

*Nothing is True, Everything is Permitted: The Life of Brion Gysin*

By John Geiger

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*Brion Gysin: Dream Machine*, exhibition, New Museum, New York City, July 7-October 3, 2010

Curated by Laura Hoptman

*Brion Gysin: Dream Machine* (illustrated catalog)

By Laura Hoptman et al.

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Brion Gysin was a many-faceted outsider personality whose artwork was also multi-faceted—literary, visual, electronic, musical, performance, and unclassifiable (the *Dream Machine*). The charming raconteur, wit, mythmaker, magician, influential multimedia avant-garde artist, and a friend of many other writers and artists was also paranoid, hypercritical, trouble-making, angry and bitter—bitter because his reputation and income did not match those less talented than he or that of his more successful friends such as William S. Burroughs and Paul Bowles. He was a misogynist and mother-hater, but also an enthusiastic participant in the “princess circuit” of wealthy women patrons and had a life-long close friendship with his “pseudo-sister” Felicity Mason. He was an inspiring friend, mentor, and lover, but also capable of sustained enmity and malicious games. William Burroughs famously said that Gysin was the only man he ever respected, but he also acknowledged that many people loathed him.

His career and lack of a major reputation are typical of many avant-garde artists who work in several media. Critics like to pigeonhole artists in particular generic or stylistic categories. Artists like Gysin who defy categories, work in several genres and mix them up, and who are not securely attached to groups or “movements” baffle critics and are often ignored or classified as “minor.” Like Gysin, these artists are often appreciated by other artists who are more accessible and who may be able to elaborate the originator’s ideas or formal innovations in a way that attracts more attention or understanding. (Burroughs’s appropriation of Gysin’s cutups are a prime example here, but, as will be seen below, Gysin also led the way with many other innovative art forms taken up by others.) Sometimes these avant-garde artists achieve a posthumous fame that eluded them in life, which may be happening to Gysin now through the 2005 publication of his biography by John Geiger and the retrospective exhibit of Gysin’s visual art at the New Museum in 2010.

Geiger’s biography provides the first comprehensive overview of Gysin’s life and is a product of impressive research. He has made use of virtually every scrap of writing by or about Gysin, published or unpublished, supplemented by many interviews with those who knew him. Gysin

was frequently a minor character in the biographies or letters of others; now he is the main character in his own life story. As a “mythomaniac,” Gysin was not always factual about his past and the people in it, so Geiger’s exemplary research has gone a long way towards correcting the record, especially about Gysin’s family background, which he modified; his youth in Alberta, Canada, which he minimized; and his mother, whom he attempted to excise from his life. We also learn his original name: John Clifford Brian Leonard Gysin. Gysin left his literary estate to Burroughs, and Burroughs and his assistant, James Grauerholz, gave Geiger access to a cache of unpublished materials lodged at The Ohio State University Libraries, which includes private diaries and journals. In addition to that major Gysin collection, Geiger consulted numerous university archives and records at institutions in the United States, Canada, France, England, and Morocco. Geiger is able to weave his multiple sources into a coherent, clearly written narrative in which each phase of Gysin’s life is described without significant lacunae (although information about his childhood is limited), with appropriate emphasis given to his most creative period, 1958-75, and his subsequent attempts at the end of his life to secure his legacy while suffering from debilitating illness. Objective and balanced in his portrait of Gysin’s personality, Geiger describes Gysin’s talent and achievements, but he is honest about his personal failings and the ways in which he sometimes sabotaged his career, all the while bewailing his lack of fame and money. This book succeeds in promoting Gysin’s reputation as an artist because it is an objective account; for, in spite of his flaws, Gysin was a brilliant man whose innovative art deserves more attention in its own right, not just because he influenced many others or because he was Burroughs’s collaborator.

