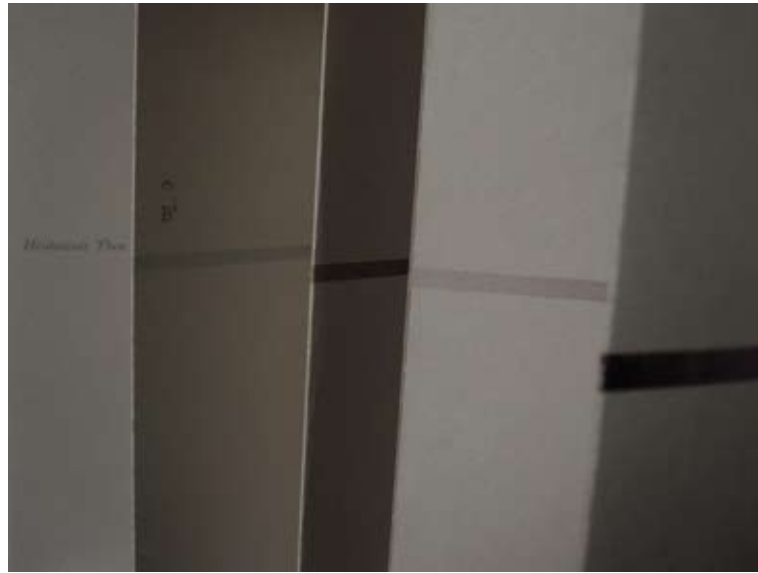


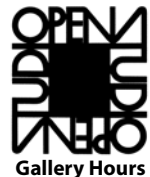
May 20 - June 19, 2010

Opening Reception
Thursday, May 20 | 7-9 pm

Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay Notation



The Burden (detail), screenprinted concertina bookwork, 14 x 22 cm (folded) 168 x 22cm (unfolded), edition of 10, 2010.



Tuesday to Saturday, noon to 5 pm

Open Studio

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The Burden

by Alisha Piercy

I put on the headphones and pick up the book.

The text begins: "*Hesitations. Then: a sustained, unbroken note. While the embouchure may wander across various vowels, it shall begin and end with l-----*". This 'l' that I read, printed in pale grey script onto paler grey paper, I hear as a stutter, as a doubt over the speaker's ability to profess it. I look down to the accordion bookwork and unfold it. I anticipate its lengths. Both book and voice begin in silvery tones.

A faience of ash and crystal are streamlined into a band: the remnants of a house-fire covered in snowfall lit by moonlight. The 'l' narrows itself into a singular tone and opens up space. I sense the enormity of a hollow room where the speaker finds himself alone. Is a voice becoming massive. The voice enfolds the room, and me, with its cloak-like layers, a voice that piles up into echoes, gathers together, descends and wavers, and gathers again, and I sense that I am becoming the 'l' that pins this space, that occupies its angles. Like I am particulate being pushed around by the gentlest of magical brooms.

As Vesuvian cinder shifts imperceptibly to mica yellow, the vowel of 'l' transforms slightly to 'E'. I think of the *viva voce* chants, the 'Divine Office' of monks. Lyrical and geological. I may be at the highest point of a mountain, willing to swoon my way direct over the edge.

The passage shifts. Where am I on the page? Is this now blue? The solo voice takes over, bringing with it a sense of calamity or the expectation of a crash. I hear thunder. Definitely murder: axes and battles or else the inner battles of angels. The colour is igneous as the sound shifts to thoughts that are explosions, gunshots of World War I, of barbaric wood and fire that barely works. The voice is blown open until...

The interlude of 'O:' and the cacophony of death wanes while I lie on a field staring skyward. Except that I'm not dead, and so: now what? Here I think of the opening lines of Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* (1321): "*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita/ mi ritrovai per una selva oscura/ che/ la dirrita via era smarrita.*" (Along the journey of our life half-way/ I found myself again in a dark wood/ wherein the straight road no longer lay.) This passage refers to the journey Dante was to make into Hell when he was thirty-five years old, at the mid-point of his life. But Nemerofsky Ramsay's pause in limbo is brief, and the printed band of silver moves onwards in a deadly straight line across the book. This line is as anchor in an underworld to the voice that is the earthly self that will wander and ache and fail and then get

up again. I trudge along after it, my heart now throbbing. My eye is transfixed by the line that is a vitrification of grey as the 'O' rounds itself off into a ritualistic cone of a horn sound pushing through space.

