

BRION GYSIN
I AM THAT I AM

Brion Gysin is at the crossroads of art history; or rather of art histories. Inventor of the cut up technique, used both in the literary and the visual arts field, he is one of the protagonists of the Beat Generation. William Burroughs, his friend and collaborator, while using his technique for his books, will not cease to attribute the paternity to him. He would not even begin to produce "cut up" plastic works until after Brion Gysin's death, out of respect.

Brion Gysin was in turn, or sometimes simultaneously: poet, calligrapher, painter, draftsman, multimedia artist, digital artist, inventor, restaurant owner, novelist, musician, performer. In addition to the Beat Generation, he frequented, in Paris and New York: the Surrealists, the protagonists of Poésie Concrète, the Lettrists, Action Painting, the gallery of Iris Clert... He traveled, among other places, to Morocco with Burroughs, where he experimented with Arabic writing and its right-to-left script. A few years earlier, during the war, he studied the Japanese language and its verticality with the Canadian army. Brion Gysin was inspired by these non-Western structures to develop his very distinctive system of inscriptions and permutations, which borrowed as much from mathematics as from Zen. From his window in Paris, he watched the construction of the Pompidou Center and Renzo Piano's avant-garde architecture inspired his "Windows" series.

"Oh I know it's better to have a body than not to have one, but the minute I fell in here I ungraciously screamed, 'Wrong address! Wrong address! There was a mistake in the mail. Please resend me. Wherever you found me, return me. Wrong time, wrong place, wrong color!'

Brion Gysin

Brion Gysin is often presented as a multiform, tormented talent. His incessant research makes him evade a "canonical" art history. A series of missed opportunities that would begin with the removal of his works by André Breton in 1935, during an exhibition in Paris where he should have been among the "great Surrealists". His homosexuality, frowned upon by the Surrealists, as well as a caricature judged as a crime of lèse-majesté against André Breton, prevented him from doing so. He tries a literary career with the novel *Othello*: a black American intellectually white, who ends up being accepted as Moroccan. But it is his friend Burroughs who gets the literary glory. In 1961, Brion Gysin invents together with the mathematician Ian Sommerville the *Dream Machine*: a luminous work which, using the flicker process, produces a visual and perceptual phenomenon. When it rotates at a certain frequency, it brings to the user, who experiences it with closed eyes, colored images and particular optical sensations. Today, it is part of the history of psychedelic experiences. Brion Gysin considered it as a possible alternative to the creation itself of an art object, everyone being able to experiment in himself a shifting and personal phenomenon similar to art itself - close to the Zen archer who doesn't aim at the target but "let the arrow hit". He tried to exploit it commercially on an industrial scale, but in vain. He even planned to exhibit a series of these *Dream Machines* in Iris Clert's gallery and to sacrifice all his visual works in parallel, in a movement of equivalence. The project does not succeed..

However, today we can consider Brion Gysin's work in a very different way. Already in 1963, the exhibition "La lettre et le signe" at the Valérie Schmidt Gallery drew a very different history by pairing his work with that of artists such as Filiou, Jasper-Johns, Twombly or Zao Wou-Ki. We see a history of art that is broader, more inclusive, than the strict modernist avant-garde. With the evolution of the figure of the artist in the 1970s and 1980s, Gysin's "place" was constantly re-evaluated. It is thus to note that the Gallery of France, which dedicates a personal exhibition to him in 1983, represents, among many women artists, one of the great figures of surrealism: Meret Oppenheim. The foundational gesture of André Breton is re-contextualized: a reconciliation beyond time and gender. The 2010 retrospective exhibition at the New Museum "refocuses" the "eccentric" image of Brion Gysin by making him one of the precursors of the figure of the contemporary artist, moving from practice to practice, without fetishizing the medium.

But we can also look at Brion Gysin's legacy in the field of painting itself. Keith Haring's heritage is claimed, as he said that it was precisely Brion Gysin's "multidirectional" work that made his own possible. And one cannot help but think that Christopher Wool, when he made his Roller And Stamp Paintings, had seen Brion Gysin's paintings, whose systematic grids are created with the help of a roller perforated by the artist. Or more recently, one can evoke the games that Josh Smith practices on his signature, and which recall the permutations tending to the monogram that Brion Gysin made on his own name.

Perhaps the most accurate term to describe Brion Gysin is the one he used at the end of his life, "I am a painter who does other things."

I Am That I Am rather than To Be or Not To Be.