

## Foreword

The relationships between photography and time are manifold: time can be directly represented within the image, it can be its theme and philosophical horizon, and it can also represent the historical and conceptual framework in which photographic practices develop and change through time.

All of these elements converge in the art of f & d cartier, two Swiss artists living and working in Biel/Bienne, Switzerland. Since 1995 they have merged their respective practices, plastic arts and photography, and created a unified artistic identity in order to discover new approaches. Examining the indispensable prerequisites for photography, light and photosensitive paper, they mainly make 'camera-less' works incorporating found objects. The two bodies of work featured in this publication, *Wait and See* and *Veni Etiam*, exemplify their minimalist tendencies, and the duo's questioning of everyday life, intimacy, the passing of time.

f & d cartier recognise that objects and images have temporal characteristics; they emerge from a given time and are experienced in a particular historical context. However, some objects and images possess an extraordinary presence and qualities that transcend the specifics of time and place. The photographic image does not need to remain ontologically bound to a single moment in time, it can evolve independently and give rise to new meanings and readings. The works of f & d cartier exploit the paradoxical character of photography and its durational nature, to create beguiling and meditative artworks that involve an overlapping of past and present, the historical and actual.

*“We had no remedy but to wait and see”*

Daniel Defoe, Robinson Crusoe (1719)

Time Will Tell

*The art of f & d cartier*

Photography is fundamentally a time-based medium, not just in the camera's ability to capture a moment in time and commit it to memory, but also because of a photograph's embodiment of spatialised time, its imprinting of duration. The photograph itself acts as a temporal passageway, enabling the viewer to experience in the present something that the photographer saw in the past and others will view in the future. Andrei Tarkovsky, who in later life had extensive recourse to Polaroid photography, said he was drawn to the medium because it created “an image as a grain, a self-evolving retroactive organism” which affords us an unbroken moment of contemplation, lying somewhere between the experience of time as absolute and remembering as a creative act.

The earliest photographic processes, whether Fox Talbot's chemically treated papers or Daguerre's silvered plates, required lengthy exposures and the resulting images were essentially durational in nature, each photograph formed by the accretion of many impressions over time. These pioneers of photography understood that the medium's potential was severely inhibited by the long time needed for image to form, and the gradual disintegration of that image over time. As physicists, they were able to apply their scientific knowledge to the vexed question of how to transcend the durational nature of the photographic surface and permanently fix the transient moment. Indeed, one might see the entire evolution of modern photography in terms of the ideological, technical and aesthetic interplay between duration and instantaneity, a tension that has contemporary reverberations as we struggle to come to terms with incessant data flow and the restless proliferation and transmutation of digital images.

From the mid-1990s onwards, the Swiss artists Françoise and Daniel Cartier merged their practices, in plastic arts and photography respectively, and embarked on a new artistic trajectory that continues today. Examining the indispensable prerequisites for photography, light and photosensitive paper, they make camera-less works incorporating found objects, exploring the relationship between light, colour tonality, form and duration. Over the time they have practiced as f & d cartier, the artists have been fascinated by and draw on a prodigious knowledge of the history of photography, but their work remains resolutely experimental and contemporary. The artists' adoption of a minimalist and abstract approach was not borne of a desire to return to the roots of analogue photography, it stems from their interest in the medium's role in enabling us to visualise the affective dimensions of time.

In 1973 the American artist Tony Conrad created a series of works called *Yellow Movies* that involved the painting in cheap emulsion of black rectangular frames on rolls of photographic paper. Conrad was interested in

expanding the framework of film, and presenting to the audience a photographic work that would continue to evolve over 50 years, changing very slowly, almost imperceptibly. Some parallels certainly exist between f & d cartier's work and Conrad's *Yellow Movies*, especially in the performative nature of their photographic installations. However, there are some crucial differences which can best be understood in relation to the circumstances surrounding f & d cartier's artistic union.

Daniel Cartier graduated in 1975 from the Zurich School of Applied Arts with a diploma in photography. His disillusion with reportage led him to seek expression as a fine art photographer, and throughout the 1980s he developed a conceptual approach involving a daily routine of photographing everyday objects in a repetitious, highly formal way. Daniel endeavoured to keep artistic intervention and interpretation to a minimum. The resultant series of black and white photographs chronicles over several years the gradual disappearance of objects in his back garden such as a pile of coal briquettes and other perishable materials.

