Speech

Simon Sheikh: In one of your earlier works, the video Come
to Your Own, you are employing the language of the
hypnotist, but, significantly, at the end part of a
session, where the person addressed has to come out of the
altered state. The video, then, uses language as a
structuring tool, a command, and, finally, as a becoming:
The person addressed has to come to his or her own. I am
curious as to your use of language as becoming, as
formative as well as formulating, something I feel is also
at stake in your sound pieces, where you strategically
employ poetic language. I think there is a usage here, that
is not exclusively narrative, but -- through the 'poetic'
language -- perhaps also formative of the subject. That is
not only coming from a subject, but also becoming and
forming this subject.

Knut Åsdam: The promise to 'come to your own' in this
particular video points to an impossibility that is
nevertheless promised. This forms a deadlock in the video
where what is promised; the (impossibility of) coming to
one's own in a terminated bodily identity, is more and more
displaced as the viewer is drawn into the repetitive and
slightly hypnotic mentioning of affect.
     I guess my use of language is highly influenced by the
idea of the 'performative' within the gender theory of
Judith Butler, where the subjectivities are articulated as
a complex and temporal effect and play of language. Since
I am not posing a singular subject in my work, my use is
rather to employ language as formative, and as a repetitive
inscription of subjectivities, desires and struggles. I use

poetic and narrative language to set up relations between
presumed subjects and architectural, social, sexual or
economic environments. This allows me to use a form of
language that is not didactic and clearly involves desire.
It also allows for humor and subtle plays on the serious,
the committed and the pathetic, as well as to use language
for including a contemporary play on age, place, etc.
Basically it sets up much the same possibilities as what
one might have within a more 'strict' visual language.

SS: Your use of language is almost exclusively -- the
graffiti pieces aside -- in the shape of speech acts, and I
was wondering how your notion of speech relates to the
signification of the human voice: The voices are often
blurred, almost gender un-specific while simultaneously
highly eroticized. I am wondering here about your use of
the performative aspects of speech, and perhaps more
specifically a 'queering' of the speaking subject?

KÅ: There are a few reasons why I am interested in 'speech
acts' as you term it: One has to with a play on theatrical
language. Today it is perhaps most conventional to tone
down the language, and work with the tensions of what is
not being said. I have chosen a more historical route that
is to attempt to spell most things out within the language
-- like in Shakespeare where somebody might be speaking
their internal thoughts out loud -- to give them to the
listener. Even in using poetic forms I employ a rather
literal language -- the words do not signify something
else, something hidden -- much in terms of the concept of
minor language coined by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.
This leads to a paradoxical position since I try to use

language that is local, but that is still applicable to a general and international cultural everyday.

Secondly, as you have mentioned, I use language as a way to incorporate a subject that is erotized and gendered and to delineate a body and a desiring subject. This is not only from my interest in narration, but also to make sure that I relate the other topics of the work, such as architecture and the city, to lived lives and social and economic dynamics, not just to formal concerns. The use of slightly androgynous voices (in some of the works like Legendary Psychasthenia 1999 Re-edit, FakeFemme, Cluster Praxis and Notes Towards a Dissipation of Desire) was an attempt to delineate a queered subjectivity, an opening up for a multitude of sexual identifications within the work, and to play around the presupposed compulsory heterosexuality of the subject in the work.

SS: It is interesting that you mention both the notion of minor language and the strategy of queering the voice in your pieces, since I think there definitely is a connection: for Deleuze and Guattari minor language is a sort of deviation strategy, speaking the major or dominant language without knowing it properly, turning it inside out, so to speak, and creating a 'new' counter-language that is none the less also related to the major language. Perhaps this is also at play in your work with space? Anyway, the point I want to make is, that your employment of androgynous voices to me is as much a minor language as a queer language -- the speaking subjects do not only sound gender unspecific, but rather sound like someone trying to become gender unspecific! That is, as someone who does not feel at home in the language they are speaking, they are

not so much at home that they can effortlessly and seamlessly shift between genders inside it; but rather they must transpose their speaking position to somewhere outside the language itself (an impossible position), and/or ridicule it while simultaneously desiring it, as in the strategy of drag. I find these voices to be voices in drag rather than unspecific. And drag obviously has a clear parallel to strategies of minor language.

