Hearne Pardee, "Destructive Modernism: Two Exhibitions of Victor Burgin", *Artcritical* , October 1, 2016, http://www.artcritical.com/2016/10/01/hearne-pardee-on-victor-burgin/.

artcritical
the online magazine of art and ideas

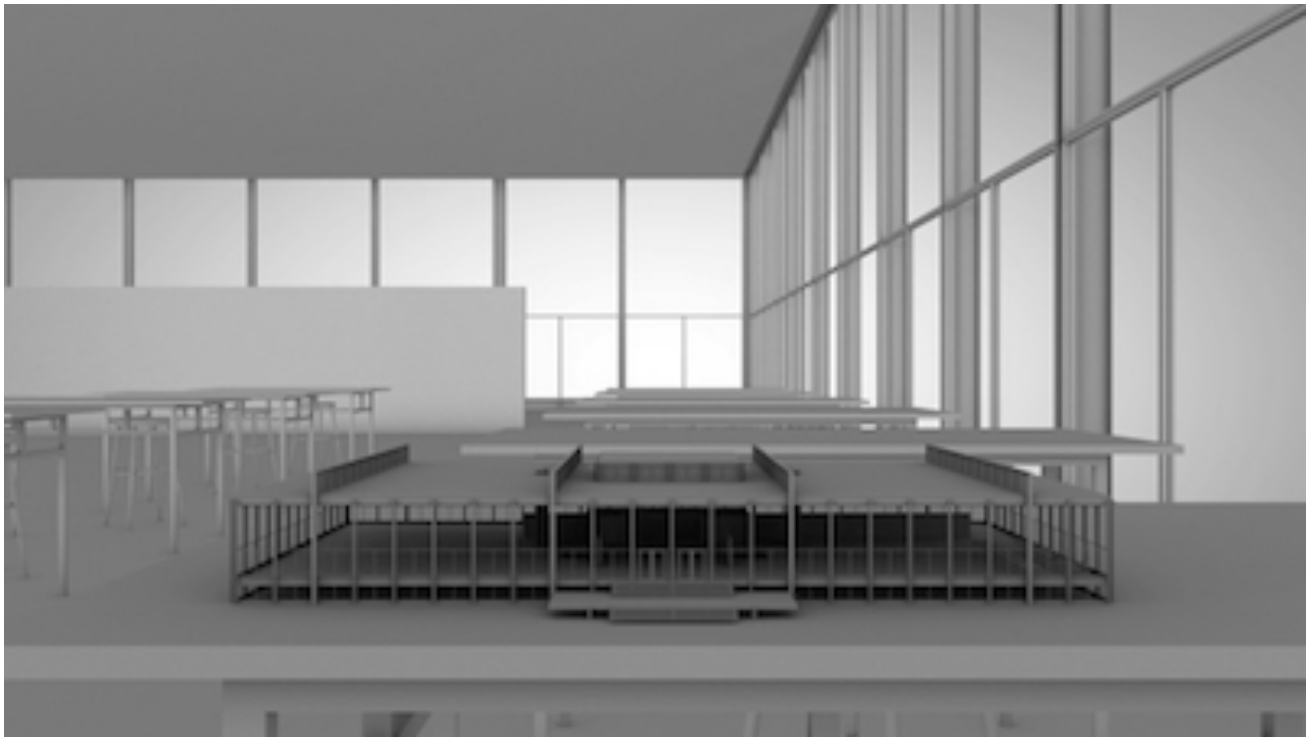
Destructive Modernism: Two exhibitions of Victor Burgin

by **Hearne Pardee**

Victor Burgin: Midwest at Cristin Tierney Gallery and Victor Burgin: UK76 at Bridget Donahue Gallery

Tierney: September 8 – October 22, 2016
540 West 28th Street, between 10th and 11th avenues
New York City, info@cristintierney.com

Donahue: September 8 – November 6, 2016
99 Bowery, 2nd Floor, between Hester and Grand streets
New York City, info@bridgetdonahue.nyc



Victor Burgin, Prairie, 2015. Still, digital projection, 8'03". edition of 3 + 1 AP. Courtesy the artist and Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York.

In his deliberately paced digital projections, Victor Burgin encourages us to meditate on the places he documents as well as on larger questions of vision and language. Involved in the early development of conceptual art, Burgin takes a methodical, analytical approach, alerting us to the way our minds make sense of experience. Seated in imposing white leather chairs, participants are encouraged to engage in the sort of "bricolage" that anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss finds at work in the creation of myths. As small text panels on black backgrounds describe unseen photographs or list names of plants, prompting us to generate our own pictures, images—sometimes animated, often inscrutable—alternate with the texts, appealing for interpretation in words. The dissolving of one panel into the next suggests movement, but these loops go nowhere. Instead, they encourage prolonged viewing and continued reflection on the histories they deploy.

This meditative stance contrasts with that of Burgin's early series, *UK76* (1976), which is currently on view at Bridget Donahue. It adopts the "loud" rhetoric of publicity to drive home the disparities of class in Great Britain. Commissioned by a labor group, Burgin photographed everyday scenes, using dramatic lighting and camera angles to link documentary realism to the theatricality of advertising. Text, often quoted from popular publications, is directly superimposed on the photographs, which are pasted like posters to the gallery walls. *US 77*, a follow-up project made in America, focuses on pictures used in advertisements. Drawing on writings of Guy Debord and Roland Barthes to examine the allusions and myths at work in figures like the Marlboro Man, it too is on view right now, in "Then and Now", at Philadelphia's Slought Foundation.

Installation view: Victor Burgin: *UK76* at Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York.

By displaying text and image separately in the new works, Burgin fosters engagement over time and more sustained probing of layered meanings. The measured intervals, like the turning of pages, create open space that sets up a context for reflection. Two recent digital projections at Cristin Tierney, *Prairie* and *Mirror Lake*, focus on the history of architectural sites near Chicago. Design, both as it penetrates the natural world and as it transforms the environments we inhabit, is a central theme, embodied in these tightly edited projections. While nonlinear in organization, they establish a historical axis by acknowledging the Native Americans forcibly displaced from both sites, and their lost languages (internalized models of the world) whose loss resonates with Burgin's emphasis on communal constructions of meaning.

Prairie is particularly stark. It establishes no sense of place, just a self-enclosed, monochromatic space, animated only by the occasional play of light across a blank wall or section of ornamental ironwork. Texts recount the destruction of Chicago's historic Mecca Apartment Building for the construction of Mies van der Rohe's Crown Hall in the 1950s. Photographs of protest meetings are described but not shown: the computer-generated figure of an African American dancer, posing motionless on a confined stage, lends a visual presence to textual allusions to sculpture and dance. Central to the entire presentation is a set-piece digital animation, the reconstruction of a classroom with an architectural model on a table, based on Mies's glass and steel construction. This machine-like architectural space gradually unfolds, becoming a larger, identical room, in which the building we previously occupied is now the model on the table—an endless regression that ominously reflects the relentless, impersonal expansion of technology.

Installation view: Victor Burgin: *Midwest*, 2016. Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York. Photo by John Muggenborg.

Burgin envisions disturbing and destructive forces at work in modernism. In *Mirror Lake*, design is embodied in images of Frank Lloyd Wright's Seth Peterson Cottage in Wisconsin, some taken by Burgin himself, but others borrowed or constructed—hybrids less solidly grounded in the "that has been" of Roland Barthes. Texts recounting the suicide of the cottage's builder enhance their uncanny quality. Digitally abstracted backgrounds of lake and sky create a sense of displacement, as the designed environment penetrates the natural landscape and suggests the work of subconscious forces. Highly edited ripples on the lake seem artificial, as though borrowed from an Alex Katz painting, and an apparently still image of a woman unexpectedly breathes: it's a clip from an Andrei Tarkovsky film and thus several steps removed from everyday life.

Rather than focus on the specifics of place, Burgin adopts a surrealist stance and introduces other unrelated materials, challenging viewers to follow his chain of associations: an encounter on a train in New Mexico, a pan across an empty train compartment that punctuates the presentation more than once, and a spectacular desert landscape with a naked man leaning against a dramatically tilted rock. This last is a sensationalized media image of the American West more akin to those in his early work. The raked sand in the foreground, however, suggests that this is really no desert but an enlarged Japanese rock garden, a digital fusion of wilderness and design. The incongruity of such images – in contrast to the straightforward narration of the texts – invites speculation. The nudity of rock and figure provides a field for projection. Is this global warming? A structuralist could generate a grid of binary oppositions: women identified with life, nurture and restoration, and men with the desert, design and pilotless drones. But the point is not so much to decode as to play. The endlessness of the loop eliminates any closure, encouraging extended viewing and reinterpretation, a process akin to culture itself.

Installation view: Victor Burgin: *Midwest*, 2016, with still from Prairie. Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York. Photo by John Muggenborg.

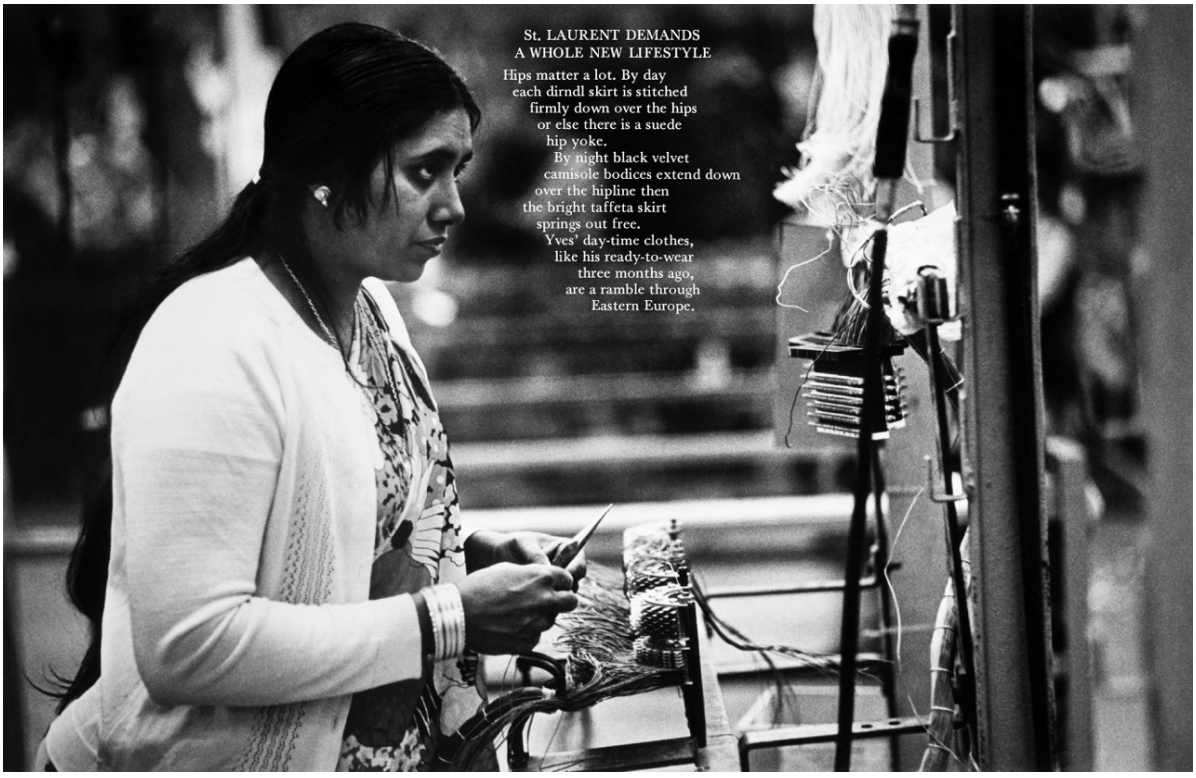
Burgin once dismissed painting as anachronistic, but his new work has much in common with painting of the academic tradition, with its literary and philosophical allusions and polished craftsmanship. His symbol-laden boulder recalls images from video artist Peter Campus's early digital collages, which combined scanned objects, texts and manipulated landscapes with overtones of melodrama and allegory. Campus has since developed a more contemplative flow in his slow-paced videos, which recall the painterly engineering of Georges Seurat. One wonders if Burgin could develop more purely visual content, perhaps extending the sequence of photos of foliage in *Mirror Lake*, for example? Is there room for the visionary visual montage that Stan Brakhage employs in his mythopoeic films? Burgin's open-ended loops offer a framework for further elaboration—perhaps even collaboration.

Alex Kitnick, "Victor Burgin", *4Columns*, September 30, 2016 http://www.4columns.org/kitnick-alex/victor-burgin.

4Columns

Victor Burgin

Alex Kitnick

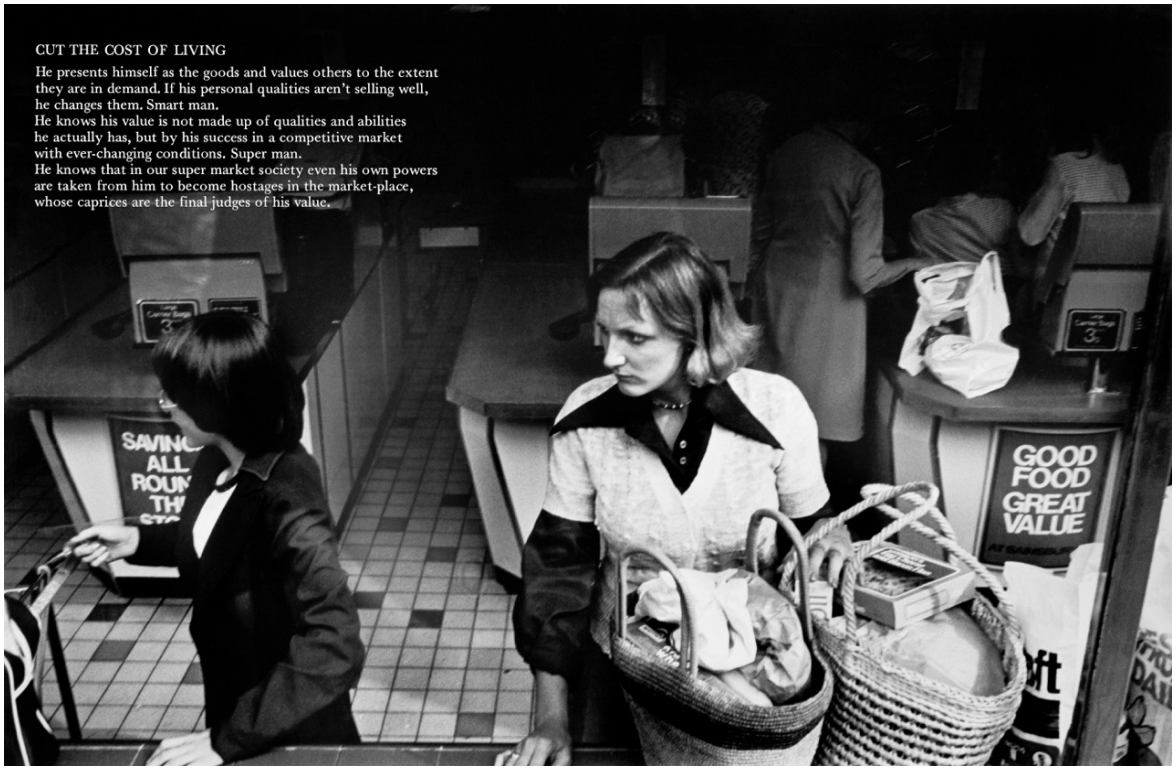


Victor Burgin, *UK 76* (detail), 1976. Set of 11 archival inkjet pigment prints printed 2016, 40 × 60 inches. Copyright Victor Burgin, courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York.

Victor Burgin, UK 76*, Bridget Donahue, 99 Bowery, New York City, through November 6*
Victor Burgin, Midwest*, Cristin Tierney, 540 West 28th Street, New York City, through October 22*

Victor Burgin began his career taking photographs of the floor. His 1967-69 *Photopath*, included in the British iteration of the seminal conceptual art exhibition *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form*, returned those photographs to their original site, creating a diagonal "path" of prints that mirrored the wooden floor beneath. Both a doubling and an alteration of the exhibition space, *Photopath* traced the edge between reality and representation. In doing so, Burgin's work asked viewers to contemplate both the context and conditions of spectatorship. But site specific to the extreme, *Photopath* verged on tautology. Burgin soon decided to use photography not simply to scrutinize the gallery, but to probe the connection between the aesthetic realm of the white cube and the world outside with a body of work that at once mimicked and manipulated the codes of commercial advertising. His 1976 *Possession* is the canonical example: featuring an appropriated image of a pampered white couple, it is bracketed by a question—What does possession mean to you?—and a firm statement of fact: 7% of our population own 84% of our wealth. And importantly, while the work has appeared in galleries, it has also been postered on city streets.

Another major body of work from this time, *UK 76*, made on the occasion of Queen Elizabeth's Silver Jubilee, is currently on display at Bridget Donahue in a sort of fortieth-anniversary celebration. Here, Burgin continued his reorientation of photography from floor to wall, but rather than transform his pictures into precious prints, matted and framed, Burgin fixed his images to the gallery as a series of posters, pasting them straight to the wall (although not, as with *Possession*, out in the streets). The project's eleven black-and-white prints don't so much hang as stick, and the scenes depicted—a white woman staring into space at the grocery store; a black woman on the sidewalk; power lines soaring over an empty street—resonate with a slew of genres, from landscape painting to magazine spreads—which simultaneously fit them into their gallery context and provide them with distance from it. The prints are large: years before Jeff Wall expanded photography so that it might compete with painting, and gave it the frames and colors to match, Burgin made it clear that "big photography" already existed in the form of advertising.



Victor Burgin, *UK 76* (detail), 1976. Set of 11 archival inkjet pigment prints printed 2016, 40 × 60 inches. Copyright Victor Burgin, courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York.

Burgin shot these photographs as part of a commission from the National Community Development Project, a UK national charity, but, in their strange lack of empathy, the images depart from traditions of picturing "the other half," swinging between something like surveillance footage and promotional materials. They also destabilized quaint ideas of Englishness on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Queen's accession; while there is one image of village life (notably tagged with a sign reading "PRIVATE"), there are many more pictures of fashion spreads and urban ennui. Moreover, the stanzas of text implanted in each photo—more than captions, one might think of them as prose poems—connect with language-based conceptualism and the lingua franca of advertising at the same time. Their tone is inconsistent: they speak breathlessly of Yves Saint Laurent fashions in one instance and parrot the syntax of Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser in another. Strange parables of surveillance and wage labor, they are alternately didactic and enigmatic, with no consistent narrator standing behind.

While close to the strands of conceptual art that sought to map social systems (think, for example, of the gridded logic of Stephen Willats or Mary Kelly's chronicles of subject formation), Burgin's work might today be interesting to think about as another kind of punk; after all, 1976 was also the year that the Sex Pistols released "Anarchy in the UK." Jamie Reid's doctored image of Queen Elizabeth, for one, gave the sound a visual language, but it used an older type of montage somewhere between Dada and a ransom note to do so. Like punk, Burgin's work is similarly patchwork in its sources and in its aggressive relationship to history, but by contrast it appears virtually seamless as an image; the work's frisson comes from how closely it approaches advertising's codes, its asymptotic proximity to photojournalism, without touching either one precisely. His project, one might say, is the product of a double negative: neither this nor that, it becomes something else.

Burgin received considerable acclaim for such work, but over time his relationship to art practice shifted. In a 1997 interview with the art historian John Roberts, the artist spoke somewhat bitterly about his drift away from the art world. Disgruntled about its embrace of fashion (ironic given his interest in the subject) and the art world's lack of serious thought, he explained his migration toward the relative freedom and stability of academia, where he wrote a number of important and difficult books (see, for example, his 1996 volume *In/Different Spaces: Place and Memory in Visual Culture*). But over most of this time he has continued to make work, and his current show at Cristin Tierney gives some sense of what Burgin, now seventy-five, has been up to in recent years.

Victor Burgin, *Mirror Lake*, 2013. Digital projection, 14:37 minutes.
Edition of 3 + 1 AP. Courtesy the artist and Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York.

Consisting of two silent, sumptuous, and somewhat ponderous digital projections, the exhibition is titled Midwest in reference to the central swath of the US. (Born in Sheffield, Burgin has always kept an eye on goings-on in the States, and another body of work, *US 77*, is currently up at the Slought Foundation in Philadelphia.) While this is suggestive territory to map in an election year, Burgin's videos are far removed from current exigencies: instead they depict desert flats, eerie interiors, startling rock formations, modern architecture. *Prairie* (2015) tells the tale of Mies van der Rohe's Illinois Institute of Technology campus in Chicago, and the destruction of an apartment building called the Mecca, while *Mirror Lake* (2013) looks at Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin and the native peoples who once inhabited nearby land. Each offers a combination of text and high-definition image, often computer generated. Invested in architectural ornament, which they treat as the bearer of social relations turned into form, the videos are intriguing, but they give off the strange air of an academic exercise. The shift in Burgin's work from the mid-1970s to today seems bound up with changing conceptions of photography, as well as a changed treatment of architecture. His early work engaged the architectural space where art is presented and understood the photograph as a physical index of the object it depicted, a certain mode of documentary, which it placed alongside other realities. Here the real occurs in a specifically digital form of imagination. Moreover, while the earlier work maintained an agonistic relationship to the gallery, here, with the white cube turned into a black box, it simply feels ambiguous: these enlarged PowerPoints could happily loop on any number of screens, and yet their target remains unclear.

Installation view: Victor Burgin, *Midwest*, 2016. Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York.
Photo by John Muggenborg.

Alex Kitnick, Brant Family Fellow in Contemporary Arts at Bard College, is an art historian and critic based in New York. His writing has appeared in publications ranging from October to May.

"20 New York Gallery Exhibitions Everyone Should See This Fall", *ArtNet News, A*ugust 25, 2016.

artnet® news

20 New York Gallery Exhibitions Everyone Should See This Fall

artnet News, August 25, 2016

Victor Bugin, *Mirror Lake*, 2013. Image courtesy Cristin Tierney.

The editors at artnet News searched New York City high and low for the most exciting, bizarre, and thought-provoking exhibitions this fall. From Chelsea to the Lower East Side, we've got you covered. (We've also included two nonprofits in the list, which are marked with asterisks.)

3. Victor Burgin, "Midwest" at Cristin Tierney, and Victor Burgin, "UK76" at Bridget Donahue

It's a double-barreled blast of the vintage British Conceptualist. Tierney features Burgin's recent digital projection works, creating multi-layered portraits of different sites in the Midwestern United States. Meanwhile, over at Donahue, the artist revisits a project from the 1970s, which had him layer elliptical, poetic texts over black-and-white photos of the British landscape. (Ben Davis)

"Midwest" will be on view at Cristin Tierney, 540 W 28th Street, from September 8–October 22, 2016 and "UK76" at Bridget Donahue, 99 Bowery, from September 8–November 6, 2016.

John Quin, "Barthes/ Burgin,"*ArtReview,* Summer 2016.

ArtReview

Barthes/Burgin

John Hansard Gallery, Southampton 13 February - 16 April

Roland Barthes drew - who knew? Wee, Victor Burgin, for one, and at the John Hansard Gallery we are presented with a dialogue between 15 of Barthes's drawings (apparently he produced some 700) and three of Burgin's recent projection works. The slash in the title of the show refers to Barthes's regular use of that gloriously ambiguous punctuation mark in his writing and also to the physical arrangement of the works here, in which Burgin's rooms are split by a space containing Barthes's wall-mounted drawings. To call them drawings might be questionable, though - they are composed of markings, sometimes done with felt-tip pens, occasionally with paint. They resemble doodling but are performed with more elan than that lowly word suggests. One imagines that those *Musical Express* writers inspired by Barthes during the 1980s (Paul Morley and Ian Penman) might have enjoyed calling them drawings/ paintings.

All three of Burgin's films are silent and visually interrupted by screen blackouts: moments of stasis that scream out: *now think!* The first room features *Prairie* (2015). There are poetic hints of haiku in the intertitles that reference the Amerindian Inoke of Illinois. These are followed quickly by static shots of covered wagons, settlers. *Prairie* refers to a mow destroyed building in Illinois that was replaced by a Mies van der Rohe construction. Art as poetic pedagogy, then: we are prompted into dwelling on the nature of memory and destruction, the rotten palimpsest of history.

The other side of the partition has the Barthes drawings, and these suggest several inspirations/interpretations (it's catching). These are small - some are executed on A2 sheets - but display an impressive control of gesture. *No. 408* (1972) might be a preparatory sketch for a late Pollock; others, like *No. 218* (1971), resemble calligraphy, Japanese markings, say, or the in the case of *No. 159* (1971), Islamic script, and it is entirely possible that Barthes took pleasure in creating artefacts that to him looked like some new form of writing, illegible but gravid with possible meaning.

Two more Burgin projections are next - one, *A Place to Read* (2010), was made for Istanbul's designation at the time as European Capital of Culture. Burgin's use of GGI illustrates troubles with the ongoing (and controversial) redesign of the Turkish city. The argument Burgin proposes around architectural vandalism spookily predicts the discontent of the Taksim Square demonstrates. The other video, *Belledonne* (2016), features panoramic visions of the Alps, projected as if one were overflying on a paraglider (imagine a blown-up 3D Google Map of the area around Grenoble). More intertitles prod the memory and there's more haiku in one that 'should be no longer than a breath'. Lastly, there is a small library that contains the canonical Barthes works and a collection of Burgin's own writings.

Burgin's practice has long been informed by his reading of the Frenchman, but what are we to make of the conjunction of his highly accomplished films and these amateur side-projects of Barthes's? Amateurism was important to Barthes. As Ryan Bishop and Sunil Manghani, editors of the book accompanying the exhibition note, for Barthes, 'the figure of the amateur is important as a means of countering power structures and keeping open to *writerly* pleasure.' But would we reach the same verdict on these drawings were it revealed to us that the author was an entirely different sort of amateur, say a rock star such as Ronnie Wood? Knowing these drawings are by Barthes immediately loads the frontal lobes of the viewer. We cannot un-know this fact, and thus it is difficult to avoid prejudgement in the penumbra of his writings. Barthes's works on paper have something of de Kooning's late paintings, with their skein of marking and a plentiful blankness. In turn this provokes disturbing conclusions on the junction between Barthes's hyperaware notions of neutrality, Burgin's contemplative pauses and the mute voids of de Kooning's dementia. *John Quin*

Aesthetica

Roland Barthes and Victor Burgin, John Hansard Gallery

John Hansard Gallery’s final exhibition before moving from Southampton University’s Highfield Campus. brings together two distinctly separate yet intimately entwined critical thinkers. Shown for the first time in the UK are a selection of Roland Barthes’ little known drawings brought together with three pieces by Victor Burgin. The influential relationship is, however, well known. Not only are several of Burgin’s essays in direct dialogue with Barthes’ writings but there is also a distinct input onto the former as an artist. It seems like over-simplification to suggest that Burgin, like Barthes, is first and foremost a writer, as the two aspects of his practice are in obvious dialogue, yet there is also a degree of separation

between the two; a kind of translation which takes place in order to allow the work to live beyond theory.

Burgin himself acknowledges a certain distance between himself and the algorithm-driven cultural developments of alter-modernity. Whilst he acknowledges his fascination with computer games, for example, he prefers to observe them and to "read about them", which for him is "the way intellectuals experience life". This is not a scathing criticism, however, for he seems to retain a certain idealism about the generative potential of games engines beyond the "pre-packaged"; beyond fixed rules and terms of engagement. Indeed he is particularly interested in the first-person video game *Dear Esther*, because there are "no rules".

Barthes' works on paper are somewhere between script and painting, which is most obviously influenced by Cy Twombly, whom Barthes wrote about, most notably, in *Cy Twombly: Works on Paper* and *The Wisdom of Art*. His drawings are rhythmic and idiosyncratic; resembling Japanese calligraphy, hand drawn maps and the repetitive 'carefree' motifs of phone book doodles. They are worlds away from the patriarchal violence and big-business spectacle of abstract expressionism, also depicting a joyous exuberance of one delighting in the properties of drawing materials.

His marks seem as considered yet carefree as those to be found on pen testing pads in stationary shops. His images, are anything but representational. The placement of marks suggest a flow of energy and dialogue that draws our attention to the paper and undermines traditional figure-ground relations. Yet, as his works on headed hotel paper suggest, his fetishism in the action of mark marking, in these terms, becomes merely a way of guiding the speed and flow of ink and the pressure of the hand. Therefore if these works are representations, they are traces of body space, movement, muscle memory. Perhaps it is better to think of them in the terms of the Situationists, as a *détournement* of the image-making process. Barthes perverts the desire for representation into a pleasurable act of what Michel de Certeau terms 'making do' – a means of losing oneself in a meditative, state; a simultaneous awakening of material consciousness and a putting subjectivity to sleep.

Burgin's digital projections combine image and text or 'intertitles', inserted between these images, inclusive of quotations from Barthes, Milan Kundera and Philip K. Dick. The three works included in the exhibition – one of which was commissioned especially – use game engines to produce what he term's 'moving stills'. Whilst animated, these frames explore images through subtle shifts that elaborate Renaissance techniques via impossible viewing points.

The artist suggests that in terms of image-making and in the context of the gallery space, these works are a development of the representational tradition of painting rather than photography or film. Yet there is also a great emphasis on breaking down the constraints of Renaissance illusionism. Presenting the viewer with unfamiliar perspectives, Burgin provides a post-corporeal vision that mirrors the transcendence of internet technologies. Likewise, the disorientating reverie in the unpredictability of the text fragments subjectivity and dislocates "Text" from "Work". In other words, it liberates the utterance from the speaker, the signifier from the signified, the script from it's institutionally supported or authorial reading / writing. What is left Barthes would describe as *signifiance*: an open and generative process of textual and inter-textual potentiality.

He brings texts together in open and contingent ways, yet prevents their internal or cross pollination: the horticulturist that keeps the bees from the flowers or removes their stamen or pistils; neutering meaning and thus the fruition of "Work". The "Textual Pleasure", as Barthes calls it, comes from the oscillation between familiarity and the shock of disorientation at the breakdown in language; the lack of definable fruit. The opening up of desire presents the vertiginous void beneath it. In this direction, Burgin is more of a reader than a maker; a flirting with texts. In a sense, he does not commit to knowing or being. His work is a dance with *heterotopia*: other spaces, other ideas, other possibilities, other beings. It becomes a way of foregrounding his enunciation so that his contingent utterances are not bound to a singular narrator / author.

"He" is not making anything; "he" is lost in textual production; "he" is lost in "Text". This is not simply to say that in his cerebral transcendence he becomes incorporeal, but that in the hybrid composition of authorship, the subjective whole is lost. To quote Barthes' most

famous essay *The Death of the Author*: 'Literature is that neuter, that composite, that oblique into which every subject escapes, the trap where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes'. Paradoxically, Burgin's position on the loss, erasure and atrophy has a distinctly critical ambivalence. Like the public coffee house overlooking the Bosphorous visualised in his work *A Place To Read*, the clearing of social spaces in common and subsequent replacement with anonymous bastions of globalisation, demonstrates the deeper problems of valourising the neutrality of a post-ideological *atopias*. That globalisation remains a historical process in which one form of power is atrophied by another; and we are all authors of that process.

Bevis Fenner

Barthes/Burgin, **John Hansard Gallery**, until 16 April.

