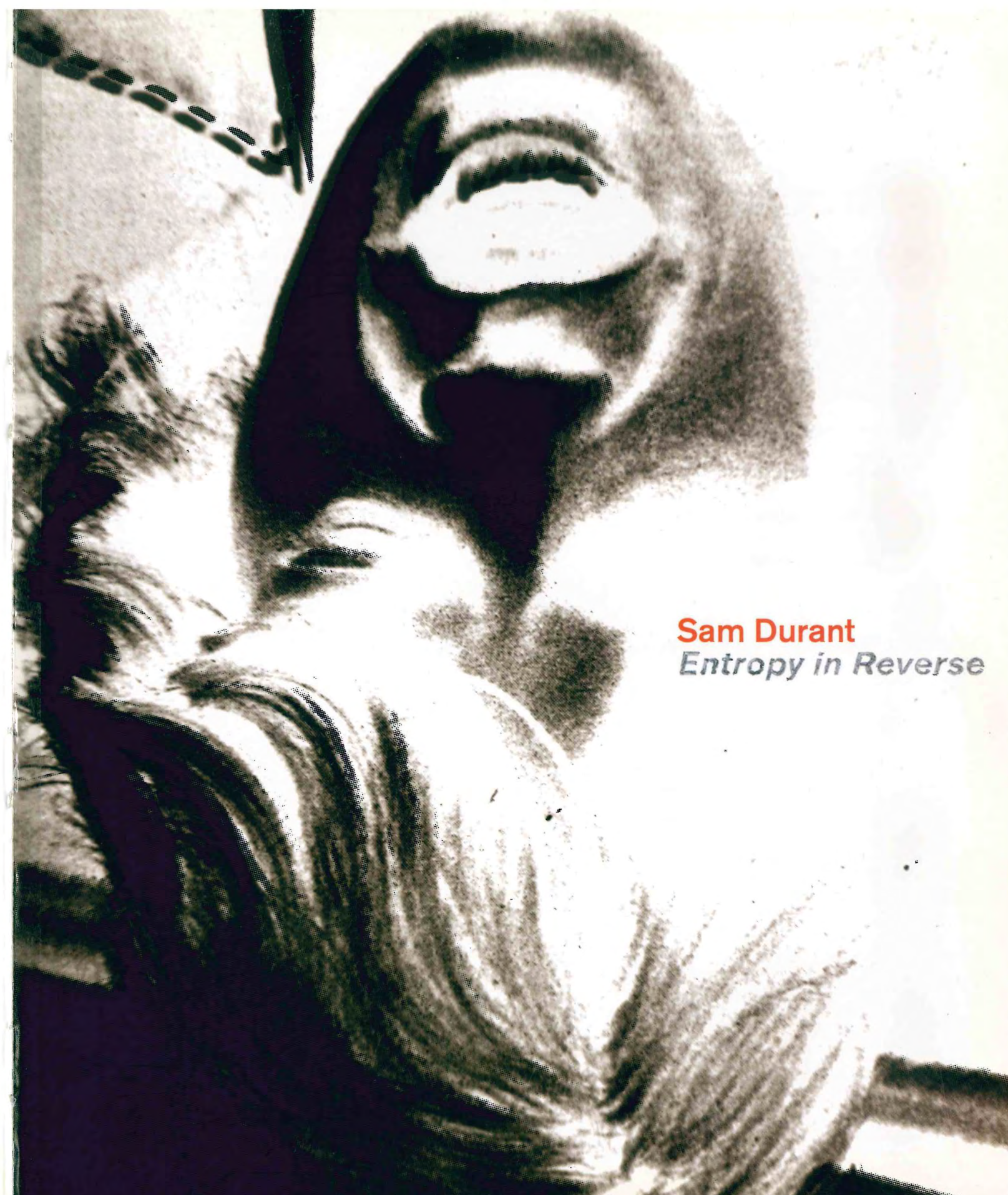




Sam Durant
Entropy in Reverse

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Entropy in reverse documents and extends a major solo project by Los Angeles based artist Sam Durant at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. The project and publication are the result of Durant's residency at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery as a participant in the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery international artist in residence programme, which brings a Pacific Rim artist to New Plymouth each year to present a new project. The programme is held in partnership with the Western Institute of Technology at Taranaki, Te Kura Matatini o Taranaki.

The artists that participate in the residency are provided with a dedicated studio and resources, enabling them to produce a new project or body of new work. Publications in the programme both document and extend the project and feature new writing on the resident artist. Previous and upcoming artists participating in the programme include Jessica Bronson, Lee Bul, Fiona Tan, Noboru Tsubaki and Pae White.

All works courtesy the artist, Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, and Galleria Emi Fontana, Milan

Director and Project Curator: Gregory Burke

Residency Management: Kate Roberts, Simon Rees

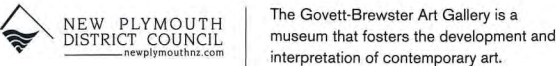
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Rewinding Histories, Artful Disassembling: views of works by Sam Durant

Nils Plath

our band could be your life (real names'll be proof) me and d. boon, played for years but punk rock
changed our life. we learned punk rock in hollywood, drove up from pedro...
Minutemen "History lesson (part II)" *Double Nickels on the Dime*, SST Records, 1984

1. For Later Use

My first encounter with Sam Durant occurred on the pages of a magazine.¹ Looking back, even though the encounter was generally an unspectacular one, it was certainly more than just coincidental proof of Niklas Luhmann's oft-quoted statement that everything we know about the world in which we live comes to us as information through mass media channels.² I don't want to call this first encounter anything more than a happy coincidence. After all, it was just the description of a building, disguised as a kind of a report of a field trip taken close to (yet also far away from) the author's dwelling; a commissioned work, not entirely lacking irony regarding certain forms of architectural critique; a piece written for an art publication with which, for the first time, I connected the name of Sam Durant. That particular issue of Artforum contained a large section dedicated to the buildings of architect R. M. Schindler, which are present in greater Los Angeles but have vanished from public awareness. Although I didn't realise it at the time, Durant's short, illustrated article unintentionally provided several of those topics that would pique my later interest in his work: how history is determined, the disintegrating effect of history, decay and rediscovery, recounting and models, the function and authority of the author's name, the process of dividing the representation of art and architecture into epochs, the role of media as a mediator between contexts, relating things to each other, and displacement. The article I read back then ultimately expresses that particular relationship between the form and function of modes of representation selected not only to comprehend phenomena and artifacts but also to make one's own view of these things reproducible and comprehensible.