Geiger gives us a nuanced portrait of a complex man with exceptional abilities. Like many who have been drawn to bohemia and avant-garde art forms, Gysin always felt like an outsider, “delivered to the wrong address” or born in “the wrong skin.” Born in 1916, with a father killed in World War I and brought up by his mother and her sister in Alberta, Canada, Gysin early on knew that he was gay, knew he wanted to leave the provinces, and knew that he had literary/artistic ambitions. He became interested in art at Downside, the elite English Catholic school he attended. After graduation, he headed straight for Paris and launched himself as a surrealist painter. Thus began a peripatetic artistic life on three continents and in four cities: Paris, New York, Tangier, and London. His early contretemps with the surrealists also seemed to set a pattern, and he returned to that story over and over again with his interviewers. Gysin was scheduled to be part of a surrealist exhibit in 1935 (his first exhibition) when, at the last minute, Breton gave orders to drop him from the show. Gysin always said that he was excluded because of homosexuality (It is true that Breton and the surrealists were homophobes.), but Geiger also points out that there might have been another, additional reason: Gysin created a poster for the event which included a surrealist calf’s head in a desert, a head that resembled Breton. Gysin also launched himself as a penniless hanger-on in what Burroughs has called “the international homosexual set” that socialized with the art world and its wealthy patrons. His youth and charm and the old boy tie to Downside served him well and also provided an entrée when he moved to New York in 1940. This social world introduced Gysin to the prospect of survival without a regular job or career through the largesse of friends, lovers, or patrons. Gysin had ambition to achieve in the world of the arts and saw the path to success paved by connections and patrons.

In Paris and New York, Gysin knew Stein and Toklas, Paul and Jane Bowles, surrealist and abstract painters, and theater artists through his friendship with John Latouche. In Paris, he did

have a one-man show in 1939, and in New York he turned to writing and published an early story in *View*, the surrealist magazine. During the war, he enlisted in the Canadian army where he was sent to school to learn Japanese and also learned calligraphy. After the war, he returned to New York and tried to establish a career as a writer of stories or nonfiction or Broadway plays, but without success. In the army, he had met a descendant of the man who was the basis for the fictional Uncle Tom, and he succeeded in researching and publishing two books about the real Uncle Tom and the history of slavery in Canada. On the basis of that historical writing, he was offered one of the first Fulbright grants to travel to Europe to study the history of slavery, which could have been the beginning of an academic career, but, just as his early career as a painter was tainted by the shock of rejection on personal grounds rather than merit, his pride in receiving a Fulbright was poisoned by a member of the jury remarking to him afterwards that he had received the award only because he looked so attractive in his photograph.

Gysin's early adulthood shows a man with many talents—intellectual and even academic, artistic, literary, linguistic—but who had difficulty deciding which field to pursue and who often dropped one project to turn to another if he did not receive enough recognition or encouragement. After disappointment as a painter, he moved on to writing, and, after rejection of his short stories, he moved on to historical research and nonfiction writing, but soon after realizing that time-consuming archival research was not his cup of tea, he agreed to accompany Paul Bowles on a trip to Morocco in 1950—a fateful decision resulting in many years' residence in Tangier and fascination with Moroccan culture but with little effort put into an artistic career; in fact, he became the proprietor of 1001 Nights, the most famous restaurant in the heyday of postwar Tangier, with occasional forays back into painting. It wasn't until he lost the restaurant, returned to Paris in 1958, and began his collaborations with that other late bloomer, William S. Burroughs, in the “Beat Hotel” that he came into his own as an artist.

Geiger convincingly shows that, throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, Gysin was a fountain of creativity in many experimental art forms: painting, collage, word and image and word as image works, sound poetry, electronic poetry, permutation poetry, cutup poetry, experimental novels, multimedia works (including cutups), light shows, recordings, music, performance art, and the Dream Machine—a work of art, if it can be called such, meant to be viewed with the eyes closed. Gysin was one of the first to use electronic media creatively, one of the first performance artists, and an early installation artist. He was well-received in avant-garde Paris by groups such as the *Domaine Poétique* and the *Lettrists*, and his calligraphic grid paintings were exhibited internationally. “The Chapel of Extreme Experience” exhibit in Rome in 1962 was one of the high points of this period: a room with paintings on the walls from floor to ceiling, a Dream Machine, and recordings of repetitive cutup poems. Gysin was also a kind of hip impresario, introducing many celebrities and artists to the musicians of Jajouka in Morocco, magic, myth, and drugs. In this mode, he contributed the famous recipe for hash brownies to Alice Toklas's cookbook. Apparently, Gysin ingested huge amounts of hashish, LSD, and alcohol in the 1960s, and the Dream Machine can be seen as an attempt to achieve psychedelic visions without drugs. (Note: the Dream Machine is a revolving cylinder with cutouts and a light inside designed to create a flicker effect on closed eyelids, which Gysin believed could produce visions. He also, at times, spelled it as Dreamachine.)

