

Ger Zielinski

On Observant Artists and Their Keepers

A review of

Adler, Dan, Jennifer Allen, Bill Burns, Dannys Montes de Oca Moreda, Jennifer Matotek and Stuart Reid, eds. Burns, Bill. 2015. *Hans Ulrich Obrist Hear Us: Featuring Bill Burns*. London, UK: Black Dog Publishing; Toronto: YYZBooks.

Burns' recent book stems in part from an exhibition of the same name curated by Jennifer Matotek (Regina) and Stuart Reid (St. Catharines) that toured in 2013, but it but retains elements from the artist's wider continuing multimedial project, including drawings, wooden carvings, work gloves with curator signatures,



Fig. 1. Bill Burns. *Adam Weinberg Remember Me*, 2014. Air advertising banner over Miami Art Fair. 2 m x 40 m. © Bill Burns. Courtesy of the artist.

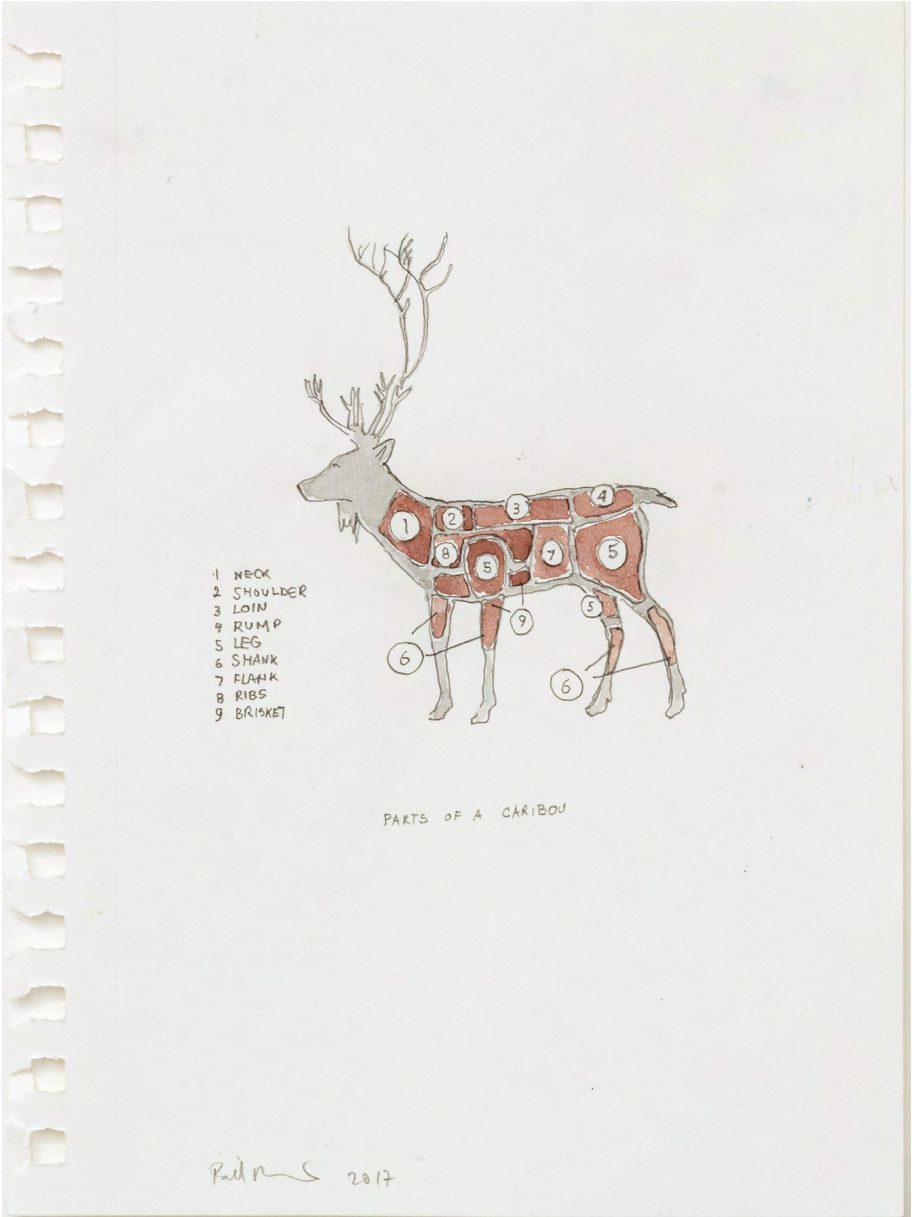


Fig. 2. Bill Burns. *The Trading Project (Caribou Meat Cuts)*, 2017. Watercolour. 16 cm x 20 cm. © Bill Burns. Courtesy of the artist.

photographs, watercolour paintings and so forth, that spill onto various digital media platforms. In very brief terms, the book and larger project together address the precarious relationship between artists and their art world gatekeepers from an artist's point of view and experience. The book qua artist's book takes on an epistolary form that combines memoir, four essays by art writers and curators, and eight sections dedicated to Burns' artwork. The book itself is co-published by Toronto's YYZBooks, associated with the YYZ Artists' Outlet, and London's Black Dog Publishing, both highly respected publishers of artist's and other books.