Durant describes a church building in South Central, a part of Los Angeles that has been stigmatised in the public consciousness as a ghetto area. At the time, I did not know of the significance of his choice of this building, which has been marked by the teeth of time and its neighborhood context. I knew nothing about Durant's deliberate destruction of



facing: *Altamont index* (detail) 2003
bottom: *Bethlehem Baptist Church* 2001



architectural models of the *Case study houses* such as his *Abandoned house #1-6* 1995, nor of his collage works on paper, which not only explored, in a different way, the aesthetic interior designs of the classic modern era, but also distorted them (see *Cabinets*, *Beer bong*, *Repression and material*, *Known associate*, all 1995). When I read the article, I was also unfamiliar with his interest in the history of Afro-American culture and the American counter-culture, both of which were ultimately absorbed over time, in a distorted form, into the American mainstream. Yet something must have appealed to me, because the article was clipped out and landed in my filing cabinet, for later use.

2. Keep Your Distance

As usual, this will be nothing but an approach. And that means there will always be unbridgeable distances among the subject under discussion, our individual attitudes towards history, and the stories invented in order to re-tell history in the most convincing manner. There are so many relationships to discover among the works, works in progress, and serial works, that it would not be possible here to begin to name them all.³ Any descriptive approach not desiring to be a comprehensive or introductory explanation of what appears to be an *oeuvre* can only be, at the beginning, an attempt to sort out pre-existing descriptions.

At first, there isn't much to say against this. No image arrives at home without a previous image and its accompanying text having preceded it. We cite texts in order to provide contexts to refer to when we're looking at images. This serves our sense of orientation, which we hope to be able to convey to others. We do this anyway, even if we are aware of the warning Jean-Luc Godard sent during one of his asides on a television talk show – to please develop your own images through your own exploration of the images you have seen, not with the mere help of prefabricated viewpoints, because otherwise the images will be missing something.⁴ Now, at first glance, cutting out descriptions from other texts and adding this second-hand material to your own written standpoint does not appear to be a particularly challenging or problematic task. As part of the task of distributing texts about images, it is business as usual, oriented towards increasing comprehension. Quotations provide images and convey authority. They are messages that can be interpreted as challenges to

Abandoned house #2, 1995
courtesy Blum & Poe, Los Angeles

observe our often unquestioningly accepted presuppositions. Durant's work performs this, when he takes an event like 'Altamont' and turns it into an opportunity to question the so-called eventful qualities of an event. Three quotes, for example, describing Durant's work:

Like returning to reread an old book, you could say viewing Durant's feedback systems is an almost entropic experience [...] Like the protest culture he speaks of, Durant's work is polyphonic. Multiple voices testify to how times they are a-changing.⁵

Durant's work on Beuys exposes the lack of identification the artist had with his thematic models, which, once they've been recognised, immediately invade all of the other works. This can be interpreted as both the necessary equidistance of the artist as well as a sign of artistic randomness [...] Durant's works can be considered a type of archaeology [...] as a step-by-step picking apart of complicated social and political utopias of the 1960s – their conflicts, origins, and failure. Thus, the success of the works is dependent upon the willingness and ability [of the viewer] to recognise the original connections of the various historical and thematic threads.⁶

There is plenty of talk of cynicism in art today, but art truly born of cynicism, in which the idealistic and romantic are forced to hold their own against a healthy dose of skepticism and pessimism, is a rare dish. Sam Durant served up just that with four jaded meditations on entropy and disintegration, which generally are forces one might consider in relation to nature, but which he shows to be steadily warring away at culture.⁷



Quotations provide impressions. The descriptions I've inserted here are accounts of different shows featuring Durant's works, which speak of completely and successfully reaching an audience, of a lack of compassion, of fulfilling tasks, and of disappointment. The viewpoints above read as if they have been taken from a pattern book. How do these kinds of visual descriptions become texts that also tell you something about themselves, about your own presuppositions, your own system of classification, your own process of approaching and formulating statements? What about the difference that is supposed to exist between the viewer's (textual) and the artist's (material) images, between expectation and fulfillment? What does this difference mean here – with reference to Durant and as part of this given text – and what does it represent? And how do you explain the demands disguised as critique, which approach the work formulated as expectations that the works have to fulfill in order to be considered successful, or in other words, 'functional'?

Entropy in reverse (Gimme shelter backwards) (video still) 1999

Durant's works do not have any direct answers. Instead, they prove to be constellations, which in turn are more than suitable examples to use to question the notion of functionalism, to question the demands made of art objects (and the writing of history), according to which, art objects are expected to function because they represent something, and are, therefore, 'useful'.