The exuberance of Gysin's output and the cultural earthquake of the 1960s were in synch, and Gysin gloried in his role as innovator and guide to celebrities such as the Rolling Stones and to poets such as John Giorno (also his lover). Geiger's book is indeed invaluable in narrating all of the details of Gysin's artistic career because few have been aware of its scope, and Geiger has also contextualized the artistic productivity within Gysin's web of personal relationships and a bohemian lifestyle centered at what became known as the Beat Hotel in Paris. Geiger's account fleshes out Gysin's life from Gysin's perspective during a period that is dominated, in most people's minds, by the multi-media cutup collaborations with Burroughs and Burroughs's subsequent fame as a novelist using cutups. Also, most ignore the fact that both Gysin and Burroughs collaborated with many others during this period as well, for the Beat Hotel provided an intimate bohemian community from 1958 to 1963.

The artistic partnership between Gysin and Burroughs is indeed a remarkable one in the annals of art, and their work together has not been adequately examined by critics who can now use Geiger's biography for some basic documentation. Gysin called it a "psychic symbiosis," and Geiger points out that Gysin ever after became "a central point of reference" in Burroughs's writing, which is filled with appearances by Gysin or references to his ideas—far more than any references to Beat friends. When it comes to cutups, the related explanations or manifestoes, and preoccupations with certain myths, historical figures, "the magical universe," or crackpot theories, the two minds can hardly be separated. The culmination of their cutup work is found in *The Third Mind*—a still unpublished masterpiece of word and image cutups. (The published book is sadly truncated.) As personalities, the more gregarious Gysin was seen by many to be dominating a withdrawn Burroughs, and Burroughs's adopted some of Gysin's less attractive traits at that time, such as misogyny, paranoia, and hostility outside a small inner circle. Their differences as artists, however, soon became clear as Burroughs worked with cutups obsessively and developed an effective personal cutup style in his fiction to which he primarily devoted himself, while Gysin did not focus on any one art form or pursue continued use of the cutup. For Gysin, the discovery of cutups, the demonstration of their use in various media, and dissemination to others was enough: he had accomplished his purpose as an innovator.

By the middle of the 1970s, Burroughs had moved back to the United States and was becoming an established, although contested, writer and a cult figure popular with younger writers and artists. He devoted himself to a literary career and gave readings for additional income, which also increased his reputation. After some wandering between Paris, London, New York, and Tangier, Gysin settled in Paris for good in 1973. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, he devoted an inordinate amount of time to failed projects: manufacture and sale of the Dream Machine which he thought could replace TV (unlikely for this "what is it"—a kinetic artwork, a gadget, a tool, a meditation technique, a drug trip without drugs, a brainwave, a visionary experience), the unpublished and unpublishable *Third Mind*, a screenplay for *Naked Lunch* that no one liked, and a novel, *The Process*, which ultimately sold 1000 copies. In each case, he ignored the signs that these projects would not be successful but persisted in believing in his vision and in the unlikely prospect that they would produce significant income.

In 1974, Gysin was diagnosed with colon cancer and underwent painful treatments, ending up with a colostomy; he later developed emphysema and lung cancer as well. The last twelve years of his life were marked by illness, loneliness, poverty, and depression. The last section of the

biography devoted to these years is where Geiger best captures Gysin's contradictory personality. Gysin was certainly not a sympathetic patient or friend at this time, full of complaints, frustration, resentment, hostility, jealousy, and malicious gossip vociferously expressed in letters and in person; yet he had many faithful old friends and younger acolytes who tolerated him and attempted to help. In spite of pain and weakness, he continued to create innovative art: most important are his photo-montages of the construction of Beaubourg (the Centre Georges Pompidou) and his final, enormous painting *Calligrafitti of Fire*, called by George Condo "a painting that could stop a train." He completed a series of interviews with Terry Wilson which, when published in 1985 as *Here To Go: Planet R-101*, amounted to an oral autobiography, and he wrote a novel, *The Last Museum*, which was published after his death in 1986. He also received significant recognition through the *Colloque de Tanger* in Geneva in 1975, the Nova Convention in New York in 1978, the Final Academy in London in 1982, the publications of Genesis P-Orridge and Terry Wilson, the homage of younger painters such as Keith Haring and George Condo and rock musicians such as David Bowie, Patti Smith, and Iggy Pop. In the 1980s, Gysin was himself becoming a cult figure and was awarded the French establishment's Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et Lettres. Also, in spite of his disabilities, he was at times able to travel, go to discos, socialize with princesses, and enjoy a final intense affair with a youthful lover. It's a cliché to say it, but true, that his indomitable, troublesome spirit survived right alongside fear, rage, self-pity, and resentment over his failed ambitions. In fact, by the end of the book, the reader can actually come to admire the unpleasant parts of Gysin's character as a sign of the strength to remain himself until the end.