Canadian artist Bill Burns has had a long, established international career. He studied at Goldsmiths, University of London and has had exhibitions at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin, New York City's Museum of Modern Art, and the Seoul Museum of Art, among others. He is perhaps best known for his widely toured decade-long project *Safety Gear for Small Animals* (1994–2004), a fictional miniature corporation that produces protective apparel and prosthetics for animals.¹

In the book's foreword, curators Matotek and Reid write that Burns' work "deals with longing—longing for success, for assistance, for recognition, for a different type of world" (24), desires common to artists worldwide. The curators understand the work as moving beyond institutional critique and note that "in brazenly spelling out his own prayers and aspirations, Burns asks the viewer to contemplate what we



Fig. 3. Bill Burns. *Okwui Enwezor Graciously Guide Us*, 2014. Acrylic sign on wooden trestle. 10 m x 3 m x 1 m. © Bill Burns. Courtesy of the artist.



ONE DAY, JUST OVER TWO YEARS AGO, SOMEONE WHO I DID NOT KNOW AT ALL, SENT ME A PERSONAL MESSAGE ON FACEBOOK. THESE MESSAGES ARE KNOWN AS PMs. I WAS IN THE SUB-ARCTIC AT THE TIME. THE WOMAN, WHOSE TONE WAS JAUNTY, ASKED ME HOW SALES OF MY BOBBLE HEAD DOLLS WERE GOING. ALARM SET IN. I KNEW THAT PEOPLE ESPECIALLY STRANGERS DON'T ASK ABOUT SALES RECORDS. I BEGAN TO OVERSLEEP AND EAT SALTY LICORICES FROM FINLAND. THE WOMAN IN QUESTION SAID SHE WAS WRITING FROM PARIS. NOT TOO LONG AFTER I GOT A THREATENING MESSAGE FROM HOU HANRU. HE WAS UPSET AND ASSURED ME THAT OTHER CURATORS INCLUDING HANS ULRICH OBRIST, ADAM WEINBERG, ROSELEE GOLDBERG, BEATRIX RUF, AND OKWUI ENWEZOR, WOULD AGREE WITH HIM. HE WANTED MY BOBBLEHEADS REMOVED FROM THE MARKET. MY NECK BEGAN TO ACHE.

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Fig. 4. Bill Burns. *The Story of the Curator, the Bobblehead Dolls, the Lawsuit, and the Empty Threats*, 2017. Watercolour. 22 cm x 34 cm. © Bill Burns. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 5. Bill Burns. *Old Schools, Old Art Shows, and Old Flames*, 2017. Felt pennants. 55 cm x 24 cm each. © Bill Burns. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 6. Bill Burns. *Great Curators of The World Bobblehead Dolls*, 2014–2015. Acrylic and stone resin. 15 cm high each. © Bill Burns. Courtesy of the artist.

value, why we value it, and what it is we truly long for” (24). This work continues, and an exhibition was recently shown at Toronto’s MKG127 gallery in 2017.²

In his chapter “Hans Ulrich Obrist Hear Us,” Burns furnishes a breathless account of how “he” became and strives to remain an artist. His history begins with an admission of “holes” in his memory (35) as he sketches his early rural life, authoritarian father, conservative Roman Catholic upbringing, experience of Cold War scares, the family’s business selling church goods, and the eventual death of his father from his second heart attack. The title itself, “Hans Ulrich Obrist Hear Us,” among the other slogans used throughout the project, borrows its form from Roman Catholic texts, albeit secular in content; for example, the opening of the Loreto Litanies makes a series of pleas:

Lord have mercy.
Christ have mercy.
Lord have mercy.
Christ hear us.
Christ graciously hear us.

Burns hails celebrity curators throughout his project through his pleas for professional recognition and help. Moreover, the narrator partitions the gatekeepers in the art world into one of three categories: “those who have helped me, those who have wronged me, and those in whom I still have hope” (222), echoing again a religious-like phrasing. Much of his essay recounts unfortunate encounters with a selected list of art world players who somehow wronged and disappointed the narrator-artist.

Later in the text Burns cites art critic and Kleinian psychotherapist Jeanne Randolph and the notion of “agitated aphasia,” which he as the narrator clarifies as his own memory blockage over the memory holes (52) that he had mentioned earlier. This admission on the part of the narrator appears to signal artistic freedom to deviate from any simple autobiography or history.

Havana-based critic and curator Dannys Montes de Oca Moreda writes in the preface, “Bill Burns: Like a Crystal Ball...,” about the biographical relations between the artist’s childhood experiences and his approach to making art. Art historian Dan Adler addresses in his essay “Service with a Smile and a Smirk: Bill Burns and the Brown-Noser” the nature of satire in Burns’ work and brings out the relation between artist as sycophant and reverant. He contends that Burns “does narrate the brown-noser’s wholehearted attempts at creative and spiritual fulfillment. But this character is always compromised by egos, by frustrations, by interferences, distractions, odd forays, and failures” (117).

