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Didier Girard

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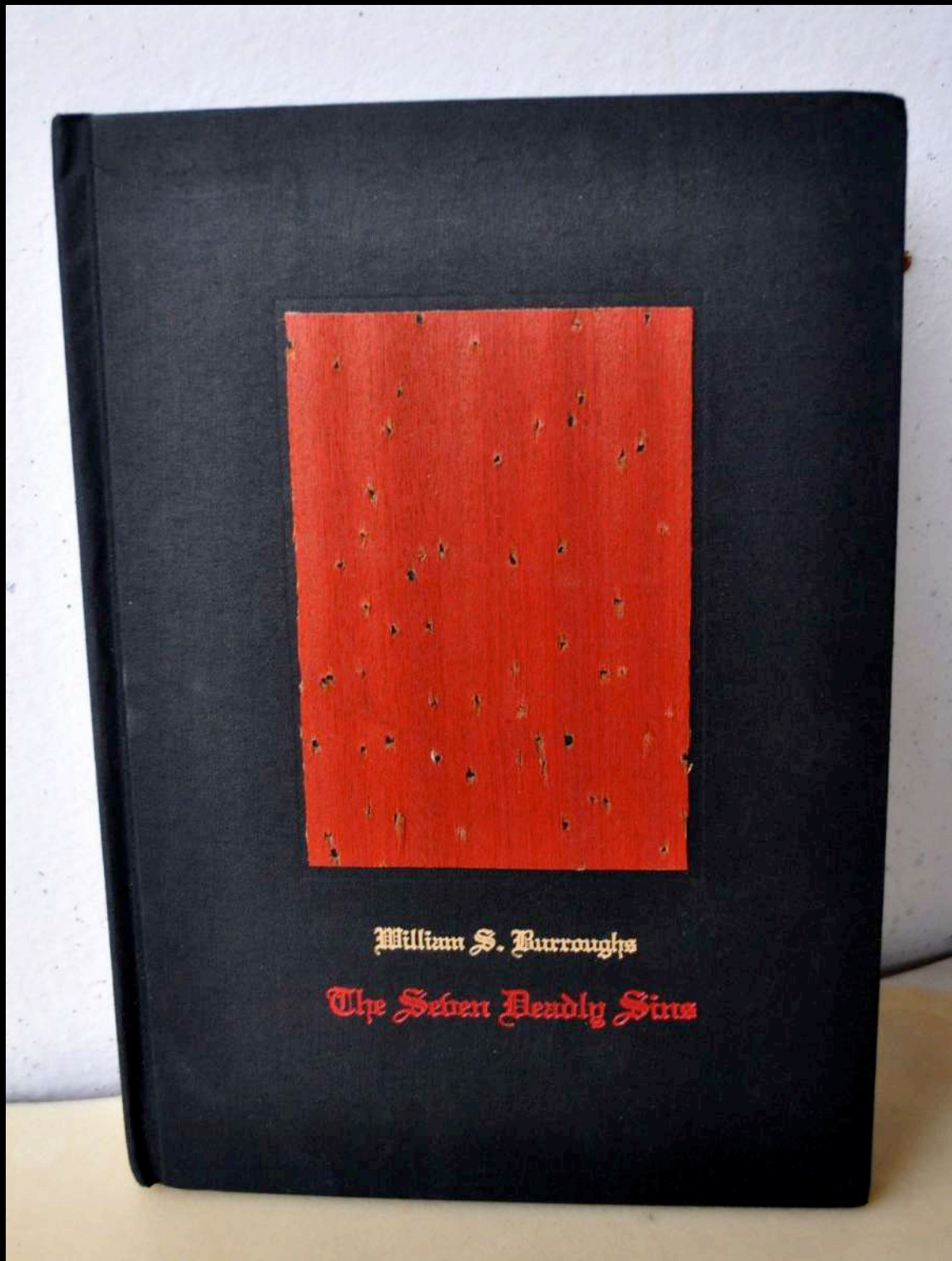
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Exhibition catalog of William S. Burroughs' THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS.
Published by Lococo-Mulder, New York / St. Louis / Amsterdam, 1992.

