

Everyday Practice

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One of the commitments I have to feminism is really about the emphasis on the everyday – and in the everyday the struggle for equality is by no means over. The circumstances are fairly clear: worldwide, women and men still do not enjoy equal pay, and outrageous crimes are still committed against women and girls, every day, only because of their gender. This is pretty obvious and crucial in understanding the need for structural change in societies world wide.

The other commitment I have is to the questions that feminism posed and that queer theory further developed – basic questions about gender and sexual relations and the understanding that these relations are culturally and linguistically constructed. Further, it is important that the resultant attitudes to gender and sexual relations are productive, i.e. that they are ultimately put into practice.

I often hear people grunt about this second aspect; it troubles people, and they would rather deal with a space in which these things don't matter, which is basically no longer possible, because, as I see it, one of the great achievements of feminism is to have initiated a process of liberation from a proposed neutral idea of gender or sexuality, in which being male or female, gay or straight, no longer has a singular meaning.

Feminism and its formative effect on masculinity

My concern with issues, or *mechanisms*, of sexuality and gender, is partially born from my own experience of growing up in Norway in the 1970s and 80s. As in the other Scandinavian countries in the period, in Norway feminism achieved a strong position and even a certain grip on institutional structures. But above all, gender issues and gender politics were an important subject at school and in the media, and thus frequently discussed. It was in other words a particular cultural climate – a social and political environment where these issues had to be discussed whether you liked it or not – that I grew up in and in which I built up my own conception of masculinity. It was not primarily an intellectual approach. Today I often hear people talk about how their childhood expectations with regard to their identity as a female or a male were fixed. But the way I remember it, even if you were in a conservative family, these issues were all around you in society, and what this meant was that the historical patriarchal position was no longer “neutral”, but a position. In school, the debate about different ideas – conservative, programmatic and radical – was very open. Feminism had actually succeeded in provoking a debate throughout the layers of society.

When I was a teenager in the 1980s, however, one article after another appeared, describing how the radical 1970s idea of the *soft man* – a generalising and derogatorily meant catchphrase for the “new” masculinities – had been a gigantic flop, and how these men had now reassumed and reassured their masculinity. Nevertheless, the youth scene of the 80s still contained some more “open” (free, liberal) currents, and to me the concepts of gender and sexuality increasingly appeared as an open practice. It was a practice in which I didn't necessarily understand the active signifiers, but in which the boundaries around being/becoming a man could be explored. Since I had not had the apparent privilege of being a youth in the politically more liberal 70s, to me, the urban club-life of the 80s granted a certain freedom to explore the possibilities and the experiences of being a man. I mention these personal aspects only to stress two things: partly that I conceive and experience the field of masculinity as being relatively open, and partly because it clarifies my

personal and historical attachment to the idea or possibility of a “queer” – a deconstructed or deviant – masculinity.

Moreover, I would like to make clear that it is impossible for me to imagine a way of looking at myself as a man without feminism. It is a question of *ambience*, and it is important to explore the relationship to feminism insofar as it entails what I call *ambient powers; productive powers*, like aggregates. It is important to understand that feminism transcended, and became productive beyond, its own discourse. This leads to a better understanding of how different political investments in historical and institutional powers, our language and subconscious, are productive in relation to subjectivity.

Two factors in particular helped to orient me consciously towards questions of sexuality. One of them had to do with my personal experience and attempts to find or articulate a masculinity that contained a space of possibilities that allowed desire to take a different direction from that of the historical patriarchal position, which I was in any case already alienated from. The other factor concerned my political, and later artistic, interest in authority – a subject that is difficult to explore without touching upon, not only identities based on gender or gender investments in notions of place and their functions, but also the uneven distribution of social opportunities for men and women. In other words, you also had to consider the forms of sexualisation that exist, the kind of signs and activities a social structure can have – what forms of (social) relations it produces, or should we say *repeats* – since in order to maintain a certain significance it has to be rewritten as such.

Queer theory

Queer Theory has had a big impact on me personally and artistically. My position in relation to Queer Theory grew from being exposed to the development of the field in New York, to the lectures of Douglas Crimp (art historian) and the work of Leo Bersani (filmmaker, theorist), Eve Sedgwick (theorist) and Judith Butler (post-structuralist philosopher). My reason for mentioning this is that there are regional differences in how the term is used; it can mean something else on the street or in other countries.

