

## Burt Barr: Aphorisms by Image

By Vittoria Chierici, English translation by Pina Piccolo

Bushwick, Greenpoint, Williamsburgh, Park Slope – all these are new artist districts on the other side of the East River in New York. The web has not deterred young Americans and foreigners from aggregating and giving new life to these old, deserted districts in the suburbs of the Big Apple. It has also failed to interfere with their efforts to organize exhibits and parties, to enjoy the pubs opened amid the old refurbished industrial plants.

If you ask anyone living in New York the name of his/her district they will reply providing its acronym. Thus, we have SoHo (South of Houston), NoHo (North of Houston), Tribeca (Triangle Below Canal), Nolita (North of Little Italy); Dumbo (Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass). These areas have been described as “gentrified”, a word referring to a kind of nomadic settling of new communities in degraded areas that opens the way to investments and the real estate industry. In the 1960s this was a process that grew out of necessity, with the expansion of the middle class, but in the last twenty years gentrification has not really been so spontaneous a process. In fact, it seems to follow a set format in which realtors and banks that own industrial buildings select specific areas on which to invest money for rehab and to enhance services.

When video-artist Burt Barr went to SoHo in the mid 1960s the neighborhood was nearly vacant: it even lacked water and heating. Today, artists set their studios in the same buildings that have already been refurbished and share showers and bathrooms. Artists are considered “first stage gentrifiers”, the first line of attack on vacated areas. First the artists and then the boutiques. In a few years’ time, an artist “colony” may transform what was once a poor and high crime area into a rich neighborhood that is open to all sorts of real estate speculation. Sharon Zukin in her 1989 book *Loft Living* speaks of an “artist mode of production”. SoHo is an example of this albeit with its own peculiarities, i.e., an important past and architecture of its own. The area between Houston Street, West Broadway, Canal Street was called the Cast Iron District and has a history that may be called “ancient” by American temporal parameters. That part of Manhattan was land owned by a Dutch family by the name of Bayard and was the highest observation point for the whole Island. Built in 1776 as a defense against British troops, in the midst of the Revolutionary War, Bayard Mountain was a military fort for George Washington’s army. In mid nineteenth century Soho was a prestigious business district for Manhattan residents concentrated in the southernmost section of the island, around Wall Street. It was the time of cast iron facades, which gave the name to the district. At the end of the 1960s SoHo was still called the Cast Iron District and only in 1973 did it become a landmark. It was declared an historical district thanks to a fight led mainly by its residents, writers,

painters, intellectual against the planned Lomex highway, which would have wiped out a large portion of the old construction .

A building that stands out on Broadway for its “lacy” cast iron detail is the Singer building, designed by Ernest Flaff (1904) which is not far away from the loft where video artist Burt Barr, a unique and distinctive artist in American video art culture, still resides. In the second half of the 1960s he had joined the artist community that had congregated around Soho. Even though the area lacked many comforts, artists flocked there spontaneously because the lofts were very spacious and rents very affordable. There were no grocery stores, banks, taxis, but there was at least one art exhibit every Saturday in new galleries such as Castelli, Sonnabend Paula Cooper. The artists that one met in the early years of Soho did not share a common style, but rather shared a place, those streets and their studios.

The painters were the working class of Soho. In order to understand Burt Barr’s cultural context it may be useful to mention a few of them. Besides the most famous ones such as “Bob” Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, there were many others who were young and still unknown such as Chuck Close, Lynda Benglis, Elizabeth Murray, Brice Marden and Richard Serra. Like some of them, Burt Barr cannot be classified as a follower of a specific movement. If in appearance he brings to mind some aspects of Pop Art or Minimalism, it is because he adhere to neither of them.

Burt Barr has been working as an artist for about twenty years. “I started late”, he says, “when everyone else was already retiring”. It all began by chance with a video camera borrowed from a family member. Over the years he went through the various formats, from magnetic tape up to digital, while maintaining a solid cinematographic “aesthetics”. Burt in fact shoots with a video camera but his videos bring to mind the cinema, in the same way that an aphorism blends poetry and philosophy.

He is still moved when he thinks of movies such as Antonioni’ s *Deserto Rosso*, *L’Avventura*, *Professione Reporter* or Anna Magnani in Pasolini’s *Mamma Roma*. Burt owes very little to Hollywood, some of his videos call to mind black and white movies. More of a remake than a quote, his video *August*, (1999) has long sequence on the ocean shore that brings to mind Deborah Kerr and Burt Lancaster in the movie *From here to eternity*. In his work he manages to keep a certain balance between classic cinema culture and the technical potential offered by video cameras. Burt maintains also a certain autonomy from technological innovations and does not cater to those who seek “quality production”, i.e., high resolution to better handle fades.

Burt Barr's videos ostensibly do not tell a story. While not following a straight linear narrative structure with a beginning and an end, his works are not devoid of a narrative principle. They simply synthesize it in a few minutes, leaving a lot to interpretation. They are brief bodies of work, compact thoughts metaphorically alluding to stories that are exemplary from a cinematic point of view but symbolically closed. His works hypnotize, elicit wonderment and let themselves be watched an infinite number of times. Their content is light and bitter and sarcastic at the same time, they may be vague and senseless but never trivial.

