Cutting Up the Corpse

Oliver Harris

An American in Paris

Thirty-six years after its original discovery, in summer 1961 three examples of the verbal exquisite corpse appeared in the second issue of *LOCUS SOLUS*, edited by John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, James Schuyler, and Harry Matthews. Published in Geneva, this "Special Collaborations" issue of the magazine put out by the New York School of poets should be regarded, according to David Shapiro, as "one of the basic texts in considering a theory of collaboration."[1] With over forty names on the front cover, the contents of this *de facto* manifesto for a "pluralist aesthetic" ranged widely—from a song by Shakespeare and Fletcher and a poem by Coleridge and Southey to translations of Japanese linked verse—although the historical grounding and theoretical framework of the collection is evident from its epigraph: "*La poésie doit être faite par tous. Non par un*."[2] Lautréamont's famous critique of individual authorship, a dictum so enthusiastically taken up by André Breton, confirms the centrality here of Surrealist collaborative work in translation, such as a section from *The Immaculate Conception* by Breton and Eluard. Tucked away in between the "Question and Answer Game" by Breton and Tanguy and "Two Poems" by Char and Eluard, were the three exquisite corpses, including the original line that gave the game its name.

LOCUS SOLUS II appeared in the context of a general post-war revival of interest in European avant-garde movements, collaborative work, chance

[1] Shapiro, "Art as Collaboration," in McCabe, 50; 50.
[2] *LOCUS SOLUS II*, 5.

procedures, and collage-based methods that crossed or combined media. This included such events as the "Art of Assemblage" exhibition at MOMA, also in 1961, and such publications as *PIN* by Kurt Schwitters and Raoul Hausmann, which in 1962 hailed the rediscovery of "new tendencies in poeting and paintry."[3] Although, of the four poets, only Schuyler was even born when the game was first played in Yves Tanguy's lodgings on the rue du Château in late 1925, the exquisite corpse had a paradigmatic status for the New York School. Not only did it model the poets' own playful experiments in collective creativity, it also signalled a curious circuit of transatlantic cultural exchange, as the corpse passed in a series of relays from one generation to another and between painters and poets. For in the 1950s the New York School poets took their concept of artistic collaboration directly from the example of the New York Abstract Expressionist painters. And the likes of Jackson Pollock and Robert Motherwell had in turn been introduced to the exquisite corpse in New York during the early 1940s by the major Surrealists; encouraging the Americans to play with the corpse, the Surrealists in exile from occupied France had, as Cynthia Jaffee McCabe notes, "transferred the concept of artistic collaboration to the young artists of their host nation."[4] In the late 1950s two of the four New York School poets then retraced the journey of the French Surrealists in the opposite direction, so that by the time they published *LOCUS SOLUS*, Ashbery and Matthews were already living as expatriates in Paris, home of the corpse.[5]

This episode of cultural history marked by the magazine of the New York School poets creates the context for what follows, focused on the experiments of another American in Paris in the early 1960s. For *LOCUS SOLUS II* also included texts that signalled another new engagement by expatriate writers with the material methods and group affiliations of the historical avant-garde. These were

[3] Schwitters and Hausmann, *PIN*, 23.
[4] McCabe, "Artistic Collaboration," 38.
[5] Once there, Matthews would become involved in OULIPO (formed officially in November 1960), yet another renewal of avant-garde literary experiment and Surrealist game-playing.

examples of the "cut-up" method, initially discovered by the painter Brion Gysin in September 1959, and then, in a career move that was an extraordinary act of brinkmanship for a novelist, taken up and developed by William Burroughs throughout the 1960s. Far from coincidentally, like the corpse, the cut-up project originated in Paris, in the so-called Beat Hotel. Situated in rue Gît-le-Coeur, just three kilometres from rue du Château on the other side of the Jardin du Luxembourg, the Left Bank hotel was home to Burroughs and Gysin on and off for five years, and port of call for poet-friends and cut-up collaborators including Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Sinclair Beiles, and Harold Norse. It was in Paris that Burroughs met Ashbery, discussed the use of cut-up methods, and so came to contribute to *LOCUS SOLUS*.[6]

As for Burroughs' cut-up contributions, the two texts published in the magazine ("Everywhere March Your Head" and "Sons of Your In") had a very particular history and identity. Originally, they had appeared a year earlier in *Minutes to Go*, the launching manifesto of the cut-up method, co-authored by Burroughs, Corso, Gysin, and Beiles. Irrespective of their content, the texts therefore made an implicit polemical connection to *LOCUS SOLUS* in its own function as a group manifesto. Geoff Ward's observation of how precisely the magazine "theorized and historicized" collaborative writing[7] is borne out equally by the specific content of these cut-up texts and by the way they were presented here.

