

# Art in America

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

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# IN THE STUDIO NANCY DAVENPORT

WITH DAVID COGGINS

*Nancy Davenport's work appears straightforward: spare photographs of buildings, for instance, or dreamy videos of factory workers. Yet there's a sense of foreboding within her finely wrought, socially observant works. There are histories behind these images—stories of crime, of violence, of corporate transgression. But this is hardly documentary journalism—nearly every scene has been digitally manipulated. We are left to find our version of the truth in images that are at once more and less than what they seem.*

*Workers (leaving the factory), an ongoing video project Davenport began in 2004, addresses the shift from heavy manufacturing in most Western societies. The multichannel installation which was shown at the 2008 Liverpool Biennial combines footage of factories in Europe and their counterparts in China, to which the Europeans' work will soon be outsourced, edited together seamlessly so that the facilities become indistinguishable. On one channel, the camera moves across the impassive faces of automotive factory workers from a Jaguar factory in England who sit around with a heavy air of exhaustion. The other channel moves along an assembly line as the gleaming cars glide by—the mechanized ambience is so pristine that when a worker appears we are surprised by the intrusion. There is no place in the factory, Davenport suggests, for the workers themselves. Yet Davenport's concerns go beyond the socioeconomic; she is also deeply engaged with the history of filmmaking, and her oeuvre references mainstays from Griffiths to Godard.*

*Icons of power and authority, such as physically imposing architectural structures, often appear in Davenport's photographs; they are the focus of the "apartments"*

*and "Campus" series (2001 and 2004 respectively). Stillness is also a recurring theme—Weekend Campus (2004) is a digitally animated video in which a camera seemingly moves across a still image, creating an uneasy friction between motion and stasis. Davenport's use of animation is soothing—it allows her to create seamless tracking shots*

*that are so languid they're almost hypnotic—yet she sets that against unexpected details like the unnervingly wide, blinking eyes of one of the workers.*

*Davenport exercises complete formal control over her films and photographs, yet reality can intrude on the most carefully staged work. This is most apparent in "apartments," which debuted in Chelsea at Nicole Klagsbrun. The large photographs of anonymous New York buildings were digitally altered to include reenactments of what Davenport calls "historical acts of resistance." Some are political, like the hostage crisis at the 1972 Munich Olympics, others artistic, like Chris Burden's 1973 performance 747, in which he shot a gun at an airplane in flight from a position on the ground. The exhibition opened the week before Sept. 11, 2001. Whatever*

*Davenport's intentions, the meaning of the show was quickly overtaken by events in Lower Manhattan. A photo depicting an explosion amid New York apartment buildings became excruciatingly timely in a way Davenport never anticipated, or sought. It was a paradoxical lesson in the power of topicality—something Davenport claims she seeks to avoid.*

*"Campus" is a series of photographs of university buildings so visually stark and unwelcoming as to seem inhospitable to higher learning. Each school has been the site of past protests, some violent, mostly during the Vietnam War. Many of the structures were built after 1970, and they're designed like bunkers. There's a dissonance between the ideals of higher education—curiosity, dissent, challenging received wisdom—and the hard facts of the world as it is. The buildings come to represent a defensive status quo, a form of social stasis.*

*Not all of Davenport's work is that fraught. She's currently working on a film inspired by the animation of American cartoon artist Chuck Jones, to be permanently installed in the Museum of Military History in Dresden, redesigned by Daniel Libeskind and slated to open at the end of 2010. In this unfinished work, violence is exaggerated to comic effect, as I saw when she showed me some digital clips.*

*Born in Vancouver, Davenport holds a BFA from Toronto's York University and an MFA from the School of Visual Arts in New York. She lives in New York and has shown at Nicole Klagsbrun since 2001. Her work has also been featured in the 2007 Istanbul Biennial and the 2008 Liverpool Biennial. She is in residence this year at the American Academy in Rome, working on a project about the Roma (gypsies) living on the periphery of the ancient city. The project, still untitled, is influenced by the films of Pier Paolo Pasolini, many of which were shot in that area.*