In their first impact with an audience Burt Barr's videos are magnetic, just like a Lumiere brothers film. They elicit emotion in spite of the absence of deep meaning. The video *Ice* (1987) consists only of one scene, no music, only audio. A man rests his hand on a vial of upright toothpicks. As he suspends his hand over a table, the toothpicks drop one by one onto the glass surface below. You only see an arm leaning on a glass table. The video shows only this action and the word ICE superimposed on the image. In *Frog* (2007) the episode of the swimming frog elicits a smile, but the elegance of the animal's back legs is exciting, even difficult to describe, it looks like the frog is swimming, moving the circles forming on the clear water, but it's not moving at all, it's not going anywhere. A short, morality tale? Burt Barr's works are solely the product of visual thought. Like the excerpts of reality from which they are extracted, they are honest and direct, they last a few minutes, 3 or 4, the longest being 20 minutes, Even when the video is a close-up of the ocean or a tree branch, his reality is modulated on a quick and intuitive urban glance.

According to the artist, he starts filming "whatever catches my eye". Over the years Burt Barr's eye has grown used to observe and discern small paradoxes in the imperceptible flow of attitudes hiding behind an habitual gesture of everyday life. He has no intention to lower himself in the depths but rather seeks to catch the facts from a "staying over the lines" perspective. This way of being is both lucid and airy, buffoonish and bitter at the same time.

"My videos", says Burt Barr, "are not abstract, they are about real people". "Sometimes I am sarcastic as in *Dolly shot twice* (2000), but it was unintentional". He's talking about a black and white video: the scene shows a woman laying on the front seat of a car from the American graffiti era, she has been killed twice by gunshots to her face. Her wounds are deep marks, one exactly below the other (right temple and right cheekbone) identical and symmetrical and completely unnatural: clearly a joke evoking scenes typical of *film noir* from the 50s.

In screening, Burt Barr's videos use a system of continuous projection, a loop technique. At the end of the film the tape winds around and start again. The difference is that there is no

real beginning and end. The audience barely realizes it is a loop because it appears to be a motivated aesthetic device rather than a technique used solely to extend the length of the work. In this sense the sequence has a life of its own: it starts and you don't know where it will end up.

In *August* (1999) the actors (painters Cecily Brown and Billy Sullivan) are embracing among the waves of a black ocean. The scene could go either towards intercourse or a kiss, as in the movie *From here to eternity*, but we'll never know. The scene stays suspended and winds again in a loop. Or in the video *Kiss* (2000) where the two actors, artist Teresita Fernandez and photographer Tim Davis kiss on the opposite side of the glass panel of what appears to be the visiting hall of a penitentiary. What follows baffles the audience.

Burt Barr's uses outdoor and indoor settings for his videos, he never shoots in a street but often along a river or on an ocean shore. Water and glass, transparency are his only special effects. Often Burt furnishes his sets with glass tables or surfaces, just like the most recent trends in sculpture and architecture. It's a device he uses in order to expand the audience's eye to the illusion of an empty space. In *Jodi* (2008) dancer Jodi Melnick moves her whole body slowly and sensually over a glass surface, just as though she were dancing on a glass plane hanging in the air. The video is shot from below so audiences can see through and get a suggestion of levitation. The video is often projected on two screens, so that by modifying the rhythm of the dance there can be a further multiplication of the image.

Water can be rendered by a drawing that is set in motion. Burt himself says so speaking of the piece *The Long Dissolve* (1998) where an ice cube melts on a transparent plate sitting on a glass table. The ice cube is moving the whole time it is melting and seem to leave a continuous line in the air.

Given that video art is not shown on TV or screened in art houses, to respect tradition it must be exhibited to museum visitors rather than screened in front of theater audiences. This kind of presentation is tied to the basic concept that video art is more like painting than cinema, thus, just as for paintings, it must be the spectator who moves around it rather than the other way around.

Consequently, over time his video installations have borrowed – in a more or less aggressive way- many forms from set design which may be more or less compatible with the architectural principle of the installation.

A video can be viewed in more ways than one: it can be broadcast on several monitors, split on more than one channel, it can be enlarged when projected on a wall or made smaller when confined to a TV screen or yet it can be placed in a room as a mere sign of

the exhibit itinerary. Burt Barr uses all of these options. He pays attention to the poetic meaning of the projection of every single work, as though every time the installation were an appendix, a flexible complement vis-à-vis the type of space in which the artist is showing. *August* is shown on two screens, one on top of the other. Superimposed on the scene with the actors is a projection of an ocean's long wave. At the end the picture comes out as a single piece, compact and with clear borders like a painting on a large canvass...

