24

Artistic representation and politics

An exchange between Victor Burgin and Hilde Van Gelder

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Introduction, Hilde Van Gelder

In his highly influential book *Thinking Photography*, Victor Burgin famously warns artists not to succumb to the romantic myth of inspiration and originality (1982: 81). He argues that, as all artistic 'creation' necessarily depends on pre-established codes and norms, naïve intuition is an insufficient basis for the creative process. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's essay "The Author as Producer," which he places at the beginning of the book, he insists that artistic representations should always include a reflective stance with regard to their own conditions of production. In retrospect this can be seen as one of the most consistent basic premises of his work. The original publication of our exchange (2011) elaborated on that premise toward a closing focus on a 'political' debate raging in visual art creation: artistic research.[1] Both Victor Burgin's oeuvre and his long academic career stand out as a pioneering, leading example within this domain. We concluded that visual art production is embedded in a historically grown, mature research praxis determined by specific paradigmatic conditions. This resulted in a joint plea for granting artistic research an independent place within the Art Academy. Seven years later, the greater urgency of the debate on 'artistic representation and politics' no longer is to be found in the internal politics of visual art. Sadly, the country where Victor Burgin presently lives, France, finds itself in a state of emergency that has been extended five times by the parliament since November 2015. Amnesty International reports that French emergency measures have 'disproportionately' restricted human rights in the country.[2] Even more unsettling is the 'wide range of new laws and policies' in my home country (Belgium) in the aftermath of the 'Brussels Attacks' (March 2016), as these have been implemented without the prior proclamation of a state of emergency.[3] On top of it all, the UK, Victor Burgin's native country, has unilaterally declared it will sail its own course. This rather unexpected sequence of events in the old heart of liberal democratic Europe has urged us to shift the focus of debate in the final part of our exchange towards an in-depth analysis of the politically allegorical projection work that is Victor Burgin's *Occasio* (2014).[4]

Exchange between Victor Burgin and Hilde Van Gelder (HVG)

HILDE VAN GELDER (HVG): You figure prominently among a pioneering group of artists that, as of the late 1960s, rejected American modernist aesthetic ideals. In your comments on the writings of Clement Greenberg and John Szarkowski, you dismantled their critical position as formalist and their theory as detached from reality. What you seem to have disliked most in Modernist discourse was the belief its adherents seemed to express in "the ineffable purity of the visual image"—a conviction that you trace back to a Platonic tradition of thought in which images have the capacity to reveal mystic truths enshrined in things "in a flash, without the need for words and arguments" (Burgin 1982: 214). I wonder if you can say today, some 30 years later, how exactly you feel that words in your work have come to counteract such illusions of pure visibility of the image?

VICTOR BURGIN (VB): I do not believe, or rather *no longer* believe, that my work can 'counteract' such illusions. Although I realise that your question refers to my photo-text work, I can perhaps more directly answer it by reference to my written work. At the time of *Thinking Photography*, I thought that a more broadly informed photographic criticism would eventually dispel the unexamined assumptions that then dominated writing and talking about photography. The notion of the 'purely visual' was prominent amongst these, as was the naïve realist idea that photography is a transparent 'window on the world'. The former belief dominated 'fine art' photography at that time, while the latter provided the ideological underpinning of 'social documentary'. When I first started to teach film and photography students, after having first taught in an art school, the 'art' and 'documentary' approaches were mutually antagonistic—ironical, given the fact that their founding assumptions are different formulations of the same Platonic idea. The Film and Photography department where I went to teach in 1973 was at the time one of only two schools in Britain openly dedicated to a documentary project and hostile to 'fine art' photography. The BA theory course I was asked to construct there, of which *Thinking Photography* is a trace, did for a while succeed in putting critical discussion—the "reflective stance" you refer to—in place of the acting out of inherited ideologies. But that period is now, as a friend of mine put it, a 'parenthesis in history'. There has since been a massive return of 'previous' frames of mind that had never in fact gone away, even among some of those who participated in the initial project—as if the mere fact of having acknowledged the validity of the arguments advanced in the 1970s and 80s now provides exemption from acting in response to them. In retrospect I can see—which should not surprise me, given my theoretical inclinations—that reason rarely prevails where there are professional and emotional benefits to be derived from irrationality. We are again confronted, as so often, with the psychological structure of disavowal: 'I know very well, but nevertheless …'.

HVG: You conclude your essay "Modernism in the Work of Art" by stating that the "division of labour" between 'theorists' and 'practitioners' is problematical ([1976] 2008: 120). In 1986, you add to this that the main problem of this divide is that it hinders peoples' attempts "for a truly critical cultural initiative" (1986: viii). The label 'critical', or stronger even, 'political' art, has often been attached to, particularly, your earlier practice. It seems, however, that, with regard to your work, this notion needs some clarification. It seems doubtful that you would agree with your art being identified as 'critical realist', a term Benjamin H.D. Buchloh coined in 1995 (196 n. 10) in order to describe Allan Sekula's photography.

