

BURGIN, Victor

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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.

CRISTIN TIERNEY

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.

CRISTIN TIERNEY

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."

CRISTIN TIERNEY

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 *Grady* 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.

CRISTIN TIERNEY

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

CRISTIN TIERNEY

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."