

made from a sci-fi locus (short)
(excerpt from the essay *The Space of the Stain*)
by George Baker

In the wake of his earlier structures, Åsdam began to devote his practice to a veritable typology of heterotopic social spaces, some of which would build upon the genealogies put in place by Graham, some of which would depart utterly from the older artist's concerns. Åsdam also began to think about what he increasingly called an "assimilatory architecture"--architecture that creates states of complete absorption as opposed to contemplative distinction, that enforces the full ramifications of those spatial experiences that the artist had already learned to call "psychasthenic." Film and video continued to provide a model for the path that Åsdam was following. "Cinematic space," he once wrote, "is a notion of space as narrative--of space as an unfolding of a certain idea of the unconscious." This was a note to himself, made in the process of working up another crucial pavilion installation. Åsdam continued:

In this sense I am more interested in looking at and working with space as a temporality of unfolding intensities--of different velocities. So it is a space of velocity rather than just a disposition for relative placement of objects or subjects. This is the space in which people fall in love, have adventures or dream. This is also however, the space in which people experience restriction, suppression or defeat--a political space.--In as much as it is a political space it is also the space of fantasy.ⁱ

These were the new terms put in place by Åsdam's structures: surprising analogies between film and architecture, between narrative and sculpture, between politics and fantasy. All of these terms would be in play in the structure for which this note served as a preparation, Åsdam's contribution to the Nordic Pavilion at the 1999 Venice Biennale. With the addition of a new subtitle, the installation was called, of course, Psychasthenia: The Care of the Self.

In Venice, Åsdam presented another pair of darkened pavilions, both of which functioned almost as negations or shadows of the modernist structure in which they were exhibited. As opposed to the complex historical chains that Graham had attached to his structures, Åsdam's pavilions seemed increasingly futuristic, glinting like alien objects in the clear light of the exhibition, borrowing their forms from and creating a dialogue with not the actual past, but a fictive dream of future time.ⁱⁱ Again, in his Venice installation, the odor of science fiction was cultivated as a specific counterpoint to the forms of architecture these pavilions meant to displace.ⁱⁱⁱ Åsdam wrote in another preparatory note:

Science fiction is like an unconscious of modernism, its flipside and fantasy--what it dreams itself to be/come--it is therefore also always reflexive on late modernism's own desires and narrative. Science-fiction lends itself to an idea of narrative--both from the idea of time-span, or time-lapse, and from the idea of occurrence--a stage for the enactment of fantasy. This is telling now that the concepts of time and distance are [being deflated] through "Real Time" communication and surveillance, changing the function of time both politically and economically in the world.^{iv}

Implicitly temporal, somewhat carceral, and manifestly opaque, Åsdam's pavilions reacted directly to the circumstances of their surrounding architectural container, transforming all of its preconditions.^v Built by the Norwegian architect Sverre Fehn in 1962, the Nordic Pavilion takes the Frank Lloyd Wright model of what could be called an "ecological modernism" to its logical extreme--think, for example, of the magisterial example of Wright's Kaufmann House--building

around the site's preexisting trees or even incorporating them within the interior of the structure. The primary forms of nature thus dot Fehn's building, like unruly punctuation marks within the otherwise rigid order of the architecture itself. Taking this opposition as a guiding principle, Åsdam's piece similarly obstructed the stark transparency of Fehn's building, parasitically insinuating its black, reflective walls within Fehn's interior as something like a formal, structural "unconscious" whose manifest exclusion had been the ideological project of the modernist space. One of Åsdam's structures served once more as an exhibition pavilion, a darkened theater for the projection of the work of fellow Scandinavian artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila. Within Åsdam's second pavilion, however, one found the evocation of another heterotopic space. But one found this time not a dance club, nor a sex club, but, appropriately--considering the program of Fehn's building--an evocation of a garden at night. Like Graham before him, Åsdam would reflect on gardens:

Gardens today are as much representations of the world as they were in antiquity. They still reflect the societal ideas and priorities that shaped them. Next to corporate buildings or in tiny city-squares, fenced in areas of grass tend only to reveal the value of real-estate. Nevertheless, temporary zones exist within the city-parks, where a multitude of activities that are repressed from the city-streets can take place. These temporary (but recurrent) zones are defined by activities that also span across generations and social and economic conventions, such as drug trafficking, sexual cruising, economic and sexual transactions, teenage 'freezones,' social escapades or loner hangouts. The private garden on the other hand is also a field for the ornamentation of everyday modern life, and like the city-park it is like a 'holodeck,' a technological dream of the city of transposing one into a wholly different narrative. As such, and in how they are connected to the economies of the city, the park and the garden are erotifications--not of nature but of the modern urban itself--ornamentations of the role of fantasy and desire within the city.^{vi}

Replete with actual trees, bushes, soil, and a series of winding pathways, Åsdam's garden called out to any number of illicit activities that occur in public when--under cover of darkness--the transparency of urban space fades away. A "Night-time Garden of Earthly Delight," Åsdam called it, an "architectural desiring machine" that distances "the idea of the futuristic from the idea of the pristine, authoritarian or utopic."^{vii} More than anything, the pavilion became a space redolent with the rhythms and aura of an urban cruising spot. But as much as it was a potential space of encounter, it also was literally a space of isolation and withdrawal. And the conditions of the stain were continued, as the one-way reflections of the glass walls of the pavilion--darkened with a filter film that produced what the artist described as a "cinematic" feeling--allowed visitors within Åsdam's piece, shrouded in almost complete darkness, to gaze like sentinels at the assembled viewers in the rest of the Nordic Pavilion's exhibition space.^{viii} However, in the last of a dizzying series of site-specific reflections and dialectical reversals, all of these conditions were obliterated at night. For then, as the lights of the Nordic Pavilion were extinguished, the lights within Åsdam's pavilion were turned on--ostensibly to sustain the plants--with the effect that from the outside, the interior of the structure became suddenly, achingly visible.

Suspended ambivalently between surveillance and subversion, the spatial references of Åsdam's recent structures are actually held in common in the work of a wide range of contemporary artists engaged in rethinking the legacy of minimalism. Within Åsdam's own Scandinavian context, one thinks of Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset's important and ongoing project entitled "Powerless Structures"; among American artists, no one has approached this nexus of concerns with more eloquence and precision than Tom Burr. In the wake of the strategies of appropriation art, Burr seems involved in a full archaeology of the forms of

minimalist and post-minimalist sculpture, an archaeology that also seeks to connect such forms to a pointed--simultaneously melancholic, elegiac, even intransigent--selection of social spaces: in his exhibition 42nd Street Structures, the mirrored cubes of Robert Morris with the threatened architecture of now-mostly defunct urban porn-theaters; in the group exhibition Platzwechsel (Change of Place), the non-sites of Robert Smithson with a now-policed former cruising area from Zurich's Platzspitz Park; in his photo-essay Unearthing the Public Toilet, the architectural typologies of Bernd and Hilla Becher with the decrepit contemporary situation of urban public restrooms; in his work Black Box, a specific wooden sculpture of Tony Smith with the highly artificial decor of a gay bar; and, most recently, in his installation Deep Purple, a reduced-scale and paradoxical reconstruction of perhaps the most important example of site-specific art, Richard Serra's Titled Arc, with the conditions of a private garden bordering a public park. Purposefully situated to create an area of seclusion within the park that would be unavailable to the prerogatives of surveillance (precisely one of the reasons for which Serra's original work had been "destroyed"), Burr's piece had been prepared by a recent series of reiterations of Dan Graham's pavilions, installed in Paris in 1999 as part of the exhibition "Private Property: Anti-Public Sculpture." In this instance, a series of stark black pavilions recalling the surveillance booths of security guards or the viewing booths in peep shows could be entered by individuals, where--secluded away in the dark interior--they were provided with framed views of specific, often overlooked details of the architectural environment (such as the floor or ceiling of the space).^{ix} Like Deep Purple, these pavilions were inspired by a memory of a specific Serra sculpture, namely Carnegie (1984-85), which the artist remembered as strewn in its public exhibition with used condoms and syringes. Burr's sculptures-as-receptacles drew upon both the illicit use recalled by this memory, as much as the literal use of minimalist work as a receptacle for the detritus of a certain conception of public activity, as a trash can or lightning rod for public desires.