During this time, Françoise Cartier's practice took a very different path. Combining a rich assortment of materials, she painted, sculpted and collected *objets trouvés*, fashioning them into colourful and sensual assemblages and installations. The artist moved between three and two-dimensional forms, proceeding as much by intuition as by concept, and giving the found objects a new life and meaning.

In 1995, Daniel exposed the last polaroid found in the camera of his late father Walter Cartier. Although the image was fogged and degraded, it had a profound spectral presence that seemed to oscillate between visibility and invisibility, presence and absence, materiality and immateriality.

(insert image of l'ombre inconnue 24/5/95)

Around this time, the interests of the artists converged and they began to make collaborative installations, setting up a new dialogue between objects and photography. In 1998 Françoise and Daniel took the decisive step towards full integration of their practices and a merged artistic identity, with Daniel abandoning his camera and Françoise becoming less concerned with the tangibility of objects. *A-venir. le temps d'être Suisse*, their first project as f & d cartier, won them the Prix Michel Jordi de la Photography. In this work they presented reflections on the Swiss Confederation in the form of 26 photographic surfaces of different sizes and colours, representing the 26 Swiss cantons. These were arranged in alphabetical order, according to their geographical area. Seven kinds of expired and unused photographic paper, left over from previous projects, were positioned in linear form and, with the opening of the exhibition, exposed to the available light in the gallery. As the days passed, the photosensitive paper reacted to the light and progressively took on various dark, pastel shades. The artists had imposed certain constraints on the work, such as the choice of paper and presentational format, but the chromatic evolution was a process remaining outside their control – a living performance that culminated in a unique artwork.

(insert image of the A-Venir installation)

In 1999, the artists spent several months in London, thanks to a grant from Zuger Kulturstiftung Landis & Gyr. During their stay, they created the series *London Light* which captured the light of the city over an exceptional summer by means of impressions made by a large paintbrush being left on photographic paper which is exposed to the light for a month. The colour range of the series of photograms produced in this way reflected the variations in light intensity as the summer advanced. The work subtly alludes to William Henry Fox Talbot's famous book *The Pencil of Nature* (1844/46), which includes several photogram experiments.

(image from London Light)

At the turn of the millennium, f & d cartier began a series of photogram-based works which explored the themes of time, mortality, eroticism, gender and identity. The common thread that unites these works is the colour pink, itself rich in association and potent cultural symbolism. The entire series was brought together in the Verlag Niggli publication *Roses* (2006). As Sylvie Henguely, Art Historian at the Musée de l'Elysée Lausanne, comments in her insightful essay in the book:

*"the playful permutations of Rose, oser, sero, eros which can't fail to evoke the famous Rose Sélavy (Eros, c'est la vie) of Marcel Duchamp, points the way to the coming years. This sequence, repeating itself in a loop, adumbrates different facets of the future collaboration: subjects with erotic connotations (eros), confrontation with death (sero), with an underlying but essential pink and all its shadings"*

(image from the Roses series)

*Veni Etiam* (2009) marks the next chapter in f & d cartier's creative journey. Whilst in residence at the Swiss Institute of Roma in Venice in 2008, the artists chanced upon forty antique silver albumen glass plates in a local flea market. These 19<sup>th</sup> Century photographic plates were in good condition, and depicted images of Murano glass chandeliers, furniture and mirrors produced by a Venetian artisan and photographer of the period. The artists created new artworks from the plates using contemporary digital processes to adjust the light contrast and colour tonality, evoking the frescoes and paintings of the Venetian School as well as the atmosphere of the city. The palette used for the *Veni Etiam* series reflects this: green to represent Verona, yellow and cerulean blue for Naples, with blond, sienna, white lead and black symbolising Venice.

In the *Veni Etiam* series, colour tonality is brought to the fore, combining the 'frame' of the mirrors or glass plates with the detail of the subjects including small cracks in the glass and each article's original reference number, and the use of saturated hues of differing values and the 'colour blocking' devices favoured by abstract painters Mark Rothko and Josef Albers. The painterly quality and scale of the work renders it fresh and contemporary, giving these fortuitously discovered images of past Venetian glory a new existence through the medium of a digital inkjet printer.

