

The Permuted Poems of Brion Gysin

Tom Bessoir
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Abstract

A brief introduction to Brion Gysin, his permutation poems, and my relationship to them.

Brion Gysin

Brion Gysin once described himself as “a painter who does other things.” His paintings are calligraphic, inspired by Arabic and Japanese script. His other things include being a novelist, a poet, a performance artist, and the inventor of the Dreamachine—a mechanized sculpture to be viewed with the eyes closed. He is perhaps best known for his friendship with the author William S. Burroughs, who called Brion Gysin “the only man I ever respected.”¹

Early life

Brion Gysin was born in a Canadian military hospital in Buckinghamshire, England in 1916. His father, a captain in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, was killed in combat in WWI eight months after his birth. He and his mother returned to Canada and settled in Edmonton, Alberta. At 15 he was sent to a prestigious, boys boarding school run by Benedictine monks near Bath, England.

Gysin moved to Paris in 1934 to study at the Sorbonne where he made many literary and artistic contacts. He soon joined the Surrealist Group, and a year later at age 19, had his first art exhibition with Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dali, Rene Magritte, Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, and others. On the eve of the opening, Andre Breton expelled him from the Surrealist Group and had his pictures removed!

After serving in the U.S. Army during World War II, he wrote *To Master, a Long Goodnight: The History of Slavery in Canada* (1946). In 1949 Gysin was among the first Fulbright Fellows. He planned to use the grant to further study the history of slavery.

Morocco

Gysin moved to Morocco in 1950 after visiting with the composer and writer Paul Bowles who had settled in the Tangier International Zone after the war. The next year Bowles and Gysin first heard the Master Musicians of Jajouka when they attended a festival. The Master Musicians are a collection of Sufi trance musicians from the small village of Jajouka (sometimes spelled Joujouka) in the foothills of the Rif Mountains. When he visited Jajouka, Gysin wished he could hear that music everyday. They invited him to stay, but he declined. In 1954 Gysin satisfied his desire by opening the 1001 Nights Cafe in Tangier and hiring the Master Musicians of Jajouka to perform daily. It was at this time that Gysin first met William S. Burroughs. When the cafe closed in early 1958, Gysin returned to Paris and stayed at what would become famous as the Beat Hotel.

The Beat Hotel

The Beat Hotel was a run down, “class 13” hotel (the lowest rating) at 9 Rue Git-le-Coeur, in the Latin Quarter. In 1957, first the poet Gregory Corso, then Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky resided there. They were soon joined by the poet Sinclair Beiles, William Burroughs, and Brion Gysin. It was Gregory Corso who coined the name “The Beat Hotel.”

It was at The Beat Hotel that Gysin and Beiles helped Burroughs edit the manuscripts he had written in Tangier into what would become *(The) Naked Lunch* in 1959. Burroughs and Gysin often discussed techniques on writing. Gysin thought writing was fifty years behind painting.

Cut-Ups

I will let Brion Gysin describe the discovery:

“While cutting a mount for a drawing in room No. 15, 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 into writing. I picked up the raw words and began to piece together texts that later appeared as "First Cut-Ups" in *Minutes to Go*. At the time I thought them hilariously funny and hysterically meaningful. I laughed so hard my neighbors though I'd flipped.”²

Minutes To Go was a collection of cut-ups by Gysin, Burroughs, Gregory Corso, and Sinclair Beiles. It was published in Paris in 1960.

Permutation Poems

The idea had been explored before, both by the Dadaists and by Gertrude Stein in 1936:

Money is what words are.
Words are what money is.
Is money what words are.
Are words what money is.³

But Brion Gysin was the person responsible for the popularization of the form in the 1960s and 1970s. In his own words:

“The whole idea of the permutations came to me visually on seeing the so-called Divine Tautology, in print. It looked wrong, to me, non-symmetrical. The biggest word, ‘That’, belonged in the middle but all I had to do was switch the last two words and It asked a question: ‘I Am That, Am I?’ The rest followed.”⁴

Brion Gysin's first published permutation poems appeared among the cut-up experiments in *Minutes To Go*. The volume contained three poems “CALLING ALL RE ACTIVE AGENTS,” “I THINK THEREFORE I AM,” and “RUB OUT THE WRITE WORD.”