Geiger is not a literary or art critic, but rather a non-fiction writer with a background in history—good qualifications for a biographer. This is an excellent biography; however, it is not a critical biography. There is no sustained analysis or evaluation of Gysin's art. An assessment is made through quoting others, many of whom, such as Genet and Giorno, praise him as "man of ideas." At the end, Gysin decided he was "a painter who writes," berating himself for not sticking to one thing: "You should hammer one nail all your life, and I didn't do that; I hammered on a lot of nails like a xylophone," an astute comment his career, but also on the inability of the critical establishment to appreciate a multi-media avant-garde artist.

For a greater insight into the work of "a painter who writes" and a critical assessment of Gysin's life's work, the Brion Gysin retrospective (his first!) at the New Museum in 2010 and the accompanying catalog nicely complement the biography. The exhibit reconstructed Gysin's visual arts career, and, except for two early surrealist pieces and a drawing, his works from 1958 until his death were displayed consecutively in a circular arrangement with side rooms that also allowed non-chronological wandering. The visual art was supplemented and contextualized by recordings of sound poems and sound experiments, interviews with Gysin and Burroughs, films done with Burroughs and Antony Balch, a film of Gysin painting a large calligraphic work on the floor, permutation poems displayed on a computer screen, a simulation of Gysin's performance art in the early 1960s (voice, image, scratched slides), a Dream Machine in a darkened room, experiments on paper with books/text/the page/word-and-image. Occupying the walls in the main exhibit rooms were calligraphic paintings/drawings and collage works. The catalog lists well over 300 works displayed which had been gathered from a number of public and private sources. (Gysin left the bulk of his artwork to the city of Paris, and the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, MAM, was a major contributor.) The sheer size of the exhibit was

impressive. In spite of not sticking to one thing, Gysin produced a significant body of visual art and developed his own characteristic imagery and style with his calligraphy inspired by both Japanese and Arabic writing, a “signature” image that the curator calls a glyph based on the initials BG, collage/montage, and the use of a grid (produced by a roller) which anchors the free-flowing abstractions of calligraphy and collage. In his final years, these forms inspired the photo-montages of Beaubourg and the final large painting.

Most exciting to this viewer was the opportunity to view portions of *The Third Mind*, the great cutup collage/manifesto project by Gysin and Burroughs, some of which was seen in the *Ports of Entry* exhibit of Burroughs’s artwork in 1996. A whole room from *The Third Mind* is stunning; these word and image collages fulfill the promise (or threat) of the cutup to break word-and-image locks, reveal new meanings, predict the future, satirize the corporate/consumer social order, and inspire the hope of freedom from “control.” Also compelling were the photo-montages based on the construction of Beaubourg which Gysin could see from his apartment across the street: Gysin’s images-within-a-grid form and penchant for permutation had serendipitously found a subject that matched his vision in the construction of a postmodern building; photographic representation becomes abstraction in complicated patterns of repetition. For those who know Gysin’s biography and writing, these late photo-montages are also poignant. Gysin entitled the series “The Last Museum” (also the title of his last novel) and said of the construction that looked so much like his grid works, “This is the Last Museum, what else? And who designed it but me!” Finally, *Calligrafitti of Fire* closed the show with a powerful and beautiful horizontal work of ten panels measuring 51 by 645 inches (130 x 1640 cm) with a calligraphic image based on the BG glyph in bright red-orange moving from right to left on a yellow background with roller grid patterns, the calligraphic mark becoming looser and fainter towards the left end. The work has the spontaneity and energy one experiences with a large Jackson Pollock. The title is apt: it is Gysin’s goodbye to the world using his initials in his unique calligraphic style and the colors of fire to say “I was here.”

