

Indestructible Desire

By Johanna Burton

I.

It comes as an accomplice, stealthily,
the lovely hour that is the felon's friend;
the sky, like curtains round a bed, draws close,
and man prepares to become a beast of prey.¹

—Charles Baudelaire

In The Practice of Everyday Life, the French theorist Michel de Certeau describes the "ordinary practitioners of the city" as those who live "down below, below the thresholds at which visibility begins. These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen; their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each other's arms."² For de Certeau, then, the city is a humming network, a complicated sensual circuitry kept alive by the movement of anonymous masses — those who engage their brief intimacies with the urban landscape (and with one another) within

¹ From Baudelaire's 'Le Crepuscule Du Soir' (translated as 'Twilight: Evening') in Les Fleurs du Mal, translated by Richard Howard (Boston: David R. Godine, 1982 (1856)), 99-100.

² Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, translated by Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984 (1974)), 93.

clandestine folds of the city's elaborate fabric. The ordinary practitioner, the laborer, the capitalist subject alienated from her own industry (the condition of every one of us) finds access to her own pleasures down below – where she, possibly, engages in a kind of twilight counter-production.

Knut Åsdam similarly delves down below in his Psychasthenia 10 series 2, filching images of the slumbering city, amassing a body of urban landscapes that look all-too-familiar but whose discrete sites go unnamed. For Åsdam, following de Certeau's logic, the city exposes its inverted, if not wholly oppositional, logic by night: It is here that a kind of blind, groping, intuitive knowledge might be utilized. After dark, the city itself becomes a corporeal being, one erotically charged and tactile in its extremes of violence and pleasure. So it is no mistake that I begin this essay with de Certeau's double-entendre-text, one that coyly brings together the, by day, seemingly incongruous impulses of sex and politics. In nearly all his works, including this one, Åsdam pushes the built-in contradictions of human intercourse, sexual and otherwise, to their structural limits; Åsdam's Psychasthenia 10 series 2 is a study of contemporary subjectivity, of the dialectical relationship between

bodies produced by and producing the living, breathing metropolis in which they reside.

Åsdam has chosen the term 'psychasthenia' as a way to both title and give access to a number of his works; as such, there is little question that he sees the always-extending epidermis of the city and its inhabitants as necessarily interlaced, co-dependent, even prosthetic. 'Psychasthenia', borrowed from the Surrealist writer Roger Caillois, is a theory of schizophrenic spatiality, whereby a subject is literally subsumed by the space she occupies.³ This radical loss of bodily boundary might profitably be read alongside Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological suggestion that there is a 'flesh-of-the world,' with no inside and no outside, of which we are all a part.⁴ Caillois's

³ Roger 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). For an extended reading of Caillois's theory of psychasthenia with regard to Åsdam's work, see George Baker's 'The Space of the Stain' in Knut Åsdam Works 1995-2000 (Published by Galleri Tommy Lund on the occasion of Knut Åsdam Psychasthenia 10, Art Now, Tate Britain, 11 July-1 October 2000), 21-43.

⁴ Merleau-Ponty writes provocatively, for instance, "Space is not what it was in the Dioptrics, a network of relations between objects such as would be seen by a third party, witnessing my vision, or by a geometer looking over it and reconstructing it from outside. It is, rather, a space reckoned starting from me as the null point or degree zero

'psychasthenia' takes up the more insidious effects of such a porous brand of subjectivity – for him, total appropriation or dispossession of a subject by its space is akin to schizophrenic dislocation. Åsdam himself willingly disallows simple definitions of subjectivity by foregrounding what could be called the skin, the teeth, the veins of the readily anthropomorphic megalopolis. Yet for Åsdam, who takes up the arguably always-already schizophrenic logic of late capitalism, an extended, even unmarked skin – shared by urban space and its inhabitants – might offer up temporary and unexpected intertwinings: intimacies, communities, dialogues, transformations. And if there is a not-place, a not-space, where 'ordinary practitioners' can take up activities of temporary deviation – possibly creating an alternate use-value – it seems to exist necessarily by night.

of spatiality. I do not see it according to its exterior envelope; I live it from the inside; I am immersed in it. After all, the world is around me, not in front of me." In Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and Mind', in The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting, translated by Galen A. Johnson (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 138. First published as 'L'oeil et l'esprit' *Art de France* 1, no. 1 (January 1961). While Merleau-Ponty hardly describes a complete dissolving of boundaries between a subject and her surroundings, his model nicely compliments Caillois's in that porosity is highlighted in both; the first example aligned more with the radically alienated subject and the second with a potentially social, political one.

A silent slide projection, Psychasthenia 10 series 2 is composed of some sixteen images – each one a different nighttime shot taken by the artist of the modern or postmodern facade of an apartment building. Formally, the emptied, anonymous images recall the water towers and parking lots of Berndt and Hilla Becher and Ed Ruscha. Yet where the Bechers or Ruscha might be said to eliminate the human body from their compositions in order to examine the ambivalent lush-starkness of the capitalist-industrial landscape, Åsdam infuses that landscape with body, with extended subjectivity. He bestows on these instances of architecture an undeniable caress, one metonymically mimed by the blanket of night that cloaks them, one that is emphatically loving and at the same time palatably ravenous. Psychasthenia 10 series 2 operates as so many portraits *sans* human sitters, as so many deferred and deterred possibilities – catching desire mid-route, between the partially blinded gaze and its fantasmatic objects that, here quite literally, dance in the modular fields of reflective glass.

