

I could imagine the men in Annika Larsson's videos not breathing. At least, I could imagine them feeling a moment so intensely that they might forget to breathe, until the demands of their bodies reminded them to inhale.

# The rules of the game

Jennifer Higgin on Annika Larsson

With their air of focused futility, Larsson's videos throb with a rarefied atmosphere, a continual experiencing of the moment that is almost Zen-like in its concentration. Surfaces struggle with, and complement movement: ill-fitting suits glitter elegantly in the shifting grey light; crisp tennis shorts cling too tightly to a man's buttocks; middle-aged men about to be shot calmly take their shoes off; the metallic fur of an aristocratic dog is reflected in a dangling silver lead.

Larsson's focus is clear and concise but it's a clarity that confuses understanding. The most seemingly banal gestures – looking, touching, lifting a hand, moving through a space – are slowed down, repeated and choreographed to precision until they emanate such a high-pitched intensity it is impossible not to imagine every gesture and surface texture as being symbolic. But symbolic of what?

Men – and Larsson's work only features men – are pictured doing some of the things men apparently like doing: playing tennis, smoking cigars, walking a dog, looking at each other competitively, killing each other. They circle, gaze obliquely at, even touch one another with a cool tenderness that seems less about clumsy expressions of desire than a need to communicate something, somehow, somewhere. But their interactions are not described with an everyday emphasis.



• Dog 2001, video still

The artist creates mini-dramas of uncertainty made bearable only through enigmatic ritual: as if knowing the rules of the game will not only provide solace, but also justify the outcome. There is no hysteria or urgency here; a quietly surreal mass murder is peacefully enacted in a gymnasium; a game of tennis is played against a mirror in an elegant apartment; beneath a Berlin sky, two men appear to be transited by themselves, each other and a dog.

These wordless scenarios are communicated with a dead-pan, oddly sympathetic humour, accompanied by soundtracks that veer from the minimal repetition of an electronic heartbeat to the bombast of Johann Strauss' 'Egyptian Waltz'. Music propels the images towards a conclusion that is never reached, in the same way you might anticipate a kiss that never happens. Stock encounters bleed into mysterious relationships, which in turn build to a crescendo of inscrutable conclusions. These are activities realized with such deliberation that you are left struggling to make sense of situations to which you have become a complicit, if ignorant, witness through the very act of looking.

But the surprising thing is that these videos are also funny – in the way that alienation can often be humorous. Although Larsson's speciality is seriously creepy relationships, they are relationships that, viewed through a filter of crisp editing and styling, look as good as they are desolate. In *Dog* (2001), for instance, two grandly if badly dressed men stand in an open space with a dog. It's not a funny situation per se, but by the time the video ends, the subtle nuances of their behaviour have become amplified; the sensual fingering of the dog-leash countered by the dull sheen of a leather glove; the angle of a chin stressing the pompous ambivalence of their relationship; the subdued delight with which one man slowly sucks a sweet proffered by the other; the jubilant lips of a mouth circling a dog whistle. By the final frame, you are laughing (and how could you not?), but it's laughter tempered with nervousness (what the hell is going on?).

The videos all express a certain obsession – not only on the part of the actors, who are, without exception, masters of the introspective stare and enigmatic sidelong glance – but by the artist who, zooming in and then standing back, employs the camera as if it were a combination of microscope and mirror. In *40-15* (1999) the actors mime a game of tennis to a reflection of themselves, their actions duplicated and repeated in both an actual mirror and the mirror of the camera's lens. This is an image of lives lived as hyperreal experience – each shrug and twist exaggerated until, within all of this ambiguous activity,



• *Dog* 2001 Video art



• *Dog* 2001 Video art



• *DIE* 2001 Video art



• *Dog* 2001 Video art



• Dog 2022 - Video 001



• D.L.E. 2020 - Video 001



• Dog 2022 - Video 001

no surface ambiguity is allowed: everything that can be seen is present and accounted for. But obviously not everything can be understood by the eye alone. What these men might be feeling or thinking is unknowable; this may be stating the obvious, but to know what is on their minds is impossible to gauge. Larsson makes it abundantly clear that despite her obsession with surface, what you see is not always what you get.

These videos could be reduced to a corny, if idiosyncratic, reading of a male world seen through the eyes of a woman. But they are too strange and too wonderful for such a simplistic take (and when you think of it, do you really know any men who behave like this?). Their lack of overt meaning seems not so much to imply a loss of meaning as a possible refiguring of it. (Can something really mean *nothing*?) These scenarios describe men for whom a kind of comfortable alienation is normal; people for whom even the most personal gestures are experienced at one remove. Although this is not a happy situation, it is one that is ubiquitous – you only have to turn on the TV to see that it's apparently the most normal behaviour in the world. It makes sense,

## Larsson creates mini-dramas of uncertainty made bearable only through enigmatic ritual.

then, that Larsson should employ only men. What could be more alien, however familiar, than the relationship between a woman and a group of men?

Happily, alienation is never one-dimensional. Larsson seems to know this instinctively. For all their mannered air of repression, her videos radiate a subtle, charged atmosphere that reflects people's curious and often unspoken hunger for each other. At the end of *Dog*, one of the men, after making direct contact with the other, laughs. It's the only moment of laughter in the video and it comes as something of a shock. The shot is low, looking up so that the man's face is framed against the sky – a mad, heroic gesture of defiance. It's a funny, weirdly uplifting moment that seems to underline a feeling pervading Larsson's videos: namely, that what doesn't creep you out too severely can only make you stranger.



• *D.E.* 2003 / Video 061



• *Dog* 2003 / Video 054