3. Producing Open Ends

In 1968, Jean-Luc Godard made a film. Filming was not only interrupted by the May riots in Paris and the temporary arrest of one of the protagonists, but it ended with a public scolding at the premiere. To take on the job of creating a product constantly regulated by change and transformation, to make something that does not become, when completed, the death mask of its own concept (as Walter Benjamin wrote in *Die Einbahnstraße*), is, in itself, no easy task. So it is even more difficult, during the process of selecting and editing image and sound, to make sure that when the viewer looks at the material, he will then resist the temptation to manufacture a unity of images – which is why the director berated one of the producers. Although only present here in the retelling, this admonishment was the obvious expression of Godard's discomfort in seeing his own creation dictated by the production circumstances – meaning the intentions of the so-called film producers, who desired a marketable product. Not only did producers Iain Quarrier and Michael Pearson change the film's title, making *Sympathy for the devil* out of *One plus one* but they high-handedly added a complete studio version of the song by that same name, which became a Rolling Stone classic, to the soundtrack accompanying the final scenes and credits. Godard could be nothing but dissatisfied with the resulting conventional narrative closure. There shall be no dissection, says the producers' intervention. At the film's premiere, at the London Film Festival, Godard said that his film had been raped, and he urged the audience to follow him out of the cinema, to watch his film outside. He also encouraged them to donate their ticket money to the fund supporting Black Power activist Eldridge Cleaver, who was on trial in a California court. The fact that Godard only allowed fragments of the music to be used, but not the completely edited final version of the song itself, corresponds with Godard's intention to set up conflicts within – and to resist – conventional cinematic format. Godard himself said that he wanted to report on the existence of two languages in *One plus one* and to work on a new dictionary. As a concurrent announcement of the film in the German magazine *Filmkritik* claimed:

the whole film actually provides aspects of the expression of black and white, aspects of linguistic invention and the loss of language. The music and voices of the Rolling Stones are an aspect in

One plus one (Sympathy for the devil) (film stills) 1968-1969
Director Jean-Luc Godard, producers Iain Quarrier and Michael Pearson
© Cupid Productions, courtesy British Film Institute

between, far from homogenous culture and good behavior. A swan song, too, for Godard's films are becoming more like biting farewells to culture, language, civilisation, and bourgeois aggression.⁸

Now, the question is, what do you actually see when you watch *One plus one*? This is a question also posed by Durant's works, in which you see a few familiar actors, themes, and stereotypes from the film – from the distance of decades, in another place, and thus in other contexts. Klaus Theweleit's eyes saw three films when he watched *One plus one*. "Godard has taken the art of making at least two or three films in one to its highest peak", he said in his speech honoring Jean-Luc Godard at the 1995 awards ceremony for the Adorno Prize given by the city of Frankfurt. In his book *One + One* Klaus Theweleit described the three-part structure thus:

One plus one: 1 Report on the creation of "Sympathy for the devil" plus 1 fictional film about the Black Panthers, both connected by a kind of political porno, a "political wild west novel", as the film says about itself, whose texts are edited rather like the political, historical events in the Stones' song.⁹

Three-in-one, which sounds pretty efficient, is actually, in reality, when watching it for the first time and then again, overwhelming to the senses. It's a challenge to sort and order, making it necessary to watch it again; it produces the demand for repetition, urging you to deviate from your own first viewing by repeatedly confronting the material. In Godard's film, you see the members of the Stones and the studio musicians alone, by themselves, in isolation booths. Mick Jagger and Keith Richards are in the centre, in the midst of action characterised by many interruptions, the repeated starts and stops taking place as their song is recorded. The later, final version is supposed to become a hymn (and it is always being replayed as such, even today). It's a repetitive exercise for the musicians, working on material, playing out their conventional roles. Work is recorded here. In order to turn the recording of work into a work in progress, the film does not end with the completion of a finished product. In between shots of the Stones, you see the camera sweeping over the junkyard that serves as a set; the black, armed revolutionaries mirroring a stereotypical image as they read out loud from black power literature by Le Roi Jones, Stokely Carmichael, and Eldridge Cleaver. Also onscreen are girls, wearing long white robes, who are roughly treated by the revolutionaries and, in an inverse of Ku-Klux-Klan racism, are murdered by them. In a porno shop in London, men and children buy porno magazines, while a man reads aloud passages from Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. We see a woman, played by Anne Wiazemsky, painting incomplete cultural revolution phrases on the walls and windows of buildings, and then, as the personification of liberal democracy, giving an interview in a forest, and finally, toward the end, on a beach, where she is shot and pulled up into the sky by a film crane. Popularised



Free Huey 2002
courtesy Galleria Emi Fontana, Milan



messages become material, framed: in book form, such as Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on ice* (see Durant's *Heap of language (Soul on ice)* 2001), or as songs (see Durant's repeated use of Stones' songs in his installations). When you see stereotypes and symbols over and over, their presence also takes on a different meaning, because they are undergoing permanent revision. This alters the view of the revolutionary potential that led to the United States' fierce persecution of the Black Panthers, and we become aware that culture and market have completed the task of taking over all symbols of resistance and self-determination. And yet their return is still a factor for fear.¹⁰

In the article mentioned at the beginning of this text, Durant wrote about R. M. Schindler's Bethlehem Baptist Church, built in 1944, "I can't see buildings as entities disconnected from their conditions. I look at carefully composed period pictures of modernist designs and I wonder, What is not being shown, what is out of the frame? These nostalgic images, reflecting a past that never was, promise a modern lifestyle without conflict."¹¹ Like Godard's movie, his three-films-in-one, Durant's own works must also be regarded as a series and thus as a continuing story, to be perceived simultaneously.

Durant's works also make visible the conflicts inscribed everywhere in society, and they do this to remind us as little as possible of museums as we know them, although Durant's works are deliberately placed in the

Heap of language (Soul on ice) 2001
courtesy Galleria Emi Fontana, Milan

frame of the white cube, and even though they are recognisably marked by a very controlled, stylised form of presentation, which obviously owes more to minimalist art than to those popular attempts (still considered current) to use all possible means to make exhibition spaces appear unfamiliar.¹² Durant's decision to use the gallery space is obviously made from a self-confident (because informed) attitude towards the achievements of 1970s art practice, which was critical of both institutions, and appropriation art's accomplishments around the time the seventies became the eighties. The work also reflects the successful conceptual connection between high and low, between theory and the kind of popular culture that is not bent upon pleasing the masses, which, for 20 years, has been managing to find ways of producing criticism within the frameworks of the art world.