To the 'Ah' of pink quartz. The voice floats above the body below it. I am rising in space like a herald that is whole but also an electronic sprinkling of ribbon parts. Jimmy Somerville floats like one thousand *putti* over Orlando and his queen. Bubble colours and bells under a chorus. Which, I remind myself, is still the singular voice of Nemerofsky Ramsay: transcendent, reborn. I am staring now into the depths of specks that have fused into a glittering unison of pigmented rose. A procession of silky flags and fanfare drifts by. Sunshine and its-over-now, and I feel like resting somewhere, if only there was a pink plumed vessel-as-soft-boat to fall into and glide along in.

Last passage: Rose meets aubergine and I don't see where one became the other. In this final mauve embouchure of urban transport, I find myself no longer in historical time. I almost laugh out loud at having been lured so deftly by some fairytale logic, and now, so suddenly ripped out again to find myself in a dance bar. It may be Berlin. Or Barcelona. Or the basement setting of my first hot kiss of adolescence. The 'l' in-song alludes to sweat, glee, and the prospects of sex, ice cubes, and smoke blown against concrete.

I try to conjure a phoenix rebirthing back into my notion of the score, but I am clearly here, a one-pointed body dancing in the paled prismatics of a grey strobe, the glittery light of 'l'.

The concertina bookwork is a notation, a script, a translation of The Burden, a song told in B-flat, written and performed by the artist. It is an ethereal eye-shadowy world, a cento that stitches together colours and sounds that are found and invented by Nemerofsky Ramsay. As a B-flat note declares itself as 'l' over a seven minute period, the listener encounters the 'l' of romantic privilege and abyss; this is the 'l' of detective stories and dramatic fiction, a voice that is prophetic, though often, unreliable, a vantage point that alternates between the auratic and the multiplicitous. The listener holds in their hands the notation for this pronoun: a letter-type 'l' that transforms itself into an off-rainbow iridescence which extends over the length of 60 inches and five bound folios.

Alisha Piercy is a Montréal-based artist, writer and paintings conservator. Her recent installation *You Have Hair Like Flags, Flags That Point In Many Directions At Once But Cannot Pinpoint Land When Lost At Sea*, a drawing performance and story, explored the perceptual world that led up to, and surrounded, the event of being lost, adrift at sea for 30 days (FOFA Gallery, Montreal and Your Lips to Mine Press, 2010). Piercy's new book of fiction, two novellas entitled *Auricle* and *Icebreaker*, will be published in the Spring of 2010 with Conundrum Press.

Through the Visiting Artist Program, Open Studio is accessible to all professional artists, with or without printmaking experience, to explore and develop new bodies of work through print media. Each year, four artists produce their work in the Open Studio facilities followed by two-person exhibitions in the Open Studio Gallery.

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Bill Burns' work about animals and civil society has been shown and published widely including solo projects at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, England (2008); KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin (2007); the Wellcome Trust in London, England (2002); and 303 Gallery, New York (1994) and group shows at the Kunsthallen Nikolaj in Copenhagen, Denmark (2009); Museum of Contemporary Art and Design in Lausanne, Switzerland (2006); Museum of Modern Art in New York (2005-06); the Seoul Museum of Art in Korea (2002); and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (1995). He has published numerous books including *When Pain Strikes*, a scholarly anthology, (Burns, Busby and Sawchuk, eds. and contributors, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999); *Bird Radio*, (Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther Koenig and KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Cologne and Berlin, 2007) and *The Guide to the Flora and Fauna Information Station: 0.800.0FAUNA0FLORA*, (Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, England, 2008). In 2009 he received the Danish International Visiting Artist Award from the Danish Arts Agency in Copenhagen.

Bill Burns would like to thank Jill Graham for lithographic printing and superb advice and management; Nadine Bariteau for screenprinting; and Shannon Griffiths for production design.

Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay is a Montréal-born artist, diarist and bon-vivant. Since 2000 Nemerofsky Ramsay's work has involved video, performance and print works as creative vehicles for examining the singing voice and the history of song, the rendering of love and emotion into words, and the impact of popular culture on identity. His work has been exhibited in festivals and galleries across Canada, Europe and East Asia and has won prizes at film and media art festivals in Canada, Germany, Poland and Portugal. His work is part of numerous private collections as well as the collection of the National Gallery of Canada. The Artist acknowledges the support of the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec for travel funding to participate in the Open Studio Visiting Artist Residency. www.nemerofsky.ca

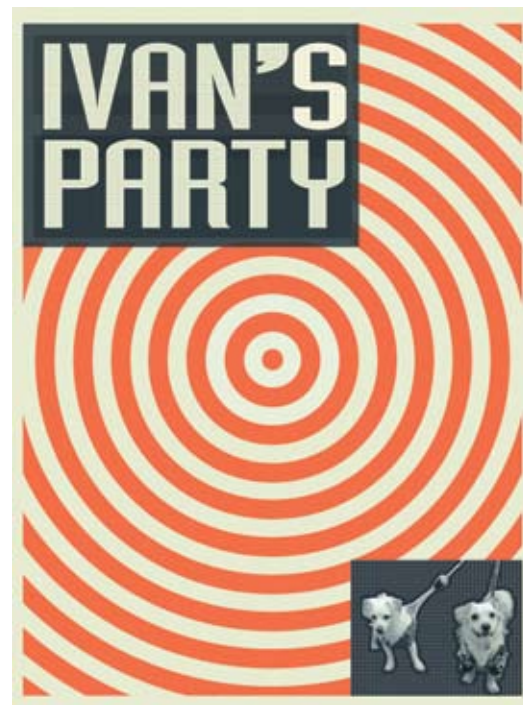
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Artist Talk at Open Studio
 Thursday, May 20 | 6 pm. Free admission

Bill Burns *Ivan the Terrible (Part One)*



Ivan's Wedding Party, lithography and screenprint, 17 x 22 inches, 2010.

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A Dog's Life, or The Biopic of Power

by Gentiane Bélanger

Conceptual artist Bill Burns is well known for his didactic installations, elaborate rescue protocols, self-help catalogues and toll-free telephone lines that promulgate environmental stewardship with an absurdist undertone. As the story goes for Burns, animals are in dire need of empathy and assistance as human actions increasingly interfere with their developmental paths. One of his latest projects extends this peculiar agenda to new territories, establishing somewhat incongruous connections between the otherwise separate realms of dogs, boats and airplanes. Emerging from a series of snapshots that Burns took during various travels, *Dogs and Boats and Airplanes* (2009-2010) started as a photographic project published in the form of a postcard booklet, and accompanied by an ambitious collection of dog, boat and airplane shaped salt and pepper shakers. Adding to the multifarious structure of his project, Burns has recently been working on a children's choir based exclusively on the sounds of dogs, boats and airplanes. Rather than archetypal or typological sounds, the choir taps into a very singular and varied repertoire of noises, reflecting the inherent diversity of this topical triad.

But what is there to be found precisely in the abrupt juncture of dogs, boats and airplanes? Quite evidently, this semantic juxtaposition brings forth a sense of the absurd, or as other critics have noted, an apparently nonsensical and perplexing collage in the Dadaist spirit. On the other hand, it is broadly recognized that dogs are heirs to millennia of husbandry and companionship. In light of this enduring entanglement of canine and human agency—what Donna Haraway terms a reciprocal state of “becoming with” that touches both humans and dogs in their mutual relationships¹—Burns' conjunction of dogs, boats and airplanes may not appear so gratuitous after all. Burns asserts that his interest in this semantic blend is, “on the one hand, an absurdity; on the other hand, they are ciphers of modernism: pedigree, global capital, movement, and travel.”² It can be further argued that through the apparent incongruity of his project, Burns resorts to a surrealist-like strategy of *cadavre exquis*: excavating a neglected take on reality in the haphazard juxtaposition of purportedly unrelated elements. While retaining their semantic autonomy to a certain extent, the dogs, boats and airplanes in Burns' work also act as indicators of a deeper, underlying question. The simple fact that dogs, boats and airplanes are being consistently used by the police and military forces in the establishment and maintenance of civility, order and power points to a valuable interpretive thread.³

