

Diffy Looks

SPARKLES TAVERN



Wednesday December 28, 2011

Curt McDowell

SPARKLE'S TAVERN, 1985, 16 mm on DVD, 120 min.

Starring Melinda McDowell, Marion Eaton and George Kuchar

PARTICIPANT INC

A Remembrance Of Curt McDowell



Writings commissioned on the occasion of the exhibition, *CURT MCDOWELL—AN UNEVEN DOZEN OF BROKEN HEARTS* at [2nd floor projects] San Francisco, 14 February to 29 March 2009

Curt was curt, cute, controversial, and not celibate. He was a barrel of laughs and a roller coaster ride to hell and back. Life for him was a fast track to fast times that included devilish detours into forbidden erogenous zones. He explored all those zones with a zealous zeal: painter, pornographer, poet of the plebeian and the perverse; you name it (or sing it since he also wrote songs) and it all rings true. Call him a Frisco fornicator or an Indiana-born iconoclast and you only skim the surface of what this entity was into. Everything that he did get into was usually greased up for maximum penetration and the ease in which he entered the lives of every Tom, Dick and Harry was breathtaking. They also spurted into him the essence of his creativity: a joy in corporeal connections and a sharing of human juices to oil up the machinery of movie making. Curt McDowell gave the paying public what they craved in darkened theaters nationwide. His was not a cinema of dead meat: His beefcake was hot off the streets and the cheesecake was equally tart and titillating. All of this was served in a blue plate special that was generously filled with obsessions immune to none. They might not have been your particular obsessions but we, as “sinners”, knew their kin.

The canvases he produced were beautifully rendered and revealed a true artist that used all his varied protuberances to maximum, imaginative potential. He also designed costumes, wrote screenplays, and graced the silver screen with his satyr-like presence. I humbly take my hat off to this very talented titan (although he'd usually suggest lowering the trousers).

Swallow

I once brought up the topic of Curt McDowell's films in conversation with an administrator at Art Center College of Design, where I have worked in an adjunct capacity for the last few years. A student had told this administrator that I taught an avant-garde film course, and he asked me if I had shown any of Matthew Barney's Cremaster films. I said no, and he ventured the opinion that Barney had “really raised the bar in experimental filmmaking.” I asked, “In what respect, production values?” He responded, “Yes, but in other ways, too.” Caught a bit off guard by someone skeptical of his latest diktat, he asked what interested me. I mentioned Curt McDowell and offered a brief but explicit précis of his film *Loads*. My conversational foray left this man temporarily speechless, so I continued to talk about my course. Whatever thoughts crossed the administrator's mind as his eyes glazed over, it was clear that he was a man who had learned the main lesson of the great “cultural producers” of the era. What mattered in art was not what a marginal character like McDowell had to offer, frisson mixed with a faint hint of nausea, exchanges of bodily fluids, cheap thrills; what truly mattered, even to a guy who named his masterwork after a testicular muscle, was access to money. If one could see where the money went, in art as in Hollywood movies, then high seriousness and legitimacy would follow. This conversation took place during a boom in the art market, when people at art schools could talk like film industry executives without being laughed at. Perhaps now that the great gaseous bubble of cultural production is getting deflated, another conversation can begin.

A while later, around the time of a precipitous decline in the Dow Jones Industrial Average, I showed Curt's films to my avant-garde film class. The students' reactions, as expressed in their discussions and weekly writing assignments, ranged from the indignant to the unabashedly enthusiastic. A student in the former camp had this to say:

I would be shocked if McDowell wasn't a sexaholic. I still can't believe that Curt filmed his sister getting screwed, the thought of it really creeps me out. Also, I think I would be very happy if I never saw another man get raped, or a man receiving a blow job from another man. That kinda rubbed me the wrong way. Oh well, the films we saw this week were pretty cool and I enjoyed them a lot.

I wonder if Curt would have recognized the writer's attitude, and how many people reacted this way in the 1970s and '80s, when he was around to present his films in person. Curt probably would have been surprised to learn that the writer of the comment was a young person, all of 19 years old. Perhaps Curt would also have been shocked at the new “generation gap” that has arisen between young prudes and their libertine elders.

One of the films on view in my class was *Nudes: A Sketchbook* (1974). When Curt made it, everyone he knew considered sex a cheap way to have fun rather than a potentially addictive activity. (Is there such a thing as “sex withdrawal”? Do people who suffer from it get delirium tremens or the like?) Regarding the charges of rape and consensual sodomy leveled against Curt, he does seem to take advantage of a few men in the film: while one man shoots a load on his sister, Curt can just about be discerned in the shadows playing with the man's ass; Curt reenacts groping a hunky young letter carrier who passed out at a wild party he stumbled into; a man, in another charmingly crude reenactment, gets knocked unconscious in a dark passage, then gets his own dark passage explored; a male friend receives Curt's oral services while perusing a girlie magazine. When I called the bait-and-switch tactic in the last scenario “the oldest trick in the book, a porn film staple,” one student loudly declared that nothing like that had ever happened to him. (A shame.)

