

Press release

March 11th
April 29th, 2023Opening
Saturday, March 11th
from 11am to 8pm

The Ripper Spirals

William S. Burroughs

The cult that revolves around William S. Burroughs (1914-1997), his reputation as an author who was both a junkie and genius, his invention of the cut-up technique in Paris at the end of the 1950s, alongside Brion Gysin, his influence that endures through the work of generations of artists, musicians and even film directors such as Gus Van Sant, who invited him to take part in his movie *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989), all evidently lend each of his artistic works the status of a fetish object. Yet in order to better observe and understand what the author of *The Naked Lunch* (1959) has left before our eyes, we must go so much further than this state of idolatry.

Both close up and from a distance, the paintings “executed” by the American writer William S. Burroughs in Kansas, during the 1980s and after, seem to me to be the epitome of punk painting. Indeed, a friend of mine recently whispered in my ear that one of these “shotgun paintings” was blasted out by the singer Debby Harry of the group Blondie. There’s something wild about this abstract bad painting, these messy compositions and his somewhat tasteless palette—I can’t help but see and hear traces of Californian punk or the Beastie *Boys Sabotage* (1993), rather than the New York mythology that habitually clings to Burroughs’ needle-pocked skin. If I had to associate it with the work of another artist, I could see it exhibited alongside the perverse and noisy paintings of the German artist Jutta Koether with her *Bruised Grid* canvases that emerged from a difficult and introspective period of her life.

However, if we are really looking to establish a dialog between these paintings and the writer’s texts, we should undoubtedly turn towards his essay collection *Electronic Revolution* (1970). In this concise handbook for media sabotage, the writer evokes a rock festival, where hordes of young people mix together thousands of random recordings: political statements, music and news broadcasts as well as sexual grunts and the farts and belching of politicians, recorded secretly in their toilets. A festival of tape recordings, a sonic magma, a giant celebration of media-jamming, to short-circuit the repetitive and mendacious flow of cultural communication.

The *Shotgun Paintings* and Burroughs’ other artworks clearly belong to this sabotage operation: he prevents any direct and convenient communication between the paintings and their viewer, refusing any messaging, gluing (sometimes repeatedly) images from magazines to the canvases, saturating the spaces with marks; jamming is obviously the true *modus operandi* of these paintings. As for the holes made by the gunshots, they are there to interrupt the flow once again, yet at the same time open “doors” to a liberating beyond.

Not entirely by happy coincidence in the times we are experiencing, it was in a recent and masterful essay by the queer philosopher Paul B. Preciado *Dysphoria Mundi* (2022), that I found some enlightening and extremely contemporary pages concerning the American writer: “For Burroughs, these acts of sabotage had a therapeutic, almost organic purpose. They were intended to heal the social body: mass communication had generated a form of contamination, against which it was only possible to fight by intentionally hijacking the inscription machines. Electronic guerilla warfare was the only thing capable of ‘releasing the virus contained in the word and thus bringing about social chaos’.”¹

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“Language is a virus”: this declaration, found at the heart of Burroughs’ thought and work, is examined and reused by Preciado in a context of dysphoria, that is to say in reality, one of general disorder exacerbated by the Corona Virus pandemic. In fact, “today, we are probably better able to understand” this strange and viral theory about language that we must also extend to the visual language used in mass media and communication: writing (and by extension language, speech and communication) is always an infection. Yet Burroughs’ proactive proposals to deal with this contamination are even more crucial: “For Burroughs,” Preciado states, “the writer and activist’s task, was to attempt to use language as an inoculation, as a vaccine. Language has infected us and we can only be cured by the intentional hijacking of the semiotic machines that inhabit us,” and that includes turning them against themselves and against the poisonous power they exert on us and within us.

In our hyper-mediatized society, we are all spreaders, that is to say we are infected and trapped in the webs of the social networks, while spreading the media virus ourselves. Swimming against the current as always, Burroughs reminds us of the counter-force embodied by painting and artistic practice, with canvases that he originally made for his own personal mental hygiene, not for the benefit of a spectator, in a mix of quasi-automatic practice, agitated thought, anti-media therapy, acute paranoia and anti-establishment painting.

Jean-Max Colard

Translation: Chris Atkinson

1. Paul B. Preciado, *Dysphoria Mundi*, p. 72, Grasset, Paris, 2022.

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Jean-Max Colard is an art critic, exhibition curator and a specialist in contemporary French literature. He is currently head of the Spoken Word department at the Pompidou Center in Paris, where he has launched the Extra! festival of living literature and created the Bernard Heidsieck-Centre Pompidou literary prize. He has published several books including *Une Littérature d’Après: Cinéma de Tanguy Viel* (Les Presses du Réel, 2015) and *L’Exposition de mes Rêves* (Mamco, 2013).