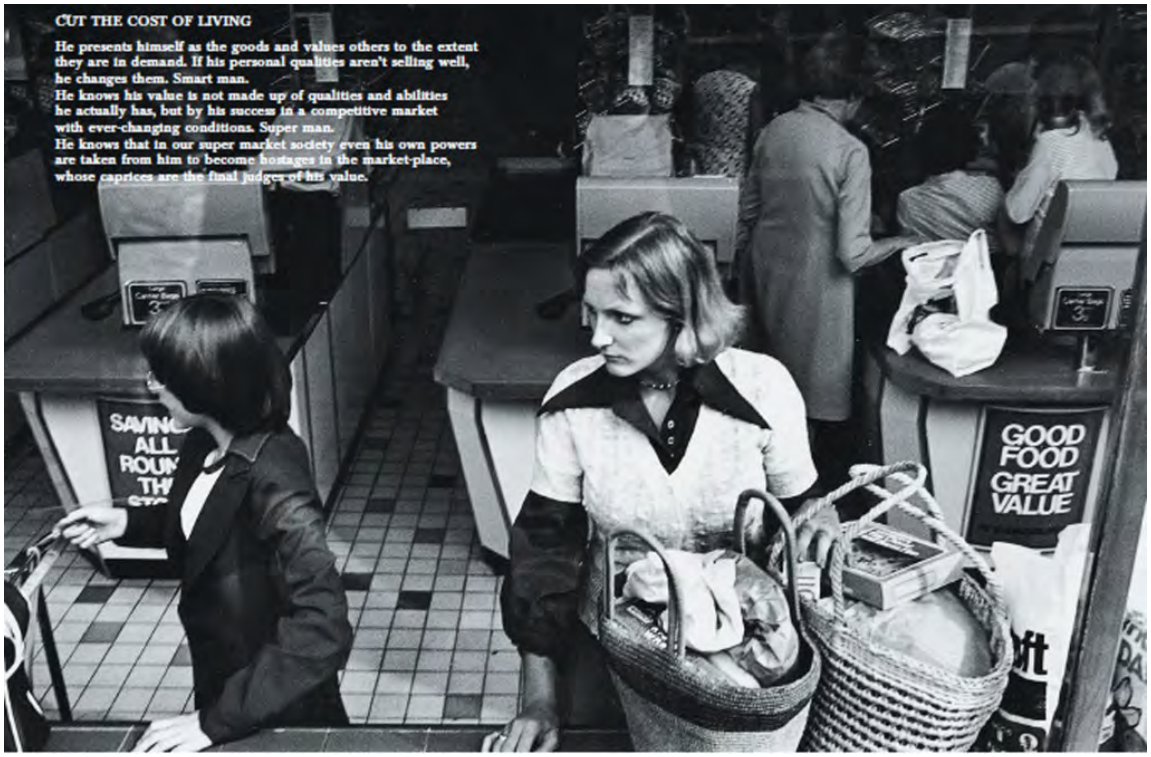
Credits:

1. Barthes/Burgin, installation image, John Hansard Gallery, 2016. Photo: Steve Shrimpton

Isabella Smith, “Review of Victor Burgin: UK76, Richard Saltoun Gallery, London”, Aesthetica, January 11, 2016.

Aesthetica

Review of Victor Burgin: UK 76, Richard Saltoun Gallery, London



11 large photographic prints of Britain in 1976 overlaid with white text: pasted directly on to the gallery wall, these will be scraped off— like advertisements— at the exhibition’s end. Richard Saltoun Gallery has chosen this bold presentation strategy for Victor Burgin’s (b. 1941) *UK 76* (1976) to present the series as it was first exhibited.

In the face of most art’s pretensions to perpetuity, this statement of artistic transience and the explicit rejection of the idea of art as commodity is particularly trenchant. But one should expect no less of Burgin, who first rose to prominence in the late 1960s as one of the originators of conceptual art. Conceptualism’s characteristic negation of the object is clearly apparent in *UK 76,* displaced in favour of a theoretical critical focus on text and the process of meaning-making.

The question of images and their relationship to text has preoccupied Burgin, who is also a writer and theorist, for much of his career. By combining photographic images with superimposed text, *UK 76* examines the relationship between explicit and implicit meaning. Burgin photographed a broad swathe of British society in the social documentary style: we see bustling, multicultural city streets, factory labourers at work,

and picturesque yet deserted country cottages. In a format familiar from magazine advertising, short texts are superimposed over each image. The rhetoric as well as the forms of mass media are imitated; if the photographs are a visual cross-section of society in 1976, then the texts are equally indicative of a range of ideologies and their particular written registers. One poster, offering a clue as to Burgin's own concerns, asks us to consider how mass media works to "direct activity towards the maintenance of the existing order."

Several captions mimic the blithe, blandly familiar promises of consumer culture. A photograph of a street in an uninspiring new-build estate, peopled only by an old woman doing her shopping, a young mother, and a stray dog, describes a near-fantastical idyll: "Ocean crystal clear. Sea anemones. Turquoise waters. Total immersion. Ecstasy. TODAY IS THE TOMORROW YOU WERE PROMISED YESTERDAY." Another highlights the flattening absurdity of high fashion's imperatives, given the realities of class, race, economic, and other differences. A multi-ethnic group of various ages waits for a city bus, while the floating text serenely describes the aesthetic of a Mayfair "lady", in which "every element is pale and perfect."

The contrast between quotidian life and mass media aspiration is here almost humorous; elsewhere the tone is that of poetic fiction, descriptive in the manner of newspaper journalism that strives to conceal its own bias through apparent objectivity, or else is stridently revolutionary: "Resistance did not last long […] the monarchy was disintegrating." This last register rings truest to Burgin's own ideological position. In another project undertaken the same year as *UK 76*, Burgin produced *What does possession mean to you?* A thousand posters were pasted around Newcastle upon Tyne that asked this question, alongside the statement: "7% of our population own 84% of our wealth." Bad as that sounds, it is worth remembering that in today's Britain, the richest 1% own as much wealth as the poorest 55%.

Given the unmistakable continued relevance of some (perhaps even most) of Burgin's statements in today's Britain, the fact this exhibition was mounted to mark the 40th anniversary of *UK 76* is particularly poignant. One print (featuring a young, half-naked woman) bemoans: "those who are compelled to reproduce their own continual poverty, who are being asked to tighten their belts." In an age of austerity in which widespread cuts to the UK's welfare system hit those on the lowest economic rungs the hardest, Burgin's work has a certain tragic relevance today. Forty years on, it still behoves us to interrogate the ideologies that occupy that uncertain space between text and image.

Isabella Smith

Credits:

1. Victor Burgin, *UK '76*, 1976. Set of 11 archival inkjet / pigment prints. Copyright the Artist. Courtesy of Richard Saltoun Gallery.

Bishop, Ryan and Victor Burgin, 2016, “Still Moving: Ryan Bishop and Victor Burgin in conversation” in Barthes/Burgin: Research Notes for an Exhibition, R. Bishop and S. Manghani (eds.), Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.

Still Moving: Ryan Bishop and Victor Burgin in Conversation

Ryan Bishop and Victor Burgin

The following conversation took place at the Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton, on 12 October 2015. Two of Victor Burgin's projection works, *A Place to Read* (2010) and *Parzival* (2013), were screened with no initial contextualisation. Each projection was followed by a conversation between Burgin and Ryan Bishop, with the second conversation moving into a Question and Answer session with the audience. *A Place to Read* is included in the show *Barthes/Burgin* at the John Hansard Gallery (2016), and images can found elsewhere in this book.

*

Ryan Bishop: I thought we would start with some of the background of *A Place to Read*. It was commissioned for the 'Lives and Works in Istanbul' project undertaken during that city's designation as the 'European Cultural Capital' in 2010. Can you discuss the genesis of the piece and the process regarding the decisions involved, such as the site explored, the reproduction of it, the materials used, etc.?

Victor Burgin: As I recall, there were maybe five artists commissioned that year to make works in response to their encounter with Istanbul. One of the problems for me in taking on a commission like that is to find the right tone, the right form of address. I hadn't been to Istanbul before, I didn't know the city and I didn't know Turkish culture. On the one hand, you want to make something which is truly a response to the city – you don't want to be one of those artists who takes whatever they've been working on in their studio and just transplants it. At the same time, neither do you want to appear to be 'revealing' the city to people who've maybe lived there all their lives. I read as much as I could about the history of Istanbul and about Turkish culture in general. I watched as many Turkish films as I could find and read a good number of Turkish novels in translation. I made several trips to Istanbul and stayed for more or less long periods of time. The hope is that gradually something will

emerge from all the intersecting facts and impressions as an 'object', a kind of 'gestalt' outline of a place where a work may emerge. And in fact what did start increasingly to preoccupy me was the sight of irreplaceable buildings, parks and other public spaces being mutilated or destroyed in the interests of private 'development' projects, frequently pushed through by the government in Ankara over the heads of local authorities. A few years later, as you may remember, there were massive public demonstrations against the Erdogan government's project to turn a park in the heart of Istanbul – Gezi Park – to turn it into a shopping mall with luxury flats and a memorial to the glories of a pre-republican Ottoman past, and so people went onto the streets at that point. In 2010, though, the act of destruction I came to be most preoccupied with had already taken place. Before being invited to Istanbul I had a prior history of being invited to respond to cities, and very often that response involved photographing a building, but in this case the building I wanted to work with – a coffee house – was no longer there to be photographed.

RB: Because it didn't exist.

VB: Bits of it were still there – it had been pulled down, but parts had been moved to another position and reassembled as a kind of orientalist restaurant for the huge hotel complex – 'Swisshotel Bosphorus' – that was built in the 1980s on the site of the 1947 coffee house. The original coffee house was designed by Sedad Haki Eldem, a Turkish architect who had studied in Paris with Le Corbusier; it was a design that programmatically set out to draw on a traditional Ottoman architectural vocabulary while also incorporating elements of Western modernism.

RB: Very much in the Atatürk model.

VB: Yes, the equally Francophile Atatürk who wanted a modern Turkish republic – 'modern' in the sense of such things as the emancipation of women and the separation of religious and state authority – that historic project also was represented by that building, which was the other thing that made me want to work with that building rather than some other, because it did seem metonymically to represent the idea that Turkey could incorporate elements of Western modernity without compromising its national identity, its Islamic history. In that immediate post-World War II period the coffee house was a democratic 'statement' – anybody could go there and enjoy the view; if you want to enjoy the view from that site today you have to pay through the nose for a very expensive room in this awful hotel. So that

was the building I wanted to work with. But it was no longer there, so what do I do? I can't photograph it so, OK, I'll work with a model. My first thought was to commission a maquette and try to photograph an actual, physical model, but then I decided to use 3D modelling. At that time I had no practical knowledge of 3D software, so I worked with a couple of Istanbul architects who did 'architectural visualisation' professionally. They constructed the house and garden from the drawings and photographs we researched together, and then I was able to move my virtual cameras around the simulated site – which is more or less what I've been doing ever since.

RB: I was going to say – one of the reasons why we chose this piece to screen is that it constitutes an important shift in Victor's work, marking the movement towards virtual spaces and the use of CGI and game engines to build environments, which raises some issues we will talk about in a minute. I want to talk a little bit more about the site. This projection, *A Place to Read,* and its accompanying text bear witness to the excavation and salvage work that you gesture to through its content. Clearly there is a kind of excavation project that's going on with this and it looks at the 'unbuilt environment': that is, in order to build something and arrive at the built environment, one has to unbuild something that occupies that space. In this case what was unbuilt was this beautiful coffee house. And as a result, during the initial installation of the piece you showed it at the Istanbul Archaeological Museum, and so in a way it's obviously about the past. But also as you said it had this prescient, proleptic dimension insofar as it anticipated some of the discontent that people were feeling with the government's neoliberal market-driven property agenda. There was and remains a good deal of discontent surrounding the remaking of the city that entails building certain parts of it in very specific ways and thus losing a kind of collective spatial memory as well actual public space. Further, in your text you also have that proleptic gesture operating at several evocative levels: with regard to the environment, with regard to discontent in Istanbul and within Turkey, and with loss and historical memory being embedded in architecture and disappeared buildings. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about showing something in a particular kind of site: the Istanbul Archaeological Museum, showing it here, or elsewhere than its original installation site. What does it mean to link a work that is about site, memory, and loss and erasure, and anticipate different modes of temporality with regard to a space, and then move that to other sites?

VB: Well, as originally commissioned, A Place to Read was a 'site-specific' work, the specificity of the site being of course that of the city of Istanbul itself. Installing the work in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum, rather than in a more neutral gallery space, underlined the local historical and political meanings of the work – in effect, the context of the museum became part of the work. So, as I began by saying, making work to commission I have a sense of obligation to the immediate local context, a sense that the work should be strictly relevant to that specific context; but at the same time I also feel that it should be possible to move the work, to install it somewhere else, without it losing all of its original meanings. In a paradoxical way the specificity of the work should be generalisable, applicable in situations other than the one in which it was originally produced. Apart from the fact that the spoliation of public space by private greed is hardly confined to Istanbul, I also felt that to shift the mise-en-scène of that topic into virtual space – I was thinking about 'Second Life' and similar uses of Internet space – I thought that might allow the work to be engaged with by people with no particular knowledge of Istanbul. At the other end of the scale, there are references that will only be picked up by people who know Istanbul. For example there's a reference to Istiklâl Caddesi, which is the 'main drag' in the Beyoglu district, one of the first places that tourists head for. But then the reference to the woman at the table of a bistro in Geneva, although perfectly understandable to anyone who reads it, will only take on its full import if you know something of modern Turkish intellectual history, a history full of Turkish writers exiled or self-exiled in Western Europe. One of them, Aslı Erdogan, published an autobiographical–fictional account of her time in exile in Geneva – Miraculous Mandarin. Of all the Turkish works I read that was the one that stayed with me the most. When I was looking for more of Aslı Erdogan's work I came across a photograph on the web of her sitting at a bistro table. That's the photograph I describe in the 'Geneva' intertitle section of my work, and that's the table with the ashtray that you see in my work, incongruously transported to that Ottoman-style coffee house interior. It's an incongruity consistent with the architect Eldem's hybrid sources, as well as with the incongruities of encounters in virtual space – whether computer space or the space of dreams. But who's going to be aware of the source of that particular image apart from myself? Probably no one. But I feel it's important to have such archival materials as points of departure because they ground the work in the factual. The imagery has to come from somewhere so why shouldn't it come from something real? My works are not 'documentaries', and I don't exhibit my research materials, but the visible contents of the work – texts and images – all have their origins in documented facts.

RB: It gives the work another layer.

VB: Yes, that layering of references, of potential meanings, is a response to the particular circumstances of viewing, and spectatorial position, in relation to work like this.

RB: Which is an installation . . .

VB: . . . yes, an installation, and not intended to be seen under these present conditions. In an educational context we accept that we look at things that are sometimes badly presented, that are shown under inappropriate circumstances. We accept that for research reasons and make the necessary allowances. But what we are in here, of course, is a theatrical situation, a cinematic situation, whereas my works are made to be shown in museums and galleries.

RB: And in the context of the gallery, unlike here in a lecture theatre, the important point to note is that your works are set on a loop.

VB: Yes, in the cinema people normally go in for the beginning of the film, at a specified show time, and everyone together watches through to the end. In a gallery people very rarely have that kind of relationship to a work. Individuals come and go at unpredictable times, and stay for indeterminate periods. It's a form of spectatorship that belongs to the history of painting rather than cinema. My works loop in response to that kind of behaviour. I expect people to be unpredictably coming and going. Some will sit through until they think, 'This is where I came in'; others will sit through two or three iterations. I know that many people have no problem doing that. I do it myself with works by other artists. You will sit for as long as you feel there is another layer you can take off, like peeling an onion. It's a mistake to equate the loop with repetition. It can be, but it needn't be – meaning needn't come to closure in a circle; it can develop in a spiral. So rather than spreading the story out in time, the way it unreels in the cinema in one single line, it is rather a matter of revealing the story through successive layers of possible meanings, so that each time you go around you have the chance of reinterpreting and making connections that perhaps didn't occur to you the first time around. So that's part of the specificity of this kind of work, which is very different from the specificity of the theatrical situation, or the specificity of watching videos on YouTube, or watching television at home, or a clip on a mobile device. These all have their own specifically different modes of spectatorial engagement, and one has to take that specificity into account.

RB: Yes, and part of that has to do with a kind of temporality in which the traditional

Western linear narrative trajectory is not possible, or even perhaps desirable. So the work as we just showed it a few minutes ago was in a sense misrepresented because we showed it from a beginning of sorts through to an end of sorts. We took one turn of the spiral and flattened it out. But the narrative structure of that line, visually and textually, presents particular challenges in that it makes each point in the loop metonymic of the whole, so that any point of entry is a legitimate point of entry, and should be arresting enough in and of itself and link enough to the whole to be successful.

VB: That's the challenge for the writing, and for the imagery, because if your viewer is walking in and out of the gallery at unpredictable times, then any image can in principle be the first image for that person, any sentence can be the first sentence. If you go into a cinema in the middle of the film, you know you've walked in after the film has started, you get that feeling of having missed something. When I'm making my own works I feel that you should be able to start anywhere. As you say, we played the work we just saw as if from beginning to end, and in fact that's largely the way I compose it, but while I'm writing I'm always thinking of the loop. That's the basic formal requirement of this kind of work, albeit it's a theoretical requirement that's very hard to meet in practice.

RB: I would imagine so.

VB: For all kinds of obvious reasons. But I was consoled by a short essay a friend recently showed me by the Canadian writer Alice Munro, a piece about how she reads and writes short stories. [Alice Munro, 'What is Real?', in Making it New: Contemporary Canadian Stories, ed. by John Metcalf. Auckland, Methuen, 1982.] I was really surprised by how closely what she says fits my own experience. She says that when she writes a short story, and even when she reads short stories by other writers, she feels she can start anywhere. She doesn't necessarily start at the beginning. She also feels she can return to the story and read again from a different starting point. And she says – it's an image that's been very helpful to me in describing my own work – she says that she doesn't think of her stories as roads but as houses. You don't travel in a single direction, taking in the sights until you get to the end of the road. You go into this room, you wander out, you go into another room and maybe stay a little longer, you keep coming and going and in addition to seeing the room you get different views of the outside. And she says . . . it gets even better . . . she says there's always a central room, but that's dark. Now she says that the 'dark room' is the dark incident

that so many of her stories relate, but in another part of the essay she says that her stories are always built around an 'indescribable feeling' that she can't describe in any other way. So I would say that the really dark room is that feeling, 'dark' not necessarily in the sense of unpleasantly disturbing, like the anecdotes she relates, but dark in the sense of being obscured from direct knowledge. So there's a kernel of affect that if we were looking at this in a psychoanalytic framework we would say is the indicator of an unconscious fantasy – which, by definition, is obscure, but which the story you write will be built around. Another analogy, one I've used most often before I found Munro's house analogy, was one taken from the story of The Invisible Man.

RB: The early film version . . .

VB: Yes, the film version, where of course the problem is 'how do you film the invisible man'? By definition he's invisible. So various devices are used – such as the bandages he wears.

RB: Nobody knows why he needs bandages, other than to show his form.

VB: That's right. There's one scene in the film where he's running from the police and by implication is totally naked, but he crosses a snow-covered field and you see his footprints in the snow. But the scene I prefer as analogy is the one where he's in the street, and there's a lot of detritus, old newspapers and stuff, and suddenly a wind blows up and all this stuff starts sticking to him and he's suddenly there, you see him. But of course you don't: you never see the invisible man, you only see the stuff that sticks to him, which can be anything. And that's the way I feel it is for me when I work – and probably the way it is for anybody else – I feel there's some je ne sais quoi, Munro's 'indescribable feeling', the 'dark room' at the centre, that you can never see, that you can only kind of stick things around and hope that some sense of its shape will emerge. But what results from that process of collage, or graffiti, is never right; it will always disappoint, and the disappointment in what you've done makes you want to try again.

RB: I think there's an allusion to that street scene in Terry Gilliam's *Brazil.*

VB: Yes, that's right.

RB: Where the newspapers and scraps of paper blow around, and he gets swallowed up

in the paperwork. Well, this leads me very neatly to your book *The Remembered Film,* and the idea of 'cinematic heterotopia' that you engage there. The cinematic heterotopia addresses the ways in which elements of cinema exist far beyond the cinema and the film-watching moment. It's an imaginary space of hybrid materials that we encounter through a heterogeneous variety of fragments, a film beyond the spatial and temporal confines of the movie theatre. The film acts as a prompt or catalyst for the construction of memory. Therefore as one moves around in the world, the cinematic heterotopia ignites ideas and connections that reach far beyond the limits of the film helping to create the world and our experience of it in the ways that any discursive formulation might but with the added sensorial input of vision, sound and touch. It seems to me that this book is the intellectual ground-clearing that leads to your projection work. Can your projections also be seen as evoking or manifesting 'cinematic heterotopia' through cinematic tools, direct and indirect allusions (especially of European film), and even the space in which they are encountered (a gallery as opposed to a cinema theatre, TV screen or computer screen)? As a result of your engagement with built and unbuilt environments, too, we find a modified version of Foucault's architectural heterotopia in your cinematic heterotopia.

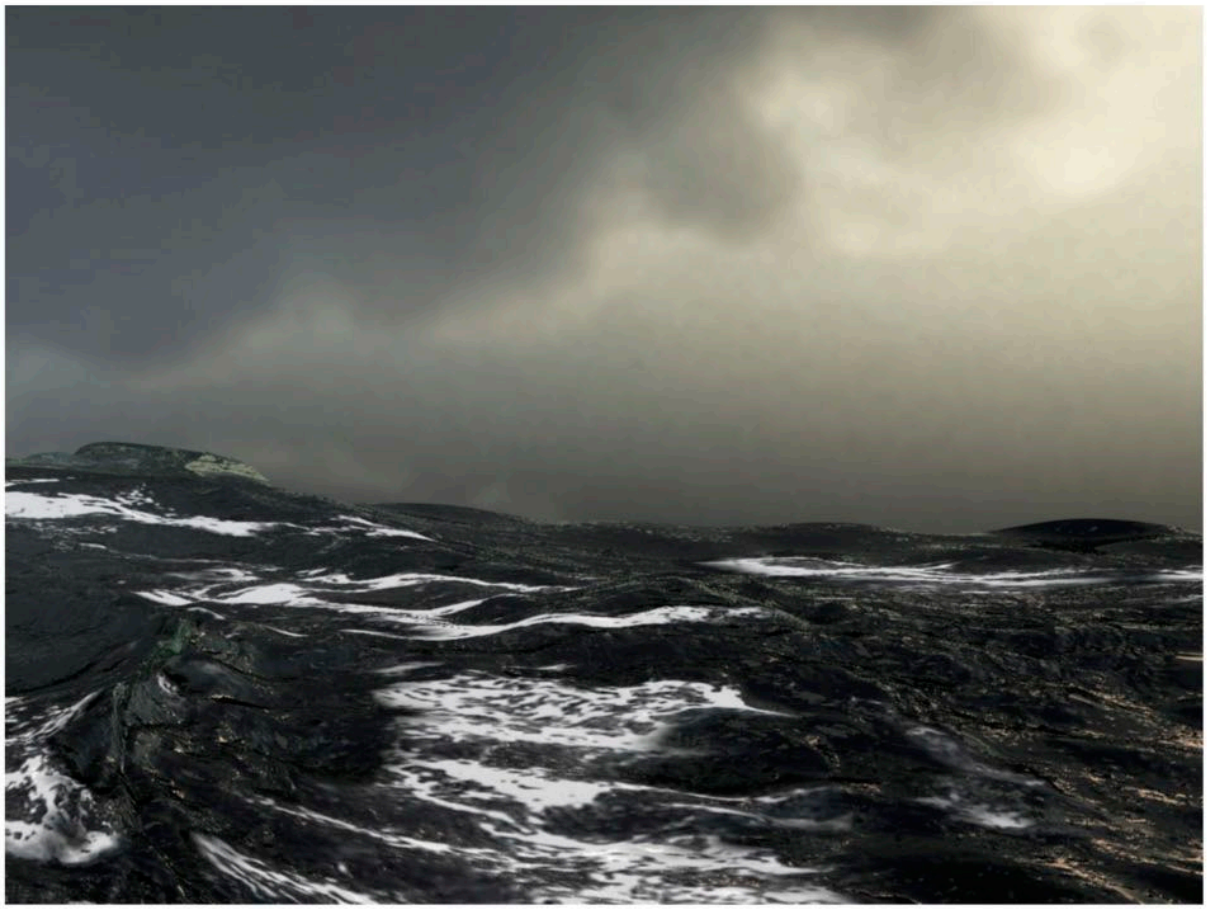
VB: Yes, if we were to stay with the analogy of the 'invisible man' then we would say that among the things that stick are fragments of remembered films, which is to anticipate the next work of mine we'll be seeing, Parzival, which was commissioned for the Geneva Wagner Festival, a couple of years back, and embedded in that work I have a fragment from Roberto Rossellini's film Germany Year Zero – that's an element that came to mind, as something that could, as it were, 'stick to the invisible man'. So, that film fragment is part of the heterogeneity you mentioned, along with the computer-modelled scenes, intertitle texts, fragments from the opera Parsifal . . . Although these elements necessarily appear one after the other, I don't think of them as a unified linear chain so much as a succession of relatively independent events. All of those bits, one feels or hopes, through working, will gradually start to reveal something of that je ne sais quoi that was, in this case, my response not to a city but to the work of Wagner. I wasn't a Wagner buff before, and have not become one as a result of working on Wagner, although I know a lot more about Wagner than I did before I started – a stunning, extraordinary person . . . but it was a response to, in this case as I say, a kind of abstract object, the corpus of the work of Wagner, who interestingly considered himself to be a poet before anything else. There's a wonderful letter that he wrote to Liszt, a close friend of his at that time, in which he says something like 'At last, after so much labour, my

Siegfried is finished; now all I have to do is write the music.'

RB: The music to him was secondary . . .

VB: . . . Yes, at the outset he considered himself to be above all else a great German poet, and there are those who still agree with him. He just happened to revolutionise Western music along the way. He was also of course a great innovator in the theatre, and had an idea of theatre that was . . . well, he himself would not have said it was unique, because he would claim he took it from the Greeks – but it was certainly revolutionary. And he was also an innovatory theatrical architect – he designed the architecture of the opera house at Bayreuth, the Festspielhaus.

RB: Yes, his was an immersive art, his *Gesamtkunstwerk* . . . fully sensorial. Perhaps we can return to this kind of immersive experience shortly, as I want to talk about game engines, and 3D modelling. However, let's stay with Wagner and show your work *Parzival...*



RB: Wagner's operas, as well as in this instance the medieval tale that underpins it and that gripped Wagner's imagination, seem almost wholly antithetical to your own works. I know you were commissioned to do a piece for the bicentenary of Wagner's birth, in 2013. Can you provide a bit of background about this piece, the commission and its relation to your interests in opera (which are not necessarily Wagnerian), as well as some of the choices you made with it: sound, texts on walls, black and white with colour tinges, colour, tracking shots, borrowed clips, 3D modelling, fractal modelling of the waves etc.?

VB: The commission came to me via the director of MAMCO, the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, in Geneva. We'd worked together previously, and he knew of my interest in opera. What he hadn't taken into account was the fact that my interest was in Baroque opera, especially the French Baroque. Although I was surprised, when I checked my shelves, to find how many Wagner discs I seemed to have acquired along the way, I was really starting from scratch in terms of any real knowledge of Wagner. So in the case of this particular commission, part of that sense of obligation I mentioned earlier took the form of a feeling of responsibility towards that part of the imaginary audience who knew their Wagner, which launched me on a long learning curve. But at the same time, again as I mentioned before, the work also had to be capable of engaging a spectator indifferent or even hostile towards Wagner. I say 'capable' – one can never *impose* an engagement on the part of the viewer.

RB: What were some of the other impulses behind the work, especially with various intertextual dimensions, including Rossellini's *Germany Year Zero,* the aria from the opera and indirect allusions to the thirteenth-century chivalric romance it sprang from? How do these add up to the work being a 'representation of a psychological object' as you have called it? How do the different elements, multiple allusions and layering of images, sound, text, references, etc., 'ground' the work? How does the range of textual sources ground the work spatially and temporally? How does it ground the work in a kind of spatiality and also evoke a range of temporalities for you?

VB: When we spoke about the work for Istanbul I gave the example of the photograph of Aslı Erdogan writing at a French bistro style table. I found the image on the Internet. It's low in information – small in size, low resolution, with no accompanying text. My best guess is that the writer is in the lobby of a large Turkish hotel, probably in Istanbul, maybe one of

those large European-style hotels on Taksim Square. In one of my intertitle texts I transpose the writer and the table to a café terrace in Geneva. The context is changed but the scene remains historically plausible. It might easily have taken place in reality. The text says there is an ashtray 'in the foreground', which signals the fact that what is being described is an image. Elsewhere in the work, in one of the three computer-modelled scenes of the coffee house interior, you see the table with the ashtray as described in the intertitle – a remnant of the original scene now inserted into a third context. A metonymic chain has been set up between a transient event in the real and the surface structure of my projection piece, but in the process the original material has been broken up, translated, scattered, recontextualised. The procedures when I write, produce images and assemble these together are analogous to the processes of memory, fantasy and associative thought that accompany the work of research. The surface structure of the eventual work follows the lines of these processes and procedures, much as the surface of a terrain follows the lines of the geological strata it both conceals and reveals. To take another example, the clips from *Germany Year Zero* you mention, here the film – unlike the photograph of Aslı Erdogan – is not at the origin of a chain of associations but, as it were, at their termination. Thoughts of Wagner, his early days as an incendiary revolutionary, the flaming destruction of Valhalla that closes the Ring cycle of his later days, these thoughts perhaps inevitably lead to the World War II fire bombings of German cities. Rossellini's documentary footage of Berlin's ruined streets represent that association, but what appears in my *Parzival* piece is not Rossellini's footage as such but my own reformulation of his footage in terms of operatic scenography, and in terms of computer modelling, particularly the theatrical domain of computer game space. Rossellini puts a fictional character, the small boy, in a real environment. I put Rossellini's real boy in a fictional environment. A more media-historical way of looking at it would be to see the clips of the boy as indexical images from the cinematic archive insert edited into a contemporary space of simulation.

RB: Our title for this conversation is *Still Moving* and it plays with the idea of still imagery and moving imagery and the gaps between these motile states that are possible with perspectives achievable through 3D modelling with computers. In a way, CGI allows one to enter a two-dimensional still image and move about in it and do some things with it. And this becomes, then, kind of like a Möbius strip where there is no inside or outside per se. How does that 'still moving' conceit function in a projection such as *Parzival,* or *A Place to Read,* for you? How does the dynamic of the computer-generated alterations to perspective suggested by these game engines and

the environments they create find articulation in the simultaneous multi-temporalities offered in your texts for the work? Might the texts provide temporal versions of the Möbius strip possibilities of the *in potentia* spatiality game engines can generate?

VB: Well, although I've spoken to you about my interest in game engines, this has been a largely theoretical interest to date. 'Learn Unreal Engine' is on my 'To Do' list, but I haven't yet found time to take more than a few first steps. This and all my other concerns though can be ranged under the common rubric of 'perspective'. I've already said it's important to me to take into account the specificity of the location of these works in art museums and galleries. For example, I accept the customary behaviour of spectators in such places. I don't ask them to behave any differently from the way they behave when they go to look at a painting. That's the representational tradition out of which my work emerges – not photography, not cinema. Maybe it's this background that has allowed me to relativise photography and cinema, to see these forms as historically contingent stages in the history of the perspectival system of representation, and to see computer simulation as the latest iteration of the way the West has represented itself and its others since the early fifteenth century.

RB: So in a way your engagement with CGI is a bit more like painting . . .

VB: It's a continuing engagement with the history of perspective . . .

RB: It's like your panoramas from the past where you have the zero degree, essentially, where you stitch together the digital imagery. You have a panorama but with an impossible perspective from which to see it. You get a perspective but there's no physical place in which one could possibly stand to get it.

VB: Yes, it's an incorporeal vision, in at least two senses. A real person, operating an actual movie camera, can never make a perfectly regular panoramic movement, whereas the movement of the virtual camera can be perfectly constant – for all that bodily movements and camera jitter can be simulated in software if required. More fundamentally, the image produced by the real camera will contain parallax effects – for example, an object in the background may appear first to the left of a foreground object and then move to the right as the camera continues its movement – but this can't be allowed to happen when stitching stills together; otherwise a seamless match of images will be impossible. The only way to avoid parallax is to have the 'nodal point' of the lens, the virtual point where the light rays

intersect, exactly coincide with the point around which the camera rotates – which is a point of view that cannot be physically embodied. I no longer use a still camera for shooting panoramas. The panorama in Parzival is made entirely in the space of 3D simulation, and in this space the laws of physics are different, and that's something I'm becoming increasingly interested in. The space of 3D modelling can look perfectly familiar, not least because it's modelled in perspective, the lingua franca of Western visual representations, but it's a space that needn't obey any law of physics that applies in the real world – apart from optics, maybe. This is a realisation I had when I put that ocean in towards the end. I was looking at this ocean, which is of course 3D-modelled, and I was thinking that the waves didn't look right – they kind of 'tear' in a completely unnatural way. But then I thought, well, of course, they're not real waves, they're something else, in a different world, and in that different world that's what they do. That's what I'm interested in now is this world without air and without gravity, where things behave differently – for example, where two bodies can occupy the same space at the same time. So that's something I want to work on more, the physics, or a-physics or anti-physics of computer-modelled space, which can be at the same time both perfectly familiar and totally unreal.

