

**ANNIKA VON HAUSSWOLFF**

**KNUT ÅSDAM**

**EIJA-LIISA AHTILA**

**END OF STORY**

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# OVER AND OVER AGAIN: REPETITION AND DISRUPTION IN THE ART OF KNUT ÅSDAM\*

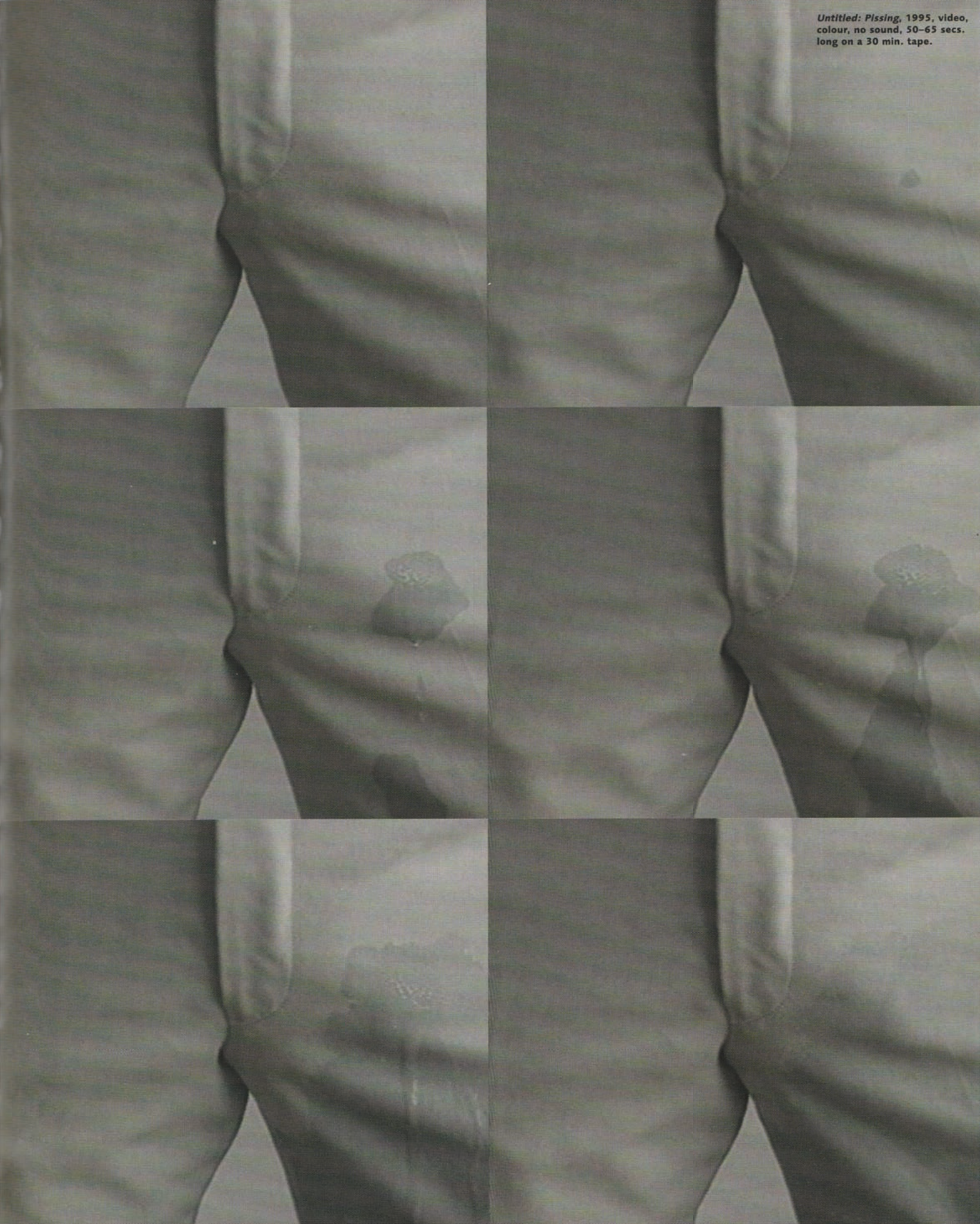
by Benedict Borthwick

**IN ALL OF THE** changes that have occurred in post-war art production, perhaps the most immediate for contemporary viewers is the decline of the importance of medium. It is no longer possible to use the categories of painting and sculpture as organising principles that differentiate artworks across a broad spectrum of production nor even within a single artist's practice. How, then, to quantify the output of an artist such as Knut Åsdam, whose work is formally and theoretically diverse, without reductively proposing a linear evolution of his practice by employing a 'prose chronology'? One method is to write about the issues raised by his work. Elsewhere I have written that Åsdam's work "elaborates a nexus of concerns that are centred around subjectivity, authority, sexuality, and masculinity... [as well as] youth culture, music, and architecture."<sup>1</sup> However, the range of possibilities mapped out by the terms listed above are so vast that they almost become meaningless. One might as well say that Åsdam's work addresses the world we live in. What is more, viewers have to work hard to fully grasp the complexity of the metonymic chains which graft layers of meaning onto his works. By concentrating on synecdochal details a rich web of meanings

emerge that are specific to each work yet are inter-related across his practice. But following the referent alone will often lead to banal generalisations. One also has to approach the work from a bodily register. I am interested in combining this approach with analysis of the work's formal and linguistic structures to find out how they figure specific meanings implied by the referents and form a complex totality. The structuring principle of this paper is repetition, a trope which constantly adapts itself to affirm and simultaneously resist the context of each piece. Tracing the twists and turns and different figurations of repetition in Åsdam's work is the means by which to establish a meaningful relationship between the referent and a long list of issues that is meaningless without specification.

The video *Untitled: Pissing* (1995) shows a close-up shot of a man's trousered crotch and inner thighs. Although the video is in colour, the pale blue of the jeans looks washed out to white against the white background. The surfaces in Åsdam's image evokes the monochrome, one of the central paradigms of modernist painting. After a few seconds, a wet spot emerges in the centre of the leg on the right. This

Untitled: *Pissing*, 1995, video,  
colour, no sound, 50-65 secs.  
long on a 30 min. tape.





*Psychasthenia 2*, 1997, video projection.

startling image of a man urinating through his trousers continues as the wet patch slowly grows, changing shape, taking hold. Another unconnected stain appears at the bottom of the screen. The wetness quickly expands but not fast enough to contain the urine. The cloth becomes more densely soaked until one, two, four, five, six drips suddenly indicate release. The piss oozes through the cloth – the fabric has reached its point of saturation and the excess spills through the surface of the trousers in a steady flow down the leg. By now most of the leg and thigh is drenched and the liquid continues to spread through the weave. Finally this stream slows down and almost indiscernibly the cloth begins to absorb the surface liquid, soaking it all up. At the top of the image the dark wetness begins to lighten until the borders between wet and dry become indistinct making it difficult to tell the difference between them. Eventually the screen cuts to black.

Wetting oneself is generally associated with childhood or traumatic situations when the body loses control over itself. This taboo relates strongly to phallogentric masculinity where control is the ordering principle. Menstruation is an associated taboo of uncontrollable release which marks out a moment of radical difference from the patriarchal.<sup>2</sup> The cyclical recurrence of menstruation provides an alternative temporality to linear progression. Julia Kristeva's model of women's time/hysterical time is premised on the notion of a temporal model of reproduction, repetition, and simultaneity.<sup>3</sup> This temporality of cycles and simultaneity structures Åsdam's work.

There is another tangential link between menstruation and

*Untitled: Pissing*. The video's white jeans are an item of clothing most women would consider taboo if they are merely expecting their period. Inability to control these bodily functions can be simultaneously traumatic, exciting, and erotically charged precisely because they are beyond physical or psychic mastery. *Untitled: Pissing* articulates a masculinity in crisis where the peeing becomes the hysterical gesture which is repeated over and over again. The image is heavily eroticised by depicting "something you are not supposed to do [and] the pleasure of release and coming on yourself [which] has an erotic relation to masculinity."<sup>4</sup> Therefore Åsdam's equation of wetting oneself is not limited to urinating, but the transparent pee is evocative of the thin clear ejaculate that only thickens when it carries sperm. It is also a gendered reference to female arousal and 'getting wet.'

The formal device of having an uncut fixed single-camera shot for the duration of the video means that the viewer witnesses the activity on-screen in real-time. We are never in doubt about how long it took to perform the activity in *Untitled: Pissing*, yet it is precisely this faithfulness to linear time that appears to disrupt the temporality of viewing. The bleeding of the liquid through the surface of the trouser canvas is similar to watching an image in slow motion. There is something hallucinatory and seductive which appears to slow down time, drawing one into the image and making one feel absorbed by it. *Untitled: Pissing* oscillates between different temporal intensities: the gradual emergence of the stain is followed by its rapid expansion, saturation, and finally the cascade of fluid spilling through the surface. Towards the end



*Psychasthenia 2+2*, 1997–98, video projection. Installation shot from *Installations at the Contemporary Art Centre, Vilnius, Lithuania, 1998*.

the sequence slowly reverses itself to re-absorb the excess until the area ceases to visibly expand and reaches its point of entropy. The brevity of the piece and intensity of the image ensure that the viewer does not lose interest. Then it finishes, only to start, then finish, then start over and over again.

