



## ANNIKA LARSSON

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In her 1974 essay "Fascinating Fascism," a biting critique of the rehabilitation of Leni Riefenstahl, Susan Sontag outlines how certain elements of fascist aesthetics—notably choreographed domination, pageantry, and an insistent glamorization of death—have entered the vocabulary of contemporary culture. Nearly thirty years later, this diagnosis seems more appropriate than ever. Co-opted for their appeal to powerful, largely latent desires, fascist aesthetics can today be found in both conservative and liberal contexts: eroticized in fashion photography and advertising on the one hand, adopted as a platform for critique in contemporary art practice on the other. In her New York debut Annika Larsson presented two stylized videos of imagined rituals and clichéd power relations that flirt with a middle ground, oscillating between Madison Avenue slickness and critical engagement.

Like much of Larsson's work, *POLISI* (Police), 2002, is a vague and fantastical story of domination, presented in slow motion as a much-larger-than-life video projection. To the pulse of a languid techno sound track, three policemen in riot gear in a city square at night press a gas mask over an unresisting man's face

until he succumbs. They lay him down and stand guard over him for several minutes, then they take turns beating him. When the man finally comes to, they drag him to their paddy wagon. Every gesture is hypersexualized—the police thump their billy clubs in their hands in anticipation and fog up their visors with steamy breath—and gains emphasis from the slowed playback. Their gear is fetishized as well: The attackers sport stylish black outfits with shiny pads, and the "victim" wears pressed white jeans and leather riding boots. Clearly *POLISI* is pure fantasy, trafficking in what Daniel Birnbaum, writing of Larsson's work in these pages, has aptly called "metacliché." While this irony drains the violence of its menace, it also keeps the viewer at arm's length. Other than the sheer visual seductiveness, there is no real "hook" here, and after a while, the video drags. Though this may be part of Larsson's critical strategy—a comment on the banality of power, perhaps—ultimately *POLISI*'s meanings remain ambiguous.

If the *polisi* were playing storm trooper, the two men in *Dog*, 2001, rehearse the role of complicit citizen. With s/m accessories sublimated into haute-couture gloves, tiepins, and leash, *Dog* presents a kind of three-way master-servant ritual. On a Berlin rooftop one of the men gets

down on his knees, while the other, older man circles him, sometimes pausing to lift and stroke the tail of the glossy weimaraner that stands between them. With long shots taken from a low vantage point, *Dog* embodies domination not only in subject matter but also in form. Larsson's cinematography is incontestably dazzling—*Dog*'s cool light recalls Stanley Kubrick as much as *POLISI*'s dark palette does Ridley Scott—and again, it's clear that surface and theatricality are her central concerns. Here too, however, the relative weakness of the authorial voice persists.

Like Vanessa Beecroft (with whom she used to work as a videographer), Larsson is apparently attempting to engage stereotypes of domination and exploitation in order to critique them. But here, as in Beecroft's work, the critique is not sufficiently articulated. The mere fact that it's unclear whether Larsson's videos offer a viable counterpoint to the eroticization of fascism or rather revel in it is itself somewhat disconcerting. So though irony is clearly Larsson's vehicle, here it seems to be spinning its wheels.

—Jordan Kantor