

A.K. BURNS: OF SPACE WE ARE...





OF SPACE WE ARE...: A PREFACE KELLY KIVLAND

Burns's largest solo exhibition to date, *Of space we are...* spans more than eleven years of the artist's practice engaged with the interrogation of value systems, including those related to the environment. The expansive exhibition also highlights the artist's interest in the relationship of bodies—in all their multiplicity—to technology, the economy, and the extraction of resources.

The centerpiece of the exhibition is the science-fiction epic *Negative Space*, which Burns has worked on since 2012. In art, the term "negative space" refers to the area that surrounds the subject(s) of an image—mere context or background for the true focus of our attention. Burns's work envisions negative space differently: as an active force that ebbs and flows in countless ways. "Negative space...is generally understood as the between, under, inside and around space, the atmosphere, the unseen matter," the artist states. "What's compelling to me about negative space is...that it has its own agency, that it is unfixed, dynamic, changeable and ultimately free: an open set of possibilities."¹

Encompassing allegory, art history, philosophy, and current events, *Negative Space* comprises a cycle of four interrelated multimedia installations. Presented together for the first time in *Of space we are...*, each installation examines an essential physical system: void, body, land, and water. *A Smear Spot (NS 0)* (2015), the opening cycle, counters the common misconception that the void is an empty space to be occupied and instead privileges the vital metaphor as undefinable and limitless. The second work, *Living Room (NS 00)* (2017), examines various conceptions of the body and humanity's challenge to maintain sanity and subsistence, while *Leave No Trace (NS 000)* (2019)—presented for the first time in the United States at the Wexner Center—studies land use and occupation with a series of vignettes in which performers resist containment and categorization. The fourth work, *What is Perverse is Liquid (NS 0000)* (2023), commissioned by the Wexner Center and making its premiere in this

exhibition, explores the subjects of water and death, highlighting themes of transmission and transition.

Poetic in nature and scored by Geo Wyex, *Negative Space* presents a layered, surreal narrative in which the environment is the protagonist and performers act as concepts. The videos take place in an alternative version of the present where hierarchies are thrown into question. The series moves through a range of sites, including the deserts of Utah and California, black box theaters, an aging New York City, a wetland marsh, and a vacant IBM building. Elements that represent “negative space”—marginalized bodies, the landscape, waste, water, and more—assume leading roles in this epic. Performers, whom Burns refers to as “acting agents,” navigate each environment and develop relationships with each other and what surrounds them.

These acting agents seek out situations in which they might shift energy and agitate change. For example, in *A Smearly Spot*, “Re/Productive Labor,” an acting agent in a dark theater, represents the weight of both domestic and industrial work while another agent, “The Ob-surveyor,” wanders the desert, fusing the acts of observing and land surveying. All of the performers are drawn from Burns’s community of artists, choreographers, and musicians and are credited within each installation. Also on view is a room dedicated to Burns’s research process that includes a “mind map” outlining themes in *Negative Space*; *Leave No Trace* (2016), an experimental sound work and poem; a series of collages that served as “visual research” for the *Negative Space* installations; and a replica of Chelsea Manning’s military jacket that is both a prop and persona appearing in all four video works.

Raised in Northern California during the drought of the late 1980s, Burns has long been preoccupied with environmental and social fragility. In addition to *Negative Space*, the exhibition also highlights bodies of work created by Burns over the past decade that address ecological crises and social relations. The series *Untitled (grain)* (2012) and *before the wake* (2014) were inspired by Lake Powell, a human-constructed reservoir on the Colorado River in Utah and Arizona. Glen Canyon was submerged by Lake Powell when a dam was built there to generate hydroelectric power. Taken on Burns’s first trip through Utah and initiating the development of the *Negative Space* tetralogy, *Untitled (grain)* captures a series of crevices on expired 35mm film. The medium gives the photographs, which depict rock formations and fissures, a particular look—featuring a heavy grain and a dark, purplish hue. Exposing the entanglement of environment and technology, the heavy film grain merges with the natural textures of the rocky soil.

The collages of *before the wake* were conceived following a visit to Lake Powell while shooting *A Smearly Spot (NS O)*. These works incorporate images sourced from a book of photographs by the American photographer Tad Nichols, who documented Glen Canyon in the 1950s and early 1960s before it was transformed into Lake Powell. The blue-green liquid that Burns spilled onto Nichols’s photographs obscures his documentation of the canyon much as the dam effaced the geological formation. Today, the reservoir is suffering from extreme drought, exemplifying the water crisis facing the western United States.

