Aziz/Cucher	Fend/Chaikin	Neidich
Baltz	Fleischer	Perkovic/Baltz
Bookchin/Manovich	Gerz	Probst
Brodsky	Hall	Rogala
Burgin	Hershman	Selichar
Burson	Huber/Pocock	Shaw
Colvin	Van Lamsweerde	Trülzsch
Cottingham	Legrady	D'Urbano
Ensdorf	Lord	Van Der Kaap
Export	Müller-Pohle	Wähner

Photography after Photography

Memory and Representation in the Digital Age

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Victor Burgin

Thomas Dreher

Angelus Novus

Pictorial and Textual Signs

Victor Burgin's main form of presentation since 1971 has been series of photo-texts: the texts explicitly exemplifying how photographs may be analyzed semantically. In *VI* (1973) and *Lei Feng* (1974) the English concept artist was preoccupied with the difference and the connection between the semantics specific to texts and to pictorial images. Since his *Portrait of Waldo Lydecker* and *à suivre*, in 1991, Burgin has been reducing textual signs to insertions of just a few words into sequences of digitized and re-worked photographic raw material.

In *Angelus Novus* (1995) Burgin expands a front view of a woman's face into a triptych by adding, on either side of the portrait, photographs of a Second World War bomb being dropped – one of which is reversed. The face of the young woman is an excerpt from a photograph which Burgin took in 1980 on a street in Lyon (cf. *Lyon*, 1980). Burgin fed the mechanical photo-reproductions into a digitized processor under real light conditions by means of a scanner. The title of the work is a reference to Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history as expressed in his essay on Paul Klee's drawing *Angelus Novus* (1920), a work which Benjamin owned until his flight to Paris in June 1940. (cf. Scholem, Werckmeister)

Iconic Codes and Digitization

Burgin's use of computer-assisted image processing in *Angelus Novus* impairs the representational legibility of the black and white photographs as a result of modifications in the tones, but it does not dispense with it altogether. These modifications in the photographic raw material themselves refer to the pictorial history of light-dark values: this differentiation (Luhmann) of light-dark values was achieved with the aid of analogue means of production – both the manual means of graphics and painting and the mechanical means of photography. Thus in Burgin's *Angelus Novus* a fusion takes place between the "chiaroscuro of the photographic image" (Burgin 1975), now the digitized image, and the "painterly" feature generated by the electronic transformation of the image. In the on-going discourse on painting, drawing, sculpture and architecture since Heinrich Wölfflin, the "painterly" is regarded as the formal complement of the "linear".[1]

For Roland Barthes, the mechanically created "chiaroscuro of the photographic image" gave rise to a theory of the photograph as a "message without codes". Burgin contradicted this theory in 1975 in "Photographic Practice and Art Theory": "… [Umberto] Eco reminds us that there can be no uncoded visual message, as the act of perceiving is a decoding operation." Following Eco, Burgin regards visual perception as only possible by means of binary coding. An artist's scheme for the production of a picture with analogue and digital means contains codes which posit differences.

According to Eco, through transformations into artistic pictorial media such as painting or drawing, visual perception results in "weak … iconic codes", given

[1] In a telephone conversation with Burgin on 4 August, 1995 he referred to his modification of digitized images and said that he wanted them to be "more abstract", so as to "look more painterly". The term used by Burgin, "chiaroscuro" (also "light-dark") in "Photographic Practice and Art Theory" (*Studio International*, July-August 1975, p. 45) is one which has strong associations with the history of graphic art and painting. Black-and-white photography proved itself to be open to artistic manipulation to the extent that it showed itself capable of differentiation and modification, thus giving rise to individual styles through the choice of frame, of aperture, of lighting and processing producing different tones. Thus photography became a competitor of realistic painting both because of its "painterly" possibilities and because of the "chiaroscuro".

that the signs in the "iconic continuum … (have) no significance in them-
selves". Alternations between "selected features" and "pertinent properties" form
a "whole sequence of idiolects". The pictorial signs assume "contextual signi-
ficance" because unlike "linguistic phenomena" they do not constitute "a system
of fixed differences". In *Angelus Novus* Burgin reworks photographic raw
material with the aid of a computer in the sense of "painterly" "idiolects". He is
concerned neither with an uncoded mechanical pictorial medium, nor with a
digitized pictorial medium with "fixed differences" like language. What he
is concerned with is the recovery of artistic "idiolects" by means of digital trans-
formation. He constructs a realism which is both digitized and painterly.

