



*Beyond the Absurd,
Beyond Cruelty:
Donigan Cumming's
Staged Realities*

By SALLY BERGER

DONIGAN CUMMING

**CONTROLLED
DISTURBANCE**

BEYOND THE ABSURD, BEYOND CRUELTY: DONIGAN CUMMING'S STAGED REALITIES

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Cruelty. Without an element of cruelty at the foundation of every spectacle, the theatre is not possible. In the state of degeneracy, in which we live, it is through the skin that metaphysics will be made to re-enter our minds.

— Antonin Artaud¹

At the heart of Donigan Cumming's artistic impulse is the desire to unseat certainty by exploring what possibilities the unknown has to offer. He does this through a unique dramatic realism in his photographs, videotapes, and mixed media installations, at full tilt and some risk, choosing society's marginalized, aging, and poor as his subjects rather than following our culture's penchant for the young and wealthy. Cumming arrives at this moment in his work by "fooling with the same nest of ideas for years," and by metamorphosing approaches across disciplines. Among these are the absurd and cruel theatres of Bertholt Brecht and Artaud; the writings and plays of Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco; the reflexive and provoked cinéma vérité of Jean Rouch; the improvisational and extemporaneous films of John Cassavetes and Mike Leigh; the Dada constructivism of Kurt Schwitters; Duchampian surrealism; and the Fluxus movements of the 1960s.

His challenge to documentary realism in photography began in the mid 1980s with a satirical critique of the medium's underlying relationship to reality in *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography* (1986), an exhibition and a catalogue produced for the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography. For this exhibition he shot a haunting series of photographs of poor and middle-class people in and around their homes. The work coalesced ideas taken from the history of photography and quoted the composition, manner and subject choices of the well-known social documentarians and modernist photographers from Walker Evans and Weegee to Diane Arbus and Lee Friedlander.

Since these early portraits he has continued to shoot dramatic, emblematic photographic tableaux and, beginning in 1993, to record vivid, anachronistic videotapes of the aging or ill, and socially assisted poor, in their most intimate surroundings without sanitizing or romanticizing these depictions. In conjunction with his photographs and videotapes, Cumming also creates installations that incorporate photography, video, and sound. In the 1980s he began to combine photographs with sound montages of fragmented and interlocking music and stories. In the 1990s he added videotaped performances to this mix of mediums.

¹ Antonin Artaud, "The Theater of Cruelty" (First Manifesto, 1932), *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings* ed. Susan Sontag (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 251.

Using a variety of pictorial, narrative, and installation forms, Cumming elicits a hybrid form of reality, fiction, and theatre, willfully weaving irreverent combinations of actuality and invention; the role reversals between subjects and characters; and the juxtaposition and staging of people among the artifacts of their lifestyles. His work takes shape as a perverse dialectic on human nature, society, art and life.

Cumming's interest in combining narrative and non-fiction material is most fully articulated in his videotapes. The antecedents for this work in video can be traced to his earlier detailed photographic *mises-en-scène*, the presentation of photographs in series, and the use of sound in installations such as those found in *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography*. This formative and monumental project contained the seeds for his future work. It was created over a four-year period and consisted of working with 250 subjects, over one hundred photographs, six sound tapes, and five pages of letters written in long-hand. The work presented a visual critique of social realist and documentary conventions in photography to expose the epistemology of the field, focusing on the naivete of artistic ambitions and the audience perception of photographic truth.

The first two sections of the exhibition consisted of photographs of people in boarding houses, institutional residences, and suburban homes around Montreal, although they could have been taken in many places. The subjects are grouped into familiar domestic units of family, friends, and lovers, but the portraits are oddly dispassionate and coolly uninhibited. As in impromptu snapshots, faces are expressionless, eyes are closed, and objects protrude awkwardly from behind and on top of figures. People stand exposed in their underwear and in absurdly exaggerated or ridiculously imitative positions. The disadvantaged and the privileged are treated as two distinct, but parallel, universes that cross over into each other. Paradoxically, some of the same models appear in both economic spheres.

