

Afterall

44

– Autumn/Winter 2017

Now and Then: Commodity and Apparatus Victor Burgin

Memory Piece

1. Two units co-exist in time.
2. Spatial separation is such that units may not simultaneously be directly perceived.
3. Units isomorphic to degree that encounter with second is likely to evoke recollection of first.

1967

Victor Burgin, Memory Piece, 1967, instruction card and instructions carried out in the form of two tensed rope equilateral triangles, 10.97m each side. Courtesy the artist



Victor Burgin, Memory Piece, 1967, instruction card and instructions carried out in the form of two tensed rope equilateral triangles, 10.97m each side. Courtesy the artist

The following is the text of a talk given at Raven Row, London, on 3 March 2017 in the context of ‘This Way Out of England: Gallery House in Retrospect’, a series of events and exhibitions revisiting the activities of Gallery House in London during the period 1972–73.

When Antony Hudek and Alex Sainsbury first contacted me about this present series of events and installations at Raven Row, I had only the vaguest recollection of having shown work at Gallery House in the early 1970s, and no memory at all of *what* I had shown. The three of us subsequently met over coffee in a Paris café. In the course of our conversation, Antony opened a laptop to show me some photographs they had discovered of Gallery House interiors at the time of Rosetta Brooks’s ‘A Survey of the Avant-Garde in Britain’. One of the photographs showed some kind of black binder on a white table in an otherwise empty room. Alex and Antony confessed that they had so far been unable to identify what it was we were looking at. I, on the other hand,

CRISTIN TIERNEY

surprised, recognised my own work. Antony and Alex subsequently wrote to me to suggest I might take as my point of departure this evening a remark I made in that moment of revelation in the café – a remark they recalled as: ‘It’s a novel experience to have a missing portion of one’s own history reconstructed by the detective work of others.’

My first response was to feel that my remark was insufficiently specific to the exhibition at Gallery House to provide an appropriate introduction to this evening’s discussion at Raven Row. However, as a student of psychoanalysis, I have learned to take seriously what first comes to mind. Why had this remark emerged as the most salient feature of our conversation in Paris, and not some other? I found myself reminded of an essay published by Sigmund Freud in 1937, shortly before his death: ‘Constructions in Analysis’. Freud is interrogating the status of the analyst’s interpretations of the material presented by the patient. He observes:

*The analyst has neither experienced nor repressed any of the material under consideration; his task cannot be to remember anything. What then is his task? His task is to make out what has been forgotten from the traces which it has left behind or, more correctly, to construct it.*¹

What I propose to do this evening is less to remember than to construct (or, as Freud himself remarks, we may prefer the word *reconstruct*) some of what may have been forgotten about the time of the Gallery House exhibition on the basis of traces left behind. Antony and Alex presented me with an image-trace from that moment; I shall respond with a fragment from my writing from that same time. In commentating on this fragment I shall aim not so much to recall a historical event as to identify a *position* in the past from which we may view the present. In a widely quoted passage from his essay of 1940 ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, Walter Benjamin writes: ‘To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognise it “the way it really was”. ... It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger.’²



Victor Burgin, *All Criteria*, 1970, fourteen recursive sentences on two A4-size sheets of paper in a Rexine office binder. Installation view, ‘A Survey of the Avant-Garde in Britain’, Part 2, Gallery House, August–September 1972. Courtesy the artist and Raven Row, London. The artist writes ‘I made a small number of works between 1969–71 which took the form of a series of sentences printed on A4 sheets and presented in binders such as the one you see in this photograph. When sending out the binders to galleries my instruction for the installers was simply to provide a table and chair for the reader. A number of these works were presented that same year (1972) in the Hayward Gallery exhibition “The New Art”.’