The exhibition catalog is well done and is a valuable reference book as well as a critical evaluation. In addition to the central, comprehensive essay by curator Laura Hoptman, the catalog also includes a more than usually interesting preface by New Museum Director Lisa Phillips (who curated the 1996 Whitney exhibit, *Beat Culture and the New America 1950-1965*) and contributions by John Geiger, Gérard Audinet (Chief Curator of MAM), James Grauerholz, Lauren Cornell, John Giorno, Genesis P-Orridge, George Condo, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Cerith Wyn Evans, Ugo Rondinone, Paul Elliman, Mark Titchner, Trisha Donnelly, Sue de Beer, Jesse Bransford, Amy Granat, Loris Gréaud, Shannon Ebner, Adam Putnam, and Scott Treleaven. In addition to the illustrations from the exhibition, photos of works by the contemporary artists accompany their commentary. There is a “construct your own Dream Machine” section at the end providing panels to cut out to make a cylinder and instructions on how to do it yourself with the cylinder, a light bulb, and a turntable set at 78 rpm. The volume concludes with a selected bibliography by Amy Mackie, a checklist, and a list of lenders. The print quality is generally good, but it is a shame that the catalog does not represent *Calligrafitti of Fire* very well, although perhaps that would be impossible.

Phillips notes in her preface to the catalog that the Gysin exhibit was unusual for a museum of contemporary art, but justified by the fact that Gysin is an influential innovator who has

influenced artists working today, thus the appreciations by contemporary artists in the catalog. Curator Laura Hoptman's essay is the first comprehensive attempt by an art critic to explain and assess Gysin's art and to give him his place in art history. She provides a coherent and insightful analysis, which helpfully divides Gysin's visual art production from 1958 to 1986 into four periods: 1) calligraphic paintings and drawings, 2) cutups and permutations of words, images, sounds, and performance 3) the Dream Machine period, and 4) photo-collage and montage revisiting techniques and images of the 1960s. She then proceeds to discuss each period and many individual artworks with careful description of techniques and effects. She describes his innovative stylistic forms (the calligraphic mark, the grid, layers, personal script, and a glyph based on his initials) and his various methods (painting, drawing, roller grid, photography, permutation, cutups, collage, montage, new technologies) and relates them to his goals as an artist: to break a culture of control enforced by language and image, to create new meanings, new psychic vistas, new consciousness, to change the world. In Gysin's philosophy, art is a weapon, a form of magic, or a counter-spell to break a curse, and the artist is a prophet, guru, magician. Thus, for Hoptman, Gysin's most important innovation was what many would see as his greatest folly: the Dream Machine.

Hoptman analyzes the Dream Machine as an attempt to create art without an object—pictures in the head—a way of achieving a state of creative production that does not necessitate painting, drawing, or writing. She defines it as less an artwork than a tool (like the cutup) to escape conventional ways of seeing, being, believing; to supersede the controlled word and image of the conscious world; to be freed of the materiality of the object, symbol, sign. Hoptman states that the Dream Machine is Gysin's best-known work, with plans for its construction currently available on thousands of websites. (Note: There is also a website that recreates the flicker effect on your computer screen.) Although one must respect Hoptman as the expert who knows Gysin's work better than anyone else, there are many of us who are left nonplussed by the Dream Machine. As Mark Titchner notes in his essay, the device "requires concentration and repeated meditative use," and, one suspects, a predisposition to expect visions.

Throughout the essay, Hoptman contextualizes Gysin's work historically in the past and present. She points out similarities between Gysin's visual art and some contemporaries, such as Mark Tobey, Cy Twombly, Franz Kline, Yayoi Kusama, Yves Klein, Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, Takis, and groups such as Fluxus, the Lettrists, and *Domaine Poétique*, but is always careful to point out that Gysin's work is fundamentally different and cannot really be connected to any movement or school. She also discusses his influence on contemporary artists, documented thoroughly by those who have contributed to the catalog. Both Hoptman and Lauren Cornell believe that contemporary artists in our neo-conservative era are responding both to Gysin's multiplicity as an artist and his oppositional stance. Certainly, Gysin has much to offer; twenty-five years after his death he is still able, as Scott Treleaven says in the essay that concludes the catalog, "to unleash his ideas and memes in the lives and work of other artists." Laura Hoptman and all who worked with her on the Brion Gysin retrospective are to be commended for a mammoth effort to resurrect the visual art career of a neglected artist, resulting in an illuminating exhibit that gives Gysin his due. Both the exhibition catalog and the biography will be important resources for years to come.

