

CRISTIN TIERNEY

BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

ARTSEEN

OCTOBER 4TH, 2016

VICTOR BURGIN

by Phillip Griffith

UK 76

BRIDGET DONAHUE | SEPTEMBER 8 – NOVEMBER 6, 2016

Midwest

CRISTIN TIERNEY | SEPTEMBER 8 – OCTOBER 22, 2016

Like any election year, 2016 is a year of slogans. *Make America great again*. With the recent vote on Brexit in the United Kingdom, slogans there, too, where politicians like Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage peddled: *Take back control*. Then there is *Today is the tomorrow you were promised yesterday*. But whose slogan is this? In the resentful politics of 2016, could it be another of Johnson's, or Donald Trump's?



Victor Burgin, *Mirror Lake*, 2013. Digital projection work. 14:37 minutes. Edition of 3 and 1 artist's proof. Courtesy the artist and Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York.

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In fact, the language is Victor Burgin's, from his photo-text series "UK 76" (1976), on view at Bridget Donahue, which superimposes white text on black-and-white documentary photographs of British life in the 1970s. On the occasion of this seminal series's fortieth anniversary, Bridget Donahue has staged its reinstallation in tandem with an exhibition of new work by Burgin at Cristin Tierney in Chelsea.

Burgin's approach to combining image and text is rooted in the assertion that seeing is never a solely visual experience. His writings on photography from the 1970s, influenced by Roland Barthes, stress the prominence of the advertising image in understanding this relationship. Like advertisements on the street, the eleven photographs at Bridget Donahue are presented in large-format panels pasted directly onto the gallery walls. The text operates, in addition to as slogan, as advertising copy, theoretical treatise, and poetry.

"UK 76" illustrates the political and economic anxieties of its time while critiquing the ideological frames that packaged narratives of just those anxieties for the public. Much of the text in the series takes the viewpoint of a left critique of capital and labor practices and of demographic changes in Britain. One image shows a country house with its property line marked by a sign reading "private." Its text, entitled "A PROMISE OF TRADITION," apologizes for the political and social shortcomings of its imagined inhabitants: "You mustn't be too hard on them." In another bucolic scene, Burgin juxtaposes the idyll of cows grazing along a river with the technical jargon of history and the proletariat, here titled "It's only natural." Of course, in the play between image and text, it's hard to say what's natural.

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Victor Burgin, *Prairie*, 2015. Digital projection work. 8:03 minutes. Edition of 3 and 1 artist's proof. Courtesy the artist and Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York.

The projections on view at Cristin Tierney deal with the United States' Midwestern landscapes, and more obliquely with the political and ideological. In two new works, which combine text and computer-generated images, Burgin has exchanged the poetry of "UK 76" for narrative. Both recount the history of specific architectural spaces, from the forced removal of Native Americans to the restoration of a Frank Lloyd Wright bungalow in *Mirror Lake* (2013), and from the building of the Mecca apartment building in 1891 to its destruction to make room for a Mies van der Rohe project in *Prairie* (2015).

The projection works read with the complexity of narrative, and the images in "UK 76" with that of poetry. This is not to privilege one form of complexity over the other. The difference here is one of fragmentation. In *Mirror Lake* and *Prairie*, the narrative encounter programmed by Burgin naturalizes the computer images. If the "poetic" enters into these works it is at the end of *Mirror Lake* when, in a nod to Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962), a film segment of a blond woman, face obscured by her hair, punctuates the flow of computer images.

Marker's celebrated short film recounts a science-fiction parable through a montage of still photographic images, interrupted only once

by a moving image of the beloved woman whom the protagonist pursues through time and his own memory. The moving image reconfigures the way in which viewers, conditioned to expect another still image, read the narrative sutured together by the film. In a similar way, Burgin's use of a non-computerized film image instead of another frame of computerized imagery in *Mirror Lake* manipulates the conventions of what is "real" or "natural" and demands that we reevaluate the way we have read these images and narrative. Such a reflexive and interrupted, or fragmented, experience veers into the terrain of poetry, which thrives off a constant scrambling and reordering of its signs and symbols.

Both exhibitions of Burgin's work present us with such startling moments, loaded variously with irony and nostalgia, to take stock of not only the political environment of our times, but also the ways in which it is anything but natural.

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