



MALCOLM MC NEILL
**OBSERVED
WHILE
FALLING**

Bill Burroughs, Ah Pook, and Me

For Orien

What follows is not a book about William Burroughs, neither is it a book about *Ah Pook*. It's certainly not a book about Me. It's an account of a blurring of those distinctions, of the line that supposedly separates and distinguishes them. With respect to the title, it's about the space *between* the names.

Bill Burroughs and I collaborated on a word/image novel for more than seven years. From a conventional perspective, the kind of interaction that inevitably involves a merging of ideas, a blurring of ownership. But Bill was not a conventional writer and Ah Pook is no ordinary character. In the course of the project there were occasions when the line between *fact* and *fiction*, *past* and *future* also dissolved.

Ah Pook is the Mayan death god. He implies a separation between the most significant of terms. A distinction considered absolute and unbreachable.

This book was written after that was shown not to be so.

*“... art makes us aware of what we know and
what we don't know that we know”*

—WSB

LOS ANGELES

2003

Dead Fingers Talk was the first thing that came to mind — a correspondence with a dead man.

When I began working with Bill, I'd found half-a-dozen pictures in a book that would become the inspiration for *Ah Pook is Here*. There was no description of the artist himself, just his images. Now, more than 30 years later, they'd resurfaced in another book and the artist had finally revealed himself. Not through pictures this time, but words.

It was a biography.

A textbook.

These were *facts*.

The artist was English, like me and, like me, he'd gone to art school in London. Like me, he'd met an American writer who happened to be living in London at the time. The writer had contacted *him* on the basis of *his* work, and they *too* had agreed to collaborate on a book together...

...about the Maya.

They'd met in Leicester Square, a few hundred yards down the street from where I'd met Bill. The artist had then moved to America to complete the work — just as I had — slightly ahead of his partner.

In Manhattan, his first home, like mine, was on Houston Street. He *also* had a studio in Tribeca.

From there we both moved to Prince Street.

We each had children born in New York, and each of us was separated from our wives there. His son, also born in December, was 6 years old at the time, as was mine.

We both quit illustration there.

As artists we shared a particular image style. In New York we'd become known for it — he through the panoramic images he exhibited in his gallery while living on Prince Street, myself through the panoramic images I created for television, while *also* living on Prince Street.

My images had led to a career as director. They were the reason I was now in California.

He also moved to California and while there, like me, became an American citizen — he while living in Solano *County*, me while living in Solano *Canyon*.

Facts.

Ultimately he produced a folio edition of his collaboration, describing the history of the project and acknowledging the friendship that had occurred as a result.

His account had already been published...

A hundred and fifty-nine years ago.

Now that I was aware of this, my own account could begin.

“The Mayan codices are undoubtedly books of the dead; that is to say, directions for time travel. If you see reincarnation as a fact, then the question arises: how does one orient oneself with regard to future lives?”

— AH POOK IS HERE



BILL BURROUGHS

1

LONDON

1970

Hornsey College of Art was supposedly one of the three best art schools in England. The prospectus showed a classic Victorian building surrounded by trees, situated in London's Crouch End. Apart from figure drawing classes, Friday Night Film shows, and the infamous Sit-in, however, I would spend very little time there. The Main College was still home to a couple of departments, but the rest were spread out in an eclectic assortment of buildings across North London.

The Graphics Department — where I *did* three years — was a former army barracks alongside the North Circular Road. Bowes Road, as it was called, was a very old barracks. A one-time recruitment center for the Middlesex Volunteers, it looked like a barracks and it felt like a barracks. Everything about it was contrary to what I thought an art school would be.

The Fine Art Department on the other hand, was located in the Alexandra Palace. A spectacular building with a glass-domed Palm Court, built in 1873, on a hill overlooking seven acres of parkland and most of London beyond. *Ally Pally*, as it was called, was where I really wanted to be.

