



Art Monthly, December 2013 (No. 372)

Victor Burgin: A Sense of Place

Walsh, Maria, Art Monthly

After a ten-year dearth of UK exhibitions, Victor Burgin returns with a double whammy. Ambika P3's 'A Sense of Place', curated by David Company and Michael Maziere, both research academics at the University of Westminster in which the gallery is located, features five recent digital projection pieces alongside an extensive number of earlier photo-text works from the 1970s and 1980s. Complementing this temporal juxtapositioning of his work, the exhibition at Richard Saltoun, 'On Paper', also curated by Company, presents mainly early poster and print works, as well as two display tables, one of which contextualises Burgin's print works as insertions in exhibition catalogues and magazines such as Artforum and Block, the other of which contextualises his shift in the early 1970s from a practice concerned with self-reflexive, tautological systems to a practice incorporating more open social systems, for example advertising and cinema, although tautology is at work here too. Burgin's numerous books as well as exhibition paraphernalia from the span of his lengthy career are also on display, including invites from landmark exhibitions such as 'When Attitudes Become Form' at the ICA, London, 1969, and book versions of gallery pieces such as Performative/Narrative, 1971, a series of photographs exploring permutations of relations between an imaginary he and she and the pictured office desk and chair. (Apparently, this work was Burgin's first step out of Conceptual Art.)

The split venue works well; the exhibition at Richard Saltoun mimicking a more museological and pedagogical display--it is noteworthy that commercial galleries are venturing into this public gallery territory, in appearance at least--while the exhibition at Ambika P3 is constructed with a more architectural ethos, which is of course apropos given Burgin's recent work. Ambika P3 is not as elegant or ruined as the modernist buildings and sites that feature in Burgin's work, but the gallery's dividing walls force us to circumnavigate the space in a manner akin to the kinds of spatial movement Burgin explores in some of his photographic series and his digital projections, the latter being dominated by circular panning motions which ex-centrally double back on themselves, for example Journey to Italy, 2006, which takes its inspiration from an archival photograph of Pompeii by Carlo Fratacci. Projected on one side of a built rectangle in the centre of the central space, Journey to Italy's digital pans are constructed from a series of shots taken on site that respectively represent the panoramic view of the site from the perspective of the woman in Fratacci's original photograph and the panoramic view of the site from the position of the original photographer. On opposite walls adjacent to the 'screen', the related photo-text pieces Basilica I, consisting of 24 black-and-white photographs and one text, and Basilica II, consisting of 17 photos and one text, echo the spatial layout of the colonnades in the original photograph,

CRISTIN TIERNEY

which the viewer unwittingly maps out as they 'read' the images, reading and looking being reversible functions in almost all the work in the show. Due to the over-lit quality of the space, which makes the projection barely visible, the accompanying soundtrack about the relationship between a man and a woman takes on more presence and generates for me a whole set of questions about the temporal and generational aspects of Burgin's frames of reference.

While an artist's references can be and often are obscure, we are at a particular moment in western cultural history when the kinds of bourgeois references Burgin overtly deploys in his work since the early 1980s are rarely exchanged as cultural currency. Sadly, the educational value of what might now be considered high-brow or specialised knowledge, eg formalist literary theory and Greek mythology, no longer holds the social aspirations it might have held in the 1970s--ie that a classical education can be had by all regardless of social class and that this is for the greater good. Although I am of a different generation than Burgin, Roberto Rossellini's *Journey to Italy*, whose first and last scenes are described in Burgin's soundtrack, is part of my embodied experience; I grew up at a time when everyone watched art-house movies on black-and-white television because there were only one or two channels to choose from. Therefore Burgin's *Journey to Italy*, despite being full of dead relics, conjures a living media memory in my mind's eye, but what meaning might it have for the YouTube generation and the production of memory in an era of virtual information?

Paradoxically, the temporal spirals of memory conjured by the associative assemblage of images by which Burgin constructs his work were triggered for me in relation to the most unlikely of works, the early photos and prints referring to class consciousness and advertising, which I was sure I would find didactic. On the contrary, I was pleasantly surprised. Works such as *Possession*, 1976, 500 posters of which were posted in the streets of Newcastle-upon-Tyne at the time, and the series of photo-text panels *UK76*, 1976, at Ambika P3, one of which featured a lithe female in a state of semiundress juxtaposed with a biting text about austerity, leapt across time to resonate with and refract the oppressive, recessionary times we are now living in regardless of the fact that advertising has appropriated similarly discordant montage techniques.

However, as Burgin has argued on numerous occasions, a politics of the image does not mean making overt political statements, but making images that are counter to dominant media interests, not just in terms of content but also in terms of what he calls 'a struggle with the medium', which is why the digital pans and tracking shots in the projections at Ambika P3 have a hesitant edge to them unlike the smooth transitions in mainstream digital imaging. Burgin further inserts a human element into his videos by using ellipses and different categories of 'image', the videos comprising static moving images, stills to which movement has been added, and sequences of text on a black screen which allude to sexual and cultural scenarios of longing, loss and displacement. In this mix, some arresting images are either pictorially rendered or textually inferred, such as when in the new work *Mirror Lake*, 2013, we are presented with an image of a woman whose head is turned away from the camera, her thick-platted blonde hair surreally taking up the space that would be her face if she were turned towards us. Other images from the repertoire of visual culture emerge-- Gerhard Richter's *Betty*, Chris Marker's *La Jetee*, Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, and this after having experienced one of Burgin's ex-centric pans around the bedroom of the Seth Peterson Cottage designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. Interesting, too, is the

CRISTIN TIERNEY

way that Burgin registers indexicality in the digital image by incorporating it into the means of production. In *Solito Posto*, 2008, the textual narrative tells of a man who looks for a woman on a particular square in Milan. We are given two pans of a square comprising black-and-white stills, the first pan shows us a cafe terrace inhabited by people, the second ex-centric pan--a slight zoom-in--shows the square with the cafe boarded up and depopulated, the before and the after incorporated into the sequence of the work itself. It is perhaps in these meditations on technology and memory that Burgin speaks to a generation which has no memory of the heated debates in photography in the 1970s about the either/or of aestheticisation and documentary which are currently being combined under the contemporary rubric of art as research, forgetting that art can make the fantastical utterly real.

MARIA WALSH teaches at Chelsea College of Art and is author of *Art and Psychoanalysis*, 2013.