

pulsatile, dazzling, and spread out

by George Baker

In the series of video works all given a version of the title Psychasthenia, Knut Åsdam transferred the repetitive and formless procedures of Untitled: Pissing. The choice of title - Psychasthenia - signals a strangely anachronistic move (although one paralleled, if not prepared, by similar interests dominating architectural and art historical discourse in the 1990s). For Åsdam's reference is to Roger Caillois's now infamous essay from the 1930s, 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia', in which the dissident Surrealist suggested that the phenomenon of insect camouflage - moths that look like bark, insects that congeal into twigs, caterpillars that resemble leaves - 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.¹ In the phenomenon of insect mimesis, Caillois proposed, "life takes a step backwards," as the difference between an organism and its surroundings is erased, through an almost masochistic lowering of the organism's former boundaries.² These were wild ideas, wild in the most

literal sense of the term: savage and violent, frantic, undisciplined, and unruly. And Caillois' essay emerged in the 1930s as the twin of a previous and just as infamous (just as wild) essay on the praying mantis, where a similar erasure of difference was located in the tendency of the female mantis to devour her mate during copulation, thereby assimilating the male and obliterating sexual difference in the form of a violent – indeed mortifying – castration.

Seizing upon the term 'psychasthenia' popularized by the work of Pierre Janet, Caillois thus compared such natural phenomena to the form of pathology then understood by psychiatry as a type of loss of psychic energy, of ego substance and form, a loss that Denis Hollier has called, appropriately, "subjective detumescence."³ And this pathology was invariably related to the experience of space, signaled by Caillois's citation of the typical response of a schizophrenic to the question "Where are you?" The response was unchanging: "I know where I am, but I do not feel as though I'm at the spot where I find myself ."⁴ For the subject in the grip of psychasthenia, as much as for the insect in the grip of mimicry, "space seems to be a devouring force." And Caillois continued: "Space pursues them, encircles them, digests them in a gigantic phagocytosis. It ends by replacing them. Then the body

separates itself from thought, the individual breaks the boundary of his skin and occupies the other side of his senses. He tries to look at himself from any point whatever in space. He feels himself becoming space, dark space where things cannot be put. He is similar, not similar to something, but just similar."⁵ Having explored a breakdown of bodily boundaries and formal distinctions in Untitled: Pissing, it would be to the multiple dimensions of this experience of space that Åsdam would now turn.

At first, in Psychasthenia 2 (1997), Åsdam 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 Åsdam, 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, does not 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 Åsdam's later reconfiguration of the video as Psychasthenia 2+2 (1997-1998), in which the entire image was folded over on itself, doubled internally like some sort of gargantuan video ink blot, creating a new set of architectural seams and an increasingly disorienting visual fluctuation.

It is here that one begins to realize the import of Åsdam's potentially anachronistic return to Caillois, as one faces this figuration of contemporary urban space – mediated through the manipulations of televideo space – dissolving into an image halfway between a warped perspectival construction and a liquefied stain.⁶ For

Caillois's central insight, in his reflection on mimicry, had to do with the conditions of vision and perception, and the manner in which vision itself may not be a possession of the subject, but might in fact constitute the subject or dispossess him in turn. "The perception of space," Caillois wrote, "is a complex phenomenon: space is indissolubly perceived and represented." Splitting the scene of vision in two, Caillois continued:

"It is a double dihedral changing at every moment in size and position: a dihedral of action whose horizontal plane is formed by the ground and the vertical plane by the man himself who walks and who, by this fact, carries the dihedral along with him; and a dihedral of representation determined by the same horizontal plane as the previous one (but represented and not perceived) intersected vertically at the distance where the object appears."⁷

