



DENNIS ADAMS



AIRBORNE

Searching the skies over lower Manhattan since 9/11, Adams has photographed newspapers and plastic bags that he observed floating over the city. This lightweight debris becomes airborne from gusts and updrafts generated by traffic, architecture and weather conditions of the city. Suspended in the atmospheric light of changing skies, Adams has captured these isolated urban fragments.

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**K E N T**  
F i n e A r t L L C

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## AIRBORNE

2001 - present

In the months following the attack on the twin towers, Adams began photographing newspapers, plastic bags and other debris that he observed floating over lower Manhattan. This lightweight material is drawn into the upper reaches of the city by updrafts generated by the interaction of traffic, architecture and weather. Suspended in the atmospheric light of changing skies, these isolated urban fragments have been captured as potential signs of both memory and prophesy.



## Sky Writing

*"The whole system seemed fairly absurd to me as I stood there watching the balloons sailing off every which way, dropping tracts everywhere—in the woods, the fields, the water—and I wondered what difference a little piece of paper dropped from nowhere could possibly make to anyone."*<sup>1</sup> **Luis Buñuel**

Since 1975 I have lived in the same loft in New York, about eight blocks north of the Twin Towers. On the morning of September 11, 2001, I had just stepped out of a taxi in front of the Cooper Union when I heard the sky roar. I looked up to see the first plane swooping down like a huge predator over the West Village—then the skyline swallowed it seconds before the north Tower was hit.

The spectacle of the event itself—the striking planes, the burning towers and their sudden collapse—was almost instantaneously seized by the media, replayed again and again, so that even first-hand experiences were being displaced by the saturation of televised images.

What New Yorkers were left with were peripheral—yet for this all the more indelible—impressions, now suspended in memory like a dream: the

falling ashes mingled with thousands of scraps of paper floating silently over downtown streets, the changing form and color of the plume of smoke that hung over lower Manhattan, the indefinable stench in the air, the startling sound of jet fighters replaying the soundtrack of the attack, the walls covered with photocopied pictures of missing loved ones, the multitude of small memorials spreading throughout nooks and crannies of the city, the eerie midday absence of cars and street life south of Canal Street, the advertisements taking on new and unintended meanings, the haunting glow of stadium lights over ground zero at night, the endless parading north and south of rescue and clean-up crews, the warm exchanges between neighbors who had never before acknowledged each other, and finally, the spatial void itself where the Towers once stood, expanding moment by moment into a monumental vacuum of loss.

Catastrophe breaks the rhythm of a city, releasing its survivors from their everyday routes, destinations, and time codes. Every state of emergency is followed by a state of emergence. In the aftermath of September 11, New Yorkers not only wandered the streets, relearning the geography of their neighborhoods, they also looked up in awe and silence at the vertical city, that legendary city they had given away long ago to new immigrants, tourists, and Hollywood. At first this was the result of the attack itself—a lingering paranoia fed by memories of violent aerial images, the ongoing sound of airforce patrols, and the escalating presence of the spatial void at ground zero—but slowly it evolved toward a visual reclamation of the city’s vertical boundaries, a site where desire and danger have always coexisted in the imaginings of New York.

In the months following the attack I needed to distance myself from the hijacking perpetrated by the media and the Bush administration. Saturated with an external excess of information, I recoiled from the rush to fill the physical and symbolic void of ground zero, by journalists, politicians, religious zealots, photographers, urbanists, architects, artists, and advertisers. I wanted—even needed—to respond in some way through my work and only knew that I could not continue as before. I was looking for an approach that was more subtle, that would diffuse the cartoon urgency of a reactive mentality and resist what Blanchot calls “political impatience” in favor of “the patience proper to the ‘poetic’ ... It is not you who will speak; let the disaster speak in you, even if it be by your forgetfulness or silence.”<sup>2</sup> What I came away with after September 11 was the realization that the more catastrophic the event, the more ephemeral the signs capable



of speaking to it. Peripheral incident fills the void of the incomprehensible. The reprieve of countless details grows precious in proportion to the exhaustion of our vigilance, offering a refuge to both displace trauma and to regroup.

