

**WILLIAM S.
BURROUGHS**

All out of time and into space

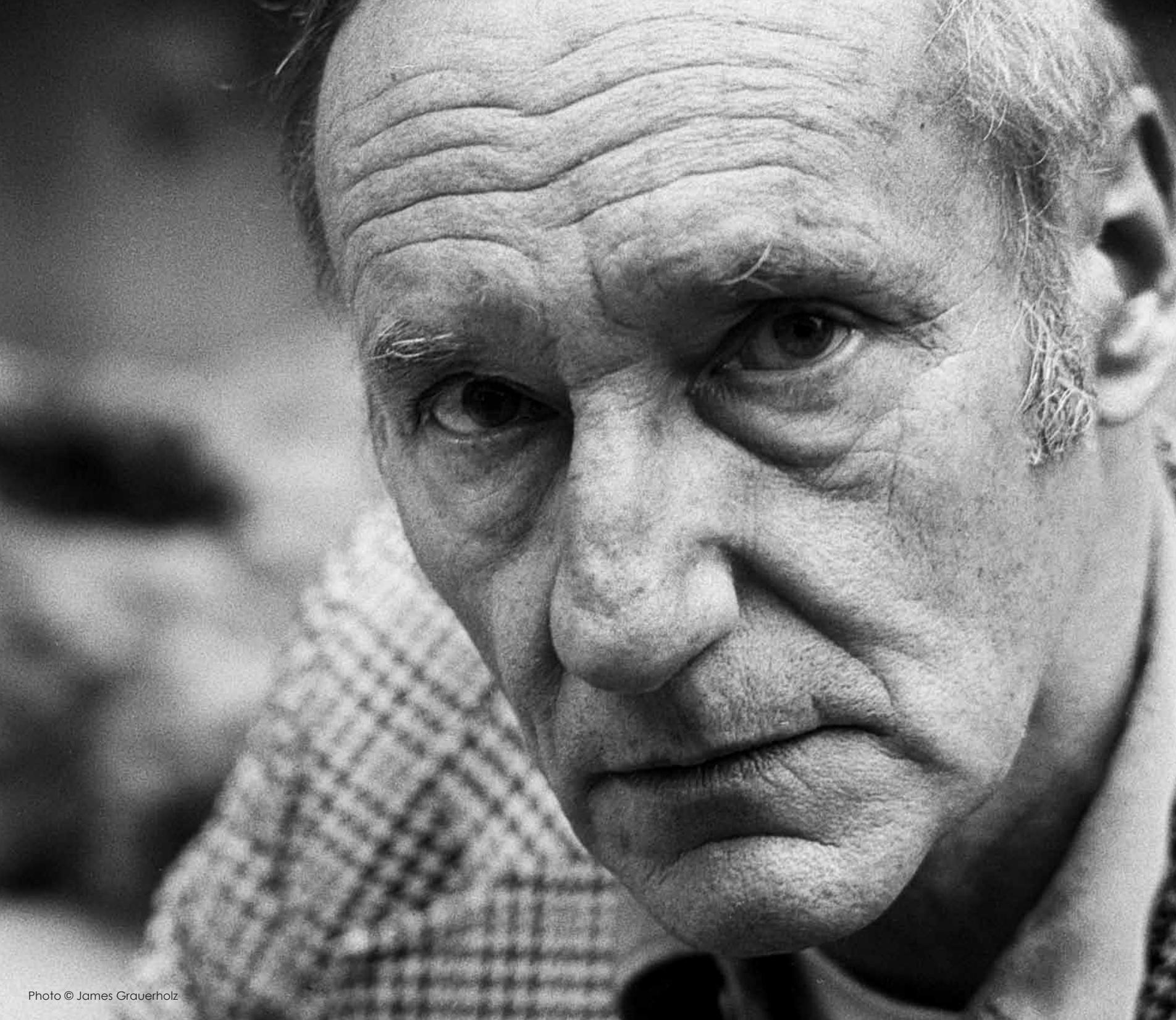


Photo © James Grauerholz

One Gallant Man

William S. Burroughs created a distinctive style which infused his art, his nonlinear fiction, his laser-sharp essays, his attire and his voice. You hear a millisecond of his voice and you know just who speaks. The producer encodes his identity in his work.

His fiction exposes techniques of conditioning systems; his art explores intelligence. He looked for allies in the world around him, and they appear in his artworks. No wonder - to maintain the requisite focus and uncompromising psychological experimentation that feeds prodigious intellectual and artistic output, one needs allies, wherever and whomever they may be.