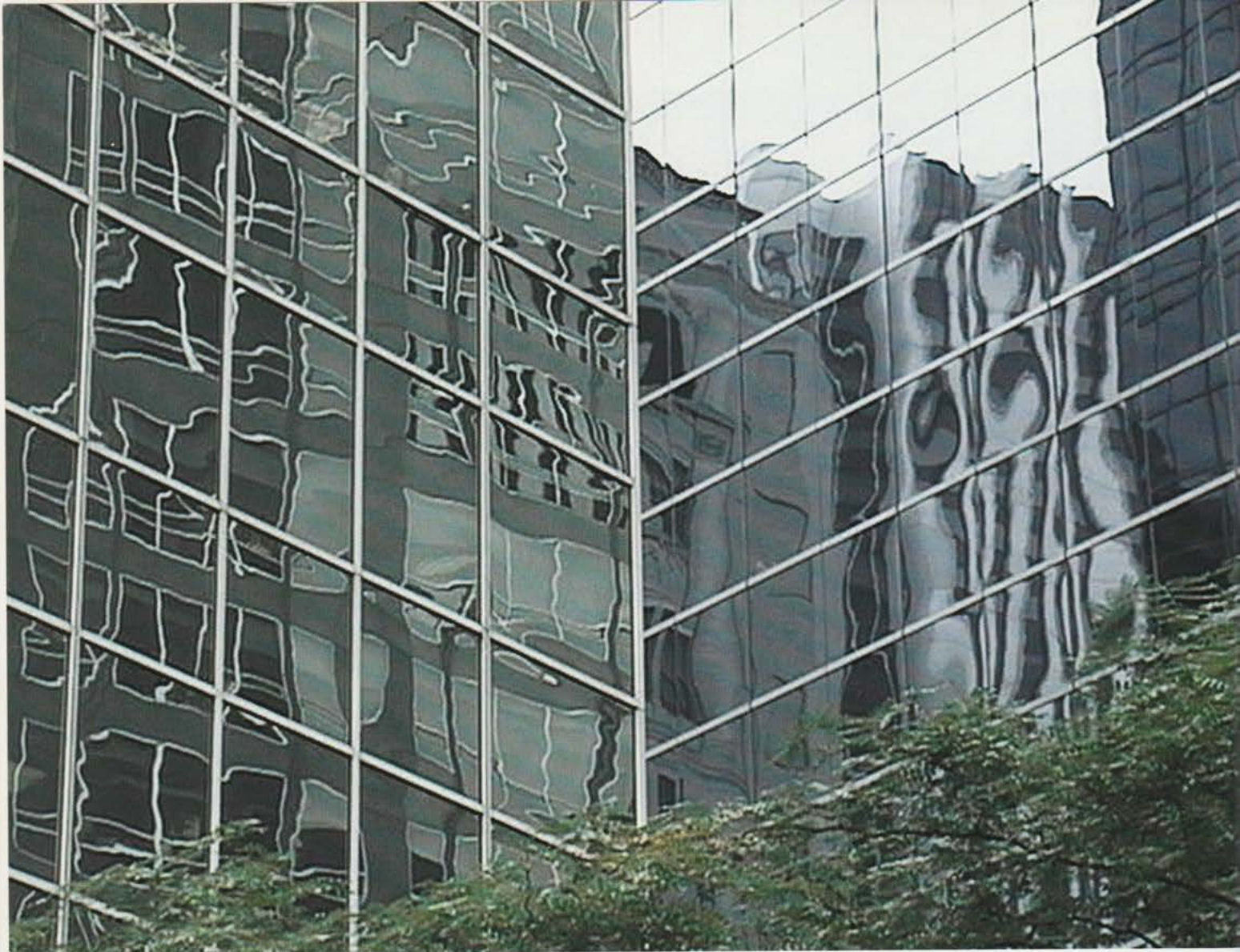
The hallucinatory sense of distortion in the temporality of viewing is a trope that runs throughout Åsdam's work. Within his oeuvre one of the closest parallels to *Untitled: Pissing is Psychasthenia 2* (1997) which achieves its effect by alternating real-time footage of a corporate building with fast, erratic, stroboscopic flickering. The piece shows two overlapping corporate buildings. The perspective is difficult to figure out as the buildings' surfaces are an indecipherable miasma of reflections of the surrounding buildings and the sky. The angles are arranged in such a way as to confuse the point of overlap between the two buildings for the corner of a single structure. The architecture in this image is the generic glass-and-steel uniform of global capitalism that can be found in any modern city.

The artist has subsequently withdrawn *Psychasthenia 2* and now presents it as *Psychasthenia 2+2* (1997–98) in which the footage and editing remains unchanged but the image is doubled. This new piece was realised by mirroring itself to create a technological Rorschach print. The symmetry emphasises the perspectival uncanniness of the seam at which the image and its reflection join centre-screen. Another uncanny symmetry is the consistency of the angles in the four panels of

the image. From left to right the first and third or second and fourth panels map onto each other even though they are different buildings.

The futuristic rhetoric of these buildings persuades us that they figure the future, that capitalism is the future, despite, perhaps even *because of* the mundane international homogeneity of corporate architecture. To be seduced by this architecture's offer of plenitude is to immerse oneself in capitalist ideology which guarantees a prosperous future that is ultimately a "sensation of eternity."<sup>5</sup> Sigmund Freud uses the term "oceanic" to describe this "feeling of indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole."<sup>6</sup> Åsdam's image uses this highly seductive and fetishised architecture to induce an "oceanic" feeling through a metonymic chain held together by the architecture's reflective surfaces which are continuous with the environment. These surfaces figure the future which, by identification, we are invited to be a part of. Yet this promise of a future is nothing more than a denial of death, the only unconditional fact of our existence. Although the reflective surfaces of this architecture create its "indissoluble bond" with its surroundings, these reflections are heavily mediated and immediately identify each building as the result of an imperfect mimesis. But more important than the exact replication of the environment is the architecture's loss of identity announced by these reflections. These buildings cannot exist as autonomous entities because they will always imperfectly assimilate themselves to the context they are built in.

Rosalind Krauss's account an outdoor exhibition of Robert Morris's

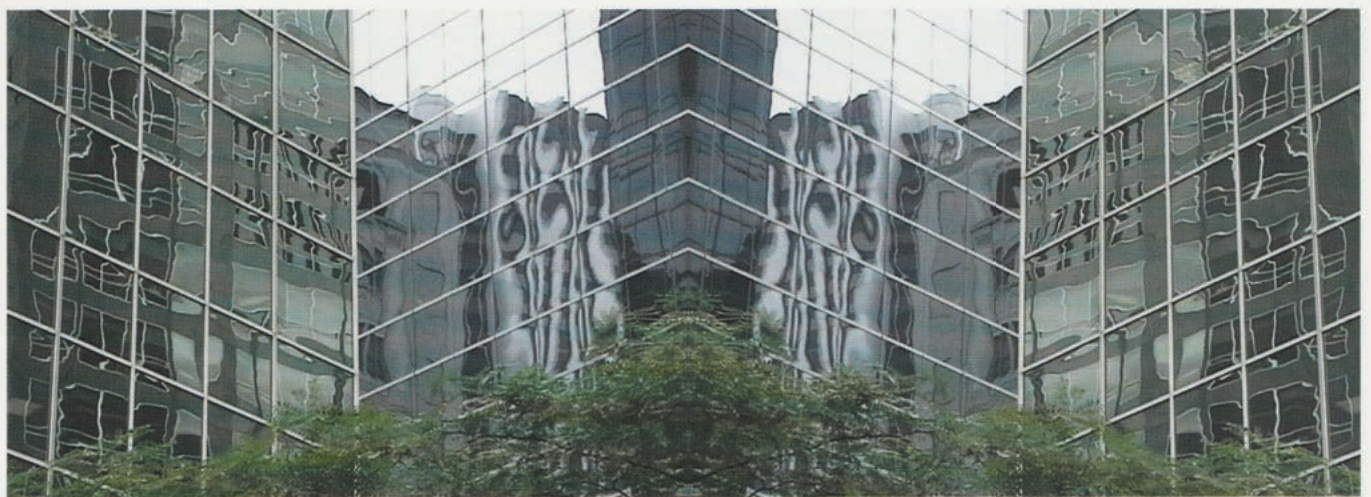


Clockwise from left to right: *Psychasthenia 2+2*, 1997–98, video projection.

*Untitled (Mirrored Boxes)* (1965) is a succinct description of a similar phenomenon in minimalist sculpture. She concludes that the mirrored cubes are "forms which are distinct from the setting only because, though visually continuous with grass and trees, they are not in fact part of the landscape."<sup>7</sup> In each of these cases the individuality of the object is renounced to its context. Hence Åsdam's title – "psychasthenia" is the term Roger Caillois uses to discuss the phenomenon of mimetic insects who adopt the visual characteristics of the environment they inhabit. Caillois shows how mimesis in these organisms is a form of "actual photography ... on the level of the object and not on that of the image, a reproduction in three-dimensional space with solids and voids."<sup>8</sup> This is not a means of protection from predators but a pathological "disturbance in the perception of space"<sup>9</sup> wherein the organism identifies completely with the environment. In Åsdam's piece, the uncanniness of mimesis is further exacerbated by the rigid grid of lines drawn across the surfaces of these buildings like units of measurement. These lines are the steel girders that at once support the entire edifice while simultaneously compromising its assimilation – they appear to distort and fragment the reflections into a discontinuous series of images

stretched over their individual frames .

The simultaneity of the rigid grid structure of lines and the melting reflections is uncanny in another way – the video resembles a memory fragment or dream image which flashes up from the unconscious yet is intangible then gone. After each blackout the image flashes up and looks exactly the same as it did before. This cycle of repetition is seductive and hypnotic – the more it repeats, the more compulsive it becomes. The repetition of this fragment results in the "accumulation of excitations each of which would be tolerable by itself but taken together they become unbearable."<sup>10</sup> The phenomenological impact of standing in this environment where the image blacks out in irregular sequences of beats and delays is overwhelming. Simulating the processes of *nachträglich* by which the memory image comes to have meaning at a later date, Åsdam sets up a traumatic relation between the subject and space.<sup>11</sup> Literally, through the viewer's phenomenological relation to the gallery space, and figuratively, through the use of a scene of highly seductive architecture presented on a cinematic scale.<sup>12</sup> The hypnotic rhythm causes a drifting between the states of immersion in, and alienation from, the image. Åsdam heightens our awareness of the split



between the cognitive and physical aspects of subjectivity. Knowledge of this split is alienating even if each side of this split can be a pleasurable site to occupy.