We are thus in the midst of a massive redefinition of the aims of the sculptural avant-garde, or at least of the aesthetic concerns of the minimalist legacy. However, with this recurrent exfoliation of minimalist form into the social spaces of the sex club, the disco, or the park-cum-cruising-spot, it would be utterly naive to believe that such artists are transforming the spaces of artistic exhibition into real sites of alternative usage, a type of perversion of the formerly public sphere. Surely, such a desire exists in the more ecstatic of contemporary artistic projects; as always, it is a strategy exceedingly hard to differentiate from the dynamic of avant-garde appropriation of subcultural forms long ago identified by Thomas Crow.^x Rather, projects such as Åsdam's or Burr's are secondary elaborations, allegorical procedures; and they seem again much closer to the strategies of Dan Graham, whose work represents the moment when the diametrically opposed claims of Minimalist phenomenology and Pop iconography would first be exposed as dialectically intertwined, the formal innovations of the former flipping over into the social spaces of the latter. In contemporary work such as Åsdam's, we again are witness to a phenomenological project, an investigation of the subjective relation to the object of art, but only in its negative, most disturbing dimensions. Robert Smithson coined the term "uncanny materiality" to refer to this seething underbelly of Minimalist form--the glittering, often reflective surfaces; the variously flat, iridescent, even repulsive colors; the neon glare and chromatic flashes of the media; the "new consciousness of the vapid and the dull" summoned up by sculptural forms less active than leaden, condensed, or congealed.^{xi} Well before Smithson, Caillois was imagining a similar experience of phenomenological disturbance through his description of dark space: "While light space is eliminated by the materiality of objects, darkness is 'filled,' it touches the individual directly, envelops him, penetrates him, and even passes through him [M, 72]." Darkness invokes the space of the stain, the dispossession of the gaze. And these are the disparate parameters summoned up by an encounter with Åsdam's recent installation works, an aesthetic obsessively circling around a narrow band of contemporary experience, ranging from the reflexive doubling of the liquefied surface of corporate architecture in the obdurate opacity of

the video screen, to the sleazy glint of televideo projection applying its luster to one's body within the technological dusk of Åsdam's architectural pavilions.

If, however, the "uncanny materiality" of minimalist form returns today in projects such as Åsdam's or Burr's--but as a reversal of the former phenomenological claims of the minimalist project--these investigations also no longer remain abstract, as they did in the 60s, a brash counterpart poised incisively against an enfeebled modernism's last gasps for formal purity. Such work today has been rendered incredibly particular: one historical moment's abstraction becoming another's reality.

In Burr's case, such particularity is achieved not just through strategies of aesthetic archaeology, but also cultural genealogy, by which I mean to highlight Burr's consistent need to attach specific sculptural forms to other contemporaneous cultural forms and figures of their era: the films of Kenneth Anger and the sculptures of Tony Smith in Burr's installation Black Box; Andy Warhol's movie Trash with Robert Smithson's non-sites in Burr's Circa 1977, his contribution to the Platzwechsel exhibition.^{xiii} (Warhol and Smithson: here Burr perhaps succeeds in drawing the spirit of the 1960s "like a bow and shooting knowledge to the heart of the moment," with a pairing that is every bit as compelling--as necessary--as Walter Benjamin's famous dialectical connection of André Breton and Le Corbusier.) Åsdam's work, on the other hand, tracks the relentless migration of the formerly aesthetic devices of Minimalism into the contemporary life-world, where they have become an all too banal part of the fabric, of the warp and the weft, of everyday life--the International Style for a world without utopias.

ⁱÅsdam, "Notes on Assimilatory Architecture...For Venice Biennale," Notes Towards a Dissipation of Desire (Oslo: National Museum of Contemporary Art, 2001), p. 14.

ⁱⁱAs a speculative aside, one might note that just as the precise historical reverberations that Graham attached to his pavilions acted to critique postmodern architecture and its amnesiac citations of past historical styles, Åsdam's meditation upon science fiction and modernism acts to open up to critical reflection the vogue that futurism currently enjoys in contemporary architecture (i.e. Frank Gehry). Since the 1960s at least, advanced sculpture has been the guilty conscience of architecture, and Åsdam continues this necessary corrective.

