Photography in the Middle: Dispatches on Media Ecologies and Aesthetics

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Published by Punctum Books


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Coda
Negative exposure. Last autumn, against our better judgement, and at great personal cost, we successfully reestablished contact with Nova agent Brenda Dunks. Having long departed her offices on Fulham Road (it would seem even Nova agents are subject to the forces of gentrification), Brenda’s new cover apparently involves running a photo centre at a branch of the supermarket chain Asda. Following advice, we visited the photo centre on a Friday afternoon, during which time we saw no sign of Brenda’s sidekick, Willy Deiches, and thought it prudent not to ask as to his whereabouts. We had been informed, through a source that will remain anonymous, that Brenda still claimed to be in communication with Control, and that she would be willing to facilitate a kind of dialogue (for an appropriate fee, naturally). However, unlike the documented experiences of William Burroughs, Brion Gysin, and Anthony Balch, where questions to Control were typed out and fed into a computer, here, we were told, our questions should take the form of photographs — latent images that beg a developed response. Brenda seemed to recognize us immediately. Clumped into a once white lab coat, its press-stud buttons fastened awkwardly high, her eyes locked on to us as we approached the scruffy counter she commanded. We offered up 27 exposures, housed in a plastic disposable camera, which she accepted with fingers raw and reticulated, perhaps from repeated contact with an unpleasant mix of darkroom chemicals. We were told to return in an hour, a period of time we spent pacing nervously in the carpark.

Light leaks. We made our way back to the photo centre the moment the allotted time had run down. As we arrived, a digital minilab was noisily throwing small piles of glossy prints into a sorter mechanism, but Brenda had already flipped up the counter hatch, pulled aside a black curtain, and was ushering us past the machine towards a darkroom at the rear. A whiff of stale chemistry hung in the air. The cramped space was lit by red safelight and our eyes adjusted slowly to a room piled with photographic apparatus most likely imported from some other space. Piles of grubby print trays lined the workbench. A series of glass and plastic bottles with encrusted lids filled the shelves. A collection of measuring cylinders stuffed into a wash tank with perished hosing occupied much of the floor. A rusty film
drying cabinet, wedged into the corner and repurposed as storage, was stacked with paper boxes bearing familiar brand names. Water was flowing freely into a filthy sink. Brenda pulled on a cord that exposed the room to white light, revealing its grime in harsh detail, and drawing our attention to the walls for the first time. Here, rendered in differing sizes and often overlapping each other, were a multiplicity of crude line drawings seemingly depicting people holding cameras. Some were drawn in marker pen, some wiped onto the wall with a thick grease, some scratched into the plaster itself and daubed in a rust-like colour. For a moment we gazed at this parietal graffiti until Brenda broke our reverie with a grunt followed by a gesture to the baseboard of an old enlarger, upon which sat an unsoiled photo wallet bearing the Asda logo. The wallet was stuffed with prints.

Sacred horror. Perhaps precipitately, I immediately open the wallet and fan several of the prints over the baseboard. Beneath the sound of the water gargling in the sink, I am distracted by a strange grunting noise. It sets the cabinet rattling and dust puffs up into the light. No-one else appears to notice. As I take a glimpse at the uppermost print, the noise turns into a low rumble. I see figures I recognize. In the deepest pit of the caves at Lascaux, the perilous chasm once described by Georges Bataille as the ‘holiest of holies’, there is a twenty thousand year old image of a man beside a bison, both apparently dead or dying. The bison, rendered with remarkable naturalism, has been eviscerated with a spear, its bowels dangling in coils. The man, just a childish cartoon, lies with erect phallus, arms outstretched. His head thrown back, the face is concealed by a bird mask. Here on the print are those same figures, now partially obscured by a swimming film of odd coloration. The noise builds to a roar, my innards boil in sympathy. Darkness radiates from the print, now perfectly black. ‘Do this somewhere else, pal.’ Brenda sweeps the prints together and jams them into the wallet, pushing us back towards the curtain and out of the darkroom in almost the same movement.

What was the question again? Still tacky, some of the prints resist easy separation. It’s as if they wish to overcome their discontinuity. What a peculiar mantic game. ‘What was the question again?’ I ask.
**Base materialism.** Rob mutters something about new weapons, pragmatic techniques of resistance. But this print I hold in my hand now, there’s a shadowy form in there that brings Gysin to mind. And Gysin is speaking... ‘a good deal of these texts become absolutely unreadable, nobody could read them, you just — William himself said he couldn’t read them a second time... uh, they produced a certain kind of very unhappy psychic effects... there was no question of their efficacy, but, uh, for what one would use such a thing, uh, gave pause for thought...’

**In the middle.** There are at least two types of middle, two modes of encounter with an immanent beyond. There is a middle of pragmat- ics and a middle of horror. The middle of pragmatics is a noisy mid -dle, a busy, multiplicitious realm, an encounter with which produces new connections with the world. It is a space from within which we can map out new possibilities, new transformations to everyday experience. The middle of horror is quite different. It is a space of silence, it is abyssal. It is, as Bataille put it, ‘a gaping void’. Nothing pragmatic is gained in an encounter with this middle. The only connection produced is one with a primordial disconnection. The only possibility on offer is impossibility. To encounter this middle is to render ourselves nothing, to sacrifice what is human in us, to sacrifice ‘us’.

**Drawing with shit.** There was no utility to these photographs, they offered no answers, they revealed nothing — even by accident — that might conceivably be turned to our advantage. We could, then, take no hope from these photographs, no promise of escape, we could see no programme of action concealed within them. They were instead grotesquely useless — obscenely, sickeningly unambiguous in their excess. They were photographs that seemed to take the elevated source of the medium — light — and reveal something impossibly rotten, a putrid origin. Clutching the wallet of prints, we emerged from the darkroom to find an implausibly large number of customers

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1 Gysin, *Here to Go*, 51.
gathered at the photo centre counter. Ignoring the queue barriers, this crowd swayed and jostled for Brenda’s attention, brandishing their memory cards, beckoning her with USB sticks. Their collective murmur channeled the buzz from a small glass fronted fridge, packed with long out of date film, set beside the cash register. We pitched chaotically into bodies.

**Holiest of holies.** Out at the back of the store, Brenda makes her way to the bins. Shuffling arthritically through a litter of cheese and cakes rejected by discriminating freegans, she hoists a large box of uncollected snaps to her shoulder in readiness to tip it into the nearest bin. A slight movement amongst the rubbish at her feet snags her attention. She bends to look, distractedly spilling some of the contents of the box which merely add to a substantial heap of prints, all perfectly black, already amassed on the ground. Surprisingly, from amidst these protrudes a phallus, engorged and shining. Never one to pussyfoot, Brenda pushes through the heap and uncovers the naked body of a man, dead or dying. Filthy and emaciated, the man wears a bird mask.

**USELESS USELESS  THE END**

*Smell of developer fixer bison breath*

joy joy joy joy you better run the best shots

black slime into the ditch into the pit into the darkroom officers poets.

*A loud false click. Human laughter. Animal hit.*

**ENTER DEATH CLICK NOTHING TO BE DONE CLICK**

Coagula negative seeing flatter than the sky

aaaaaghahahahaagmuahhhghhuu
PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE MIDDLE

SHICK KA-CHICK SHICK KA-CHICK SHICK KA-CHICK HEHEHE

FACELESS FACELESS horse shitter direction in which we go THE EXIT

white fog planetary convulsions

MAGNUM CHAOS BRACE BRACE

SACRIFICE

Brenda grasps the black beak, tugs off the mask. Through the matted hair curtaining his face she recognizes Willy, even though the ecstasy of communication has made him younger.