The tranquil image in *Psychasthenia 2+2* is momentarily ruptured

by metonymic sequences and details. When the viewer becomes aware of these contingent breaks, the seductive spell of the image is broken – it no longer seems to exist outside of time. This break occurs on two levels. The first is on the level of the symbolic, when the fragmented



discontinuous reflection of a bird appears on the building's gridded surface. The bird appears involuntarily like a dream image upon the surface of the unconscious. It cleaves open the nature/culture split between the stasis of the architecture and dynamism of the environment it mimics. The bird's appearance thirty seconds into the video functions as a punctum that pierces the architecture's timeless ideology and provides momentary relief from the epileptic flickering. It suddenly splits in two then disappears as its reflection is devoured by the building. Less than a minute later the trees at the bottom of the image, which had been still up to that point, are suddenly ruffled by the wind just before the tape finishes. Unlike the hallucinatory image of the bird, this detail is a gentle and hypnotic announcement of real-time into what had been disorientingly atemporal relationships between the body, the image, architecture, capitalism, and ideology.

Similarly, the gradual shift in the pace of *Untitled: Pissing* is punctuated by a moment which draws the viewer back to real time. At the cusp of changing from slow expansion to excessive flow, six drips fall from the uppermost fold of the trousers. Each drip ruptures the atemporal flux between the video's possible readings as a highly sexualised narrative of desire or trauma. Like the relationship between trauma or desire and the unconscious, the drip represents the uncontainable gesture or excess which pierces through the surface to declare itself repeatedly. The drips hystericise this image, momentarily breaking the desiring or traumatic illusion of a hermetic and self-contained temporality. The internal rhythm of the piece is ruptured by the drips which announce two certainties: firstly, the man will inevitably be covered in piss; secondly, the inevitability of the progression of time – a fact that much work which (re)presents 'real time' accepts uncritically as it's natural condition.

Repetition is featured in both *Untitled: Pissing* and *Psychasthenia 2+2* in the ways they are edited into a series of slightly altered versions of the same piece of footage. For instance, each time *Untitled: Pissing* finishes and starts again, the sequence has a slightly different length by extending or shortening the beginning, the end, or both. Instead of merely repeating itself on a loop, the work produces a serial progression of differentiation which causes an indiscernible disruption at the level of unconscious perception. Similarly, *Psychasthenia 2+2* has two versions that appear consecutively. In one, the flickering is irregular and jarring, in the other, it is more consistent and monotonous. This juxtaposition reinforces the difference between them, yet these differences are almost imperceptible.

The strategy of repetition was developed over a series of three video performances made during 1993–94. These are: *Come to Your Own* (1993); *Play Dead* (1993–4); and *Untitled: Skipping* (1994), with Michael Curran.<sup>13</sup> Like most of his other videos these works use real time single-camera stationary shots that record whatever enters the frame. This series has clear historical references to the task-oriented video performances of the early 1970s where artists like Bruce Nauman and Dan Graham enacted a clearly defined set of actions. However, the historical references in Åsdam's work are revived, not as influences, but as tropes that are already in place and can be used to articulate different kinds of significations that might even conflict with the premises and assumptions of the earlier works they create a dialogue with.

In *Come to Your Own* (1993), a darkly dressed man sits at the entrance to an empty white room. He repeats an invitation to the viewer using a limited set of terms and phrases, each time inflecting the

meaning by changing its syntagmatic structure. Over 22 minutes innumerable forms of the invitation alter the meaning which constantly mutates with each reconfiguration:

Now, if you feel at ease, if you feel comfortable about it, if you feel it is right for you now, you might want slowly to move back in to the space that you are in and become aware of your physical presence in that space.

PAUSE

If you're comfortable about it you now might want, slowly, at your own pace, to move back into the space you are in.

PAUSE

If you feel at ease, if you feel comfortable about it, you can now move back to the space that you occupy and become aware of your physical presence in that space

The spoken element of the piece resembles an audio meditation tape but taken in conjunction with the image it becomes something quite different. Unlike the audio tapes in which a disembodied voice invites the listener to meditate, *Come to Your Own* forces viewers to accept that the body is utterly mediated by technology and language. We see a figure occupy space and become absorbed by his own performative relation to the absent addressee. The inability of language to adequately articulate an intention compels the performer to shift between each rhetorical possibility and syntagmatic combination of the phrases, including persuasion and permission. At one point the man seems to challenge the viewer to disobey his authority, at another the challenge is to achieve the total presence implied in the instruction, an impossibility which will end in the failure/humiliation of anyone who attempts it. The insistent reassurance that the decision to move back into the space you occupy becomes a paranoid mantra that occupies the performer as much as the viewer. Åsdam has written that "the subject position of the work is shifted from the viewer (when the performer speaks) to the performer (when he is quiet) in the course of the performance."<sup>14</sup> However, this exchange between the performer and viewer does not always occur. At times, the performer's compulsive repetition of the phrase becomes an attempt to recover his own loss of 'total presence' which places the viewer in a highly voyeuristic position. Reiteration of the refrain highlights the performer's inability to coax the correct meaning from language that will articulate his intention – an intention to perform an impossible task – but it also points to the potential failure of language itself to convey meaning.

As with both *Psychasthenia 2+2* and *Untitled: Pissing*, repetition in *Come to Your Own* constantly evolves, mutating with each reiteration. Åsdam's historical rhetoric resembles the form of serialism practised by Sol Lewitt in pieces like *Variations of Incomplete Open Cubes* (1974). Mel Bochner characterises Lewitt's work as being "premised on the idea that the succession of terms (divisions) within a single work is based on a... predetermined derivation (progression, permutation, rotation, reversal) from one or more of the preceding terms in that piece."<sup>15</sup>

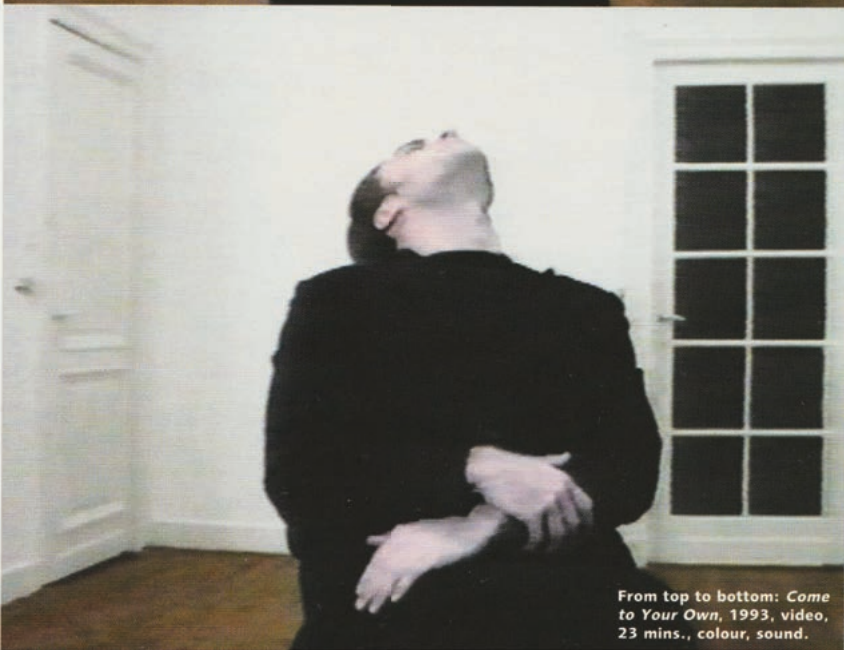
Through consecutive modulations of the preceding terms Lewitt "arrives at a unique perceptual breakdown of conceptual order into visual chaos."<sup>16</sup> However, Åsdam mobilises the breakdown of order into chaos to address the ways in which subjectivity is constantly articulated and reiterated through experience. Unlike Bochner's definition of seriality where "the idea is carried out to its logical conclusion," Åsdam's work refutes the possibility of logical operations to explain subject-formation. Instead, we are left with the unending deferral of presence between the artwork and viewer.

The rhythm of progressions, breakdowns, and repeated mutating phrases is echoed in the sound component of Åsdam's *Whitney I.S.P. Installation* (1995).<sup>17</sup> Two small speaker components are mounted face to the wall. The muffled sound of the 90 minute 'mix-tape' repeats a cyclical refrain that reinforces the standardised 4/4 beat, yet each repetition marks a small mutation within the musical grid. The music is not loud, so the distortion and choking of specific elements on the tape – such as snare and hi-hat patterns or string lines – make it difficult to grasp the exact points at which one track is being mixed with another.

The installation is in a room divided by a diagonal pathway between two entrances. The speakers are on the left of the main entrance, one on each side of the corner. On the right there is a small monitor mounted on a wall bracket at eye-level, angled slightly towards the corner. The walls comprise of alternate strips of mahogany Formica and white gallery wall which appears to follow some elusive pattern of distribution and measurement that echoes Barnett Newman's late-modernist aesthetics.<sup>18</sup> The Formica constructs a narrative of institutional power, referring to the common use of this material in institutional settings.<sup>19</sup> Formica is the hegemonic surface of state apparatuses like schools and government offices as well as commercial institutions where it decorates bank and corporate interiors. The material is also commonly used in the basement 'rec-rooms' and gyms of middle-class suburbia, providing a link to the principle locus of the family as an institutionalised function of the state.<sup>20</sup> Within the installation, the video *Citizen* (1995) disrupts the conformity presupposed by the above institutions. *Citizen* is a collage of footage shot by the artist and edited into a sequence that intercuts the same extended shot with a series of short clips. The long shot looks down from an angle at a section of a chair and edge of a rug. This shot is interrupted by images that include: the torso of a man dressed in a suit jacket with a wool vest underneath who moves his hand over his crotch; a shot of two towels stacked on a wooden surface; a close-up of a man lying face down on a couch with his arm across his back and his hand moving between his legs; and a male figure dressed in camouflage visible only from the chest to his ankles which are spread very wide. There are more.