VB: I have heard references to the time when my work "used to be political." My work has never ceased to be political, what has changed is my understanding of the form of politics specific to *art*, rather than, for example, investigative journalism or agit-prop. Benjamin

Buchloh's expression seems to me a symptom of the disavowal I just cited, not least because the issue of *representation* has simply dropped out of the picture. Beyond the attempt to rebrand what used to be called 'social documentary' it is difficult to see what work the expression 'critical realist' is intended to do. Either of the two terms Buchloh associates requires careful specification. To simply conjoin them as if their meanings were self-evident is inevitably to fall into complicity with the doxa—in terms of which to be critical is to *criticise*. Here the 'critic' assigns the 'artist' a position analogous to the one he himself assumes—that of a literally *exceptional* person who surveys, discriminates and judges. Where such a position is assigned, we do well to ask if there are not blind spots in the critical view. In the early to mid-1970s, when my work had an unambiguously obvious political content, there was very little such work in the art world. Forty years later, 'political art' is the new orthodoxy, but it is 'political' only in the way the media understand the term. For example, the enthusiasm for 'documentary' in the art world of the past quarter-century has provided a spectrum of gallery-sited narratives—from intimately anecdotal 'human interest' stories to exposés of the devastation of the human and natural environment by rapacious global capitalism. But there is nothing in the content or analysis of these stories that is not already familiar from the mass media, and I have seen only insignificant departures from conventional media forms. Such 'artworks' solicit the same range of interests and the same reading competences that the media assumes in its audiences. Complementing 'documentary' work in the art world are other kinds of work offering spectacle, decoration or scandal. Here again we have not left the discursive space of the media, we have simply turned the page or changed channels. Brecht defined 'criticism' as that which is concerned with what is *critical* in society. My own sense of what is now fundamentally critical to the Western societies in which I live and work is the progressive colonisation of the terrain of languages, beliefs and values by mainstream media contents and forms—imposing an industrial uniformity upon what may be imagined and said, and engendering compliant synchronised subjects of a 'democratic' political process in which the vote changes nothing. The art world is no exception to this process. Artists making 'documentaries' usually encounter their subject matter not at first hand but from the media. The audience for the subsequent artworks will instantly recognise the issues addressed, and easily understand them in terms already established by the media. What is 'documented' in such works therefore is not their ostensible contents but rather the mutating world-view of the media, and they remain irrelevant *as art* if they succeed in doing no more than recycle facts, forms and opinions already familiar from these prior sources. I would emphasise that I am talking about documentary *in the art world*. In 2010, the Iranian film maker Jafar Panahi was imprisoned—primarily, it seems, because he was making a documentary about the mass protests that followed the dubious 2009 elections in Iran. The political value of documentary is conjunctural: context is as important as content. The political value of art primarily bears on neither content nor context but upon *language*. I see no point to 'art' that calls upon the same general knowledge and interpretative capabilities I deploy when I read a newspaper.

HVG: What about the other word in Buchloh's expression, 'realism'? Arguably, your work *Zoo* (1978–79), consisting of eight photo diptychs that quite explicitly address the Cold War situation in Berlin, can be seen as a turning/closing point in your view of realism. I say 'arguably' because in 1987, in an essay entitled "Geometry and Abjection," you launch a plea for a 'realist' artistic project. However, you now define this project in terms of "psychical realism," an expression you take from Sigmund Freud (Burgin 1987: 56).[5] The term already takes a central position in your essay "Diderot, Barthes, Vertigo," where you argue that "*psychical-reality*," "unconscious fantasy structures," constantly exercises "its effects

upon perceptions and actions of the subject," such that the world can never be known "as, simply what it *is*" (1986a: 105). To what extent do you still rhyme this notion of psychical realism with your earlier emphasis on art's function as cultural critique? In other words, can you articulate the kind of sociocultural reflection you wish to put forward through your work ever since the concept of psychical realism has become one of its principal motors?

VB: The British philosopher Gilbert Ryle long ago commented on the habitual distinction in which 'reality' is seen as something separate from our 'inner' lives. In terms of this distinction we simultaneously inhabit two parallel worlds—one private and psychological, the other public and material. In this view the expression 'psychical reality' would be an oxymoron. Ryle noted, however, that in this version of our experience of the world there is no way of accounting for the *transactions* that take place between public and private histories, as by definition such transactions belong to neither of the 'two' worlds. There is therefore no account of how individual subjects become inserted into general political processes—except in terms of such now largely redundant categories as 'class consciousness'. What Ryle did not note, but might well have done, is that the distinction between private and public is hierarchical—as when 'subjective fantasy' is subsumed to 'objective reality'. With the idea of 'psychical reality' Freud in effect 'deconstructs' this hierarchy. Anticipating Derrida's critique of the 'logic of the supplement' Freud shows how the 'supplemental' category, that which is considered as superfluous and undesirable, is at the very heart of the category that is upheld as primary and essential. I see no contradiction between a commitment to art as cultural critique and a taking into account of psychical reality. The British cultural and political theorist Stuart Hall said that his attempts to understand the mass appeal of Thatcherism had led him to conclude that the logic of the appeal was not that of a philosophical argument but rather the logic of a dream. To take a more recent example, Michael Moore's film *Sicko*—a damning account of the US health care system and the pharmaceutical and insurance industries that benefit from it—was released in 2007 to enormous acclaim, quickly becoming the third largest grossing documentary film of the past thirty years. Barack Obama was elected US president the following year, and afterwards encountered overwhelming opposition to his proposed health care reforms from the very people who had most to gain from them. As the American expression succinctly puts it: 'Go figure'. If nothing else, this recent history might have prompted a little self-reflection on the part of 'political artists' who see their work as 'consciousness raising'. Not only is there something inevitably patronising in the attitude of artists setting out to raise other consciousnesses to the level of their own, but also the exercise is generally futile—either the mass of the people 'know very well, but nevertheless …', or their consciousnesses are the unique and unassailable product of the populist-tabloid Fox News Channel.

