

In Conversation

Daniel Marzona:

Many people approaching your work may not be aware of the fact that it stems from a strictly analog process; could you describe the way you work?

Niko Luoma:

Yes, the process is completely analog and is studio based. I work directly onto the film with a four-by-five-inch studio camera. I use light as my raw material, not reflected, but directly from the source I choose. I shape light into lines, straight and bent, various lengths and thicknesses. Each negative is exposed multiple times, sometimes into the thousands. Each series of exposures is based on premeditated systems of shapes, numbers, and orders. The work is very process-based and relies on the analog nature of exposing a negative to light.

DM:

In a way, all your recent works, as complex as their appearance may be, are portraits of the process of their own making. Therefore one could say they fit in a certain modernist tradition promoted by Clement Greenberg, demanding a full self-reflection of all the important aspects of a work. Although Greenberg was mainly concerned with painting, do you think your work could be seen in line with this tradition of abstract art, or do you think your work is more strongly connected to other traditions?

NL:

Each finished piece reflects its own creation process based on the systems and order as it was conceived. The spatial idea is the center of my focus, and I let the system I use to create it determine the content. It's in the actual act of exposing the negative to the light that the materiality of the works finds the substance of its content.

In my *Cronos* and *Symmetrium* series I focus on the passage of time, space, order, and color. To answer your question, I think my *Kairos* works best fit the Greenbergian view of the abstract due to their performance-like qualities, as they're ever changing and without structure.

I think my works lean towards Concrete Art and the conceptual practices of the sixties and seventies. Actually, what inspires my work the most are Minimalist composers like Eliane Radigue, Tony Conrad, Steve Reich, and Phillip Glass. With their work, it is almost more like watching than listening . . . if you know what I mean . . . like Music in Twelve Parts, for example.

DM:

I think I understand what you mean when you refer to minimal music and why these compositions inspire you. The same way they transfer one dimension to another—sound into space—your work may be seen as a transformation of time passing or accumulating on a light sensitive surface. You mentioned the importance of a system and if we think about rule-based art—and your work may be considered as rule-based—we find quite a number of rather boring projects and only a few which have really gained a wider influence. I think, for example, about Sol LeWitt, or the early

photographic works of John Baldessari. What made their concepts interesting is that despite all the emphasis on systems, they invited chance to play a certain role. Is chance an important element in the development of your work and, if so, could you try to explain how it comes into play?

NL:

I like the idea of boring because it has its complete opposite also built into it. Something that is boring and simple might get quite interesting and complex through repetition. And repetition invites chance and gives it more space.

Chance is very important in my work. The key reason why I use an analog technique is the increased possibility of the unexpected. There are two wonderful elements to the analog process that fascinate me. First, the negative absorbs everything you expose it to. Second, you don't really know what you have until you develop it. Because of this, I can only imagine what takes place on the negative during the series of exposures. I do notation and keep a count on the number and placement of each exposure, but the result is always full of surprises and is always different. These surprises become the foundation for the next step, the next work, the next idea. It is also beautiful that hundreds and thousand of exposures of lines of light exposed onto one negative leave nothing behind other than an exposed negative. No debris, no ruin, just an index of calculations and coincidences, marks on the film.

The impression of depth and three dimensionality, especially in my present *Symmetrium* series, is always more of the result of chance than aim. The starting point or the plan and idea of each new work is based on two dimensionality, on height and length. I basically work on a flat surface. It's through these linear interactions that I create the illusion of depth based on a random choice of repetition. The work is usually successful if this is in balance with the conceptual idea of the work, shape, space, and order. Sometimes when the illusion of space gets too strong, too optic, the work seems to die.

