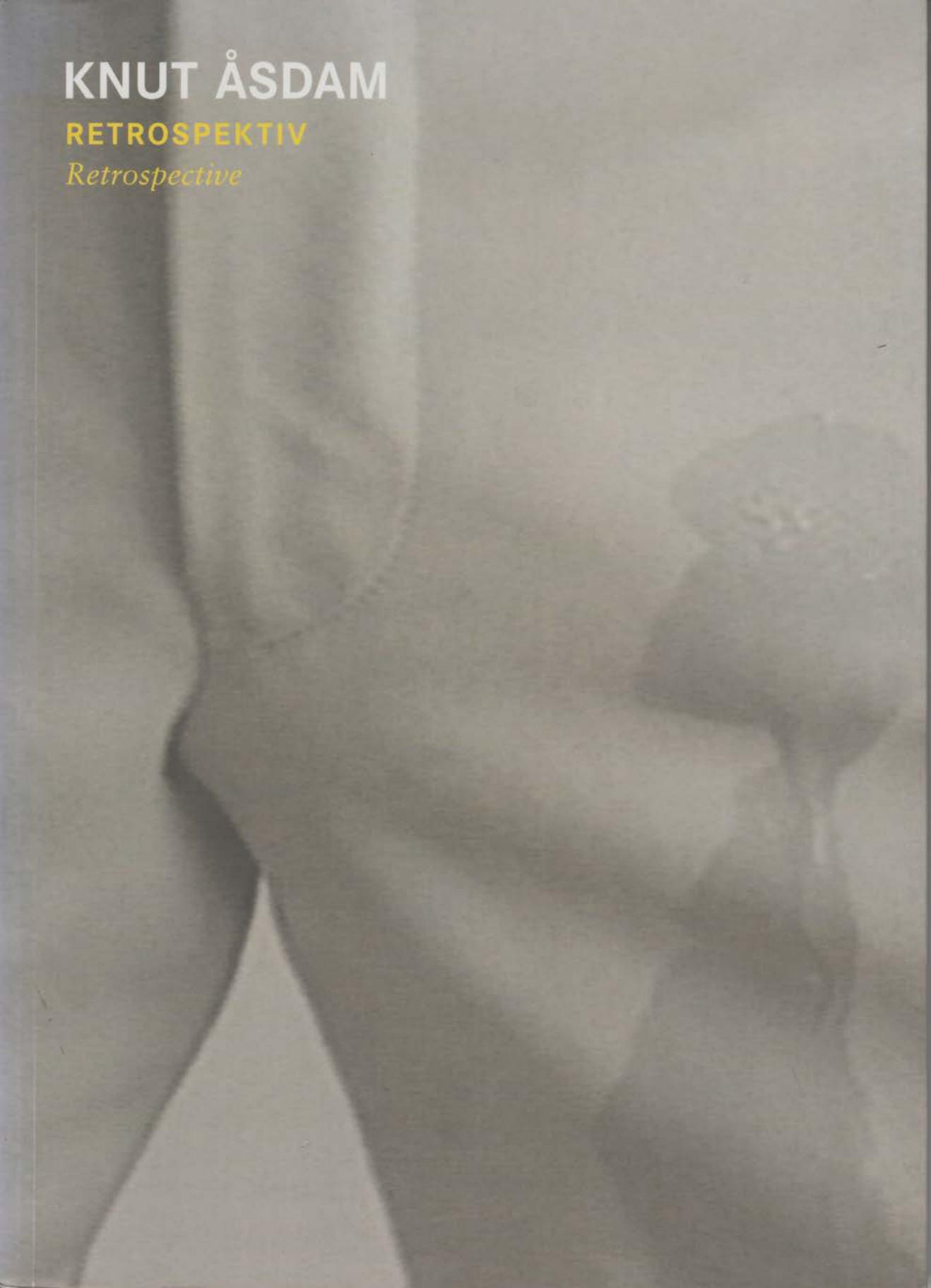# KNUT ÅSDAM

RETROSPEKTIV
Retrospective

«Not quite here, not quite there»

An E-mail conversation between
Knut Åsdam and
Hanne Beate Ueland/Grete Årbu

GÅ: You are now one of the most profiled international artists we have in Norway, an urban globetrotter with several of the world's big cities as your work place. This is clearly reflected in your art. But in this first retrospective presentation of your artistic practice here at home, we would like to go back to ‹the beginning› in order to get to know you. Could you tell a little bit about your background and motivation when you, in 1988, began your art education in London?