*We spoke in her airy studio at the Academy, which offers views down the Gianicolo and across the domes and towers of the city's churches. Davenport keeps her studio spare—there were a few cameras and a computer, and the walls were bare but for several digital stills and detailed maps of the city.*

**DAVID COGGINS** Tell me about the proposal that won the Prix de Rome.

**NANCY DAVENPORT** It was something I was thinking about for a long time, independently of Rome; it didn't occur to me to apply until a couple of years ago. The project that I proposed was very specific—about the early works of Pasolini, the journalism, the poetry and especially the early films, like *Mamma Roma* (1962). I wanted to go back to those neighborhoods and examine how the periphery of Rome

Nancy Davenport in her Rome studio. Courtesy the artist.

“THE ART WORLD SOMETIMES FINDS MY WORK TOO POLITICAL BUT ACTIVISTS DON’T THINK IT GOES FAR ENOUGH.”

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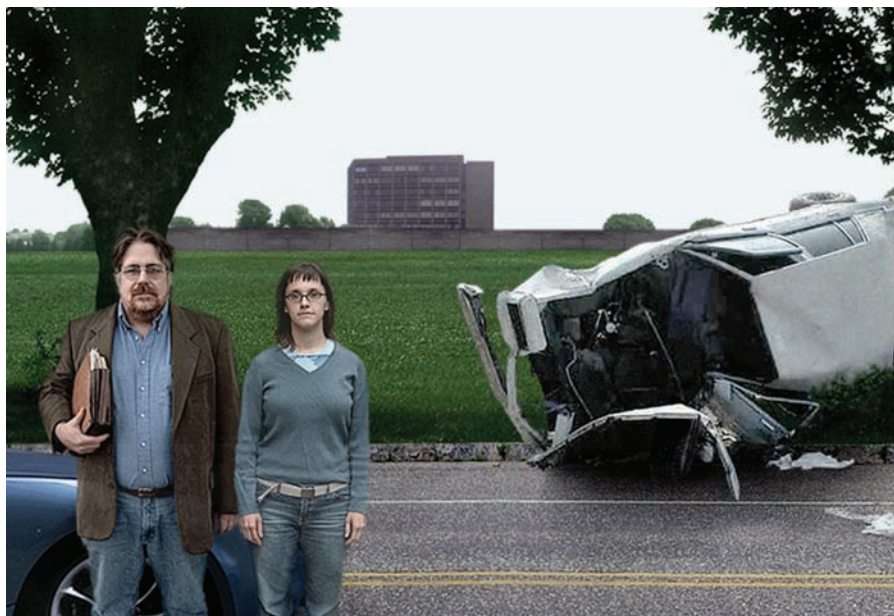


*Bombardment*, 2001, C-print,  
38 by 50 inches.

Right, *Weekend Campus*,  
2004, DVD, approx. 4 minutes.

All photos this article,  
unless otherwise noted,  
courtesy Nicole Klagsbrun  
Gallery, New York.

had shifted, and how the populations had changed. I was also interested in finding people who had been extras in his films. There’s a certain generation of Romans who all claim a kind of relationship with Pasolini. You wouldn’t believe how often people in the film community here say, “I know somebody who worked with Pasolini.” A lot of people have this connection. I’m interested in examining the generation of men who were boys at the time of his films. As I’ve been here,



since September, my ideas have been changing very quickly.

**DC** Is that how you typically work—starting with a general idea and changing as you go along?

**ND** Yes, that's pretty consistent. *Workers*, the project I showed at the Liverpool Biennial [2008], changes each time I show it in terms of the number of projections, and because I film workers from the city where the piece is to be shown.

**DC** How do you prepare?

**ND** I do a great deal of research. For this project I've been reading about the development of Roman urbanism. Much has been written about the relationship between cinema and architecture in Rome, and about the failures of certain housing projects. Rome developed very differently from other cities—it didn't have the industrialization of Milan or Paris. But there were moments historically when populations were pushed out, literally, in one big shove to the periphery—for example in 1925, when Mussolini demolished the medieval and Renaissance houses around the Colosseum and the Forum. So the periphery itself developed in a way different from that of other cities.

