



A.K. Burns, *What Is Perverse Is Liquid (NS 0000)*, 2023, three-channel video installation, HD video, color, sound, 35 minutes. Installation view. Photo: Stephen Takacs.

A.K. Burns

WEXNER CENTER FOR THE ARTS

In the art world, epics are necessarily parasitic. Like H. R. Giger's xenomorphs in the *Alien* franchise, they assume the attributes of their host. Since 2015, A.K. Burns has been producing a cycle of video installations on ecological fragility called *Negative Space*, each concerned with a distinct physical system and supported by different institutions. *A Smeary Spot (NS 0)*, 2015, which premiered at Participant Inc. in New York, evokes "the void" by juxtaposing scenes of genderqueer performers, identified in the credits as "Ob-surveyors" and "Free Radicals," exploring the Utah desert with saxophone solos and poetry recitations held in a shadowy black-box theater. *Living Room (NS 00)*, 2017, often represents the body by figuring sections of the partially-renovated building next door to New York's New Museum as organs, i.e., likening a restroom where a performer re-created the bathtub assassination in Jacques-Louis David's *The Death of Marat*, 1793, to the kidneys. For *Leave No Trace (NS 000)*, 2019, which focuses on land, the artist fashioned a Stonehenge-like sundial out of audio speakers from the Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center (EMPAC) in Troy, New York. In "Of space we are . . ." at the Wexner Center for the Arts, these three installations are presented together for the first time, alongside the newly commissioned *What Is Perverse Is Liquid (NS 0000)*, 2023. Its theme, water, became grimly Ohio-specific when, a week before the exhibition's opening, a freight train derailed in East Palestine, spilling hazardous chemicals into the state's rivers.

“Of space we are . . .” complements *Negative Space with a selection of Burns’s sculptures, including two pieces made from bent chain-link fences—named after Ursula K. Le Guin’s The Dispossessed*, a 1974 sci-fi novel about a society without prisons—that debuted at FRONT International: Cleveland Triennial for Contemporary Art in 2018. An adjacent gallery operates as an extended footnote to the videos, with copies of Burns’s eclectic reading material dispersed over a raised platform: Octavia Butler’s *Dawn* (1987), Donna Haraway’s *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (1991), Monique Wittig’s *The Lesbian Body* (1973), Kathryn Yusoff’s *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (2018). On the surrounding walls, a row of mirror-backed collages isolate the videos’ key motifs, and a hand-drawn “mind map” sketches out their interrelated themes with looping Mark Lombardi-esque lines. The room also displays a prop featured in multiple videos: a replica of the military jacket worn by Chelsea Manning, the transgender intelligence analyst convicted of espionage in 2013, i.e., a “leaky body” held in prison for leaking classified documents to WikiLeaks. Burns has described *Negative Space* as a sci-fi epic, but the metaphoric seepage of the Manning jacket suggests that the cycle might be better understood as a new kind of allegory.

By “allegory,” I refer principally to the concept as theorized by Craig Owens in a series of articles centered on Robert Smithson in 1979 and 1980. The tendencies that Owens attributed to the allegorical impulse—“appropriation, site specificity, impermanence, accumulation, discursivity, hybridization”—now read as the familiar stock-in-trade of so much contemporary art. In retrospect, however, the texts’ unreflective default to male pronouns calls attention to their more troubling dimensions. “Allegorical imagery is appropriated imagery; the allegorist does not invent images but confiscates them. He lays claim to the culturally significant, poses as its interpreter.” *Confiscates? Lays claim?* In two short sentences, the allegorist is aligned with patriarchy, the prison-industrial complex, and settler colonialism. Burns’s layering of references and casting of performers as Ob-surveyors or dancing skeletons certainly places *Negative Space* within a tradition that can be traced back to John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678), but rather than steering allegory’s lineage through Smithson, the artist reroutes it through Nancy Holt. In November 2018, Burns made a brilliant contribution to the Dia Art Foundation’s “Artists on Artists” lecture series that examined how Holt’s conception of the site-specific work *Sun Tunnels*, 1973–76, was informed by her background in science and her openness to the landscape’s destabilizing effects. “Here in the desert,” Burns noted, “the perimeter is the curvature of the earth—making specificity and location and self and other a hot-mess, a sweltering in the sun hot-mess.” Throughout the talk, projectors cast circles onto the walls that could be variously interpreted as spotlights, portholes, glory holes, or orifices—“negative spaces” that offer outlets for both pleasure and release.

Leaky allegory? Hole allegory? Holt allegory? Hot-mess allegory? I’m not sure what to call it, and maybe categorization would defeat the point, but it makes sense that so many of Burns’s stand-alone sculptures are failed fences. An ecologically minded allegorist allows meaning, like water, to flow freely.

— Colby Chamberlain