Before and After Burroughs

Light has no image. Space has no Image.
Art records the Word that Light writes in Space.
Brion Gysin

I first became aware of William Burroughs through the novels of Jack Kerouac. Growing up in Lowell, Massachusetts in the late 1960s and early 70s, I spent much of my free time at the public library, an imposing Romanesque Revival structure built in 1844 from pink New Hampshire granite. One day wandering in the special collections room I came upon a locked glass case containing all the books of Jack Kerouac. Kerouac was only recently dead, and his work was already languishing in obscurity. He was, however, fondly remembered by many of the locals. As liberal working-class democrats, they were not nearly as scandalized by his outlandish barroom antics, or his more-distant notoriety as Beat Generation progenitor, as is commonly reported. Kerouac had been on my paper route briefly before he moved to Florida for the last time: 172 Sanders Avenue, The Lowell Sun. I remembered him because he was always home during the daytime, which made no sense to me.

I was known to the librarian as an avid reader, so despite my age I was allowed to borrow these books––likely putting her job in jeopardy I now realize. I carried home The Town and the City, Kerouac's first novel, a great book and ideal starting place for his work. On page 435 Kerouac introduces the character of William Burroughs (Will Dennison): elder, tailored, upper class, drug-devoted, observant, knowing. Kerouac's prescience regarding Burroughs is remarkable in the way he immediately senses how meeting this character seems to change everything, neatly demarking life into a series of before and afters: before and after the atomic age, before and after the fall, before and after Burroughs.

From an acquaintance with Burroughs as a fictional character I quickly found my way to his books: Junky, Naked Lunch, The Yage Letters. At sixteen Naked Lunch proved a truly shocking literary experience, revealing on a visceral level how truly powerful a work of art can be. Later in life Burroughs would often say that the ideal literary creation would be one that would assume a life of its own so real as to actually threaten the writer's own existence. Burroughs' monster was built from the novel form he shattered, giving direct access to the writer's most unspeakable thoughts, and from a practice of writing so profound as to ultimately make nearly all mainstream American literature seem inconsequential. It was a new language.

By the time I worked my way through The Soft Machine, The Ticket That Exploded and Nova Express, it was obvious that Burroughs was writing the great epic of the narco-empire of our times. The blueprint he drew was staggering: money, power, oil, greed, fundamentalist Christianity, Islamo-fascism, environmental degradation, germ warfare, space weapons, media control. Would that it were only experimental fiction.

Of the man himself, it was difficult to get a fix. Conservative suit, glasses, haircut. Unsympathetic to hippies. Involved with mind control, Scientology, Wilhelm Reich. Experiments with apomorphine. Living in Tangiers, now in London. Clearly a secret agent but for whom? As Grace Slick once said of Bill Graham, "He's one of us but he's one of them." What little information on Burroughs one could glean usually came from the underground press. The first prominent mainstream coverage was the Paris Review interview of 1965, wherein numerous pages from Burroughs' scrapbooks were reproduced. I still remember the thrill I felt seeing these works, for it was obvious that the profound experiments that Burroughs was conducting with the written word extended to the image as well. In these modern day pictoglyphs Burroughs was exploring the common root of word and image.

News that Burroughs had finally returned to America was stunning, and quickly spread. In 1975 I read a report of a creative writing class Burroughs was teaching at N.Y.U. A student asked if he believed in life after death. "What makes you think you're not dead already?" he replied.

I finally met Burroughs in the fall of 1975. He was giving a reading with John Giorno at the University of Pennsylvania. I was a film student at the Philadelphia College of Art, and I brought along a small tape recorder to the reading. I entered the auditorium an hour early. Burroughs was sitting in a chair surrounded by a dozen or so journalists. Neatly dressed in a suit, he was chain smoking an esoteric brand of cigarettes called English Ovals, while patiently answering questions. This was the first time I'd heard his strangely disembodied voice (as if it came from a speaker behind him), and it immediately reminded me of T.S. Eliot's, which I'd known from the old Caedmon recordings––not surprising given Burroughs' same St. Louis / Harvard / London trajectory. Meeting Burroughs for the first time was something of a shock, given his mythical status: one was not just meeting Burroughs, but all of one's projections of Burroughs as well.