WILLIAM

THE LIGHTER SIDE

BURROUGHS

FINAL COUNTDOWN:

SEVEN DEADLY SINS

AGAINST THE MORAL

GRAIN

By Didier Girad

Edited & translated by Scott Rhodes

William Burroughs is in my opinion—whatever his conscious intention maybe—a religious writer. There is a sense in *Naked Lunch* of the destruction of soul, which is more intense than any I have encountered in any other modern novel. It is a vision of how mankind would act if man was totally divorced from eternity.

-Norman Mailer

William Burroughs published *The Seven Deadly Sins*¹ in an era when apparently sin can no longer be “Capital” (a contemporary Catholic catechism only devoted one small section to the subject). He created this seven-part prose piece to accompany the titular series of “shotgun” paintings conceived and commissioned by Robert Lococo in 1989.² This catalogue, published in 1992 for the paintings’ premier exhibitions in Amsterdam and London, featured the prose in Gothic script with its corresponding print on the facing page. A photograph of the author by Robert Mapplethorpe served as a preface and the cover featured

a single plate of painted wood Burroughs had also shot with his 12-gauge shotgun. Inasmuch as sex can engage both mental and physical extremes of human experience this text could also be seen as an extreme in Burroughs’ writings. Since the publication of *The Places of Dead Roads* he had made himself a stranger to literature, claiming to have reached the end of his words and preferring other engagements such as independent filmmaking, exhibiting his painted work and shooting his rifle. Meanwhile the media flirtation with religious decorum about Burroughs steadily increased—further supporting Norman Mailer’s assessment. Burroughs had become the “pope” of what we still call cyber-culture and was seen in 1987 as the “Father” of the Junky Church in his portrayal of Father Murphy in Gus van Sant’s *Drugstore Cowboy*. But make no mistake: if the image had taken center stage in the creative life of this artist, it is not because images or representations are too limited by writing, as we will presently show. He had

1 William Burroughs, *The Seven Deadly Sins* (New York–Saint Louis–Amsterdam: Lococo Mulder, 1991) no pagination.

2 Jeannette Cooperman, *Art of the Deal*; *St. Louis Magazine*, August 24, 2007. Additional information through private conversation with Robert Lococo.

merely overturned the common, romantic notion of the creative process for a more poetic point of view, to have images generating thought, and no longer the reverse.

Before analyzing these epistles on the Seven Capital Sins and defining Burroughsian sin, I recall what the concept of sin entails—particularly the Capital Sins. First of all, theologians mark an important distinction between Mortal, or Capital, sin and venial sin. The venial allows the possibility of some component of charity in which, for Burroughs, sentimentality or even commiseration has no place. As the author of *Queer* has it: “In deep sadness, there is no place for sentimentality. It is as final as the mountains: a fact.”³ And although the meaning of ‘Capital’ seems to be as certain as a buttress, even in the alternative adjective ‘Mortal’ it should not imply the closure of death. They are Capital as a *genus*, they rank with certain other sins, which in fact generate one another. This is the concept of Capital Sin at the basis of the ascetic teaching of Evagrius Ponticus (d. 399), his follower John Cassian (d. 435), and later made official by Pope Gregory the Great (d. 604).⁴ Capital Sin is not only “a word, an act or a desire contrary with eternal law”⁵ it conducts a proliferation a generative activity that is Vice proper. On the Christian view, if Vice is to reproduce and be reinforced it must distort and darken the discernment between good and evil. But tenuously situated between these two extremes it does not entail any moral forfeit of the most intimate care. In order to proliferate, Vice cannot completely destroy the moral sensibility at its root.

It is this moral core, its nucleus, I want to debrief with this analysis. The Burroughsian temperament is not one of relative amorality it is very well situated *within the immoral*. Yet I hasten to emphasize that his exposition of Vice does not have moralistic intention, which would only free the mind up to treason, rather it is posited as poetic research, to return the reader to the archaic roots of evil, wherein all times and places combine.

To review the Capital Sins, they are indeed seven in number and ordered thusly: Pride, Avarice, Envy, Anger, Lust, Gluttony and Sloth (formerly known as *akedia*). First of all the order is modified in Burroughs: Sloth tops the list, then follows Avarice, Anger, Gluttony, Lust, Envy and Pride. With this reversal, Burroughs’ countdown exemplifies his poetic method as well as his aesthetic bias. The analysis focuses on the sin of Lust, comparing the role of writing itself with representations of sexuality, of eroticism and even pornography.⁶ Then, an outline of what one could call *poetic camp* in William Burroughs will be drawn to

3 William Burroughs, *Queer* (London: Pan Books – Picador, 1985) p. 91.

4 Saint Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job* 31, 45.

5 See Saint Augustine, *Contra faustum manichæum* 22, 27 and Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1-2, 71, 6.