An explanatory note, taken from *Minutes to Go* and given after each text, clarifies that the two texts were each a "Cut up of Rimbaud's 'To a Reason', arrangement by Burroughs & Corso."[8] Within *Minutes to Go*, these two texts had accorded Rimbaud a unique prominence—one given historical meaning by the fact

[6] Actually, the evidence is only circumstantial, but Burroughs did write to Ted Berrigan—concerning his magazine, *C*, which was publishing a cut-up text alongside work by Ashbery—to say: "Yes I have talked with Jon Ashbery who has been using cut ups for years. Before I talked with him I knew that he was using cut ups from reading his work." (Burroughs to Berrigan, September 10, 1964; Northwestern University.)
[7] Ward, *Statutes of Liberty*, 126.
[8] *LOCUS SOLUS II*, 149 and 151.

that the Surrealists had claimed him as one of their own. While Burroughs made the relationship fully explicit in following texts, the very fact of choosing to cut up Rimbaud's poetry tacitly defined the cut-up method in relation to the canons and methods of Surrealism. The choice of a Rimbaud cut-up was therefore ideal from the point of view of *LOCUS SOLUS* and the literary histories it was bringing together. If the selection of texts had a particular resonance, so too the presentation: for here, at the top of the page, the cut-ups are attributed to "William Burroughs, Gregory Corso, & Arthur Rimbaud"—a much more striking statement of co-authorship than the note given in *Minutes to Go*.[9] The texts seemed to fulfil *both* forms of literary collaboration theorised by Kenneth Koch in his "Note on This Issue": for these were not only texts made by "two or more poets actually together while they wrote" but also "composed by poets working with already existing texts."[10]

Burroughs criticism has often noted the legacy of Surrealism, usually by recycling his own polemical statements on the relation, but there has been no more than a single, passing, comparison of the cut-up with the exquisite corpse.[11] This oversight probably reflects the fact that neither Burroughs nor Gysin mentioned it directly, while the only time examples of both methods ever appeared together was in *LOCUS SOLUS II*. Although this unique point of intersection is narrow with respect to the full range of the cut-up project—the variety of methods used over time, purposes theorised, and results achieved across several media (photomontage, collage scrapbooks, tape-recorders, films)—it does open up for comparative analysis specific histories of related cultural and textual experiment. Building on other studies of its aesthetic and political dimensions,[12] here I want to put the cut-up project beside the exquisite

[9] *LOCUS SOLUS II*, 149 and 151. There's also a third text—"Cut Up," attributed to Gregory Corso and Dwight Eisenhower—that was also first published in *Minutes to Go*.
[10] Koch, in *LOCUS SOLUS II*, 196.
[11] See Gérard-Georges Lemaire, "23 Stitches Taken," in Burroughs and Gysin, *The Third Mind*, 11–12.
[12] See my essays "Cutting up Politics" in *Retaking the Universe: William S. Burroughs in the Age of Globalization* (London: Pluto, 2004), edited by Davis Schneiderman and Philip

corpse on Lautreamont's operating table, and see what emerges from their encounter.

? Four young explorers

For Kenneth Koch, collaboration between poets was inherently and radically inspiring: "The strangeness of the collaborating situation, many have felt, might lead them to the unknown, or at least to some dazzling insights at which they could never have arrived consciously or alone."[13] While he went on to identify two broad understandings of literary collaboration—one where writers compose together, the other where they work with already written texts—Koch was happy to see the second as a variant on the first, so conflating an important distinction with regard to the exquisite corpse and the cut-up.[14] However, before considering the acts themselves in these terms, and before making any concrete textual analysis of their results, it's necessary to address the collaborative *movement* that was the context for the discovery and development of each.

There is ample evidence to suggest that the cut-up method, like the exquisite corpse game, was the paradigmatic creative act of a collaborative group. After all, *Minutes to Go* was the manifesto of four writers, and not just in the same sense that *LOCUS SOLUS* had four contributing editors. Firstly, it was an openly proselytizing polemic, directly promoting the method to its readers and inviting them to apply it. And secondly, the ideology informing its joint authorship was spelled out in a grid on the front cover which seemed to apply the cut-up method to their very names, creating four new composite authors: "Wm Bubrio, Rroungy Ghsin, Sincgreg Lairory, and Beilcors Eso." The deconstruction signalled

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Walsh, 175–200, and "'Burroughs is a poet too, really': the Poetics of *Minutes to Go*," in *Edinburgh Review* 114 (2005), 24–36.
[13] Koch, in *LOCUS SOLUS II*, 193.
[14] Koch says that existing texts are used "as if they were other poets in the room" (193).

a critique of individual originality that coincided with the production of new hybrid identities, very much in the manner of the exquisite corpse.

The number of collaborators here—four—is itself not without significance, since it corresponded to the quartering operation of the basic cut-up action, as described by Burroughs in "The Cut Up Method of Brion Gysin" (first published in January 1961):[15]

> The method is simple. Here is one way to do it. Take a page. Like this page. Now cut down the middle and across the middle. You now have four sections [. . .] Now rearrange the sections placing section four with section one and section two with section three.

Burroughs' instructions for dividing the page into four sections make interesting parallels to the collaborative practice of the exquisite corpse, although it's revealing that it is the *pictorial* rather than verbal version that it most resembles, in two key respects.

Firstly, in a very broad sense, Burroughs' quartering of the textual body as if it were *material* declares the method's painterly origins. It recalls both the general context and precise circumstances of Gysin's original act of discovery:[16]

> While cutting a mount for a drawing in room 25, I sliced through a pile of newspapers with my Stanley Blade and thought of what I had said to Burroughs some six months earlier about the necessity for turning painters' techniques directly onto writing.

Arising from a material accident occurring within a framework of inter-disciplinary artistic discussion, the method answered Gysin's now-famous proposition to

[15] Burroughs, in *The Third Mind*, 31.
[16] Gysin, "CUT-UPS: A Project For Disastrous Success," in *Brion Gysin Let the Mice In*, 4.

