

BOOKS

The Hunter Gracchus and Other Papers on Literature and Art

by Guy Davenport. Counterpoint, Washington, D.C., U.S.A., 1997. ISBN: 1-887178-55-4.

Reviewed by Roy Behrens, Department of Art, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, IA 50613-0362, U.S.A. E-mail: <ballast@netins.net>.

Guy Davenport, a MacArthur Fellow and an award-winning translator, poet, critic, short fiction writer and visual artist, is also one of the finest essayists of our time. This is his third collection (the first two, *Geography of the Imagination* and *Every Force Evolves a Form*, were both nominated for the National Book Award). His delightful essays, like his more difficult short stories, are literary montages; they begin by combining unlikely events, people and ideas, then show us a sensible, elegant way by which these all flow together. Among the 40 essays in this book are commentaries on Thomas Merton, Franz Kafka, revolution, the Shakers, Gertrude Stein, John Ruskin, Grant Wood, the Bible, Paul Cadmus and snake handling. Davenport grew up in rural South Carolina, in the Old South, and his most exhilarating passages are often colorful childhood memories, as when, for example, in a brilliant essay titled "On Reading," he remembers the people who encouraged him to read: Aunt Mae, who was married to Uncle Buzzie and never drove over 30 miles an hour, and Cora Shiflett, a neighbor who lent him his first volume of *Tarzan*, in which the Lord of the Jungle survives in the Sahara Desert by dispatching a vulture and drinking its blood.

Design Literacy: Understanding Graphic Design

by Steven Heller and Karen Pomeroy. Allworth Press, New York, NY, U.S.A., 1997. ISBN: 1-880559-76-5.

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In the past several decades, various authors have objected to approaches to graphic design history that focus on individual masters, movements and styles; that analyze the structural attributes of a work (derided in this book as "eye candy"); or that feature highbrow examples while leaving out simpler, more popular works. This volume, which is one of the more inventive and thought-provoking books on design history in recent years, offers a plausible alternative: it consists of 93 "object lessons" in the form of engaging, short essays about a wide variety of graphic icons, from the late nineteenth century to the present, ranging from the ubiquitous (shooting targets, the swastika, Joe Camel) to the esoteric (Emigre magazine, the Cranbrook posters and April Greiman's self-portrait). Organized somewhat chronologically but in eight thematic categories (Persuasion, Media, Language, Identity, Information, Iconography, Style and Commerce), the essays form readable "stories" about the objects, the designers' thought processes, and the social and political circumstances from which they emerged.

EXHIBITION CATALOG

Seeing Jazz: Artists and Writers on Jazz

Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service. Chronicle Books, San Francisco, CA, U.S.A., 1997. ISBN: 0-8118-1732-6.

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Some people are capable of synesthesia, which results in a kind of connection among the various senses. The Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky, for example, often heard specific sounds when look-

ing at colors, or saw colors when listening to sounds. The intent of this catalog is not dissimilar, in the sense that it tries to establish a link between the musical experience of jazz and the sensory experiences of other art forms, including painting, sculpture, photography and the written word. The result is a kaleidoscopic assortment of more than 160 visual artworks, anecdotes, poems, lyrics and jazz-related writings, including, for example, four Romare Bearden collages; Piet Mondrian's famous *Broadway Boogie Woogie*; Lee Friedlander's photograph of Sweet Emma Barnett; and poignant excerpts from Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man* and Jack Kerouac's *The Beginning of Bop*. Divided into three sections (Rhythm, Improvisation, and Call and Response), each introduced with a brief essay by jazz scholar Robert Meally, this is the catalog for a traveling exhibition that began at the Smithsonian Institution in October 1997 and will travel around the U.S. until July 1999.

OBITUARY

William S. Burroughs (1914–1997)

by George Gessert, 1230 W. Broadway, Eugene, OR 97402, U.S.A. E-mail: <ggessert@oregon.uoregon.edu>.