Despite the bluster and protest, *Nudes: A Sketchbook*, as well as the other films I showed, clearly spoke to some need in the students. In keeping with Art Center's sexual harassment policy, I told the class that anyone offended by the content of Curt's movies could take flight, but no one did. The student who wrote the comment above, in unconscious imitation of Sarah Palin, mentioned that films of certain activities "kinda rubbed me the wrong way," but then in a surprising and contradictory concluding sentence admitted, "I enjoyed them a lot." Either the woman threw this in as a sop to an old, perverted instructor, or it took her pages of prose to get to the five words she really meant.

Curt McDowell had no use for such evasion and disavowal. He arrived in San Francisco from Indiana in the '60s, went looking for what he wanted, and offered no apology whatsoever for getting it. The great George Kuchar was one of many to be ensnared by Curt's considerable sexual charisma. In the book *Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool*, George describes his welcome as a new arrival from the East Coast:

The first student I ever laid eyes on was the underground filmmaker Curt McDowell. He was sitting on my desk, wearing cut-off jeans and swinging his bare legs in the stuffy setting. He had on a tee-shirt and woven sandals of straw, looking very much like a big boy with a huge appetite for cinematic knowledge [and for his teacher].

That meeting led to other meetings outside the classroom, and before too long, Curt (the "satyr" as he is called in the book) and George (the "secret pervert" as he calls himself) were a couple. It is hardly surprising, considering the satyr's appetites, that tears and anguish quickly followed. As George explains, "Curt and I were going together, and perhaps we fondled too many sticks of dynamite for our own good." This brief summary of their affair leads me to another student comment that is worth noting:

Dear Mr. Kuchar,

I am in love with you. When I say that, I am not implying that sort of intellectual love that goes along with deep admiration for a predecessor's work. I mean love. . . . I realize that you are older than I and homosexual. I am not a man, but it is said by enlightened people that true love is unattachment, that because you love someone so much, you want what is best for them, including loving someone other than yourself. I think you, George, would agree with this. I accept my fate. I am miserable, unhappy with unrequited love. I am letting you love whomever you must for your own happiness, thus creating my own misery. The only choice left is to delve into my own work—thus devoting myself to you even more.

This student, echoing and expanding on sentiments expressed in *Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool*, has summed up George's dilemma. The traits that draw this woman to her beloved are precisely those that will break her heart, but by taking refuge in art, she can indulge (and redeem) all the wretched, maudlin excesses of misdirected lust.

Curt, the satyr himself, was no mere Lothario counting his conquests. He had his own dramas of unrequited affection, and he returned to them over and over in his films. Perhaps Curt's films do not approach the grand, romantic passions that pervade his teacher's works, but they have a raw power in their directness. There is an aching pathos in Curt's halting delivery of unadorned autobiographical monologues. He is unashamed in his sexual behavior but reluctant to make his account of it. He knows that by telling his tales, he is revealing dark undercurrents in the daily erotic life of a gay man who wants what he can never truly have.

From the evidence of his films, it seems that Curt's greatest pleasure was in giving straight men pleasure. As George Kuchar memorably put it, Curt enjoyed "lapping up cream filled Ding

Dongs." Never one to shrink from a challenge, Curt loved nothing more than blowing (and rimming) guys who couldn't care less whether he got off. Curt applied himself to this service with an almost evangelical sense of mission. Today—when young Republicans go to jail on charges of "criminally deviate conduct" for sucking off their sleeping bunkmates—Curt would be called a compulsive fellator, and would gravitate to any number of websites, 12-step groups, or places where recently released convicts congregate. During the 1970s, Curt was a sexual pioneer, making movies about practices that most men preferred to keep quiet, then as now. Curt found his own fun, and most importantly for him as an artist, he also found a number of men who were vain, indifferent, or desperate enough to be filmed while they reached their climax.

