

Playback on location

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We are living in the world of Burroughs' novels.¹

*What is the nature of an experimental action?
It is simply an action the outcome of which is
not foreseen.²*

Magnetic word dust

The writer, artist and agent provocateur William S. Burroughs was introduced to the cut-up technique by the artist Brion Gysin in 1959. Bourroughs adopted this new method of composition wholeheartedly, and it would come to play a key role in crafting the altered states of his novels.³ The 'expansion of consciousness' brought about by the cut-ups would, however, go far beyond the written word: from the first readymade sentence made up of newspaper cuttings casually laid out on a table,⁴ through to the tape recorder experiments described in *The Invisible Generation* and *The Electronic Revolution* (two key texts both written in 1966), we see a significant change of course in Burroughs' practice. Within a few years, he moved from the surface of the paper sheet to the stage of real action. // *The counter move is very simple – This is machine strategy and the machine can be redirected – Record for ten minutes on a tape recorder – Now run the tape back without playing and cut in other words at random – Where you have cut in and re-recorded words are wiped off the tape and new words in their place – You have turned time back ten minutes*

1 Kathy Acker quoted in Davis Schneiderman and Philip Walsh, eds., *Retaking the universe: William S. Burroughs in the age of globalization*, Pluto Press, London, 2004, p. 158.

2 John Cage, 'History of Experimental Music in the United States', in *Silence: lectures and writings*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, CT, 1961, p. 69.

3 'My own myth as an omniscient author writing in a timeless vacuum was exploded

when I first met Brion Gysin (...) the principal instigator of the cut-up. New words and new meanings emerged: cut words, new words come, sometimes the perfect word. Expansion of awareness emerged. (How random is random?'), William S. Burroughs in Chris Keledjian, ed., *Ports of Entry: William S. Burroughs and The Arts*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, 1996, p. 167.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 175.

and wiped electromagnetic word patterns off the tape and substituted other patterns – You can do the same with mind tape after working with the tape recorder – (this takes some experimentation) – The old mind tapes can be wiped clean – Magnetic word dust falling from old patterns.⁵

Other than representing a new approach from a formal and linguistic perspective, the tape recorder experiments marked a strong expansion in Burroughs' field of action; they accelerated the process in which the aesthetical blended with the political, causing the fusion of art and life. 'The ambition to dissolve the gap between the writer as sole active producer of meaning/truth and the reader as passive consumer – as Oliver Harris points out – is [now] based [...] on strictly material and pragmatic grounds.'⁶

Street playback

Tape recorders allowed for the cutting practice to be transposed into a new, concretely temporal dimension. // listen to your present time tapes and you will begin to see who you are and what you are doing here mix yesterday in with today and hear tomorrow your future rising out of old recordings you are a programmed tape recorder set to record and play back.⁷

Different from writing, tapes have a direct effect on reality: they allow the capturing of events, facts, thoughts, and the building of temporal sequences. In addition, they offer the possibility of rearranging pre-recorded fragments. // yes any number can play anyone with a tape recorder controlling the sound track can influence and create events.⁸ Even language takes on a different actuality, as it is captured in the moment of being spoken, and because of its direct relationship with the voice. But tape recorders are not just non-linear tools of production. Burroughs did indeed discover in the aural dimension a new contextual practice. // this is the invisible generation (...) you need a philips compact cassette recorder handy machine for street recording and playback you can carry it under your coat for recording (...) playback in the street will show the influence of your sound track in operation (...) carry my message all over london in our yellow submarine working with

street playback you will see your playback find the appropriate context (...) you will learn to give the cues you will learn to plant events and concepts.⁹

In situ

Undertaking *in situ* interventions played a fundamental role within the scope of attacking the established order of things. The cut-up process no longer played itself out just on the tape, but took effect in our real experience in a performative way. // Playback on location can produce definite effects. Playing back recordings of an accident can produce another accident.¹⁰ Sounds can in fact be captured, re-broadcast and injected in different places of everyday life: in the street, on the underground, in pubs, in hotel rooms, or in workplaces. // record your boss and co-workers analyze their associational patterns learn to imitate their voices oh you U be a pop-ular man around the office (...) record their body sounds from concealed mikes the rhythm of breathing the movements of after-lunch intestines the beating of hearts now impose your own body sounds and become the breathing word and the beating heart of that organization become that organization the invisible brothers are invading present time.¹¹

