

The image shows the front cover of a book. The cover is primarily a dark, almost black, textured material. At the bottom, there is a horizontal band of a vibrant red color with a subtle, draped fabric-like texture. The text 'KNUT ÅSDAM' is printed in a clean, white, sans-serif font, centered horizontally and positioned in the upper half of the dark area.

KNUT ÅSDAM



## DISCUSSION

The initial meeting took place at The Heights Bar, Saint Georges Hotel, Portland Place, London, July 15, 2000.

CLAIRE BISHOP : Caillois's essay "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia" describes the phenomenon of camouflage in insects, which he sees less as a defensive strategy than as a desire for assimilation to space. He goes on to legitimate a reading of psychasthenia as a cultural symptom. Caillois's essay was written in 1931, but you clearly feel that the concept of psychasthenia to be relevant and useful today. Why might this be?

KNUT ÅSDAM : It is interesting as a cultural symptom, easily perceptible over a range of phenomena. It has to do with negotiating the border between personality and environment. For example, you see it in the recent resurgence of drug culture as well as in contemporary music which has become incredibly spatial. While ambient music in the late 70s was often about creating an environment, in the 90s, it became about problematising the borders between the music, the environment and the body of the listener. Sometimes the music is something you can feel inside your body, other times it is like a backdrop; it never settles in one point. You can also see it in architecture: in the emphasis on reflections and disappearance via glass and mirror facades; in the conflation of perspectives; in the formal mimicry or abstraction of the surroundings. One can also see parallels to these cultural practices in the way global business manifests itself—decentered, camouflaging and assimilatory.

CB : But if psychasthenia is essentially a pathological condition concerning our relation to space, don't your examples suggest its use as an aesthetic category?

KÅ : No. The aesthetic here is a product of cultural and economic circumstances, and is intertwined with the social and psychological. Of course, the 'aesthetic', 'psychological' and so on, are not only produced by society but are also productive in themselves. However, I am not primarily interested in the subject's relation to architecture—or music. It is more a question of cultural conditions that preoccupies me—how a group (or a person) relates to itself or to a socio-economically determined place, not space as an abstract aesthetic category, or a void. An example would be going to a nightclub where in the darkness of the space you have this small loss of subjectivity: you are not perceived as easily, not so identifiable. You yourself become part of this ornamentation of space—parts of your body together with parts of other bodies, architectural fragments, sound elements and light flickers. Often the experience of going to a club has very little to do with actual things happening to you; it is more about inserting yourself into a narrative and partaking in the body of the space and its erotics of ornamentation.

## KNUT ÅSDAM WITH CLAIRE BISHOP AND BEN BORTHWICK

It is important that I am referring to actual bodies that fill spaces in society, whose subjects are gendered and have their body as a site of struggle, contestation and pleasure. My work is filled with bodies—the 'viewers'—in the same way, and that is how they can relate to, experience, think about, and sometimes function within the works themselves.

CB : This is an important difference between your work and that of artists in the late 1960s and 70s to whom your generation is continually compared. Your installations evoke the work of Bruce Nauman and Dan Graham, but the use of specific reference points—corporate architecture, sex clubs, etc.—clearly differentiates your project from the agendas they laid out 30 years ago. How else do you situate your work in relation to theirs?

KÅ : These artists have been an influence on my work. However, my architectural installations like *Psychasthenia 5* are much more narrative spaces: you become a part of a narrative the moment you walk into it. And they offer a social and psychological experience in relation to specific themes. I think the relationship to strategies of the 1960s and 70s is a large problem for a lot of artists in my generation. Many use the aesthetic of these artists, or