RB: So it's a bit like an extending of but undermining as well at the same time of the metaphysics of cinema, because cinema allowed us to manipulate time and space in very specific ways. I mean you can run things backwards so that you can – to borrow a line from Brian Eno – you can put a grape back on the vine, by running it backwards.

VB: That's right, which was one of the first things that interested people in the earliest days of cinema . . .

RB: That capacity, too, to stop the film when shooting and to change things within the frame, and start shooting again to create the illusion of things appearing or disappearing immediately, which is what mesmerised Georges Méliès in the early days of cinema.

VB: . . . and I find myself getting excited about the possibilities in all of that and then think: 'Oh, have I just discovered animation? Big deal!'

RB: Yes, the Fleischer brothers, they've done that already! But it is giving you a different set of tools to play with, to think through perspective, because as we've discussed before in different venues so much of what's been done with computer-

generated environments is what happens when any new technology comes along. It documents what it is replacing, and computer-generated imagery has done a fantastic job of storing up Quattrocento technological perspectival and technological modes of representation. But do you see your work as stepping beyond that, or having the potential to do so?

VB: Perhaps what I see as a potential is less of a 'stepping beyond' and more in the nature of the spiral movement we talked about earlier. The various practices that are emerging in our time of 'post-cinema' are also invoking pre-cinema. For example, you could describe the two works we've just screened as silent movies with intertitles. The description is accurate, but would be totally misleading if offered to someone who hadn't actually seen the works – which neither return to early cinema nor move existing cinema forward: they rather spiral back through cinematic memory to lift away from cinema.

RB: OK – well, we've got a few minutes left here, and with that we can open the floor to questions and comments.

Audience Member #1: I'm really interested in the loop as a structure, the loop and how important it is in terms of content, as well as in terms of people going in and out of galleries. And you mentioned Philip K. Dick – I'm not sure if this is the reference, but he refers to Parsifal where I think it's Gurnemanz says to Parsifal: 'here space becomes time'. It's really interesting in that one wonders where did Wagner get that idea from, and it occurred to me that that's quite possibly a description of the loop as a structure. Is that how you're thinking? I thought you were going to mention Philip K. Dick because of that connection to *Parsifal.*

VB: I talk about Philip K. Dick, certainly, in some things I've written, but I'm not sure it's in that work as such.

RB: I thought it was in one of the wall texts but I might be wrong.

VB: OK, I'm sorry, you're right. I didn't talk about that part of the work today, but when Parzival is actually installed in a gallery context there is a whole apparatus of wall texts, and Philip K. Dick is 'referenced', as they like to say, there. I think Dick's reference to Parsifal is in Valis. But the reference in my work is to Martian Time-Slip, where a principal character is

this autistic child – who I associate with the Parsifal character – or at least he's assumed to be autistic, but his 'problem' is that where everybody else is seeing what is present he only sees what that present will become in the future.

Audience Member #1: Yes, he draws the new apartment block as a ruin . . .

VB: That's right, everyone is marvelling at this new apartment block and he's just seeing a ruin.

RB: Which is a bit like *A Place to Read.* We see the building as it was while knowing it is ruin now. I think we all agree that the loop is a really interesting structure, and it's one that links to cybernetics as well as to a whole host of related concerns of the means by which information operates within a loop. A loop repeats but, in doing so, proves there is no such thing as repetition, or so cybernetic theory argues. The loop links as well to Derridean notions of iterability insofar as the question of what is primary in a sequence becomes foregrounded: which is the first can only be established by the second that establishes the first as the first. The first one depends on the second, as it were, to constitute it as primary.

VB: And it's also the ritornello form in music – if a refrain or phrase comes back then the second time it's heard it's not the same, because your second hearing of it is informed by your memory of the first time and by what's come in between. So there is no repetition; it's not a circle it's a spiral; it's continually spiralling and lifting off from itself – potentially infinitely, because there's no end to the potential input of the viewer. In principle, the viewer's mind is working all the time and elaborating on the material because there's enough 'space' in the material to allow that process of elaboration, whereas conventional narrative fills in the spaces. As Barthes says, in the cinema you're 'not allowed to close your eyes', whereas in 'uncinematic' works like this you are.

Audience Member #2: Yes, you're very much of the school that says it is not the teller that tells the tale. It's something I know you've written about – that the interpretations are primary, not the authors' intentionality. But at the same time, clearly, you are not primarily motivated by communicating with the outside world per se. It's an internal conversation you are having. So how do you square those two sides?

VB: I don't see my works as being about a kind of Romantic communion with my inner life.

I don't see my work as being about 'communication' either – which is usually impossible outside of such controlled contexts as road signs. One's inner life is always there – as one's inner life always is, so you can't deny it – but at the same time my works engage with a common object, a public object. I started by discussing how I try to think about who my public is, how to address them, how to put something out there which is both the object I'm working on and working with, and at the same time an object that they are seeing too, as an object in their own space and time. The object, whether it's a coffee house or the works of Wagner, becomes a kind of crossroads where my own responses, intellectual and emotional, intersect with those of others – or possibly where they just cross, without understanding or even acknowledging each other, which is in the unavoidable nature of things also.

Audience Member #3: You use computers to make your works, I wonder if you've ever thought of making interactive works.

VB: I have thought about it, but to date I've always decided against it. One reason of course is that the works are already interactive, in the sense I've already mentioned, in the viewer's interpretative activity. But all works of art are 'interactive' in this sense – the sense, for example, in which we 'interact' with a novel when we form mental images while reading – so it's not really answering your question. It has occurred to me that if I'm serious about the general idea of specificity then I should perhaps make more use of the interactive capabilities specific to computers. Here, though, I've come to accept that just because you can do something, it doesn't necessarily follow that you should do it. With maybe one exception, a work called *The Waves* by the French artist Thierry Kuntzel, I haven't yet seen a software-driven interactive artwork that I actually liked. I find that having to press things, or slide things, or wave my arms or otherwise dance about . . . I find all of that gets in the way. I'm looking for a more contemplative relation to the work, one that encourages a different type of immersive experience than that offered by actual physical activity. Something that I find more interesting, and feel I should perhaps try to explore, is the capacity of the computer for parametrical variation. For example, I could in principle allow an algorithm to introduce variation into my intertitles, or images, when the material loops. But, again, I haven't yet seen an example of this kind of database-permutational approach that I've found anything more than amusing, which is not to say there is no potential for anything more interesting. I'm hoping that if I ever find the time to explore game engines in depth I may come across such a potential.

Audience Member #4: I don't know how interested you are in ontological incompleteness in the black and white video game and the distant buildings without any interior and how that might relate to the house you mentioned in the Alice Munro essay. So is it the anti-physics within that virtual world that interests you or is it the ontological rifts we might actually have within the universe itself?

VB: When you mention video games I think again of Barthes, who says he doesn't go to the theatre but it's always there in his work, in his consideration, and I've come to feel that way about video games. I have always, ever since a child, hated playing pre-packaged games. I think video games are really interesting; I just wish I didn't have to play them to learn about them. So I've read about them quite a lot, which is the way intellectuals experience life, and I've looked at them. In fact I sent one to Ryan, but it's barely a game. People are arguing about *Dear Esther:* 'Is *Dear Esther* a video game or not?' I don't know, I found it interesting. You're let loose on an island and you can just wander anywhere you want. The wind's blowing, it's kind of melancholy, you can hear the seabirds and the sea, there are ruins and other signs of previous habitation. You hear fragments of voiceover narrative from time to time. And you start to form a picture of the history of what may have happened on this island, but you also form a picture of what's happened in this individual's personal life. And I found that really interesting.

RB: There's no real goal, though, is there?

VB: There's no goal, no.

RB: Which is quite nice.

Audience Member #5: I know the game and I know the company that made the game. All of their games are based on walking through a space and finding the narrative, and making it up for yourself, and uncovering it for yourself, and you being sort of in control of what you take from that narrative, it's still muddled towards the end.

RB: Because it's got a narrative closure, as it were.

Audience Member #5: Yeah, the idea is that you are engaging this place that they have made which is so life-like that the focus is on the environment. The software

that they use to make games is mimicking the world.

VB: It's a very obvious thing to say, people say it all the time, but we might look to video games for the next historical shift in the history of storytelling through the moving image. But videogames, or 'computer games' as we might better call them now, have been around for a while – why hasn't it happened yet?

Audience Member #6: I just wanted to go back . . . you were telling the story about how you discovered this three-dimensional world which is able to be liberated from physical laws, but I wonder at the same time whether you think there's something you've lost, that you have let go of something real-world and your relationship to it that you regret. I mean it's not irreversible . . .

VB: Yes, I know what you're talking about, but may I answer by asking you a question? It's a question I ask myself. Do you think that something of that which is lost comes back when I include, to take the example of Parzival, the clip from Rossellini? You see a photographic image, a film image, does that – albeit paradoxically, as we're talking about a fiction – bring something of that real world back? Brings it back if only in the form of nostalgia perhaps, which is the way I think about cinema and photography now. I think that ones relation to that century and a half of photography and cinema, inevitably, has become nostalgic. You know, I find it very difficult these days to make a photograph, just as there came a point in time when I could no longer paint. I trained as a painter, I have a First Class Diploma in painting from the Royal College of Art. My first exhibitions were of paintings, but it got to a point when I could no longer paint. It became nostalgic: you put this stick in your hand with bristles on it and dip it in the coloured goo. . . . What am I doing? Where am I in time when I'm doing this? Which is maybe just a personal problem, but after that nostalgic relation to painting, and the sense that I couldn't do it because it had all been done already, I developed a great excitement for photography. I discovered it comparatively late in life, taught myself how to take photographs, looked at works by 'great photographers' – that was a very exciting time. I learned a lot from it. I used photography for a while, then suddenly that too . . . I suddenly felt, I can't take another photograph. And I'm hoping I'll die before I get to the end of my interest in 3D-simulation! It's an endless learning curve, not least because, unlike painting and photography, it's a technology which is perhaps unlikely to achieve any definitive efflorescence, and therefore obsolescence, as it's an epiphenomenon of our now fundamentally algorithmic existence.

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Reading Barthes

Victor Burgin and Sunil Manghani

> He sometimes used to regret having let himself be intimidated by languages. Then someone said to him: But without them, you wouldn't have been able to write! Arrogance circulates, like a strong wine among the guests of the text. The intertext does not comprehend only certain delicately chosen, secretly loved texts, texts that are free, discreet, generous, but also common, triumphant texts. You yourself can be the arrogant text of another text. (Barthes 1977a: 73)

The following correspondence between Victor Burgin and Sunil Manghani was compiled in the lead-up to the exhibition, *Barthes/Burgin,* at the John Hansard Gallery (2016). It is part of a longer dialogue that is currently in preparation, which takes its framing from Victor Burgin's *Components of a Practice* (Burgin 2008). In this book, Burgin offers critical reflections on his practice as it emerged in the 1960s through to the present. The book is divided into four main elements: beginnings, evolution, ideology and specificity. While these headings are not stated explicitly in the following text, they can be understood to nonetheless guide the unfolding correspondence that examines the work of Roland Barthes, and particularly Burgin's 'reading' of Barthes.

*

Sunil Manghani: Roland Barthes is mentioned only a few times in *Components of a Practice,* yet I think it is fair to say his influence echoes across much, if not all, of your work. You write: 'Anyone who practices an occupation over a period of years will have a sense that it involves a number of constants. Some of these "components" of a practice are common to all, others vary between individuals and over time' (Burgin 2008: 10). We might regard Barthes as one of these 'components' – certainly a common influence for many artists working from the 1970s onwards, and, as we'll consider here, of particular and changing significance for your own work. In fact, just in the first couple of pages of your introduction to *Components of a Practice,* Barthes' resonance can be heard, both as a constant and a shifting presence.

You note, for example, how your work has been 'fundamentally concerned with relations between words and images, with hybrid "scripto-visual" forms in which neither picture nor text predominate' (Burgin 2008: 11). This same fundamental relationship lies at the heart of Barthes' oeuvre. And indeed a similar rubric is presented in his *Empire of Signs:* 'The text does not "gloss" the images, which do not "illustrate" the text. For me, each has been no more than the onset of a kind of visual uncertainty [. . .] Text and image, interlacing, seek to ensure the circulation and exchange of these signifiers: body, face, writing . . .' (Barthes 1982: np). This, then, is a constant. However, there is equally an interesting shift or oscillation noted in your introduction to *Components of a Practice.* In referencing your early photographic work, which itself might be framed with regards to the impact of the semiotic research and engagement with sociopolitical 'texts' found in Barthes' early writings (along with other semioticians of the time), you make reference to the term 'zero degree' (suggesting a 'return to a semi-autonomous "zero degree" of photography in the panorama of my recent videos . . .' (Burgin 2008: 11)). This phrase 'zero degree' is, of course, strongly associated with Barthes' first book, *Writing Degree Zero,* from 1953, and relates to a movement within post-war literature. That book makes an important argument for 'writing' as distinct from language and style (or body) – which perhaps might also suggest of a certain 'constant' in your work: a search for a form of 'writing'. Yet, equally, in the very next line, you refer to the idea of the 'grain' of the voice in your video work, which, of course, is again a reference associated with (a later) Barthes. He writes: 'The "grain" is the body in the singing voice, in the writing hand, in the performing limb' (1985b: 276). This appears to take us back to questions of style, but through the lens of *pleasure,* or an attempt to enquire at a glance, over one's shoulder; within the realms of a third, or obtuse meaning, and the *punctum.* I'd like to move through these 'incidents' with Barthes, but to start with we should pose a more rudimentary question – one that I think Barthes himself would surely approve of, and equally reveal to be a far more complex question than we bargain for: When did you first come to read Barthes, and/or when did you first come to acknowledge you were engaged in a reading of Barthes?

Victor Burgin: It would have been somewhere around 1971, I no longer remember exactly when. I was in my first job, teaching at Nottingham School of Art, and had become friendly with someone with a background in anthropology. I believe we had bonded over Georges Charbonnier's *Conversations with Claude Lévi-Strauss,* which I had read in English translation in this small Jonathan Cape edition. I would guess it was this that led my colleague to

recommend that I read *Elements of Semiology,* which had also been translated for Cape. It was a 'Saul on the road to Damascus' moment in my intellectual history. After that first reading – of course it's a book I continued to reread – I went looking for other books by Barthes and found only *Writing Degree Zero*, in the same Cape series. There were no other English translations of Barthes available at that time. So I went to Paris and came back with a bag full of assorted texts, not only by Barthes but also by the writers he draws on in *Elements*. I bought myself a large French–English dictionary and sat down to work my way through them. An irony lost on me at the time was that *S/Z* had just appeared in France, signalling Barthes' post-structuralist turn. Barthes later spoke of the way his investment in intellectual projects was a desiring one, they would endure for whatever periods of time they endured, like amorous investments, and then be overtaken by other passions. The affair with linguistic theory that gave birth to *Elements*, however, was arguably the longest and most intense.

SM: In *Components of a Practice,* you note your encounter with A.J. Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic,* which you read at art school in the 1950s. Even now, in general conversation, I sense this book remains an important touchstone. As you explain:

> In this book Ayer argues that a sentence can be meaningful only if it is 'analytic' (tautological, like mathematics), or empirically verifiable. If a sentence is neither, it is literally nonsensical. Ayer applies this 'verification principle' to ethical, theological and aesthetic propositions. All fail the test and are condemned as meaningless. This chance introduction to Ayer's book came at the right moment for me. I was having difficulty making much sense of what painting tutors and art critics were saying. It came as a relief to learn they were talking nonsense. This was the beginning of my search for an appropriate critical language for thinking through my art practice. (Burgin 2008: 15)

Barthes represents a very different 'proposition'! He writes, for example, how in a novel such as *Robinson Crusoe* 'there is a historical knowledge, a geographical, a social (colonial), a technological, a botanical, an anthropological knowledge (Robinson proceeds from Nature to culture)' (Barthes 2000: 463); and that if we had to make a choice between all disciplines, we should save literature, since it contains everything else. However, it is not simply literature's encyclopaedic predilections that are important, it is what it does to/with knowledge:

> [it] displaces the various kinds of knowledge, does not fix or fetishize any of them; it gives them an indirect place, and this indirection is precious. On the one hand, it allows for the designation of possible areas of knowledge – unsuspected, unfulfilled. Literature works in the interstices of science. It is always behind or ahead of science . . . The knowledge it marshals is, on the other hand, never complete or final. Literature does not say that it knows something, but that it knows *of* something . . . (Barthes 2000: 463)

As you note, you came to read Barthes later than when first reading A.J. Ayer. Along with his criticisms of Derrida, Ayer would no doubt consider Barthes a rhetorician. However, what was your reading of Barthes and what was going on at this time for you with regards your practice?

VB: My encounter with Ayer, and with logical positivism in general, was almost as important to me as my encounter with Barthes some fifteen years later. One can hardly think of two more different thinkers, but they nevertheless performed complementary functions for me. Ayer allowed me to clear the ground of the kind of impressionistic and opinionated writing that was rife in so-called 'art criticism'. Barthes allowed me to construct an alternative critical apparatus once that ground was cleared. I was surprised that you referred to Barthes as a 'common influence' for artists from the 1970s onwards. Apart from myself I don't know of any artist at that time who was even aware of Barthes, much less reading him. The conceptualists I tended to be associated with then, mainly the Art-Language group, trod the British 'natural language philosophy' line of hostility to what they called the 'French disease'. The people who *were* reading Barthes were the film theorists around *Screen* magazine. I later became friendly with some of them, mainly with Peter Wollen and Laura Mulvey, but in the early 1970s I was pretty much intellectually isolated.

SM: Yes, perhaps the artists I'm thinking about do come a little later. And, certainly, I recognise the point that it is with regards to film that Barthes is perhaps being more widely read. Those connected with the London Film-Maker's Cooperative, for example, as I understand it, were reading him. Of course, in trying to contextualise your reading of Barthes I'm likely in danger of implying a 'grand' reading of Barthes. There is a lovely line in Barthes' essay 'On Reading', in which he says: 'The library is a space one visits, but not that one inhabits' (Barthes 1989: 37). I'm interested in how Barthes brings us to 'visit' his writings, rather than inhabit them or build upon

them. In knowing your work, and indeed your particular interest in remembered fragments, I imagine your reading of Barthes might be broken into fragments and phases. In interview, Barthes is referred to as a critic who 'loves to read'. He responds in typical fashion:

> I wouldn't want to deprive you of an illusion, all the more so in that I do love to read. But I'm not a great reader, I'm a casual reader, casual in the sense that I very quickly take the measure of my own pleasure. If a book bores me, I have the courage, or cowardice, to drop it. I'm freeing myself more and more from any superego in regards to books. So, if I read a book, it's because I want to.
>
> My reading schedule is not at all a regular and placid ingestion of books. Either a book bores more and I put it aside, or it excites me and I constantly want to stop reading it so that I can think about what I've just read – which is also reflected in the way I read for my work: I'm unable, unwilling, to sum up a book, to efface myself behind a capsule description of it on an index card, but on the contrary, I'm quite ready to pick out certain sentences, certain characteristics of the book, to ingest them as discontinuous fragments. This is obviously not good philological attitude, since it comes down to deforming the book for my own purposes. (Barthes 1985a: 220–1)

The 'amateur' is a recurring figure for Barthes. Here he refers to himself as a 'casual' reader. As noted elsewhere in this book, the amateur is an important figure for *Pleasure of Text,* and there is a specific entry in *Roland Barthes:*

> The Amateur (someone who engages in painting, music, sport, science, without the spirit of mastery or competition), the Amateur renews his pleasure (*amator:* one who loves and loves again); he is anything but a hero (of creation, of performance); he establishes himself *graciously* (for nothing) in the signifier: in the immediately definitive substance of music, of painting; his praxis, usually, involves no *rubato* (that theft of the object for the sake of the attribute); he is – he will be perhaps – the counter-bourgeois artist.(Barthes 1977a: 52)

I think you position yourself similarly when you refer to having difficulty 'making much sense of what painting tutors and art critics were saying'. The relief in realising that perhaps they are indeed talking nonsense is not simply a resolution of a problem,

but a point of departure. The amateur is important for Barthes as a means both to destabilise hierarchies and to return us to questions of *pleasure* – to respond as a form of *writing*. I wonder if this was something you were drawn to in reading his work? His remark on wanting to stop reading something when it excites is perhaps a good description of what we most take away from Barthes and why he has remained of interest for many creative practices. In this sense, it is not necessary that we make a full reading of Barthes. I'm inclined to think of Derrida's confession of having *not* read Barthes. The plural in Derrida's (2001: 31–67) title, 'The Deaths of Roland Barthes' is important. He must leave his thoughts fragmentary, to value the incomplete: 'These little stones, thoughtfully placed, only one each time, on the edge of a name as the promise of return' (2001: 35).

Roland Barthes is the name of a friend whom, in the end, beyond a certain familiarity, I knew very little, and of whom, it goes without saying, I have not read everything. I mean reread, understood and so on. And my first response was most often certainly one of approval, solidarity, and gratitude. Yet not always, it seems, and as insignificant as it may be, I must say this so as not to give in too much to the genre. He was, I mean, he remains, one of those of whom I have constantly wondered, for almost twenty years now, in a more or less articulated way: What does he think of this? In the present, the past, the future, the conditional, and so on? Especially, why not say it, since this should surprise no one, at the moment of writing. I even told him this once in a letter long ago. (Derrida 2001: 56)

VB: Just as there is great intellectual rigour in Barthes there is also a great permissiveness. You might say the one is nourished by the other because the permissiveness often takes the form of an attention to detail. I forget where it is that he talks about the different ways in which one can read, but he includes such things as skipping through a book taking in passages at random. We all do that, but I remember that at the time I first read that it was something I felt guilty about. Barthes also speaks of knowing books 'by osmosis' – he hasn't actually read them but has heard enough talk about them to be familiar with them. Of course you need to contextualise remarks like that, French print and broadcast media provide a quantity and level of intellectual discussion unimaginable in Britain and the United States. For all Barthes speaks of his 'undecided' relation to psychoanalysis, I always find his relation to the world scrupulously analytic if only in the sense that nothing in his experience is considered, a priori, insignificant, in the sense of unworthy of attention. Jonathan Culler

tells a great story about the time he was a graduate student at Oxford. Barthes had been invited to the university and Culler was given the task of showing him around the colleges and gardens. He says that Barthes quickly and obviously became bored, so he asked him if there was anything in particular he would like to see. Barthes said he'd heard that the British had electrical plugs very different from those in France, and could they go somewhere where he could see them. So they spend a happy forty-five minutes at Woolworths, looking at 'insignificant' objects of everyday British life.

SM: We've come together to discuss the influence of Barthes in light of the exhibition at the John Hansard Gallery, *Barthes/Burgin,* for which we have brought together some of your recent projection works and a selection of drawings by Roland Barthes. These might not seem natural bedfellows. Two very different mediums. In your case the works are resolutely artworks, involving painstaking 3D modelling and lots of attention to detail. While Barthes' works on paper are more akin to automatic writing; mere exercises in mark-making. Crucially, Barthes is not an artist, and would never have suggested as much. If we think of artists such as Cy Twombly (whom Barthes admired), Mark Tobey and Simon Hanteï, there are resonances – each (at different points in their careers) work around the boundary of writing and drawing. Yet there is a very different sense of scale, composition and material process that quickly marks them out as practitioners. By contrast, Barthes hovers about the boundary between writing and drawing, but only as a dalliance, as an escape from the fact that he is a writer (underneath the reproduction of one of his drawings in *Roland Barthes,* for example, he captions it simply 'Squandering' (Barthes 1977a: 113)). His motor-reflex is to scribble not mark. Nonetheless, there is a latent artist in Barthes (in his book, *Roland Barthes: The Professor of Desire,* Stephen Ungar has suggested a repressed artist, though I'd disagree). This becomes apparent in his late career, and is captured explicitly in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, in which he claims the semiologist needs to be an artist playing with signs 'as with a conscious decoy, whose fascination he savours and wants to make others savour and understand'. The sign for this artist 'is always immediate, subject to the kind of evidence that leaps to the eyes, like a trigger of the imagination', which is why semiology in this case 'is not a hermeneutics: it paints more than it digs' (Barthes 2000: 475). I have always liked this line. A book such as *Empire of Signs* is a good example of what it might look like for the semiologist to paint rather than dig. We know also, from *Roland Barthes,* how Barthes was concerned with his place of work, in situating a space for freedom

and creativity: 'My body is free of its image-repertoire only when it establishes its work space. This space is the same everywhere, patiently adapted to the pleasure of painting, writing, sorting' (Barthes 1977a: 38). Again, without wanting to categorise Barthes as an artist as such (at least not in the everyday sense of the term), it seems pertinent today, within the context of a 'return' to Barthes (see 'Barthes, Burgin, *Barre oblique*'), to reflect upon his influence within the visual arts and creative practice. An underlying tenet of the exhibition, in a sense, has been to consider yourself and Barthes as being *both* artists and writers. In your own case, of course, you have long been admired as both theorist and practitioner. However, in focusing on Barthes' *practice* of painting and drawing, there is an occasion to revisit the terms theory/practice, writing/making and criticality/visuality etc. In your essay on the emergence of the practice-based PhD (Burgin 2006), you refer to several different types of researcher. I wonder how we might imagine Barthes as one of these types, and/or what influence he might still have in thinking through these different approaches. To clarify, you refer to the PhD candidate who is 'both an accomplished visual artist and who not only wants to write, but is capable of writing, a long dissertation' (2006: 103). Another type is 'one who received a thorough introduction to a specialist academic literature as an undergraduate, but has little experience of practical work in visual arts' (103–4); and finally there is the third, and arguably the most common type: 'one who makes works of art and who also reads enthusiastically. This student is interested in ideas, and turns concepts encountered in reading into practical projects. The research of this type of candidate typically has a mainly practical outcome, with academic work playing a subordinate and "instrumental" role' (104). You give an example of a student who reads both Bachelard and your own book on 'space', before making an installation of stuffed toys turned inside out. As you note, '[t]here is nothing in either Bachelard or in [your] own work to recommend this treatment of stuffed toys, but if this person had not read the theory he might not have thought of doing this' (104). You go on to point out, the question raised is not whether the student is engaged in 'research', but more simply how they can be assessed.

> . . . visual arts departments confidently assessed such students before the coming of the PhD. Throughout the history of art the finished 'work of art' has represented the culmination of a process of research; a large part of the routine *work* of artists is a work of research. Although the shift from a language of 'creativity' to a language of 'research' may confuse that part of commonsense inherited from nineteenth-

> century Romanticism it is otherwise easily justified historically. The question of whether visual art production constitutes research is not a significant issue. The substantive issue for visual arts departments now is the widespread inability or disinclination to clearly distinguish between an art work and a written thesis, a tendency to obfuscate or ignore the differing specificities of two distinct forms of practice. (Burgin 2006: 104–5)

It is worth remembering that back in 1979, it was Barthes who accepted a PhD thesis made up solely of photographs, by Lucien Clergue. I'm not sure if recognition in the scholarly value of creative works in this way is possible now.

VB: This may be the moment to remind whoever may be reading our exchange that although the exhibition you conceived of has opened in 2016 it was originally planned to open the previous year, to mark the centenary of Barthes' birth. Your juxtaposition of my own work with that of Barthes is an act of collage I have accepted as your creation of 'an object to think with' – otherwise, as the English expression goes, 'there's no comparison'. But to enter into the game again, we might say that there are two mainly unrelated situations in play. You earlier cited Barthes from *Empire of Signs*, where he speaks of the 'interlacing' of text and image, in which the text does not 'gloss' the image, and in which the image does not 'illustrate' the text. In a memoir about Barthes, Éric Marty (2006) describes Barthes at work writing, with different coloured pencils and inks, to mark additions, corrections and so on. The closest I've come to writing as painting was during my early years as an art student, when one of my enthusiasms was for the work of Stuart Davis. I emulated Davis by incorporating words into my otherwise abstract works, making the forms and colours of the letters part of the overall design. My mature work has of course been on the side of the 'interlacing' that Barthes describes, with the rider that something I was very much aware of when doing photo/text work was that the photographic grain on the surface of the paper formed both the image and the letters, and that this is also true of the pixel structure of my later computer-based work. I don't know what the circumstances of Lucien Clergue's doctoral degree were, nor do I have any idea what relationship he had with Barthes. The issue of doctoral degrees for artists started to be discussed in France only two or three years ago, some time after similar discussions began in the United States and well after such degrees became an established fact in the UK. To my knowledge there are still no doctoral degrees for artists in France, so I would guess that Lucien Clergue's degree was an exception. Clergue seems to have been one of those individuals to whom nothing is denied. He 'knew everyone', as the expression

goes, and wound up being inducted into the French Academy wearing a costume and épée designed by Christian Lacroix – a spectacular crowning of an artistic reputation based on pictures of long-suffering gypsies and naked girls. My own concern, when I first encountered PhDs for artists on my return from teaching in a graduate cultural studies department in the United States, was that the newly 'doctored' artists might go on to supervise written theses. I was worried about the quality of teaching that would result. Apart from that concern, I'm on the side of the Wizard of Oz when he argues for the superfluity of degrees and decorations of all kinds. Barthes himself, of course, because of his long isolation due to his tuberculosis, had none of the academic qualifications that his intellectual peers would routinely have had.

SM: I'd like to turn to the period of the late 1970s and early 1980s, a time when there appears to be an important shift taking place in your work. In 1973 you leave a fine art department to take up a post in a department of film and photography (in the School of Communications at the then Polytechnic of Central London). This must have been a big decision at the time. What attracted you was the engagement there in social documentary, and you published your book *Thinking Photography* in 1982, which remains a key document from this period. However, you also note how your attention shifts from issues of gender to sexuality. You write:

> It seemed that the complex of unconscious forces at play in the working out of sexual difference might be the matrix within which all subsequent forms of pathological love and hatred, idealization and abjection, were formed – including those driving such phenomena as homophobia and racism. [. . .] After years of subordinating the image to the kind of 'semioclasm' recommended the Roland Barthes of *Mythologies,* I began to allow the image its power of fascination. (Burgin 2008: 52)

I appreciate there are many other reference points and influences at this time, but I am interested how your reading of Barthes might have altered. Both, the texts you were drawn to and how you were interpreting them. There appear to be some parallels in your thinking. For example, you draw here on psychoanalytical terms and ideas, and similarly Lacanian terms begin to show up in Barthes' later writings. It is also interesting you refer to 'semioclasm'. This appears in Barthes' reflection on *Mythologies,* written in 1971, in the article for *Esprit,* 'Change the Object Itself' ['Changer l'objet lui-même'] (Barthes 1977b: 165–9). Barthes actually uses the term to articulate the need of a new approach, to overcome the 'mythology doxa' that has been created (not

least in part by his own contribution to semiotics) – which I'd suggest tallies with your interest 'to allow the image its power of fascination'. Barthes writes:

> In an initial moment, the aim was the destruction of the (ideological) signified; in a second, it is that of the destruction of the sign: 'mythoclasm' is succeeded by a 'semioclasm' which is much more far-reaching and pitched at a different level. [. . .] Thus, rather than myths, it is sociolects which must today be distinguished and described; which means that mythologies would be succeeded by an idiolectology – more formal and thereby, I believe, more penetrating – whose operational concepts would no longer be sign, signifier, signified and connotation but citation, reference, stereotype. [. . .] This is no more than a programme, perhaps only an 'inclination'. I believe, however, that even if the new semiology . . . had not applied itself further to the myths of our time since the last of the texts in *Mythologies* where I sketched out an initial semiotic approach to social language, it is at least conscious of its task: no longer simply to *upend* (or *right*) the mythical message, to stand it back on its feet, with denotation at the bottom and connotation at the top, nature on the surface and class interest deep down, but rather to change the object itself, to produce a new object, point of departure for a new science, to move – with all due allowance for difference in importance (obviously) and according to Althusser's scheme – from Feuerbach to Marx, from the young Marx to the mature Marx. (Barthes 1977b: 167–9)

I'm interested if this material is already circulating within your thinking (published in French in 1971, translated around 1977), or if your engagement is through a wider discourse at the time. I've also found this article by Barthes – as a historical document – extremely illuminating and provocative. However, it is elliptical. What does it really mean to 'change the object', or more to the point to change the 'sign'? The line 'it is at least conscious of its task' is most suggestive. What is he attributing consciousness to? Is it the semiologist? The system of signs itself? The field of practitioners within semiology? Or even the readers of signs themselves? It strikes me that as an *artist,* and with the shift you are making to the image as *fascination,* it is a particularly fertile time for *making* a difference, and to be able to move into a new intellectual space that the theorist has marked out, but is not seemingly able to complete.

