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PENELOPE CAIN: URBAN ECOLOGIES

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http://runway.org.au/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/cain_cubicle_farmers1_1_1880px.jpg Penelope Cain, *Cubicle Farmers* from the series *Hypotheticals*, 2009, digital image.

Not so long ago, the proportion of the world's population living in cities edged past fifty percent, making the urban lifestyle the dominant cultural experience of mankind. While every city represents a different and evolving permutation of population, cultures, structures, geography, services, and information, the phenomenon of the contemporary city is universally a function of capitalist logic. The urban condition is defined by the activities of production and consumption, and this is reflected in the spatial and temporal orders that govern its inhabitants.

The patterns, rituals and rhythms that emerge from within the city's ecology are the focus of Penelope Cain's cross-media practice, which incorporates installation, video and drawing. For Cain, this has entailed an observational approach to research and to collecting material that oscillates between the leisurely, situated engagement of Baudelaire's flâneur, and the more systematic, detached scrutiny of the cultural anthropologist. Significantly, Cain's aesthetic and its conceptual underpinning have also been guided by her initial training in the field of animal science and she frequently draws into dialogue human and animal behavioural traits.

This particular tendency was relatively subtle in her recent exhibition *Meshing on the grid* at MOP Projects, Sydney, in which Cain presented a major new installation, *On Thursdays we run clockwise around the park* (2009). Stretching across an entire wall—floor to ceiling, from the gallery's front entrance to back door—*On Thursdays...* comprised hundreds of miniature figures pinned to the wall in a symmetrical geometric pattern. The figures are cut-outs from photographs taken by Cain in Martin Place during its daily peak hours, where the artist trained her lens on people who were moving purposefully, 'going somewhere with intent' through this arterial urban thoroughfare. Unsurprisingly, there are many suited men and women of the business world; but alongside them are dozens of lunchtime joggers, the occasional courier, and the monotone symbol representing a person in the vernacular style of a street sign. In fact, on close inspection it becomes clear that the sequence of figures repeats several times across the wall, such that the already anonymous individuals become more like generic representations of the CBD's native inhabitants. On the stage that is the city, these characters obediently play out their bit parts in the grand narrative of the capitalist urban machine.

The context of the city is in fact not visible in the work's final form; each of the figures has been meticulously extracted from their surrounds. They float, looking variously decisive and harried, against the void of the gallery's white wall. Cain has painstakingly duplicated each of them, pairing an opaque print with a transparent one, and then securing these on top of one another into the gyprock with long, fine entomological pins—the type used in the taxonomic display of insect specimens. The effect is an evocation of frantic movement, produced by the shadows of varying qualities that gather around each form. Although the figures have been removed from the literal streetscape, the architectural framework of the city is nevertheless a pervasive presence, signalled in part by the abstracted grid-like pattern in which the figures are arranged. Cain's adherence to the physical limits of the exhibition space also alludes to the regulating force of architecture on movement and the body.

As the title suggests, *On Thursdays...* is an exploration of how the physical superstructure of the city produces regulated flows of movement, but also of how certain temporal and social values are implicated within this. The work responds to the way in which the urban lifestyle is organised around the treatment of time as a commodity or, as Guy Debord observed decades ago on the cusp of postmodernity, time as:

... an infinite accumulation of equivalent intervals ... [that] typifies the consumption of modern economic survival — of that augmented survival in which daily lived experience embodies no free choices and is subject, no longer to the natural order, but to a pseudo-nature constructed by means of alienated labour.¹



(http://runway.org.au/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Cain_park_detail_1880px.jpg) Penelope Cain, *On Thursdays we run clockwise around the park*, 2009, installation view (detail), MOP Projects. Photo: the artist.



(http://runway.org.au/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Cain_around_park1_1880px.jpg) Penelope Cain, *On Thursdays we run clockwise around the park*, 2009, installation view, MOP Projects. Photo: the artist.



(http://runway.org.au/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Penny_future_1439px.jpg) Penelope Cain, *Survival Skills #1*, 2008, video still.



(http://runway.org.au/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Cain_Camouflage_1880px.jpg) Penelope Cain, *Camouflage*, 2005, video still.

