

Hans Ulrich Obrist Hear Us: Featuring Bill Burns, Bill Burns, Dan Adler, Jennifer Allen, Dannys Montes de Oca Moreda (contributors)

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A title that extends its work's content and not merely encapsulates it is always an indication of a well-conceived piece. The book cover of *Hans Ulrich Obrist Hear Us* states under its big, bold capitalized title, 'Featuring Bill Burns', suggesting it is the star curator who initiated this publication, which in turn highlights the Canadian artist. To the reader's surprise, it turns out to be an artist book that indeed 'features' Burns' work, but is largely conceived *by* him, too. Invoked in a series of artworks as if calling to, Obrist along with other influential curators, rather than an editor or a contributor satirically fulfills the role of the Lord.

If the mountain won't come to Muhammad, Muhammad must go to the mountain, so why not assert oneself? One of Burns' strategies involves '...having yourself paged in public places along with the name of someone important like Beatrix Ruf or Hans Ulrich Obrist' (63), as the witty eponymous cover story has it. The book cover does exactly this, and uses the formula used in popular music to turn the spotlight on an upcoming artist 'featuring' in the song (or rather, music video) of an established star. It covers an artist book that reflects on power and (in)dependency in an art world that moves forward at the forefront of a global, high-end culture industry.

It has become widely understood that contemporary art operates within a paradigm of personality cult.¹ Burns enriches modalities of institutional critique with a reading of this hegemony of public image by appropriating and reversing a number of the latter's recurrent motifs such as self-staging, sacrosanct veneration and self-boasting, (fictionalized) (auto)biography, allegory, and personification. Accompanied by an introduction by Dannys Montes de Oca Moreda, two essays elaborating on Burns' work by Dan Adler and Jennifer Allen, and a survey of Burns' recent work, the abovementioned text and a series of drawings (*Excerpts from the Artist's Life in Pictures*) constitute the central diptych of the book. They complement one another: some drawings are illustrations of anecdotes in the exquisitely written and often hilarious faux

¹ Recent reflections on this tendency include: Barolsky (2010), Graw (2010), *Texte zur Kunst* (2016), Van Winkel (2013), Walker (2003).

autobiographical text in the tradition of illustrious – albeit less discursive – precursors such as Salvador Dali's or Andy Warhol's self-performing prose. ²

Burns' implicit counter-proposal to these and contemporary celebrities is his self-staging as an anti-hero, having grown up in the bosom of rural catholic Canada (Saskatchewan?) to be a modest success artist, and longing for recognition. The story is complemented by erudite and virtuoso writing, where understatement combines with exaggeration. The artist's birth, for example, is shrouded at once in saintliness and mediocrity. Nuns convene a novena at the child's birth in order to thwart his mother's aim to call him Valentino. (He was born on the Feast of Saint Valentine) 'As it turned out, I was christened "Wilfrid," after a bishop who was also my godfather. The moniker "Bill" took effect immediately, since it was determined that this name might lead to confusion between me and my father, whose name was also Wilfrid' (35). Besides employing impeccable deadpan, Burns satirizes a tradition of romanticizing artist's names – think of Picasso, who took on his mother's family name after judging 'Pablo Ruiz' too quotidian for a genius. In the story that follows, the text ties into another tradition, of romanticizing the artist's youth – going at least as far back as Giorgio Vasari's *Vite*. While less heroically so, Burns lays out the precedents for the interests and motives of his professional art practice, notably, explorations of nature, animal life, and religion.