VB: Barthes rarely defines his terms, he rather leaves it to the reader to 'catch his drift'.

My own understanding of what it means to change the object is in good part Foucauldian in inspiration: objects do not so much sit in the world waiting to be described, they are more fundamentally constituted *within* the descriptions. A table is a different thing to a structural engineer from what it is to an antique dealer. All objects in this sense are discursive objects, you 'change the object' if you change the discourse. My intention when I put together *Thinking Photography,* which came out of my teaching at the Polytechnic of Central London, was to change the object 'photography' as it was then constituted within the hegemonic discourses of the time – for example, in such British photo magazines as *Amateur Photographer, Zoom and Creative Camera,* the last of these of course in turn grounded in the institutional-discursive power of John Szarkowski, the then director of the New York MOMA, who could create 'great photographers' by naming them. The taking into account of the *fascination* that photographs may exert emerged as an internal necessity within my teaching. A semiotics that takes its analytical categories from structural linguistics is enormously effective in parsing the public meanings of images, but is hard pressed to account for the fact that when we look at one image we may find ourselves thinking of another, and has nothing at all to say about the affective power of photography. It was here that I found psychoanalysis had the most to contribute to filling in these lacunae in the maps of photographic meaning.

SM: In 1986 your book *The End of Art Theory* is published. As noted in the subtitle, this book faces head on the emerging debates of postmodernism. The book includes two essays directly concerned with Barthes' writing. The first of these, 'Re-Reading *Camera Lucida*', closes with a lovely anecdote:

> Barthes was once asked at the end of a lecture, by someone obviously irritated by what they took to be Barthes's willful 'difficulty', if the Freudian 'superego' wasn't really just what we all know as 'conscience'. Barthes replied: 'Yes, if you leave out all the rest'. It was rather like being asked if 'lightning' isn't the same thing as 'Zeus's thunderbolt' – yes it is, if you're happy to ignore the difference between the 'world-view' of modern meteorology and that of classical mythology." (Burgin 1986: 91)

Camera Lucida is of course the last book Barthes completed in his lifetime, giving added poignancy (indeed there is a double poignancy in that the book is itself about mourning). Alongside *Mythologies,* it is perhaps *the* most cited of his books (Batchen 2009; Elkins 2011). It has become a canonical text, and as if providing a new theory

of a private semiotics. My reading of this book, however, is of a *performance* of theory (as well as a genuinely, heartfelt search for what is forever lost). I don't think the introduction of its two critical terms, *studium* and *punctum*, were ever meant as generalisable terms. I feel it was always intended to be an enigmatic book. As such, what is the status of the book? Your essay, 'Re-Reading *Camera Lucida*' (Burgin 1986: 71–92), was one of the first critical introductions to the book, but you don't necessarily reveal what you personally take from the book – and perhaps how it might have affected your practice at the time. No doubt, given its *writerly* status, your view upon it will have altered many times since . . .

VB: My first reaction to *Camera Lucida* was one of dismay. If I stay with the analogy of Barthes' desiring relationships to his intellectual objects then I might say that he treated his discarded lovers badly, or rather disparaged the lover he himself had once been. For many years *Elements of Semiology* was the core text of the introductory course I gave to photography students at the then Polytechnic of Central London. Their reactions varied widely. One woman left the course saying she didn't see why she had to fight World War III in order to take a photograph. On another occasion I was in a London pub when an ex-student lumbered over to me in a state of inebriation and told me he was really grateful to me for having taken him through *Elements*. He said, 'I know now that if I can read that, I can read anything!' If the acceptance of semiotics could not be guaranteed even inside PCL – where students were warned at interview what kind of intellectual work they would be expected to do – then it was simply anathema beyond the walls. It was obvious to me that *Camera Lucida* would be read as a deathbed act of repentance in which Barthes renounced the wayward errors of his youth. *Elements* was the culmination of work that had begun with his early writings on the theatre and the essays collected in the volume *Mythologies*, work in which he stated unequivocally that 'the enemy is the bourgeoisie'. I knew that *Camera Lucida* would be received as a gift by that same bourgeoisie. But it got worse, I thought *Camera Lucida* would be read as a rejection of theory, it never occurred to me it would be treated as theory. As theory, most of what is in *Camera Lucida* had already been laid out in more detail by Sartre, which Barthes acknowledges when he dedicates the book to Sartre's 1940 *L'Imaginaire*. The distinction between public and private meanings of an image was something we talked about in my *Elements* classes, but in much less elegant terms than in the 'studium'/'punctum' distinction – which can therefore be a useful rhetorical aid in teaching, but only if it is *explained*, which is one of the things I tried to do in my article about the book. I saw *Camera Lucida* as an elegant book of mourning, Barthes' meditation on the

one image he does not show – the 'winter garden' photograph of his mother. I didn't really take anything from it.

SM: I want to turn to the theme of utopia in Barthes work. His writings often evoke an 'as if . . .' – as if things might be different, or as if something might be the case. 'I have a utopian imagination,' Barthes writes, 'and very often when I write, even if I'm not referring to a utopia, if, for example, I'm analysing particular notions in a critical way, I always do this through the inner image of a utopia: a social utopia or an affective utopia' (cited in Knight 1997: 1). Michael Wood (2015) takes this further, making the point that Barthes' relationship is necessarily about escape. '[E]ven the most brilliant remark', he notes, 'will be a prison if it arises only from the language of others, that there is no use of language that does not stand in need of subversion' (Wood 2015: 11). Thus, '[w]hen Barthes thinks of literature he thinks precisely of an escape from the language of others' (10) – as if it might be somehow different. The close of an essay that I think has been quite important to you, 'Leaving the Movie Theatre' (Barthes 1989: 345–9), ends with a tempting possibility: '. . . it is, one might say, an amorous distance: would there be, in the cinema itself . . . a possible bliss of *discretion?*' (349). The trope of 'as if' is also explicit in his lecture on Proust, 'Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure . . .' (Barthes 1989: 277–90), in which he posits the possibility of writing a novel (a virtual project that is taken up in earnest in his final lecture course, *Preparation for the Novel*):

> It is important for me to act *as if* I were to write this utopian novel. And here I regain, to conclude, a method. I put myself in the position of the subject who *makes* something, and no longer of the subject who speaks *about* something: I am not studying a product, I assume a production; I abolish the discourse on discourse; the world no longer comes to me as an object, but as a writing, i.e., a practice: I proceed to another type of knowledge (that of the Amateur), and it is in this that I am methodical. 'As if': is not this formula the very expression of scientific procedure, as we see it in mathematics? I venture a hypothesis and I explore, I discover the wealth of what follows from it; I postulate a novel to be written, whereby I can expect to learn more about the novel than by merely considering it as object already written by others. (Barthes: 1989: 289–290)

In viewing your work, particularly your projection pieces such as *A Place to Read* (2010)

and *Parzival* (2013), I sense something akin to Barthes' 'as if . . .'. And in fact, your essay 'Geometry and Abjection', from 1987, closes with a rather Barthesian line: 'It cannot, of course, be what it was at the time of Courbet, or even of Brecht. Attention to psychical reality calls for a *psychical realism* – impossible, but nevertheless . . .' (Burgin 2009: 197) – the three dots of the ellipsis being the very end of the article. *As if* . . . Is it fair to characterise your work in this way? We could perhaps take it further with reference to your use of the panoramic viewpoint. In *Components of a Practice* you suggest that in retrospective you realise much of your work has deployed a panoramic framing of one kind or another. More significantly, you suggest panoramic photography has been a means by which you seek a form of 'photography degree zero'.

> Composition is the corollary of framing, but the panoramic scanning of a still image produces a frame that is 'acompositional' (much as one speaks of the 'atonal' in music); the contents of the moving frame are in a perpetual state of *de*-composition as the result of the constant, mathematically uniform, passing of all that is visible. As there is no parallax, there is no differential movement between foreground, middle-distance and background – as there would be if the pan had been conventionally filmed by a camera operator. This is an incorporeal form of vision, the view of a disembodied eye turning upon a mathematical point of zero dimensions. Neither does the way in which the visible world enters and leaves the frame owe much to the optical schemas at work in cinema, as this movement is a product of mathematical calculations rather of the characteristics of glass lenses. This is a *theoretical* vision. (Burgin 2008: 92)

Barthes includes a short entry on 'panorama' in The Neutral (2005). His account is far less technical, but nonetheless resonates with your interest in the 'degree zero' – indeed Barthes considers the panorama as being 'on the side of the Neutral'. He offers a useful contrast with the panopticon:

> Panopticon: endoscopic device: presupposes the existence of an interior to be discovered, of an envelope (the walls) to be pierced: vital metaphor = the shell that needs to be cracked in order to access the core ≠ panorama: opens onto a world without interior: says that the world is nothing but surfaces, volumes, planes, and not depth: nothing but an extension, an epiphany (*épiphaneia* = surface) (Barthes 2005: 163)

Picking up on the idea of 'theoretical vision', this again suggests to me an 'as if . . .', a hypothesis or even an image (or seeing) of a utopia. While technically it is very different, your acomposition and an inhuman vision brings to my mind the early essay by Roland Barthes, from 1953, on seventeenth-century Dutch painting. Barthes begins with reference to Saenredam, who he describes as 'a painter of the absurd [. . .] To paint so lovingly these meaningless surfaces, and to paint nothing else – that is already a "modern" aesthetic of silence' (Barthes 2000: 62). By the end of the essay we learn that the aesthetic is of the gaze itself. Barthes ends with the enigmatic line: 'Depth is born only at the moment that spectacle itself slowly turns its shadow toward man and begins to look at him' (73). Perhaps, with respect to your interest in the panorama, you might hold some affinity with a spectacle's own shadow turning itself out to look at the viewer? Of course, the circular nature of the panorama is not to be underestimated. As with the dialectic, in Adorno's sense, of working through contradiction interminably, the panorama as 'circular' is significant as a critical response to the predominance of the (rectangular) frame that intercuts both the physical and psychical spaces we inhabit. Barthes writes in his lecture course, *How to Live Together*:

> Look at the spaces we live in: the majority of angles are at 90 and 180 degrees = houses, apartment buildings, doors, windows, roofs, lifts. . . . Since we now associate city, living space, humanity, and pollution, there's a pollution effected by the rectangle. . . . Rectangle: as the basic shape of power (Barthes 2013: 114)

To this, Barthes reminds us: 'The circle [is] something that's difficult to make [. . .] Robinson Crusoe makes all he needs in terms of furniture. He has no trouble making rectangles (tables, chairs, cupboards), but can't make a wheelbarrow, a barrel' (Barthes 2013: 115). Indeed, perhaps we might think of the panorama as an island, à la Thomas More!

VB: I'm led by association to Barthes' beginnings. Barthes begins *for us*, his readers, in 1934, with the diagnosis of his tuberculosis. For some fifteen years after, while he's preparing the intellectual foundation of his work, he is largely separated from the world. For most of World War II he was outside history, being treated with the means of the time, treatments that had not changed since the nineteenth century – silence, rest, clean air, sunshine, isolation punctuated by exchanges with fellow patients and the intrusions of doctors. During his three years in the student sanatorium at Saint-Hilaire-du-Touvet he had a panoramic

point of view upon the mountains, and as a tubercular patient he was also under constant surveillance – so he was a subject both of the panorama and the panopticon. As Barthes himself indicates, probably the closest we can come now to the world he inhabited during that time is the one described in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. During Barthes' time in Saint-Hilaire the death rate in the sanatorium averaged three per day. The sense of a common human condition must have been no less acute for those in the sanatorium than it was for those under the occupation outside – as was, albeit very differently, the question of how to live together. Barthes' seminars at the Collège de France on the preparation of the novel, and on the question of how to live together, seem inescapably to reformulate questions that preoccupied him during those years of illness. Barthes' later interest in utopias must have more than a little to do with his early experience of hermetically enclosed monastic communities, but a monasticism founded upon devotion to the text and moreover one that required neither asceticism nor celibacy. In respect of my own relation to utopias, I've come to accept utopianism, the 'as if . . .', as an inevitable precondition for my work. For example, I make artworks as if commodification and spectacle, the sound bite and the one-liner, were not the ruling principles of the society into which they are produced, and the ruling principles of the 'artworld' produced by that society.

Art in America

Victor Burgin

MILAN,
at Lia Rumma

by Federico Florian

The atmosphere at Lia Rumma gallery during British artist Victor Burgin's recent solo exhibition was clean, cerebral and spare, seeming to emanate the temperament of the artist-theorist. After attending London's Royal College of Art in the early 1960s, Burgin moved to the U.S. to study philosophy at Yale, famously rejecting painting as "the anachronistic daubing of woven fabrics with colored mud." Occupying the entire ground floor was Burgin's new video installation, titled *The Ideal City*. As with every project by the artist, it was conceived as a response to the place of its display.

The work's centerpiece is a silent video projection featuring a female protagonist wandering through the streets of a virtual "ideal city." The images, created with 3-D modeling software, are interspersed with text screens describing the figure's actions. Two 30-by-83-inch black-and-white prints, realized with the same technology, complete the installation. They reproduce two of three anonymous 15th-century Italian paintings known as *The Ideal City*. Both present an ordered view of buildings and a plaza rendered through a rigorous use of perspective. (One painting is at the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, the other at the State Museum in Berlin.)

The computer-generated protagonist is Lidia, the character played by Jeanne Moreau in Michelangelo Antonioni's film *La notte* (1961). Burgin includes an original scene from this movie, in which Lidia walks through a congested, black-and-white Milan, establishing a strong connection between this video inside the gallery and the urban locale outside. Burgin's utopian city contains Renaissance architecture as well as Classical ruins and modernist buildings, combining art-historical references (such as Renaissance perspective, on which 3-D modeling is based), cinematographic suggestions and the artist's memories of Italian architecture. The result is an emotive portrait of a Nevercity—a sort of virtual psychogeographic *dérive*.

On the other floors of the gallery were two older works. *Hôtel Latône*(1982) is a group of 20 black-and-white photographs depicting urban views, cabin interiors and television monitors, accompanied by texts that create a fictional narrative. The 12-minute film *Solito Posto*(Usual Place, 2008) was inspired by the final seven minutes of Antonioni's *L'eclisse* (1962), in which the camera presents details of Roman architecture and lonely individuals in the streets. Through Burgin's usual alternation of quasi-still images (shot in the Venetian suburb of San Basilio) and text frames (reporting the conversations and the feelings of the protagonists), *Solito Posto* tells the story of a man and a woman, never shown to the viewer, who get together in Milan and look back upon their first encounter in Venice. The very slow takes and the looping establish a contemplative mood. The artist has compared the film to a painting. Here Burgin isolates the cinematographic image and reveals its intrinsic pictorial quality, bringing it back to its original condition—the photographic frame.

The thoughtful orchestration of visual and textual sequences allows Burgin to describe, with the rigor of the theorist and the lyricism of the artist, the functioning of our psyches—incoherent masses of emotions, recollections and random mental associations. What is at stake in this Milan exhibition is the role of images and their ability to conjure an invisible, partially unconscious world—the non-optical side of every picture. For Burgin, an image is neither a physical entity nor a pure visual surface; as he said in a 2013 interview, it is more like "a virtual event occurring between material reality and psychological space."

Art Monthly, December 2013 (No. 372)

Victor Burgin: A Sense of Place

Walsh, Maria, Art Monthly

After a ten-year dearth of UK exhibitions, Victor Burgin returns with a double whammy. Ambika P3's 'A Sense of Place', curated by David Campany and Michael Maziere, both research academics at the University of Westminster in which the gallery is located, features five recent digital projection pieces alongside an extensive number of earlier photo-text works from the 1970s and 1980s. Complementing this temporal juxtapositioning of his work, the exhibition at Richard Saltoun, 'On Paper', also curated by Campany, presents mainly early poster and print works, as well as two display tables, one of which contextualises Burgin's print works as insertions in exhibition catalogues and magazines such as Artforum and Block, the other of which contextualises his shift in the early 1970s from a practice concerned with self-reflexive, tautological systems to a practice incorporating more open social systems, for example advertising and cinema, although tautology is at work here too. Burgin's numerous books as well as exhibition paraphernalia from the span of his lengthy career are also on display, including invites from landmark exhibitions such as 'When Attitudes Become Form' at the ICA, London, 1969, and book versions of gallery pieces such as Performative/Narrative, 1971, a series of photographs exploring permutations of relations between an imaginary he and she and the pictured office desk and chair. (Apparently, this work was Burgin's first step out of Conceptual Art.)

The split venue works well; the exhibition at Richard Saltoun mimicking a more museological and pedagogical display--it is noteworthy that commercial galleries are venturing into this public gallery territory, in appearance at least--while the exhibition at Ambika P3 is constructed with a more architectural ethos, which is of course apropos given Burgin's recent work. Ambika P3 is not as elegant or ruined as the modernist buildings and sites that feature in Burgin's work, but the gallery's dividing walls force us to circumnavigate the space in a manner akin to the kinds of spatial movement Burgin explores in some of his photographic series and his digital projections, the latter being dominated by circular panning motions which ex-centrically double back on themselves, for example Journey to Italy, 2006, which takes its inspiration from an archival photograph of Pompeii by Carlo Fratacci. Projected on one side of a built rectangle in the centre of the central space, Journey to Italy's digital pans are constructed from a series of shots taken on site that respectively represent the panoramic view of the site from the perspective of the woman in Fratacci's original photograph and the panoramic view of the site from the position of the original photographer. On opposite walls adjacent to the 'screen', the related photo-text pieces Basilica I, consisting of 24 black-and-white photographs and one text, and Basilica II, consisting of 17 photos and one text, echo the spatial layout of the colonnades in the original photograph,

which the viewer unwittingly maps out as they 'read' the images, reading and looking being reversible functions in almost all the work in the show. Due to the over-lit quality of the space, which makes the projection barely visible, the accompanying soundtrack about the relationship between a man and a woman takes on more presence and generates for me a whole set of questions about the temporal and generational aspects of Burgin's frames of reference.

While an artist's references can be and often are obscure, we are at a particular moment in western cultural history when the kinds of bourgeois references Burgin overtly deploys in his work since the early 1980s are rarely exchanged as cultural currency. Sadly, the educational value of what might now be considered high-brow or specialised knowledge, eg formalist literary theory and Greek mythology, no longer holds the social aspirations it might have held in the 1970s--ie that a classical education can be had by all regardless of social class and that this is for the greater good. Although I am of a different generation than Burgin, Roberto Rossellini's Journey to Italy, whose first and last scenes are described in Burgin's soundtrack, is part of my embodied experience; I grew up at a time when everyone watched art-house movies on black-and-white television because there were only one or two channels to choose from. Therefore Burgin's Journey to Italy, despite being full of dead relics, conjures a living media memory in my mind's eye, but what meaning might it have for the YouTube generation and the production of memory in an era of virtual information?

Paradoxically, the temporal spirals of memory conjured by the associative assemblage of images by which Burgin constructs his work were triggered for me in relation to the most unlikely of works, the early photos and prints referring to class consciousness and advertising, which I was sure I would find didactic. On the contrary, I was pleasantly surprised. Works such as Possession, 1976, 500 posters of which were posted in the streets of Newcastle-upon-Tyne at the time, and the series of photo-text panels UK76, 1976, at Ambika P3, one of which featured a lithe female in a state of semiundress juxtaposed with a biting text about austerity, leapt across time to resonate with and refract the oppressive, recessionary times we are now living in regardless of the fact that advertising has appropriated similarly discordant montage techniques.

However, as Burgin has argued on numerous occasions, a politics of the image does not mean making overt political statements, but making images that are counter to dominant media interests, not just in terms of content but also in terms of what he calls 'a struggle with the medium', which is why the digital pans and tracking shots in the projections at Ambika P3 have a hesitant edge to them unlike the smooth transitions in mainstream digital imaging. Burgin further inserts a human element into his videos by using ellipses and different categories of 'image', the videos comprising static moving images, stills to which movement has been added, and sequences of text on a black screen which allude to sexual and cultural scenarios of longing, loss and displacement. In this mix, some arresting images are either pictorially rendered or textually inferred, such as when in the new work Mirror Lake, 2013, we are presented with an image of a woman whose head is turned away from the camera, her thick-platted blonde hair surreally taking up the space that would be her face if she were turned towards us. Other images from the repertoire of visual culture emerge-- Gerhard Richter's Betty, Chris Marker's La Jetee, Hitchcock's Vertigo, and this after having experienced one of Burgin's ex-centric pans around the bedroom of the Seth Peterson Cottage designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. Interesting, too, is the

way that Burgin registers indexicality in the digital image by incorporating it into the means of production. In Solito Posto, 2008, the textual narrative tells of a man who looks for a woman on a particular square in Milan. We are given two pans of a square comprising black-and-white stills, the first pan shows us a cafe terrace inhabited by people, the second ex-centric pan--a slight zoom-in--shows the square with the cafe boarded up and depopulated, the before and the after incorporated into the sequence of the work itself. It is perhaps in these meditations on technology and memory that Burgin speaks to a generation which has no memory of the heated debates in photography in the 1970s about the either/or of aestheticisation and documentary which are currently being combined under the contemporary rubric of art as research, forgetting that art can make the fantastical utterly real.

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TimeOut LONDON

Victor Burgin: A Sense of Place

For the past 40 years, Victor Burgin’s art has essentially been about a single subject: the relationship between image and text. During the 1970s and ’80s, this basically meant black-and-white photographs accompanied by words, either overlaid or framed separately. Yet if the format sounds simple, the results are deeply complex and provocative – as shown in his seminal ‘UK76’, the first series seen by the visitor to this extensive survey of the influential English conceptualist, held in the cavernous and atmospheric P3 building. Here, documentary-style shots of British street life are combined with ironic, disassociative descriptions which, redolent of glib advertising language or fashion puff, accentuate the gulf between reality and marketing fantasy.

In later series, Burgin’s approach becomes more like a kind of travelogue – exploring aspects of 1970s Berlin, for example – or elliptical storytelling. Certain themes and images recur, in particular a focus on different modes of display – from framed paintings to strippers. His texts, meanwhile, frequently delve into notions of gender theory and political ideology (Burgin is known as a theorist as well as an artist). Sometimes, it has to be said, it all feels rather dense and demanding.

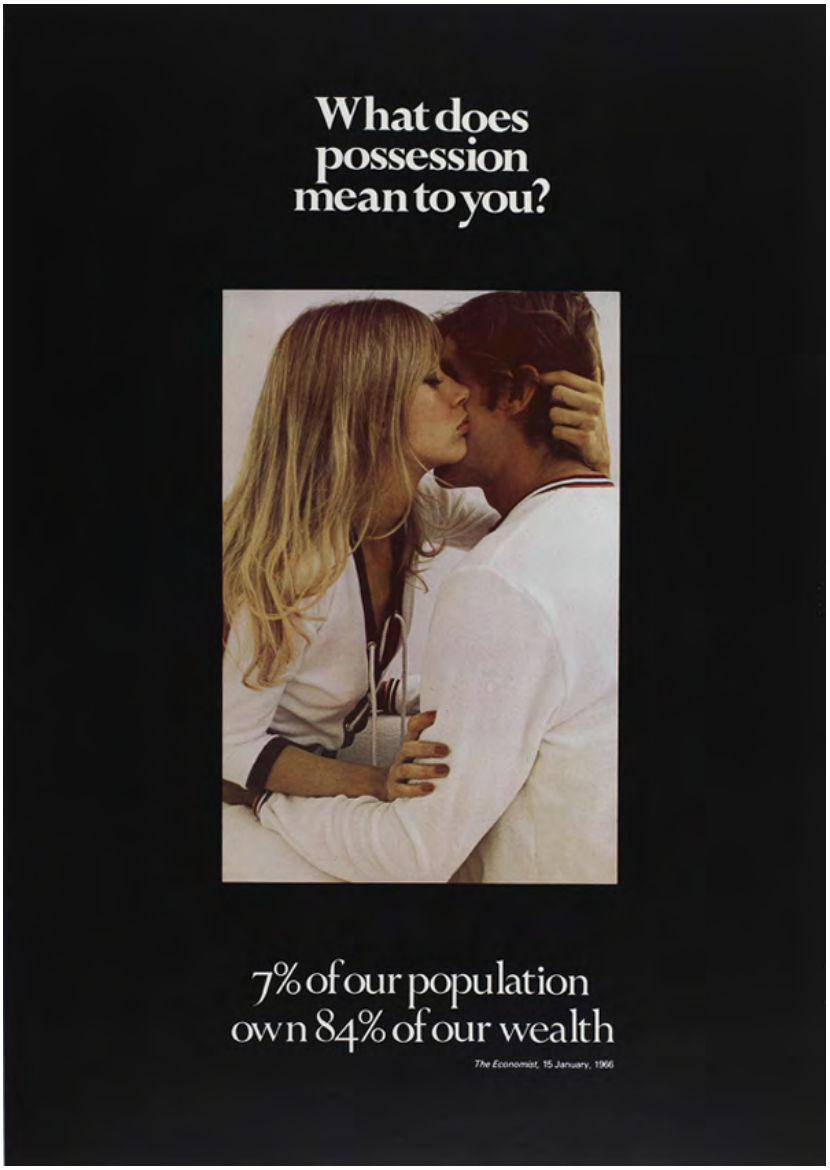
His video pieces from the past decade similarly require close attention. Each one has a virtually identical format: loops of about ten minutes or so, in which sequences of text, often taken from works of literature, are intercut with 360-degree panoramic shots, sometimes digitally created or enhanced. The overwhelming sense is of imagination and description combining, of memories and histories coalescing around a specific time or place. This occurs most powerfully in his most recent work, ‘Mirror Lake’, where text referring to European immigration, Native American expulsion and modernist architecture alternates with shots of Winnebagos, a Frank Lloyd Wright building and the Wisconsin landscape to leave a lasting sense of melancholy grandeur.

Gabriel Coxhead

POSTED: WEDNESDAY NOVEMBER 13 2013

Aesthetica

Victor Burgin: On Paper, Richard Saltoun Gallery, London



Text and image meet, clash and play off each other in this new exhibition of the work of pioneering conceptual artist Victor Burgin (b.1941) at the Richard Saltoun Gallery, from 1 November- 6 December. Burgin’s first solo exhibition at a private gallery in London since 1986, this new show races back to the early days and paper-based works of the 1960s and his breakthrough to prominence as an originator of Conceptual Art, through the 1970s and 1980s, up to today.

Focusing on his radical intervention into mainstream media through the interplay between the visual and textual, *On Paper* launches from his key work *When Attitudes Become Form* (1969) at the ICA London. It then goes on to pay close attention to deconstructed photographic images, such as *Framed* (1977) which subverts a Marlboro cigarette campaign, and *Possession* (1976), a series of 500 posters installed throughout Newcastle upon Tyne, showing a man and woman embracing next to the statement “What does possession mean to you?/ 7% of our population own 84% of our wealth”.

Exploring the conventions and rhetoric of the images in the mass media, operating both on the gallery wall and the printed page in poster, book and magazine form, Burgin revels in straddling the boundaries between “visual art” and “theory”, “image” and “narrative”, in a way that makes reader and text interact, work together and create constant and engaged dialogue.

Credits:

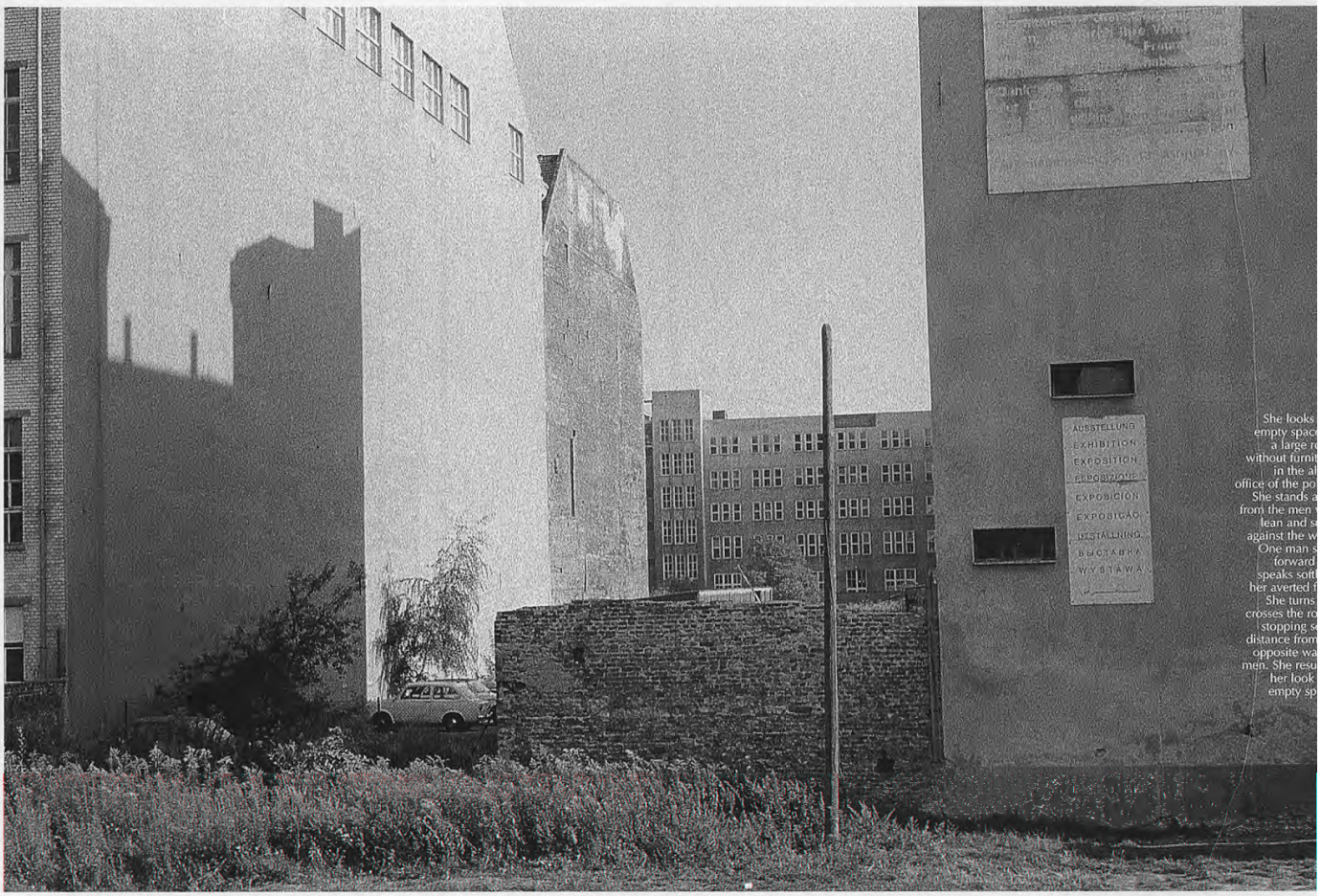
Possession, 1975, Victor Burgin.

David Campany, “Other Criteria”, interview, Frieze, May 17, 2013.