6 Contrary to the notion spread with zeal by so many journalists and commentators the political struggle between oppression and affirmation of sexual identity never appears in Burroughs work.

see if this hypothetical solution can address the spiritual question *The Seven Deadly Sins* asks.

Nor should this suggest that Burroughs’ text is a work of anagogic speculation; it is a poetic work, a very liberal survey of the course of sin that the author perceives current in the world. The seven parts are not even homogeneous in style, but borrow from a hypertext that constitutes the work—with themes, fragments and pre-textual images of obsession: as everyone knows Burroughs is a master of recycling. The first section corresponds to the last two with a moral thread reappearing in tautological inserts, in the manner of allegorical satire. The four remaining central parts are as follows: a political manifesto, a cut-up, a scientific anecdote and a sadomasochistic scenario.

The Seven Deadly Sins opens with the sin of Sloth. It is actually an opening in the musical sense of the term, an overture, since it introduces the themes in a line, a melodic sequence of sins, each to follow its own respective exposition: “All the Seven Deadly Sins involve a degradation of the human image to a subhuman level...” This progression of sin denotes a moral discernment that I intend to give account. According to tradition, as well as Burroughs, Sloth is a kind of passivity in lifestyle. It is the mother of all vices and the primary position the author gives it underscores his poetic intention to trace the source of evil. This progression, having a formal structure, proves that even though sin is anarchic, its proliferation is cyclic.

Sloth (Greek *akedia*, an absence of care) is human weakness seen as Daliesque, soft structures in the soft machine of an individual (the bare consciousness of being). If *akedia* is the engine of all the other vices, it means that at the origin of all immoral desire there lies only self-reference, a reproduction, onanism in terms of human action, and obscurity in the way of perception. The author speaks of “Gluttony that eats itself”, of “the cold metallic Avarice of a computer”, of “the Pride of viciously closed minds”, and finally of “protoplasmic Lust” which is then transmuted into fury: “to barren, slaving rage, like Pavlov’s dogs”. This obscurity or hiddenness of Sloth accentuates a notion of fear (‘Fear’ is the only word capitalized in the passage other than the sins: “Pride in the ability to make hands sweat and shake, to inspire Fear...”) In this fear of being afraid the reader is tempted to see an eighth Capital Sin taking shape. The mental trap, in all its trappings, is set and the final sin of the flesh, like that of the spirit, is not found where it was expected.

Avarice, the second sin, ostensibly corresponds to an economic, political machine (“The old miser fingering his gold coins with idiot delight has given way to the deadly, disembodied Avarice of vast multinational conglomerates.”) Burroughs (who elsewhere defines paranoia as “Having all the facts”) criticizes authority unambiguously. With an allegorical routine between Sloth (“Sloth says don’t stick your neck out...”) and Envy (“He is... tale-bearing lies and slander... so busy...”) he characterizes a capitalist

ANGER

William S. Burroughs c. 1991
(45 x 31 inches (114 x 79 cm))
Unfinished plywood, impact side.
Courtesy of Lococo Gallery



Incompetence with a weapon was the ancient meaning of a “sin” in both Greek (*hamartia*) and Hebrew (*chata*). “Sin” was a swerve of true intention: to miss the mark.

conspiring to deny the ecological stakes of the planet. “No more responsibility or consideration for the welfare of the planet than the computers that orient their maneuvers...”

The bit devoted to Anger is a cut-up of science fiction clichés (“space aliens”, “astronaut”, “from escaped alien fan mail”, “the moon”), of molluscish figures (“fish face”, “slimy scaly things”, “salt lizzards”, “a snail”, “blubbering snivelling wimps”, “slimeball need”), with bits of American mythology (“national anthem”, “Ugly Ugly heroes”, “the Fourth of July”) all in a mannerist aggregate cast in an eroticized Burroughsian underworld (“Uncle Ed Anger”, “damned coward soprano”, “castrating terrorists”, “firecracker a bomb”, “Ed Anger will never clear the holster”).

