Splitting the Choir

The Moving Images of Donigan Cumming

Edited by Scott Birdwise

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After Beauty

BY MIKE HOOLBOOM

Steve Reinke had tipped me to Donigan's existence, like a detective in a foreign country pointing out one of the locals with a nod of his fedora. That one, he might not look like much, but he's one of us. Not that Steve would ever be so crass as to speak in the third person. But I was already primed when they rolled out the easy chairs. Where was my Donigan virginity lost? I had dutifully ignored his decades of outsider photography and stepped up only for his opening video memorial work *A Prayer For Nettie* (1995). As soon as it started, with its harsh lighting and sub-optimal camera microphone sound, and most of all the infuriating tendency of the director to hand hold everything in a wobbly, amateurish paroxysm of anti-spectacle, I closed my heart. No please, not in my avant living room. His subjects — uniformly poor and disheveled and alcoholic — seemed like furniture props for the director's slumming projects. Oh yes, I used to raise a glass of cheer with you, but now I'm on the way up, and you are the necessary ladder rungs to take me there. Don't mind my camera boot heel in your face. And don't think you're going to be memorialized or anything. What do I look like — Walker Evans? Dorothea Lange? Everything they touched was silver happiness, they could stand their subjects up in front of the worst day of their lives and make it glitter with the kind of truth that makes collectors reach for the deep folded green. But Donigan? It's as if he'd never heard of silver, and so his subjects — already worn by years of living on the Titanic, still running the self immolation derby that began before the beginnings of memory — looked like they were trying on a last testament, one final pit stop before saying yes to the death drive. Their surgical scars appeared unadorned in the harsh, digital video contrast, their wattled skin like the camouflage of jungle fowl trying to escape notice, their sinking flesh long ago surrendered in a losing fight with gravity.

I was waiting for beauty — even of the abject sort dished up by edge dwellers like Witkin or social justice photographers — who illuminated the overlooked and unwanted in a silvery skin. In other words, I was looking for a shield, for something I could put between myself and the subjects of this work. Surely there must be some kind of consolation (the mastery of tones, the perfect composition, the uncanny intersection of emotive gestures frozen in an instant of narrative collision). Donigan refuses all this. Instead, he pushes his low-fidelity camera into the vanishing faces of his company, mercilessly and without adornment, or even the traditional cinematic easements of triple take grammars and reac-

tion shots. If he was a boxer he would be a slugger, loading up the same punch round after round. Take this, and this and this. When Cocteau quipped that in the cinema we are watching death at work, he might have been describing these encounters.

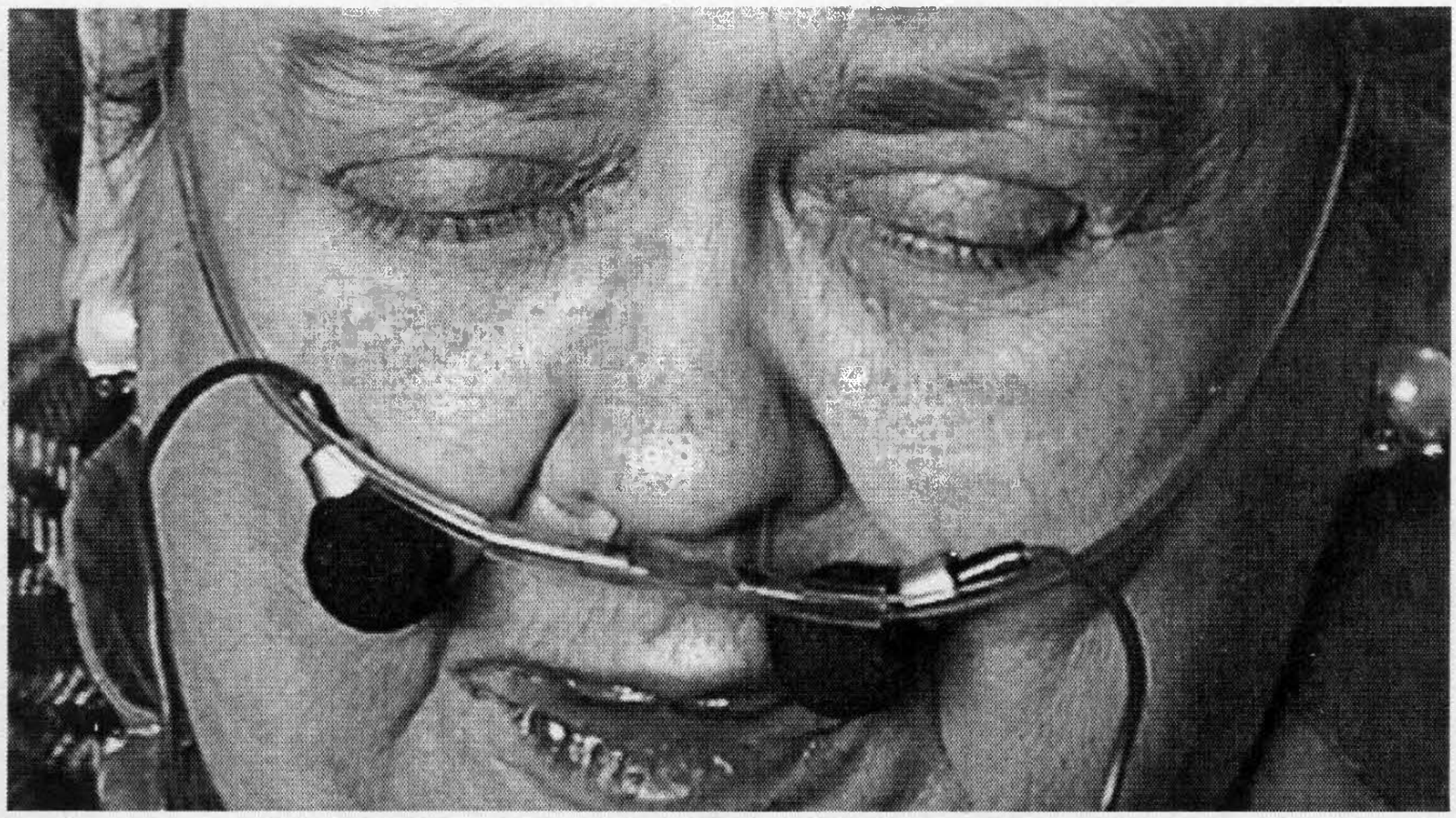
How helpful for the artist to present to me with the unwanted gift of my own looking, my own point of view. Without the balm of traditional virtues, and all that virtue manages to keep secret, I am confronted by my own wishes and need to look away. My taste. Judgment means what am I willing to swallow, and Donigan serves up dish after dish, until I need to reconsider again the words Freud laid down in an essay he named Negation.

"The judgment is, 'I should like to eat this,' or 'I should like to spit it out'; and, put more generally: 'I should like to take this into myself and to keep that out.' That is to say, 'It shall be inside me' or 'it shall be outside me'... the original pleasure-ego wants to introject into itself everything that is good and to eject from itself everything that is bad. What is bad, what is alien to the ego and what is external are, to begin with, identical."

How can I know who I am unless I can start spitting things out of my mouth, and deciding every time I do: not me, not me, not me, until at last a vague outline takes shape. I would be nothing without my dislikes, my familiar prejudices, my reliable oppositions. National identities, of course, are founded and founder on exactly the same lines. What is a newspaper but the sound of nations spitting each other out?

The Donigan movie that turned the corner for me was *Karaoke* (1998). The camera draws a bead on its subject, bedridden Nelson Coombs, who appears to have mastered the final posture in every yoga setting, savasana or corpse pose. There's a folk song playing, a home brewed cover version sung out by Nelson's girlfriend's friend, and then accompanied by unseen singers in the room. A wobbly pan runs down the remains of his body, and then the whole thing plays backwards, as if Nelson were a living palindrome. I have a weakness for palindromes, ever since Owen Land worried them in movies like *No Sir, Orison* (1975) or *Wide Angle Saxon* (1975), figuring them as necessary preconditions for the conversion experience he held out as the hope of every avant seeing. While I shuddered at Donigan's make shift pan, longing instead for some dolly tracked, steady as she goes framing, there is an undeniable power in this seeing, and just as Mr. Land might have hoped, my conversion into a Donigan acolyte had begun. The punchline in *Karaoke*'s single shot encounter arrives in the middle of the tape — exactly where one might expect to see it, given its symmetrical construction. The crux is in the fold, the crease, after which the tape backs right up and does it all again. What is revealed in this moment? Nelson's toes! Nelson's toes are moving! Until then the body appears dead, and the insistent closeness of the camera implies some terrible intimacy between viewer and viewed, some prior relation which has brought this anguished proximity to bear. It's as if the camera wanted to plunge into this body and see every organ and protein redistribution centre and bone marrow replenishment. It just can't get close enough to register the fact of the death of this strange familiar. But then I see those toes moving, signaling not only life, but some form of pleasure, a pleasure so large and strange and unworldly that even the dead are compelled to tap their toes to this Inuktitut cover song.

My taste and the experiences that I spit out of my mouth (that's not me!) had been reborn along with Mr. Coombs. Somehow the artist had managed to broaden my acceptable expe-



rience, what I could imagine as myself, or for myself (as if I was always up for election, and every object in the world was voting: this is for me, this is not for me). It is the toes of Nelson Coombs that provide the turn. The mirror fold of the movie occurs at the end of his body, at the bottom of it all, the base in every sense of the word, that is mostly kept under wraps. Locked up in a clinch with this nearly dead and supine body, starved and scarred and hardly there, I learn something new about the pleasures of the flesh. Even until the last breath there is the possibility of celebration, of dancing, even carrying the tune. There's no future and it doesn't matter.

I met Donigan at last at the closing dinner of the Nyon Festival in Switzerland, a staff-only love-in for its charismatic director Jean Perret. Each of the special guests — as we were described — was asked to do something for the occasion, and while my own contribution is lost even to memory, Donigan engaged Jean in a short skit that involved the A fest director sitting up on his chair and barking like a dog. It was charming and cruel and hilarious at the same time, the loving trust between the two of them palpable. I resolved to look deeper into Donigan's work.

The next year in Nyon he presented *Fountain* (2005), a movie premised on his book *Lying Quiet* (2004) which presents a sequence of video stills. His strategy in producing the book was to take his 143 hours of raw footage and divide it by the number of stills required for the book, approximately 500, which gave him a figure of 17 minutes and 7 seconds. At this point in every tape he would stop and create a frame grab, allowing a second on either side for closed eyelids or pan blurs. These were then intuitively arranged into a final selection of 119 pictures. Using the book as a kind of script, Fountain revisits his work, producing a kind of greatest hits, a quickly paced theme song of despair and decay, not 'over the top,' but under the bottom. The faces of the underclass loom into the lens in these up close and personal encounters, whether it is the man who wants to put bars near the toilet to help his father (though it is Donigan who knows that the problem is a broken shoulder, not a broken arm), or the salivating ungrand dame on the oxygen tank, the Elvis send up,

the stuttering actor, the toothless display, the home sewn pants, the corner of an uneaten sandwich. *Fountain* is an accumulation of details that graze across its rooming house interiors, each one a punctum, a piercing point that plunges into the thick and gristle of these usually forgotten and unpictured lives. Like the paper airplane that reads Jesus is my Pilot. Interspersed between the extracts is Donigan's voice directing his charge, urging them on, reading them letters, asking about their legal status, their health, their parents. He is with them and not with them, holding the camera but refusing to vanish behind it. Instead, he stays in the room with them because the only way to bear witness is as an active participant. Death is never far from his lens. There are hospital visits and memorial photos and sleepers who look like they may never see another morning. Donigan's engagements throw him into the damage of these difficult lives, and refuses to put 'them' over there, on the other side. He doesn't spit them out. His subjects are a part of him and apart from him, in frame after frame he negotiates this distance, which is the magic of his work as an artist, to find the necessary distance between his life and the lives of those around him.

At last we sat to talk in the shadow of foreign mountains, and he was blunt and smart and didn't come with an off switch. There was something soft in his face that the rest of him nearly regretted. It was clear he'd been hurt, cut hard and deep and often, and instead of bearing off his wounds in silence and re-encoding them in the catastrophe of family genetics or substance sprees he'd decided to wear them up on his face where everyone could see it. Donigan has a face that hasn't learned the knack of looking away, in fact, when the usual electric pulse signals flight he seems to draw closer. His world, his ethics and art, all happen in close-up, as he casts his wound of attention into mine, trolling for secrets, and then abruptly pulling away, retiring back into his emotional force field of WASP reserve, near and far, fort und da, back and forth, until it's time to say good-bye.

"*Fountain* squeezes the storytelling out of my work. Storytelling has run its course. We are overwhelmed with stories whose seductive plots and strong emotions camouflage the dangerous state of human relations. In *Fountain*, short fragments of image and sound are intended to subvert the cinematic effect of reality which makes fools of us all."

funeral song

BY MIREILLE BOURGEOIS

"Everyday is blue Monday, everyday you're away."

Who was Nettie Harris? Harris was a former journalist and model as well as part of a group of individuals, often elderly, featured in Donigan Cumming's photographs between 1982 and 1993. She is recognizable from the photographic series *Pretty Ribbons* (1992), as one who mused the lens with her body, at times naked, in intimate embraces with various maturing men, her facial expressions rapt with emotions.

Cumming, a friend to Harris spent countless hours with the subject, adding to his wide-spanning collection of quirky personae captured on film. Most specifically, Nettie is introduced as a treasured icon. The fact that she is a woman enters the frame a little more objectively, through scientific portrayals of the body. The female body is rarely portrayed in such a sequence in visual media. Nettie isn't imbued by the trope of the mother, the caretaker, or the sexual bombshell. She carves out an identity that stands alone despite the context of the aging female icon. She can appear almost genderless, since aging tends to strip the individual of important traits like sexuality and gender. However, in the artist's video *A Prayer for Nettie* (1995) we become very aware that the filmmaker exhibits her via predominantly male voices, as a representation of the moral fiber she is believed to uphold in his eyes. Though the collection of the female body is a tired assemblage, Cumming's collection is not about the glamorous female body, but about the cumulative behaviour of a group of individuals who wish to be part of something. As a kind of leveling of the playing field of visual association, the viewer can interpret Nettie as an equal to her male counterpart.

In both photography and video the artist confronts the viewer with close ups and invasive angles, breaking down the barriers of the gaze. We are encouraged—if not forced—to look closely and empathize. Cumming's photographs are much less exhibitionist than they are revealing, which is the genius of working with a close collection of actors spanning multiple years. Art Critic Henry McBride is said to have stated that writer and art collector Gertrude Stein "collected geniuses rather than masterpieces." Every collection is a marriage of want and need that idolizes what is collected. Perhaps Cumming is experiencing aging through symbiosis, or maybe he is attempting to defy the loss of life by casting these people in stone for his collection.

A Prayer for Nettie marked the first video for the artist after a twenty-seven year distance from his first film, *Tennessee Street* (1968).[1] Cumming and his then collaborator, filmmaker Robert Forsyth, interviewed individuals on the street of a commercial strip. The film was an eight-minute short, and was looped over a 2.5 hour-long soundtrack. Despite this film work, Cumming's *A Prayer for Nettie* is considered his first video, which won him the Telefilm Canada Video Prize for Canadian Discoveries and now lives in the Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection in New York City along with five other films.[2] *Nettie* is a thirty-three minute video, handheld in style, where the artist interacts with seven elderly individuals, which the artist calls *migratory figures*.[3] He alternates between questioning them about their relationship to the protagonist who is said to have died in her nursing home at the age of eighty-one or eighty-two, and prompting the characters to read scripts emulating eulogies of the Christian funeral service type, and others based on theatrical scripts from classical plays. The artist also plays with familiar country songs, as a nostalgic meditation on Nettie's life. That Nettie was still living at the beginning of this production (Harris passed away in 1993) is the basis for this offbeat documentary that is more *realistic* than *real*.

Regardless of the falsities foregrounded in his documentary work, the artist's transition to video feels far more revealing than in photography. The viewer is placed not only in relation to the visuals, but also to the breath, body-twitches, pauses, and laughter of these characters. Cumming sets his film scenes like a photographer would: nurturing an obsession through placing, staging, collecting and creating the atmosphere in which the image should be read. Regardless of the skepticism that has developed surrounding the age-old debate of photographic truth and the death of photography as addressed by Roland Barthes, photographs are deemed artifacts. Their authoritative precedence in society as conductors of fact and event—even through the lens of simulacra—functions to prove or disprove the subject matter. In the case of photographers such as Donigan Cumming, the photograph can lead the viewer to achieve empathic moments of true pain, pressing the grit of life to the lens. If anything, one would assume the translation of these moments from photography to video would only enhance the portrayal of reality; Cumming's videos serve instead to destabilize it.

Everyday fictions and frictions

"Oh shoot I forgot her name... anyways... You'll always be remembered."

Some of Cumming's actors are prominently featured in his other videos, namely Albert Smith who is also filmed as being one of Nettie's close friends in *A Prayer for Nettie*. The praise and proclamations of love bestowed by a mourning Albert suggests an intimate relationship between the two. In an earlier scene, Cumming feeds lines to Albert as he recites "We miss you and wish you hadn't gone away, we want you back, please come back, oh dear Nettie, goodbye... and goodbye... forever." The film is divided into multiple scenes that seem inconsequentially linked from one to the next. The self-contained cast is composed of recognizable personalities, if only due to how easily we can typecast the elderly and the circumstances of life that has brought them to their state of existence. Cumming describes them in his cast list as "a man in his fifties, a forty-eight-year-old man with a camcorder, a woman in her seventies" and so on and so forth. There is no clear indicaton of their names

and their relation to Nettie. To the viewer there is: the heavy smoking man, the man in his underwear, the man walking with a cane, a woman on ventilator, etc. All the characters seem to live in a state of suffering, except for Albert who recites the script giddily for Cumming, almost over-joyed with the experience of an odd interaction. Albert sings songs, sometimes simulating the western hero wearing a miniature cowboy hat, as Cumming films his and the others' living spaces. Cumming takes us from the dingy carpet to the decorative brass plates on the wall, the various carpet and chair patterns, from floral to plaid, to country style and blurs them together using the fast pans of his 90s-quality camcorder.

Home, home on the range
Where the deer and the antelope play
Where seldom is heard a discouraging word
And the skies are not cloudy all day

A scene that stands apart from the others is when Nettie and Albert are filmed in an embrace. The slow-motioned scene records them arms around each other's neck, then Albert kissing Nettie on the cheek. "My my...," says Albert. Then Nettie: "I never grew up you know, that's my problem." The schoolyard kiss is the only scene where Nettie speaks and shows some semblance to the ray of light portrayed by Cumming. It also marks the only nostalgic visual reference to when she was alive, laughing and well.

The kiss between the two, though shared, seems staged. Past analyses of Cumming's work have made reference to his controversial documentary practices. The filmmaker can be criticized for exploiting his subjects. Whether his cast is willing or not doesn't imply they fully grasp how they will be portrayed. But they generally look like they are having a great time and the filmmaker doesn't mask his relationship to his subjects. As such, we get to see the snarky comments, the giggles at ridiculous acting requests, and we also see Cumming's own vulnerability emerging occasionally as he releases his subjects in moments when they seem to have had enough. Much like Polish filmmaker Artur Zmijewski, who has been highly criticized for his documentaries in which he situates the elderly, the disabled and the political victim in contentious scenarios, Cumming heavily leads the viewer in one particular direction. *The Art of Love* (2000) by Zmijewski is a film that portrays individuals living with Parkinson's disease.[4] The filmmaker shows close ups of ticks and spasms experienced by coupled individuals that trigger an inadvertent sexuality when strategically positioned near each other. Awkward because of their glaring giddiness towards the camera, a shy elderly couple is filmed, open mouthed and twitching into a kiss for a long period of time. Then they are filmed once more for emphasis.