As I watched the city transform from the rooftop of my building, I began to photograph: plastic bags, newspapers, and other airborne debris that floated up from the street. Chosen by interminable variables of wind against the weight and shape of their materials, only a few fragments shoot upward, lifted by the constricted drafts of street canyons and sudden gusts from speeding cars, then channeled into violent updrafts between high-rises and beyond, just free of water towers and antennas. Not gods, but fragile and improbable spirits. Some become snagged; some fall to ruin, perhaps to rise again. Others refuse to fall, drifting toward desire and

prophesy in the irises of children and prisoners of the city.

In Wim Wender's *Alice in the Cities* a little girl tracks a distant bird against walls of skyscrapers through a coin-operated telescope from the top of the Empire State Building. As my memory traces that flight, other fragile images follow: Bruno Munari's floating paper snakes, the swirling plastic bag in *American Beauty*, swarms of airborne flyers in Kalatozov's film *I am Cuba*, tickertape-filled skies for Lindberg and Glenn, Mallarmé observing the obscuring of narrative in the windblown pages of a newspaper, Shigeru Ban's blowing curtain wall, the snowballs of David Hammons, the disappearing candies of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, my friend Alfredo Jaar's cloud project over the Mexican-US border, Whistler's nocturnes, Cai Guo-Qiang's fireworks, Wilhelm Reich searching the night sky for orgone energy, Duchamp's bottle of Paris

air, Warhol's silver clouds, Yoko Ono's Sky Dispenser ...

For all its horror, the attack on the Twin Towers reconfirmed the symbolic role of New York as vertical, the city's ultimate resistance to the Enlightenment principles that had determined its horizontal development when a vast grid of streets was devised to parcel out the land in 1811. At the beginning of the twentieth century, New Yorkers revived an ancient image of verticality. They envisioned the city as a collection of medieval towers, a display of fortresses of competing powers. Beyond the common assumption that Manhattan turned upward because the limited space of the island left it nowhere else to go, one might speculate on a deeper motive: that the grid's radical leveling of New York's natural topography gave birth to the city's revenge as vertical, a wild counter-narrative of overcompensation through total extrusion, a violent desire to upend and

warp this unyielding horizontal grid into the upper reaches of the imagination. In their competing bids for attention, skyscrapers disperse their territorial claims in the visual complexity of the skyline, where intersections of ornamental toppings, exposed operating systems, and abstract wedges of sky confound the ego of ascension. Beyond the prescribed social layering that situates the rich and the powerful at the top of the city, here at the limit of vertical megalomania one discovers visual disorientation and vertigo that destabilize social hierarchies better evident and more secure in the urban planning below. The rationality of street, orientation, and facade is displaced in the city's upper reaches.

In 1783 the launching of Montgolfier's passenger balloon at Versailles in the presence of the court and over 120,000 commoners momentarily destabilized the perception of class differences. As Simon

Schama writes of the event, “Instead of being an object of privileged vision—the specialty of Versailles—the balloon was necessarily the visual property of everyone in the crowd. On the ground it was still, to some extent, an aristocratic spectacle; in the air it became more democratic.”<sup>3</sup> At the Al Shati refugee camp in Gaza, boys make kites out of colored tissue paper and folded pages of old homework tethered with cassette tape or torn plastic thread from the sacks of flour distributed by the United Nations—small aerial interventions that hover between diversion and subversion. In Beit Hanun, a town near the Israeli fence that encloses Gaza, boys fly kites in the colors of the Palestinian flag and try to crash them on Israeli tanks.