*Citizen* combines the images in two almost identical sequences edited together at slightly different paces. This was the first video in which Åsdam used different versions of the same sequences consecutively. Although the differences between the two versions are marginally more clear in *Citizen* than in the other videos, the effect of questioning

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From top to bottom: *Come to Your Own*, 1993, video, 23 mins., colour, sound.



Clockwise from left to right: *Psychasthenia*, 1996, installation: Formica, TV/VCR monitor, video, speakers, music (a 90 min. DJ-mixed techno tape). Installation shots from the *UKS Biennial* at Stenersenmuseet, Oslo, Norway, 1996.





From top to bottom: *Citizen*, 1995, video, colour, 3 mins., no sound.

one's memory of the earlier version remains. The video and the installation mimic each other's formal structure – just as the edits disrupt the continuity of the long shot, the panels of Formica disrupt the continuity of the gallery's white wall, acting as fissures in the institutional ideologies that are figured by the materials used.<sup>21</sup> The sum of these formal elements present a construction of masculinity in relation to those same institutions signified by the Formica, the suit, the D.P.M., and the shots set in domestic interiors.<sup>22</sup> These institutions form the bases of patriarchal authority and, as such, they are deeply imbricated in the discourse of masculinity. This installation draws attention to the fissures in the fabric of ideology that open up possibilities of alternative subject positions.<sup>23</sup>

Viewers have an option of two positions from which to watch *Citizen*. The first requires standing very close to the monitor blocking other visitors' views. Through this formal strategy the artist develops a particular relation between the viewer's body and the installation. The second way to watch the video is to stand in the main entrance of the space, thereby avoiding the intimate relation between oneself and the object. However, this forces other viewers to squeeze between the people blocking the entrance, brushing up against other bodies. Also, it is possible for a few people to see the screen at the same time if they huddle together, their bodies in close proximity as they watch the different constructions of masculinity. Engaging in a private, even intimate, relationship with an object or person in a public space is a theme that runs through Åsdam's work and refers to sites such as night-clubs where the articulation of sexuality tends to be more fluid.

By congesting the spatial economies of viewing, Åsdam mobilises the trope of disruption in yet another new permutation. This strategy is even more emphatically pronounced in *Heterotopia* (1996). The entrance opens onto a bottleneck passage that viewers must pass through to enter or leave the gallery. The installation was part of the exhibition *Departure Lounge* at the P.S.1 Clocktower Gallery in Manhattan. This exhibition was a cacophony of screens, cables, text, music, amplified ambient sounds, and bright lights. To enter, visitors had to walk along a raised catwalk that circled the outside walls of half the room. The catwalk afforded viewers an instant overview of the exhibition as it simultaneously put them on display. At the end of the catwalk, a few steps were squashed between the gallery wall and a large raised platform. These steps led down to a narrow passage that viewers had to walk through to get into the main gallery. *Heterotopia* was housed beneath the raised platform. Its entrance was only four by six feet and opened onto the bottom of the stairs. To enter viewers had to bend over or crouch down thereby blocking the bottleneck to the main gallery at its point of maximum congestion.

Heterotopias, according to Michel Foucault, are spaces in society that absorb social taboos<sup>24</sup> Society and heterotopias constantly define each other in relation to socio-historical attitudes. They are spaces of crisis and deviation from social norms and as such they constitute the split in the psychic identity of any society. Such spaces of social negation share a physical and psychic boundary with society. By installing *Heterotopia* beneath the platform the piece is inconspicuous from the outside. Two sides of the piece have walls of translucent milked-glass panels. These function as camouflage that establishes an osmotic border between the exhibition and artwork. The installation creates a 'space of withdrawal' while simultaneously retaining a visible and aural

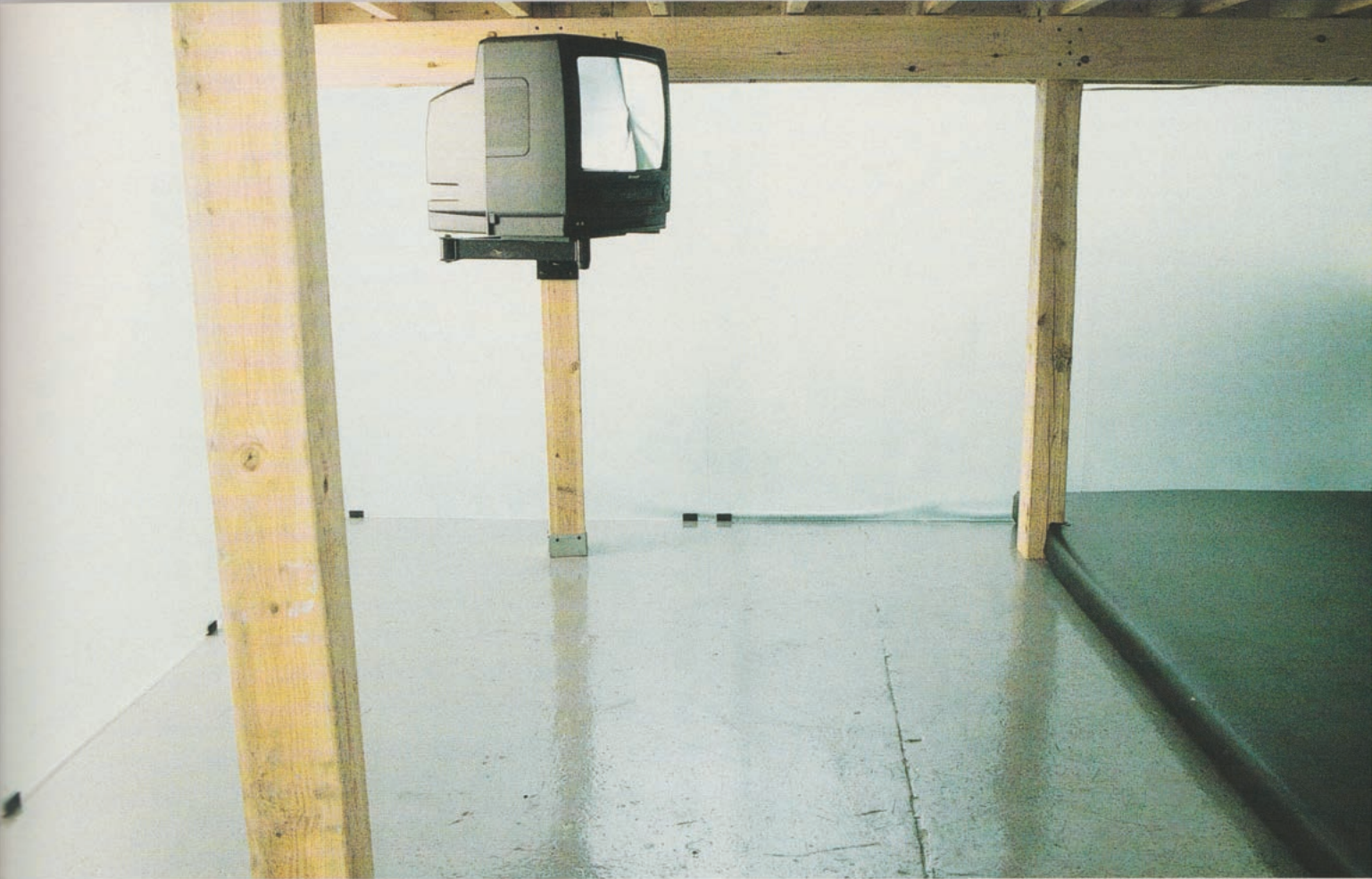
connection to the rest of the exhibition.<sup>25</sup> Inside, the compact space is only four feet high, eight feet wide, and ten feet deep. A monitor showing *Untitled: Pissing* is mounted on a wooden strut and functions as an invitation for viewers to cross the threshold of *Heterotopia*. People can sit or lie down on the black vinyl cushions to watch the video or just hang-out. The cushions specified the space by evoking the chill-out areas in night-clubs which can often be as intimidating and asocial as they are relaxing. Like the use of Formica in earlier works, these cushions are cheap, easy to wipe down, and superficially improve the spaces they decorate. What makes some night-clubs heterotopic is the immediacy of their function as places of withdrawal from the hegemonic social ideologies that they simultaneously reinforce by being defined in a negative relation to them. This makes permissible forms of behaviour that elsewhere are intolerable.

*Untitled: Pissing* sets up an explicitly voyeuristic situation for the viewer who can watch the moment of humiliation or *jouissance* without feeling inhibited by making eye contact with that person. This experience is directly echoed by the structure of *Heterotopia* where one's head is positioned at the crotch-level of passers-by, heightening participants' bodily relations to the piece, each other, and those viewers outside. *Heterotopia* inverts the viewing conditions proposed by minimalist sculpture (which externalises the relations between artwork, viewer and exhibition context), by centralising the relations between object, viewer and space within the artwork itself. Åsdam cites the heavily masculinised discourses of modernism that are fundamental points of departure in his attempts to queer those conventions.

As in many of Åsdam's pieces, the concept of 'ambient' plays a significant role in *Heterotopia*. The sounds of the gallery become a soundtrack that connects the installation to the other activity which can be heard through the glass. The milked glass mutes the visual and aural mayhem of the show, thereby using the mediation of those sounds to differentiate the installation as a quiet zone. The contingent ambience of the gallery in *Heterotopia* functions similarly to the 'mix-tape' in the Whitney installation. Both are soundtracks that specify the context and other elements that make up the installation.

