A Do Easy Portrait of William Burroughs

William Burroughs, like most people who are in treatment for narcotics addiction, had a very consistent daily routine. He woke early, around seven in the morning, fed his cats, took his daily dose of methadone, and went back to bed for a little while. Sometime between eight and nine he would get out of bed and have a light breakfast of Earl Grey tea, a soft-boiled egg and toast while he read the day's news, usually from the International Herald Tribune. Then he would get dressed, usually in blue jeans and a work shirt, and get to work.

He practiced what he called "Doing Easy." This was a method he had followed since the late 1940s. He wouldn't force anything. He trusted his intuition. He considered every act, as a kind of meditation, seeking efficiency on a path of least resistance. He wrote, "Once you find the easy way you don't have to think about it will almost do itself. You ignore something because it is painful, and it becomes more uncomfortable through neglect, and you neglect it further. Everyday tasks become painful and boring because you think of them as WORK something solid and heavy to be fumbled and stumbled over. Overcome this block and you will find that DE can be applied to anything you do even to the final discipline of doing nothing. The easier you do it the less you have to do. He who has learned to do nothing with his whole mind and body will have everything done for him."

Employing this frame of mind, starting in mid-morning he might write a little, arrange clippings, pictures or scraps of writing into one of his elaborate scrapbooks. Or, following the death of his close friend and collaborator Brion Gysin in 1986, he might do some painting. (William said Gysin was the only person he ever really respected. Brion was a painter and didn't have much commercial success in his lifetime. Burroughs's celebrity insured that whatever art he made would have a ready market. Not wanting to overshadow his friend, William deferred from seriously focusing on making painted works for sale until after Brion's death. Burroughs's first solo exhibition of painted works took place in December of 1987 at Tony Shafrazzi Gallery in New York, and it was a commercial success and a counter-culture sensation, if harshly reviewed by the blue-chip critics. His painting sales eventually generated more income for him than his writing ever did).

Burroughs did most of his artwork in two places on his property; scrapbooks, collage work, drawing and small paintings in the front bedroom of the house; and larger paintings or anything that involved fire, explosives or noxious fluids in the detached garage in the back yard. His shotgun pieces were done either on his friend Fred's farm or behind the Outhouse, east of Lawrence. He rarely ate lunch and worked for two to six hours, until the inspiration ran thin. Then, it was time for a drink. He made a rule for himself: no alcohol before four in the afternoon. He struggled to stick to the rule.

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By the time Burroughs moved to Lawrence, in 1980, he was, arguably, the major literary figure who had the broadest influence on popular culture. The Beatles, Rolling Stones and David Bowie referred to him and cited his ideas in their stylistic construction. Ridley Scott titled his film Blade Runner after a Burroughs novella. Debra Harry and Chris Stein struck up friendships with William, and he was seen as a kind of role model for the Punk movement in general. Madonna attended the after party of William's opening show at Tony Shafrazzi gallery and sat beside him to be photographed by the tabloids. Though William wasn't famous the way the superstars who sought his company were (he could still go to the grocery and liquor stores without making a scene). He was the man that people who "knew" knew about.

I was formally introduced to him in the late summer of 1982, at his house in Lawrence. We spent a couple of hours that afternoon awkwardly getting acquainted. He showed me some of his guns, introduced me to his cat Ruski, and he talked about the way his friend Brion Gysin's paintings were like time travel. I can't remember what I said. Of course I was completely awestruck, trying to play it cool, soaking it in, about as callow as it is possible to be. We smoked a joint. I don't remember much except that I had never experienced being around anyone with such wildly intense personal charisma. To this day I've never been around anyone with more mesmerizing presence. I was feeling awkward and trying to make a good impression.

I guess I didn't make too bad an impression because over the next few months he accepted invitations for dinner at my house. In those days he was always looking for a free meal, and I had become a reasonably good cook, regularly sharing meals with a group of like-minded friends. Eventually, I became a member of his local posse. I visited him every few days and he joined us for dinner a couple of times per month. This was a time of my life when I was

reading voraciously, hanging on every word he said, beginning to learn what it is to be an artist.

Me goofing around with a pistol shaped lighter at William's house, with William in the hallway door – circa 1987

In the late spring of 1985, I began making plans to move to Paris. When I told William, he asked me, "Do you speak French?" When I replied, saying no, but I plan on learning, he slapped his forehead and said, "Oh boy… "
After we had discussed it a few more times, and he saw that I was serious, working three jobs, saving every penny, and I was studying the language intensively, he began giving me tips. "Paris never changes. You can still buy a pheasant at the market. You can go to any pharmacy and tell them that you have a cold, and ask for some codethyline Houdé…" a potent opiate… "You don't need a prescription." He carefully wrote the name of the product down on a piece of note paper. "They're little pink balls, about the size of number four buckshot. A kid like you, you take two of them, and baby, the pain is ***gone***." He also gave me Brion Gysin's address and telephone number.
At the age of 25, having grown up in Kansas, I had never seen the ocean. Once I had committed myself to emigrating to France, the choice of making the passage on a coal freighter became evident. It was the same price as a plane ticket.
When I told William of this, he thought it was a bad idea. "It's so slow and boring!" I explained I wanted to see the ocean and feel the distance from

Kansas to France. He instructed me to take a dense book, "A Russian novel, Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky. Read 'The Brothers Karamazov'."

