

radar: every posture is a pose, every hair and tissue of her being a contrivance at once self-fashioned and media-sensate.

Yet some turn to 'beauty' is important to 'Exposed', because it allows the introduction of art as aesthetics at the expense of art as politics. So it is that the exhibition becomes little more than a tour round the great photographers of art history – in this context, primarily Americans – and the graced and favoured of the contemporary art world. Too often what's proposed here as spontaneous and intrusive is posed and consensual; it is just proposed as art, not life. Nan Goldin's *Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, 1979-85, is an exposé of the micro-celebrities of the New York No-Wave. Yet Goldin's work, like Larry Clark's, rests upon the complicity of photographer and subject. *The Ballad*, originally, was shown in nightclubs where its subjects hung out to the morning and cheered their own projections. Goldin's bohemians, whether they are masturbating, shooting-up or only dancing, are self-consciously beautiful. The milieu they created was, in itself, a self-conscious palimpsest of imagined bohemias, including the bohemia of 1930s Paris pictured here by Brassai, another photographer with posing friends. As with the modern celebrity, cult status in bohemia pivots on the pose, without the poseur ever having read Roland Barthes and Craig Owens on the production of identity in the look of the other. But even when the subject doesn't know it is being captured, photographers often reintroduce a distancing beauty through their own style. Philip Lorca diCorcia's contemporary images from New York streets, just ordinary faces blown-up big in Fuji colour, still look – as with all his work – as if they were made in the studio.

In the era of high-modernity, to ride the New York subway was, on the evidence of this show, to almost inevitably be photographed by a camera in a shoe, or one with a trick lens that shot not what it seemed to be pointing at but a subject standing to the side. Playing in the streets of Brooklyn risked the covert attention of the documentary photographer. For Helen Levitt, as for Walker Evans, Weegee, Paul Strand (the man with the 90° lens), Ben Shahn, Robert Frank and Morris Engle, the modern city cut two ways, simultaneously a site of fascination and disgust on which the concealed camera offered politicised insight. And yet now the spectator looks at the lined, dirty face of a Manhattan stevedore or street vendor in a Strand print and remarks on their nobility, the beauty of the image. If the subject cannot supply it, we redress for ourselves the veneer stripped by our total access to the impossible, unreachable lives of others.

The ultimate metaphor for this is, of course, the stripper. In the strip club men gaze into the incomprehensible, untouchable lives of others – women – and into, if they're lucky, the fount of their own

origins. And if Courbet anticipated all this by painting *L'Origine du monde* in 1866, let's not forget that he had, already, photographic models. There is little of such explicit pornography here, however, despite it being the apotheosis of voyeurism. Instead there is a token odalisque by d'Olivier – photography aping Ingres rather than painting drawn from porn – and Belloccq as another American old-master. However, we do get Merry Alpern's grainy, fragmentary encounters of hookers and punters, and we get Susan Meiselas, behind the curtains in a variety of strip-joints, returning 'the look'. Rather than mapping the desiring self onto the impossible other, Meiselas puts us in the place of the stripper, proposing our look for hers. A similar act of intercalation, more explicit, can be found in Oliver Lutz's *The Lynching of Leo Frank*, 2009, which uses live video feed and infra-red technology to implicate the spectator in a historical catastrophe that art ignored. It is as near as 'Exposed' gets to cutting through its own aesthetic spectacle.

If 'beauty' is reasserted in the pose or becomes a varnish, applied by spectator or artist to subdue the rawness of the everyday, the average citizen gets no such privileges from the state. Especially not the protesting, dissenting citizen: the most 'political' photographs in this exhibition are covert shots of suffragettes, made by British spooks just before the First World War. Such photographs might, in a more thoughtful, less self-consciously aestheticised exhibition, have introduced a commentary on the emergence of the modern security state, the surveillance of its population promoted through the marketing of crisis among those surveyed. But then, of course, we would have drained all allure from the image and its subjects. ■

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## Dead Fingers Talk: The Tape Experiments of William S Burroughs