HVG: In your work in the 1970s you often drew directly on codes and conventions of the media, especially advertising, to make ironic comment on various kinds of exploitation and inequality, such as in *UK76*, where in one of the panels you insert an excerpt from a fashion magazine into a photograph of a female Asian factory worker. You now say you conceive differently of "the place of the political in art" (Burgin 2008a: 80). In this regard you cite Jacques Rancière, who says that "aesthetics has its own meta-politics" (Rancière 2004: 60), as a privileged ally in your own attempts to understand how art relates to politics and ideology (Burgin 2008a: 43). You conclude by insisting that "the political meaning of attempts … to give aesthetic form to a phenomenological truth or a psychical reality … may lie precisely in the ways in which they *fail* to conform … to established regimes of intelligibility" (2008a: 85; original emphasis). Could you elaborate on this?

VB: Art, at least in our Western populist liberal democracies, has no direct political agency. When I joined the protest march against the Iraq war in London, when I joined demonstrations against the National Front in Paris, I acted as a citizen, not as an artist. (By the way, it does seem that the days when street protest could have a real political effect have now passed into history.) When I refused to cooperate with 'obligatory' but intellectually ridiculous government research assessment exercises, when I refused to join a 'compulsory' training day for academic staff run by a private management training consultancy, I acted as a university teacher, not an artist. The work of 'political artists' usually harms no-one, and I would defend their right to make it; what I cannot support is their self-serving assumption that it 'somehow' has a political effect in the real world. In a university art department, I would prefer as my colleague the artist who makes watercolours of sunsets but stands up to the administration, to the colleague who makes radical political noises in the gallery but colludes in imposing educationally disastrous government policies on the department. The political agency of artists is not 'on the ground' in everyday life—at this level they must be content to act as citizens and/or, in my example, teachers (I have always considered teaching to be my most important political activity)—their agency is in the sphere of representations. Since the work to which you refer, and up to the present day, I have measured the political and critical dimensions of my work by their relation to the mainstream mass media—as the media is most responsible for the production of subjects for the political process, most instrumental in delivering votes to politicians. You are nevertheless right to note that my position in relation to the media has shifted. My initial position combined Lévi-Strauss's notion of bricolage with Barthes's idea of 'semioclasm'. For example, the panel we have already mentioned from *UK76* juxtaposes fragments from two disparate and 'antagonistic' discursive formations—social documentary photography and fashion journalism—in order to bring out a social contradiction. The problem I see with this now is that it leaves the fragments intact, and what one is able to construct—to 'say'—depends entirely on what it is possible to do with the fragments. No great surprise therefore that what I was able to say with this particular panel of *UK76* was already well known, and that the only 'value-added' element to the source materials was my own irony (albeit there was also a cultural-political significance *at that time*—it was relatively short-lived—in putting such content on the wall of a gallery). As I have already said, I see the critical task of art today as that of offering an alternative to the media. I am opposed to any form of conformity to the contents and codes of the doxa—what Rancière calls 'consensual categories and descriptions'—even when these are deployed with a 'left' agenda, as I believe that, in this particular case, 'one cannot dismantle the master's house with the master's tools'. At the present conjuncture it seems to me that society is most present in an artwork—as a critical project—when the artwork is most absent from society.

HVG: If we can turn then to a more recent work: *Hôtel D* (2009) is a site-specific piece consisting of a digital projection loop inside a box installed in a principal room of the ancient former pilgrims' hospital Hôtel-Dieu Saint-Jacques, in Toulouse, once known as the 'Salle des portraits des bienfaiteurs' (Burgin 2016: 100). Could one understand this 'sequence of images' as a '*sequence-image*', a term you have defined earlier in your writings (Burgin 2004: 27), and more recently in conversation with Alexander Streitberger, where you call it "both the elemental unit from which chains of signifiers are formed and the hinge between movement and stasis, the motionless point of turning between unconscious fantasy and the real" (Streitberger 2009: 268)?

VB: The short answer to that question is 'No', as the 'sequence-image' is a purely theoretical entity. I coined the expression to allow me to talk about an image that is neither still nor

moving or, to put it the other way, is *both* still and moving. The fact that such an image is by definition impossible signals its location in psychical space, on the side of the unconscious, where the 'law of excluded middle' does not apply (as when a woman in a dream is both the dreamer's mother *and* sister). I coined the neologism reluctantly but there was no other way of speaking about what for me is an important aspect of the 'psychical reality' I try to represent. The material images projected in the Hôtel-Dieu and the material sound of the '*voix off*' in the adjoining chapel were combined in an attempt to represent the strictly unrepresentable (Burgin 2016: 101). Each new work renews this attempt, making its singular contribution to the generality at which I aim. I think by analogy of an old movie version of H. G. Wells', *The Invisible Man*, where a number of devices are used to signify the invisible man's form—for example, in one scene, some trash whirls into the air on a windy street and sticks to him; in another scene, disembodied footprints advance across a snow-covered field. We would not say that either the trash or the tracks are the invisible man, but they are the more or less contingent conditions of his 'appearance' in the visible world. *Hôtel D*, in common with all of my works in recent years, is an attempt to represent some unrepresentable 'thing'—in this case deriving from my being *there*, in the *Hôtel-Dieu* in Toulouse, and being aware of the lives and deaths of those who were there before me, aware of the past function of the building, and at the same time aware of the forms of the architecture, of the time it takes to cross the room—*everything*, in fact, *at the same time*, including the connotations and fantasies that accompanied my perceptual experience and knowledge of the place.