KÅ: My motivation for working with art had developed over many years; at the same time I was very interested in psychology and architecture. I began to study psychology, but decided to hop over to architecture. Some months before I began studying architecture in London I changed my mind again and ended up going to art school instead. Naturally I was quite immature with regard to what art was at that point in time, but I was under the strong impression that art had a political role in society, in giving people a space for experience and reflection otherwise unavailable through other types of production, and this was particularly motivating. I also felt that if I was going to go in for this I needed to get into an international context as soon as possible, in order to confront my own preconceived ideas about art and society as much as possible, and that way have the best possibility for maturation. I felt I needed to understand a more complex society if I was going to better understand the role of art, and, not least, learn more about contemporary and art-

historical conventions which one must relate to, whether one likes it or not. London was chosen because that was where most of the music I was interested in – and had been interested in – came from.

GÅ: Can you tell us a bit about the school and your education? What were the dominating tendencies at the end of the '80s? Your teachers and fellow-students, who were they and what kind of perspective on art did they represent?

KÅ: At the end of the 1980s very different directions dominated the art scene. There were ‹death throws› back to the heavy German and Italian new-expressive painting, there was the cool neo-geo from New York City (NYC), there was political conceptualism – mainly from the USA – and strong formalistic conceptualistic art from London, just to name a few. There was a lot of installation art. At the beginning of the '90s video and photo were also very strong mediums. Those who were most interesting for me at that time were maybe people like Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Dan Graham, Dara Birnbaum and Group Material.

But what meant just as much for me, if not more, were things happening in London's music scene at that time; Acid House, Hip Hop, Trip Hop, a lot of dance-oriented music, Electronica, and then later, Drum and Bass music, etc. Also this all represented different social environments, and at that time there were highly illegal raves in really fantastic places in town. They were easy to organize because there were so many derelict and deserted buildings around town, even in quite central locations. People created extreme clubs everywhere, even on the Circle Line train.

At that time there was also an extreme AIDS crisis, and that affected a lot. There were many around me dying and it was an exceptional horizon to live up against. Self-organized political movements and health

organizations tried to take on rolls the public sector either would not or could not manage.

The milieu that managed most clearly to conduct itself in relation to an art and theory that took life outside the studio seriously was in NYC. In London at that time, it was a matter of re-packaging the art-object, and a large degree of aesthetisization. Therefore NYC was a magnet for those of us who were concerned with political and social questions in relation to art. It was a NYC before the last decade's powerful gentrification, and social questions were first on the agenda. At that time Chelsea was poor and filled with drug gangs; it was not a gallery zone.

First I attended a foundation course at Wimbledon School of Art, Foundation Studies, thereafter Goldsmiths College, Jan van Eyck Academie, and finally the Whitney Program. What was good about Goldsmiths was that there was a large selection of teachers who covered a wide spectre of work-methods, also with respect to performance, photo, video, etc. They also represented different attitudes, everything from politically motivated artists to formalists. Young people and old people. One could choose whom one wanted to discuss with, and relate to many teachers or none at all. The only thing that held it together as a place was the weekly seminars where students presented work and it was discussed. It was a very sharp, intense climate, and it functioned because people were so motivated, in spite of it not being particularly structured. The problem was simply that London was so extremely concerned with English art at that time, and many of the best artists who were not English left England and moved, for the most part, to NYC or Germany (preferably to Colon then, and later Berlin).

Jan van Eyck Academie was theoretically oriented but minimally focused on cultural questions, and to me it seemed rather academic.