Part three is an installation comprised of letters written by an anonymous woman to Elvis Presley (who she believed communicated with her through his songs played on KSSN, Little Rock); photographs and text supporting the "evidence" of her letters; and a sound montage of people reading and responding to the letters and singing Presley's songs. All three sections are presented as objective documentary reportage, but were deliberately staged, and satirical and/or allegorical in tone. The confusion caused by this, combined with disturbing images, simultaneously compelled and alarmed viewers. The exhibition was controversial, especially because it was not readily apparent that the subjects were in on the deception.

While taking the photographs that initiated the above project, Cumming met many of the individuals who came to be a feature of his future work. In 1982, an extraordinary 70-year-old woman, Nettie Harris, became his principle photographic model and collaborator. Together they created a series of lucid and playful photographs on the qualities of her life and aging that broke taboos on the representation of older women as well as on the representation of death. Out of this photographic record of Harris, Cumming created an installation, *Pretty Ribbons* (1993), that incorporated excerpts from a friend's diary and two soundtracks. A book by the same title followed in 1996.

Cumming turned his initial encounters with other subjects from *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography* into collegial and intimate friendships with lasting connections. The fictional community created for the exhibition began to take the shape of a committed working group of models and professional actors. Geoffrey Bates, Raymond Beaudoin, Nelson Coombs, Joyce Donnison, Gerald Harvey, Bea Johnson, Colin Kane, Albert Smith, and Susan Thomson are just some of the individuals in an ever-evolving cast in Cumming's photographs, videotapes, and installations.

Cumming adheres to the notion that "...an effective documentary montage must be as dense and disturbing as its subject reality."² In creating the photographic project *The Mirror, The Hammer, and The Stage* (1990), he began to work more intimately with a smaller group of people. In order to "show that photographic distillation is reductive and inadequate to the human situation," he scaled down the large roster of subjects from the hundreds in *Reality and Motive* and dropped the pretense or "act" of objectivity to engage with his subjects in a more outrageous and comedic exaggeration or "spectacle"³ of documentary realism. For *The Stage*, Cumming delved into his photographic archives of people playing themselves in daily life and created a tightly arranged mosaic of 250 photographs of their antics. A soundtrack of Albert Smith doing a tour-de-force, improvised recitation of all the parts of Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* accompanied the installation. It was at this time that Cumming began to narrow his focus to emphasize, "the imperfections and uncertainties of real engagements with another human being," by looking at a variety of psychological situations. An amalgam of these ideas is at the centre of Cumming's cinematic practice in which he explores cinema as neither documentary nor fiction, but as an organic functioning whole, where as Artaud proposed it was possible for cinema to "enter into contact with the real."⁴

Cumming's first videotape, *A Prayer for Nettie* (1995), was made as an elegy to his model and collaborator, Nettie Harris. It includes images recorded when Cumming first turned to video during the same year of her death in 1993. Since this work was produced, he has made at least one videotape per year and installations related to each. These videos— *Cut the Parrot* (1996); *After Brenda* (1997); *Karaoke* (1998); *Erratic Angel* (1998); and four short pieces from 1999, *Four Storeys*; *Trip*; *Petit Jesus*; and *Shelter*— build on and extend his narrative, theatrical, and documentary ideas. From videotape to videotape, Cumming exploits the qualities of a main actor to reveal his or her real-life story; he develops broader topics around that specific character's issues; and he openly experiments with new cross-genre methodologies to most effectively portray the themes that surface.

A Prayer for Nettie is Cumming's compelling signature videotape that grew out of the artist/mentor relationship between Cumming and Harris. Based on the candid nature of their previous work together, Cumming constructed a brutally honest and darkly ironic portrait on aging and death. By openly expressing his contradictory feelings about love and loss for the videotape, he established

²Donigan Cumming, "Concerning La Répétition" (1995), artist's statement published by Frac Lorraine 2.

³Donigan Cumming, "Concerning La Répétition", 2.