Other *Criteria*

From his Conceptual art of the 1960s to his recent computer-generated works, **Victor Burgin** has consistently explored the virtual nature of images and words. He talked with writer and curator *David Campany*

From the series ‘Zoo 78’, 1978, silver gelatin prints, diptych: each 50 × 75 cm



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Victor Burgin first came to prominence through his inclusion in landmark Conceptual art shows such as the touring exhibition 'Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form: Works, Concepts, Processes, Situations' (1969–70) and 'Information' (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1970). Informed by semiotics, cinema studies and psychoanalysis he went on to produce a series of influential works using photographs and text reworking the language of mass media into allegories of sexual and political power, memory, history and desire. In a number of projected videos (1999–ongoing) Burgin has turned his attention to architecture and psychical space, to explore how the forces of modernity shape the world in which we live and the unconscious pictures we make of it. Recent works have used computer programmes to bring the image closer to its essentially virtual state. Burgin's recent books include Parallel Texts. Interviews and Interventions about Art *(Reaktion, 2011) and* Situational Aesthetics: Selected Writings *(Leuven University Press, 2009). He discusses these and other matters with David Campany, who is curating a major show of Burgin's work for Ambika P3, London, opening in October this year.*

DAVID CAMPANY
The departure point for your as-yet-untitled current project is the Seth Peterson Cottage of 1958, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, in Mirror Lake State Park, Wisconsin.

VICTOR BURGIN
I've been interested in that building from the beginning. Having spent 18 months learning how to use 3D software programmes, I'm only just now getting to the point where I'm feeling I know enough to actually use them; I've just been modelling a desert.

DC *These programmes are extremely complex. Why not work with specialists?*

VB I trained as a painter and I'm very aware that a lot of what happens in painting comes out of a struggle with the medium. It will never quite do what you want or expect. Later, using photography was a struggle. And I always found the dialectic between what you think you want to do and what the medium will let you do is an aspect that keeps things alive. That's not to say that the result is going to be any more or less appealing or interesting to an audience. Now, if somebody works in the directorial mode with assistants and technicians …

DC *They're not struggling with the medium, not benefitting from the dialectic.*

VB Aside from the ethical issues of authorship, I personally need to derive enjoyment (if that's the right word; most of the time it's just graft) from that sense of not knowing what's around the corner, struggling with the medium to produce a compromise between what it is I think I want and what the medium is going to allow me to do.

DC *The 'artist's team' has become a cliché, and I suspect it's largely to blame for the stodgy familiarity of much art (which looks like mainstream film, which looks like fashion, which looks a bit 'arty', round and round).*

VB A few years ago I came across a staged photograph in which an artist featured himself. I thought it was a poor idea, derivative and quite banal, but I was impressed by the technical quality. It was very beautifully shot. And then about six months ago I was introduced to a professional photographer who does various jobs including work with one or two artists. It emerged that he'd taken that shot. I was brought up thinking artists make things themselves. Is my reaction just dumb or is there something more at stake? I also think of another successful video artist, who uses professional people all the way down the line – lighting, special effects farmed out to people who work for the industry. One of my problems in both cases is that this work *looks* as if it's a product of the industry. I might be able to accept that if the idea was, for want of a better word, transcendental. But nine times out of ten the ideas are not that great, even though the production values are terrific.

DC *Whether it has been photographs and text arranged along walls and across pages or, more recently, video projections that incorporate scrolling panoramas, you've had a consistent interest in the form of the sequence.*

VB Yes, time, which is part of my phenomenological preoccupation. The structures that interest me are the ones where you keep moving. One of the main reasons for this it that life is like that. Being awake is like that. Being asleep is like that. When you dream there is always that movement and I want to deal with that structure. In the form of a film, yes, there's movement but it comes to an end, so there is a way out, traditionally at least. One of my interests is in short loops of moving image and sound which has a specificity to the gallery setting. It offers the possibility of spending a long time with it, or a short time. It's indeterminate. It's the viewer's choice.

DC *The loop is the form that brings the moving image closest to being a contemplative object.*

VB That's right, but when it comes around again, it is experienced differently, much more like a spiral than a loop. I think that's what I have often tried to aim for, even in my early written pieces, where you have sentences organized recursively. If you follow the instructions and return to the beginning …

DC *… it's a different beginning.*

VB Exactly. In a recent projection piece, *A Place to Read* (2010), the text and its relations put you in the same position, spiralling. You can't 'get out'. You can't exhaust it. You can only walk away. So a question I often ask myself is: 'Can one exhaust *anything*?' I could argue intellectually that one can't but I feel that the products of the entertainment industry, for all that they are entertaining (and I'm as happy to be entertained as anyone), they do get exhausted quickly and at that point they become exhausting.

DC *Can you say a little more about the different registers of 'specificity' that inform your work? In the past you have talked and written about discursive and institutional specificities (for example in your book* Components of a Practice, *Skira 2007), and your artistic career got going at a point at the close of the 1960s when notions of the specificity of media were joined or eclipsed by overt concerns about the institutions of art and the media.*

VB In the beginning, the idea that specificity should be a 'criterion', something we should pay attention to, certainly came from Clement Greenberg. My early education was Modernist in that sense. And then I became more aware of ideological and institutional specificities: the politics of it all, not a small part of which was my waking up to the fact that I've made it from working-class Sheffield to this middle-class artistic milieu and what the fuck am I doing here? I feel that distance from my own original environment, my own loyalties and affiliations. It's difficult to find the right words. How does one answer those questions? And answer in a way that's not merely self-serving? For me, part of the answer had been to address the doxa of the entertainment industry and consider alternatives to those preformatted modes of thinking and presenting and responding – to hold the door open to other ways of being in the world. So that's a transition from a formalist notion of specificity to a more political one, which for me came out of Louis Althusser's writings. So I had Greenberg's specificity and Althusser's specificity. And, of course, feminism made its own contributions to that.

DC *That transition, and I guess it was at first felt as a transition, manifested in the turn away from image making to a 'hard linguistic Conceptualism'.*

VB Let's say it was a putting aside of the optical rather than a putting aside of the image, because I don't think my Conceptualism was ever that hard. In common with Joseph Kosuth and Art & Language, with whom I was hanging out, I had read my Wittgenstein. But unlike them I'd read a lot of phenomenology, particularly Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Soon after I became very interested in French thought, the 'French disease' as they called

'The "image" is neither a material entity nor simply an optical event – it is a complex psychological process.'

VICTOR BURGIN

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Still from an untitled work in progress, 2013, digital projection

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Frames from the three camera movements of the video projection *A Place to Read*, 2010

it. So in that early anti-optical work of mine there is a lot of imagery evoked. The image is mental. I'm still constantly struggling against the art world's reduction of the image to the optical. For phenomenology and later for Gilles Deleuze the image is always virtual; the optical image always joins with the memory image, the fantasy image.

DC *The relation between actual and virtual in your work often appears as a tension between real, exterior space and psychological, interior space. 'Room' (1969) is a series of sentences asking the viewer/reader to consider their immediate perceptions and memories. 'UK76' (1976), 'US77' (1977) and 'Zoo 78' (1978–9) play the supposed 'immediacy' of street photography against the fantasies of desire and ideology.* A Place to Read *(2010) includes a computer modelled virtual environment of an ideal Turkish coffee house that was demolished by the forces of corporate real estate.*

VB To have an interest in the relation between real exterior space and psychological space is quite simply to be interested in the image. The 'image' is neither a material entity nor simply an optical event, an imprint of light on the retina, it is also a complex psychological process. It is in this sense that the image is defined as essentially 'virtual' in the phenomenological perspective that Deleuze derived from Henri Bergson. The 'image-for-commerce' is something that can be propped on an easel beside an auctioneer, something that can sit easily on the cover of a magazine, something that lends itself to becoming logo or brand. But the image is a different thing outside the circulation of commodities, outside the order of the spectacle – which is to say, outside of modern Western history. For example, in the Western tradition there are things – objects, 'images', whatever – and then there is the space between them, which is empty. In a certain Japanese tradition the space between – *ma* – is as tangible as any material thing and is as charged with sense. This is the place and the substance of the 'image' as I understand the term.

DC *Your moving-image works make use of recent image technology but often their 'subjects' are moments from the past – a building, a symbolic site, a film, a social formation that were all short-lived gestures of resistance, extinguished by commercialization. These are brought into the present and suspended for the viewer as moving panoramas of computer-generated or digitally stitched still photographs. In this suspension both the hybrid technological 'form' and the historical 'content' are rethought, opened up. This too seems to be a counter-model to the commodification of the past, of Hollywood's mobilizing of techno-spectacle to 'make history come alive'.*

VB A historical event is a complex of fragmentary and often contradictory representations – archival, fictional, psychical and so on. Hollywood film depictions of historical events tend to coat such representational complexes in a sticky layer of unifying ideology, a mix of consensual categories, stereotypical crises and predictable narrative resolutions. To show the event 'as it really was' is not an alternative. It never 'really was' any *one* thing – past and present alike are sites of contestation where radically different perspectives collide. For Bergson, the 'image' is a process in which memory is invested with the experiential force of present perception – an idea famously given extended literary exposition by Marcel Proust. There is something of this idea in Walter Benjamin's notion that our access to history is a matter of the activation of a memory in a moment of crisis. One way I understand that moment of crisis is as the experience of affect, or even the lack of it, in our first encounter with a place.

A Place to Read was the outcome of an invitation to make a work in response to Istanbul. After several visits to the city, I found myself preoccupied by the ongoing process of destruction of some of the most beautiful public aspects of Istanbul in the pursuit of private profit. What came to metonymically represent this present process for me was the past destruction of an architecturally significant coffee house and public garden, on a beautiful site overlooking the Bosphorus, to make way for a hideous orientalist luxury hotel. The house and garden had to be disinterred from oblivion through the agency of surviving drawings and photographs, and was resurrected as 'memory' in the form of virtual camera movements through a computer modeled space. The completed work was then installed in the Istanbul Archeological Museum.

I am responding to you now having just replied to a question about this same work put to me by the editors of a cultural theory journal. They raised the much-debated issue of photographic 'indexicality' in the age of digital simulation, and consequently of the status of my 'site-specific' Istanbul work to its historical referent. I told them that I have been unable to share in the excitement over the question of 'indexicality' in relation to digital photography – or computer simulation – because I never considered traditional photography to be indexical in any epistemologically fundamental way. I gave the example of news reports that refer to images of a massacre but with the caution that the veracity of the images 'cannot yet be confirmed'. This has become a familiar refrain throughout the reporting of the recent and ongoing conflicts in the Arab world. The image is never enough. At some point someone has to step forward and say: 'I was there, I saw this' – and then even this statement has to be interrogated and either substantiated or denied by others. It makes no difference to this process whether the image is digital or was shot on film. The most epistemologically profound register of the indexical is discursive and affective, the optical is quite literally superficial. A woman at the opening of the installation at the Archeological Museum in Istanbul was in tears – she had known the original coffee house as a child.

In retrospect it is interesting to me that there was absolutely no reference in Istanbul to the *difference* between the actual building and the computer simulation of it – the 'indexicality' of the work in this sense seemed not to be an issue, suggesting that we need to broaden the definition of indexicality beyond the tacit empiricism of the discussions to date.

DC *The idea that a computer-generated work may produce an image that is as 'indexical' as any other also raises interesting questions about 'virtual cameras'.*

VB Strictly speaking, the camera has never been anything other than virtual. There is a *New Yorker* cartoon that shows two people in medieval dress walking through an architectural environment of crazily incompatible vanishing points. One of them is saying: 'I won't be sorry when they have this perspective thing worked out.' The perspective thing was worked out in the West centuries ago, and has framed our view of the world ever since. When photography replaced perspective drawing as the principal means by which the West represents itself and its others, it was consistent with the central impulse of the industrial revolution: the delegation of previously time-consuming and skilled manual tasks to the automatic operation of machines. Where photography represents a shift from manual to mechanical execution, computer imaging effects a shift from mechanical to electronic execution. However, where photography represents a particular aspect of the object in front of the camera, the computer simulates the object in its entirety. I see no difference in kind between the virtual camera and the lump of metal with 'Nikon' or 'Canon' stamped on it, but rather see them as different implementations of the same geometrical and optical knowledge. This same knowledge is brought to the design of glass lenses in real cameras and to the specification of algorithmic lenses in virtual cameras. Significantly, however, an enormous amount of expertise is devoted to writing computer code that not only models a scene as it appears to a virtual lens, but may also simulate the results of the various imperfections of glass lenses. The prevailing criterion of realism in computer modelling is not the world as such, it is rather the world as it appears to the camera – an index of insecurity in a period of historical transition, like the trace of a potter's fingers in the design of a moulded plastic bowl. In time we may forget how physical cameras once showed the world, and accommodate our supposedly 'natural' vision to the new conventions.

David Campany is a writer and curator based in London, UK. His books include Photography and Cinema *(Reaktion, 2009) and* Jeff Wall: Picture for Women *(Afterall/MIT Press, 2010).*

1
Photopath, 1967–9, installation view as part of '1956–1972 – When Attitudes Became Form', Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, 1986

2
Think About It, 1976, silver gelatin print, 1.2 × 1.6 m

3
Possession, 1976, duotone lithograph, 119 × 84 cm

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Any Moment, 1970, first published in *Studio International*, July–August 1970

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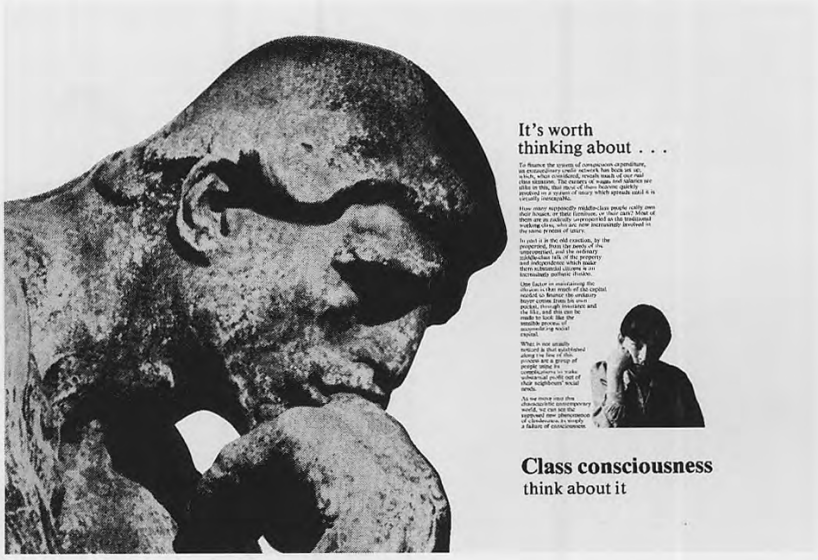

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aperture

Victor Burgin: Between

APERTURE NO. 210, SPRING 2013

By David Campany

“Literature,” Susan Sontag once said, “is writing one wishes to reread.” Artworks, one might extend, are images or objects or performances one wishes to re-view. Early in his long career, 1973 to be exact, the artist-writer Victor Burgin offered a slightly different definition:

“A job the artist does which no-one else does is to dismantle existing communication codes and to recombine some of their elements into structures which can be used to generate new pictures of the world.”

Here an artist isn’t simply someone who works within the institutions of art; it is someone who works in relation to, and at odds with, the structures of culture at large. An artist may well exhibit in galleries but may also be a writer, architect, filmmaker, designer, musician or speaker. Burgin himself has made visual work and written essays for over forty years. His photography and video pieces are visual and textual, and so are his writings.

My first encounter with his work came in the form of the book *Between*, published in 1986. Elegantly designed, it contains sequences of black and white photos with overlaid texts. The photos are quite like many things: film stills, classic street photography, fashion, advertising and reportage. In addition there are various pieces of writing that seem “theoretical” but are also poetic, aphoristic, polemical yet fragmentary. There are also short, free-standing paragraphs full of insight into the presumptions of the mass media, the clichés of art-speak, the role of the unconscious in looking, and the shaping of class, gender and sexuality. The contents are ordered in rough chronology although it’s not necessary to read it that way. But this is how Burgin begins:

“My decision to base my work in cultural theory, rather than traditional aesthetics, has resulted in work whose precise ‘location’ is uncertain, ‘between’: between gallery and book; between ‘visual art’ and ‘theory;’ between image and narrative – ‘work’ providing *work* between reader and text.”

Books of photographs and words may construct a space set apart, a world in which the oppressive conventions of daily life may be suspended and rethought. *Between* is as rich as the best movies by Jean-Luc Godard: fiercely critical, joyously playful, wildly idiosyncratic yet *always* interested in telling us about the culture in which we live and the alternatives. And like Godard, Burgin opened more doors than I have been able to explore in the years since. From this one book I found my way to writers such as Roland Barthes, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Viktor Shklovsky, Louis Althusser, Julia Kristeva and Karl Marx. It also led me to Lee Friedlander, Garry Winogrand, Alexander Rodchenko, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Alfred Hitchcock and John Cage. Sure, all these figures came before Burgin but none of us discovers things chronologically. We are always going backwards and forwards.

From the late 1960s to the mid-1980s *Between* charts Burgin's passage from early conceptual art, via appropriationist works and critiques of mass media imagery to a series of photo-texts informed by psychoanalysis, semiotics and cinema studies. During this period, the art markets came to dominate and dictate as never before. Art was no longer that stubborn space of resistance and reflection; it was to be part of the spectacle of neo-liberal capitalism in which image is all. Self-congratulatory art fairs, artists as media celebrities, bloated auction prices, and the reduction of criticality to recognizable and increasingly empty gestures. *Between* includes an extract of a letter written in reply to a collector:

"We are a consumer-society, and it seems to me that art has become a passive 'spectator sport' to an extent unprecedented in history. I have always tried to work against this tendency by producing 'occasions for interpretation' rather than 'objects for consumption.' I believe that the ability to produce rather than consume meanings, the ability to think otherwise – ways of thinking not encouraged by the imperative to commodity production, ways condemned as 'a waste of time' – is fundamental to the goal of a truly, rather than nominally, democratic society. I believe art is one of the few remaining areas of social activity where the attitude of critical engagement may still be encouraged – all the more reason for art to engage with those issues that are *critical*."

Burgin makes photographic work like no other artist, but his themes and motifs are drawn from experiences common to us all – the modern city, the structures of family, language as something that forms and reforms us, the power of images, principles of government, memory and history. And yet, encouraged by the

media to look to art for quick messages, some audiences and critics have found his work “inaccessible.” Actually Burgin’s work is among the most accessible I know, if by that we mean “easy to get into.” It’s the *getting out* that’s tricky. To be truly challenged and changed is to find yourself unsure, slightly lost, forgetting where you came in but pleased you did. As Roland Barthes once put it, “To get out, go in deeper.”

You won’t see this publication in the canon of photobooks, nor on lists of recommended theory books. It’s not a catalogue, or a monograph or an “artist’s book.” It really is between.

ARTNEWS

‘WELL-EDITED MEMORIALS OF WANDERLUST’: A BRIEF HISTORY OF BRITISH CONCEPTUAL ART BY Alex Greenberger

“Victor Burgin at Galerie Thomas Schulte”
By Alicia Reuter

September 2012

In this thought-provoking retrospective of three decades’ worth of film, photography, and text-based work, British artist Victor Burgin, one of the founding fathers of Conceptualism, asserted his intellectual might, as well as a surprising ability to transform the mundane into rich, sensual imagery.

The show opened with Burgin’s first juxtaposition of text and image, Performance/Narrative (1971), which consists of 16 framed photographs and one framed text. The black-and-white gelatin prints depict a small desk, a chair, a lamp in a mysterious office, while the text describes various obscure narrative possibilities.

In the last room, eight diptychs titled Zoo 78 (1978) paired unsettling images, often of women in various states of undress, with mundane shots of the courtyards, street signs, room interiors, and buildings that surround the Berlin Zoo. Short texts from Russian critic Viktor Shklovsky and the Marquis de Sade created a sybaritic element, suggesting Burgin’s interest in acts of voyeurism.

Victor Burgin, “Limited Optimism”, Autumn, 2012.

VICTOR BURGIN

LIMITED OPTIMISM

An e-mail exchange between Victor Burgin and David Campany.

In a recent online interview you say:

> **… I think that the most important work that art can attempt is to provide alternatives to the hegemonic popular common sense created by industrialised mass culture and propagated by the media. That is to say, to support the exercise of one's own intellectual and sensual faculties, without ceding to pressures from outside.**

I agree, and see photography education facing the same challenge. What do you think?

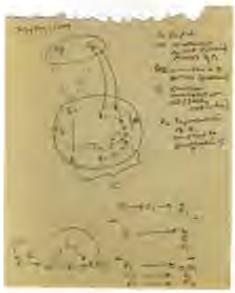
I agree that art practices and photography education are in pretty much the same boat. In Britain this present state of affairs originated about forty years ago when Thatcherism first promoted business and commerce from the status of mere occupations to that of transcendental values. The steady withdrawal of public funding for arts and education over the past forty years or so pitched museums and educational institutions alike into the marketplace to survive as best they can, with the result that a whole range of intellectual and cultural activities that were once valued according to their own criteria now have to look for their legitimation in market terms – in terms of 'contribution to economic growth' and 'impact on society', in terms of money and mass audiences. This has produced the widespread tendency in contemporary art to address much the same range of interests, forms of attention and reading competences that the mass media typically assumes in its audiences. For most of modern history the role of the arts has been to accommodate non-consensual thought and provide a space for intellectual and formal diversity and complexity, but this role has declined dramatically over past decades.

One salutary effect of the present recession is that it has clarified for many the situation you describe. With a collapsing art market, an education system crumbling under cuts and the sheer number of students with so few job opportunities, the question is reemerging about the degree to which market forces dictate art and culture if left unchecked. In a recession a palpable gap opens up between the mass media image regime around us and our own lived experience. Is this a source of hope? Optimism, even?

History does not encourage optimism. Nevertheless there are periods of respite, 'parentheses in history' as a friend of mine calls them. The immediate post-war Labour government, in a time of great economic hardship, introduced the National Health Service, unemployment insurance, public pensions and free higher education for working class children. It was a parenthesis in history that closed with Thatcher-Blair and is now being walled off from memory by Cameron/Clegg. Although I was always an opponent of the vulgar-Marxist argument that culture is nothing other than a superstructural projection of the economic base it's more difficult to argue against it when you look at what happened to the art world during the years of unrestrained finance capitalism. As the saying goes: 'We get the art we deserve'. Those who became the primary arbiters of public taste during that period – museum directors, artists, curators, art journalists, dealers, collectors and so on – are still in place, as is the economic and discursive apparatus they helped construct, or at least did nothing to resist. The period in which silly amounts of money were poured into the art market was the period which not only introduced league tables of artists ranked according to their prices at auction, but league tables of curators and dealers ranked according to their 'power' – the 'power', of course, of gatekeepers. Although there are always dissidents within any hegemonic order, most of that legacy is still with us. More seriously, a whole generation has grown up knowing nothing different. I just read a piece in *The Guardian Weekly* about the artist Jeremy Deller. He refers to Chris Burden's 1971 performance which consisted of Burden being shot in the arm by an assistant. Deller says: 'I doubt if he made much money out of that but as an idea they don't come much stronger, and you will never forget that I've told you that.' Here are those terrible twins again – 'money' and 'impact'. They speak equally through the mouths of artists and government white papers on education. Back in 1969 I ended an essay in *Studio International* magazine by citing Bertolt Brecht's suggestion that rather than judging a work by its suitability to the apparatus, we should judge the apparatus by its suitability to the work. I was writing then from within another parenthesis in history. My limited optimism now is for the opening of another clearing in history, but there first has to be widespread recognition of the possibility of an *outside* to the currently dominant apparatus, and the value-system it enshrines.

Much of your artwork since the late 1960s has taken up this problem at a formal level: *Photopath* (1967) eluded easy commodification just as the art market for photography was getting going; your photo-text pieces of the 1970s and '80s reworked and revealed the conventions of reportage and advertising; and you have talked of your projection works as 'uncinematic', ignoring spectacle to open up other relations to the moving image.

Photopath was one of the first works I made after graduating from Yale School of Art, where I met questions about the limits of mark-making and what can count as sculpture. Underlying these questions was a historical shift of attitude towards the frame, iconically represented in Hans Namuth's photographs from 1950 of Jackson Pollock



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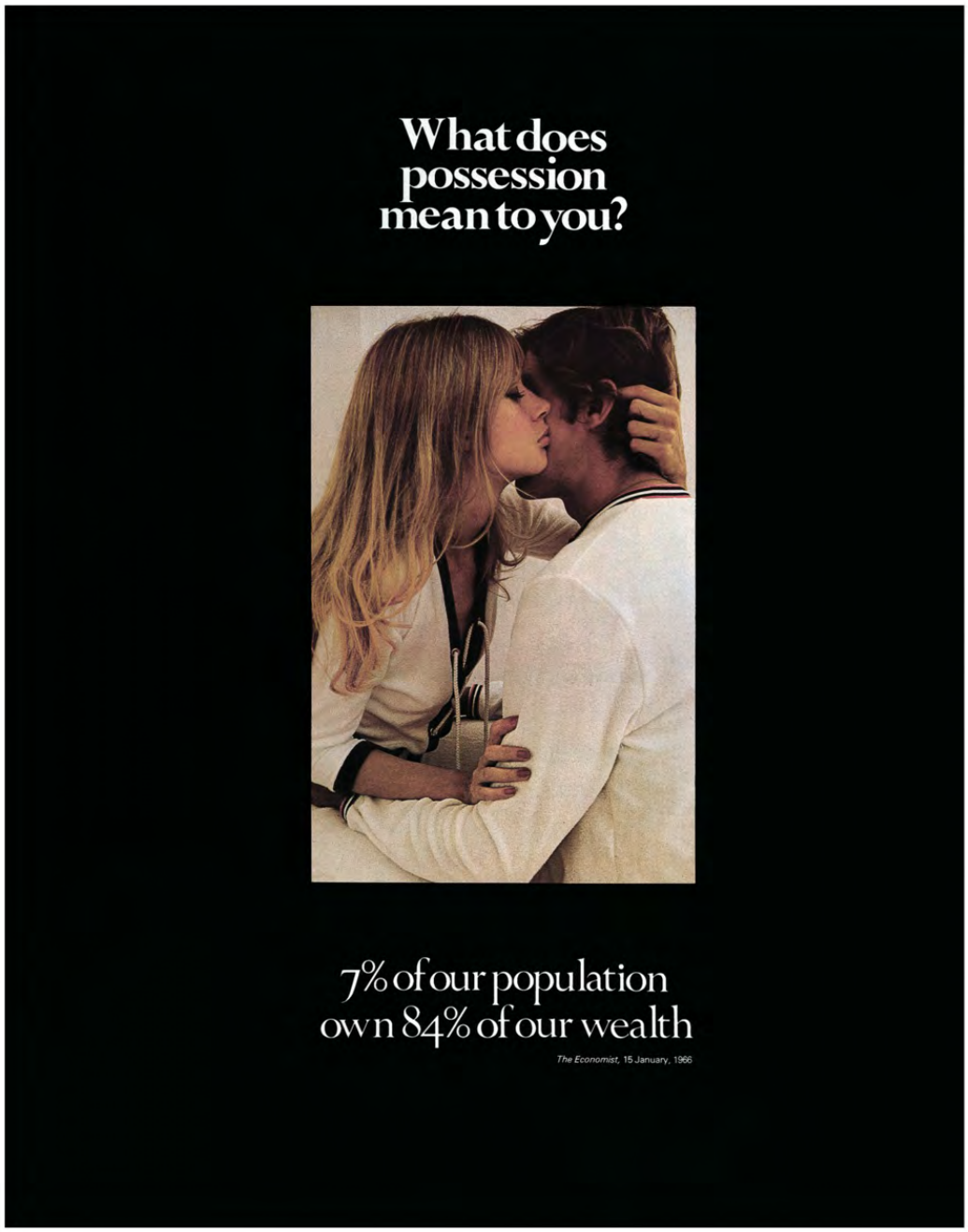
ALL ASPECTS OF 12 UPON WHICH YOU CONSIDER ANY MEMBER OF 9 TO BE CONTINGENT

at work. You can see these images as background to that 1971 Burden piece – the performance of a body making a mark, the performance of a mark made on a body. The breaking of the frame, in both physical and discursive terms, broke the historical pact with commodification, as the art object – now reconceived as 'work' – entered into more complex negotiations with its outside. The apparent anti-commodity stance of the late 1960s and early 1970s was more often an unintentional by-product of working through these historical questions than it was a conscious intention on the part of the artist. The market eventually adapted, as it always does, and work from that period has now been commodified. Anything can be commodified. The distinction is not between work that can be commodified and work that cannot, it is between work conceived from the outset as commodity and work where the conception is indifferent to commodity status. The reportage, advertising and street poster works you mention were also in part a continuation of work on crossing the frame – the architectural frame of the gallery walls, the discursive frames of advertising rhetoric and documentary conventions. My projection works are continuous with the earlier work in their attention to the 'demotic' as I defined it in one of our earlier exchanges [see *Parallel Texts: Interviews and Interventions about Art*, Reaktion, 2011, p. 170]. What I might call the 'demotic attitude' differs from aesthetic populism in that its focus is not on actual mass cultural forms and contents but rather on virtual possibilities, alternative configurations and outcomes, inherent in contemporary technologies and extant languages.

One of the ways in which the relation between actual and virtual has played out in your work has been in the tension between real, exterior space and psychological, interior space. *Any Moment* (1970) is a series of sentences asking the viewer/reader to consider their immediate perceptions and memories. *UK76*, *US77* and *Zoo 78* play the supposed 'immediacy' of street photography against the fantasies of desire and ideology. *A Place to Read* (2010) includes a computer modelled virtual environment of an ideal Turkish coffee house that was demolished by the forces of corporate real estate.