HVG: *Hôtel D* offers itself as a key case study in order to understand your interest in "perceptual reality," as you name it in your "Note" accompanying the piece (2016: 100). The research component of this interest brings in the 'historical identity' of the place as a space of labour for the *filles de service*—female hospital orderlies. The sequence of images and the spoken text testify to a paradox encountered in your own initial observation of the reality of this room. Among the five large-size portraits of illustrious historical benefactors of this establishment you found an equally monumental picture of a woman identified only as *fille de service*. The image of this woman, named at the bottom of the portrait itself as Marguerite Bonnelasvals (†1785), is exhibited together with the other portraits, which are all of people of a higher social rank. Facing Marguerite Bonnelasvals, as you point out, hangs a tableau of Princess Marie-Thérèse de Bourbon, daughter of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette. This striking finding, a result of your scrupulous perception and observation of the place, is a key theme in *Hôtel D*. Can you perhaps clarify how, from a strictly methodological point of view, you decided to focus your work on this quite incredible coincidence?

VB: In the perceptual and associative complex that is my experience of a place there is often a privileged point around which everything else turns. It might be a detail, an anecdote or something else. The juxtaposition of the two portraits in the Hôtel-Dieu became this point of anchorage for everything that made up my awareness of the place. One of the things that interests me is the way 'the political' may be manifest as a mutable aspect of our everyday reality, on the same perceptual basis as the changing light, an aching knee or a regret. The coincidence of the portraits is a trace of the political in the overlooked, and therefore part of what I look for in the everyday. There is no need for the Western political artist, too often a disaster tourist, to 'sail the seven seas' looking for injustices to denounce. Inequality and exploitation saturate the ground on which we stand, they are in the grain of everyday life. This granular-perceptual manifestation of the political is part of what I try to represent in my works.

HVG: I have come to understand *Hôtel D* as a work that brings together all the major themes and preoccupations of your oeuvre. With the concept of psychical realism entering your work, your interest in the representation of women entered the foreground. Many of your pieces, as of the early 1980s, take account of the impact of male desire on female perception and vice versa, and the issue of sexuality and sexual difference in general. You have emphasised the influence that 1970s feminism exercised on your artistic trajectory, for example in the attention in your work to "the construction of gendered identities through identifications with images" (2008a: 50). Now, in *Hôtel D*, the long-lasting key importance you have accorded to this very subject appears to engage in a dialogue with an interest you have had, in an even earlier phase of your work, with regard to the representation of labour. Many contemporary artists have taken on the problematic consequences of currently globalised labour conditions by directly representing people at work. Whereas the atmosphere of *UK76* seems to have something in common with such an approach, you have later come to take the representation of labour in your work in a different direction.

VB: I do not understand how 'directly representing people at work' can be said to 'take on' the issue of the globalisation of the labour force—at most it can only redundantly *illustrate* it. Amongst other things, the issue is fundamentally one of organising collective action across cultural, linguistic and legal international borders. How can adding more pictures to the mountain of images of the labouring classes have any relevance to such questions, let alone any purchase on them? And what about the act of picture-taking itself? As your reference to *UK76* invokes the historical perspective, I would like to quote what I said in an interview from the late 1970s when I was asked how I felt about the power relation between myself and the Asian woman worker whose image appears in this work:

> I'd been commissioned to take photographs by the Coventry workshop, they were working with various other local workers' organisations and they wanted someone to take some pictures in some of the factories around Coventry. It was in that capacity that I took that particular picture: it was not shot as a work of art but as something for their publications and their files. […] No one was photographed who didn't want to be. Some obviously didn't feel comfortable with the camera on them, so I didn't take photographs of them, but others obviously enjoyed being the centre of attention. I was a source of entertainment for them for the afternoon. Having said all that, the fact remains that I was free to walk out of that place and they weren't—a fundamental distinction. The work I was doing was intended to support them, the same goes for the art piece that some of the images were subsequently used in, but the fact remains that my intervention there, if not actually exploitative, was politically irrelevant; that's how I feel about it now, and that's how I feel about the work of other 'artists' who take their cameras into such situations.
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> *(Burgin 1986b: 39)*[6]

VB: Under what circumstances is it acceptable for a middle-class photographer to point a camera at a wage-slave? A campaigning journalist, illustrating a news story that might mobilise public opinion and embarrass corporations and politicians into changing their behaviour, is certainly justified, but I find something profoundly distasteful in the spectacle of workers having a last increment of value extracted from them by 'political artists' parading their moral narcissism in pursuit of their careers.