CRISTIN TIERNEY

I do not believe I need to elaborate on what there is of danger in our present historical moment. What might it mean for us to seize hold of a memory of Gallery House in this moment? The exhibition 'A Survey of the Avant-Garde in Britain' took place at Gallery House around 1972. The lines I shall comment on are from my article 'Situational Aesthetics', which was first published in 1969 in the British art magazine *Studio International*. The title of my article was intended to evoke the philosophical idea of *situational ethics* – the idea that an action is

0
ANY MOMENT PREVIOUS TO THE
PRESENT MOMENT
1
THE PRESENT MOMENT AND ONLY
THE PRESENT MOMENT
2
ALL APPARENTLY INDIVIDUAL
OBJECTS DIRECTLY EXPERIENCED
BY YOU AT 1
3
ALL OF YOUR RECOLLECTION AT
1 OF APPARENTLY INDIVIDUAL
OBJECTS DIRECTLY EXPERIENCED
BY YOU AT 0 AND KNOWN TO BE
IDENTICAL WITH 2
4
ALL CRITERIA BY WHICH YOU
MIGHT DISTINGUISH BETWEEN
MEMBERS OF 3 AND 2
5
ALL OF YOUR EXTRAPOLATION
FROM 2 AND 3 CONCERNING THE
DISPOSITION OF 2 AT 0
6
ALL ASPECTS OF THE DISPOSITION
OF YOUR OWN BODY AT 1 WHICH
YOU CONSIDER IN WHOLE OR IN
PART STRUCTURALLY ANALOGOUS
WITH THE DISPOSITION OF 2
7
ALL OF YOUR INTENTIONAL BODILY
ACTS PERFORMED UPON ANY
MEMBER OF 2
8
ALL OF YOUR BODILY SENSATIONS
WHICH YOU CONSIDER CONTINGENT
UPON YOUR BODILY CONTACT
WITH ANY MEMBER OF 2
9
ALL EMOTIONS DIRECTLY EXPERIENCED
BY YOU AT 1
10
ALL OF YOUR BODILY SENSATIONS
WHICH YOU CONSIDER CONTINGENT
UPON ANY MEMBER OF 9
11
ALL CRITERIA BY WHICH YOU
MIGHT DISTINGUISH BETWEEN
MEMBERS OF 10 AND OF 8
12
ALL OF YOUR RECOLLECTION AT 1
OTHER THAN 3
13
ALL ASPECTS OF 12 UPON WHICH
YOU CONSIDER ANY MEMBER OF 9
TO BE CONTINGENT

Victor Burgin, 'Any moment previous to the present moment...', Studio International, vol.180, no.924, July/August 1970, p.28. Courtesy the artist

to be decided, or judged, not according to transcendental moral rules, but rather according to the context, the *situation*, to which the act is a response. Analogously, my essay proposed that art was to be neither made nor judged in accordance with purportedly timeless aesthetic values, but should rather be conceived in response to its broader historical *situation*. I summarised this situation as one in which the possibilities of art practices had become largely confined to the restrictive role of providing material commodities alongside the other consumer objects of industrial capitalism in a world with ecologically finite capacities to sustain such an exponential accumulation of merchandise. I wrote:

... art is justified as an activity and not merely as a means of providing supplementary evidence of pecuniary reputability. ... As Brecht observed, we are used to judging a work by its suitability to the apparatus. Perhaps it is time to judge the apparatus by its suitability for the work.³

There are two propositions here that may be seen as more or less implicit in all the works in the Gallery House exhibition: the first is that art activity should be freed from the commodity form; the second is that a critique of the art institution – the 'apparatus' – is the necessary condition for such an emancipation. The situation in which these two related proposals were made has changed greatly since the early 1970s. Using the dual optic of 'commodity' and 'apparatus', how does our present situation appear when viewed from this point in the past?