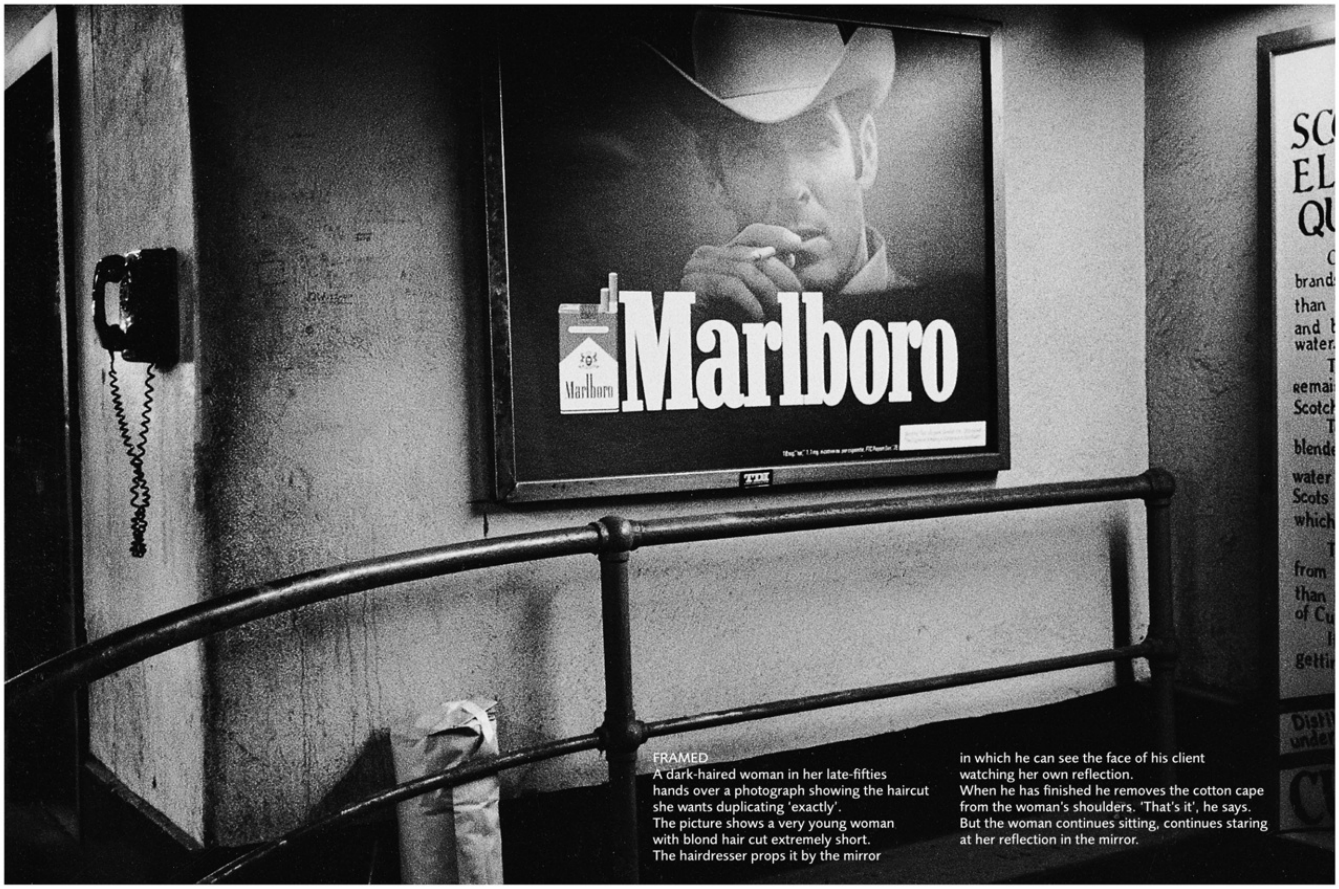
To have an interest in the relation between real exterior space and psychological space is quite simply to be interested in the *image*. The 'image' is neither a material entity nor simply an optical event, an imprint of light on the retina, it also is a complex psychological process. It is in this sense that the image is defined as essentially 'virtual' in the phenomenological perspective that Gilles Deleuze derives from Henri Bergson. The 'image-for-commerce' is something that can be propped on an easel beside an auctioneer,

Left: Preparatory sketch for Any Moment, 1970
Centre: Any Moment as published in Studio International, July/August, 1970
Right: Photopath, 1967



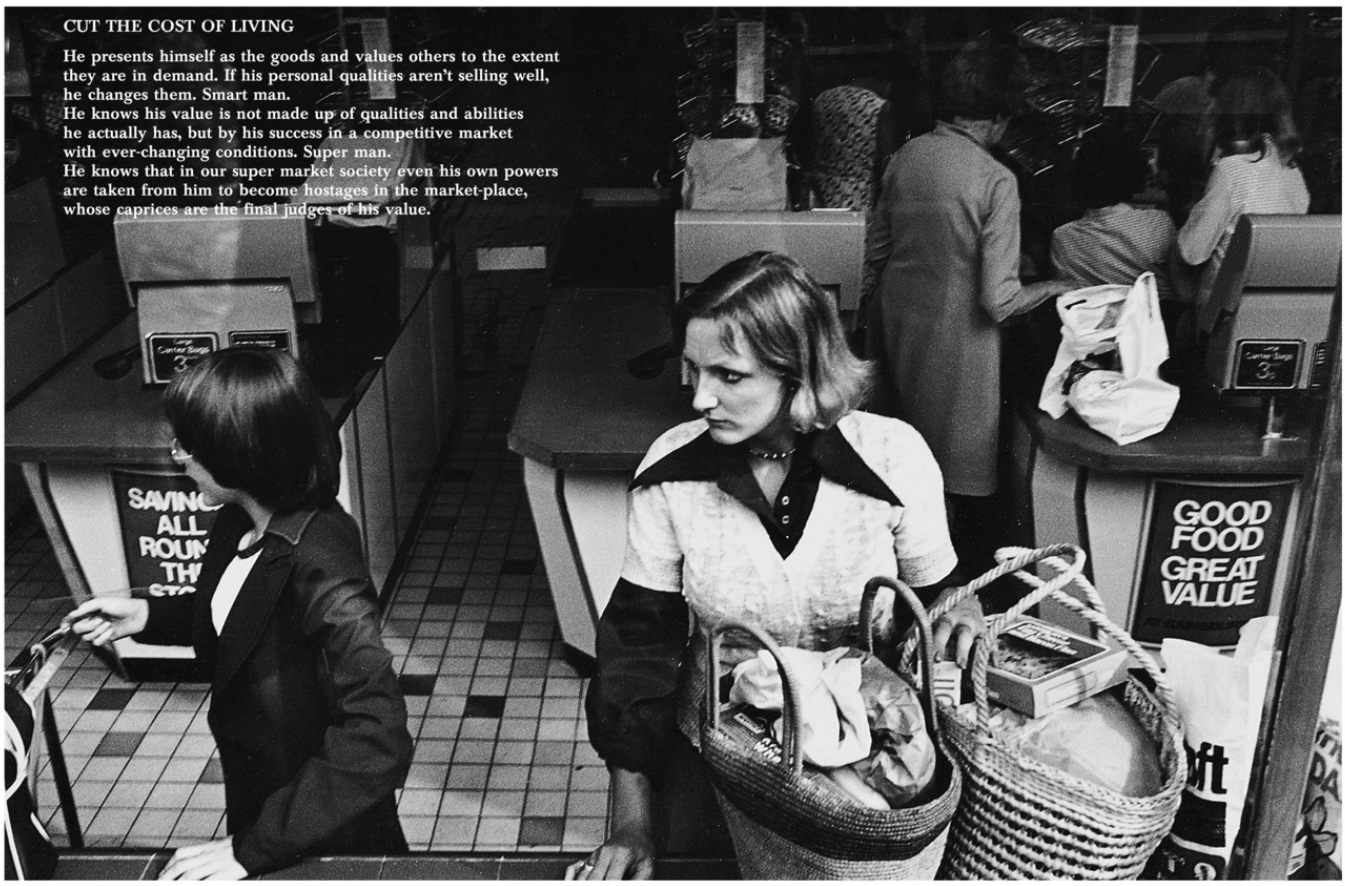
Possession, 500 copies posted in the streets in the centre of Newcastle Upon Tyne, 1976

From Zoo 78, 1978



FRAMED
A dark-haired woman in her late-fifties hands over a photograph showing the haircut she wants duplicating 'exactly'.
The picture shows a very young woman with blond hair cut extremely short.
The hairdresser props it by the mirror in which he can see the face of his client watching her own reflection.
When he has finished he removes the cotton cape from the woman's shoulders. 'That's it', he says.
But the woman continues sitting, continues staring at her reflection in the mirror.

From US77, 1977



something that can sit easily on the cover of a magazine, something that lends itself to becoming a logo or brand. But the image is a different thing outside the circulation of commodities, outside the order of the spectacle – which is to say, outside of modern Western history. For example, in the Western tradition there are things – objects, 'images', whatever – and then there is the space between them, which is empty. In a certain Japanese tradition the space between – '*ma*' – is as tangible as any material thing and is as charged with sense. This is the place and the substance of the 'image' as I understand the term.

Your moving image works make use of recent image technology but often their 'subjects' are moments from the past – a building, a symbolic site, a film, a social formation that were all short-lived gestures of resistance, extinguished by commercialisation. These are brought into the present and suspended for the viewer as scrolling panoramas of digitally stitched still photographs. In this suspension both the hybrid technological 'form' and the historical 'content' can be rethought, opened up. This too seems to be a counter-model to the commodification of the past exemplified by Hollywood's mobilizing of techno-spectacle to 'make history come alive'.

A historical event is a complex of fragmentary and often contradictory representations – archival, fictional, psychical, and so on. Hollywood film depictions of historical events tend to coat such representational complexes in a sticky layer of unifying ideology, a mix of

From UK76, 1976

consensual categories, stereotypical crises and predictable narrative resolutions. To show the event 'as it really was' is not an alternative. It never 'really was' any *one* thing – past and present alike are sites of contestation where radically different perspectives collide. I mentioned Bergson, for whom the 'image' is a process in which memory is invested with the experiential force of present perception – an idea famously given extended literary exposition by Marcel Proust. There is something of this idea in Walter Benjamin's notion that our access to history is a matter of the activation of a memory in a moment of crisis. One way I understand that moment of crisis is as the experience of affect, or even the lack of it, in our first encounter with a place. You earlier mentioned my work *A Place to Read*, which was the outcome of an invitation to make a work in response to Istanbul. After several visits to the city I found myself preoccupied by the ongoing process of destruction of some of the most beautiful public aspects of Istanbul in the pursuit of private profit. What came to metonymically represent this present process for me was the past destruction of an architecturally significant coffee house and public garden, on a beautiful site overlooking the Bosphorus, to make way for a hideous orientalist luxury hotel. The house and garden had to be disinterred from oblivion through the agency of surviving drawings and photographs, and was resurrected as 'memory' in the form of virtual camera movements through a computer modelled space. The completed work was then installed in the Istanbul Archeological Museum. I am responding to you now having just replied to a question about this same work put to me by the editors of a cultural theory journal. They raised the much debated issue of photographic 'indexicality' in the age of digital simulation, and consequently of the status of my 'site specific' Istanbul work to its historical referent. I told them that I have been unable to share in the excitement over the question of 'indexicality' in relation to digital photography – or computer simulation – because I never considered traditional photography to be indexical in any epistemologically fundamental way. I gave the example of news reports that refer to images of a massacre but with the caution that the veracity of the images 'cannot yet be confirmed'. This has become a familiar refrain throughout the reporting of the recent and ongoing conflicts in the Arab world. The image is never enough, at some point someone has to step forward and say: 'I was there, I saw this' – and then even this statement has to be interrogated and either substantiated or denied by others. It makes no difference to this process whether the image is digital or was shot on film. The most epistemologically profound register of the indexical is discursive and affective, the optical is quite literally superficial. A woman at the opening of the installation at the Archeological Museum in Istanbul was in tears – she had known the original coffee house as a child. In retrospect it is interesting to me that there was absolutely no reference in Istanbul, either in what that woman and others said to me at the time of the exhibition or in the response of the audience when I later screened the work at a conference, to the *difference* between the actual building and the computer simulation of it – the 'indexicality' of the work in this sense seemed not to be an issue, suggesting that we need to broaden the definition of indexicality beyond the tacit empiricism of the discussions to date.

I agree with that. The idea that a computer-generated work may produce an image that is as 'indexical' as any other also raises interesting questions about 'virtual cameras'.

Strictly speaking, the camera has never been anything other than virtual. There is a *New Yorker* cartoon that shows two people in medieval dress walking through an architectural environment of crazily incompatible vanishing points. One of them is saying: 'I won't be sorry when they have this perspective thing worked out.' The perspective thing was worked out in the West centuries ago, and has framed our view of the world ever since. When photography replaced perspective drawing as the principle means by which the West represents itself and its others it was consistent with the central impulse of the industrial revolution: the delegation of previously time-consuming and skilled manual tasks to the automatic operation of machines. Where photography represents a shift from manual to mechanical execution, computer imaging effects a shift from mechanical to electronic execution. However, where photography *represents* a particular aspect of the object in front of the camera, the computer *simulates* the object in its entirety. I see no difference in kind between the virtual camera and the lump of metal with 'Nikon' or 'Canon' stamped on it, but rather see them as different implementations of the same geometrical and optical knowledge. This same knowledge is brought to the design of glass lenses in real cameras and to the specification of algorithmic lenses in virtual cameras. Significantly however an enormous amount of expertise is devoted to writing computer code that not only models a scene as it appears to a virtual lens, but may also simulate the results of the various imperfections of glass lenses. The prevailing criterion of realism in computer modelling is not the world as such, it is rather the world as it appears to the camera – an index of insecurity in a period of historical transition, like the trace of a potter's fingers in the design of a moulded plastic bowl. In time we may forget how physical cameras once showed the world, and accomodate our supposedly 'natural' vision to the new conventions.

Victor Burgin, Parallel Texts, interview with Sarah Thornton, London: Reaktion Books, 2011.

dated to the seventeenth century, when painters seceded from the crafts guilds to create the first art academies. So the very origin of the art school is in the idea that making art is a way of thinking, and that thinking involves critical self-reflection. Similarly, the university, by definition, is a theoretical institution. But in the short space of time available a student can only be introduced to theory – whether she or he will develop a relationship with theory remains to be seen. If so, the relation maybe short-term or a life-long one, and like any important relationship it's going to be full of ambivalence – a love-hate relationship. At Goldsmiths I'll be mainly involved with the combined practice/theory research degrees that the department offers. This brings us back to the issue of specificity. To speak of 'research' in a fine art department raises a fundamental question: what is the specificity of research conducted from within a fine arts programme? What distinguishes it from research in other academic programmes, such as art history and cultural studies, that may themselves take artworks and art institutions as their object? For me it's the uniquely intimate relationship between the practice of writing and other symbolic practices. This is what is most interesting to me. As for your other questions, I don't feel qualified to say anything about the British art world as it has been such a long time since I've had anything to do with it.

17. 2005

Sarah Thornton: My first question is one that is often met with hostility, which is very interesting to me as an ethnographer. Can you tell me . . . what is an artist?

One can answer that question in an essentialist or a materialist way. I prefer a materialist answer: an artist is somebody who is recognized as such in the society in which he or she lives.

'Art' is their occupation. It may not be their only occupation, but it is the occupation which is taken as defining them. They produce certain kinds of objects – written, performed, painted, sculpted, film or photographic – within recognized 'art' institutions. These can be literally 'concrete' institutions – such as museums, galleries and art schools – but more fundamentally they are discursive institutions: art criticism, art history, art theory and so on.

And what is the essentialist definition of the artist?

It is someone of a particular heightened sensibility, who sees the world with a clarity – or in terms of a vision – that is denied to lesser mortals, and generously gives the benefit of their vision to others, generally in exchange for money.

Loads of it!

As much as possible.

What kind of artist are you? You gave me a cogent sociological definition of the artist. Could you describe yourself more specifically?

It seems to me important not to take oneself for an 'artist', as this invites alienation in an image given from outside, and can lead to the worst kinds of compliant bad faith. For example, there are those 'artists' who play the kinds of roles that make them attractive to the media: they behave like naughty children, throw stuff around, get drunk and vomit, exhibit their sex lives . . .; their work takes the form of similarly media-friendly 'provocations'. . .

What about the idea that art can be politically dangerous, or subversive?

It can be, in specific historical circumstances. Art that is genuinely subversive is usually illegal. Writers and filmmakers are the most likely to get into trouble. In totalitarian regimes these are the people most likely to be imprisoned or murdered. In

Blair's Britain it is hard to imagine a work of visual art that could put a dent in the complacency of the current regime. From time to time a 'political' artist may break the law to attract attention. But the simple fact of illegality does not in itself make a work politically effective.

So you are suspicious of definitions of the artist, and of political art. You yourself have been defined as a political artist. Did you ever consider yourself 'political'? But this brings me back to my original question: what kind of artist are you?

I'm a 'realist', but not in the nineteenth-century sense. I'm more a 'phenomenological' realist. There is some 'thing' in my encounter with the world, something that seems to have no place in the field of representations. I try to bring that 'thing' into representation. The history of my work is a series of failed attempts, with each failure the impetus for the next work.

I look at the gamut of art. On one hand I see artists who are very auction friendly, who are very colourful, bright and brash – like Jeff Koons. They play off popular culture and have immediate appeal. On the other hand, there are artists who make work that is more theoretically oriented, quieter, literally less colourful. Their art practice doesn't interact with the market all that much. Their work has a different life, a different way of circulating. These artists seem much more affiliated to universities, more concerned with language.

As they don't have a great deal in common, perhaps there should be different words for the different practices you describe – perhaps they shouldn't both be called 'art'. Art for me is a way of thinking – a way of thinking about one's experience, a way of thinking about the world – and therefore unavoidably discursive. But the other kinds of art you mention – the sound-bite, market-friendly, not-too-far-from-popular-culture-that-you-have-to-make-a-great-effort-to-understand-it . . . that kind of work – is no less embedded in language; it is dependent on the language of art criticism, publicity and promotion, salerooms and auction houses. It is embedded in those variously

interdependent discursive formations, but it doesn't critically engage with them. It surfs on those discourses.

What is the opposite of surfing?

Boat-building?

Should art be entertaining?

What is entertaining to one person may be tedious to another, so the only way I can answer that question is to rephrase it and ask: 'Should art be part of the entertainment industry?' I think we can agree on what we mean by the entertainment industry – mainstream cinema and television, popular music and video games and so on. A lot of art today aspires to belong to that industry, but still falls short of achieving a comparable mass audience. The dependence of museums on corporate sponsorship has led to their pitching for entertainment industry size audiences with publicity driven blockbuster shows, with frock designers jostling for position with Manet and a show of motorcycles. That kind of pandering to money and Sunday-supplement sensibilities has almost entirely sucked the meaning out of art displayed in museums, where all art is now expected to provide a crowd-pulling spectacle.

What do you expect of art that makes it different from entertainment?

Precisely its *difference*. The art I value is often judged 'difficult'. But the supposed difficulty of the work comes merely from the fact that it cannot be understood in terms of the established categories and conventions on which entertainment relies. In entertainment, I generally know what is coming, and know in advance that I am going to like it – it's a free ride. I have nothing against that. I enjoy being entertained, distracted from life, as much as anyone. With art, there is more work to do, it takes time, but you are prepared to give the time because there is something that touches you in some way – a sympathetic resonance between yourself and the work.

What is the zeitgeist?

Literally, it's a Hegelian term: 'spirit of the age'. It's the idea that all cultural and scientific production in a particular period – of course you have to decide how you periodize your period – ultimately emanates from, expresses, a unitary spirit of the age. It's an idea that supports periodization in art, such as 'renaissance', 'baroque', 'classical'. But when you look closely the distinctions generally disappear. In relation to art now, I don't know . . . what comes to mind are terms like 'spectacle', 'money', the culture of 'celebrity' – but as I don't believe in ghosts then I would prefer to explain such manifestations not as spirits of the age but rather as cultural formations of late money-market capitalism. But why do you ask?

It's been said to me many times that the responsibility of a biennial is to capture the zeitgeist. What do you think about that?

Is that a term they use then?

Yes, or other words like 'emerging' or 'contemporary'.

But the 'contemporary' changes every time you have a biennial, and if they had them annually then it would change annually. From there it's not far to Spring and Fall collections. Fashion industries, whether for frocks or art, manufacture the next manifestation of the 'contemporary' and then ascribe their economic machinations to supernatural forces. In the obsession with the contemporary the past is valued only to the extent that the present can use it. So the past is devalued in the interest of the present, and the present is devalued because it's soon to be past. So you live in this continual state of nervous anticipation – it's like the people at a party who are having conversations with each other and looking over each others' shoulders to see if there's somebody more interesting there.

That's the perfect metaphor. Yes, someone younger. It's interesting how the age of the artist has become so significant, because although

youth and beauty have been a factor for a long time, it was the youth and beauty of the depicted – Botticelli's Venus*, or whatever – that counted; now, there's this shift to the youth (and beauty) of the artist him or herself.*

It's a symptom of the confluence of the art world with the worlds of fashion and popular music: worlds of money, youth, beauty, celebrity, a 'zeitgeist' that changes as the wind blows. But then why call it 'zeitgeist' and not simply 'fashion'? You asked for a definition. When Jean Cocteau was asked if he could define fashion, he said: 'Fashion is what goes out of fashion.'

But all of these artists, no matter how pretty and commodifiable their work is, they're all 'conceptual'. The 'idea' is the alibi for the high price.

Most of my generation of 'conceptual' artists rejected the material object commodity form of art. So the fact that this object, having returned with a vengeance, now wears a sash printed with the word 'conceptual' is poignantly ironic. A concept is not something in a wrapper, like cheese on a supermarket shelf; it is part of an intellectual system. Ideas belong to contexts of ideas, to processes of thinking. What we have now are gestures masquerading as ideas, and ideas for stunts.

Do you think that your success as a writer and critical thinker has, in any way, undermined your status as an artist?

I'm sure it has.

Tell me about that.

I remember one prominent critic telling me: 'I really admire your work. I've really wanted to write about your work, but then you write about it so well yourself.' Another, no less prominent, said: 'I would really like to write about your work, but I just don't have time to do all the reading you've done.' Then there is a critic who wrote that my work 'merely illustrates theory' – which in effect, is to say: 'I understand the theory

so well that I can say that this work illustrates it.' It also says, 'I know what an illustration of a theory looks like' – which I certainly do not. I have just come from a conference in Durham, where I gave a paper on the panorama. Why a paper on the panorama? Because in my videos over recent years I've found myself returning to panoramic movements – almost against my will. And then, when I thought about my work before video, I could see that I've always been making panoramas. The works have always been assemblies of images laid out to fill the entire room, so that the experience is one of having to turn in order to see all of it. So, given that insistence of the panorama in my work, and given my realization that this is not a recent thing, I thought it might be helpful to learn something about the panorama and to think about it, so I wrote about it. My writing is a reflection upon issues arising in my work, an articulation of those issues *otherwise*. I suppose most artists find that they work in a coming and going between intuition and critical reflection. All I'm doing is making that process explicit. One of the main reasons for doing this is that I long ago decided, on political grounds, that teaching was an integral part of my practice. I wanted to produce texts that would be useful to my students. So I wrote essays that arise out of interests I have in my visual work, but which reflect on issues that are sufficiently general to apply not only to my own work but to be of use to other people.

I think there is increasing intolerance of role transgression, and a higher expectation that you should observe your role. The idea of a Renaissance man, the fact you could be an artist/writer/photographer/theorist/teacher, is not credible for many people. They want to know: what are you really?

Someone said as much to me recently, someone with fingers in a lot of art-world pies, he said: 'You know, you're really difficult to place.' I don't think it was intended as good news.

Do you see yourself as an interloper?

I feel somewhat out of place, which is rather odd, given the fact that I was trained as an artist, and that that's been my life since. Maybe a better way of putting it is that I am *in* the art world but not *of* the art world. An increased distance from the art world has not made me feel more distant from my work as an artist; on the contrary, I feel closer.

Can I jump now to a question about art teaching? What are the pros and cons of the 'group crit'?

There was a time when I insisted on group criticism sessions, and simply refused to give individual tutorials. I took the position that the most important issues concerned all of the students in common. But since that time the art world has become so heterogeneous that it's more difficult to argue for an overriding framework that will fit all students. In a pluri-discursive and multi-subcultural context the 'one-on-one' is probably the only way of engaging with an individual student's particular preoccupations.

That's interesting. I've found international differences between people's comfort levels with different kinds of crit situations. Americans are most gung-ho about group crits with British in the middle and certain parts of Europe favouring the one-on-one tutorial. But I hadn't thought of it historically like that. Could you elaborate on some of the strengths of the group session? Why did you originally favour that format?

I was concerned to get the students to think about their class position as artists, and about the place of their art activity within a broader socio-political setting. For example, I would ask them if they knew who cleaned the room they were sitting in, and when, and how much the cleaner was paid. Then when we came to the work itself, I insisted on what one might then have called a 'scientific' criticism – that's to say, a way of discussing work that doesn't rely upon individual response and personal opinion, but rather draws on a shared and testable interpretive language. My preferred language in those days

was semiotics. So having the students together allowed me to introduce some basic semiotic concepts, as analytical tools, so we could talk about the meaning of the work outside of a purely aesthetic framework. That is why a group session was necessary, but you can't achieve very much unless you are meeting with the group on a regular basis over a length of time.

Could you elaborate on what you saw as the problems of the one-on-one situation?

If you are not careful, it can easily turn into something between a Catholic confessional – the imparting of confidences in the assurance they will go no further – and what Freud called 'wild analysis'. The tutor is already interpellated as 'the one who knows' and who can advise, and it is easy for this role to become generalized beyond the tutor's professional competence, so in what is already a transferential situation you can get a quasi-therapeutic thing started that can be quite suspect.

How is it suspect?

Because you are in danger of talking about the student's emotional life or personal problems rather than their thinking processes in relation to their work.

Their parental transference?

You can get the full blast of that anyhow. As a tutor, one becomes aware of it and finds techniques for dealing with it. There is inevitably an analytic dimension to teaching, but teaching isn't analysis. But as things happen in teaching that happen in analysis, then some exposure to the psychoanalytic literature can help in teaching – for example, help deflect transference.

Do you have techniques for deflecting transference? Could you elaborate?

I'm not a professional shrink. I have no techniques as such. It's rather a matter of being alert to those moments in the conversation where the exchange can take a damagingly transferential turn, so that you can try to steer the conversation out of it, or just refuse to respond. I feel that having been in analysis has helped me in my teaching. But this is absolutely not to claim that teaching is somehow akin to doing analysis. The value of my having been in analysis goes in the exactly opposite sense. It allows me to dodge being put in the position of an analyst, and so avoid the tutorial degenerating into a kind of wild analysis.

I've never been in proper Freudian analysis, but I've been in therapy sporadically over the years and I think artists, in particular, would benefit hugely from the greater self-consciousness engendered by psychotherapy. What do you think?

I agree with Theodore Reich, who said: 'Every artist should be analyzed, but not too much.' I also agree with Winnicott's notion of the 'creative use of a neurosis'. He did not see the problem as being one of 'curing' a neurosis, but rather one of making it positively productive.

Are you a creative user of your neurosis? In your own artistic practice, or your own writing practice? Could you tell me just a little about how you've experienced that question over the years?

In common with many people today, if I have a significant psychological problem it's depression. There are times when it stops me working, and there are other times when I'm able to work in spite of it – and presumably whatever is making me depressed is also making me work. Hence Reich's 'not too much'.

That's interesting – whatever makes one depressed also makes one work. I think it's so true, but I'm having a hard time thinking around it. Can you elaborate?

Not without launching into an account of object relations theory.

I'm looking for tips, on how to get through my own life!

Listen, if I knew . . .

When you are discussing student artwork, do you find yourself falling back on certain words, phrases?

Only the entirety of what language offers me.

Really? So no places where you start off?

Perhaps there is, in one particular kind of situation. Where I teach now, the way the tutorial system works – with a 'sign-up sheet' sort of 'blind date' process – I can find myself walking, by appointment, into the studio of a student I haven't met before – which is a very strange situation, if you think about it. On occasions I will walk into their studio and think: 'Oh my God . . . What can I possibly say about this . . . ?' But this presents quite an interesting challenge. I invariably find that I do have things to say. There are always things to be said, but you have to find the way in. You have to find what it is you are able to speak about together. This can mean a necessary silence at the beginning, as it is most important not to say things just to fill the silence. If the student then responds by trying to tell me everything he or she thinks I should know, I will stop them . . . and say: 'I want to hear what you have to say, but before you tell me anything it might be helpful for me to tell you "cold" – coming from the outside, as a complete stranger – what I *see*.' I begin there and I try to leave out any words that imply value statements.

Why are value judgements inappropriate?

Because they say less about the artwork than they say about my personal sensibilities or taste. I have to allow for the fact

> that I may be completely blind to the merits of the work. I also have to allow for the fact that a negative judgement may be spot on, that what I am looking at may be rubbish – but this doesn't necessarily prevent the student from having a brilliant career. In the institutional context you have to bear in mind why the student is there, why you are there, where the student hopes to go . . . into a career as an artist, presumably. My personal taste in relation to the work is strictly irrelevant to this. My job is to try to enlarge the scope of their critical thinking about the work – whatever my opinion of its merits.

Do you use the word 'criticality'?

> No, it's one of those words like 'curation', which I loathe – 'curation' sounds like something you do to meat.

18. 2006

On the evidence of the transcript of The Art Seminar I might now make much the same assessment of photography theory that Julia Kristeva made of Russian Formalism: 'when it became a poetics [it] turned out and still turns out to be a discourse on nothing or on something which does not matter'.[1] However, rather than pursue this melancholy reflection, I prefer to offer some thoughts on one of the two topics that receive most discussion: 'medium specificity'.

Rosalind Krauss has suggested the idea of 'reinventing the medium'. She develops it mainly through reference to photography, which she describes as ascendant in art from the 1960s but as 'obsolescent' by the end of the century. For Krauss, this particular fate of photography exemplifies a more general condition at the recent *fin-de-siècle*. She writes:

> [T]he late twentieth century finds itself in the post-medium age. Surrounded everywhere by media, which is to say by the

eurozine

Victor Burgin, Hilde Van Gelder

Art and politics: A reappraisal

"There is no need for the western political artist, too often a disaster tourist, to sail the seven seas looking for injustices to denounce. Inequality and exploitation saturate the ground on which we stand, they are in the grain of everyday life." Conceptual artist Victor Burgin launches an excoriating attack on documentary art as the "new doxa".

In his highly influential book *Thinking Photography* (1982) Victor Burgin famously warns artists not to succumb to the romantic myth of inspiration and originality.[1] He argues that as all artistic "creation" necessarily depends on pre–established codes and norms, naïve intuition is an insufficient basis for the creative process. Drawing on Walter Benjamin¹s essay "The Author as Producer", he insists that artistic representations should always include a reflective stance with regard to their own conditions of production. In retrospect this can be seen as one of the most consistent basic premises of his work.

Hilde Van Gelder: You figure prominently among a pioneering group of artists that, as of the late–1960s, rejected American Modernist aesthetic ideals. In your comments on the writings of Clement Greenberg and John Szarkowski you dismantled their critical position as formalist and their theory as detached from reality. What you seem to have disliked most in Modernist discourse was the belief its adherents seemed to express in "the ineffable purity of the visual language"[2] –– a conviction that you trace back to a Platonic tradition of thought in which images have the capacity to reveal mystic truths enshrined in things "in a flash, without the need for words and arguments".[3] I wonder if you can say today, some 30 years later, how exactly you feel that words in your work have come to counteract such illusions of pure visibility of the image?

Victor Burgin: I do not believe, or rather *no longer* believe, that my work can "counteract" such illusions. Although I realize that your question refers to my photo–text work, I can perhaps more directly answer it by reference to my written work. At the time of *Thinking Photography* I thought that a more broadly informed photographic criticism would eventually dispel the unexamined assumptions that then dominated writing and talking about photography. The notion of the "purely visual" was prominent amongst these, as was the naïve realist idea that photography is a transparent "window on the world". The former belief dominated "fine art" photography at that time, while the latter provided the ideological underpinning of "social documentary". When I first started to teach film and photography students, after having first taught in an art school, the "art" and "documentary" approaches were mutually antagonistic –– ironical, given the fact that their founding assumptions are

department where I went to teach in 1973 (the London Polytechnic –– ed.) was at the time one of only two schools in the UK openly dedicated to a documentary project and hostile to "fine art" photography. The BA theory course I was asked to construct there, of which *Thinking Photography* is a trace, did for a while succeed in putting critical discussion –– the "reflective stance" you refer to –– in place of the acting out of inherited ideologies. But that period is now, as a friend of mine put it, a "parenthesis in history". There has since been a massive return of "previous" frames of mind that had never in fact gone away, even among some of those who participated in the initial project –– as if the mere fact of having acknowledged the validity of the arguments advanced in the 1970s and 1980s now provides exemption from acting in response to them. In retrospect I can see –– which should not surprise me given my theoretical inclinations –– that reason rarely prevails where there are professional and emotional benefits to be derived from irrationality. We are again confronted, as so often, with the psychological structure of disavowal: "I know very well, but nevertheless...".

HVG: You conclude your essay "Modernism in the Work of Art" (1976) by stating that the "division of labour" between "theorists" and "practitioners" is problematic.[4] In 1986, you add to this that the main problem of this divide is that it hinders people's attempts "for a truly *critical* cultural initiative".[5] The label "critical", or stronger even, "political" art, has often been attached to, particularly, your earlier practice. It seems, however, that with regard to your work, this notion needs some clarification. It seems doubtful that you would agree with your art being identified as "critical realist", a term Benjamin H. D. Buchloh coined in 1995 in order to describe Allan Sekula's photography.[6]

VB: I have heard references to the time when my work "used to be political". My work has never ceased to be political, what has changed is my understanding of the form of politics specific to *art*, rather than, for example, investigative journalism or agit–prop. Benjamin Buchloh's expression seems to me a symptom of the disavowal I just cited, not least because the issue of *representation* has simply dropped out of the picture. Beyond the attempt to rebrand what used to be called "social documentary" it is difficult to see what work the expression "critical realist" is intended to do. Either of the two terms Buchloh associates requires careful specification. To simply conjoin them as if their meanings were self–evident is inevitably to fall into complicity with the doxa –– in terms of which to be critical is to *criticize*. Here the "critic" assigns the "artist" a position analogous to the one he himself assumes –– that of a literally *exceptional* person who surveys, discriminates and judges. Where such a position is assigned we do well to ask if there are not blind spots in the critical view.