Burroughs produced visual art throughout his adult life: collage, photomontage, films, drawings. In visual diaries he noted juxtapositions of personal with public events.

When Brion Gysin died in 1986, Burroughs took up painting with a passion. Burroughs lived the last 10 years of his long life, happily and productively in Lawrence, Kansas, writing and making art.

BAG OF TRICKS Often called the father of the Beat Movement, Burroughs did not associate his work with the Beats, although Ginsberg, Kerouac and Corso were personal friends. "We're not doing at all the same thing, either in writing or in outlook." Burroughs pioneered methodologies to deconstruct mechanics of institutionalised control systems that corrupt inborn intelligence.

Cut-ups, developed with Brion Gysin, is the most known of his conceptual contributions. It is a technique charged with revolutionary power of random recombination, though it isn't the only wand in Burroughs' bag of tricks.

He developed an array of idiosyncratic artistic practices to reveal interior worlds, and other, often non-human, worlds. Intelligence resides everywhere and human perception is designed to recognise intelligence. When Burroughs finished a work, he would scrutinise it, sometimes with a magnifying glass, peering through marks and patterns to seek out allies. He said that there are no such things as

friends, there are only allies, possibly referring to the dynamic and ambiguous histories of human interaction.

Scrying, a general term for oracular practices, means seeing, or peeking. Burroughs peeked into worlds that remain invisible to dwellers of the quotidian. Maybe citizens of hidden worlds did peek back at him, as he suspected.

THE MAN IN A TOP HAT A feature of his artworks is that they are populated. Creatures, celestial bodies, ghostly trajectories, emotive faces abound. Viewing some paintings, it's as if you looked into a microscope and viewed a drop of your saliva on a slide, seeing the organisms who live inside but to whom you have not been introduced - an alien, yet intimate, relationship.

Or it's as if the stream of people passing you on the sidewalk of a major city appear just for you. Their psychic trajectories trail like the tail of a comet or the wake of a boat, the smoke from a candle flame or a ciphered genealogy. In one drawing, a lone figure sports a top hat; in a painting, if you look closely, you can spy the same figure in a tangle of shapes but this time riding a bicycle. Top Hat Man keeps turning up on that sidewalk dream, day after day - why? Are you suffering from amnesia about your friend, a dream in a Top Hat?

Burroughs loved the rare, the exotic, the uncanny, the underdog, the secret, the dark, rogues, lemurs, stray cats, pirates, and artists. He had a high tolerance for ambiguity. He loved life. What's known as the self is in fact a multiplicity and he understood that no one is a unity, but a swarm of identities, held together by attention and acts.

Who's to say non-standard worlds are not saturated with real intelligences with the diversity and splendour of the natural world? Children are born pantheists; Burroughs maintained this childlike openness, and he stalked intelligence like a naturalist or ethologist does, in what E.O. Wilson called the naturalist trance. His paintings are magical snares for mysterious beings.

James Grauerholz, in his essay “The Art of William S. Burroughs”, quotes from text for the 1987 Tony Shafrazi exhibition: “The shotgun blast releases the little spirits compacted into the layers of wood, releases the colors of the paints to splash out in unforeseeable unpredictable images and patterns.”

Burroughs’ art practice was an expedition into the unknown, always his favourite destination. A love for increased complexity, chaos and potentiality appear in splinters from small explosions in the shotgun pieces, in the rust or decomposition in others. Wherever he goes or whomever he meets on the way, he does not pretend to explain or interpret in verbal sequences. He recognises and apprehends, like a good private detective. His art has simultaneous strangeness and familiarity, both *déjà* and *jamais vu*.

Some paintings portray common hallucinations. They may contain zigzags or swirls as in a migraine aura which, incidentally, are experienced by nearly 20% of the population yet typically unreported. People may see fortification spectra, Lilliputian dense tiny worlds that crawl or fly, floating moiré patterns. Other visions are hypnagogic, experienced just before falling asleep or upon awakening, but rarely fixed into memory. Daydreams are seldom given due credit for their influence, except by poets, mystics, musicians, artists or theoretical physicists. Yet every child builds her world around them.

THE ONEIRA Burroughs explored the interstices of human perception - the relation and the gap between image and word, between altered and banal states, between other and self, between sleep and waking. Oneiric diversity is as complex as the biodiversity of a tropical forest. Burroughs does not interpret or explain in verbal sequences. He thinks in images, and even as a writer, the images came first. Some paintings contain grids akin to the Moroccan qabalistic tic-tack-toe that inspired Brion Gysin’s grid paintings. They’re reminiscent of Widmanstätten patterns, criss-cross latticing seen in meteorite sections.

