

OFFICE AT NIGHT

Victor Burgin

L A C E

Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions

J u n e 1 0 - J u l y 2 6

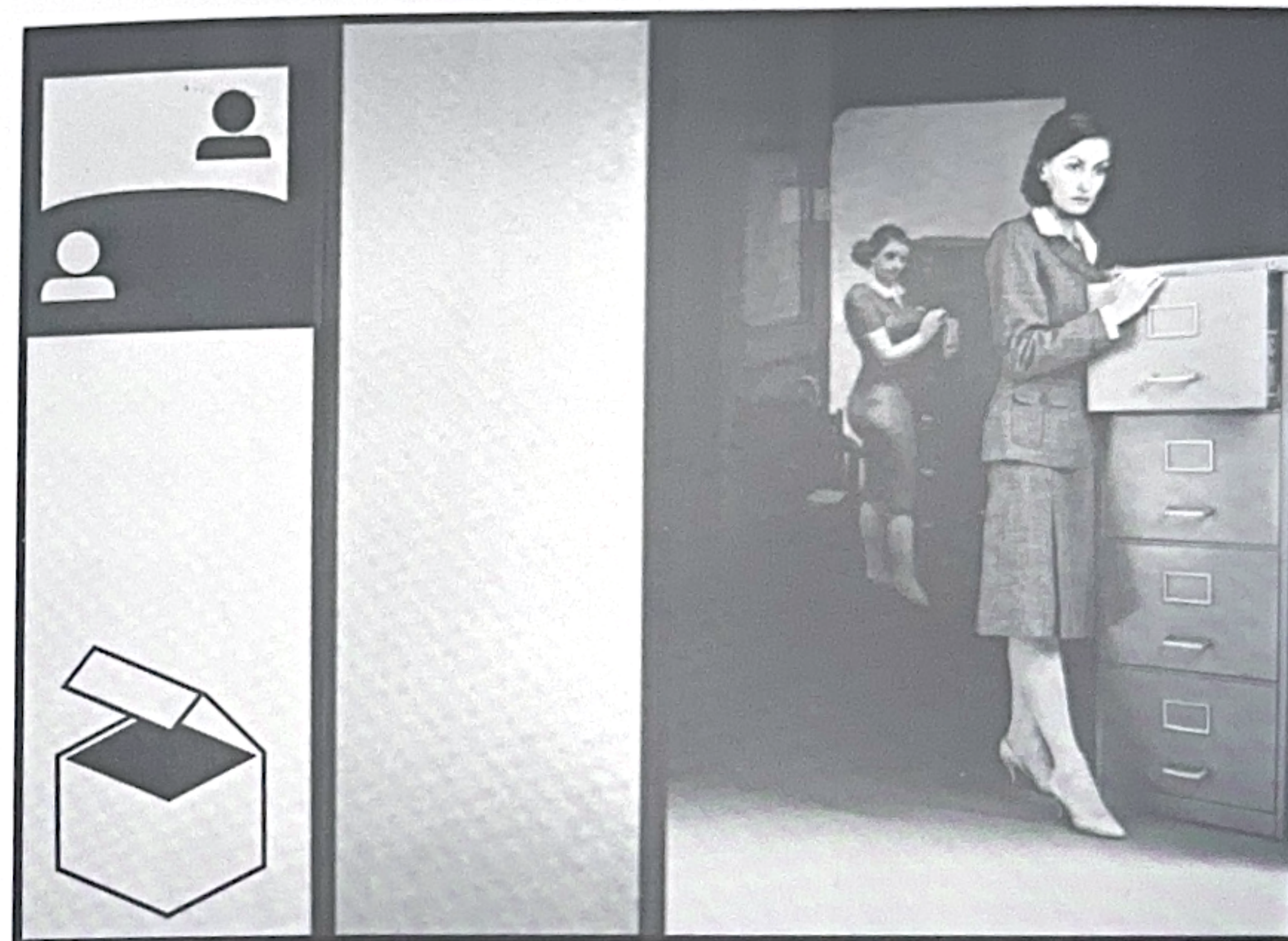
Edward Hopper's **OFFICE AT NIGHT** may be read as an expression of the general political problem of the organisation of Desire within the Law, and in the terms of the *particular* problem of the organisation of sexuality within capitalism — the organisation of sexuality *for* capitalism. Patriarchy has traditionally consigned women to supportive roles in the running of the economy, subject to the authority of men. The 'secretary/boss' couple in Hopper's painting is at once a picture of a particular, albeit fictional, couple and an emblem, 'iconogram,' serving to metonymically represent all such couples — all such links in the chains of organisation of the (re)production of wealth. Such coupling for reproduction must of course contain its sexual imperative. The family functions to contain, restrain, this imperative in so far as it is directed towards the reproduction of subjects for the workplace. The erotic supplement to the biological imperative cannot however be contained in the family. It spills into the place of work, where it threatens to subvert the orders of rationalised production. The painting, clearly, may represent such a moment of potential erotic disruption in appealing to such preconstructed meanings, items of the popular pre-conscious, as are filed under, for example, 'working late at the office.' At the same time the painting stabilises the situation by providing a moral solution to the problem of the unruly and dangerous supplement. That the morality is patriarchal goes without saying. ¶ Stability is made *physically* manifest in the massive formal stasis of this painting by a man who admired Courbet. Within a setting of firmly interlocking rectangles the main compositional device is a triangle, its base the bottom edge of the frame and its apex in the head of the woman, making her the focal point of the image. From her head, our gaze is allowed unrestricted movement down the full length of her body. This body is twisted, impossibly, so that both breasts and buttocks are turned towards us. The

