Victor Burgin

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As my taxi rolled down the wide avenues of Barcelona en route to Victor Burgin's retrospective, I found myself remembering an exchange with an East German border guard. It was the mid-80s and I was fumbling with the syntax of verbs of motion whilst explaining 'the purpose of my journey to West Berlin was to see Bob Dylan in concert on a train'. The guard smiled and I reasoned my German was the source of it all. He then looked down at me as he returned my passport and said in perfect English, 'We have Bob Dylan today!' My confusion was greater than I expected. The guard was, in the end, very right. Dylan failed to sell enough tickets in the West and so relocated the concert to secure a captive audience in the East. Later that night, as I stood on the other side of the Wall among a few hundred thousand people in the Treptower Festwiese, I imagined it was the border guard who was holding up a sign that read: 'Robert Zimmerman - We Know Who You Are.'

I do not know what triggered this associative overlay of memory, spaces and figures. Rather than seek an answer, it seemed more important simply to go with it, as is the case here, and embrace the daydream as a significant subordinate narrative to my more purposeful task. Burgin's retrospective takes place abroad just as he is again figurally among us in London. The retrospective will not travel, though it is extended through a catalogue that surpasses the scope and scale of the show. Moving between the exhibition's galleries, one traverses sobering expanses of time and evolution in Burgin's practice. Thirty years pass in the less than ten feet that separate the recursive logic of Room, 1970, from the space in which Elective Affinities is shown — a poetically hypnotic new video work Burgin made specifically for this show.

This retrospective makes clear that Burgin is relentlessly flexible in the ways he deals formally with conceptual issues that were first fixed upon in his early work and still inform his work today. Photopath, 1967, is not present in this show, yet this piece shadows nearly every work included. As an image forever dissolved after its initial construction, Photopath anticipates many of the concerns in Burgin's later work: the expression of the presence of an absence, and transitions between inner and outer realities — or the spilling over of psychical content into the porosity of social space. Burgin's great themes are in a sense those of love and labour. Bodily or intellectually, each is subject to relations of power — be it social, political, amorous, or institutional — that structure the worlds we inhabit. One enters the retrospective through a gateway of glossy reproductions of the 1976 Newcastle upon Tyne poster Possession. There follows an exposition of the collusive bonds between image and text in early works like Performative Narrative, 1971, UK 76, US 77 and the nine-panel Lei-Feng from 1974 whose fundamental textual component is sadly given short shrift in the catalogue. The catalogue excels, however, at that which is most difficult to pull off in print: the adequate presentation of video works. This is due perhaps to the emphasis that Burgin's recent videos place on simulated movement set within a frame of the still image. Only three video works are included in the retrospective, while Burgin's entire body of work in this medium is brilliantly reproduced in the catalogue. The scale and formal structure of Office at Night, 1985-86, shown complete here and with its introductory text image, prefigures much of the formal area that Burgin's video occupies as it situates itself between the space of painting and photography: Olympia, 1982, on display in its chrome period frames, equally gathers up the logical strands of the dream and desire that are afforded significant space in Burgin's video work. Of the three videos on show Venice, 1993, Love Stories #2, 1996 and Elective Affinities, 2000-01, the latter work perhaps best informs the recent past and near future of his practice.
Like the photo/text pieces *In Lyon*, 1980, and *In Grenoble*, 1981, *Elective Affinities* is a work that arose out of an invitation to respond to the experience of a city. In its title and formal handling of content, it is linked to two pieces which immediately predate it – *Lichtung* and Nietzsche's *Paris*. In the new work, Burgin fixates on the ghostly apparition of the reconstructed Mies van der Rohe pavilion. A little more than one tube stop away, the structure is a monument to aesthetic Modernism which cannot escape the harsh Catalanian shadows cast by modernity and the Fascist occupation of the city. Burgin constructs something akin to a stereoscopic panorama which embraces the double articulation of this space's haunting message. The apparent movement in this image stream of discontinuous fragments is couched in a pan-n ing black and white still which stitches together a suprematist configuration of glass, steel, and marble. Movement is grounded in jump cuts to shimmering stills of vibrant colour found in the verdant green of a garden, a heavy red curtain, and a rippling blue pool of water. Documentary footage from the Spanish Civil War of a smiling woman with rifle who raises her arm to shield her eyes from the sun flows into this image stream and freezes frame to join with Georg Kolbe's bronze statue of a female figure doing the same in the pavilion. A text culled from the *Odyssey*, where Penelope fends off her suitors while weaving a shroud for her father, joins with all of the above. Not unlike Penelope's handiwork, the warp and weft of these formal moves make plausible the bond of intellectual and emotive connotations Burgin configures within the pavilion and video. *Elective Affinities* is a work that asks a viewer to allow the metaphor of a daydream to generate its own form – which is theory that perhaps even the most resistant can swallow. 

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