Nettie and Albert's kiss isn't unlike the kiss in Zmijewski's video. We could assume a consensual kiss belongs in the *Nettie* documentary, but then again, if everything else is faked, perhaps the kiss is also false? The field of documentary in Zmijewski and Cumming's work is more so a matter of style than of genre. Where the two differ greatly is in how Cumming intends to deliberately present an important *rupture* in the very fiber of his characters.

> The continuity in my work is to raise questions about documentary practice—to challenge assumptions—even as I present the realities of social conditions. In short, the work comments, often very critically, on the documentary tradition that feeds

> and houses it. Its overt artificiality and lack of orthodoxy are the first signs of rupture—fiction infiltrating the house of truth, and vice versa.[5]

The politics of the documentary enters the discourse of film in the same manner as his photography, which is why we are a most stern audience, able to read between the lines, sent into a position of criticality. Though a living elegy isn't more palpable because of our criticality, it may at least be distinguishable from a true one, as Cumming allows us to grasp a much deeper concept of life through his depiction of death.

Gestation and the portrait

"You don't want to die do you?"

"I have to."

Contemporary artist Martha Rosler used the tactic of distance in her video art, where she felt the viewer needed visual detachment in order to grasp the underlining politics of her work. In a 1977 essay, she wrote:

> Tactically I tend to use a wretched pacing and a bent space, the immovable shot or, conversely, the unexpected edit, pointing to the mediating agencies of photography and speech; long shots rather than close ups, to deny psychological intent; contradictory utterances; and, in acting, flattened affect, histrionics or staginess.[6]

Cumming denies us the comfortable visual distance of the apparatuses of aging; the oxygen tanks, the wires and deathbeds that may delay death if only to give a false sense of security to loved ones. Sometimes the characters appear as if in a state of benevolence, offering themselves to death before their body is ready. Flowers at a funeral, food on a grave or like the mourning portrait, *A Prayer for Nettie* is in constant friction between life and death. Nettie has died in the film, but she is being born in our eyes/mind. It isn't unimaginable to wonder if Cumming has filmed her dead body in one scene where she lays still and naked. He closes in on her groin, moves up her body and moves clinically close to her lips, wrinkled and still. It is her stare, her opened eyes that blink occasionally, that reminds us of her subtle living state. She is laying on an oversized calendar; the camera closes in on October as if approaching her deathday. She is still breathing but she has accepted to be portrayed in her own death portrait. The death portrait, a popular subject in Daguerreotypes, was a form of portrait taken of deceased family members and friends, infants dead at birth or from disease, or politicians and leaders who died, as a commemorative object. It was also a way to preserve the last breath. As in the death portrait, the images in *A Prayer for Nettie* depict the mourning process itself, not death as such.[7] One can't help but link Cumming's own fear and suffering to this elegy. The prayer grasps in hope to false relationships and a peaceful afterlife. The elegy can be a transferable speech, one that could be bequeathed upon anyone and is perhaps also meant to be Cumming's elegy. Aside from the state of aging, the filmmaker also explores the depleted state. Eliciting the outcome of lives lived in poverty, affected by disease, or trapped in mental illness, Cumming's videos investigate the emotional renderings of individuals that disappear like fleeting memories from society's psyche.

If we viewers arrived at the video knowing nothing of Nettie, we leave knowing our minds

have been impregnated with her. Whether they are staged or true reactions to facts, we are nevertheless taken by the reverie brought forth by Cumming. *A Prayer for Nettie* is a self declared elegy, and yet at the same time the video progresses with a smirk, playing with many characters as we become more fascinated by the human condition. If we didn't hear the artist directing his subjects, we wouldn't question their existence. Nettie becomes a conduit for a discussion on community, not only on the single person. The prayer in *Nettie* acts like an embryonic sac; it is imperative to keep it protected throughout the video: once it bursts, Nettie will be freed. However, like birth, emerging from the womb is as cruel as it is miraculous. In one of the scenes featuring Nettie, Cumming films her sleeping while audio of another character incessantly repeats her name as if trying to wake her out of a restful sleep. By this time we know that she is gone. Simulating illness and death through scenes of fragile elderly bodies makes Nettie's death so believable. Cumming presents Nettie not necessarily in death but in a state of gestation. Through the video she is not quite reborn; she is fetal. Embodied and articulated. The disturbing fate of gestation is that, like death, it has not been attributed a determinate fate. We await Nettie, having met some version of her, yet we have nothing with which to cross-reference the validity of Cumming's account of her.

"I didn't know her very well though..."

"Yeah, I guess you didn't."

NOTES

1 Text of the lecture given by Donigan Cumming as part of the French tour *Donigan Cumming: Continuity and Rupture*, a series of video screenings organized by le Centre culturel canadien and Transat Vidéo, shown in Paris, Hérouville Saint-Clair, Strasbourg and Marseille, from October 25th to November 2nd 1999. http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/new_offscreen/cumming.html

2 *Cut the Parrot* (1995), *After Brenda* (1997), *Karaoke* (1998), *Erratic Angel* (1998), and *If Only I* (2000).

3 Cumming, *Continuity and Rupture.*

4 *Szutka kochania* (*The Art of Love*, 2000) was a film made for the exhibition *Sexxx* (2000). It deals with the phenomenon of elderly patients—suffering from Parkinson and other diseases—attempting transference.

5 Cumming, *Continuity and Rupture.*

6 Martha Rosler, "to argue for a video of representation. to argue for a video against the mythology of everyday life" (1977) in Stephen Johnstone, ed., *The Everyday, Documents of Contemporary Art* (MIT Press and Whitechapel Gallery, 2008), p.52

7 Ben Mattison, *The Social Construction of the American Daguerreotype Portrait*, award winning senior thesis, Vassar College, 1995, Chapter 3, http://www.americandaguerreotypes.com/ch3.html

Following *After Brenda*

BY TOM MCSORLEY

In some hallway where love's never been, Leonard of Montreal sings. This is where the Brendas, Pierres, Nelsons, Colins, and Donigans traffic and conspire. Play. Record. Pause. Rewind. Forward. Backward. Again and again.

All that beer. All that inescapable before-ness. The detritrus of then and now. Garbage bags and panties; butts and ashes. The sour hereafter. Pick yourself up and perform what you were and what you are, they all say. Endlessly down the hall. The snot of self-pity, clear and trapezing from nose to chin to jolly sad sweater.

Solace. Pierre, you have no idea. Nelson is right. Go live someplace else, in some other time. When and where the walls don't whisper of Brenda sex and Brenda betrayal. You say she's a whore now. Tell the others, tell that damned camera. The camera will listen and it will witness; it will egg you on. Go on and on, then, show us your jagged edges of thought, before and after Brenda. The pain, he said, I want the pain.

A dim residue of love stains the air, like dirt on the lens, something caught in the eye. An alphabet of emotion in reverse gear. All that bullshit. Forget the real. Corrode memory. The narcissism and tedium of the rambling and delusional. Can numbskull philosophizing arrive at truth? Maybe. Really, though, just shut up and suffer like the rest of us. Disappear into the city. Get out of the frame.

Look. Out the window. Children in the playground. Donigan says they're cute. Someday they might come into these rooms, these very hallways. Then you'll see.

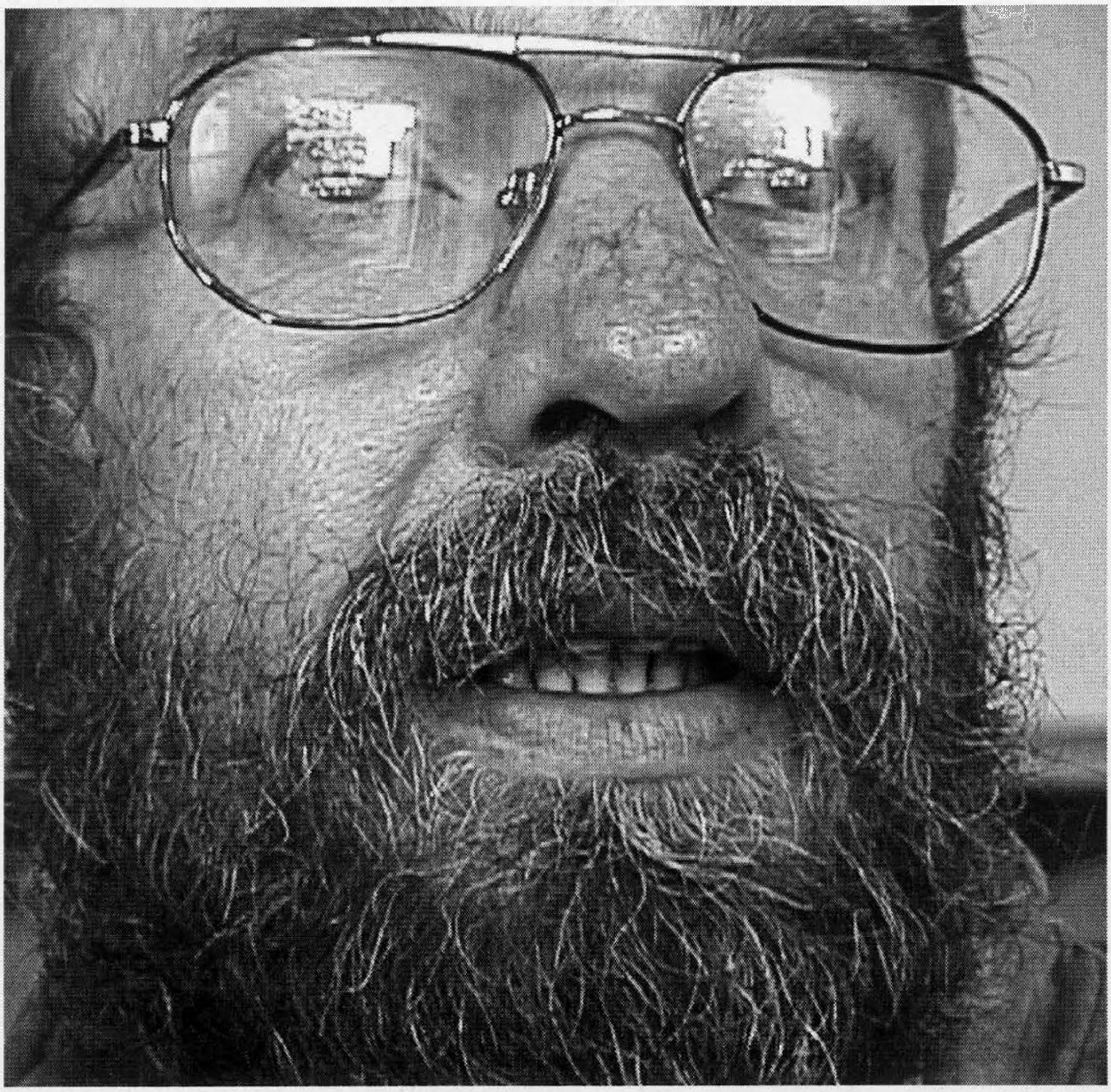
Then you'll see.

Colin's Beard

BY CHRISTOPHER ROHDE

Erratic Angel (1998) is a documentary by Donigan Cumming about Colin Kane, a middle-aged man with a long history of drug and alcohol addiction who lives in a run-down rooming house in Montréal. Although Colin has been clean and sober for four years (save for the occasional harmless joint), his many years of self-abuse have left him suffering from memory loss, brain damage, asthma and other health issues. Despite these setbacks, Colin is still one of the most eloquent, lucid and well-spoken people Cumming has interviewed on video. He is also friendly (although not outgoing), witty (although cynical) and stoic, for the most part placidly accepting his undesirable circumstances. Unlike the linguistically challenged subjects of videos such as *A Prayer for Nettie* (1995), *Cut the Parrot* (1996), and *My Dinner with Weegee* (2001), Colin is able to articulate himself to a degree that makes *Erratic Angel* stand out from Cumming's other videos about people living in the margins of society. However, Cumming's encounter with Colin goes beyond "interview," as the exchange that develops between the two men incorporates aspects of therapy and performance. The culmination of these forces and the centerpiece of the video is a shave and haircut that Cummings convinces Colin to accept. For many years, Colin had a long, thick beard, and initially he is reluctant to part with it. Shaving it off represents a major, if only temporary change in Colin, not only in his superficial appearance but also in his personality and powers of speech, revealing a repressed rage and deep-rooted anger felt towards the upper-middle classes.

Although Colin and Cumming have a good rapport, and the process of creating the video involves some degree of sharing and collaboration, Colin hints that he still identifies Cumming as belonging to a higher social stratum than himself. Colin is aware that Cumming's status as an artist and video-maker gives him access to opportunities and accommodations that Colin will likely never experience. At one point, Colin accuses Cumming of using his documentary to become a voyeur of the lower classes, comparing him to people who sometimes drop by "wanting a story, and then they leave." Colin also makes a comment about Cumming's photography and gallery exhibitions that belies a hidden resentment towards him and an implicit accusation of exploitation. This partially explains why at first Colin is not enthusiastic about being shaved as part of the video. Colin assumes that Cumming will interview him during it, and thinks he is being made into a spectacle. While the idea of conducting an on-camera interview while receiving a shave and a haircut might not seem



spectacular to some, for Colin the act has a deeper significance. Being impoverished and not accustomed to paying for personal grooming is only one aspect of it. Although to some degree the beard does act as a signifier of Colin's depressed economic status, to a large extent he has avoided being clean shaven as a way of sheltering himself from too much undesired contact with society.

Colin has grown to prefer the anonymity that comes with hiding his face behind a beard. "When I have the beard, people leave me alone," he says. He knows that most upper-middle class people who pass by him on the street will either ignore or fail to notice him. He also knows that other lower class people will see the beard and take it as a sign that he has no more than they do. The beard makes him feel safe and hidden from the world, absolved of responsibilities and debts. Colin worries that getting a shave will mean people will start expecting more from him. If he were clean shaven, people might assume he has a job and possesses even a small degree of wealth. Indeed, once Colin is cleaned up, he looks like a new man. Not only does he cut a handsome figure, he looks like just another typical middle class citizen with a job and a house and perhaps a family. Colin tells Cumming that this is how he would present himself if he had to see his relatives again, or attend a funeral, but

until then he'd prefer to let his hair grow back out. Another reason for Colin's hesitation about subjecting himself to this transformation is that he knows that this new appearance is only a construction, which must be continually maintained if it is not to be lost.

When asked about his relationship with his parents, Colin makes an observation that reflects on this idea of class image. Colin says that his parents enjoy a comfortable upper-middle class life, which seems luxurious compared to his own, yet they refuse to help their son with money, always claiming that they're flat broke. Colin theorizes that they are not necessarily lying, but rather that all of their money goes towards maintaining their lifestyle. They confirm their economic status to their peers through spending and consumption. Therefore they can simultaneously be "flat broke" and still enjoy frequent vacations in Europe. Ironically, this makes Colin and his parents alike, in that in his past all of Colin's money similarly went towards maintaining his addictions. However, since going straight, Colin has decided to opt out of any such lifestyle maintenance beyond basic self-sustainability. He does not belong to any specific social group or niche among the lower class, nor does he particularly aspire towards climbing the "social ladder." Getting a shave and haircut is symbolic of putting himself back into circulation, and Colin is as hesitant about going in this direction as he probably would be about going back to drugs and drinking. He prefers to have no affiliations at all, to be a contentious objector from society.

Something else happens once Colin gets the shave and haircut. Besides looking different, a dormant side of his personality also emerges. Late into *Erratic Angel*, Colin tells Cumming about a rotten situation in his hospital group, having been accused of enabling a fellow ex-addict to prostitute herself for drug money. Colin is so enraged over the accusation that he erupts into a violent tirade, calling out the social workers and doctors for their ignorance and prejudice. Frequently in Cumming's videos we hear the director having to tease answers and responses from his interview subjects, but during this sequence Colin does not need prompting. Before he got the shave, Colin often had to pause and think about his next words (especially if he hadn't had a coffee yet), but now his speech is quick, sharp and powerful. Colin's outburst is shocking because it seems to come from a different person than the one we met at the start of the video. The bearded Colin's laconic attitude conveyed an amiable disposition about everything, including his own oppressed existence, but without the beard Colin seems furious about his situation and social position. It brings into question whether the beard served as a container, keeping Colin's pent-up anger locked inside. However, through his outburst, Colin also speaks truth, giving insight into a situation that prevents him and many others in similar circumstances from being successful in their attempts at rehabilitation.

Over the course of Colin's angry speech, we are painted a dismaying picture of the heath care programs in which Colin is obliged to participate. Despite having freed himself from alcohol and hard drugs, Colin is still forced to stay on a constant, heavy regime of pills and other medications, even though they often make him ill. If he stops taking the medication, his doctors will assume that it means he has relapsed back into his old habits and will cut off his welfare. Colin's brain damage and memory problems make it impossible for him to hold down a normal job, so losing his welfare is not an option. He has tried complaining but all the doctors can do is change his dosage and wait to see if his condition gets better (it doesn't), which in turn leads to more physical discomfort and emotional distress. He even

compares the doctors to the drug pushers from his past who held him under their thumb. Colin is also obligated to take part in group therapy sessions, and much like the doctors, the social workers and therapists seem to operate on a set of prejudiced assumptions about addicts and the poor, and are similarly quick to accuse their patients of failure. But aside from this grievous situation, a part of what aggravates Colin about these people is that they represent wealth and affluence, and this partially explains why someone as intelligent and sincere as Colin lives on the fringes of society, only a short step away from homelessness.

Much like his parents, the doctors and social workers Colin is forced to interact with and answer to are firmly lodged in the upper-middle classes. The saine could also be said about many of the young people Colin met in his youth as an addict. Colin says that he never felt like he belonged to the counter-culture, having little in common with the "sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll" image. Many of the young people he knew who did subscribe to that lifestyle came from comfortable middle class backgrounds, and got involved with drugs as a way of acting out or "slumming," whereas his own addictions were not fashionable and attended to a deeper personal pain. Colin was and continues to be suspicious of the motives of those with wealth, but not out of jealousy. It is not so much that Colin *can't* be like them, as the results of the shave and haircut amply demonstrate; it is more that he truly doesn't *want* to be like them or associated with them in any way. He says that he simply doesn't trust anybody who looks good and dresses well every single day.

Fortunately for Colin, the beard grows back. When he and Cumming meet again some time later, Colin looks much like he did before. His thoughts and speech have similarly also grown fuzzy again. His apartment is still as dirty and run-down as it ever was. His problems, like those of countless others in similar situations, also continue. Although his words are not as powerful and urgent as before, in this final interview Colin is still able to converse with wit and veracity. What makes Colin special among Cumming's video subjects is that he is the most able to articulate the causes of his own poverty and marginalization. He can explain with a surprising amount of self-critical awareness the mistakes that he has made in the past that have led him here. More importantly, he can also identify that some of the people who purport to help him are partially responsible for keeping him both economically and emotionally depressed. It is a problem faced by many with mental health and substance abuse issues, but not everyone who lives on the fringes of society is as well-spoken as Colin, and most will never be spoken for.