body is ostensibly clad in a modest dress, but a dress which clings and stretches like a costume of latex rubber. An ambivalence similarly inhabits the woman's gaze. Her eyes may be downcast, conventionally connoting modesty, or she may be directing a seductive or predatory look towards the man at the desk. This man does not return her look, his gaze is upon the strangely rigid sheet of paper in his hand. I'm reminded of Perseus, gazing into the shield which is about to reflect the image of the Gorgon. Clearly, if any impropriety were to take place here, then it would not be *his* fault. The painting therefore offers the heterosexual male viewer, by identification with the man in the image (in the imaginary) the exciting promise of a forbidden satisfaction *without blame attached*. The elaborately constructed alibi pivots on a disavowal of voyeurism: 'I (male spectator) know very well that I am looking at the body of this woman, but nevertheless I (imagined man) am not.' The painting offers itself as evidence in his defence, like a photograph presented in a court of law. ¶ Hopper spent a year in Paris in 1906 and exhibited in the Armory Show of 1913, but he never had any truck with Modernism. Today, history has moved around his work and effectively changed its 'valency' from aesthetic conservative to proto-postmodernist. There is much in Hopper's work which clearly derives from the cinema and from photography, and throughout much of his life he was directly involved in the production of vernacular imagery in his work as an illustrator. In a recent book on Hopper, Gail Levin observes that the office equipment and furnishings seen in the 1940 painting, *Office at Night*, are derived from his office illustrations of the 1910 period, albeit the dress worn by the woman in this picture clearly belongs to the same period as the painting. In the photographs I've just started shooting 'around' this image, my model wears a 1940s business suit — as a sort of 'tacking stitch' loosely pinning the images to the period of the painting

