

# DUST ON THE NEEDLE: MOYRA DAVEY'S PHONO/ PHOTOGRAPHICS ERIC ROSENBERG

It is said that when the Beatles listened to the first playbacks of their recorded music at EMI studios, in 1962, it was the first time they really heard what they sounded like. Paul McCartney apparently exclaimed: "Oh, that sounds just like a record! Let's do this again and again and again!"<sup>1</sup> From the moment sound emerged from studio speakers, the listener sought fulfillment of the wish in the assumption that all will come to roost in the form of a "record"—as vinyl, in other words. And not just any vinyl, but vinyl as a totality, an essence, repeated into infinity, which only gains its true and ultimate character in a completion—understood as such—that is made, heard, seen even, and held, perhaps, "again and again and again."

Of course, that figure of repetition masks the wish fulfillment of another type of repetition, that of sales. But, for the time being, let's stop on the alacrity with which McCartney makes

recording, makes sound itself, into vinyl, or into some kind of cognate articulation: the record. It is almost as if this resolution *has* to come to pass, its potential deferral an absolutely unacceptable conclusion to all that is implied in the making of the recording in the first place, or to the wish for a conclusion to whatever the original desire—for perhaps the sound in and of itself—might have been.

McCartney's startled, befuddled, delighted, and sublime reaction is capacious enough to hold the wonder that must have been obtained from hearing performances and songs such as "Ask Me Why," "I Saw Her Standing There," "There's a Place," and "Misery" played back for the first time. In such capacity there is suggested as well a largeness of experience that is embedded in the cultural capital held by the very term "record." The experience of the finished product must have been looked forward to so much that

what came out of the speakers in the studio that first time was, to the imagination, a finished, marketable product that engaged *all* of the senses at once—the sound of the LP, the look of the album’s cover photo, the text that constituted liner notes, and the material feel of the object—even if a number of those stages of production still lay in the future.

In other words, while the Beatles were not yet in the presence of their sound transmogrified into vinyl, a part of their reaction must surely have conflated the audio experience of recorded sound with the black vinyl embodiment of what would soon reach consumers, listeners, *fans*. It was, in fact, the cycle of maker and receiver, in its very completion, that demanded reaffirmation, “again and again and again.” The metonymic sign of such was and is the nearly monolithic repetition of countless discs that litter the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and survive into the 21<sup>st</sup>, since the moment in 1900 when Nipper stared intently into the gramophone funnel looking for *His Master’s Voice*.

Moyra Davey’s photographs understand this nexus, and quite a bit more.

*Shure* (2003) offers the viewer a record on a turntable being “played,” to put it colloquially, by a stylus, attached to a cartridge, which, in this case, is an early 1970s Shure N97HE ERA IV, or a “pretty good piece of hardware,” as one recent Internet chat-room discussant put it.



sticking through the hole in the center of the platter. And yet the seemingly innocent movement of the earth on its own axis and around that of the sun is belied by the deliberate violence done to vinyl by the application of stylus to the record's surface, the cartridge accruing the look of a locomotive's cow catcher as it collects dust from the vinyl's grooves, its furrows, its streams of sound-holding polymer. Needle to vinyl comes to seem a virtual determinant of environmental conditions: a *deus ex machina* stirring up dust, making particles, "harvesting" the detritus that attaches itself so naturally to the polished surface, while disturbing the peace, the ironic silence that is always present in any given moment as embodied by the vast portions of the vinyl yet to be played. A mini-drama of "creation" is played out before our eyes, wherein the sharp scratch of the stylus pries music or spoken word or sound effect out of the otherwise resistant vinyl, out of the primordial blackness of the polymer itself.

Davey's photograph *Shure* takes on historic proportions as its vision of the everyday unleashes a struggle of epic scope, even as it trades in the microscopic. In doing so it offers an epic to which we are usually blind, vis-à-vis those mechanisms by which sound itself is carried physically, and deaf by dint of those by which sound is actually made manifest. In other words, we cannot hear what we see. So much sensory experience implied, so much held in abeyance; any chance at pleasure seems almost in the extent to which it is always deferred, belated, held, as if an investment, by the photograph's visuality. The photograph itself becomes a displacement of its very subject.

The needle wears the groove, fits into the grooves, already worn, or ribboned, into the vinyl surface of an unidentifiable LP.

