

Image and text was one of the great themes of William S. Burroughs. He once remarked, "I've been interested in precisely how word and image get around on very, very complex association lines."¹ When Burroughs referred to imagery he often conflated the visual image with the word. "Image is trapped in word," he wrote.² His prose is renowned for its visuality. Reviewing Burroughs's novel, *The Ticket that Exploded*, JG Ballard stressed the vivid imagery, "of which 'the photo flakes falling' is the most moving in the book..."³ In his assessment of Burroughs's poetics, Ballard acknowledged the writer's use of the cut up technique. Cut up was discovered (rather re-discovered) in 1959 when Burroughs's friend, the painter Brion Gysin, accidentally sliced through layers of newspapers. The first literary cut ups combined fragments of text from newspapers and magazines to yield new, unexpected phrases. Burroughs, Gysin and others extensively experimented with the method, which received wide critical attention with the publication of Burroughs's *Nova* trilogy (1961-1964). Cut up is emblematic of Burroughs's interest in text and image. Early precedents are both visual - including, the Surrealist collages of Max Ernst - and literary - the oral dada poetry of Tristan Tzara in which snippets of text were randomly withdrawn from a hat. When existing images are combined, new ones emerge, Burroughs observed. "I could see right away all the possibilities of cut ups, where you have one image you can have six out of that. You

¹ Knickerbocker C, 'Interview with William Burroughs'. In Burroughs WS, Gysin B (1978) *The Third Mind*, New York: Viking Press

² Sobieszek R (1996) *Ports of Entry: William S Burroughs and The Arts*, Los Angeles: LACMA, p 35.

³ Ballard JG, (1996) *A Users Guide to the Millennium*, London: Harper Collins, p 129

can get, what cuts up well are images, so you take Rimbaud and start cutting it up you get all sorts of quite good Rimbaud."⁴

Besides being a novelist, Burroughs was a photographer and a collector of photographic ephemera. Through the use of cut up (and related techniques such as fold in) he identified many interesting analogies between his literature and photography.

"The cut-up method brings to writers the collage, which has been used by painters for fifty years. And used by the moving and, still camera. In fact all street shots from movie or still cameras are by the unpredictable factors of passersby and juxtaposition cut-ups. And photographers will tell you that often their best shots are accidents . . . writers will tell you the same."⁵

The subject of photography permeates Burroughs's fiction and non-fiction. It is reflected in his poetic imagery ("Characters walk in and out of silver film...") and present in the form of exotic characters such as "Jimmy the Take" (The Soft Machine) and "Fred Flash from St Louis" (The Wild Boys). His interest in the subject was serious but tended to lean towards the obsessive and the arcane. For instance, he would regale audiences with descriptions of a "wish machine" that deployed

⁴ Miles B, "The Future Leaks Out: A Very Magical and Highly Charged Interludes". In Fallows C, Genzmer S (eds) (2012), *CUT-UPS, CUT-INS, CUT-OUTS: THE ART OF WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS*, Vienna: Kunsthalle, Wien, p 23

⁵ Burroughs WS, Gysin B (1978) *The Third Mind*, New York: Viking Press

photographic technology. Burroughs became obsessed with the number 23 and collected any image in which it featured. He recommended taking photographs as a way of sharpening a person's observational skills. "Walk down a city block with a camera and take what you notice, moving the camera around as closely as possible to follow the direction of your eyes."⁶ Years before networked camera phones fell into the hands of deviant users, Burroughs promoted the offensive use of cameras. Burroughs announced that the Church of Scientology (Burroughs had been a former member) moved its London headquarters following a "Playback operation".