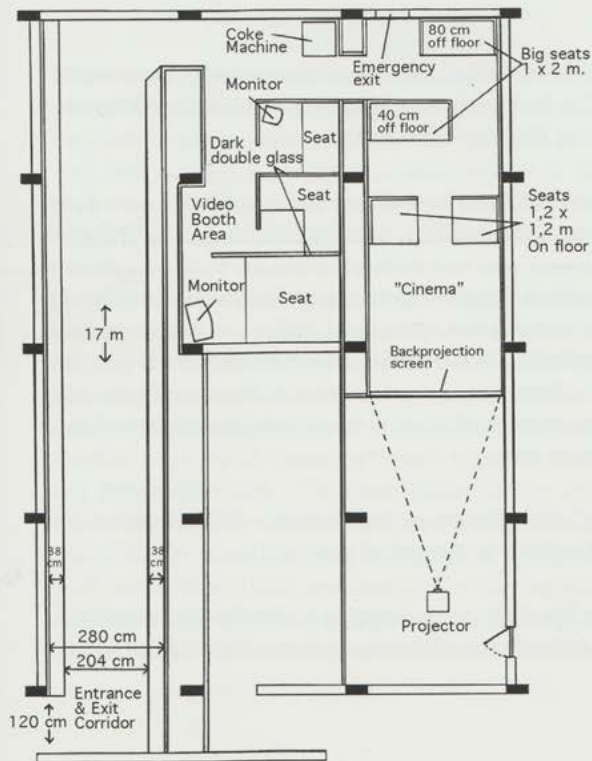


**Psychasthenia (5)**, 1998. (opposite page)  
Architectural installation. Installation detail.  
View of entrance to video-booths.

**Psychasthenia (5)**, 1998. Plandrawing. (left)  
Architectural installation. Installation with three sections:  
17m (55') entrance and exit corridor, a middle area with  
2 small video booths and 1 small peek-booth, and finally  
a larger screening room for projected videos.  
Video-programme, coke-machine.

**Psychasthenia (5)**, 1998. (above)  
Architectural installation. Installation detail.  
View from one booth into another.

All photography, pages 53 - 56, by Stein Jørgensen.





the formal strategies of conceptual art, without really considering how and why those artists came to those necessary conclusions. That is, I think a lot of artists today deal with viewer experience in a manner based on decisions made by artists 30 years ago.

CB : The 1960s obsession with phenomenological immediacy was a political issue: activating the spectator carried an almost moral urgency.

KÅ : I have a problem with trying to reduce these things to a singular phenomenological experience. I am more and more drawn to narrative spaces and dealing with the psychological experience of the viewer while referring to particular spaces in society. If you are going to talk about phenomenological problems, you have to deal with the complexity and dynamics of experience: how people relate to each other, how they speak, and the speed and movement of these relations, all at the same time.

CB : You often speak about “queering” architecture in this respect. Tell me about the video *Untitled: Pissing* (1995) and how it relates to the rest of your work.

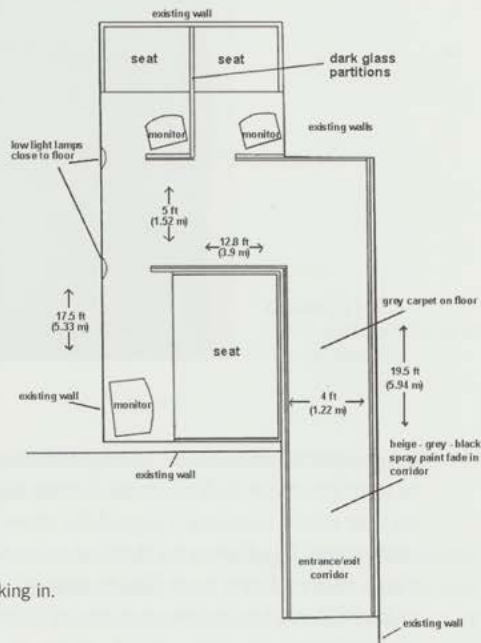
KÅ : I think it is a piece that connects a lot of my work, bridging the earlier pieces and the more architectural work that followed. Many of the architectural pieces deal with space that



**Psychasthenia 5**, 1998. (opposite page)  
Architectural installation, detail. View from exit/entrance corridor, looking in.