Angelus Novus
(Street Photography)
1995, triptych
3 digital prints, 213.4 x 91.5 cm each,
total dimension: 213.4 x 274.5 cm

Courtesy of the artist

Telefilm-without-End

For Burgin the computer is an instrument for reworking basic photographic and typographic elements (Burgin 4 August,1995: "The computer is a tool"). He looks upon it as one apparatus among the many which make the everyday interchange of images between different media (photography, film TV, video, CD-ROM, printing) possible, the so-called "telefilm-without-end" (Burgin 1991). In 1975 already, Burgin made a reference to this pictorial exchange: "Eco refers … to the systems for storing, transmitting and displaying pictures with the aid of computers, in which the apparently analogical has been interpreted in digital terms. He also points out that modern reproductive processes, from half-tone blocks to TV images, present us with discontinuous systems." Through the interchangeability of images between the different media facilitated by digitization, specific pictorial features, whose differentiation is closely related to the history of individual media, also become transferable at will. If computer art in the 1960s was still a linear and abstract art, in the 1980s it became an art which simulated realistic images thanks to differentiated digitization. Burgin turns his back on an art which merely demonstrates the simulation potential of computer-assisted image processing by reference to itself. He works with computer-assisted image processing and digitized photographs in such a way as to almost expound the problems which arise from inter-media exchange. Computer euphoria is relativised by references to specific features of the pictorial media of painting and photography.

De- and Re-Territorialization

Peter Weibel described the history of the pictorial media – from paintings executed by handicraft, via mechanical reproduction in photography and film (as moving photomontage) to computer-assisted image processing – as an acceleration of image sequences in the dimension of time. Burgin demonstrates his reservations about this kind of future-orientated 'techno-discours' by recourse to Benjamin's "New Angel". As Benjamin outlines in his *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, the wings of this angel are inflated by a "storm from paradise", as a result of which the angel is swept "into the future", "on which he turns his back, while the heap of rubble in front of him mounts up into the sky". The "New Angel" turns away from the techno-discourse and – as an "Angel of History" – devotes himself to the question of "where the idea of tradition and history comes from" (Burgin 4 August, 1995): "The historian is a backward-looking prophet." (Benjamin) In the course of the search for answers what need to be considered are the contradictions between territorially and ethnically orientated "identity politics" (Burgin 1991, 1995) and de-territorialized multi-media systems, whereby the latter also make other individualizations possible, such as that of the "international community of adolescence" (Burgin 4 August, 1995 on Rap etc.). The interplay between de- and re-territorialization both restricts and opens up possibilities for future constructions of social codes.

The planes of reference between de- and re-territorialization are also implicit in the title which Burgin considered as an alternative to *Angelus Novus*, namely 'Street Photography'. This is the term which Burgin uses to describe the photographs of Henri Cartier-Bresson and Lee Friedlander, as well as the portrait in the middle panel of his own work (Burgin 4 August, 1995). He explains that "the genre of 'street photography' requires that nothing be staged" (Burgin 1986).

Bibliography:

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On Victor Burgin's texts and works, cf. Bibliography, additional telephone conversation from 4 August, 1995.

Umberto Eco, *Einführung in die Semiotik*, Munich 1972.

Julia Kristeva, *Le révolution du langage poétique*, Paris 1974.

Niklas Luhmann, *Die Ausdifferenzierung des Kunstssystems*, Wabern-Berne 1994.

Gershom Scholem, "Walter Benjamin und sein Engel", in Siegfried Unseld (ed.), *Zur Aktualität Walter Benjamins*, Frankfurt am Main 1972.

Peter Weibel, *Die Beschleunigung der Bilder in der Chronokratie*, Berne 1987.