Curt McDowell, like Pasolini before him, did not conform to society's expectations of the abject, straight-chasing homosexual. Curt and Pier Paolo both knew what many men engaging in these sexual games eventually learn: within the surrender of giving pleasure without taking any in return, there is a species of control. The man with the rock hard cock in need of relief thinks he calls the shots, but every moment is staged and directed by the man doing the draining. As the title character of Gore Vidal's *Myra Breckinridge* confides to her journal:

The sailor who stands against a wall, looking down at the bobbing head of the gobbling queen, regards himself as master of the situation; yet it is the queen (does not that derisive epithet suggest primacy and domination?) who has won the day, extracting from the flesh of the sailor his posterity, the one element in every man which is eternal and (a scientific fact) cellularly resembles not at all the rest of the body. So to the queen goes the ultimate elixir of victory, that which was not meant for him but for the sailor's wife or girl or simply Woman.

Cineastes from the days of silent cinema to the latest pay-per-view scenes on the internet have treasured the knowledge of this elixir and transformed it into art. PPP, whose oral escapades with the young men of the Friuli lost him his job and his membership in the Communist Party, fled to the slums of Rome, where for years he profited from his obscurity, avidly consuming cruel tales of working class life and rivers of working class spunk. (It's hard to miss the admiring descriptions of men's crotches occurring throughout *Ragazzi di Vita* once the details of Pasolini's life are known.) Alas, Pier Paolo never got around to directing a cum shot, but there is little doubt that he was capable of imagining one as hilarious and profane as the shot of the devil's asshole expelling priests at the end of *Canterbury Tales*.

The cum shot, that staple of porn—straight, gay and bi—cannot satisfy the truly devoted cum pig. All that juice spilling onto bellies, butts and faces goes to waste. A memorable, if atypical, scene from the early '90s gay porn video *Doin' Hard Time* features a fat, hairy, balding photographer seducing his model. He devours the model's cock so avidly that when the magnificent youth finally ejaculates, only a thin white foam limning the greedy queen's mouth is visible. Such a mistake was not allowed to occur again in the *oeuvre* of Latino Fan Club *auteur* Brian Brennan. The scene reminds us of a central contradiction in filming sex: what feels (and tastes) good does not necessarily "read" on camera. In a recurring shot in *Loads*, Curt plays with this contradiction as he fellates one of his tricks. Curt nibbles on the head of a man's cock, waiting for it to erupt, and even though his eyes are closed, his hesitation seems to indicate a thought. He asks himself, do I coax this cock to shoot a wad on my face, or do I just get things over with and take it all down my throat? The answer, after some teasing, is the one that makes the most sense for the film. The suspense is broken at last by a thick line of semen spurting over Curt's nose and forehead.

Coitus that plays well and the moment that is camera-ready have won out in the present era of immediately accessible porn. Boys who have been watching money shots in movies for several years before their first real, physical sex act wouldn't think of ejaculating during intromission. This is what Larry Clark discovered in the

course of interviewing young men in *Impaled*, his contribution to the art/porn film *Destricted*. A band of guys from the Inland Empire, some aspiring porn actors and others just up for a good time, tell Clark that they imitate what they have seen since childhood: shaved pubic hair, lots of tattoos, and a preference for shooting cum on (rather than in) their partners. If a few of them have tasted semen, they aren't admitting it to Clark, the director who has taken an interest and might make them stars. Only an old pro, actress Nancy Vee, cops to her pleasure in lapping up seed. She makes Daniel, the MILF-loving male talent of the movie, groan in ecstasy, but when the climactic moment arrives, we get to see very little spunk. Nancy, with a fiendish grim, admits, "I swallowed most of it." She chuckles because she has done a naughty thing, but she knows that she can get away with it. *Impaled* is a documentary, and the cum shot is not the dramatic and economic necessity that it would be in a real porn movie.

During the late 1970s, another MILF had her say about swallowing. Citrus spokesperson and free-lance moral entrepreneur Anita Bryant recognized a threat in semen consumption, which she understood to be a kind of cannibalism. "The male sperm" as she put it, is the essence of life with the greatest concentration of blood in the body. In her 1978 *Playboy* interview she decried the vampiric sin of drinking cum. Pasolini did not live long enough to read this condemnation of his favorite pastime, so we are deprived of the pithy response he no doubt would have made in the pages of *Corriere della Sera*; but gay men in San Francisco pounced with relish upon new pronouncements from this Baptist virago. Curt McDowell's rejoinder to Bryant's pseudo-medical rationale for gay-bashing came in the form of the film *Loads*. Made in 1980, *Loads* followed the success of the "Save Our Children" campaign but preceded the first wave of AIDS panic. In that transitional moment, around the time the jovial fascism of Ronald Reagan got him elected president by a landslide, it was still possible to make a case for cum guzzling. Curt never wrote a manifesto extolling the beneficial effects of drinking cum on filmmaking. He put his convictions into practice, and the results inspire fascination, discomfort, and admiration (in almost equal measure) in contemporary audiences. This polarizing effect is strongest among those spectators whose childhood president was Reagan, the man who told us that big city perverts were really some sort of vermin to be ignored, demonized, even killed. Like all skillful grifters, he did it with a smile on his face.

