

A SYSTEM IMPRINTED WITH PHANTASIES

[THE SYSTEM] IS A NIGHTMARE FROM
WHICH I'M TRYING TO AWAKE.

Robert Smithson¹

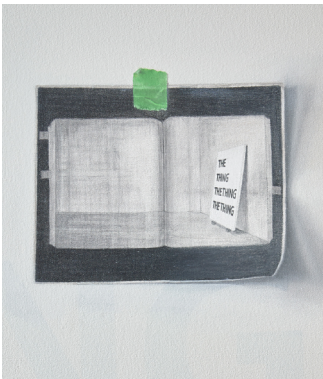
MY HARD DRIVE IS A DREAM THAT I'M
ATTEMPTING TO INTERPRET.

Anthony Burnham²

The notion of “system,” omnipresent throughout the 1960s and 1970s, forged the conceptualist imagination to such an extent that to some artists from this generation, it became a (bad) dream from which it was almost impossible to escape. As art historian Eve Meltzer asserts in her book *Systems We Have Loved* (2013), this systematized view of the world, immersed in structuralism and its critique of the humanist subject, was paradoxically subject to the phantasmatic and aesthetic strategies of conceptual art. The use of structures (grids, diagrams, schemas, and so on), the adoption or invention of various systems, the importance accorded to language, and the (pseudo-)scientific approach of the visual field made evident that which Meltzer calls “the dream of the information world”: the phantasy of a world reduced to a pure sign system, stripped of all subjectivity and affect.³

While current art practices may take up conceptual methods and codes, thereby retaining a trace of this fiction associated with contemporary communication technologies, new considerations of how images exist in the digital age now tend to

fig. 1a *Not Yet Titled*, 2010. Oil on canvas, 2 wooden blocks, 72.5 × 60 in. Private collection, Ottawa. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Eli Kerr.
 fig. 1b *Not Yet Titled*, 2010 (detail). Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Eli Kerr.
 fig. 2 *Fragment*, 2009. Oil on linen, 72.5 × 60 in. Private collection, Montreal. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Eli Kerr.



dominate. Exemplary of this is the work of Anthony Burnham. Though still attached to a form of systematicity inherited from conceptualism, he seeks to restage the actual desire to produce images and thus grasp the complexity of how images function in a reality that they have completely *reallocated*, if not *overrun*. Through various operations of mediatization evoking the technological filter of our experience of the real, Burnham explores different modalities of the presence, mutability, and circulation of images in a multitude of networks, as well as our falsely transparent relationship with images. The visual investigation that the artist has been pursuing for over twenty years generates its own “system of transformations,”⁴ a system whose internal structure—aleatory, recursive, and circular rather than linear—echoes the digital environment in which images become integrated, combine, and circulate today. By modeling its system of representation on the media reality of the twenty-first century, Burnham’s painting process simultaneously re-envision and deconstructs the structuralist imaginary described by Meltzer. In response to the nightmare of the totalizing system ironically evoked by Smithson in 1968 is Burnham’s dream of an infinitely expansive and reconfigurable image bank, a dream in which the entangled meaning of his works is being reinvented constantly, according to laws that are partly outside his control.

Images Gaining Autonomy

Straightaway, we can say that Burnham’s painting is perpetually in pursuit of its own subject. Although the means employed by the painter necessarily refer to external elements, their aim is not to represent reality but rather to transform it until all substance, evidence, and precedence has been removed from the images through which this reality exists and is constructed before our eyes. Developed in steps carefully documented through photography, as well as drawing and other related techniques, his paintings take shape based on clever stagings of sculptural objects whose referential status gets lost as a result of the artist’s many interventions: reproduction, displacement, *mise en abyme*, imprinting, gridding, fragmentation, reconstitution, formatting, and so on. The sequence of numerous transformations applied to the initial model, conditioning the gradual disappearance of external referents, thus constitutes the actual subject of Burnham’s work.

Far from adhering to the conception of painting as an “index” of the artist’s subjectivity, as advocated by Isabelle Graw,⁵ his research into the loss of the image’s indexicality brings into play an opacification of representation, which at first pushes back against narrativity.⁶ Particularly illustrative of this are *Photocopy* and *Fragment*, two paintings made in 2009 as part of a project motivated by the artist’s desire, and ultimately the impossibility, to create a work with political

fig. 3 *Photocopy*, 2009. Oil on canvas, 79 × 96 in. Private collection, Montreal. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Eli Kerr.

fig. 4 *Perspective Correction Remade In My Studio*, 2010. Oil on linen, 14 × 11 in. Private collection, Ottawa. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Eli Kerr.