— but I've made no other gesture towards a 1940s feel. History has moved around my own work, changing at least one of its meanings. When I began using photo-text it was in the interests of a 'zero degree' of style, an 'absence' of style. Today, such work constitutes a distinct genre, and an item in the available repertoire of stylistic conventions. For this particular work I would like to vary the genre a little. To emphasise the reference to the social order, I'm thinking of replacing the printed word component with the 'Isotype.' ¶ Those ubiquitous pictograms we see — for example, offering us directions in bus-stations and airports — have an interesting history. They derive from the 'Isotype' movement, which began in the 1920s under Otto Neurath. Neurath was a member of the Vienna circle of logical positivist philosophers. One of the ambitions of the Vienna circle was to develop an unambiguous international language for science. Neurath, however, was also very interested in politics, in sociology, and in education. His ambition for the Isotype — which is an acronym for International System of Typographic Picture Education — was that it would develop into an unambivalent international picture language for everyday use. It's interesting to think of this search for the unambiguous image taking place in Vienna at the same time as Freud's researches into the irresolvable ambivalences of the psychic processes. With the onset of Nazism both Neurath and Freud took refuge in England. There's an appropriate coda to this. The Isotype archive is currently lodged at Reading University, which is unusual in having a Department of Typography and Graphic Communication. One of the legacies of the isotype movement is a problem which, I've been told, successive generations of students at Reading have attempted to solve. It's this: design an Isotype, a pictogram, which says neither 'man' nor 'woman,' but simply *person*.

Victor Burgin

From, BETWEEN, Basil Blackwell, Oxford and New York, and ICA, London, 1986.



OFFICE AT NIGHT, 1986. 6' x 8' No. 1 of seven panels.
(Not Included in Exhibition)

As an artists organization, LACE is not hampered by the constraints of the commercial art market, neither is it subject to a mandate as with museums to interpret and preserve a permanent collection. Rather, LACE is committed to artists and to the presentation of their work and ideas in a context free from any prejudice regarding form or content.

Thus, it is significant that LACE presents the work of Victor Burgin and Allan Sekula (in concurrent exhibitions). By refusing to acknowledge the traditional separation between artmaking and critical discourse, both Burgin and Sekula engage in a practice which grows from the interaction of these disciplines. Through their critical and theoretical writings, teaching and visual work their ideas have had a major impact on the art world and artists working within it.

Victor Burgin's activities as artist/photographer and critic/theorist address the relation of art to its social and historical context; he seeks to reveal the psychological processes through which individuals are formed within the social order. Over the past ten years, the central motif of Burgin's work has been 'patriarchal power relations, and the "masculine" identity which support them.' This concern is again evidenced in "The Office at Night" which is presented at LACE in a series of seven tableaux. Investigating an 'archeology' of certain familiar pictures of women, Burgin, taking his title from Edward Hopper's painting circa 1940, re-presents "the general problem of the organization of Desire within the Law, and . . . the particular problem of the organization of sexuality within capitalism."

I would like to thank: Gilbert Silverman, Martin Sklar, and the John Weber Gallery for the loan of the works from 'Office at Night'; Jeffery Keedy who designed this catalogue/brochure; and Jeff Mann, LACE's Exhibition Coordinator for bringing this show to fruition. Special thanks is extended to Victor Burgin for giving LACE the opportunity to premiere his work in Los Angeles.

Joy Silverman

Executive Director

Victor Burgin

Born 1941 in Sheffield. Studied at Sheffield College of Art, Royal College of Art 1962-5, Yale University 1965-7. Taught at Trent Polytechnic 1967-73, Polytechnic of Central London, School of Communication since 1973. US/UK Bicentennial Arts Exchange Fellow, New York 1976-7. Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst Fellow, Berlin 1978-9. Picker Professor of Fine Art, Colgate University, New York, 1980. Artist in Residence, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Boston 1986. Distinguished Visiting Scholar, Art History Dept., SUNY Binghamton, 1987. Visiting Artist, University of Colorado, Boulder, 1987. Visiting Artist, Adelaide Festival of the Arts, Adelaide, Australia, 1988. Member of editorial board of *New Formations* (Methuen). Lives in London.