The background to Queer Theory, understood as an academic/theoretical discourse or genre, makes it a direct extension of gay and lesbian theory and activism. In order to understand the background to Queer Theory, it is crucial to understand a number of movements that have aspired to challenge the historical-patriarchal masculinity of the 20th century by articulating a different notion or form of sexualised society, and of sexualised, personal identities and practices, notions that recognise that personal identities and practices are political. Here I am thinking of Marxism, feminism, lesbian and gay theory and activism. It is necessary to understand the social and political conditions for these movements in order to understand the articulation of Queer Theory in the late 80s and early 90s: the critical theory of Marxism, in which theory is closely related to social and political problems; feminism's questioning of language, opening possibilities for thinking about the making of gender and sexuality, and of creating a new (formative and productive) language; and of course, the experiences of lesbian and gay activism, which have exposed the political structures of everything from everyday life through to the metapolitical sphere (as in feminism) as sexualising and existing within a sexualised field of interest. Without these movements it is not possible to understand Queer Theory, nor how it has given scope to more essentialist homosexual movements, and how it has helped a broader spectrum of sexual orientations to be included among political identities and as a theme of political action.

It is central to Queer Theory that the man is also considered as an entity that enters into processes of objectivation and subjectivation. Consequently, the sexual invisibility of the normative male (or more correctly, the myth of his existence) is destroyed. Once one has grasped the normative male as exclusively normative, on account of his continuously repeating the normative heterosexual inscription through practice, then one sees that he is extremely conditioned by the processes of sexualisation and absolutely not neutral, as he is generally and has historically been assumed to be.

AIDS

It is also important to understand how AIDS played a significant role in the development of Queer Theory, owing to the fact that the syndrome clearly articulated sexuality and the body as a site of political crisis (just as feminism had done in relation to the female and male body). Many people have lost family members and friends to AIDS, and/or they belong to social groups living with HIV or AIDS. The crisis of AIDS (which is still not over, although its focus has changed) has been important, not only as a factor that has repoliticised gay communities, but also as a means of politicising the surrounding, broader social groups in relation to the body, in ways not seen since the questions of abortion and women's rights became part of the political agenda. In the years when I was living in the US, the political battle with regard to AIDS extended from the street and homes (e.g. *Gods love we deliver*) through to consciousness-raising efforts, work with specific political structures or with specific, acute issues (e.g. Act Up), and on into academic circles and discussions of the related crisis (Crimp, Bersani, Butler).

The male subject of Queer Theory

Queer Theory is born of all this as a revitalisation of critical, political cultural theory. In fact it amounts to a sort of temporary revitalisation of the left in American politics (due to a displacement of the historically centred patriarchal subject). In relation to masculinity, Queer Theory highlights masculine subjectivities, which might involve the desire to be penetrated as much as to penetrate, and, more importantly, which provide the opportunity for other investments of desire and sexualisation than those of the historical heterosexual, which is associated with the hysterically limited possibility of a male desire for active penetration – *period*. The anus becomes affirmative, and the root of desire, just as much as the phallus has been. The male body in Queer Theory is homosexualised and psychosexualised – a positioning of the subject in a different place than the historical patriarchal subject. The male subject of Queer Theory is a male subject that largely entails the possibility for a sexualisation of the body and its practices.

Queer Theory finds itself in an interesting and relatively schizophrenic *double bind* due to the inclusion of psychoanalytic theory – which renders the relationship to the absent phallus central to the production of desire. But Queer Theory also has a Deleuzian drift – with which I would position myself – which aims to include other forms of production of desire. Queer Theory is a field that makes it possible to articulate the male body as a locus that diverges from that of the phallogentric economy of desire, and begins to approach a position where desire is conceptualised in relation to a plane of *consistency* and *immanence*, rather than being defined in terms of absence. A locus where you can see the Lacanian and Freudian positions as a necessary analysis of the surrounding historical, heterosexual institutions. Precisely because these historical entities – based on patriarchal desire – are productively reinscribed, the corresponding production and function of desire is repeatedly limited.