⁴Antonin Artaud, "Cinema and Reality", ed. *Antonin Artaud*, 150-152.

new grounds for greater trust with the subjects in his future projects. At first viewing, *A Prayer for Nettie* appears to disparage memory and poke fun at death. It is comprised of a contradictory web of testimonies by people who do not seem particularly close to Nettie, people who only knew her through other's recollections, or who did not know her at all. From the outset, Nettie's name is mispronounced as Nellie, and Cumming, situated behind the camera, can be heard prompting the characters what to say in their reminiscences and repeatedly asking them to practice their prayers for her. Whichever way you look at it, his construct is playfully cruel—or cruelly playful. He includes images of Nettie asleep, her breath emanating from her lips in silly popping sounds. An actor repeatedly calls out her name in contrapuntal synch, as if to cajole her back to life, while lamenting her death. Or Cumming straddles her naked vulnerable body with his own as he videotapes her exposed pubis.

As the videotape unfolds, the viewers come to realize that we are witness to Cumming's hidden recollections and feelings toward Nettie, as they are enacted through others. Further, we observe the other characters' lives and hear about their specific philosophies of death even as it knocks on their door. In *A Prayer for Nettie*, a conversation between Cumming and the character played by Raymond (Beaudoin) is continuously interrupted by Raymond's hacking cough. Cumming interviews Joyce (Donnison), who lives, sleeps, and breathes with a long hose attached from an oxygen tank to her nose. He has absurdly wound two tiny black microphones onto the paraphernalia of her life-support system to record her as she rasps: "When you are remembered so well, then all is not lost."

This type of dark humour and acknowledgment of death's evidence in life is found throughout Cumming's work. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes writes about how a photograph is always in some way about death, and the camera a clock for seeing⁵. Cumming uses the moving-image medium of video to draw out the relationship between the image, time, and mortality.

A Prayer for Nettie conveys a palpable connection between the maker and his subjects and reverses the roles between them. Time slips forward and backward and stands still. One endearing character, Albert (Smith), becomes as central as Nettie in the videotape. The scenes shot with him on the day Cumming informs him of Nettie's death bracket the work. They create a rupture in time that drives the abstruse narrative from Nettie's death back to the living. In the first scene, Albert prays for "Nellie" and then angelically opens his eyes wide. In the final scene, Albert and Cumming weave in and out of a role play involving two hucksters, a real conversation between male friends, and a quasi truthful account of Nettie's death. Albert affectionately calls Cumming "Don" (just as all the characters refer to each other on a first-name basis). The exchange between the two leads up to a repeat of Albert's opening "prayer for Nettie" scene. This time he appears as an actor frozen in time at the end of his part.

⁵ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), 15, 97.

Unlike much documentary realism, Cumming's work ultimately leaves the inner privacy of the lives of the subjects intact. *A Prayer for Nettie* does not offer up a slice of Nettie's life, nor seek to reveal her hidden secrets. The work pulls from the roles that people play as characters in life, and the existential, metaphysical, and dramatic experienced in the everyday— simultaneously anguished, loving, and unpredictable. The installation for *A Prayer for Nettie* evokes the spiritual symbolism of the Pieta. It consists of seven monitors: one shows the entire tape in continuous loops, the others present the work in looped excerpts. Large formal black and white photographs of male mourners in beautiful poses surround the monitors marking Nettie's death.

The creation of a community that bridges art and life guides Cumming's work. For almost twenty years, his motivation has been in working with the disenfranchised—those who are often summarily disregarded and categorized as poor, sick, elderly, mentally impaired, alcoholic, drug-addicted, homeless, or uneducated. Cumming's theatrical community does live on the brink of survival. In his tapes they are revealed as tangible people with problems that anyone can relate to. Their concerns are ours too, and the issues they present us with do not fade away.

Cumming's second videotape, *Cut the Parrot* (1996), revolves around Albert (Smith's) death and male bonding. The title is an oblique reference to Eugene Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*. Disarmingly comedic in tone and laden with multiple readings, as are all his titles, the work is a darker, more self-referential account of loss in the director's own life and the pathos of life in general. Cumming appears frequently throughout this tape: his handsome face directly addresses the camera but is tightly framed in a similar fashion to the extreme wide-angle, distorted close-ups that capture the other characters. He assumes different roughly-hewn roles and only speaks in a natural tone in brief, off-camera moments. Cumming describes his feelings for Albert in a parallel roundabout manner, evoking their professional relationship rather than an infuriate one by saying, "I needed him, the little fucker." The final scene is a monologue in which Cumming describes what happened when as a nine-year-old boy, he and his family visited the institution where his non-communicative and retarded older brother Julien lived. A loquacious fellow resident grabbed his parents' attention, and fooled them into thinking he was "normal." If this stranger was not what he seemed to be, who then was his brother? This pivotal incident appears to shape Cumming's larger inquiry into personal alienation and the incongruity between appearances, human behaviour and societal prejudices.