When I started the Whitney Program, it seemed to me to function well. Many of the artists I was most concerned with held the seminars: Douglas Crimp, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Homi Bhabha, Leo Bersani, Isaac Julien; there were also people like Benjamin Buchloch, Hal Foster and many, many others. They often came with almost-finished manuscripts and tested them through discussions with us. At that time the program was led by Mary Kelly and Ron Clark, who kept each other in line.

Through that program I also became acquainted with many others who had studied there before me, and they – together with others I was there with – continue to be the main group of people I communicate with about art, and the people I collaborate with now and then.

HBU: It is interesting to hear about your involvement in the art scene and musical life of London at this time. One of your earliest known works from this period is the series *Londonscapes*, where you show panoramic segments of the city. It is as if this work, with its almost Romantic overview, is a way of introducing a large theme (the city structure, architecture) in your artistic practice. How would you yourself describe this work?

KÅ: *Londonscapes* is totally different from all the other works I made at the time, which were installation-based or architectural; they were very active and direct in relation to «the viewer's» body. I worked a lot with architectural quotations, and used, for example, Formica, aluminium and glass in relation to the conventions of bank, insurance company-and university buildings in England, places which assert authority. *Londonscapes* is the only photographic work from this time, yet it shares the same themes as the other works, given that it deals with the seductive aspect of authority: One looks from the outskirts of the city,

in towards well-defined areas of London's financial centre, the City of London. It is chillingly beautiful, as long as it remains distanced, within the framework of a city-landscape. In a way, one could say that the social and economic realities of place undermine the classical cityscape pictures, yet one must also remember that the landscape tradition began as a description of property and culture, so there is actually no opposition in the pictures.

GÅ: With *Londonscapes* you introduce us to the use of repetition and seriality in your art. What would you like to achieve by working in series? To me it seems like the small variations from picture to picture help to underline the distance between the authoritarian and anonymous components, or the centre and the periphery in a city-structure. But do you agree if I say that the series bears witness to a certain optimism, a desire to stage London (it could have been any city whatsoever) as a changeable state in which neither place nor subjectivity are static?

KÅ: I would disagree that the series represents any optimism, but I agree it could be any city whatsoever. That subjectivity and place are changeable states is important in all my subsequent works. In itself, it does not entail that things necessarily change for the better. So there is no optimism in it per se. But of course, the understanding that both subjectivity – and who you are or can be – and culture and economics are processual, renders the possibility that things can change – even if the process happening in oneself or in the society usually is a repetition. But it never is perfect.

GÅ: Let's leave *Londonscapes* and move on to another series included in the exhibition: *Scenes 2* (2002). Here you focus more closely on ‹invisible› scenes from the every-day life of the big city; you examine

architectural spaces and their use, and you stage individual people. Can you say a little about the relation between people and places in these pictures?

KÅ: *Scenes*-the photographs, *Scenes 1, 2, 3, 4* and *5* are series where I use actors in city environments. They are all shot according to film-conventions, with regard to camera angles, etc., and in *Scenes 1* and *2* they repeat the formal content with small changes in camera angles. The repetition is important in these works. For example, in *Scenes 1* and *2* the repetition makes it possible to begin to think about the relation between the characters and the places in which they find themselves. What is the relation between the women and the city-environment they are in? What sorts of signs are found in that place and how are they used? In *Scenes 3, 4* and *5* I have dissolved the strict repetition of a formal content of a place; now the repetition has more to do with the theme, and I mix the actors with other people.

The pictures are shot in environments or spaces that are part of our everyday routines, relatively public spaces – almost everyone can use them provided they satisfy a sort of mediocre societal norm. For example, a homeless person is easily chased out of a supermarket or a playground. These places are beyond the protagonist's control economically or politically speaking, but it is nevertheless those places the person uses as their own, and that take on personal and private significance, even if only temporarily. This is also mostly the way I have used space in the films *Filter City* and *Blissed*.