**Psychasthenium**, 1998. (above)  
Architectural installation, detail. View of video-booth entrance.  
Entrance and exit corridor with spray paint fade; three video booths; video-programme.  
Three monitors, vinyl cushions.

**Psychasthenium**, 1998. Plandrawing.  
Architectural installation.



is quite sexualised, and some deal with traditionally patriarchal, authoritarian set-ups, which I want to invest with other meanings: to “queer” the masculinity in those spaces. And *Untitled: Pissing* is quite architectural in itself in the way the body fills the monitor like a wall, and when it is projected it really relates to the space in which it is shown. The man has a very rigid masculine stance—the crotch is firmly placed in your face—but the moment he starts peeing on himself that rigid masculinity is undermined. It has a traumatic relationship to adult masculinity, firstly in that it represents something that you are not supposed to do as a child, and secondly because it signifies a loss of control in relation to a straight defined masculinity. But of course, in the video this moment is also eroticised: it is like coming on yourself, or an erotification of the male body through the feminine metaphor of getting wet—so this traumatic event in relation to one kind of masculinity can also be a point of pleasure and release. It opens up different terms of masculinity.

Another example of “queering” space might be the video viewing booths in *Psychasthenia 5* and *Psychasthenium*. The conventions of that architecture might be experienced by men more than women—it could be a gay club but it could also be a straight club. In the circulation of bodies there is a great ambiguity as to what that space actually means. The Whitney *I.S.P. Installation* (1995) also does this by playing with different formal strategies. It is a dense room with Formica fake wood panels that are used in corporate offices, but also in American family homes—in the living room, TV room, and so on. The domestic space supposedly sig-





nifies a particular sexual configuration: the straight citizen and family, which of course has its own practices and zones of deviation. I use music that is very ambiguous—a kind of techno that could connote a lager-lout crowd or a gay crowd—so the subjectivity at stake there isn't clear. Together with that I show my video *Citizen* (1995). The monitor is positioned in a way that makes it look like furniture—a family TV or an office monitor—but it is turned in to face the wall so that in order to watch the video you have to move very close to it. For the most part the video shows a domestic image, such as a piece of rug and a chair, but then there are rhythmic breaks showing men in quite sexualised positions. The piece is really about opening up the space of the installation for a spectrum of identifications which, however, have a very uneasy relationship to the repressive narrative in the architecture.

CB : I am interested in the viewer's actual experience of a work like *Psychasthenia 5*, where the dark video booths plunge the visitor into absorptive, "psychasthenic" conditions. Is it possible to reconcile the "death-drive" aspect of psychasthenia (Cailliois says the assimilation to space is an 'instinct of renunciation') with your interest in narrative spaces?

KÅ : Even if you just walk into the installation and peek into a video booth to see if a seat is available, it is as if you are checking out the people there. So your behaviour involuntarily becomes part of this cruising narrative of the space. But it is also a very comfortable place to sit, and people often stay for an hour and watch all the videos. It is definitely a space where you became assimilated, and you are more and more comfortable the longer you spend there. You can't immediately be seen by the people who have just come in, because it really is quite dark. Because you lose visual control over your surroundings, and because of the "physical" quality of dark space which envelops and touches you, the desire to stay in this installation flirts with the death-drive in that it is motivated by a desire to lose yourself. What is interesting to me is that the installation refers that desire to a particular cultural experience, in a specific social and economic context, in this case the sex-club.

CB : This is quite different to Dan Graham's *Interior Design for Space Showing Videotapes* (1986-7) where you are acutely aware of the other people in the installation and consequently of your status as a socially-constructed subject. In his installation *Present*



**Citizen, 1995**  
Video, 3 min. colour, no sound.  
(far and near left)

*Continuous Past(s)* (1974) this is particularly so. You are never allowed to be an isolated monad in Dan Graham's work, but actually, isn't this the case with yours too?

