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OPENINGS

NANCY DAVENPORT

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I find digital photography vaguely depressing, an oxymoron like the advertising slogan “a major motion-picture event” or the hip-hop mantra “Keepin’ It Real.” For one thing, it now seems clear that our greatest account of the photographic medium, Roland Barthes’s *Camera Lucida* (1980), emerged only at the moment of the historical dissolution of precisely those aspects of the photograph that it isolated. Conceptual art had already embraced an aesthetic of pure photographic denotation, declaring war on what Barthes called the *punctum*—the photograph’s mad dalliance with contingency, its excessive replication of the real. Whether this war was successful or even possible with photographic means is now a moot point: The digital “revolution” bequeaths to us a desiccated photographic field of complete authorial

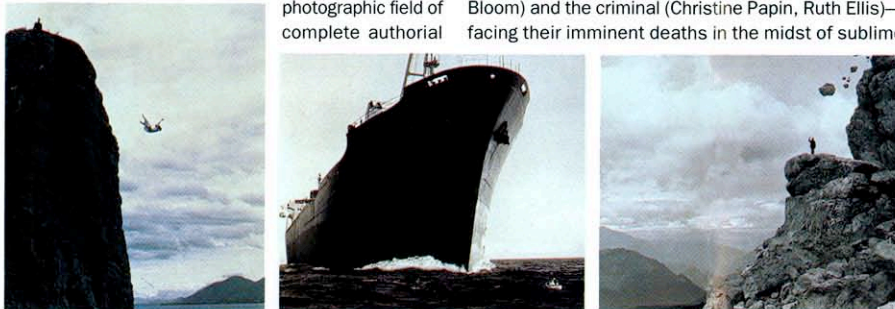
control, within which the experience of anything like a *punctum* has been banished (Barthes’s word would be “tamed”). And while the digital image embeds itself ever more completely within the domain of the photographic archive, what Barthes called the *studium*—the photograph’s communication of cultural information—fares no better. The photographic document suffers the same fate as the photographic wound; the agon of truth and excess fades away. We now prefer photographs “without qualities,” or those with too many—photographs of everything and nothing at once. And yet the ghost of the *punctum* survives. Digital photographers seem obsessed with its replication, from the “natural wonders” of Gregory Crewdson to the fabricated marvels and staged accidents of Jeff Wall (think of *The Giant*, 1992, or *The Stumbling Block*, 1991). Emerging from the same Vancouver milieu as Wall, Nancy Davenport has constructed her artistic project on the lost experience of the *punctum* in a series of digital montages that are less inauthentic simulation of this experience than an almost compulsive memorialization of what we might now call photography’s lost object. In an early series, “Accident-Prone,” 1996, we encounter image after image of single figures—identified in digressive captions with pedigrees including the literary (Leo Bloom) and the criminal (Christine Papin, Ruth Ellis)—facing their imminent deaths in the midst of sublime

uncategorizable—a systematic archive of unrepeatable events—in an era of total recall. But if the digital photograph in “Accident-Prone” can do nothing but display its oxymoronic nature, the result of this clash of opposed forces for Davenport is not depressing but infinitely comical, like a string of self-deprecating jokes.

“The Apartments” gathers interconnected phenomena—terrorism, radical protest, the neo-avant-garde—as a catalogue of resounding failure.

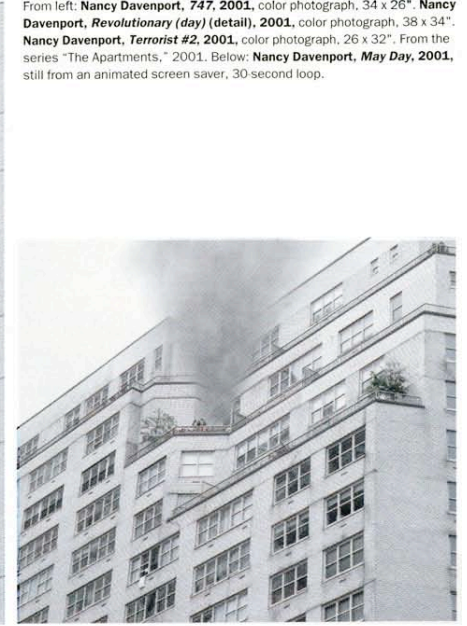
Humor of course can be a sign of crisis, a way of negotiating implacable contradictions in a symbolic order. In her more recent work, Davenport has allowed the photographic crisis staged in her images to seep into other domains, connecting the collapse of the photographic medium to a succession of social and artistic dilemmas. Davenport’s most recent series, given the deadpan title “The Apartments,” 2001, concentrates on a form of New York City architecture: pseudo-modernist apartment buildings commonly known as “white-brick wonders.” Though they are anything but wondrous, in the grip of digital montage these structures become the blank staging area for a series of miniature marvels, an almost unfathomable chain of “radical” events. Masked, faceless terrorists raise their fists on garden terraces while others glower on high-rise balconies, as if in emulation of the hostage crisis of Munich ’72. Revolutionaries rappel down building facades, hoisting a red flag on a mid-level apartment. A streaker zips past a lobby entrance. A protester self-immolates on a shared balcony amid plastic exterior chairs. A man aims a pistol at a passing airplane, an act that we recall as a precise replication of the documentary image of Chris Burden’s performance *747*, 1973, just as an anarchist’s hanging mysteriously between two buildings replicates Dennis Oppenheim’s *Parallel Stress*, 1970. These citations and replications raise the possibility that the provenance of all these actions is in some sort of documentary image, whether artistic or journalistic, and

