



PHAIDON, 2006

Nancy Davenport	Nd	[1] [2] [3]	[4]
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In describing Alberto Giacometti's paintings, Jean-Paul Sartre characterized them as "questioning apparitions" — images with the power to address us not as affirmations, but as interrogations. **Nancy Davenport's** photographs are similarly "questioning". But if Sartre saw in Giacometti's art the examination of a universal existential condition, the query that animates Davenport's work could only be formulated in our current day. "Now," her images demand, "that the utopian dreams associated with the project of modernity have all but vanished, what is left of the social groups who once served as their incarnation?" These groups were the students and the workers and, with them, the guerrillas. Their object was revolution, their spaces of operation were those emblems of the international welfare state — the university, the factory and the urban housing project. It is thus no coincidence that the three major bodies of work that Davenport has created in the past five years comprise images of college campuses, of the workers' lounge of an aluminium processing plant and of those quintessential late-modernist apartment blocks known as "white brick wonders". Davenport depicts these sites as haunted by their once revolutionary potential. The photographs in "Campus" (2004) are devoid of students, populated rather by the fortress-like brutalist architecture embraced by North American universities in order to prevent the return of the student uprisings of the 1960s. The overall-clad men and women in "Workers" (2005) toil for a Norwegian corporation in the process of outsourcing its operations to China, leaving behind a singular form of wreckage. Lost in balconies or descending from uncertain ropes, the masked figures who wreak ambiguous acts of terror in Davenport's "Apartments" (2001) appear less on the march to a new world than lost in a history whose movement has come to a standstill. They seem more like characters of Giacometti than of Aleksandr Rodchenko.

Davenport's interrogation links these outmoded avatars of revolution to a faith in photography that, in our digital age, has been rendered similarly obsolete: what Henri Cartier-Bresson described as its power to capture "the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event". Davenport's work at once mourns and mocks the possibility of such a "decisive moment" — whether in photography or politics. In *Library* (2004) a swirling stack of leaflets buoyed by a gust of wind appears poised to do battle with an impassive brick building. In *Classroom # 1* (2004) the sun bursts into the site of learning as if to impart a transforming illumination. Digitally doctored, these moments are clearly products of Davenport's calculated effort — both phantoms and negations of the belief in a decisive turning point that analogue photography and revolutionary politics share. It is in this double movement that one uncovers the deeper implications of Davenport's inquiry: how to represent, and thus imagine, an emergent social group that — coming into being where the utopian dreams of those earlier groups lie buried — could induce a break in a world without horizon? In their hints of rupture, in their mysterious shinings, in their curious stillness, this, ultimately, is the question that Davenport's images pose. — Margaret Sundell



- [1] **Classroom #1**, from the series "Campus", 2004, C-print, 127 x 91.4 cm, 50 x 36 inches
- [2] **Library**, from the series "Campus", 2004, C-print, 111.8 x 78.7 cm, 44 x 31 inches
- [3] **Mechanical Engineering**, from the series "Campus", 2004, C-print, 83.8 x 64.8 cm, 33 x 25.5 inches
- [4] **Earth and Space Science**, from the series "Campus", 2004, C-print, 83.8 x 64.8 cm, 33 x 25.5 inches

