

CRASH: AN ODE TO VALERIE, ANNIE AND ELIZABETH

Rachel Hope Allan



Figure 1. Rachel Hope Allan, *Spit and Blow*, 2017, archival digital inkjet print on Epson Hot Press Bright, 285gsm, 1000 mm x 2000 mm.

Jean Baudrillard writes in *Simulacra and Simulation*: "From a classical (even cybernetic) perspective, technology is an extension of the body;"¹

Sharing the title of JG Ballard's novel of the same name, the series of works titled *CRASH* explores the textured collision between technology and human inquiry. The works are *as raw as rope burn* and *as black as the dull ache you only feel in your groin*. Accelerating into a world where steel and steam fuse with spit, rubber and desire, this series of works was rendered from photographic process of both the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries. *CRASH* deals with restraint, curiosity, violence and mimicry. It attempts to challenge perceptions of reality and explores the fetishisation of objects in both subject matter and process.

Offered up to me, as if by the motorway angel himself, was the vehicle versus vehicle, the so-called 'accident' that altered my delivery of the silver-soaked fibre. I had been waiting for it to happen, almost willing it into being, lusting over the broken glass and contusions, the impact: that moment when everything slows down, steel on steel, skin against seatbelt. When it is both incredibly loud, but unnervingly silent.

You breathed life into me. Lifted my inert body up and away like a god. Our teeth touched and your saliva slid down my throat: my bruised lips and the pins and needles in my wrist the only reminder of our encounter. But you are here with me now, here with me always. When the lights flash and then everything goes black you stand beside me. One, two, three, breathe.

What began in homage to JG Ballard's pivotal symphorophilic² novel *Crash*³ emerges as something new. The photographic work from *CRASH* pulls focus on the fragility of life by centering on a cardiopulmonary resuscitation manikin as its subject and through the use of antiquated and contemporary photographic processes. From the semen-soaked pages smelling of oil and lube grows a similarly divergent picture.

I remember vividly the first time I learnt CPR⁴. Dressed in white knee-high socks and sandals, I was ushered into the school assembly hall. It was cold and had been raining and my woollen uniform itched against my skin. The hall was empty except for the cardiopulmonary resuscitation manikin and the awkwardly standing CPR instructor:

Something happened when I knelt at the manikin's side, when I first felt my breath inflate her plastic lungs, when I called her by her name: *Annie*.

She became real.

She became everyone.



Figure 2. Rachel Hope Allan, from the series: *sex & sedatives*, 2017, archival digital ink jet print on Epson Hot Press, 285gsm, 500 × 500 mm.

In Paris, in the 1880s, a beautiful young woman's body was pulled out of the river Seine at the Quai de Louvre. She had no identification and her clothing did not point to her position in life. Her body showed no signs of violence, so her death was ruled a suicide. In accordance with the practice of the time, she was exposed/exhibited at the Paris morgue. Viewing bodies at the morgue was a popular pastime, but the body of *L'Inconnue de la Seine* ("the Unknown Woman of the Seine") was never identified or claimed. In addition, the mortician at the Paris morgue was allegedly so intrigued by the beauty and apparent smile of the unknown girl, that he had a death mask made of her face. *L'Inconnue de la Seine*'s death mask thus became a cult object. It was hung in the polite homes of bohemian society and graced the wall of artists' studios. Her likeness became the erotic ideal of the period. But why is this melancholic tale relevant and why does it continue to be retold?

Rescue Annie, the manikin I encountered in the dusty assembly hall all those years ago, has L'Inconnue's face: or rather, she is the simulacrum of her; has her enigmatic smile. A nineteenth-century identity theft has relegated an unclaimed corpse's likeness to be poked and prodded, violated and victimised for eternity. Asund Laerdal was the toy-maker who gave the CPR manikin L' Inconnue de la Seine's likeness. He believed that she had a face people would want to rescue.⁵ But this leaves L'Inconnue caught in a loop, unable to rest, succumbing to the will of the do-gooder or whim of the miscreant. She is coveted and abused, consigned to dusty cupboards and trunks, wiped down with rubbing alcohol and stuffed into bags. CPR course participants are taught to imagine that the manikin in front of them is indeed a real person. They are instructed to call her name as they approach.

Rescue Annie is an enigma, often referred to as "The Mona Lisa of the Seine." She is a vessel for us to project our own dreams onto, she is unattainable and silent. Elizabeth Bronfen wrote in *Over her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*: "She is desirable because she is distant, absent or not quite there, a dream, a phantom, a mediatrix, a muse."⁶ The manikin itself generates the dual emotional quality of fear and attraction. Annie's likeness is almost invariably seen without a physical body, thus consequently she has no social body: she belongs to no one, asks for nothing and therefore is non-threatening.