Working to reverse the process of mythologisation requires an effort not to reproduce essentialism and not to fetishise. That means maintaining some distance from the kinds of simple irony or self-revealing parody, signaled by acts such as the on-going rededication of the museum, which the institutions love to welcome with open arms. Because Durant's works, on the other hand, put two characteristics on display – appropriation on one side, distancing on the other – they achieve the ability to estrange – and to instigate further investigations through irritations. In order to perform this, they are reliant upon the gallery, that peculiar space, which has undergone so many re-interpretations ever since Robert Smithson provocatively announced that museums are tombs.¹³ It is there, in this storeroom for genealogical pieces of evidence, that Durant's works become troubled as well as troubling texts, to borrow Bill Nichols' terms. His works include photographs, portraits, song lyrics, text excerpts, artistic works that have gone down into art history (and their reproductions, through which the works have been distributed), as well as social, political, and cultural associations that have also become part of various history books. Durant's favored themes (protest culture of the late 1960s, appropriation from Afro-American culture, interior design) are distinguished by the fact that they either appear "with intermittent lapses or subversions", or offer "...a systematic procedure for overturning our assumptions", or achieve both at the same time, meaning that they are successful at "...open[ing] out onto that amplitude of experience beyond the ideology of unity or wholeness by intensifying the very antinomies, the logical scandals, inherent in narrative".¹⁴

This narrative is formulated in Durant's work, not through an indifferent attitude, nor from a distance that tries to pass itself off as objective and controlling, but in fact from a position that does not allow any room for an emphatically personal view of things. Here, there is no immediately visible identificatory artistic gesture dealing with theme and material – a gesture that art critics seem to hate to do without, for they use it as an aid to orientation and to promote the notion of the *auteur* as the proprietor of signature pieces. As multi-part, space-filling installations or simple, sketched pencil drawings, as three-dimensional models or as copied and estranged reproductions of



Landscape art (Emory Douglas) 2002

images, Durant's works shape a concept of correspondence. As the results of appropriation, as citations – and that means: as the temporary recording of a process that reacts to the inability to stop reacting to references. It means always using recombination in new exhibition contexts to continue to provoke, without ever falling into the paranoia of that unholy undertaking, which ultimately ends in the attempt to randomly combine everything with everything.

Of course, there remains the not-always-unjustified accusation of carefree superficiality. Without overlooking the absolute necessity for fundamental reflection upon the conditions under which the works are created and perceived, without calling them obsolete in a reactionary gesture based in strategic motivation, Durant's method of dealing with the material displays a certain amount of impartiality – an impartiality that might lead to accusations that the artist is identifying with 'his themes'. Yet it is precisely this impartiality that allows Durant to exhibit his correspondences (archival, archaeological interrogations stemming from his aesthetic sensibilities) in a way that is elsewhere often quickly prevented by conventions, where perception is turned into demonstratively static insistence.

4. Monuments in the Moment

It is generally believed that a monument addresses both the contemporary world as well as posterity.¹⁵ As a three-dimensional piece of architecture, visible in a prominent place, it is supposed to have an effect upon the future. Concentrated upon effect, it transforms the past into the present through remembered images, which are considered to be lasting, thanks to the durable materials usually chosen to create a monument. Durant's *Proposal for monument at Altamont Raceway, Tracy, CA 1999* is nothing more than a platform made out of raw wood covered with beige polyurethane foam (often used as insulation). The foam runs down the sides of the platform and is paralysed in motion, doubtless reminiscent of Robert Smithson's *Asphalt rundown* and *Glue pour*, the latter created in December 1969 in Vancouver, Canada. It is not only from a distance that the ensemble recalls a miniature, abstract illustration of the Northern Californian rolling hills, where the free concert featuring the Rolling Stones, attended by an audience of 300,000, took place on December 6, 1969.



top: *Proposal #2 for monument at Altamont Raceway, Tracy, CA 2003*
bottom: *Entropy in reverse (Gimme shelter backwards)* (video still) 1999

There, one of the audience members met his death directly in front of the stage where the Stones were performing. This, in turn, led to many consequences, for one of the Hells Angels, hired as security guards, had killed the man by stabbing him in the back with a knife. In Durant's monument, two metal structures rise out of the amorphous mass of foam. They resemble structures often seen flanking the stages at open-air concerts, and these types of structures keep appearing in the Maysles brothers' film. This film pretends to be a reconstructive retelling of the concert and the surrounding circumstances that did not allow Altamont to become the West Coast Woodstock, as was planned. Instead, the concert quickly achieved negative fame as a negative myth, and to this day it remains, in the popular view, the sole event signalling the final end of the United States counter-culture's utopian perception of the world.¹⁶

The title of Durant's work can be read as an expression of intentional indecision. Is this supposed to be the model for a monument that will actually be erected, in a very specific place, somewhere in the middle of nowhere, in the foothills of Northern California? Is it supposed to be a lasting presence – an assertion of the will of a collective identity, intended to foster memory and thus manufacture a symbolic unity? If so, then we should be allowed to ask whose identity is being memorialised here, in this place that first becomes a site when a monument is erected? After 30 years (time for an entire generation to mature), questions arise: whose unity is asserted by appropriating from the past? How does an event, which creates identity, manifest itself? Of course, you can interpret the title literally, consider the work a sketch, a proposal, something preliminary. Instead of wholeness, instead of auratic, material unity (a characteristic last identified with minimalist sculpture), we have the installation, made of found pieces, whose substance announces its temporality. As something temporary, Durant's proposal also questions the statements that stubbornly stick to the immobile monuments



Altamont 1999
courtesy Blum & Poe, Los Angeles

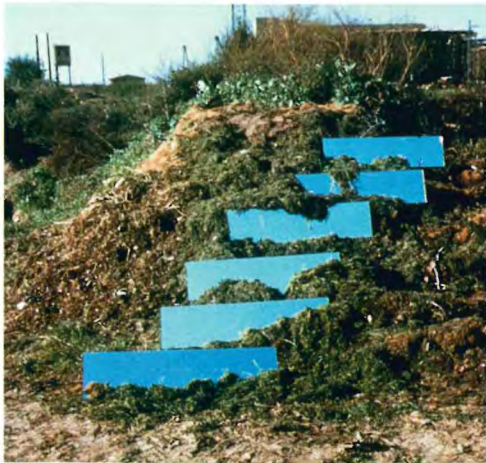
that dominate and shape the self-images of collective groups, even though the public eye simply ceases to perceive these monuments, so that over time, they disappear from their place, from visual consciousness.