ⁱⁱⁱOther contemporary artists have recently shown how historical the dreams of science fiction actually are--how linked they are to changing historical conditions--and how tied such narratives may be to the achievements of modernist architecture. Such was the focus of an early exhibition by the Swiss artist Christian Philipp Müller that reflected on the late work of Le Corbusier; see Müller, Vergessene Zukunft/Forgotten Future (Munich: Kunstverein München and Edition Artelier, 1992).

^{iv}Åsdam, "Science Fiction is Like an Unconscious Of...," Notes Towards a Dissipation of Desire, p. 18. Note the reference Åsdam makes to real-time, another of the foundational characteristics of a video logic.

^vÅsdam's reflections and actions upon architecture seem to share much with the prognoses of a thinker like Paul Virilio, especially his thoughts on the rising importance of the individual within mass society, the new importance of temporality within all conceptions of space, and the breakdown of boundaries between the former inhabitant and his milieu. See, for example, the dialogue published in this magazine between Paul Virilio and Sylvère Lotringer, "After Architecture: A Conversation," Grey Room 03 (Spring 2001), pp. 32-53, where Virilio states: "The inhabitant becomes the habitat of technology. He is 'phagocyted,' if you like the word. And that's what exclusion is, you see. A man who is equipped like a territory is no longer an inhabitant; he becomes a habitat...Architecture possesses him [p. 49]." The thoughts of Caillois are not far off. But how can one make art from such a situation? And more importantly, how can art contest these conditions? Or at least divert them, if contestation is too avant-garde, too optimistic a term? Such are the questions that must hang over the present development of Åsdam's work, and the work of many others besides.

^{vi}Åsdam, "Made from a Sci-Fi Locus," Notes Towards a Dissipation of Desire, p. 19.

^{vii}Åsdam, "Made from a Sci-Fi Locus," p. 19.

^{viii}This one-way, but paradoxical structure of surveillance--for it reverses the social hierarchy currently in place, in which it is precisely the spaces that Åsdam's structures evoke that society submits to surveillance--was continued in a later piece from 1999, Psychasthenium Audio, in which one-way, light-filtering glass windows were cut through the

former walls of the Vienna Kunsthalle. Again shrouded in darkness, visitors to the installation could survey the street outside the museum without fear of detection.

^{ix}Again, the stress on the experience of the individual remarked upon by Virilio seems enforced in Burr's work (the work of Andrea Zittel must also be related to this dynamic). Supposedly intended to be models for outdoor garden pavilions, Burr's Black Pavilions are also designed for interior exhibition, as occurred in Paris. Documented in a series of collages and photographs, the artist's desire for their public placement would have them constructed on the sidewalks of the residential neighborhoods of a wealthy city like Palm Beach, where they would provide views into secluded private gardens and property. In their simultaneous evocation of a guard booth used for surveillance and a chamber for individual isolation, the pavilions should be related to a similar, previous work constructed by Christian Philipp Müller for the 1995 Platzwechsel exhibition, which was organized in Zurich by the latter artist. Müller's sculpture was called, simply, Untitled (Mystagogue Cell). I discuss this work in my essay "Lies, Damn Lies, and Statistics: The Work of Christian Philipp Müller," Artforum XXXV no. 6 (February 1997), pp. 74-77, 109-110. The best description of Burr's "Anti-Public Sculpture" exhibition can be found in Joel Sanders, "Frames of Mind," Artforum XXXVIII no. 3 (November 1999), pp. 127-131, 157.

^xThomas Crow, "Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts," in Modernism and Modernity, ed. Benjamin Buchloh, Serge Guilbaut, and David Solkin (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1983), pp. 215-264.

^{xi}Smithson speaks of the "new consciousness of the vapid and the dull" in the essay "Entropy and the New Monuments (1966)." He coins the term "uncanny materiality" in "Donald Judd (1965)," where he also has this to say about space, a dictum much aligned with Asdam's present endeavors: "Time has many anthropomorphic representations, such as Father Time, but space has none. There is no Father Space or Mother Space. Space is nothing, yet we all have a kind of vague faith in it." See Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

^{xii}Burr's cinematic connections in both cases should be compared to Asdam's consistent positioning of his sculptural pavilions in terms of media experience, especially cinema and video.