In *Cut the Parrot*, as in *A Prayer for Nettie*, Cumming again sculpts time and image to fracture and to add a cyclical dimension to the narrative. An extreme close-up of a foot with grossly overgrown toenails over a calendar appears in the opening frame of the videotape. In slow motion, Cumming moves through a cluttered apartment to linger over a watch that no longer keeps time, and observes the depletion of meager savings in the pages of a bankbook. On the soundtrack, a man's voice dramatizes Winston Churchill speaking about the Second World War. The meaning of this opening sequence is made clear as the narrative evolves. First, Cumming describes his trip to the morgue to identify Albert's body four weeks after his death, when Albert's beard and nails have continued to grow, and his now yellowed tongue hangs limply out of his mouth. Later, the character Geoffrey (Bates), explains how everyone considered Albert a saint. His lips move silently as in prayer and Albert's voice impersonating Churchill fills the soundtrack. Albert is once again larger than life, even as we travel in memory and time back to the beginning of the story and the news of his death.

Side stories allude to homosexuality, the extreme poverty of the subjects, and their religiosity. Gerald (Harvey) relates how friends are expected to give sex to ("bugger off") a superintendent in lieu of rent and why he refuses to pay for his own mother's funeral. These tales are told as the camera focuses on the torso of a man fiddling with his genitals, and slowly encircles Gerald's naked body lying on a table as if laid out in a funeral parlor. At various interludes comforting religious songs are sung such as "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."

Part of Cumming's strategy is to let things just happen. At the same time, he provokes, manipulates, and tweaks the action. One such moment occurs after Susan (Thomson)—a youngish woman with a rosy blush to her cheeks, a sparkle to her eyes, and a gap in her top front teeth—has an epileptic attack. Right after this frightening scene, she talks about her happy approach to life and strong attachment to her common-law husband, Jimmy. Provoked by Cumming, who asks her if she has ever come close to losing Jimmy, Susan becomes fearful. In turn, she asks about Cumming's relationship with his own wife in a manner that is as dogged as Cumming is mischievous. Their talk develops into a friendly, but loaded, flirtation. When this edgy banter reaches a pitch, Cumming slips in a cue, and Susan falls back into character singing "Que sera sera" while Cumming reclaims his role as director.

After Brenda (1998) is a romance based on the break-up of Pierre (Lamarche) and his girlfriend, Brenda. It is more specifically story-driven than the previous works and opens with a dis-armingly catchy title song, "I Lost My Baby," by Jean Leloup. Pierre shows Donigan where his belongings have been thrown out on the street and discloses that he was arrested after Brenda charged him with rape and for holding her against her will. Charges and countercharges of prostitution and jealousy ensue. Alcoholism and poverty are the key issues here; the constant concern is to avoid homelessness by seeking the lowest rents. Other characters in the story include Nelson (Coombs) and his new girlfriend, Mina (Putugu), who are the friends with whom Pierre shares temporary quarters. Colin (Kane), who has been on welfare for twenty years, plays a cameo role. Cumming enters his apartment, sweeps through to document the cluttered quarters, and leaves with not a word spoken between them. Colin faces a curtained window with his back to the camera, yammers on about satanic worship, and relates how he came to learn of another close friend's death after

Cumming located him in a shelter. Cumming assumes the role of a detective cum voyeur in this work, entering and leaving apartments at will, reporting and musing on the activities of the participants' lives directly into the camera.