Politics of the soft machine

It was Gilles Deleuze who showed how the 'societies of discipline', which exerted their power in enclosed places such as prisons, schools and hospitals, went into crisis, and how a 'new monster', which made its way into the various areas of our everyday life, was spotted and called 'control' by Burroughs, before Foucault did the same.¹²

The actions that Burroughs proposed to alter the soundscape around us are thus to be read as a form of

5 William S. Burroughs, *Nova Express*, Grove Press, New York, 1992, p. 74.

6 Oliver Harris, 'Cutting up Politics', in Schneiderman and Walsh, op. cit., p. 186.

7 William S. Burroughs, 'The Invisible Generation', in *The Ticket That Exploded*, Grove Press, New York, 1992, p. 213.

8 Ibid., p. 207.

9 Ibid., p. 208.

10 William S. Burroughs, *The Electronic*

Revolution, Expanded Media Editions, Bonn, 1998. Available on-line at <http://archive.groovy.net/dl/elerev.html>.

11 Burroughs, 'The Invisible Generation', op. cit., p. 208.

12 Gilles Deleuze, 'Post-scriptum sur les sociétés de contrôle', in *Pourparlers*, Les Editions de Minuits, Paris, 1990, pp. 240–8. Available on-line at http://infokiosques.net/imprimersans2.php3?id_article=214.

resistance against this new all-pervading ability exerted by 'control'. They are about taking back control over reality, and taking possession of the tools that the media, politics and other structures of the capitalist society constantly use to reach their aims. // *I have said that the real scandal of Watergate is the use made of recordings. (...) What then do they do with them? ANSWER: THEY PLAY THEM BACK ON LOCATION. They play these recordings back to the target himself ir [sic] the target is an individual from passing cars and agents that walk by him in the street. They play these recordings back in his neighborhood. Finally they play them back in subways, restaurants, air ports and other public places.*¹³

Muzak Co., for example, is a company specialising in the development of techniques aimed at controlling our everyday listening, and that has been producing and selling 'background music' since the 1930s. Intended to increase production and consumption, Muzak sounds are most effective when played in specific places such as offices, lifts, supermarkets, airports or dentists' practices. // *PLAYBACK is the essential ingredient.*¹⁴

Burroughs' visions of modern society are as hallucinated as they are lucid. For him, the body is a (soft) machine that is subjected to the continuous and targeted assaults by control devices: // *a vast hungry host of parasites with many names but one nature being hungry and one intention to eat.*¹⁵

The ideas behind Burroughs' writing somewhat recall the concept of biopower as described by Michel Foucault. The latter too, in fact, referred to the body 'as a machine' on which various forms of 'power over life', developed as early as the eighteenth century, are exerted.¹⁶ To contrast 'the *anatomo-politics* of the human body', to use Foucault's terms, Burroughs established some forms of subversion and resistance that took place within the same territory. // *It was time to act (...) Equipped now with sound and image track of the control machine I was in position to dismantle it – I had only to mix the order of recordings and the order of images and the changed order would be picked up and fed back into the machine (...) Cut word lines – Cut music lines – Smash the control images –*

*Smash the control machine – Burn the books – Kill the priests – Kill! Kill! Kill!*¹⁷

The reality studio

Our sense of identity is entangled in the net of the society of control. In fact, as Timothy S. Murphy points out, subjectivity 'is a form of addiction to language, to the "I" of self-consciousness and identity as instrument of control'.¹⁸ The way out is thus one of fragmentation; a cut-up not only of the narrative order of reality, but also of the cognitive structures that keep our very identity together – those internal processes that are set and reproduced just like on tape. // *A tape recorder is an externalized section of the human nervous system. You can find out more about the nervous system and gain more control over your reaction by using a tape recorder than you could find out sitting twenty years in the lotus posture. Whatever your problem is just throw it into the machines and let them chew it around a while.*¹⁹

In the sense of subtracting reality from macro-narratives, Burroughs' operation is postmodern. Likewise, reality is a sort of tank – a big archive of samples, of endlessly spliceable fragments. // *Let us start with three tape recorders in The Garden of Eden. Tape recorder 1 is Adam. Tape recorder 2 is Eve. Tape recorder 3 is God, who deteriorated after Hiroshima into the Ugly American.*²⁰

Expanded social space

The new space for action was not only determined by the 'cut and splice' method the tape recorders offered, but also by their portability. Almost like a weapon, the tape recorder is a mobile device to be hidden under one's jacket or given out to an army of followers, to set off multiple chain reactions

13 Burroughs, *The Electronic Revolution*, op. cit.

14 Ibid.

15 Burroughs quoted by Serge Grünberg, 'la recherche d'un corps': langage et silence dans l'oeuvre de William S. Burroughs, Seuil, Paris, 1979, p. 47.