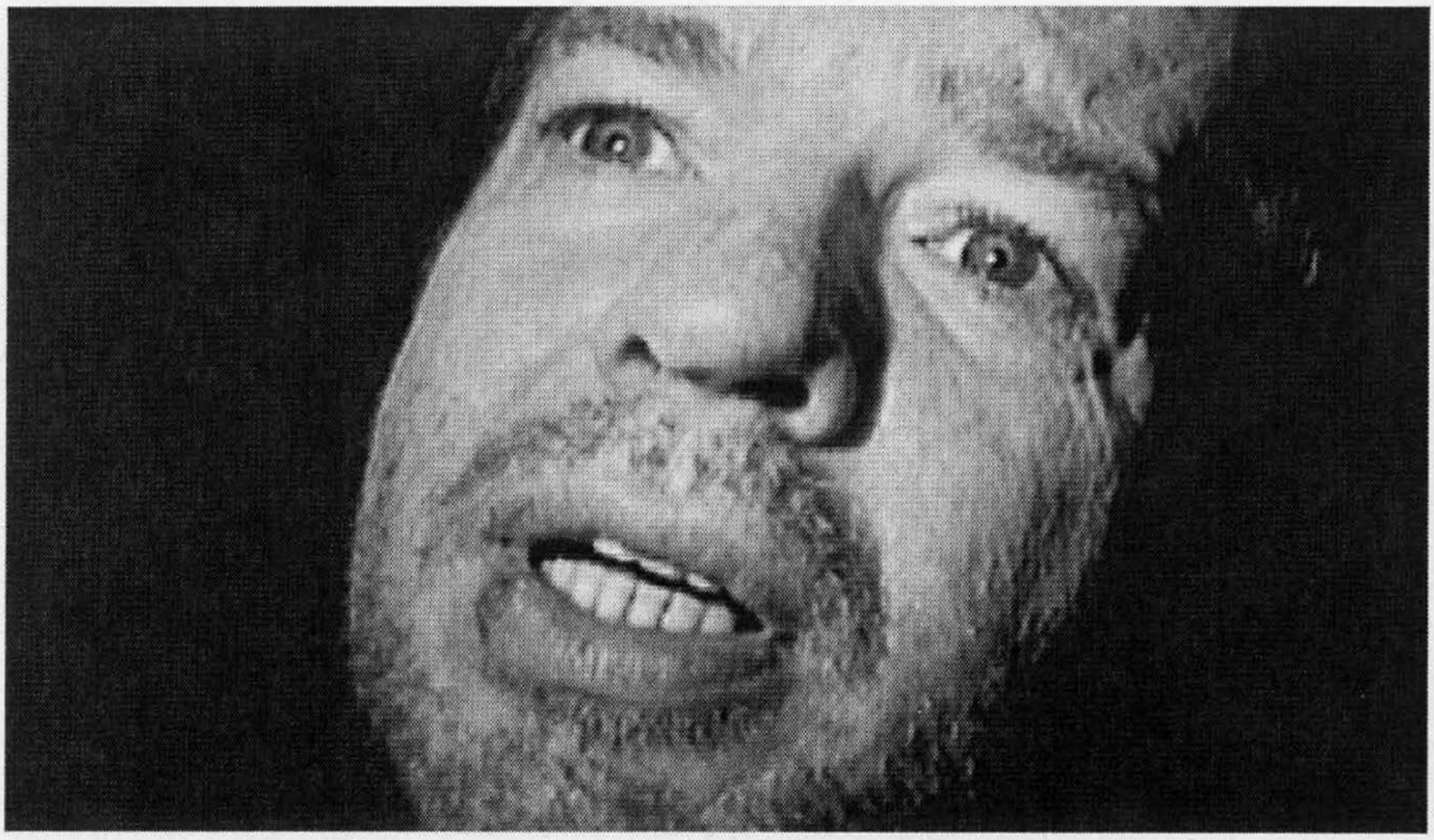
This Is Your Life: Donigan Cumming's Cinematic Antagonisms

BY ZOË CONSTANTINIDES

"But what are the others doing? They're accusing you of exploiting—accusing me of exploiting her. You think I'm going to exploit a person who's in that shape? What kind of person do you think I am?"

– COLIN, *ERRATIC ANGEL*

In *Erratic Angel* (1998), Colin protests against accusations that he is "exploiting" Colleen, who remains unidentified in this work and does not make her own video appearance until *Four Storeys* (1999). The dynamic between Colin and Colleen takes shape before the camera in *if only I* (2000), in which Colin again takes up a defensive position. The charge of exploiting those in his care has also been levelled at the work's author, Donigan Cumming, though only rarely in such blunt terms. In art magazine *Ciel variable*, for instance, David Balzer estimates the audience's response to Cumming's work: "Can we muster up the same courage as the photographer, who had the gall to look first? We feel dared, morally besieged: the work is exploitative, voyeuristic, manipulative, misanthropic."[1] More commonly, the allegations from critics and journalists take the form of insinuation and vague speculation. So while it may miss the point of Cumming's oeuvre to tackle the question of exploitation head on, the nature of the work itself insists that the matter never be put to rest. The ostensible consensus among critics—for the most part a self-selected group who, at the least, are committed to advocating Cumming's work—is that the role of "exploitation" in the work is too slippery to grip and, since this puzzle is so conceptually constitutive to the work, it is best to let the ambiguities lie. Notably, Peggy Gale boldly supports Cumming's representational ethos, attesting not only to the value of ethical messiness, but indeed to the work's deeply moral nature: "[...] one assumes the worst of the works' author: he must be cold, manipulative, degrading further these unfortunate persons and experiences. But that viewer would be wrong. Rather than turn away, one must persist, go deeper."[2] This position calls on viewers to challenge their own unwillingness to confront images of "failed" subjectivities.[3] Yet the seemingly widespread sympathy for, or at least acceptance of, Cumming's approach is belied by the frequency with which the word "exploitation"



pops up in the critical and journalistic writing.

It is not clear exactly *why* Colin, who has adopted the role of Colleen's caretaker, would be taking advantage of her, and what he stands to gain, though we suspect it has something to do with her good looks. As Cumming verbally intimates from offscreen in *if only I*, perhaps what is at stake for Colin is old-fashioned romance. Characteristically, Colin bristles at the suggestion. But for the bureaucrats on whom Colleen and Colin depend, it is sufficient that Colleen, in her physical and emotional fragility, appears to be more vulnerable than Colin, whose own struggles undermine his qualifications as a caregiver, however dedicated and articulate he may be. The question of the conditions under which such a relationship could be labelled exploitative cuts to the core of Cumming's practice and gets to the heart of the cultural meanings of "exploitation."

Conventionally, "exploitation" refers to the use of resources for material gain. The term is morally neutral, though applications of the economistic definition to social relations, from Marx's labour value to Frankfurt School-style critiques of the culture industries, have fused exploitation together with injustice in moral and political philosophy. On such grounds, *New York Times* critic Jack Gould attacked the proto-reality television spectacle *This Is Your Life*, expressing a tidy if quaint discomfort with the show's crass parade of adversity and tears in the name of sponsorship.[4] But outside the realm of commercial entertainment, the ethics are cloudier, not coincidentally because economic determinism loses purchase. When Frederick Wiseman was accused in court of invading the privacy of patients at the Bridgewater State Hospital for *Titicut Follies* (1967), it would have been a stretch to accuse him of doing so for financial gain. If Wiseman had been motivated by profit, he would have continued his legal practice and probably would have received fewer allegations of exploitation throughout his career. What we see in *Titicut Follies* is the imbrication of the Bridgewater patients' manipulation at the hands of the guards, the institution, and the encompassing state apparatus with the menace of cinematic technology, and the resulting impression of cruelty is difficult to parse.

In Cumming's videos, too, there is a dense layering of institutional, interpersonal, and cinematic aggression. Again, the question of exploitation that arises has little to do with a classic definition of "turning to account," though Cumming claims that some of his subjects participate strictly to receive a fee he offers them.[5] Rather, Cumming's work affirms that exploitation is about money only insofar as money is an index of power. Cumming's work invites concern over exploitation not because we suspect the author of mercenary intent but because of his stark depictions of human vulnerability. These representations expose the social distribution of power through age, health, eloquence, beauty, and charisma—factors that bear an undeniable yet enigmatic relation to class.

Cumming's transgressive videos cross class lines and breach the personal boundaries of their characters and viewers. Of course, Cumming's cast of characters, or rather, subjects, is made up of willing and consenting participants, alleviating some—though not all—of Cumming's responsibility as author and producer. Defending *This Is Your Life*, television writer Allison Silverman appeals to the generally positive experiences of its "contestants": "Jack Gould [...] accused the show and others like it of exploiting the raw and private emotions of the unfortunate. But the unfortunate? They liked it. *This Is Your Life* might have exploited your story, but it also told you your story. Gave it to you. And once you had it, you could do whatever you wanted with it."[6] Whether the stories in Cumming's videos empower their tellers is debatable, but there is sufficient onscreen evidence that performing these stories is deeply satisfying. Not least for Colleen, who is clearly and touchingly delighted when Cumming asks her to tell him and the camera tales from what she calls her "wretched life." Likewise, Colin's longing for a forum is palpable in *Erratic Angel*, in which he delivers a whirlwind treatise on the failures of Montreal's social services, even as Cumming persistently severs the thread with offscreen directives, a wandering camera, and erratic editing. Still, Colin's profound trust in Cumming and his camera is evident here. And even while we cannot reconcile the naked faith Cumming elicits from his subjects with our own suspicions, that confidence somehow makes us want to trust him by proxy.

NOTES

1 "Donigan Cumming, Moving Pictures," *Ciel variable* 69 (2005), http://www.cielvariable.ca/archives/en/reviews-of-current-events-cv69/donigan-cumming-moving-pictures-by-david-balzer.html.

2 "Touching on Donigan Cumming" in *Lying Quiet* (Toronto: Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, 2004), 1.

3 Thanks to Papagena Robbins for her insight on the topic of "failed subjectivity."

4 For example, "Programs in Review: New Edwards Show Opens – 'Everyman's Story'", *The New York Times* (November 28, 1948), X11. While this article reviews the "This Is Your Life" radio program that preceded the television show, the latter became in the coming years a favourite whipping post for Gould, who used it as shorthand for television he deemed ethically dubious commercial entertainment.

5 Donigan Cumming, *Continuity and Rupture* (Paris: Services culturels de l'Ambassade du Canada, 2000), 18.

6 "Oh You Shouldn't Have." *This American Life* podcast, ep. 428 (originally aired March 4, 2011).

Strange Inventory; or, Cumming's Masks

BY SCOTT BIRDWISE

Actors, taught not to let any embarrassment show on their faces, put on a mask. I will do the same. So far, I have been a spectator in this theatre which is the world, but I am now about to mount the stage, and I come forward, masked.

– RENÉ DESCARTES, *PHILOSOPHICAL WRITINGS*

A mask of dirty old hairy leather, with two holes and a slit, it was too far gone for the old trick of please your honour and God reward you and pity upon me. It was disastrous.

– SAMUEL BECKETT, *THE END*

Donigan Cumming's videos extend – and distend – into two primary directions or layers: one, into the apparent immediacy, the rawness, of the body; into its muteness, its obstinacy and decay: growth and overgrowth. Crossing civilization's taboo against staring at the Other, Cumming's camera takes the measure of the body's intensities: the experience of time, the vicissitudes of the flesh. As Sally Berger writes, "He magnifies specific features – a fat stomach, the dirty creases of a mouth, a gap-toothed smile, or a nose drool – through fragmented close-ups and longtakes."[1] The other direction, in seeming contrast to the first, is the mediality of the (art) historical past, a past rich in symbolism and metaphor, theatre and illusion. Emotionally charged situations and inchoate narratives take shape, sometimes fading as quickly as they emerge, as a theatre of memory spills out of the video image. The rituals of song embody the complexity and ridiculousness, the absurd and comically democratic scrambling of shared signifiers of culture in its many guises. Witness, for example, the influence of Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco (not to mention Winston Churchill and Doris Day) in *Cut the Parrot* (1996) or the reference to Weegee and the allusion to Dante in *My Dinner with Weegee* (2001), the invocation of the American Civil War in *Cold Harbor* (2003) and the nod to Marcel Duchamp in *Fountain* (2005). One layer is the chaos of presence, of the body, of the thing trying to establish itself as its own environment; the other layer is the labyrinth of social history, haunting presence with the unpredictability of absence and the uncertain promise of significance. The terrible sovereignty of the object

(which ultimately perishes) and the implacable waiting game of meaning: indexicality and (over-)signfification. Symptom and expression. Implosion. Explosion.

It is, really, the strange territory that joins the somatic and the semiotic, the raw and the cooked, private(s) and public that Cumming traverses in his videos. His work exposes the sociality of matter and the matter of the social, found in such forms as allegory and the pun – things which nourish and express the play (and the breakdown) of materiality and meaning. In Cumming's universe, a universe we share, humans are weird animals manipulating – and manipulated by – signs and things. That is, humans are *creatures*: beings creating and created by relations of force and signification, real-izing and de-realizing a common world.[2] Cumming's longtime photographic model, Nettie Harris, half-dressed and almost ravished in her gown in *A Prayer for Nettie* (1995), appears in all her "creatureliness" – a strange social, yet silent, animal that wears clothing; a creature read against the numbers of the calendar. Clothing, possessions, numbers, words: the stuff of human relations. It is in what Cumming has termed his laboratory or theatre that these relations of force are articulated in aesthetically significant and socially explicit form. In this theatrical interzone, Cumming's strategies of fiction critically intersect with and emerge from the contradictions of reality itself: in Cumming's words, "discordant photographic and videographic techniques simulate the pressures on people's lives."[3] These pressures necessitate fashioning and forming the face as object and the face as subject: the face as mask.

Intimate Distance

Donigan Cumming is no stranger to the mask. Early in his photographic career he assumed three exhibition pseudonyms: C.D. Battey, Georgia Freeman and John Marlowe. Cumming later exhibited his three-part series *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography* (1986) under his own name, but took on the task of "unmasking" the pretences and codes of social documentary photography.[4] It was *Reality and Motive* that established his working relationship with a number of Montreal characters, in the broad sense of the term, and which eventually led to the videos of the 90s and beyond. Building on *Reality and Motive*'s deconstruction of social form and convention, its trumping of the logic of display of a late capitalism that mirrors itself, Cumming and his characters continue to play versions of themselves in the many videos, taking apart their identities – the lives that have been handed to them and that are ultimately taken away. Like marking the cards one has been dealt from a stacked deck, Cumming's characters angrily and playfully return the screw to those who like their vision of others and of the world neat and tidy and certain and, ultimately, unfair. To the spectacle of a society that pretends to have done away with its masks (that masks its masks), that presumes to shine in the (en)light(enment) of justice and rationality, Cumming offers an alternative vision – or, rather, a disturbance that punctures the monovision that perpetuates the falsely presumed stability of context and community. His videos offer a demonstration of the world that does not take the social for granted (and thus do not instrumentalize the social, abandon it). In the only kind of cruel gesture that holds its own in this time of wilful neglect, selective memory loss, and stupid pieties, Cumming takes us closer to the truth of the mask.[5] Intimate distance.

Testing the ethical boundaries that typically separate the filmmaker from his subjects, Cumming challenges the easy assumptions of his viewers. He explores the spaces between

the codes of our society, where the architecture of our mannered forms is revealed in its rigidity and weakness. He finds the cracks in our perceptions of reality. "The commitment that reality's instability demands is not some empirical distinction between reality and fiction – true or false – but humane mediation," as Nicholas Renaud aptly puts it.[6] To be sure, to be humane is to sometimes (appear to) be cruel. And so much of this cruelty, this humanity, turns, again, on the problem of the exposure, the cracks, of social relations. Cumming's approach, then, is fundamentally social: it demands "face time" as he faces the same people over and over again. He has continued working with some of his subjects for over thirty years, so the relationships and their evolution – the accrued interest of intimacy and in-jokes – are very much part of the work. What so often startles is the encounter between the camera and its subjects, between the artist and his characters – the returned gaze of the people captured on video.

If the lineaments of the face coalesce to form a distinctive trait or feature, then one can say that Cumming's creation of a community of characters, his strange inventory of mask-faces, forms the lineaments of his distinctive videography. His is a kind of inventory of faces, bodies, places, and things. He is interested in how we construct sociality (in a video, in a life) and this leads to a reflexive concern with performativity, exhibiting the social actor's mediality in relation to itself and to others. The direct address of Cumming's characters displays the social dimensions of the documentary encounter: place and space (t)here are not merely quantitative or geographical coordinates but qualitative and relational energies, points of view and engagement. Cumming's practice is premised on the existence of viewers in this extended world – splitting the choir, as it were, that exists in the intimate spaces of his arena as the implied, unknown and anonymous future. This is the wager of the camera, the promise and the risk inherent to bringing (at least) two things together by way of the mediation of a third term.

People Person

The term "person," etymologically speaking, is from the French *persone* for "human being" which derives from the Latin word *persona*, the name originally given to a type of mask through which the voice of the actor on stage resonates. *Per sonare*: to sound across, to "sound through." In this sense, the person is the presentation – the emission of the voice – of the human animal via the medium of the mask. The mask, then, conditions community in its recursivity, in the way it mimetically relays and delays sense. Aristotle held that humans are by nature political animals, animals that take their very lives into question in the transformative realm of language, thus forging a political community. The human animal secures itself by "sounding through" its persona in the *polis* or *demos* – the human arena where appearances congregate and are received and disseminated, where persons are fabricated. Without the mask, as Hannah Arendt for one maintained, the human animal becomes endangered in being deemed politically irrelevant. Perhaps we can say that democratic politics is founded by its distinction from the immanence of a certain kind of village mentality or closed community (where everyone, it is said, knows everyone else): in the *demos* each of us is or can be strangers, masked; and so much of the virtue of our democracy depends upon how we treat our fellow strangers. Uncertainty, then, is a necessary ingredient of democratic communication. Aesthetics, the realm of art broadly speaking, is linked to this power of uncertainty – otherwise art would simply disappear into craft and

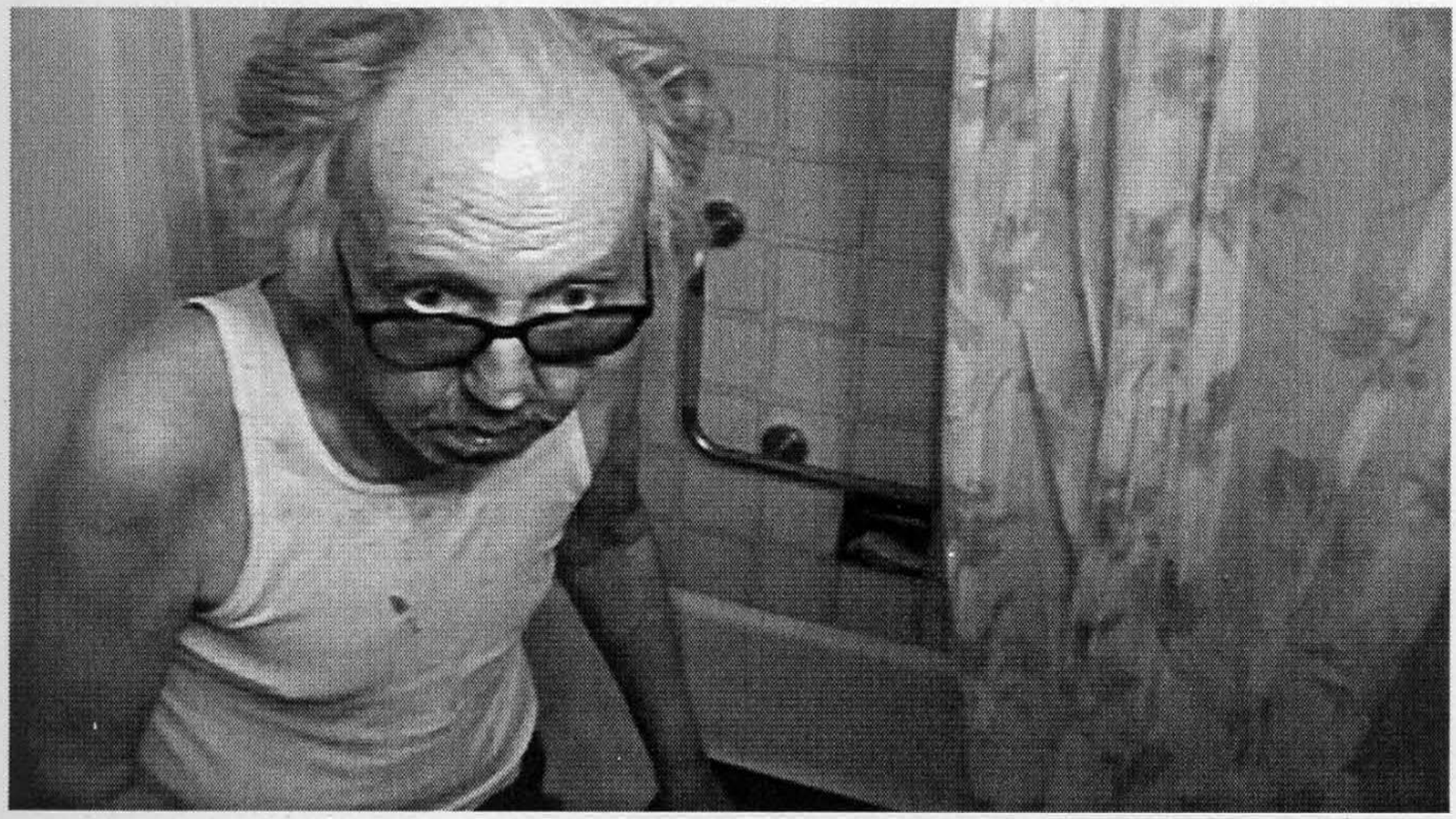
culture proper, where cultural norms are effectively facts.