Burroughs that "Writing is fifty years behind painting," because of writers' failure to apply the revolutionary potentials of collage practices. Collage had in turn long been understood in terms of collaborative creativity, as in Max Ernst's proposal that "the systematic fusion of the thoughts of two or more authors in the same work (otherwise called 'collaboration') can also be considered a relation of collage."[17] Gysin was well aware of such definitions, having known Ernst in the Surrealist circles of Paris in the 1930s and in New York during the 1940s. Burroughs' description of the simplest cut-up method was actually informed, via Gysin, by a sophisticated grasp of the history of fertilising cross-overs between visual and verbal media and different modes of collage and collaboration.[18]

Secondly, there is a precise relation between the quartering method of cutting-up and the creation of a pictorial corpse because four was also the preferred—or rather, the *perfect*—number for the drawing game, as is evident from the many examples showing three creased horizontal lines, visible marks of the folding process that creates the four sections from which the corpse is constructed. (As Koch notes in *LOCUS SOLUS*, the ideal number for the written version was *five*, corresponding to the syntactical rules by which a sentence was produced.)[19] Although *three* would become the special number in Burroughs and Gysin's well-known theory of collaboration, magically arising from two—"The third mind is there when two minds collaborate"[20]—in the early days of the cut-up project Burroughs was definitely fascinated by four as the number of collaboration. Hence, in both *Minutes to Go* and the first edition of *The Soft Machine* (1961), he alludes to a narrative, also published separately, "based on recent newspaper account of ? four young explorers": "it seems the party were

[17] Ernst, "Beyond Painting," 132.
[18] This isn't to overlook all that predisposed Burroughs to embrace cut-up methods—from his previous experiences of collaborative writing to his creating *Naked Lunch* as a montage of routines—only to insist on the breakthrough made possible by a practical technique.
[19] "These one-line works were composed five at a time by persons sitting around a table. Each poet began by writing a noun on a sheet of paper, which, after folding so that the noun was invisible, he would pass to the poet on his left. In similar fashion an adjective (or adjectival phrase), a verb, another noun, and another adjective or adjectival phrase were added." (202–03)
[20] Burroughs, "Introductions," *The Third Mind*, 25.

given to exchange of identifications [. . .] and even to writing in each others diaries an unheard of intimacy in any modern expedition."[21] This mysterious quartet clearly paralleled the four cut-up "explorers" of *Minutes to Go,* and in fact the most revealing evidence for seeing the method itself as part of a collaborative "expedition" again features the magic number four. It comes as a suggestion Burroughs made in July 1960, when writing to the publisher of *The Exterminator* (the sequel to *Minutes to Go*):[22]

> Perhaps a game would do it. Like, say four people each write a page on any subject comes to mind. Then cut and rearrange. With squared paper and the cut lines drawn you dig.

Burroughs' cut-up game sounds a lot like the exquisite corpse, and evokes a similar scene of group activity, one where the social pleasure of play produces a collective outcome that is more than the sum of its rearranged parts.

It comes as no surprise to find that, over a year before it was put to new polemical use in *LOCUS SOLUS II*, Burroughs had himself taken up Lautréamont's famous call to collective arms (although he always misattributed it to Tristan Tzara): "Say it again: 'Poetry is for everyone.'"[23] The communal corpse of Surrealism had seemingly been resurrected by cutting it up.

"Will////// ughs ////// ward////// Burro// iam / Se."

Such evidence for what the exquisite corpse and the cut-up method shared as collaborative activities can all be viewed in a very different light, however. Take

[21] Burroughs, "But All Is Back Seat of Dreaming," 13–14.
[22] Burroughs to David Hazelwood, July 26, 1960 (Auerhahn Press: General Correspondence 1959-1967; University of California, Berkeley).
[23] Burroughs, *The Third Mind*, 31. See footnote 52 for evidence that Burroughs took up Lautréamont's call at least as early as 1960.

the game Burroughs proposed. When he suggested "a game would do it," this isn't to say he thought the cut-up method was itself a game. For the "it" here refers to his desire to *promote* the method: he looked to a game, another form of activity altogether, as a way to get others involved in cutting up so that they could better understand his practice.[24] Equally, Burroughs' idea takes on a different meaning when it is placed in relation to the chronology of his cut-up publications. *Minutes to Go* had appeared in April 1960, but by the time *The Exterminator* came out later that year, the number of collaborators had halved. Four had become two, as Burroughs acknowledged in another letter to *The Exterminator*'s publisher: "Difficulties with my colleagues resulted in a considerable shift of material as you can see. Leaves only two names connected with THE EXTERMINATOR."[25] Since this was written in March, and Burroughs came up with his game for four players in July, the idea seems to arise in defiance of his own recent experience of a *failure* to sustain group collaboration.

This little scenario suggests the need to rethink not only the relationship between the corpse and the cut-up, but equally the relation between Burroughs' method, collaborative creativity, and the context of a movement.