I joined the group and soon began asking very specific questions about characters and events in his books: What was stored in the Grey Room? What was the relationship between the Heavy Metal People of Uranus and the Insect People of Minraud, and so forth. He seemed amused and later gave me his address (75 Franklin Street) and telephone number in New York, with an invitation to visit.

For a long time, fear and awe prevented me from establishing a comfortable rapport with Burroughs. This was aggravated by the fact that whenever one visited him, one got extremely high on very strong marijuana–at the very minimum. I don't recall that Bill was yet drinking his unusual mix of vodka and coke (gin seemed his preference in those days), but there were always drinks. Bill took a dim view of people who did not drink because they were always drinking the soft drinks that he had bought for the mix. "They pour a big glass of ginger ale, swill it down, lick their chops, and then pour another one," he once said to me with contempt after a few tee-totaling guests departed.

Socially, things were not as organized in the early days as they would later become at the Bunker, at 222 Bowery, where Burroughs had Giorno, Victor Bockris, or James Grauerholz to oversee arrangements. Bill ate out more often (the El Quixote in the Chelsea Hotel was a favorite), or people brought food over. I recall one strange dinner when he told all of the guests to bring a different dish. I was asked to bring kidney pie, not so easy to find in New York. When we arrived we were all served what we were told to bring—there was no sharing. What surprised me most me about Bill when I first got to know him was how real his characters were to him. Often he would pace the room, first acting out what he would later write. I think in many ways his characters were the part of his writing he was fondest of—not surprising for a novelist.

In 1978 I was living in San Francisco where I interviewed Bill for the punk rock magazine Search and Destroy. (1) Re-reading the interview today I find it full of naïve generalities on my part, which Burroughs nonchalantly shoots down, one by one. That was one of the most important things I learned from being around William–one could never refer to such vagaries as "people" or "society." Which people? he would ask. "Society is not an entity, it consists of individuals and groups," he would correct. He insisted on a relentless form of mental vigilance. One learned to speak carefully around Burroughs: words mattered.

That evening I took Bill to the Mabuhay Gardens to see some of the local punk bands: The Dils, The Avengers, The Mutants. The result was quite unexpected; Bill was suddenly swarmed by teenagers in torn blue jeans and black leather jackets; he stood in a corner with that Cheshire cat grin, chatting and signing the occasional autograph on somebody's arm or back. The next day at his book signing at City Lights we walked past a line that extended for almost three blocks. Bill was under the impression it was for a movie. When we arrived at the bookstore, Bill suddenly realized it was for him and seemed slightly shaken. He spent the next four hours greeting each person warmly, looking directly into their eyes, before signing their book. Practically every other person who approached him remarked that reading his work had changed their life: the experience was first moving, then surreal, then unnerving.

With the advent of neo-expressionism and graffiti art in the 1980s, prevailing aesthetics seemed much closer to William's own sympathies, and he soon became friends with Francesco Clemente, Keith Haring, George Condo, Philip Taaffe, and others. All these artists knew Bill's work well, and all had absorbed and internalized his work. I think Philip Taaffe speaks for many artists of his generation when he discussed the influence of Burroughs: "At sixteen or seventeen years old, when I was reading those books for the first time, he instantly broke down all these barriers for me, shattered this sense of what was possible, and really made me believe in myself and my own sensibility and who I was." (2)

I began regularly inviting Bill to visit the galleries in New York. We visited a Julian Schnabel exhibition at the Leo Castelli Gallery in 1981; confronted with paintings of massive proportions, Bill completely ignored their size and walked up to the works to scrutinize them from a few inches away. He pointed out demons and evil spirits who were trying to escape from the paint; in other passages mountains and canyons and rivulets made up a landscape on a foreign planet, and so on. It was as if we were huddled in a cave, looking at strange markings on the wall by firelight. All the modern trappings of the white cube meant nothing. Art was about primal forces.