In *A Prayer for Nettie* and *Cut the Parrot*, for example, Cumming assembles his cast of characters to "sound through" his feelings about the deaths of Nettie Harris and Albert Smith respectively. In some measure, his characters are masks; indeed, in *A Prayer for Nettie* Cumming's character's faces captured by his handheld camera stand-in for his face in its total absence from the recording – not that his face is absent from the proceedings, however, for it is present in the video in the way it surely provokes his interlocutors, in the way it is mirrored by the visages captured by the camera. In *Cut the Parrot*, meanwhile, Cumming's face is manipulated and inverted in extreme close-up: his mouth sometimes turned vertical, his eyes leering into the camera, into off-screen space: the space of the viewer or the space of Albert's coffin. In *Cut the Parrot*, the camera is Cumming's mask.

At the end of *Cut the Parrot*, Cumming recalls a memory from his childhood involving a family visit with his institutionalized brother, Julien (whose experience takes center stage in later videos such as *Locke's Way* [2003]). Cumming explains how at one point a man – seemingly normal and well-to-do, taken as another "visitor" – approached the family and enjoyed a friendly chat with Cumming's father about cars, work, and family life – the stuff of a conventional bourgeois conversation. It turns out, however, that the man was also retarded and, like Julien, a patient at the institution. This man, this stranger, appropriated the language and gesture – the appearance – of the norm. As Cumming poignantly concludes, this was a shock to the family: "It amazed them."

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, first published in 1956, the sociologist Erving Goffman suggests that people, akin to actors on a stage, don masks (personas) and adopt roles in order to project a working definition of themselves and their social situation. Masks are crucial to the social performance of being a full, functioning member of society. For Goffman, human reality is in fact "a delicate, fragile thing that can be shattered by very minor mishaps."[7] In order to maintain consensus, the social actor must often perform his or her role as if it were natural, not a performance properly speaking; performance must be masked by artifice that obscures its artificiality. Here, the mask serves the interests of consensus, the maintenance of the status quo. Goffman observes that dissensus occurs when there is confusion over, or different definitions emerge of, what an acceptable performance (of reality) is: what is taken as natural can de-naturalized.[8] This is of course also what Bertolt Brecht demonstrated in his epic theatre and, further, what Mikhail Bakhtin recognized as the liberatory power of the mask in the carnivalesque. In *Cut the Parrot*, Susan Thompson demonstrates the power of the carnivalesque – its intensity and disruptive potential – as she slides from epileptic seizure to confession and flirtation to a haunting rendition of "Que Sera, Sera." Whatever will be, will be.

Dissensus exposes the constructedness, the theatricality, of our naturalized performances; the fragility and instability of our collective picture, pose, reality. The philosopher Jacques Rancière seizes on the fragility of consensus in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. According to Rancière, dissensus "is not a designation of conflict as such, but is a specific type thereof, a conflict between *sense* and *sense*...a conflict between a sensory presentation and a way of making sense of it, or between several sensory regimes and/or 'bodies.'"[9] Dissensus thus occurs when those who have no part, or an all too narrowly defined part (as, say, a



social type or identity), in the given distribution of the sensible – "specific distributions of space and time, of the visible and invisible, that create specific forms of 'common sense'"[10] – claim their (illegitimate, according to the consensus) share, in the name of a "wrong."

It seems for Rancière that there is something about sense that is constitutively and dynamically insensitive to remaining stable in its sense: it will never settle into a final sense of the world. In disagreement, persons, social actors, continue to force a re-distribution of the sensible. This is perhaps an aspect of what Cumming refers to as Marty Corbin's "last radical act" in *My Dinner with Weegee*, as Marty puts his own life and impending death on the record.[11] In the video, Cumming works with Marty in the display of the relationship between his speech and his body as a political problem, as a way to trouble the mythological politics of the American war machine and its imposition of the form that dialogue, as political communication, takes. In *My Dinner with Weegee*, Marty brings life to his politics and, in the brave exhibition of his struggle and decline, his politics to life in the sense and nonsense of the body.

Cumming's intervention into the politics of documentary representation provokes the viewer to ask him- or herself about the politics of its aesthetics. The questions that emerge – for example: Why am I so uncomfortable with images of these bodies and faces (old, decrepit, ugly) in close-up? – sensitize the viewer to the repression and selectivity of our image culture. Cumming's close-ups do indeed exaggerate the ugliness of the body, as well as fragment the subject and disrupt context, but they are productive in the way they upset the consensual distribution of the sensible. These displacements of bodies, faces and testimonies escape from being either mere icons of grief and misery or sociological and identity co-ordinates of victimhood. That is, they acquire another power, linked to their ability to shock and scandalize, to communicate in dividing sense. Furthermore, in Cumming's diagnosis of this scandal, the veneer of the contract between audience and spectacle can be at least temporarily rubbed off: viewers may become more aware of their performance – their collective role – as "upset and outraged viewers." The weight and force of social and cultural norms, the masks of propriety and their exclusions, are intensely felt as Cumming's

videos make us ask ourselves about the social and political nature of embarrassment: if his characters are not embarrassed in their display, are we embarrassed for them because we have the supposed "good sense" to be so in their stead? Why are we moved in whatever way to publicly emerge from our private experience of shame to become advocates of conventional middle class values? In such embarrassing intervals, we feel ourselves readjusting our masks of privilege and relative power. Indeed, there is mercy in Cumming's merciless excoriation of human folly and insight in his dismantling of the seductive consensus of enjoyment.

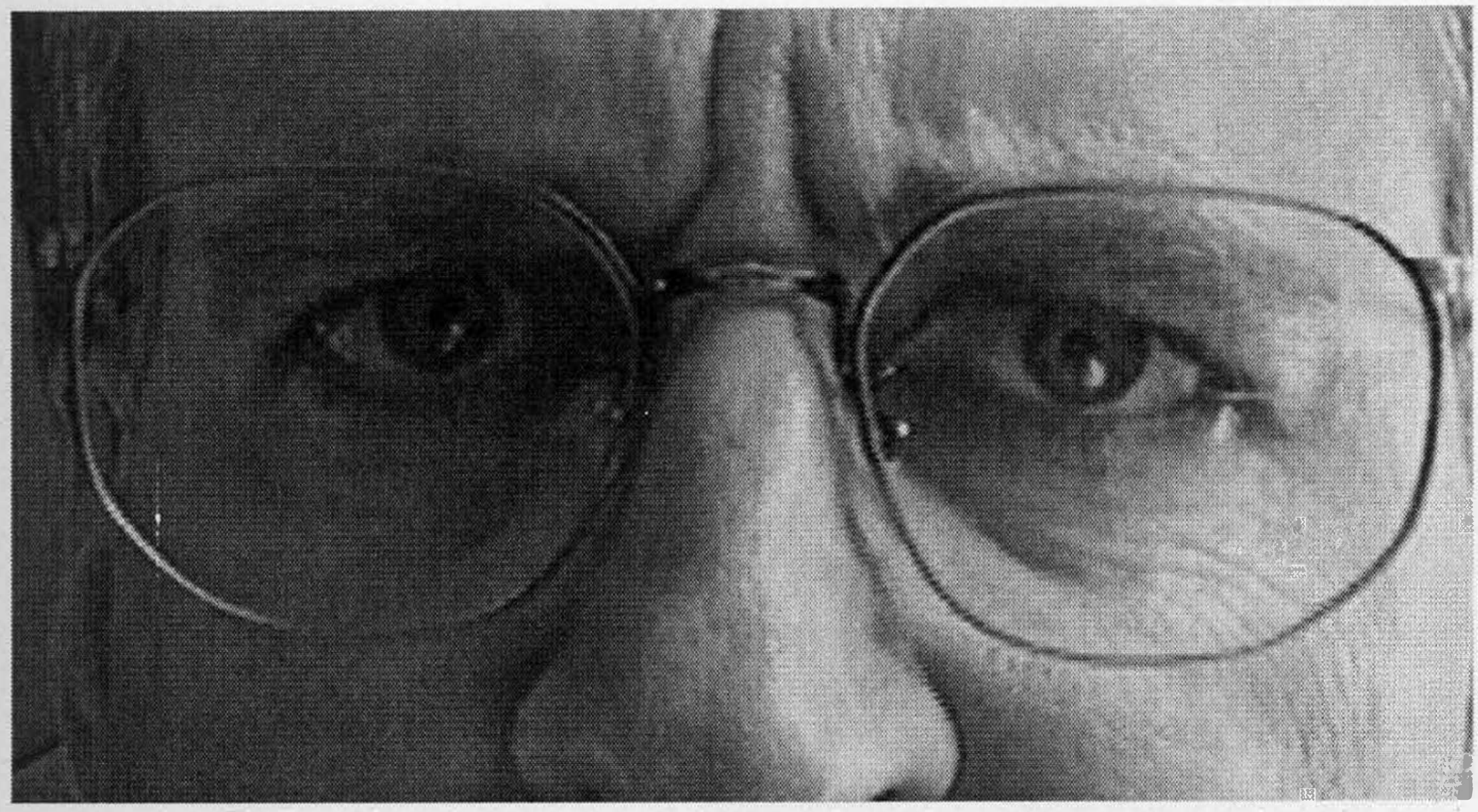
Makeshift Masks, Torn Away

Akin to how Cumming's documentaries (in design and intent) do not represent a preconstituted reality but rather performatively engender their event, so the mask is a kind of originary prosthesis, a necessary supplement to the face. It is by way of the mask – its light and shadow, its play of concealment – that the social dimension of the body and the bodily dimension of the social can be exposed: the mask is the index of the face. The mask is something like the anti- or non-social *thing* at the core of the social: we wear masks, so the expression goes, because we are amongst others. We Others.[12] Where the mask is expressive (or prohibits expression), the face is impressive – a surface for the other to project upon it (if the mask should ever slip off, become unstuck; if the bandage should ever be peeled off the wound). Indeed, there would be nothing to communicate, no possibility of community, if we were always immediately present to each other. Perhaps we can say: the mask is the medium that (re)presents, that shares and divides the face. All too often the face is instrumentalized – pornographized – as an object of knowledge. The person without a mask – or, it amounts to the same thing, the person who is only a mask – is the person that is not a person: a phantom, a monster.

In the short video *Docu-Duster* (2000), Cumming appropriates the melodramatic speech and facial expressions of characters in the western *3:10 to Yuma* (1957) for his own ends as he contorts his visage into a kind of extreme close-up mask. Cumming is at once himself and the characters that inhabit him or that he imitates – a kind of monster. On the other hand, Pierre Lamarche, the lead in *After Brenda* (1997), seems to have removed his protective mask, his distance, in *Petit Jésus* (1999). Crying in his beer at Christmastime, Pierre sends a heart-rending message to Christ as Ennio Morricone's movie music swells with put-on emotion. Viewers are caught between the rock of the "reality" of Pierre's tragic performance and the hard place of the ridiculousness of the scene's staginess. In this way, Cumming re-sensitizes us to the intensity, the monstrosity even, of the face through the estrangement of the torn away mask. Cumming never stops showing and telling us that to belong to a community is to be a person; and that to be a person is to wear, that is, to cobble together, a makeshift mask.

Inventory

To invent is at once to find and to create – to have a finding, to "make a discovery," so the expression goes. When considering Cumming's videos, we should pay careful attention to the notion of "make" in "make a discovery." In his productively "filthy workshop of creation," to borrow a suggestive passage from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Cumming



demonstrates how so many things taken as facts, things done, are rather artefacts, things made. Cumming's inventory of faces, his assemblage of what appears to be a sampling of specimens and "social types" – to go back to *Reality and Motive* – is a reflexive counter-archive of sorts, a dissensual intervention into the documentary imagination of community. Sociology and anthropology this is not; rather, Cumming's videos display the compromises and confusions of being together, the shifting ground of the assemblages that make up what we call society. It is not simply that Cumming and his characters "make things up," but that "making things up" is really a part of life.

Certainly, the structures of power in our so-called democratic societies need to be unmasked, as do the falsities of so much of what we take to be our immutable identities, our well-defined roles as consumers and tourists of everyday life. That said, masks will always, necessarily, positively, be among us as we continue to reinvent a common world: we masks. In engaging with Cumming's work, we realize that we are implicated in our failing bodies and organs, our unreliable memories, our silly desires: common sense falters. But we also realize this is a world, or negotiation of worlds, that is charged by the vitality of imagination, improvisation and humour. I am implicated in and by the other person; we are implicated in and by other people. We invent each other. The mask is the power of the other person – marginal or not; poor or middle class – to invite one (me, you) to see one (me, you). The mask here is not "our" power to visit or to look, but the power of another person to show him- or herself, willingly. In Cumming's documentary theatricality we find such an intervention, a "coming between" that re-sensitizes connection: where the powers of fiction, masks, and the political potentiality of uncertainty are taken up by those who are too often barred – or perceived to be barred – from their use as forms of impression and expression, appearance and disappearance. Cumming's faces, rather than being securely located in the coordinates of consensus and State-sanctioned legibility, partake in the creative uncertainty of masks.

In this light, it could be said that the political community is the space or spacing, the staging, of the mask, rather than the managed state of the police order where one only has one's

place/face (or not). In place of a community of perfect (common) sense and purity, of fusion, we should posit a community premised on its ability (and dis-ability) to cut its sense (confusion, de- or ex-fusion); an aesthetic of rupture that generates new, or what are perceived to be new, continuities (and, vice versa, an aesthetic of continuity that creates ruptures). To perform a dissensual act is to perform outside the realm of consensus, in the non-places of common sense, but inside "reality." Consensual reality, then, becomes questionable and uncertain, monstrous in its display to the audience. In this way, the potential to reappropriate expropriated common sense is opened up and the possibility of changing the very framework of the debate (of the real) is generated. Self-evident truths are called into question; convenient everyday habits become alien. The roles of actors and audiences shift; the masks go and off as they circulate. Nudity is relative to being dressed up, in costume. Between scenes, in bathrooms and behind closed doors, we all drop our pants. The mask is a mirror. It reverses itself: we see ourselves looking.

Donigan Cumming is a kind of "genealogist" of the documentary specifically and civilization more broadly, "for the genealogist knows that while any stance is provisional and historically contingent, intelligibility – *sense* – often requires that some stance be taken."[13] The stance taken here, however, is always suspicious of any sense that seems too settled, too easy. As Cumming, all eyes in extreme close-up, puts it in *Fountain*, the complexity and difficulty of sense is bound up with "a more peaceful time, a more violent time, a weirder time" – layers of temporality that scramble storytelling. Here, Cumming manipulates the labour of takes and retakes that serve as so much of the source material for, and the conditions of, his other works. The outtakes and the spaces between takes come to take their place in a different kind of everyday performance, a different take on history. The non-place where these non-personas reside is the damaged and senseless, yet fertile, ground from which the public image-world rises.

Issues related to visibility and invisibility, appearance and disappearance that the question of the mask raises come to the fore in other videos as well. In *Shelter* (1999), Cumming keeps his camera focused on the ground, refusing to provide the image of the old man who was apparently hit by a car, thus bringing into relief the viewer's desire for identification, the often self-serving pleasure of "face time" in the relative "shelter" of conventional representation. If *Shelter*'s power resides in the withdrawal of the visible, *A Short Lesson* (2000) demonstrates how apparent maximum visibility generates its own form of unease. Cumming's "short lesson" brings together two audio layers – one a clip from *Sullivan's Travels* (1941) about class and representation; the other a brief anecdote about an alcoholic film critic who reviews movies he's never seen – to bear on extreme close-ups of an undisclosed man's (Marty Corbin) withered, filthy face. By way of the framing and scale of the extreme close-ups, the organs and surfaces of the face become an uncanny landscape. It is by way of abstraction that Cumming provokes the viewer to consider the politics of aesthetics and the shelter of representation in the documentary.

In the documentary form, then, one can argue that it is a political act to engage in a process of making the subject strange within his or her actually existing and shifting occupations of space, place and the face. In Cumming's spaces of anxiety, characters participate in a world that is not their own, shifting and adjusting its sense – and so make it their own. This process then turns to the viewer, the other side of the mask, another face-mask/mask-

face, made strange, making him- or herself strange, shifting in their chair, their place, in turn. Dongian Cumming's masks help us to see the one and the other, the other in the one: the disastrous mask of the face. After all, the face is really but a temporary mask over the inhuman grin of the skull.[14]

NOTES

1 Sally Berger, "Beyond the Absurd, Beyond Cruelty: Donigan Cumming's Staged Realities" in *Lux: A Decade of Artist's Film and Video*, Steve Reinke and Tom Taylor, eds. (Toronto: YYZ Books and Pleasure Dome, 2000), 290.

2 For an extended discussion of the concept of "creatureliness" see Eric Santner's fascinating study *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

3 Donigan Cumming, "Continuity and Rupture," *Offscreen*, April 30, 2000 http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/new_offscreen/cumming.html (accessed October 18, 2007). Cumming goes on: "Systematic tensions maintain a condition that goes beyond the absurd – beyond its negativity – as an interdisciplinary theatre of chaos – a productive condition."

4 In her critical essay on the three-part exhibition, Martha Langford puts it best: "*Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography* incarnates and exposes social documentary's tragic flaw: to reflect and thereby improve society, photography has adopted its prejudicial codes." See her "Donigan Cumming: Crossing Photography's Chalk Lines," in *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1986), 14. A downloadable version of the essay is available at http://donigancumming.com/d_c/donc_home.html.

5 By "mask" I mean to play between at least three different registers: the commonplace notion of the theatrical mask as a device for disguise; a protective prosthesis, shielding the face from danger; and the metaphorical or figurative idea of a put-on social role, a public face. To arrest this play would be to fall into the trap of a facile empiricism, taking things at face-value, so to speak. The mask, here, is metaphor, metonym and thing. It is the necessarily integrative and disruptive power of the mask that is the (often disguised or deflected) source of such productive confusion (and extrusion, infusion, intrusion).

6 Nicholas Renaud, "Exchange and Conflict: The Videographic Ritual of Donigan Cumming," in *Barber's Music / Donigan Cumming* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1999).

7 Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), 56.

8 Ibid., 61.

9 Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, Steve Corcoran, trans. (London and New York: Continuum, 2010), 139.

10 Ibid., 141.

11 Donigan Cumming in interview with Mike Hoolboom, in Mike Hoolboom, "Donigan Cumming: Reality and Motive in the Documentary," in *Practical Dreamers: Conversations with Movie Artists* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2008), 114.

12 "We Others" is the English translation of the title of Jean-Luc Nancy's essay "Nous Autres" in The Ground of the Image, Jeff Fort, trans. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 100-107.

13 Michael R. Clifford, "'Shadow Narratives' of Personhood: MacIntyre and the Masks of Genealogy," *The Personalist Forum*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Fall 2003): 41.