The combined forces of increasing density and growing subterranean infrastructure created “slot” effects between Manhattan’s buildings and under its streets, which accelerated the wind at ground level

to wild speeds. The “updraft” became a vestige of nature in the vertical city, a manmade hyperforce that entered the imagery of modern urban life. By the turn of the twentieth century, this compressed wind had already become an erotic by-product of New York’s streets. The reputed origin of the phrase “twenty-three skiddoo” goes back to 1901 and the high winds created by the construction of the Flatiron building at 23rd Street—a warning to women (by the police) not to linger near the building, where men would gather to catch a glimpse of ankle beneath windblown skirts. One of Edison’s earliest films, made that same year, showed a woman trying to hold her dress down as she stands over a sidewalk grate in New York, a scene that Marilyn Monroe would transform into an icon over a half a century later. In the aftermath of World War II, artists responded to the psychic fallout of apocalyptic events with lapses, false starts, meditations on absence, and childhood identifications. Empty

space was conceived of as either an image in and of itself or as a tabula rasa upon which to inscribe first gestures. Otto Piene recounted that his memory of Allied air raids as a child—that blue skies no longer meant the freedom of playing outdoors but signaled the potential of attack—spawned his ambivalent relationship to the sky, which makes his choice of the sky for his artistic operations a loaded one. Witnessing the children descending on Amsterdam after a snowstorm, Aldo van Eyck envisioned the reconstruction of the city out of small, leftover fragments. For him the sky had fallen and with it the top-down legacy of modernist urban planning.

Robert Smithson directed his gaze toward the upper reaches of New York, where he perceived the ruins of ancient cultures in the ornamental tops of Art Deco skyscrapers. In his essay “Ultramoderne,” the vertical terminus of the city provides a coda for the flights

of his own musings, generating a spiraling epilogue that unthreads itself in the decor of its own language: “The thirties apartment buildings along Central Park West are named after the bewildering and the remote—The Century, The Majestic, The Eldorado. On top of some of the ultra-towers we discover ziggurats or models of ‘cosmic mountains.’ The heavy leaden memories of monolithic civilizations are placed out of sight, in the aerial regions that few look at.”<sup>4</sup>

In Wenders’s *Wings of Desire* the heights of the buildings, billboards, and monuments of Berlin are occupied by angels. These guardians look down, indifferent to the wall that divides the city. They care nothing of political territories, attentive only to the broken time of the circumstantial; the small dramas and accidents of everyday life accumulate under their unacknowledged gaze. Only the children look up—look back at them as

the inheritors of the vertical city of infinite time and return.

In the wake of every disaster, a pair of eyes look up—toward an opening of blue sky. Always the same blue, whether over Dresden, Sarajevo, or New York. Before we reach its zenith, its full saturation, we must pass through dark clouds, poisonous gases, flames, human ashes, flying debris: the entire detritus of modern warfare and disaster. In the face of catastrophic events, the rush to history—regardless of which one—contains its own fallacy. The eyes seek solace above the noise of words and images, in a clearing for hope and regeneration. Turner and Yves Klein knew. The sky is the silent afterimage of disaster, beyond the limit of language. As the ground for our mourning, our longing, it can never be written.

Dennis Adams, *New York* 2003

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- 1 Buñuel writing on his brief service as a Communist propagandist, when he oversaw the launching of small balloons filled with tracts over the Pyrénées. Luis Buñuel, *My Last Sigh* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
  - 2 Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of Disaster* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986). Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1989).
  - 3 Robert Smithson, *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979).

