

REVIEW - 02 JAN 2003

Victor Burgin

BY MORGAN FALCONER

Arnolfini, Bristol and Matt's Gallery, London, UK



Victor Burgin has crossed the Atlantic so many times in the past 40 years that the question of who has rightful national ownership of him is surely moot. Yet it still seems amusing that it has taken an American, the Arnolfini's Catsou Roberts, to revive him in England.

Brits tend only to remember the early Burgin, the 1970s Marxist-economist-Conceptualist of poster works and political text pieces, and from that perspective he does look as period British as Reggie Perrin and the three-day week; yet of course he has spent much of his career in the US. Last autumn he returned to Britain for the third time, to take up a teaching post at Goldsmiths College. The fact that his return is heralded by a show in London of the video piece *Watergate* (2000) and a retrospective titled after his latest video, *Listen to Britain* (2002), is, diplomatically speaking, very neat.

Britain has recently seen a considerable revival of interest in early Conceptualism, yet such is Burgin's reputation that Roberts has to argue for him. She starts right away with *Performative/Narrative* (1971), exactly the tough sort of word-image conundrum we expect. A series of nearly identical photographs of an office are paired with short texts suggesting various narrative possibilities. *Listen to Britain*, however, reveals the rebranded Burgin. Taking its name from the Humphrey Jennings film of 1942 (a short wartime propaganda piece aimed at beefing up morale on the home front), it deftly blends film clips, music, new footage and text into a sumptuous whole, showing that the reasons for war and patriotism are rarely plainly apparent. Burgin has moved on, Roberts' argument goes: the militant austerity is gone, the media have got hip, even production skills have been groomed. But the fundamentals remain constant: he still has a distaste for conventional narrative and, charmingly, still has the same leavening humour in his texts.

CRISTIN TIERNEY

Having won our confidence, Roberts returns to the 1970s in the next room with *US 77* (1977), the series of photo and text works that Burgin called his 'road movie'. Black and white images of American life (he resisted colour until 1984) are captioned with texts that sometimes run counter to the images and sometimes simply comment on them in a slightly ponderous, bearded manner. Those unfriendly to Burgin could undoubtedly point to this series as demonstrating how his work lectures; broadly speaking, Roberts' selections make that charge seem unfair, but what she can't conceal is the way he insists on patience and application in his audience in a very teacherly way, or the fact that he has a tendency to pile reference upon scholarly reference. All these traits are particularly apparent in the suite of five related works '*Tales from Freud*' (1980-3).

In each part the black and white photographs and captions are compacted into dense, highly economical narratives. In *Gradiva* (1982) the method is highly effective, with the sequence open to be read both left to right and right to left. It's a rather hermetic commentary on Freud, but one attuned to Burgin's interest in the way the fundamentals of psychoanalysis play their part in the battle of the sexes.

In *Grenoble* (1981) is similarly impressive, but in *Olympia* (1982) Burgin brings too many ingredients to the mix, making it messy. In *Love Stories #2* (1996), one of his first video pieces, the typical themes of misrecognition and displacement are present, though the purpose is more opaque.

Roberts' retrospective may be a British reappraisal of Burgin, yet it is most persuasive in junking the old image of the artist. The fact that *US 77* introduces his later work is pivotal in this respect, since this work marked the moment when Burgin turned away from Marxism and economics toward Roland Barthes, psychoanalysis and feminism; while others of his kind - for example, Art and Language - remained with language-based Conceptualism, he moved, along with many Marxist academics of the period, towards film and cultural studies.

Watergate (2000) screened at Matt's Gallery in London, is perhaps most expressive of this shift, because while it had the complexity of that earlier language-based work it was also more mellow. A stationary camera pans around the finest of the Corcoran's holdings of 19th-century American painting while a woman reads from Jean-Paul Sartre's *L'Être et le néant* (Being and Nothingness, 1943); the camera then switches to pan around a room in the Watergate apartment buildings; then the screen darkens, the names of the paintings appear and a Handel cantata washes over us. There's politics here, but it's buried, skilfully, in hermetic preoccupations with memory, intuition and perception; obscured, one must also say, in the warmth of Burgin's inclusive humanity. It's no wonder he lost friends on the left.

It's not for me to say whether Burgin's political choices were right or wrong, but given the number of younger, contemporary artists who might find sustenance in his newest work, and given the fate of much language-based art and the persuasiveness of Roberts' show, one must say they were smart moves for his art, at least.

MORGAN FALCONER