16 Michel Foucault, *La volonté de savoir*, Gallimard, Paris, 1976, pp. 182-3.

17 William S. Burroughs, *The Soft Machine*,

Grove Press, New York, 1992, p. 92.

18 Timothy S. Murphy, quoted in Jason Morelyle, 'Speculating Freedom: Addiction, Control and Rescriptive Subjectivity in the Work of William S. Burroughs', in Schneiderman and Walsh, op. cit., p. 75.

19 Burroughs, 'The Invisible Generation', op. cit., p. 213.

20 Burroughs, *The Electronic Revolution*, op. cit.

aimed at nullifying the effects of control over everyday life. // *I consider the potential of thousands of people with recorders, portable and stationary, messages passed along like signal drums, a parody of the President's speech up and down the balconies, in and out open windows, through walls, over courtyards, taken up by barking dogs, muttering bums, music, traffic down windy streets, across parks and soccer fields. Illusion is a revolutionary weapon.*²¹

Having seized the opportunity of mobile technology as a means for collective action, Burroughs, in this respect too, proved to be a visionary – the Nostradamus/Prophet of the electronic future, as Timothy Leary put it in 1987.²² The idea of coordinated happenings in public space, pre-dated what we know today as the smart mob phenomenon. Smart mobs are groups that exploit the coverage and accessibility of communication networks as a tool for social coordination, acting in areas ranging from the political to performance, or, more often than not, leisure.

It is not by accident that many of the actions by smart mobbers recall Burroughs' project aimed at breaking the cognitive and logical patterns connected with reality, although they operate in a different register. // *There is no true or real 'reality' – 'Reality' is simply a more or less constant scanning pattern – The scanning pattern we accept as 'reality' has been imposed by the controlling power on this planet, a power primarily oriented towards total control.*²³

In Rome, for instance, smart mobbers went into a bookshop and started asking the staff for information on books that don't exist,²⁴ while a website of one of these groups that organise so-called silent raves states, in Burroughs' style: 'Arrive at locations at stated time. Dance to the music of your choice. There is no time restriction so dance till you drop. Utilise the entire space. You will be one of many.'

Only recently, the artist Riccardo Benassi told me about how he had witnessed hundreds of headphone-wearing people dancing at Tate Modern's turbine hall on the edge of Doris Salcedo's 'crack in the floor' (*Shibboleth*, 2009). 'An impromptu sound piece, one of the best I've ever seen', Benassi said.²⁵

Yet, the private space of listening through headphones, which, paradoxically, is shared through the silent rave's collective action, remains, after all, a closed space. // *Take two opposed pressure groups – Record the most violent and threatening statements of group one with regard to group two and play back to group two – Record the answer and take to back to group one – Back and forth between opposed pressure groups – This process is known as 'feed back'.*²⁶ Though in a different way, Burroughs' actions connect to the idea of a constantly expanding and self-redefining social space that brings the balance of closed systems to a breaking point.

Word and image as parasitic invaders

Burroughs' reality is mostly made up of 'junk': dense heaps of words and images that pollute the neural tissues as if they were a toxic substance or a virus, thus corrupting the cognitive processes. // *Virus of rage hate fear ugliness swirling round you waiting for a point of intersection and once in immediately perpetrates in your name some ugly noxious or disgusting act sharply photographed and recorded becomes now part of the virus sheets constantly presented and represented before your mind screen to produce more virus word and image around and around it's all around you the invisible hail of bring down word and image.*²⁷

In such a landscape, in which the inner and outer worlds get mixed up, power is able to exert a form of total control. // *Nobody is permitted to leave the biologic theater which in this case is the human body.*²⁸ To escape from such a panopticon, in which our consciousness is locked up, one has to experience new paths of perception. Brion Gysin's *Dreamachine* was one example. This device emitted pulsating flashes to be

21 Ibid.

22 Timothy Leary, 1987, quoted by Oliver Harris, 'Cutting up Politics', in Schneiderman and Walsh, op. cit., p. 189.

23 Burroughs, *Nova Express*, op. cit. p. 53.

24 See 'Smart mob storms London', BBC, 8 August 2003, online news article, in <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/3134559.stm>.

