

THE COMMON GUILD

Visual arts: Projects / Events / Exhibitions



Photo by Ruth Clark

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COMMENTARIES

Mircea Cantor

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'Which light kills you'

A proposition by Ami Barak

Much of Mircea Cantor's work has to do with revealing traces, and this interest is pursued at various levels, from the intimate, indexical nature of the fingerprint or footprint, to markers of commerce and signifiers of national history. Although he works across media, it would seem that photography's procedures have a particular importance in Cantor's practice. For Roland Barthes, photography's indexical nature linked it to the world and to death, as an evocation of presence which is inevitably enunciated in the future anterior—'this was'. On this account photographs have special evidentiary status, but part of what they evidence is the ineluctable: *which light kills you* indeed.

In the selection of work shown at The Common Guild, *Vertical Attempt* (2009), a film consisting of a one second shot endlessly looping, shows a small boy 'cutting' water from a tap with a pair of scissors, and it is not too far fetched to think of this as a metaphor for the photograph and its interruption of the flow of life. *Tracking Happiness* (2009), in which seven women walk in time across fine sand in various formations, dealt in the erasing rather than the making of indices—as the women walk each brushes away the footprints of those in front of them. This action brings to mind the fragment of Georges Bataille that concludes Denis Hollier's book *Against Architecture*: "Like the Archbishop of Paris who when he walked with a mistress in his gardens had three men with rakes following to erase their footprints, we are obliged to dissolve into silence a sentence barely formed".¹ Despite any such resonance with the history of Surrealism, this work reflects nothing so much as the twenty-first century and the immateriality of digital data, which tracks our presence in the world, but often does so without leaving a tangible trace. Analogue photography's own mortality is amongst the themes here.

Ciel Variable (2007–13), a piece consisting of the titular phrase written in reverse on the gallery ceiling with candle smoke, and *Chaplet* (2007), an image of barbed wire made by the artist's inked fingerprints on a large mirror, both suggested that Cantor is adept at using indexical procedures to refer to matters of everyday life as well as to intimations of death. Taken together, these works might also reference the injunction to be accountable to an unchanging identity in a world that is fundamentally unpredictable. Such reflections on the vicissitudes of contemporary life were extended by the sculpture *Diamond Corn* (2005), its pristine crystal form, humble subject matter and mundane cardboard support placing aesthetic value in explicit relation to the commercial, quotidian worlds in which art circulates.

In 2005 Cantor used a marker pen to pluralise a famous newspaper nameplate—from *Le Monde* to *Les Mondes*. This gesture might mark the transition from the world of the 'print capitalism' which underpinned the emergence of modern national identity to what philosopher Peter Osborne terms 'photo-capitalism'—"a distinctively transnational and translinguistic cultural-economic form".² Cantor harnesses the indexical poetics of traditional photography to address the ambivalent, plural worlds emergent from such a 'photo-capitalism'. Here images, like commodities, like artworks, and indeed like artists themselves, are continually in transit, moving under and through uncertain skies. Cantor's practice bears the imprint of the worldly forces to whose traces he is so attentive.

Dr. Dominic Paterson is a writer and art historian based at the University of Glasgow.

1. Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille* (trans. Betsy Wing), Cambridge MA, 1992, p. 171.

2. Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, London, 2013, p. 118.