KÅ: That is an important point, also because the notion of drag, connects so clearly the minor language and the subjectivities at stake, to the performative. I think your point also underlines that this is a processual (and repeated act) -- to try to become gender unspecific is something that is never attained -- but in so doing opens up more possibilities for what that gender and that desire would mean. In the idea of the minor language -- for instance, the way a minority group might use a dominant language, a language that does not quite fit, as something to dress in and transpose new or different meanings into -- the crisis point (or generosity) is perhaps that this inevitably leads to a contribution to the major language. But then again; who are looking for termination of goals anyway, -we all know a thing or two about temporality by now and we have to work with that in our personal and political strategies. But I am very interested in the whole notion of generosity. The idea of generosity relates to how cultural phenomena circulate around the globe, and it was very much at the root of how I thought about the graffiti project in Vienna, Picnoleptic City: Women's Time that I did in 1997. I had for years been very engaged with music that came out of Vienna in the mid-nineties. Much of

it had a basis in electronica but also in hip hop and break beats, music that had traveled out of black America. However, there was a cultural contribution and excess that made the music contribute back to the strands it came from. With the graffiti I saw at that time in Vienna it was totally different. The little that existed in the city at that time were mostly almost exact copies of graffiti from New York City in the late seventies and early eighties; I could look them up in my old book on New York City graffiti from that period. Often they were, in the context of Vienna, quite exoticized versions of New York City inner city subjectivity. There was little evidence of a cultural contribution or generosity at all, and I was left unsure if this was some sort of 'soft' racism or xenophobia or that I just really did not understand the context. From my experience of i.e. hip hop and graffiti other places in Europe in the eighties I saw that even if the language and practices of hip hop were adopted and found incredibly identifiable to minority groups there -- which then perhaps had more to do with class than race -- they were digested and contributed to from the local context.

SS: The video Come To Your Own suggests a parallel between language and space/architecture. The voice constantly urges/commands you to come to back to your own space, and the set-up is almost a mirroring of what could be imagined as the other side of the monitor screen, ie. the actual space the spectator is presumably in when watching the video. Additionally, the mirroring aspect of the video is related to the images of masculinity in Untitled: (Pissing) and Psychastenia 2+2: both can be termed crotch shots, of the body and of architecture, respectively. Both, however,

deal with the structuring of the subject, in the body <u>with</u> organs and in corporate architecture. Both are, in these ways, similar to language as formative and structural, in terms of the subject and its becoming a specific and specified subject. How do you see the relation between architecture, the discipline of the body and language as speech acts and tools of power?

KÅ: I am not sure if I totally understand the question. Architecture can sometimes be almost a metaphor for an ideological definition of the body and the subject, but in its rigidity and slow change, it is quickly co-opted, changed and sometimes inverted. However, this does not only belong to 'progressive' forces, but as much to 'conservative' ones. Like any articulation given to the public there are possibilities for attachments, neglect, and for changing its meaning. (Stalinist housing architecture, for instance, has become fashionable in the liberal capitalist former communist Eastern Europe). What is important to understand with the whole issue of performativity within language -- whether or not it deals with a body, a social group, a building or whatever, is that is that in order to maintain a particular signification, articulation has to be repeated and re-inscribed -- again and again... In terms of the meaning of social spaces this often is done through usage: if a street corner is going to maintain a space for a group of drug-dealers, it has to be used by the drug-dealers repeatedly -- to put it in a simplified way. Often we don't notice the contestations of these repetitions -- like your own repetitions of how you define yourself sexually, or the definitions of your every day environment -- unless you are

in conflict with them. In this way architecture is part of a quick and repeating interplay and contestations on an every day level -- one that often passes our attention.

SS: I think what I am aiming at is language as a kind of architecture, and vice versa, which is what intrigues me in your dual employment and dérive of language and architecture. Language places you in "a circuit of recognition", to quote Judith Butler, but so does architecture: different architecture for different socialization, or recognition, if you will. The corporate headquarter addresses you in a specific way, as do various spatial installments of control (passport control, for instance), or leisure (parks or viewing booths, for instance). Buildings have to be recognizable to (their) subjects, and imply certain ways you are supposed to act: Questions demand (certain) answers, and usages of language are always an employment of power that has to do with the mode of address. Obviously, you try to formulate different modes of address, we can call them performative or whatever, but what interests me is the dichotomy between speaking against language and architecture (as powerful) and speaking inside at the same time. (It is, after all, neither incomprehensible language (as in Schwitter's Ursonata) nor dysfunctional architecture (as in Matta-Clark's 'anarchitecture').

KÅ: I am very interested in speaking from within the conventions that I engage in (which is unavoidable anyway). But this also entails the possibility of changing signification and usage. I guess what I see as my political placement -- in relation to the language forms or

institutions I deal with -- is to make claims as to their meaning and function. This might have parallels to other 'real' political work. You are always involved with distributions and significations of power -- you are never outside power, obviously. But, again, as we can learn from Butler, signification can be re-inscribed again and again, and this allows for interruption, change or even mere repetition... This also, ultimately, does not only affect the content of my work, but my relationship to various parts of the art institution. At present I am trying to make work that overlaps to more than one sphere of reception, i.e. films that are as much for the cinema and film festival circuit as for museums or galleries. I am trying to avoid what I see as a deathtrap of much of my generation; the endless recycling of the conceptual framework of art and political work made in the seventies and eighties as a privileged content and motivation of the work. I am now trying to deal with something that I find much more interesting and difficult; to grapple with current political, social, and psychological stakes, in a language that is approachable for audiences outside as well as within the art world through working with film in particular but also architecture in a more conventional 'narrative' way.