Figure 3. Rachel Hope Allan, *Elizabeth Taylor*, 2015, unique ambrotype, 165 mm x 125 mm.

The work in Figure 3, simply titled *Elizabeth Taylor* (2015) is a direct reference to the silver screen legend and protagonist's crush in Ballard's novel. The work has two utterances in its realisation: one chemical and one digital. The chemical photographic process, Ambrotype, literally means "immortal impression." Rescue Annie and my wet-plate photographic practice are entwined through their precarious and unique histories. The digital photographic process in essence is an exercise in duplicating or transposing the wet into dry by re-photographing the Ambrotype, forcing the chemistry into code, enlarging it and exposing the fragility of the chemical process by amplifying its pores. When viewed together, these pieces ask the viewer to fall headlong into a collision between the real and its simulation. Questions of authenticity and aura are provoked by the reveal of what lies beneath the digital. Code and chemistry collide, providing the impetuses for new life and expectations.



Figure 4. Rachel Hope Allan, *Helen Remington/Breathe for Me*, 2017, archival digital ink jet print on Epson Hot Press, 285gsm, 500 x 500 mm.

Wearing lipstick smears, a plastic bag and fluid, an exhausted L'Inconnue is captured in violence. Here, the images expelled from the mechanical device depict the aftermath (the corpse). They are confronting due to their size and subject matter. But there is a quietness to the work. Car and camera arouse an indexical link, while the device and doll collide.



Figure 5. Rachel Hope Allan, *The Overpass*, 2017, archival digital ink jet print on Epsom Hot Press Bright, 285gsm, 1000 mm x 2000 mm.

In *The Overpass* (2017), Rescue Annie is cast as the one to be saved. Photographed alongside the interior of the rescue vehicle and before the resuscitation, this image allows the viewer to bear witness to the intensity of the act: the disembodiment of trauma and the uncanniness of coming back to life.

My Annie embodies all that require the kiss of life, her decapitated self wounded by my own impact upon her; her stillness reconciling her implicitness in the recreations acted out. Roland Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida* that: "A photograph however lifelike we strive to make it (and this frenzy to be lifelike can only be our mythic denial of apprehension of death) ... is a kind of primitive theatre, a kind of tableau vivant, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead."¹⁷ A photograph, like a death mask, has the power to resurrect the past. It is a testament to the fact that the moment-of or having-been existed. "Photographs are a way of imprisoning reality, understood as recalcitrant, inaccessible; of making it stand still."¹⁸ A photograph retains knowledge of a precise moment in time. It is physically touched or wounded by its subject. It is a testimony of that thing or moment having existed. It is the photograph that breathes life into my Annie, that resuscitates my Elizabeth, and it is the camera that wounds her.

The camera itself is a machine that both distances and protects its user; its controller; or its handler.

In *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Vilém Flusser suggests that "In the act of photography the camera does the will of the photographer but the photographer has to will what the camera will do."¹⁹ The photographer is always limited by what the camera can do; "the freedom of the photographer remains a programmed freedom."¹⁰



Figure 6. Rachel Hope Allan, *do no harm*, 2017, archival digital ink jet print on Epson Hot Press, 285gsm, 500 x 500 mm.

Perverse acts of photography are inherent in my practice. Photographic techniques collide to produce images that clutch at the fluid hybridity of life, seizing it and holding the notion still enough to leave a definable trace. There is a physicality to my work. Large format cameras are removed from their anchors and cradled between thighs; there is an urgency owing to the demands of the techniques deployed. There is an apprehension of one's own death.

Convulsive beauty¹¹ is the fetishistic side of the marvelous. It is linked to the feminine and involves 'hysterical' confusion, delight and dread, attraction and repulsion. *CRASH* (the exhibition) picks at the seams of reality to expose the eerie, breathless flesh of the CPR training manikin and the fascination – and ultimately, fetishisation and personification – of a rubber device used to instruct CPR trainees.

In Ballard's *Crash*, body and technology entwine: metal, glass and skin intermingle with sweat and spit. Vaughan (the protagonist) stalks and constructs car crash scenes. He photographs the aftermaths, the wounds, the debris, the deaths. In *Crash*, the camera is used both as a weapon and fetishist device to highlight the protagonist's deliberate dance with death. Vaughan's pictures of wounds fused with steel, limbs with tarmac, become trophy pieces and reminders of automobile versus human. "It is the Accident that gives form to life ..."¹²