14 In 2005, Cumming completed two major encaustic collages involving fragments from thousands of photographic and video images: *Prologue*, based on Pieter Bruegel's *The Suicide of Saul* (1562), and *Epilogue*, based on James Ensor's *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889* (1888). Ensor's paintings are notable for his obsession with masks as well as with skulls and skull masks. For an illuminating psychoanalytic discussion of Ensor's interest in masks see David S. Werman, "James Ensor and the Mask of Reality," *Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (July 2003): 335-348. For an excellent analysis of Cumming's *Prologue* and *Epilogue* see Catherine Bédard, "Mascarade = Masquerade" in *Donigan Cumming : La somme, le sommeil, le cauchemar* (Paris: Centre culturel canadien/Ambassade du Canada à Paris, 2006), 16-33, 94-111.

Donigan Cumming: Photographs in Video Works

BY BLAKE FITZPATRICK

"Come on – you've got to see evidence of that [...] it's got to be here!"

– DONIGAN CUMMING, *LOCKE'S WAY*

The still photograph is anything but still, especially when embedded in the dynamic flow of a video work. In Donigan Cumming's evolving practice from photographer to video artist, photographs return, but in a form that threatens to jar loose their evidential holdings. Specifically, in Cumming's now earlier video works *Culture* (2002) and *Locke's Way* (2003), photographs are held in the hand and presented to the video camera as signs from a past unfixed. These works reveal a tension caught between photographic and filmic modes of representation and point to limitations in the documentary image, a subject that was first investigated in Cumming's groundbreaking and contentious work of the 1980s, *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography*. In that work, Cumming mounted what could be considered a counter-rhetorical attack on the motives of judgment and authority in classical documentary photography. Cumming's critical mode of making and reflection, continues in the video works cited above, as he once again asks fundamental questions of the photographic image. Can the photograph be read backwards and forward in time? Do they connect back in a direct indexical link to their referent or forward as autonomous signs excised from the larger world, circulating into the future? What haunts these questions is all that isn't in the photograph to see, including the circumstances of its making and what remains ungraspable in their evidential forms. As Maurice Blanchot contends, "the ungraspable is what one does not escape."[1]

The criticism engendered by Cumming's photographic works as gathered under the overarching title, *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography* was due in-part, to the ironic detachment that Cumming maintained from social subjects whose economic conditions were less privileged than his own - the night-shift workers, unemployed and pensioners who were his subjects.[2] In contrast, Cumming's video work is much more intimate. Many of characters first seen in the photographic work have returned and are now named in what has emerged as a longitudinal yet fragmented study of an evolving community. The shift to video has also turned Cumming's focus away from a detached critique of documentary codes and conventions toward a directly complicit mode of performativity in his work.

In this mode, the distanced realism of the wide-angle photograph is replaced by the implicated view of the video close-up. Cumming has said that one of the most direct ways of challenging the truth assumptions of documentary traditions was to use video to implicate himself in a way that he couldn't with photography. The photograph is as he suggests, bound by its two-dimensionality: "It's implacable – mute."[3] In *Locke's Way* specifically and *Culture* to a lesser extent, the muteness of the photograph elicits a frantic monologue in which Cumming is compelled to speak because the photograph can't. In these works, Cumming's voice-over and his probing camera act as an extension of his thinking. Just as the voice in film is assumed to be the authentic entrapment of thought, in Cumming's video work we not only see what he sees but we hear what we presume he thinks. The works construct lost and found narratives of obsessive looking as the presentation of photographs to the video camera rhetorically emphasizes the act of looking itself. The revelation of photographic images becomes an occasion for questioning the life histories that we project into them, rendering the photographs as incomplete documents that are detached from the events that they depict.

Culture is a complex piece that fittingly takes its title from a word that is, according to Raymond Williams, one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. The early use of the word culture encompasses meanings such as cultivating and tending: to cultivate crops, to tend the herd.[4] Cumming's use of the word extends these early meanings metaphorically to take on new associations such as, tending to others as well as cultivating long-term relationships. These associations evolve around Nelson Coombs, a subject long associated with Cumming's work. A key figure in the community that Cumming has investigated for years, images of Coombs date back to the *Reality and Motive* photographic project and can be found in video works such as, *A Prayer for Nettie* (1995), *After Brenda* (1997), *Karaoke* and *Erratic Angel* (both 1998).[5]

Culture is structured around a quest in which Cumming rummages through Coombs's apartment to find a cheque-book. The video opens with a slow zoom into a closely cropped photographic snapshot of three friends, grinning at the camera. Nelson Coombs wears a sunhat stenciled with the word "Acapulco," Joyce Donnison is also present, framed between Coombs and another man. The occasion seems joyous, perhaps the threesome are on vacation. Cumming's camera zooms in on Joyce Donnison's brightly coloured lips. A common and seemingly innocent snapshot is made suddenly strange. What sunny optimism that might have been found in the snapshot is immediately thrown into doubt as the next scene has Cumming entering the frame of Coombs's darkened apartment and proceeding to clean out the fridge. Rotting food in sopping wet plastic bags are held up to Cumming's video camera, more food will be found under the bed, half eaten cans of soup will also be revealed, covered by fruit flies. Claustrophobic scenes of squalor are repeatedly illuminated as the flexible flashlight that is wrapped around the neck of the artist directs our attention throughout the apartment. We might assume that the power to the apartment has been turned off, that the food in the fridge has spoiled and that the artist therefore needs to bring in a light. But to shine a light is never an innocent act, and in the early stages of the video, the act of looking or searching and of shining a light onto a dark corner of the world takes on a decidedly forensic, voyeuristic and expository glow. Shining a light, making visible, revealing, exposing – these are of course the terms that accompany classic modes of documentary, a rhetorical form held up to continuous scrutiny in Cumming's on-

going practice. Thus, from the beginning of the piece we are tossed between differing image modes and feelings, the snapshot – a rhetorical form that promotes identification with the subjects depicted – and documentary modes of forensic disclosure that may cause us to recoil at the sight of appalling conditions in the apartment. The work is destabilizing as it produces in viewers the messiness of affective responses arising in conflict with each other.

Cumming's video works demonstrate a complex relationship to issues of truth and fiction. As Peggy Gale suggests, "his characters are real but they are also performers [and that] Cumming has shaped some facts for his own purposes, or concealed certain issues and connections."[6] In *Culture*, the premise of looking for Coombs's cheque-book leads Cumming to eventually discover an envelop containing a packet of photographs that he took of Nelson Coombs, Joyce Donnison and other friends who will be identified in the title credits at the end of the piece. The revelation of the photographs appears to be a serendipitous discovery, but it could just as easily be a dramatic set-up, orchestrated to bring us to the video's climatic conclusion. Finding a subject of opportunity for reflection on the past, the packet of photographs completes a narrative arch initiated by the snapshot in the opening stanza and invites speculation on the photograph as that which may inadvertently memorialize community while confounding time in a particular way. Cumming brings to the lens one image after another: photographs of his friends, associates, accomplices, and social gatherings. In this context, the presentation of the photograph within the frame of the video camera calls to mind the memorial convention of photographs within photographs. The very syntax of the photograph within a photograph, or in this case a photograph within a video frame, intermixes past and present temporalities and attests to what Roland Barthes considered to be the essential *noeme* of photography: "That-has-been."[7] Most provocative in relation to images of the dead, is the paradox of experiencing the "thereness" of the photographic subject at a moment that is coincident with the realization that they cannot be here again. Just such a paradoxical display of chronological dislocation completes the video as time structures run in reverse. Time moves backwards as Coombs's signature in the elusive cheque-book is sucked back into the pen with which he writes, erased from the record and made to disappear. An epitaph to Nelson Coombs follows, as the disappearance of the signature prefigures the disappearance of the man in this video based eulogy.

Acts of loss and disappearance can suddenly transform any social image into a commemorative image. In *Culture*, photographs previously produced in a context far removed from where they are now encountered, return full circle, and are inscribed into a seemingly incidental memorial work. Like the snapshot that suddenly becomes strange in the opening frames of the video, this is a work that traffics in unstable forms, where revulsion is juxtaposed with tribute and where looking for a cheque-book becomes another way of not finding easy conclusions or, in the disappearing signature of Nelson Coombs, another way of not finding closure.

In *Locke's Way*, Cumming references questions of knowing and of comprehension by citing the name of English philosopher John Locke (1632-1704). As an empiricist, Locke espoused the concept of the mind as a blank slate or a *tabula rasa* on which could be written the experiences gained through one's sense perception. Chapter 10 of Locke's, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) investigates memory and retention. Memory is described as the storehouse of our ideas with "the power to revive again in our minds those

ideas which after imprinting, have disappeared, or have been as it were laid aside out of sight."[8] While Locke considered sensory imprinting as a means to reveal the secrets of human understanding, Cumming turns to the indexical imprinting of light onto the photographic surface as a means to revive and retain the life history of his brother Julien (referred to as "Jerry" in the video). The video begins with an ending of sorts, a photograph of an older woman in her coffin. While holding this photograph up to the video camera Cumming pronounces, "This is the end [...] that was the end. But there was a beginning. Here is the beginning, with him and her." The photograph of the dead woman has been replaced with one of a mother and child. Between the death of the woman and the birth of the child, Cumming will reveal the inevitable failure of memory in reconstructing the history of Jerry, his older brother.

The tension between memory and history plays out architecturally in the video as Cumming continuously runs back and forth from the top floor of a home where Jerry's medical history is recorded to the basement where the photographic memories are stored. Cumming's frantic and darkly humorous oscillation back and forth between the top and bottom floors is a race between two ways of knowing that uses an architectural parable to juxtapose the blind spots of official documentation upstairs against the partial memory of the vernacular photographs in the basement. Downstairs, the sifting through photographs of Jerry goes on as Cumming continually supplants the photographic evidence with his own recollections of Jerry's life. The past is not in the photographs; however fragmented memories may be subjectively triggered by the pictures, that is, until a memory block is reached. At that point, the reactive camera breaks loose and the race backup to the top floor is repeated, as the search for clues in the medical records to explain Jerry's condition begins all over again. The journey up and down the staircase is repeated eight times through the video. Memories unleashed by the photographs in the basement become jumbled. Cumming runs upstairs as if to gain perspective, only to turn around and head back down the stairs again. "Go downstairs and figure this out [...] get back to the bottom, there's got to be a bottom!" The camera records every step of the traumatic return: a metonymic footpath of sorts is apparent on the worn staircase, visually underlining the repetitive circulation of unanswered questions. Every now and then a dog enters the frame, and looking back at Cumming it scrambles to get out of the way. Wryly humorous, the dog is a reminder of the incidental, the quotidian and of the artist's life out of frame and on the other side of the performative.

Functioning as if in a loop or repetition compulsion of obsessed behaviour, it is important to note that when memory breaks down, the power to revive memory is presumed to be located elsewhere, first upstairs and then down, but always in a space off-frame. Christian Metz suggests that: "The spectator of the photograph has no empirical knowledge of the contents of the off-frame but at the same time cannot help imaging some off-frame, hallucinating it, dreaming it."[9] Metz calls this a "projective off-frame" and in these terms the off-frame of the photograph can be understood as a subjective space pointing to an experience beyond itself. The off-frame of the photograph is always already beyond what is here and now, and beyond what we are capable of grasping by way of the evidential record.

In *Locke's Way*, Cumming's family photographs hold their secrets and disrupt attempts by Cumming to read into them a set of causal relations of certainty for those depicted. The

video's voice-over does not adhere to the authoritative certainty of the traditional "voice-of-God" soundtrack in which the images become illustrative of a dominating point of view. Instead, Cumming's voice-over creates a countervailing experience of the artist's quest that is fraught with uncertainty, blocked connections in the interstices of the photographs presented and the sense that Cumming makes of them. At times, the narrative constructs a credible and close reading of what might be discernable in the image, but this correspondence is short lived, as Cumming is just as likely to blurt out associative streams of unseen and invisible family secrets – speculative assertions concerning Jerry's familial relations that only a family member could know. For example, following a repeated assertion that Jerry was abandoned by the family at Saranac Lake, a photograph of the mother is held before the video camera: "I think she was so guilty about that she never got over it." Similarly, a mug shot of a young Jerry and his sister: "His sister was always embarrassed by him, still is, still is." Cumming's reactive camera records in multiple dimensions at once, recording what is in front of the lens as well as what is behind it by way of guilt and embarrassment. There is also the anxiety that accompanies the uncertainty of understanding Jerry's condition and the irrational speculation that this leads to. These moments of breakdown in the rational order are signaled by the "chipmunk" voices. Not the sense-making rationality of traditional narration, but a voice of doubt, disembodied, frantic and equivalent to the nonsense sounds of a speeded up tape. As in *Culture*, the piece concludes with a breakdown in the temporal order but instead of time running in reverse, the fast forward irrationality of the chipmunk speech concludes with images of mother and father and son, held sideways in the frame as the audio slows down into an exhausted drone. Cumming's family photographs may come with memories attached, but they are modified and transformed by the artist into extended forms of critical engagement that provide partial and difficult access to the subjects that they depict.

NOTES

1 Quoted in Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 40.

2 See Martha Langford for critical reaction to Cumming's photography project, *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography*, in "Donigan Cumming: Crossing Photography's Chalk Lines" in *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 2006), 14.

3 Robert Enright and Donigan Cumming, "Endgames: Donigan Cumming's Subverted Narratives," Interview by Robert Enright" *BorderCrossings*, Issue No. 94 (2005), 20-31.

4 Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 76-77.

5 See Peggy Gale, "Touching on Donigan Cumming" in *Lying Quiet* (Toronto: Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, 2004), 6.

6 Ibid., 4.

7 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 77.

8 I thank Jonathan Bordo for drawing my attention to this passage. See *Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Book II: On Retention* (available as of March 2011 at http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/locke/locke1/contents2.html).

9 Christian Metz, "Photography and Fetish" in Carol Squires (Ed.), *The Critical Image: Essays on Contemporary Photography* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990), 161.

Moments of Photography and The Absoluteness of Loss

(Notes on *Voice: off*)

BY SOLOMON NAGLER AND CRAIG RODMORE

"I decided I liked photography in opposition *to the cinema, from which I nonetheless failed to separate it."*

—ROLAND BARTHES

"The crude real will not by itself yield truth."

—ROBERT BRESSON

HAIKU

Gerald Harvey, whose voice box has been taken out, composes an adventitious haiku in the notebook he carries with him:

"Horse meat"
"She has bad food here"
"I took it"

He is outdoors with the artist Donigan Cumming. A moment earlier we saw the same man seated on a bed; speaking with a humming voice synthesizer the model read from letters between American Civil War generals Grant and Lee: "It is reported to me that there are wounded men . . . lying exposed and suffering. . ." Before that, video stills: clothed, sitting on a bed with a dog; the face in close up, eyes shut. And before that, naked, embraced by another old body, the man's dark skin against Gerry's translucent white, faces pressed together, the cinematographer Cumming circling them, struggling to capture a panoptic view of his waltzing subjects, stretching the document out into a space unachievable in still photographs.

The stark, rudimentary video lacks the cinematic poetic of Cumming's still photographs.

Already in these opening moments it is manic, fragmented, vacillating and desperate. To jarring effect, the awkward frozen time of inserted stills is paired against sped-up video that flies through a labyrinth of thin-walled assisted living apartments; photographs are obsessed over and discarded in fast-forward, voice-over transformed into unintelligible high-pitched babble. In this panicked montage, contrary forms of duration are set against one another; photographs long to move while the video camera dwells on still photographs in a visceral exploration of the antinomy between photography and cinema. The introductory haiku is a divisible index of situations. Fragments are strewn throughout the work. Time will be sculpted, cut-up, rearranged and put on trial. Cumming, in voice-over: "We wanted to start kind of at the beginning; we ended up starting at the end."

CUTS

Hollis Frampton explains the work of the photographer in a memorable analogy: "A butcher," he writes, "using only a knife, reduces a raw carcass to edible meat. He does not *make* the meat, because that was always in the carcass; he makes 'cuts' (dimensionless entities) that section flesh and separate it from the bone." The work of the photographer, Frampton tells us, is to make "cuts" in time and space. These cuts, too, are dimensionless, in a sense; more accurately, they tarry in a duration that is imperceptible to our eye, that is, in fact, something outside our consciousness—is the revelation, in Walter Benjamin's famous phrase, of an "optical unconscious": "Whereas it is a commonplace," Benjamin writes, "that, for example, we have some idea what is involved in the act of walking, if only in general terms, we have no idea at all what happens during the fraction of a second when a person *steps out*. Photography, with its devices of slow motion and enlargement, reveals the secret." It is to the infinitesimal duration of the photographic exposure—to the logic of the cut—that we owe the revelations of Marey, Muybridge, and others and the rhetoric of the "decisive moment."

The camera's capacity to freeze time, the stasis of the photograph, is obscured in motion pictures through the processes of recording and projection. In the moving image of the cinema, an advancement which appeared some seventy years after the still photograph and which reproduces with far greater fidelity our own vision, our own experience, "everything which happens within the frame dies absolutely once this frame is passed beyond," writes Roland Barthes. "When we define the photograph as a motionless image, this does not mean only that the figures it represents do not move; it means that they do not *emerge*, do not *leave*: they are anesthetized and fastened down, like butterflies." The reactions of those who first viewed the Lumières' *actualités* provide ample evidence of the cinema's terrific verisimilitude. Yet in the cinema, "the photograph, taken in flux, is impelled, ceaselessly drawn toward other views" and as such "it does not cling to me: it is not a *specter*."

ARREST

The photographer, in making cuts, hopes to extract certain instants from the ceaseless, ineluctable current of time, to arrest and preserve things that otherwise will never be seen again or which would not have been seen at all. When Robert Bresson, in his *Notes on the Cinematographer*, tells himself to "Make visible what, without you, might perhaps never have been seen," he gives voice to a fundamental photographic imperative, a conceit

that we find in a thousand iterations: just as Walker Evans thought, when photographing, "there's a wonderful secret here and I can capture it. Only I can do it at this moment, only this moment and only me," Diane Arbus sensed that she, too, had "some slight corner on something about the quality of things": "I really believe," she said, "there are things which nobody would see unless I photographed them." And when Arbus photographed poverty, illness, and deformity in South Carolina "as well as Walker Evans," Studs Terkel told her: "You saw what Walker Evans saw." That we might see what they saw is the goal. The more the photographer wants to preserve, the more cuts must be made. The hyperproduction of Winogrand's final years in Los Angeles, during which developing and editing gave way entirely to compulsive recording, is the quintessential example.

According to a reflection by Proust, "a photograph acquires something of the dignity which it ordinarily lacks when it ceases to be a reproduction of reality and shows us things that no longer exist." The hope which we invest in the photographic act is precisely this antidote to the vicissitudes of time: that what is fleeting or perishable might remain with us forever, undiminished, if we are fortunate enough to photograph it. Barthes, in a morbid twist, speaks instead of "the return of the dead" and notes: "my attention is distracted from her by accessories which have perished; for clothing is perishable, it makes a second grave for the loved being."

THE POSE (DEATH)

For Barthes, "what founds the nature of photography is the pose. The physical duration of this pose is of little consequence. . . ." The pose transforms the nature of the subject. In being photographed, Barthes observes, "I constitute myself in the process of 'posing,' I transform myself in advance into an image. This transformation is an active one: I feel that the Photograph creates my body or mortifies it, according to its caprice." In this moment—a fleeting moment that accompanies the infinitesimal duration of the exposure—he is "neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a specter." Thus in the photographic pose—the pose that is not merely struck for a photograph but produced by the photograph, by the striking of the subject by the action of photography—we find an inversion of the sad spectacle of "death imitating life imitating death" that Caillois observed in the praying mantis which, after death, continues to carry on the actions of life, including the imitation of death. In the mortification of the photographic pose we find life imitating death imitating life.