HBU: Before we return to the films *Filter City* and *Blissed*, I would like to ask you about your experiences with video-media from the early 1990s. The video-work *Untitled: Skipping* is perhaps one of your least discussed works. The viewer is confronted with naked men skipping

rope. The repetition of a simple physical movement can be reminiscent of the early video-works of Bruce Nauman. Can you tell a bit about this work?

KÅ: *Untitled: Skipping* is rarely discussed because I have not shown it since 1994, when I had just finished making it with Michael Curran. For me this work is a historical milestone in my development as an artist, but it is not a work I think is particularly important in the context of my other works. It is correct that it relates to Nauman and other early video-artists, who made video art on the threshold of performance art. The difference from Nauman and others is perhaps, as with other video-works I made at the time, that the male body here is strongly sexualised, but as an open or ambiguous sign that can lead into several directions of desire. These are Nauman's strategies, but one could say they have been confronted with the politics of identity, AIDS and Queer Theory – and hence they speak from a different historical perspective.

HBU: In the video-work *Come to Your Own* from the same period, you avail yourself of the language of the hypnotist, and you linger over the moment when the individual awakes from hypnosis and returns to reality. With the aid of repetition, you create a suggestive effect where the shades of language are crucial. What was the point of origin for this close investigation of linguistic nuances?

KÅ: *Come to Your Own* was the first instance where I worked from the perspective of linguistic psychology. I was concerned with language's ability to name desire for identity or presence. The format was chosen coincidentally. A friend of mine who studied psychology at Blindern (University of Oslo) had learned a basis procedure for hypnosis. He tried it on me and I was fascinated by the form.

It was slightly authoritarian, polite in its application and implied many choices; nevertheless the desired direction was given. Moreover, it was ‹the therapist› who clearly was in power – seen from my perspective.

Yet what was particularly interesting for me was the last part of the hypnotic procedure, when one had returned to the space one was sitting in and heard that, if it was so desired, if it felt right, one could now return to the room one was in, and become aware of one's bodily presence in the same room. This was perfect for my video; I wanted to play upon the promise, given by language – of a presence, a ‹core-self›, a symbiosis of body and identity – based upon language's ability for subjectification. Meanwhile, it is only a construction; one is never ‹completely here› or ‹completely there› physiologically, psychologically or sociologically. In the video there is a dialectic between the promise of presence – that never is fulfilled in the person in the video or in the viewer – and the course of the video – which draws one into a temporary virtual space. Not quite here, not quite there.

HBU: These descriptions of the function of hypnosis make me think of the concept *psychastenia,* which is central to your production. For me the concept addresses the loss of control over one's own physical presence in the world, a state of being usually described as a psychological crisis. How have you worked with this concept in your artistic practice?

KÅ: It is correct that psychasthenia represents a sort of crisis for personality or subjectivity. Psychasthenia, in the sense I have used it, stems from the French theoretician Roger Caillois' writings. He describes psychasthenia as a breakdown in the distinction between the personality and space, where one is seduced and devoured by the subjectivity of space, or the subjectivity of that which is outside oneself, to a state

of being where one no longer is the point of origin for coordinates, but one point amongst many others, and where one knows where one is, yet does not feel that one is there.

Here subjectivity is seen as processual or textual; therefore one can also attribute subjectivity to places, buildings, and non-organic elements. This breakdown in the distinction between the personality and space naturally causes crisis, but it also offers possibilities. It is exploited by many different phenomena today. Naturally one could speak about dance, music and drugs – practices that work actively upon the distinction between one's psychology, body and location, the collective or the society. But structurally it is also found in modern architecture – the dissolution of the distinction between a body (the house-body) and the environment – through transparency, for example. One can also readily find it within liberal capitalism's movements, where firms can operate more as virtual entities without the limitation of local connections. Here we are talking about a personal, cultural and economic backdrop, where the distinction between one type of identity and another – or one body or another – is not in itself given. In my work, psychasthenia has been such a backdrop, and it has readily pointed to how the work operates – as for example in the installations *Psychasthenia 5* and *Psychasthenium Audio* – where darkness is used actively in order to effectuate the loss of subjectivity – and to create the possibility for entering into other narratives than one's own. Also in the video-work *Cluster Praxis* this is apparent in the light, the development of audio and the activization of space. At the same time these individual works deal with something more specific. The content of *Psychasthenia 5* has been given by different artists through their videos, *Cluster Praxis* deals with feelings of belonging, completely temporary utopian social narratives and their relation to the every-day economy.