I arrived in Paris in early October of 1985, with Burroughs's advice, instructions, and something of his blessing. I set about learning to speak French, enrolling in an intensive course, five hours per day, five days per week. I finished reading The Brothers Karamazov and went on to other books on William's recommended reading list. I tried taking some codethyline Houdé and didn't like it. I contacted Brion Gysin and eventually met him. I got odd jobs, from tutoring English to making product photographs for a shady car stereo dealer. My student ID from my French class allowed me to get into the Louvre without an entrée fee, so I visited the museum regularly, taking in the collection bit by manageable bit. I made hundreds of photographs (mostly bad ones) that I processed in a tiny closet darkroom in the maid's room I lived in with my girlfriend. I explored Paris and the region around it by commuter train and bicycle. I took short trips to Barcelona, Vienna, Saint Paul de Vence and explored the megalithic ruins at Carnac in Brittany.

Just before Christmas of 1985, Burroughs came to Paris, with his entourage, to visit Gysin, who was stricken with emphysema and in dwindling health. William had written The Cat Inside and had commissioned Brion to do the illustrations for it. As soon as Burroughs arrived, things started happening… dinners, brunches, outings and meetings. One afternoon William, James Graerholz and his spouse Michael Emerton and Udo Braeger came to visit the tiny apartment my girlfriend/fiancé were living in. William wanted to see it. I'm not sure why, exactly. But I had the feeling he wanted to make sure I was in a sufficiently stable situation. James later told me that William had encouraged Brion to hire me as his assistant. I was flattered by this, but, especially in retrospect, if I had taken on the position, it would have been a mess, at best.
My girlfriend and I got married just before Christmas of 1985. With that, I became a legal French resident, and she acquired a Green Card for United States residency. She became very frustrated with the French system of higher education. She had an opportunity to do post graduate work in Biochemistry at the University of Kansas back in Lawrence. So, toward the end of 1986, after a year of intensive immersion into French culture, we moved to Lawrence again. Brion Gysin died a few weeks after we had returned. I remember visiting William the day after the news had arrived. By that point in his life, he had lost many close friends and collaborators. Even so, Brion's death was a serious blow.

William was very private about his emotions. But it was obvious he was grieving. He was subdued, doting on his cats more regularly, drinking a little more than usual and letting others carry conversations.

But he was also looking ahead. He started asking me about ways to photographically merge images from one painting onto another. A few weeks after that, James called me to ask if I could help William use photography to make visual analogies to cut up recordings.

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When I met with William, he asked me to shoot macro detail slides of some of his favorite parts of pieces he was working on. "Do you see that fox, right there, coming out of those bushes?" he would ask, pointing at a swirl of color on wood, I could nearly always see exactly what he described. It was amazing to me. "Look, there, that's a 1934 Duesenberg. Do you see it? Coming out toward you?" I did see it –it was right there! - and I photographed it for him.

The next step was coming over to his house with the slides and a slide projector to project the macro images onto other paintings and see what emerged. For this we both smoked a lot of weed, getting very high. We would darken the house and move the projector and the paintings around until… something… seemed to take form. Then I would photograph that with negative film for making color prints. Then he collaged the. resulting prints back into other works. From 1986 to the end of his life, Burroughs was exceptionally prolific. His paintings were generally panned by blue chip critics. But the best of them (and there are quite a few of those) are visual portals into the visionary worlds that make his writing so uniquely captivating, vexing and perplexing. He approached making his work using his "Do Easy" mindset. He didn't force it. Nor did he wait around until he was "inspired." He methodically went about it, one focused choice at a time, following his intuition while invoking the inventions that can come from pure chance, like reading tea leaves, tarot cards or the lines in your hand, teasing signals out of noise. As I witnessed all of this, I found myself marveling at the forces of chance that had brought me into intimately witnessing Burroughs at work.

Outside of my work for William, I was pursuing my own endeavors in photography. I was regularly photographing the landscape of the region – looking for the kind of epiphanies of chance that I was seeing in his paintings. I also worked as an assistant for a successful commercial photographer in Kansas

City named Hollis Officer. Through him I met Barbara Dezonia, who was beginning to publish a national arts magazine called Borderline, based in Kansas City, on a grand scale. She became an exceptionally encouraging patron of my photography, and, among other assignments, commissioned me to make portraits of Burroughs.

At that point in his life, he had been photographed countless times, often by some of the most celebrated photographers alive, including Robert Mapplethorpe and Richard Avedon. James Grauerholz prepared me for the shoot by warning me that William had no patience for the admittedly tedious process of adjusting light, or finicky clothing or prop contrivances. He said I shouldn't count on more than a few minutes of William's attention. These restrictions didn't trouble me very much, because I hoped to make a picture that didn't look overly contrived. I hoped to make an image of William that would reflect his life as an artist, his "Do Easy" method.