The increasing figuration of space in popular culture, which is particularly evident in music, plays an important role in Åsdam's work. His own practice mediates other forms of cultural production through the formal prisms of modernism.<sup>26</sup> Åsdam attempts to disturb the borders between different spheres of cultural production by using diverse methods and resources in his practice. His work thus operates at a liminal intersection between a broad range of cultural activities. The idea that soundtracks can specify an artwork and that ambient and recorded sound are equally appropriate is given another permutation in *Psychasthenia 2+2*. Rather than merely adding an ambient soundtrack Åsdam takes the formal structure of electronica and tries to represent it visually. *Flutter*, from Autechre's *Anti e.p.* (1994) is a useful example. This track was "programmed in such a way that no bars contain identical beats," which unmoors thereby unmorring electronica from the convention of the 4/4 musical grid.<sup>27</sup> *Flutter* figures the hallucinatory experiences that resulted from the interdependent co-emergence of early-1990s dance music and drug culture. In *Psychasthenia 2+2*, this dialogue with *Flutter* operates at successive levels, including the disorienting spatialisation of audio and visual material, the erratic pulse that underpins each work, and the hallucinogenic and psychasthenic drift of





Clockwise from left to right: *Heterotopia*, 1996, installation below platform with milked glass walls, black vinyl cushions, and monitor showing *Untitled: Pissing* (1995). Installation shots from ICA, P.S. 1 Museum, New York.

subjectivity. *Psychasthenia 2+2* and *Heterotopia* both cite parallel cultural activities (such as fine art and popular music) as metonymic proximities rather than literal quotations. The machinic aspect by which Åsdam's work produces experience, compels the viewer to negotiate the relations between each piece and its cultural moment.

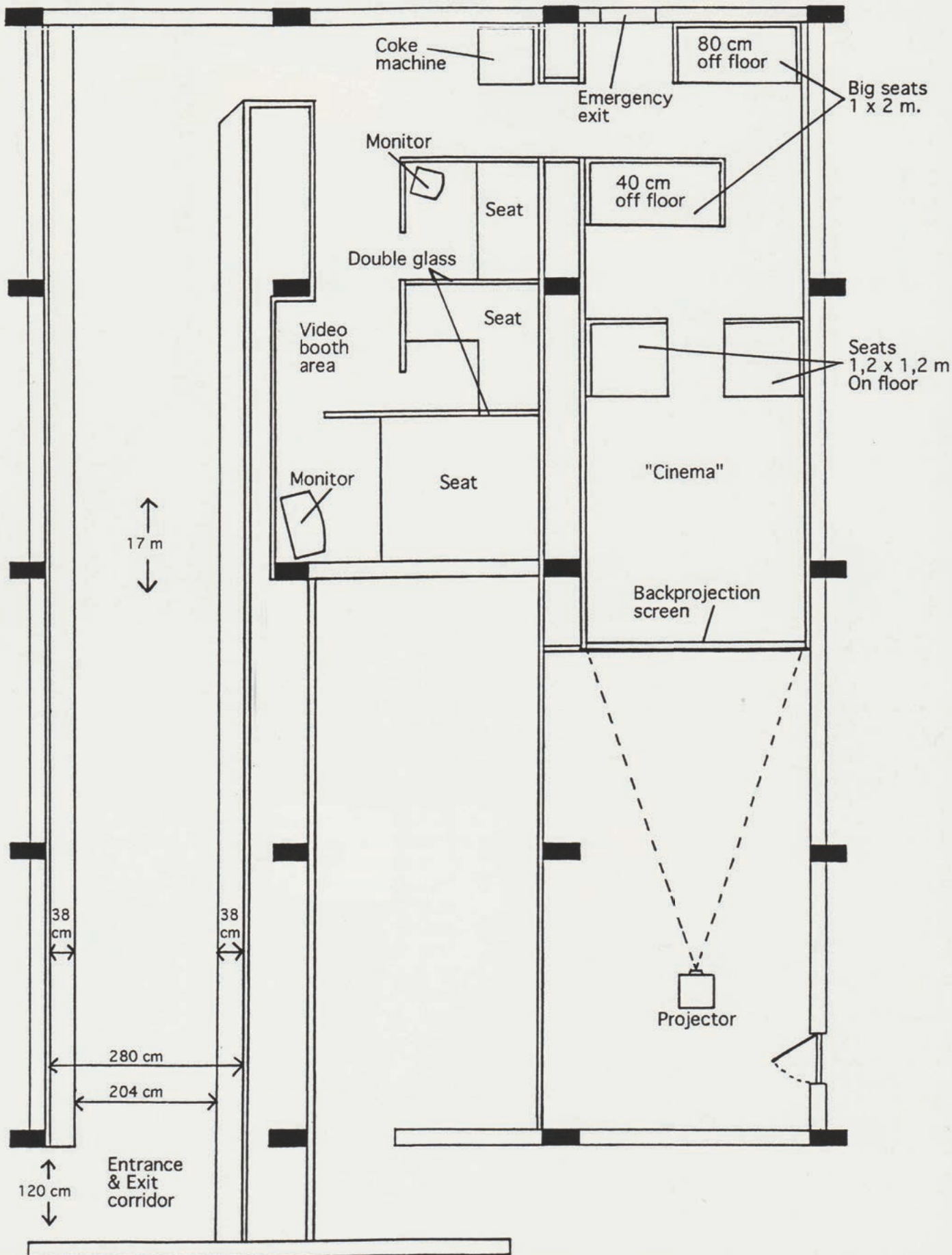
The ways that 'ambient' is configured in *Heterotopia* finds a close parallel in Björk's *There's More to Life Than This – Recorded Live at the Milk Bar Toilets* (1993).<sup>28</sup> This track begins with the diegetic sounds of a party reminiscent of the gallery sounds audible within *Heterotopia*. The crowd is still audible when the beat kicks in and the track has the tinny sparseness of a cheap bootleg – only Björk's voice has the clarity of a studio recording. She sings "let's sneak out of this party..." and the song's spatial context shifts to the club's toilets where the tune is muffled by the closed door. It now becomes clear that we are not hearing Björk performing on-stage – her singing represents the thoughts in her head. In the toilet she fantasises that she could "go down to the harbour... nick a boat, and sneak off to this island..." Inside the club, the toilet is the only island of withdrawal that she can attain. Continuing her reverie, she leaves the toilet, walks through the club, and exits into the sounds of the street, leaving the music behind her.

The links between this song and *Heterotopia* work on many registers. One is the co-existence of ambient as a structuring principle; another is the desire for a space of withdrawal from the object's socio-economic context. In both pieces, the fantasy of withdrawal idealises space – for Åsdam it turns the gallery into a club chill-out area; for Björk it turns the

