

VICTOR BURGIN language, perception and representative function

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Contemporary avant-garde, divided as it is into fragments, displays a plurality of attitudes, not incompatible, as often stated, but rather complementary in their antinomy. Today, no individual or separate school may pretend to cover the whole sphere of artistic investigation, and to consider this sphere means considering those individuals and schools as a whole. The movements of each one, either regressive or progressive, can be mutually accounted for. Though it embraces only one particular aspect of the artistic issue, nevertheless each 'avant-garde' lays claim to universality and whatever it rejects is taken over by the next 'avant-gardes', not acknowledged, or course, by the former. Thus, the subjectivistic effusion expressed in different ways by Beuys, Heizer or Acconci, for example, will make possible a criticism of the radical nature of minimal positivism. Similarly, the forceful come-back of a pictorial (hyper)realism on the same scene where Conceptual art has just asserted itself with essentially textual productions, shows how pressing it is for it to theorize its breach from the image. Any appraisal leaving out one or the other or many of these avant-gardes, merely setting them in chronological order (i.e. rejecting some on grounds of anachronism or obsolescence) would amount to agreeing to the arbitrary dismissals of a select avant-garde, taking a partial, biased view.

However great the historical importance attributed to the American Cool Abstraction, we must not, however, accept the breaches it operates as definitely verified. It may not be analysed outside of what contemporary schools have opposed to it. It will be particularly interesting to study the attitudes which, stating they are directly issued from American geometric painting and sculpture, will turn back to problems evaded by the latter. Objective methods, the principle of looking back upon 'what has already been done', common to the best examples of Conceptual art and particularly to Burgin, may cause this fragmentary artistic sphere to be rectified and a generalised purpose to be achieved.

A functional objectivation

Such as it appears through Hard Edge and Minimal art, abstraction lives on a paradox. It takes upon itself the heritage of American Expressionism and gestural painting, while it deprives it own productions of all expressive elements. This deprivation is evinced by a functional reduction tending to provide an essential, axiomatic definition of the art-work. To this end, the work is stripped of all that appears external to its distinctive nature: all that constitutes a reflection of the world, all representative elements and, as such, representative of the artists himself. Minimal art's interpretation — and also, let us own it, some Conceptual artists' somewhat hurried interpretation — of Pollock's work, reduces the latter to its effects alone taking no part in the methods which made them possible. Our attention is drawn to the casting-off of the easel, the

use of the canvas no longer focused, 'forgetting', though, that such a modification has been made possible to Pollock only through the expressive element. In order to abide by the principle of a self-definition of the art-work, Minimal art gives mechanically rise to works which merely disclose their apprehending process disregarding totally the process through which they are produced. For example, the only accepted psychological references are those supplied by the psychology of perception.

In 1969, Burgin still produce pieces close to the purpose of Minimal art, such as the one carried out in London's Greenwich Park. It consists of two equilateral triangles traced slightly above the ground with a rope threaded through three rings. These triangles, which are similar, are set at opposite sides of the park but, being both placed within view of the same path, they are seen inevitably one after the other. As explained by Burgin in the description of his work, the first triangle calls upon a subliminal level of perception. The simple geometric form, the commonplace material, enter the walker's consciousness even though he hasn't payed them any particular attention. On the other hand, the sight of the second triangle can't fail to recall the first to mind and the perception of it is more complex. It calls upon memory and the phenomenon of association. A process of perception is evinced which, in the case of the second triangle, is a direct and physical process as well as a psychological one. «Schematically and in terms of dischimation any path of consciousness through time might be represented as a meander. Attention to objects 'out there' in the material world is constantly subverted by the demands of memory. Wilful concentration is constantly dissolving into involuntary association». Burgin attempts to show the absolute necessity for a clue — a historical precedent — in the identification of a work, necessity that has become all the more evident since the casting-off of the traditional plastic media. For this, he makes use of a method typical of Minimal art which consists, by displaying the work within the physical space — the observer must add up several points of view — in revealing the psychological space it occupies simultaneously. Another very similar work is the one for which a file-card container is used. The container is moved on the ground in a straight line by regular stages. At each stage, the container is photographed. The photographs are then filed by means of index-cards in the container, in a sequence corresponding to the serial order of the stages. Thus, the object, directly perceived, is confronted with its perception in time, punctuated by the photographs.