The plain fact of vinyl is evident and unavoidable, a functioning aspect of daily life, turning as the very world itself turns: all rotation, spin, axis, and orbit, its sun a plastic spindle

The artist's fascination with vinyl and its attendant accoutrements—its housings, its information, its mechanisms of amplification and reproduction, its storage—is, in fact, only evident photographically in its visualization. At the same time, sound is implied or directly referenced in *Shure* at virtually every visual moment. The image takes its responsibility to sound seriously; highlights rest on the surface as if musical notes on a clef. Take, for instance, a detail as passing as that one we might rightly call the most frontal and forward of all on view. In the image, an illuminated patch at the front edge of the disc, extending as far inward, perhaps, as the end of the first track holds the grooves in the vinyl (those most particular signs of the presence of sound), and almost seems to flip them upward to appear parallel with the picture's surface or plane, in a gesture that is nearly declarative in its effect. It's a smudge, or a thumbprint, the kind of mark that vinyl in this form is so susceptible to bearing. Or maybe it is a mere drag of light catching the black, mirrorlike surface of the vinyl, which seems invisible on first glance but is actually dense with form, information, color, and material. In turn, this curvilinear grid finds its most proximate tonal cognate in the mass of dust collected by the stylus in the middle ground of the image, also arguably the photograph's most highly illuminated and visually loudest note. Indeed, once noticed, the dust on the needle calls to our attention another dramatically lit detail in the photo: the head or top of the cartridge that holds the stylus bearing down into the vinyl below and the name SHURE. Quite aptly, that surface, which in its density exerts the greatest pressure on the sound-bearing material, is an almost divinely lit

passage—one of the lightest in the whole photograph. This might be a pun, but it is also an irony. In the absence of sound, Davey's image declares the deafening quality of vinyl's visuality. The photograph assumes the responsibility of all the senses in one; if it cannot reproduce sound, it will at least be specific in its owning to what is required of the visual as metaphor. There is an ethics at play here.

To that end, it is essential to recognize that vinyl, conformed as a long-playing record, constitutes a reflective surface. This surface, in turn, refracts light, or encourages retinal refraction, embedding in the disc a shadow of whatever is captured in the space of that light. As vinyl serves to contain sound, so it also demands sight's attention. This seems particularly true of *Shure*, with its whirl of light and dark slips of mirroring surface, so reflective as to hold dust and particles only above the plane of the record, even when simultaneously nailed down by the groove-cutting stylus.