25 Riccardo Benassi has participated by way of an instruction in The Invisible Generation project. On the 'silent rave' episode at Tate Modern, see also Benassi's *Letters from the Passenger Seat with No One at the Wheel*, Mousse Publishing, Milan, 2010.

26 Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded*, op. cit., p. 55.

27 Burroughs, *Nova Express*, op. cit., p. 73.

28 Burroughs, *ibid.*, p. 8 (footnote).

'seen' with closed eyes, as they act on the alpha brain waves. For Burroughs and Gysin, the *Dreamachine* was intended to operate at the same level as the media, as a 'counter-conditioning tool' (Branden W. Joseph) that was envisaged to be installed at 'every suburban home, in the spot formerly occupied by the television set' – as Gysin put it.²⁹ // *The control of the mass media depends on laying down lines of association. When the lines are cut the associational connections are broken.*³⁰

Coordinate points

It is necessary to pierce through the thin shell of images that enclose us – similar to when Truman, the main character of the film *The Truman Show*, finally decides to escape, and he ends up piercing through the painted scene of the huge film set in which he had, unbeknownst to him, always been living and by which he had been controlled. // – *nova criminals are not three-dimensional organisms (...) but they need three-dimensional human agents to operate – The point at which the criminal controller intersects a three-dimensional human agent is known as 'a coordinate point'.*³¹

With his practice, Burroughs aimed to 'remove the grey veil' that obfuscates reality. In the neo-futuristic tones of *The Invisible Generation*, he insisted on sound as a guerrilla tactic to transform our everyday environment. // *Storm the Reality Studio and retake the universe.*³²

Sound permeates places, causing space-time to expand. It spreads in all directions and influences our perception of our environment and events. More than written word and image, sound has the ability to pervade and break into the spaces we inhabit. // *programmed tape recorders are of course essential to any party and no modern host would bore his guests with a straight present time party in a modern house every room is bugged recorders record and play back from hidden mikes and loudspeakers phantom voices mutter through corridors and rooms word visible as a haze tape recorders in the gardens answer each other like barking dogs sound track brings the studio on set you can change the look of a city by putting your own sound track into the streets.*³³

The shift of perspective, the constant possibility of changing position with respect to reality is a central aspect of both Burroughs' poetics and the way he lived his life. When he was four years old, a little grey man appeared in his toy house. 'I wouldn't call [such type of experiences] hallucinatory at all. If you see something, it's a shift of vision, not a hallucination. You shift your vision. What you see is there, but you have to be in a certain place to see it.'³⁴

The Subliminal Kid

The sonic's potential as a subversive and destabilising means is suggested likewise by Jean-Luc Nancy's reflections on the act of listening. Nancy pointed at the wave nature of sound as an element able to break the strong link between shape and sense, to reverse 'the logic of presence as appearing, as phenomenality, or as manifestation, and thus as the visible face of a presence subsisting in self.' To listen, argued Nancy 'is to enter that spatiality by which, at the same time, I am penetrated.'³⁵ // *'THE SUBLIMINAL KID' moved in and took over bars cafés and juke boxes of the world cities and installed radio transmitters and microphones in each bar so that the music and talk of any bar could be heard in all his bars.*³⁶

'The sonorous is omnipresent', wrote Nancy, 'and its presence is never a simple being-there or how things stand, but is always at once an advance, penetration, insistence, obsession, or possession.'³⁷ // *'The Subliminal Kid' moved in seas of disembodied sound (...) he set up waves and his agents with movie swirled through all the streets of image and brought back street in music from the city and poured Aztec Empire and Ancient*

29 Brion Gysin as quoted by Branden W. Joseph in *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the arts after Cage – (a "minor" history)*, Zone Books, New York, 2008, p. 311.