Burroughs’ treatment of Gluttony does not typify the standard causes and effects of deviant behavior. To go to the source of a need that can destroy one’s being, the author chooses the illustration of an endocrinic phenomenon, and thus characterizes all temptations. The reader passes quickly from sugar to the Adam’s apple, eroticizing the text with fragments of the object of desire, in other words moving from the general topic of sin to a sin of the flesh. The prodigious nature of a chemical effect is analogous to an irreversible process set in motion leading to sin in action, rather than one of omission. Desire absorbs the entire body leaving at the end of the text, as at the end of sex, a “crusty penis” with “pearly testicles”.

Lust begins with an allegory, rather emblematic (“The red whip of Lust” turns into a “black whip of Anger”), from which springs a pornographic theatre with streaks of scatology wherein pleasure and sadism mingle. The scene between Edward II and his minion Gaston is tinged with “Purple Pride” and ends with the decadent dance of a “Flayed Man”. The author closes in a lyrical flourish that celebrates a worldwide network of electronic sex.

For Envy, the text recalls the tone of the first; sin is compared to what the author styles as a ‘virus’ (“The model for Sin can be seen in virus”). This biological image is used as a pivot to return to the original moral discourse, picking up with the principal idea that desire, like Vice, aims primarily at reproduction: “Virus that feeds on itself for all eternity”. One will note that before moving on to the finality of Pride, he has penultimately planted the seed of ‘eternity’ in the reader’s mind.

Restoring the ancient order⁷ the final sin in Burroughs list

7 Pope Gregory places Pride at the head of the list in his *Moralia*. Cassian had followed Evagrius’ original order where Pride is last. (See Antoine and Claire Guillaumont; *Traite Pratique ou Le Moine*; Les Éditions Du Cerf, 29, Paris, 1971 p. 67). Curiously in his final novel Burroughs says “...the last place to look for clues to ancient Egypt is in Egypt itself. ... In truncated time areas like Egypt, a diving-bell approach is indicated. Time has backed up here and solidified. ‘Batten the hatches, Mr. Hyslop, we are going down.’” (*The Western Lands*, New York, Penguin Books, 1988)

is Pride as the concentric circulation of sin returns (“Sin is a stuck record, ...always the same, always deader, the smell of decay always heavier”). As if to say that it is in its centrifugal force that Capital sin becomes deadly. The last ‘verse’ of the text: “When me you fly I am the wings” celebrates the liberating capacity of drugs. This melancholic, poetic taxonomy of the sins is not without method even if it is not an analytical treatise. The progression from section to section precludes isolating this or that sin by weaving the moral means that bind their generally anarchic ways.⁸ As the author says in *The Place of Dead Roads*, “Life is an entanglement of lies to hide its basic mechanisms”⁹ but it is in *Naked Lunch* that Burroughs develops the concept of what he calls “The Algebra Need”. From this point of view, as in *The Seven Deadly Sins*, sexual desire is like the quest for Power or a material Lust, manifesting the state of dependence that characterizes the human condition. As said in the introduction of *Naked Lunch*: “Junk yields a basic formula of evil virus: the Algebra of Need. The face of evil is always the face of total need.”¹⁰ Reading in the section on Greed: “the deadly process is activated”, it seems what is Capital is not the sin itself, which is merely one of many possibilities natural to humanity, but as a Vice it is a process triggered in the sensate experience of the sinner.

Benway is a manipulator and coordinator of symbol systems, an expert on all phases of interrogation, brainwashing and control. <...> “I deplore brutality, ” he said. “It’s not efficient. On the other hand, prolonged mistreatment, short of physical violence, gives rise, when skillfully applied, to anxiety and a feeling of special guilt. <...> The subject must not realize that the mistreatment is a deliberate attack of an anti-human enemy on his personal identity. He must be made to feel that he deserves any treatment he receives because there is something (never specified) horribly wrong with him. The naked need of the control addicts must be decently covered by an arbitrary and intricate bureaucracy so that the subject cannot contact his enemy direct.”¹¹

Sex in William Burroughs, together with the Vice it generates, amounts to violence and manipulation. Similarly Decadent author Jean Lorrain defined Vice as a pleasure that is not shared. Yet when transferring sex into text there occurs a conversion (or revolution—the two are rarely separable) because illuminating sin and the infamy of the crimes against an overburdened heaven requires an assessment of conscience. The spirit and body combine to produce a gift, if not an act, of grace—recalling the teaching of Saint Paul: where sin has multiplied, grace

8 Note: the centipede, so ubiquitous in Burroughs work, lies latent here.

9 William Burroughs, *The Place of Dead Roads*, 1983 (London: Harper Collins–Paladin, 1987) p. 23.

10 William Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* (New York: Grove Press, Black Cat Edition 1966) p. xxxix.