CRISTIN TIERNEY

Commodity

I derive my understanding of how the nature of the commodity has changed since the 1970s from a study published in France in early 2017. In their book *Enrichissement. Une critique de la marchandise* (Enrichment: A critique of the commodity),⁴ the French sociologists Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre describe a fundamental transformation, across the last quarter of the twentieth century, in the way wealth is created in the Western nations: a change marked on the one hand by deindustrialisation and on the other by the exploitation of resources that, although not totally new, have assumed unprecedented economic importance. The two sociologists bring together domains previously considered separately – most notably the arts (especially visual arts), the luxury industry, the trade in old objects, the creation of foundations and museums, and the national heritage and tourist industries. What all of these have in common is that they generate their profits through an exploitation of the past. Boltanski and Esquerre describe how the type of industrial capitalism that came to be established in the West after the Second World War reached a platform in the mid-1970s. An overcapacity of production and an increase in costs due to the success of labour unions in securing higher wages and better working conditions reduced profits to shareholders. Capitalism found a way out of this impasse by exporting production to countries with a cheap and docile labour force, thereby increasing unemployment and depressing workers' incomes in the West. As industrial production declined in the West, there was an increase in the value of newly unregulated financial services and an unprecedented expansion in the production of luxury goods. Whereas under the industrial regime products such as motor cars and washing machines were aimed at all economic classes of society except the extremely poor, the new luxury goods were aimed exclusively at the very rich. In the industrial economy, the middle and working classes were needed to sustain the market; in the enrichment economy, these classes are no longer needed. Boltanski and Esquerre use the term 'enrichment' to refer both to the system under which commodities are produced exclusively for the rich and the operations by which such goods are 'enriched' in the eyes of their wealthy consumers. They distinguish between different classes of commodities according to the types of discourses associated with them and their relation to time. In the case of the mass-produced 'standard form' of commodity (the washing machine, the motor car) the dominant discourse is one of innovation, reliability and durability, even though with respect to time it is tacitly accepted that such products are destined to obsolescence and the scrapheap.

To illustrate how Boltanski and Esquerre conceive the dis-course and time of the enrichment commodity in the particular setting of contemporary art, I shall turn to an anecdote. Most of the information I receive about what is happening in the art world today arrives in the form of unsolicited emails. One of these, not so long ago, told me of the creation of a new prize for sculpture: 'The Hepworth Prize for Sculpture'. From the blurb I learn that 'sculpture is the art form of the moment', and that the prize is to be presented by the president of the British luxury fashion house Burberry Group. I am told 'sculpture is the art form of the moment',⁵ but the word 'sculpture' inevitably trains in its wake the history and reputations attached to such names as Praxiteles, Michelangelo, Rodin and so on. The name Hepworth by implication belongs to this series, and by further

CRISTIN TIERNEY

implication the recipient of the prize touches, may even inherit, the mantle of this history. This exemplifies what Boltanski and Esquerre call the ‘serial apparatus’: the legitimating narrative within which the value of the object – here the sculpture – will be enriched. In the enrichment economy, value is added to the object largely through the agency of such overt or implicit storytelling. If sculpture, according to this story, is both very ancient and at the same time ‘the art form of the moment’, it can only be because sculpture is outside of time and therefore impervious to the fluxes in valuation that may affect other potential investment assets. In this particular case, the timeless *mise en scène* is completed by the allegorical figure of Capital personified by the President of a FTSE 100 company. Although it is symbolically important who gives the prize, it is strictly irrelevant who receives it; the only essential is that the gift be *accepted*.⁶ Jean-Luc Godard was once asked, in a television interview, if he would go in person to receive a prize recently bestowed on him. He replied: ‘If someone gives you what is called a “prize” you can’t deny the fact that it is *they* who have given it, they are the *authors* of the prize ... so I say, “give this prize back to the authors” ... so I won’t go to receive it.’



Victor Burgin, *Memory Piece*, 1967. Courtesy the artist

Apparatus

I invoke the idea of ‘apparatus’ in the textual fragment with which I began by citing Brecht. By ‘apparatus’, Brecht means every aspect of the means of cultural production – from technologies, through publicity and promotion, to the financial and political elites that bankroll and control the various cultural institutions. Brecht speaks of what he characterises as the ‘muddled thinking’ of artists and critics alike in respect of this apparatus. He writes:

*... imagining that they have got hold of an apparatus which in fact has got hold of them ... leads to a general habit of judging works of art by their suitability for the apparatus without ever judging the apparatus by its suitability for the work. People say, this or that is a good work; and they mean (but do not say) good for the apparatus. Yet this apparatus is conditioned by the society of the day ... an innovation will pass if it is calculated to rejuvenate existing society, but not if it is going to change it.*⁷