PAYBACK

2002

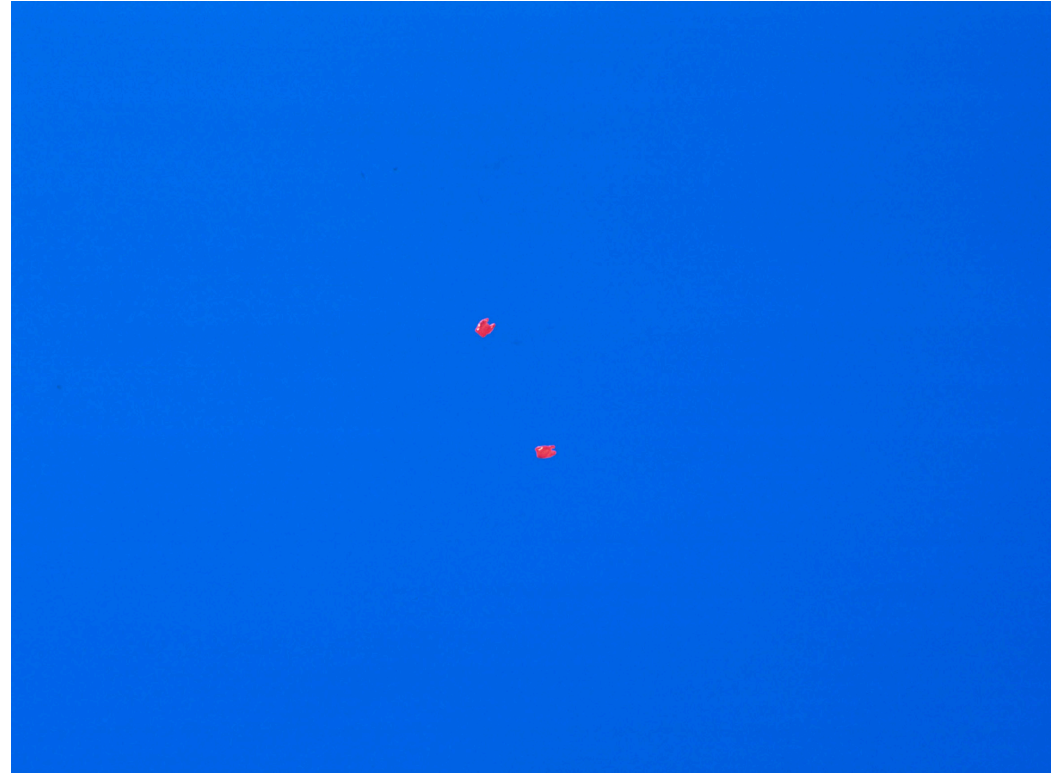
103x137cm



SNAKE EYES

2001

69x91cm



I'M SORRY  
2002  
103x137cm





PATRIOT

2001

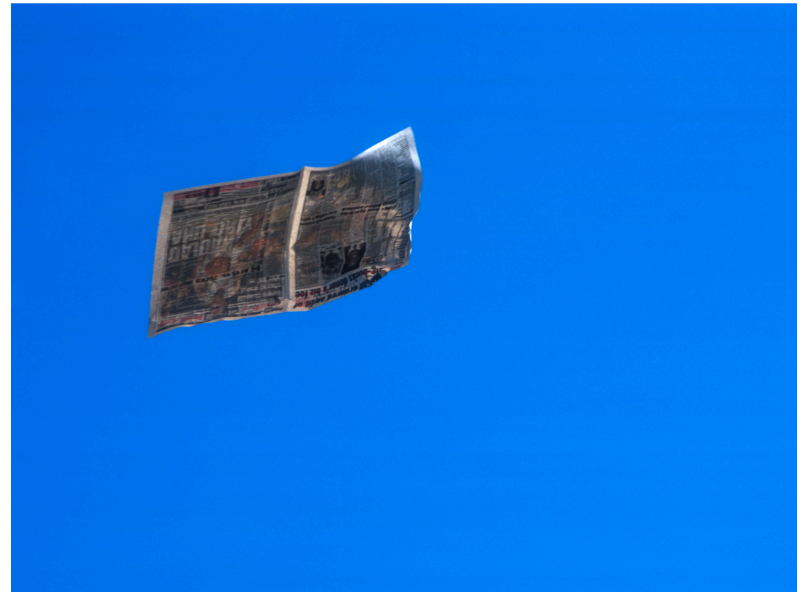
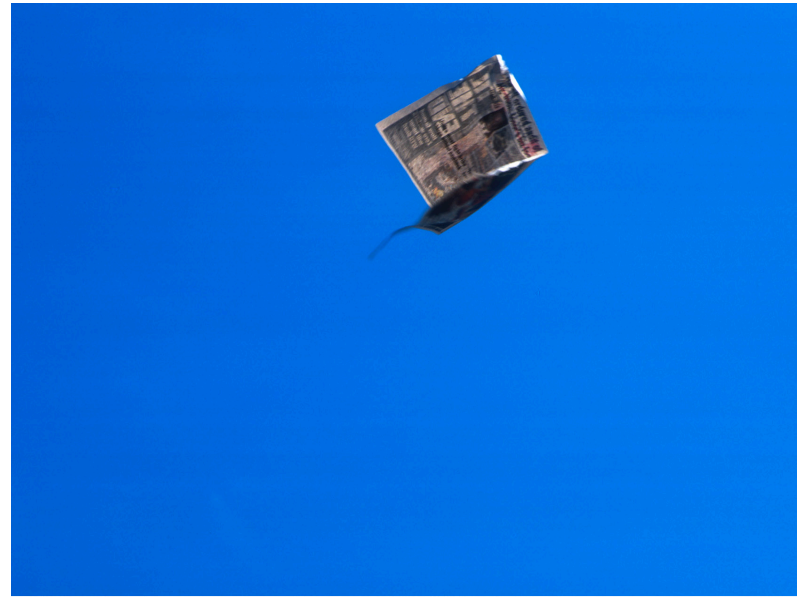
103x137cm