In the photograph the subject is executed, but in death its beauty is preserved: that particular beauty which is not revealed by our gaze, no matter how long we look, but on the contrary emerges from—owes its existence to—instantaneity, to the reflex mechanical-chemical process of photography: "What no human eye is capable of catching, no pencil, brush, pen of pinning down," Bresson writes, "your camera catches without knowing what it is, and pins it down with a machine's scrupulous indifference."

MOMENTS OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Manic switch: now a towering voice demanding perverse poses, now directorial supplica-

tion. The pose is brought to our attention by the boisterous directions employed to produce it, an exploitative gesture that calls into question all acts of portraiture. The shadow of Donigan Cumming's work in still photography is cast upon the filmed situations in his videos when he shifts from cinematographer to director, breaking into a spasm of instructions for precise movement and expression, for the minutia of detail one normally observes only in photographs. These moments suggest an urge to make moving images still—to reproduce in life and subsequently record on video the mortification of gesture that is produced automatically by the still photograph. Imposing photographic vision onto the situation, Cumming violently evinces the tension between the natural and the staged that is endemic in the photographic portrait (Sayre), the tension Barthes feels as "a sensation of inauthenticity," when he finds that he is "neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object," when, posing, he finds himself in the process of "becoming a specter" (both spectre and corpse: he speaks at the same time of being "embalmed" by the gesture of the photographer).

In the photograph, it is the awkward gesture, the inarticulate pose, the product of an instant, that strikes us. Arbus, who was also compelled to record outcasts, cast-offs, and misfits ("because," she said, "they will have been so beautiful"), speaks of capturing something "between gesture and repose." Lacking the dignified permanence of the subjects of early photographs, who were required to remain still for relatively long exposures and who perhaps were not used to seeing themselves in pictures, the amateur, the ordinary person, in posing, inevitably fails: under the scrutiny of the camera one invariably becomes an Arbus subject, or, in Barthes's phrase, "a criminal type." In the cinematic continuum, on the other hand, "the pose is swept away and denied" (Barthes). With Cumming, video images are arranged into photographic moments or moments of photography. In his video portraits we are presented with the before and after of the photographic moment, the duration from which it is excerpted; instead of the still photographer's delicate "cuts," we are confronted with the carcass—whole, unwieldy, inelegant. His attempts to sculpt and form the gestures of those whose movements are hindered, spasmodic, blissfully uncontrollable extend the photographic gesture into the duration of the cinema—the duration of experience—but as the pose fails, the fleeting images become immobile, become photography. In his preference for models over actors—models whose performances are forced, awkward, sometimes ecstatic, other times expressionless—Cumming's approach is Bressonian: neither cinema nor photography, but "cinematography." Like Bresson's, his models are both acting and being: "divinely themselves," their performances glow with the aura of the photographic "that has been."

INSPECTION

In the attempt to see more, to save more, the move from still to moving image proves useless. In reducing video to photographic moments, motion pictures to stills, it would seem that the possibility of scrutiny returns. The photograph shows us a great deal—we notice in photographs much more than we can see when we look with our eyes—and in arresting an image, seizing it from the baffling flux, it might become as legible as a picture (we are told that Arbus "often invited people to her apartment in order to 'scrutinize them'"; she also liked to photograph the blind: unable to return the gaze, like the medicated and mentally ill, they can be scrutinised freely—in the flesh as in a photograph). But the photograph

does not give itself up to scrutiny for long. "If you look at something long enough," Warhol said, "I've discovered that the meaning goes away." This observation makes plain the impossibility of finding what we are looking for in pictures.

In *Voice: off* (2003), we see a photographer panicked by the limits of photographic duration, with photographs as silent crypts that keep their secrets. The intractable reality of the "that has been" has been banished to the basement of his house, where a forlorn exploration of family photographs that could only be transformed by the "drawer or the wastebasket" (Barthes) takes place. Jumbling personal histories, he retrieves and studies the photographs and casts his models in a failed resurrection. There is a mystery to be solved. Gerry will play the part of Cumming's estranged brother, taken away from the family at a young age for fear that growing up with a mentally ill brother would spoil the carefree childhoods of him and his siblings. Time will be carved up, rearranged, with attempts at stasis: "We wanted to start kind of at the beginning; we ended up starting at the end." Running up and down the stairs of his house, withdrawing to the second-floor space of solitude and contemplation and then racing downstairs to an archive of images in the basement—the site of roots, dirt, and dreams (Bachelard)—confronted with the meagre results of photographic cutting, Cumming is faced not only with the impossibility of coming to conclusions ("You can't put anything to it," he says) but the uselessness of such conclusions were they attainable. This shambles represents a double failure in the photographic impulse: first, the failure of the act, the vain attempt to record everything, from all angles, at every moment; second, the failure of the fantasy, the hopelessness, if such a document could be produced, of drawing from it what one wanted. In the same way, the cinematographer and his models dwell on the irreparable errors and contingencies of the past: old slippers that may have caused the old woman's fall; the father's fall "while Julian was watching him."

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In a climactic sequence, Cumming goes in search of a cigarette burn left by his dead model Albert: the "burn that Albert made when he collapsed on his sofa with his lit cigarette"—a burn made by the cigarette that fell from his hand or mouth after death, a spirit stain, a humble death shadow leaving a modest mark. Three video stills show the burn mark, three different views; by counting the tiles it is possible to locate it in the apartment. Cumming presents the stills to an old woman, explaining the objective and the method. (The contrast between them is striking: her resignation—"that's all gone in the garbage," "I don't know if we're allowed in," "they would stop us from going in," and "if they rip up the tiles it's too late"—and his agency, the privilege of the socially adept, the able, the powerful—"Who's down there and gonna stop us?" and "Let's get down there before they do it.") Six years after the fatal heart attack, Cumming locates the burn and places the prints on the floor, representations pinwheeling around the original mark, the latter's imminent erasure signalled by the deafening noise of jackhammers, building renovations closing in on all that remains of a man who stepped lightly on the earth.

The urge to locate the burn is the same one that motivates the photographer to make cuts: the veneration of the index, the trace, and the desperate desire to preserve it. "The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent," writes Barthes. "From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the

transmission is insignificant." (This the pathos of the erased faces in Bellocq's photographs of prostitutes in New Orleans: the erasure is an interruption in the present, that is always present.) The spell of the trace motivates the desperate search for answers within the image. For Barthes, this trace is alchemical: "If photography belonged to a world with some residual sensitivity to myth, we should exult over the richness of the symbol: the loved body is immortalized by the mediation of a precious metal, silver . . . to which we might add the notion that this metal, like all the metals of Alchemy, is alive." Inferring the same connection between reproductive technologies and the supernatural, Bresson gives the process another name: "DIVINATION—how can one not associate that name with the two sublime machines I use for my work? Camera and tape recorder carry me far away from the intelligence which complicates everything."

"I took it"
"She has bad food here"
"Horse meat"

"We wanted to start kind of at the beginning; we ended up starting at the end."

Cinema shows us something that corresponds to our own experience of time and space, and appears to us as unnatural only when stopped, sped up, or reversed. Still photographs neither reproduce our usual experience of time nor extend it: they stop it dead, showing us precisely what we *do not* see. In the stutters and hesitations of Bressonian cinematography, we see photographs emerging from the flux of images. An old disappointment—that so little can be recovered from these moments of photography—is the source of *Voice: off*'s anxious perplexity.

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The Social Life of Things

BY MARCY GOLDBERG

When I first saw Donigan Cumming's *Too Many Things* (2010) last year, my initial response was: but what happened to the people? I was surprised – disappointed, even – not to be reunited with the cast of characters I had come to know from Donigan's previous work. Colin, Colleen, Nelson, Susan, Marty, Albert, Joyce, and all the rest: the people that my film festival colleagues and I had come to refer to affectionately as "the family," when we put together a retrospective at Visions du réel in Nyon, Switzerland in 2002 of the films up to that date, starting with *A Prayer for Nettie* (1995). Edgy portraits of all-too-human characters, who are strangely compelling in spite, or perhaps because, of their weaknesses, frailties, personal traumas and failures. These films seemed to be first and foremost about human relationships: about the protagonists' friendships, love affairs and conflicts with each other; about their seemingly easygoing rapport with Donigan, and their obvious enjoyment in appearing before his camera and being goaded by him into producing daringly revealing performances. A precarious balance between the theatre of cruelty and sudden acts of kindness; magnificent staging, tinged with the shock of the real.

And then: a sudden shift to a world of things. An enormous warehouse filled with discarded objects for resale. Unlike the previous films, which often begin with disquieting closeups of their characters, opens in an impersonal way, with circular panoramas of the cityscape seguing into a long travelling shot of driving through a tunnel, and coming to rest on closeups of toys on a concrete floor. (The film is also interspersed with animated sequences; but that's another story.) We hear men's voices offscreen, talking about these discarded old playthings; we see their hands as they pick up the objects. But the closeup of a face that follows belongs to a creepy rubber doll, not a human.

Later we see the men as they sit together and swap anecdotes about the objects around them. A new cast of characters: unfamiliar faces, people whose names we don't know, whose main function seems to be to set off the objects surrounding them. They engage mostly in casual male banter, kidding around. No personal tragedies, traumatic memories, drunken or senile ramblings. Instead, there is the flotsam of consumer society: sports trophies, outdated children's toys and household devices, anachronistic electronic equipment, winter coats, rows of dishes and books. A public warehouse, brightly lit. Not the dim intimacy of private living spaces, often disturbing in their squalor but sometimes strangely cosy.

A troubling question: did the family fade out of Donigan's work because so many of its members have died? If so, this would certainly be a logical consequence of filming the elderly, the infirm, the mentally ill. A partial explanation, perhaps. But as it turns out, not the most important one. Sometimes, in creating a new work that seems to be a radical departure from what went before, an artist throws new light on previous works. A motif that had lain hidden in the background all along is suddenly brought into sharp focus. When I asked Donigan about the seeming transition from people to things in his recent work – already foreshadowed in *3* (2007) and *Monument* (2008) – he pointed out that the things had been there from the beginning, alongside the people, and usually in relation to them.

Indeed, the focus on details has always been an integral part of Donigan's approach: close-ups, fragments, moments, glimpses – and things, as vital clues. The way his characters live is reflected not only in their stories and their interactions with Donigan and with each other. It is also illustrated by the objects surrounding them. *My Dinner with Weegee* (2001) contains these lines: "Time improves nothing. Decline, fracture and loss mark everyone's passage." All the films are stamped by this ambivalent fascination with aging, absence, death, decay, the passage of time and the traces left by the departed.

Things are also a crucial part of the narrative, helping to tell the stories of the characters' lives. In *Culture* (2002), for instance, Donigan rummages through Nelson's apartment, rifling through the drawers to find his friend's passport. Amid the squalor of the abandoned flat, he uncovers a collection of photos testifying to Nelson's past and to the work they'd done together. In *if Only I* (2000) he chronicles Colleen's ambivalence about her life not only in interviews, but by juxtaposing the things she needs for her physical care, like medication and diapers, with her compulsive grooming habits and meticulous application of makeup. In *My Dinner with Weegee*, Marty's trembling hands reaching for a beer bottle seem to summarize his cynicism, disappointment and defeat, in sharp contradiction to the flashes of delight when he sang along to old songs.

Fountain (2005), which is structured as a resumé of the "family" characters through little vignettes, focuses on often unappetizing physical details, such as toothless mouths, sagging genitals, protruding navels, misshapen feet, and unidentified wrinkled body parts. But it also focuses on things. Beer bottles, vials of prescription drugs, picture frames, photographs, dirty dishes, cigarette butts, banknotes and coins, Christmas decorations, playing cards, mattresses and, alongside the claustrophobic interiors, equally claustrophobic outdoor locations like graveyards, concrete underpasses, and hospital corridors.

In commodity theory, the study of things serves to analyse underlying societal relationships and economic structures. In the attempt to uncover a culture's structures and rituals, the ethnographer interrogates artifacts, utensils, objects from everyday life and their festive counterpoints. Much had been made of Donigan's role as friend, caretaker, portraitist and sparring partner to the people in his films. But in fact he has also been their political economist, their ethnographer, and the curator and archivist of their personal collections of things. And ultimately, their philosopher of everyday life.

With *Too Many Things* Donigan segues from a focus on addiction, mental illness, old age and marginality to more general questions of mortality and the ephemeral. Here the things do not tell the characters' stories: each abandoned object in the warehouse is a reminder of a life story we cannot know. This is the more detailed exposition of a motif already explored in *Monument*, where he was inspired by an envelope with a sticker saying "Return to sender, deceased since 6 years" to create a memorial to the dead man he never knew. An artificial flower sculpture made of tissue paper and wire, wood and string is handed around, an ironic burial ritual is staged. The explanation, such as it is, comes in an intertitle: "Memories and fantasies keep objects alive. The flower has lost its utility. The cancelled address is the new monument."

Wrap

INTRODUCTION TO THE SCRIPT

My tapes are all improvised. Only occasionally does a text guide the action, and then it's obvious – the characters read from pieces of paper or repeat memorized scraps of poetry, speeches, or songs. Kathleen Fleming who did the French sub-titling for my videos frequently mentioned how many words there were in my tapes. She enjoyed all the words, but it was a challenge to spot or accurately place the sub-titles. I found myself very intrigued with the results and began to wonder what it would be like to character this stream of time coded dialogue and go even further by describing the shots as they had happened. I wanted to build scripts that could be re-cast and shot.

- DONIGAN CUMMING

Following from his interest in human communication and in objects, in spontaneity and structure, documentary and drama, Donigan Cumming has taken his singular approach to documentary performance from photography through video to encaustic on wood panel – as in the monumental *Prologue* and *Epilogue* (both 2005), where the greatest mass of imagery came from reproductions of the photographic series *The Stage* (1990) combined with an estimated one hundred video grabs – and to the page. That Cumming's characters perform versions of themselves, "reciting" as much as "speaking" their minds, has been discussed in a number of critical essays about his work. His practice of "reverse engineering" his videos into scripts for future performance and recording, however, has received far less attention. In its technical sense, reverse engineering refers to the taking apart of an object to see how it works, often to duplicate or adapt it for future use. Reverse engineering involves approaching the object in question by working backwards from the completed object to the origins of its design; or, alternatively, from technical documents to construction to simulation.

Since 2005, Cumming has reverse engineered all of his work in video up to and including *Fountain* (2005). Five video scripts, edited with the support of Erin Silver and Mike Hoolboom, have been published on Cumming's website: *Cut the Parrot* (1996), *After Brenda* (1997), *Wrap* (2000), *if only I* (2000), and *My Dinner with Weegee* (2001). In the case of the approximately three-minute *Wrap*, a video that, as Christian Bovey puts it, "stutters," Cumming has found a fascinating performance-object for the reverse engineering treatment. The script transcribes not only Gordie's (Gordon Verge) performatively stammered "testimony" about violence in a prison cell necessitating the emergency application of Saran Wrap to his wounds, but also the unwinding and stuttering of the apparently damaged audio and video recording equipment. In *Wrap*, contingency and chance, accident and glitch, difference and repetition, become destiny and fate.

- SCOTT BIRDWISE

Wrap

BY DONIGAN CUMMING

Characters

Gordie
Gordon Verge, a man in his late forties

Gerry
Gerry Harvey, a man in his late sixties

Donigan
Donigan Cumming, a fifty-two-year-old man with a camcorder

FADE IN

INT CLOSE SHOT GERRY AND GORDIE'S ROOM GORDIE DAY

GORDIE sits with his back to the window, his worn face haloed by unkempt, curly hair. He wears a blue patterned flannel shirt. There is an acid green cast to his skin. Cigarette smoke rises in the background. As the hand-held camera holds on his face, the room's vertical window blinds are reflected in the lens, creating a striped pattern over his left eye. Low asynchronous sound of a MAN SPEAKING

GORDIE
(stuttering)

The, the guards must have seen something ... because they, they come in and they, they, they, they took him out and, and, and, and, and, and, and, and then, and then they called me out and they told me to turn around and my shirt, my shirt was all...

GERRY COUGHS (OS)

GORDIE (cont'd)

...all full of, all full of blood and they took me over to the, to the, to the healthcare and, and they, and they wrapped me all up, all up in Saran Wrap and, and then they took me to the hospital. (Clears his throat)

The camera tracks out, then the scene runs in reverse, with the smoke in the background falling.
Asynchronous monologue, with distortion, hiss, and crackling.

GORDIE (VO)
(stuttering)

I, I walked out because, because I couldn't take it ... but then I couldn't live with myself, and myself ... so I come, I come back out and I told him. I said, "Hey," I said, "why don't you just live and let live. Everything was going okay before you

got here". And, and then, then I turned and he come, he come over to me and he said, "Do you, do you, do you know what I'm in here for". And, and I said, "No, I, I don't care". And, and he, he, he said, "I'm in here for killing a white man just, just like you".

The scene abruptly REPEATS. Gordie's first monologue runs synchronously at full volume, with a second track of the same monologue mixed in softly underneath.

GORDIE (VO in sync)
(stuttering)

The, the guards must have seen something ... because they, they come in and they, they, they, they took him out and, and, and, and, and, and, and, and then, and then they called me out and they told me to turn around and my shirt, my shirt was all, all full of, all full of blood and they took me over to the, to the, to the healthcare and, and they, and they wrapped me all up, all up in Saran Wrap and, and then they took me to the hospital.

The camera tracks out, then the scene runs in reverse, with the smoke in the background falling.

GORDIE (VO - distortion, hiss, and crackling)
(stuttering)

... and they took me over to the, to the, to the healthcare and, and they, and they wrapped me all up, all up in Saran Wrap and, and then they took me to the hospital.

The scene is reversed, including the sound which becomes incomprehensible. BAD DISTORTION, BAD HISS, BAD CRACKLING. Freeze frame of Gordie with eyes closed.

DONIGAN (OS)
I'm going to put a light on you this time.

Territorial Anxieties

An Interview with Donigan Cumming

CONDUCTED VIA EMAIL OVER FEBRUARY AND MARCH 2011

Scott Birdwise (SB): In 1995 you made *A Prayer for Nettie*, a video memorial for your deceased model, Nettie Harris. In 2010 you made *Too Many Things*, an investigation into what you have called "the world of objects – their accumulation and dispersal – and their creation of communities of curiosity." In the fifteen years between these two works you have created and described a kind of community of people and things in varying forms of distress – energized, in a way, by this very distress. Bearing in mind the "Afterword" to the book *Lying Quiet* (2004) where you conclude, "There is no clear story to tell about my video work, nor would I tell it if there were," I want to ask: In the context of your artistic practice, how does a community – of people and things – form without the neatness and comfort of narrative, without a clear story to tell? What kind of a community has taken shape in your work in the last fifteen years?

Donigan Cumming (DC): First, the recipe for gathering a community together and focusing on a task without the crutch of narrative is to seek out players and things that have lives in the present – episodic humans prone to moving through time in a state of continuous serious play and volatile "objects" with no easily discernable agency. That doesn't mean that the humans involved live without a plan or "story" but that they are open to chance in ways that the more programmatic are not. Once a group is established, the circle drawn in the sand, the perimeter mapped, then off you go. Everything flows from present action to present action. No destination until arrival.

The communities encountered in my work are riven with and driven by happenstance. Why should I try to force them into neat and comforting narrative structures? What if these very structures were actually instruments of control with manipulative, sometimes vengeful connections to the actual facts? Much of what we call "documentary film" is simply (and harmfully) a means of accumulating currency in the economy of human affairs. Important stories are told through my work, but my characters and I seem pre-disposed to refuse the ordinary traffic of narrative.

SB: So the conventional documentary film, or ordinary traffic of narrative, perpetuates a (false) sense of consensus, or destination, or identity, where none in fact exists. Would it be

fair to say that your work is better characterized by disagreement?