At the most basic level, the methods can be distinguished according to Koch's two types of collaboration. Self-evidently, the corpse game exemplified his first type because it was *inherently* collaborative in terms of participants working together; if not four or five, it required the input of at least two. At this point, we begin to see just how particular the selection of cut-up texts was for *LOCUS SOLUS*. For it not only presented examples uniquely based on "collaborating" with Rimbaud's writing—an instance of Koch's second type—but also two of the very few published instances of texts resulting from the collaboration of two cut-up

[24] "I find that people read MINUTES TO GO without ever using the cut up method themselves. But when they once do it themselves they see." Burroughs to Hazelwood, July 26, 1960 (Auerhahn Press: General Correspondence 1959–1967; University of California, Berkeley).
[25] Burroughs to Hazelwood, March 21, 1960 (Auerhahn Press: General Correspondence 1959–1967; University of California, Berkeley).

practitioners. The cut-up books for which Burroughs is famous—his trilogy of novels—were collaborative only in marginal or secondary senses, and there are only three conventionally co-authored works in his oeuvre.[26] Equally, the standard bibliography lists over 350 magazine publications covering the period 1957-1973, but the Burroughs-Corso collaborations are two of only four texts credited to more than one author. Although it wouldn't be accurate to say that those published in *LOCUS SOLUS* were atypical—since it falsely presumes the existence of a *typical* cut-up text—they were certainly not representative.

What, however, about *The Third Mind*, Burroughs and Gysin's theorisation and illustration of cut-up collaboration (which included as an introduction the one critical essay to compare cutting up with the exquisite corpse)? To begin with, it's significant that its co-authorship follows the example of *The Exterminator*—also by Burroughs and Gysin—rather than *Minutes to Go*. Once again, the reduction of four to two implies a limited collaborative practice. In addition, what's striking about *The Third Mind* is that the texts collected in it are all signed by either Burroughs or Gysin; none are credited to their collaborative authorship. In fact, although Gysin dismissed "Breton's precious and pseudoautomatic writing" as irrelevant,[27] one book that did exemplify the "third mind" was *Les Champs magnétiques* (1920) by Breton and Philippe Soupault. Their names appear on the cover, but the sections in it are not credited to either, so that the writing can only be attributed to a mysterious, composite third.

Finally, on closer inspection, "collaboration" is a term hardly used in *The Third Mind*, and when it is defined here it is in *relation* to cutting up rather than as integral to it. In "Fold-ins" (originally presented to the Edinburgh Writers Conference in 1962), Burroughs comments: "The method could also lead to a

[26] An Acknowledgment in *The Ticket That Exploded* notes that two sections were "written in collaboration with Michael Portman" and credits Gysin with a page of calligraphy, while in *Nova Express* a note says one section was "written in collaboration with Mr. Ian Sommerville." The three co-authored works are *The Yage Letters* (1963), with Allen Ginsberg, *So Who Owns Death TV?* (1967) with Claude Pélieu and Carl Weissner, and *Brion Gysin Let the Mice In* (1973), with Brion Gysin.
[27] Gysin in Wilson, *Here to Go*, 184.

collaboration between writers on an unprecedented scale to produce works that were the composite effort of any number of writers living and dead."[28] Note the three-fold qualification—*could also lead to*—and the conflation of writers *living and dead*. As in Koch's second type of collaboration, Burroughs is talking about intertextuality, in which it is *writings* that produce a "composite" work, not *writers*. In this context, the "*tous*" in Lautréamont's dictum is equated with "any number" of texts, and is worked on "*par un.*"

As a polyphonic practice that critiqued language as a transparent medium of expression, the method might make this writer a radically decentred hybrid, as in the names scrambled on the cover of *Minutes to Go*, but this didn't require that any other writers do likewise or that they work together. Unlike the exquisite corpse, cut-ups could be made by anyone with a sheet of typed paper and a pair of scissors. What emerges, in short, is that collaboration was promoted along with the cut-up method in the context of launching a *movement*.

From the outset, Burroughs and Gysin defined their discovery in relation to techniques of the historical avant-garde—collage, chance operations, automatism—and, as a consequence, in relation to the collective projects of which they were a part. As James Grauerholz observes: "In true Surrealist fashion, Burroughs and Gysin envisioned their discovery as the foundation of a new worldwide movement in all the arts, but specifically in writing—and a literary 'Cut-Up Movement' took root during the middle to late 1960s in Germany, England, and the United States."[29] In fact, Burroughs and Gysin didn't so much model their movement on Surrealism, as they defined it in an openly antagonistic relation.

Again and again in the early polemical writings, the Dadaist Tristan Tzara is invoked (for his proto-cut-up method, "pour faire un poème dadaïste") in order to blast the Surrealists. Thus in *Minutes to Go*, acknowledging that cut-ups "are

[28] Burroughs, "Fold-ins," in *The Third Mind*, 96.
[29] Grauerholz, 120.

not a new Discovery," Gysin praised the revolutionary potentials of Tzara's method only to complain that he had been "diverted into the Communist Panic by the Art Wing of the Freudian Conspiracy calling itself Surrealism under Andre Breton. We don't want to see it happen again. Above all I don't."[30] As a young painter, Gysin had been expelled from a Surrealist exhibition by Breton, and his final phrases confirm that the antipathy towards Communism and Freudianism—which he shared with Burroughs—and the art-historical knowledge he brought to cut-up methods—which he passed on to Burroughs—were shaped by bitter personal experience of the historical art movements. Gysin's hostility to comparisons with the Surrealists would only have been heightened by Burroughs and Corso's recent experience at the hands of French art-magazine interviewers. Corso, who had no axe to grind, reported that "they wanted me to say the Beat Generation is founded on surrealism," a notion he rejected on the grounds it had been an elitist "social clique," whereas "the Beat claim that it is possible for any man to write a poem [. . .] if he only 'free' himself."[31]

