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Piss Eloquent

by *George Baker*

It is not polite to speak of the crotch of the question.

ERIK SATIE

YOU ARE PUSHED UP CLOSE AND TIGHT AGAINST THIS BODY, a man's body, held by a camera that clings to its object like a pair of too-small trousers to the skin beneath them. You are staring at a crotch. Fragmented by the camera's inert pressure, this is a body robbed of any sense of boundary, caught--like the trunk of an upended tree--at one of the sites of its own splitting, displaying the shadowy fold of zipper and seam as displaced echoes of the body's own rupture. You notice, of course, the penis, cradled in the snug material but also pushing against it, the full promise of its phallic burgeoning into form thwarted as well as belied by the blue-gray expanse of fabric melting into a similarly gray background. You face an image almost without figure, a formal condition that emerges as the lethargic analogue of this body without borders--bland, monotonous, and monochrome.

But then a wet spot emerges. It quickly spreads, amorphous and glistening, only to be joined by a second stain slightly further down the leg. The video assimilates the medium's inherent temporal unfolding not to any narrative schema but to the simple action of a man pissing his pants in real time. And as the two stains merge into one, continuing their inexorable spread, the liquid suddenly breaks through the surface of the pants, first a single drop, then several more, promptly accumulating into warm, gushing streams of semi-transparent, shimmering fluid that pours down the surface of the screen. This cascade provides the obvious climax of the video, as well as its eventual denouement: the trousers' slow reabsorption of the liquid, the rebalancing of an initial excess, the diffident expansion of the stain into a moist, tepid indistinction, barely set off from the rest of the pants.

And with this, Knut Asdam's video *Untitled: Pissing*, might be seen as prefiguring almost all the concerns of the larger project that this young Norwegian-born, London-educated, but New York--based artist has been elaborating over the last five years. The video's art-historical references are obvious and dense: We think of other male artists who have shown us their genitals (Robert Morris's *I-Box*); we think of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* and Bruce Nauman's rearticulation of the readymade as task performance (*Self-Portrait as a Fountain*); we are meant, I believe, to think of the marking procedures of Jackson Pollock and their send-up by Andy Warhol in his "Oxidation" paintings. But rather than embrace a simple thematics of urination--a common enough proposal, really, in recent art--Asdam's video enacts a type of formal devolution, an operation rather close to what

Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois would subsequently define as the workings of the informe in its modality of entropy. For if *Untitled: Pissing* seems to invoke a literally phallic unification of the visual field, it simultaneously presents the phallus as a "part object"--a bodily fragment whose anarchic equivalencies undo both corporeal unity and fixed identity--recoding the masculine body as a producer of flows and locating the aesthetic gesture not in the realm of mastery but in a loss of bodily control. And rather than produce some emissary of the Phallus in its guise as bounded, distinct form, this loss of control spawns a type of ambivalent visual mark that leaches into a state of nondifferentiation: the ghost, as it were, of form.

Asdam would immediately transfer the procedures of *Untitled: Pissing* to a series of ongoing video works, all given some version of the title "Psychasthenia." The reference is to Roger Caillois's infamous 1935 essay "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," in which the dissident Surrealist suggested that the phenomenon of insect camouflage should be compared to a type of schizophrenic psychic condition characterized as a "depersonalization by assimilation to space": an entropic loss of distinctions, of ego boundaries, of any bodily sense of inside and outside. At first, in *Psychasthenia 2*, 1997, Asdam would replicate the immobile, fragmenting stare of *Untitled: Pissing*, focusing our attention now on the forms of corporate architecture as opposed to the male body. Once again, though, we are staring at something like an architectural part object, at what Asdam, thinking of *Untitled: Pissing*, has called "an architectural crotch shot": a tightly framed image of what seems to be the corner of a mirrored glass building. It soon becomes apparent, however, that we are gazing at the disjunctive seam between two separate glass towers, presented to our vision as if they were one. And again, the rigid girder structure of the two buildings invokes the specter of a properly phallic, bounded form, only to be immediately subverted by the myriad, liquefying reflections of the mirrored glass walls--a mode of visual doubling undermining the givens of formal organization that was precisely Caillois's larger concern. The video's arrangement of the harsh armature of these two buildings also inevitably summons up the gridded application of a traditional perspectival system. The system, however, doesn't work, as the uncanny sense of optical illusion and anamorphic distortion generated by the piece constantly flips one's reading of the grid from ordered recession to anarchic projection, disturbing the perspectival system's anchoring of what Caillois would have called the subject's "coordinates," and thus the ability to place oneself within a given space. Such uncertainty would only be redoubled by Asdam's later reconfiguration of the video as *Psychasthenia 2 2*, 1997-98, in which the entire image would be folded over on itself, doubled internally like some sort of gargantuan inkblot, creating a new set of architectural seams and an increasingly disorienting visual fluctuation. When I first saw the video as part of the "Nuit Blanche" exhibition in Paris in 1998, it was called *Psychasthenia 3*. Projected in such a way that the image was disrupted by a constant but erratic stroboscopic flickering, it was paired, on that occasion, with a video of an open flame, suggesting not some sort of revolutionary call for an architectural conflagration, but rather seizing on fire as the prototypical engine of the dynamic of expenditure, as

the visual enactment of perpetual flux and the unending dissolution of formal boundaries.