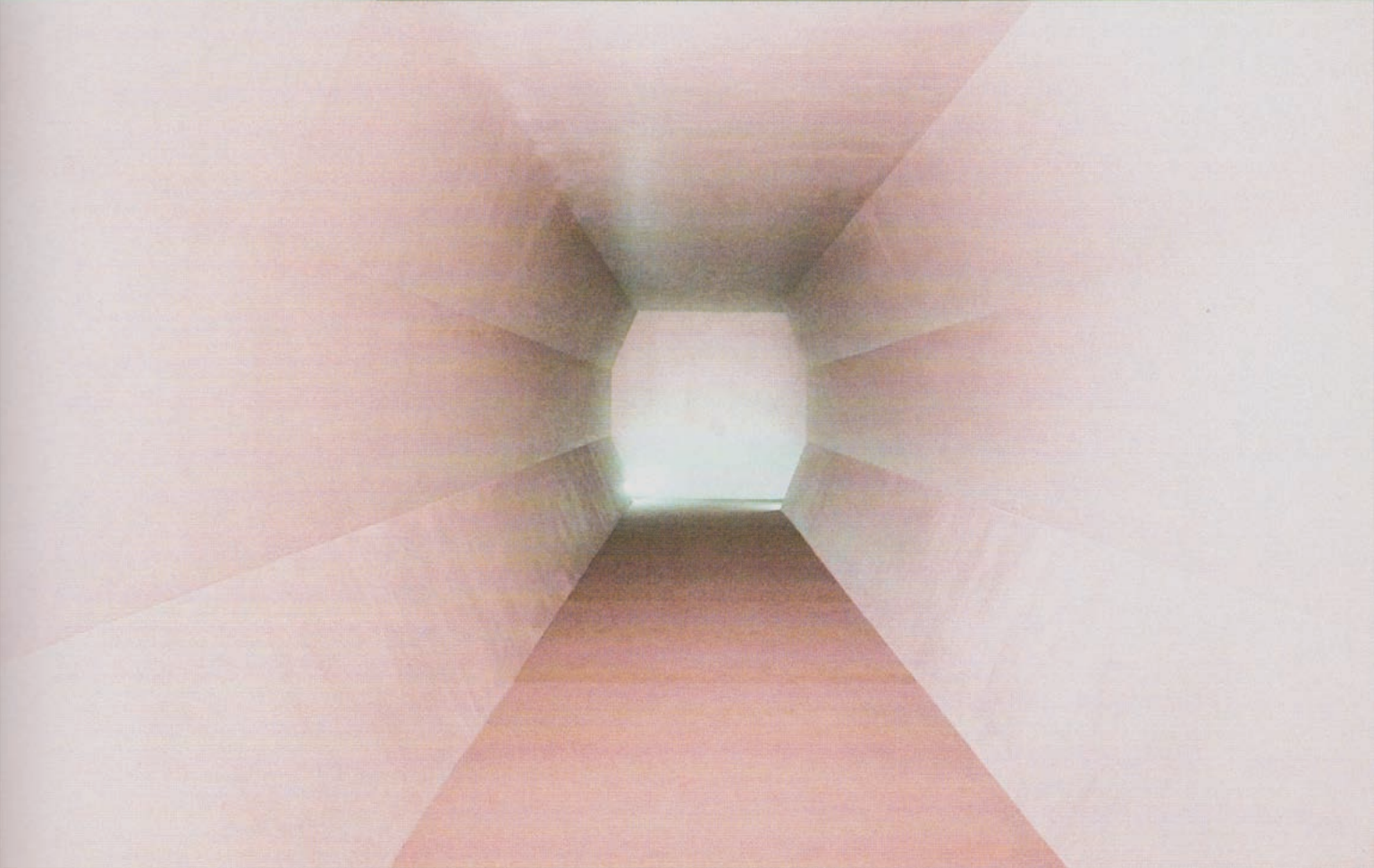
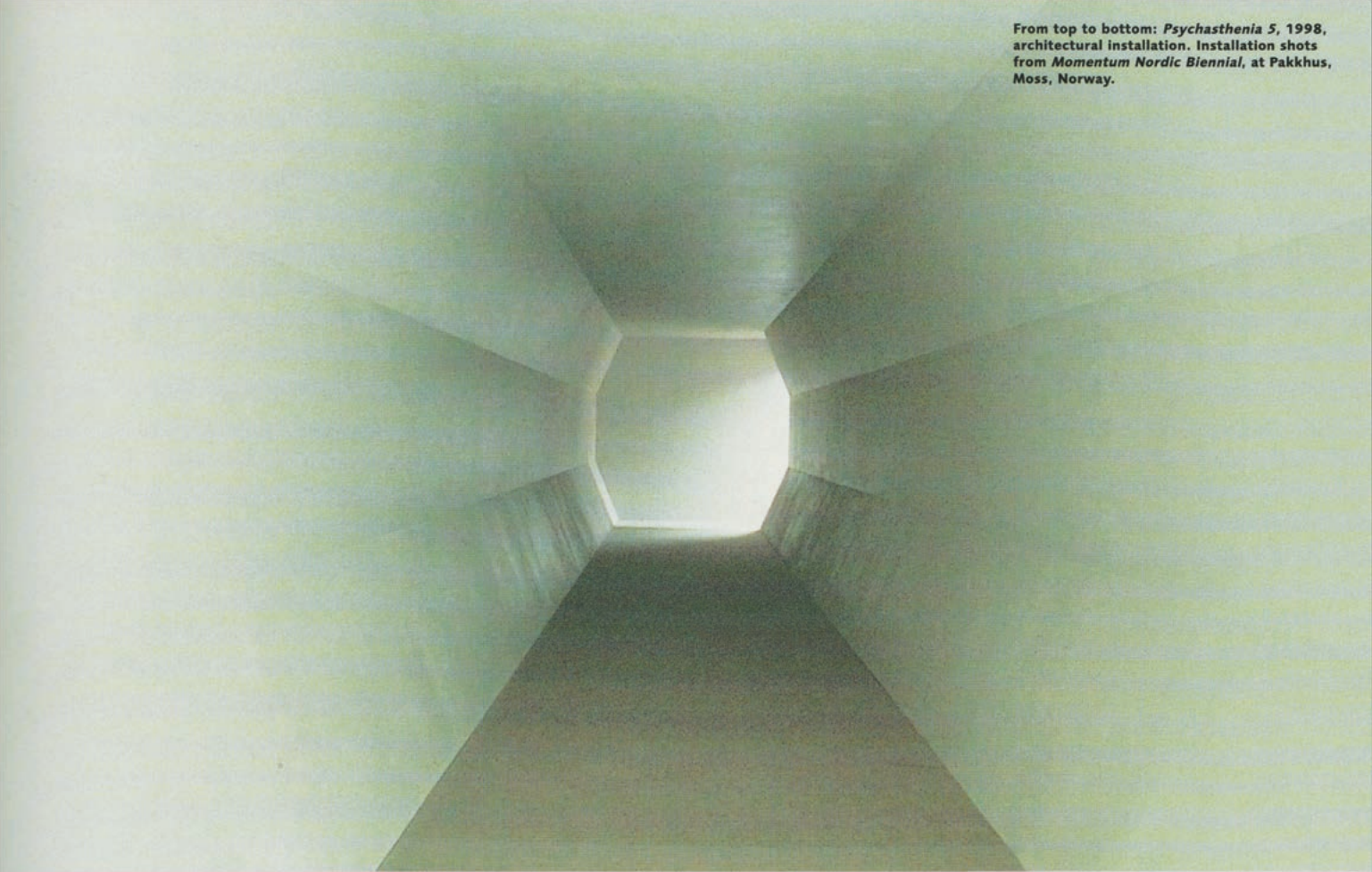
club toilets into her own island of retreat. In both works 'the toilet' is figured and represents a space of release. Literally, in that one pisses and shits there, but also because night-club toilets are where boundaries are broken down and the conventions of behaviour in public spaces is challenged. In addition to illicit activities like sneaking into a cubicle to take drugs, perhaps even to have sex, it is not unusual to see women in the men's and men in the women's toilets. Or they are visited simply because the atmosphere everywhere else becomes too intense.

In *Psychasthenia 5* (1998) and *Psychasthenium* (1998) Åsdam departs from the imagery of *Psychasthenia 2+2*.<sup>29</sup> Like *Heterotopia*, both *Psychasthenia 5* and *Psychasthenium* construct spaces of retreat from the rest of the exhibition for the purposes of viewing videos and socialising.<sup>30</sup> On a narrative level, *Psychasthenia 5* evokes a heterotopian site – the sex club – as the model for its interior. Entry to the space involves walking down a fifty-five foot octagonal corridor resonant of science-fiction films.<sup>31</sup> Passage through this endoscopic space often results in an encounter with someone else. The space is barely wide enough for two forcing people to negotiate each other's physical presence. This feeling intensifies when the viewer reaches the end of the corridor, turns right, and enters the heart of the structure – a kind of lobby with a Coke machine two more corridors leading off it. It is so dark it takes a few moments for your eyes to adjust. The first corridor has a series of small booths with black vinyl cushions on the benches which can seat up to three people. Videos by other artists are shown inside two of these booths. While waiting for a seat