The day of the shoot arrived, and I was at William's house at 11am sharp. I knew that his rigorous daily routine would have him at peak energy and patience for photographs from around noon to three. It was just me and him. We were, by that time in our friendship, comfortable with each other. I knew my way around his house, what lines not to cross. He was familiar with my materials and my way of communicating. We visited for a while. I explained what the magazine was and why we wanted to make a portrait of him. He offered a joint to me -I declined. I explained to him that I was going to look around the house and property, find a setting, prepare my equipment, and then I would come get him when it was time to make some pictures. I would only need fifteen or twenty minutes of his time. He seemed to be relieved that it was to be so relatively undemanding for him. I spent a little over an hour scouting around the property…

I found a promising location at the external garage in the back yard behind his house, where he did his more involved painted pieces. I found a way to create a kind of proscenium out of the open garage door that would turn the garage window into a resemblance of one of his paintings in the background of the spot where he would be sitting, aside one of his current works on an easel. I unpacked my equipment, arranged it and brought him onto the set. I was using a camera that allowed eight exposures per roll of film. After I had made six exposures of him in slightly varied poses -making sure the hand from which he

had amputated his pinky finger was visible, he said, "When I was photographed by Richard Avedon, he only made two exposures." I took that to mean he was done. Oddly enough, I was confident I had a decent picture I could be happy enough with. So I made two more quick exposures to finish the roll, thanked him, and let him get back to his day. He asked me what time it was. A little after two. "Too early for a drink." -He was struggling with his rule of no alcohol before four in the afternoon.

William Burroughs at his garage studio in the back yard of his home at 1927 Learnard Avenue in Lawrence, Kansas

As I was packing up my equipment and putting the objects I had moved for the picture back in their proper place, he began pulling out some of the pieces he had been working on and taking them into the house. He again offered me a joint, and I accepted. Burroughs always had exceptionally strong pot. I got very high almost immediately. I helped him carry a couple of larger paintings on plywood panels into his house. He again asked me what time it was. Three o'clock. "Fuck it. Let's have a drink." He poured two tumblers two thirds full of cheap vodka, one ice cube and one third Coca-Cola. I sipped mine and he drank his straight down. Then he propped one of the painted panels up onto one of his dining room chairs in front of his sofa, took another pull off his joint,

and sat down on the sofa to study it. This was how he decided whether a piece was finished and how he went about finding titles for the ones he considered finished. While he was doing this, I finished packing up my camera. Just as I closed up the zipper of my camera case, I looked up and saw William's favorite cat Fletch had positioned himself on the chair next to the chair where William had set his painting, I saw Brion's painting on the wall over the dining room table, the light that filled the room, William's empty vodka tumbler on the bookshelf, and all of it framed perfectly against the west wall of his living room, and I knew I had to make that picture immediately.

I unzipped my camera case and reassembled my camera with sharp focused urgency. I was extremely high from having smoked some of William's pot and already kind of drunk from the half tumbler of vodka he had given me. My will to make the picture cut right through my inebriated fog. I snapped my camera onto the tripod, praying, please God, don't let anything move for just this minute… please please please let me get this picture… I framed the camera back parallel to the west wall… Fletch hadn't moved… William hadn't moved… I screwed the cable release onto the shutter… closed the shutter… I guessed at the exposure… 200 ISO… f11… ¼ second… cocked the shutter… watched for a second when William was still… pressed the shutter release… William moved, and it was over.

William Burroughs studying one of his paintings to find its title with his favorite cat Fletch, Lawrence, Kansas. A painting by Brion Gysin hangs over the dining table.
The front room of the house at 1927 Learnard Avenue, Lawrence, Kansas

1988

This remains my favorite of all the pictures I made of William over the years. It only would have been possible at that time in our lives. The light from the lamp on the dining room table was always the first thing I noticed whenever I entered his house. It was always on. Brion's painting over the dining room table remains deeply etched into my memory as a superb example of his work, and the ideas that form his work. Fletch the cat was William's psychic familiar, always gently present at William's side when his mind was most active.

I'm writing this nearly 40 years after the day I made these two pictures. William died in 1997, nearly thirty years ago. I'm now nearly as old as he was when I met him. I've never met anyone even slightly like him, and only one other person who had as much force of character: Irving Penn (but that is another story). What would my life be like if he hadn't moved to Lawrence, Kansas? I wouldn't have written this essay, and I wouldn't think about "Do Easy." Most people have someone they miss at some point in their life, and William is one of the people I miss most. He was a particularly privileged and gifted member of the generation that came of age between the two World Wars, a generation that has all but disappeared from the planet and will never be duplicated. He was arguably the most sought out member of the counterculture. I feel fortunate to have known him, with all of his brilliance and folly.

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