

Nicolas Renaud



Barber's Music

DONIGAN CUMMING

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THE TITLE REFERS TO HARSH, DISCORDANT MUSIC PRODUCED BY CUSTOMERS WAITING THEIR TURN IN A BARBER'S SHOP WHERE A MUSICAL INSTRUMENT WAS PROVIDED FOR THEIR AMUSEMENT. *BARBER'S MUSIC* CAPTURES SEVERAL KEY ELEMENTS IN MY WORK: A KIND OF PLANNED SPONTANEITY, SPARKED BY THE PRESENCE OF AN INSTRUMENT; THE UNPLEASING NATURE OF THE PERFORMANCE; THE REGULAR CONVOCATION OF AMATEUR PERFORMERS TO A SEMI-PUBLIC PLACE; THE UNPREDICTABILITY OF THE RESULTS.

Barber's Music (1999) is a series of one-room installations using photographs, video projections, and sound. This exhibition is the first room in the series. The real-life basis of the work is the situation of a man named Colin whose recovery from alcohol and drug abuse was documented by Cumming in a videotape entitled *Erratic Angel* (1998). This 50-minute tape is playing continuously on a TV monitor. The gallery space of *Barber's Music* is conceived as exploding out of Colin's room, absorbing the viewer in his predicament. Three monumental photographs exhibit the aging male body; on the left, a camera spins around the walls of the apartment (the man on the TV shouts); on the right, a camera struggles through a hallucinatory maze formed by the 1998 ice

storm (the man with the camera trips). What unifies these elements is *excess*: of the body (a massive corporeality), of nature (the extreme conditions of the ice storm), and of an individual's life (messy and permeated with addictions). *Excess* is always measured against the norm or the necessity - the standards exceeded here are natural, social, and moral. The force of the ice storm was unexpected; it provoked shock and feelings of extreme vulnerability. Colin's life, by his own account, has also deviated from the norm. Sometimes hopeful, then angry and full of despair, Colin is working toward recovery, but time is running out and his erratic angel is late.

The devices used by Cumming in this work - closeness, repetition, exaggeration, play-acting, fantasy, even *excess* - have appeared in his work in one form or another since he began to question and reinvent the social documentary genre. His first major project, *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography* (1986), developed a form of thick description in photographs, letters, and sound, vacillating between truth and fiction in its images of rich and poor, young and elderly, healthy and sick. Cumming's next photographic project, *The Mirror, The Hammer and The Stage* (1991) only intensified the controversial strategies of the first, though he included as the finale what he called "a curtain call," effectively inviting the spectator backstage to meet his documentary cast.

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The Stage is composed of 250 photographs, tightly arranged in a grid. The same types and social strata are displayed, though the subjects seem somehow out of character: they mug for the camera or cut up between "documentary" takes. The absurdity of these photographic tableaux is underscored by the soundtrack, one man's improvised recitation of all the parts in Cecil B. de Mille's epic film, *The Ten Commandments*. Again, fiction and reality are in delicate balance, because the narrator is real, his talent as a mimic is real, and his attachment to the film is real. The discovery of such qualities in his players is at the core of Cumming's work. The tales that he weaves are founded on intimate relationships.

The most famous of these is no doubt his long-term association with Nettie Harris, an elderly woman who was Cumming's photographic model for about ten years. The result was *Pretty Ribbons*, an extended portrait of Mrs. Harris that challenged the taboos against picturing the elderly naked body. Just before Nettie Harris died in 1993, Cumming had begun to record her on videotape, maintaining their habit of working together

once or twice a week. That archive became the basis of *A Prayer for Nettie* (1995), an elegy to Mrs. Harris offered in the form of improvised prayers by people who did, and did not, know her. Four more videotapes have followed - a comedy, *Cut the Parrot* (1996); a romance, *After Brenda* (1997); a documentary, *Erratic Angel* (1998), and a moving still, *Karaoke* (1998). These works are sometimes screened, sometimes installed as durational, mixed-media works. Their compatibility with photographs is one of their interesting features. Cumming continues to work at close physical proximity to his subjects, and to record their lives in almost unbearable detail. As Cumming has said:

"In content and theory, my work addresses issues of categorical confusion and transgression, simulating the stumbles and recoveries of life, its continuous delivery of "barber's music." The large cast, first assembled over sixteen years ago, is still the community in which I work. This is an extraordinary outcome for something that began as a study of photographic reception - a documentary project that I am committed to pursue."

Exchange and Conflict The videographic ritual of Donigan Cumming

The videotapes of Donigan Cumming are variations on a singular vision (an experience of reality and an approach) that has been developing for twenty years in the work of this Montreal photographer. The approach is essentially documentary, though its detours, digressions, and excesses make the work far more than a simple reflection of reality. Cumming destabilizes, sometimes even brutalizes our senses and expectations, throwing the real in our faces with all of its weight, even as it resists and comes flying back around. What is happening in this whirlwind reversal, at the heart of this paradox, to stimulate such a vivid and fleeting perception of truth? This work whose substance is invariably social, even anthropological, demands attention by forcing open the doors of ethical debate.

