



Annika Larsson, *New Gravity*, 2003, still from a color video, 29 minutes 30 seconds.

## STOCKHOLM

## ANNIKA LARSSON

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The climactic "penis hanging" scene in Annika Larsson's video *New Gravity*, 2003, retraces the dark fringes of her earlier themes: pleasure from pain, erotic ritual, and a taste for sadism's aftermath. Moreover, failed episodes of autoerotic asphyxia echo Larsson's narrative style, where ends are left hanging. But while on familiar terms with Larsson's fictionalized erotica, *New Gravity* is on its own in confronting the history of lethal sexual behavior and its self-inflicted moral predicaments.

In *Dog*, 2000, and *Pink Ball*, 2003, Larsson pushed off Barbara Kruger's mocking of male sexual personae (*You Construct Intricate Rituals Which Allow You to Touch the Skin of Other Men*) to tell tightly constructed stories of initiates playacting glamorously elusive rites. These videos, visions of a dispassionate voyeur, were all make-believe. But autoerotic asphyxia has a history embedded in masculine sexuality and in culture, too. At least by the early seventeenth century it had been noted that hanged men frequently developed an erection and even ejaculated while strangling, and sexual asphyxiation became a treatment for impotency.

The first half of *New Gravity* unfolds in a strobe-lit indigo den of adolescent boys enraptured by the droning pulse of an androgynous vocalist dressed in fuck-me heels and snug black latex pants. The music slows time while Larsson's camera lingers over the inelegant swell of teenage crotches, klutzy hand gestures, and pimply faces. The boys are plebes in

a masculine netherworld, their body language straining with repressed sexuality. Larsson reels out a doomed fantasy of unrequited love while fetishizing the implements of eroticized hanging as fashion accessories: a carabiner, a pocketknife, and even white athletic socks, which, like the shotgun in a Chekhov play, inevitably return.

Our protagonist is a geek. He wears cargo cutoffs, a button-down shirt, ancient tennis shoes, and sagging white socks. At the club, the magnetism of the androgynous performer is total, but, unable to possess this object of desire, the boy opts for the routine and goes home to jerk off. Life at home is as much a fantasia as dancing under the strobes; the boy's imagination displaces sexual worship with a ritual of instruct-and-obey conducted by a master/father avatar. The avatar demonstrates standing on tippy-toes—a "stress position" familiar to those who torture for a living—then gently presses the boy: "Can you do this?" With the camera focused on his white socks, the boy struggles to balance as the avatar counts off seconds. Then, lifting both feet in the air, the avatar inquires: "Can you do this?" He defies gravity; his face melts into self-gratification that is unmistakably tempting. Following on as best he can, the boy stands on a chair and, tipping it backward, answers the challenge put to him. His feet swirl arrhythmically off the ground. Tragically flailing at manhood but unable to surrender his virginity, he sacrifices himself.

Experts discourage representing eroticized hanging, citing the high risk of imitative behavior. Does *New Gravity* gamble art's poetic realism against moral responsibility? If Larsson merely glamorizes deviant

but toxic sexual behavior, then hers is a vacant style, like fashion's once trendy "heroin chic." Do we let this pass as a weakness of art, which rarely reaches into life to trigger tragedy? For now, it may be enough that Larsson has deftly staked out questions that are almost certain to find self-incriminating answers.

—Ronald Jones