The appropriation of prayer that gives the book and the text their title exists as a series of photographic works, printed in the book. Star curators are called upon in devotional litanies, through signs on top of iconic museums ('Beatrix Ruf Watch Over Me' adorns Hamburger Bahnhof) and airplane banners (Hou Hanru is asked to 'deliver us', over Art Basel Miami Beach). These and other works reflect upon the power system of the art world and the inevitable inferiority it suggests to lesser gods. This industrial structure encourages an attitude of brown-nosing, as both contributing essayists ironically refer to Burns' memoir. In a series of pictures of 'bobble head' action figures Adam Weinberg, RoseLee Goldberg, and others, are reframed as flimsy gods doubling as jokey-looking kids' toys. This connects the 'historical, religious, and political as analogous and converging ways of understanding the geopolitics of subjectivity', as Montes de Oca Moredes proposes in her introduction.³

Such juxtaposition of playfulness and eloquence is one of Burns' trademarks (see for example his mid-1990s series of mini-garments entitled, *Safety Gear for Small Animals*). But they also bring to mind of the use of satire and fiction as literary devices in recent books that stage art

² See for example Dali's *The Secret Life of Salvador Dali* (1942), *Diary of a Genius* (1964), and Warhol's *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)* (1975).

³ For an elaboration on commodity culture, ideology, spectacle, and the cultural industry in the context of religious appropriation of modern capitalist culture, see: Lütticken 2009.

world personae as godlike figures. Charles Saatchi's *Be the Worst You Can Be* (2013) is just one of the books in which the advertising mogul turned art dealer attains a merciless kind of heroism for himself, not despite but because of his witty arrogance. A more vital reference for *Hans Ulrich Obrist Hear Us*, however, is the 1966 artist book *Polke/Richter Richter/Polke*.⁴ Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter position themselves as personifications of 'the artist' as an utterly quotidian, almost silly, domestic human being. Satirizing the public persona of the artist as a romantic, earth-saving hero, they discursively reframe the artist against the background of trivial consumerism and cold-war politics, quite plausibly implicitly targeting the rising mystical star of their acquaintance Joseph Beuys. While the latter employed nature as a fundamental condition for both his fictional autobiography and the material reality of his practice in an attempt to reconstruct past and present realities, Burns' affinity with nature is employed as a demystification of the artist as well as an allegorical mechanism.

Burns' *Excerpts from the Artist's Life in Pictures*, stand out in this respect. They are emblems with inscribed mottos, where animals and art world stereotypes are enacted and re-enacted. 'I immediately recognized the body language of a Kunsthalle director' (76), states one. Curators come across as scientific observers doing fieldwork, describing and reproducing species and specimens of flora and fauna as they would in the field. 'The fact that curators are fond of ungulates has proven an enormous benefit to me. Moose standing in marshes has become one of my specialties' (66), reads another. Again, the anti-hero persona proves a fine device for reflecting on the difficult balance between the art world imperative of self-staging and its dependence on curators and collectors: 'The plan was to impress the collector's companion with my knowledge of mushrooms and varieties of flora, but she reminded me that mushrooms are not flora' (89).

Both Adler and Allen's essays included in the book allow the reader to understand Burns' work as deeply allegorical. Adler's essay disentangles the ways in which themes of nature, the art world, and religion are woven together by overt and covert modes of irony; from tragic comedy via 'the central Kafka joke' to satire. Jennifer Allen insightfully asserts how the theme of nature, and the motif of wood in particular, sustain Burns' critique of the art world economy: 'Instead of confirming that art can be anything, he uses wood to make a much more powerful argument: the Art World is at once the most archaic economy and the most sophisticated one' (154). If Beuys posed seriously as the personification of art as capital, Burns poses ironically as a personification of the artist as an endangered species.

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⁴ See for a study of *Polke/Richter Richter/Polke*: Tait 2015.

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The Journal of Curatorial Studies is an international, peer-reviewed publication that explores the cultural functioning of curating and its relation to exhibitions, institutions, audiences, aesthetics and display culture. The journal takes a wide perspective in the inquiry into what constitutes "the curatorial." Curating has evolved considerably from the connoisseurship model of arranging objects to now encompass performative, virtual and interventionist strategies. While curating as a spatialized discourse of art objects remains important, the expanded cultural practice of curating not only produces exhibitions for audiences to view, but also plays a catalytic role in redefining aesthetic experience,