"... make recordings and take pictures of some location you wish to discomode or destroy, now play recordings back and take more pictures, will result in accidents, fires, removals. ..."⁷

We know Burroughs began taking photographs in July 1951 in Panama then Equador while searching for the mysterious drug, yagé. He continued throughout the sixties in London, also during his 9 months in New York City in 1965. In 1974, after returning to the US, Burroughs seems to have more or less stopped taking photographs. It is likely that he owned several cameras during this time (Burroughs mentions a Zeiss Ikon model)⁸ His archives contain images in both 35mm and square formats (6x6cm). Because Burroughs began taking photographs prior to his discovery of cut up, photography can't be seen simply as an extension of his literary

⁶ Burrough WS (2005), *The Electronic Revolution*, ubu.com: Ubuclassics, p 22

⁷ Burrough WS (2005), *The Electronic Revolution*, ubu.com: Ubuclassics, p 10

⁸ Burroughs WS (date?), *St Louis Return ??* p 80

experiments - as might audio and film, for instance. We still don't know much about his use of photography, or its significance in his work (it was an inspiration in 1958, when Burroughs reportedly covered his hotel room walls with his photographs while writing *Naked Lunch*), nor do we understand his influence on photographers, if any. His archive contains a mixture of private pictures and pictures that can be identified with his work (for instance the portraits that were staged for the camera and kept as research for his novels) but it seems Burroughs did not recognise any separation between the categories. He left behind many snaps of friends, lovers and social events, and many of these, even the most personal, can be found in Burroughs's experimental collages and paste-ups.

It appears that Burroughs also used photography to investigate his theme of text and image. Cut up was the first "word machine" devised to generate new, startling phrases and images. Many photographs exist of "found cut ups" that might also be described as word machines. In one variant of the technique, disparate texts are cut into blocks and butted together to generate unexpected content. "Cut right through the pages of any book or newsprint ... lengthwise, for example, and shuffle the columns of text. Put them together at hazard and read the newly constituted message."⁹ Some of Burroughs's photographs are analogous to this literary method. One such, of a London bus from a three-quarters angle, shows advertising slogans on the front and sides. These colliding texts yield the Burroughs-esque legend: Who is Lady L Crown Wall papers Aldgate. Another shows the intersection of two busy

⁹ Burroughs WS, Gysin B (1978) *The Third Mind*, New York: Viking Press

streets and includes the front and side of an Italian restaurant called Terrazza. In the foreground, in heavy traffic, is a mail van with a prominent slogan on the side.

Reading the texts from top to bottom, produces: Terrazza Terrazza I LIKE THE JOB - SO WOULD YOU. Barry Miles reports that some of these readymade cut ups found their way into Burroughs's literature of the 60s.¹⁰

Burroughs took street photographs in London, New York, Tangier and Gibraltar. His subject matter encompasses details of shop windows, views of unpopulated city places, and "candid", shots of people taken unawares. Some - such as his documents of half-demolished buildings in Soho, London - were plainly shot as a series. These photographs are the work of a competent snap shooter that pays attention to the rules of composition and relies on a basic camera to get the exposures more or less right. Pictures exist of the writer holding such a camera, possibly an Eastern European Certo Phot model, calibrated for either sunny and dull conditions.

The years during which Burroughs was most active as a photographer coincided with an unprecedented expansion of image culture in the West. This is reflected in increased ownership of televisions, the growing influence of advertising, the first books about media theory and so on. Partly in response to these developments, photography became established as a modern art form with the endorsement of major US museums. The street was the theme of a ground-breaking art photography

¹⁰ Miles B, 'The Future Leaks Out: A Very Magical and Highly Charged Interludes'. In Fallows C, Genzmer S (eds) (2012), *CUT-UPS, CUT-INS, CUT-OUTS: THE ART OF WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS*, Vienna: Kunsthalle, Wien, p 26

exhibition of 1964, *New Documents*. Curated by John Szarkowski at New York's MoMA, this was essentially about everyday America. It featured black-and-white pictures by Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander and Gary Winogrand that were informed in different ways, by the snapshot. The images of Friedlander, especially, wrest formal order out of coincidence and accident in the city. It seems certain, though, that Burroughs did not consider his snapshots to be art. Because they were concerned with content, not form, it is relatively easy to spot repeat motifs that refer to obsessions in his life and writing. One of these is the city itself, the backdrop to his utopias and dystopias. Burroughs always claimed he was successfully treated for morphine addiction by a substance called Apomorphine. This is represented by a formula that includes four interconnected hexagons. Burroughs took many photographs containing this basic shape that he found echoed in such diverse objects as tiles, a prism and chicken wire. There are also photographs of pylon lines that may allude to his obsession with networks and "lines of power". Other photographs record creative processes and materials that Burroughs used; for instance there are picture of Gysin painting, and another features scissors. In addition, Burroughs also took many pictures of his raw materials - newspaper and magazine pages, the covers of his own publications. All this represents a valuable document of the writer's art and life.

