

Seeing in the Dark: The Notion of Visibility in Knut Åsdam's
Psychasthenia 5

By Andrea Kroksnes

Entering Knut Åsdam's Psychasthenia 5 our bodies are engulfed by the darkened space of screening and viewing rooms. We enter the installation through a narrow corridor that seems to suck us into space. At the end of the corridor we have to turn and enter another corridor with adjacent booths for video screenings. The booths have benches covered with rubbery vinyl and two of them have videos, each on a single monitor. We are not necessarily alone in the booth but have to share the small space with someone sitting close to us. The wall between our booth and the one next to it is made visually permeable by a darkened glass window that juxtaposes reflections coming off our screen with what happens in the other booth. We can see the legs and hands easier than the upper body of the person that sits – just like us – on the other side of the wall. He/She might look at us as well, or watch our video through the window. The crossing, refracting, and merging of our gazes in the space is charged with sexual desire. The experience can be described as an entirely fluid, mobile, amorphous series of identifications and internalizations of images invested with libidinal energy. We are no longer able to separate between

our own libidinal structure and the desire projected onto us because these two sides are in constant flux. "All the effects of depth, of interiority, of the inside, all the effects of consciousness (and the unconscious), can be thought in terms of corporeal surfaces, in terms of the rotations, convolutions, inflections, and torsions of the body itself."¹

Psychasthenia 5 directly takes up dissident surrealist Roger Caillois' concept of psychasthenia. In his text 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia', Caillois explores the spatiality of the phenomenon of mimicry in the natural world. In opposition to the dominant biological viewpoint, Caillois points out that mimicry usually has little survival value. He likens the insect's ability to camouflage – mimicking the appearance of its environment – to a human psychosis in which the subject is unable to locate her or himself in a position in space.

"Psychasthenia is a response to the lure posed by space for subjectivity. The subject can take up a position only by being able to situate its body in a position in space, a position from which it relates to other objects. This anchoring of subjectivity in its body is the condition of a coherent identity and, moreover, the condition under which the subject has a perspective on the world, becomes a source of perception, a point from which vision emanates."²

As an architectural construction that organizes visibility and spatiality, Knut Åsdam's 'psychasthenic' video screening space can be aligned with the feminist refusal of the conventional apparatus of narrative cinema. Feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey criticized narrative cinema for providing visual pleasure only for male subjects, with the male gaze as the active one and woman impersonating a passive to be looked-at-ness. Åsdam is not denying us the visual pleasure that cinema and video customarily provide—a pleasure that has been linked to masculine perversions, voyeurism and scopophilia. What Åsdam disturbs is the purity of a male perceptual experience through the act of turning the scopophilic spectator into the object of voyeuristic desire.³ This kind of extended visibility constitutes a clear disavowal of the privileging of the modernist notion of the visual, "especially in a culture in which visibility is always on the side of the male, invisibility on the side of the female."⁴

Feminist theorists of cinema including Joan Copjec and Constance Penley have been arguing that the concept of the film as "apparatus" is dependent upon the construction of the act of spectatorship as a narcissistic identificatory moment of suture. This is a moment of plenitude that is a denial of the difference between the image and reality, involving a suppression of the issues of sexual difference that lie at the heart of representation. Åsdam's Psychasthenia 5 might at first seem to follow the masculinist perversions of visual

pleasure but it also opens up the screen and the space around us allowing for imaginary and marginal projections. Especially when we wander through the dark and narrow corridor space -- although we do not see much -- we are in a phenomenological sense engulfed in a moment of visibility. While our bodies are immersed in the dark, our senses are heightened and the 'seeing' of the artwork becomes a bodily sensation, one that cannot be grasped or fixed but diffuses through the dark and our bodies. This kind of visibility has nothing in common with the God's-eye gaze that controls and owns what it sees. Rather, it diffuses the old hierarchies and boundaries between subject and object. While we look out over the things in the world we have to question our own fixed position in it, seeing ourselves next to, under, and within things as they surround and envelop us. This disturbance of a clear perception of the world around us becomes palpable in Åsdam's dark viewing space. The viewer is not only left in the semi-dark in order to better project oneself into the illusionary space of the screen -- like in a normal movie theatre -- in Åsdam's psychasthenium the viewer's bodily space is physically touching and penetrating the spaces of the other bodies in the room.

According to Caillois, darkness plays an important role in the disturbance of the perception of space: "While light space is eliminated by the materiality of objects, darkness is 'full', it touches the individual directly, envelops him,

penetrates him, and even passes through him: hence 'the ego is permeable for darkness while it is not so for light,' the feeling of mystery that one experiences at night would not come from anything else."⁵ In the darkness of the viewing space, the seated or standing viewer is only one position among others, he/she is dispossessed of the privilege of fully perceiving the space and literally no longer knows where he/she finds herself in relation to the surrounding world. Caillois describes this moment as depersonalization by assimilation to space, or psychasthenia.

Caillois's theory of depersonalization greatly influenced Jacques Lacan's account of the relationship between visuality and subjectivity. Lacan's theory of visual subjectivity aims at the modern belief that the subject stands at the center of vision, in a position of mastery over its visual field. Contrary to the position, Lacan argues, the subject can never be at the center of the visual field it occupies because it is obliged to coordinate its personal visual experience with the symbolic order (in Lacan's terms, the ruling descriptions of the world around us). The process of making meaning for the subject can be described as "the simultaneous process of possession and dispossession in the field of vision."⁶ When looking out into the world, we bring ourselves, that is, our bodies and our lived visual experience. But at the moment we want to make meaning (when the act of seeing is transformed into the "I see" of understanding) we have to submit this

experience to the already prefabricated symbolic order. "And insofar as the social coherence of the visible world requires me to submit my visual experience to the operations of the visual and the verbal signifier, it obliterates me as the center of my lived horizon at the very same moment when I seem, to myself, to occupy its heartland."⁷

According to Lacan, depersonalization happens all the time in the visual field, and Caillois's example of the dark visual field highlights the inability of the subject to remain in an autonomous position over its surroundings; the subject ultimately has to identify and organize itself in relation to the visual order around it. This negotiation of subjectivity in the visual field, usually a blind spot in the identity formation of the subject, becomes apparent in the dark space of Åsdam's Psychasthenia 5. Here the ultimately unstable position of the subject in its world is made palpable: Our assumption that we are the originary center of the visual is frustrated by the fact that we in turn are the objects of visual desire that we cannot control. We are caught within the regime of the symbolic order – the perversity of the cinematic apparatus with its norms and rules of social interactions – that simultaneously preexists and positions the spectator. But the permeable screens of Åsdam's Psychasthenia 5 return our gazes and interrupt the centering process of the sight, eventually exposing the symbolic orders that we have already ourselves internalized.

¹ Elizabeth Grosz, "Embodying Space", *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Spaces*, (Massachusetts, The MIT Press, 2002), 32.

² *ibid*, 38.

³ In the psychasthenium that he installed at White Columns in 1998, for instance, the scopophilic gaze was confronted with the feminist video works by Annika von Hauswolff & Lotta Antonsson, Annika Ström, and Lisa Strömbeck.

⁴ Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism", in Hal Foster (ed.) *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, (Seattle, Bay Press, 1983), 72.

⁵ Roger Caillois, "Mimicry and legendary Psychasthenia," *October* 31, Winter 1983, 30.

⁶ Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History," *Art Bulletin*, vol. 73, no. 2, June 1991, 200.

⁷ *Ibid*.