(insert installation shot from Veni Etiam?)

*Wait and See* (2011- present) is the latest manifestation of the durational photographic installations that began in 1998 with *A-venir. le temps d'être Suisse*. The *Wait and See* series initially saw f & d cartier experimenting with their own expired photographic papers. Latterly, they have collected unexposed papers from colleagues and via the Internet. By September 2012, the artists' collection comprised around three hundred varieties of fibre-based photosensitive papers, ranging in age from the 1880s to 1980s. They often acquire paper in its original packaging, providing them with critical information about its provenance, the story of the brand, its projected expiry date, and so on. This research has become a key part of the work, although they admit that it would take a professional historian of photography to investigate properly the more complex papers.

One example of the early paper used for *Wait and See* is Velox. This was invented by Leo Baekeland, a Belgian-born American chemist in 1893, and was the first photographic paper that could be printed in artificial light (as opposed to sunlight). In 1899, Baekeland sold his company, the Nepera Chemical Company in Yonkers, New York, and, with it, the rights to Velox, to the U.S. inventor George Eastman. Introduced by Kodak as the "first of the true gaslight papers", Velox is a silver chloride contact print paper, which, compared to bromide paper, is very slow to develop and therefore does not require a darkroom. For this reason, *Velox* was extensively promoted for use by amateur photographers. The Eastman Kodak Company first listed *Velox* photographic postcard stock in its 1902 catalogue. This stock was discontinued in the late 1940s but the paper is still being manufactured.

Such compelling narratives complement the aesthetic beauty of the papers as they become exposed. Each individual sheet has its own past history and each will develop its own unique future pattern. The older papers need a longer exposure time to become colour saturated, but none of the papers used has ever turned black, and often a very sympathetic chromatic palette develops. The artists observe that the most dramatic changes occur in the first two days after the opening of the exhibition.

(insert image of the Wait and See installation process/artists on ladders etc)

In this return to basic techniques which reflect the artists' minimalist tendencies, the elaborate hanging seeks to revive the various qualities of the photographic paper by exposing it to the light present in the exhibition rooms. Through a subtle interplay with the space, the chromatic transformation of the paper begins; and according to the paper's composition and the nature of its contact with light, the flat surfaces develop random colour patterns over time.

To observe the progressive saturation of the paper, the viewer is asked to remain still for a few moments in order to observe a latent process, the meaning of which derives from the very act of being seen. Through this audacious project, f&d cartier are able to simply and powerfully create a mechanism that reveals a passing moment, the traces of which remain visible, in abstract nuances, on the exposed media.

In *Wait and See*, the viewer is confronted initially with a minimal white or off-white photographic paper installation and the exact nature of the chromatic transformation is as yet undetermined. Patience and curiosity is required, but upon returning to the gallery several times the subtle changes will slowly reveal themselves, as each sheet of paper becomes colour saturated. One is reminded of Herman Melville's words in *Moby Dick*:

*"In essence whiteness is not so much a colour as the visible absence of colour, and at the same time the concrete of all colours; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning?"*

So often when we look onto a photographic image, we are not experiencing something very unusual, but that which we encounter daily in our lives. Such is the ubiquity of images, we can speak of photography as being, in many ways, a very vulgar and commonplace phenomenon, in the sense that most people do not even notice that they experience the same photograph reproduced many times, for example in an advertising or news context. The rapid technological development of the medium has irrevocably changed the status and meaning of photography, its apex being the digital revolution of the camera and relentless circulation and reproduction of images on the web.

Jean Baudrillard used the term 'obscene' in this regard. For Baudrillard, obscenity begins when everything is about transparency and immediate visibility.

*"The obscene is what puts an end to every look, to every image, to every representation...it is the obscenity of the visible, of the too visible, of the more visible than visible; it is the obscenity of that which has no more secrets, of that which is miscible in information and communication"*

The work of f & d cartier offers a more optimistic view of transience and dematerialisation, of presence and absence. Through their art, we rediscover the temporal multi-layeredness of the photographic image, and also the magical effect of natural light interacting with light sensitive material. The artist's concern is not to render an exact physical likeness of things, but to

make visible what lies beyond that we immediately see, the hidden meanings which underline the gulf between reality and appearance.