HVG: In your photo-textual work *Office at Night* (1986) the 'psychical' component has already entered the very depiction of labour. The work prominently focuses on male–female power relationships in the work place. Its extremely dense, sexually and power(less)-loaded atmosphere differentiates it from Jeff Wall's more neutral photographic depictions of labour, not least with regard to the so-called "iconography of cleaning up," an issue I would like to come to in a minute (Van Gelder 2007: 76). In *Hôtel D*, the representation of labour is only indirectly present, as this was already the case in your *Performative/Narrative* (1971), a photo-textual piece that shows an empty office of a male employer (as the accompanying text indicates). In *Hôtel D*, it is not so much in the sequence of images itself but instead in the *voix off*—the voice heard in the adjoining chapel—that the humble work of cleaning up is more explicitly addressed. The *voix off* operates 'in parallel' to the images, as Philippe Dubois has argued with regard to other of your works with a similar approach (2007: 77). The sequence of images shows the perfectly neat tiled floors, walls and ceiling of the 'salle des portraits des bienfaiteurs' and a perfectly clean hotel room—although subtle details, such as a playing TV, luggage, gloves on a desk and a bottle of pills besides the bed, reveal it is in use. Yet for a major part of the eight-and-a-half-minutes-long parallel audio sequence a woman's voice slowly describes the repetitive activities of making a bed and cleaning a hotel room. I wonder if this (by definition) 'non-iconographic' soundtrack can be understood as performing a double function in your work. I feel that its descriptive character can be seen as programmatic with regard to your decision, articulated one year after *Office at Night*, in "Geometry and Abjection," that a 'political' art theory should simply 'describe' rather than exhort or admonish, or offer 'solutions' (1987: 56).

VB: Perhaps I should first describe the work, as it is unlikely that anyone reading our exchange will have seen it. *Hôtel D* comprises four components: the two actual spaces in the Hôtel-Dieu, an image-track and a soundtrack. The image sequence assembled from the photographs I made in the Salle des Pèlerins is projected in a continuous loop in a 'viewing box' constructed inside the Salle itself. The room represented in the box is therefore a *mise-en-abyme* of the room that contains the box. The 'work of art' here is in good part a work of the visitor in a coming and going between the experience of the actual rooms and their representations. There is an analogous coming and going between the real and projected images in the Salle des Pèlerins (as you have noted, formerly the 'salle des portraits des bienfaiteurs') and the voice heard in the adjoining space of the chapel. Rather than 'voice-over', the equivalent French expression *voix off* is more appropriate here as the text is heard not over the images, but at a distance from them. *Hôtel D* is the product of a reflection upon the 'perceptual reality' of the Salle des Pèlerins—as I experienced it and as it is refracted through the photographs I made there—and upon the historical identity of the room as a place of care for the sick and dying, a place of work for the *filles de service*. Another axis of my work—prompted by the historical function of the Hôtel-Dieu as a place of rest for the pilgrim—is formed in a coming and going between associations with the meaning of the term *hôtel* in this particular building in Toulouse, and with the more usual meaning of the term in everyday use today. Images of a hotel room in a modern city (in actual fact, in Chicago) therefore come to join my images of the Salle des Pèlerins. Similarly, in the *voix off*, references to the repetitive routine task of bed-making occur in both a hospital and a hotel setting. *Hôtel D* is not 'about' such things in the way that either a documentary or a fiction film might be about them. It is a work best considered not as one might view a film, but rather as one might approach a painting.

HVG: You have in fact said that the spectator should try to view the complex perceptual installation called *Hôtel D* as a painting in which you see "everything and nothing at the same time."[7] Could this statement perhaps help to grasp what you have elsewhere identified as the "*uncinematic* feel" of your video practice (2008a: 90; original emphasis)?[8] Also, in order to better understand this fascinating concept of the dispersed painting or tableau, to be discovered layer by layer in a mode of "*reprise*," as you call it (2008a: 91), would it be helpful to recur to an analogy with the notion Allan Sekula coined for several of his works, namely that they are "disassembled movies" (Buchloh 2003: 25)? Could we say with regard to *Hôtel D* that it is to be considered as a "disassembled tableau"?

VB: In the 1970s I used to speak of my large-scale photo-text works as the remnants of hypothetical films—for example, I described *US77* as "a sort of 'static film' where the individual scenes have collapsed inwards upon themselves so that the narrative connections have become lost" (1986b: 40). However, I also at that time spoke of the viewing conditions of such works as being the "negative of cinema"—for example, in the cinema the spectator is in darkness whereas the gallery is light; the cinematic spectator is still while the images move, whereas the visitor to the gallery moves in front of static images; or again, the sequence and duration of images in the cinema is predetermined, whereas visitors to the gallery determine their own viewing times and sequences. Or again, there is little opportunity for reflection during the course of a film (Barthes says the cinema "does not allow you to close your eyes"), whereas my work in the gallery solicits active reflection on the part of the viewer/reader. To take such differences into account is to pay attention to the *specificity* of the practice—that which distinguishes it from other neighbouring practices. For example, one of my constant technical concerns is with the elaboration of forms of language adapted to the situation of reading or listening in the gallery. In general I aim for texts that condense relatively large amounts of information into small spaces, and that allow readers to bring their own associations to fill out the meanings of the laconic texts. Most of the time this requires little more than an attention to economy of expression. For example, the opening sentence of the voice-over to my work *Dovedale* (2010), first exhibited in Cologne, reads: "The major museums are all close to the station, which is by the cathedral so I cannot get lost" (Burgin 2016: 109). This sentence establishes that the speaker is a stranger to Cologne, there to visit the museums, and it also documents a material fact about the city. So far, I might be writing a short story. However, although I referred to this as the "opening sentence" of my text, it is not necessarily the opening sentence for the visitor to my installation, who is free to come and go at any time during the continuously looping audio-visual material. A specific requirement of the voice-over text, therefore, is that it be written so that any sentence may occupy the position of 'first' sentence. Now, although the words and images that make up my work are necessarily deployed in time, my accommodations to the indeterminacy in their viewing and reading in effect breaks up and spatializes the temporal flow—so your expression "disassembled tableau" may fit my work quite well. There is a further 'disassembling' in the material condition of the work as a number of separate but interrelated 'bits'. In Cologne, my moving projection-sound piece is accompanied by a still photo-text work based on photographs I made in the Peak District in Derbyshire, England, at the place depicted in Joseph Wright's landscape painting *Dovedale by Moonlight* (1785), which is in Cologne's Wallraf-Richartz-Museum. There is a 'scattering' of references to the painting here analogous to that of the scattering of a film in the "cinematic heterotopia" I name and describe in my book *The Remembered Film* (2004). All of this is related to my interest in what I have termed the increasing "exteriorisation" of psychical processes in everyday life—especially