Burt builds his scenes with the attention to detail of a cinema master, starting from a brief script and then using props and extras like a real movie. In *Gun* (2007) he built a whole scene in which someone is shooting in the air for two and a half minutes. The scene consists of a faceless bust, a very close close-up of a hand that is pulling the trigger of a gun, a gesture resulting in rhythmic noises. The author has no intent of providing the viewer with a key of interpretation, no emblematic meaning. The whole scene is in black and white, with black prevailing, and a contrast that is reiterated by the stripes on the shirt of the mysterious character who is shooting (an interesting aside -the gun was to be loaded with blanks and when Burt tried to buy the ammunition he had trouble finding blanks in the gun shops. The clerks kept on telling him that it would be a lot easier to buy live ammo).

Burt does not enjoy editing, he prefers to shoot. His videos are almost always shot in a single take, with a sequence plan. The artist says that in the long time of a single scene, what counts is the richness of the take, not the movement given by the cuts made during editing. It is the pleasure of observing, letting himself get lost inside the whole scene without being attracted by the focal point of the action. In fact in Burt's videos there never is a main scene and a background. The wave and the gun, the stripes on the shirt and the actress are always on the same plane, just like in Matisse's *Studio*. It is the plane itself that observes those who are able to stop and watch.

In the *Watching the Paint Dry (Red Yellow Blue)* trilogy of 2007 the color of a brush stroke changes as it dries. The bright red paint becomes dull and fades, losing its attractiveness and interest. Because the time of the piece matches exactly the entire drying process, the time of the video is so long that it exhausts viewers who watch it till the very end. But as it passes from the vitality of the color to its surrender, to its death over an excruciatingly long time, Burt seems to convey a cruel sense of the flowing of life. The piece seems to mimic a situation in which people's expectations dissolve, and little by little what had originally been the raw material of desires dries up.

Burt Barr often works with friends, as documented by his videos. He invites other artists to perform giving rise to new collaborations and exchanges of ideas. Some of them are

masters in their field, suffice it to think of painters Elizabeth Murray, Cecily Brown, dancers Trisha Brown and young artists Jimena Paz and Roz Le Blanc.

An example of a collaboration between contemporary dance and video art is Burt's set for the *Fanfare* show presented by choreographer and dancer Jodi Melnick at the historical New York gallery *the Kitchen* in February 2008.

Burt Barr created a masterpiece, a simple but very effective set. Two pairs of constantly moving industrial fans, made of unvarnished dark metal with simple lines, are placed in front of the stage. They project their shadow on the dancer while their own video projection expands out of proportion on the screen at the back creating a vortex of forms. These forms suggest an infinite number of types of motion and their sizes scales down because of the different dimensions of the reproduced images. The buzzing of the fans blends with the music and the rhythm of the dance steps that are both light and planned in detail by Jodi. She dances amid her own shadows as if they too were moved by the fan's blades. A magical scene, all in black and white.

The latest videos Burt Barr produced are, by contrast, "patriotic" and in full color. In *Self-Portrait* (2006) screened in June at the Artist Space in New York, the artist is the protagonist of his own self-portrait. Burt moves on the screen with dance steps that are tentative and disenchanting following the rhythm of a piece of country music. The music comes from a radio he is carrying on his shoulder, a boom box like those carried by African American on their shoulders, full volume, on the streets in the 1980 and 90s. One imagines it to be that kind of music, but what you hear issuing from the boom box is instead a cutesy folk tune repeating in a loop, with almost hypnotic results. He Burt, a white man, is not poking fun at African Americans but rather is poking fun at himself in a buffoonish sort of way. The monotony of the dance is abruptly cut short by a clipping from an old Boston newspaper about Candy Barr, a famous stripper in the years when Burt was growing up, and whose homonymous last name led to Burt Barr being teased by schoolmates as a child. Whether Candy is or isn't a relative, the spectator is assailed only by one doubt. Her photo is added to the "icons", typical figures of American society- the black man, the prostitute the white intellectual.

In this regard we can only quote Austrian writer Karl Krauss when he says that an aphorism never coincides with reality but it must go beyond it, with a single step it must jump over it.

America is still the subject of *Wild BlueWonder* (2009). Here the artist is filming an outdoor scene with a fixed camera on a tripod just as it is: the remains of a plane and other debris in a desolate landscape. He adds the star and stripes and a female vocalist singing the US

national anthem. Nothing more for a kind of allegory of recent wars, but one that is coming perhaps from the heartland of America, poor and dispersed on a very extensive territory, far away from luxury and the pride of European culture. This is the America that serves as cannon fodder.

Burt Barr was born in Boston in 1938 but lives and works in New York. He has been showing his video art since the mid 1980s in the important museums all over the world, including the Whitney and the PS1 in New York, the Reina Sofia in Madrid, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Houston Museum, the National Gallery of Washington and the Pompidou Centre in Paris. He has won many awards and fellowships including from the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council and the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation.

Burt is nostalgic for old times when there was no money and all you needed was a sheet of paper and a pencil to sketch. AND IT WAS BEAUTIFUL, HE SAYS.