In New York City in the ‘40’s, William underwent analysis with the psychiatrist and hypnotherapist, Lewis R. Wolberg, M.D. As a result of these sessions over two years, he experienced an overlay of altered states - dreams, hypnosis and drug effects. This introduced him to complexity of consciousness which daily life compacts into an illusion of self-unity.

Some of his works are cinematic frames from an ongoing alchemical process. In others, appearances are made of mysterious *takwin*: proto life, alien life, or barely recognisable human forms and faces, which witness, assert, recede, swim, signal, float. Our brains map and identify, in order to navigate the unknown, and based on testing prior knowledge. The painting is like a slide stained by a chemist to highlight the underlying forms.

These oneira appear and disappear, indicating trajectories and timelines of which the viewer is unfamiliar. Sometimes they appear precisely to convey a specific message. Other times they meander through a frame which one recognises as ‘their’ world. They are akin to, but more familiar than, passers-by or extras in a film. He renders these creatures for permanent view.

MADAGASCAR “All out of time and into space” refers to Burroughs’ concern with ecological crisis in the age of space exploration. He aimed to create a mythology appropriate for the space age. Burroughs calls himself an “explorer of psychic areas, a cosmonaut of inner space... to achieve complete freedom from past conditioning is to be in space.”

Burroughs’ Earth is a planet of complex biodiversity, damaged and impoverished by sadomasochistic impulses of a humanity conditioned by power-possessors and the advertising industry. Known for explorations of the dark side of human nature and his peerless parodies and satires, this interest in ecology, a core part of his identity, has been overlooked. Burroughs explored the cultural and psychological mechanics of human-instigated ecological catastrophe, accompanied by mass extinction of species. Beyond cultural judgements of good and bad, he was at heart a moralist who knew evil when he saw it. And he saw it everywhere.

“The processes set in inexorable motion by the Industrial Revolution, with its total commitment to quantity and quantitative criterion, are just beginning to reveal themselves as the Death Trap that they always were.”¹

1. William S. Burroughs, 1993, *The Adding Machine: Selected Essays*. New York: Arcade Publishing.





The Prison Scribe, ca. 1990.
Paint and photo collage on Cadillac Paper,
double sided, 58.4 x 44.5 cm.
Photo: ONUK.

Burroughs could not bear the idea that anyone would suffer pain. He identified with patients of burn units, he identified with the endangered lemurs of Madagascar. Lemurs are luminous creatures with flared paper-thin ears and otherworldly bejewelled eyes, who stand on two legs reminiscent of a man. In his novella *Ghost of Chance*, he mused whether humans could ever coexist in harmony with other life. Who are we really, this human species? Are we suffering from neoteny - paused or halted development? What is a human destiny that would be life-enhancing, not destructive to other beings? Perhaps clues to that destiny will be found in dreams, in what's called 'subconscious', in altered states.

In thrall to the world market, humanity accelerates its rapacious behaviour, using rationalisation in the name of rational thought to justify the ravages of predatory capitalism. In his life and work, Burroughs deconstructed logic and rationalism to pursue other strategies of thought. But far from anti-scientific, he studied science, attended scientific conferences, and followed discoveries. He honoured the objective consciousness and conscience that true science can spawn, which could be had by anyone, anywhere on earth with some effort on their part.

His life was a cohabitation of inner and outer realities, a dissolution of the false dichotomy between experimenter and experiment, the essence of both art and science. A populist, he had faith that anyone could achieve inner and outer liberation. He detested the concept of social class, which was his problem with Tibetan Buddhism and its lamas and rinpoches.

Nevertheless, the man himself was a class act,
a prince among thieves.

Kathelin Gray
November 2012





*The Ripper Strikes Again: Note Two
Bobbies in Upper Left of Picture, ca.
1990. Paint and collage on paper,
58.5 x 44 cm. Photo: ONUK.*

Untitled, 1988.
Spray paint on paper,
71 x 55.5 cm.
Photo: ONUK.





Untitled, ca. 1988.

Spray paint and gunshots on metal sign, 36 x 50.5 cm.

Collection of William S. Burroughs Trust.

Photo: ONUK.



Untitled, ca. 1992.
Ink and spray paint
on file folder, 30 x 48 cm.
Photo: ONUK.