

control and command altered with time



Annika Larsson 'Pink Ball' (2002), 16 min

Reviewing Annika Larsson's videos from the earliest years of this century makes clear how sober they are to our present, their future, despite their dream-like qualities. The alternating currents of Fascism and Fetishism are deployed without dissonant, post-modern distancing effects. This is not quite cultural critique at an arm's length. The artist has her finger on something else.

Some years in advance of Apple's 2007 release of their touchable display devices (an innovation on a then decades-old yet under-commercialized technology that now dominates our mobile interfaces), she produces images of measured, slowed-down, wordless gestures whose tangibility and physicality, prefigures the pleasures of the touchscreen, somehow. Making these images, she lets herself and invites us to be seduced, amused, only vaguely disturbed, even as we come to comprehend more clearly what tends to control us or rather our desires.

The purebred hound on a short leash, the human finger which – via an electronic mouse – manipulates another digit beyond human capacity, a manicured beach, two manicured men who arrange a third (naked) one between sand and surf... so many ciphers of control and manipulation. I watch these videos and they seem to look back with the dead pan neutrality of androids. Emotions under control. Barely touching. Who will crack the first smile? Who will wince? And what will happen now that some years have passed? Are these carefully composed characters and their carefully composed images capable of seducing me still?



Annika Larsson 'Bend II' (2002), 13.5 min

Videos like *Pink Ball* (2002), *Dog* (2001) and (the most literally 'digital', as it is all about the fingertip) *Bend II* (2001) are scored with electronic music composed by Tobias Bernstrup and the artist – the kind that gets under your skin, into the bottom of the belly, inside my mouth, but without any force or violence. This music induces a more visceral experience of the images and even a hypnotic one. Soon, subconscious or barely buried impulses surface to be projected

onto the video scenes. I see the foot on the pink capped head of the naked man in *Pink Ball* and recall Sylvia Plath's "Every woman adores a Fascist,/The boot in the face, the brute" in her poem *Daddy*, first published in 1960. This is the softcore version of that. What is more, the threat diminishes as does the gender difference between proverbial master and servant. The homogeneity of the three men, and perhaps my awareness that the woman who directs them is not a sadist, makes of *Pink Ball* a game, an amusement, a seduction in and of the image. A digital image that reaches a fuller physical dimension through electronic sound. Come to think of it, that slowing down is a temporal and therefore a musical effect too.

Johann Strauss II's *Egyptian March* at the beginning of *Dog* links to an earlier music which was meant to move mind and body together. I start to project Napoleonic forces and goose stepping Nazis onto the corporate suits and onto the gloved hand holding a chain link leash. Yet the intrusion of history is temporary and gives way to a slower, base-heavy synthetic stream. I am reminded of how (images of) smooth surfaces, smooth transitions serve to delete the (perception of) disturbances, divisions, walls and differences to make room for ever expanding markets.



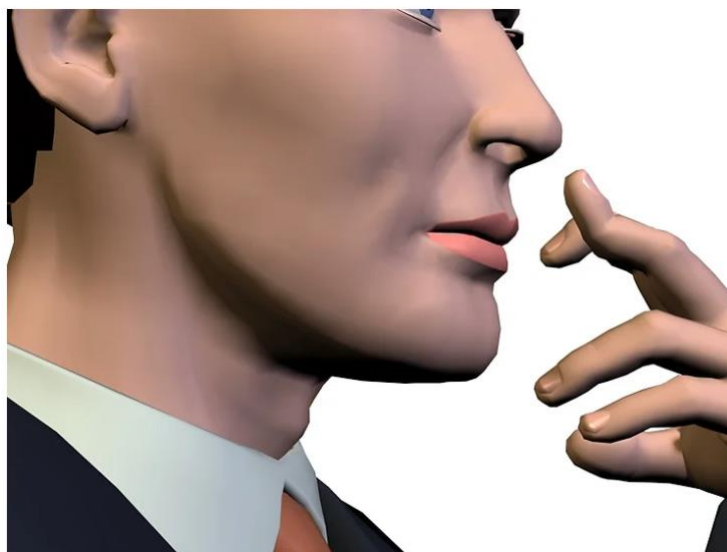
Annika Larsson 'Pink Ball' (2002), 16 min