IMT Gallery London 28 May to 18 July

The centrepiece of this exquisitely staged show is two unpublished tape experiments by William Burroughs, made in the 1960s and 70s with his British assistant Ian Sommerville. Twenty-three artists, musicians, writers and curators were invited to respond to the tapes and the results are dense, rewarding and thoughtful. The highlight must be Burroughs's piece *Her Primrose Laundry*, 1966, a 22-minute two-channel experiment that opens with the smaltzy grandeur of Delibes ballet *Coppélia*, the story of a doctor who invents a life-size dancing doll. Much like the cut-up technique Burroughs pioneered in fiction (*Dead Fingers Talk* was his fifth novel, published in 1963, that recycled material from three previous books), this experiment cuts between dialogue from a TV series called 'Amos Burke – Secret Agent', concerning the search for an atomic bomb hidden inside a sculpture, and a dislocated exchange between Burroughs and Sommerville. Amid the dramatic countdown to nuclear annihilation, as the frenzied scientist works to defuse the bomb, Burroughs's voice from the other speaker is trying out tonal ranges as he repeats 'hello ... yes ... hello' in his round, resonant voice, over and over. If we use tone as the device to smuggle emotional meaning into the spoken word, here Burroughs sounds bored, excited, weary, faint, seductive, shocked, impatient or amused, with Sommerville imitating him, countering his tone, until

### Denis Beaubois

*In the event of amnesia  
the city will recall ...*

1996-97

video still

text reads: warning you  
may be photographed  
reading this sign





they both begin to laugh and Burroughs says: 'Stop. OK.' The TV investigation builds a violin-scored tension while the intimacy between the two men is hinted at in their colloquy that reveals the neophyte's admiration and awe. The final soundclip of the TV drama discloses that one of the characters, having survived the nuclear threat, is still unable to invite a Mexican woman into her home and is castigated by the hero for being prejudiced.

Humour and tenderness are not usually associated with Burroughs and are really only picked up by one of the few women in the show – Cathy Lane. In her sound piece *In Combat With...*, 2010, two or possibly three women, who sound like family members, talk animatedly over each other about the task of trying to record one's thoughts while preparing food. It veers from colloquial fun – 'What are you going to have the mushrooms on if you don't have a bit of toast?' – to Beckett-like absurdity – 'Am I thinking anything when I'm slicing mushrooms?' One of them starts whistling, adding: 'I could say "words, words, words", while I was whistling.' This last statement is chopped up, intercut, repeated until the voice concludes, 'Oh, you're still here', as if to the listener. The piece captures those slightly barmy familial situations where verbal communication is sabotaged by habitual behaviours of blocking, interruption and inattention. In another sound piece, *Let the Voice in*, 2010, Scanner has slowed snippets of Burroughs's recordings down to a growl. If voice is a form of separation and can be construed as the phantom projections of the body's presence and the identity of the self, then here the voice sounds as if it remains heavily corporealised, as if speaking through the mass of flesh, blood, bone and water the body carries. Alma/Joe Ambrose's spoken word piece *He Also Took the Boat*, 2010, uses repetition and a mesmeric musical beat to invoke the opiate days in Tangier where Burroughs lived briefly in 1954. 'I took a Yugoslavian freighter to Tangier, reading Kerouac ... He also took that boat.' The track pays homage to Paul Bowles and Brion Gysin and the refrain works up into a eulogy for the Beat Generation.

But for all the talk about intertextuality and Burroughs's experiments exemplifying an earlier version of contemporary fascination with interactivity, the exhibition on the whole is nostalgic for the tape recorder and analogue sound. Although technology is on the brink of perfecting the nuances of the voice so that it sounds utterly human, vocal computerisation cannot produce a voice that alters its emotional tone in response to human input. Perhaps this is why advancements in vocal digitisation have produced so few radically new interpretations of the voice itself. Some of the sound and image grab techniques used here have been



William Burroughs's self-portraits c1965

around since the early days of video editing in the 1970s. Jorg Piringer's *Sorted Speech*, 2010, which mashes up Barack Obama's speeches, while virtuoso in its alphabetical precision, is not revolutionary. Rather than such a sincere homage, some of the artists might have cared to take on Burroughs's dictum: 'Smash the control images. Smash the control machine.' ■

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The BFI Gallery is supported by LOTTERY FUNDED

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