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...
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.