content. Initially materialized in the form of a cardboard sign bearing the inscription “PUNTO DE REVOLUCIÓN,” this desire was filtered and rationalized—“managed” as Meltzer would say—over a long time, eventually resulting in failure. In the end, only two enigmatic grid paintings remain, represented as screens standing in a space: a numbered section of the back of the cardboard sign, rendered unreadable (*Fragment*), and an image of the complete poster, recomposed from photocopies collected in a booklet designed to spread the revolutionary message, yet never distributed (*Photocopy*). Even though the political meaning of the original object has been eliminated and replaced by a reflection on the failure of militant art, the resulting visual documentation allows us to construct another narrative, in which images gain autonomy from reality and acquire their own agency. The erasure or suspension of the referent, also implied in titles such as *Not Yet Titled* (2010) and *To Be Titled When You Please* (2015), moreover suggests that painting is the ideal place for the emancipation of images from any artistic or human intention—in this case, any predefined political aim—as well as for a certain physical reallocation of the real.

Staging the System

Burnham’s interest in systems of representation is amply evident in his paintings from 2010–2011, which reproduce or reconstruct key conceptual artworks through photographic documents, specifically *Blue Sail* (1964–1965) by Hans Haacke and *Perspective Corrections* (1968–1969) by Jan Dibbets. As Marie-Ève Charron writes in regard to these works,⁷ which are also based on multiple mediations, “there is apparently no limit, then, to the sequence of interrelated copies and remakes whose circularity increasingly opacifies the process of representation.”⁸ So just like the mundane objects that the artist first used as models, the historical references to conceptual art have been abandoned in favour of self-referential constructions whose closed-loop function mimes, in a more theatrical manner, the self-regulation of systems, that is their ability to sustain and develop themselves through their very transformations. The prior rejection of narrativity now gives way to a certain dramatic, or even animist, impulse, which reintroduces subjectivity into Burnham’s work.

Still building his models in the studio, as subjects engaged in quasi-autonomous activities, the artist invents an even more sophisticated apparatus to generate new series of images. In the work presented at Galerie René Blouin in 2014 and 2017, a wood sculpture consisting of an assemblage of geometric forms is examined from different angles, deconstructed and flattened, then schematized in a pattern that reconfigures and multiplies the object’s figurative possibilities, which are determined according to various positions on a grid. Using

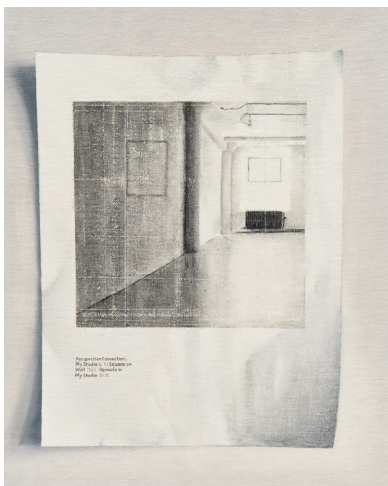
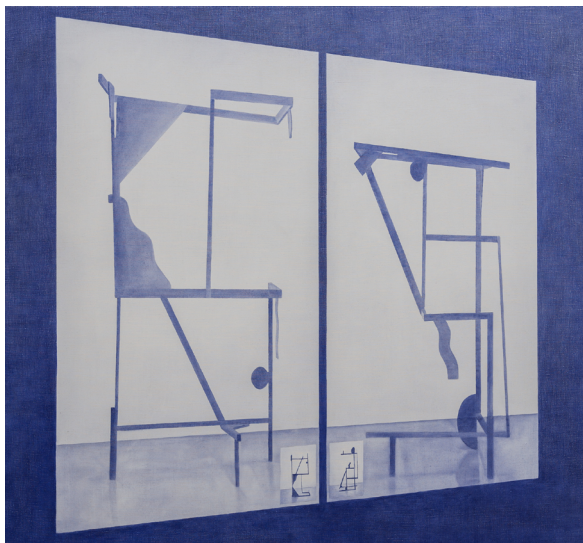


fig. 5 *Revolving Multiple Orientations*, 2014. Oil on linen, 67 × 72 in. Artist's collection. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Eli Kerr.

fig. 6 *Position 014 Full Repeatable View Bottom-Lit/Made-Up*, 2017. Diptych, acrylic on canvas and oil on canvas, 83 × 65.5 in (each). Musée d'art de Joliette. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Eli Kerr.



a classical perspective approach, works such as *Animation* (2014), *Performing Multiple Orientations* (2014), *Display* (2017), and *Witness* (2017) offer different points of view of the structure, set up or suspended in deliberately anthropomorphic positions, which give it a strong theatrical presence in the pictorial space. Emphasized by the human scale of the work, this effect of presence moreover contributes to activating the exhibition space, a veritable stage⁹ on which the images interact with each other according to the artist's spatializing strategies, such as using maquettes that are then also staged in the image.

