

THE COMMON GUILD

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COMMENTARIES

Roni Horn

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'the tiniest piece of mirror is always the whole mirror'

*"A word is dead, when it is said
Some say—
I say it just begins to live
That day"¹*

Language, poetry and literature are important in Roni Horn's work, especially through figures such as Dickinson and Clarice Lispector, from whom the phrase "the tiniest piece of mirror is always the whole mirror" comes.² "I move through language to arrive at the visual," Horn says. Yet language and its potential to describe and encompass experience also presents problems, insofar as Horn has also remarked that "you use metaphor to make yourself at home in the world. You use metaphor to extinguish the unknown. And for me the problem is the unknown is where I want to be." Dickinson's poetry in particular offers a model by which both self and world remain unfamiliar, ambiguous, and mutable yet may still be figured. And like Dickinson's poetic language, Horn's work in sculpture, photography and drawing has an enigmatic self-sufficiency which only slowly reveals its inner life. When it does so, however, it presents art (and subjectivity too) not as fixed, but as a matter of living, shifting relation.

If drawing, broadly defined, might be the key medium in Horn's practice, water might be thought of as her muse. "Water is a mirror," Horn says—but what is reflected in it? Taking the unknowable flux of the Thames as her example, Horn describes water as both singular and plural, familiar and unfamiliar. On the one hand, "going into water is going into yourself," but on the other the Thames might be "a solvent for identity." As she told James Lingwood, one of the things that draws her to water as a subject is the very fact "that it's possible to have such intimacy with something that will always be unknown to me ... it offers a complexity that defines identity as an open-ended thing." Horn's work engages the viewer in a similar manner.

Photography is a liquid medium in Horn's hands and her photographic work *Portrait of an Image* (2005) plays precisely on the imbrications of complexity, intimacy and

enigma she sees in water. In this work, actress Isabelle Huppert enters imaginatively into different characters she has embodied in memorable film performances, but the close-up shots vary only slightly in appearance. The viewer is invited to consider infra-thin differences between versions of a self, and between portraits which dissolve rather than consolidate any sense of identity.

Though Horn's work resists easy meanings, it can solicit deep subjective investments or projections. Horn's *Gold Field* (1980–82), for example, initiated an extraordinary reciprocal exchange of works and texts with Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Gonzalez-Torres, encountering the work with his dying partner in 1990, saw in it "a new landscape, a possible horizon, a place of rest and absolute beauty... an undiscovered ocean for us."³ The folds and creases of the *Gold Field* shown in Horn's Common Guild exhibition seemed to reflect not just such a romantic space of possibility and imagination, but also to suggest traces of experience and loss, figures of relating to oneself and others. *Gold Field*, like many of Horn's sculptures, turns the language of minimalism into an implicit topography or topology of the subject.

The philosopher Michel Foucault conceptualised an ascetic "arts of existence" in which subjectivity could be reshaped and reinvented. Judith Butler suggests that such a project turns on "a moment of ethical questioning which requires that we break the habits of judgement in favour of a riskier practice that seeks to yield artistry from constraint."⁴ This could be a fitting description of Emily Dickinson's poetry, or indeed of Roni Horn's artistic practice.

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1. Emily Dickinson, 'A Word is Dead', (1862), in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, Part One: Life*, USA, 1960.

2. Clarice Lispector, *The Stream of Life* (trans. Elizabeth Lowe), Minneapolis, 1989, p. 64.

3. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "1990: L.A., 'The Gold Field,'" in *Earths Grow Thick: Roni Horn*, exh. cat., Columbus, Ohio: Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, 1996, p. 68.

4. Judith Butler, *What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue* [online], 2001. Available: <https://eicpc.net/transversal/0806/butler/en.html>