

CRISTIN TIERNEY

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

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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.

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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

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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