In a complementary way, the ingenious technique of making imprints to create other series of paintings derived from the schematization of a model underscores the materiality of the painted image, which, despite its apparent illusionism, evokes the presence of the concrete object without resorting to trompe l'oeil. According to Georges Didi-Huberman, "the imprint physically—not just optically—transmits the resemblance to the 'imprinted' thing or being,"¹⁰ operating outside the figurative paradigm of imitation, which is based on an artist's technical virtuosity. To this end, Burnham uses a handcrafted suction and airbrush machine to trace segments of his sculpture, disassembled and rearranged on a flat surface covered with a canvas, which, when suctioned, takes on the relief of the sculpture. Although this technique mobilizes a complex apparatus and a specific sequence of artistic gestures, it proceeds through direct contact with the represented thing, creating the illusion of "self-generated"¹¹ images: a process whose phantasmal charge is heightened by the theatricality of the compositions, in which the sculpture seems to move or strike a pose, float freely on the canvas, put on a strange performance, or even dislocate itself.

Along similar lines, the more atypical works from 2017, such as *Powderize* and *Figure Seized in a Template*, condense different plastic approaches and forms into composite units, as though the mechanism developed by the painter has malfunctioned and the figure, filled with impulsive energy, seeks to break free of the rigid apparatus enclosing it.¹² The dramatization and animation of Burnham's aesthetic system, pushed to its limits, shatter the logic that, so far, has contained its subjects, thereby revealing the key role of phantasy in his processual universe.

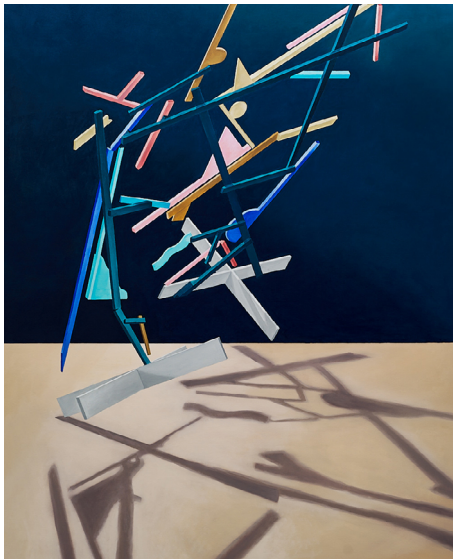


Phantasmal Scenes

In its psychoanalytical sense, phantasy refers to an "imaginary scene in which the subject is a protagonist, representing the fulfillment of a wish (in the last analysis, an unconscious wish) in a manner that is distorted to a greater or lesser extent by defensive processes."¹³ As we have seen, in Burnham's work, such phantasmatic "scenes" or "stages" structure the paintings as much as they do their staging in an exhibition. The specific operating rules that he applies to his work assume a defensive

fig. 7 *Witness*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 83 × 65.5 in. Private collection, Toronto. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Eli Kerr.

fig. 8 *Hiding in Plain Sight 1*, 2021. Acrylic on canvas, 21 × 25 in. Artist's collection. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Eli Kerr.



function in this regard: in a way, they serve to control the desires driving his process by formally and discursively articulating them in a coherent manner. As a result, it is primarily through the documentation of his process, which is largely erased from the finished images shown to the public, that we can actually understand the phantasmatic content and stakes in his work—in particular, the manner in which the artist dramatizes his own presence in the work, as well as that of the images, instruments, and other components of his system.

By gradually removing resistances, Burnham no longer seeks simply to document his interventions for illustrative or archival purposes, or even to question the (indexical or artistic) status of the document in the wake of conceptual art. In recent years, he has increasingly striven to stage and even script everything that happens outside his paintings: the actions taken to make them as well as those they generate, in an endless loop. Some of these photographic documents—discarded processual images—seem to be the uncensored expression of artistic phantasies—as is the case for a series of photographs in which the artist, adopting the postures and attributes of his sculpture, penetrates inside his suction machine, thus exploring the interstice between apparatus and image. Others are somewhat accidental series, in which the repetition and sequence of gestures inspire different possible scenes.

Such is the case, for example, of many images documenting the positioning of the paintings and sculptures—considered to be “characters” in a decor usually consisting of the canvas, technical equipment, and other works that function as props—particularly those associated with diagrams and exhibition views whose “photogenuity”¹⁴ is expertly harnessed. Sometimes, the artist’s body, garbed in various costumes, breaks into the image of which he is the author, which has the effect of multiplying, blurring, and even reversing the roles and the succession of actions captured from one scene to the next. The relationship created between these heterogeneous images, which are akin to a storyboard, moodboard, or lookbook, clearly brings out a structure of mimicry: less and less in control of the representation, Burnham immerses himself in the postures of his works, following an inverse and entirely novel conception of artistic appropriation. This storyboarding not only allows him to revisit his system and redeploy the processual imaginary, but also allows us to reflect on the largely unconscious experience we have of images today.

