

George Baker

the mirror of a disappearing subject

My new ambition: to lose one's self in the city.
this riddle
might explain something about my self.
De-signify.
Become.
Labyrinth, or
City.ⁱ

--Knut Åsdam and Onome Ekeh

Let us return for a moment to Caillois's invocation of "dark space" cited above. For it would be Åsdam's understanding of the implications of dark space from which one of his most recent works would arise, a suite of photographs installed during the summer of 2000 in London's Tate Gallery and entitled Psychasthenia 10. The series emerged as well, it seems, from the lessons of Åsdam's Venice Biennale installation, as the viewer in the Tate stared at photograph after photograph of public housing projects, isolated like vessels from a science fiction fantasy or film stills from a gaudily lit movie, with the modular forms of their architecture almost always set off against a scattered trace of trees and other natural forms, like any number of what Gilles Deleuze might have called "rhizomatic" screens invading the numbing order of the man-made. If this collision of architecture and nature was one of the main stakes of the Venice installation, it also stretches back in Åsdam's representations of space to the video Psychasthenia 2 and its varied progeny. It thus seems a constant preoccupation of Åsdam's practice, and it is a collision that almost always occurs, as was the case in Venice, under the cover of darkness.

Here is Åsdam on darkness: "Darkness has of course the effect of facilitating a loss of subjectivity; one is not perceived clearly, which allows for a certain freedom, but you are not perceiving as clearly either and space gains a certain subjectivity from that."ⁱⁱⁱ And here is Caillois: "The magical hold...of night and obscurity, the fear of the dark, probably also has its roots in the peril in which it puts the opposition between the organism and the milieu...darkness is not the mere absence of light; there is something positive about it...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 [M, 72]."

Like a procession of surveillance photographs, the images from Psychasthenia 10 capture a seemingly placeless series of housing projects in the murky grip of an urban night. But hardly a sign of human presence enters these images. Instead, the buildings begin to seem like bodies themselves, but bodies submitted as always to Åsdam's techniques of fragmentation and splitting, a part object logic of the image: so many denials of the architecture's full Gestalt, so many bits and pieces of an architectural body now deprived of any sense of hierarchy, of direction, of beginning or end.ⁱⁱⁱ In one image from the series, for example, we peer through the foliage of two trees touching furtively, linked in ways that the two buildings obscured by them will never be; we witness the trees in other images writhing in the garish artificial light of the cityscape, beginning to glow with a force that all but obliterates the structures behind them. Some images, largely stripped of such trees, focus solely on the glare of the urban spectacle, floating like a sickly fog before the windows of the slumbering buildings, or gleaming in the form of artificial suns tethered to the rigid street

lamps around which the architectural masses now seem to revolve. And other buildings, deprived of this glare, seem to fade into nothingness, taking on the life of shadows within the field of vision, or dissipating into the dank swamp of an unarticulated night.

In an essay entitled "Dark Space," architectural theorist and historian Anthony Vidler has argued, against Michel Foucault, that space itself might not be the agent of power and domination, but one of the potential tools for their contestation. Vidler argues, in fact, against what he calls "the identity of the spatial and the monumental in Foucault's system," wherein the operation of power through panopticism, or spatial transparency, is seen as homologous with any number of monumental architectural types, from the hospital, say, to the prison. Identifying a counter-deployment of (dark) space dating back to the same Enlightenment moment in which panopticism and the desire for transparency were born, Vidler suggests that "the spatial is rather a dimension that incipiently opposes the monumental...[operating at times] to absorb the monument altogether."^{iv} Offering up Etienne-Louis Boullée's Temple of Death as an example, Vidler observes: "Here the bodily substantiality of the traditional monument and the palpable spatial identity of the controlling institution dissolve into a mirror of the projection of a disappearing subject. Space, that is, has operated as an instrument of monumental dissolution."^v If is as if we have just heard a precise description of Åsdam's most recent series, for we see nothing else but this operation in the photographs from Psychasthenia 10. Space, rather than illuminating the housing structures and acting as an extension of the order at their cores, instead eats away at each building, dissipating the substantiality of the architecture itself, penetrating the structure not through the revelation of formal and functional clarity, but through a dizzying osmosis between the building and its surround. Consider, for example, the stunning subset of photographs provided by images #10, 12, and 17 in the series. Here, each building is only registered as pricks of light emanating from its facade, as the darkness of night in some cases fully merges with the presumed substance of each building's outer walls, casting architectural structure out into the vast emptiness of space. Each of the three photographs shares the same oblique point of view, a device that, rather than throwing the buildings into angular relief, serves to flatten them, offering up once again the ghost of a logical perspectival structure, a perspective now, however, leading one far along the road to nowhere. Vision is baffled here. And so these, then, are hardly surveillance photographs.^{vi} On the contrary, and once again, they register the effects of the space of the stain. Psychasthenia 10 offers up images of perhaps the primary symbol of mass, collective belonging of which architecture has recently been capable. But we see neither figurations of a modernist utopia ebbing into what we now know to be its current state of neglect and alienation (although the signs of neglect are there), nor do we sense the housing projects as sinister agents of a type of urban dystopia (although the scent of the dystopic wafts through the series). "What is a utopia for?" Roland Barthes once asked. "To make meaning," he concluded. "Confronting the present, my present, a utopia is a second term which permits the sign to function: discourse about reality becomes possible, I emerge from the aphasia into which I am plunged by the panic of all that doesn't work within me, in this world which is mine."^{vii} To make meaning: surely this is not the project of Psychasthenia 10. And Åsdam hardly seems frightened of aphasia, nor in love with that which works. Instead, in these photographs, we see the architectural representatives of a former longing for utopia actively eroded by the space of night, figurations of an urban community simultaneously emptied and opened up to the void that surrounds it. We see the former rigidity of this dream of mass utopia given over to the flow of the stain, the architectural collective driven beyond its limits by the palpable hole of

dark space, a sleeping community without bounds, deprived of the comforting chains of its form.

© George Baker

This is an excerpt from George Baker's comprehensive text on Knut Åsdam's work entitled: *The Space of the Stain*, and published originally as *Piss Eloquent, the art of Knut Åsdam*, in *Artforum* February 2000, then in an extended version as *The Space of the Stain in Knut Åsdam works 1995-2000*, and finally in a further extended version in *Grey Room* fall issue 2001.

ⁱKnut Åsdam and Onome Ekeh, "Legendary Psychasthenia 1999 Re-edit," Notes Towards a Dissipation of Desire, p. 6.

ⁱⁱKölle, p. 157.

ⁱⁱⁱ"To endow architectural elements with human features," André Breton once claimed in a denunciation of Georges Bataille and the other dissident Surrealists like Caillois, "is again nothing other than a classic sign of psychasthenia. The fact of the matter is that M. Bataille is simply very tired." Breton, "The Second Manifesto of Surrealism," Manifestos of Surrealism, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1969), p. 185.

^{iv}Anthony Vidler, "Dark Space," The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), p. 172.

^vVidler, p. 173.

^{vi}They are thus also quite separate from the specifically photographic legacies to which this new body of work might superficially be related. I am thinking, on the one hand, of the typological drive registered most recently in the architectural photographs of the Bechers and Thomas Struth, or, on the other hand, of postmodern practices that turned to architecture in order more fully to explore and inscribe the effects of photography itself, i.e., the earliest and most recent work of James Welling.

^{vii}Roland Barthes, Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes translated by Richard Howard (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 76.