KÅ : You are right to the extent that the visitor becomes part of a narrative in my installations. However, you can go into them on your own and really be isolated from the outside. I think this was particularly the case in *Psychasthenia: The Care of the Self* (1999) made for the 1999 Venice Biennale, especially in the more secluded parts towards the back. Sometimes I found people lying there, hanging out or sleeping, while most visitors would just walk around the little loop at the front and then leave. So it was a space where you could actually withdraw and get some solitude, or you could look out of the window and see other people walking past. My installations often have a "heterotopic" dynamic, in the sense of being spaces of deviation or crisis that are at the same time intimately linked to the priorities of the society that produces them. In the Venice piece this dynamic is repeated on a formal level by the view through the glass to the outside world.

CB : So are you more interested in representing the condition of psychasthenia in urban culture, which I think *Psychasthenia 10* (2000) in the 'Art Now' gallery at Tate Britain does, or in restaging an assimilation to space for the viewer to experience first hand, which I think *Psychasthenia: The Care of the Self* at Venice did? I see these as two parallel strategies.

KÅ : The *Psychasthenia 10* photographs are a study of psychasthenia as a phenomenon or a cultural narrative while the architectural pieces and installations are about making a space where a psychasthenic experience is part of the work.

BEN BORTHWICK : Claire's distinction between work that explains the condition and work that provides the experience is really useful. As well as the Tate and Venice installations which function as two distinct articulations of the term, how do you see your other work in relation to psychasthenia? I mean the video projections *Psychasthenia 2+2* (1997-8) with the mirrored corporate buildings, the late-night graffiti you did for *Picnoleptic City: Hysterical Time* (1997) in Vienna, the sound pieces like *Legendary Psychasthenia 1999 Re-edit* (1998-9) which builds a narrative around the idea of an urban unconscious. Also the new video *Cluster Praxis* (2000) where you position urban space in relation to electronic music and clubs. In some of these pieces the

relationship to psychasthenia is not so distinct or immediately identifiable as in Claire's examples. Are you are developing a typology of psychasthenia in the work you have made during the last five years?

KÅ : It is important to remember that the works are all dealing with other issues as well. But psychasthenia as a cultural condition is the common strand that runs through them as a backdrop for the other themes.

With the video-projection *Psychasthenia 2+2* for example, you have this intense spatial experience which sometimes invades your body and other times is outside; sometimes you are really seduced by it and other times it really hurts your eyes. But this experience is in relation to an international hyper-capitalist architecture—which stands for a very particular economic movement—and this is where the work becomes tied to a specific theme. In fact, it is only when psychasthenia is explored in relation to sexual, social or economic situations that it becomes interesting.

In the video *Cluster Praxis* I deal with dancing as a form of social practice. The assimilatory aspect of dancing in a club or party makes the dancer part of a mass erotification of the space. However, I am also looking at the utopian side of dancing as a liberating practice, however unglamorous, temporary and naïve it might actually be. I relate this use of space to other scenes of architecture at night and a daytime scene of real estate development in the city.

BB : I am interested in the way you make those links. However, isn't there a contradiction between clubbing as a performative act that could liberate the subject from the conformity of institutional politics into some kind of collectivity, and the way club spaces and dance music have become so stratified into normative behavioural patterns that once again the subject is defined by another form of consumerism?

KÅ : My emphasis is on dancing as a practice rather than the club or party (which the video makes abstract). Dancing has its own conventions, but it can allow small escapes and temporary deviations. It is so paradoxical: you can have this incredible mix of people on a dance-floor and let yourself go in a utopic narrative, even while you know that it has very little to do with the social or political make-up of everyday life.

BB : Is the reference to corporate architecture in *Cluster Praxis* a way of signalling that these economies exist in the same space and are easily incorporated into each others existence, or is it an indication that there is always the possibility for queering those conventions from within?