Despite his use of the term 'dihedral', we can sense here that Caillois is thinking about the traditional cone of vision associated with the system and the subject of Renaissance perspective, onto which Caillois then layers another cone, an axis of vision hardly emanating from the subject but pinioning him instead within its stare. "It is with represented space that the drama becomes more specific," Caillois concludes, "since the living creature, the organism, is no longer the origin of the coordinates, but one point among others; it is dispossessed of its

privilege and literally no longer knows where to place itself."⁸

It would be this space of dispossession that Caillois would label 'psychasthenic', and it is precisely this dispossession that Jacques Lacan later seized upon in his own theorization of the conditions of what he called the "gaze."⁹ The Lacanian gaze takes up what Caillois called 'represented space', for Lacan locates the gaze not in the subject but in the world. "We are beings who are looked at, in the spectacle of the world," Lacan insists.¹⁰ As with language, the gaze pre-exists the subject, and thus the seeing subject must be reconceived as the subject seen, just as the picture produced by consciousness is preceded by the picture in which the subject's centrality is lost. "I am not simply that punctiform being located at the geometral point from which the perspective is grasped," Lacan explains.¹¹ "No doubt, in the depths of my eye, the picture is painted. The picture, certainly, is in my eye. But I am in the picture...And if I am anything in the picture, it is always in the form of the screen, which I earlier called the stain, the spot."¹² Caught by the light emanating from the spectacle of the world, pinioned by the gaze inasmuch as it is "pulsatile, dazzling and spread out," the subject casts a shadow, as it were, becoming a

'stain' within a picture of which he or she is not the origin.¹³ And it is in the paradoxical darkness provided by this shadow, as it screens the subject from the blinding intensity – the primary force – of the gaze, that the fictions of consciousness and visual self-possession survive.

But the stain is also, as Lacan begins to think directly of Caillois, the foundational logic of the phenomenon of mimicry. To give oneself over to one's primary existence as a stain within the scopic field, to cease to disavow the picture that precedes one's own picturing: this (a)logic by which "I situate myself in the picture as stain," Lacan suggests, constitutes the fundamental "facts of mimicry."¹⁴ Recasting the thesis of Caillois, Lacan argues that the mimetic animal adapts itself to the function of the stain,

"it becomes a stain, it becomes a picture, it is inscribed in the picture. This, strictly speaking, is the origin of mimicry. And, on this basis, the fundamental dimensions of the inscription of the subject in the picture appear infinitely more justified than a more hesitant guess might suggest at first sight."¹⁵

If the stain hollows out a blind spot in the gaze within which vision becomes possible, the phenomenon of mimicry provides a counterlogic of the stain in which the organism is given over to its own blinding, facing into the gaze, as

it were, and aligning itself with a picture that is not its own. It is, I think, this understanding of the stain to which Åsdam submits us in the Psychasthenia videos, as we stand suspended before a scene that we cannot place, and that absolutely cannot be mastered by the logic of vision. As recession flips into projection, and as structure dissolves into fluidity, we are confronted by a fantasy of urban space as the space of the stain, a space in which one is seen more than one sees, that blinds more than it illuminates.

When I first saw the Psychasthenia video as part of the Nuit Blanche exhibition in Paris in 1998, it was called Psychasthenia 3. And there, as had occurred before in Åsdam's exhibitions of the piece, the video was projected in such a way that the image was disrupted by a constant, but erratic, stroboscopic flickering. Pulsatile and dazzling, it was as if Åsdam was attempting to figure forth the gaze, but only in order to plunge the viewer into the function of the stain, just as he or she was plunged into the dark enclosure of the room within which the video was projected.¹⁶ And if this descent into darkness would become one of Åsdam's next major artistic preoccupations, Psychasthenia 3 displayed the stain less as the ground of vision than as its ungrounding, and as a blindness that was

indistinguishable from the gleam of an excessive light. It thus makes a certain sense that the projection was also paired, on that occasion, with a second video that recorded an open flame, gleaming in the darkness, 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. For, in the Psychasthenia videos, just as the surface of contemporary corporate architecture slides into the flow of video form, so too does the viewer give him or herself over to the vertiginous, hallucinatory dissolve of the space of the stain.