William S. Burroughs's life reads like some foundational myth of contemporary culture. His paternal grandfather

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invented the adding machine and established the company that bears the family name. A maternal uncle, Ivy Lee, helped forge modern public relations as a powerful weapon for big business in its battle against labor. As a boy, Burroughs attended Los Alamos Ranch School, which he later referred to as his “radioactive alma mater” (after Burroughs graduated, the government commandeered the campus and turned it into laboratories for the Manhattan Project). Burroughs went on to Harvard University, where he majored in English “for lack of interest in any other subject” [1]. He graduated in 1936, then studied medicine at the University of Vienna. As war approached, he married Ilse Klapper, a German Jew, and helped her escape to the United States. For a year he did graduate work in anthropology at Harvard.

During World War II, Burroughs served briefly in the army before receiving a disability discharge as a paranoid schizophrenic. A stipend from his family made work unnecessary, and he gravitated to the world of hipsters, which at the time consisted mostly of drug addicts and small-time criminals. In 1944 he met Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. About this time Burroughs began using morphine.

After the end of the war, Ilse Klapper and Burroughs amicably divorced, and he entered into a common-law marriage with Joan Vollmer, a friend of Ginsberg’s. Burroughs was predominantly homosexual but loved Vollmer, and they had an intense, if complicated, sexual relationship. They moved to Texas, where they farmed, raising carrots, peas and cotton—and marijuana on the side. A son, William Jr., was born in 1947. During these years, the elder Burroughs had many scrapes with the law, mostly for homosexual activities or drug possession. “Crime,” he wrote in a 1948 letter to Ginsberg, “is simply behavior outlawed by a given culture. There is no connection between crime and ethics” [2]. In 1950, after an arrest in Louisiana for drug possession, Burroughs was fed up with life in the U.S. and left for Mexico with his family. Mexico proved congenial, a place “where everyone has mastered the art of minding his own business” [3]. In Mexico City he completed his first novel, *Junky*.

On 6 September 1951, in a game of “William Tell,” Burroughs attempted to shoot a glass off Joan Vollmer’s head and

accidentally killed her. He would atone for Joan’s death for the rest of his life. Burroughs did not attribute the shooting to accident or to unconscious motives on his or Joan’s part, but to possession (in the archaic sense of that word). In the 1980s he wrote, “I am forced to the appalling conclusion that I would never have become a writer but for Joan’s death . . . I live with the constant threat of possession, and a constant need to escape from possession, from Control. So the death of Joan brought me in contact with the invader, the Ugly Spirit, and maneuvered me into a lifelong struggle, in which I have had no choice except to write myself out” [4].

Vollmer’s death may have made Burroughs a writer, but more immediately it landed him in prison, lost him his son and made permanent residence in Mexico impossible. Once out on bail, he travelled to Panama and South America. In the Amazon, he accompanied the ethnobotanist Richard Evans Schultes in search of yage, a hallucinogen made from the bark of a jungle liana that supposedly gave the user telepathic abilities. Burroughs’s letters to Ginsberg from this period became an epistolary novel, *The Yage Letters*. After further wanderings in the United States and Europe, Burroughs settled in Tangier, Morocco, a city almost unique in the world at that time for its live-and-let-live atmosphere. Drugs and all kinds of sex were readily available, and Burroughs’s heroin habit escalated. In the course of struggling with addiction, he wrote *Naked Lunch*, parts of which were published in 1957–1958. Censorship, scandal and literary acclaim followed.

With publication of *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs’s life assumed certain features of a traditional American writer’s. He moved between London, Paris and New York, and published numerous books, most notably three long experiments in literary collage: *Nova Express*, *The Ticket That Exploded* and *The Soft Machine*. He collaborated with artists, encouraged younger people, taught and gave readings. He was lionized. He appeared in films and on television, became the subject of many books, and received awards and honors, including induction into the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.

In 1981 his son died, after which Burroughs made a final move to Lawrence, Kansas. Except for brief travels, he remained there until his death.