In the days when *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* played every weekend in major American cities, eager spectators/participants would shout the question, "What's your favorite high protein drink?" and from the film, Frank N. Furter would answer, "Come!" Now that swallowing during oral sex hovers between the categories of "possibly unsafe" and "unsafe" sexual activity, and many men must perform the calculation of how many hours ago they brushed their teeth before performing fellatio, jokes about the nutritional value of jism tend to fall flat. The juice extracted from so many anonymous cocks can no longer serve as a rejuvenating force for cinema, at least outside the sequestered world of porn. Perhaps the lack of semen swallowing among high-profile directors is the real reason movies are so anemic these days. No matter how much liver these boys eat (or how much money they have access to) their silly macho pabulum fails to exude any real energy. To take only one example among many, it is impossible to imagine Michael Bay swallowing another man's cum. In his office decorated with pictures of his most famous ejaculations—movie explosions—Bay can probably muster little more than masturbating and licking a watery load from his fist after an afternoon of screaming into a megaphone, jettisoning it to the ground, then starting all over again with a new megaphone. The throat that barks can never get the soothing balm that all those grips and gaffers have percolating inside their bulging pants. The man who blew up Alcatraz doesn't have the goods to direct *The Gospel According to Matthew*, and if he ever saw *Loads* in the course of his education, what he took from the experience has been buried too deep to benefit his filmmaking. Michael Bay attended Art Center, but he graduated before I arrived to teach there. If he had swung his bare legs in my direction, I doubt I would have given him so much as a second look.

DIRTY LOOKS is a roaming series held on the last Wednesday of the month. Curated by Bradford Nordeen, Dirty Looks is a screening series designed to trace contemporary queer aesthetics through historical works, presenting quintessential GLBT film and video alongside up-and-coming artists and filmmakers. A salon of influences, Dirty Looks is an open platform for inquiry, discussion and debate.

“Deliver us from Daddy! Dirty Looks sets its sights on artist film and video that pierces dominant narratives, wanders with deviant eyes or captures the counter in salacious glares.”



CURT MCDOWELL worked in San Francisco from the late 1960s until his death in 1987—a period that witnessed the Summer of Love, gay liberation, and the onset of AIDS, to which he succumbed at the age of forty-two. The author of numerous films that recast the American dream of plenty in pansexual terms, McDowell, like so many artists of his generation, indulged in the era's carnal abundance, and his appetites and experiences are reflected in his work, which alternates between the revealing and the puerile. His short films, such as *Weiners* and *Buns Musical* (1972) and *Loads* (1980), celebrate sex as well as genre riffing and autobiographical narratives (McDowell's insatiable desire for seducing straight men is explicitly documented in his 16-mm works), and bear the influences of Jack Smith's lush, DIY camp aesthetic, Rainer Werner Fassbinder's explosive melodrama, and Nan Goldin's glimpses of countercultural bohemia.

GEORGE KUCHAR was among the most prolific and influential American filmmakers of the last half century. His more than two hundred low-budget films, many made with his twin brother, Mike, regularly feature his friends and students, pioneering a camp aesthetic that has inspired generations of filmmakers and artists. Based in San Francisco since the early 1970s, where he taught for four decades at the San Francisco Art Institute, Kuchar grew up in New York City, in the Bronx, where he began his career, before resettling in California in 1971.

WILLIAM E. JONES is an artist and filmmaker who grew up in Ohio and now lives and works in Los Angeles. He has made two feature length experimental films, *Massillon* (1991) and *Finished* (1997), several short videos, a feature length documentary and many installations. He has worked in the adult video industry under the name Hudson Wilcox, and he currently teaches film history at Art Center College of Design under his own name.

Since establishing [2nd floor projects] San Francisco in 2007, I have featured twenty-six writers with the exhibitions—with six writers forthcoming in 2012. Programming includes commissions to writers throughout the country to produce an edition: essays, personal narratives, interviews, poetry, or mixed-genre pieces in the form of handcrafted broadsheets or chapbooks. From early on in my art practice, I have been interested in trespassing disciplines. These visual, theoretical, and narrative crossings perhaps address an interstitial space of engagement with the artists' works from the writer's point of departure. —Margaret Tedesco, director

All images courtesy of the Curt McDowell Estate.



This screening is dedicated to
MARION EATON (1932 - 2011)
AND
GEORGE KUCHAR (1942 - 2011)