My application to study Fine Art was turned down in favor of Graphics. In those days, English kids were paid to go to art school. Their tuition fees were covered and they were given a living allowance, none of which needed to be repaid. Colleges, in turn, received funding based on the number of students they graduated.

As a result, I was advised to become an Illustrator — a future, I was assured, that would benefit us both. A commercial artist that is, not a fine one. It was an arrangement I wasn't happy with. Fine artists were supreme in the hierarchy of image-makers. Illustrators were beneath them. They made art in a palace. We made do with a barracks.

It was a dismal place. Three years worth of students crammed into pokey little rooms, with pokey little windows and ceilings you could almost touch. Stables converted into darkrooms on one side, and the North Circular Road with its traffic on the other. If you were lucky enough to get a window seat you could see it. If not, you just heard it. Every day, nine to five.

For my flatmate Eddie and I, it was three years of long rush hour commutes, lugging portfolios back and forth from one double-decker bus to another. Showing up at nine a.m., sometimes soaked to the skin, in order to stare at a wall and try to be inspired. Try to come up with a more efficient design for the dialing instructions inside public payphones say, or a logo for an imaginary pub.

I hated type. In those days you had to painstakingly trace every letter out of giant typeface books to get the arrangement you ‘needed,’ then go downstairs to the compositing room and painstakingly assemble it backwards with wood and metal blocks. Then wait for it to get it printed. A procedure carried out by two ancient gentlemen in brown lab coats who’d conceivably been there longer than the building. Fortunately, a breakthrough occurred around that time: press type. Now you could painstakingly scrub letters directly down onto the paper — one after the other with a ballpoint pen. When it came to type, I sometimes hid out in the men’s room for entire classes.

The only practical lasting instruction I recall was in photography. Vincenzo Ragazzini had been head of the Experimental Photography School in Rome and for some unaccountable reason had enlisted at Bowes Road. He taught darkroom tricks which I later applied to illustration. Apart from that, it was a group of well-intentioned, encouraging folks who actually demonstrated very little.

In order to graduate I had to write two papers: one on an artist of choice, the other on an art-related subject. I chose “Egon Schiele” — to me, the ultimate draftsman — and “Visual Narrative,” a history of the process of using images to tell story; from the Egyptians, Greeks, Romans and Maya up to the present day Sunday Funnies.” Having done that, I was good to go.

I was discharged in the spring of 1970.

I’d been working on sequential imagery ideas on my own in the meantime, trying to figure out a way of making self-contained narrative episodes in the form of freestanding paintings. I thought that if I could put a magazine together which featured that kind of work, as well as conventional comics and other forms of word/image narrative, I’d have the financial means for continuing with the idea. It would be an English version of the kind of magazines that were being produced in California by

R. Crumb, S. Clay Wilson, etc. During the final term at Bowes Road, I'd found several artists around London who were up for it.

A friend mentioned the idea to Graham Keen, graphics editor of *International Times* magazine, a London underground newspaper, who was interested in the same kind of idea. We should pool our resources, he said.

After an unsuccessful group attempt at deciding on a name, Keen phoned a couple of days later to inform me it was *Cyclops* — did I want to do the cover and advertiser's rate card? He had this much to spend, etc. Also he'd convinced a writer friend to contribute. When he'd shown him the artwork of the available artists, the writer had pointed at mine and said, "I'll work with this guy." It was a great opportunity, said Keen. I'll send you the text as soon as I get it.

In no time it wasn't *our* magazine anymore — and it wasn't an *English* one either. Keen's 'backer,' Matt Hoffman, was American and so was his writer friend.

Some guy named William Burroughs.

It wasn't so remarkable that I didn't know anything about him. In London — in 1970 — he was far from the celebrity he would later become. I read a lot, but he just wasn't an author I'd been drawn to.