"As Vaughan turned the car into a filling station courtyard the scarlet light from the neon sign over the portico flared across these grainy photographs of appalling injuries: breasts of teenage girls deformed by instrument binnacles"¹³ In *Simulation and Simulacra*, Baudrillard also refers to Ballard's novel: "Pleasure (whether perverse or not) was always mediated by a technical apparatus ..."¹⁴. Like Vaughan, I use my apparatus, my device, to both distance me and enter me in the carnage. What I choose to photograph with is as integral to my process as my doll and my dog-eared copy of *Crash*. Baudrillard writes: "the shining and saturated surface of traffic and of the accident is without depth, but it is always doubled in Vaughan's camera lens. The lens stockpiles and hoards accident photos like dossiers."¹⁵

There is an obsession associated with ambulance-chasing and photograph-taking. That fleeting moment when your heart rate slows and your breath becomes shallow. Susan Sontag suggested that to "take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt."¹⁶ In this series, there is a fusion of technology, sex and death, and a "new sexuality born from a perverse technology"¹⁷ is achieved.

So, I search scrapyards for blooded remnants and retrieve anonymous gifts of manikins from my mailbox. I resuscitate and coax exhausted chemistry from its slumber; warming it against my body. I inflate my goddess and spit in her face, I retouch and rephotograph. I covet her. I seal my lips to hers in an attempt to resuscitate one man's fantasy and the myth of a girl too beautiful to fade away. She is my secret, my mother, my Annie, my Elizabeth Taylor. I am her-Vaughan and he is me.

The boundaries between Ballard's fantasy and mine have blurred and mirror the balance between fiction and reality that has altered so significantly in the past decades.

In my photographs I rehearse a death, I rerun the resus. I magnify my fears and export the minute details of my hauntings. My offering to the highway angels is exported, enlarging the grittiness until it dissolves into the blackest of black. I exploit the imperfections of character and code. My mutilated Annie bears witness to this exploitation, enacting erotic celebrations of convulsive beauty. The images commemorate Her potency and Her future demise. They provoke confusion. She is inanimate but real, simultaneously dead and alive.

Interested in subterfuge, trickery and the alchemical magic of photography, **Rachel Hope Allan's** photographic work raises questions about the potential and expectations of image production in the twenty-first century. Allan holds a Master of Fine Art with distinction from the Dunedin School of Art, where she now lectures in photography and electronic arts. Allan's research practice is wide-ranging and extends from traditional, darkroom-based processes through to digital and alternative liquid photography. Her work deals with restraint, curiosity and mimicry, and she is interested in using her work to challenge perceptions of reality, and to explore the fetishisation of processes and objects. Allan exhibits locally and internationally in public museums, art galleries, project galleries and artist-run spaces.

- 1 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), 111.
- 2 "Symphorophilia "is a paraphilia in which sexual arousal involves staging and watching a disaster, such as a fire or an accident. The term was coined by John Money in his 1984 paper *Paraphilias: Phenomenology and Classification*, formed from the Greek root "συμφορά" ("symphora," event, misfortune) [J Money, "Paraphilias: Phenomenology and Classification," *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, 38:2 (1984), 164-78.] A special form of sacrificial paraphilia, for which a suitable name is symphorophilia (being erotically turned on by accidents or catastrophes), culminates in an arranged disaster, such as an automobile crash. Like a game of Russian roulette, it may end in death – alone or with the partner. However, flirting with disaster, rather than suicide and murder is the trigger responsible for autoerotic arousal and excitement. Being the daredevil who will live to risk a love-death again is an essential part of this paraphilia. As a photographic print is the positive made from its negative, so also the positive of self-crashing is arranging for a disaster to occur on the highway, and then watching the carnage from a preselected observation post. Disasters other than on the highway may be arranged – catastrophic fires, for example. For those members of the general public who have a touch of sadomasochism in them, disaster as an unrehearsed event is often a large part of the appeal of entertainment stunts and sports, from the circus to stock-car racing." <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphorophilia> (accessed 19 April 2017).
- 3 JG Ballard, *Crash* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973).
- 4 "Cardiopulmonary resuscitation, commonly known as CPR, is an emergency procedure that combines chest compression often with artificial ventilation in an effort to manually preserve intact brain function until further measures are taken to restore spontaneous blood circulation and breathing in a person who is in cardiac arrest." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cardiopulmonary_resuscitation (accessed 30 April 2017).
- 5 Jeremy Grange, "Resusci Anne and L'Inconnue: The Mona Lisa of the Seine," *BBCNewsMagazine*, 16 October 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-24534069> (accessed 30 April 2017).
- 6 Elizabeth Bronfen, *Over her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 205.
- 7 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1981), 31-2.
- 8 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Allen Lane, 1978), 14.
- 9 Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 35.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (London: MIT Press, 1993).
- 12 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 113.
- 13 Ballard, *Crash*, 134.
- 14 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 116.
- 15 Sontag, *On Photography*, 15.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ballard, *Crash*, 13.