Burroughs and Gysin declared what they called an "Open Bank" policy, which applied the logic of Lautréamont's call by freely giving away their discovery: as Burroughs recalled, their "basic postulate, *Poetry for all*, dictated that the method be revealed and explained."[32] Or as Gysin announced in *Minutes to Go*, "the writing machine is for everybody."[33] The other side of the coin was an understanding of cutting up as a way to deconstruct a possessive authorial ego, and it was in keeping with this that they promoted the method as part of a collective (but non-ideological) movement, rather than any one writer's invention. Hence, the critique they directed at Breton, put most forcefully by Harold Norse in his cut-up collection, *Beat Hotel*: "'*MY* IDEA! *MY* INVENTION! *MY* WORDS'—*MY* God!—makes you puke—never credit sources know what I mean? Every

[30] Gysin, *Minutes to Go*, 43. See also footnote 52.
[31] Gregory Corso to James Laughlin, December 25, 1959, in Morgan, 228.
[32] Burroughs, "Foreword," *Beat Hotel*, viii.
[33] Gysin, *Minutes to Go*, 5.

movement has one—always a Pope."[34] Ironically, Burroughs' own introduction to Norse's book implied a certain symmetry between the cut-up and Surrealist movements: "We were well on the way to launching a literary movement, complete with *copains* and enemies. (It is said that André Breton, dictator of the Surrealists, wrote and answered twenty abusive letters a day.)"[35]

There were no excommunications of cut-up collaborators, but the "difficulties" with colleagues that left only Burroughs and Gysin as contributors to *The Exterminator* did represent a crucial splitting of the initial cut-up movement. Although Sinclair Beiles had withdrawn because he suffered a breakdown, Gregory Corso left because, after an initial enthusiasm, he now wanted no further part in it. *Minutes to Go* even included as a "Post-script" the dramatic statement of Corso's retraction. At its centre was a distinction between "uninspired machine-poetry" and what Corso (like Ginsberg) generally termed "Poesy": "Word poetry is for everyman, but soul poetry — alas, is not heavily distributed."[36] While this wasn't quite an abusive letter, it's still significant that Burroughs' reaction was to *cut up* Corso's postscript—clearly to be understood as a hostile act.[37]

Corso's withdrawal from the cut-up group of four was an index of how old alliances were breaking down around Burroughs as new ones emerged, a shift in aesthetic direction that is unfortunately disguised by the fact that cut-up headquarters took the name "Beat Hotel." For two months after Ginsberg left (in July 1958), Gysin moved in, and from then on Burroughs began to break from his old, loosely grouped, Beat literary associations: Corso belonged to that past, and his hostility to Burroughs' new method (and, by association, to his new circle) was of a piece with the reactions of Ginsberg and Kerouac. Opening up a distance

[34] Norse, *Beat Hotel*, 14.
[35] Burroughs, "Foreword" to Norse, *Beat Hotel*, vii–viii.
[36] Corso, "Post-script," *Minutes to Go*, 63.
[37] In Burroughs' May 16, 1960 letter to Gysin, he enclosed "a cut-up of Corso's anti cut-up note." In Miles Associates, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the William S. Burroughs Archive.* (London: Covent Garden Press, 1973), 44.

between the cut-up and Beat movements was a by-product, if not the intention, of including Corso's retraction within *Minutes to Go*.[38]

Burroughs' reference to "*copains* and enemies" suggests the way in which a movement needs an external other for self-definition—especially a movement that invested its methods with political as well as aesthetic ambitions, and that was held together by a shared sense of radical possibilities during that "hectic, portentous time in Paris."[39] But this dynamic also points towards the intimacies—creative as well as social—encouraged by the group identity. And in this respect, both the cut-up method and the exquisite corpse game did seem to inspire a distinct communal experience.

In Paris during the 1920s and '60s very similar accounts were given of the spooky, apparently transpersonal communication that arose from both practices. From playing the corpse and taking part in other experimental exercises in spontaneous creative collaboration, all in an atmosphere of "comradely excitement,"[40] Breton deduced his "mise en commun" or pooling of thought.[41] In relation to the exquisite corpse, he drew attention to the "considerable enigma" posed by "the frequent encounter of elements with similar associational origins in the course of the collective production of a sentence or a drawing."[42] Four decades later, Harold Norse found equally inexplicable congruences in cut-ups produced individually by residents of the Beat Hotel: "Comparing our works, we found whole word-clusters and images, as well as style, astonishingly related, often identical."[43] Such coincidences might well be explained in terms of the fervent communal atmospheres in which they arose, but they also point towards

[38] In this context—the relation between creative methods and the politics of manifestos and movements—it's interesting to note that one aim of *LOCUS SOLUS II* had been to distinguish the New York School from the Beat and Black Mountain poets. See David Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 52.
[39] Burroughs, *The Western Lands*, 252.
[40] Short, *Dada and Surrealism*, 127.
[41] Breton, Note to "Second Manifesto of Surrealism" (1930), in Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 179.
[42] Breton, "Le Cadavre Exquis: Son Exaltation" (1948), in Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, 290.
[43] Norse, "Cut-Up Magic" (1968), in *Beat Hotel*, 62.

a specific psychological aspect of each activity: the paradox of expecting the unexpected. For in both cutting up texts and in writing or drawing the corpse, the surprise for the practitioner, and the fascination, arises from anticipating the apparently chance production of significance.