In this ongoing series, writers are invited to introduce the work of artists at the beginning of their careers.



From left: Nancy Davenport, *Ruth Ellis (detail)*, 1996, black-and-white photograph, 10 x 6 1/2". Nancy Davenport, *Michael Scott Keen (detail)*, 1996, black-and-white photograph, 9 1/2 x 8". Nancy Davenport, *Leo Bloom (detail)*, black-and-white photograph, 6 1/2 x 6". From the series “Accident-Prone,” 1996.

landscapes. These deaths are catastrophic and absurd; we witness Davenport’s characters subjected to the indignity of a sudden avalanche, or to a chance encounter with a grizzly, or to an apparent proclivity for falling from cliffs. Bucking the monumentalizing tyranny of the C-print, Davenport’s images are small, the events depicted within them even smaller, as if these miniaturized accidents needed to be experienced as receding into the distance: the *punctum* as physically remote. The pathos, and paradox, of the series lies in its simultaneous attempt to construct images of contingency through a medium from which they have been barred and in so doing to erect a category of the



From left: Nancy Davenport, *747*, 2001, color photograph, 34 x 26". Nancy Davenport, *Revolutionary (day)* (detail), 2001, color photograph, 38 x 34". Nancy Davenport, *Terrorist #2*, 2001, color photograph, 26 x 32". From the series "The Apartments," 2001. Below: Nancy Davenport, *May Day*, 2001, still from an animated screen saver, 30 second loop.

that the digital archive put into play here should be read as marking a series of dialectical connections: Burden's *747* shares not only the same date as the birth of contemporary terrorism but the same primary target, and the same appeal to the efficacy of a media politics in the age of spectacle, a last gasp in the battle between reality and the image.

"The Apartments" seems by contrast to gather these interconnected phenomena—terrorism, radical protest, the neo-avant-garde—as a collection of masochistic futility, a catalogue of resounding failure. The images are absurd, for what terrorists would attack these buildings? As Hal Foster has recently observed, the events of September 11 unveiled the fetishes of the contemporary moment as our architectures of finance and defense. And yet the images make perfect sense. The architecture of "The Apartments" is a cliché, a failure of modernism, a stereotype of its ideals. This investment in the stereotype thus links these architectural scenes to the "sublimity" of the landscapes of "Accident-Prone"; both traffic in the cliché, as if in travesty of the pretensions of other contemporary photographic projects, such as the landscapes of Andreas Gursky and the urban typologies of Thomas Struth. In Davenport's montages, however, the nauseating chatter of that most postmodern of forms, the stereotype, gathers to itself a further series of clichés. There is a complete congruence between figure and ground, between the failed architecture and the impotent actions—not the disjunction of modernist montage, but the seam-

lessness of digital redundancy. And yet what was once called the "revolutionary beauty" of the work of a modernist such as John Heartfield needs now to be redefined, for in the seamlessness of Davenport's work disruption can still erupt.

"Revolution," Barthes once mused, "must of necessity borrow, from what it wants to destroy, the very image of what it wants to possess." It is a dictum appropriate for both the content and the form of Davenport's digital work, with its sights set on the dissolving reality of the photograph itself. In the wake of September 11, Davenport's images perhaps seem less humorous. To some, they seem more real. But what would that mean? Consider the full oxymoron that is the digital photo, the true paradox of this work: When shown in New York this fall, "The Apartments" was accompanied by Davenport's initiation of a series of "protester screen savers," the first of which was titled *May Day*, 2001. In it, we see a young man Davenport caught on her video camera at a West Village march, displaying all the signs of revolutionary fervor: a Che Guevara T-shirt, a worker's cap, one fist clenched and pounding the air, a red flag raised and waving. In something like a *Vanilla Sky* effect, we realize of course that we've seen most of these

elements before, in the various attributes and poses of Davenport's montages. The screen savers are digital images with their origin in reality, in actual documentation, but in documentation of the continued existence of radicality—as well as of rupture, and of the real—as a spread of signs, of nostalgic logos of unreality, a tautology every bit as circular as this protester dancing in the technological reverberation of a video loop. The song that Davenport originally chose for the loop was Stephin Merritt's ethereal "Just Like a Movie Star." And a "May Day," of course, is also a cry for help. □

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