

CUMULUS

From America

IN EVERY EDITION OF PARKETT, TWO CUMULUS CLOUDS, ONE FROM AMERICA, THE OTHER FROM EUROPE, FLOAT OUT TO AN INTERESTED PUBLIC. THEY CONVEY INDIVIDUAL OPINIONS, ASSESSMENTS, AND MEMORABLE ENCOUNTERS—AS ENTIRELY PERSONAL PRESENTATIONS OF PROFESSIONAL ISSUES.

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The Technology We Deserve

The evidentiary value of photographs was in question long before Photoshop had made its presence quite as keenly felt in the art world as it is now, and in broader contexts. The Rodney King beating incident and its aftermath provide one familiar touchstone. How often have you heard someone say, “Well, since Rodney King, you can’t believe what you see”? Such statements are a little wide off the mark, though: people took to the streets, after the first King jury acquitted the police, because they did believe what they had seen in the famous video. And, of course, there are vast realms in which photography’s claim to truth has ever been suspect: the fantasy scenarios of advertising have had to become increasingly ironic (if none the less successful, for that), as consumers have become less likely to

accept the suggestion that they will get more girls/be more beautiful/have more freedom if they buy this or that product. Nowadays, though, the idea seems to be afoot that digital imagery renders any such investigations moot. Just as Rodney King is referenced only to reiterate that the evidentiary value of photographs has always been contextual and contested (despite their “indexicality”), so the claim that digital technology has brought about a fundamental change is anachronistic. Even though we might like the imagined security of photography as a guarantee of truth, photographs, like any other images, have always been up for interpretive grabs.

More insidiously, claims for digitization-as-revolution rest on the progressivist—I’m tempted to say dotcom—

assumption that technology drives culture. On the contrary, to put it simply, everything is not different now because there are images that are a function of technology, only residually reliant on nature. To draw this out, I want to make what is perhaps initially a counter-intuitive connection, between the (pre-digital) photographic mediation of the body in performance art by Chris Burden, and the digital account of relations between bodies and technology in recent work by Aziz + Cucher. The points of contact between these moments, nearly thirty years apart, suggest that while technology may at any given time allow for new forms of expression, far broader cultural trajectories determine what can be expressed.

Chris Burden is one of a number of artists whose performances of the sev-

enties (despite their apparent physical extremity) clearly anticipated and integrated into their production, their doubleness in terms of audiences. That is, these artists took into account both the immediate, live audiences for their work, and the majority of people who would necessarily experience the work as it was distributed in photographic form. A number of Burden's performances were done in the presence of very small audiences or no audiences at all, except a photographer and other assistants, so that the entry of these radically embodied acts into public circulation as photographs, accompanied by texts, gave them a somewhat virtual quality, before the fact. And some of the photographs that do not picture Burden himself, such as the image of the lockers used to illustrate FIVE DAY LOCKER PIECE (April 26–30, 1971), or the image of the platform in WHITE LIGHT/WHITE HEAT (February 8–March 1, 1975), cannot strictly be said to verify the experience described in the texts (although we may choose to believe them). In the crucial instance of DOORWAY TO HEAVEN (November 15, 1973), at least, the photograph that "documents" the performance is an image of something that no one could have seen; it is a function of the technology of photography, just as digital images rest on computer technology. The characteristically blank description that accompanies the image reads as follows:

At 6 p.m. I stood in the doorway of my studio facing the Venice boardwalk. A few spectators watched as I pushed two live electric wires into my chest. The wires crossed and exploded, burning me but saving me from electrocution.¹⁾