Within art, the photograph was discussed as a "visual language", separate from written language; but Burroughs considered words and photographs to be equivalent as instruments of social control. Control was another of Burroughs's

major themes. He deeply mistrusted images because they vindicated objective reality, which he rejected. In *Nova Express*, he wrote: "'Reality' is simply a more or less constant scanning pattern - The scanning pattern we accept as 'reality' has been imposed by the controlling power on this planet, a power primarily oriented toward total control." His metaphors of junk and the virus signify the insidious operations of language. "Words and photographs are used by vested interests as a control machine to manipulate humanity." There are affinities between this radical scepticism and the Marxist critiques of such as those of Herbert Marcuse and Louis Althusser (who coined the term Ideological State Apparatuses to mean schools, courts, unions, political parties, media, and families that maintain the capitalist system by reproducing themselves), though by contrast, Burroughs was never politically aligned. Control through word and image could be subverted, argued Burroughs, by non-alphabetic systems along the lines of Mayan and Egyptian hieroglyphics. The New York public library possesses a photograph by Burroughs of a drooping street banner inscribed with Chinese characters that is, perhaps, emblematic of his obsession with non-Western pictograms.

One of Burroughs's visual experiments involved substituting colours for words. Miles recalls seeing a "beautiful" set of "Rub out the Word" images from 1968 in which words were replaced with the colours blue, red, brown, green, yellow and white. In a 1961 letter to Gysin (who invented a kind of calligraphic language) Burroughs describes how colour photography was used in one of these exercises. "Something happens when you take pictures of pictures," he wrote. "Notice how the

colour dots seem to be in clay and not paper. I am now making a colour series to rub out the word." ¹¹

Burroughs filled many scrapbooks with "association blocks" that illustrate such linguistic systems. They comprise cut ups, words and images placed in collage-like formations. Scrapbooks were popular among artists at the time, including William Turnbull, John McHale and Eduardo Paolozzi, all associated with the British Independent Group (1952-57). These artists filled their scrapbooks with press clippings to recreate or signify the precocious and non-hierarchical image environment of the post-war period. Burroughs considered his scrapbook collages to be exercises in "time and space travel", equivalent to those found in novels such as *Cities of the Red Night* (described as "a kind of historical science fiction, re-imagining the history of the eighteenth century ..." ¹²) Some collages contained so-called "intersection pictures" that Burroughs took in response to existing imagery.

"I'll read in the newspaper something that reminds me of or has relation to something I've written. I'll cut out the picture or article and paste it in a scrapbook beside the words from my book. Or I'll be walking down the street and I'll suddenly see a scene from my book and I'll photograph it and put it in a scrapbook." ¹³

¹¹ Miles B, 'The Future Leaks Out: A Very Magical and Highly Charged Interludes'. In Fallows C, Genzmer S (eds) (2012), *CUT-UPS, CUT-INS, CUT-OUTS: THE ART OF WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS*, Vienna: Kunsthalle, Wien, p 28

¹² Hibbard A, 'Shift Coordinate Points: William S. Burroughs and Contemporary Theory'. In (2004) Schneiderman D, Walsh P (eds), *Retaking the Universe: William S. Burroughs in the Age of Globalization*, London: Pluto Press, p 24

¹³ Burroughs WS, Gysin B (1978) *The Third Mind*, New York: Viking Press

As collage elements, such pictures were used as links in the construction of associative chains of imagery and as catalysts for the production or accumulation of further photographs.