Cumming and the subjects who offer themselves to his camera form a community. Some are long-term relationships based on a mutual confidence that raises the stakes of the game, or play. The subjects behave like actors

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who can never be totally separated from the dramas of their personal lives. Many of them are elderly; some are poor; most lack formal education; they all struggle with life's common problems. Their physical and psychological characteristics are marked, rough, and unusual - they personify the Other to the intolerable nth degree. Why choose such subjects to study the big questions of art -sex and death? Because Cumming believes that shifting the gaze away from the standards of our society can help us to understand who we are. Furthermore, since cinema, the drama of movement, can film death at work, these aging and bruised bodies form an ideal tableau vivant. The performances of this unusual cast and the semi-improvised interventions of the director wallow in excess and shamelessness that gain force before a crude and floating camera. The locations are in a rough state, without artifice of any sort; settings of the real become spaces of documentary performance. Within this framework, Cumming takes the measure of the chaos, comes to organize and control it, irrigating reality with fictional canals. He inserts himself as a reflection in a window, in the eyes of a subject,

or as a character in a story that he himself narrates. The work has this quality of immediacy - you believe it, you are there - but it's all backwards, the antithesis of the mythic, televisual voyeurism that expects events to unfold "as though the camera weren't there" to make you feel "as though you were."

There may be value in art that disturbs our values; even so, its working methods are bound to raise social and ethical questions that are not easy to resolve, and are perhaps not intended to be. Manipulating and confronting his characters, Cumming has often been accused of trickery and deception; some people have accused him of profiting from his subjects, of turning them into spectacles, of having no ethics. Admitting that he sometimes finds it hard to articulate his own defence, Cumming points out that such criticisms only make sense if his critics consider him the more "sophisticated" party in the exchange. Doubtless, there is an exchange, an exchange in conflict. As when two cultures, two distinct groups, collide in misunderstanding, though the collision be fatal, there is still some kind of strange exchange, something that is born. An entire

school of ethnology has been based on this phenomenon; the films of Jean Rouch are its benchmarks. So could these accusations simply be knee jerk reactions to difference, masking the incomprehension that the Other incites and the opening to another intelligence? The value of this work is to make ethical discourse a possibility, not to impose it, take it for granted, or deny it. Ethics is not a closed concept, but a vibrating line; you step from one side to the other. Conflict is a part of the human condition; the Other will never be perceived totally and understood in totality; you have to work at it.

By every means possible (here, extremity and provocation), the idea is to establish a documentary method that breaks away from the illusion of objectivity. Cumming's tapes have been strongly influenced by theatre. Brecht can be felt in the interconnection of life and theatre, Beckett is there for the absurd, and Artaud for the pain. If these works connect at all with the cinema, it is John Cassavetes's and Mike Leigh's: the space between the character and the "real" person, identities perpetually under construction, the use of improvisation, the

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impact of excess, and the place of "performance" in everyday life... In short, these filmmakers meet in the paradox that a language or a medium is fatal to expression, and the only way that it can exist at all. Sustaining this approach, the commitment that reality's instability demands is not some empirical distinction between reality and fiction - true or false -but humane mediation.

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An earlier version of this text was published for the launch of the retrospective at the Cinémathèque québécoise in 1999.

Biographical Note

Donigan Cumming's photographic work has been shown in numerous national and international centres such as Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal, New York, Paris, Berlin, Cologne, Amsterdam and Glasgow. His videotapes have been featured independently in film and media festivals in Canada and abroad, most recently at the 28th International Film Festival in Rotterdam and *Visions du Réel*, Festival international du cinéma documentaire, Nyon, Switzerland. In 1997, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City presented three of his videos in its *New Documentaries* series. In 1998, Cumming received the *Barbara Aronofsky Latham Memorial Award* at the 11th Annual Dallas Video Festival. In the same year, *Erratic Angel* won the Telefilm Canada Award for the Best Canadian Production (Short and Medium-Length section) at the 27th *Montreal International Festival of New Cinema and New Media*.

Cumming's major publications are *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography* (1986), *The Stage* (1991), *Diverting the Image* (1993), *Pretty Ribbons* (1996), and *Continuity and Rupture* (1999). His photo-

graphs are also found in numerous catalogues and anthologies including *The Photography Book* (Phaidon Press, 1997). His work is represented in national museum collections of photography and contemporary art in Belgium, Britain, Canada, France and the United States. Forthcoming thematic exhibitions include *Habiter le présent*, Le Mois de la photo à Montréal (1999), *Portraits intimes*, organized by Vox Populi for the Nederlands Foto Instituut of Rotterdam, and *World without End*, at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia (2000). Cumming's work has also been selected by Cindy Sherman for a 10-artist portfolio marking the 20th anniversary of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MoCA) in Los Angeles. Cumming was born in Danville, Virginia, and has lived in Montreal since 1971.

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