In the early– to mid–1970s, when my work had an unambiguously obvious political content, there was very little such work in the art world. Forty years later, "political art" is the new orthodoxy, but it is "political" only in the way the media understands the term. For example, the enthusiasm for "documentary" in the art world of the past quarter–century has provided a spectrum of gallery–sited narratives –– from intimately anecdotal "human interest" stories to exposés of the devastation of the human and natural environment by rapacious global capitalism. But there is nothing in the content or analysis of these stories that is not already familiar from the mass media, and I have seen only insignificant departures from conventional media forms. Such "artworks" solicit the same range of interests and the same reading competences that the media assumes in its audiences. Complementing "documentary" work in the art world are other kinds of work offering

spectacle, decoration or scandal. Here again we have not left the discursive space of the media, we have simply turned the page or changed channels.

Brecht defined "criticism" as that which is concerned with what is *critical* in society. My own sense of what is now fundamentally critical to the western societies in which I live and work is the progressive colonization of the terrain of languages, beliefs and values by mainstream media contents and forms –– imposing an industrial uniformity upon what may be imagined and said, and engendering compliant synchronized subjects of a "democratic" political process in which the vote changes nothing. The art world is no exception to this process. Artists making "documentaries" usually encounter their subject matter not at first hand but from the media. The audience for the subsequent artworks will instantly recognize the issues addressed, and easily understand them in terms already established by the media. What is "documented" in such works therefore is not their ostensible contents but rather the mutating world view of the media, and they remain irrelevant as art if they succeed in doing no more than recycle facts, forms and opinions already familiar from these prior sources.

I would emphasize that I am talking about documentary *in the art world*. As I write, the Iranian filmmaker Jafar Panahi is in prison –– primarily, it seems, because he was making a documentary about the mass protests that followed last year's dubious elections in Iran. The political value of documentary is conjunctural, context is as important as content. The political value of art primarily bears on neither content nor context but upon *language*. I see no point to "art" that calls upon the same general knowledge and interpretative capabilities I deploy when I read a newspaper.

Victor Burgin, from *Zoo78* (1978-79)

HVG: What about the other word in Buchloh's expression, "realism"? Arguably, your work *Zoo78* (1978-1979), consisting of eight photo diptychs that quite explicitly address the Cold War situation in Berlin, can be seen as a turning/closing point in your view of realism. I say "arguably" because in 1987, in an essay entitled "Geometry and Abjection", you launch a plea for a "realist" artistic project. However, you now define this project in terms of "psychical realism", an expression you take from Sigmund Freud.[7] The term already takes a central position in your essay "Diderot, Barthes, Vertigo" (1986), where you argue that "psychical–reality", "unconscious fantasy structures", constantly exercises "its effects upon perceptions and actions of the subject", such that the world can never be known "as, simply what it *is*".[8] To what extent do you still rhyme this notion of psychical realism with your earlier emphasis on art's function as cultural critique? In other words, can you articulate the kind of socio–cultural reflection you wish to put forward through your work ever since the concept of psychical realism has become one of its principal motors?

VB: The British philosopher Gilbert Ryle long ago commented on the habitual distinction in which "reality" is seen as something separate from our "inner"

lives. In terms of this distinction we simultaneously inhabit two parallel worlds –– one private and psychological, the other public and material. In this view the expression "psychical reality" would be an oxymoron. Ryle noted however that in this version of our experience of the world, there is no way of accounting for the *transactions* that take place between public and private histories, as by definition such transactions belong to neither of the "two" worlds. There is therefore no account of how individual subjects become inserted into general political processes –– except in terms of such now largely redundant categories as "class consciousness". What Ryle did not note, but might well have done, is that the distinction between private and public is hierarchical –– as when "subjective fantasy" is subsumed to "objective reality". With the idea of "psychical reality" Freud in effect "deconstructs" this hierarchy. Anticipating Derrida's critique of the "logic of the supplement", Freud shows how the "supplemental" category, that which is considered as superfluous and undesirable, is at the very heart of the category that is upheld as primary and essential.

I see no contradiction between a commitment to art as cultural critique and a taking into account of psychical reality. The British cultural and political theorist Stuart Hall said that his attempts to understand the mass appeal of Thatcherism had led him to conclude that the logic of the appeal was not that of a philosophical argument but rather the logic of a dream. To take a more recent example, Michael Moore's film *Sicko* –– a damning account of the US health care system and the pharmaceutical and insurance industries that benefit from it –– was released in 2007 to enormous acclaim, quickly becoming the third largest grossing documentary film of the past 30 years. Barack Obama was elected US president the following year and, since then, has encountered overwhelming opposition to his proposed health care reforms from the very people who have most to gain from them. As the US expression succinctly puts it: "Go figure." If nothing else, this recent history might have prompted a little self–reflection on the part of "political artists" who see their work as "consciousness raising". Not only is there something inevitably patronizing in the attitude of artists setting out to raise other consciousnesses to the level of their own, but also the exercise is generally futile –– either the mass of the people "know very well, but nevertheless..." or their consciousnesses are the unique and unassailable product of the populist–tabloid Fox News Channel.

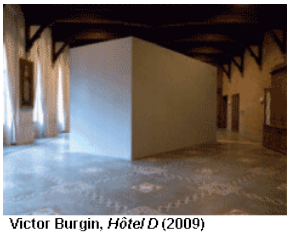
HVG: In your work in the 1970s you often drew directly on codes and conventions of the media, especially advertising, to make ironic comment on various kinds of exploitation and inequality, such as in *UK76*, where in one of the panels you insert an excerpt from a fashion magazine into a photograph of a female Asian factory worker. You now say you conceive differently of "the place of the political in art".[9] In this regard you cite Jacques Rancière, who says that "aesthetics has its own meta–politics",[10] as a privileged ally in your own attempts to understand how art relates to politics and ideology.[11] You conclude by insisting that "the political meaning of attempts [...] to give aesthetic form to a phenomenological truth or a psychical reality [...] may lie precisely in the ways in which they *fail* to conform [...] to established regimes of intelligibility".[12] Could you elaborate on this?

VB: Art, at least in our western populist liberal democracies, has no direct political agency. When I joined the protest march against the Iraq war in London, when I joined demonstrations against the National Front in Paris, I acted as a citizen, not as an artist. (By the way, it does seem that the days when street protest could have a real political effect have now passed into history.) When I refused to cooperate with "obligatory" but intellectually ridiculous

government research assessment exercises, when I refused to join a "compulsory" training day for academic staff run by a private management training consultancy, I acted as a university teacher, not an artist. The work of "political artists" usually harms no one, and I would defend their right to make it; what I cannot support is their self–serving assumption that it "somehow" has a political effect in the real world. In a university art department, I would prefer as my colleague the artist who makes watercolours of sunsets but stands up to the administration, to the colleague who makes radical political noises in the gallery but colludes in imposing educationally disastrous government policies on the department.

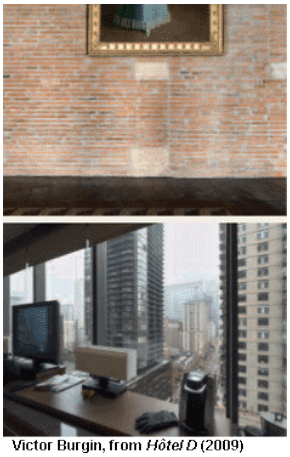
The political agency of artists is not "on the ground" in everyday life –– at this level they must be content to act as citizens and/or, in my example, teachers (I have always considered teaching to be my most important political activity) –– their agency is in the sphere of representations. Since the work to which you refer, and up to the present day, I have measured the political and critical dimensions of my work by their relation to the mainstream mass media as the media is most responsible for the production of subjects for the political process, most instrumental in delivering votes to politicians. You are nevertheless right to note that my position in relation to the media has shifted. My initial position combined Lévi–Strauss' notion of "bricolage" with Barthes' idea of "semioclasm". For example, the panel we have already mentioned from *UK76* juxtaposes fragments from two disparate and "antagonistic" discursive formations –– social documentary photography and fashion journalism –– in order to bring out a social contradiction. The problem I see with this now is that it leaves the fragments intact, and what one is able to construct –– to "say"–– depends entirely on what it is possible to do with the fragments. No great surprise, therefore, that what I was able to say with this particular panel of *UK76* was already well known, and that the only "value added" element to the source materials was my own irony (albeit there was also a cultural–political significance *at that time* –– it was relatively short lived –– in putting such content on the wall of a gallery).

As I have already said, I see the critical task of art today as that of offering an alternative to the media. I am opposed to any form of conformity to the contents and codes of the doxa –– what Rancière calls "consensual categories and descriptions" –– even when these are deployed with a "Left" agenda, as I believe that in this particular case "one cannot dismantle the master's house with the master's tools". At the present conjuncture it seems to me that society is most present in an artwork –– as a critical project –– when the artwork is most absent from society.


Victor Burgin, *Hôtel D* (2009)

HVG: If we can turn then to your more recent work: *Hôtel D* (2009) is a site–specific piece consisting of a digital projection loop inside a box installed in a principle room of the ancient former pilgrims' hospital, Hôtel–Dieu Saint–Jacques, in Toulouse, once known as the "*salle des portraits des bienfaiteurs*".[13] Could one understand this "sequence of images" as a "sequence–image", a term you have defined earlier in your writings;[14] and more recently in conversation with Alexander Streitberger, where you call it "both the elemental unit from which chains of signifiers are formed and the hinge between movement and stasis, the motionless point of turning between unconscious fantasy and the real"?[15]

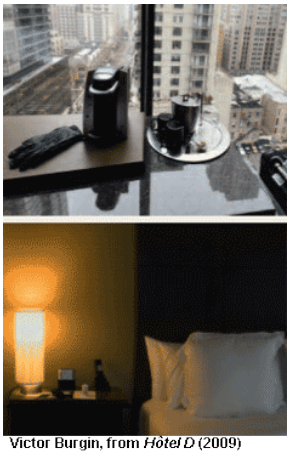
VB: The short answer to that question is "No"; the "sequence–image" is a purely theoretical entity. I coined the expression to allow me to talk about an image that is neither still nor moving or, to put it the other way, *both* still and moving. The fact that such an image is by definition impossible signals its location in psychical space, on the side of the unconscious, where the "law of excluded middle" does not apply (as when a woman in a dream is both the dreamer's mother *and* sister). I coined the neologism reluctantly but there was no other way of speaking about what for me is an important aspect of the "psychical reality" I try to represent. The material images projected in the Hôtel–Dieu, and the material sound of the *voix–off* in the adjoining chapel, were combined in an attempt to represent the strictly unrepresentable. Each new work renews this attempt, making its singular contribution to the generality at which I aim.



Victor Burgin, from *Hôtel D* (2009)

I think by analogy of an old movie version of H. G. Wells' *The Invisible Man* where a number of devices are used to signify the invisible man's form –– for example, in one scene, some trash whirls into the air on a windy street and sticks to him; in another scene, disembodied footprints advance across a snow–covered field. We would not say that either the trash or the tracks are the invisible man, but they are the more or less contingent conditions of his "appearance" in the visible world. *Hôtel D*, in common with all of my works in recent years, is an attempt to represent some unrepresentable "thing" –– in this case deriving from my being *there*, in the *Hôtel–Dieu* in Toulouse, and being aware of the lives and deaths of those who were there before me, aware of the past function of the building, and at the same time aware of the forms of the architecture, of the time it takes to cross the room –– *everything*, in fact, *at the same time*, including the connotations and fantasies that accompanied my perceptual experience and knowledge of the place.

HVG: *Hôtel D* offers itself as a key case study in order to understand your interest in "perceptual reality", as you name it in your "note" accompanying the piece. The research component of this interest brings in the "historical identity" of the place as a space of labour for the "*filles de service*" - the female hospital orderlies. The sequence of images and the spoken text testify to a paradox encountered in your own initial observation of the reality of this room. Among the five large portraits of illustrious historical benefactors of this establishment you found an equally monumental picture of a woman identified only as "*fille de service*". The image of this woman, named at the bottom of the portrait itself as Marguerite Bonnelasvals (Ý1785), is exhibited together with the other portraits, which are all of people of a higher social rank. Facing Marguerite Bonnelasvals, as you point out, hangs a tableau of Princess Marie–Thérèse de Bourbon, daughter of Louis XVI and Marie–Antoinette. This striking finding, a result of your scrupulous perception and observation of the place, is a key theme in *Hôtel D*. Can you perhaps clarify how, from a strictly methodological point of view, you decided to focus your work on this quite incredible coincidence?



Victor Burgin, from *Hôtel D* (2009)

VB: In the perceptual and associative complex that is my experience of a place there is often a privileged point around which everything else turns. It might be a detail, an anecdote or something else. The juxtaposition of the two portraits in the *Hôtel–Dieu* became this point of anchorage for everything that made up my awareness of the place. One of the things that interest me is the way "the political" may be manifest as a mutable aspect of our everyday reality, on the same perceptual basis as the changing light, an aching knee or a regret. The coincidence of the portraits is a trace of the political in the overlooked, and therefore part of what I look for in the everyday. There is no need for the western political artist, too often a disaster tourist, to "sail the seven seas" looking for injustices to denounce. Inequality and exploitation saturate the ground on which we stand, they are in the grain of everyday life. This granular–perceptual manifestation of the political is part of what I try to represent in my works.

HVG: I have come to understand *Hôtel D* as a work that brings together all the major themes and preoccupations of your oeuvre. With the concept of psychical realism entering your work, your interest in the representation of women entered the foreground. Many of your pieces, as of the early 1980s, take account of the impact of male desire on female perception and vice versa, and the issue of sexuality and sexual difference in general. You have emphasized the influence that 1970s feminism exercised on your artistic trajectory, for example in the attention in your work to "the construction of gendered identities through identifications with images".[16] Now, in *Hôtel D*, the long–lasting key importance you have accorded to this very subject appears to engage in a dialogue with an interest you have had, in an even earlier phase of your work, with regard to the representation of labour. Many contemporary artists have taken on the problematic consequences of currently globalized labour conditions by directly representing people at work. Whereas the atmosphere of *UK76* seems to have something in common with such an approach, you have later come to take the representation of labour in your work in a different direction.

VB: I do not understand how "directly representing people at work" can be said to "take on" the issue of the globalization of the labour force –– at most it can only redundantly *illustrate* it. Amongst other things, the issue is fundamentally one of organizing collective action across cultural, linguistic and legal international borders. How can adding more pictures to the mountain of images of the labouring classes have any relevance to such questions, let alone any purchase on them? And what about the act of picture–taking itself? As your reference to *UK76* invokes the historical perspective, I would like to quote what I said in an interview from the late 1970s when I was asked how I felt about the power relation between myself and the Asian woman worker whose image appears in this work:

> I'd been commissioned to take photographs by the Coventry workshop, they were working with various other local workers' organizations and they wanted someone to take some pictures in some of the factories around Coventry. It was in that capacity that I took that particular picture: it was not shot as a

> work of art but as something for their publications and their files... No one was photographed who didn't want to be. Some obviously didn't feel comfortable with the camera on them, so I didn't take photographs of them, but others obviously enjoyed being the centre of attention. I was a source of entertainment for them for the afternoon. Having said all that, the fact remains that I was free to walk out of that place and they weren't –– a fundamental distinction. The work I was doing was intended to support them, the same goes for the art piece that some of the images were subsequently used in, but the fact remains that my intervention there, if not actually exploitative, was politically irrelevant; that's how I feel about it now, and that's how I feel about the work of other "artists" who take their cameras into such situations.[17]

Under what circumstances is it acceptable for a middle–class photographer to point a camera at a wage–slave? A campaigning journalist, illustrating a news story that might mobilize public opinion and embarrass corporations and politicians into changing their behaviour, is certainly justified, but I find something profoundly distasteful in the spectacle of workers having a last increment of value extracted from them by "political artists" parading their moral narcissism in pursuit of their careers.

HVG: In your photo–textual work *Office at Night* (1986), the "psychical" component has already entered the very depiction of labour. The work prominently focuses on male–female power relationships in the work place. It's extremely dense, sexually and power(less)–loaded atmosphere differentiates it from Jeff Wall's more neutral photographic depictions of labour, not least with regard to the so–called "iconography of cleaning up", an issue I would like to come to in a minute.[18] In *Hôtel D*, the representation of labour is only indirectly present, as this was already the case in your *Performative/Narrative* (1971), a phototextual piece that shows an empty office of a male employer (as the accompanying text indicates). In *Hôtel D* it is not so much in the sequence of images itself but rather in the "*voix–off*" –– the voice heard in the adjoining chapel –– that the humble work of cleaning up is more explicitly addressed.[19]

The *voix–off* operates "in parallel" to the images, as Philippe Dubois has argued with regard to other of your works with a similar approach.[20] The sequence of images shows the perfectly tiled floors, walls and ceiling of the "*salle des portraits des bienfaiteurs*", and a perfectly clean hotel room –– although subtle details, such as a playing TV, luggage, gloves on a desk and a bottle of pills besides the bed, reveal it is in use. Yet for a major part of the eight–and–a–half minutes–long parallel audio–sequence a woman's voice slowly describes the repetitive activities of making a bed and cleaning a hotel room. I wonder if this, by definition, "non–iconographic" soundtrack can be understood as performing a double function in your work. I feel that its descriptive character can be seen as programmatic with regard to your decision, articulated one year after *Office at Night*, in "Geometry and Abjection" (1987), that a "political" theory of art should simply "describe" rather than exhort or admonish, or offer "solutions".[21]

VB: Perhaps I should first describe the work, as it is unlikely that anyone reading our exchange will have seen it. *Hôtel D* comprises four components: the two actual spaces in the *Hôtel–Dieu*, an image–track and a soundtrack. The image sequence assembled from the photographs I made in the *Salle des*

Pèlerins is projected in a continuous loop in a "viewing box" constructed inside the Salle itself. The room represented in the box is therefore a *mise–en–abyme* of the room that contains the box. The "work of art" here is in good part a work of the visitor in a coming and going between the experience of the actual rooms and their representations. There is an analogous coming and going between the real and projected images in the *Salle des Pèlerins* –– as you have noted, formerly the "*salle des portraits des bienfaiteurs*" –– and the voice heard in the adjoining space of the Chapel. Rather than "voice–over", the equivalent French expression "*voix–off*" is more appropriate here as the text is heard not over the images but at a distance from them. *Hôtel D* is the product of a reflection upon the "perceptual reality" of the *Salle des Pèlerins* –– as I experienced it and as it is refracted through the photographs I made there –– and upon the historical identity of the room as a place of care for the sick and dying, a place of work for the "*filles de service*".

Another axis of my work –– prompted by the historical function of the Hôtel–Dieu as a place of rest for the pilgrim –– is formed in a coming and going between associations to the meaning of the term "*hôtel*" in this particular building in Toulouse, and to the more usual meaning of the term in everyday use today. Images of a hotel room in a modern city (in actual fact, in Chicago) therefore come to join my images of the *Salle des Pèlerins*. Similarly, in the *voix–off*, references to the repetitive routine task of bed–making occur in both a hospital and a hotel setting. *Hôtel D* is not "about" such things in the way that either a documentary or a fiction film might be about them. It is a work best considered not as one might view a film, but rather as one might approach a painting.

HVG: You have in fact said that the spectator should try to view the complex perceptual installation called *Hôtel D* as a painting in which you see "everything and nothing at the same time".[22] Could this statement perhaps help to grasp what you have elsewhere identified as the "*uncinematic* feel" of your video practice?[23] Also, in order to better understand this fascinating concept of the dispersed painting or tableau, to be discovered layer by layer in a mode of "reprise", as you call it,[24] would it be helpful to recur to an analogy with the notion Allan Sekula coins for several of his works, namely that they are "disassembled movies"?[25] Could we say with regard to *Hôtel D* that it is to be considered as a "disassembled tableau"?

VB: In the 1970s I used to speak of my large–scale photo–text works as the remnants of hypothetical films –– for example, I described *US77* as "a sort of static film" where the individual scenes have collapsed inwards upon themselves so that the narrative connections have become lost".[26] However, I also at that time spoke of the viewing conditions of such works as being the "negative of cinema"; for example, in the cinema the spectator is in darkness whereas the gallery is light; the cinematic spectator is still while the images move, whereas the visitor to the gallery moves in front of static images; or again, the sequence and duration of images in the cinema is predetermined, whereas visitors to the gallery determine their own viewing times and sequences. Or again, there is little opportunity for reflection during the course of a film –– Barthes says the cinema "does not allow you to close your eyes" –– whereas my work in the gallery solicits active reflection on the part of the viewer/reader. To take such differences into account is to pay attention to the *specificity* of the practice –– that which distinguishes it from other neighbouring practices.

Victor Burgin, from *Dovedale* (2010), photo/text

For example, one of my constant technical concerns is with the elaboration of forms of language adapted to the situation of reading or listening in the gallery. In general I aim for texts that condense relatively large amounts of information into small spaces, and which allow readers to bring their own associations to fill out the meanings of the laconic texts. Most of the time this requires little more than an attention to economy of expression. For example, the opening sentence of the voice–over to my most recent work, *Dovedale*, which is currently exhibited in Cologne, reads: "The major museums are all close to the station, which is by the cathedral so I cannot get lost." This sentence establishes that the speaker is a stranger to Cologne, there to visit the museums, and it also documents a material fact about the city. So far, I might be writing a short story. However, although I referred to this as the "opening sentence" of my text, it is not necessarily the opening sentence for the visitor to my installation, who is free to come and go at any time during the continuously looping audiovisual material. A specific requirement of the voice–over text therefore is that it be written so that any sentence may occupy the position of "first" sentence. Now although the words and images that make up my work are necessarily deployed in time, my accommodations to the indeterminacy in their viewing and reading in effect breaks up and spatializes the temporal flow –– so your expression "disassembled tableau" may fit my work quite well.

There is a further "disassembling" in the material condition of the work as a number of separate but interrelated "bits". In Cologne, my moving projection–sound piece is accompanied by a still photo–text work based on photographs I made in the Peak District in Derbyshire, England, at the place depicted in Joseph Wright's landscape painting *Dovedale by Moonlight* (1785), which is in Cologne's Wallraf–Richardtz–Muzeum. There is a "scattering" of references to the painting here analogous to that of the scattering of a film in the "cinematic heterotopia" I name and describe in my book *The Remembered Film* (2004). All of this is related to my interest in what I have termed the increasing "exteriorization" of psychical processes in everyday life –– especially the "prosthetic memory", and perhaps even prosthetic unconscious, that the Internet increasingly represents. It was with such things in mind that I was struck by the remark by the painter Pierre Bonnard, who said that he would like the experience of his pictures to have something in common with the experience of first entering an unfamiliar room –– one sees everything at once, and yet nothing in particular. What I want to add to Bonnard's purely optical picture is the fleeting concatenation of impromptu thoughts one may have at that moment –– which of course may include what I have already referred to as the "granular–perceptual" manifestation of the political.

HVG: I would like to end with some questions on a more institutional topic. You have recently spoken of art departments that share "a history of research

initiatives".[27] By this, you seem to imply that the new "art–as–research" initiatives popping up in these departments are in fact not so new at all. To what extent can you agree with the assertion one often hears that it is Conceptual Art that provided the fundamental impetus to the research–based developments that have now become *bon ton* not only inside many art departments but increasingly also in the broader artistic discourse? Are there, according to you, other historical elements that are perhaps more easily overlooked but that should also be taken into account in order to understand the new research–related dynamics the art world experiences nowadays? Also, as you have repeatedly expressed your concern with regard to the "universal hegemony of global capitalism, and its preferred form of political expression, neo–liberalism", do you think that the insertion of "market values and relations" into what you call the "previously alternative" spaces of the university and the art institutions" can also partly be held responsible for the developments in academia that are now more prolifically described as artistic research?[28] To what degree can we say that the academicization of the arts brings with it a new logic of financial gain for institutions that traditionally used to cherish a non–profit logic, parallel to and in competition with the already–existing one of the galleries?

VB: In the sentence you quote from my article I am referring to those artistic initiatives, mainly in the 1960s, that were self–consciously associated with *scientific* research –– for example, the projects undertaken by the group "Experiments in Art and Technology" (EAT) in the USA. Outside these initiatives the word "research" was rarely used in art schools at that time –– one was more likely to hear talk of "creativity". It was only when I began to teach in a British art department in 2001 –– after 13 years in the Humanities at the University of California –– that I encountered such expressions as "research–led practice", "practice–led research", "practice–as–research", "research–artist" and so on. In the interim, the terminological shift from "creativity" to "research" had been brought about by political and economic necessity rather than intellectual self–searching. The idea that "Conceptual Art" was responsible for this shift simply shows how incapable the self–obsessed "art world" is of understanding the real historical determinants of its own condition. In Britain in the 1970s, the previously autonomous "colleges of art" were incorporated into newly–formed, multi–disciplinary "polytechnics" that from 1992, under the Conservatives, were rebranded as "universities". In order to receive government funding, art departments then had to meet the same kinds of criteria that were applied to the assessment of other university departments –– with quantity and quality of research foremost amongst these. It was then that, somewhat in the manner of Molière's Monsieur Jourdain, the former art schools found they had been doing "research" all their lives.

What you call the "academicization" of the arts would have been anathema to the old art schools, where the reigning ethos was rigorously anti–intellectual –– I think of the painter Barnett Newman's remark that philosophical aesthetics, to him, was what ornithology must be to a bird. The drive of successive British governments for standardization and centralized control of the universities not only imposed fundamentally alien and incompatible academic practices on the old art schools but, more perniciously, also undermined the very meaning and culture of research in the universities; in the same historical moment that the art schools were entering the university research environment, this environment itself was radically changing. When I first started teaching in Britain the art colleges and universities were under the "Ministry for Education and Science", they are now administered by the

"Department for Business, Innovation and Skills". I am speaking of the British example, but there are comparable tendencies throughout Europe, such as the "Bologna Process" initiative to establish a "European Area of Higher Education"–– an intellectual equivalent of the Common Market which has much the same economic–instrumental values and goals. In Britain, a government–appointed body has recently set out a "Research Excellence Framework" for the assessment and funding of research that makes short–term "outcome" in terms of demonstrable "impact" on society the primary funding criterion: in the sciences, "impact" will mean measurable technological and economic benefits; in the arts and humanities it can only mean measurably visible publicity and entertainment value –– assessment of which will inevitably defer to the media. In fact, for some long time now the art world and the art departments have provided media–ready art much as supermarkets provide oven–ready chickens. The mainstream media has become increasingly populist over the past quarter–century or more, a process that was at first commented on, to again take the British example, in frequent references to the "dumbing down" of the "quality" press –– now a *fait accompli* that no one mentions any longer. This consequence of the political demagogy of the Thatcher–Blair years was accompanied by a new demagogic spirit in art –– incarnated most visibly by Charles Saatchi and his protégés –– and a corresponding mutation in the audience for art. The art world congratulates itself on the fact that art today has a larger audience than at any time in its history –– but this is simply an epiphenomenon of the increasing mediatization of art. As the saying goes, "we get the art we deserve", and it is increasingly apparent that we will get the universities we deserve too.

The meanings and aims of both art and academic research are being harmonized with those of ordinary "non–élitist" everyday common sense. I met a routine manifestation of this the other day when I went into my local organic food store to buy sweet potatoes. I had bought some there the previous week, and they had been labelled with Spain as their country of origin. I picked up a couple of them and took them to the counter, but I noticed that the label was gone. I asked the woman behind the counter if these sweet potatoes were also from Spain. "They're from Israel," she said. "Then I don't want them," I replied. "Oh," she said, "the farmers are not the government. They just want to make money, like the rest of us." She said this in a tone and with an expression that made it clear she believed she had made an argument to which there was no possible reply –– and in fact it left me speechless. She spoke exactly as she might have if she had said: "They just want peace, liberty and happiness, like the rest of us." How could I argue? To "make money" is our fundamental desire and inalienable right, it guarantees our common humanity, it's what joins each atomic individual to "the rest of us" –– what hope is there for either art or the university if this mind–set prevails?

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The Boston Globe Arts &Reviews

In videos, seeing is experiencing; Victor Burgin’s ‘Little House’ is haunting

Victor Burgin: The Little House

CAMBRIDGE - Victor Burgin offers no introductory text to his single-channel video installation "The Little House," in the Sert Gallery at Harvard's Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts. The visitor walks in bare, ignorant of Burgin's intriguing sources.

The experience is lush and haunting. The video, projected large in a dark room, sweeps through a sparse Modernist house and garden to the accompaniment of a text, read aloud by a woman. The text is part libertine novel, with a lothario attempting to seduce a lady, part mouth-watering passages on interior design. Every now and then, the tour stops, and a young Asian woman appears holding a small book. The piece evokes desire, heaving like an eager bosom against a tightly laced bodice of restraint: Barbara Cartland meets Frank Lloyd Wright.

For decades, Burgin has been a leading light of conceptual art and an avowed feminist. "The Little House" patiently and methodically leads us into territory fraught with the tension between desire and its pale satisfaction. The house is Rudolph Michael Schindler's Kings Road House, built in Hollywood in 1922 for two couples in open marriages; divorce ensued.

The steamy text, Jean-Francois de Bastide's 1758 novel "La Petite Maison," follows a wager: the Marquis de Tremicour bets that a tour of his house will bring the virtuous Melite to his bed. Burgin's version, on a video loop, never reaches that end; he suspends resolution.

The Asian woman holds Mao's Little Red Book. The woman is the video's keystone. She might represent Melite, or the room "a la Chinoise" in the little house, a symbol of Westerners' coveting of the mysterious East. But Burgin's cultural revolution is far gentler than Mao's is. It's a spiral of yearning and resistance through centuries and across continents.

Cate McQuaid

ARTFORUM
September 2005 (Vol. 44, No.1)

Victor Burgin: Christine Burgin Gallery

Martha Schwendener

In Design and Crime (and Other Diatribes) (2002), Hal Foster argues that design has taken over every aspect of industrialized society. Yet Victor Burgin's recent video, The Little House, 2005, points out that even in earlier eras design was linked to everything from natural urges and social constructs to sexual desire to the creation of narrative.

At Christine Burgin Gallery, a large box functioned as a small theater for viewing Burgin's work, which is based on a panning shot of the interior and garden of a 1922 Rudolph Schindler house in Los Angeles. The images are accompanied by narration excerpted from a text by eighteenth-century writer Jean-Francois de Bastide (a recent translation of which was published as The Little House: An Architectural Seduction in 1996). Bastide's La Petite Maison, which was conceived in collaboration with "architectural educator" Jacques-Francois Blondel, combines the form of the erotic novella with that of an architectural treatise to create a titillating but educational brochure for prospective homeowners. In the story, the wealthy, conniving Marquis de Tremicour makes a wager with the bookish Melite that she will succumb to him after seeing his petite maison, an architectural form that everyone else in Paris, save Melite, knows is actually a large, opulent house "contrived for love"--more precisely, clandestine sexual encounters.

Burgin's work leads naturally back to Bastide's text, a fascinating document that draws comparisons to Choderlos de Laclos's Les Liaisons dangereuses (1782) and de Sade's La Philosophie dans le boudoir (1795), as well as Roland Barthes's lesson on the techniques of narrative seduction in S/Z (1970). The maison is the stage for seduction, although the supposedly uncontrived style of the design is repeatedly emphasized in exteriors that, according to Bastide, "owed more to nature than to art." Bastide's descriptions are the textual equivalent of an effective photo spread, detailing Rococo interiors full of painted panels and opulent fabrics, a dining room with a mechanical table, and a bathroom with exciting technological innovations such as a flushing toilet. Language and seduction go hand in hand; descriptions of the house are like a striptease in which the body is revealed in strategic increments. Names of eminent artists and craftsman (Francois Boucher, Nicolas Pineau, Jean-Baptiste Pierre, Francoise Gilot, Pierre-Bertrand Dandrillon) are sprinkled throughout the text, and every time Tremicour moves in on Melite, a description of yet another design confection interferes.