When Keen announced Burroughs wanted to work with me, I was fairly indifferent. I was far more concerned with the way the magazine was headed. After his phone call, my enthusiasm for the entire project went downhill.²

Thinking it was only a matter of time before I quit, I didn't research Burroughs at all. In talking about the idea with friends though, I did discover a couple of things about him: he was American, a political writer, a junky, and he'd shot and killed his wife — despite which, somehow he was gay. A bio that didn't really resonate with my English art-kid way of life so far. I hadn't so much as smoked a joint, had never fired a gun, and I certainly wasn't gay.

As far as politics were concerned, in the spring of 1968, Hornsey art students had been the first to take over and close down their college. Ostensibly in protest over restrictions to making art, it rapidly became a forum for just about anyone with a political agenda. Marxists, Anarchists, Trade Union activists, anti-Vietnam War activists, among others,

capitalized on a well publicized event to air their beefs. One speaker, Tariq Ali, harangued the students for not being political *enough*:

“You’re artists!” he shouted. “Do something!”

“Like what?” we shouted back.

“Paint the walls!” he said.

Everyone laughed.

The muddle of art theory and left wing agendas³ that followed short-circuited whatever political sense I might have had. It was my first exposure to the ‘revolutionary’ mindset. When the rhetoric went from practical restraints to making art, to the obligations of art to society, to the restructuring of society altogether, it was difficult to know what was what anymore. “*Smash the System*” and “*Don’t Let the Bastards Grind You Down*” became the slogans for the event, but what did they have to do with Van Gogh or Leonardo Da Vinci?

The Vietnam War may have been bad, but that was America’s problem. The pictures of My Lai would be published the following year, and the year after that, those of Kent State. The U.S. was a mess, but since I didn’t live there, and wasn’t threatened with the draft, what did it have to do with me? Like most English people I knew, my sense of America came from television, movies, and newspapers. Typically it wasn’t very flattering. Right around the time of the Sit-in, we learned that Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy had both been murdered. Who in their right mind would *want* to live there?

When Keen handed me the first batch of Burroughs’s text, this overall disparity became painfully obvious. I’d thought that if I could come to terms with Beckett and Joyce, I shouldn’t have a problem with anyone. Mr. Burroughs, though, was beyond me. And as far as ‘comic strip’ was concerned, gave me very little to work with. No real scenes, no character descriptions, no dialogue. Just a first person consideration of something called “Control” alternating between references to people and things I’d never heard of. It was called *The Unspeakable Mr. Hart* and it read like a text book. The first sentence set the tone:

“Mr. L. Ron Hubbard has postulated a Reactive Mind designed and implemented to inhibit creation or destruction and keep things on a sound financial basis... Other investigators such as Freud have also postulated such self defeating mechanisms but considered these as integral parts of the human psyche

rather than parasitic implants quite deliberately imposed by interested parties.”

And so on. A total of 600 words in all, that I somehow had to illustrate and fit onto a single page.

The only thing to do was find phrases or ideas that I could visualize such as “*industrial giants*” ... “*Mayans*” ... “*something between a tape recorder and a virus,*” etc., and arrange them in frames like a comic strip. Then run the type as a block down the side.

... The Unspeakable Mr. Hart ... dinosaurs, electronic gadgets, Mayans...

It was an inauspicious start, and the result was far from impressive. I wasn't looking forward to the next installment.

Cyclops was a large format newspaper — 11 inches by 17 inches — similar to other underground publications such as *International Times* and *Friends*. *Cyclops* No. 1 appeared in July 1970. Along with *Mr. Hart*, I produced three other pages of my own and an image for the cover. In keeping with the American trend, the first issue also featured a strip by Vaughn Bodé, one of several American artists the paper promised to include in the future.

The next batch of text turned out to be easier. There were scenes, dialogue, and action. *Mr. Hart* himself was introduced, including his childhood and days at Harvard. There were Egyptian and Mayan images and even a murder. There were also a lot fewer words and enough visual material to expand it into a double-page spread.

... Mr. Hart, Clinch Smith, Harvard, Egyptian art, Mayan art ...