Burns' residency at Open Studio has set the stage for yet another chapter of *Dogs and Boats and Airplanes*, while simultaneously opening onto an entirely new project. Using Sergei Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* (1944) as a template, Burns conceived five prints alluding to specific scenes in the film. These prints will eventually be included in an artist's book retelling the story of Tsar Ivan IV in the form of (you guessed it) dogs, boats, and airplanes. By inserting these motifs in the story of *Ivan the Terrible*, Burns provides a semantic direction—even if loose—to what initially appeared like an absurd assemblage of patterns. The connotations of order and power already suggested are rendered more explicit in this work, centered as it is on the biographical milestones (coronation, wedding, war travels, state rule, illness) of an historical figure known to have turned Russia into a single, strong and politically united—if not cohesive—state. Moreover, Eisenstein's biopic of Ivan IV, on which Burns' work is based, is known to have functioned as a narrative of the Stalinist reign by proxy, from visionary leadership to megalomaniac totalitarianism. Burns' dogs, boats and airplanes are thus caught in a palimpsestual cycle of power, ambition, conspiracy, and hubris.

Recasting Ivan as a dog, Burns displaces the protagonist from an historical framework to a narrative structure somewhat reminiscent of fables, where animals are given the moral attributes of humans. Burns is, for that matter, known to have exposed—and humorously criticized—human systems of value through their projection on animal needs and behaviors, most notably through the design of anthropomorphic gear for small animals. The conflation of human and animal in Burns' *Ivan the Terrible* is thus the continuation of a theme for which the artist has gained strong recognition. In Burns' prints, the young Phalène dog representing Ivan—with its slender features and feathery coat—vaguely echoes Eisenstein's symbolic fashioning of the Tsar's hair, beard and robe so as to evoke the spirit and morphology of a bird.

The prints nonetheless retain a collage quality reminiscent of Eisenstein's own propensity to compound a myriad of references in his filmic productions, including Walt Disney, mythology and Stalinism in the specific case of *Ivan the Terrible*.⁴ The compositional eclecticism shared by Burns and Eisenstein attests to a creative process at once rigorous, elaborate and playful, and therefore akin to the Surrealist spirit of juxtaposing disparate elements so as to generate semantic play. Adding to the referential complexity of Burns' project, the industrialism evoked by the boats and airplanes echoes an aesthetic bias familiar in Eisenstein's work—albeit less obvious in *Ivan the Terrible* than in earlier filmic productions—an inclination shared by Constructivism and Futurism for the evocative power of machines and structural materials. Burns makes sure to align his series of prints with a Constructivist style through a meticulous attention to technical details. Slight compositional gaps point to the layered process of printing and the materiality of the paper approaches the matte finish and brittle texture of newspaper. The carefully chosen fonts and the contrasts of deep masses of red, black and white explicitly emulate graphic designs by Constructivists Alexandr Rodchenko and Lioubov Popova. The proletarian propaganda of the original works is simply replaced by the current imperatives of travel, leisure and transportation through Burns' iconographical triad.

Delving deeply into strategies of appropriation, citation and emulation, Burns' *Ivan the Terrible* fits uncompromisingly into the phenomenon that Nicolas Bourriaud terms “post-production” and describes as the creation of artworks on the basis of preexisting ones by re-presenting, reinterpreting, recycling and restaging.⁵ The collage/montage aspect of Burns' prints only accentuates their inscription in this cultural trend of postproduction. By collapsing historical data into fiction through the reworked form of the biopic, this series adds yet another interpretive strata to the ever thickening palimpsest of history. The dogs, boats and airplanes that populate Bill Burns' savvily composed prints replay older themes so as to connect the past with the present and to question what might possibly pass for today's hegemonies. And, as has come to be almost expected from Burns' work, animals play a key role, seemingly better mirrors of ourselves than we can ever possibly hope to be.

¹Donna Haraway, “Encounters with Companion Species: Entangling Dogs, Baboons, Philosophers, and Biologists,” *Configurations*, n. 14, 2006: 97-114.

²Renay Egami, “An Artist for Animals in Peril: A Conversation with Bill Burns,” *Lake Journal*, UBC, Vancouver and Kelowna, Fall 2009: 19.

³Conversation with the artist, March 19, 2010.

⁴Anne Nesbet, *Savage Junctions: Sergei Eisenstein and the Shape of Thinking*, London and New York: Tauris, 2003.

⁵Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction. Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*, New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002.

Gentiane Bélanger holds a Master's Degree in Art History from Concordia University (2008) and is currently pursuing doctoral studies at UQÀM. Her research interests lie in the intersection of art and environmental philosophy. She is a member of the editorial committee for the Montréal-based art magazine *ETC* and she has published in other specialized venues.