

# Taking Shots



# Taking Shots

## The Photography of William S. Burroughs

Patricia Allmer and  
John Sears



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# Contents

p. 7

Foreword  
Clare Grafik

p. 52

The Fugitive:  
Citation and Flux in  
William S. Burroughs'  
Re-photography  
Susan Laxton

p. 9

Acknowledgements

p. 66

Tickets to St Louis:  
Time and Place  
in Burroughs' Photographs  
John Sears

p. 10

Introduction  
Patricia Allmer  
and John Sears

p. 78

Unfolding Burroughs  
Patricia Allmer

p. 16

The Photo Collage  
William S. Burroughs

Plates:

p. 18

Photographs as Weapons:  
William S. Burroughs  
and Photography  
Barry Miles

p. 90

Self/Portraits

p. 120

Assemblage

p. 144

Pattern Recognition

p. 32

Innerspace Documents  
David Brittain

p. 159

Biographies



*Photobooth Portraits*, Paris, silver gelatin print, 15.2 × 4 cm (6 × 1<sup>5</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.), c.1960

## Foreword

William S. Burroughs (1914–1997) was one of the most influential American writers of the 20th century. His best-known titles include *Junky* (1953), *The Soft Machine* (1961) and his ground-breaking *Naked Lunch* (1959), which was adapted into a feature film directed by David Cronenberg (1991). A cult icon, he was also a painter and a spoken-word performer. Despite these prolific achievements, Burroughs' work as a photographer is rarely acknowledged. This oversight may be due to his overwhelming prominence in other media as much as to the way in which his photographic material has been dispersed, often discarded, cut up and left behind as a result of Burroughs' peripatetic lifestyle.

While Burroughs was photographing along Duke Street, St James's, or making studies of Egyptian and Aztec artefacts in the British Museum during his time in London in the early 1970s, The Photographers' Gallery had just opened its doors in 1971 in the same area, on Great Newport Street. This was a creative time for photography in the capital, but it is hard to know if Burroughs would have engaged with it. More often his images are of empty streets, or dilapidated buildings in Soho, or hotel beds, made and unmade, or arrangements of photographs laid out in his St James's hotel room. Burroughs' photographs are striking for their self-containment and lack of reference to other practitioners or genres. While they can be gathered into categories of a kind – street scenes, still lifes, collage, radio towers, people – his works sit outside of any canonical structure.

Burroughs' images are both fleeting and utterly deliberate. Lacking any interest in the fetish of photography as rarefied object, his images were processed in high street chemists, cheaply and with little thought. While they appear to have the random quality of snapshots, they also contain a singular vision. Burroughs himself saw photographs as throw-away, destroyable, but also as possessing occult powers (Barry Miles, 'Photographs as Weapons'), as providing the ability to 'travel' in space and time (John Sears, 'Tickets to St Louis') and as having a hallucinatory function – as Susan Laxton puts it, 'If William Burroughs could have photographed his dreams, he would have'. The primacy of the visual image in Burroughs' creative process is scrutinised in Patricia Allmer's discussion of the 'un- and refolding of art historical allusions, evocations and reminiscences' in Burroughs' photographs, and his concern with the photographic image as precedent to the word is also explored in David Brittain's analysis of how he 'often conflated the visual image with the word'.

It is only when we are permitted this rare opportunity to consider his photographic output as a whole (or, what still exists of it) that we can appreciate its significance. We hope this book and exhibition, *Taking Shots: The Photography of William S. Burroughs*, will redress this balance and acknowledge the significant

role photography plays in Burroughs' oeuvre – and the contribution his work makes to photography as a whole. This project coincides with the centenary of Burroughs' birth, and includes over 150 images rarely or never published before, taken across several decades, in locations including Tangier, Paris, New York and London.

We extend our warmest thanks to many people for making this ambitious project possible, but specifically to the two curators of the project, Patricia Allmer and John Sears, to the lenders, to our supporters, to the authors of these essays, and to Ali Gitlow at Prestel, for their time, dedication and enthusiasm.

Clare Grafik  
Head of Exhibitions  
The Photographers' Gallery



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Patricia Allmer and John Sears

Unknown photographer, *Burroughs*  
*in the Hotel Villa Mouniria Garden,*  
Tangier, scan from negative, 1961



Patricia Allmer  
and John Sears

# Introduction

I drifted along taking shots when I could score.  
I ended up hooked. (William S. Burroughs, *Junky*)

William S. Burroughs was a major 20th century writer and artist. He was also a photographer. Some of his photographs have been reproduced in a variety of illustrative contexts: in biographies and critical texts and in literary histories of the Beats or of American writers in Tangier or Paris; as images accompanying exhibition catalogues of his shotgun paintings and other artworks; and as adjunct material to exhibitions and publications relating to the many writers and artists with whom Burroughs associated throughout his life.

*Taking Shots*, its title playing on the symbolic and overt connections between Burroughs the heroin user, Burroughs the firearms obsessive and Burroughs the photographer, is the first major exhibition and publication to explore his photography on its own terms and to examine the ways Burroughs used the camera as an aesthetic and recording device. Burroughs gives some clues to how he thought about photography in the 1963 essay 'The Photo Collage', which is, in facsimile, published here for the first time (see pp.16–17). The typescript of this essay is included in the exhibition. The essay contributions here offer a variety of approaches to understanding these photographs, from the perspectives of biographical narrative, photographic history and practice, the theorisation of photography, literary analysis and art historical interpretation. This range of approaches indicates some of the ways that Burroughs' photographs resonate in relation to the variety of his works.

The photograph occupies an important and complex place in Burroughs' works, particularly in the context of his extensive and sustained critique of the relationship between word and image in late capitalism. Photography is both the production of images and a technology facilitating that production. Burroughs seems to have had little overt interest in the mechanics of this productivity. Ian Sommerville, a key collaborator from 1959, co-resident of The Beat Hotel in Paris and one of Burroughs' lovers, seems to have undertaken much of this aspect of Burroughs' photography and to have contributed significantly to many of its experimental dimensions. For example, Sommerville described in *Gnaoua* in 1964 the technique of producing 'one great continuum' of photographs through a fold-in