

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 on the dark background.

KNUT ÅSDAM

PSYCHASTHENIA 10

The nocturnal city is a landscape of fascination and fear, rich in shadows, offering the solitary walker infinite possibilities: freedom, pleasure, temptation, but also the threat of danger. As easily as we might feel drawn to it, we are also threatened and alienated by it. These contradictions lie at the heart of Knut Åsdam's photographic project *Psychasthenia (10)*. Through these suggestive images, Åsdam examines the psychological and sociological impact of the architecture of the city and how it controls its unseen inhabitants.

These nocturnal views are taken from cities in which the artist has lived and worked in recent years, principally London and New York. However, they could be any modern metropolis, for Åsdam takes one of the most pervasive icons of contemporary urban life - the high-rise apartment building - as his focus. The uniform grids of the modernist tower blocks are instantly familiar to us. But Åsdam uses many devices to alter our perception of them. He photographs the buildings at night, knowing how darkness can bring about a change in atmosphere. Moreover, in many of the images the sharp lines of Modernism are blurred by nature's imprint: the buildings are shrouded by trees and flattened against an overcast night sky. This staging renders them mysterious, and they appear to form part of a kind of dream imagery. The buildings are immersed in their environs and become part of the fantasy that is the city at night. As they rise up before us, illuminated by the eerie glow of artificial street lighting, they seem remote and exotic.

The absence of any human presence within these scenes confirms our status as solitary onlooker. The fact that Åsdam situates himself (and us) at some distance from the buildings, choosing the surrounding parkland as a vantage point, is significant. The far-off apartment buildings may seem inviting - occasional lights glimmering in windows offer the prospect of company and society - but they are also oppressive, their vertical structures suggestive of a kind of hierarchy. The ubiquity of post-War, high-rise housing in the city landscape is a reminder of Modernism's lofty ideals about providing light, clean spaces for harmonious communal living. Now these structures seem distant and dehumanised, a symbol of collapsed utopianism. And we remain outside of them, vulnerable, but also solitary and free.

Åsdam has, in the past, adopted complex strategies to highlight our uneasy relationship with modernist architecture; using film, photography and installation. An earlier work, the video *Psychasthenia 2 + 2* 1997-8, relates to *Psychasthenia (10)* on many levels. Here, the shimmering façades of two sets of modernist office blocks, seen as converging grids of glass and steel, are projected floor to ceiling within a darkened space. It is hard to tell if these reflective surfaces comprise two buildings or a single unit, or whether they recede from, or project towards us. The sense of spatial disorientation is heightened by the persistent flickering of a

strobe light, which disrupts our ability to focus clearly. We shift between alternating states of assimilation into and alienation from the projected image.

The corporate architecture in *Psychasthenia 2 + 2*, like the residential buildings in *Psychasthenia (10)* form part of the fabric of the city that shapes contemporary human experience. We may partly identify with such structures, feeling reassured and protected by them, but equally we may wish to see them broken down and transgressed. The buildings in *Psychasthenia 2 + 2* flicker and fragment, the tower blocks in *Psychasthenia (10)* merge with their environment. As darkness overwhelms, uncertainty sets in.

Åsdam has drawn a great deal from the writings of the theorist, Roger Caillois. In his essay *Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia*, the dissident Surrealist uses the term 'psychasthenia' to describe how the relationship between personality and space can be disrupted. Caillois made an analogy between the phenomenon of insect camouflage and a kind of schizophrenia in humans: in both situations, he pointed out, the subject experienced a "depersonalisation by assimilation to space".¹ In other words, the individual identifies so closely with their environment, they are absorbed into it, and as the boundaries of subjectivity are blurred, any sense of self is lost.

It is also significant that when Caillois describes the schizophrenic's identification with space he writes that the subject "feels himself becoming space, *dark space where things cannot be put.*" According to Caillois "darkness...touches the individual directly, envelopes him, penetrates him" noting that "the feeling of mystery that one experiences at night would not come from anything else." (Ibid.) The impulse towards dark space fosters contradictory emotions: the feeling of liberation which can be uplifting, but also a sense of surrender which is unsettling. This underpins *Psychasthenia (10)* and Åsdam acknowledges that, "Darkness has.. 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.." ²

This duality is succinctly illustrated in Åsdam's architectural installations where he has constructed darkened, secluded spaces within the 'white cube' of the gallery. Often these spaces contain booths with video monitors, separated by glass, as in *Psychasthenium 1998*. Themes of voyeurism and covert surveillance link many of his installations, including *Psychasthenia: The Care of the Self* Åsdam's installation for the Venice Biennale in 1999. This was a dark enclosure built from semi-transparent glass, located in the Nordic Pavilion, a transparent, modernist structure. Filling this cramped, dark space with trees and undergrowth, Åsdam evoked a garden or park at night. It was possible to see out, but no one could see in. Ideas of covert surveillance reverberate through to *Psychasthenia (10)* where we

again find ourselves in some kind of park at night, close to society but isolated from it.

The urban park at night is a place often associated with illicit encounters, with the potential for danger. Åsdam notes how, as the city “has its own systems of representation and repression ... there are certain activities and functions that are excised from the ‘visible’ city ... and can only exist in special spaces” such as “the city park at night which provides spaces for drug-trafficking, sexual cruising, ‘free-spaces’ for teenagers and so on.”³ In his essay *Of Other Spaces*, the philosopher Michel Foucault identifies certain spaces that are isolated from, but integral to society, places he refers to as “heterotopias”. These sites have many manifestations, but are often places where there is the potential for normal codes or structures in society to be transgressed.⁴ One might argue that the city park at night has become such a heterotopic site. Whilst the architecture of the city may engulf and oppress its inhabitants, in the dark spaces in between - such as the parks - there seems to exist the possibility of liberation, deviation from accepted codes and structures (although, of course, this freedom is not without its risks).

The images Åsdam has created in *Psychasthenia (10)* are as disruptive as they are seductive. Here, as with all his work, we set light against dark, public against private, restraint against liberation. In *Psychasthenia (10)*, rational and carefully regulated society is seen to be at odds with the private desires and needs of the individual, just as the modernist dream of light-filled spaces, clarity and transparency is pitted against the desire for darkness.

1 R. Caillois, *Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia*, p. 72, quoted in A. Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, 1992, p.174-5.

2. Knut Åsdam, quoted from an interview with Brigitte Kölle, *Norden*, exh. cat., Kunsthalle Wien, 2000

3. Knut Åsdam, quoted from unpublished exert of interview with Brigitte Kölle (Spring 2000)

4. Michel Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces’, *Diacritics* Spring 1986 p.22-7