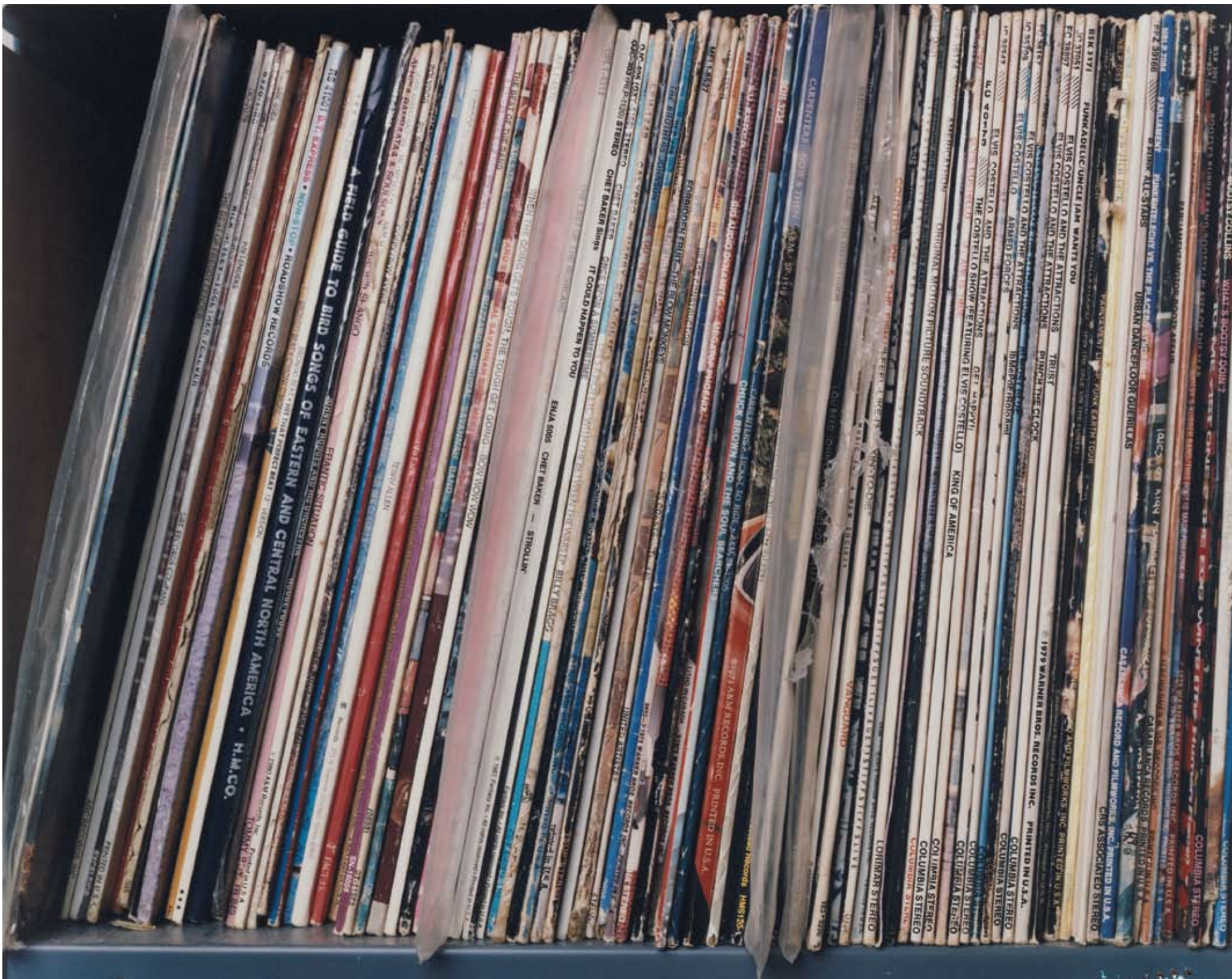
Sight, thus, comes to seem inseparable from sound, seems given back, in fact, by sound's materialism. Sound's visuality, its imagined materiality, is always a displacement, a deferral, a metaphor without a material referent, or, more unsettling still, a referent without a metaphor. Sound's appearance is in its maker, its receiver, but never the thing itself or stuff itself—at least not to the naked eye. Of course, our existence is dependent upon the constant elision of one sensory experience by another, to the extent that we spend our days "hearing things" and saying we "see" in order to register comprehension, and "tasting" experience and "feeling" blue. At the same time, a state of pure sensory distinction argues against the possibility of such

metaphoric translations of the real. The eyes do this, the ears that, the tongue another thing altogether, or so it would seem.

Whatever the case, we persist in looking at sound, or allegorizing sound as held by forms other than itself, or conveying sound by conduits, constructed like *passagen*, to insure movement of waves from maker to hearing receptacle, as we pass images like arcaded storefronts along the route.

This is the effect given off by record spine after record spine in Davey's photographs *Bird Songs*, *Greatest Hits*, and *Glass* (all 1999).









Indeed, the word “album” already brings to mind the lexicography of early photography: *The Pencil of Nature*, *Sun Pictures*, *Gardner’s Photographic Sketchbook*.<sup>2</sup> Lest we worry too much over the recent obsolescence of vinyl in relationship to digital technologies, we find down such associative paths a trip more alaciously headed for the first decades of photographic work. The very notion of the outmoded is rendered obsolete by the transformative tenacity of vocabulary’s persistent, even historical rightness. In turn, the attraction of vinyl as photographic subject is found in proximity to some of the most originary marks of visualizing technology, an acknowledgment of the extent to which the emergence of the auditory into reproducible form is as dependent upon symmetry with, and enframing within, the visual.

A type of formal arcade is made here out of the archival tendency, the housing that is so familiar, so everyday. And the very reorientation of the visual demanded by the implied auditory, in the reflective quality of vinyl, its pliability, and tendency to smudge and fingerprint, is mirrored in the perversion of the visual demanded in the

reading of these very album spines. That is to say, the imagined perfection of what the vinyl is conveying is belied by the very imperfection of the means of conveyance (and not just the smudge, but the always anticipated *snap*, *crackle*, *pop* of imperfect, damaged, and strafed surface).