the "prosthetic memory," and perhaps even prosthetic unconscious, that the Internet increasingly represents. It was with such things in mind that I was struck by the remark by the painter Pierre Bonnard, who said that he would like the experience of his pictures to have something in common with the experience of first entering an unfamiliar room—one sees everything at once, and yet nothing in particular. What I want to add to Bonnard's purely optical picture is the fleeting concatenation of impromptu thoughts one may have at that moment—which, of course, may include what I have already referred to as the "granular-perceptual" manifestation of the political.

HVG: In your projection work *Occasio* (2014), you appear to consolidate this very tactic. The work is made of one digitally composed projected image sequence in which a virtual camera takes 14 min 18 s to complete a 360° turn around a 3D computer model of the lift cage winding tower of a mine (see Plates 20 and 21). While observing the slow circular movement of this image, the spectator listens to a female *voix off* who brings in scattered, fragmented references to both an old master oil painting and to a movie.[9]

VB: *Occasio* was made in 2014 for a retrospective exhibition of my work at the Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Siegen. The painting to which the voice-over refers is a large allegorical tableau by Peter Paul Rubens entitled *The Victorious Hero Seizes Opportunity in Order to Conclude Peace*—which is in the collection of the Siegerlandmuseum, a short walk from the contemporary art museum where my retrospective took place.[10] I chose the painting as the point of departure for my projection work.[11] The Siegerlandmuseum is housed in the old 'Upper Castle', which is near the site of the house in which Rubens was born. The house was destroyed in the Allied bombing of Siegen during the Second World War, which razed almost 90 per cent of the old town centre, but the Upper Castle survived. From the ground floor of the museum visitors may descend into a replica of mine workings typical of the local ore-mining industry that flourished in the Siegerland up to the 1960s. During the war, such subterranean galleries sheltered works of art, albeit the Rubens 'Occasio' now hanging in an upper gallery of the museum was not amongst these. My mind was on the mining industry and the wartime assault on Siegen as I stood in front of Rubens's allegorical plea for peace. These three things coalesced into the kernel of the work as it evolved in my mind. Freud spoke of the contribution made to the formation of a dream by the "day's residues"—memory traces of events and thoughts from the day preceding the dream that are opportunistically seized by the 'dream-work' for the expression of unconscious desires. *Occasio* is a waking product of such residues structured in accordance with the looping and repetitive movements characteristic of daydreams. Of all my projection works, *Occasio* most perfectly meets the requirements discussed in my description of the *specificity* of my practice—most notably that any image, any sentence, may serve as a beginning. Most of my works, for all they loop seamlessly, nevertheless have a narrative arc more or less implied within them. *Occasio* escapes the gravitational pull of linear narrative completely.

HVG: The Rubens 'Occasio' represents Minerva, goddess of wisdom, softly urging a Perseus-like Hero armoured with a Medusa-headed shield to seize the forelock of naked Opportunity's long blonde hair. Accompanying Occasio in order to present her to her bridegroom are her father, Time, and her mother, Peace. Contrary to more conventional representations of Perseus, Rubens' 'Occasio' diplomatically suggests that the successful hero should not seek to overpower his bride and that the soon-to-wed couple can benefit much from the helping hand of their entourage. This sheds light on the artist's opinions regarding equilibriums of power, both between the sexes and on the level of politics within society in general (Rosenthal 2005: 167–197). Balanced relationships are to be considered fragile at all times, for violence can flare up again at any opportunity. The Rubens 'Occasio' thus