CRISTIN TIERNEY

Brecht's notion of the apparatus is primarily socio-economic in inspiration. For a more comprehensive concept of apparatus, we may turn to the work of Michel Foucault. In questions put to him in 1977, following the publication of the first volume of his *History of Sexuality* (1976), Foucault was asked to explain what he meant by the word 'apparatus' (*dispositif*) when speaking of the 'apparatus of sexuality'. He replies:

*... firstly, a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions ... the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements.*⁸

If 'art' is to be judged by its entertainment or news value, then we no longer need the category – as we are already amply entertained and informed elsewhere.

Foucault goes on to say that the apparatus is articulated within systems of power and the 'epistemic' – the shifting ground of what counts as legitimate knowledge in a particular society at a particular time.⁹ If we were to identify the components of the art apparatus in Foucault's terms, we might begin by making lists under some of the categories he identifies as constitutive of the apparatus. For example, under 'discourses', we would enumerate the various bodies of speech and writing that take 'art' as their object: curatorial, critical, journalistic, historical, sociological, philosophical and so on. Under 'institutions', we would list not only such entities as the Tate Modern, the Royal Academy of Arts and art departments in art schools and universities, but also such instruments of legitimation as the aforementioned Hepworth Prize, the Turner Prize, the Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation Prize and so on. Foucault's category 'architectural forms' would include the various types of structures within which works of art are presented: most obviously art museums and galleries, but also journals, magazines and newspapers, and the internet. It is obvious to common sense that art discourses, institutions and so on all converge upon a singular common object that has given rise to them all: 'art'. But this putative singularity is in fact a mutating heterogeneity incapable of presenting a coherent picture without discursive framing. It is the apparatus alone that now produces 'art' and manages the historical contradiction between the idea of art as a vehicle for 'higher values' and the recognition that art is now an integral part of the society of the spectacle, the culture of celebrity and the economy of enrichment.

The New

While looking on my bookshelves to confirm my citation of Brecht, I came across a single copy of a forgotten journal from 1993. Curious as to why I might have thought it worth keeping, I opened it at random and read from an interview in which someone is saying:

CRISTIN TIERNEY

I find we are in a period of great poverty of thought. ... We seem content to recompose ... simulations of new ideas with clever montages and collages of old ideas. ... There is only repetition, bricolage. This is not to say that X or Y in her or his corner is not onto something, but from there to the point they can make themselves heard, the apparatus is not in place.¹⁰

The words are those of the late French psychoanalyst Serge Leclaire. His remarks are as apposite to the art world as to the intellectual world, and have never been more apposite to the world of politics. In the years since the Gallery House show took place, there has been a dramatic rise in the number of people, especially young people, who live in perpetual economic insecurity. Such people – many of them art school graduates – provide a labour pool of ‘discard-after-use’ workers for low-paying, low-skilled jobs without retirement benefits. None of the artists I knew in the early 1970s expected to make money from their work. Most of them earned their living from teaching. Those who were prepared to accept a ‘full-time’ teaching job were in principle guaranteed security of employment for life. The majority of artists teaching in art schools today live precariously from one short contract to the next, their lives subject to coercively technocratic managerial practices, which, since the 1980s, have been subordinating the entire educational sphere to the market-driven needs of ‘business’.¹¹ This particular case exemplifies a general employment situation that can only get worse with the increasing loss of jobs consequent upon accelerating computerisation and robotisation. This is a salient feature of our ‘situation’ today.

