

Living

Simon Sheikh: A recurrent theme in your work has been the usage, representation and perhaps even psychology of architecture. On the one hand you seem interested in the surface of buildings, their reflections but also deferrals of gazes, desires and usages, and on the other hand you seem committed to the everyday, to other practices in other spaces, often connected to the apparently invisible, the nighttime or dark side, but also the pleasurable and desirous. I guess my question is, what the connection between those functions and placings is, and how this relates to notions of living space, both as sites of everyday struggles and what you have termed a "lived nothing" (perhaps a relationship that mirrors the above, with the former corresponding to the latter and vice versa)?

Knut Åsdam: What is important I think is to remember the relationship between the functions and placements of space and architecture are always temporary and often multi-leveled. This statement is not about a theoretical compulsion. How else can you understand the way a park functions within a city, or even assumedly singular spaces

like a sex club: the division between the work of upkeep of the place, its economic position and production, the fictive role it inhabits within the psyche of the city and the narrations of desire that happens there every night? In understanding something from its temporality in this sense, we can also deal with social dynamics and historic memory. This is why I think if we are looking at a site -- or a building for that matter -- we cannot think it in a singular form as only representing one kind of project or social or economic state, but rather we should see it as something that in its historicity represents several developments and moments: socially, politically, etc. Then we will also see a history of different engagements with that site, not only the way the actual site relates to socialization, protest, struggle, or economic development, but also with that which is produced into the narrative of that place at that time; the common pool of prejudice, myths, and fantasies that we affirm as a place takes up a fictive placement in our culture and in relation to our own everyday or history.

It is hard to talk more specifically about the relationship between spatial functions, placements, and usage without opening up a large field of discussion: for instance, we could talk about the rhetoric of the gaze in

high-capitalist office buildings, and how that functions internally and externally, or we could talk about the public square and the dynamics of privacy socialization and 'being public' that happen there. But in each case when I develop a work, I am first and foremost interested in space and architecture as places where lives, struggles and narrations occur where subjectivities and bodies are negotiated, and from which history is interpreted and produced: albeit in a 'minor' way, in and as spaces of the everyday.

My investigations into spatial and architectural entities have been concerned not just with setting up experiences of absorption into space -- experiences of togetherness of disorientation -- but in each case, to set these experiences in relation to actual spaces of society. So rather than reducing one's experience to a singularity, it has been my aim to open it up and connect it to a multitude of experiences and conflicting everyday desires. When I have picked special sites of interest, such as the nightclub, apartment, or that of a street or a park, it has been because of a particular interest in spaces that connect to the economics of desire within contemporary society.

There is a shift in my work with architecture, if you can call it that. I have gone from making works like Psychasthenia 2+2 that engage an architectural formalism and deal with the issues implicit, to my later works that are primarily interested in architecture as spaces that are used, and where I am not trying to deal with any particular kind of formalism per se. In these earlier works, I was occupied with the surfaces, the directions of the gaze, the disintegration and reflection or the surroundings in high-capitalist architecture, for instance, and I tried to deal with our conflicting desires in relation to that architecture and the ideologies and social structuring implicit. It was not about simply posing something as separate from oneself, but at the same time, to deal with how we are implicit, but also seduced and to quote Caillois, "devoured by space", and in this case a high-capitalist space.

My current use of architecture has been very influenced by my architectural installations and my development of narrative spaces, all again in relation to actual societal spaces and social processes (parks, streets, apartment buildings, dances, protests, etc). This is also the case in the video work. The development of the use of architecture from the earlier video works to the

later video works happens through the architectural installations and the audio works. This is significant in that it helped me avoid moving my works into the trap of architectural formalism, and instead underlined the use, the fictions, and the social and economic processes of space. I was obviously conscious of this when I made Psychasthenia 2+2 also, and that work in and of itself was a move from making Untitled: (Pissing), a move to avoid making a decathlon on neatly packaged excrementations of the body, and to further the inspection of the crotch and that of masculinity through architecture. Basically architecture only interests me in so far as it defines spaces of desire, struggle, living, politics and economy.

SS: You have suggested science fiction as the unconscious of Modernism, and I do feel that there is a connection between your photographs of high-rises at night, of living spaces, as it is, and the works of such sci-fi writers as JG Ballard (Highrise and Crash, obviously), but perhaps also Burroughs and Dick, as well as contemporary writers such as Noon, in your transformation of building structures into hallucinatory and almost bodily entities, as also seen in your video (Psychasthenia 2+2), and I was wondering how these notions of space, sidestepping Caillois for a moment,

have influenced your concrete architectural installations, such as the cinematic spaces of Heterotopia and Psychasthenia 5, but also your sci-fi like pavilion for the school of Architecture in Oslo (perhaps a deliberate attempt at leading the architects astray from functionality towards the unconsciousness of buildings), and finally, how these ideas would influence your notions of living space, for instance, what would a Knut Åsdam-designed housing complex look like?

KÅ: My mention of sci-fi as an (one) unconscious of modernism, had to do with a particular piece (Psychasthenia 5), where I was trying to look at different strands of the desire of modernism, i.e. like what it desires itself to be (science fiction), and what desires are produced within it (the desire for spaces of transgression, like sexclubs, parks, etc) and to look at how these spaces function temporarily and as part of the narrative of the urban as much as from their physical functions.