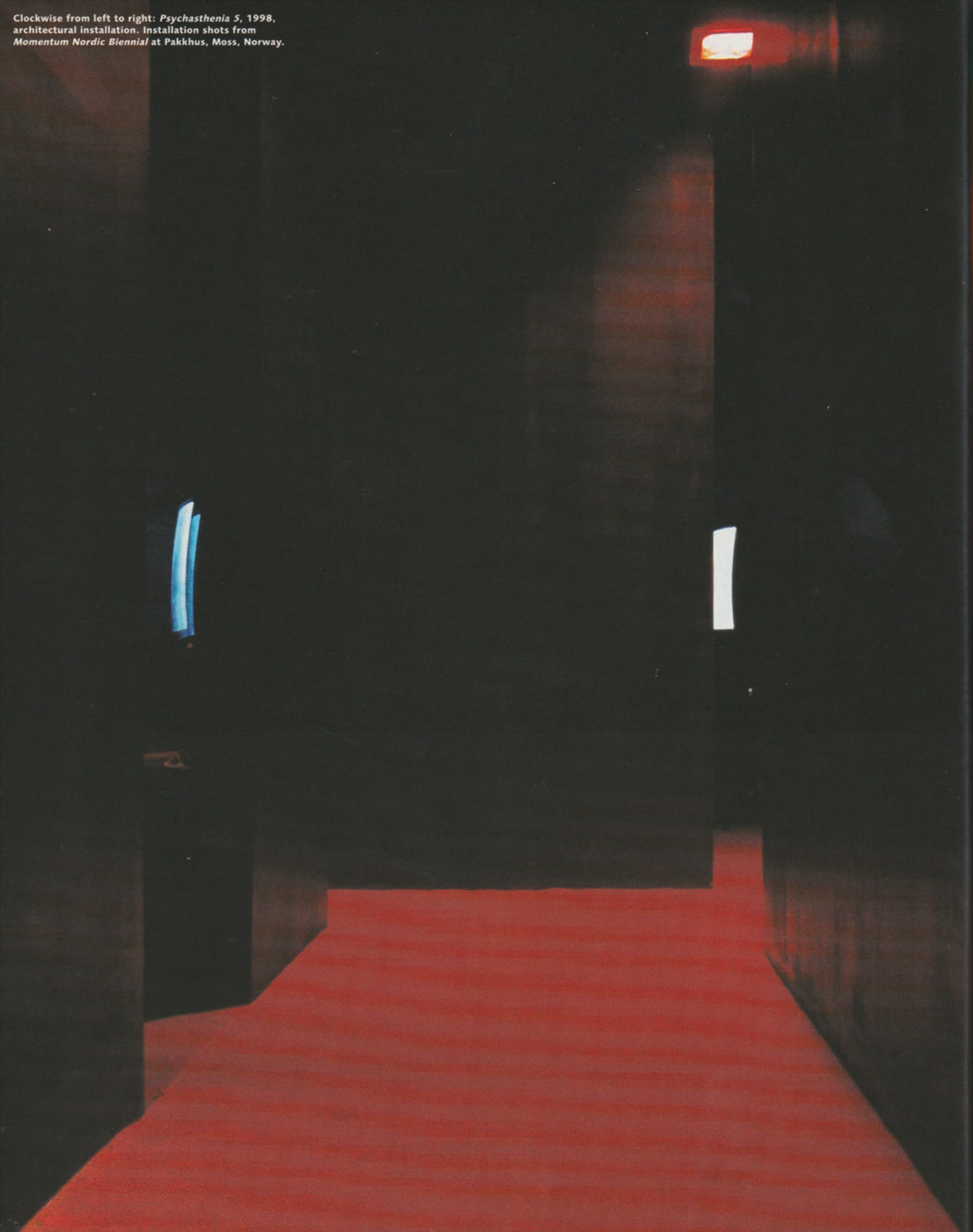


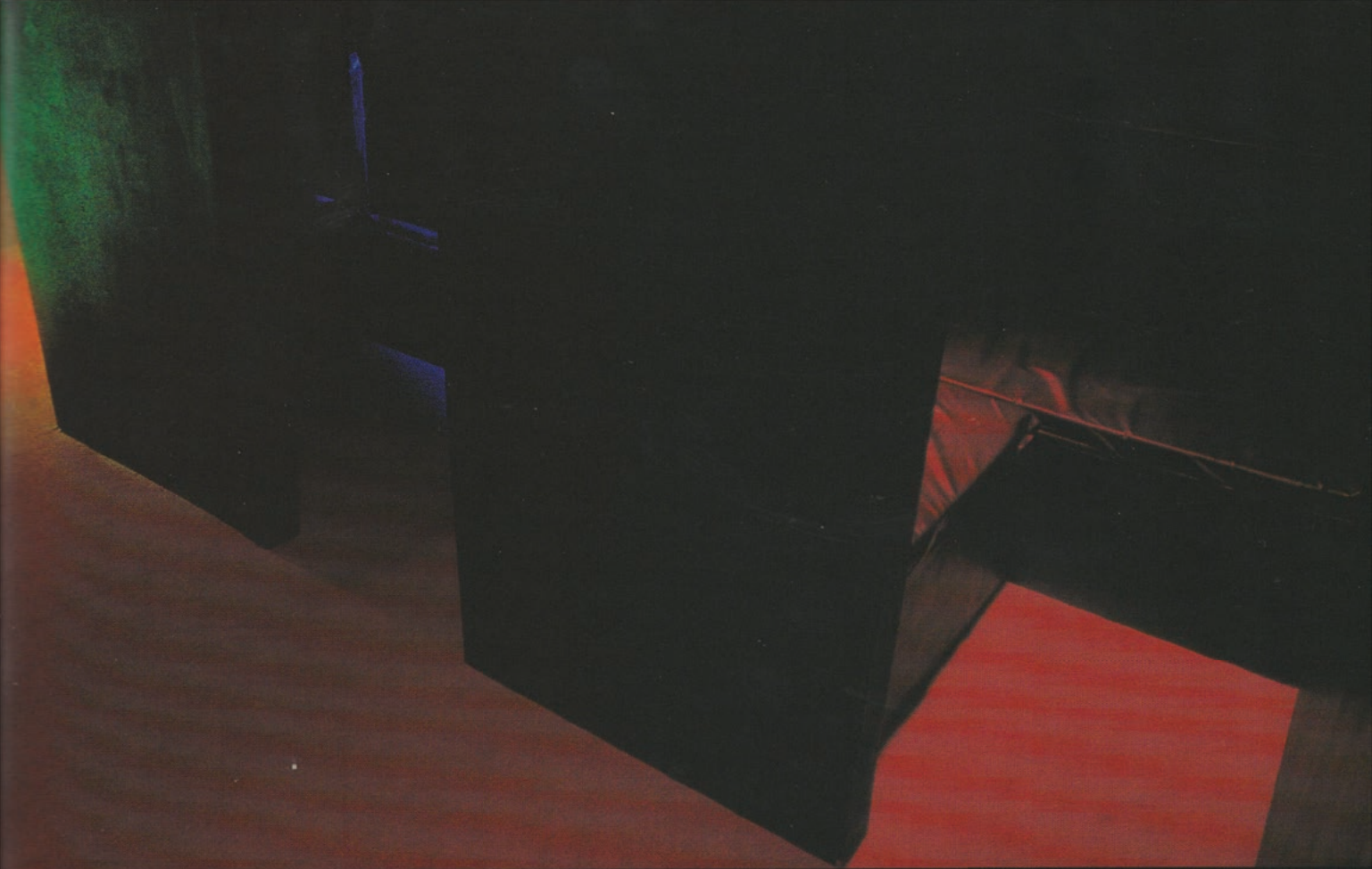


From top to bottom: *Psychasthenia 5*, 1998, architectural installation. Installation shots from *Momentum Nordic Biennial*, at Pakkhus, Moss, Norway.

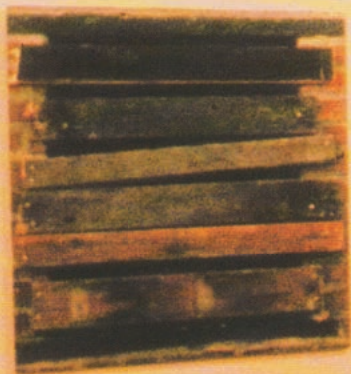


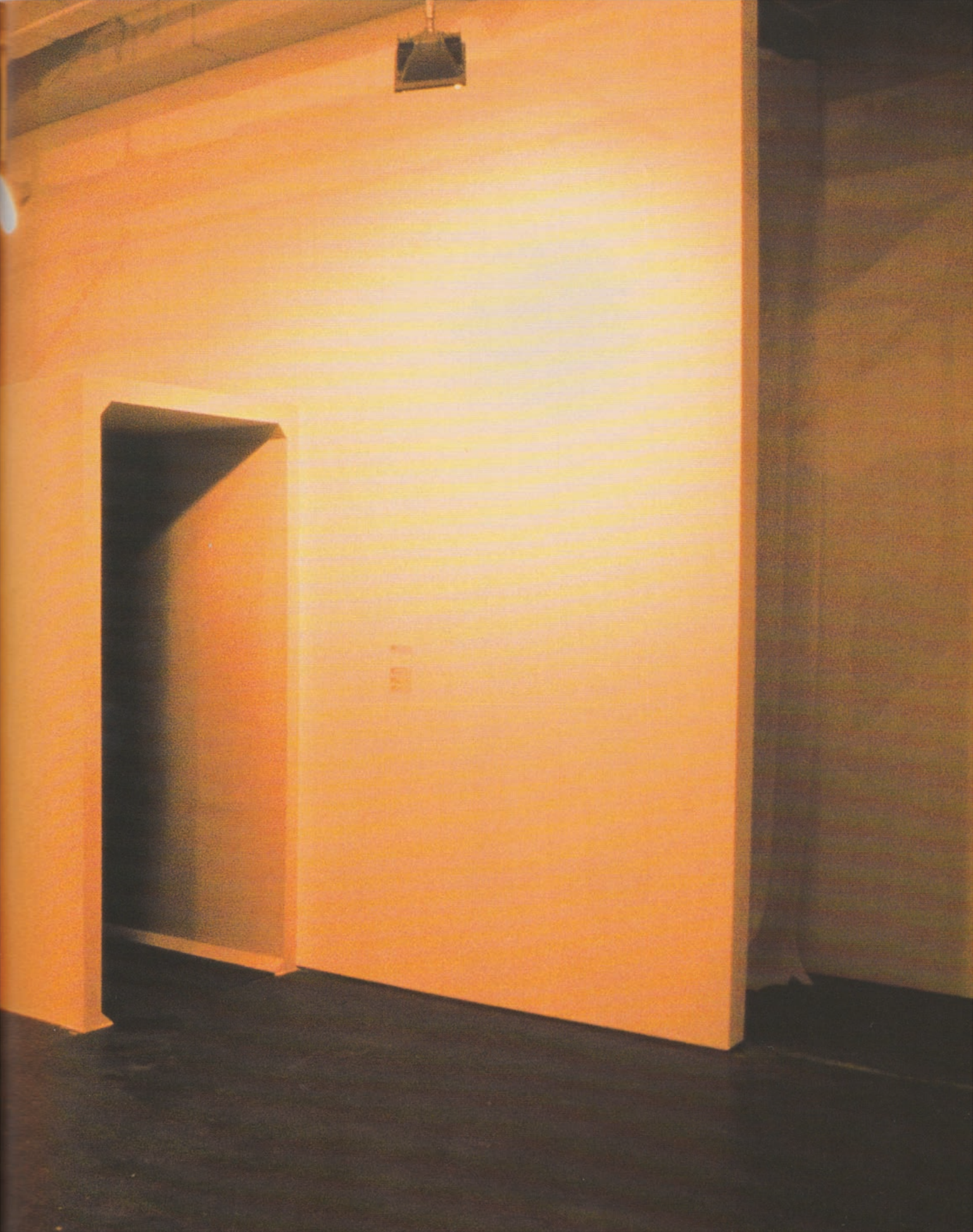
Clockwise from left to right: *Psychasthenia 5*, 1998, architectural installation. Installation shots from *Momentum Nordic Biennial* at Pakkhus, Moss, Norway.





*Psychasthenium*, 1998, architectural installation. Installation shot from *Nordic Nomads* at White Columns, New York.