One response has been the idea of a Universal Basic Income (UBI), which would give every citizen, without exception, a fixed monthly allocation of money. Each individual would thereby be spared the threat of absolute poverty, and would have a free choice of how to occupy their time – in pursuit of a remunerative career, or working for a benevolent organisation, or for their family, or making art. The idea is not new, it dates from the eighteenth century. It has since been advanced from sources as diverse as the anarchist movement and the free-market economist Milton Friedman, and has been in practice in the US state of Alaska since 1982. It was recently being promoted in France by the Socialist presidential candidate Benoît Hamon. Shortly before I travelled here, I listened to a long report on BBC News on the then-current state of the French election campaigns. I was told about the extreme right-wing National Front candidate Marine Le Pen, the right-wing Republican candidate François Fillon and the centre-right independent candidate Emmanuel Macron. The Socialist candidate Benoît Hamon and the left independent Jean-Luc Mélenchon were not even mentioned. The distribution of attention in the French mainstream media has not been substantively wider. Arguably, however, the only new idea to have been advanced in the debates so far is the old idea of the Universal Basic Income promoted by Hamon. For all it may be an old idea, it represents a radical shift in thinking about the organisation of the economy for the benefit of the many rather than the enrichment of the few. Recalling Leclaire, we might say that Hamon is ‘onto something’, but from there to the point he can make himself heard,

CRISTIN TIERNEY

‘the apparatus is not in place’. Recalling Brecht, the innovation ‘will pass if it is calculated to rejuvenate existing society, but not if it is going to change it’. This may alert us to the fact that the originality – the ‘newness’ – of an idea is to be decided not only in its relation to what has gone before, but in its relation to the situation into which it is introduced. The ‘new’ has been the very motor of consumer society since the time when industry responded to saturated markets by creating new products together with an accelerating cycle of obsolescence. Throughout the sphere of mass culture, we find, as Roland Barthes puts it, ‘always new books, new programmes, new films, news items, but always the same meaning’.¹² The ‘new’, therefore, should be understood as that which is ‘new to’ an established system of meanings, that which is unfamiliar and therefore a challenge to existing regimes of thought.

Accessibility

For most of modern Western history, art provided a space for non-consensual thought, for intellectual and formal diversity and complexity, but this role has declined dramatically over past decades. The prevailing tendency in art today is to address much the same range of interests, forms of attention and reading competences that the mass media typically assumes in its audiences. Travelling on the London underground some years ago, I saw a *Daily Mail* headline that trumpeted that more people are interested in contemporary art today than ever before. Had the newspaper’s readership changed, or had art? The expression ‘fine arts’ was introduced into language by an eighteenth-century French philosopher puzzling over the different aims that distinguish one sphere of cultural activity from another.¹³ If ‘art’ is to be judged by its entertainment or news value, then we no longer need the category – as we are already amply entertained and informed elsewhere. I was recently invited to an event featuring a writer whose name was unfamiliar to me. I googled the name and found myself reading the publisher’s blurb for a book the writer had produced in 2009:

*... blistering, brilliant and utterly original. ... An ambitious mould-breaking book ... which abandons the false distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture in favour of a borderless world where pop music and sculpture, literature and film, TV and painting are all ... part of the same vision.*¹⁴

The refusal of ‘false distinctions’ between cultural practices in favour of a ‘borderless world’ subordinate to a ‘same vision’ (the same vision, presumably, that decides what is true and what is false) necessarily requires *borders* at which cultural forms that cannot be assimilated to a single, unifying gaze will be expelled or denied entry. The slogan of the French extreme-right National Front party is: *Au nom du peuple* (In the name of the people). In a recent article in a French newspaper, the philosopher Frédéric Worms observes that epochs in which fascism has threatened have always begun with the corruption of language.¹⁵ In National Front discourse, the corruption takes the form of a denial of difference in which the words *le peuple* and *la République* are used interchangeably. To the contrary, Worms notes, the meanings of the two terms are radically opposed: whereas ‘the people’ implies a homogeneous entity, ‘the Republic’ refers to a political and legal framework constructed to contain, and guarantee the rights of, potentially discordant groups and