THE END

2002

each 103x137cm



HE IS NO TERRORIST

2002

103x137cm



LIAR, LIAR

2002

103x137cm



DOG

2002

103x137cm



SMILEY FACE

2001

69x91cm



HOOP

2002

each 103x137cm



TRAITOR

2001

103x137cm





ENOUGH

2002

103x137cm





Vincent Lavoie

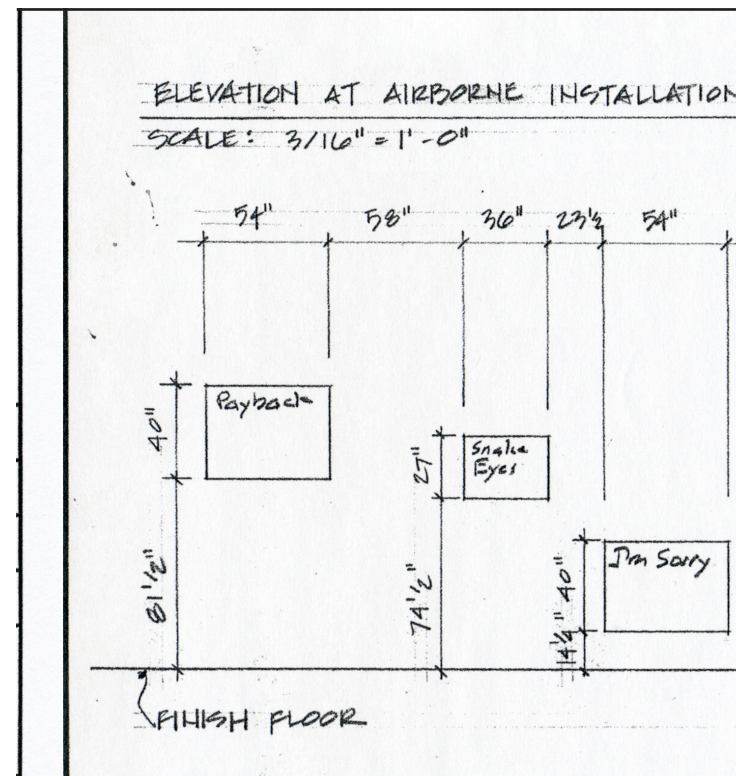
“The very antithesis of the peremptory and patriotic images produced in the wake of the attacks of September 11, the photographs of the American artist Dennis Adams represent a poetic take on the aftermath of the events. Adams photographed refuse and various bits of refuse floating around Manhattan following the collapse of the twin towers. Newspapers, the means first used to transmit pictures of current events, are in dissociable from the history of news photography. Here they are literally carried away by events.”

*2 Entre témoignage et spectacle:  
l'homme selon la photographie  
d'actualité* L'Oeil, October 2003

## AIRBORNE 2002

All images in camera by the artist from 35mm slides, no digital reimagining, 2002. In an edition of three, Set 1/3.