And so *On Thursdays...* captures the spirit of a lifestyle organised according to cycles of productivity (conditioned work hours, weekdays and weekends, annual leave allowances, and so on) whereby 'free time' is forever subsumed into a higher order of consumption that self-perpetuates the hegemony of work.

Cain's practice hones in on the time of productivity and those adjacent periods that are in its service, like transit time and the lunch hour, to reflect on questions around a greater human agency. In another recent installation, *Infestation* (2009), she articulates this by more explicitly characterising a cluster of office workers as insects. Again a series of tiny, generic suited figures are pinned to the walls, but this time they are crawling, and their arrangement mimics the industrious march of ants between their nest and prized scraps of nourishment. Where the rigid composition of *On Thursdays...* speaks primarily to the choreography of urban flows, *Infestation* is more suggestive of the ideological forces that drive the momentum of urban flows: social aspiration guided by measures of success complicit, by and large, with capitalist values.

Using the example of the ubiquitous office worker, *Infestation* draws a neat correlation between the meritocracy of corporate culture and natural evolutionary processes exemplified by Darwin's 'survival of the fittest' maxim. It parallels aspects of human and animal behaviour that reflect the authority of social hierarchies, collective models of industry, and normative ambitions over individual autonomy. By extension, Cain characterises the city as an environment that does not simply constrain its subjects, but simultaneously produces them.

Rather than frame the urban condition as an oblivious capitulation to the endless cycle of production and consumption, however, earlier works of Cain's suggest that she sees the dynamic between city and citizen as more of a conscious co-dependency. In her video *Camouflage* (2005), surveillance-style footage captures a lone, suited man as he strides along the side of an office tower's exterior before coming to a halt, placing his briefcase purposefully on the pavement, and withdrawing a folder. He then proceeds to take out sheets of paper that are colour-matched to the tiles behind him and tape these to his body one by one until only his head remains uncovered. He presses himself back against the wall and as the papers flap in the breeze like the feeble armour of an oversized beetle, breathes deeply and closes his eyes with an understated resolve, as though willing himself to disappear. The absurdity of the gesture is both genuinely comical and yet quietly unsettling, encapsulating a sense of utter despair.

In a similar vein, Cain's subsequent video *Survival Skills #1* (2008) charts the narrative of a female administrator who becomes so overwhelmed by her workload that she psychologically withdraws herself from the reality of her office cubicle in complete resignation. Using her piles of paperwork in the service of an alternative kind of labour, she sets about stacking them into an igloo-like shelter inside which she then furtively takes refuge. Whereas Cain's more recent installations call to mind the dispassionate gaze of the sociological researcher, *Camouflage* and *Survival Skills #1* reveal a more humanised facet of her practice. These works probe the effects on the psyche of banal and repetitive urban work patterns: desperation, anxiety, denial, disillusionment and dissatisfaction. But while they entertain the notion of escape, or even a momentary reprieve, ultimately they also suggest this is a fruitless endeavour.



http://runway.org.au/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/cain_infestation_detail2_1772px.jpg Penelope Cain, *Infestation*, 2009, installation view (detail), Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney. Photo: the artist.



(http://runway.org.au/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Cain_cubicle_farmers2_1880px.jpg) Penelope Cain, *Cubicle Farmers* from the series *Hypotheticals*, digital image, 2009.

While escape may be implausible, other recent works by Cain suggest change is not. Alongside her intricate, large-scale wall installations, Cain has been developing a series of images titled *Hypotheticals*, which are essentially propositions for unrealised actions in public space. Aesthetically, these images refer to tactics Cain has utilised in the past for inserting her work into the fabric of the city, such as pasting up human-scaled photocopies in civic thoroughfares, or projecting videos onto buildings. Narratively, they describe modest acts of urban regeneration. *Cubicle Farmers* (2009), for instance, imagines the collective energy of a team of office workers being channelled into the seeding and tending of plants in an otherwise redundant slice of roadside terrain. Conflating the utopian ideal of urbanism with the dystopian daily routine of labour described by Debord, Cain's *Hypotheticals* seem to reflect a new direction in her practice that is more speculative in nature, and that returns a sense of personal agency to the urban landscape.

1. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, (New York: Zone Books, 1995), 110-11.

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