

Background and opposite page:
Annika Larsson, *Bend*, 2001.
stills from video.



sara arrhenius

i wanna be your dog

*the double play of submission and
dominance in Annika Larsson's work*

As always in Annika Larsson's films, the two men are dressed in immaculate grey business suits. The first grips a short leash in his leather-gloved hand, restraining a big, shining, muscular dog. One needs to watch no more than the first suggestive minutes of the film's obsessively repetitive quarter of an hour to understand how libido is distributed in this somewhat unusual *ménage à trois*: old man, young man, and then the dog. Even for someone not skilled in the codes of sadomasochistic desire, the strict division of labor between the three is as crisply clear as the almost dazzling sharpness of the screen. The elder rules them both: the big obedient dog and the young man, speechless, tall and slender, uncannily canine. To hold the scheme together, there is a generous display of fetishist accessories: shining leather, metal chains, glimmering fur coat, erect tail, tailored suits, and hard, fit bodies. The bewildering and disturbing elements in Annika Larsson's films can be connected to Helmut Newton's photographs. There is a similar game played with the somewhat jaded glamour of sophisticated settings that shamelessly display all the tempting clichés of decadent extravaganza: the idle dandy occupied in nonsense







Above and opposite page: Annika Larsson, *Dog*, 2001, stills from video.

games, the well-dressed playboy enjoying the pleasures of life. In this recent film, *Dog* (2001), there is also the ambiguous play with the historic iconography of fascism—the endless skies, monumental bodies, and an aestheticized play with dominance, submission, and male power—all fundamental essentials of Newton's work from the late '70s. This fascination, in both artists' work, involves something much more complex and troubled than the mere transgression of taboos just for the sake of it. Larsson shares with Newton not only an enthrallment with the object's erotic ambivalence and the irresistibility of the perfect surface, but also a sense of participation in the staging of the fantasy, so that both the artist and the

audience become voyeurs or accomplices. Yet in *Dog* there is also something that radically breaks with Newton's tradition—a bizarre humor that smashes all the accepted interpretations of symbol and narrative by pushing the codes and stereotypes to their extremes. The opening location in one of her earlier works, *Cigar* (1999), is a generic, air-conditioned office. With all the delicate and smooth gestures of a connoisseur, a suited, middle-aged man removes an expensive cigar from a long, silver holder in a black leather case. Using a miniature guillotine, he slices the end off the cigar, making the careful preparations for its enjoyment. He hands it to his visitor and lights it for him. Their hands touch each other gently, the cigar is lit.

With a nearly obscene, concentrated pleasure, the visitor smokes away, seated comfortably on a sofa, while the other man regards him intently. Despite the fact that the men in Larsson's works are in many ways caricatures of the typical Western male as a symbol of power, it would be wrong to state that she merely examines or critiques male authority. Rather, it is the evidently peculiar erotic tension contained within apparently banal tasks that is of importance: a man smokes a cigar while being watched by another, two men together with a brawny dog on a leash. Their anonymous masculinity comes to function as a sign of the unknowable in human beings, of the stranger who is impossible to know or approach. The suited man is enjoying himself, but his enjoyment is incomprehensible and inaccessible.



Above: Annika Larsson, *Perfect Game*, 1999, still from video.

Perhaps that is what makes the images in Larsson's videos so bewildering and affecting; they brush against that part of enjoyment that is solitary and incomprehensible. In an earlier video, there is another possible clue. In *Today I'm a Chauffeur* (1997), it is the artist herself, dressed up as a limousine driver, who plays the role of the man. The extreme finish that characterizes the rest of her work, the fetishist surface, is not yet apparent. There is a

failure of exactitude and precision—her uniform is a little too large and the cap slips down over her ears—that gives the film an experimental feel, like a prologue that functions as a vague matrix for the suited men who will populate her later works.

This is because we can read the men who are performing masculinity as erotic fetishes precisely as we would a woman who dresses up as a man. It is an act of cross-dressing that

experiments with an enigmatic and fascinating role, challenging insofar as it transgresses the image of the male as a neutral center; forbidden in that a fetishized masculinity would reveal masculinity itself as an act, something to be created and performed. Masculinity is here a complicated system of signs that revolves around unconscious fantasies and desires to the same extent as does the concept of femininity. The conventional male costumes in



Top to bottom: **Annika Larsson**, *Cigar*, 1999, still from video; **Annika Larsson**, *D.I.E.*, 2000, still from video.