This historic smoothing of space first favored the course of ‘soft-power’, pace Joseph Nye’s argument, first aired in 1990, just after the fall of the (hard) Berlin Wall; and more fully developed in the early 2000s, culminating in his 2004 book *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. The title says it all, perhaps. His argument is basically that seduction or getting another to want what you want is key to

successful domination. Annika Larsson’s early videos dramatize these seductions on a micro-level, via command and control choreographies that are slick, slow, bloodless, meeting no resistance. Her edits suggest equivalences between humans, animals and technology. The single-minded Sony robot puppy, programmed to follow a pink ball, is the prototype for the consumer who may be controlled by his own desire.

It is precisely the sharing of these (self- and other-) control fantasies which is at stake here. The question arises: what do we (humans) share with the workings of emerging technologies – including all the increasingly personalized, atomized, digitized, me, me, me, i, i, i, iTechnologies of the 21st Century – as well as remote controls? Have they trained us to fantasize constantly about control, like well-behaved dogs?



Annika Larsson 'Bend II' (2002), 13.5 min



Annika Larsson 'Dog' (2001), 16 min

What else might we share?

Anger has swelled since the turn of the century. The anger of the far right and the anger of the anarchist and the anger of the indebted and the anger of the religious fanatic and the anger of the racially oppressed and all the seemingly uncontrollable angers. As a president of a nation or a corporation, it pays to get angry too. It may be the one sure way to ride out the chaos. It captures votes, ensures clicks. And clicking is what

control driven people like to do. One interesting development is the return to the button interface of early mobile market monopolists like Nokia, abandoning the gentler strokes of the touchscreen. What is this reversal of what looked like progress?

Are we smarting from the earlier softness and smoothness due to the constant policing against all sorts of persons who fail to scan correctly for that proverbial **(facial)** social recognition software set to distinguish mostly men like those who populate Larsson's early videos? After all, the sublimation of fascist-backed corporate profit (or is it corporate-backed fascist profit?) into full blown economic warfare against so many 'misfits' requires some 1's for all the 0's. Annika Larsson's early videos cracked this code. But rather than denouncing the program, she tested the strange enjoyments of fuller immersion in its command and control systems – a kind of becoming animal, becoming machine, becoming 'the man'.

In more recent works, particularly *Europe* (2013) and *The Discourse of the Drinkers* (2017), a very different program emerges. What is remarkable, particularly in light of the earlier works, is that one cannot feel the filmmaker is in full control. Perhaps it is not even a program. Each film is produced, each is beautifully composed, but the camera continues to pass between protagonists in such a way that it now joins the drinking and the dancing rather than the command and control rituals. The decidedly unmanicured spaces of a tavern and two bars [two bars that appear as one – promiscuous spaces that mingle], are filmed with a touch of the loving attention to human variation we find in Pieter Bruegel the Elder. If the (desire for) manipulation of the earlier work is still there, its appearance is forever altered. Perhaps the one aspect that remains is a kind of proximity, indeed a certain touch.

These recent films await more collective viewing that would allow them to unleash another shared fantasy – one where the desire for control gives way to the desire for conviviality perhaps. Seeing them, after seeing the works from the early century, I think to myself, is this the future? No longer more smooth, hairless, slick and manicured than the present, but rather

shaped by a sense of good times past and a relation to technology, to the camera, as comrade, or an extra digit (why obsess about the perfection of five fingers?).

In other words, onwards to more medieval times.

Monika Szewczyk

*Images courtesy of Annika Larsson and Andréhn-Schiptjenko, www.andrehn-schiptjenko.com
Annika Larsson's solo exhibition showing; Dog (2001), Pink Ball (2002), Bend II (2002), is on view now through November 11.*

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