HBU: In the work *Psychastenia 10 Series 2* you invite the viewer into a dark room and show slides of cityscapes. Has this room any connection with the Bauhaus designer Lily Reichs' «soft architecture»?

KÅ: Yes, absolutely. I was very inspired by her! I was interested in how Lily Reich used curtains in Mies van der Rohe's architecture (something she often does not receive credit for). For example, in the Barcelona Pavilion I experienced a photographic architectural effect in the way the curtain surfaces (which can also refer to photo-backgrounds) made new experiences of room in an almost two-dimensional way. I had moved away from making architectural installations that required solid walls and ceilings, and was very interested in «soft architecture», as a means for making temporary room divisions; they would be easy to set up, and would operate differently than the architecture of the gallery. So I thought about how I could take Lily Reich's strategies and use them three-dimensionally, to offer a change in the experience of space, yet simultaneously I could, in the simplest way, create good spaces for slides, video and audio. The result became a series of curtain-room installations: *Psychasthenia 10 Series 2* (2001), *Filter City Audio* (2002), *Scenes 1* (2002), the installation versions of the videos *Notes Towards a Dissipation of Desire* (2001) and *Cluster Praxis* (2000). In these rooms I have used curtain systems from the film- and photo industry, in order to create temporary spaces.

HBU: It has often been focused on the connection between *Untitled: Pissing* and *Psychastenia 2 + 2*, because both zero in on a building/body and focus on a central point. How do you experience the connection between these two works?

KÅ: They were made in quick succession. Even though *Psychastenia 2 + 2* is dated 1997–98, the material was filmed in

'96 while I was making the installation *Heterotopia* (1996), where I incorporated *Untitled: Pissing* (1995) in an architectural structure. They are formed through similar ways of thinking and have, as you mentioned, a similar structure. When I filmed *Psychasthenia 2 + 2* I thought of it as an architectural crotch picture, where the facades of two buildings are joined together around a ‹fly›, and where the hallucinatory reflections on the one side correspond to the growing spot of urine in *Untitled: Pissing*. Yet in *Psychastenia 2 + 2* this is redoubled, and the most direct similarity becomes less important. The point is more that it is highly fetishistic architecture symbolizing a power-dominance that also resembles the male body symbol. In *Psychasthenia 2 + 2* one is just as much the observed as one is the observer. The skin of the architecture becomes like skin/surface of a body, and just as the urine changes the meaning of the picture in *Untitled: Pissing*, so also the hallucinatory mirroring in *Psychasthenia 2 + 2* changes the understanding of the architecture. In *Psychasthenia 2 + 2* there is no change or transgression in the meaning of the architecture (such as with *Untitled: Pissing*) – the mirroring only emphasizes the architecture. There the similarity between these two works ends. *Psychastenia 2 + 2* has, as one can see from the title, other interests, namely to problematize the cleft between the viewer's body and what is pictured – a fetishized high-capitalistic architecture. This happens not only through the pictorial aspect but also through the pictorial rhythm. The video is structured in a way derived from electronic music; it is cut into pieces and extended with many small bits of black of varying length. This creates an epileptic rhythm, which in turn creates subtle shifts of bodily and psychological distance, pain, seduction, pleasure or absorption.

HBU: Architecture and urbane space gain significance on several levels in your filmatic (and photographic) works. In 1997 you made the graffiti-series *Picnoleptic City: Hysterical Time*. This project distinguishes itself from several of your other artworks in that you work directly with written language and you go in and actively participate in a visual change of the way the city looks. Why did you choose Vienna as the location, and what was the point of origin for the work?