The performative aspect

One central concept that can help us understand gender and sexuality is that of the *performative* aspect, a concept that has been developed by Judith Butler, among others. As a point of departure, the performative can be conceptualised as a process of gendering for anyone in the process of becoming a subject. The idea that gender and sexuality are performative also includes an understanding of these notions as *linguistic*, which is not to deny, however, the actual existence of the body, nor that it constitutes an actual site of agency. What it does assert is that the body has to be understood as already present in language. The performative plays a central role in the notions or practices of woman or man, and in dramatising the limits. Drag is an example of the challenging of heterosexist boundaries. At the same time, drag refers to a theatricalisation and melancholy of gender roles. To the extent that gender or sexuality is a role, it is one that can never be performed as instructed, and its character never quite contains the ideal you are trying to approach (which itself is probably not so stable). Its embodiment is a repeated process, and repetition can be understood as precisely that which undermines the stable authority of the subject; consequently, as something that opens the way to different possibilities of sexualisation.

This notion of drag can also be associated with Deleuze's and Guattari's ideas about minor languages, while the subjectivities at stake in such minor languages connect to the performative. According to the idea of the minor language – e.g. the way a minority group might use a dominant language, one that does not quite fit, as something to dress in and transpose new or different meanings into – the crisis point (or generosity) is perhaps that this inevitably leads to a contribution to the major language in which e.g. gender or sexuality is understood by the larger population.

For example, the attempt to become gender unspecific is something that is never attained, yet the attempt itself, or the failure thereof, opens up more possibilities for what that gender and that desire could mean. Thus when performing e.g. masculinity, one is placed in a position that is traumatic for traditional notions of masculinity, and its notion being that masculinity is not performed but is the site of the person who does the performing. This traumatic position obviously brings with it the possibility of openness. In any case, young men today are quite occupied with the body as a potential object for others; old men today have grown used to new notions of subjectivity and deviation from their own experiences, thanks to contemporary media, meaning that this is already an obvious aspect of people's everyday practice and experience.

Camouflage

The relationship between camouflage and normality is an intimate one. The central pedestrian street may seem unsexualised to many, but this is because it repeats a heterosexual order or law that involves the subjects that we find there acting in accordance with the identity and the sexual order of the locality as a sort of camouflage. This amounts to a form of submission to the subjectivity of de-individuation (of responsibility). The moment this order is transgressed, for instance by two people of the same sex kissing, the heterosexual gendering of the “normalised” becomes apparent. Such actions immediately make it clear that a place is *always* sexualised, even where it does not appear to be so. Of course, this is not because a *place* or a *room* is sexualised in itself, a priori, but because such a space does not exist for us independently of the practices that



Knut Åsdam, *Abyss*, 2010. 43 min. 35mm, 5.1 surround audio

take place there, how we use them. It is, as Certeau writes, “the walkers who transform the street to the place of the walkers”. Practice defines the sexualisation of places. In relation to this, architecture seems inscribed in a *double bind*, and space is, according to Caillois, “seamlessly presented and represented”. On the other hand, camouflage can be used affirmatively in relation to identity in a broader spectrum of sexual groups and to the process of uniformation by willingly submitting one's “subjectivity” to that of a narrative or to the “subjectivity” of a place or a practice rather than to that of an individual. The political investment is context specific.

But to understand the male or female as objectified and subjectified is also to understand the self as embedded in a consciousness and a language, where the possibility exists of participating in a semiotic play with the terms in question – an interplay where you can engage in and transgress given norms and forms. This is where you can enter a complex, erotic play with signifiers that might initially signify something oppressive or unambiguous, but which one can, however, adapt to one's own ends as a means of “queering” – a sort of deconstruction, a reading of the limits, so to speak. *Transgression* is important here as a practice that involves



Knut Ásdam, *Blissed*, 2005. 12 min. 35mm, stereo

eroticising otherwise authoritarian forms with meanings that shift their signification; to disclose these as invested with other, divergent forms of desire, thereby destabilising the normative function that constitutes its point of departure.

Virtually everyone who appears in my films is a simply gendered and sexed subject who is not entirely stable and centred. The relative openness in terms of sexual identification also serves a narrative strategy; to elicit the viewer's own desires and presuppositions, to implicate the desire and the narration of the viewer. But it has been important to invest my work with a sense of gender and sexuality that is affirmatively different from, as well as critical and analytical of, the traditional compulsory heterosexual economy in which we live (also within art and architecture). However, it is not just enough to open up or queer the respective notions of masculinity; the same must also be done with the notions of femininity or woman that play a part in these works. In works such as *Scenes 1* and *Filter City*, the two main female characters can be seen as friends as much

as lovers or acquaintances – in a manner that takes these possibilities for granted. I have tried to make apparent the processual and performative aspects of gender and sexuality. In some of my works, like the video installation *Cluster Praxis*, this is highly evident in a visual way that seeks to involve the viewer and the viewer's body. However, even when dealing with a seemingly static or stable person, that person's subjectivity is in all respects processual and performative. Consequently I do not see it as my task to illustrate the performative and the processual by means of speed, youth and pictorial flux; its purpose lies in the very constituents of subjectivity and sexuality. The point is rather to identify subjectivities in the work that open up many different attachments within the piece, attachments to different listeners and viewers and their differing desires.