More and more I'm going back to Pasolini's journalism, too. In addition to a regular column in the *Corriere della Sera*, he wrote editorials, essays and film reviews for other papers, including *Officina*, *Vie nuove* and many others, from the '50s through the '70s. It's

hard for us to understand his importance in Italian culture because we've never had a figure like that; he was so prophetic about the culture of globalism and consumerism. Sometimes you can read his columns and, if you crossed out specific names of neighborhoods, it could be something you would read today in the *New York Times*. Now the tensions at the periphery are different—it's more about issues of immigration and racism than class conflict.

In terms of research, I'm also going around Rome to different neighborhoods and interviewing people. The more I learn about the specific development and the politics of this situation, the more the issue of the Roma comes up. For example: Pasolini shot *Accattone* [1961] in Il Pigneto, a neighborhood that was a slum. Its history is sort of like that of the East Village in terms of how it developed: it's a cool place to live now, and much more diverse than the city's center—you see African people and Chinese restaurants. The wife of Pasolini's title character, Accattone, lived in Il Pigneto, and it's exactly in that place that the Roma had a temporary encampment for a while in 2007. The issue of what is happening with the Roma right now is historically specific and complex, and the geography of the periphery is very different and expanded, but much of what Pasolini was concerned about is relevant today in relation to the Roma community. Although my work

will probably not address the Roma issue directly, it seems very important to consider as I think about Rome's developing periphery, Pasolini's method of representing spaces of social subjection and the city's failed attempts at renewal and reform.

**DC** What is your studio practice like at the Academy?

**ND** At this stage, I'm collecting material and experimenting. At the beginning of all my projects, I do a lot of notational work, shooting with a small digital camera, trying different variations in Photoshop and After Effects. Then I go back to a site and shoot with a larger format camera. At first it's just mapping out what I want to go back to. Everything is on the computer right now. I didn't bring a lot of equipment because I wanted to be less reliant on all the stuff that I usually use.

**DC** At what point does the final shape of the work become clear—whether it will have multiple projections, say, or be a 15-minute film?

**ND** It depends on the project, of course. Some commissions are very specific about what they entail. The Dresden project I'm currently working on, for instance, has to be a certain length and a self-contained projection. It's inspired by Chuck Jones.

**DC** Tell me more about that.

**ND** The commission is for the new Dresden Museum of Military History. My piece—which is still very much in progress, so some things might change—will be based on one fictional





Above, *Study (Dresden commission)*, 2010.  
Courtesy the artist.

Opposite top and bottom,  
stills from *Workers (leaving the factory)*, 2007, multichannel  
video installation.

character who is completely obsessed with carrying out a series of quasi-situationist, quasi-“MTV’s Jackass” schemes inspired by the classic Chuck Jones Road Runner/Wile E. Coyote cartoons. Like Jones’s Coyote, my character is luckless and inept, and his violence always bounces back to himself—back to some self-inflicted chaos. But unlike the Jones cartoons, my proposed animations will have no Road Runner. My coyote subject will operate schizophrenically from both sides. He will be stalking himself and multiplied in every role. The background for his actions will be the very museum where it will be shown—an incredible building designed by Daniel Libeskind and currently under construction. So, the action in the piece will be taking place in the Libeskind building while it’s being built.

**DC** Shifting gears from animation, can you talk about your relationship with documentary film? Is that an association you resist?

**ND** That’s something I think about all the time—creating something that comes from a documentary tradition but isn’t concerned with conventional documentary structure or style. I think about ethics and power relationships. Very few of Pasolini’s actors were professionals, and he always shot on location, as opposed to Fellini, who built an entire section of the Via Veneto on the set. Pasolini grew more and more allegorical, so his realism refused naturalism. I’m interested in that aspect of his legacy. I’m certainly struggling with ways to represent these nomadic populations without falling into easily consumable clichés. Pasolini’s work expressed the contradictions of the time. I keep hoping that, in that spirit, I can show the contradictions as opposed to a simple political viewpoint. It’s almost a cliché about political art: if it embraces openness and ambiguity, then people tend to read into it what they want. The art world sometimes finds my work too political but activists don’t think it goes far enough.