Oddly enough, *Altamont* 1999 also echoes a marketing symbol that also similarly vanishes from local public perception, but which every visitor's eye eagerly searches for: those enormous letters in the Southern California hills that spell out H-o-l-l-y-w-o-o-d. I am reminded of this because *Altamont* consists of large, soft felt letters leaning against a mirror, spelling the word A-l-t-a-m-o-n-t backward in a reflection. The piece also recalls other artistic works in which writing forces its way into the image. In Durant's exploration of the experience of Altamont and its history, the visual reference to a historical event becomes a complex exploration of writing history and the motives for writing history in general.

The resistance found in Durant's work shows that he is aware, on one hand, of the problems involved in never being able to consider history as finished and in never regarding any epoch as simply a part of the past. On the other hand, he is also aware of the impossibility of participating in the reproduction and continuing distribution of images, wherever the attempt is made to re-organise, correct, or erase them. However, through this alert resistance, Durant takes up the job of questioning the relationships existing among different historical images of history, thereby conjuring those significant moments that occur between these images. You could call Durant's works unflagging critical retrospectives, which currently display an interest in what are now historical critiques of ideology and the figureheads needed to propagate them. Yet this interest is a delayed one and therefore distanced, and thus it is free of blind utopianism, disencumbered of any self-righteous irony or cynicism also professing distance. His interest doubtless arises from a position that regards its own contemporaneity as provisional. It's not a question of a new or old attitude – this question has already been posed and answered.

Q: [...] The standard fate of novelty is to be justified by history. Your position is thus ironic.
A: I would say that it has a contradictory view of things. It's basically a pointless position. But I think to try to make some kind of point right away stops any kind of possibility. I think the more points the better, you know, just an endless amount of points of view.¹⁷

You could find this not really simple, yet conceivable position in Durant's works. Robert Smithson, whose significance for Durant cannot be overlooked, mentioned this position in a 1967 conversation, calling it a "pointless position" or rather, a practical multiplication of positions. In Durant's works, too, the attempt is made to hinder monolithic types of interpretation by calculatedly presenting differing perspectives. Or he tries to achieve a temporary though complete loss of perspective and comprehensibility, by translating images found in other media, using backward projections, mirrored writing, backward tapes, overlapping sound installations, and, last but not least, the work of art's traditional self-reflection, as seen in pieces by Smithson, Dan Graham, Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman, and other prominent artists who



Robert Smithson *Mirror Displacement on a Compost Heap, Düsseldorf, Germany 1969*
35mm slide and color photographic print
Dallas Museum of Art, gift of Jane and James Cohan
© Robert Smithson, licensed by VISCOPY, Australia, 2004

used mirrors in the 1960s. In his constant references to things past, Durant explores contemporary, possible ways of formulating 'surprises' or 'disturbances' in his works, which will challenge the viewer to question the issue of the demand for newness in works of art. You can see this attitude in the confrontations Durant seeks with carefully selected positions. These confrontations can only be achieved by appropriating and thus re-interpreting historic positions, although not at the price of acknowledging history as an unchanging frame of reference monolithically dominating the present or as a promise that will be fulfilled in a utopian future.

5. Back and Again

In Walter Benjamin's *Denkbilder* 1933, there is a short passage about successful work, which has something to say about belatedness and repetition. It is, writes Benjamin, as if there is an evil or unfruitful success, and perhaps you must have an understanding of it in order to comprehend what the right kind of success is. "Generally speaking, there are two slogans that oppose each other: once and for all, and once is not enough.



Meredith Hunter at Altamont moments before he was shot. See Page 7

Of course, there are cases where you can succeed once and for all – while playing games, during exams, in a duel but never while working. Work proves that ‘once is not enough’ is justified.”¹⁸ When repetition turns a past event into what it is actually meant to be, when it is repetition that first produces an individual event, when a past event first becomes an experience through recitation, then one result is that it becomes difficult to determine a here and now that can be used as a descriptive reference point. So it also follows that without representation, there is no event.

At the beginning of the Maysles brothers’ documentary film, *Gimme shelter* 1970, eyewitnesses are shown reconstructing an event. By the time the film premiered, barely a year after the concert, this event had long since become a historic, symbolic, evil, and unfruitful event – an event regarded as a piece of unlucky work.¹⁹ The film shows members of the Rolling Stones in the editing room, looking at the footage of the Altamont concert, whose anti-climax was the manslaughter in front of the stage. We watch the band members watching the omnipresent violence, which escalated into the crime committed by the Hells Angels, who had been hired to maintain order. However, this culmination did not signal the end of the concert or force the Stones to prematurely finish their performance. The band members listen to a radio moderator attempting to act like a history writer on the day after the concert, asking his listeners for first-hand accounts. Then, over the airwaves, he broadcasts a self-justifying statement from the Hells Angels leader Sonny Barger, which turned into an accusation of the Stones, who, according to him, simply got what they asked for. The Stones obviously acknowledge this without condoning it. At first sight, the issues are responsibility and guilt. How could things have gotten so out of hand? Who played which role in the events? The filmmakers’ perspective cannot hide the fact that they intend to make a statement, and they make it clear whose side they are on: the side of the unbelieving Stones and their apparatus, which had given them permission to document the United States tour. It also becomes clear who is supposed to be led forth as the party responsible for the unforeseeable events that will and are supposed to remain in the memory as a myth – for in a myth, individual responsibility is no longer a relevant issue.

