

Donigan Cumming

The Stage

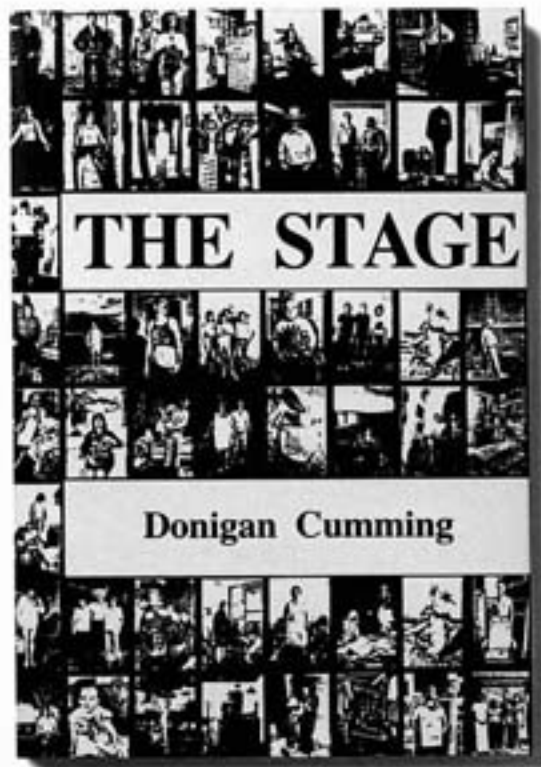
The Canadian photographer Donigan Cumming is a unique talent. The only photographer who can be compared to him in terms of making transgressive portraits is Diane Arbus (see Volume I, pages 258–59), but Cumming, while not the greater artist, possibly takes more risks, at least psychologically. His book, *The Stage*, exemplifies his method to perfection, a method that might be characterized as a three-way collaboration between environmental portraiture, staged tableaux and group therapy.

The photographs for the book were selected from 'out-takes' from two of Cumming's other book projects,

Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography and *The Mirror, the Hammer and the Stage*, and also existed as an installation, a large grid of all the pictures with a soundtrack, the text of which is reproduced in this volume.⁸ Basically, *The Stage* is a picture gallery. If one takes the theatrical metaphor a little further, one can say that each individual portrait represents a little psychodrama played out on the stage that is the picture frame. Collectively, the images function as the dramatis personae – the characters in a play about life.

Cumming's characters are a weird and wonderful bunch, which is to say they are ordinary people. His interest as a portraitist is not so much social as psychological. He seeks the thing that makes each individual a character, or each character an individual. And

where Arbus found the ordinariness in the strange, he finds the strangeness in the ordinary. Like Arbus, Cumming has been criticized for being both aggressive and cruel, but everyone in *The Stage* looks willing enough and well aware of what they are letting themselves in for. He does not make his subjects appear demented, just eccentric. In this extraordinary book, everything is done with a sense of humour and good nature on the part of both photographer and photographed.

**Donigan Cumming *The Stage***

Maquam Press, Montreal, 1991
240 x 165 mm (9½ x 6½ in), 256 pp
Paperback
248 b&w photographs
Text passages from Cecil B de Mille's film *The Ten Commandments*
as remembered by Albert Ross Smith on 30 May 1988

The Stage is included in Martin Parr and Gerry Badger, eds.,
The Photobook: A History, Volume II
(Phaidon, 2006)

Excerpt from the book:

Donigan Cumming

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