Payback	40 ½ x 54 in.
Snake Eyes	27 x 36 in.
I'm Sorry	40 ½ x 54 in.
Patriot	40 ½ x 54 in.
The End, part 1	40 ½ x 54 in.
The End, part 2	40 ½ x 54 in.
He is No Terrorist	40 ½ x 54 in.
Liar, Liar	40 ½ x 54 in.
Dog	40 ½ x 54 in.
Smiley Face	27 x 36 in.
Hoop, part 1	40 ½ x 54 in.
Hoop, part 2	40 ½ x 54 in.
Traitor	40 ½ x 54 in.
Enough	40 ½ x 54 in.



K E N T

Dennis Adams  
Airborne 02

New York 10001

Attn: D Walk

Date 6/01/04

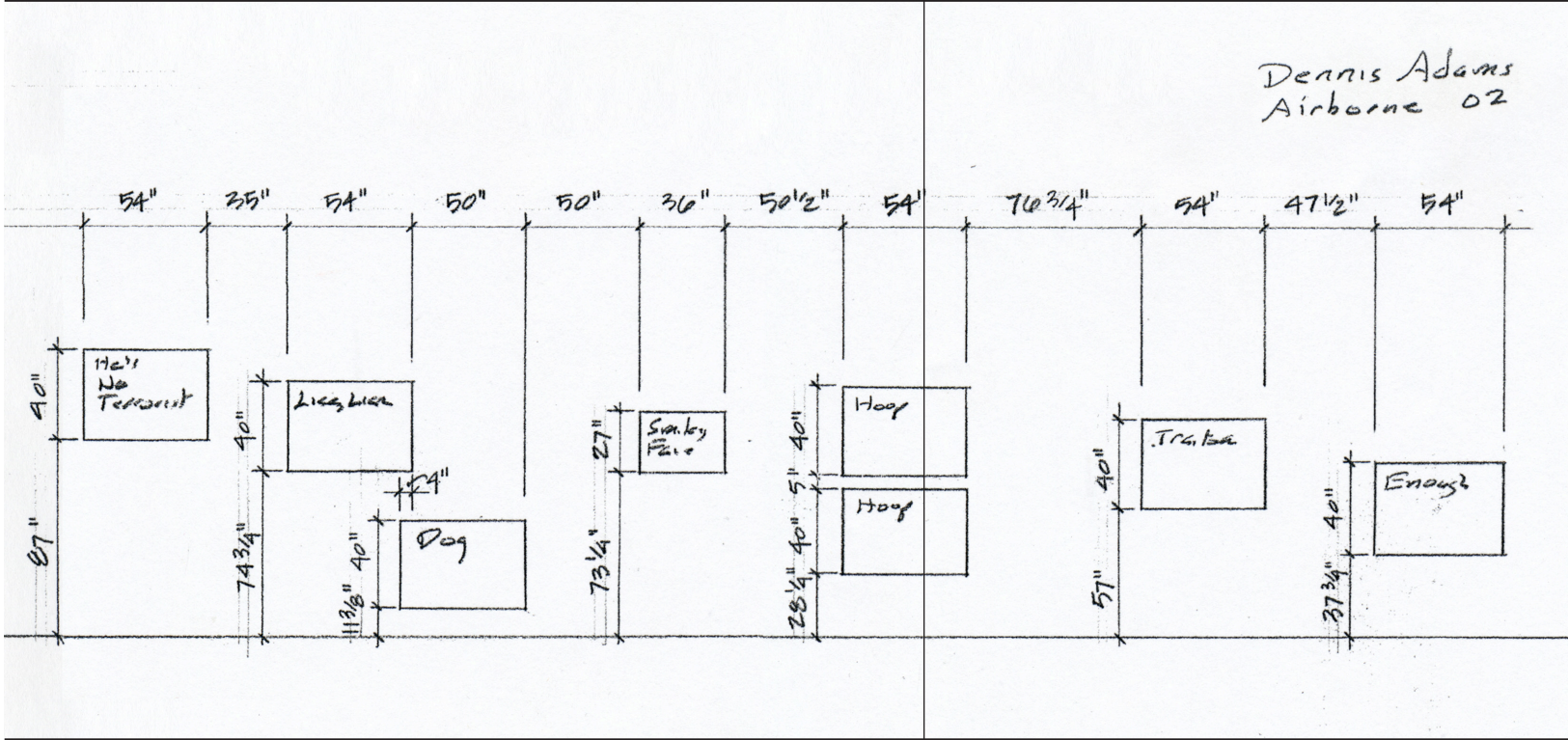
Scale 3/16" = 1'