Larsson's films are necessary props in a performance that forms identity in the same way as the razor-sharp high heels do in Newton's photographs. Yet it is a performance where none of the roles are assigned, and the artist's fascination with masculinity can perhaps best be described as both an act of role-playing and as one of exposure, of enjoyment in the fluidity of the performance. Her films are built up as a series of performances or, to be more precise, displays of a set of rules. She

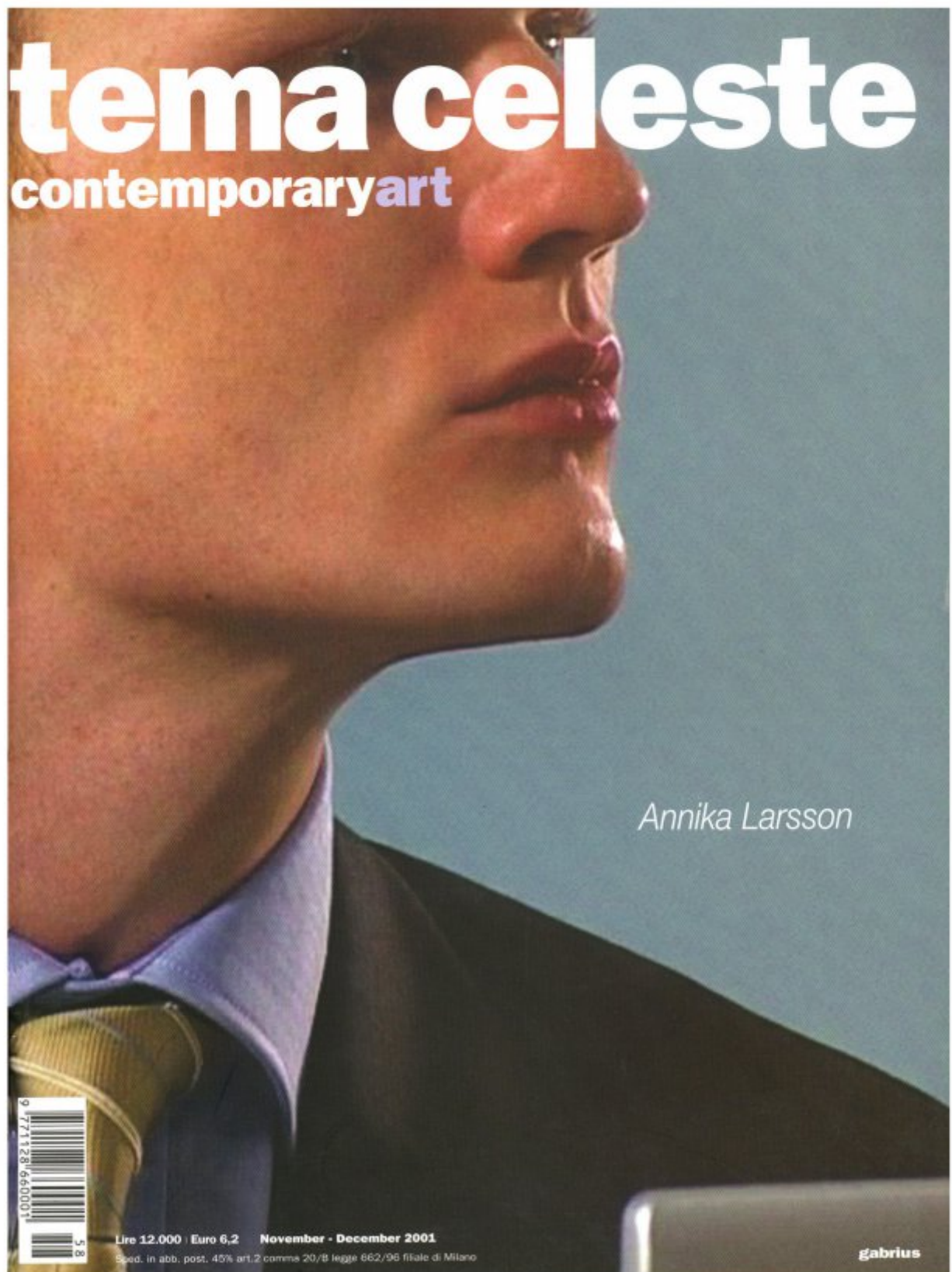
creates a strange universe with its own rules: two men play tennis in an empty apartment, three men play a grown-up version of Mikado, a solitary man in a grove covers his expensive car with a custom-sewn cover. Every detail is decisive and carefully planned, and we are drawn into and participate in the same fantasy. The goal of the game becomes unfathomable, despite the absolute transparency. What is clear is precisely the game itself, the display,

the rules. In this way, identity is performative regardless of whether it is masculine or feminine, heterosexual or homosexual. The slow tempo emphasizes this: Repetition is in itself the act that forms subjectivity. Every gesture, every movement, every object, and every room give shape to bodies, desires, people.

Photo Credit: Andr  hn-Schiptjenko, Stockholm.

Annika Larsson was born in 1972 in Stockholm. She lives and works in Berlin and Stockholm.

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