The exhibition also presents the artist’s sculptures. In them, fabricated materials intersect with found objects to create symbolic forms while figures and metaphors intertwine. For instance, some sculptures suggest bodies that have been depleted from excessive labor, while glass works are embedded with materials and burns that disturb their ability to reflect and instead read as faces and punctuation marks. Punctured screens hung on the wall represent a false barrier between interior and exterior worlds. Shown indoors for the first time is *The Dispossessed* (2018), two large, bent chain-link fences that indicate a border within an open gallery while referring to forms of control of bodies outside. The work is named after Ursula K. Le Guin’s 1974 novel of the same name that depicts a society with no prisons, an experiment in “nonviolent anarchism.” In the spirit of that book, the crumpled sculptures defy the original function of fencing to suggest figures freely traversing the landscape.

Burns’s work presents a gesture of world-building that aims to resist fixity and to advocate for a continuous state of becoming. In a political moment where the expression of boundaries and the fate of bodies are in question, the artist offers a contrasting vision of affinity and coexistence.

1 A.K. Burns, “If the Future Were Now: A.K. Burns,” interview by Lauren Cornell, *Mousse* 50 (October–November 2015), <https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/ak-burns-lauren-cornell-2015/>.









GATHERING BREAKS COLE J. GRAHAM

A nonnarrative science-fiction epic told across four videos and their corresponding installations, A.K. Burns's *Negative Space* is oriented by an ethic of play: a subterranean game played through the artist's relation to fantasy. The fantastical is, for the artist, just to the left of center: outside what we know and recognize and pressing against what we accept as a given. In the void—that is, space in the negative, the space existing outside of and around claimed space—*anything could become*. Yet it would be too easy to assert that the fantastical is inherently queer; Burns's works are, rather, entangled with real and current events.

The void's potential lies in the metaphors that fill it—and so, as we build our worlds, we are asked to interrogate fantasy itself. Whose fantasies are these? Whom do they serve? Fantastical world-building, as Burns understands it, cannot remain fantastical. We might, therefore, approach Burns's work with the mindset of a cartographer-splunker, faulty flashlight in hand. The dark is bursting at its ontological seams; what you don't see matters as much as what you do. In the flickering light, the gray mush of our brains fills in the gaps; it is up to us to look beyond normalizing and beyond hierarchies of value. In the best-case scenario, *we will (re)make what we perceive and perceive what we (re)make*.

In navigating Burns's *Negative Space*, we must therefore learn to welcome the tetralogy's radical efforts at (re)orientation and to accept its simultaneous operation as organizing device and uncontained sprawl. Emptiness is not empty; pure potential holds volume. This is, however, not archaeology: digging, cutting, cauterizing, and categorizing. Land and space are imbued with humanlike agency such that we might recognize the protagonist-as-site rather than protagonist-as-person. Space, for Burns, is not simply taking up space; it *resists* occupation. But this is not an unfriendly resistance: in *Negative Space*'s episodic wanderings, space opens up to greet us—it offers a place of contemplation and repose.

Burns often speaks of the “seduction of cinema.” One aspect of that seduction must be the invitation to stay. And what is at stake in that invitation if not intimacy—however restful and restless, active and actualizing? Our time with Burns’s work is not the rest of the dead or inert. Rather, in sitting with the work, we *continue*, we breathe, our chests still expand. This mode of being—observing and questioning potential futures—makes us *all* complicit, makes us *all* the artist’s coconspirators in an act of resistance that accumulates and is ongoing. Here gather the breaks that let us hang in the in-between. Where (or when) we enter (or leave) is less important than the fact that we were there. And when we return, though nothing will have waited for us, it will be like we never left.





ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Of space we are... includes the complete set of four major video installations that comprise *Negative Space*. Because these works cannot exist without the effort of many, the expansive lists of contributors are centered within each video installation. All four works are scored by the brilliant Geo Wyex, and sound engineer Quentin Chiappetta skillfully mastered the scores. To bring *Negative Space* to completion has required the generous support of many institutions and granting organizations. The work would not be possible without the fiscal support of a Creative Capital Award in Visual Arts, the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, the NYSCA/NYFA Artist Fellowship, the Research Foundation of CUNY, and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. Additional resources were provided by The Kitchen, Participant Inc., and the New Museum, all in New York City. Further support was provided by the Julia Stoschek Collection, Dusseldorf, Germany; the Curtis R. Priem Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, NY; and central to this exhibition, the Wexner Center for the Arts.