"Take pictures of Athens at all time from Ancient Greek reconstructions--museum photos of Attic vases, sculpture, frieze, temples – to present time streets parks and cafes--Arrange collage--Take--Rearrange--Take--The collages can be panoramic or precise--You can trace time lines down one street or flash a city--You can mix in time collages of other cities and places – " ¹⁴

"Take... Rearrange... Take." From this we can determine that the intersection pictures were conceived of more as a function of collage than as autonomous images. These scrapbook collages are revealing and important as analogues of Burroughs's non-linear prose, but they are also invaluable records of his application of photography.

Photography was also used to produce a kind of image reminiscent of the assemblages of Pop artists such as Rauschenberg, whom Burroughs knew and admired. Printed words and images (and sometimes objects) were arranged on table-tops then copied. There is even a photograph of an assemblage in the making (showing the shadow of Burroughs falling over the contents). Burroughs records

¹⁴ Burroughs WS, 'The Photo Collage', unpublished ms ??

that he began photographing such arrangements when he began living in Tangier in March 1961. "During that summer I made many of these montages in different ways and combinations."¹⁵ He never discriminated between types of image. He included snapshots of his friends and male lovers, post cards and magazine tear sheets, and seemed, like Pop artists, to eschew an aesthetics of perfect forms. He used a variety of improvised backdrops and now and then the legs of a tripod, enlisted to ensure sharp images, intrude. His lighting set ups could also include flash. In a letter to Gysin, Burroughs describes the scene of his earliest copy photographs. "Since arriving in Tangier I have been working full time and the place is littered up with flash bulbs and negatives and magazine cut outs."¹⁶ The assemblages only exist in the form of photographic records, possibly for maximum portability.

Evidently, Burroughs was interested in photography as a process, rather than an art form. One might look to Surrealism for precedents for his use of still photography as an aesthetic investigation into reality. Photographs by Man Ray, Jacques-André Boiffard and Brassai were regularly published as "evidence" in magazines such as *La Révolution Surréaliste* (1924-29) and *Minotaur* (1933-39). Burroughs's pictures of depopulated urban fringes, taken in harsh Mediterranean light, can possess the same haunted ambience as surrealist photographs. As Robert Sobieszek has shown, Burroughs's immediate contemporaries were not art photographers but conceptual

¹⁵ Miles B, 'The Future Leaks Out: A Very Magical and Highly Charged Interludes'. In Fallows C, Genzmer S (eds) (2012), *CUT-UPS, CUT-INS, CUT-OUTS: THE ART OF WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS*, Vienna: Kunsthalle, Wien, p 27

¹⁶ Miles B, 'The Future Leaks Out: A Very Magical and Highly Charged Interludes'. In Fallows C, Genzmer S (eds) (2012), *CUT-UPS, CUT-INS, CUT-OUTS: THE ART OF WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS*, Vienna: Kunsthalle, Wien, p 26

artists. They included Douglas Huebler, Dan Graham, Robert Smithson and Ed Ruscha. Like Burroughs, they were uninterested in art photography and its preoccupations with form, medium purity and so on. Instead they used photography as part of their art works. Ruscha, for instance, produced artist's books such as *Every Building Along Sunset Boulevard* (1966) from his basic snapshots. "I never take pictures just for the taking of pictures," he told the critic AD Coleman. "I want the end product ... that's what I'm really interested in."¹⁷ The British critic, Lawrence Alloway, noted that a common feature of the "photo-projects" of conceptual artists was an "anti-expertise, anti-glamorous quality about the photographs."¹⁸ Likewise, Burroughs showed little interest in craft issues, leaving the processing of his negatives and his prints to local pharmacies. Robert Smithson was a prolific photographer and Sobieszek has compared his so-called "photo-markers" with the photographs of Burroughs because each, "viewed the photograph as a means of locating co-ordinates in time."¹⁹ Ken Josephson is another conceptual photographer that might be compared with Burroughs, because he is interested in themes of serendipity, parallel realities and the uncanny. Josephson takes repeat photographs in which he places his earlier photographs of the same situation taken from the same vantage point.