These poems are related to Concrete Poetry, where the typographical effects the words make on the page is part of the art form. I have carefully reproduced the typography to the best of my ability:

RUB OUT THE WRITE WORD
 RUB OUT RIGHT WORD THEE
 RUB OUT WORD RITE THEE
 RUB OUT THE WORD RIGHT
 RUB OUT RIGHT THE WORD
 RUB OUT WORD THEE WRITE

RUB THE WORD RIGHT OUT
 RUB THE RIGHT OUT WORD
 RUB THE OUT WORD RIGHT
 WORD OUT RIGHT
 RIGHT WORD OUT
 OUT RIGHT WORD

RUB WORD RIGHT OUT THE
 RUB WORD OUT RIGHT THE
 RUB WORD THE RIGHT OUT
 RIGHT THE OUT
 OUT THE RIGHT
 THE OUT RIGHT

WORD RUB THE RIGHT OUT
 RUB RIGHT OUT THE
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 THE OUT RIGHT
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 OUT THE RIGHT

WORD RIGHT RUB THE OUT
 THE
 OUT
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 THE
 OUT⁵

In the summer of 1960, the radio program “The Permuted Poems of Brion Gysin” was recorded for the BBC. (It was not broadcast until August 15, 1961.) It included “CALLING ALL RE ACTIVE AGENTS,” “JUNK IS NO GOOD BABY,” “KICK THAT HABIT MAN,” “I AM THAT I AM,” and “Pistol Poem” described by Gysin:

“A single pistol shot on a short loop of tape was recorded by the BBC Sound Effects studio and was rerecorded as heard from the distance of one yard, two yards, three yards, four yards and five yards. These reports were run through their possible permutations and laid in sound layers with my voice speaking the numbers.”⁶

Burroughs and Gysin continued working with cut-ups and some of this work appears in *The Exterminator* which was published in San Francisco later in 1960. The back cover describes the book

“...Almost nothing remains in a narrative context; everything is anatomized and forced to live in an agonized truce. Chessmen, viruses, sex, narcotics, and many other concerns of Burroughs scramble together commenting on one another simply by their proximity. the effect is like being turned loose in someones unconscious; the manifestations are various but they all carry the quality of one man. Brion Gysin contributed the poems and calligraphs which finally “rub out the word”.

It contained nine permutation poems. Here is “KICK THAT HABIT MAN.” This is the same version as read on the BBC program.

KICK THAT HABIT MAN
KICK THAT HABIT
MAN KICK THAT
HABIT MAN KICK
THAT HABIT MAN

KICK THAT HABIT MAN
KICK HABIT THAT MAN
KICK MAN HABIT THAT
KICK THAT MAN HABIT
KICK HABIT MAN THAT
KICK MAN THAT HABIT

THAT HABIT KICK MAN
THAT KICK HABIT MAN
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HABIT THAT KICK MAN

MAN KICK THAT HABIT
MAN THAT HABIT KICK
MAN HABIT KICK THAT
MAN KICK HABIT THAT
MAN THAT KICK HABIT
MAN HABIT THAT KICK⁷

The Third Mind, The Nova Convention, and Me

After a French language edition the previous year, the English edition of *The Third Mind* by William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin was published in September of 1978.

It is an anthology of writings on, and examples of, their cut-up method. One section is titled PERMUTATIONS. It contained versions of the permutation poems “I AM THAT I AM,” “JUNK IS NO GOOD BABY,” “KICK THE HABIT MAN,” “I THINK THEREFORE I AM,” and “RUB OUT THE WORD.”

RUB	OUT	THE	WORD	#	\$	%	&
RUB	OUT	THE		#	\$	%	
WORD	RUB	OUT		&	#	\$	
THE	WORD	RUB		%	&	#	
OUT	THE	WORD		\$	%	&	
RUB	OUT	THE	WORD	#	\$	%	&
RUB	THE	WORD	OUT	#	%	&	\$
RUB	WORD	THEE	OUT	#	&	%	\$
RUB	OUT	WORD	THEE	#	\$	&	%
RUB	THE	OUT	WORD	#	%	\$	&
RUB	WORD	OUT	THEE	#	&	\$	%
OUT	THE	WORD	RUB	\$	%	&	#
OUT	WORD	RUB	THEE	\$	&	#	%
OUT	RUB	WORD	THEE	\$	#	&	%
OUT	THEE	RUB	WORD	\$	%	#	&
OUT	WORD	RUB	THEE	\$	&	#	%
OUT	RUB	THE	WORD	\$	#	%	&
THE	WORD	RUB	OUT	%	&	#	\$
THEE	RUB	WORD	OUT	%	#	&	\$
THE	OUT	RUB	WORD	%	\$	#	&
THE	WORD	OUT	RUB	%	&	\$	#
THE	RUB	OUT	WORD	%	#	\$	&
THE	OUT	WORD	RUB	%	\$	&	#
WORD	RUB	OUT	THEE	&	#	\$	%
WORD	OUT	RUB	THEE	&	\$	#	%
WORD	THEE	OUT	RUB	&	%	\$	#
WORD	RUB	THEE	OUT	&	#	%	\$
WORD	OUT	THEE	RUB	&	\$	%	#
WORD	THEE	RUB	OUT	&	%	#	\$ ⁸

The Nova Convention was held from Thursday, November 30th to Saturday, December 2nd at various locations around New York City. It was multimedia retrospective of William S. Burroughs’ work and influences. In addition to Burroughs and Gysin, many other writers, musicians, and artists participated including Allen Ginsberg & Peter Orlovsky, Timothy Leary, Terry Southern, Robert Anton Wilson,

Laurie Anderson, John Cage, Philip Glass, Patti Smith, and Frank Zappa. Among other works Gysin performed “JUNK IS NO GOOD BABY” and “KICK THAT HABIT MAN.”