DM:

It is interesting how you point to the dialectics of boredom or dullness. Just to mention another aspect of boredom, here is a small quote from an unfinished novel by David Foster Wallace:

"Maybe dullness is associated with psychic pain because something that is dull or opaque fails to provide enough stimulation to distract people from some other, deeper type of pain that is always there, if only in an ambient low-level way, and which most of us spend nearly all our time and

energy to distract ourselves from feeling, or at least from feeling directly or with our full attention."¹

When we last met we were talking a bit about what it really is which can be seen in your images and at some point you said you were not really sure if your work could be considered as photography because it does not refer to anything else but the temporal phenomenon of light, or as you put it, your work refers to nothing. I agree that this nothingness as a reference makes the work special and different from other photographic projects related to time because it touches the essence of this very relation without offering representational images in a traditional sense. But I would still argue that the works are interesting because they are photographic in nature, they are still indexical even if they are indexes of nothing. Do you agree with this notion?

NL:

When I started to work with completely abstract content in 2006, I was faced with a number of questions connected to photography. My main issue was whether or not it is possible to truly create an abstract image through the photographic process. The nature of direct representation was a big obstacle. I was not after the visual abstraction of blurring by long exposure or soft focus. I was searching for what could be realized from inside the camera, as opposed to any reference from the reality outside, visualizing nothing.

That year I made a photograph of the exact moment when one hour “disappears.” When the time is moved one hour forward, the so-called daylight saving time. This happens every year on the last Sunday of March at 3:00 AM; 3:00 AM becomes 4:00 AM at an instant. I pointed my camera outside the window of my studio and released the shutter on that day, at exactly 3:00 AM. The landscape outside of the window was dark because it was night, and the camera was only able to capture its own reflection on the surface of the glass window. It was a failure and a revelation. A failure in a way that it failed to make the invisible visible, but a revelation because it pointed back to processes. It was the end and beginning. It turned out to be a photograph of an exposure itself, a photograph of an idea.

After that I started to focus on the photographic process itself as content by breaking the process into various parts. I decided that the next work to be completed should be a sum of several exposures instead of one. Instead of focusing on what is in front of the camera, I focused on what is inside of it. Photography as a process and the camera as an apparatus and tool is about mathematics, physics, numbers, rules, and standards. The process becomes my source material. I started to use drawings as a bridge from the outside to the inside, between the idea and the photograph. A kind of ritual for the deconstruction of the tool. Then there was my first line/light based work, *One Day in March* (2006). This was a beginning of the *Cronos* series. It took me almost half a year to do the next line work just because I was confused and surprised by what I had done, but at the same time I knew I was up to something that would probably change the way I work.

I worked with the *Cronos* series, which shows an abstract image of a day. The passage of time as changing as highlighted by the everyday objects on my table. First, I made a small drawing of lines illustrating this phenomenon which represented this one day. Then I photographed each line, one by one, on the same negative, using only light as material and the drawing as my instructions and plan. At the end there was an abstract photograph of time, of one day.

Next I got more interested in the so called “first time images” in the series *Kairos*. The number of lines and exposures per work were increasing and the nature of the line got thinner. Instead of working with a specific day or event, I worked with expressions. The works turned out as more improvised and instant. More musical. . . . Then the matter of their photographic qualities came into question. I was not really photographing anything. I began to wonder if these were photographs at all. Maybe these series were a new form of showing with light as opposed to a pencil. I am still not sure what to call these works specifically.

DM:

Could you be more precise about time as just an idea? I assume most of us would agree that time

is a useful construction, and one could reasonably argue that there is no time. But in your case what makes the notion of time as an idea so important to your work?

NL:

Numbers. Photography is about time, both inside and outside the camera. My focus is inside of it, which makes sense as numbers. The series of exposures instead of long exposure, the series of moments instead of a decisive moment. In my recent work I am interested in continuums that are excluded from the durational reality. For me time is material that I work with. Numbers, and then as equations. Immaterial as material.