Untitled: Pissing prefigured another dimension of Asdam's production as well: the making of structures, a series of architectural frames, to facilitate (or disrupt) video viewing. For when Untitled: Pissing was seen in New York in 1996, it was part of a larger installation entitled Heterotopia, consisting of a type of Minimalist box or platform structure that one had to enter to view the video. Cushions like those found in the "chill out" rooms of dance clubs were set up for viewers within the piece. Occupying the body of the sculpture like a rearticulation of Robert Morris's Column, 1961, visitors to the installation were made to feel deeply conscious of their own bodies within the small, dim space, a phenomenon that would only be amplified by Asdam's more recent structures, such as Psychasthenium, installed as part of a group show at White Columns in 1998. Here, Dan Graham's idea of building a video-viewing pavilion was appropriated by Asdam, whose piece served as the frame of presentation for most of the other video works within the exhibition. But Asdam's structure reversed the references to both corporate architecture and the transparent Enlightenment forms characteristic of Graham's work, evoking a different capitalist space--the dark interior of a sex club with its see-through partitions and video booths. Most recently, in his contribution to the Nordic Pavilion at the 1999 Venice Biennale, Asdam's Psychasthenia: The Care of the Self presented another darkened pavilion, one that functioned almost as a negation or shadow of the modernist structure in which it was exhibited. Built by the Norwegian architect Sverre Fehn in 1962, the Nordic Pavilion takes the Frank Lloyd Wright model of what could be called an "ecological modernism" to its logical extreme, building around the site's preexisting trees or even incorporating them within the interior of the structure. Asdam's piece obstructed the stark transparency of Fehn's building, parasitically insinuating itself within the interior as something like a formal, structural "unconscious" whose manifest exclusion had been the ideological project of the modernist space. And within Asdam's pavilion, one found this time not a dance club, nor a sex club, but, appropriately, an evocation of a garden at night. Replete with trees, bushes, soil, and a series of winding pathways, Asdam's garden called out to any number of illicit activities that occur in public when--under cover of darkness--the transparency of urban space fades away. More than anything, the pavilion became a space redolent with the rhythms and aura of an urban cruising spot.

Suspended ambivalently between surveillance and subversion, the spatial references of Asdam's recent structures are held in common in the work of a wide range of contemporary artists engaged in rethinking the legacy of Minimalism. Within Asdam's own Scandinavian context, one thinks of Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset's important and ongoing project "Powerless Structures"; among American artists, no one has approached this nexus of concerns with more eloquence and precision than Tom Burr. Now, with this recurrent exfoliation of

Minimalist form into the social spaces of the sex club, the disco, or the park-cum-cruising spot, it would be utterly naive to believe that such artists are transforming the spaces of artistic exhibition into sites of alternative usage, a type of perversion of the formerly public sphere: Call this, if you will, the Rirkrit Tiravanija principle, a strategy exceedingly hard to differentiate from the dynamic of avant-garde appropriation of subcultural forms long ago identified by Thomas Crow. Rather, Asdam's project seems again much closer to the strategies of Dan Graham, whose work represents the moment when the diametrically opposed claims of Minimalist phenomenology and Pop iconography would first be exposed as dialectically intertwined, the formal innovations of the former flipping over into the social spaces of the latter. In Asdam's work, we again are witness to a phenomenological project, an investigation of the subjective relation to the object of art, but only in its negative, most disturbing dimensions. Robert Smithson coined the term "uncanny materiality" to refer to this seething underbelly of Minimalist form--the glittering, often reflective surfaces; the variously flat, iridescent, even repulsive colors; the neon glare and chromatic flashes of the media; the "new consciousness of the vapid and the dull" summoned up by sculptural forms less active than leaden, condensed, or congealed. Well before Smithson, Caillois was imagining a similar experience of phenomenological disturbance through his description of dark space: "While light space is eliminated by the materiality of objects, darkness is 'filled,' it touches the individual directly, envelops him, penetrates him, and even passes through him." These are the disparate parameters summoned up by an encounter with Asdam's work, an aesthetic obsessively circling around a narrow band of contemporary experience, ranging from the reflexive doubling of the liquefied surface of corporate architecture in the obdurate opacity of the video screen, to the sleazy glint of tele-video projection applying its luster to one's body within the technological dusk of Asdam's architectural pavilions.

If, however, the "uncanny materiality" of Minimalist form returns today in projects such as Asdam's, these investigations no longer remain abstract--as they did in the '60s--a brash counterpart poised incisively against an enfeebled modernism's last gasps for formal purity. Such work today has been rendered incredibly particular: one historical moment's abstraction becoming another's reality. Asdam's work tracks the relentless migration of the formerly aesthetic devices of Minimalism into the contemporary life-world, where they have become an all-too-banal part of the fabric, of the warp and the weft, of everyday life--the International Style for a world without utopias.