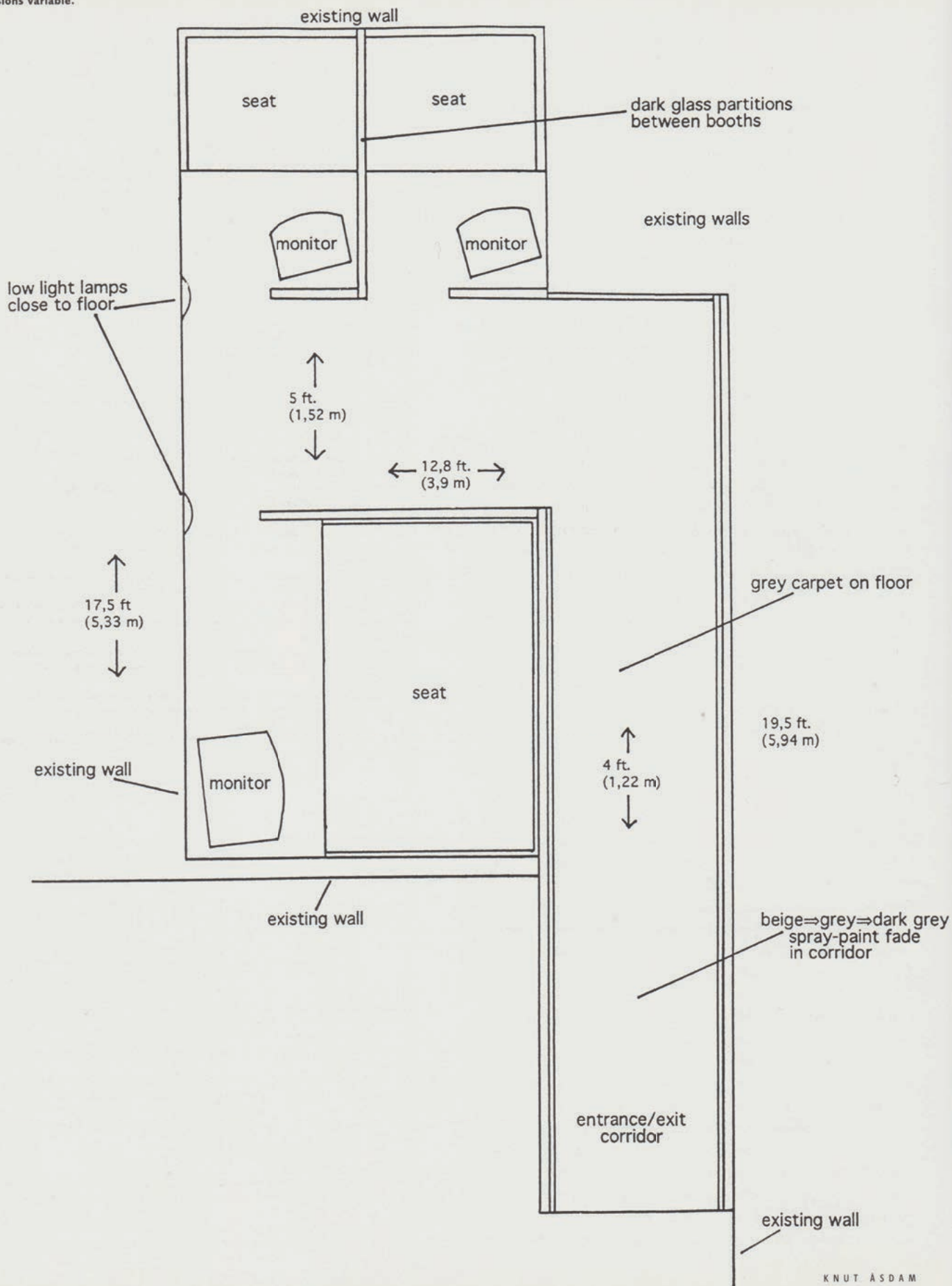


From left to right: *Psychasthenium*, 1998,  
architectual installation. Installation shots from  
*Nordic Nomads* at White Columns, New York.









other visitors can hang out in the middle booth which contains no monitor. Darkened windows connect the booths. Different layers of images appear in the glass – superimposed over the people in the booth next door are viewer's own reflections and the images from monitors.<sup>32</sup> The second corridor opens onto the back-projection video room with large comfortable seats. People waiting for seats in the booths make the lobby resemble what Åsdam calls "a dense cruising area."<sup>33</sup> Even if the lobby is empty, the chance of encountering another body in the anonymous darkness fills this transitional space with a sexual intensity.

*Psychasthenia 5* brings together two strands of the unconscious of modernism – science-fiction as an idealised modernist fantasy and the sex club as a social space that contains, within a semi-public setting, forms of desire and sexuality that are not permissible in the public domain. Åsdam takes the undifferentiated viewer presupposed by minimalism and queers it by creating a bodily state that reflects the economics of sexuality in the city. Unlike the traumatic spatial alienation effected by *Psychasthenia 2+2*, the intimacy of these corridors and booths create a space that "is embedded and soaked in [the] fantasy and desire" of modernist space. Immersion in darkness is at once arousing, unnerving, and seductive. The anonymity induced by darkness effects relationships with the self as well as others, resulting in the uncanny feeling of not knowing where one's body ends and space begins. The body seems to assimilate with the dark space. Caillois describes the schizophrenic's identification with space as one where the subject "feels himself becoming space, dark space where things cannot be put."<sup>34</sup> In such a situation the body is not an autonomous entity, but merely a negation of space.<sup>35</sup> *Psychasthenia 5* sexualises space through the metonymic association of darkness and the sex club interior.

Writers are often called upon to write about work they have not seen in person. Of all the works I have discussed in this paper *Psychasthenia 5* is the only one I have not physically encountered. By relying on photographs, texts, conversations with the artist and viewers, and knowledge of similar spaces I have had to build an idea of what this piece is like. This emphasised the degree to which a physical encounter with Åsdam's work determines much of its' meaning. However, the requirement of a physical encounter should not be confused with the ideology of total presence in the autonomous subject. Even when physically present with an art object our knowledge of it and ourselves is mediated by language. The sense of immersion in space does not, therefore, result in a unified subject who is at one with the world, nor in an autonomous subject unaffected by the social forces around him.<sup>36</sup> The desire for total presence cannot be satisfied by an encounter with Åsdam's work because each piece asserts the impossibility of unmediated experience. Viewers are encouraged to reflect on the phenomenology of their experience by the disruption of continuity that insistently marks each work. Instead of proposing a subjectivity that is unified, pieces like *Come to Your Own*, *Heterotopia*, or *Psychasthenia 2+2* constitute subjectivities that are repeatedly split by their experience. The impossibility of a unified subject position is recognised as traumatic, yet the work articulates the co-existent desires and pleasures of that realisation.

As I stated in the introduction, the diversity of Knut Åsdam's work makes it difficult to discuss it as a totality. The formal and thematic disruptions and repetitions which emerge across his oeuvre figure the dynamism of subject formation. By employing discontinuity as a constitutive condition for his practice, Åsdam emphasises how subject forma-

tion is produced by breaks and ruptures. Over and over again, Åsdam's work shows how the splitting of subjectivity through and by desire is never final but part of an ongoing process of becoming. ■

\*This paper would not have been possible without the editorial support of Cylena Simonds.

1. "Bits of Pieces as Parts and Wholes", *U.K.S. Biennalen 1998*, p.55.
2. This line of thinking arose in discussion with Lynn Turner.
3. However, one cannot get away from the fact that hard as Kristeva tries to theorise femininity as a distinct experience she still bases her theory of temporality in the biological body and uses maternity as the definitive marker of difference. This ultimately essentialises the feminine as biological. See "Women's Time", in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. T. Moi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 187-214.
4. "Queering Space: Benedict Borthwick in Conversation with Knut Åsdam," *Index #3-4*, 1996, p. 113.
5. Sigmund Freud, "Civilisation and It's Discontents", in *Civilisation, Society, and Religion* (London: Pelican, 1985), p. 251.
6. Freud, p. 252.
7. Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1985), p. 282.
8. Roger Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," *October #31* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press) p. 23.
9. Caillois, p. 28.
10. J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, "Trauma", *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (London: Karnac, 1973), p. 467.
11. *ibid.*
12. The impact of the cinematic scale and shape of the projection compounds the oceanic identification invited by the architecture. The metropolis has been a central trope in Modernity and it's representation in cinema is particularly appropriate for Freud's model of the oceanic he develops in "Civilisation and It's Discontents." Further on in the same essay Freud proposes the city as a model for the unconscious.
13. *Untitled: Skipping* is no longer available.
14. Letter to the author. 28 August, 1998.
15. Bochner, Mel, "Serial Art, Systems, Solipsism" in *Minimal Art*, ed. G. Battcock (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California 1995), p. 100.
16. Bochner, p. 101.
17. This piece was later modified and presented at the 1996 U.K.S. Biennalen as *Psychasthenia*. The only difference was the use of white Formica panels which contextualised the piece in relation to Norwegian institution.
18. See, for example, the exhibition views of *The Stations of the Cross: lema sabachthani* at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 23/4-19/6/1966.
19. The first time Åsdam used Formica was in *The Self-Affirmation of the British University* (1992), an installation at Goldsmith's College which drew on the prevalent use of the material in local institutions and within the college itself.
20. Formica also figures a particular history within modernism. Richard Artschwager's *Piano* (1965) is one example where the artist makes ironic comment upon the minimalist obsession with industrial materials.
21. Ironically, the defacement of the pristine 'white cube' enacted by the wall panels cancels out the commercial gallery which is replaced by a set of ideological references with far more instrumental relation to capitalism.
22. DPM is the military acronym for "Disruptive Pattern Material" from which camouflage clothing is made. The popularity of DPM in the early 1990s techno club scene was such that it became a 'uniform', mimicking and queering the material's institutional use as military uniform.
23. The same strategy is used in *Psychasthenia 2+2*, although to very different effect.
24. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics*, Spring 1986, pp. 22-27. Heterotopias can also be sites of privilege that have a distanced relation to society.
25. *Index*, p. 112.
26. Of course those discourses from which he draws are also heavily imbricated in the formal tropes of modernity such as repetition, reproduction, and disruption. I am not just thinking of the ways those tropes are figured in modernist art production, but also architecture and the music of composers like La Monte Young or Philip Glass.
27. Taken from the cover sticker of Autechre's *Anti e.p.* (Warp Records, 1994). Electronica is, broadly speaking, the bridge between techno and ambient music.
28. Taken from her first solo album *Debut* (1993).
29. Four of the seven pieces in the *Psychasthenia* series have used diverse formal strategies to address the relationship between the social subject and space. These are: *Psychasthenia* (1996), a modification of the *Whitney I.S.P. Installation*; the radio play *Legendary Psychasthenia* (1998); *Psychasthenia 2* which is used in *Psychasthenia 3* (1998) and doubled for *Psychasthenia 2+2*; finally, *Psychasthenia 5* and *Psychasthenium* are both structures designed for viewing other artists videos.
30. For the sake of simplicity and illustration I discuss only *Psychasthenia 5* although most of what I say also applies to *Psychasthenium*. However, there are differences that make the two pieces distinct.
31. In *Psychasthenium* the colour of the walls is graduated from light beige at the entrance to dark grey deeper in.
32. Dan Graham's series of video-viewing structures, like *Interior Design for Space Showing Videotapes* (1986-7) are important historical points of reference for *Psychasthenia 5*. Again, I reiterate that Åsdam's work is situated in a dialogical rather than derivative position to these pieces and Graham's work in general – we can learn as much about Graham's work from Åsdam as we can about Åsdam's from Graham.
33. Unpublished interview with the artist, 5 January, 1999.
34. Caillois, p. 30.
35. The viewer assumes the kind of relationship to space exemplified by Rosalind Krauss's statement that Robert Morris's minimalist sculptures are "what is in the room that is not really the room." Krauss, p. 282.
36. I self-consciously use the masculine pronoun, not to elide gender difference in the construction of subjects, but to evoke the historical use of the masculine pronoun to propose a universal subject.