As the film progresses, this work of reconstruction, marked by uncertainty, increasingly recedes into the background. This uncertainty is most impressively personified by Charlie Watts, who darts many questioning glances towards the rest of those in the room, as he hesitatingly comments on the pictures of the rampaging Hells Angels. It becomes obvious that the film considers its own images as proof of an event – exactly what convention demands of a documentary film. Images are supposed to speak for something that has happened.²⁰ In attempting to do this, the Maysles brothers simply overlook the fact that each and every edited film image should, according to this convention, from the first glimpse onward, illustrate the norms that define our notion of history.

Gimme shelter actually does not fulfill its claim to be a documentary, nor does it show how something is reconstructed. Instead, you see how an event, ‘Altamont’, is constructed through repetition, through the power of the reproduced image, by showing how eyewitnesses and participants try after the fact to create for themselves an image of an event that they have all perceived from different perspectives.²¹ The film is about having control over an event, which can be achieved by controlling strong images that make powerful statements. As time progresses, it is the repetition of perceptions, reproduced in diverse media, which first produces this ‘Altamont’, which has become a noun unto itself, in its various versions. Technology promises viewers a true-to-the-original, multi-perspective view of the process, from organisation to clean-up. It allows

viewers to stop and start the film, to zoom in, to enlarge individual frames. In the film, we see the filmmakers and the Stones working on the aftermath, rewinding the film, re-examining it. However, running the film backward still cannot make it possible for us to understand the event known as ‘Altamont’. Symbolically reversing the procedures captured by many cameras and edited in the editing room – an act that has long been part of the narrative conventions of film and has also become popular in the past few years in art installations – cannot promise to tell us ‘how it really was’. For this ‘how it really was’ is the expression of an ideology that would like to assert its control over history. At the same time, ‘how it really was’ is still just a theme for self-righteous discussions about what happened on this day at the end of the 1960s – a day that is nowadays considered to be a *caesura*, a day that is supposed to mark the end of an epoch.



That the film is often presented as a re-telling of the event is characteristic of the powerful notion that images simply depict something. In his own way, projecting the film backward on two screens, Durant comments upon Altamont (*Entropy in reverse (Gimme shelter backwards)* 1999). However, this reversal alone is probably not enough to make us aware of the seductive difference between fiction and documentation, which owes everything to historical conventions. On the other hand, he at least disturbs these conventions, and this leads to the increasing instability of the perceived order of the things shown. According to Robert Smithson, “[A]ny film wraps us in uncertainty. The longer we look through a camera or watch a projected image, the remoter the world becomes, yet we begin to understand that remoteness more. Limits trap the illimitable, until the spring we discovered turns into a flood. ‘A camera filming itself in a mirror would be the ultimate movie’, says Jean-Luc Godard.”²² It makes sense to say that, through this deliberate reversal, the concert is undone and a condition of entropy sets in – a condition marked by irreversibility, where everything winds up at a final standstill. After all, the term entropy can claim a rather prominent position for itself in Durant’s work.

Yet it behooves us to show a bit of skepticism, for we don’t want to see that borrowed Smithson metaphor as a simple description, as an all-too-appropriate model for describing the world. With his many references to Smithson, which have been obviously present since at least *Partially buried 1960s/70s utopia reflected (Wavy gravity at Woodstock)* 1998, Durant refers not only to a mythic figure of American art history, who is not easy to classify because of his strongly referential writing, lectures, land art, and objects. At the same time, Smithson is someone Durant would find interesting, for Smithson’s thoughtful critique of minimalist art and

Entropy in reverse (Gimme shelter backwards) (video still) 1998

the role models of high modernity is always connected with observations of cultural forms of expression and politics outside of the art space. In Smithson's form of critique, whether in the form of art magazine articles, sketches, objects, or even large-format outdoor installations, Durant encounters forms of expression that are not fixated upon replacing the canon of minimalist or conceptual art of the time with a mere opposite – a new utopia or a marketable strategy. Apparently, Smithson's work had more to do with employing allegorical interpretation in a self-reflective search for confrontation with given circumstances, deliberately questioning them without putting his own critical position at the service of a type of avant-garde thought long since considered dubious.²³



What makes it so interesting to investigate the relations among content, expression, and reception in Durant's work is the omnipresent, processual quality of its visual relations, the problematic of transfer and transport, which is also at the center of Smithson's work, and the two artists' common interest in making visible constellations that cannot be depicted, as well as in exhibiting overly determined objects. To lose control over the correspondences that result from this kind of work can be a good feeling, a feeling that can also set in when you leaf through old magazines in archives, reading reports of events that are still somehow present in a collective memory and are not yet regarded as closed matters – and at the same time, to see, in between ads, the past and the continuity in fashion, styles, and the dictates of taste. By the way, for a certain mass medium with a fitting name – *Time Magazine* – the event that is today called 'Altamont' was obviously not newsworthy. When you go to a library today and page through the December and January issues of the period, you will see that not a single line about that ill-fated event in December 1969 appeared in the national magazine's pages. Altamont took place between two issues; on the day before the concert, the magazine's feature article

Partially buried 1960s/70s dystopia revealed (Mick Jagger at Altamont) 1998 [left hand side]
Partially buried 1960s/70s utopia reflected (Wavy Gravy at Woodstock) 1998 [right hand side]

dealt with a violent event that had been long suppressed by military officials but which had become news in the previous week. It would not only go down into history, but in retrospect, remains a measure of American society to this day: "My Lai: An American Tragedy". Two weeks later, just before the beginning of a new decade, the issue featuring Milton Friedman on the cover gazing out at the reader made room for a special section entitled "Into the 70s: From Violence to New Values".