reads as a warning sign: if the hero misses out on his 'kairotic moment' to unite with Opportunity, her abundant hair will most likely transform into Gorgon's deadly horns—or even coiling snakes. The female *voix off* of your *Occasio* suggestively brings into play such a wide range of reminiscences to the rich iconography of this painting. In doing so, she also introduces listeners to a scene from Claude Chabrol's film *Alice ou la dernière fugue* (1977). Though she inserts minor narrative variations, the *voix off* in the end always returns to the same motif: a naked woman sitting motionless, staring into a mirror, and the camera capturing this scene. The spectator may happen to remember this part of the Chabrol movie, allowing her own daydreams to muse on it. The moment you have selected is the one in which the film's principal character, a beautiful young woman named Alice Carroll (Sylvia Kristel), receives her death sentence from the invisible, devilish male voice of another personage named Henri Vergennes (Charles Vanel)—operating as a *voix off* within the movie. The film scene before this one, which your *voix off* by no means is explicitly alluding to but which the viewer may recall, shows Alice leaving the luxurious old chateau where she—only seemingly it turns out later—found hospitable refuge for the night. Arriving at her car with the intention to continue her journey she finds Time disguised as a snail slowly inching forward on its front window, leaving behind a trace of slime across the window.[12] Unable to recognise Chronos for who he really is, Alice tragically turns out to be not capable of realising that he is about to guide her towards the wall she should have climbed over in order to find her once-upon-a-lifetime opportunity for true liberty. Chabrol painfully stages how Alice, by stopping short at the threshold of the wall, misses her Kairos for finding a peaceful life. Towards the end of the film, when Alice has worked herself through regret and remorse, and when she positively knows her destiny is sealed, comes an unexpected catharsis. Alice encounters Colas, the castle's servant who so generously received her on the first night when she was seeking refuge from stormy summer rains. He quietly informs her she should have trespassed, that "she should have had confidence in herself and have gone to the end of what she had decided." Alice replies firmly, "I can always start again, you know." When Colas triumphantly sibilates, "Good night, Alissss," after having meanly confirmed that for her this option now is forever closed off, she rather unexpectedly hisses back, "Good night Colassss." Alice accepts her imminent death in a fatal car crash, but she feels strong as she knows *she* is the "immemorial image" (*l'image immémoriale*). She is *Ninfa*, the ageless trope, certain that she will continue to return as "the same image," to borrow Giorgio Agamben's terminology (Agamben 2004: 97–110). Alice knows what Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne* atlas has demonstrated in the transition from Table 46 to 47: that the '*Lastenträgerin*' (porter of burdens) is capable of transforming into '*Kopfjägerin*' (head huntress; Warnke and Brink 2008: 84–87). Judith, after all, ends up slaying Holofernes. Alice as well may likely seize a later opportunity to strike back. Colas, closing his eyes at the end of this overpowering film scene, even appears to concede that. When taking the time to observe the projected image of your *Occasio* while engaging in this reflective excursion that builds on the 'screen memories' of *Alice ou la dernière fugue*, one could imagine the following coda to the film: the deceased Alice returns as a dominant, powerful Gorgon who casts a spell on the water castle in which she was obliged to spend the last, damned days of her life, completely flooding all its surroundings. The basic allegorical message the spectator of your *Occasio* may then take home, is that every refusal to engage in sincerely welcoming and providing hospitality to stranded strangers could very well at some point later in time explode back in one's own face.

VB: You have just given a wonderful description of the unwinding of a line of association in your own mind. For me, a work of art is precisely an *occasion* for such work by the viewer. A more

or less spontaneous and unconscious work of association may take place in the contemplative experience of the loop, as it might also take place in contemplation of the Rubens painting. As you have demonstrated, this associative work may then be continued (no longer spontaneously but '*on occasion*'—in response to a conjuncture) in an intellectual process of "secondary-elaboration," to appropriate Freud's expression, *after* the viewing experience.

HVG: Absolutely, and the image projected as a loop in *Occasio*, on which we should definitely elaborate now, suggests such possibility for "secondary elaboration." In fact, Alice's warning to Colas can also be extrapolated to a collective level, to that of contemporary civil society itself. The visitor encounters a flooded pithead amidst a calm ocean. One imagines it to be either sunrise or sunset—a dynamic moment of transition between states of day and night. Because of its peculiar setting, all on its own surrounded by an endless mass of water, the isolated tower may remind of a watch post or a waiting station —such as, for example, the Maunsell Forts built during the Second World War in the Thames and Mersey estuaries to defend UK territory. Will it turn out to be a reliable beacon, a welcoming lighthouse? Or, on the contrary, could the simple act of approaching it already imply that one may get shot? Will it be a refuge or instead become a prison? Entirely inundated, the tower appears far removed from land. Yet one is aware this may change, for it is not unlikely that the waters may eventually recede. From that perspective, *Occasio* reads as a work that both warns about the frailty of balances and pleads for preserving them, nurturing them. In January 2016, Eurotunnel, a limited liability company (SE), announced—shockingly—it was flooding the marshy pieces of land surrounding the Channel Tunnel entrance to prevent people from approaching the barricades closing off the tracks (Gee 2016). The company's spokesperson did not shy away from perversely assessing that the flooded marshland served to use the "natural environment as a layer of protection." As a concerned citizen, one is tempted to ask: 'protection' for—or rather, *against*—what and whom? How is one to come to terms with what, at this very moment in time, is daily business in a region that only a hundred years ago was perfectly capable of providing adequate housing and food for a mass of war refugees? Seen in this light, *Occasio* reads as a silent work of resistance. Stronger even, one may understand *Occasio* as a resolute encouragement to displaced persons seeking refuge away from home: go and meet Kairos, claim your 'right to be reborn', believe in the decision you make and then live it consequently—all the way to the end. Arguably, *Occasio*, as one single moving 'immemorial image' of pure allegory, is one of the most 'political' works that you have made in a very long time. It is so highly abstracted that it becomes terribly, perturbingly tangible and concrete. This is such a striking paradox that I would like to ask you to elaborate on how you came to the decision to make this type of 'political' work of representation? What do you expect *Occasio* to achieve today, where do you feel lies its 'critical' power?