¹⁷ Coleman AD, (1989) *Light Readings: A Photography Critic's Writings, 1968-1978*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, p 118

¹⁸ Sobieszek R, (1993) *Robert Smithson: Photo Works*, Los Angeles: LACMA/University of New Mexico Press, p 18

¹⁹ Sobieszek R, (1996) *Ports of Entry: William S Burroughs and The Arts*, Los Angeles: LACMA, p 60

While the photography of Burroughs does not betray the stylistic influence of art photography, it seems that art photographs had at least some impact on his thinking during the 60s. His many collages and scrapbooks include tear sheets from publications that reproduce images from photographic history. The publication, in 1964, of the first aesthetic history of photography (*The History of Photography: From 1839 to the Present*, by Beaumont Newhall) created an appetite for images by old masters. Burroughs included historical photographs by Paul Strand, Frederick Evans and Frank Meadow Sutcliffe, in his collages. We can't know what their significance may have been, unfortunately. Pieces of the same image, by the painter LJM Daguerre, appear twice in the same scrapbook (the so-called "green scrapbook", c. 1971-73). Taken at the very dawn of photography (around 1838), this is a view of the busy Boulevard de Temple, in which the only human presence is a shadowy figure of a man having his shoes shined (things in motion are rendered invisible when exposure times are longer than a few seconds). Such images may explain why photography fascinated the Surrealists as portals to mysterious and unseen dimensions. It is perhaps these elements of strangeness and chance that attracted Burroughs to this image.

Photographers finally became aware of Burroughs's photographs and collages in the 1980s, some years after he stopped taking pictures. His first photography exhibition at the B2 gallery, London, coincided with the rise of poststructuralism within photographic circles. Poststructuralist theory was sceptical of realism, the official photographic aesthetic, and critical of the role of photographers in reinforcing

consumerist values. A key photographic publication of poststructuralism was *Thinking Photography* (1982), edited by the English artist, Victor Burgin. With Walter Benjamin as his touchstone (in essays such as *The Author as Producer*), Burgin and his collaborators set out to reclaim photography from the mystifications, as they saw it, of both spectacular society and newly ascendant art photography. Burgin wrote a keynote article in a special edition of the photography magazine *Creative Camera*, devoted to image and language. Significantly, it also contained images by Burroughs and included, prominently, his portrait on the cover. Burgin's subject was Roland Barthes who, in the 1950s, began to develop a systematic theory of the ideology of photography with tools developed by linguists such as Ferdinand de Saussure. Barthes observed a divergence between what a photograph denoted (the putative subject) and what it connoted (what it might signify). He illustrated this with reference to a magazine photograph of an emotional black soldier giving the French salute. Barthes discerned a covert message in the image, which was that "there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors."²⁰ Burgin took this as proof that photographs were not transparent, after all, but rather were deeply implicated with language, myths and ideology.

We know from interviews and writings that Burroughs was familiar with the linguistic concepts of Alfred Korzybski, whose ideas regarding the relationship between the signifier and the signified roughly equates with de Saussure's. Barthes'

²⁰ Quoted in Burgin V, 'Re-Reading Camera Lucida'. In *Creative Camera* No 215, November 1982, London, p 730

observations about the duplicity of the photograph certainly ring with Burroughs's conception of the image as an instrument of control. Significantly, Barthes' ideas were the catalyst for photographic practices that interrogated the ideological content of photographs. Many, including collage, text and image and appropriation, were favoured by Burroughs. Burroughs recommended the use of cut up to expose the latent content of media texts. "You can cut the Truth out of any written or spoken words ... " ²¹Burgin exploited the susceptibility of image to text, to develop an aesthetic of deconstruction. His image, *What Does Possession Mean to You?* (1974) offers a critique of advertising. The work, originally disseminated as a poster, features a "natural" picture of an embracing couple that is still widely used to convey consumerist messages. Burgin re-appropriates this trope, adding the slogan, "7 per cent of our population owns 84 per cent of our wealth", to convey a counter-ideological message.

