

## Penumbral Zones: recent work by Ann Lislegaard

By Robin Clark

Published in *Danskjävlar- A Swedish Declaration of Love*, exhibition catalogue, Copenhagen: Charlottenborg Kunsthall, 2008

Science fiction films and novels from the 1960s and 1970s have provided rich material for Ann Lislegaard's recent work. At the time of this writing, Lislegaard's *Science Fiction 3112 (after '2001: A Space Odyssey' by Stanley Kubrick)* (2007) is installed outside of a former industrial laundry facility in Copenhagen. A passageway formed by two neighboring buildings marks the territory of the installation. The sweet spot, where sound comes most fully into aural focus, is centered between two speakers embedded behind air vents in one of the walls. Clipped and metallic chirping sounds issue from the vents, suggesting the hiss of an abraded audio cassette tape combined with other, less intelligible reverberations. Ambient sounds blend with the recorded noise. The walls of the buildings are floridly tagged and retain small metal labels reading "KOLDT VAND", cold water, and "SYRE", acid. This post-industrial site recalls the Zone through which some travel to find the mysterious room that they hope will fulfill their desires in Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Stalker* (1979). Yet while the site of *Science Fiction 3112* evokes the atmosphere of the Russian film, the audio components of the piece are indexically related to Kubrick's film: to create *Science Fiction 3112*, Lislegaard compressed and folded Kubrick's sound track in its entirety. The compressed sound is both familiar and unfamiliar, contributing to an overall uncanny effect which is heightened by the fact that the source of the sound is hidden and the installation is not identified on site as an artwork. As is the case with science fiction literature and film, technology has been used in these artworks by Lislegaard to produce and explore states of psychological ambiguity.

Two of Lislegaard's recent video installations take science fiction novels as points of departure. Samuel Delany's novel *Dhalgren* (1975) is credited in the title of Lislegaard's installation *Bellona (after Samuel R. Delany)* (2005), and *The Crystal World* (1966) by J. G. Ballard is the inspiration for Lislegaard's double projection entitled *Crystal World (after J.G. Ballard)* (2006). Although the literary sources of Lislegaard's video installations are stated from the outset, the videos are profoundly different in texture from the novels that inspired them. In a reversal of Lislegaard's compression and transposition of Kubrick's grand soundtrack onto an obscure and crumbling location for *Science Fiction 3112*, she reinterprets the crowded and collapsing environments in *Dhalgren* and *The Crystal World* as pristine, uninhabited settings. *Bellona*, the city in which the novel *Dhalgren* takes place, is teeming with gangs and looters, and the outskirts of Port Mataré, where *The Crystal World* unfolds, is home to listless bands of people stricken with leprosy. Lislegaard's *Bellona* is hard-edged and high-keyed, a series of rectangular doors and orb-shaped lamps experienced at lugubrious speeds and plunging perspectives. "Sometimes it seems," notes *Bellona*'s narrator, "as if all these walls on pivots are controlled by subterranean machines so that after one passes they might suddenly swing to face another direction, parting at this corner, joining at that one, like a great maze – forever adjustable, therefore unlearnable." In *Bellona*, architecture is defined by changing hues of light: stage-like spaces glow tangerine, cobalt, azure, and chartreuse,

then suddenly turn black, white, and grey. The surfaces are crisply reflective, as if lacquered. Space is mirrored and mirrored again, folding back on itself.

A sense of vertigo pervades Lislegaard's *Crystal World*. Rendered in black and white, the installation presents images of a dense forest viewed through the grid structure of a glass house. This viewpoint seems to impose order on the chaotic tangle of vegetation. Before long, however, interior and exterior begin to merge. Crystalline forms sprout up in the forest, penetrating the glazed membrane of the house, and a river of quicksilver inundates the rooms. For *Crystal World*, Ann Lislegaard selected and extrapolated phrases from Ballard's novel and inserted them into her oscillating two-screen projection. The writer's tool of enjambment, in which a word or verse encroaches upon the physical space of another, both elucidates the narrative and introduces another layer of complexity to the visual flow of *Crystal World*. Sometimes the type appears as white on black, while at other times it is reversed as black on white. The words take on a curious materiality. Lines break before they should, as if too brittle to support their own weight.

Another reversal in the translation of the tales from book to screen concerns subjectivity. Although aspects of the original characters survive in Lislegaard's works, the identities of the narrators are abstracted from their sources, and gender is mutable. Delany's *Dhalgren* is told from the viewpoint of a young American Indian man, but in Bellona his words are narrated by a female voice. The main character in Ballard's *The Crystal World* is a middle-aged British man, but his words are expressed silently as text on screen with no indication of gender. In fact, the psychological tenor of the works is expressed through an experience of architecture without the intervention of any human figures. In a recent interview Lislegaard asked whether "every emotion could be rendered spatially." Through constructions of eerie and arresting architectural surrounds, Lislegaard's installations evoke anxiety, reverie, curiosity, wonder, confusion, and, perhaps, a willingness to become absorbed into something unknown. The work does not engage every emotion, but rather focuses on sensations that exist on the borders, or penumbral zones, of rational thought.

1 Bill Arning, "Hearing and Seeing Things," in Gunnar B. Kvaran, ed., *Ann Lislegaard: Science Fiction and Other Worlds* (Oslo: Astrup Fearnley Museum, 2007). J. G. Ballard, *The Crystal World* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1966). Matthew Buckingham, "Other Rooms: The Work of Ann Lislegaard," in Gunnar B. Kvaran, ed., *Ann Lislegaard: Science Fiction and Other Worlds* (Oslo: Astrup Fearnley Museum, 2007). Samuel R. Delany, *Dhalgren* (New York: Bantam Books, 1975). Anders Kreuger, *Ann Lislegaard: Crystal World* (Copenhagen: Statens Museum for Kunst, 2007). Agustin Pérez Rubio and Ann Lislegaard, "Toward an Identity and Subjectivity of Space,"

2 Film References: *2001: A Space Odyssey*, 1968. MGM, Stanley Kubrick director. *Stalker*, 1979. Mosfilm, Andrei Tarkovsky director.