DC: There is certainly disagreement, though it might be helpful to think about the work that disagreement is doing. A good example occurs in *if only I* (2000), when I ask Colin about the feelings that seem to be developing between him and Colleen, and Colin accuses me of trying to make a happy-ever-after-romance out of the crisis in Colleen's life. What is revealing to audiences – I know this from talking to them – is the combination of things taking place in the scene. Colin's loud display of contempt for me and his authoritative sense of what should be the subject of this film encounters Colleen's quiet acceptance of the possibility that Colin is in love with her. In a later scene, she will go on to say what that means, which is being coerced into sex when she doesn't feel like it. In the first scene, I appear to be trying to force a narrative template onto the situation, I get my head bitten off, and other stuff emerges, in part because Colleen knows that a film is being made and that a film should have a happy ending. Colin has his version of what that might be, so does Colleen, and so do I: three characters, three different versions, each thick with perceptions of what is going on when a camera is pulled out of a bag. The disagreement experienced by the audience is in the content and in the form.

I've also tried to improvise or respond to scenes that have no apparent narrative content at all. One is the scene featuring two characters, Geoffrey and Gerry, in *Voice: off* (2003). They're in a small room, silently shuffling around the space and each other – no "storytelling" here, they are aimless and mute. The camera follows them for several minutes and cuts just as one of them appears about to speak. This scene is driven by a refusal to narrate.

I think these two scenes – one of disagreement and resolution; the other of enforced proximity and false harmony – unveil some of the tools that are used to build up a narrative in a film or video. I'm actually kind of sympathetic to those tools. They're useful in creating illusions and destroying them. I'm not the first to think that documentary in all its forms is a kind of fiction. Its tools are theatrical. To get back to your question, implanting disagreement or doubt in my video work is crucial to getting the audience to engage critically with what they are watching. Perhaps some of that spreads to their reception of other, more traditionally structured work – that would be nice, but I can't be sure.

SB: Can you explain a bit more about what you mean by the term "character," and how it works in relation to the episodic? It seems that you are also often a kind of character in the work, more explicitly in *Docu-Duster* (2001) perhaps, but also in the others in different ways – a kind of hardboiled detective in *Cut the Parrot* (1996) possibly?

DC: The characters are as I find them, when the process of making a video slices into their life. They are – because the process is – episodic to the core. I visit people. I drop in on their lives. I've been doing this with some of these folks for thirty years – you know what that's about, the conversation simply starts as though we'd been together yesterday. Living the kinds of lives some of these characters live, their chapters are framed by rooms they've lived in, a particular social worker who was nice to them, a fascist nurse who wasn't – these characters come and go in their lives as I do. Colin makes a point of telling me that on a number of occasions, before letting me off the hook. When I get into role-playing with Albert or Colin or any of the others, I frequently play some part of cheap authority. The social

worker, high on surveillance, in *Cut the Parrot*, is a good example. *After Brenda* (1997) has me in a number of sleuthing roles – I start out looking for Gerry because I want to make a film about him, I end up staring at the red panties that Brenda has apparently left behind. In that work, the social actor – I'm in a caretaking mode in a number of scenes – is infected by Pierre's multi-faceted paranoia and possessiveness for Brenda, feelings of desire that I, as filmmaker, was earlier expressing for Gerry. You could say there's a parallel – that's certainly my intention.

SB: Location and place, as well as dislocation and displacement, are important aspects of your work. From the various settings that the viewer is often uncomfortably thrown into to the fluidity of the handheld camera, it seems that one of your strategies or concerns is working with how one (a person, a filmmaker, a viewer) creates a sense of place. This has a long history in ethnographic film, going at least as far back as Edward Curtis through Robert Flaherty to Jean Rouch and beyond. Do you see your practice in relation to this ethnographic tradition?

DC: A background as a photographer has influenced how I react to location, place and my subjects. My shooting style is rooted in the photographic – it moves through spaces frame by frame; I'm always looking for the next shot; the result is a restless and curious camera that, when things are fluid, seems to have a life of its own, to be animate. A photographic background is good discipline for making improvisational video. One has to be prepared to go with the action – photography has no dictatorial voice-over. Additionally the still camera refuses to recognize the neutral backdrop – everything is symbolic – every space is a jumbled Pandora's box of experience and feeling. The rules of engagement are glaring and transparent – open every door and cupboard. Start with the refrigerator!

A handheld cam allows for these very photographic interactions. Even the lighting can be "curious," as in C*ulture* (2002) and *My Dinner with Weegee* (2001) when I shoot with a snake light around my neck. Scenes go to the Brechtian strange while staying firmly stuck to the ordinary day-to-day grit.

This type of exploratory shooting has been given a bad reputation by certain strains of ethnographic and social documentary film where the deck has been stacked to make the findings – ordinary circumstances for the subjects – into something new or exotic. I try to do the opposite by showing the interconnections between the circumstances or predicaments of the characters, and those of the viewers who are encouraged to recognize the on-screen characters as people they see everyday on the street. This stickiness is photographic, in terms of memory, but also imaginative, in terms of social interaction. I work in a social space where I expect the viewer to experience an imagined encounter with the person on screen. This is not an exotic creature, but a fellow pedestrian. In other words, it's not the bowels of Montreal that I'm trying to reveal, but the bowels of spectatorial uneasiness, and I'm not revealing them, as an ethnographic discovery, but twisting them. I would rather rattle than entrance. So I have a contrarian relationship with ethnographic film and enjoy keeping up with the ethical and epistemological trouble some of its esteemed practitioners have gotten into.

SB: While we're on the topic of spectatorial uneasiness, we should consider the presence of

theatre in your work. You mention Brecht, but there is of course also Beckett and Ionesco – the theatre of the absurd, broadly speaking, and the dismantling of the traditional structures of meaning in the theatre. Performance art also staged its attack on representation by way of bringing the lived body of the subject to the foreground. This aspect of performance art can be found in how your videos, often clothed in the epistemology of documentary, foreground your physical presence – your bodily locatedness – in the events you depict. I'm thinking here of, for example, *Locke's Way* (2003), where the exhaustion of your search for signs of your brother's disability manifests itself in a kind of Sisyphean gesture: breathing heavily, you run up and the down stairs. In the more recent video *Monument* (2008) you appear at the beginning crushing a pathetic looking paper flower in video slow motion, naked and without the camera in your hand. Is this scene another kind of implication of the body, in this case that of the documentary filmmaker, designed to generate spectatorial uneasiness? Is this a kind of theatre of the absurd?

DC: Are you suggesting that the theatrical is the wolf in sheep's clothing in documentary epistemology, in other words, that science and theatricality can't be combined? If so, are you not pining for the order of the "culinary effect" as Brecht might put it – fork on the left, knife on the right? We are taught to believe that theatricality startles, entertains, and excites, while science observes, collates and theorizes. But both seek to draw out invisible realities, and this is where they intersect. Most influential for me from science: James Clifford, Robert Gardner, Erving Goffman, Marcel Griaule, Jean Rouch, Michael Taussig; and from theatre: Antonin Artaud, Samuel Beckett, Bertolt Brecht, Eugène Ionesco, Harold Pinter . It seems to me that these groups have fed off of each other. Science has certainly drawn massively from theatre, most significantly with the dramaturgical approaches of Griaule and Goffman, and both camps work with a provoked reality, not a purely objective one, and both are comfortable with provisional understandings. I feel influenced by all of them. Creating uneasiness – a surreal unmanageable quality – in an audience is not the final goal. Rather it's a conditioning that leaves viewers more open to the realities of the figures they find represented and more receptive to the confusion in other lives. Such experiences can be overwhelming – I mean that in a positive way – and transformative – ditto. I think too that combining these approaches contributes to the political and ethical intent underlying all my work.

SB: Science and theatre are both involved in making something invisible visible. And I agree both science and theatre feed off one another, but they do seem to have different (social, political, technical) effects in terms of the different discursive structures in which they operate and in the ways in which they address their audiences. What I was trying to get at was how, in many and perhaps most cases, documentary epistemology presents itself as disembodied. And if the body (of the filmmaker, say) does make an appearance, it often is bound up with a kind of will to physically master the space. I feel that your work exposes this will to documentary mastery: the physical (and emotional) effort it takes to get a shot, to move in or through a space, to "capture" a subject or create a feeling. One might say that your work theatricalises this, and it consistently raises questions related to doubt and scepticism that are, again, often skirted in the conventional mechanics of the documentary. Are doubt and scepticism important to the political and ethical intent of your work? I ask because the videos generate – or provoke – intense feelings at the same time as, perhaps, in-

tellectual suspicion or self-reflexivity: they alert me to questions of metaphor, convention, and form at the same time as I think about the realities, plural, of your characters.

DC: You raise three distinct modes of reception: intense feelings, intellectual suspicion, and self-reflexivity. The last concerns me. If we're talking about audiences, I would tend to say "self-consciousness," rather than reflexivity. For me, reflexivity is the maker's mode – one I have tried to wear, while conscious of the possibility that reflexivity – or the time to reflect – is really a privilege. Accepting that doesn't make it any easier to achieve without sacrificing the very thing that creates spectatorial self-consciousness, which is the "encounter effect." The strategy of overt reflexivity tends to be used to undermine documentary positions, most obviously, the position of omniscience or objectivity. Still, there's a balance that has to be maintained between the desire to de-mystify and the urge to indulge in the opposite. On one hand, your audience has to be made aware of the "puppetmaster," and on the other, suspension of disbelief (here comes theatre again) also advances the plot. We can't forget that there are always two concurrent, sometimes competing projects: to show people to others (not "others" to people) and to keep everybody thinking about the epistemology of the work. An overriding rule: Never let the agent be forgotten. Norman Cohn's *Quartet for Deafblind* (1986) is a very moving and highly theatrical example of this. At the end of the piece, Cohn the omnipresent recorder gives the camera to the child and exposes the territorial anxieties behind everything that has gone before. Cohn's work shows that there is no such thing as the disembodied eye, or ear, in documentary film. Reflexivity is an addition to content – in the age of YouTube, none of this should come as a shock to audiences. What might interest them is to discover that Cohn, myself and others have been trying to represent implication for some time.

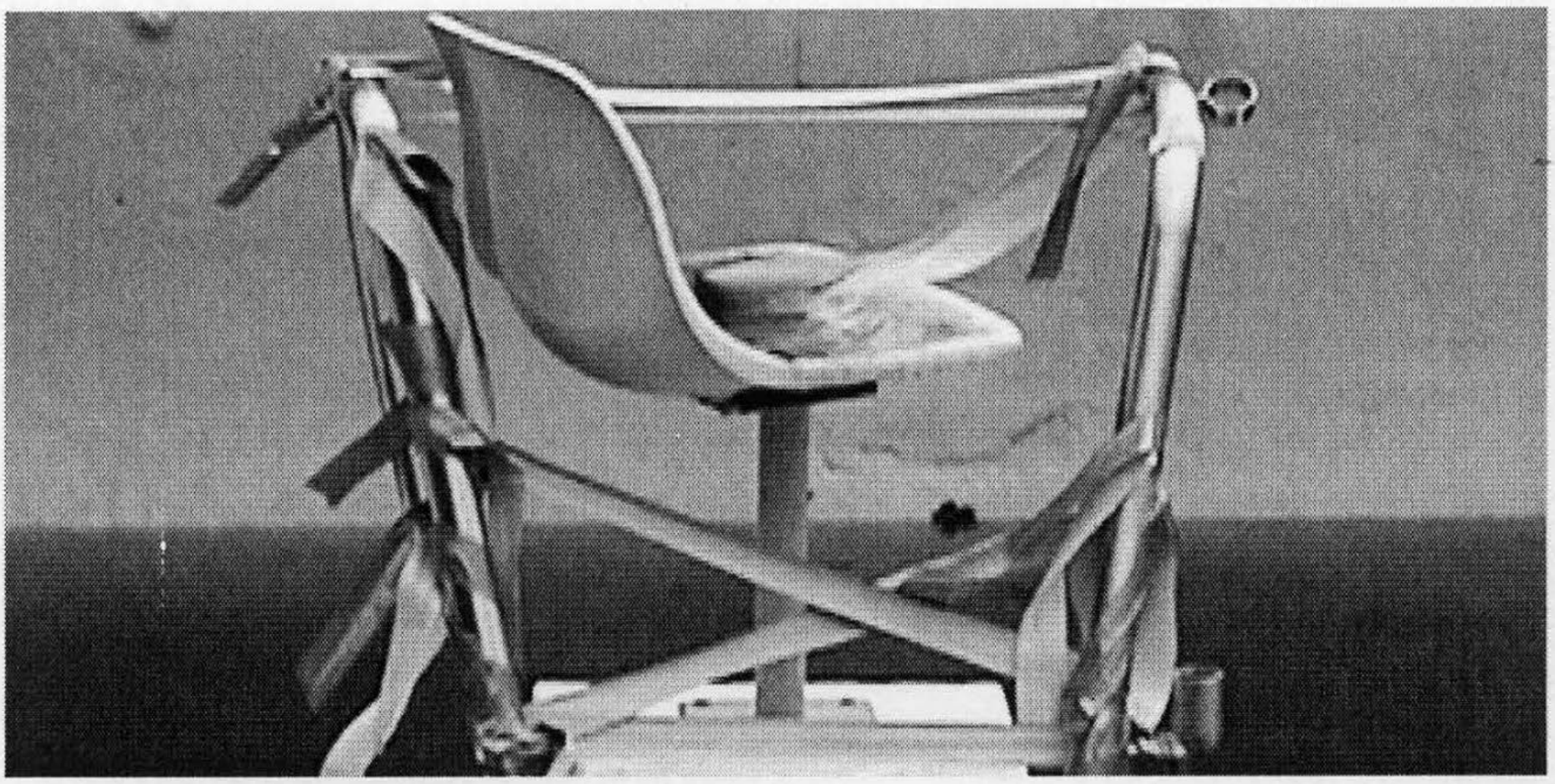
Documentary mastery is largely a matter of controlling your tools. If you're a well financed mainstream filmmaker, you have crews, equipment, editors, researchers, actors, interactive options, and so on, that allow you to dramatize and symbolize multiple points of view. Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991) is a useful example of what can be done with seemingly unlimited resources. The lesson for filmmakers is that if multiple vantage points and endless re-enactments offer the hope of secure knowledge, doubt and scepticism can't be far behind. If you're a lone wolf videographer, your tools are social skills, repetition and the crazy gymnastics of wielding a small camera in each hand.

SB: While it may seem odd or counterintuitive, it does appear that the more the body (the apparent site of the documentary "voice" before and/or behind the camera) is implicated, the more (latent) anxiety emerges – and this is very productive anxiety which can, as you say, help condition or open up viewers' spectatorial and/or social reflexes in terms of how they perceive other people. Now, we have discussed how you reflexively twist or turn the gaze of the social documentarian from the margins of Montreal to the viewer, thus taking them self-consciously "outside," or, from another angle, "inside." I think the critic Annie Paquette put it well: "[Cumming] has cast each of us in the Other and has thus caused us to consider the more pitiful side of our own social interaction and vulnerabilities." I'm glad you mention YouTube, because it takes me to the next question: Would you hazard describing, however loosely, who you find the audience for your work to be, that is, to whom your work speaks, these "others" as you put it?

DC: Annie Paquette is referring to a series of photographs that I exhibited in 1989, roughly five years before I began making my first video, *A Prayer for Nettie.* Such a comment meant a great deal to me at the time and still does. Audience response to photographic imagery tends to work through channels – critics, curators, educators, security guards, and gallery receptionists are filters for public reaction. Photography and film/video audiences are quite different, as the white box and the dark theatre are very different, as the experience of sitting in a theatre differs from the YouTube experience in front of a screen. Entering the film world of festivals and screenings, often with the Q&A, I could measure the size of the hall within that public forum and engage in discussions with the vocal few, but in the end, audience seemed to come down to audience members, and especially those with some kind of stake in what I was doing. Anyway, your question has sent me back to the different kind of responses – positive and negative that my work has engendered over the years and what these responses might tell us about the people who see my work.

When I launched my critical attack on what I saw as the stagnancy and complacency of social documentary photography, I naturally drew the ire of certain practitioners and their defenders. By accusing me of mocking the unfortunate, of controlling and manipulating innocents, of twisting the reality of conditions and events, these members of the audience were self-identifying as believers in photographic truth – something that most of my models were quite capable of disabusing them of. Positive responses came from people who thought that I was paying attention to individuals and groups that tended to be ignored and unconditionally, that is, not asking them to assume the cast of worthiness. I received a very touching letter from a woman in Toledo who said that she loved the pictures of people showing their scars – she and her girlfriends did this all the time. Other people found that the images – surreal and mute – expressed their feelings of alienation. So those audiences included people who shared their most intimate secrets as well as people who recoiled from others. And so it went on with *Pretty Ribbons* (1993), the series that focused on a single elderly woman, with its sub-section *Harry's Diary* in which she posed with several male models. Some people said the series made them feel more positive toward elderly people, more understanding of their complexity including their sexual desires. Others were appalled that an elderly woman should be photographed in the nude – stress on "elderly" – and the censorship of this work raised some very lively private and public debates. This happened on two separate occasions in Europe. I was criticized and so was Nettie Harris – she for promiscuity, of all things – while in her nursing home, she was held up as an example of an elderly woman still working. So audiences for this work were fed by taboos, on one side, and advocacy for the elderly, on the other.

Having used sound in both these projects, I knew that exposure to the subject's voice changed the nature of the work and drew spectators who were interested in more complex experiences. When I began to work with video, I saw that the politics submerged in my still photographs seemed to be rising to the surface. This was sometimes very personal, as people in the audience developed affective relationships with the subjects. This might be selective identification with, or understanding of, Colleen's history of abuse, Pierre's sense of injustice, Colin's battle with the authorities, or Marty's alcoholism – content-driven, in other words, the content shaped by the life stories on display. Sometimes these members of the audience wanted to know that the work had been seen by the people on screen – know-



ing that Marty had endorsed his social performance as a cautionary tale was important to them. Often the collective mood of an audience is caring – people express a caretaking attitude, and not just for the represented, but for me. I have often heard expressions of concern about the emotional drain of making connections to imperilled people. In a more detached way, from their positions as citizens, some people ask how I think Canada is doing – are we still a compassionate society? The audience always includes young filmmakers who want to know how such statements can be made with limited means and how a filmmaker can sustain such a life. Audiences always include people who are curious and inspired to think that they might record and communicate their own situations.

These are some of the conversations and arguments I've had with individuals who have responded in writing or called out from the audience over the years – such discussions become inner voices that encourage, sometimes by trying to discourage, the making of the next body of work.

SB: I'm interested in the idea of the citizen interacting with you and your work; how people take the work as a springboard for inquiry into the social state of Canada and the political notion of a collective "we," as it were. Perhaps we should consider your position as a citizen of Canada a bit. As we learn from your exchange with Marty Corbin in *My Dinner with Weegee*, you came to Canada from the United States in the early 1970s, as the Vietnam War escalated. I believe one can find reverberations of this – a concern with war, American imperialism, forms of protest and contestation – in other videos too: in the references to the American Civil War and the recent "War on Terror" in *Cold Harbor* (2003), for instance. War, in its various manifestations, from civil war to global war to class war, seems to me to be an important subject (and formal issue) in your work, an aspect of its social and political relevance. Can you say something about how the experience of coming to Canada, and in particular Montreal, from the U.S. in a time of war has informed your work?

