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Brion Gysin with Dreamachine at Musée des Art Décoratifs, Paris, 1962
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Installation view of slideshow in "Brion Gysin" at the New Museum

Page from Brion Gysin sketchbook, 1952
Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University

Brion Gysin poem at New Museum

MACHINE TOOL
by Ben Davis

"Brion Gysin: Dream Machine," July 7-Oct. 3, 2010, at the New Museum for Contemporary Art, 235 Bowery, New York, NY 10002

What to do with Brion Gysin, the oddball Surrealist-cum-Beat artist currently getting a full-floor retrospective at the New Museum?

There's no denying his considerable, subterranean influence on art, even if he is not exactly a household name. The excellent New Museum catalogue brings in a variety of contemporary artists to testify to Gysin's inspiration on their practice. However, is he, as curator Laura Hoptman insists, a *role model* for today's artists?

This I cannot accept. I'd even say that to pitch him this way does some violence to the fragile, otherworldly weirdness of Gysin's works, which are relics of a world that no longer exists -- for bad and for good.

The New Museum show is eclectic and episodic, reflecting the zigzags of Brion Gysin's own life. We find traces of Gysin's early, Surrealist-inspired works; his "writing paintings," canvasses overrun with scribbly marks and repeating grid patterns; his extensive collaborations with Beat svengali William S. Burroughs, scrapbook-like "board books" and spreads from their schizophrenic 1965 collage tome *The Third Mind*; his so-called *Dreamachine*, essentially a motorized spinning cylindrical lamp; Gysin's late-life experiments in photo collage; a room-filling slideshow recreating the experience of a live Gysin reading of his combinatory poems; recordings of his collaborations with jazz musicians and poets; and lots and lots of other ephemera.

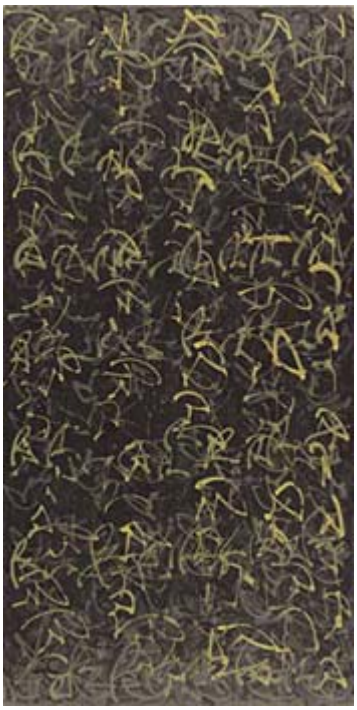
Born in England of Canadian parents in 1916, Brion Gysin attended an elite Catholic boarding school in the UK. When he was 18, he enrolled in the Sorbonne, with the ambition of exploring the delights of Paris' interwar cultural scene. Through Max Ernst's wife, he was introduced into Surrealist circles, only to have his work unexpectedly purged from a 1935 showcase at the last minute. Whether this was because of André Breton's hostility to Gysin's homosexuality, or because Breton believed Gysin had dared to mock him in a caricature, is not really clear (Gysin does not seem to have been a particularly reliable narrator of his own life).

In summer 1940, he returned to North America to escape the impending World War, and ended up at Vancouver's "Canadian Intelligence Corps S-20 Japanese Language School," where he learned Japanese for intelligence purposes (an interest in non-Western writing characterized much of his later work). Post-war, he moved in literary circles, and gravitated back to Paris, where his friend, author Paul Bowles (of *The Sheltering Sky* fame), decided to take him to Morocco.

By 1954, Gysin was living in Morocco, painting figurative images of the Sahara, and had become an enthusiast of *kif* (marijuana mixed with tobacco). He ensconced himself in Tangiers as -- to quote the

Brion Gysin
Untitled
1959
Musée d'art Moderne de la Ville de Paris

Brion Gysin
Untitled
1960
Collection Shane Akeroyd



New Museum catalogue -- "a fashionable restaurateur and purveyor of Moroccan exotica, both culinary and, more significantly, musical." That is, he was co-owner of a cabaret with the unabashedly Orientalizing name "The 1,001 Nights," which featured a group called the Master Musicians of Jajouka, and dancing boys.