It is fitting that Burroughs’s life came to an end not far from where he was born, in the heartland of America. He was thoroughly American, adrift, alienated, profoundly inventive and tyrannically individualistic. His imagination was shaped by mass media, science and imperial power. His personal life was a head-on collision between American democratic ideals and its harsh class realities. Humor was his lifeline. He is one of America’s greatest humorists, comparable to Twain and Vonnegut. *Naked Lunch* may be one of the most horrifying novels ever written, but it is also one of the funniest, and anyone who can read it without laughing again and again has missed the point. Burroughs himself gave readings from it in the manner of W.C. Fields.

Burroughs intended to shock, of course. If writers are lighthouses, he illuminated reefs that can wreck us all. He accepted the role of bad-news messenger with caustic humor, and spoofed *Naked Lunch* as a book that “grabs you by the throat. . . . It leaps in bed with you and performs unmentionable acts . . . behind the [book’s] humor, the routines, the parody (some of it a bit heavy-handed to be sure), you glimpse a dead-end despair, a bleak landscape of rubble under the spreading black cloud of a final bomb” [5]. Self-ridicule like this is precarious: it leaves ample room for irony and extreme violence, but no room at all for self pity or other false notes. Literary rote was impossible for Burroughs. He found even such minor exercises in mechanical writing as biographical notes virtually impossible.

He practiced writing as a form of dictation or magic and, like a shaman, often worked with the help of drugs, especially marijuana. In his last years, Burroughs came to see his need for heroin as the result of a physiological deficiency, similar to the diabetic’s need for insulin, and he wrote at least one novel, *The Place of Dead Roads*, while on heroin [6]. However, throughout most of his life as a writer, heroin contributed to his work only as a negative force, something to overcome. He mapped the absolute need of addiction as a metaphor for civilization in general, and for the appetite for power in particular. Exceedingly few writers have explored in as lucid and sustained a way effects of the great twentieth-century technologies of control and destruction on the imagination—only Norman Mailer, Philip Dick, Kurt

Vonnegut and J.G. Ballard come immediately to mind, all of whom, except Mailer, are science-fiction writers, and underrated by critics (science fiction has been twentieth-century literature's Cinderella, consigned to the dirty job of creating myths for a violent century).

Burroughs believed that among the arts, literature was 50 years behind the times, but that the visual arts and music were genuinely contemporary. To me his novels of the late 1950s and early 1960s do not recall *Finnegan's Wake* or *The Tropic of Cancer* so much as improvisational jazz and abstract expressionism. Like Pollock, who abandoned the concern for a permanent art, Burroughs saw permanence in literature as inappropriate to an age of instant annihilation, and he tried to create an emergency literature for breakthrough into a new culture. In this, he was close to the spirit of much experimental art, which is probably why Burroughs appealed to visual artists as did no other writer of his generation.

My only contact with Burroughs was by letter. In 1988 I wrote him to praise *The Western Lands* for exploring the effects of biotechnology on imagination, a subject that was vanishingly rare in fiction of the 1980s (and only slightly less rare today). One phrase in the reply that he sent me leaped out. "I don't see art as . . . information, rather all artists are trying to literally create life" [7]. We exchanged a few more notes, and he encouraged me to devote all my energy to genetic art. For the right words at the right time, I owe him a debt of gratitude, which is why I am writing this obituary.

Burroughs believed that certain determining features of our time—mass media, nuclear devices, industrialized genocide, the decoding of DNA, space exploration and seemingly limitless forms of control—demand reassessment not only of all pre-existing myths, but of language itself. In the beginning was definitely not the word. To me a significant part of Burroughs's appeal as a writer is that both his capacity to give everything to his art and his genius for language still reflect profound suspicion of words. Language was a virus, but a virus that could be turned on itself to liberate its hosts.

