

FIRST TAKE

Daniel Birnbaum on ANNIKA LARSSON

SOMETIMES A CIGAR IS JUST A CIGAR, BUT WHEN IT'S guillotined in a slick video by a young Swedish artist who used to be one of Vanessa Beecroft's videographers, it's no longer simply a plug of tobacco nor a mere symbol of masculinity. It has already become a kind of metacliché. Annika Larsson, who is based in Stockholm and Berlin, will have her first major solo show outside of Scandinavia, at London's Institute for Contemporary Art, in February. What's fascinating about her videos isn't so much their exploration of male stereotypes, which may be what first strikes the eye: men in dark suits and ties, men with impeccable haircuts and cigars, men with black leather gloves and, perhaps, a huge dog on a leash; serious-looking men, like stockbrokers playing a children's game with utter absorption, as if it were a matter of life and death. All of that may be interesting as an investigation of the social construction of masculinity, but what's really fascinating is something else altogether—something to do with the repetitiveness and pulse of her video loops, usually highlighted by a monotonous sound track. What I experience is a strange sense of time coming to a halt.

This peculiar temporal effect must be the result, at least in part, of the strict set of rules according to which the slight alterations and modifications of the same basic elements take place. In *Perfect Game*, 1999, nothing much happens apart from the young men's concentrated staring at a game of pick-up sticks. In *Dog*, 2001, an old man, a young man, and man's best friend are implicated in some kind of ritualistic power play (involving metal and leather) that seems almost a parody of fascist aesthetics. The combinations of significant positions and gestures are limited and worked through systematically. My favorite video, though, *40-15*, 1999, is even sparer, showing nothing but two men playing tennis, or rather warming up, in front of a mirror in a sparsely furnished apartment. Years ago I remember being mesmerized by the music video for Air's "Kelly Watch the Stars": It simply recorded a Ping-Pong match and the audience who so solemnly followed the ball's movement back and forth. The effect of *40-15* is even more unnerving. One gets lulled into a soporific state in which time is clearly flowing but also standing still. Repetition can be torture, as in some of Bruce Nauman's work. It can also

produce a feeling of lightness and joy. Through iteration Annika Larsson produces a kind of psychological slow motion (maybe it has something to do with hypnotic techniques), and her work becomes less about process and more about a state of mind. It's been called *durée*. Let's call it absolute flow. □

Director of the Städelschule art academy in Frankfurt, DANIEL BIRNBAUM also heads the institution's renowned Portikus gallery, where, in his first year as director, he has mounted shows of the work of Rirkrit Tiravanija, Jason Rhoades, Elmgreen + Dragset, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Archigram's Peter Cook, and Rivane Neuenschwander. The author of *The Hospitality of Presence: Problems of Otherness in Husserl's Phenomenology* (Almqvist & Wiksell, 1998), Birnbaum is a contributing editor of *Artforum* and has written for these pages articles on a wide range of artists, including Gregor Schneider, Sam Taylor-Wood, Mark Dion, Thomas Ruff, Bruce Nauman, Darren Almond, Olafur Eliasson, Jason Rhoades, and Tobias Rehberger.



Clockwise from top left: Annika Larsson, *Dog*, 2001, USA film, a color video, 14 minutes; Annika Larsson, *40-15*, 1999, still from a color video, 14 minutes; Annika Larsson, *Dog*, 2001, still from a color video, 14 minutes.