

KNUT ÅSDAM



CONVERSATION

Psychasthenium Audio.

BRIGITTE KÖLLE : Your piece *Psychasthenium Audio* which is on view at the Kunsthalle Wien is an architectural system of three booths, where two have sound narratives on headphones. Could you tell something about the narratives and the relevance of language in your work?

KNUT ÅSDAM : All my works deal with language to some degree, even though it is often not in terms of the more narrow understanding of spoken or written language. But this kind of language has become more important in my later works where I have started to use poetic forms of language within my installations. Previously I kept these texts separate from 'visual' art-works. However all my early video works were strongly motivated by ideas of language and enunciation, acted out in terms of bodily placement and movement rather than as spoken or written texts. The only early work that uses vocal narration is the video *Come To Your Own* (1993).

With a work like *Psychasthenium Audio* which is being shown at the Kunsthalle Wien there is a complex relation to language: On the one hand there is the use of audio narratives within the piece. These two audio narratives *Legendary Psychasthenia 1999 Redit*, [*Leg Psych*] and *Firenarrative (Fakefemme)*, [(*Fakefemme*)], both deal with an object of desire which dissipates into the idea of the city. (*Fakefemme*) is a 4-minute monologue intertwined with a distinct sound element, while *Leg Psych* is a 9 minutes long composition of monologues, dialogue and narratively textured audio. Both pieces use a poetic slang that is like a contemporary form of Beat poetry. I wrote the original 24-minute radio version of *Legendary Psychasthenia* together with the writer Onomé Ekeh, and we wanted a piece that dealt with identity in relation to an idea of the city's unconscious and a desire that despecifies and dissipates into the fabric of the city. We were looking for a textual form that could both merge contemporary urban youth culture into the fabric of the piece, and make the sexuality at stake ambiguous and quite open – in which the direction of desire of the main protagonist is not clear. S/he could be both a man or a woman, depending on the listeners desires. The aim was, for me, to make the sexuality in the piece queered in relation to a conventional heterosexual axis. This poetic form with its city slang, the quirky ironic love-scenario, its rhythm, musical overlays and mixing, seemed to work together for such an effect.

The other aspect of narrative in *Psychasthenium Audio*, like with the whole *Psychasthenia* series, is what I call 'narrative spaces'. The thematic spaces with their particular cultural references (for example the sex-club), creates a thematic environment which comments on the viewing experience. In the darkened spaces everyone become

BRIGITTE KÖLLE WITH KNUT ÅSDAM

both part of their own and other viewers' narrative and fantasy.

So there is both the relation to language in terms of the actual narrative in the audio pieces, and then there are the narrative spaces that are, in themselves, a kind of literary version of the actual spaces of society. Their particular economic, social and sexual references become narrative constructs around how the viewer enters, socialises and thinks that space.

BK : Between the two booths with the narratives, there is a booth without any sound. All three booths are interconnected by dark-grey windows and people can see each other in dim light. The booths face out to the street through a glass wall that reduces the light to 2,5 per cent of the natural light outside. Which effect has the darkness on the viewer, and what means the use of darkness for you in this particular work?

KÅ : 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. I have particularly worked with darkness as a strategy of problematising the border between personality and space, much inspired by Caillois' ideas on the mimetic and subjectivity. Picking up on the strategies inherent in sex-club and club architecture, with its intentional loss of recognisability and loss of subjectivity, I have worked with the role of the mimetic in contemporary subjectivity, as relates both to my use of video and music, hallucinatory elements and architecture. As the subjectivities in these pieces are blurred so are the masculinities at stake, they could be straight/gay or queered in a more open sense. In an exhibition situation there is also an opening up of this space for female desires, which is much more restricted in the societal spaces that are referred to.

If one sees modernism and modernist architecture as sexualised and gendered historically as heterosexual male, these pieces – through social-architectural conventions of the modern city itself – queers that masculinity that is produced by the architecture and opens it up to a variety of identifications.

BK : You often use the term 'psychasthenia' as the title of your works which refers to Roger Caillois' 1935 essay "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia". What is of interest for you in Caillois' understanding of 'psychasthenia'?

KÅ : "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia" by Roger Caillois is a text that has a lot of contemporary relevance. Particularly if you look at the term 'psychasthenia' which points to a disruption in the relationship between personality and space/environment. Seen as a contemporary state of subjectivity and as something that extends the idea of subjectivity and

gives agency to quantities like space, environments, larger masses of people and temporary spatial-social configurations (devoid of an idea of value onto that particular observation), one can relate it to many of the phenomena one sees today. For example, the resurgence of drug culture in the 90s definitely has to do with negotiation of the borders of subjectivity or self. Also, music today has become incredibly spatial —while ambient music in the 70s was about being a backdrop, electronica in the 90s has become about problematising the borders or threshold between background, foreground and the body and experience of the listener. But there is also the blurring of the borders of capitalism and other agencies of power. So basically my interest in the term comes from it as a model of contemporary subjectivity in an extended sense, which however reaches into specific personal, economic and political relations of everyday life.

BK : It is striking that your work is very diverse when it comes to media. You work with and combine architectural elements, installations, videos, sound pieces, or you include other artists' work as in the 'videotheques' where other artists' videos are shown. Despite the range of media, your work seems to be thematically consistent. How would you yourself describe your main artistic concerns and 'themes'?

KÅ : The main concern of my work is an inquiry into 'contemporary subjectivity'. Seeing subjectivity as something that is produced and as processes that are also productive, it is clear that my outlook is very concerned with contemporary culture and interested in seeing what is at stake within parts of contemporary culture. The way I have used rhythmic structures from electronic music, architectural strategies from sex-clubs and so on, have to do with how they articulate and connect to important aspects of subjectivity today. Subjectivity is always in interplay of political and social forces, and I always see a sexed and gendered subjectivity. Therefore the issue of sexuality has been very important throughout my work, and I have worked with different aspects of masculinity. In the earlier works it is connected to the gendered and sexual agency of historical power structures such as architecture, authority and so on. In some more recent works it is more direct either in terms of using the male body or by looking at aspects of spaces within the city in which a narrative of sexuality is intimately linked to issues of economy and a (sometimes problematic) play of conventions. Queer theory has been important to me in this respect for its opening up of the masculine and feminine identification regardless of sexual preference. Knowing that identifications are also productive, they can be used for destabilising archaic claims of authority and for opening up the possibilities in people's everyday understanding of themselves and their practice.

BK : You were born and raised in Norway, you studied in London, and you now live in New York. Do you think that your place of birth and childhood left traces in your work in terms of specific concerns or themes? Would you agree to the sociologist Paul Gilroy who said that it is equally both routes and roots that create a person's identity?

KÅ : I agree with Paul Gilroy. At least there is always the interplay of routes and roots, even if they are not always equal. One must remember that roots are not something that you are given at birth, but that they can spread out all your life. On a general level it is clear that growing up in Scandinavia had a very specific effect in terms of what I thought was possible: how I think of myself; how I understand the political and social interplay between individuals and communities; what is political; what is art and its role and so on. In so far, as I have tried to embrace or distance myself from these attitudes, this process has been determined by my own confrontation with the societal ideas of the Nordic region. I have lived outside Norway for more than twelve years now, the period when I went from being a boy to becoming an adult, which amounts for a very important period in one's life. And some experiences and development from that period have segmented into some ideas of belonging and rootedness that have nothing to do with Scandinavia.

Following photo spreads (pages 70 - 73) :

Psychasthenia 10, image 1, 2000.

Psychasthenia 10, image 13, 2000.

