

## A note on *Young Oaks*

In 2016 I was invited by the Italian scholar and publisher Gabriele Guercio to contribute to a series of artists' books on the common theme of the 'afterlife'. My response to the project subsequently outgrew the proposed 'limited edition' format and was eventually published in 2019 by Thomas Zander/Walther König as *Afterlife*. The book – which also exists in web-based form – consists of passages of images and texts orbiting the core premise of a parallel world in which technology provides perfect digital copies of individual minds: "Once the duplicate is made, there are effectively two beings: one organic, the other numeric. Each evolves separately but only one will die".<sup>1</sup> The science fiction scenario serves as an allegory of ordinary everyday life understood as a continual work of transaction between material reality and the virtual realities of memory, fantasy and computer simulations. I conceived of *Afterlife* as an open project to be expanded upon in further works that function both independently and as satellites of the original premise. My book *mandarin*, published concurrently with *Afterlife* by Guercio's Juxta Press, was the first of these. My gallery work *Young Oaks* is the second.

*Young Oaks* elaborates upon a passing evocation in *Afterlife* of the work of the Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershøi. In 2008 the Royal Academy of Arts, London, mounted an exhibition of Hammershøi's work. Walking through the Royal Academy galleries I could imagine myself circling the artist's Copenhagen apartment. The experience remained with me and I included an image in *Afterlife* to represent my memory in the form of a view down an enfilade of rooms with light from windows casting patterns on the floor. In common with all but one of the other images in *Afterlife* the view of the rooms was made with a virtual camera in a set constructed using a 'game engine'.<sup>2</sup> For *Young Oaks* I expanded my set into a suite of four interconnecting rooms, elaborating upon their architectural details and furnishings, and placing them in a natural setting. The passage between rooms is described in four pairs of superposed images, each pair forming a shot/countershot from one room into the next. Two additional diptychs reveal objects that in the other image pairs are concealed in blind spots behind doors. These objects also appear in the pages of *Afterlife*. The suite of six diptychs is completed by a brief framed text citing a haiku by Richard Wright.<sup>3</sup>

*Young Oak Trees* was painted in 1907 and exhibited in Copenhagen the following year. The Hammershøi scholar Poul Vad sees the work as evidence of the emerging influence of classical Chinese and Japanese art upon a legacy of landscape painting inherited from German Romanticism. Works of art imply ways of being in the world. *Young Oak Trees* was first shown in the year the first works of Analytical Cubism were exhibited in Paris. Despite their apparent dissimilarities Hammershøi's paintings and those of his Cubist contemporaries are equally attempts to represent a phenomenological real. The French literary theorist Roland Barthes observes:

From ancient times to the efforts of our avant-garde, literature has been concerned to represent something. What? I will put it crudely: the real. The real is not representable, and it is because [we] ceaselessly try to represent it by words that there is a history of literature.<sup>3</sup>

I might say much the same of the kind of 'visual' artworks that interest me most. The 'real' is not to be confused with the consensual 'reality' assumed by common sense and mainstream media. For Barthes the purpose of formal invention is to circumvent preformatted verisimilitude. Analytical Cubism fragmented a previously unitary pictorial field into disparate views from multiple points in space. Concurrently, such thinkers as Henri Bergson and Sigmund Freud traced the geometry of psychical space by dismantling previously categorical distinctions between 'inner' and 'outer' reality, 'memory' and 'fantasy'. Whereas the focus of Hammershøi and the early Cubists is upon material reality, my own attention is primarily on the fragmentary and shifting phenomena of what Freud terms 'psychical reality'. *Young Oaks* elaborates upon an image from *Afterlife* which stands in for a memory now inseparable from other memories, fantasies and associations. It contributes to a 'realist' project that, as I remark in concluding an essay of 1987:

... cannot be what it was at the time of Gustave Courbet, or even Bertolt Brecht. Attention to psychical reality calls for a psychical realism – impossible, but nevertheless ...<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Victor Burgin, *Afterlife*, Cologne, Thomas Zander/Walther König, 2019, unpaginated. Web-based version (Chrome on desktop only) at <https://afterlife.victorburgin.eu/>

<sup>2</sup> 3D modelling software for the design of videogames.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Wright, *Haiku: This Other World*, New York, Arcade, 1998, p. 170, Verse 679.

<sup>4</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Lecture in Inauguration of the Chair of Literary Semiology, Collège de France, January 7, 1977, *October*, vol. 8, Spring, 1979, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Victor Burgin, 'Geometry and Abjection' [1987] in *In/Different Spaces*, Berkeley / Los Angeles, University of California, 1996, p. 56. See also, Alexander Streitberger, *Psychical Realism: The Work of Victor Burgin*, Leuven, Leuven University Press, 2020.