Compared to the previous piece, this work is more successful; it is not confined to one aspect alone of the art-work. While Minimal art (and the triangles of Greenwich Park) is only concerned with the spectator's point of view, Burgin, with this piece, succeeds in associating the former (perception of the real object and the photographs it contains) to the artist's point of view (perception of the photographed object). He goes back to considering the representative function that the previous generations ad more or less arbitrarily dismissed, and this without

of psychoanalysis, just as his concept of eroticism has more affinity to that of a heretic of surrealism like Bataille than to Breton. Also in this partiality for heretical ideas Oshima shows himself to be an artist of the moment. Basically his attitude remains that of an anarchist who concentrates on tearing a few enraptured moments out of reality; his feelings conflict with established order more with the impatient anger of the rebel than with the positive persistence of the revolutionary. It is always this anger which causes his characters (his 'ghosts' as the director calls them) to expose themselves so easily to the temptation of suicide, which is not so much death of the body as that of a genuine-ness of existence which cannot be reached, despite so much fury. Since his inspiration is in the unconscious, his true tendency urges him towards impersonality, the symbol, the public and institutionalised rite, and the private one which attempts to smash the former (eroticism and volutary death highly ritualised as they are, both in our unconscious and the oriental tradition itself). Thus he has been able to give the collective crime in *The Hanging*, and the individual - collective release at the end of *The Diary of a Thief*. What really obsesses him deep down is the threat of emptiness, which is also a synonym for impotence and creative death, to which Oshima reacts rather like Godard through feverish abctivity because he is continuously being persued by the ghost of incommunicability, the torment of our times. All his successes are the result of this capacity which he possesses of filling in this vacuum, although he refers to it and remains dangerously close to it. His disasters always correspond to trials of unfaithfulness, that is to say attempts to exchange the vacuum for the richness of some thematic or linguistic solution which is too stiff and limiting, apart from being pre-established. But *The Ceremony* is still a splendid disaster. Because Oshima is certainly not a purist, and is anxious to go ahead whatever the theme so as not to be silent, he has shown himself ready to borrow eclectically from the whole experimental tradition of the theatre and cinema. Here too his strength lies in his ability to erode, or otherwise, the cultural and linguistic heritage on which he has put his hands.

Transl. David Stanton

losing any of the objectivity or didactic evidence they had established.

Language as related to the image

Since the beginning of 1970, Burgin makes exclusive use of language. 'Performative Narrative Piece' which is the only piece carried out in 1971 and contains a photographic section, is quite remarkable. Paradoxically, it is language that enables Burgin to consider the connection of the art-work to reality, i.e. to revert to the traditional functions of the art-work so as to view them methodically.

Burgin has often explained the nature of the language he used. In his own words, he only provides 'empty categories'; the texts are divided into propositions describing an event at a general rather than particular level (they do not necessarily refer to any particular event known to Burgin).

For example:

«1. All criteria by which you might decide that any series of bodily acts, directly known to you at any moment previous to the present moment, constitutes a discrete event.

2. All criteria by which you might assess the similarity of any one event to any other event.

3. Any series of similar events directly known to you previous to the present moment». And so on. Burgin writes: «My original motivation was to treat the phenomenological concerns of minimal sculptures at a high level of generality». If Minimal art has systematized the use of geometric forms, it is because these offer the advantage of not constituting a particular and anecdotal representation of reality. Set in a space, the minimal sculptures are not the reflection of this space, they merely describe the structural relations they maintain with it. Language, such as it is used by Burgin, displays the same features and possibilities. He abides by the same level of generality. The propositions are connected according to the proper logical and structural rules of language; they are not submitted to the logic of a reality which would be external to them. It is the reader, whom Burgin appeals to openly, who characterizes the event by providing the physical and psychological context available to him. In other words, Burgin's text, empty of meaning because elaborated outside of all specific context, acquires a meaning when the reader provides this context.

It is then the very use of language that enables Burgin to pursue an objective investigation — established by Minimal art — while operating a return to the representative function Minimal art had dismissed. Though the text are produced 'empty of meaning' they do not remain abstract. Burgin uses sometimes words denoting acts of physical objects. The reader may then bring the text into contact with reality, internal reality (through memory), external reality (his environment).

This is sometimes very clearly suggested. A series of '18 propositions' is distributed evenly on the walls of a room, to be read. The propositions must be read in relation to the elements of the room, its dimensions, the objects it contains, etc. While the propositions appear, to begin with, as 'empty categories', reading them may connect them to a perception and a visualization of reality. In Burgin's practice,

language far from negating the image, may constitute a way of approach and a means of elucidating its modes of action.