KÅ : Well, club architecture is often corporate and clubs can be the most repressive places. This relation is important in the video. But there are always possibilities for temporary deviation and transgression. It is all about use (hence 'praxis'), and about taking something for yourself and making it function for your own ends. This is what can take place in a party or at a club.

BB : How important is it to you that the buildings in *Psychasthenia 10* are either specific or non-specific in relation to different political structures in different nations—say the Scandinavian social democratic model or British liberal capitalism—and the social histories associated with those nations and political ideologies?

KÅ : We know that in the more social-democratic models (like post-war Norway) many of the architects were strongly influenced by American social building projects: ideas were and still are circulating between architects and city planners in different countries who work with many of the same strategies. And modernism as a project haunts them all. Many of these buildings—even in the US or in Europe—were funded as social or lower income housing in the 1950s after the war, which makes them interesting to consider in relation to a trauma of the nation or of the city.

What my photographs don't tell you is anything about the specifics of each location. They don't tell you who lives there, what's going on inside, or what the society around it is like. We just recognise these buildings from our own experience and the way we think about them. That is also why I haven't labelled where they were taken.

BB : We have already talked about how darkness facilitates a certain identification with space. The fact that your photographs are representations creates a distance between one's actual experience of these spaces and the experience of viewing photographs of them in a museum. There is a real disjunction between the beautiful images and the buildings they represent. Can you talk about the differences between the way those buildings function during the daytime as signifiers of particular class conditions, and how they are transformed by darkness to the point where the tower blocks become more general symbols of myths and fantasies of the city?

KÅ : The tension between the distanced beauty and the social reference is one of the basic parameters of the work and part of its perverse economy. However, I don't think the images conceal social and economic information. Some of them are identifiable as social housing while others are clearly not. The ways that this information is inscribed in the building (stains, curtains) changes your perception of the photos.

However, *Psychasthenia 10* is also dealing with a mythology of the city. These kinds of buildings are the ghosts of the Western city—you find them all over Europe and the US—and that is partly what this series of photographs is about too. We don't necessarily notice these buildings, but they are part of our experience of the city.

BB : I am interested in the way these buildings produce conflicting fantasies, bracketed on the one hand by their architectural models and on the other by your photographs. The model reifies the architects' utopian fantasies about the building that have a completely arbitrary relation to its subsequent history. Then there are your photographs which show the gradual distortion of these façades (and fantasies) into something much more banal, sometimes sinister. There is a perverse beauty in the photographs which is less about the building's actual dilapidation than about the transformation of the idea of them. They function as a grotesque epitaph to the utopian fantasies of modernism.

KÅ : For me the project got more and more dystopic the more I worked with it. But the relationship to the notion of the model is actually there in the images. Just look at the form of some of those buildings—they are complete architectural wet dreams, they are just so fantastical! You can imagine how excited these architects would have been designing these sci-fi buildings. But I am interested in the role of desire and fantasy both in how the buildings

were initiated, and how you experience or relate to them today. For example, one of these images might be overwhelmingly beautiful and have a cinematic appearance, but then when you actually identify what you are looking at it is overlaid with a harsh social reality. I don't think these things are disjunctive, but overlap in different economies of desire and fantasy.

BB : The cinematic reference really comes through when looking at the way *Psychasthenia 10* has been installed at the Tate. The lights are slightly dimmed and if you sit against the back wall the photographs wrap around the other three walls like a Cinerama screen from the 1950s. From a distance the buildings seem incredibly romantic and beautiful, but when you move closer they become more grotesque as the details emerge. In one image there is a satellite dish that looks like a strange anamorphic stain. It is neither the architecture nor the photograph but it is part of the surface of both. So there is a duality that is simultaneously seductive and repulsive.

KÅ : Some of the images look very romantic and refer to landscape painting and photography but when you see the disrepair on the buildings, you realise the nature of these apartments. That twist is very important for me, because it ensures this is not a romantic project, and not a project about the sublime.