This is a banal trope, perhaps, but persistent as heck; the founding imagery of the phonograph and its attendant accoutrements turn, so to speak, on this very figuration. *His Master’s Voice* has Nipper actually *looking* at sound, as much as—even as the end result of—hearing it. That, of course, is what is demanded by many of Davey’s photographs: the conditional or situational fact that we are never far removed from the founding truism that sound’s abstraction demands the marshalling of other senses and faculties, in order to reign in the destabilization inherent in hearing’s invisibility.

And yet so simple a proposition is deceptive. Davey’s images ask us to reorient our gaze in difficult and contorted ways. As is the case when we peruse albums on a shelf in real time, she asks us to bend our heads to the right at a 45-degree angle in order to ‘read’ the title and artist of each record-cover spine. Reading is proposed as an act other than looking, one that entails a reorientation that is perpendicular to the expectations of standing before the shelf, or the photo, and perusing at 90 degrees. Here, then, are the difficulties later to be encountered in reading cyberspace: reading against the flat surface of the computer screen, reading as scrolling, up and down. And so, when mobilized by Davey’s photograph, reading requires a movement against the grain of looking.

In contrast, hearing and looking seem somehow congruent, all cutting

horizontally across the plane of ear and eye. When considering the album spine, reading’s approximation of horizontality is only purchased with difficulty and the deformation of the norm. Such typologies of the senses as performative entities are of particular importance to Davey. Consider the relative drama of close-ups that is accorded her shelved albums. We are meant and invited to read, as well as to look—but a distinction between the two remains necessary.

For photography is never just about looking for Davey. Her images require the viewer’s senses be marshaled in their entirety. We want to pull this or that record off the shelf; we want to twiddle the knobs of this or that receiver. We want to adjust the position of that *Speaker* (2003); we want to lift the cartridge from the LP and blow the dust off the stylus. After it finishes playing, we want to return the Laura Nyro record in *Nyro* (2003) to its inner sleeve, and then to the album cover itself, and then we want to put something else on.







To put it another way, these are deeply unselfish images. They confess their incompleteness as they take our hand, engage our eye, and remind us of the first time we heard Al Green's "Look What You Done for Me," or Elvis Costello's "Allison," and of the last, and of how we look forward to the next. In fact, we positively crave the next: it's McCartney's "again and again and again," transposed to the receiver, the audience, as well as the maker. In the end, we are encouraged to press our ear to the surface of the photograph, as Nipper trained his eyes on the first phonograph's speaker, looking for *His Master's Voice*. Except in this case, there's no master, save perhaps for what one of Nipper's contemporaries might have called *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*.

Of course, at the very moment that Nipper trained his gaze on the miracle of recorded sound, Freud published his *Interpretation of Dreams*. Somewhere in the match conducted between *Shure* and *Paw* (both 2003), we find the concatenation of wonder, but also the degree to which wonder, and its attendant dream, are always mired in the stuff and detritus of the everyday, conscious or otherwise.

These are photographs that are only complete in their suggestion of our participation, in their implication of a collective experience in which they are merely another contiguous part—momentarily dominant, perhaps, in their initiatory status, in their very power of suggestion, but cooperative and coextensive. Pliable to suggestion themselves, the images work with the viewer to find a way into the having of pleasure, the fulfillment or failure of desire, the perpetuation of the moment, which can only be manifested relationally, if sometimes in solitude, and never only as solipsism. The repetition compulsion that is insured by the maintenance of the outmoded, the very trauma of the outmoded, is, in other words, only affirmed socially.



*Paw* (2003), C-print, 24 × 20 inches

Davey's images propose the momentary as a dream of the coalescence of the senses, the connection of the animal to the technological, the way in which the animal *drives* the technological. Furthermore, her photographs propose the extent to which even the most perfect of machinery is not inured to the ravages of time, environment, animus, aggression, and passivity, but instead just might be able to render the past present, and not at the cost of progress—the CD and CD player *do* make their appearance in Davey's images—but simply to discourage a culture of forgetting the

still functional but not necessarily new and improved.

These are modes of reproduction, which are, after all, what our senses are, what we ourselves are. If we weren't, we would lack the mechanisms by which to filter reality to the extent that we can bear it. What Davey's images demonstrate is that this filtering process is anything but a purely internalized exercise in survival. Instead, it has an inextricably social component, which isn't simply about the passage of time in the most mundane and personal of settings, but about our survival in relation to one another. This survival is strained through consumerism, and the maintenance of popular culture in all its sordid as well as sublime formations, as well as the endless reminders of our commodity fetishism, into perpetuity. But it also relates to the little acts of resistance to such: the photographs themselves, and the games of looking (and hearing, feeling, smelling, and tasting) they encourage us to participate in. These are the games by which we survive another day, another minute, another hour.