CRISTIN TIERNEY

individuals. Here, a corruption of the distinction between meanings of words serves as a refusal to admit social difference and contradiction into the realm of representation. The growth of the enrichment economy has been accompanied by the rise of political populism. Much of the shift in mainstream art institutions since the 1970s seems to have been premised on the idea that ‘ordinary people’ should be able to understand art even though they may never aspire to own it. The prevailing attitude at the time of Gallery House was, to the contrary, that ‘ordinary people’ might aspire to own art even though they might not understand it. Here, the word *own* is to be understood not in a narrowly economic and possessive sense but in the broader sense of ‘to make one’s own’. As a working-class child, with nothing of ‘high culture’ at home, I had access to well-stocked free public libraries. The city I lived in had an art museum, admission was free and I went there often. I made the books and paintings my own. I can’t say I ‘understood’ everything I saw in the city art gallery or read in the books I borrowed from the library, but worlds beyond the confines of my everyday life – not least, worlds of my own imagining – were accessible to me. No one patronised me, no one condescended to provide me with books or paintings they thought I would ‘understand’ – after all, what does ‘understand’ mean if not a perfect match between the message emitted and the message received? This kind of understanding is for traffic signs, not art. The Gallery House exhibition ended in 1973, the year I began teaching at the Polytechnic of Central London. At that time, I use to recommend a daily intellectual exercise to my students there: When you’re waiting for a train on a platform of the Underground, surrounded by advertising posters, look at each and ask yourself the question, ‘Who does this advert think I am?’ We might perform a similar exercise in relation to works of art, asking ourselves, ‘Who does this artwork think I am?’ And by extension, ‘Who does the art apparatus think I am?’; and ultimately, ‘What form of society does the institution of art as we know it today presuppose?’

Footnotes

1. Sigmund Freud, ‘Constructions in Analysis’ (1937), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, vol.23, 1937–1939* (1964, trans. and ed. James Strachey et al.), London: Hogarth, 1957, pp.258–59. ↑
2. Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ (1940), in *Illuminations* (1955, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn), London: Fontana, 1973, p.257. ↑
3. See Victor Burgin, ‘Situational Aesthetics’, *Studio International*, vol.178, October 1969, p.13; reprinted in *Situational Aesthetics: Selected writings by Victor Burgin* (ed. Alexander Streitberger), Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2009. ↑
4. See Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre, *Enrichissement. Une critique de la marchandise*, Paris: Gallimard, 2017. ↑
5. ‘It is an old trick of our criticism to proclaim its breadth of views ... by baptizing *avant-garde* what it can assimilate, thereby economically combining the security of tradition with the *frisson* of novelty.’ Roland

CRISTIN TIERNEY

Barthes, 'There is no Robbe-Grillet School', in *Critical Essays* (1964, trans. Richard Howard), Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972, p.95. ↑

6. The scene of prize-giving is itself inscribed in a 'serial apparatus' of histories and myths more turbulent than the history of sculpture. For example, Paris awards the golden apple to Aphrodite with disastrous consequences for his nation; the black athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos receive their medals at the 1968 Olympic Games and raise their fists in the Black Power salute as the band plays 'The Star-Spangled Banner'. ↑
7. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* (trans. and ed. John Willett), London: Methuen, 1964, p.34. ↑
8. Michel Foucault in 'The Confession of the Flesh' (a conversation with Alain Grosrichard, Gerard Wajeman, Jaques-Alain Miller et al.), in M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–77* (ed. Colin Gordon), Brighton: Harvester, 1980, p.194. ↑
9. Foucault's idea of 'apparatus' has since been the object of lengthy exegesis by other writers; for example, Gilles Deleuze and Giorgio Agamben have each devoted studies to the notion. ↑
10. Serge Leclaire, '27 décembre 1992, un dimanche', *Encore*, 6–12 January 1993, pp.9–10. Translation the author's. ↑
11. See, for example, Ross McKibbin, 'Good for Business', *London Review of Books*, vol.32, no.4, 25 February 2010; and Simon Head, 'The Grim Threat to UK Universities', *The New York Review of Books*, 13 January–9 February 2011, pp.58–64. ↑
12. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (trans. Richard Miller), New York: Hill and Wang, 1975, p.42. ↑
13. See Charles Batteux, *Les beaux arts réduits à un même principe*, Paris: Durand, 1746. ↑
14. See <https://www.harpercollins.co.uk/9780007333776/england-is-mine> (accessed February 2017). ↑
15. See Frédéric Worms, "'Au nom du peuple", ou l'i