Juxtaposing descriptions of lush eighteenth-century interiors with images of Schindler's stark, empty interiors and gardens, Burgin highlights Anthony Vidler's claims in the preface to La Petite Maison's recent translation that there was "little room for the secret and arousing chambers of desire in the cool and transparent environments of modernism." But Burgin adds a third element in the form of a beautiful young Asian woman who appears occasionally, reading silently from a little red book. This reference to Mao functions, perhaps, as a Fosterian critique of design's potential for mass social seduction.

The power of design, for both Bastide and Burgin, resides in its apparent democracy and globalism. Anyone with money might be educated into the haute consuming classes, just as the garden in Schindler's California house looks as if it could be anywhere, the south of France or LA. But what in Burgin's hands could have prompted a sterile academic exercise has, instead, happily resulted in a richly detailed and highly stimulating journey through history and materialism, the point of which is that Melite is far from design's only victim; as a culture, we've long since been collectively seduced.

The New York Times

April 29, 2005

Art in Review; Victor Burgin

By ROBERTA SMITH

'The Little House'

The veteran English Conceptualist Victor Burgin has more than 35 years of art and writing to his name, so it is dangerous to generalize about his achievement. Still, the video "The Little House," in his 11th gallery show in New York, may be one of his best efforts.

Like two previous pieces, this work translates the photo-text combination for which Mr. Burgin is best known into a video that explores a specific architectural site, while a voiceover travels elsewhere. On screen, the camera trolls through the austerely beautiful interior and garden of the Japanese-influenced modern house the architect Rudolph Schindler built for himself, his wife and a second couple in Los Angeles in 1922. Its pavilion-like open plan reflected their open marriages, but it was damp and drafty and fomented divorce.

Meanwhile, a woman's voice takes us to 18th-century France, specifically to an aristocrat's "petite maison" built for trysts, where a seduction is in progress. The text, adapted from an 18th-century book by Jean-Francois de Bastide, is a kind of titillating real estate brochure. It alternates detailed descriptions of interiors rich in color and chinoiserie with the charged conversation of one Marquis de Tremicour and a young woman named Melite, who has wagered that she will not yield to her host's charms.

The serene plainness of the architectural setting before you contrasts well with the opulent one you build in your mind, while the couple's skillful repartee shows a woman easily holding her own.

Mr. Burgin's text-image work has often had a made-by-committee obscurity spiced by slick presentation (a critique of advertising) and gratuitous images of beautiful young women (despite the artist's avowed feminism). Here, the feminist perspective is sharper, the beauty diffuse, the slickness replaced by elegance. The romanticism often glimpsed in Mr. Burgin's art has come to the fore, to improvement on all fronts.

Morgan Falconer, “Victor Burgin”, Frieze, January 2, 2003.

FRIEZE.COM

REVIEW - 02 JAN 2003

Victor Burgin

BY MORGAN FALCONER

Arnolfini, Bristol and Matt's Gallery, London, UK

Victor Burgin has crossed the Atlantic so many times in the past 40 years that the question of who has rightful national ownership of him is surely moot. Yet it still seems amusing that it has taken an American, the Arnolfini's Catsou Roberts, to revive him in England.

Brits tend only to remember the early Burgin, the 1970s Marxist-economist-Conceptualist of poster works and political text pieces, and from that perspective he does look as period British as Reggie Perrin and the three-day week; yet of course he has spent much of his career in the US. Last autumn he returned to Britain for the third time, to take up a teaching post at Goldsmiths College. The fact that his return is heralded by a show in London of the video piece *Watergate* (2000) and a retrospective titled after his latest video, *Listen to Britain* (2002), is, diplomatically speaking, very neat.

Britain has recently seen a considerable revival of interest in early Conceptualism, yet such is Burgin's reputation that Roberts has to argue for him. She starts right away with *Performative/Narrative* (1971), exactly the tough sort of word-image conundrum we expect. A series of nearly identical photographs of an office are paired with short texts suggesting various narrative possibilities. Listen to Britain, however, reveals the rebranded Burgin. Taking its name from the Humphrey Jennings film of 1942 (a short wartime propaganda piece aimed at beefing up morale on the home front), it deftly blends film clips, music, new footage and text into a sumptuous whole, showing that the reasons for war and patriotism are rarely plainly apparent. Burgin has moved on, Roberts' argument goes: the militant austerity is gone, the media have got hip, even production skills have been groomed. But the fundamentals remain constant: he still has a distaste for conventional narrative and, charmingly, still has the same leavening humour in his texts.

Having won our confidence, Roberts returns to the 1970s in the next room with *US 77*(1977), the series of photo and text works that Burgin called his 'road movie'. Black and white images of American life (he resisted colour until 1984) are captioned with texts that sometimes run counter to the images and sometimes simply comment on them in a slightly ponderous, bearded manner. Those unfriendly to Burgin could undoubtedly point to this series as demonstrating how his work lectures; broadly speaking, Roberts' selections make that charge seem unfair, but what she can't conceal is the way he insists on patience and application in his audience in a very teacherly way, or the fact that he has a tendency to pile reference upon scholarly reference. All these traits are particularly apparent in the suite of five related works '*Tales from Freud*' (1980-3).

In each part the black and white photographs and captions are compacted into dense, highly economical narratives. In *Gradiva* (1982) the method is highly effective, with the sequence open to be read both left to right and right to left. It's a rather hermetic commentary on Freud, but one attuned to Burgin's interest in the way the fundamentals of psychoanalysis play their part in the battle of the sexes.

In *Grenoble* (1981) is similarly impressive, but in *Olympia* (1982) Burgin brings too many ingredients to the mix, making it messy. In *Love Stories #2* (1996), one of his first video pieces, the typical themes of misrecognition and displacement are present, though the purpose is more opaque.

Roberts' retrospective may be a British reappraisal of Burgin, yet it is most persuasive in junking the old image of the artist. The fact that *US 77* introduces his later work is pivotal in this respect, since this work marked the moment when Burgin turned away from Marxism and economics toward Roland Barthes, psychoanalysis and feminism; while others of his kind - for example, Art and Language - remained with language-based Conceptualism, he moved, along with many Marxist academics of the period, towards film and cultural studies.

Watergate (2000) screened at Matt's Gallery in London, is perhaps most expressive of this shift, because while it had the complexity of that earlier language-based work it was also more mellow. A stationary camera pans around the finest of the Corcoran's holdings of 19th-century American painting while a woman reads from Jean-Paul Sartre's *L'Etre et le néant* (Being and Nothingness, 1943); the camera then switches to pan around a room in the Watergate apartment buildings; then the screen darkens, the names of the paintings appear and a Handel cantata washes over us. There's politics here, but it's buried, skilfully, in hermetic preoccupations with memory, intuition and perception; obscured, one must also say, in the warmth of Burgin's inclusive humanity. It's no wonder he lost friends on the left.

It's not for me to say whether Burgin's political choices were right or wrong, but given the number of younger, contemporary artists who might find sustenance in his newest work, and given the fate of much language-based art and the persuasiveness of Roberts' show, one must say they were smart moves for his art, at least.

MORGAN FALCONER

John Slyce, “Victor Burgin, Retrospective in Barcelona”, Art Monthly, June 2001.

Art MONTHLY

■ Victor Burgin

Matt's Gallery London October 6 to December 1

Arnolfini Bristol September 20 to November 17

Could it be that there are some political scores held over from the 70s that are still being settled? The Arts Council of England declined to support Victor Burgin's show 'Listen to Britain' as it travels from Bristol to Manchester and later, in reduced form, visits Norwich. The institutional memory is long even while others atrophy. The point is petty. However, it speaks to the reception and recognition of not only one who has returned but also those who never left and whose practice remains engaged in actually existing Conceptual Art. As densely interwoven as Burgin's recent work in video may be, there is space there for such wandering thoughts and speculative intuitions.

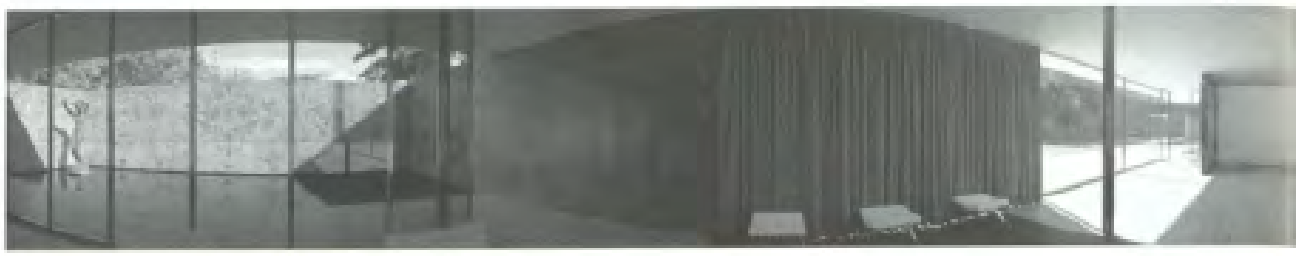
Burgin relocated to Britain a year ago. His 2001 retrospective – an event set to punctuate his return – lacked a British leg and was shown instead in Barcelona. The Arnolfini's 'Listen to Britain' – a self-described monographic exhibition – succeeds despite a meagre budget while falling not entirely outside the majestic shadow of Burgin's retrospective. It does not attempt a historical survey of Burgin's work but rather posits evolving models of the production of meaning evidenced across time. These are articulated through pieces that serve as plot points in his practice, like *Performative/Narrative*, 1971, *US77*, 1977, and a suite of three works from the early 1980s: *In Grenoble*, 1981, *Gradiva* and *Olympia*, both

Victor Burgin
US77 1977
detail

from 1982. In these 'tales from Freud', image and text are set to strike at memory as much if not more than the eye. This suite serves as a means for viewers to enter into the eponymous *Listen to Britain*, 2002 where 'seeing as', or aspect perception is a crucial component of the work. It is the ability to recognise, or see one thing in something else, that makes *Listen to Britain* so haunting. Indeed, a wall text culled from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* hovers near the entrance to the darkened space where the video work is installed: 'The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen.'

Listen to Britain is deceptively straightforward both in its structure and stream of sound and images. The video was made – better imagined – in the context of the England to which Burgin returned: one felt to be under siege following September 11. Given this context, Burgin recalled a filmic moment, quite unlike our own, when the enemy was known and the threat was undoubtedly real. Humphrey Jennings' *Listen to Britain* is a 20-minute b/w short made in 1941. Jennings pictures a nation at war where actual conflict is displaced beyond the edge of frame; he neither shows nor names the enemy while creating an atmosphere where the threat of violence is everywhere but itself appears nowhere.

Such serendipitous moments of free association of memory and purposeful intuition inform Burgin's recent work and his recollection of Jennings' film, made when Britain seemed imminently at risk of invasion, called up the memory of a short sequence from another film: Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's *A Canterbury Tale*, 1944. Burgin draws on the b/w sequence where a young woman in a light summer dress – at once an English Rose and reminiscent too of Margaret Thatcher – climbs a path onto the downs above Canterbury. An ominous silence hangs as she turns her head quickly around sensing a present danger in the winds over this rural idyll. Contemporary colour shots from the Kent countryside are overlaid with music composed by Benjamin Britten that is as sweet as the candy floss landscape. *Listen to Britain* contains two text components. The first is in white lettering on a black ground and recounts the terror of the Glue Man who pours the stuff on local girls' hair, thus thwarting the advances of American servicemen.



Victor Burgin

Fundació Antoni Tàpies Barcelona April 6 to June 17

As my taxi rolled down the wide avenues of Barcelona en route to Victor Burgin's retrospective, I found myself remembering an exchange with an East German border guard. It was the mid 80s and I was fumbling with the syntax of verbs of motion whilst explaining 'the purpose of my journey to West Berlin was to see Bob Dylan in concert on a train'. The guard smiled and I reasoned my German was the source of it all. He then looked down at me as he returned my passport and said in perfect English, 'We have Bob Dylan today!' My confusion was greater than I expected. The guard was, in the end, very right. Dylan failed to sell enough tickets in the West and so relocated the concert to secure a captive audience in the East. Later that night, as I stood on the other side of the Wall among a few hundred thousand people in the Treptower Festwiese, I imagined it was the border guard who was holding up a sign that read: 'Robert Zimmermann – We Know Who You Are.'

I do not know what triggered this associative overlay of memory, spaces and figures. Rather than seek an answer, it seemed more important simply to go with it, as is the case here, and embrace the daydream as a significant subordinate narrative to my more purposeful task. Burgin's retrospective takes place abroad just as he is again figurally among us in London. The retrospective will not travel, though is extended through a catalogue that surpasses the scope and scale of the show. Moving between the exhibition's galleries, one traverses sobering expanses of time and evolution in Burgin's practice. Thirty years pass in the less than ten feet that separate the recursive logic of *Room*, 1970, from the space in which *Elective Affinities* is shown – a poetically hypnotic new video work Burgin made specifically for this show.

This retrospective makes clear that Burgin is resolutely flexible in the ways he deals formally with conceptual issues that were first fixed upon in his early work and still inform his work today. *Photopath*, 1967, is not present in this show, yet this piece shadows nearly every work included. As an image forever dissolved after its initial construction, *Photopath* anticipates many of the concerns in Burgin's later work: the expression of the presence of an absence, and transitions between inner and outer realities – or the spilling over of psychical content into the porosity of social space. Burgin's great themes are in a sense those of love and labour. Bodily or intellectually, each is subject to relations of power – be it social, political, amorous, or institutional – that structure the worlds we inhabit. One enters the retrospective through a gateway of glossy reproductions of the 1976 Newcastle upon Tyne poster *Possession*. There follows an exposition of the collusive bonds between image and text in early works like *Performative Narrative*, 1971, *UK 76*, *US 77* and the nine-panel *Lei-Feng* from 1974 whose fundamental textual component is sadly given short shrift in the catalogue. The catalogue excels however at that which is most difficult to pull off in print: the adequate presentation of video works. This is due perhaps to the emphasis that Burgin's recent videos place on simulated movement set within a frame of the still image. Only three video works are included in the retrospective, while Burgin's entire body of work in this medium is brilliantly reproduced in the catalogue. The scale and formal structure of *Office at Night*, 1985-86, shown complete here and with its introductory text image, prefigures much of the formal area that Burgin's video occupies as it situates itself between the space of painting and photography. *Olympia*, 1982, on display in its chrome period frames, equally gathers up the logical strands of the dream and desire that are afforded significant space in Burgin's video work. Of the three videos on show *Venise*, 1993, *Love Stories #2*, 1996 and *Elective Affinities*, 2000-01, the latter work perhaps best informs the recent past and near future of his practice.

Like the photo/text pieces *In Lyon*, 1980, and *In Grenoble*, 1981, *Elective Affinities* is a work that arose out of an invitation to respond to the experience of a city. In its title and formal handling of content, it is linked to two pieces which immediately predate it – *Lichtung* and *Nietzsche's Paris*. In the new work, Burgin fixates on the ghostly apparition of the reconstructed Mies van der Rohe pavilion. A little more than one tube stop away, the structure is a monument to aesthetic Modernism which cannot escape the harsh Catalonian shadows cast by modernity and the Fascist occupation of the city. Burgin constructs something akin to a stereoscopic panorama which embraces the double articulation of this space's haunting message. The apparent movement in this image stream of discontinuous fragments is couched in a panning black and white still which stitches together a suprematist configuration of glass, steel, and marble. Movement is grounded in jump cuts to shimmering stills of vibrant colour found in the verdant green of a garden, a heavy red curtain, and a rippling blue pool of water. Documentary footage from the Spanish Civil War of a smiling woman with rifle who raises her arm to shield her eyes from the sun flows into this image stream and freezes frame to join with Georg Kolbe's bronze statue of a female figure doing the same in the pavilion. A text culled from the *Odyssey*, where Penelope fends off her suitors while weaving a shroud for her father, joins with all of the above. Not unlike Penelope's handiwork, the warp and weft of these formal moves make plausible the bond of intellectual and emotive connotations Burgin configures within the pavilion and video. *Elective Affinities* is a work that asks a viewer to allow the metaphor of a daydream to generate its own form – which is theory that perhaps even the most resistant can swallow. ■

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Victor Burgin: Nietzsche's Paris

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In Victor Burgin's video installation Nietzsche's Paris , the melancholy of the excluded party in a love triangle pervades a garden of learning, writes Jeremy Melvin . Burgin weaves together two paradigmatic concepts through the specific instance of an episode in Nietzsche's life.

During much of 1882 Nietzsche was in love with Lou Salome, a relationship forged through philosophical discussions in the forest of Tannenbaum, but complicated by Salome's attachment to Paul Ree.

For a short time it seemed that a menage a trois in Paris would satisfy all parties. Suggestively Salome wrote: 'I saw a pleasant study filled with books and flowers, between two bedrooms, and, coming and going amongst us, comrades in thought forming an intellectual circle at once serious and gay.'

But she abruptly left Leipzig with Ree, leaving Nietzsche in confusion. Three years later he would ask: 'Supposing truth to be a woman - what? Is the suspicion not well founded that all philosophers, when they have been dogmatists, have had little understanding of women? That the gruesome earnestness, the clumsy importunity with which they have hitherto been in the habit of approaching truth have been inept and improper means for winning a wench?'

It is the Nietzsche who germinates such thoughts that interests Burgin. A stay in Weimar where Nietzsche died 100 years ago suggested the subject to him: the tantalising relationship between Nietzsche and Paris became a source of speculation.

Even if Nietzsche had actually visited Paris - which he never did - he would have made an unlikely flaneur ; it's hard to imagine him, tortoise on a lead, strolling through the arcades. Burgin, not a realist, circumvents this by reference to Nietzsche's restlessness for an ideal domicile, and by using contemporary Paris. Where, after all, would Nietzsche have gone when he failed to find his beloved but the Bibliotheque de France?

There Burgin's piece begins. A video camera takes a panoptical view from the library's podium, a wistful gaze over the roofs of Paris (see above).

Nothing moves other than the eye. De Chirico-like, the smoke from a power station hangs still in the air; there are no people (removed by technical sleight of hand); and the waves are frozen, as if in a futile attempt to forestall life's tragic end. Even the plants, confined in their frames, add to the sense of stifling restriction. It all begins to suggest a temporarily arrested descent into madness.

Relief only comes in heart-rending extracts from Handel operas, and brief colour shots of a prim matron in a Victorian crinoline sitting on a park bench. Is she Nietzsche's less than praiseworthy sister or a middle-aged, regretful Lou?

Madness, too, connects Nietzsche with the library. If Nietzsche upended European philosophy, so Perrault upends, literally, the library, with books in glass towers rising above an enclosed reading area. But it is also a repository of knowledge, that one leitmotif of optimism in Western thought - optimistic, at least, until Nietzsche and particularly his work as it was coerced into service after his death. And the antipathy between learning and love lies at the heart of one of Europe's most pervading legends, Faust.

So Burgin's work tugs at the sinews of Western culture: love, madness, learning and cities. No wonder that rationalists suspect it. As Jeeves consoled Bertie Wooster over the ending of his betrothal to Lady Florence Cray: 'I have it from her ladyship's own maid. . . that it was her intention to start you almost immediately on Nietzsche. You would not enjoy Nietzsche, sir. He is fundamentally unsound.'

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Laura Cottingham, “Interview with Victor Burgin,” in: Journal of Contemporary Art (Spring/Summer), n. 4, pp. 12-23.

JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY ART

BURGIN, Victor
I: L. Cottingham. 4.1 (1991): 12-23

Laura Cottingham: In the eighties there was much discussion about art as a commodity, and how the object becomes a commodity; however, twentieth-century criticism has hardly begun to address just what art-making is or does.

Victor Burgin: Clearly, the predominant form of critique of art-making and the market, which has been a Marxian sociological critique, can't explain why these very particular things — artworks — have been made in the first place. No analysis of the function of art as a commodity, or of the gallery as an institution, is going to account for that. Take the issue of identity: we seem to be at a moment in history when identity is at the top of the slate of political priorities, we're in a period of "identity politics." The psychoanalytic literature has most to say about how a sense of identity is formed in the first place, and one of the ways in which it's formed is through the agency of the image — through the "assumption" of the image, as Lacan puts it, playing on all the senses of that word. What Lacan refers to as the "misrecognition" of the self through the agency of the image is fundamentally important to both art-making and identity politics. Certainly the most interesting debates of the seventies were feminist debates over precisely such things as images of women. One source of the desire to make images, to make art, is a desire to position oneself in the world — to construct a space in which identity can take place, a subjective space. The problem is that the space of identity is always already there, prior to birth, as a matrix trying to mold the plasticity of your subjectivity, of your sexuality, in a normative direction. Part of the politics of representation is to try to shift the form of that matrix, which is largely made up of images, to allow other subjectivities, other sexualities, other forms of society to come into being. That's the source of my continuing interest in art-making, even in an art world almost completely driven by money-making hype.

Cottingham: What form of self-consciousness is applicable to the art-making process?

Burgin: I have reservations about self-consciousness. Art and politics alike are not only a matter of self-consciousness and voluntary, willful decision-making, but they also involve unconscious processes. One has to account for the ongoing movement of the unconscious in political life, the psycho-sexual dimension of politics. The tendency is always to think of politics in rational terms, in terms of a calculation of interests. But what was rational about the appeal of Reaganomics to the working-class people who were put out of work by it? What will be rational about Schwarzenegger's appeal when he enters politics, as I'm sure he will? My work is "self-consciously" about the agency of the image and the unconscious in political life, in the politics of everyday life.

Cottingham: There's still some strong resistance against a theoretically active art-making process. What's this gleeful celebration of naiveté about?

Burgin: One thing it's about is the division of labor: between artists, who are supposed to be relatively inarticulate and badly read, and critics, who are supposedly more articulate and can explain what the artist does. It's a quasi-biological, symbiotic relationship that since the rise of criticism at the end of the eighteenth century has become the framework and frame of the art institution.

Cottingham: But who benefits from that?

Burgin: Who benefits? Yeah, I wonder. Perhaps there's a sort of economy there that derives from the division of labor as a general social principle, a principle of productive efficiency. That doesn't in itself explain the hostility toward people like myself who work in both fields. I still read critics I've never met writing things like, "Burgin insists you read his theoretical writings before you form an opinion about his visual work." This is a projection of their own insecurities. If I were able to "insist" on anything at all, it would be that the meaning of any work will always exceed what its author intends, because of both the author's own unconscious and the differences between readers. The only "hidden meanings" in my work are those hidden from myself.

Cottingham: But it would seem as if the person who works self-consciously with material is operating on a more informed level or even a more honest level than those who operate on a level of naive production. Except that modernism's agenda privileges the naïf with the formalist.

Burgin: Artists who make art "without thinking about it" are simply acting out a script written long ago. And it's often quite a sophisticated one if you look at all the stage directions. So it's not that they work naively, without any theory. It's rather that they couldn't verbally tell you what the theory is. The theory is internalized in them to the point that it becomes a form of "unselfconscious" behavior. This unwitting pantomime of naiveté is a highly marketable commodity. There's a desire, I think, on the part of a lot of people to have a representative of a part of themselves who is childish, innocent, transgressive — all the things they're not allowed to be, they don't permit themselves to be anymore, because they're occupying important positions in society, in various institutions. But they are able to buy back that transgressive bit of themselves in the form of, say, Julian Schnabel.

Cottingham: So, it's Peter-Panism.

Burgin: That would be one way of putting it if Peter Pan here is someone who smears his bodily wastes on a flat surface. It's something we all have done at some point in our history and want to have back. And if we can't do it ourselves, we'll buy it back; because in this society you can do that. You can buy people to represent you — surrogates. And you can hang their products on the wall. You can have the pleasure of having your excrement on the wall with the alibi that it is really the work of someone else, and the double alibi that it's not excrement but holy shit — gold. Of course the unconscious equation between excrement and money is one that was noticed from the very beginning of psychoanalysis.

Cottingham: How do you feel about the cooption of radical art strategies to produce reactionary art; for instance, Jeff Koons, Richard Prince, or David Salle? What's going on here?

Burgin: Business as usual, I suppose — a sort of aesthetic corporate raiding. No form of art is inherently politically radical. I agree with you that much of the more conservative work of the eighties wouldn't have had a space open to it if that space hadn't been created by the politically conscious work of the late sixties and the seventies.

Cottingham: You have said that you maintain that certain formations of the masculine, or masculinity, are the cornerstone of the authoritarian culture we live under — late patriarchal capitalism. How did you come to feminism and how did you recognize it?

Burgin: Well, I didn't come to feminism so much as feminism came to me. But any man who felt the force of the argument in feminism, and felt it make some changes in himself, had to be predisposed to receive the argument in the first place. In my case, I think, predisposition was formed somewhere in my early history. Certainly it has a lot to do with growing up in post-World War II, northern industrial working-class Britain, which was a very macho, quite brutal culture. And growing up in that culture as a physically weak, and intellectually and emotionally "sensitive" boy, feeling continually that I wasn't quite equal to the demands of masculinity as it was defined then. The experience of growing up in that culture as the "wrong" sort of young man also enabled me, I think, to be more tuned in to male and female gay sexuality, to be able to empathize with the strain of inhabiting a preengendered role that you didn't feel you could quite fit.

Growing up working-class in Britain, where the class system is so oppressive and highly codified, also left me with indelible memories of humiliation, of feeling inferior, of experiences of a variety of forms of symbolic and real violence. All this allows me, perhaps, to empathize more than I might have done otherwise with other groups in marginalized and minority positions. So when I first heard the arguments of feminists, they had an instant reality for me, just as the arguments of racial minorities have always had. At the same time, I've never felt incapacitated by "liberal guilt."

Because of my background, my "solidarity with the working class" can't involve romanticizing the working class, and neither do I idealize women and minorities to the point that I lose all critical distance on what they say. Accepting all people as equals means accepting that they're just as capable of stupidity as I am; any other attitude would be patronizing. I'm not claiming my experience is equivalent to theirs. I could repress my class background — in fact I tried to repress it for years (it came back in my analysis) — but they can't walk away from their gender or skin color. They can never stop paying dues. That's the difference.

Cottingham: In the late seventies you encountered a lot of criticism from feminists whose reading of your work, especially of Gradiva and Zoo, was that you were reproducing the same old sexist imagery in another form. Obviously that was not your intention, and the criticism was very reductive of your strategy. How did you respond to that? Did that make you rethink, for instance, how you were working with the female nude or with Freud in terms of femininity? What did you do?

Burgin: I carried on. The criticism was predictable; I was only disappointed that it was almost unanimous. I had hoped that there would be women who'd speak on my behalf, but there were very few of them — more now than then. Ironically, the most detailed and sympathetic piece written on my work at that time was by Laura Mulvey whose authority my critics would often invoke in support of their attacks on me. As you say, the criticism was reductive. It was incapable of discriminating between my images and the images of a pornographer. I think a form of analysis that fails to make such simple distinctions should reassess itself. Criticism should be able to tell the difference between a work by me and a photograph by, even, Helmut Newton, who is a comparatively sophisticated photographer.

Cottingham: Pornographer.

Burgin: Some of my critics behaved like pornographers, fetishistically clipping the one or two "offensive" images from the larger context of my work to republish and recirculate them — thereby adding to the "evil" that they were condemning. In terms of their arguments, which I generally found more moralistic than political, this seemed rather inconsistent.

Cottingham: But you can see how a certain political perspective, even one of extremism, is often politically necessary. It's also possible for it to be the "right" position — even for psychological reasons, in terms of reestablishing one's identity — at the time. At that point in feminism, women were just beginning to experience the horror of really seeing ourselves as the culture reproduces us.

Burgin: Yeah, I perfectly understand that political necessity of, as Bertolt Brecht put it, "speaking crudely" — there are times when it's necessary to speak crudely. I am perfectly sympathetic toward the necessity of someone taking that position. But it doesn't follow from that that I have to take any notice of what they say, because my work actually became irrelevant to them other than as a sounding board for their position. Their criticisms were not really about my work at all and they never, in fact, addressed the work as such but only the fetishistic fragment. Their charge was, "You're just another man making images of a woman." To which my reply was, "Yes, I'm a man making images of a woman, but that's not all I'm doing."

There's a paper by Freud called "Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through." That's what I was doing — I was remembering, repeating, working-through.

I did about ten years of that working-through. I'm doing other things now. But that was a necessary working-through for me, and perhaps, also, for thinking about the image in that period. There was a gap in representations and I moved into that gap. I thought it was necessary to show how complex the relationship of a heterosexual man to the image of a woman is, and that was my reason for doing it. I wanted to show how mobile and provisional masculine sexuality actually is — the sexuality that both feminists and patriarchy alike seemed to collude in defining as unproblematically cocksure. Lacan always stressed that the Phallus is a fraud. Women have always known this. The problem is how do you represent that knowledge without posturing in a similarly belligerent know-it-all position yourself?

Cottingham: With your current work, specifically your most recent show in New York at John Weber, "Family Romance," what were you working-through?

Burgin: At a personal level, I was working-through some adolescent memories, memories of the fifties but returning in the present, in the nineties. The main issue in that recent work is the formation of identity across heterogeneous and contradictory points of identification — class, gender, and so on — set in the context of the emerging Gulf crisis; that's to say, in a context where "nation" is offered as the master discourse of identity. The work is not really "about" these issues so much as it's a sort of picture "of" those issues as they came to my mind in California, on the "Pacific Rim." I'd been struck by some mirror relations between the U.S. in the nineties and the UK in the fifties, when Britain was facing, for the first time, the decline of its international influence, as the U.S. is today. The U.S. in the fifties had of course just become a major global power. I was interested in the nostalgia for the fifties here, being resurrected everywhere, in design, in fashion, in music, and so on.

"Family Romance" is a restaging of some current issues in terms of fragments from the fifties. The large black and white images in the work were a gesture toward "The Family of Man" exhibition, which was shown at the Museum of Modern Art in 1955. The film version of South Pacific was released about the same time. None of the images in Family Romance actually occur in the film. I used a computer to bring figures from separate scenes together in a space to

which neither of them belonged. I like the way the virtual space of the computer can work analogously to memory or dreams. The seascape backdrop to these figures, always the same, is an image that immediately precedes the titles at the beginning of the film. The Family of Man exhibition began with a rather similar image. It's difficult for me to say very much more about it now because I find that with any work I've just finished, it generally takes me a year or two to get sufficient distance on it to decide what it was about. I work very deliberately and methodically, but this doesn't mean that I have a clear idea of what the meanings are going to be for me when all the bits are added together. If I knew that in advance, I wouldn't make the work.

Cottingham: If you were in a position to navigate the course of contemporary Western art, what would you chart for the next thirty years? What would you like to see happening in art- making? Or in art's reception?

Burgin: If you'd asked me that question twenty or more years ago I would have found it much easier to answer. Back then, I wanted to see a dissolution of the hegemony of modernism and an expansion of art-making to include considerations of content that, you may remember, Greenberg defined as "something to be avoided like a plague." I wanted content to be defined not solely in terms of "personal expression" but in terms of critical social and political issues — considerations that Greenbergian modernism defined as improper to art. I wanted an end to the definition of visual art in terms of the traditional media alone. I wanted to see a use of contemporary technologies and forms that would make a link between what was on the gallery walls and what was in the world outside. Today most of that seems to have happened. But what didn't happen, or at least didn't happen very widely, was the element of critique. What took over was a sort of sixties pop art celebration of the eighties, a period of Reaganomics and junk bonds, when a speculation-fed art market had expanded to the point where it could economically support those "alternative" sorts of activities — but only to the extent that they could be commodified. It will be interesting now to see whether what emerged in the late eighties in an expansionist economy will develop, or even survive, across the nineties, which seems almost certain to be a period of recession and retrenchment in the U.S. What I would like to see now, though, is going to be much harder to get. I would like to see the creation of a critical and curatorial climate in which long-term critical projects in art can be sustained and flourish. I would like to see novelty and "mediability" displaced from their present positions as paramount aesthetic values. I would like to see just a little less of museums being led by the nose by fashion. This is even more politically important now that being "right on" is becoming chic. I would very much like to see "critique" take forms other than simple accusation. There's a great belief among self-defining "political artists" that the other guy did it. It's never our own fault, is it? So I would like to see an end to "the oversimplification of everything."