Erratic Angel (1999) is Cumming's most documentary-like video to date. Colin is a recovering substance abuser and his obsessive nature and self-absorption dominates the narrative. It is his story and Cumming gives Colin's running dialogue free rein. The time the two spend together illuminates Colin's battle with addiction. As cinéma vérité provocateur and friend, Cumming encourages Colin to cut his hair and beard in the hopes that a physical transformation will provoke an inner one. Colin is verbose and articulate, but cannot easily cope with people nor can he seem to conquer his demons. By the end of the video, he reveals a story about himself, when as a "strange" young paranoid student he is saved by a vision—the erratic angel of the title—from killing a priest he believed to be bad. Gerald (Harvey) hovers nakedly at the beginning and end of the tape like Clarence in Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*. Can Colin be saved? The tape clearly indicates that there is no easy resolution to his dilemma. Cumming's installation *Barber's Music* (1999) evolved out of *Erratic Angel* and features both Colin and his "angel." The title refers to the discordant music produced by customers who wait their turn in a barbershop and play instruments provided to keep them occupied. The installation envelops the viewer in the cycles of transgression, recovery, and confusion of addiction.

Cumming's most recent short works are simpler in form, but no less provocative than his more elaborate story constructions. With these, Cumming extrapolates discrete moments of personal isolation and tragedy to create moving stills. *Karaoke* was the first work made in this style. It features Nelson (Coombs) as he drifts in sleep and moves his foot to recorded music accompanied by two off-camera singers. Nelson, who has worked with Cumming since the early 1980s, is now aged, sickly, and exceedingly thin. Nelson's foot moves jauntily to the beat while a deathlike sleep flits across his sunken face. Following this work, Cumming made four additional short pieces. *Four Storeys* is about a woman who survived a suicide attempt made to escape her boyfriend's all-encompassing heroin addiction. *Trip* is an anonymous, melancholic stumble through an ice-laden wintry landscape. *Petit Jesus* is based on "Solitude," a poem written and weepingly recited by Pierre about unrequited love and religion's salvation; and *Shelter* is about a chance, brief encounter between Cumming and a man adrift at a bus shelter. Three of these works (*Four Storeys*, *Karaoke*, and *Petit Jesus*) are incorporated into the installation *Moving Stills* (1999).

Each of the three tapes is projected onto one of three walls, and each soundtrack comes up separately. As in the installation for *A Prayer for Nettie*, one woman is centrally featured, flanked by two men. This triptych evokes strong religious overtones that offers a transcendence from the despairing stories.

It is in his videotapes that Cumming renders his own theatre of the absurd, cruel and humane. Each videotape is shot in long takes, punctuated by slow motion and freeze frames, and based in theatrical reality. Artaud, who found dramatic and documentary cinemas to be either too intellectual and pat or too innocent and mechanical, would likely find Cumming's work close to the ideas

expressed in his manifesto, *The Theater of Cruelty*, and in his writings on the cinema⁶. Through artistic creation, Artaud sought to purge the alienation that tormented his own consciousness. He believed that the value of theatre "lies in its excruciating, magical connection with reality and with danger."⁷ Cumming has distilled the influences of many creative voices into his own unique practice, and it is illuminating to look specifically at how he has used the intimate qualities of video to reinterpret Artaud's visionary theatre of the absurd for the present.

Like Artaud, Cumming flirts with danger to express hard-to-face or buried psychological truths. His chosen topics are not sexy, light, or entertaining. The improvised role-playing with a cast of non-professional actors produces unpredictable material that reaches coherence only through the processes of shooting and editing. The results of this methodology are non-generic, without any guarantees for a predictable or positive audience reception. It is an intentional part of Cumming's strategy to use images and methods that will stimulate a strong reaction from the audience. His real-life characters may be physically repellent and spiritually broken, and they represent what one does not want to face: sickness, aging, and mortality. These are not fairy tales with happily-ever-after endings, and yet at the same time they give us hope because they strive to confront reality at its strongest.

To Artaud, theatre should not rely on the text, but "rediscover the notion of a unique kind of language halfway between gesture and thought."⁸ To him, language was not just sound, but also a visual panoply of objects, movements, attitudes, and gestures that combine meaning and physiognomy into signs.

The possibilities presented by the physicality of expression in space, anarchic humour, imagistic and symbolic poetry, the chaos of creation, productions staged around subjects, events, or known works, and the qualities of persuasion of the actor are only some of Artaud's imaginings on how his *Theater of Cruelty* could exorcise the pain of existence.