11 William Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* op. cit., p. 21.

ANGER

William S. Burroughs c. 1991
(45 x 31 inches (114 x 79 cm))
Plywood, exit side with ink.
Courtesy of Lococo Gallery



“The shotgun blast releases the little spirits compacted in the layers of wood, causing the colors of the paints to splash out in unforeseeable, unpredictable images and patterns.”

(William S. Burroughs, *Painting and Guns*, Hanuman Books; 1992.)

abounds.¹² Whether the medium is manuscript or male body, it is poetry in the main, and it is for the poet to articulate, fathom and perhaps digest what had crystallized as a desire. In other words the erogenous zones of writing, or those of a body, are implements of sin to come.

In the section on Pride, Burroughs speaks of “searing erogenous fumes of hermetic Lust”, on par with the acidity of craving, the “mineral” hunger of Avarice or the corrosive force of Pride. Erotisation is abundant in Burroughs, and it persistently reiterates the supreme rebellion of inflated adolescence, raw in desire and revolt, as here in *The Place of Dead Roads*:

Kim is a slimy, morbid youth of unwholesome proclivities with an insatiable appetite for the extreme and the sensational. His mother had been into table-tapping and Kim adores ectoplasm, crystal balls, spirit guides and auras. He wallows in abominations, unspeakable rites, diseased demon lovers, loathsome secrets imparted in a thick slimy whisper, ancient ruined cities under a purple sky, the smell of unknown excrements, the musky sweet rotten reek of the terrible Red Fever, erogenous sores suppurating in the idiot giggling flesh.¹³

Those erogenous zones, true black holes for Burroughs, also represent these points of violence and danger, tragic moments amounting to a moral summons. While working on his Interzone project in Tangier, where he met Brion Gysin, Burroughs wrote: “I am trying, like Klee, to create something that will have a life of its own, that can put me in real danger, a danger which I willingly take on myself.”¹⁴ This digression brings us to a possible definition of the interzone, it is at once the chaotic, pure violence of seeing one’s life in writing and of a self-knowledge in the practice of Vice. There is a grey place between sex and text, as that divide between discipline and self-violation.

The Klee quotation comes from a time when Burroughs was somewhat influenced by Jean Genet. Apropos the sins of the flesh of Burroughs’ text, a further analysis of Lust can be gleaned from Genet’s correspondence with Jean-Paul Sartre about his sexuality. Genet says of the lover: “the object charged with representing death has visible attributes, but I see myself as dead. I put him in charge of living in my place, apparent. The loved one does not just love me, he ‘reproduces’ me, but in doing so, I sterilize him, I cut off his destiny. You see I’m not talking about faggots in terms of sex, but in terms of life and death.”¹⁵

12 Romans 5:20 (King James Version) “Moreover the law entered, that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound...”

13 William Burroughs, *The Place of Dead Roads* op. cit., p. 23.

14 Quoted by James W. Grauerholz in the catalogue “William Burroughs Painting” (London – Amsterdam: The October Gallery–Suzanne Biederberg Gallery, 1988) no pagination.

15 Jean Genet, undated letter to J.-P. Sartre (1952?)

So without a doubt it is necessary to read the pornographic repetitions in Burroughs’ books—*Nova Express* or *The Wild Boys*, for example—as tableaux from a grand Sadean theatre measuring the feeble restlessness of life *vis-à-vis* death. As Burroughs said regarding the protagonist of *Queer*: “At the beginning of the Queer manuscript fragment, having returned from the insulation of junk to the land of the living like a frantic inept Lazarus, Lee seems determined to score, in the sexual sense of the word. There is something curiously systematic and unsexual about his quest for a suitable sex object...”¹⁶ Returning to *The Seven Deadly Sins*, one no longer sees his sexual inclination behind his words he is released from that which generated the desire, toward the poetic precipitate. The rest is only a chemical process. As said in the section on Greed: “One taste, and the deadly process is activated: digestive juices concentrate and churn, eating the body away”. As with Envy, the author underscores a melancholic progress expressed as desire: “The same can be said for all the Sins: an inordinate, loveless, soulless Lust, like the paintings on Chimu urns, where a man is being absorbed into his own penis.”