DC: I was born in Danville, Virginia, in 1947. The United States has been in a state of war – Cold, hot, covert, or televised – for my entire life. Take it from Harold Pinter: "the crimes of the United States have been systematic, constant, vicious, remorseless, but very

few people have actually talked about them." I came to Canada in 1970 to resist the war in Vietnam, and have lived here since, often distressed with American foreign policy, especially when acted out by Canadians in unholy alliances, as we currently see in Afghanistan. The Civil War is a theme in my work because my extended family is from the southern United States; in my childhood, the moral righteousness and strategies of the American Civil War were rehearsed around the dinner table. No one liked the comparison with the Civil Rights Movement or the American Indian Movement – the nation's war against its citizens. In *Cold Harbor*, the reading of a Civil Warrior's memoir against the modern background noise of non-stop news means to suggest that citizens are not informed, but dulled into a sort of half-death by the barrage of lies and half-truths that make up their daily diet. Marty's situation in *My Dinner with Weegee* is a warning for exiles. He exhibits all the signs: a bottomless sense of outrage at American injustice fed by daily doses of *The New York Times* and toxic feelings of displacement as he constantly looks over his shoulder at the country he left in disgust. I don't think that's my situation, or I would hope it isn't. After all, I've spent most of my life in Canada and, with the exception of Marty's reminiscences, made all of my work in relation to lives lived here in Montreal. Heroes, wherever they're from, arouse my suspicions, which is why the work is punctuated with quotations from scripture, military oratory, and mainstream movies, such as *3:10 to Yuma* (1957 – the original version).

SB: In your book *Pencils, Ashes, Matches & Dust* (2009), you describe a street, Kincora, and the ways it seems to haunt your work. You write: "In the late 1980s, urban developers razed a street named Kincora erasing the name and scattering its residents. Nothing was ever built on the site. Most of the people who lived there are now dead. I photographed and videotaped the exiled Kincorans and the people they led me to." Living in Montreal for some forty plus years, how has the specificity of that city contributed to your work? I'm thinking, of course, of your photographic models and video characters and collaborators, the lives lived in Montreal, but also of the locations – apartments, rooming houses, street corners, underpasses, bus shelters, and the Salvation Army in *Too Many Things*, for example – you depict in such suggestive, yet not always explicitly named, ways.

DC: Montreal is a landscape of inspiration and counter inspiration – utopic and dystopic: a nineteenth-century city whose downtown neighbourhoods were incompletely gutted in the "urban renewal" fever of the 60s and 70s. The remaining buildings are still in use, the double parlours of the row houses are individually inhabited rooms. Many of these rooms boast views of elevated highways built on the ruins of the old neighbourhoods, now crumbling into ruins themselves: a dirty sci-fi future vision; the underbelly of urban planning gone wrong. In Montreal this urban desert under and around the highways has been repurposed as neighbourhood commons and, in the "wilder" areas, repopulated – tent villages as the developers never imagined. The fences that authorities put up to control access to these spaces have been systematically breached, creating another world of shortcuts and secret pathways underneath the endless traffic. Walking these paths, people run into emblems of their own lives. As Colin says, at the beginning of *Erratic Angel* (1998), after we have examined the mysterious remains of a chopped car tossed under a highway: "That's my situation, for sure. You sort of know what it is, sorta don't know what it is. It has the outside parameters and internally it's all, it's inside out and twisted."

Kincora is a historical reference, a street that was, and a vacant lot that is. Nothing remains of the big money with plans for modern highrises on these sites. The bottom-feeding investors have also been and gone; the cheap apartment buildings, quickly thrown up over industrial landfill to mollify a symbolic group of displaced inhabitants, are literally sinking. Kincora is also an imagined place, inhabited by Kincorans, otherwordly figures or restless ghosts, who move through the back lanes and abandoned lots. They come to life in the actors of *Too Many Things* who are wardens of waste and playful recyclers. The hallucinatory superabundance of the animated toys featured in *Too Many Things* also speaks to the mindlessly circling parade of consumption on this planet. Designed for consumer appeal, and manufactured for pennies, the obsolesence of these objects is built in. So it is remarkable, and somehow very touching, to find them, still bright, fluffy, and stubbornly functional, washed up on the shores of a Thrift Store. The discarded, still earnestly labouring automata is a perfect metaphor for marginalization and human struggle. These conditions are as specific to Montreal as they are representative of global disaster.

SB: Last question: How do you know when something – and I leave this "something" up to you – is over?

DC: Since we're talking about my work in video, there might be two possible "somethings." The first would be my work in its totality. How would I know if my work in video were over? Since I haven't yet arrived there, I can't tell you. The other is a more practical question: how do I know when my work on a particular video is over? That realization comes in stages because of the way I work, which is very open-ended, never knowing precisely what I'm setting out to do, so without a firm idea of how the process will end.

There are a number of stopping points along the way, that would seem to indicate that the end is near. The first is when I record a key segment, something that I know will appear in the final work. This moment can be deceptive: *Cut the Parrot* got its title from a key piece of tape that never really worked and had to be eliminated in the final edit. Still, the parrot sequence was key – it gave meaning to everything else that happened, so it was crucial and unforgettable, even though I had to forget it to complete the tape. Once this keystone has been identified, the gathering of material continues, but somehow with more point. Now there are projects and situations – Colleen's or Marty's – that represent a particular human crisis or where the subject (I mean this in the largest possible sense) has something urgent or essential to reveal. In these cases, I keep going until I feel that this information has been teased out or until I find myself repeating. At that point, I know that most of the recording is over and I start to edit the piece. Over the course of the rough edit, I may show the work to a few people, sometimes to the people in the work, as happened with Marty and Colin. Once I've learned everything I can from their response and the experience of watching the rough cut with others, that stage of the edit is over, and I'm ready to take it into an editing suite. At that point, the work will have a title – another sign that the process is almost over. *Almost*, because a careful editor's response and facility with the software can yield important benefits. Once the editing is over, I watch the work again and usually go back into the studio to tweak it. Then the making of the work is really and truly over, though meanings and effects continue to accrue. Those things are never over.

Videography

A PRAYER FOR NETTIE

1995 | COLOUR | 33.00 MIN.

A Prayer For Nettie dramatizes the death of an elderly woman who was Cumming's photographic model from 1982 to 1993. The tape presents an improvised series of prayers and memoirs offered in memory of Nettie Harris by people who knew her and some who did not. In its ambiguous mix of tenderness and aggression, *A Prayer For Nettie* extends the traditions of the grotesque and the absurd. The fervent prayers of the actors are undermined by indifference, forgetfulness and the presence of the camera. In the end, comedy turns the tables on piety and remembrance as Nettie looks up from the grave.

CUT THE PARROT

1996 | COLOUR | 40.00 MIN.

"The police phoned. They left a message on the machine. They said he was dead."

The tape unwinds through stories of sex for rent, unclaimed bodies, cigarette burns and other monuments of life's long run from wall to wall. *Cut the Parrot* is three grotesque comedies in one: the story of Gerry; the story of Susan; and the story of Albert. Songs of hope and heartbreak spill from the mouths of the performers. The order of impersonation rules.

AFTER BRENDA

1997 | COLOUR | 41.00 MIN.

Donigan Cumming's improvisational style has criss-crossed the boundaries of tragedy and comedy, drama and documentation. In *After Brenda*, Cumming redefines the genre of popular romance. His abject hero is Pierre, a fifty-something male who has lost everything in the name of love. He is homeless and adrift, an unwanted guest with nothing to offer but a tale. After Brenda searches the hearts and rooms of his audience, seizing the evidence of sex, love and survival.

KARAOKE

1998 | COLOUR | 3.00 MIN.

In *Karaoke*, an ailing, elderly man is listening to a performance given in the privacy of his room. The singing is halting and cross-cultural - Inuktitut laid over Country & Western. Transgressive and mesmerizing, *Karaoke* distorts the landscapes of sound and body.

ERRATIC ANGEL

1998 | COLOUR | 50.00 MIN.

"I'm not finished. I don't know how long it's going to take. As far as I'm concerned I'm officially dead." In his fiftieth year, Colin looks back on a life of drug and alcohol abuse. Four years into recovery, he is angry and articulate about addiction, treatment, and the romance of the street. In the chaos and claustrophobia of the ice storm, Colin waits to be reborn. His erratic angel is late.

SHELTER

1999 | COLOUR | 3.22 MIN.

A conversation about marriage and horses between two unseen men.

PETIT JÉSUS

1999 | COLOUR | 3.02 MIN.

Christmas Eve. A man alone finds someone he can talk to.

TRIP

1999 | COLOUR | 2.11 MIN.

A camera on thin ice.

FOUR STOREYS

1999 | COLOUR | 2.04 MIN.

The confession of a woman who took flight.

A SHORT LESSON

2000 | COLOUR | 1.18 MIN.

One minute, two mysteries: the shelf life of genius and why we try to make pictures when, as Robert Lowell put it, "no voice outsings the serpent's flawed, euphoric hiss."

DOCU-DUSTER

2000 | COLOUR | 3.03 MIN.

To be a man, to be a hero, to be a wife: these voices in conflict inhabit the body of a documentary filmmaker as he reenacts the climax of a western morality play, *3:10 to Yuma.*

WRAP

2000 | COLOUR | 3.03 MIN.

System failure: a man repeats the story of a prison stabbing as something goes wrong with the tape.

IF ONLY I

2000 | COLOUR | 35.00 MIN.

What if... Colleen's life, in her own words, has been "wretched." She was sexually abused by her father, betrayed by her husband, separated from her children, driven by her love for a heroin addict to attempted suicide. Colleen has survived by taking responsibility for her decisions and dreaming of a safer place. She has sometimes relied on the kindness of strangers. *if only I* marks another hot summer in crisis. Colleen presents herself, broken and whole, to the camera.

MY DINNER WITH WEEGEE

2001 | COLOUR | 36.26 MIN.

In *My Dinner with Weegee*, Donigan Cumming weaves together two life stories. The central figure, a man in his seventies named Marty, remembers his experiences in New York as a young Catholic labour organizer and peace activist, his friendships with David Dellinger, the Berrigan brothers, Bayard Rustin, Weegee, and James Agee. This mixture of first-hand knowledge and gossip brightens Marty's dark passage – he is old, sick, depressed, and alco-

holic. The other story is Cumming's in his fifty-fourth year, as he examines his own radicalism in light of the "dirty wheezing beacon" up ahead.

CULTURE

2002 | COLOUR | 17.04 MIN.

An urgent act of housekeeping, *Culture* uncovers all the hidden meanings of culture, from systems of knowledge and taste to active microorganisms. In the process, the artist confronts his rapidly decaying past.

LOCKE'S WAY

2003 | COLOUR | 21.00 MIN.

Locke's Way is the photographic path to knowledge, full of twists and turns, treacherously steep. What has happened down here? A family's photographs tell us everything and nothing about the subterranean past.

COLD HARBOR

2003 | COLOUR | 3.00 MIN.

In *Cold Harbor* an old soldier's regrets in a violent present.

VOICE: OFF

2003 | COLOUR | 39.00 MIN.

Voice: off is the autobiography of a forgotten man. Brain damaged, body violated, emotions crushed, Gerry who rarely spoke has now lost the power of speech. The video camera is his prosthesis and he borrows the memories of people who no longer need them. How can this be a comedy? It is.

CONTROLLED DISTURBANCE

2005 | COLOUR | 6 HOURS | DVD BOX SET COMPILATION

Surveying 10 years of Cumming's production (18 titles with optional French subtitles), this 3 DVD box set also features excerpts from a workshop given before a live audience at Visions du Réel, Nyon International Film Festival (Nyon, Switzerland), as well as 8 essays and images from Cumming's work in different media.

FOUNTAIN

2005 | COLOUR | 22.00 MIN.

Cutting to the core of cinematic realism, *Fountain* presents the plotless character of human encounters. In a string of moments with the people who have presented themselves to Cumming's camera for over twenty years, *Fountain* allows the accidental and the absurd to dominate our impressions. Storytelling is evacuated in the process.

3

2007 | COLOUR | 3.45 MIN.

Men asleep, a dream, play, a song; angel and snow, wings and flowers, money and trees; fast then slow, piano decays, laughter.

MONUMENT

2008 | COLOUR | 5.50 MIN.

Monument stages the violent death and ceremonial burial of a symbolic object. Three pallbearers are the ghosts in a cruel machine. Mangy parrots, they mourn the death of a man they never knew.

PENCILS, ASHES, MATCHES & DUST

2009 | COLOUR | 1.20 MIN.

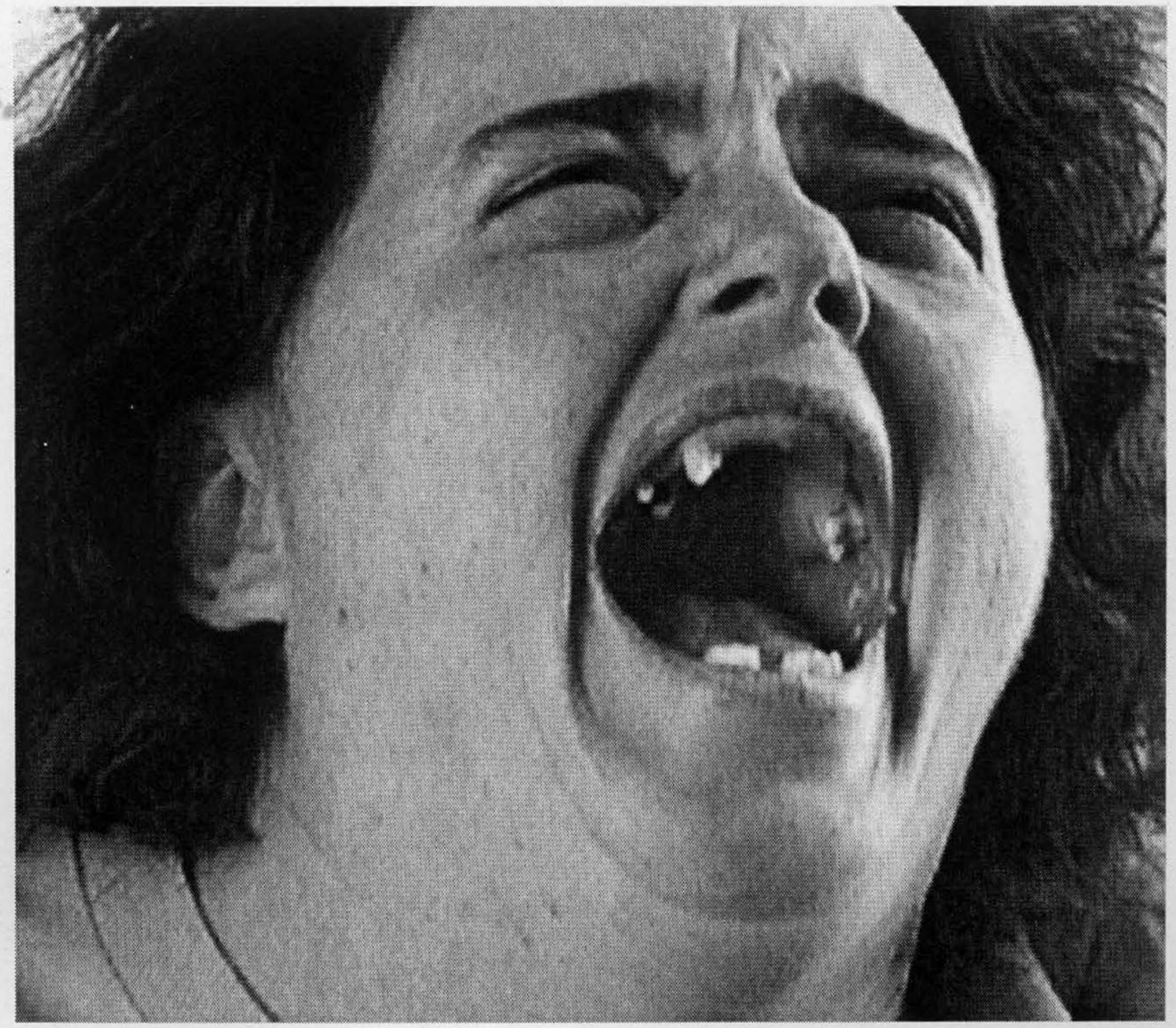
"Two photographic images – one of a man in his underwear with suitcases in his hands; the other of Geoff (from *A Prayer for Nettie* and *Cut the Parrot*) holding a sign that reads "Peace on Earth" – taken from Cumming's exhibition "Kincora" (2008/10) are the material from which this short animation unfolds. In the spirit of that exhibition, *Pencils...* is a kind of memorial to the displaced, exiled people of the demolished neighbourhood of Kincora" (Scott Birdwise).

TOO MANY THINGS

2010 | COLOUR | 36.00 MIN.

Obsession, fascination and confusion in a world of objects that refuse to disappear.

All descriptions from donigancumming.com unless otherwise noted.



Contributors

Scott Birdwise is currently pursuing a PhD in Cinema and Media Studies at York University. He is also a programmer at the Canadian Film Institute where he is involved in curating the ongoing Canadian experimental film series *Café Ex*.

Originally from Dieppe, NB, **Mireille Bourgeois** has an MA from the Centre for Curatorial Studies at Bard College (2009). She has been active in the media arts community, serving on multiple administrative boards, has also independently curated/contributed to programs throughout Canada, in the US as well as in Germany, and has published critical writing in *Visual Arts News*, *Creative Times Press*, *C-Magazine* and the online art blog *Artengine*. Mireille Bourgeois is currently Interim Director for the Centre for Art Tapes in Halifax.

Zoë Constantinides is a PhD Candidate in Communication Studies at Concordia University. Her dissertation research looks at the history of popular film criticism in Canada. She also coordinates community cinema events in Montreal.

Blake Fitzpatrick holds the positions of Professor and Graduate Program Director, Documentary Media (MFA) Program at Ryerson University. He is an active photographer, curator and writer. His research interests include the photographic representation of the nuclear era and visual responses to contemporary militarism. His writing and visual work has appeared in *Public*, *Topia*, *History of Photography* and *Fuse Magazine*.

Marcy Goldberg was born in 1969 in Montreal, Canada and has been based in Zurich since 1996. She is a film historian, media consultant, film festival programmer and translator. She currently teaches cultural and media studies at the Zurich University of the Arts.

Mike Hoolboom is an independent film and video maker, writer, and editor of several books on Canadian experimental cinema. His most recent book is *The Steve Machine* (Coach House Books, 2008).

Executive Director of the Canadian Film Institute, **Tom McSorley** is also a Sessional Lecturer in Film Studies at Carleton University and film critic for CBC Radio One. His most recent book is *Atom Egoyan's The Adjuster* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press/Toronto International Film Festival Group, 2009).

Solomon Nagler is a filmmaker and professor at NSCAD University in Halifax.

Craig Rodmore is a photographer who used to teach architecture students at Dalhousie University in Halifax, but now drinks tea, reads books, and studies French in Montreal.

Christopher Rohde is a practicing media artist and has been a member of Available Light Screening Collective since 2006. His video *The Pink Ghosts* has been screened across Canada and was one of the first films selected for the inaugural edition of EnRoute, Air Canada's in-flight film festival. He has curated several programmes for Available Light, including *Stellar Regions: Jazz & Avant-Garde Film* and *Raw Power: Rock & Avant-Garde Film*. He is currently the programmer at SAW Video Media Art Centre.

Splitting the Choir

The Moving Images of Donigan Cumming

Scott Birdwise

Mireille Bourgeois

Zoë Constantinides

Blake Fitzpatrick

Marcy Goldberg

Mike Hoolboom

Tom McSorley

Solomon Nagler

Craig Rodmore

Christopher Rohde

An award-winning photographer, videographer and visual artist, Donigan Cumming has internationally exhibited and screened videos that are widely praised (and criticized) for their genre-bending, unsettling iconoclasm. *Splitting the Choir* – a collection of essays along with a video script, a new interview with the artist and a videography – marks a period of sixteen years since Cumming's first video, *A Prayer for Nettie* (1995). The essays in this volume take up a range of topics in relation to Cumming's videos, from the role of photography and memory in the moving images and temporalities of video to questions of ethics, representation and performance in the documentary. The essays demonstrate that as Cumming continues to chart the underrepresented life-worlds and experiences of the marginal (elderly, ill, damaged, broken) citizens of Montreal, those who would seem to be so radically "other," he insistently reminds us of the things we share in common.

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