Consider the initial reactions to each discovery, first of the corpse (in Simone Collinet's account) and then of the cut-up (in Brion Gysin's):[44]

> André shouted for joy, and immediately saw in [the Exquisite Corpse] one of those natural sources or cascades of inspiration that he so loved discovering [. . .] The suggestive power of these arbitrary juxtapositions of words was so stupefying and dazzling, it so brilliantly verified the Surrealist thesis and mentality, that the game became a system, a research method . . . perhaps even a drug.

> I picked up the raw words and began to piece together texts which later appeared as "First Cut Ups" in *Minutes to Go*. At the time I thought them hilariously funny and hysterically meaningful. I laughed so loud my neighbours thought I'd flipped.

Each account features the immediate and intense pleasure of discovery and the equally important sense of *recognition*, of having found by accident something that made perfect sense. Then again, in both cases what was discovered answered to a larger underlying *need*—whether Breton's for a new, exciting game to unify his group, or Gysin's for a collage technique that Burroughs could apply "directly onto writing." The intoxication of discovery was, in a sense, only to be expected.

[44] Quoted in Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind,* 258; Brion Gysin, "CUT-UPS: A Project For Disastrous Success" in *Brion Gysin Let the Mice In* by Gysin and Burroughs, 4.

The original experiences inaugurated a dialectical relationship between surprise and expectation, novelty and repetition. The game or method is found "hysterically meaningful," comes to fascinate the practitioner, and is taken up obsessively, like a drug. There is something of the séance and the ouija board about both practices ("Table tapping? Perhaps"),[45] an auratic or fetishistic pleasure in its results, and it is not surprising that Burroughs and Gysin—who, like many of the Surrealists, were attracted to the occult—embraced cutting up as a technique of divination. For in both activities, meaning is not expressed but discovered, isn't put into words but comes from them. Very soon, accidents are invited, cryptic personal messages anticipated, and fragments collected together like pieces of a puzzle. Since chance played a vital role in both collage and automatism within Surrealism, Breton's notion of *hazard objectif* might help clarify the psychology of desire operating in the game of the corpse and the method of cutting up.

In Hal Foster's psychoanalytical reading, while it may seem "spontaneous," objective chance is not free of causality: *imprévu* and *déja vu* coincide.[46] What appear to be remarkable coincidences and mysterious messages denote a "'hysterical' confusion between internal impulse and external sign": "its instances are taken as external 'signals' of future events rather than internal signs of past states; the anxious is projected as portentous." In other words, the role that chance plays in both the exquisite corpse and the text produced by cutting up is actually a ruse for mediating the return of the repressed. What Donald Kuspit says of the fragments found in collage compositions therefore applies equally here: "Chance is a disguise for the uncertain yet highly personal significance they are felt to have. [. . .] The fragments are experienced as profoundly meaningful, but the meaning cannot be spelled out completely and

[45] Burroughs, *The Third Mind*, 32.
[46] Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, 29; 30.

never seems to truly surface."[47] Burroughs was certainly aware of how accidental procedures (rather than spontaneous ones)[48] allowed him to exceed his own reach, his own control and conditioning, and so served his definition of art's purpose: to make us aware of what we know but don't know we know. The found object is really a lost object regained, and the unknown turns out to be secretly familiar—that is, the Freudian uncanny.

Burroughs also credited cut-up methods with a radical therapeutic efficacy, from the outset seeing them as a way to deal with buried past traumas by repeatedly conjuring and exorcising obsessive personal material. He modelled this application of the method on techniques used in Scientology—something else he learned form Gysin—and promoted it as an alternative to psychoanalytic treatment (which he had begun in the early 1940s and resumed in Paris). There's no need to rehearse here the integral relationship between Surrealism and psychoanalysis, but it is interesting to note that when the psychoanalyst Maria Torok described a particularly traumatic form of secret knowledge, an identity entombed within the subject and liable to return in cryptic linguistic form, she should have called it the *exquisite corpse*.[49]

Nevertheless, if we return to the actual procedures involved in composing the corpse and making a cut-up text, whether we approach them in terms of magical, psychic or creative operations, a fundamental difference remains. The uncanny aspect of the Surrealist game depended on the *collective* production of a sentence or a human figure. It was the juxtaposition of elements arrived at independently in an inter-subjective social context—in ignorance of the contributions of others—that invested the result with a miraculous potency for all. In the case of cutting up, an element of ignorance—of the precise outcome of the

[47] Kuspit, "Collage," 46.
[48] "Needless to say such obvious devices as automatic writing would never get by the Censor," Burroughs had recognised as early as 1956. In *The Letters of William S. Burroughs, 1945–1959*, edited by Oliver Harris (New York: Viking, 1993), 311.
[49] See Maria Torok, "The Illness of Mourning and the Fantasy of the Exquisite Corpse" (1968) in Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, edited and translated by Nicholas T. Rand (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 107–24.