In time, the emergence of William Burroughs as cultural celebrity took its toll. By the late 1980s, the deluge of guests and the corresponding substance abuse had became so great that things were going downhill fast. With little warning, Bill up and moved to Kansas. He later explained to me in uncharacteristically dramatic terms that his departure from New York was a matter of life and death, and that once he left New York he did not miss it "for one single day." The years of teaching at the Naropa Institute in Boulder had reawakened Bill's love of the outdoors, and the American West. I think Bill sensed he was entering the final stage of his life. Returning to his home in the Midwest simply made sense. It was then that Burroughs' art making activities began in earnest.

Bill's house in Lawrence, Kansas was a one-story affair, ordered from a Sears Roebuck mail order catalogue in the 1920s. From a small front porch one entered a large living room. Behind the living room was a kitchen, and a small pantry with back door that led out to small yard. Off to one side of the living room were two smaller rooms. Burroughs used one for his bedroom, and the other as an art studio. For larger works he also used the garage, and would sometimes work out of doors, especially when puncturing cans of spray paint–a favorite effect. If anything more powerful than a BB gun was involved, the shooting took place at Fred Aldrich's house in the countryside, as there was an ordinance against discharging firearms within city limits.

In my view, there were two factors without which Bill would never have pursued life as an artist. The first as I've mentioned was the move to Lawrence, which provided Bill the space and time to apply himself to this deceptively demanding vocation. The other factor was the death of Brion Gysin. During an early visit to the Bunker in 1978, Burroughs showed me one of his few possessions: a calligraphic painting by Gysin in muted browns and grays of figures in the desert. We stood in front of the small canvas for a long time, silently gazing. From various remarks he made through the years, it was obvious that Brion meant everything to him. Brion was the teacher, and it is as a disciple of Gysin that Burroughs' art should be considered. "You see, I could never have started painting until after Brion was dead. I could never have competed with him." (3) Moreover, following Gysin's death, I sensed that Bill felt the need to keep Brion's spirit alive in his work. This is not uncommon in art history, when two artists share a close personal and aesthetic bond and one suddenly dies; for instance it has been noted that in the immediate years following the death of Matisse, Picasso seems to be painting both their pictures, and the same has been said of de Kooning's work following the death of Franz Kline. Brion Gysin was the spirit guide who directed Burroughs in his visual work.

In 1987 Burroughs held his first solo exhibition in New York at the Tony Shafrazi Gallery, organized by Diego Cortez and James Grauerholz. William's work was uncalculated regarding the contemporary art world, and yet absolutely essential to the scene: once again he was the insider's outsider. I sensed Bill was about to do in painting what he had done with the written word, through his refusal to accept any pre-existing terms abut how some-

thing should be made, or what it should look like. When Burroughs began to paint he took the activity back to a primal place, examined all of the constituent elements, and proceeded from there. As he said in his Paris Review interview, "Somebody has to program the machine…."

Exhibitions followed, in the United States and Europe. William's most enthusiastic audience was always other artists, and he collaborated extensively with George Condo, Keith Haring, and Philip Taaffe––as Burroughs often said, when two minds collaborate a Third Mind is created. In 1993 I spent a week in Lawrence assembling Bill's last one man show in New York, at the Gagosian Gallery. Although reviews and attendance were positive, only four of the fifty works in the exhibition sold: to me, Francesco Clemente, Philip Taaffe, and Terry Winters. (For all of their supposed sophistication, art collectors are essentially sheep.) Shortly before the exhibition William informed me he was no longer traveling and would not attend the opening. I told him this was fine, the exhibition was not about him, but about his work. But I sent a plane ticket and hotel reservation, just in case he changed his mind. The day before the opening I received a call. "Well Raymond, I suppose it's time for the old sheriff to strap his guns on one more time." (Although he left the guns at home, I do recall a doctor's bag well stocked with medications.) The opening was an extraordinary crush, and there was a clear sense among old friends in New York that this would be the last time they might see him. Bill even had an opportunity to chat with a close relation of Joan Vollmer, the wife whom he accidentally shot in Mexico City in 1951. Years later Larry Gagosian told me that in all the years of presenting exhibitions, Bill was the only artist who ever wrote him a thank you note afterwards.