Also during his Tangiers period, Gysin met author William Burroughs for the first time, who was then on his own nomadic voyage of self-discovery. Burroughs was at first unimpressed with Gysin, but after the latter man abandoned his life as a nightlife entrepreneur, the two ended up together, back in Paris, in 1958, sharing the same flophouse, the so-called "Beat Hotel." In the next few years, the two would enter into a remarkably fertile creative symbiosis, as they experimented both with various mind-altering substances -- Timothy Leary himself sent them psilocybin pills in the early '60s -- and with different modes of art-making.

In 1959, Gysin formulated what came to be called his "Cut-Up Method," tearing apart sentences and images to create new meanings, an esthetic strategy Burroughs would make the basis for a trilogy of novels. At the same moment, Gysin also discovered the principle behind his *Dreamachine*, that viewing flickering lights with closed eyes could trigger something approaching hallucination. He seized upon this as a new form of artmaking, believing he had discovered a direct pathway to artistic consciousness, one that bypassed the material world altogether. For a 1962 show of the devices at Paris' Iris Clert Gallery, he half-seriously proposed destroying all his paintings as a symbol that art had arrived at a new stage.

Three years later, now in New York, Gysin and Burroughs finished their collaborative tome *The Third Mind*, a rambling book of fragmentary, labyrinthine texts and reworked newspaper collages, laid over pages marked with what had become Gysin's signature uneven grid pattern, which he created using a customized paint roller (in a letter on display at the New Museum, Gysin writes that the grid symbolizes "the vast but mathematically knowable world whose outer limits we refer to when we speak of distances in terms of 'light years'"). *The Third Mind* was meant originally as a kind of How-To manual for the use of the "Cut-Up Method" to free human creativity from what he and Burroughs both called "Control" -- the soulless rationality of the modern world, the evil specter of normalcy that they saw as their enemy.

The "Cut-Up Method" is counted among Gysin's big artistic innovations. It must be admitted, however, that the technique owes something to the lineage of Surrealist automatic writing experiments and Exquisite Corpse games. Similarly, though Gysin bore the scars of his youthful rejection by André Breton all his life, and vociferously rejected any connection with Surrealist ideas, you have to admit that there are certain modernist skeletons that Gysin never really got out of his closet. In particular, he was fully caught up in the Surrealist fascination with madness and altered states of all kinds, and, most problematically, the belief that one could find in an exoticized Primitivism an antidote to suffocating Western middle-class life.

Born during World War I, Gysin was a product of a different world than the one we live in today. It was a world where men still wore hats; that is, before counterculture went mainstream (a process he had a hand in, introducing Rolling Stone Brian Jones to Jajouka), and well before the gay liberation movement (Gysin was 53 at the time of the Stonewall Rebellion, in 1969). This is the basis for the underlying assumption of much of his work, the notion that living a free-spirited bohemian lifestyle is *in itself* an unthinkable rebellion against the entire system.

Brion Gysin
Ivy
1959
Musée d'art Moderne de la Ville de Paris

Brion Gysin
Untitled
1962
Collection Shane Akeroyd

Brion Gysin
The Last Museum
1977
Musée d'art Moderne de la Ville de Paris

Brion Gysin
Untitled (Beaubourg)
1977
Muséée d'art Moderne de la Ville de Paris

On the other hand, Gysin was also formed by a world transitioning from colonialism to the decolonization movements that crested in the '60s. The Tangiers of Gysin and Burroughs was famous as a dumping ground for expats, who could come to indulge in taboo-breaking at a safe distance from home (when they met, Burroughs was renting a room at a brothel that specialized in procuring boys for American and British men). The New Museum catalogue begins with a quote from Gysin -- reflecting a sentiment that the text reiterates multiple times, approvingly -- that the artist always believed himself to have been born, "wrong time, wrong place, wrong color. . .," presumably because Black people are so free-spirited and earthy, and magical thinkers like Gysin. Yikes. Exoticism of this variety is just the flip side of an inherited colonial superiority, which, after all, Gysin partook of as proprietor of "The 1,001 Nights."

In later years, Gysin liked to tell admirers that he lost ownership of his restaurant because of a curse that was put on him, which he unearthed when he found a small piece of paper covered with a grid of magical glyphs in the establishment's chimney. The form of this spell -- the grid, magical writing -- became the basic formula for his later esthetic experiments after he left Morocco for Paris, as well as for his increasing belief that art was a pathway to other dimensions of consciousness. In fact, as the New Museum catalogue notes (in passing), the loss of The 1,001 Nights probably owed less to magical curses, and more to the political mood after Morocco gained independence from the French in 1956. Confronted with the political reality that Moroccans were not simply raw material for his desires, Gysin went off to chase his imagined version of a pure Other, on a cloud of *kif* smoke, into his own mind.