The conventions of the everyday

This interplay between the performance of subjectivity and the performance of social order has been a key aspect of my outlook as an artist and how I construct elements of my work. Understanding subjectivity as culturally constructed, as feminism and queer theory have elaborated, shows that it is something that exists within language, in as much as it appears in our world, tells us that it is performed, is inscribed within culture, and is connected to the idea of the struggles of the everyday – the everyday contestations that one takes part in willingly or unwillingly.

Gramsci said that it is necessary or even unavoidable to take part in struggles – one's life is defined by the contestations that occur within one's social group, one's body, relationships, welfare or profession, contestations that have resonances and alliances with those of others. In many of my works I attempt to narrate and articulate relations that are political in the way they relate to an everyday existence that can be recognized in many different urban settings. It might be small or big conversations, rather unimpressive meetings in ordinary settings, but it is in the relations between all these things – the architecture, the place, the subjects and characters – that there is a political resonance, one that brings forth the social and economic uncertainties of today.

One struggles both *with* and *against* structures of power or a topic

(which does not of course mean that you can ever be on the “outside”). In the psychology of language, there is the struggle between, on the one hand, working with language, using it as a tool of one’s own, making it “meaningful”, and, on the other hand, rendering language unintelligible and risking or seeking a decline of the “self”. None of these strategies works in and of itself, but in their conjunction or interplay we find the development and definition of struggle as such.

However, in the struggle to find the missing 10% of who you are and what you want to be, or to articulate yourself as, there is also the simple recognition that everything we deal with in our everyday life entails a certain degree of performativity and depends on being reinscribed – even conservative power needs to be reinscribed daily. It means that everything is up for contestation. Sure, some things re-establish themselves in much the same way as the day before, for example, your body – but never in exactly the same way. You might suddenly feel more tired or your back starts to ache. There is always something that is pulling even as you let go. So you need to rearticulate yourself, your thoughts, your participation in your society or within your family – even if you aim at that totally unattainable “like it is everyday”. If you live in a complex urban environment, everyday life makes even more claims on you, in your workplace, your free time, the time you spend with family and friends – one is constantly required to face one way or the other so as to stabilize oneself. (This is reflected also in the explosion of political struggles in contemporary urbanity, because of the great diversity of people and issues, and the difficult task of maintaining integrity within larger political entities such as parties or unions.)

On a fundamental level the notion of performativity teaches us ways of inserting difference and of changing things. This is not about body modifications and the play of external identity markers, but rather about understanding how we live in relation to conventions, and that the conventions of language are up for grabs and can be changed and annulled or made to work differently.

Basic questions

What feminism teaches us is that, in as much as we take part in society, we are gendered and sexual subjectivities, and unless we define these categories for ourselves, we will have no choice but to adopt those that are ready-made for us, defined by surrounding society and given to us within the realm of the symbolic, and which demand that we fit in with them physically and psychologically. What it also teaches us is that, being culturally constructed, these ready-mades, or our own bastardisations thereof, are only maintained by being reinscribed in society; they don’t exist there as natural law.

Like the unavoidable Marxist questions of ownership and agency – for whom, by whom – feminism asks essential questions about the subjectivities at stake in the struggle: for which gender, for what sexuality, what do these terms we have for gender and sexuality signify, and for whom? This exposing of the notions of gender and sexuality as culturally constructed has killed once and for all the possibility of a neutral or transparent gender or sexuality. This is perhaps the genius of feminism’s achievement, the impossibility of not noticing that the terms are contested. When in the 70s I and my school class were asked whether we thought there should be equality between the sexes, we realised that terms like man and woman were no longer neutral, regardless of which side one favoured. This was a fantastic opening up of the possibilities of gender and sexual positions. What it was to be a man, in my instance, was up for grabs, and not singular or centred. As desiring subjects, subjects with bodies, we enter the interplay and politics of that desire in everyday life.