After this show Bill and I stayed in touch through the occasional phone call. In 1996 when Herbert Huncke was hospitalized, I knew a call from Bill would cheer him up. Bill obliged by calling the next day. I was by the bed when the phone rang: "Hello," Herbert said as he picked up the receiver. "Who is this," Bill said. "Who is this," Herbert replied warily. "Who do you think this is," Bill answered. They both laughed and began chatting like schoolboys. Two of Herbert's doctors happened to be in the room at the time, both young interns, and both wildly excited to think it was William Burroughs on the phone. Doctor Benway had come full circle.

Allen Ginsberg died exactly one thousand days prior to the millennium (April 5, 1997), and William died four months later. He had been hanging on despite failing health, but after Allen died Bill seemed to let go. It was almost as if Allen gave Bill permission (and instruction) for death, in the same way Brion did for painting. Their deaths coming so close together were staggering, and I took it as a no-confidence vote for the next millennium. It felt even emptier after the bombing of the World Trade Towers, with the government/media madness that followed, when Bill's sane voice and piercing intelligence would have been so welcome. (Like many people, I felt as if the entire 9-11 scenario had already been written by Burroughs.) But mostly I just missed him, a caring and eventful man who was always on to something new.

When I was young I often thought about what would it be like when Allen and Bill and Gregory Corso were no longer alive. They were like dinosaurs, or gods who walked the earth, and they left behind a pygmy race. It's as if an entire continent one knew well just isn't there any more.

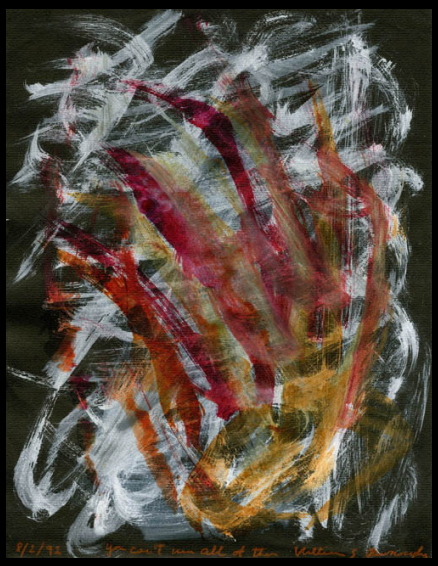
Despite the large number of interviews William gave on nearly every subject imaginable, in later years I felt there were two topics that still needed to be addressed comprehensively: painting and guns. Both were central to his life and works. The latter subject I addressed in "The War Universe" (1992), culled from a series of interviews conducted over several days in Lawrence; the former subject, "On Painting," was compiled from numerous interviews with William, in New York, and Lawrence. (4) It was my desire to create as complete a document as possible in his own words that touched on both theory and practice. It is reprinted here in its original form.