Burroughs never broaches homosexuality in this text. It falls under a long surrealist tradition which spans the catalogue of non-reason and irrational objects desired, to by-pass the fictional origin of desire—‘deviant’ or otherwise. We are reminded of the poems of Salvador Dalí in the early thirties “*Rêverie masturbatoire*”, *La femme visible*, *L’amour et la mémoire*,¹⁷ or Hans Bellmer’s *Petite anatomie de l’inconscient physique ou: l’anatomie en image*.¹⁸ The latter begins with the image of a young girl holding a sugar cube with her fingertips, and describes the contortions of space by a body diffused with a desire stemming from the cube’s mere texture. The parallel is so close to certain passages of *The Seven Deadly Sins* one should not be surprised to find the following flow from the pen of this painter and lover of dolls so suited to the homoeroticised world of Burroughs: “Since the germ of desire precedes being, hunger precedes the ego, the ego precedes the other, the experience of Narcissus will supply the image of you.”¹⁹ Beyond gender, as a kind of intermediary, the text returns to sex its mystery:

Unless and until a free examination of sexual manifestations is allowed, man will continue to be controlled by sex rather than controlling. A phenomena <sic> totally unknown because deliberately ignored and ruled out as a subject for writing and research. <...> In short, the same objective

quoted by François Regnault, “Sodome U.S.A.”, *L’Avant-Scène* no. 957 (11-1-1994) p. 82.

16 William Burroughs, ‘Introduction,’ (1985) *Queer* op. cit., p. 12.

17 Salvador Dalí, *L’amour et la mémoire* (Paris: Editions surréalistes, 1931) and *La femme visible* (Paris: Editions surréalistes, 1930) p. 70.

18 Hans Bellmer, *Petite anatomie de l’inconscient physique: ou, l’anatomie en image* 1957 (Paris: Le Terrain Vague, 1977) p. 71.

19 Ibid. p. 29.

ANGER

William S. Burroughs c. 1991
(45 x 31 inches (114 x 79 cm))
Finished print with layered Mylar drawing.
Courtesy of Lococo Gallery



“The paintings write. They tell and foretell stories. Now the pictures are moving, laughing, snarling, talking, screaming, changing, but it is movement in another dimension, not some physical miracle of moving paint.”
(William S. Burroughs, *Paper Cloud Thick Pages*; Kyoto Shoin; 1993.)

methods that have been applied to natural science should now be applied to sexual phenomena with a view to understand and control these manifestations.²⁰

Edmund White knew very well how appreciate the literary originality of Burroughs' sex scenes: "All these exotic homosexual (and heterosexual) couplings are quick, explosive, sometimes lethal but never romantic. As Burroughs once remarked, 'I think that what we call love is a fraud perpetrated by the female sex, and that the point of sexual relations between men is nothing that we could call love, rather what we might call *recognition*.'"²¹ From this point of view, the relation with the other, therefore with oneself, is completely melancholic independent of its object. Self-relation predicates a confusion of desire and pain: this is precisely the logic of *The Seven Deadly Sins*. In the section on Envy, Burroughs writes: "the hideous voracity of the Vile Self Eaters reduces the subject to quivering protoplasm <...> Envy, inordinate by its nature, a need that can never be satisfied". At the base of this desire, as with writing, satisfaction is idealized in order to occupy the space between crude desire and what little the world has to offer. Whether in sex or text, self-abnegation is employed with the strategy of sinning to gauge oneself against "eternal" laws that *cannot* contain eternity. This is perhaps the true meaning of what theologians call 'the sins which cry toward heaven', such as the blood of Abel in *Genesis*, the clamor of a people oppressed in Egypt, the injustice to wage earners in *Deuteronomy*, or yet the sin of the Sodomites.²²

The only thing specifically homoerotic about Burroughs writing would be its "male voluptuousness" which John Russel talks about in connection with the paintings of Francis Bacon²³ where certain images suggest a relationship to Burroughs: "The young monk led Bradley to a cubicle — On a stone table was a tape recorder — The monk switched on the recorder and sounds of lovemaking filled the room — The monk took off his robe and stood naked with an erection — He danced around the table caressing a shadowy figure out of the air above

20 William Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* op. cit. p. xxxv.

21 Edmund White, "This is not a Mammal: A Visit with William Burroughs" *SoHo News* (2-18-1981).

22 Genesis 4: 9-10, "And the Lord said unto Cain... the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground." Exodus 2:23, "...the children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and they cried, and their cry came up unto God by reason of the bondage." Deuteronomy 24:14-15, "Thou shalt not oppress an hired servant that is poor and needy... lest he cry against thee unto the Lord..." Genesis 18:20-21, "And the Lord said, Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous; I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto me..." Genesis 19:13, "For we will destroy this place, because the cry of them is waxen great before the face of the Lord; and the Lord hath sent us to destroy it.

