

Sexualities

Simon Sheikh: I want to talk about the subjects in your work, as they present themselves in the forms of voices and images, in terms of becoming -- as we touched upon in the discussion on 'speech' -- the constant formulation and negotiation of the subject through speech acts. However, how does the question of sexuality come into play here? How are sexual positions and desire formulated in your work? First of all there is the shift between male and female voices, and, in turn, the recognition of the speaking subject as gendered and sexed. The sexed subject seems decentered and its sexual orientation(s) unspecified. Is the encounter between the protagonists in your sound piece Legendary Psychasthenia 1999 Re-Edit, for instance, a woman and a man, or two men? Are they entering into a sexual identity - becoming sexed and sexualized, or are they being deconstructed, and what, then, would be the relation or dialectic between the becoming and disappearing (or, in direct sexual terms, coming or going)?

Knut Åsdam: The decentered nature of my subjects (not phenomenologically speaking but merely thought in a social sense) are of course not the cause of them being sexed and gendered. Like everyone they are simply gendered and sexed subjects, and then they are not totally stable and centered. The relative openness in terms of sexual identification also serves a narrative strategy; to invite

the listener's own desires and presuppositions, to implicate the desire and the narration of the listener. But it has been important to invest the experience of my work with a sense of gender and sexuality that is an affirmative difference from, and a critique and analysis of, the traditional compulsory heterosexual economy we have (also within art and architecture). However, it is not just enough to open up or queer the notions of masculinity at play, it will have to be done with the notions of femininity or woman in the work too. In the later work like Scenes 1 and Filter City, the two women that are the main characters in the works are as much friends as lovers or acquaintances -- in a manner that is taking these possibilities for granted. In your question you are hinting at the processual and performative aspects of gender and sexuality, which is something I agree with. In some of my work like Cluster Praxis this is very prominent even in a visual way which also seeks to include the viewer and the viewers body. However, even if we are dealing with a seemingly static or stable person -- that person's subjectivity in all its parts is processual and performative. So I don't see it as my work to illustrate the performative and processual with speed, youth and pictorial flux -- it is already in the very constituents of subjectivity (and sexuality). The point is then rather to have an identification of subjectivities in the work that open up many different attachments within the piece , attachments to different listeners and viewers.

SS: The relation between coming and going is also evident in Untitled: Pissing, where on the one hand something is definitely being let go, but the close-up, or crotch-shot, also sexualizes the image; and refers to coming in the sense of cum. The phallus, here, is at once ridiculed and reified, I think: the image can also be read as auto-erotic, as a sexuality that is inwardly directed rather than outwardly projected. It is a sexual image that rejects the gaze of desire as much as invites it. How does this image relate to your circumscription of the phallus, of heterosexual masculinity, and to your reading and employment of queer theory?

KÅ: If we are talking about Untitled: Pissing in particular, it was strongly motivated by queer theory on one hand and on the other hand by a reaction to all the abject masculinity work that was being produced at that time (early-mid nineties) and that in my opinion just affirmed the compulsory heterosexual order it was pertaining to criticize. I wanted to make a work that was affirmative of masculine sexuality as a 'possibility' that also opened up the terms of that masculinity, where the sexual identifications were multiplied without priority for one or the other in the work. I wanted to make a work that produced a notion and relation of sexuality that was different from the powerful and dominant relic that is reiterated so much in all the heterosexual male-abject work. As much as the act within the work, to piss on one self, is traumatic in relation to the adult masculinity -- there is in that an element of celebration -- and

that touches onto what you mention as the autoerotic within the work.

Queer theory and feminism have laid a basis for the way I am attempting to deal with subjectivity in my work at large, even though sexuality or gender might not be the main focus in a specific work. This is of course not an academic concern, but something that comes out of a relation of experience and everyday living. These are after all relations that meet us every day of our lives, and that we have to relate to knowingly or not, willingly or not. Growing up in nineteen-seventies Scandinavia feminism had set a stage for the discussion of what it meant to be a boy, girl, woman or man -- a discussion somehow everyone had to participate in regardless of your stand. But this also meant that we were able to think about womanhood or masculinity in terms of possibilities, not just as 'fixed inheritance'. I really don't understand why so many straight people have problems with the discussion of masculinity from queer theory and feminism, after all it opens up the possibilities of what sexuality and relations you can produce as male -also as a heterosexual male. As saturated as this is into every little crook and cranny of our societies -- gender and sexual roles, law, advertising, media, architecture and even bureaucratic structures -- as much as it effects people in the every day, these are essential projects to continue.

My works cannot tell you a lot about sexuality perhaps, but they try to deal with subjectivities that question the way we perceive and experience power and social space, and this is intrinsically linked

to sexuality and gender. I am also interested in working with how we internalize gender and sexual norms within our own systems of desire.

Dealing with masculinity also led me to work through many of the notions of space and architecture. In the early-and-mid nineties with work like Abyss: striated space, smooth space and the beginning of the Psychasthenia series, queering architecture was at the forefront as the main thematic of the work. It then became part of the basic vocabulary of the work and a the method of articulating and activating space. What has been important to me is to have an understanding of the structural work of issues of sexuality and gender, as a segmentation of these topics' histories. Then what is important is to understand -- as we have touched into many times in our discussions -- the performative and processual nature of this, the temporality and repetition at stake. How a space or an attitude has to be reinscribed in order to present 'stable' meaning.