Sci-fi is interesting to me, from Ballard, Burroughs, Dick, and Noon as you mention, but also Samuel Delany with his incredible Dhalgren. Already mentioning these writers it is clear that we are here talking about an uneasy collective, with writers positioned far from each other

across a large field. However, sci-fi has been a narrative form that, at its best, is as explorative of the boundaries of subjectivity and the body as contemporary society through its drug cultures, architecture, social forms, and economics. Sci-fi is also interesting as it has a kind of double role culturally, as both minor and mainstream literature. It is minor in the sense of its relationship to the 'major' literature but also in some cases in terms of interest field, topics, and language etc. There is a big jump from sci-fi television series or mainstream sci-fi film, to what is written in sci-fi literature -- at least at the moment. If you think of Delany's explorations of homosexuality within the genre it is obviously a far cry from Star Gate on television. Noon's exciting affirmative explorations of drug-enhanced systems of power or street culture are far from Earth Final Conflict. However, I am not really dealing with or developing sci-fi in my work, it is rather one of many cultural elements that inform contemporary narrative and reflect contemporary desire (like the outrageous amount of militarized sci-fi series on American television stations, programs that are basically imperial fantasies.

But if there is one aspect from sci-fi that has found a place in my work on the level of a formal strategy, it

has to do with hallucinatory and psychotic space as well as fragmented or disembodied manifestations of authority and, as it is a major discourse within sci-fi, an active testing of dynamics of the gaze.

I have encountered that my use of architecture is very different than that of the architect, and we are looking at it from very different angles. To an architect my use of architecture might seem vague, since I am not really involved in the architectural specifics or the architectural (academic) discourse. To me on the other hand, an architect's use or discussion of architecture might be too formal, even in the way it thinks about use, without perhaps pressing the social and political production of the building/place itself.

SS: There is an interesting corollary between the formal and the political at play in modern architecture: Units are designed for specific functions, institutions and modes of being, and thus for producing and inducing certain patterns of behavior and even subjectivity. It is a social design, or aesthetics for living. Modern architecture uses a particular strategy of compartmentalization, simply put; it distinguishes between spaces of production, living and leisure. This also leads to a compartmentalization of

subjectivity. A mapping of the city into different areas of desire is a parallel to an idea of mapping the body, structuring it into different zones of desire. But the body always leaves residues -- desire and behavior are not evenly structured -- and the same happens to the flows of the city space. I think you described it as "Order in the streets leads to disorder in our minds", and I am wondering about this relation: How compartmentalization leads to a certain schizophrenia. This question is at play in relational theories of the city, such as Foucault's notion of 'heterotopia' that you have employed, as well as in reversals of spaces and desires. I see a constant strategy of mirroring, reversals and schizo-analysis in your works on architecture and city space. Additionally, we are now witnessing a postmodern and global shift in how the city is compartmentalized and specialized. Former industrial areas become areas of leisure or even living, while other areas of living become almost deserted. I am wondering how you think these structural changes affect subjectivities, desires and living conditions. Filter City seems to be about loss of direction, of a merger and resistance between the subject and the city, but in a way that is not yet defined or directed. Do these shifts make, say, schizo-

analysis or Foucaultian ideas of space, domination and relationality more or less useful?

KÅ: Well, disorder could also mean other states than schizophrenia, for example, a state of paranoia that is often seen as close to the totalitarian and fascistic desire. What has been useful for me with Foucault and schizo-analysis is that they point to an understanding of place and space as produced by social and economic processes, in a way that is applicable to our times. I know my work is very informed by both Foucault and Deleuze & Guattari, but not more so than to Kristeva, DeCerteau, Delaney, Negri or Crimp. But you can then perhaps trace an interest for a political commitment.

In the film Filter City I have tried to tie the sense of loss of direction to a sense of loss of direction in the language of the characters themselves. So basically through the structure of the film I want to make a symbiosis between the external and internal for the subjects at play. The sentence you quoted is an anonymous graffiti from Paris '68 that I again have taken from DeCerteau. It is a wonderful or even 'ideal' piece of graffiti, showing a need for disorder on the skin of the city that it is in itself. However, it is tragic that we have in the end of the

nineties and in an accelerated fashion, in the beginning of the millennium, a growing sense of societies of control. Deleuze's text "Postscript on Societies of Control" seemed at a point in the beginning of the nineties a bit quaint, or old-fashioned, in its analysis -- while it is today so contemporary. "Postscript..." is, in a sense, a good prescript to the current understanding of Empire too. I guess it took the last few years for me to realize that we were indeed in postmodern territory. I had, until then, seen us in nothing but a reiteration of modernism. Now we see Empire clearly as a very postmodern re-actualization and reworking of imperialism. As much as that there are growing movements for political activism and focused production among 'ordinary' people and cultural producers, there is also a sense of a really hard struggle with power. Perhaps a struggle that is so unattainable, un-winnable and hard to feel impact on, as the class struggles of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The agencies of power are so far removed from the people, that one is faced with a near collapse of language or the desire to speak. These are some things I try to deal with in Filter City, and that in one of the characters, O, leads to a melancholy or depressed speech, an ensnarling and apathetic speech that totally fails to communicate with others. In the

other main character, S, the same confrontation results in a desperate search for meaning and articulation in her relationship to others, and to a search for other possibilities for her self, -including other fictive friends/lovers. The architecture here is very dominant in the film. It represents something that changes slowly but fast enough to represent, exclude and include from the economic and political fluctuations of a city. Its change is out of control for the protagonists of my film. If there is a dynamism then, between the two, it is rather one directional -- the subjects here are 'subjected' to their city environment and its processes of economic and social restructuring -- but of course what that means to them as 'subjects' is to a certain degree up for grabs and that is what they are struggling to make sense of.