KÅ: I did graffiti parallel with what I was doing at the art schools during the '90s. It was mostly political graffiti around Antwerp. It is only in *Picnoleptic City: Hysterical Time*, in Vienna in 1997, and later in a new version in Bern as *Picnoleptic City Bern Edit*, in 2005, where I have used graffiti in my later works. The initial impetus for the Vienna-pieces was that I was invited to make new works for an exhibition there, which concerned Do It Yourself-strategies. I wanted to engage with the city out from my own acquaintance with it; how much or how little I knew about the city. Aside from my visits there, I knew of Vienna first and foremost through its music scene during the mid '90s, which was very rich and important internationally. It included both new electronica, Hip Hop and Drum and Bass. There is much to tell about Vienna and the work, but I will just say that graffiti at that time, in any case in Vienna, to a large degree copied NYC-graffiti from about 1980, and it was limited to a few walls in the city. Rather than using graffiti in the mere obvious ways I wanted to make small contributions to the city's every-day life, and to its unconscious. My graffiti was anonymous, but had readable words, and I made them on 10 places in the city. German words were used, those having to do with assimilation (socially or physically) and the fracturing of the understanding of reality and time. But they had to be made quickly and in the middle of the night in order to avoid policemen and guards. Therefore many of them were raw or unfinished, while others were more elaborate. I also had an

English radio play on Austrian radio ORF2, which was another way of entering into the city's subconscious, by creating chance thematic meetings with a public who did not need to think of them as art.

In Bern last year I did a graffiti in the form of a whole sentence with large letters on a very prominent place in the city: «Order in the streets makes for disorder in our minds», an English translation of a graffiti from Paris '68. In one sense this is a perfect graffiti sentence; it comments on its own role but points far beyond itself.

GÅ: In recent years you have mainly occupied yourself with film, and the exhibition in AFM presents both *Filter City* (2003) and *Blissed* (2005). In contrast to monologue-based video works such as, for example, *Cluster Praxis* and *Notes Towards a Dissipation of Desire,* both films are dialog-based, and they seem to deal less with the subject's relation to the environment/the city than about people's relationships with each other. Can you say some words about your relation to the film media and your intentions in these two works?

KÅ: I started working with film as a result of doing more and more narrative sound-works (radio-plays, sound installations) and video. At the same time I was concerned with a sort of ‹genealogy of the scene› and the structure of the scene itself in relation to the persons in the film/video and the place and environment they were in. 35mm film, which still has twice as high resolution as HD-video, can be used to underscore the spatial dimension in the picture more than video can. But actually, the reason I started using film was because of the way movement is depicted. Since film is not organized on a grid, like video is, the borders move differently (for example the border between a body and the background). The border is simply not very clear. This was an effect I wanted to achieve in *Filter City,* in the

relationship between the characters and the place – through how the characters move through the room. But I have no program of using 35mm film in place of video; one of the latest works I made, a video-installation called *Abyss,* is made with Mini-DV video and digital still pictures, and it is just as important or good a work as *Filter City* or *Blissed.* In the video-installation *Abyss* (in the same project as the photos with the same title) it was important to achieve a raw, clear picture such as the Mini-DV renders.

But when we talk about film we often think of it as a category, regardless of whether it is made with film or video. A work that relates to the conventions of film and the film's relatively limited display-layout in relation to video/film-installation. I have approached film through a sort of ‹experimental› narrative form, not through working in an ‹experimental› way with the media– like scraping the film, etc. As has been mentioned, I had for a long time worked with narrative form through sound installations and sound-plays; thereafter my video installations became more and more narrative. But it was first in *Filter City* that the works became more intensely so; divided into scenes with exchange of dialogue. The scenes in my films can be placed in a different order than they are presented here; in itself, it is not an important issue for me, but it shows that structurally speaking, the films are built up with parts that but up against each other in order to get us to relate them to each other – but not in order to come to a sort of processual conclusion.