DOORWAY TO HEAVEN provided for one of the most striking photographs

generated by Burden's work. Burden's head, bare torso, and hands appear as if emerging from darkness. His hands, at waist level in an almost supplicatory gesture, each hold one of the wires that meet at his chest in a spectacular cascade of long, arcing sparks. The small explosion almost looks as though it emanates from Burden's chest, which is lit by the same flash that casts a somewhat unearthly light upwards, causing the dramatic shadowing of his face. His eyes, looking down, might be closed; his expression is impassive. It is not clear whether the "spectators" the description refers to were invited or incidental, and in this case the photograph suggests that it makes no difference. The instant "documented" was invisible in any case. As Johannes Lothar Schröder has observed: *A split second later, the sensation of burning would already have reached his brain and his face would have been distorted with pain. The simultaneity of calm composure and life-threatening short-circuit would have escaped the gaze of the naked eye blinded by the flash.*²⁾ And, in this case, the simultaneity of composure and short-circuit that makes the image so striking must also have been invisible to the photographer. So DOORWAY TO HEAVEN provides a photograph of something that in one crucial regard no one saw. Burden is sometimes denigrated as an artist whose apparent risk-taking involves a romanticization of the artist. I think he is rather cannier than that. I take the title, DOORWAY TO HEAVEN, to be somewhat ironic. His heaven seems to be a kind of abyss, suspended somewhere between act and photograph. The doorway to his studio, in this instance, serves as the entry through which his body passes, as photograph, into the circuits of representation.

This might suggest exactly the somewhat abyssal structure of the digital world, full of images of things that people have not quite seen, arrangements that don't quite meet expectations (though that is to imply their engagement with preexisting conventions). Burden's persistent interest in relations between the body and machines of different kinds is an avatar of this world. For instance, a recent series of photographic images by Aziz + Cucher, *Interiors* (1999–2000), treated, or generated—though it no longer makes a difference—by computer, envisages architectural spaces and details that are covered in, or made of, skin. A freckled corridor recedes into indistinct space; a cornice seems to breathe. The body—at least putatively at risk in its interface with technology, in Burden's work, and then dissipated into the world as representation—is in these images rendered even more diffuse, gothic, as organic and inorganic, flesh and space, become one. But although these spaces do not exist anywhere else than in the photographs, this is not a realm of pure imagining, conjured by technology, we have seen skin, we have seen rooms, corridors, corners. And we have seen Surrealism. This is not to suggest that Aziz + Cucher's work is a retooled version of collage, but at the same time, neither is their combinatoriality of images generated by the technology itself. The seamlessness with which skin becomes wall becomes representation may be new, so that the technology may be said to enable a different-than-before form of visual metaphor. Aziz + Cucher's photographs, however, are metaphors for the abandon and the terror of the collapse of distinctions between human and non-human, the attraction and the re-

CHRIS BURDEN, FIVE DAY LOCKER PIECE, 26–30 April, 1971, University of California. The artist was locked in locker no. 5 for five days and did not leave the locker during this time; the locker above him contained 5 gallons of bottled water, the one below an empty 5-gallon bottle. / FÜNF TAGE IM SCHLIESSFACH, der Künstler war fünf Tage ohne Unterbruch eingeschlossen; im Schließfach über ihm war ein 20-Liter-Wasserbehälter, unter ihm ein leerer 20-Liter-Behälter.



CHRIS BURDEN, DOORWAY TO HEAVEN, 15 Nov. 1973, performance / HIMMELSTOR.

pulsion of the dissolution of limits. That is, as much as they are bound to the digital, they are also bound to a preexisting—and longstanding (think of Frankenstein)—set of cultural anxieties.

In Burden's perhaps inadvertent, sly reflection on photography's claim to truth, heaven (and, in a broader sense, representation) was constitutively bound to photographic technol-

ogy, to the speed of the camera's vision that outstripped the human. Aziz + Cucher's photographic images are a function of a different technology, perhaps, or at least in their hands, more inclined toward forms of self-reflection. Their digitized skin-architecture dispenses with any always-dubious photographic claim to empirical truth, and represents, not heaven, but an everywhere-and-nowhere that asks us to

think about the effects of technology in relation to the culture from which it emerges.

- 1) Chris Burden, "Chris Burden: Original Texts 1971–1995" in: *Chris Burden* (Paris: Blocnotes, 1995).
- 2) Johannes Lothar Schröder, "Science, Heat and Time: Minimalism and Body Art in the Work of Chris Burden" in: *Chris Burden: Beyond the Limits*, ed. Peter Noever (Vienna: Austrian Museum of Applied Arts, 1996), p. 205.

AZIZ + CUCHER, INTERIOR NO. 1, 1999, C-Print, 72 x 50" / INNENRAUM NR. 1, 182,9 x 127 cm.



AZIZ + CUCHER, INTERIOR NOS. 2 & 3, 1999, C-Prints, 40 x 30" each / INNENRÄUME NR. 2 & 3, je 101,6 x 76,2 cm.