Three works that have definitely spoken to me about photographic time come to mind: Harry Callahan's multiple exposure work of a Chicago street view that is abstract, experimental but subjective, called *Alley, Chicago*, (1948). Then, *The Shadows are Reminiscent of Nothing* (1991), a triptych where the negative has been exposed several thousand times, by Dieter Appelt. And *Constellation* (2000) by Thomas Demand; a photograph where the sky over Paris is shown as in year 2300—a photograph of the future! These works inspire me for the same reason; what is more important, time, or the idea of time?

DM:

When I look at the development of your work there is an increasing visual complexity of the images, from the early series *One Day*, which are structurally rather simple, to the new works, which are the result of up to 14,000 exposures. For some reason the new works seem to become even more abstract and strange. They offer an amazing depth of pictorial space and are for the most part too complex to ever be grasped in their totality. I assume that you cannot really have an image in mind when you start working on a work like *Spira #4* (2010). Are there real surprises when you start working on a new series, or is everything based on the experiences with previous experiments, and thus to a great extent predictable?

NL:

When we last met and we were talking about the *Spira #4* (2010), the work with bent lines, and I checked my notes and have to add that there are 9,600 lines. Anyway, I think that one thing leads to another. I see my work as one continuous experiment that will probably reach its end when it gets too predictable.

DM:

Well, then 9,600 exposures, the exact number probably does not matter that much.

NL:

Exactly. I always think that the first one hundred lines are the most meaningful. With them the pace is set. The stretch from there to a thousand or more is like following the rules of a decided concept towards a desired result and form.

But, the exact number of lines is interesting; in each work of the *Symmetrium* series the total number of lines is always divisible by four. This means that each individual line appears four times in each piece. When I expose one line onto the negative, I expose it there four times, four places

symmetrically, top, bottom, left, and right.

The construction process of each piece is either started from the edges of the negative towards the center or from the center towards the edges. Because I work with the standard space of a four-by-five inch negative and the symmetrical even space like a square, some lines only hit onto the negative twice instead of four times. I basically stretch the ideas based on the square format into rectangular space and see what happens.

And because of this symmetrical composition around the number four and the four sides of the negative, the works are centrally balanced and are therefore more or less free from the gravitational direction. They can be installed either vertically, horizontally, or even diagonally depending on the space in which they will be hung. So, the exact number of lines has some meaning connected to composition.

DM:

It made me curious that you mentioned drawing as another one of your practices as an artist. It is curious because your working process as a photographer seems to be close to the process of drawing anyway. But then if you think about it, your works on paper almost offer an inversion of the photographic process as the endless numbers of graphite lines rather block the light of the white paper. Do your drawings sometimes feel like negatives to you? And last but not least, are your drawings just preparatory works for your photographs or do they have a life of their own, and may they even be exhibited at some point?

NL:

Yes. Drawing has played a huge role since the beginning of the line-works. Everything always starts from the drawing. In my *Cronos* series it was the bridge from actual to abstract. In the *Kairos* and *Symmetrium* series it serves as an instructional plan. The most drawing-like series to date is found in my newest works *Motives* (2011-12). Here I am taking the actual drawing and reconstructing it by using light instead of graphite. Each line in the photograph represents a pencil line on the paper. Yet they have a translucent effect that I hadn't planned on. Originally, those drawings were made as motifs when I was planning the *Symmetrium* series in 2008.

In the last two years my drawings have evolved from sketches and calculations of space to individual works of systems and chance. My drawings became more serious when I decided to conceptually see what was actually taking place on the negative during these series of exposures. To do this I used a ruler and black ink on white paper. These became my "negative studies."

These processes would appear to be at opposite poles, yet they share many similarities.

It's nice to see in these new drawings things that were hidden in the photographs and the process that produced them. I think that right now the photographic works and drawings grow together in symbiosis. As much as I enjoy the process and the surprise of analog photography, I enjoy the immediacy of drawing. I have not exhibited the drawings so far, but I am getting more curious to see them on the wall with, or perhaps even without, the photos.

Notes

1 David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King* (New York, 2011), p. 85.