The exhibition, and specifically the *Negative Space* video installations, requires a highly skilled team of technicians to bring the work to fruition, and we want to thank Senior Installation Manager/Head Preparator David Dickas, former Design Engineer Stephen Jones, and their teams at the Wexner Center, who exceeded all expectations for this presentation. We also share our deepest gratitude to Senior Registrar/Exhibition Manager Kim Kollman, Associate Registrar Nicole Miller, Curatorial Assistant Jon Gonzalez, and Exhibitions Department Coordinator Lynne Pearson, who kept the many moving parts that comprise the exhibition on schedule and wonderfully coordinated. For every person named there are many who work in the background to make an exhibition of this scale occur—so we want to send our thanks to the entire staff at the Wex and especially to Executive Director Gaëtane Verna, who saw fit to extend this presentation.



Thank you to all the studio managers who Burns has had the pleasure of working with, in particular Emir West, Celia Nicolson, and Immanuel Williams, who have had a direct hand in helping this exhibition come to fruition, and studio assistant Shauna Steinbach, who pulled long hours to complete new sculptural works for this exhibition.

We extend our heartfelt thanks to Fred and Laura Ruth Bidwell, Gregory R. Miller and Michael Wiener, Sophie Mörner, Shelley Fox Aarons and Philip Aarons, and private lenders who graciously loaned works to this exhibition. Over the past several years, Michel Rein, Alice Joubert-Nikolaev, Florent Houel, and the rest of the staff at Michel Rein Gallery have provided indispensable support to Burns—to whom we say, merci.

A special thank you goes to the observant editorial work of Julian Myers-Szupinska and thoughtful design of Ryland Wharton/The Work We Do on the exceptional gallery guide, as well as curatorial intern Cole J. Graham, who wrote brilliant reflections on Burns’s work. Our thanks as well to Wexner Center’s Dionne Custer Edwards, Julia Harth, Amanda Tobin Ripley, Sarah Robison, and Jo Snyder for the inspired learning guide.

The Wexner Center is sincerely grateful to the National Endowment for the Arts and Shelley Fox Aarons and Philip Aarons for their support for the exhibition and this gallery guide. Finally, Burns would like to thank their “given and chosen family, without whom I would not be as I am.”

— A.K. Burns and Kelly Kivland

A.K. Burns: Negative Space (2023)

Copublished by Dancing Foxes Press and Wexner Center for the Arts and edited by Karen Kelly and Barbara Schroeder, A.K. Burns’s first monograph grapples with climate change, community, and sociopolitical agency. Available summer 2023, *A.K. Burns: Negative Space* features a four-part interview between Burns and curator Karen Archey and includes contributions by scholar Mel Y. Chen, poet CAConrad, scholar Megan Hicks, critic Aruna D’Souza, and poet Simone White.

CREDITS

A.K. Burns: Of space we are...

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COVER, pp. 4–5: *What is Perverse is Liquid (NS 0000)*, 2023. Three-channel video installation; HD video with color and 5.1 sound; 35 mins. Commissioned by the Wexner Center for the Arts. Installation view at the Wexner Center, photo: Steven Takacs.

INSIDE COVER, pp. 6–7: *Leave No Trace (NS 000)*, 2019. Projection cube, faux skull, used tires, and ratchet straps. Five-channel HD video with color and sound; 28 mins. Installation view at the Wexner Center, photo: Steven Takacs.

p. 8: TOP: *A Smearly Spot (NS 0)*, 2015 (still). Four-channel video installation; videos 1–3: HD with color and six-channel sound, 53 mins.; video 4: black and white, silent, 4 mins. BOTTOM: *Living Room (NS 00)*, 2017 (still). Two-channel HD video with color and sound, 36 mins.

p. 9: TOP: *Leave No Trace (NS 000)*, 2019 (still). BOTTOM: *What is Perverse is Liquid (NS 0000)*, 2023 (still).

p. 10: *Split Mother*, 2023. Construction tarp, zipper, steel remesh, steel rods, dead insects, acrylic paint, caulk, urethane resin, Ethernet cables, Plasti Dip, and grommets, 96 x 84 x 299 in. Installation view at the Wexner Center.

pp. 13–15: Installation views of *A.K. Burns: Of space we are...* at the Wexner Center for the Arts, 2023. Photo: Steven Takacs.

p. 16: *The Leak*, 2022. Replica of Chelsea Manning's military jacket, concrete, garment bag, and metal hanger, 62 x 24 x 18 in.

All works courtesy of the artist.

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5:30 pm

A.K. Burns in Conversation
with Geo Wyex and Kelly Kivland
Featuring a performance by Geo Wyex

Q&A follows the talk
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