6. Yet Another Preliminary Speech

Jacques Derrida's remark, which begins the third, longest section of his *Mal d'archive* 1995 (translated into English as *Archive fever*), mentions a sense of discomfort, which (as always happens whenever reflection is intended to be the continuance of history) must be read as the instigation of investigations that will lead further. Derrida explains that there is the impression that it is no longer possible to question the term, the history of the term, and especially the understanding of the archive itself. Derrida writes:

We no longer find assured meaning in questions such as these: do we already have at our disposition a concept of the archive? A concept of the archive which deserves this name? Which is one and whose unity is assured? Have we ever been assured of the homogeneity, of the consistency, of the univocal relationship of any concept to a term or to such a word as 'archive'?²⁴

According to Derrida's point of view, the problem, which marks a beginning here, consists of the fact that the form and grammar of these questions are focused on the past. In Derrida's eyes, to have a concept, to be sure about your subject, presumes a "closed heritage", and in his words, "the guarantee [is] sealed, in some sense, by that heritage". "...[T]he word and the notion of the archive seem at first, admittedly, to point toward the past, to refer to signs of consigned memory, to recall faithfulness to tradition".²⁵

When, with the very first word of every question, you show others the attempt to emphasise this past, this indicates, according to Derrida, "...the direction of another problematic [...] As much as and more than a thing of the past, before such a thing, the archive should *call into question* the coming of the future."²⁶ This longer passage from a text that gets involved in the complicated relationship between memory and psychoanalysis is not of further interest here, even though it might be tempting to move in its direction. However, it does allow us to emphasise two final points: in order to contain anything at all, the archive relies upon the revision and updating of its contents. It is possible to see Durant's works as attempts, suggestions, sketches, and announcements, which do not surrender the idea of an archive as a fundamental collection of common knowledge and images necessary for collective identities, even when you can assume that it is increasingly difficult to predict where such images can be found in modern societies conditioned by an increasingly functional selective process – images that might assert a unifying function for large portions of a society or societies.



To change terrain, discontinuous and irruptive, by brutally placing oneself outside 2001
courtesy Galleria Emi Fontana, Milan

Durant's works guide our attention to the spatial and temporal conditions required for a necessary performance of depiction in the virtual archives. Yet when they are in the archives, images must be repeatedly updated so that they remain accessible to the future. As archeological pieces for the present, we should not believe that Durant's works look back at the past, that they are interested in finding an imaginary zero point, or in doing justice to events of a particular period by providing them with meaning – as obvious and seductive as it might be to oppose, with the best of intentions, the version of history of the kind Benjamin described as the history of the victor.

Unlike a description of history that relies upon the chronological reconstruction of events, which presupposes either the truth of events or an original meaning of what has happened, it is impossible to recognise in Durant's works any interest in using the impressions that he has turned into correspondents as a way to explain a given, assumed, historical context.²⁷ Durant's works are present in today's context – a context that will be a given tomorrow, but is still not determinable today. As such, his work does a more fundamental job of questioning implicit, presupposed content than do the continually recurring discussions about distorted representations of history or correct interpretations of historical events. Durant's works pose the question of if (and how) we can possess a picture of history. If this question can be answered in the affirmative (but then, where would we be, if we gave a rash answer), then it would require an inevitable postscript: possession – here, meaning appropriating or taking into possession images of the past – implies responsibility. Durant's works testify to this responsibility, for his appropriated historical images are not used to simply construct a single representation of the past, but to acknowledge possible alternative histories. In so doing, they make room for a multiplicity of viewpoints and thus shape yet another question, of how to forge your own position among the many possibilities. This is followed by the matter of assuring yourself of your position, by putting images in contexts and circulating them in new places. I cannot get any closer to the matter than this. But how could I have seriously promised to conclude this history?

Translated from German by Alison Plath-Moseley.