Selected Individual Exhibitions

- 1967 British Pavillion, Expo '67, Montreal
- 1976 Institute of Contemporary Arts, London
- 1977 Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven
- 1978 Museum of Modern Art, Oxford
- 1979 DAAD Gallery, Berlin
- 1980 Picker Art Gallery, Colgate University, New York
- 1982/3 Musée des Beaux-Arts de Calais
- 1986 Institute of Contemporary Arts, London; Kettle's Yard Gallery, Cambridge; Orchard Gallery, Londonderry; Albert and Vera List Visual Arts Centre, Boston; The Renaissance Society, Chicago, Knight Gallery, Charlotte, NC
- 1987 LACE, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1965 *Four Young Artists*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London

- 1969 *When Attitudes Become Form*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London
- 1970 *Information*, Museum of Modern Art, New York; *Idea Structures*, Camden Arts Centre, London
- 1971 *The British Avant Garde*, New York Cultural Center; *6th Guggenheim International*, Guggenheim Museum, New York
- 1972 *Documenta 5*, Kassel; *The New Art*, Hayward Gallery, London
- 1984 *1965-1972, When Attitudes Became Form*, Kettle's Yard Gallery, Cambridge, Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh
- 1986 *The Turner Prize, 1986*, Tate Gallery, London

Victor Burgin has exhibited regularly at John Weber Gallery, New York and Galerie Liliane et Michel Durand-Dessert, Paris

Selected Books by the Artist

- Work and Commentary*, Latimer, 1973, introductory essay; language works, plus two photo-text works, from the period 1967-73.
- Victor Burgin*, Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 1977, introductory essay; photo-text works from 1974-6.
- Thinking Photography*, Macmillan, 1982, edited by Burgin, who contributes introductory essay and three of the subsequent articles
- Between*, Basil Blackwell/ICA, 1986. Photo-text works from 1976-85, interspersed with extracts from interviews, talks and letters
- The End of Art Theory — criticism and postmodernity*, Macmillan, 1986
- Formations of Fantasy*, Methuen, 1986, co-edited by Burgin, Donald, Kaplan. Burgin contributes introduction and one essay
- Introduction to Theory of Representations* Blackwell, 1988 (forthcoming)

L A C E
Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions
 1804 Industrial Street
 Los Angeles, CA 90021
 (213) 624-5650

STAFF

Nancy Barton, *Bookstore Manager*
 Anne Bray, *Video Coordinator*
 Weba Garretson, *Performance Coordinator*
 Jim Isermann, *Bookkeeper*
 Martin Kersels, *Administrative Assistant*
 Jeff Mann, *Exhibitions Coordinator*
 Joy Silverman, *Executive Director*
 Judith Teitelman, *Development Coordinator*

L A C E is supported in part by Apple Computer, Art Matters Inc., the Atlantic Richfield Foundation, Brody Arts Fund, the California Arts Council, the California Community Foundation, Chevron U.S.A., Inc., the Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles, the Cultural Affairs Department of the City of Los Angeles, International Business Machines, W. Alton Jones Foundation, Local Initiatives Support Corporation, Meet the Composer, MIKA Company, the National Endowment for the Arts, National/State/County Partnership, The Rockefeller Foundation, the Security Pacific Foundation, Touche Ross and Co., and the FRIENDS and SUPPORTERS of **L A C E**.

This catalog is funded in part by a grant from the Cultural Affairs Department of the City of Los Angeles.

Catalog design Jeffery Keedy
 Typesetting by Women's Graphic Center

Exhibitions Committee

Laurel Beckman
 Karen Carson
 Harry Gamboa, Jr.
 Jeff Mann, *Staff*
 Lari Pittman
 Lane Relyea
 Joy Silverman
 Cam Slocum, *Chair*
 Elaine Wintman

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Joseph R. Austin
 Karen Carson
 Catherine Chester
 Karen Comegys
 Elizabeth Freeman
 Gai Gherardi, *Secretary*
 Edward Helfeld, *Chairman*
 Lin Hixson
 Mike Kelley, *Vice Chairman*
 Bruce Lyon
 Jon Peterson, *Treasurer*
 Lari Pittman
 Astrid Preston
 Anthony de los Reyes
 Joy Silverman
 Cam Slocum
 Coleen Sterritt
 Robert Walker
 Bruce Yonemoto
 Marvin Zeidler