Otto K. Werckmeister, "Walter Benjamin, Paul Klee und der 'Engel der Geschichte'" (1976), in Werckmeister, *Versuche über Paul Klee*, Frankfurt am Main 1981.

Heinrich Wölfflin, *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (1915), Basle/Stuttgart 1976.

However, in the case of *Angelus Novus* – as opposed to the street photographs in his photo-text-series *Lyon* of 1980 – in the close-up of the face of the "young girl in the street" (Burgin 4 August, 1995) nothing is to be seen of the surroundings: the street photograph has become a portrait. In *Angelus Novus* Burgin avails himself of two perspectives – the front view on the street and from the air – in order to draw attention to the fault-lines between de- and re-territorialization. Only from the distance – from the bird's eye viewpoint – does the street itself become a pictorial motif. Up close, it disintegrates into isolated objects. Concentration on particular close-ups and distant views has been part of the history both of the medium of photography (Weibel's "Der Orbitale Blick: Der Aufstieg des Auges") and of the medium of film (close-up).

De-Syn-Thesizing

The photographs on the side panels can be read as the wings of an "Angel" whose face on the middle panel gazes out through and behind the observer. This reading of the side panels as angel's wings is facilitated by the contour of a shoreline in the upper parts of the photographs, reminiscent of the inner out-line which the raised 'wing-arms' form with the head in Klee's *Angelus Novus* drawing. The representations on the side wings of Burgin's triptych can be read as angel's wings carrying bombs. Alongside this reading of the combination of photographs as a reference to imaginative concepts (for example, the Archangel Michael in the Fall of the Damned to Hell), another interpretation is also conceivable which would place the internal camera position in the photographs in relation to the location of the observer in front of the triptych.

The observer's gaze at the side wings of the triptych, and the gaze of the female face on the middle panel at what is lying behind the observer, form two inter-penetrating triangles. While the observer gazes past the middle panel at the two sides where the bomb is being dropped, the woman in the middle panel 'looks' past the observer on both sides at something unknown behind him.

In Burgin's triptych the angle of vision of the camera in the side panels is that of *Angelus Novus*, the bird's eye view, gazing "at the heap of rubble in front of him". But at the same time, unfortunately, it is also that of the bomber pilot. The observer in front of the triptych sees himself confronted with the face in the middle panel and, with respect to the side wings, can locate himself either in the position of the fighter plane or of *Angelus Novus*: Do the tensions evoked in the observer by these three possible locations resolve themselves "kaleidoscopically" in the "continuum of … constantly shifting picture patterns" in "mediatic imagespace"? Or do the tensions implicit in a relatively restricted number of possible locations put up sufficient opposition to the "kaleidoscopic", interminable rotation of the pictorial sequences in the "tele-film-without-end" – as if turned by an invisible hand? (Burgin 1991, 1995)

Burgin's suggestion is to create counter-movements to the closed symbolic worlds by introducing "idiolects" into the public image media, or by trans-forming strong codes into weak ones, but without "shattering"[2] the "mediatic imagespace". Is it still possible to "desynthesize"[3] the symbolic in "mediatic imagespace" by means of the semiotic, or is the world of the pictorial media already too hermetically sealed to allow access to "idiolects"?

Translation: Pauline Cumbers

[2] Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 1.2., Frankfurt a.M. 1974, p. 660: "The course of history as implied in the term catastrophe, cannot make any more demands on a thinking person than a kaleido-scope in the hands of a child, in which at each new turn all that was once ordered is thrown into a new order … The concepts of those in power have always been the mirrors by means of which the image of an 'order' came into being. The kaleidoscope must be shattered."

[3] In the process of de-syn-thesizing, the function of the symbolic is maintained but with a negative sign. De-syn-thesizing the semiotic is "comme un retour 'second' de la fonctionalité pulsionelle dans le symbo-lique, comme sa transgression". "Transgression" and not destruction of the referential sign function could be the motto of Burgin's painterly realism (Kristeva; cf. Victor Burgin, *The End of Art Theory*, Hampshire 1986, p. 22 and 84).