

There is no innocence here: Some considerations on Knut
Åsdam's Filter City Audio, 2002

by Magali Arriola

We might think of innocence as nostalgia for an idealized stage isolated from the contingencies of the everyday; contingencies marked by the gradual dissolution of moral absolutes and their replacement by bureaucratic logic in its most instrumentalized form. When one of the characters in Knut Åsdam's Filter City Audio states that there is no innocence here, it is clear that in Åsdam's installation the reference to innocence does not intend to stage the longing for a purified, abstract social utopia; rather, it is about producing and locating intermediary spaces – some would say heterotopias – where deviations in social norms cease to appear as degraded and instead allow for mediation between private interests and the public realm.

In Åsdam's words, it is the configuration of contemporary subjectivity that is at stake when we come to realize that the presumed universality of the subject has resulted in the institutionalization of the self within the frame of established norms that orient our ordinary actions. If, as Åsdam suggests, subjectivity is always an

interplay between political and social forces, one should ask how the individual could actually picture and situate himself within the world if not through the disruption of the encoded beliefs and desires rooted in his intimate landscapes?

"Of course, there are narratives that form us all as residents and as characters (...) not mere fantasies, but narratives of contestation and struggle, to which we commit or submit our bodies, psyches, and everyday lives."

Filter City Audio functions as a fragmented sound narrative in which we hear of meetings and missed encounters, ruptures between couples, accidents, and street fights. The narrative negotiates between the inner and outer world addressing the distorted dimensions attained within the banality of everyday situations. The work is composed of a somber architectural structure bordered by three black curtains and a window. As the window filters natural light to only 5 percent it transforms the scenery outside into the gloomy autumnal landscape of a park. The interplay of two feminine voices overlapping incidentally against the brownish background of the city generates a layered cinematic experience in which notions of space and time never quite coincide. We find ourselves tracking their

arguments while simultaneously being compelled to make sense of another story: the one suggested by the city seen through the window. We are tempted to fit the unpredictable urban dynamics passing through the still frame – a flow of familiar but still ungraspable scenes filtered into a darkened phantasmagoric space – with the sequence of facts and emotions called up by the voices.

As viewers, we create coherence out of narrative drama through a process of framing and editing. As if passive spectators to our own lives, we are inclined to make sense of our experiences within a safe logic of conduct. But what Åsdam's work describes is precisely a loss of control. Not only will the passersby never notice they are being observed, they are equally unaware of being incorporated into the narratives of complete strangers. Flirting with the voyeuristic gaze of the spectator, the gaps in the narrative flow also enjoin the viewer to fill in the blanks and generate new meanings according to his own interpretation of the facts. By integrating the imaginary spaces of these unrelated points of view, the artist suggests that the fabric of the city no longer necessarily corresponds to the rigid structure proposed by its social institutions; rather, it is a fluid configuration of the

exchanges and interplays that take place between its inhabitants.

"A city transforming more than the users feel they have control over – an exchange without a clear idea of what exactly is being transacted. (...) A slight fear, and uncertainty, had forever fragmented our group."

If cultural modernity's attempts to produce a homogenous social body have largely dissolved, perhaps the notion of a shared identity might be negotiated less on the behalf of an inherited history, than through the interaction of individuals that shape a group or collectivity. Åsdam's production insinuates that we may no longer be speaking about identity but identification: A subjective process that recovers the scale of particularity through micro-narratives that stir at the core of everyday life. By creating floating and suspended spaces that stimulate veiled feelings and emotions, he seeks alternatives to the articulations of the social through the personal. Darkened spaces, Åsdam has often remarked, loosen our sense of space and problematize the bounds of personality, subjectivity and experience. Altering the intelligibility of

architectural structures – and the implicit ideological functions transmitted through social planning and design – Åsdam undermines the productivist logic inherited from modernity, particularly from modern architecture and urban rationalization. Within the professed visibility and openness of such spaces, the situation of the individual turns out to be that of one who comes “to inhabit a house where the inside space has been violently turned to the exterior [leading to] a de-structuration of behavior, of consciousness and the self, calling into question hierarchies and structures.”¹

“We all sensed a loss of collective speech or meaning. We were numbed, it was like feeling physically inarticulate, – it corrupted your sex drive, made you drink and get fat. (...) Now, the floor seemed to merge with my stomach and the walls were curving to touch.”

The expansion of the media within post-industrial society has come to dissolve the borders between individual behaviors and collective conduct. As Åsdam puts it, it is possible to think about contemporary subjectivity as something that is produced, as a productive process that is directly related to the socioeconomic conditions of contemporary life and that acts as mediator between our

conscious fantasies and unconscious desires.

It has often been pointed out that it is possible to see in Modernism the expression of a will to auto-referentiality. By conceiving the work as an entity that refers only to itself, the Modernist ideal ran the risk of remaining isolated from the real context it aspired to effect, committing itself to the narcissist pleasure taken in its own deployment. It is from this perspective that the masturbatory episode alluded to in Filter City Audio makes sense as an image of modernity's decay: "A whining man smudged in months' old dirt. Looking awry, looking horny, ready for another run." In this particular case, masturbation not only refers to sexuality exposed publicly by a marginal character – a homeless person excluded from the urban structure – but can also be perceived as a gesture that a productive and functional society cannot recuperate. Expelling a corporeal fluid without any procreative end echoes a failure enacted in infertile, wasted actions.

This might also hint at the mislaid sense of innocence in contemporary culture, a naïve reliance upon personal desires that are often dictated by a social apparatus that produces needs only to fulfill them. It is precisely the deceptive nature of promise operates within the legacy of

modernity that is addressed in Åsdam's project. His works seems to resignify the emancipated virtues professed by the modern individual, confronting us with the expression of a social unconscious, making us embody, and by the same token assume, the vulnerability of our civilized world.

¹ Quoted from Gillo Dorfles in Marc Perelman, "Le stade du verre de l'architecture moderne comme transformateur du moi," Dan Graham, (Paris: Editions Dis Voir, 1995), 84.