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## Victor Burgin: Parallel Texts

Thatcher, Jennifer, Art Monthly

Following *Situational Aesthetics* in 2010, *Parallel Texts* is the second recent retrospective anthology of Victor Burgin's writings. A time to take stock now that he is in his seventh decade but not, it seems, to relinquish control. Given the lack of a named editor or acknowledgements (other than a couple of publications from which texts were republished), one must presume that this compilation of 'parallel' texts--parallel, that is, to his theoretical writing and artist's books--was selected by Burgin himself. You certainly get a lot of Burgin for your money: interviews, emails, early magazine texts, and transcripts of talks and conferences. The preface--also written by Burgin--quotes Honore Daumier on the importance of being 'of one's own time', and certainly 40 years of writing and speaking about and of course making art reveal some significant shifts both in Burgin's thinking and in the art world more generally, from an idealised admiration for Mao in the 1970s to a bleak view of commodity culture and rampant capitalism today. Even the style of questioning has changed, from the 1970s 'priggishness' about which interviewer Tony Godfrey and Burgin laughingly reminisce in 1997, to the more deferential tone of the 2000s.

The selected writings are assembled chronologically with no individual introductions and few images. Nonetheless, the preface offers some direction in the form of key periods and dates for Burgin: 1969-72 (Conceptual Art and its definitions), 1976-78 (post-conceptualist socialist art), 1979 (important text on gender politics), 1986 (grand narratives and Postmodernism), 1987-2000 (teaching in California), 2001-today (back in the UK). His use of psychoanalysis and semiotics as tools for analysis are unusually consistent, despite falling out of fashion over the past couple of decades. Burgin impressively keeps up-to-date with technology over the decades, enthusiastically embracing digitisation and editing software. A long-term interest in panoramas evolves into a fascination with Google Maps and webcams. Despite early protests against going into filmmaking, he begins to make videos, arguing that internet images are, after all, stills from a perpetual film.

The ghost of Clement Greenberg haunts the collection, first as part of a Conceptual Art stance against conservative modernism and artistic essentialism, and later as a concession that Greenberg had a point about the importance of high culture--though not in a hierarchical sense--in an era when, for Burgin, the culture of the oppressors and oppressed has become indistinguishable. Yet despite campaigning for the importance of social context since the time when formalism was still the norm, he is unimpressed by the rise of social documentary in photography and the more general political turn in art of the early 21st century. The kind of politics artists like to play, according to him, too often merely mirror what is already known in the media and does not benefit the subject; 'moral narcissism' he calls it, after Andre Green. He is

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particularly scathing about a Magnum photographer who defends his images' aesthetic quality against those of citizen journalists. Quoting Theodor Adorno (twice repeated in this book), this is an example of an art that 'both presents itself as didactic, and claims aesthetic dispensation from responsibility for the accuracy of what it teaches'.

Other than a loathing for Margaret Thatcher (that he claims as one of the reasons for leaving the UK in the 1980s--although he ironically ends up in the US of Reagan and later Bush) and occasional references to the first Gulf War, Burgin rarely mentions specific political events. As he reiterates in 2010, teaching is his most important political activity, and indeed his ongoing commitment to education is apparent in the purposeful tone of the texts. As art schools become more subject to market values, he cites the importance--in accordance with Jacques Ranciere--of acting as a citizen rather than as an artist: someone 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... disastrous government policies on the department'.

Still, a strong sense of injustice regarding class, gender and sexual politics motivates much of Burgin's writing, a fact that he attributes--in rare moments of autobiography--with his workingclass upbringing in which public libraries were still well-stocked and the desire to educate oneself was encouraged. Disappointed by the left in the UK (another consistent theme), in the mid 1970s he makes detailed reference to the Maoist idea of 'cadres'—the better-educated working class--and the Russian formalist ideal of the artist-producer to challenge the western middle-class myth of a homogeneous working class or the Greenbergian view that formalism is incompatible with political content.

On gender issues, however, his writing tends to be more timid than his art, such as the controversial 'Zoo 78' series that features defiantly erotic female nudes. In a 1978 debate he admits asking an editor of a feminist film journal whether there is anything inherently wrong in making pictures of naked women: he couldn't see the problem so long as he engaged with the issue of the representation of sexuality; the editor could, on the other hand, see no justification in including nude scenes in a film. A decade later, in a rather unusual interpretation of Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema* of 1973, Burgin argues in favour of giving in to viewer expectations of pleasure rather than denying them pleasure and having this displaced into, say, pornography. The later texts are rather quieter on gender, and he finally admits to students in 2008 that change has been 'glacial' and, while not going as far as to explicitly state that a semiotic or psychoanalytical approach has become redundant, suggests that gender issues have moved into the realm of pure politics—the implication being that this is no longer his territory.

It is notable how many times Burgin is asked about his audience, usually with the subtext that his work may be too 'difficult' for viewers. Burgin is mostly unapologetic: in his writing he strives to be accessible, to students at least; in the gallery he is 'relieved of the imperative to be understood'. *Parallel Texts* would indeed serve as a useful introduction to Burgin for students, though the refusal for his theoretical texts to act as captions to his visual work means that, ironically, it is useful to have an extensive prior knowledge of his artworks. Burgin is a shrewd and precise thinker but not always the most lively read, despite the odd, dry witticism. Nonetheless, Conceptual Art--even in the often 'lite' version in which it has survived--is still the

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dominant artform and no one today disputes the socio-political (what he would call 'ideological') framework for art that Burgin fought hard to establish. More cynically, one might add that art's self-righteous political status has been at the expense of its diminishing political agency—a situation about which Burgin seems deeply frustrated, even defeatist.

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