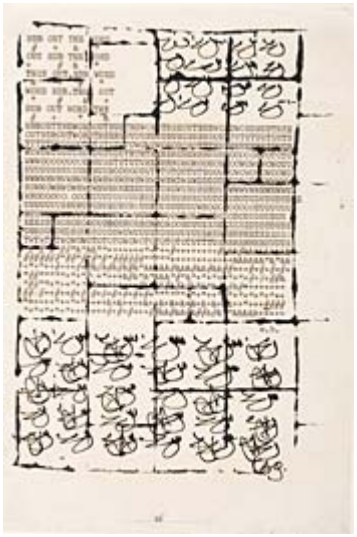
"The Egyptian and Mayan control systems were predicated on the fact that only the priests and rulers could read the written language," Burrough wrote to Gysin, laying out the significance of their experiments with picture writing. "The supposition arises that the present control system is predicated on exactly the same consideration." Their shared artistic attempts to burst open language attain their demonic esthetic charge because they are infused with this countercultural social mission; the Cut-Up Method, we are told, was a "radical weapon to hack through the literary woods towards some goal still out of sight; Interior Space. . ." But obviously, the Burroughs/Gysin idea of "Control" was primarily mental, cosmic and metaphysical, and their focus on it represented a turn away from addressing the forces that actually controlled their world, towards mental spelunking.

The work, I think, suffers as a result of its thin grip on social reality. Gysin sincerely believed in the project of his *Dreamachine*, taking out a patent on the device and forecasting that it would replace TV as a popular entertainment. Such fancies probably underestimated how connected his personal experience of the Machine's effect was with the psychedelic substances he had been ingesting, mistaking his own internal experience for a commonly held one. Similarly, Burroughs once claimed of Gysin's paintings that, "The pictures constantly change because you are drawn into time travel on a network of associations," saying he could read messages in them -- messages that are manifestly not there when you see the canvasses at the New Museum (indeed, the only "message" that is there is Gysin's initials, repeated over and over). The exhibition text makes a lot of how certain Gysin drawings -- colorful starburst patterns -- resemble the kinds of patterns one sees when one is it tripping. And, in fact, they are likely exactly that: Attempts to put down some otherworldly experience whose intensity does not make it to the page.

Gysin's own assessment of his achievements was that he had lived "a life of adventure, leading nowhere." This is certainly too harsh. The two most enthralling pieces in the New Museum show prove as much,

"Board book" collaboration between Brion Gysin and William S. Burroughs

William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin
The Third Mind
1965
Los Angeles County Museum of Art



William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin
The Third Mind
1965
Los Angeles County Museum of Art

and also illustrate what exactly is missing from the other works: Brion Gysin's mesmeric presence itself. In one corner of the galleries, on an iPod, you can listen to a recording of Gysin reciting poet John Giorno's fragmentary ode to New York chaos, *Subway Sound* (Giorno and Gysin were lovers in the mid-'60s). As the sounds of the New York subway breathe eerily in the background, Gysin performs the hell out of the poem, slowly building, his voice rich and casually expressive, pausing at exactly the right moments, wringing deadpan comedy and then a certain grandeur out of Giorno's stitched-together mindscape, composed of geographic information and free-floating slogans. "Be a Hair Stylist in 6 ½ months. . .," Gysin rumbles. "Preparation H!" he trumpets. "Does She or Doesn't She?"

Elsewhere, a short TV interview playing outside the chamber where the *Dreamachine* is housed shows the artist explaining the theory behind it, as he casually passes what appears to be a joint. Captured on film, Gysin has a spell-binding, guru-like conviction in his own invention. His charisma is palpable. You get the sense that you might believe anything that this man wanted you to, and understand fully the cult that built around him. In the end, that aura is probably Gysin's greatest creation. And in that sense -- but maybe only in that sense -- he did indeed succeed in transcending the material world.

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Brion Gysin
Untitled
1962
Collection Shane Akeroyd

Installation view of "Brion Gysin: Dream Machine" at the New Museum