

# ARTFORUM

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## Victor Burgin: Christine Burgin Gallery

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In *Design and Crime (and Other Diatribes)* (2002), Hal Foster argues that design has taken over every aspect of industrialized society. Yet Victor Burgin's recent video, *The Little House*, 2005, points out that even in earlier eras design was linked to everything from natural urges and social constructs to sexual desire to the creation of narrative.

At Christine Burgin Gallery, a large box functioned as a small theater for viewing Burgin's work, which is based on a panning shot of the interior and garden of a 1922 Rudolph Schindler house in Los Angeles. The images are accompanied by narration excerpted from a text by eighteenth-century writer Jean-Francois de Bastide (a recent translation of which was published as *The Little House: An Architectural Seduction* in 1996). Bastide's *La Petite Maison*, which was conceived in collaboration with "architectural educator" Jacques-Francois Blondel, combines the form of the erotic novella with that of an architectural treatise to create a titillating but educational brochure for prospective homeowners. In the story, the wealthy, conniving Marquis de Tremicour makes a wager with the bookish Melite that she will succumb to him after seeing his *petite maison*, an architectural form that everyone else in Paris, save Melite, knows is actually a large, opulent house "contrived for love"--more precisely, clandestine sexual encounters.

Burgin's work leads naturally back to Bastide's text, a fascinating document that draws comparisons to Choderlos de Laclos's *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782) and de Sade's *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* (1795), as well as Roland Barthes's lesson on the techniques of narrative seduction in *S/Z* (1970). The *maison* is the stage for seduction, although the supposedly uncontrived style of the design is repeatedly emphasized in exteriors that, according to Bastide, "owed more to nature than to art." Bastide's descriptions are the textual equivalent of an effective photo spread, detailing Rococo interiors full of painted panels and opulent fabrics, a dining room with a mechanical table, and a bathroom with exciting technological innovations such as a flushing toilet. Language and seduction go hand in hand; descriptions of the house are like a striptease in which the body is revealed in strategic increments. Names of eminent artists and craftsman (Francois Boucher, Nicolas Pineau, Jean-Baptiste Pierre, Francoise Gilot, Pierre-Bertrand Dandrillon) are sprinkled throughout the text, and every time Tremicour moves in on Melite, a description of yet another design confection interferes.

# CRISTIN TIERNEY

Juxtaposing descriptions of lush eighteenth-century interiors with images of Schindler's stark, empty interiors and gardens, Burgin highlights Anthony Vidler's claims in the preface to *La Petite Maison's* recent translation that there was "little room for the secret and arousing chambers of desire in the cool and transparent environments of modernism." But Burgin adds a third element in the form of a beautiful young Asian woman who appears occasionally, reading silently from a little red book. This reference to Mao functions, perhaps, as a Fosterian critique of design's potential for mass social seduction.

The power of design, for both Bastide and Burgin, resides in its apparent democracy and globalism. Anyone with money might be educated into the haute consuming classes, just as the garden in Schindler's California house looks as if it could be anywhere, the south of France or LA. But what in Burgin's hands could have prompted a sterile academic exercise has, instead, happily resulted in a richly detailed and highly stimulating journey through history and materialism, the point of which is that Melite is far from design's only victim; as a culture, we've long since been collectively seduced.