

**Scott Burton. Collected Writings on Art and Performance 1965–1975.** By David J. Getsy. 258 pp. incl. 9 col. + 7 b. & w. ill. (Soberscove Press, Chicago, 2012), \$18. ISBN 978-0-9824090-4-6.

**Michael Peppiatt. Interviews with Artists 1966–2012.** By Michael Peppiatt. 256 pp. incl. 45 b. & w. ill. (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2012), £20. ISBN 978-0-300-17662-9.

Reviewed by JAMES CAHILL

IN OSCAR WILDE'S 'The Critic as Artist' the writer heretically strove to dissolve the boundary between art and criticism. 'The antithesis between them is entirely arbitrary', opines Gilbert, one of the two interlocutors in this aesthetic treatise dressed up as a Socratic dialogue. The antithesis has prevailed in two perennial forms of art journalism – the interview and the review. Yet recent anthologies of each genre show them to be at their best where they threaten to merge.

Scott Burton, who died in 1989, is remembered primarily for furniture sculptures and performances which dismantled the art-life divide, but he also worked as a critic and lecturer on the American art scene from the 1960s to the mid-1970s. In the introduction to this new collection of his reviews and essays, David J. Getsy proposes that Burton's 'distaste for narrowly normative and canonical values' as a critic prefigures the demotic spirit of his art. Undoubtedly, a non-hierarchical sensibility pervades Burton's writing and sees him ranging between aesthetic camps. The earliest texts celebrate Tony Smith's investment of minimalist form with emotional charge, while

elsewhere Burton hails the new wave of figurative painting led by artists such as John Button (his partner throughout the 1960s) and Alex Katz. In an introduction to the seminal exhibition *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form* at the Kunsthalle Berne in 1969, Burton's excitement about 'the continuing dilation of art's limits' is palpable. Throughout his interest is in art that is allusive, that looks beyond itself to lived experience.

Burton's style excels most where he eschews academic 'throat clearing' (such as agonised definitions of terms) in favour of lyrical *brevitas*. Brushing aside the question of why Anne Arnold is a figurative, rather than abstract, sculptor, he posits: 'That is a donné, like being a natural blonde'. Yet his usually limpid prose gives way, on occasion, to poetic ambiguities that teeter just on the right side of axiomatic: Al Held's paintings exhibit 'the pressure of a search for a precision that would

be the opposite of mechanical'.

In the book's later sections, we see Burton moving towards self-referential performance texts – the foundations of his career as an artist. He appeared in 1971 as an art critic lecturing on his own art. He was later to term himself 'a failed critic', yet his fizzing erudition and gift for moments of evocative imprecision make this book a vital – and vitally personal – study of an often oversimplified decade in American art.

Michael Peppiatt's name is most closely associated with that of Francis Bacon, the subject of several of his books. In an extensive new survey of interviews, Bacon plays a brief, if predictably urbane, walk-on role, and we are exposed to the voices of a host of other figures whom Peppiatt has encountered (and in several cases befriended) since the late 1960s. Encompassing 'Q&A' exchanges and longer articles, many of the interviews share a twilight ambience: Peppiatt's subjects are regularly in their eighties and nineties.

The interviews frequently become arenas for performance and mythmaking. In one of his prefaces, Peppiatt recalls Balthus's 'carefully stage-managed, aristocratic hauteur'. By contrast, Henri Cartier-Bresson aims to dismantle his popular image when he admits that drawing has always come first, and that photography is 'instant drawing, really, like instant coffee'. And of course, contradictions abound between the equally dogmatic pronouncements of different artists. For Avigdor Arikha, for example, anything that is not drawn from life is an aberration; for Dado, drawing is vital as a 'way out of life'. Such insights can seem as polished stones within a quagmire. But ironically, some of the profoundest remarks deal with the very problem of indefinability, and of the mutability of 'perspective'. R.B. Kitaj admits: 'Certain pictures bore me now, and I want to interpret them differently. I even revise the intentions I had when I did them'. As if concurring, Jean Dubuffet (interviewed ten years earlier in 1977), proposes that 'we live in mental fictions – in the conventions that have been imposed on us'.

Wilde's desire to synthesise should remind us of the similarities between criticism and artistic statement, not least their shared capacity for revelation and obfuscation. Both volumes under review have the immediacy of primary sources, of *témoignage*, offering glimpses of the eras from which they spring. Burton was acquainted with many of the artists and writers of the 'New York School', and Getsy's compendium amounts to a social portrait of that milieu. Peppiatt suggests that his interviews collectively amount to a kind of autobiography. Their 'Gallic or certainly European slant' stems from his

having spent over three decades in Paris. Moreover, he swerves towards those styles that he favours (figurative painting dominates, although we also find encounters with three 'starchitects').

The corollary is that both books are necessarily 'dated', underlining how their respective genres are epoch-bound and destined to age rapidly. Judge Time was not around to sift through some of Burton's obscurer subjects, and we find our attention being drawn to a number of proverbial footnotes in history. Certain of Peppiatt's interviewees have been all but forgotten, perhaps, on occasion, for good reason.

But by the same token, each book acts like a distorting mirror to highlight the gulf between 'then' and 'now', pointing to all that is strange and lacking about contemporary art and its criticism. Burton makes bold counter-intuitive assertions, and tradition is not a dirty word: Ronald Bladen's *Black triangle* puts him in mind of the *Winged nike* from Samothrace. While catholic in his tastes, he is also willing to criticise (that is, assert the failures, affectations or hypocrisies of certain works – minimalism in most of its forms is reductively rational; Pop art is based 'on the premise that our collective mental age is six'). In Peppiatt's dialogues, we find artists who express existential doubt with rare frankness; postmodern irony seems a world away. Antoni Tàpies bleakly confesses: 'we have tried to secularize transcendental values without finding any true equivalent for art's original function'.

Together the two books serve as a timely admonition against trends towards a *lingua franca* of contemporary art, in which critical and artistic voices alike take on a quality of deadpan descriptiveness that surely belongs to the dustiest recesses of academia.