The performative utterance

The effectiveness and justification of Burgin's work lie in the production of pieces which totally modify the mechanism of the representative function in relation to the reality it represents. From its elaboration, a traditional art-work holds a meaning based upon an ambiguity, such as follows: the meaning of the work, which claims to be an information on reality, cannot be verified at all by that same reality. The meaning of a sign contained in the work, may only be specified in relation to the other signs it contains. The imperatives of the cultural structures and of the representative code isolate this meaning from all real context. Yet, the art-work whose meaning is thus verified in a totally conventional way, claims to identify with reality. Any other function which may be attributed to it rests on this lie; a lie not consistent with reality, a disguised lie (the quality of the work is measured by its fidelity, both representative and expressive) into which creeps what may be called the function of transcendence.

If this is true for writing (traditional literary production), one must not fail to notice that the image has played there an even more mystifying role. Textual transcription obviously complies with the logic of a code distinct from the organization of reality. On the other hand, the image was claimed to be congruent with the very organization of the real world; the imaginary context regulating the plastic sign has been mistaken with the real context: by a reversal of knowledge (the reproductive instrument used as an instrument of analysis), perspective, the method of reproduction of a three-dimensional reality within a two-dimensional space, has asserted itself as the objective method of interpretation of this reality. Thus, the pictorial lie was all the slower to come to light.

Burgin's text, such as we see it, does not contain that meaning imprisoned within a conventional context. We know it acquires a meaning only when the reader applies it to his own experiences, present or recalled by memory, or else, as in the case of *Performative-Narrative Piece*, when he relates it to a photograph. This work, *Performative-Narrative Piece* has, moreover, been conceived by Burgin as a very demonstrative piece, relating in detail the activity of all his textual pieces in general.

Performative-Narrative Piece is made up of three sections: the narrative section, a text containing a certain amount of elements, mentioned but not qualified, both objects and events; the visual section, photographs in which it is possible to recognize elements from the narrative section (one relates the word 'desk' to the image of a desk); and last, the section Burgin calls "performative" which enables to establish a correspondence between the two preceding sections, in the same form as all the other pieces known to us:

« 1. Your knowledge of the preceding narrative

« 2. Your knowledge of the preceding photograph

« 3. The criteria by which you might decide that aspects of 1 are analogous to, correlate with, or may be placed in some common context with aspects of 2

« 3. Your inferences from 1 and 2 on the basis of 3. »

The narrative section acquires a meaning only when it is confronted with the photographs and this under the impulse given to the reader by the artist in the performative section which calls for a comparison between the other two sections.

It is therefore necessary to consider the notion of performative utterance which Burgin has borrowed from the English philosopher J.L. Austin. Austin writes: « The constative utterance, under the name, so dear to philosophers, of *statement*, has the property of being true or false. The performative utterance, by contrast, can never be either: it has its own special job, it is used to perform an action. To issue such an utterance is to perform the action, action which might not be accomplished, at least as precisely, in any other way ». Burgin explains the mechanism of his work, as follows:

« There is a degree of correspondence between the verbal signs and the visual signs (e.g. between the word 'desk' and the image of a desk), the performative section of the text calls for a comparison between the two parallel systems of signs. In making the acts of attention called for by the performative section the spectator is now dealing with particulars in the real world of which he has direct cognisance. The literary text is made the object of a performative act ».

Thus, Burgin's work, as opposed to the traditional art-work, acquires a significance verified by the real world since the performative utterance which specifies it is reality itself. It cannot claim to be "true" as compared to its model (the traditional lie), insofar as the true/false alternative does not exist in the case of the performative utterance and, above all, as this model-representation relation dissolves when the text is no longer an estrangement from reality. Burgin's practice, which makes use of the performative text to acquire a meaning, while still abiding by the traditional data characterizing the art-work (representative function, appearance of a message) succeeds in evading the aesthetic distortion, the idealism of the function of transcendence.

Transl. Daniella Dangoor

¹ In Victor Burgin, *Situational Aesthetics*, Studio International - October 1969.

² Text by Victor Burgin from *Publication* by David Lamelas, Nigel Greenwood ed.

³ *Narrative Piece* (b), 1970.

⁴ This notion is a constant in Burgin's work. A 1969 piece consists in covering a section of floor with a photograph printed to actual size of said section. The question is to perform a shift from the particular object (floor) to the general object (its representation). Burgin draws, from this shift, a dualism. Here, the representation which usually enjoys that level of generality only because it is deprived of the real object's real context, is restored to this context.

⁵ These propositions, like Joseph Kosuth's problems of logic (6th investigation, proposition 3), cannot fail to recall Lewis Carroll.

⁶ *Narrative Piece* (18 propositions), 1970.

⁷ In J. L. Austin, *Performatif-Constatif*, *La Philosophie Analytique*, éd. de Minuit. Austin provides, as examples of performative utterances, expressions such as 'I promise that...', 'I am sorry', 'Hello!', etc.