

*VISUALIZING SHAME: Knut Åsdam's Untitled: Pissing*

Gertrud Sandqvist

What does masculine shame look like? Knut Åsdam's well-known video of a man pissing his pants should be a good example when it comes to visualization. The first time I saw it, in a survey of young Norwegian artists in Oslo in 1995, it was shown on a monitor installed facing a wall, but quite close to it, almost hidden. The viewing space that this created suggested a secret about to be disclosed, a public confession, or, perhaps more precisely, the ambivalence between intimacy and publicity that is the basis for shame. To paraphrase the anthropologist Mary Douglas, one could say that shame is intimacy in the wrong place. Most of all shame is connected to the exposure of bodily functions or desires that a person cannot control.

There is an element of obsession to masculine culture's interest in the penis, and its potential for becoming Phallus. Sigmund Freud's infamous notion of penis envy is actually referring to the same function as his observations on the significance of castration anxiety, and the role it plays for adolescent boys. In both cases, the penis – I am referring to the actual bodily organ, its size and functions – is given an all-dominating symbolic meaning for boys and men in a

patriarchal society. I will even go as far as to suggest that penis envy – in the sense of a continuous comparison between physical properties with symbolic power – is something very common among men.

It is remarkable how often the symbolic order shifts under pressure from the Real. We see how a metaphor such as 'pissing territories' is not that far removed from its physical counterpoint. Boys' competitions to see who can produce the longest fountain become one aspect of a larger cultural arrangement where the order among men is manifested in well-known competitions about real and symbolic power. It is interesting that one of the pillars upon which this homogeneously gendered grouping rests is outspoken homophobia, where, precisely, homosexuality is considered shameful.

Someone who pisses his pants is seen as someone who has lost control, who has given up and lost. In cultures with strong taboos against masturbation, wetting the bed is connected to ejaculation, but the fact that the shame associated with pissing yourself is equally enunciated in a culture where masturbation is considered a normal and integral part of sexuality, points towards more complex correlations. Perhaps the fear of homosexuality is really about the threat of a man who refuses to partake in the homogenization of penis envy and castration anxiety? It

would then more likely be a matter of a man not following the rules of the group, and thereby exposing the anxiety that is the basis for comparison and competition, rather than the more traditionally inscribed fear of a specific sexual orientation.

In his work on nakedness and shame, Hans-Peter Duerr describes how, in most cultures, there traditionally is a relation between exposure of the genitals and denigration<sup>1</sup>. In the middle ages, for instance, a form of punishment was to make the man (or woman) expose his genitals, or, 'private parts', in public. For men, an especially loaded and humiliating circumstance was to have an erection or ejaculation in front of strangers. For these reasons, the dead bodies of executed men were covered in long capes, since erection and ejaculation is quite common at the moment of death in hangings. And in almost all cultures it has been considered shameful to uncover the genitals of a sleeping or otherwise defenseless man.

The example of a corpse with an erection is one of the few instances involving a male protagonist that Duerr mentions, although he also mentions the 'unwritten law' prohibiting nannies from playing with small boys and stimulating them to gain erection – both cases which involve the shame of being defenseless. Most taboos and potentially shameful behaviors, however, pertain to

women's bodies. While it is not surprising that the blood of menstruation holds a special place, in Europe at least, the exposure of any part whatsoever of a woman's body has been considered shameful. The word 'naked' originally meant a full covering dress, even to be worn while bathing, or the dress worn by female athletes in ancient Greece, who had to cover at least their genitals and breasts – a predecessor of sorts for the contemporary bikini. It was also the woman who had to bear the shame if she was caught by male eyes while changing. For women, other bodily functions, such as urination, were, possibly, even more shameful and surrounded by much stronger restrictions. On the contrary, men in western culture were allowed to urinate anywhere, even in the middle of a city. As long as he can control himself, pissing standing up is indeed something to be proud of.

In all its formal simplicity, this is the story that Åsdam's Untitled: Pissing visualizes. He also has quite unusual credentials for doing just that. As a heterosexual man with a background in queer theory, he has had the unusual opportunity to view an emotional phenomenon from his own history and understand what it entails. When he places his video – of a penis inside a pair of pants that slowly gets wetter – inside the public space of an art exhibition he breaks all taboos, be they contemporary or inherited. He does so all the more

effectively by avoiding explicit sexual connotations. Naked genitalia, be they male or female, are common enough in art contexts; they no longer provoke anything even remotely related to feelings of shame. On the contrary, one can say that Åsdam plays upon the expectations of the spectator for a more or less enticing invocation of sexual arousal through the crotch shot that only shows a slight erected penis inside a pair of pants, behind the veil of cloth. Instead Åsdam exploits the voyeuristic gaze of a spectator that expects nourishment for its fantasy without being exposed to, or exposing, naked genitals. The video loop's rhythmic return to the moment before the urine stain began to appear seems to indicate as much. But the pleasure that follows relieving oneself is much more shameful than sexual satisfaction, and is often mentioned in the reception of the video. A promise of satisfaction is offered to the spectator, but it is a satisfaction that does not follow the anticipated genitally-oriented norms of sexuality. The spectator is entered into a dialogue and offered two options: either to acknowledge identification with a sexual perversion involving urination, and thereby save face, or to turn his/her head, remove one's gaze, in embarrassment or even shame over witnessing another's defeat and denigration.

Why would Åsdam be so interested in visualizing shame? Perhaps due to a simple desire to show what we

would rather keep hidden? Or perhaps to question the very mechanisms of exposure? But that would be too avant-garde inspired a practice, that, in effect, would only give the audience more of what it expects and wants. I think that Åsdam is more conscious than that. What he really wants to confront are the still active, essentially patriarchal structures in our society, structures that he cannot reach any other way than through surprise. I think he wants to show how bothered we get in the presence of a man that has lost control. Why are we so ashamed?

Despite several well-targeted and energetic attacks patriarchal society is still alive and well. This is also the case within visual art, even though the patriarchy here most often appears in disguise. By showing us how the utmost humiliation for both genders still pertains to loss of male power, Åsdam illustrates how our contemporary society is still built upon the classic patriarchal model. The cornerstone is still homophobia, the hierarchical order still achieved through male dominance and control. Through his video Åsdam is really 'outing' patriarchy.

---

<sup>1</sup>Hans Peter Duerr, Nacktheit und Scham (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988).