¹Roger Caillois, 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia', translated by John Shepley in October: The First Decade, 1976-1986, edited by Annette Michelson, Rosalind Krauss, Douglas Crimp, and Joan Copjec (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 59-74. First published as 'Mimétisme et psychasthénie légendaire,' Minotaure no. 7 (June 1935).

² Ibid., 72

³Denis Hollier, 'Mimesis and Castration 1937', Absent Without Leave (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 41. For Caillois' essay on the praying mantis, see 'La mante religieuse,' Minotaure no. 5 (May 1934), pp. 23-26.

⁴ op. cit., 72.

⁵ op. cit., 72.

⁶Åsdam has recently commented on his own understanding of the contemporary usefulness of Caillois's text: "[It] is a text that has a lot of contemporary relevance. Particularly if you look at the term 'psychasthenia' which points to a disruption in the relationship between personality and space/environment. Seen as a contemporary state of subjectivity and as something that extends the idea of subjectivity and gives agency to quantities like space, environments, larger masses of people and temporary spatial-social configurations...one can relate it to many of the phenomena one sees today. For example, the resurgence of drug culture in the 90s definitely has to do with negotiation of the borders of subjectivity or self. Also music today has become incredibly spatial – while ambient music in the 1970s was about being a backdrop, electronica in the 1990s has become about problematizing the borders or threshold between background, foreground and the body and experience of the listener. But there is also the blurring of the borders of capitalism and other agencies of power. So basically my interest in the term comes from it as a model of contemporary subjectivity in an extended sense, which however reaches into specific personal, economic, and political relations of everyday life." See Brigitte Kölle, 'Psychasthenium Audio: Conversation with Knut Åsdam,' Norden: Zeitgenössische Kunst aus Nordeuropa (Vienna: Kunsthalle Wien, 2000), 158. On the one hand, Åsdam's use of Caillois seems to operate in ignorance of the (now defunct) historicity of the term 'psychasthenia' itself, with its epistemological links to other defunct pathologies such as neurasthenia (Janet, indeed, had hoped that his term would itself displace the use of the term neurasthenia). On the other hand, however, Åsdam's insistence that such phenomena have continued life in our present 'post-industrial' and 'postmodern' world creates a dialectical connection to regimes of modernism and modernity that have evidently not yet played themselves out. For the best account of the discursive regime within which a pathology such as psychasthenia would be thinkable, see Anson Rabinbach, The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990)

⁷ op. cit., 70.

⁸ op. cit., 70.

⁹Jacques Lacan, 'Of the Gaze as Objet Petit a,' The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 67-119.

¹⁰ Ibid., 75.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹²The Sheridan translation reads "But I am not in the picture." (96-97) That this is a mistranslation was pointed out to me by Hal Foster several years ago, during a discussion of this seminar. Inasmuch as Lacan's notion of the gaze is a reworking of the Freudian topos of castration, we can locate here another logical connection between the development of Åsdam's project and its seeming initiation in the scene of 'phallic divestiture' that is Untitled: Pissing.

¹³ Ibid., 89.

¹⁴ Ibid., 98.

¹⁵ Ibid., 99.

¹⁶In The Return of the Real, Hal Foster locates a desire within contemporary art to unleash the gaze, thought of as the traumatic, Lacanian 'real', from the taming defenses of the Imaginary and the Symbolic alike: "It is as if this art wanted the gaze to shine, the object to stand, the real to exist, in all the glory (or the horror) of its pulsatile desire, or at least to evoke this sublime condition [140]." The function and space of the stain, as I understand it, exists in communication, yet at a slight angle, to the desire that Foster expresses. For the stain is not identical to the gaze, but rather a product of one's position in relation to it, simultaneously that which allows one to disavow the gaze as well as to be located by it. Some of Åsdam's architectural installations play with these two, opposed functions of the stain, variously dispossessing the viewer of vision or placing the viewer in the position of voyeur, unseen and yet all-seeing.