In the fall of 1978 I was a junior, studying electrical engineering and mathematics at The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in New York City. Writing poetry was my main creative outlet. I had some minor success getting a few poems in small literary journals and had published a chapbook *EXAMINATION BOOK* earlier that year.

Attending The Nova Convention and reading *The Third Mind*, I was inspired to try my hand at composing permutation poems. “You Can’t Find Love” was the most successful and I dedicated it to Brion Gysin:

You can’t find love
You can’t love find
You find can’t love
You find love can’t
You love can’t find
You love find can’t

Can’t you love find
Can’t you find love
Can’t find love you
Can’t find you love
Can’t love you find
Can’t love find you

Find you can’t love
Find you love can’t
Find can’t you love
Find can’t love you
Find love you can’t
Find love can’t you

Love find you can’t
Love find can’t you
Love you find can’t
Love you can’t find
Love can’t you find
Love can’t find you

Shortly after writing this poem in 1979, my artistic attention would shift to filmmaking and photography. In 1980 I made the Burroughs/Gysin inspired, 16mm experimental film *Intercut*.⁹ It is a stroboscopic film poem that explores perception and comprehension through the rhythmic pulse of intercut text. Every half second I cut between two different readers: one reading Marshall McLuhan’s *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (McGraw-Hill, New York 1964) and the other reading William Burroughs describing intercutting text using tape recorders in *The Ticket That Exploded* (Olympia Press, Paris 1962).

My films often use mathematics and randomness to explore perception and the structure of cinema. In 2024 I used my 1979 permutation poem as the basis for my 15th experimental film. *You Can't Find Love*¹⁰ explores selective viewing by overloading the brain with different presentations of my poem.

Epilogue

Brion Gysin died from lung cancer on July 13, 1986.

In 2022 a complete anthology of his permutation poems was published by DABA press, making his poems accessible to new generations, as many of the original publications were printed in small editions and have long been out of print.

“RUB OUT THE WRITE WORD” is on the next to last page of *Minutes to Go*. The last page reads:

“Post-Script from Gregory Corso: --

Note for my contribution to the Cut-Up System.

Poetry that can be destroyed should be destroyed. even if it means destroying one's own poetry – if it be destroyed. I join this venture unwillingly *and* willingly. Unwillingly because the poetry I have written is from the soul and not from the dictionary; willingly because if it can be destroyed *or* bettered by the ‘cut-up’ method, then it is poetry that I care not for, and so should be cut up. Word poetry is for everyman, but soul poetry – alas, is not heavily distributed.

Unwillingly because Tzara did it all before: willingly because Mr Burroughs is a knowing man, and I am in soul to abide by him his ‘unlock your word horde’ is good charity.

Unwillingly because my poetry is a natural cut-up. and need not be created by a pair of scissors; willingly because I have no other choice. I have agreed to join Mr Gysin, Mr Beiles, and Mr Burroughs in this venture, and so to the muse I say ‘Thank you for the poesy that cannot be destroyed that is in me’ – for this I have learned after such a short venture in uninspired machine-poetry.”¹¹

On that note, I end this venture.

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Notes

1. The Guardian, 18 January 1997
2. "CUT-UPS: A Project for Disastrous Success," was first published in *Evergreen Review*, No. 32 (April-May 1964) and later reprinted in Brion Gysin et al., *Brion Gysin Let the Mice In*. (Something Else Press, West Clover VT 1973) p. 4
3. Gertrude Stein, *The Geographical History of America; or the Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind* (Random House, New York 1936) and (John Hopkins University Press 1995)
4. Brion Gysin et al., *Brion Gysin Let the Mice In*. (Something Else Press, West Clover VT 1973) p. 53
5. Brion Gysin et al., *Minutes to Go*. (San Francisco: Beach Books 1968) p. 62
6. Brion Gysin et al., *Brion Gysin Let the Mice In*. (Something Else Press, West Clover VT 1973) p. 51
7. William Burroughs, Brion Gysin, *The Exterminator*. (San Francisco: Auerhahn Press, 1960) p. 16
8. William S. Burroughs, Brion Gysin, *The Third Mind*. New York: (New York: Viking Press 1978) p. 83
9. <https://www.tombessoir.com/intercut>
10. <https://www.tombessoir.com/you-cant-find-love>
11. Brion Gysin et al., *Minutes to Go*. (San Francisco: Beach Books 1968) p. 63