

## A token of absence

*"To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge - and, therefore, like power. A now notorious first fall into alienation, habituating people to abstract the world into printed words, is supposed to have engendered that surplus of Faustian energy and psychic damage needed to build modern, inorganic societies".*  
- Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, 1977

The intervention of the photographic capture draws up one of the most significant and mysterious objects characterising our modern world. Our recent history could be drawn up through iconic images, which altered the way we understand and relate to our world. The pervasive power of images has progressively subjugated everyday culture by continuously circulating images and the force of the photographic keeps on prompting new questions about the relationship between experience and reality.

The digitalisation of photography has given us a new type of photograph; the networked image, which relies on probabilities, algorithmic synthesis, and pixelated randomness, breaking apart any remaining indexical relations and points of reference to authenticity. The relationship between the sign and referent object is perpetually melting together in a new mixture between times, reference, registration and reality, complicating and abstracting the relationship we have to the image and representation. Antagonistically, Emil Salto's photographic work establishes itself as a kind of primary form of photography rooted in analogue laboratory-like experiments. Photograms register direct and unrestrained interventions between light, time and space. In the series *Cloud Chambers*, monochrome photograms orchestrate scales of grey, black and white, while precise geometric shapes perform perceptual illusions and impressions activating our sense of form, structure and replication. Milky 'clouds' of floating dust break with a tight geometry and disrupt the optical space between different layers of light exposure. The clouds occupy an indexical registration; as the dust concretise a presence within time and space, which is precisely the referent we no longer have in the new digital and networked image. Our digital image consists of a mosaic of millions of changeable pixels and it grants no imprint of an actual reality. The digital image can be influenced by algorithmic instructions and is susceptible to sophisticated manipulation. The relationship between sign and referent object becomes abstract, although we might still tend to perceive or relate to images as depicting a visible reality.

Financial speculations often abstracts this same relationship between sign and referent – exchange and use value, through sudden miraculous enhancement, or spin, that snaps apart any remaining relation to the object's value or definition. The financial world is increasingly becoming an algorithmic supposition where high frequency trading becomes the determining factor for value. This system is often mystified as capitalism's immaterial transcendence - difficult to grasp for human perception, as this mathematical inferno of speed and trade grows and multiplies. Although the recent financial crisis highlighted the possibilities of obscuring these value systems, we continue to base our society on the prospect of value from exchange and seem satisfied to carry on without any major changes. The parallels between the financial and the photographic (algorithmic, digital) distortion is maybe stronger than one might first think, and combined, they could contribute to a general abstraction of social relations and the value forms in our capitalist economic system, as the referential goes beyond our perceptive reach.

Modernism created a marriage between man and machine, between art and science - parameters all strongly manifested in photography. Modern technology progressed the old world into a smarter, faster and more governable new world, potentially fostering a mentality of seeing the world as a set of photographs. Adverse or in parallel to this, artists have kept on questioning the photograph's rational power as a knowledge system, by materially disrupting its definition and function, to be able to obtain critical experiences of our technologies. On a similar account, Salto's aesthetical play with analogue materials registers the photographic as indexical and tangible, yet placing the rational base of the photograph out of its own logic and confinement. By surpassing the automatic mechanism of the camera, Salto's hands operate directly with the imprints on the photo paper. Blinded by the dark, he investigates tensions between reality and record, time and spatiality, through receptive attention to the present moment and the sensibilities activated by relaxing the control and intensifying the process of creation. Salto takes us into the core form of the photographic omnipresence and raises fundamental questions about the limits of rational thought through optical misbehaviours and by stretching our perception beyond the confinements of reason.

The way Salto experiments with the ubiquitous space of light and depth in the core of the photographic is unusual - often we approach technologies through their preset instrumentalisation and photography generally prevents us from intervening with the world in front of us. The act of photography can essentially be stripped down to an act of non-intervention. When we record our world we cannot simultaneously intervene in that world. Photography becomes a filter through which we hide from actualities we fundamentally do not wish to understand or fully experience. The automatic functionality pleasantly provides a technological (hence fictionalised) capture of the reality in front of us. The photograph both functions as a fictional presence and a token of absence. Salto's photographic experiments intensify an involvement as he relies on sensory registers to find what he is looking for in the photograph. Here double exposures, contrasts and the random potential of the medium help to envisage mental stages and perceptual movements. Typically the photographing is an act of observing, a prolonging of whatever activity is being captured, as a way to keep status quo - action remaining unchanged or pacified - but in Salto's mute universe we sense the presence of a reality, the matter existing between optical knowledge and transitory experiences. In the piece *Hands*, a 8mm filmstrip shows two illuminated hands softly pressing towards each other, as if exploring an imperceptible source. The hands take record of each other and softly touch in their parallel performance of double exposure. Although the hands exist at different times, one hand searches the presence of the other in its absence, as if different moments could somehow assimilate. Time in itself seems brutally moving, irrational and mysterious - an elastic conception, a non-quantifiable measure out of sync from its own calculation and rhythm. Salto's work often depicts a sort of non-space where he experiments with registers of time and spatiality and the perceptually turmoil in-between.

— Iben Bach Elmstrøm