Drawn N Pillsige

Job

Sheet

Of Sheets



### Exhibitions

Dennis Adams: *Airborne*: Kent Gallery, New York 18 May - 28 June 2002

Dennis Adams: *Airborne: Maintenant: Images du Temps Present* curated by Vincent LaVoie Maison de la Culture Parc Frontenac: Le Mois de la Photo, Montreal 2003

Dennis Adams: *Airborne*: Real Jardin Botanico, PhotoEspaña, Madrid 2 June - 18 July, 2004

### Literature

Johnson, Ken *Dennis Adams: Airborne* New York Times, Reviews, 7 June 2002

Mahoney, Robert *Dennis Adams: Airborne* Timeout New York , 6 June 2002

Lavoie, Vincent: *Maintenant: Images du Temps Present* Montreal: Le Mois de la Photo, 2003, front cover, pp. 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, fronticepieces

*L'Evenement* Archistorm, November 2003

*Cliché, quand tu nous tiens* Femme, October 28 2003

Guerrin, Michael A *Montreal, l'art cherche a dececadrer l'image d'actualite* Le Monde, October 7 2003

Lavoie, Vincent: *2 Entre temoignage et spectacle: l'homme selon*

*la photographie d'actualite* L'Oeil, October 2003

*Le Mois de la Photo a Montreal* Observatoire des Musees, October 2003

Delgado, Jerome *L'actualite autrement* La Presse, September 28 2003

Lemarche, Bernard *Decodes et de sens* Le Devoir, September 28 2003

Crevier, Lyne *Tout Vu*, September 4 2003

Adams, Dennis *Objectif reflexion* L'Actualite, September 1 2003

Lemarche, Bernard *Culture: Le Mois de la Photo, l'instant Extensible* Le Devoir, August 31 2003

Delgado, Jerome *La presse dans la mire au Mois de la photo* La Presse Montreal, August 27 2003

Lemarche, Bernard *De notre temps* Le Devoir, August 24 2003

Passiour, Andre-Constantin *Ici et Maintenant* Fugues, August 20 2003

Delgado, Jerome *Un Automne en Deux Temps* La Presse Montreal, 2003

Baque, Dominique *Pour un Nouvel Art Politique: de l'art contemporain au documentaire* Paris: Flammarion, 2004, *Airborne* illus p. 158

Fernandez, Horacio *Historias* Madrid: PhotoEspaña04, 2004, pp. 63, 64, 65, 66, 168, 169, 170

Guerrin, Michel A *Madrid, les photographes face a l'histoire* Le Monde: Culture, 15 June 2004, p. 30

Furio, Maria Jose *Historias visuales* Barcelona: La Vanguardia, 23 June 2004, color front cover and p. 18

Dennis Adams

b. 1948, Des Moines, Iowa

From the metamorphosis of Patricia Hearst to the trial of Klaus Barbie, from the omissions and distortions of Joseph McCarthy to the execution of the Rosenbergs, Adams has singled out controversial figures and events from our not-too-distant past that, if buried underneath layers of silence, still carry an explosive charge. Over the past three decades, Adams has produced site-specific works, often in highly visible locations such as bus shelters, and urban public settings that focus on the phenomenon of collective amnesia in the late twentieth century. A survey of ten years of site-specific interventions was published in a monograph entitled *Dennis Adams: The Architecture of Amnesia* (1989) written by Maryanne Staniszewski. The publication was followed by two mid-career surveys organized by the Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen and the Contemporary Art Museum of Houston.

Adams has been a faculty member or Visiting Professor at numerous institutions including, Parsons School of Design, Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris, Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten, Amsterdam, and the Akademie der Bildenden Kunst, Munich. From 1997 to 2004, he was the Director of the Visual Arts Program in the School of Architecture at MIT in Cambridge, MA. He currently lectures at Cooper Union, New York.