There are far too many aspects of film and film history I am interested in, and that I work with, than what we can write about here, but I can in any case say that new-wave film from the end of the '60s particularly has motivated my attitude towards making film. There are several reasons for this: First and foremost, they made films with an acute political relation to the society around them, even if the characters at times could

go around and talk about the most trivial things. Secondly, there was a sort of do-it-yourself attitude (seen in relation to regular film-production) and the films were made with exceedingly limited equipment and budgets. Finally, they took other cultural phenomena around them seriously. Among other things, they worked with sound-artists and composers to try to expand the use and understanding of sound in the works, and they also allowed politics to be included, not as a narrative reference or dramatized to the *endth* degree, but simply as politics. This is easily seen in Godard for example.

I have in many works been concerned with speech (pronunciation, articulation, accent) and linguistic psychology, for example, how different language-strategies to a greater or lesser degree are used in order to emphasize the subject. Hence slang is also very interesting to me, an inquiring or apathetic relation to language, and also how one and the same sentence can be pathetic, humoristic and serious – not as aspects cancelling each other out, but which are there simultaneously. Moreover, in all my works, I am concerned with the experience as an active category, and am first and foremost concerned with what is at stake in the work as a whole rather than in individual textual statements. Therefore it is better for me to use a narrative form, with dialogues, monologues and with a relatively free use of language including slang, than to use more theoretical language.

During the '90s references to film were often dealt with, and for a while they were a kind of value, in the same way as architecture and electronica were. It did not matter so much what one did with the references, but it was sufficient that they be mentioned in the work. I think it is more interesting to use film as *possibility*, through its limitations and preferably narrative format. Coming from an art-background, I have been through so much object-and cultural analysis, art history, cultural history

and societal debate. I have examined so closely how people ‹talk›, how ‹the sentence› produces different meanings, that I have a very interesting possibility for working with new film. Within this field there needs to be more works that avoid normal dramaturgy or traditional ‹experimental film›. The film-world, such as it is presented at film festivals, is often extremely conservative; the creators often forget the conditions for how they speak, and they think only about the most superficial actions. On the other hand, artists hold too strongly to a sort of antiquated idea of an art object – one or another sort of circular logic guaranteeing it as art. This is just the result of poor teaching at art schools and universities, but it permeates the entire field of art.

My long-term interest is to work with new narrative and political film; therefore I also work now very closely with film history, scene study, linguistic psychology and language forms. I do research at the University of Central England where this is the focus of my research. I am interested in a re-articulation of the possibilities within film, particularly short film.

The reason why I am primarily interested in short film, films less than 70 minutes long, is that since I use dialogue, the short film offers a good balance in the relation between individual scenes, the text and the edited rhythm in the work. In a longer film it is easier for the more traditional dramaturgical aspects to be the most important.

HBU: In the new series *Abyss Photos* you continue working with people placed in urban environments. In contrast to *Scenes*, I experience that the architectural surroundings become even more subdued and anonymous, and that the works therefore to a greater degree invite the viewer to engage in them with their own meanings and experiences. How would you yourself describe these works in relation to the *Scenes* series and your latest film-works?

KÅ: *Abyss Photos* is actually *Scene 5* in my
cataloguing of the project. By that I mean
that they are also similar to the other scenes-
pictures in that they invite projections from
viewers themselves – about the context,
the relation to society, etc. You are correct
in observing that this aspect is more
pronounced in these photos. Perhaps these
pictures use artistic conventions to a greater
degree. For example, the clipped horizon is
not merely a social or economic horizon to
be filled in by the observer, but it is also a
segment filled directly by the gallery's wall,
and it draws into the work the role of the
exhibition room. With regard to how the
viewer is invited to be co-creator of their
own meanings and experiences, one can see
this in my architectural installations and
photos, for example in all of *Psychasthenia
10* series from 2000 and 2001. The buildings
in *Psychasthenia 10* series are all apartments
and they follow similar architectural
strategies; moreover, they distinguish
themselves from each other according to
what sort of milieu and social reality they
entail. But this information is not available
to the viewer, the pictures contain almost
no factual information about the lives lived
in the buildings. Therefore the pictures are
left to the viewer, who must fill in her own
experiences, prejudices or fantasies. This
is also the case for the milieus in my films
Filter City and *Blissed.*