Burroughs is not for everyone. He wrote neither for those interested only in the mundane details of protected lives, nor for those who believe that some things should never be said. No

doubt Burroughs may be forgotten, canons being what they are, but he has already left such an indelible mark on culture that his anarchic spirit will enliven the arts whether or not his works are read. As we move into the twenty-first century, which is already taking shape as the time of the great extinctions—nature's naked lunch—we will need more than ever his determination to destroy the destroying culture and find alternatives. He was less a voice of despair than is generally realized: he permitted himself to seriously consider the possibility that the human race was an evolutionary mistake, but he kept writing, and trying to warn. He believed, as many lesser artists and writers do not, that history can be changed by art.

References and Notes

1. W.S. Burroughs, *Junky* (Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1983) p. xiii.
2. W.S. Burroughs, *The Letters of William S. Burroughs*, Oliver Harris, ed. (New York: Viking, 1993) p. 25.
3. Burroughs [2] p. 69.
4. W.S. Burroughs, from *Queer*, as quoted by Ted Morgan in *Literary Outlaw* (New York: Henry Holt, 1988) p. 199. For the fullest available account of Joan Vollmer's death and Burroughs's atonement, see pp. 194–204.
5. Burroughs [2] p. 255.
6. Morgan [4] p. 556.
7. W.S. Burroughs, unpublished letter, 4 July 1988. He expanded this idea in *Painting and Guns* (Madras, India, and New York: Hanuman Books, 1992) pp. 18, 33–35.

MATERIALS RECEIVED

Audio Compact Discs

L'arpa e L'asino (The Harp and the Donkey)

N.O.R.M.A. and Chris Cutler. ReR Megacorp, Surrey, U.K.; Cuneiform, Silver Spring, MD, U.S.A., 1997.

Autour

Claude Schryer. Empreintes Digitales, Montréal, Québec, Canada, 1997.

Consume Red

Ground-Zero. ReR Megacorp, Surrey, U.K.; Cuneiform, Silver Spring, MD, U.S.A., 1997.

Fabulous Drop

Curlew. Cuneiform Records, Silver Spring, MD, U.S.A., 1998.

L'ivresse de la vitesse (Intoxication by Speed)

Paul Dolden. Empreintes Digitales, Montréal, Québec, Canada, 1994.

Leone

Philippe Mion (livret de Philippe Minyana). Empreintes Digitales, Montréal, Québec, Canada, 1996.

More Encores

Christian Marclay. ReR Megacorp, Surrey, U.K., 1998.

Phoenix: The Music of Ernő Király

Ernő Király. ReR Megacorp, Surrey, U.K.; Cuneiform, Silver Spring, MD, U.S.A., 1997.

The Previous Evening

Fred Frith. ReR Megacorp, Surrey, U.K., 1998.

The ReR Quarterly: Vol. 4, No. 2

Various Artists. ReR Megacorp, Surrey, U.K.; Cuneiform, Silver Spring, MD, U.S.A., 1997.

S.O.D.

Otolithen (Päd Conca & Dirk Bruinsma). Cuneiform, Silver Spring, MD, U.S.A., 1997.

Books

Behind the Picture: Art and Evidence in the Italian Renaissance

Martin Kemp. Yale Univ. Press, New Haven, CT, U.S.A., 1998. 320 pp., illus. Trade, \$35.00. ISBN: 0-300-07195-7.

Bright Paradise: Victorian Scientific Travellers

Peter Raby. Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, NJ, U.S.A. 304 pp., illus. Paper, \$14.95. ISBN: 0-691-04843-6.

Courbet

James H. Rubin. Phaidon Press, London, U.K., 1997. 352 pp., illus. Paper, \$19.95. ISBN: 0-7148-3180-8.

Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature

Espen J. Aarseth. Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, Baltimore, MD, U.S.A., 1997. 203 pp., illus. Paper, \$14.95. ISBN: 0-8018-5579-9.

Early Christian and Byzantine Art

John Lowden. Phaidon Press, London, U.K., 1997. 352 pp., illus. Paper, \$19.95. ISBN: 0-7148-3168-9.

Greek Art

Nigel Spivey. Phaidon Press, London, U.K., 1997. 448 pp., illus. Paper, \$22.95. ISBN: 0-7148-3368-1.