Art photography locates the source of meaning in the intentions of the demiurgic photographer. By contrast, poststructuralism conceives of an "intertextual space" in which the reader/viewer produces meaning. The task of interpreting a photograph involves making connections, Burgin noted. "I am relying upon knowledge that is no longer 'natural', 'purely visual". I am relying upon knowledge that is cultural, verbally transmitted, and in the final analysis, ideological."²² An early lesson in

²¹ Burroughs WS, Gysin B (1978) *The Third Mind*, New York: Viking Press

²² Burgin V, 'Art, Common Sense and Photography'. In (1997) Evans J, Hunt B (eds), *The Camerawork Essays: Context and Meaning in Photography*, London: Rivers Oram Press, p 79

intertextuality is found in both Burroughs's intersection photographs, and *The Third Mind*. An intersection picture was taken in response, not to things seen - as is usually the case with photography - but to things already seen/known (as Barthes would say, *deja lu*). Burroughs wrote, "Such pictures are often interconnected. When you pick up one, you may find it is a branch of word or image vine reaching from North Clark Street to California to Manila to Gibraltar."²³ Regarding the reading experience of *The Third Mind*, Gerard-Georges Lemaire commented, "The reading of it is not linear but inscribed in the space of its multiplicity."

One way postmodernism opposed the romanticism of art photography, was to place authorship in contention. The artist Richard Prince, for instance, photographed magazine pages then re-presented them as his work. Similarly, Sherrie Levine copied canonical works of art photography. Her *Untitled 1979 (After Edward Weston)* consists of a copy of a print by this famous modern master. With this simple gesture, Levine seems to claim this work of art (*Torso of Neil, 1926*) for herself, while asserting "the finiteness of the visual universe".²⁴ Questions of the ego and authorship were also of central interest to Burroughs, who is regarded as a postmodern novelist, *avant la lettre*. The issue of creative ownership emerges in his photographic archives. There are many unattributed photographs of Burroughs himself, suggesting that the taker of the picture was always less important to

²³ Burroughs WS, Gysin B (1978) *The Third Mind*, New York: Viking Press

²⁴ Grundberg A, 'Camera Culture in a Postmodern Age'. In (1987) Grundberg A, Gauss K (eds), *Photography and Art: Interactions Since 1945*, New York: River Cross Press, p 210

Burroughs than the picture itself. In his writing, he deployed a number of approaches to undermine his own singular authorship, such as mixing the texts of different authors (Nova Express contains quotes from Joyce, Shakespeare, Rimbaud and Kerouac) into his own cut ups. Another strategy was collaboration. Throughout a long career Burroughs worked fruitfully with countless artists, film-makers and also musicians (including Anthony Balch, Rauschenberg, Keith Haring, Laurie Anderson and Kurt Cobain). He always considered his closest collaborator to be Brion Gysin. Both considered their many creative activities to be the manifestation of a "third mind" (the title of their book to popularise cut up). This term, found in a self-help book, describes the "superior" creative entity or "unseen collaborator" that results when two minds combine. Photography, so cheap and convenient, provided an appropriate visual expression for the concept of the third mind. Burroughs's archive contains many portraits combined out of two halves of two different faces. Some are pasted into scrap books or recognisable as discreet collage elements. Precedents for this could include a series of composite portraits of surrealists that Eduardo Paolozzi made in the 50s (one combined Andre Breton's eyes with Giacometti's mouth). Burroughs also collaborated with photographers - including Charles Gatewood, for whose anarchic book, Sidetrapping (1975), he penned an introduction. More noteworthy, though, was his relationship with the film-maker and photographer Robert Frank. Frank and Burroughs may have met in the late 50s or early 60s through mutual contacts with Beat writers including Jack Kerouac, Gregory Corso, Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky - who all participated in Frank's film, Pull My Daisy (1959). Certainly they were acquainted by 1967 when Frank was

cinematographer on Conrad Rooks's film, Chappaqua that included a performance by Burroughs. Within photography, Frank is best known for his influential book, *The Americans*. This appeared in English in 1959, coinciding with the publication of *Naked Lunch* (Burroughs owed his title to Kerouac who wrote Frank's introduction). The Beat influence in *The Americans* is manifest in both Frank's "hipster" attitude and his jarring "snapshot aesthetic" that exploited the odd juxtapositions that Burroughs noted when he described "the unpredictable factors of passersby and juxtaposition cut-ups".