**DC** Does even calling a work political change the audience’s expectations?

**ND** I don’t know.

**DC** Do you consider yourself political?

**ND** I wouldn’t use that term. I’ve been thinking about the territory between photography and film, the impact of digital technology on the temporality of the photograph—that photography is a medium in transformation and that

**“I’M INTERESTED IN THE CONGESTED TEMPORALITY OF DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHS. WHAT HAPPENS WITH THIS NEW ESTHETIC OF SMOOTHNESS AND ERASURE?”**

it’s important to consider the shifting boundaries between different technologies. In terms of my own work, I think the opposition between the still and moving image provides an interesting way to explore certain changing social oppositions—like progress versus the experience of social paralysis. I’m drawn to depicting subjects that emphasize opposed or seemingly contradictory ideas.

**DC** Your work includes many references to the history of cinema, and yet you’re often addressing very contemporary issues, like migration and globalization.

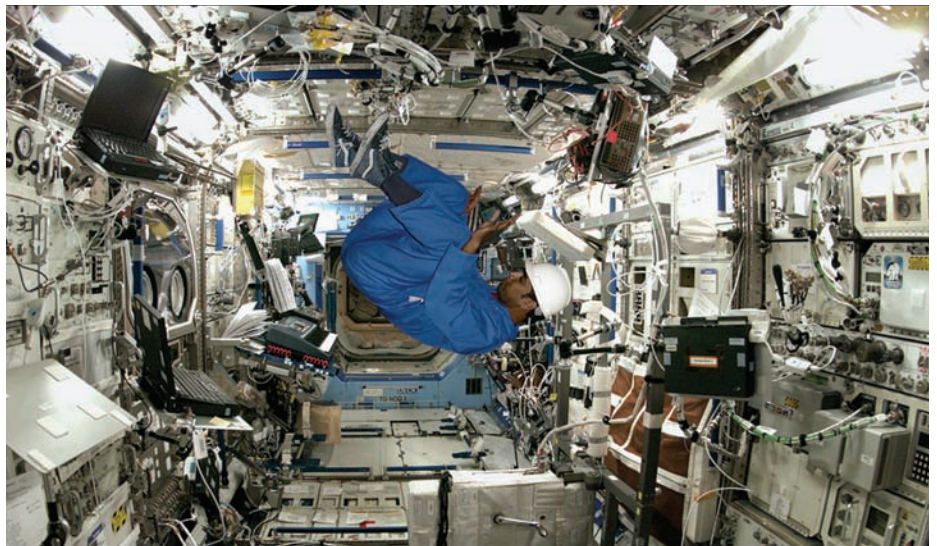
**ND** Each reference serves its own purpose. In Godard’s *Weekend* [1967], that long tracking shot was an incredible inventory of 1967 French society right before the events of 1968. There are significant changes in my video *Weekend Campus*: instead of the French countryside it’s a university, and instead of a country population it’s a student body. References focus attention on different layers in the work.

Louis Lumière’s film *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* [1895] repre-

sents an emerging class in motion—at the very historical moment so often described as the beginning of the modernization of urban experience. It directly reflected an uncertainty and fluidity of class boundaries that was characteristic of the late 19th century.

I also had stylistic and structural

interests: my piece *Workers* has a clear reference, when the workers are sent into orbit, to another seminal film of the same period—Georges Méliès’s *Voyage to the Moon* [1902]. The Lumière brothers and Méliès form one of the original polarities in film history—a dichotomy often expressed as



the tension between the actual and the fantastic, between documentary realism and expressionism, between the “cut” and “objective” or straight documentation. I feel that these are false dichotomies—or, at least, that these things do not have to be mutually exclusive—which certainly relates to my interest in Pasolini’s realism.

By referencing aspects of these two iconic films within a transformed and contemporary framework, I wanted to evoke maybe a tiny bit of the complexity of our globalizing culture and economics, this constantly changing system of delocalization and labor

flows. I wanted to raise questions regarding our present moment of capitalist development, but with humor. I wasn’t interested in making a moralizing piece nor, of course, some naive celebration of this complex issue. I also hoped to raise questions about the historical representation of labor. I really hoped to avoid clichés in representing labor, like the heroic worker, the redemption of labor, or, on the other side, the victim, the exploited.