scissors' arbitrary action—was also essential, so that the results never merely conformed to expectations. But the process entails what one critic calls "*motivated chance,*"[50] because the material to be cut up had to be chosen in the first place (while the results to be retained could also be selected). Far from starting with a blank page and awaiting the input of others, it was the recombination of an already existing, received text, the *détournement* of signs, which produced uncanny results for the practitioner. The real thrust of the cut-up method's claims to decondition identity by deconstructing language was not, therefore, best represented by the scrambling together of names on the cover of *Minutes to Go* but by a version on the inside. Here, Burroughs cut up and reassembled his own name—his original "received" text: "Will////// ughs ////// ward////// Burro// iam / Se."[51]

Now we see the significance of Burroughs' always attributing Lautréamont's dictum to Tristan Tzara—embraced for his "cut-up" poème dadaïste, rather than any collective Surrealist practices.[52] Likewise, when Gysin seemed to echo Lautréamont—"the writing machine is for everybody"—it's noticeable that any *collaborative* potential, any social dimension, was immediately qualified in his very next line: "do it yourself."[53] In other words, underlying this critique of traditional artistic hierarchies of production and consumption was a vision of radical individual autonomy. As Burroughs himself put it: "ANYONE CAN RECORD WORDS - CUT UP your own *hustling myself*."[54]

[50] Motte, "Burroughs Takes a Chance," 216.
[51] Burroughs, *Minutes to Go*, 59.
[52] It seems Burroughs' published misattributions were not accidental: "The Surrealist [sic] said 'Poetry for everybody.' And Tristan Tzara was the first to demonstrate publicly The Cut Up Method. The Cut Up Method Poetry For Everybody was sold out to the Freudian Conspiracy and Communist Party." Burroughs to Jon Webb, August 21, 1960 (*The Outsider* Collection, Northwestern University).
[53] Gysin, *Minutes to Go*, 5.
[54] Burroughs, *Minutes to Go*, 60 (my emphasis).

Four letter words

The above account has necessarily generalised the exquisite corpse game and the cut-up method, compounding a critical tendency to take for granted the relation of theory to practice. So to complete this comparative analysis we need to introduce some textual specificity.

The cut-up texts published in *LOCUS SOLUS* don't offer promising examples for close reading, although the reasons why are themselves instructive. Firstly, in reordering the individual words of a single, short text, they approximate the verbal corpse (and Tzara's poème dadaïste) in terms of unit length, which means they can tell us very little about how the cut-up method operated in the great majority of Burroughs' texts. Secondly, they fragment an original—Rimbaud's poem—without making visible the process of transformation introduced by the scissors: indeed, the words are too fragmented to even recognise the source. What identifies cutting up as a true collage practice, however, is that the material act of production is dynamic, the metamorphic process visible on the page. Collage produces a "paradoxical presence," as Elza Adamowicz says, "a material reality in the incipient stages of configuration, an embryonic monster in the phase of gestation, the body in the process of being reconfigured."[55] She captures here both the formal dimension of the cut-up text—whereby the reader recognises the redistribution of fragments cut from different sources and juxtaposed to make new compounds—and the relation between textual and physical bodies in the process of mutation.

We can see this process of assemblage in action, and grasp a significant relationship to the exquisite corpse, by examining typical instances from "I AM DYING, MEESTER?" published as the conclusion to *The Yage Letters* (1963).[56]

[55] Adamowicz, 195.
[56] A good deal might be said here about the particular relevance of *The Yage Letters*, not as a co-authored book but as a composite of Burroughs' writing across decades. For the relation it makes visible between Burroughs' montage

These are the opening half-dozen lines:[57]

> Panama clung to our bodies — Probably cut — Anything made this dream — It has consumed the customers of fossil orgasm — Ran into my old friend Jones — So badly off, forgotten, coughing in 1920 movie — Vaudeville voices hustle sick dawn breath on bed service — Idiot Mambo spattered backwards — I nearly suffocated trying on the boy's breath — That's Panama —

Even before beginning to read the words, one feature is immediately apparent. Made from blocks of short phrases bridged by dashes (70 altogether, in a piece less than 700 words long), the physical appearance of the text on the page insistently foregrounds the material procedures of its own making. Since each dash signals the scissors' cut, the second phrase block ("— Probably cut —") even seems to turn this material self-reflexivity into a joke. There's a certain visual similarity therefore with the verbal exquisite corpse, whose division into five syntactical units was sometimes also physically marked by dashes: "Le cadavre — exquis — boira — le vin — nouveau."[58]

The most significant similarity, however, is with the phrase blocks themselves. For whereas the dashes stand in for cuts and make immediately visible the collage process of (de-)composition, the phrase blocks are the real because unexpected site of surprise. They turn out to be composites of fragments forced together to make strange hybrid lines such as, "I nearly suffocated trying on the boy's breath." Two features especially recall the exquisite corpse. Firstly, a distorted, disruptive representation of the human body, given here across a number of phrases in displaced and partial form (orgasm, coughing, voices,

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writing inspired by the hallucinogen *yagé* in 1953, his cut-up methods, and Rimbaud's "derangement of all the senses," see my *William Burroughs and the Secret of Fascination* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003).

[57] Burroughs and Ginsberg, *The Yage Letters*, 65.

[58] As in Breton and Eluard's *Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme*, cited in Adamowicz, 55.

breath). Secondly, an internal tension between phrasing that is grammatically correct but semantically impossible.

