

Hans-Michael Herzog



The Body

Donigan Cumming

Hans-Michael Herzog

The predominant public moral attitude of our society makes taboo both the subject of the aged body, and that of physical intimacy. Cumming breaks both taboos in his photographic work.

It is remarkable that the public image of the kind we are familiar with through television, or the photographic image in advertising (the best most recent example being the much discussed Benetton advert) gives only scant consideration for the personal privacy of individuals, who are merely enlisted to demonstrate a particular situation. Our society has thus become accustomed to representations of mutilated faces and mangled limbs. However, the war victims shown on television remain anonymous, even if we see their faces. They can no longer defend themselves against being used as instruments of the ultimate in show effects on reality television. Nobody would want to foist *guilt* upon them for being as they are. Yet Nettie Harris, Cumming's female protagonist, a former journalist and actress who died in Montreal at eighty-one in the autumn of 1993, was not only decisively responsible for the way her body was - she also declared herself agreeable to presenting it in public; marked by life, and in all its intimacy.

An act of openness - as much by the model as by the photographer - which quickly reaches the limits of acceptance. In view of the vast number of beautiful, young bodies by which advertising daily forms our conception of the ideal human being, old people have no place here, never mind the gaunt, wrinkled bodies whose parts are so evidently on the brink of decay, evoking associations of presaging death. Whilst the wasted bodies in Serbian concentration camps achieve their place on reality television as graphic specimens of their existence (111. 1),



III. 1: Serbian Prison Camp, August 14, 1992

Nettie and her photographer had to expose themselves to accusations of indecency, shamelessness, even of obscenity. Nettie was regularly asked whether she was aware of her actions, and the disturbing, powerful effect of her pictures. She was! Cumming's unconventional representations of the body were once even dubbed with the epithet *anti-human*¹; a term which backfires against the user. It is not the pictures of Nettie which are *anti-human*, but the predominating moral attitude which denies her joy in herself, in her body and its representation. *Real* horror in the form of countless massacred corpses we are able to accept all too easily. The natural processes of ageing and decay in a human body are a rigorously held social taboo - even more so, when, as in this case, they are presented (embodied) with self-assured emphasis and an apparently unflinching belief in being human.

Cumming and his models lack neither shame nor sympathy, just as little as they are full of shame, or full of sympathy. The pictures are devoid of illusion, and therefore, merciless. Devoid of any false morals or any false hope they are full of humanity, existentially moving, their *all-too-human* appearance being almost too much to bear. Looking away out of irritation or even disgust is the equivalent of Nettie Harris' inadmissible ostracism from society. Donigan Cumming's pictures are not shameless, on the contrary; the naked, physical (and psychological) human presence attained, despite the self-presentation of his models, he gives back to those represented (not only them, but all those who live in similar circumstances) the sense of worth too often lost from consciousness - a value which should remain inviolate.

Harry's Diary is the name of an installation comprising photographs, a text upon the wall and a soundtrack. The photos show Nettie and six different male characters. The text consists of excerpts taken from the diary of Harry Strong (a friend of Cumming's) who died in 1987.

The soundtrack consists of four voices, of which two are partly super-imposed. Nettie Harris recites a poem of her own, speaks the strophes of a song, talks about her dog, Blackie, and is to be heard in excerpts from conversations with Donigan Cumming. A man sings and another male voice reads from *Harry's Diary*; Cumming himself commentates on this text.

The question asked ever and again about Cumming's work, of how far his photographs possess a documentary character, may be answered just by close scrutiny. "As a film actress, her

mannerisms and dramatic expressions can be disruptive. I have never tried to curb Nettie's urge to improvise since I discovered the compelling images in the spaces between her gestures and moods." (Cumming, 1990). Cumming does not intervene in setting up a pose, but allows Nettie's psychological composure absolute free rein. This means that posing was innate to Nettie, and not serving some fiction, thus referring only to Nettie herself. In 1986 Cumming programmatically analysed the theme *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography* in one of his most important series of work; now this has evolved into a documentary portrayal in the most essential, original sense. The documentary character of his photographs finds lively support in the voices of his actors. The soundtrack intensifies the mood of the photos, lends them a tone-colour of their own, and strengthens the equal qualities of hopefulness and desolation in their physical presence, which in the same breath, communicates despair and security. It becomes clear that the images at least are freed from the subjects in just the way that their voices are. From this results an impression which is at first artificial and stylised. Together, pictures and voices, which ultimately arise from the body, yield a total impression, as in a film. Nettie and the other models are portrayed in all their realistic humanity in the most direct way, revealed so that it hurts. Donigan Cumming bestows form to an *essential* image of reality through powerful pictures, full of inner, and surface beauty. They maintain the balance between the touchingly beautiful and the fascination of grotesque situations as described by Diane Arbus.