as fragments around the streets...I still want all kinds of things...spaces to be walked...cluster machine...the start was entropic, but with a flipside of flows, but we share no spirit." This is not the plenitude of living speech but monologues from the limits of language as they meet a newly articulate technological time. Its technologies travail as you hear the moment of the cut. The provisional nature of the environment of Cluster Praxis and the intimacy of its internal structure houses a plenitude of another kind. As a response to the violence of the teleological it may solicit the work of entropy, yet this paradoxically has within it the energy to invigorate and multiply the potential in references and signs, maybe even undermine the birth of something harsher: To live in luxury.

---

<sup>1</sup> Louis Aragon, Paris Peasant Translated with introduction by Simon Watson Taylor (Boston: Exact Change, Boston, 1994), 140.

<sup>2</sup> Allen S Weiss, Wireless Imagination, Sound, Radio and the Avant-Garde, eds. Douglas Kahn and Gregory Whitehead (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1994), 300