23 John Russell, *Francis Bacon* 1971 (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985) p. 59. This topic is addressed in a chapter with a title worthy of W. Burroughs: 'Do you love me?'

the recorder."²⁴ In *The Seven Deadly Sins*, homoeroticism gives rise to one such scene wherein the true sexual partner of Edward II is not his 'minion' *per se* but by metonym, Gaston, his male member. To name his genitals (and by analogy the attribute of sin) and not the partner minimizes the distance, here at least, between desire and its object: in respect to the text, eroticism yields to pornography and its solipsistic and moral mechanics. This hyper-real, scatologic scene is haloed in what the author preciously calls "sweet, reluctant, amorous delay". Burroughs' baroque, and kitsch mannerism exploits over-referenced esthetic extremes in order to pass from stereotypical gay pornography into the cultural frame of literary decadence whose ultimate refinements lay claim to bad taste. This is particularly discernible in the text on Anger, as well as the play of images in the parting section on Lust: "Every whip snaps into every other. Purple Pride can watch the Dance of the flayed Man with civil leer, punctuated by delicious delightful delovely bits of Dream Cake. Look at this switchboard, plugged into millions of cocks and assholes, lips and tits, it blares out a blowtorch crescendo."

Kitsch is an acknowledged genre, formally in Art Criticism at least, but its scope is nevertheless limited to the ornamental. *Camp* on the other hand falls under a sociological reality constructed on a deviating or indiscernible sexual identity. Artistically, when not outright ignored, the concept is far from clear but we could sketch a definition: camp would be kitsch sexually contextualized, no longer at rest with the representation of the still image but integrating a temporal dimension and the related phenomena of metamorphoses and anamorphoses. In this hypothesis the esthetic of camp does not carry the good-taste/bad-taste dichotomy, it is neither good or evil, *nor their refusal*. The concepts of beauty and truth are redrawn from new criteria, essentially fluctuating, virtual. As suggested in the representation of sexual desire, one could say that as art the appearance or methods of camp are characterized by the reduced distance between the locus of perception and the object of desire, in a kind of hallucinatory hyperrealism. Thus, as the reader of the *Seven Deadly Sins* is told, sin is "the degradation of a natural instinct" and so, in the section on Envy, beauty and purity are thus presented:

The model for Sin can be seen in Virus, which produces replicas of its own image from the host it invades. The Anger of a wildcat is pure and beautiful, the Anger of a lynch mob or guard dog is ugly and diseased — ugly because it is distorted, diseased because it is imposed. The Anger is not a reaction of the organism itself, but an image forced upon the organism.

Camp sequences abound in Burroughs, and particularly in *The Seven Deadly Sins*. On the cannibalism of pleasure in Gluttony, the poet writes: "...the quintessence of delight residing in the juice of the Adam's Apple dissolves to ingest the living brain, quivering like a great oyster, from the

24 William Burroughs, *The Ticket that Exploded* 1962-1968 (London: Grafton Books-Paladin, 1987), p. 38.

softened skull... oh ! oh ! La la la... slurp... blub....” So why not see his *shotgun technique* as the esthetic of camp as well? His aim is carried off by a bullet following the trajectory of perception to its explosive artistic realization on the target, shredding the materials—grains of wood and coats of paint—into media of release. In *Nova Express*, more precisely in ‘Inflexible Authority’ (another kind of resistance near to our concern) yields to the imagery of camp for its own release:

Images — millions of images — That’s what I eat — Cyclotron shit — Ever try kicking that habit with apomorphine? Now I got all the images of sex acts and torture ever took place anywhere and I can just blast it out and control your gooks right down to the molecule — I got orgasms — I got screams — I got all the images any hick poet ever shit out — My Power’s coming — My Power’s coming — My Power’s coming....²⁵

