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 60 x 75 cm
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). Influenced by semiotics, cinema studies and psychoanalysis, he went on to produce a series of influential works using photographs and text to rethink 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 psychic 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 benefiting 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 like 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, transcendent. 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 is 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.
The loop is the form that brings the moving image closest to being a contemplative object.

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...

...it's a different beginning.

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.

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, Stern 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.

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 add 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.

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'.

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...

Still from an untitled work in progress, 2010, digital projection

Frames from the three camera movements of the video projection A Place to Read, 2010
Strictly speaking, the camera has never been anything other than virtual.

VICTOR BURGIN

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 real 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 adding the viewer/reader to consider their immediate perceptions and memories. 'USF6' (1976), 'USF7' (1977) and Zoo Y8 (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 up 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 in the history of computer-generated or digitally stitched still photographs. In this suspension both the hybrid technological 'form' and the historical 'content' are rethought, thought 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 ideological categories, stereotypical clichés and predictable narrative solutions. 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 amously 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 a piece 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 oriental islly luxurious hotel. The house and garden had to be disintegrated 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 in was 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 often add 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'.

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 Carrier 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).


2 Think About it, 1976, silver gelatin print, 7.2 x 1.6 m

3 Presence, 1976, duotone lithograph, 119 x 84 cm