Episode 3 reverted back to the alternating ‘textbook,’ factual-fictional narrative style. Even so, it had a Mayan scene and opened a lot more image possibilities. The amount of reference material required meant it also took a lot longer to put together, so I decided to drop my other pages.

... cops, cadavers, executions, newspapers ...

I asked Keen if I could talk to Mr. Burroughs to get a sense of what was going on and where the story was headed, but for some reason it didn't happen. It was a surreal arrangement.

I decided to try and get a clue from other things he'd written and borrowed a copy of *Naked Lunch*. It didn't help.

Episode 4 continued the same way. The action still revolved around Hart, but the first person considerations continued to suggest more specific imagery. Whatever it was, I felt like I was getting better at it.

... *cops, cadavers, executions, Mayan ceremonies* ...

On the downside, as a replacement for my original cover strip, the first three pages featured a reprint of the American newspaper series *Flash Gordon*, a 'straight' comic from the 1930s. With that, the idea of an alternative English magazine disappeared altogether, and inevitably, since the paper clearly had no sense of direction, *Cyclops* No. 4 turned out to be the last.

I wasn't expecting to hear from Keen again, but very soon after, he phoned me. "You'll be getting a call this afternoon," he said, "you might want to be there."

Around three o'clock, for the first time, I heard the remarkable voice of the man himself: Mr. William S. Burroughs.

"I want to meet the guy who knows how to draw me!" he intoned and insisted we meet.

Considering I'd really had no idea what I'd been doing for four months, it was an odd proposition.

Number 8, Duke Street, was a couple of blocks south of Piccadilly Circus; a narrow, nondescript building with a small, rickety elevator.

It opened directly into flat number 22, where Mr. Burroughs was waiting to greet me. He introduced himself as Bill.

The first thing that struck me was that he was wearing a jacket and tie — around the house — and not, I imagined, for my benefit. He was older than I'd expected, soft spoken, and polite.

The short hallway opened into the living room and small kitchen area. The furniture was unremarkable. Functional. No curves. More like an office, I thought. There were small desert watercolors on the walls. Kind of '50s looking. "... by Mr. Brion Gysin," I was informed — who shared the flat.

The place was completely silent.

It was the middle of the afternoon and Mr. Burroughs was eating bacon. He invited me to join him. We sat on either side of a long polished table, with a few strips each, eating with our fingers. The end of one of his, I noticed, was missing.

When we were done, he lit up the first of many Senior Service cigarettes and brought up the subject of the visit.

“So,” he said. “*You’re the guy who knows how to draw me. How d’ya do that?*”

I hadn’t intended to make Mr. Hart look like Burroughs. Even if I had known what he looked like, it would hardly have made sense to draw him as the villain. As a younger version of himself, however, the likeness *was* remarkable. An “identikit” picture he called it.

“*I’ve no idea,*” I said.

He asked if anything like that had ever happened before. I told him that when I was younger, I used to draw pictures of a boy who appeared at the dinner table sometimes.

“*Who was he?*”

“*I don’t know. I was the only one who ever saw him.*”

“*Did he ever call?*”

“*No.*”

He then asked how old I was.

I was 22 when I started working on *Cyclops*. Earlier that month I’d turned 23. He found this amusing. “*It’s an auspicious number,*” he said, but didn’t explain why.

We talked about *Cyclops*. How it had started. Why it had folded. The difficulties I’d had with the text. Now that it was over, I asked if he’d mind telling me what happened next. How did it end up? What was it about?

He was more than happy to oblige.

During the next couple of hours, he introduced me to the Reactive Mind, the Mayan Codices, Bishop Landa, Control, Cut-ups, the Word as Virus, The Algebra of Need, Randolph Hearst, and whole lot of other things that it ‘was about.’ How it ended up, though, he couldn’t say. He hadn’t written much beyond what I’d already seen.