For games, read play. Davey's photographs skirt, somehow, the edge of Walter Benjamin's beautiful, poignant, and painful closing statement to an essay called "Old Toys," written in 1928 for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*:

But we must not forget that the most enduring modifications in toys are never the work of adults, whether they be educators, manufacturers, or writers, but are the result of children at play. Once mislaid, broken, and repaired, even the most princely doll becomes a capable proletarian comrade in the children's play commune.<sup>3</sup>

Revolution, located for the moment in the realm of children's play, seems to gain its most personal and yet most *possible* manifestation as a result of the quotidian reconfigurations to which we subject our objects of everyday play, pleasure, survival, and even work. Once perfect in their newness, lordly in their elevated status—and who can deny the extent to which any new piece of technology *lords* it over us?—such objects become part of a collectively broken but still functional world that goes on because we go on with it, reuse it, reimagine its use, because it makes use of the past in the present, rather than rendering it obsolete at the drop of a needle, or the click of the shutter.

Something of the narrative Benjamin accords the child's resourcefulness with toys—an ethos likely more lost to us today than ever before, given that all technology and manufacture is now instantly replaceable when first recognized as damaged, defaced, even traumatized—is at the heart of Davey's immersion in seemingly outdated means of representation, reproduction, pleasure, and desire.

*Receiver* and *Receivers* (both 2003) make this point.





In the first photograph the new and the old work together, the adaptability of technology being the *modus operandi*. In the second image, the sheer multiplication of possible solutions to the problem of amplification, all pre-digital, speaks to the notion that we forget the past at our grave (no pun intended) risk. The child's adaptation of the broken toy prince—the implication even of the child in the very breaking of the toy—to the ongoing circumstance of play, produces a plethora of variations denoting improvement as well, of course, as cost. How many different volume controls do we need? How many ways to push sound through

a set of speakers? How good does the sound have to be? How clear, how powerful? Are the Beatles better digitally than they are analogically? Does *The White Album* sound superior downloaded to an iPod Nano than the cassette version through a Sony Walkman, or best by way of the recent CD remasters of 2009. Mono or stereo? Can the sublime *be* new and improved?

Any kind of sustained critique of terms like obsolescence, progress, the outmoded, or “better” will demand much closer consideration than, even considerable disagreement with, what this essay can offer. What Davey's photographs allow for, however, is a way into (and perhaps out of) the inevitable oppression that results from our blind devotion to sensory regimes—so expertly facilitated by the drive of capitalism—that demand a constant reevaluation of the present, of our being here now, of our always already being before death.

Let the present *be*, say Davey's photographs. Let it have its time, *let it take its time*, especially if the future means doing away with what's broken before we determine how the broken might be still employed, held, or *seen*. Let's not be too overly anxious to actualize the future, her images say. Since too frequently those impulses have ended in pain, let's elasticize the present, so that eternity might last a day, instead of being eternally a cometlike flash of light, or sound. Let vinyl hold what it holds. If use-value is still construable, let's keep it on the shelves, and in the picture. Let's turn the volume on our old receivers up to 11 and party like we remember, perhaps even understand, something of 1999. Let's remember Roy Rogers and Dale Evans's signature tune, “Happy Trails,” sung by Quicksilver Messenger Service

at the end of their 1969 LP of the same name: “Happy Trails, to you, *until* we meet again.” The present is always deferred; the present is always the future. Let's not rush to declare the outmoded before we are in the midst and can more adequately take the temperature of its inevitable return. Even the shiniest new toys only elide the past. They never fully replace it nor determine its absolute and eternal inutility.

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- 1 Geoffrey O'Brien, “Seven Years in the Life,” *New York Review of Books*, vol. 48, N° 1 (January 11, 2001).
- 2 The first two titles here refer to William Henry Fox Talbot's following works: *The Pencil of Nature* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1844–1846), and *Sun Pictures of Scotland* (London: 1845). The following work referenced is: Alexander Gardner, *Gardner's Photographic*

- Sketchbook of the War* (Washington, DC: Philp & Solomons, 1865).
- 3 Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume Two, 1927–1934* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999) 101.