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Notes

- 1 Sam Durant "Saving graces" *Artforum* May 2001, pp. 151-152
- 2 In his 1996 study, *Die Realität der Massenmedien*, which begins with the above paraphrased statement, sociologist Luhmann also formulates a premise that proves to be definitive in describing observations of Durant's works, whose common theme seems to be society and context: The thesis of operative constructivism does not, therefore, lead to a 'loss of the world'. It does not dispute the existence of reality. However, it presumes that the world is not an object, but a horizon, in a phenomenological sense, and is therefore unreachable. And hence there is no other possibility, except to construct reality and maybe observe the observers, to see how they construct reality. See: Niklas Luhmann *Die Realität der Massenmedien* 2nd expanded edition, Westdeutscher Verlag, Opladen, 1996, p. XVI Viewed this way, Durant's works must be described as representations of the task of reconstructing real history, caught in a standstill, at the moment of being observed.
- 3 Two extensive interpretations of Durant's *oeuvre* between 1994 and 2002, one by Michael Darling, the other by Kevin Young, appeared in the catalogue published for the joint project produced by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and the Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf. The catalogue also features a conversation between the artist and Rita Kersting, in which you can read about the meaning of the 1960s for Durant's works and some statements on his view of Robert Smithson.
- 4 Godard said this during a round table discussion, which also included moderator Marc Ferro and historian Eric Hobsbawn. The subject was the various presentations of the May 1, 1950 demonstration on newsreels in the Soviet Union, the United States, France, and East Germany. *Histoire Parallel: autour et a propos du 1er Mai* broadcast in 2000 on the German/French cultural channel ARTE.
- 5 Dan Fox "Like a rolling stone" *Frieze* April 2003, pp. 70-73
- 6 Christian Rattemeyer "Die neue Referenzklasse. Sam Durant in Los Angeles und Düsseldorf" *Texte zur Kunst* June 2003, pp. 213 -215
- 7 Christopher Miles "Sam Durant: going with the flow" *Artforum* November 1999, p. 148
- 8 Hans Ungureit "Godard's 'One plus one'" *Filmkritik* #1 1969, p. 7
- 9 Klaus Theweleit *One + one* Brinkmann & Bose, Berlin, 1995, p. xviii
- 10 In his choice of subject and figures – Smithson, Neil Young, Curt Cobain, Public Enemy, among others – Durant shows a sensibility for choosing protagonists who are popular projection surfaces for the construction of identity. They are commonly viewed as figures that personify authenticity. Yet at the same time, it is possible to discern at least one commonality: it's difficult for critics to classify them, because of the disparity within their work.
- 11 Sam Durant *op. cit.* p. 152
- 12 Nevertheless, it is difficult not to think that Durant's works (which can hardly be categorised within the paradigm of institutional critique) owe as much to approaches that showed a critical interest in the frameworks of artistic practices under particular socio-political conditions – those by Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, and Michael Asher, as well as Mike Kelley's or John Miller's juxtapositions of socio-political involvement and idiosyncratic confrontation of high and low culture.
- 13 Robert Smithson "Some void thoughts on museums [1967]" *Robert Smithson: the collected writings* Jack Flam (ed.), University of California Press, Berkeley / Los Angeles, 1996, p. 42
- 14 Bill Nichols *Representing reality: issues and concepts in documentary* Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1991, p. 241
- 15 In the introduction to the new French edition of Alois Riegl's book *Le culte moderne des monuments* 1984 (p. 11) originally published in German as *Der Moderne Denkmalkultus* in 1903, Françoise Chaoy distinguishes between the two meanings of the word 'monument'. The notion of the historical monument is not a cultural invariant ... For if the monument – that is (etymologically) the artifact – which calls out to make us remember – can be said to participate in a universal 'art of memory' found in almost every culture, the invention of the historical monument is bound up with that of the concepts of art and history. It belongs to post-Gothic Europe, which elaborated the concept in the successive stages of a long process, whose first stratum can be seen in the Quattrocento. Quoted by Jean-François Chevrier in *Dual reading* 1992 (p. 23) Walter Evans & Dan Graham, Jean-François Chevrier et al (eds.).
- 16 Shortly after the events, the American *Rolling stone* described Altamont as perhaps rock and roll's all-time worst day (John Burks "In the aftermath of Altamont" *Rolling stone* February 7, 1970). The beginning of a negative myth, serially reproduced, recounted in countless articles, and continually re-conjured.
- 17 Robert Smithson *op. cit.* p. 51
- 18 Walter Benjamin *Gesammelte Werke* IV:1, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt, 1972, p. 433
- 19 Amazing, the blindness involved in viewing cineastic images as depictions of an event, which are used to reassure a generation of its identity. This blindness is apparent early on in *Rolling stone* magazine "...if you weren't at Altamont, you can still get the same lesson if you see *Gimme shelter*... The first half of the film teases us, alternating various concert footage with dire hints of the terror to come; the second half takes us to Altamont, and from dawn to dusk – from Woodstock West to the seventh circle of our own Aquarian inferno. It's a real horror movie. The Maysles' film has no in-front point to make, nor, in fact, any point of view at all. If *Gimme shelter* isn't cinema *vérité*, it's something very close to it. And because we believe it, watching the film is very much like taking part in some kind of encounter group – there's no way to escape the image on the screen, nor any way to deny its truth". (Michael Goodwin "Gimme shelter" *Rolling stone* 1970)
- 20 At the point where filmmaking becomes the fulfillment of norms by lining up images in a row as evidence, the point of view of the

filmmaker betrays itself as one that betrays the images. Where it is not allowed to speak for itself and about itself, or to tell its own history, a film – like *Gimme shelter* – becomes an edited surveillance video. And thus can tell you in retrospect about the intentions to monitor the action.

- 21 A postscript to a lecture given by Greil Marcus in 1988 at the commencement ceremonies of the Department of History at UC Berkeley displays the earnestness and self-righteousness employed in the disputes over the truth about Altamont. The lecture was published under the title "Myth and Misquotation". Altamont is mentioned in the article in order to depict how a myth can be created from a false report. An early, incorrect report in *Rolling stone* said that Meredith Hunter had been stabbed in the back while the Stones were playing "Sympathy for the devil". This early report cannot be banished, despite repeated corrections. In a postscript to a printed replica, Stones biographer Stanley Booth blames Marcus for his words, which portray the death of Meredith Hunter, a black teenager, as "cold-blooded murder", or at least as "a killing". Booth writes, "I saw the attack on Hunter and what preceded it. I believe he died not because of his proximity to the stage but because he stood with his white date too close to a Hells Angel and made the fatal error of pulling a gun when the Angel pushed him away, not so much to keep Hunter from the stage as to distance himself from the sight of potential miscegenation. I saw it happen. Hearing now, nearly twenty years later, yet another entirely original version, or perversion, of what I observed...followed by the words 'That is what happened', blew, as we used to say in the 'sixties, what's left of my mind". What at first appears to be a dispute between two veterans about the truth of their memories turns into a confrontation about truth in history in general. In their little argument, both authors employ historical statements and those of eyewitnesses, showing that every recounting of 'Altamont' represents a complex exploration of control and prestige.
- 22 Robert Smithson *op. cit.* p. 141
- 23 How far Durant's own image of history is determined by a notion of entropy must however, in view of his works, remain an open question.
- 24 Jacques Derrida *Archive Fever: a Freudian impression* Eric Prenowitz (trans.), University of Chicago Press, Chicago / London, 1995, p. 33
- 25 Derrida *ibid* p. 33
- 26 Derrida *ibid* pp. 33-34
- 27 At this point, I have to refer back to Luhmann's statement, according to which the only alternative is to observe how the world is constructed, without thinking that it is possible to take a privileged standpoint toward history or the present.

Works in the Exhibition