To take up the second, formalist point first, Adamowicz has described the importance for Breton of "radical syntagmatic combinations," which he traced back to the poetry of Lautréamont and Rimbaud.[59] Preserving syntax, she notes, yielded an appearance of formal cohesion, and this is the key source of the subversive potentials in both the verbal and visual exquisite corpse: "The common denominator to all surrealist games is that they articulate a syntactic or compositional rule, and a semantic or iconic transgression. A rigidly mechanical rule is combined with the workings of chance encounters in a paradoxical structure where incongruous statements and images clash within a fixed framework." By similar means, then, the corpse game and cutting up achieved a similar tension on the page between coherent syntax and jarring semantics to create disturbing results.

But we can give this similarity more precision by considering the process of verbal collage at work in Eluard and Péret's Surrealist proverbs. Eight examples were included in *LOCUS SOLUS II*, including "Beat your mother while she is young" ("Battre sa mère quand elle est jeune"), which appropriated and reworked the well-known proverb, "Il faut battre le fer quand il est chaud."[60] The distinction here is that, whereas the verbal exquisite corpse obeyed recognisable syntax, the proverbs *also* exploited the reader's recognition of a specific and familiar original text, given a subversive twist. In this context, lines in "I AM DYING, MEESTER?" such as "I nearly suffocated trying on the boy's breath," can be read as a kind of composite of the two principles represented by the corpse and the proverb. The difference is that, in Burroughs' case, the reworked "original" is not a familiar maxim that the reader might know already, but a line

[59] Adamowicz, 45, 55.
[60] *LOCUS SOLUS II*, 67.

read previously in Burroughs' own text: "I nearly suffocated myself trying to sniff enough of this crap to get a lift."

The original line appears sixty pages earlier, in the conventionally written section of *The Yage Letters* (dating from ten years earlier), but its words, rhythm, and tone of voice are distinctive enough for readers to recognise. Clearly, the cut-up version takes the opening phrase ("I nearly suffocated myself trying") and, after losing "myself," combines it with another phrase altogether ("on the boy's breath"). Rather than being incongruous, this second half almost "fits," creating an uncanny effect. Since this half doesn't appear elsewhere in *The Yage Letters*, the cut-up phrase block combines two distinct elements: one recognisable from an earlier context and another that completes that original text syntactically while reorienting it semantically. Burroughs used this technique extensively in his cut-up trilogy, where the effect is rendered more uncanny still because the coherent "original" is usually given *after* we have read a fragmented and recombined version. The result in "I AM DYING, MEESTER?" is both surprise at the monstrous new hybrids and an unsettling sense of *déja vu*.

However, there is more to this intertextuality, as the full context of the original line makes clear:[61]

> I wonder what a Panamanian boy would be like? Probably cut. When they say anything goes they are referring to the joint not the customers.
>
> I ran into my old friend Jones the cab driver, and bought some C off him that was cut to hell and back. I nearly suffocated myself trying to sniff enough of this crap to get a lift. That's Panama. Wouldn't surprise me if they cut the whores with sponge rubber.

Immediately, we now recognise several other fragments presented in the cut-up passage ("anything"; "the customers"; "ran into my old friend Jones"; "That's

[61] Burroughs, *The Yage Letters*, 4.

Panama"), all of which contribute to the eerie, faint familiarity of the lines on first reading, and then work as cues to direct the reader back into the original context. In retrospect, the phrase "Probably cut," which had seemed a contrived, self-reflexive pun on the cut-up method, now appears uncannily predictive. We begin to see how precise and deliberate, rather than arbitrary and obscure, are the processes of selection and recombination that make up Burroughs' textual body.

The two passages are also significant in terms of how Burroughs conceives and represents the *human* body. The original context for the cut-up phrases is visibly thick with references to *cuts*, again suggesting a precise choice of material thematically as well as formally. In modelling the "cutting" of boys and whores on the cutting of cocaine, Burroughs first reduces people to mere objects of sexual pleasure and then equates them with drugs that can be consumed. Their bodies can also be adulterated with inert material (white powder, sponge rubber). This is only consistent with Burroughs' general representation of the body as a "soft machine," occupied by parasitic inhuman forces, and so (as the opening section of the book of that title puts it), born "Dead on Arrival."[62]

Finally, we have to recall the relationship between the two exquisite corpses—namely the transition from collaborating to construct a sentence to collectively assembling the picture of a body. If there is a tacit equivalence between the two—why else does it seem so natural a progression?—Burroughs would develop it explicitly through the understanding of language that went together with his cut-up methods. In *Minutes to Go* he made the relation between language and the body explicit through newspapers articles, transforming the traditional use of this staple resource of modernist collage (to sabotage the mass media's reportage of reality), by focusing on the subject of genetic research:[63]

[62] Although the material is present in the first edition, this chapter title was added for the second (1966) edition of *The Soft Machine*.
[63] Burroughs, *Minutes to Go*, 60–61.

> 'The entire message of life is written in four letter words with our genes' Dr Stanley explained—adenine guanine thymine or cytosine—which are built into Thee whether it be one, two, three, four or one, two, four, three, for example links or letters are arranged to spell out man [. . .] 'We will be able to write out the message that is you.'

Confirming again the particular relevance of the number *four*, Burroughs' interest in the genetic code as a determinist "writing" of identity clearly establishes the relationship between the body's DNA and the subversive possibilities of cutting up and rearranging linguistic codes. Burroughs' method of constructing new hybrid creatures was based on rewriting and reordering the received text with his scissors. In other words, he literally cut up the corpse.

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