30 Burroughs, *The Electronic Revolution*, op. cit.

31 Burroughs, *Nova Express*, op. cit., p. 56.

32 Burroughs, *ibid.*, p. 59.

33 Burroughs, 'The Invisible Generation', op. cit., p. 214.

34 Burroughs quoted in Allen Hibbard, *Conversations with William S. Burroughs*, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, MS, 1999, p. 182. Available on-line at http://newdawnmagazine.com.au/Article/William_S_Burroughs_20th_Century_Gnostic.html

35 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, English translation, Fordham University, New York, 2009, pp. 13–4.

36 Burroughs, *Nova Express*, p. 147.

37 Nancy, op. cit., p. 15.

Rome-Commuter or Chariot Driver could not control their word dust drifted from outer space-Air hammers word and image explosive bio-advance.³⁸

'It is a present in waves on a swell, not in a point on a line; it is a time that opens up, that is hollowed out, that is enlarged or ramified, that envelops or separates, that becomes or is turned into a loop, that stretches out or contracts'.³⁹ // and he had tape recorders in each bar that played and recorded at arbitrary intervals and his agents moved back and forth with portable tape recorders and brought back street sound and talk and music and poured it into his recorder array so he set waves and eddies and tornadoes of sound down all your streets and by the river of all language.⁴⁰

'The sonorous present is the result of space-time: it spreads through space, or rather it opens a space that is its own, the very spreading out of its resonance, its expansion and its reverberation.'⁴¹ // Word dust drifted streets of broken music car horns and air hammers – The Word broken pounded twisted exploded in smoke.⁴²

Playback of daily life as a critical practice

Burroughs created his performative actions in the form of instructions and calls to action. Such experiments (as he didn't consider them art) could be carried out by anyone. Thus, rather than their authorial value, what counts is their inherent potential to produce change: // everybody splice himself in with everybody else yes boys that's me there by the cement mixer.⁴³ As Mike Kelley wrote, Burroughs 'proposed the systematic recording and "playback" of daily life as a critical practice'.⁴⁴ It is about a praxis that allows for the recovery of an effective role within the present and that also implies a different consciousness of one's being in space. // Anybody can make cut-ups. It is experimental in the sense of being something to do. Right here right now. Not something to talk and argue about.⁴⁵

In the face of the passive acceptance of crystallised patterns describing the inner as much as the urban landscape, Burroughs proposed instead a means of involvement, agency, and production: // take a prerecorded sound track into the street

anything you want to put out on the sublim eire play back two minutes record two minutes mixing your message with the street.⁴⁶ In this, as Timothy S. Murphy has clearly pointed out, Burroughs was close to the methods used by the Situationists, with their 'total reorganization of the lived space around patterns of human affect and association.'⁴⁷ Burroughs and Guy Debord, in fact, shared not only the critical view of a society based on image and 'spectacle', but also a practice aimed at transforming everyday life. Both the Situationist *détournements* (here, the act of fragmenting and de-contextualising images) and Burroughs' cut-ups are, in keeping with Murphy, a 'reconceptualization and reconstruction of the human environment, especially the urban environment'.⁴⁸ // in the silent dawn, little grey men played in his block house and went away through an invisible door.⁴⁹

38 Burroughs, *Nova Express*, pp. 148–9.

39 Nancy, op. cit., p. 13.

40 Burroughs, *Nova Express*, p. 147.

41 Nancy, op. cit., p. 13.

42 Burroughs, *Nova Express*, p. 147.

43 Burroughs, 'The Invisible Generation', p. 212.

44 Mike Kelley, 'An Academic Cut-Up, in Easily Digestible Paragraph-Sized Chunks or THE NEW KING OF POP: DR. KONSTANTIN RAUDIVE', no date, available on-line at <http://www.mikekelley.com/academiccut.html>.

45 Burroughs and Brion Gysin quoted by Timothy S. Murphy, 'Exposing the Reality Film: William S. Burroughs Among the Situationists', in Schneiderman and Walsh, op. cit., p. 39.

46 Burroughs, 'The Invisible Generation', p. 208.

47 Timothy S. Murphy, 'Exposing the Reality Film: William S. Burroughs Among the Situationists', in Schneiderman and Walsh, op. cit., p. 41.

48 Ibid.

49 Burroughs, *Nova Express*, p. 72.