VB: Godard said that for him a film is "*pour en parler après*." Just as the specificity of spectatorship may differ between films, paintings and projection loops, so there may be different specificities of such discursive 'afterwardness' *in practice*—not least in academic practice. The two of us have previously had conversations about the idea of 'art-as-research' as it entered the discourse of art schools and university art departments over recent decades, and which I myself first encountered on my return to the UK in 2001.[13] Just as we are in an evolutionary/revolutionary period in European political history, so we are undergoing a period of radical mutation in the history of relations between text and image—one that is difficult to see clearly, as we are in the middle of it, but one to which the academy must nevertheless respond. As academics and as artists, the specificity of our politics will be formed in the nature and quality of our response. So I would repeat myself and say that the critical

power of an artwork lies in its *language* (rather than in what it overtly 'says') and in the *occasion* it provides for the critical speech of others to emerge—which is why it is important that the artist not simply parade her or his own political convictions, leaving others merely to applaud or deride.

Notes

1 See Burgin and Van Gelder (2010); republished as "Art and Politics: A Reappraisal" in *Eurozine*, available at: www.eurozine.com/art-and-politics-a-reappraisal/</URI> [accessed May 31, 2017]; and, in a slightly shortened version, in Burgin (2011: 207–226).
2 *Amnesty International Report 2016/17. The State of the World's Human Rights*, 160. Available at: www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/4800/2017/en/[accessed May 31, 2017].
3 *Amnesty International Report 2016/17:* 84. Laws voted or new policies implemented during an official state of emergency are lifted when the state of emergency ends. Belgium adopted, among others, a parliament bill broadening police surveillance powers. These counter-terrorist policies are now meant to remain in force for an indefinite period of time. Amnesty deplores that, in this process, "little effort was made to assess the human rights impact of new measures."
4 Sincere thanks to Mark Durden and Jane Tormey for having provided a unique opportunity to reconsider what artistic representation can bring to the dismal political reality of today.
5 Further on the notion of 'psychical realism', see Streitberger (2009), "Questions to Victor Burgin."
6 Interview with Tony Godfrey recorded in 1979, originally published in *Block* 7, 1982.
7 Victor Burgin, "Note on *Hôtel D*," unpublished earlier version, 2009, n.p.
8 See also: Symons and Van Gelder (2017).
9 The full text can be consulted in Schmidt (2014: 14–19) and in Mavridorakis (2016: 141–145).
10 The work was painted ca. 1636, and is attributed to Rubens and his workshop. See: Victor Burgin, 'A note on *Occasio*,' in Schmidt (2014: 3).
11 A reproduction of this work is available online via: https://books.google.be/books?id=tIa0iUVpGbcC&printsec=frontcover&hl=nl&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0—v=onepage&q&f=false[accessed May 31, 2017].
12 On the motif of the snail as an archetypal, apotropaic visual trope for Time (Chronos), see Baert (2016: 86–88).
13 See the previous publications of this interview, referenced in note 1 and Burgin (2009).

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Plate 20 Victor Burgin, from *Occasio* (2014). Video still courtesy the artist

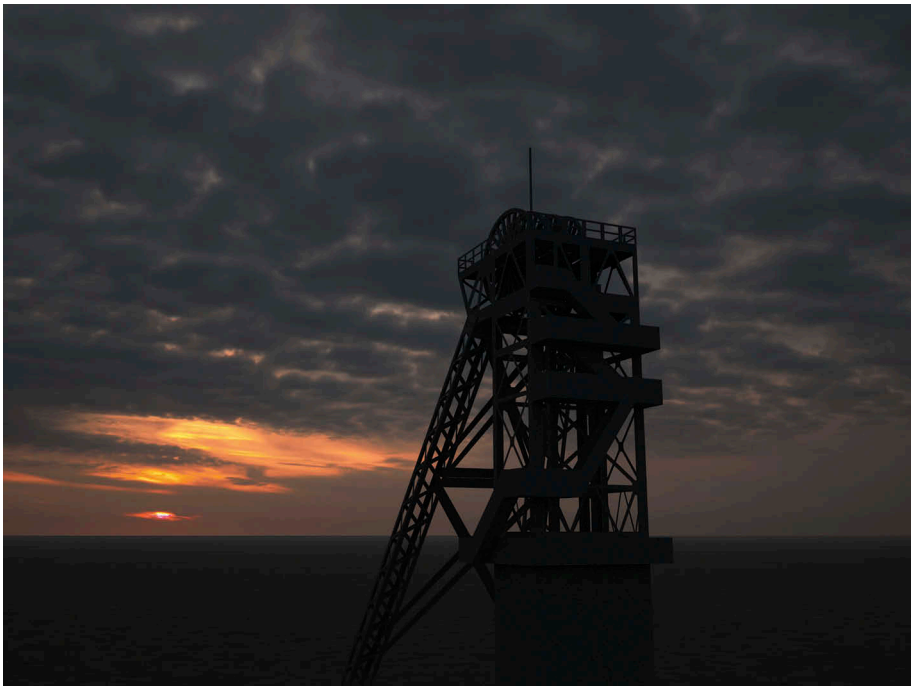

Plate 21 Victor Burgin, from *Occasio* (2014). Video still courtesy the artist