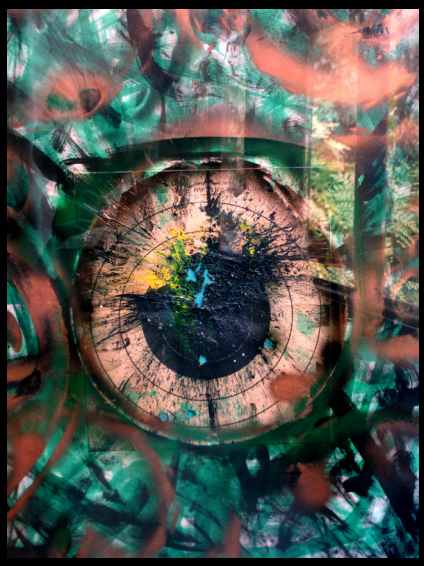
NOTES

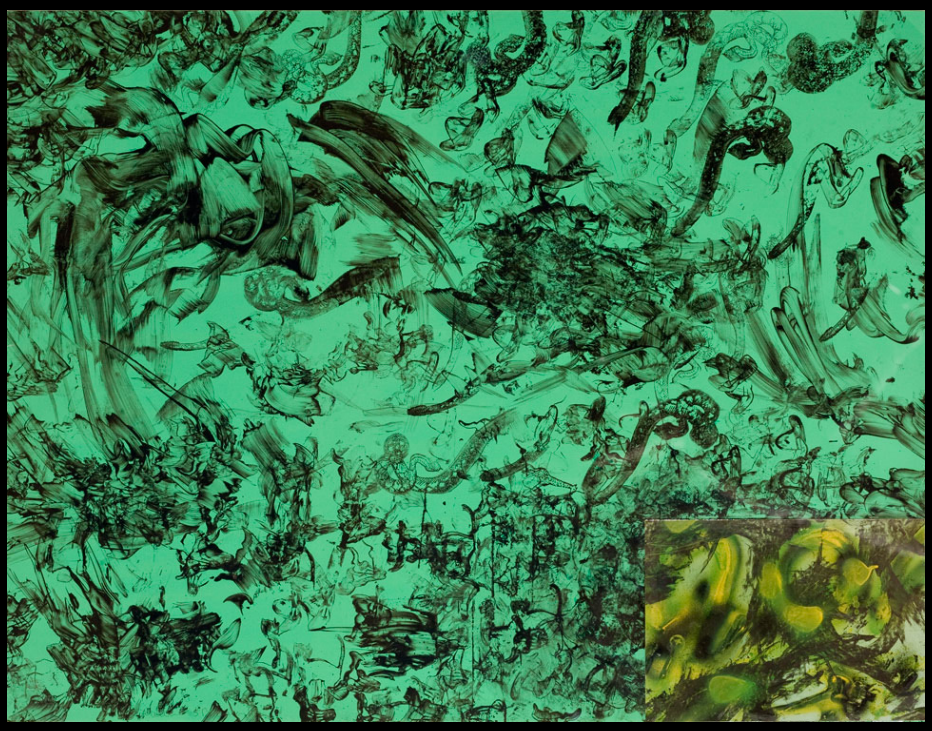
1. Burroughs Live: The Collected Interviews of William S. Burroughs 1960-1997, ed. Sylvère Lotringer 2001 Semiotext(e), p. 394
2. Philip Taaffe, in Philip Taaffe. Composite Nature. A Conversation with Stan Brakhage, exh. cat. Peter Blum Gallery (New York, 1997), p. 74.
3. Burroughs Live, p.754 (as spoken to Timothy Leary).
4. Painting and Guns (1992: Madras and New York, Hanuman Books)

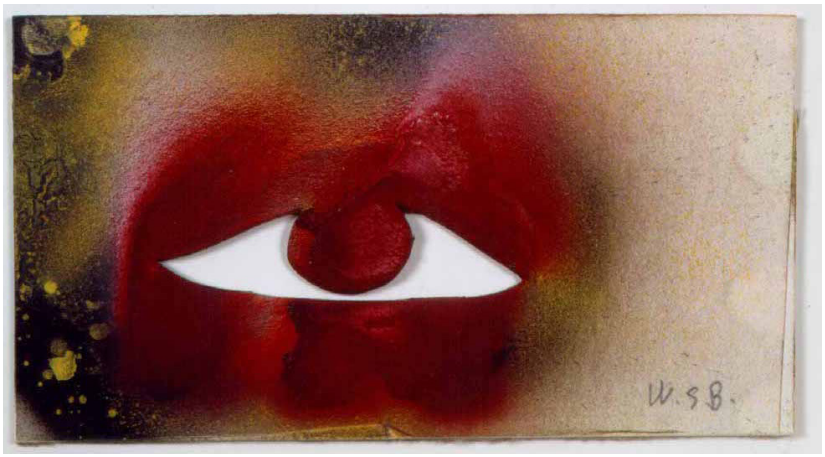
William S. Burroughs

PAINTING & GUNS







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