Plainly, the editor of *Creative Camera* included Burroughs's photographic works to complement Burgin's theoretical text. It is probably not surprising that Burroughs's antipathy to notions of medium purity, the myth of authorship and his advocacy of text-image - all part of his radical opposition to literary convention - should accord with the critical tenor of postmodern photography. Robin Lydenberg noted that, "the ideas we now recognize as characteristic of poststructuralism and deconstruction were being developed independently by Burroughs almost thirty years ago."²⁵ Burroughs opposed the Aristotelian view of reality ("either-or thinking") on which the work of art photographers was necessarily posited. In contrast to the so-called "new documents" of Arbus, Friedlander and Winogrand -

²⁵ 'Introduction: Millions of People Reading the Same Words' Schneiderman D, Walsh P. In (2004) Schneiderman D, Walsh P (eds), *Retaking the Universe: William S. Burroughs in the Age of Globalization*, London: Pluto Press, p 24

described as efforts "to know life"²⁶ - Burroughs's intersection photographs represent "inner space documents" that addressed the connections that link different states of awareness.²⁷ Lydenberg refers to such practices as attempts to create "a total awareness that transgresses the boundaries separating outside and inside..."²⁸

Contemporary critics have noted the prescience of Burroughs's metaphors of language as virus and his themes of cut up, addiction and virtual travel in relation to the internet age. What is his relevance for photographers today? The "photographic philosophy" of Vilém Flusser forms a useful bridge between poststructuralist politics of representation and the discourse of photography in the digital age that concerns authenticity, the dangers of the simulacra and so on. In places the prose of Flusser's book, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* uncannily echoes Burroughs's in its evocation of sinister programmers that conspire to use technology (photography) as a means of control. Flusser writes, "instead of presenting the world to man [photographs] re-present it, put themselves in place of the world, to the extent that man lives as a function of the images he has produced."²⁹ As Flusser

²⁶ Szarkowski J, 'New Documents press release' (12th June 2013) http://www.moma.org/docs/press_archives/3860/releases/MOMA_1967_Jan-June_0034_21.pdf?2010, Museum of Modern Art

²⁷ Burroughs WS, Gysin B (1978) *The Third Mind*, New York: Viking Press'In my writing I am acting as a map maker, an explorer of psychic areas, to use the phrase of Mr Alexander Trocchi, as a cosmonaut of inner space, and I see no point in exploring areas that have already been thoroughly surveyed...

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ Flusser V, (2000) *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, London: Reaktion Books, p?

intuited, digital culture claims for the images it generates and circulates, the transparency once attributed to photographs. Contemporary photographers such as the UK-based Mishka Henner still claim to be producing documentary evidence of real events. Henner produced the series, *No Man's Land* (2011) by reworking images taken by Google. He discovered that in the course of documenting European road systems, Google's photographers had inadvertently captured images of women waiting by roadsides and sheltering within underpasses. Many claim that these are evidence of prostitutes at work and that the images shed light on a dark side of globalised culture. Flusser, like Burroughs, thought of photography more like a "screen" on which we project our fantasies, than something giving access to the real. But he also agreed with Burroughs that some individuals might succeed in unmasking the "controlling interests". For some, Burroughs was a prophet of the digital age. Though he did not live long enough to experience the internet, he understood - as does Henner - the importance of information networks. Long before computers were linked, there were small press networks. These have been identified as the forerunners of the internet because they enabled marginal interests to group, communicate and maintain an (albeit marginal) presence in the public realm. During the 60s Burroughs took pleasure in "jamming" media networks by placing his fictions in small literary and art magazines (including Jeff Nuttall's *My Own Mag*). "So stir in news stories, TV plays, stock market quotations, adverts and put the altered mutter line out in the streets."³⁰ One recent image demonstrates that the alliance of Photoshop and the internet offers more opportunities than ever