SS: Queering of space seems to be a recurrent theme in your work, but also what could be termed 'the sexualization of architecture'. I am here thinking about the architectural crotch shot of your Psychasthenia 2+2 video, that can be seen as an extension of Untitled: Pissing, if not an response to it, moving from the internalization of sexuality to the externalization of sexual relations of power. I find this shift of accentuation interesting; after the release comes architecture! Architecture, that is, as another form of enclosure and socialization, surely, but also as an

investment in and invocation of desire through the gaze. But both pieces, however, employ a strategy of mirroring, of recognition, and in both pieces I see a filling of the screen itself that thematizes the function and notion of the screen, and both obviously relate to Lacanian notions of gaze and desire, not least of which how these are formulated through the mirror stage. We have previously talked about architecture as a form of language, but here my question goes to architecture as a producer of sexuality, or sexual identities, and I would like to explore this along two lines: placing and construction, or, in broader terms 'the sexualization of architecture' and 'the architecture of sexuality'. Obviously, modern architecture has predominantly been a masculinist enterprise, but your work seems to suggest a reconfiguration here through different visions of and encounters with -- or even intercourses with -- modern urban architecture on the one hand, and an investigation of actual sites for sexual encounters, that is, other spaces for other sexualities. But firstly, my question goes to how you envision a sexualization of architecture that is mostly described as cold or mundane, one that is functional as much as representational.

KÅ: I think I engage architecture as a very useful (since it is visible) representation or actualization of historic, economic, and social structures. They represent particular ideological moments or movements, and also with this a particular sexed representation and investment of power. High modernist architecture is also of course a

representation of the high modern male 'master' architect. Then, if you look at it in a more psychoanalytical way and when you know about the dynamics of gender and sexual representation in advertising, for instance it is easy to see how these dynamics are active in other formal representations, like architecture or everyday language. The way things are articulated and put on display are of course through language and we understand then that the politics of gender and sexuality are embedded in language, also formal and social language. But on a less theoretical level, architecture in the end articulates spaces for use and the way people use spaces for everyday tasks or leisure often reveals the sexual and gender economies of their society. I guess I am very afraid of a discussion that over-emphasizes architecture as a critical context while I am more interested in the discussions of social and economic processes to which architecture is also subjected. 'Architecture' easily becomes a very formal or academic concern, and in as far as the critical discussion around architecture goes, it seems to me that is it mostly interesting to look at 'usage' and then from that to see what happens to the ideas of 'place' and 'space'. It is also in the temporal interplay between usage and predetermination that we find the functions of architecture, and the ways in which also we can talk about sexuality and gendering of architecture. Then I would repeat what I have already mentioned, which is that then 'architecture' is a cultural text like everything and can be subjected to cultural analyses. In my case that means poetic analyses that are influenced

by feminism, queer theory, Marxism and psychoanalysis. This might sound mundane, but within art and music there have been so many critical and sexual claims for architecture over the last ten years that fall flat upon closer examination, and I would really like my work to be distanced from that.

SS: The other thing that I find pertinent is, obviously, the construction of 'other' spaces, in an almost Foucaultian manner, that you have been involved with, and that directly deals with possible sexual encounters. Naturally there are the installations from the psychasthenia series, both the viewing booths of Psychasthenia 5, that deliberately invoke the architecture of porn cinemas and dark rooms in gay discos, and the park landscape of Care of the Self inside the Nordic Pavilion in the Venice Biennial, that also pointed towards the everyday function of the biennial area, that functions, among other things, as a park for sexual encounters outside the biennial season every second summer. Both pieces are engaged in deviations rather than the normative, which perhaps sets them apart from, say, Psychasthenia 2+2. I am curious as to your interest and reading of such functional sites, but also to the difference and/or relationality between different spaces as well as between different usages of spaces; in your recent work, such as Filter City, everyday places such as a children's playground becomes the meeting place for adults and (im)possible sexual encounters. As you mentioned, the main characters are as much lovers as friends as strangers, which seems to

me, again, to be an invocation of 'other' or 'queer' spatial practices. And the playground becomes yet another site for sexualization and subjectivization. There is almost a mapping of sexual or sexualized spaces happening in your practice: the desire of street life in Cluster Practice, the porn cinema of Psychasthenia 5, the cruising area of Care of the Self, the lounge/playing ground of Recombinant Place and the rendezvous of Filter City.

KÅ: Well, this is something we return to in the discussions regarding 'Struggle' where you mention working more representationally with articulation as a way of forming political subjects. I think this sums up quite well what I think is important here. In all my work -- as in the work of most artists -- there is also a contestation of different subjectivities, and different political readings and 'meanings' of practices and spaces. I think it is important to look at the subjectivities that find place within the work and which possibilities are produced or named by it. I want to avoid the constant rearticulation of the compulsory heterosexual subject in my work, and rather take other subjectivities for granted within the work too. Then again, I have also been looking at analyses of the spaces of contemporary society, and the whole narration of spaces of crisis and deviation has been particularly interesting to me. It is not just in how such analyses look at the subjectivities and the investments of sexuality and gender at the center of historical and urban narratives that make them interesting and useful, but also how

they reveal the political and economic priorities of the everyday and the exceptional. Initially I was interested in focusing in a Foucaultian manner on spaces that reflected the history of sexuality and the dispositions of sexuality within our western societies. In works like, Psychasthenia 5 and The Care of the Self I was interested in how architectural strategies are built or accumulated in relation to the desires and social codes of a society. The dark-boothed architecture of a night club or a sex club is, for example, not just a way of compartmentalizing what cannot be seen in public and narrating the myth of sexuality within a city, but it is also one way (among many) of working with the way one sees, experiences, and interprets oneself as desired and desiring in a site. The way I work with sexuality now, for example in the film Filter City, the photographic work Scenes 2 or the recent audio narratives, has less to do with a mapping of spaces and usage, than with working with the subtle interplay between characters in site. I have in a way come back full loop to earlier works like Come To Your Own and Play Dead and again I am working directly with the spoken or posed language of desire and change.