For the first iteration of *Workers*, the project focused on two locations: I visited the Årdal factory in Norway right before it closed down. The town

of Årdal is completely dependent upon the auto industry. In China, I visited the company’s new factory in Xi’an, which is now experiencing the same kind of economic boom that Shanghai and Beijing went through a few years ago. So, for the first sequence of *Workers*, I made a kind of virtual rest area, incorporating photographic elements from the two locations—portraits of the Norwegian workers whose jobs are being phased out and portraits of the Chinese workers who are just starting at theirs. **DC** How has being at the Academy affected your work? What’s it like being



This spread, stills from *Workers* (Liverpool animation), 2008, multichannel video installation.



**DAVID COGGINS** is a writer who lives in New York.

**“WORKERS CHANGES EACH TIME I SHOW IT, BECAUSE I FILM WORKERS FROM THE CITY WHERE THE PROJECT IS TO BE SHOWN.”**

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with historians and other scholars?

**ND** It's been a wonderful surprise. I didn't know that Luca Caminati was going to be here—he's a film scholar who wrote a book about Pasolini. He's been an incredible resource.

**DC** And what effect has living in Rome had on your work?

**ND** Being here, I've become very interested in an age-old problem with the city—the relationship between the *centro* and the rest of the city. There is a Byronic approach, the romantic approach, to the ruins of the city. Lampedusa was alienated by the center. For years people have been writing about this Disneyland and consumer place. This is not just a question that arises in the '50s—it's been an issue for centuries. Even in the Academy's relationship with the center, there's a kind of distance. It's difficult to be unaware of the privilege of living in this villa in the richest neighborhood versus the walls or barriers built around the Roma people, isolating them in camps.

**DC** Tell me about the Roma.

**ND** I'm still in the process of learning, but the terms gypsy or *nomadi* are considered derogatory. They refer to themselves as Roma. That's not a reference to Rome; the literal translation is “man.” It's a diverse group of people, not just Romanians. There are 14 camps spread around the city—you can see them on Google Earth—and they have differ-

ent levels of legitimacy. Some are very barrackslike, some are temporary, some are not recognized by the government at all. As the periphery has turned into the suburbs, there's more of a right-wing feeling in a lot of places. That's a generalization, but just driving by Corviale, an infamous kilometer-long failure of a housing project built in the '70s along what was then the periphery, you can see that the fourth floor, which was supposed to be shops, is occupied by squatters. But there's also a right-wing political party based there.

**DC** What happens when reality intrudes on your projects? Can you talk about “apartments,” and how Sept. 11 affected interpretations of the work?

**ND** That body of work is about the repetition of social crisis and how, with the rise of digital photography, there was a certain loss of the real—or lost illusions of the real. I was interested in how those lost illusions of the real related to lost political illusions. It was right after the anti-globalization riots in Seattle, and it was a very specific political moment. I wanted to explore this ever-repeating social crisis, the history of terrorism and even the history of performance art. I can speak about those intentions and those references until I'm blue in the face, but in the end the interpretation of my work is out of my control. That work will probably

always be seen through the lens of 9/11. It was also shown in Italy [at Photo & Contemporary, in Turin, in 2002], which has its own history of terrorism, so the interpretations keep changing.

**DC** When these changing associations were made, did it feel like your work had become impossibly fluid?

**ND** Yes. It was a really important lesson about the quagmire of topicality. I'm not making work about Berlusconi or something like that. I don't mean for my work to be topical, but it became so. And I think that is a huge problem and hugely limiting.

**DC** Can you talk about working in digital photography as it relates to “lost illusions of the real,” as you put it earlier?

**ND** I'm not thinking about the work in terms of a social witnessing function. Everything I do is highly manipulated. I think it's a generational thing—this is the new normal photography. I'm not so nostalgic for the darkroom. I still shoot on film because I think it looks better. There are important shifts in going from analog to digital. I'm interested in the congested temporality of digital photographs. Anyone can read them as digital collage and yet there are no seams, there's no rupture. What happens with this new esthetic of smoothness and erasure? It's very interesting how you read that. What kind of temporality does a digital photograph have? ○