This is the ultimate phantasy (or the new reality?) that has emerged with the Internet and that Burnham seeks to translate into his art practice: to no longer stand *in front* of images but rather *inside* them, subject to their wild, circular logic and the constant redefinition of their use. Rather than seeking to extricate ourselves from this visual and phantasmal economy—this 2.0 dream that requires interminable analysis—we can explore it from within in order to better understand its mechanisms and flaws, as well as the more or less automatic affects and behaviours that it produces in us as contemporary subjects.

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This essay is published to accompany Anthony Burnham's personal exhibition, *Exposition pour marionnette en 3 actes*, curated by Ji-Yoon Han at Galerie Eli Kerr, Tiohtià:ke/Montréal, from April 25 to June 8, 2024.

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1 Robert Smithson, "The Establishment," in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (1968), cited in Eve Meltzer, *Systems We Have Loved: Conceptual Art, Affect, and the Antihumanist Turn* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 66.

2 Anthony Burnham, email to author, June 28, 2021.

3 Meltzer, *Systems We Have Loved*, 7–9, 65.

4 I am referring here to the definition of "structure" formulated by Jean Piaget: "A structure is a system of transformations. Inasmuch as it is a system and not a mere collection of elements and their properties, these transformations involve laws: the structure is preserved or enriched by the interplay of its transformation laws, which never yield results external to the system nor employ elements that are external to it. In short, the notion of structure is comprised of three key ideas: the idea of wholeness, the idea of transformation, and the idea of self-regulation." Jean Piaget, *Structuralism*, trans. Chaninah Maschler (New York: Basic Books, 1970), 5.

5 See Isabelle Graw, "The Value of Painting: Notes on Unspecificity, Indexicality, and Highly Valuable Quasi-Persons," in *Thinking through Painting: Reflexivity and Agency beyond the Canvas*, eds. Daniel Birnbaum, Isabelle Graw, and Nikolaus Hirsch (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 45–57; Isabelle Graw, "The Value of Liveliness: Painting as an Index of Agency in the New Economy," in *Painting Beyond Itself: The Medium in the Post-medium Condition*, eds. Isabelle Graw and Ewa Lajer-Burcharth (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 79–101; and Isabelle Graw, *The Love of Painting: Genealogy of a Success Medium* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2018).

6 Diana Nemiroff addresses the question of narrativity in Burnham's work in the exhibition catalogue of *Even Space Does Not Repeat*, presented at the Carleton University Art Gallery and the Walter Phillips Gallery in 2011. Diana Nemiroff, "Is Painting a Good Idea?" in *Anthony*

Burnham: Even Space Does Not Repeat, eds. Diana Nemiroff and Naomi Potter (Carleton and Banff: Carleton University Art Gallery and Walter Phillips Gallery, 2011), 6–12.

7 This body of work includes the following paintings: *Blue Sail* (2010), *Perspective Correction Remade in My Studio* (2010), *Perspective Correction Hinged, Corrected by the Lens Sigma DC 17-70 mm 1:2, 8-4.5* (2010), and *Exhibition View, Walter Phillips Gallery, "Perspective Correction Hinged, Corrected by the Lens Sigma DC 17-70 mm 1:2, 8-4.5"*, and *"Even Space Does Not Repeat"* (2011).

8 Marie-Ève Charron, "Painting as Re-enactment," *Anthony Burnham: Even Space Does Not Repeat*, 22.

9 The idea of the exhibition as a stage is evoked in the presentation text, written by Ji-Yoon Han, for the exhibition at Galerie René Blouin in 2017.

10 Georges Didi-Huberman, *La ressemblance par contact: archéologie, anachronisme et modernité de l'empreinte* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2008), 53 (our translation).

11 Didi-Huberman, *La ressemblance*, 155 (our translation).

12 This production recalls the mechanism of condensation, which psychoanalysis associates with the "work of dreams" and more broadly with the functioning of unconscious processes. In Freudian theory, condensation refers to the process by which the same representation assembles "several associative chains" and "is cathected by the sum of those energies which are concentrated upon it by virtue of the fact that they are attached to these different chains." J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1973), 82.

13 Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, 314.

14 The term comes from Rémi Parcollet, *Photogénie de l'exposition* (Paris: Manuella Éditions, 2018, our translation).