In closing this countdown of Burroughs’ *Seven Deadly Sins* we return to the overture. As we saw the first sentence encapsulates the whole, a work devoted to Vice and the search for a dignified, critical refusal. “All the Seven Deadly Sins involve a degradation of the human image to a subhuman level...” We also hear strains of Evagrius in this overture, the Desert Father of what we now know as “the Seven Deadly Sins”. The human image was central to Evagrian contemplation and theology, particularly its status after the fall of angels and humans. He notoriously speculated that the image of God was not lost in the fall but neither is it found in the body, what we have is an absence of mind, blindness in thought, forgetfulness. The image is betrayed by human *misrepresentation*.²⁶ These thoughts in turn evoke Burroughs’ original desire to write of an image already in rebellion, playing gangsters with a childhood

friend — from whom he had been separated. Burroughs’ childhood reaction was, as his fate would have it, dry: “The environment was empty, the antagonist hidden, and I drifted into solo adventures.”²⁷ These adventures, hallucinogenic or not, carried him to peaks of solitude and clarity leading him to write in 1953: “Perhaps all pleasure is relief. I have learned the junk equation. Junk is not, like alcohol or weed, a means to increased enjoyment of life. Junk is not a kick. It is a way of life.”²⁸ One often speaks of hallucination while describing Burroughs’ style but in light of this quote, which attests an artistic inexhaustibility, it seems more accurate to speak of hallucinatory *poetics*. Because however noble, treacherous, feverish and ultimately narcissistic, Burroughs altogether achieves that rare formula of the process described by a fellow anchorite of inspiration and abandon, Marcel Duchamp: “...I am trying to describe the subjective mechanism which produces art in the raw state — *à l’état brut* — bad, good or indifferent.”²⁹ This effect in *The Seven Deadly Sins* is re-iterated in another Burroughs’ maxim, inspired as it is by Bryon Gysin’s interior images: “The artist shows you the spectral street of your own past associations.”³⁰

The prolific centrifugal forces that animate the last lines of the text speak volumes: “round and round, slower and slower ... Christ bled, Orgone balked at the post, Time ran out. Thermodynamics has won at a crawl. Toise, Master of the Seven Chains, admonishes sweetly: ‘You reckon ill who leave me out—when me you fly, I am the wings.’” Burroughs’ *The Seven Deadly Sins* are not just verses on Vices or sexual identity, they quicken intimate perceptions of being to extract, *en creux*, their share with eternity.

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25 William Burroughs, *Nova Express* 1964, also found in *The Soft Machine–Nova Express–The Wild Boys* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1980) p. 227.

26 Burroughs’ discrimination between the self-evident image and that which is occulted is closely parallel to Evagrius. Evagrius’ peculiar imageless-image is well summarized in Elizabeth Clark’s groundbreaking *Origenist Controversy* (Princeton University Press, 1992). Yet Julia Konstantinovsky rightly warns, “it is an oversimplification to ... affirm the post-lapsarian loss of the image” in Evagrian thought (Julia Konstantinovsky; *Evagrius Ponticus, The Making of a Gnostic*; Ashgate, 2009. P 9). Like Burroughs, Evagrius’ criticism produces a strategy of seeing, he reorients the image: “Where is sin, in the intellect? How could that be? It is the image of God” (...ὁ νοῦς καὶ πῶς; εἰκὼν ἐστὶ τοῦ θεοῦ. Translation by S. Rhodes). But identifying the image of God as *intellect* does not mean cognitive thought; *nous* is a capacity of contemplation without object, envisioning a transcendent intentionality. The misrepresentation of image as reason or logic has led more than a few theologians to the bathetic notion that “in heaven we will not make mistakes even in arithmetic.” (See Gordon H. Clark, “The Image of God in Man,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, XII. Fall, 1969). Burroughs dismisses this impotent interpretation of *logos* as well as *nous* wholesale with his most famous caveat: “Language is a virus”.

27 William Burroughs, *Junky* 1953 (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1977) p. xiii.

28 Ibid, p. xvi

29 Marcel Duchamp, “The Creative Act,” *Art News* 56. 4 (Summer 1957) appearing in Marcel Duchamp *Le processus créatif* (Caen: L’Echoppe, 1987), no pagination.

30 William Burroughs, interview with Edmund White, “This is not a Mammal: A Visit with William Burroughs” *SoHo News* op. cit.