Eight chapters are dedicated to different series associated with the “Hans Ulrich Obrist Hear Us” project. “The Meeting of the Board (after William Burroughs and Brion Gysin)” includes a photograph of a mock board of directors with the names Hans Ulrich Obrist, Iwona Blazwick, François Pinault, David Zwirner and Eli Broad, all major art curators or collectors, chalked on a small blackboard, while other images make reference to Burns’ childhood and his continuing relations to animals and nature in his artwork. An early section, “Excerpts from the Artist’s Life in Pictures,” contains a series of watercolour paintings with annotated texts that appear to illustrate the artist’s own essay. The images playfully depict moments wherein animals and nature are described as the heroes and the celebrity curators as *maladroit*. Later in the book, “The Museums and the Signs” brings out a series of pleas. We see signs placed above art museums with such statements as “Hans Ulrich Obrist Priez Pour Nous,” “Iwona Blazwick Entrega-Me,” “Beatrix Ruf Watch Over Me” and “Adam Weinberg Help Me,” among others.

“The Bobblehead Collection,” similarly, depicts art world celebrity curators and museum directors in the parodic form of the lowly children’s toy bobblehead. Regarding the mobility required in the contemporary art world, “The Hotels, Airports, and Train Stations” provides a series of photographs of moments of waiting in transit, while “The Celebrity Glove Collection” furnishes a set of simple white work gloves with the name of a celebrity art world player stitched onto each. The quest for the recognition of the artist’s labour in relation to the celebrity’s power is a common thread throughout the project. To be sure, the project has a wide diversity of media and forms, brought into relation through its overall theme on the artist seeking recognition from the saintly set of celebrity art world gatekeepers.

Alongside the book version, Burns’ Instagram feed (@billburnspictures) circulates photographs from his ever-accumulating collection of images associated with this project, including his responses to the apparent threat of a lawsuit from

representatives of Hou Hanru over the use of the curator's face without permission. Burns deftly integrated this unexpected turn of events into his project by placing a small customized bag over the curator's bobblehead to obscure his identity, but also created numerous drawings in response pleading his case and expressing his heightened anxiety over the threat of legal action.

When I first starting reading the book, I thought of Jorge Luis Borges' innovative reviews of fictional books in his 1944 collection *Ficciones*. They were not fiction books or books of fiction, but rather fictional books, namely ones that had never been written but only imagined. While Burns' narrator tells his story, real names, people and events become clear, unlike with Borges' plausible counter-factuality. The accompanying essays offer a variety of takes on the character represented throughout: who is this "I" that Burns writes? We have Burns the living artist and Burns the character, and we must permit artistic (and literary) licence and sleight of hand. To be sure, Burns' project is in part a reflection on the ethics of the art world from the standpoint of the artist. We read of many trials and tribulations that the artist survives, particularly false promises by curators and critics and the consequent disappointment and altered career expectations. The more contemporary novel *I Love Dick* (1997) and recent television miniseries of the same name (2016–) seem a more appropriate comparison to Burns' book. The American artist and writer Chris Kraus stitches together a semi-fictional-semi-autobiographical memoir. Instead of found letters, newspaper clippings and diary entries, among other documents in epistolary novels, the form of artist's books such as Kraus' and Burns' is always already a hybrid of texts: namely, the foreword, the artist's statement on life work, assorted essays on the artist's work, and photographs of installations and other work. Reminiscent of Kraus' novel, Burns' artist's book³ compiles a wide variety of texts and images, each by the artist or an invited curator or critic, and exposes relations in the art scene as experienced by the narrator-artist.⁴

Although not conventionally academic, Burns' book would serve well any scholar researching cultural and artistic production and its complexity. It may be understood as an accompaniment to the work more commonly read in the areas of sociology and cultural studies, such as Howard Becker's sociology of the art world (1982) and Pierre Bourdieu's theories of distinction and the field of cultural production (1993). However, these works miss Burns' fine-grained, wry, emphatic and even affective fragmented narrative told from the artist's point of view. The vulnerable and wronged narrator-artist pulls together a sophisticated satire, if we go along with Adler's interpretation, of the art world and its hagiography of celebrity players and gatekeepers, as well as observant obsequious artists. Burns offers us through his performance of pleas an intelligent fresh take.

Notes on the Contributor

GER ZIELINSKI writes on contemporary art and cinema. He received his PhD from McGill University and was a postdoctoral research fellow at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. For his project on cinematic cities and sexuality, Zielinski held a summer residency at the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal.

Notes

1. For more on the artist's *Safety Gear for Small Animals* project, see his dedicated website at http://billburnsprojects.com/?page_id=128.
2. *The Bill Burns Show (Part 3)* can be found under "past exhibitions" at the gallery's website at <http://www.mkg127.com/>.
3. Beyond the formal and thematic relations between the books, there is the contingent connection of Sylvère Lotringer, Kraus' former husband, who is also acknowledged by Burns as a supporter of his project (222).
4. Another possible comparison would be Julia Kristeva's faintly disguised tell-all novel *The Samurai* (1992), on Paris' intellectual scene.

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