Each site to which Åsdam delivers audiences is at once discrete unto itself and coded as same – another worn-out example of 1950s pseudo-utopian, low-cost architecture

exhaustedly admitting, ironically, that inhabitation, or living itself, disrupts the possibility of utopia. De Certeau's group of 'ordinary practitioners' operate much in the same way – at once solitary and of a piece. And it is both as solitary and of a piece that we ourselves gaze upon these buildings that mime our social situation and, correspondingly, house it. In the second image in Åsdam's series, we are looking, perhaps from across the street, at a tall, sterile, concrete building. Lit sickly, with the tones of yellow and green that seem only to catch full pallid vibrancy in the small hours of the morning, the building's vertical thrust pushes up and out of the top of the frame, only two or three windows lit from within, and two brilliant outdoor lights straining to feign a performance of security. The fourth image, on the other hand, shows a sprawling horizontal complex that has surrendered itself almost entirely to the surrounding sheath of darkness. The vantage is further away from this building, couched in lush foliage, squinting an eye at the scattered squares of color that light up this otherwise disappeared behemoth. In all these images, the viewer fluctuates, variously taking up the posture of hiding, of spying, of stealing, of needing, of being satisfied, amorous, afraid, in any case no longer firmly affixed by

any utopian ideal. Åsdam offers no stable gaze; indeed, the images are anchors for a fleeting, fantasmatic, identificatory staging of a kind of fugued subjectivity. Perhaps the viewer is, in fact, doubly removed, a somnambulant Freudian case-study: having left the body, crouching, stalking, camouflaged in a no-place, scanning the grid, waiting to recognize one of the tiny lit squares as her own, knowing that none of them are hers, and that all of them are.

II.

My mouth always dribbles with its coupling force;
My soul, jealous of the body's intercourse,
Makes it a tearful, wild necessity.⁵ – Arthur Rimbaud

Consider this stanza from Rimbaud's 'Hidden and Wrinkled', one of his '*Stupra: Three Scatological Sonnets*'. I have yet to find a more succinct account of the discrepancy

⁵ Arthur Rimbaud, Complete Works, translated by Paul Schmidt (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 133. In another of the '*Stupra: Three Scatological Sonnets*', entitled 'Our Assholes Are Different', Rimbaud writes of the "architecture of [the] crotch," a phrase Åsdam has used in describing his 1995 video, Untitled: Pissing, a continuous close-up shot of a man who pisses his pants. There, Åsdam employs a foil-logic for his later *Psychasthenia* works – the (phallic) body is itself rendered architectural, fleetingly monumental, before it literally loses control of itself.

between the euphoric merging of bodies and the belligerent isolation of the intellect that, ironically, accompanies it. Rimbaud paints a picture of desire as an internal battle, a splitting of the self, an impulse whose existence is impossible to deny yet is ambivalently, even violently experienced. The precarious traversal of porous bodily boundaries only underscores the delimited, solitary psyche. And yet it might be this very contradiction that charges sexuality (and subjectivity itself) with more than simple pleasures, that makes of it a frustrating, anxious endeavor, one potentially imbued with political and ethical possibilities. On one level, Rimbaud's gorgeous graphic scenes – usually of male homosexual sex – might work merely to reinscribe one kind of classical phallocentrism, yet, his willingness to point to fissures, gaps, and disappointments tends more to deconstruct it.

Rimbaud gives an account of indestructible, timeless desire, a desire whose very strength lies in its perpetual deferral of satisfaction, its status as unquenchable, fragile, fractal. He is hardly alone as he queries the ontology of desire. "If indestructible desire escapes from time, to what register does it belong in the order of

things?"⁷ This delicious question, posed by Lacan, has an answer, if a precarious one: Indestructible desire resides in the non-temporality of the unconscious or, more accurately, in the elusive space that exists but momentarily between apprehension and repression – in a kind of vision eclipsed instantaneously by blindness. Describing this nearly simultaneous appearance and disappearance as "the rhythmic structure of this pulsation of the slit," Lacan hardly need prompt his readers more overtly to think of the ways the structure of the unconscious, then, mimes the body, with its own rhythmic structures, pulsations, and slits. Åsdam's Psychasthenia 10 series 2 prompts an additional answer to Lacan's question: Indestructible desire, on the social level, can be found in the register of the urban unconscious. Åsdam's hulking, sadly graceful buildings are, at once, constructions, constructed, and constructing – living concrete envelopes whose rigid skins produce an unlikely rhythmic pulsation.

The images that make up Psychasthenia 10 series 2 are viewed according to their own rhythmic structure: set on a timer, each image emerges slowly from the dark, the

⁶Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 32.

nocturnal details of another building arranging themselves momentarily before fading away, bleeding back into the dark. Like tired architectural blushes, the buildings, as Åsdam renders them, become so many soft structures, their contours loosened by their dream-like presentation, a strange difference and repetition. To further soften the strict lines of these now-tired utopian erections, Åsdam has his audiences take them in while sitting in a round fabric viewing room, one constructed in the spirit of the Bauhaus designer Lily Reich's 'soft architecture'. Less a shelter than a kind of membrane, the viewing room connects audience members with the outside world as much as it cuts them off from it. Åsdam's supple enveloping of the rigid, if fatigued, phallic modernist architectural archetype suggests that a dialectical relationship may be activated between subjects and the space they occupy.⁷ In Åsdam's work, Caillois's notion of a subject radically dissolved in space can be paired with Rimbaud's adamant, if failed, desire for such a state. Åsdam's urban unconscious offers up the rich possibilities of going *down below*, if only to momentarily recognize the alienated, though relentlessly persisting desires of our own.

-Johanna Burton

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