The reason for the meeting had been simply to acknowledge an odd coincidence. Now that *Cyclops* was over, the idea of continuing with Mr. Hart hadn’t been a consideration. By the end of the afternoon, though, we were talking about ways we might be able to do just that. A book maybe, a

full-length novel. Not a comic book, but a *visual narrative* where pictures and text interacted in whatever form seemed appropriate. We agreed to meet again to talk further.

It was dark when I left. When I stepped out of the elevator, I felt like I was in a completely different world.

Things were never the same again.

In the second meeting, he gave me 11 pages of text:

The beginning was a countdown 23 seconds before ‘Little Boy,’ destroyed Hiroshima. A Japanese couple have sex and two small boys masturbate to coincide with the explosion. Counting down from 23 is an “*old sex game*,” apparently.

Hart’s childhood and time at Harvard remained the same, but a scene with his drunken father trying to give him a sex talk had been added. Words that are wasted on young Hart, who feels neither pleasure nor pain.

It was great start but then it reverted back to methods again.

Having found the lost Mayan books, Hart is ready to set up his Control Machine. In his role as newspaper tycoon, his obsession with the images of fear and death continues, but now with a more extensive list of instructions regarding the kind of pictures his photographers must find and the ways in which his *artists* must enhance them. What he actually does with these pictures, however, was difficult to understand. The images he needed had to be so bad that he *couldn’t* print them. Just a “*whiff*” was enough for what he had in mind. They are never actually shown, simply hinted at on “*computerized associational networks*.”

“*Mr. Hart intends to monopolize the pictures that others can’t stand to see. Then he will never have to show them.*”

Having accumulated his store of “UGLY” words and pictures, Hart then uses the rage and fear contained within them against various people who get in the way of his research.

An example is “Percy Jones.”

Jones is experimenting with speech scramblers — a means for “*getting inside*” people’s heads, an idea Hart wants to corner for his own purposes. He hires ‘the Whisperer’ to take care of him, a character who has the knack of projecting his voice in such a way that other people appear to be doing the talking. He follows Jones, ‘whispering’ obscenities so that

those around him become unaccountably abusive and threatening. Jones is reduced to a nervous wreck and his research comes to an end.

Hart then switches his attention to viruses — the perfect delivery system for infecting his victims with the images of their own death; images augmented by his *stable of artists* who combine them with the features of particular viruses.

Drawings are made of cold sores and people *with* cold sores in order to “*draw out the cold sore feeling.*” Drawings of hepatitis and encephalitis are enhanced the same way so that Hart can “*draw the virus onto any body just as he drew a synthetic anti-Jones virus onto Jones.*”

The virus of choice is rabies. Once the symptoms develop, no one survives it. By understanding the mechanisms involved, Hart is on the verge of creating viruses to order. Push button plagues with specific targets.

But “*then disaster strikes*” —

Scientists announce that any gene can now be created synthetically. Any country can now produce viruses for which there is no cure. To compound matters, a 6-year-old boy in Ohio survives rabies. He has survived death and become death for Mr. Hart.

“Little Boy” has come home to roost.

Hart dies.

As a kind of afterthought, the final page introduces 23-year-old Audrey Carsons, who experiences the effects of a rabid bat bite.

Compared to what he’d talked about at our first meeting, it was anti-climactic and, as far as a book was concerned, as difficult as it had been with *Cyclops*. Apart from Percy Jones and Hiroshima, there were no real scenes, just a long exposition of Hart’s methods. Methods that now included many references to artists and drawing — an idea that was confusing for other reasons.

When I was working on *Cyclops*, I really knew nothing about Burroughs. Even so, I’d somehow made Mr. Hart look just like him. Mr. Hart the *bad* guy, that is.

Hart the newspaper tycoon, who was loosely based on Randolph Hearst, came from a wealthy background, went to Harvard to study the Mayans, then set out to discover the secrets of Control. In our first meeting, Burroughs revealed that he, too, came from a wealthy background and had also studied the Mayans at Harvard. He, too, was fascinated by the control system conceivably contained within their books.