³⁰ Burrough WS (2005), *The Electronic Revolution*, ubu.com: Ubuclassics, p 14

before to subvert the networks. one that seemed to show the American politician, Sarah Palin, brandishing an assault rifle. Apparently, it appeared online shortly after John McCain selected her as his running mate in the 2008 US election. Palin's real-life penchant for posing with guns may have lent the image some of its initial credibility. In the event, it was exposed as a seamless grafting of Palin's head onto another woman's body by means of Photoshop.

conclude

It seems that Burroughs had no interest in becoming an art photographer, nor is it likely that his relatively crude photographs would yield easily to aesthetic classification. One reason for this is Burroughs's insistence that photography was a means to an end, not an end in itself. His archive presents other problems for photographic specialists. Besides the lack of documentation, there is confusion over the way private and personal conjoin within his practice. This makes it difficult to identify which material was connected with Burroughs's literary project. Yet he would seem to have relevance for generations of photographers, albiet of different persuasions. Is Burroughs's influence manifest in the work of photographers?

Robert Frank and the Beats considered themselves to be fellow travellers. During a road trip with Frank for a magazine article, Kerouac noted analogies between their respective practices. He noticed Frank's camera eye roving over the material of everyday America - the face of a waitress, piles of dirty dishes, a car park. "I suddenly realised I was taking a trip with a genuine artist and that he was

expressing himself in an art-form that was not unlike my own."³¹ After the success of *The Americans*, Frank abandoned photography for film-making, but not before becoming recognised as a major progenitor of 60s street photography. In his 1972 publication, *The Lines of My Hand*, Frank returned to photography, but not as realism. Frank's new collage style combined elements of film and still photography. In composites such as *Mailbox + Letters*, Winter 1976, Frank combined private and public imagery, to pursue themes of selfhood and personal loss. At the same time he continued his collaboration with the Beats, casting Burroughs in the role of an undercover agent in the short film, *Energy and How to Get It* (1981). Frank was also interested in the complex relationship between images and language. In 2002 he selected an excerpt from Burroughs's *Western Lands* for inclusion in a special edition of *Du* magazine in Frank's honour. In *Dead Man's Blues* an "old writer" (Burroughs's alter ego, William Seward Hall) fails to make out typewritten words that float before his eyes. The stubborn words reappear in handwritten form, and he begins to decipher some of them. "From a piece of brown paper he read: '2001'. Then there was another white sheet with six or seven sentences on it, words crossed out, and he was able to read" 'well almost never.'³² Finally, the writer records these words using his typewriter as if it were a camera. Frank's collage, *Mabou Fear no Fear*, 1987 (also published in *Du*), offers a tantalising analogy. Hand-written words are scratched into two out of three images of the same old manual typewriter loaded with a sheet of blank paper. The top image contains the word "fear" and the bottom image announces, "No fear". Frank asks the viewer to look to his own resources for

³¹ Kerouac J, 'On the Road to Florida'. In *Du* No 731, November 2002, p 39

³² Burroughs WS, 'Dead Man's Blues'. In *Du* No 731, November 2002, p 72

the meaning of this conjunction of words and typewriters. Burroughs's description of words that are difficult to decipher reminds us of the many ways he contrived to distract the reader from the habit of linear narrative. Writing about cut up, Gerard-Goorges Lemaire observed it, "imposes another path on the eyes and on thought."³³ Similarly, Frank deploys collage and image and text in order to wean the viewer from the habit of photographic realism. Frank once said, "It's the misinformation that's important."³⁴ A deeper analysis of Frank's indebtedness or otherwise, to the ideas of Burroughs, will have to wait. But Frank might be a fruitful place to begin a reappraisal of photography in relation to the study of Burroughs.

³³ Burroughs WS, Gysin B (1978) *The Third Mind*, New York: Viking Press

³⁴ Tucker A, 'It's the Misinformation That's Important' in Tucker A, Brookman P (1986) *Robert Frank: New York to Nova Scotia*, Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

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