Cumming assumes the intonations of various roles as a kind of narrator on human frailty, in turns playing the parts of director, detective, friend, storyteller, and himself. The characters also take on the various intonations of their roles. Albert has great oratorical skills at reciting scenes from movies and recalling political speeches from memory. Pierre is a romantic poet consumed with the demons of alcohol and finding love. And Colin is ferociously angry and alive, self-absorbed as well as one who speaks out for other recovering addicts so that they can receive more thoughtful health care. Beyond the explicative power of language and music, it is the objects that clutter people's homes, and the characters' lack of teeth and craggy skin, that spell out their poverty and the realities of aging.

⁶ Antonin Artaud, "The Premature Old Age of Cinema", *Selected Writings*, 311-314.

⁷ *Selected Writings*, 242.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Confusion and chaos are devices used by Cumming to complicate the subjective/objective realities of his work. The narratology in his videotapes is erratic; the story goes backward and forward in time and conversations are not necessarily linked. We know characters only by their first names, if we know their names at all. Their speech may be garbled or they say contradictory things. Time is elliptical, and memory is fiction. Cumming can't remember exactly where Nettie was when she died and he recalls visiting his brother as if it was a dream in black and white. Susan doesn't really know how long she has been with Jimmy: "thirty-six years," she states, "or twenty-five." Homes are cluttered with kitschy objects, dirty laundry, and the omnipresent pots of soup. Busts of Beethoven and the Madonna adorn Pierre's television set, candle wax drips over Colin's radio, and shoes and slippers lie randomly about Albert's and Nettie's apartments. These messy signs of daily life become emblems to larger universal truths about all people.

Cumming focuses on faces, lined and weathered by time and hardship like masks over the inner soul. 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 long takes. In *A Prayer for Nettie*, an actor's cotton underwear, sporting the insignia "Mr. Brief," become a darkly humorous symbol of death as Cumming and Albert talk about the last moments of Nettie's life.

Cumming's role as both artist and participating subject is aggressively foregrounded in his videotapes in ways that were not possible in his earlier photographs, and yet he seems to relish a certain anonymity. Cumming places himself in the videotapes physically and aurally, while the photographs only suggest his subjective presence, or ideas, through his choice of imaging and staging devices. In the videotapes, Cumming reveals elements of his personal relationship to the subjects, and at the same time, is frankly manipulative of the actors. Moments that take place in the margins of the process, sometimes in front of the camera, at other times only on the soundtrack, often are the most critical ones. These are enhanced by the fluidity of directing, acting, and communicating between the director and actors. The actors such as Colin and Susan as well as Cumming take turns at being in and out of control.

The new freedoms and possibilities found through videotaping have liberated Cumming's work into a more total theatre of absurdist reality. In his videotapes, the camera looks at certain things, while the soundtrack provides meta levels of discourse using songs; fragments of soundtracks from classic Hollywood movies; jokes, conversational patter; Cumming's off camera personal and directorial remarks; and the subject/character responses. All become part of the text of the narrative. This is non-fiction (neither fiction nor documentary) at its most extreme, a merger of fiction with reality. Cumming is intent on pushing beyond the boundaries of realism, at once compelling, repulsing, and changing the expectations of the viewer. His tapes are filled with the charms and excesses of his subject/characters. They sing familiar religious songs and popular tunes, speak in "dirty" language, and tell unsavoury stories. They sport about in unflattering and provocative nude poses and live in cluttered houses.

DONIGAN CUMMING, CONTROLLED DISTURBANCE

Does Cumming go too far? Does he push your buttons? His work compels us to ask: How involved is this community of actors really? What choices do they have in the videomaking process? Upon close examination, we can see that the subjects do comment upon the work, just as the subjects in reflexive cinema are commonly called to do—and they also shape it intrinsically. In the opening scenes of *After Brenda*, Pierre asks Cumming if he can be the producer: "You want the whole thing? The pain too?" In the closing scenes, after we have followed the convoluted story line of love, jealousy, and harsh reality, he advises, "Show the human tragedy, but also show the human love."