

PASSING BY ON THE OTHER SIDE

THEATRE OF THE FORGOTTEN & ART OF THE SCARS OF THE PEOPLE

THE WORK OF DONIGAN CUMMING

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Here we have an art in which Utopia and dystopia co-exist, one operating at the periphery of what is permitted, an art dealing at once with alienation but which is also a profound exploration of our humanity. The phrase, in fact it is the title of his book, which comes to mind in connection with Donigan Cumming's work is Bishop Huddleston's Naught for Your Comfort. There is indeed little to comfort us in Cumming's work, unless we can see it as somehow redemptive in that it is some kind of affirmation, and that against all the odds, of our humanity. For the overwhelming mass of his audience there is little familiar in his intimate depiction of his subjects. The most that most of us will have seen is those similar, either frozen within frames or, glanced at uneasily, freezing within shop doorways. No comfortable words and no comfortable images either. The homes are not homely, his subjects' bellies, we are persuaded, will not be full and none are possessed of a sense of well-being. Security is foreign to them, at least in their present circumstance: uncertainty about their future is a consistent feature but one allied with an almost certain knowledge of a squalid and alienated death. Little for our comfort and

certainly naught much for theirs: most of his subjects exist, marginalised and beyond that and afraid; life as most of us live it is beyond their scope. A constant is that these people are beset by events that they do not fully understand. Those of them who do, like his character Colin, can do precious little to change anything, merely rail against what is so familiar: the horror, fear, disquiet and pain, mental and physical.

In all this Donigan Cumming is a puppet-master, one who avoids the usual conduits through which the bourgeois audience experiences things which outrage it. His form of *docutheatre* avoids the sanitisation which the Sunday supplement shock-horror-squalor stories engender, that easily-forgotten-by-lunch *frisson* of concern. At the same time he engages in a form of guerilladom, succeeding in a process of de-voyeurising his audience. He may even be a voyeur to a greater or lesser extent (who knows?) but he makes it impossible for us to adopt a voyeuristic position.⁽¹⁾ This is the heart of his subversion and the essence of his enigma. This art is absolutely political in both the conventional and unconventional senses but it also engenders highly

personal considerations of What is identity? and What is individuality? It is difficult: an art of hybridity, hovering between theatre and real-life. Above all it is, to my mind, a re-engagement with concepts and concerns of community. In thinking of ways in which to introduce this body of work to Wales, where little of Donigan Cumming's output has previously been seen, I allowed myself to think of others who have produced images here which were calculated to inculcate in the audience feelings ranging from mere concern to total and unmitigated outrage. Photographs of deprivation and art dedicated to the depiction of exploitation, greed and misery are understandably legion in Wales and indeed are as ubiquitous as photographs of a now melancholically beautiful but previously raped landscape. But it has been to the utilitarian that my mind has most turned, to Salvation Army, rather than Benetton, adverts; to Snowdon's photographs of psychiatric hospital patients, taken not ten miles from where these images will be seen and I am confident that, even in today's homogenised, heritage park Wales, where landscape might have changed but institutions maybe not all that much, the equivalents of such harrowing photographs might be taken still.

My thoughts have obviously turned too upon issues of



social suffering, so much in my mind has *been gwerin y graith*, that peculiar part of our national literature: the literature of the 'suffering folk' but more poetically and more accurately, the literature of the 'scars of the people', for there are large correspondences in that Donigan Cumming's art is in essence the art of the scars of the people.⁽²⁾

Appropriately, it was a piece of social service which suggested the title of this essay and it was an essay on art as a social service which suggested the sub-title (even though a more than referential nod in the direction of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed was also a temptation). But the original spur was in fact an essay concerned with a product of President Johnson's version of the New Deal, his Great Society programme of the Nineteen Sixties. Under its provisions many arts organisations which provided 'services for the unfortunate', and how authentically Victorian that sounds, came into being. One of these, The Theatre for the Forgotten, was established in 1967, having as its remit to do creative work in prisons, with juvenile offenders and others of society's outcasts and supposed failures: marginality pervades every aspect of the group's work.⁽³⁾ Another poetic expression to describe the fragile 'unfortunate' is one that Tennessee Williams used to describe his motivation for A Streetcar Named Desire; he called it a plea for the delicate people. That too was the plea of the Theatre of the Forgotten, it is also Donigan Cumming's most earnest plea, indeed it is the leitmotif of his theatre of operation.

This American thrust towards supporting 'socially engaged art' coincided, more or less, with the rise of the use of art 'in processes of social and political change', which occurred in the United Kingdom and which, fairly rapidly here, became institutionalised as 'Community Arts' and subsequently and consequently, a neutral politico-cultural force, before vanishing utterly, at least under that bankrupt label.

At its rawest and most valuable margin, this art concerned itself with people and problems that society at large preferred to ignore. The degree of discomfort experienced by the audience, subject, or target for action, varied but unless the art was particularly effective, then (as a general principle) its efficacy in changing social/political situations tended to diminish, as its targets (often official bodies rather even than private companies) developed ever more sophisticated mechanisms for ignoring the message. Thatcherism of course finished it off, as bodies of public arts support and local authorities, in a gross dereliction of their stewardship, saw the virtue of, in actuality, abandoning both art's alliance with social concern and effective action for the dispossessed. That this was done as a cynical form of theatre, in which the mask of the dull rhetoric of political correctness, combined with 'a lack of funds' and a lack of honest debate, were all characteristics of quasi-fascism and a 'me first, look out for your job' pragmatism, renders it pathologically fascinating as a study. Its cultural effect has been horrible and its ramifications still affect us.

Now Richard Nonas, American anthropologist turned minimalist artist, has argued that the value of art is diminished whenever the noun art is qualified by an adjective, as instances of this one can advance: 'Public'; 'Outsider'; 'Healing/Health'; 'Performance'; live', 'Computer' and, of course, 'Community'. I realise that some of these examples are arguable but certainly in the case of the last the art is usually severely compromised. What almost all examples have in common is that, ironically, they are (or their continuance beyond their natural lifespan is)



frequently the result of bureaucratic imperatives and, as we in Wales well-know, great art, even just good art, is hardly ever sustained by bureaucratic imperatives. We do not diminish the art of Daumier, Gilray, Hogarth, Delacroix *et al.* by characterising it as 'political' or 'social' because if it is 'merely' that it is not art.

In his book *The Art of Interruption* John Roberts uses a number of telling phrases, which have great resonance in relation to Cumming's work and particularly to speculations concerning its worth both as document and as art. Firstly he considers photography of documentary value in the sense of: "the idea of photography as contribution to the production of an archival knowledge of a particular event or period

has been judged ... as a valuable empirical resource." He writes of " 'the everyday' as a source of fraternity with others" and of the social anthropological approach to "the low and the fallen." He also refers to the "melancholic art of class observation" and the aestheticisation of misery.⁽⁴⁾ That art then which deals with people (or subjects) regarded as marginal because of the fact that we are more comfortable as an audience gazing over, or impressionistically regarding it and them, but it is none the less art. Throwing at it accusations of 'voyeurism' (though some would say that documentary is intrinsically voyeuristic), or dismissing it as 'social realism as a liberal panacea', and even accusing it of 'emotionalism', as if emotionalism were per se a full, perfect and sufficient form of critical denigration, rather than one more means to open minds and achieve a caring sharing society. All, of course, are simply ploys, to socialise its critics' discomfort. Neatly, I hope, bringing us to focus on the subject of Donigan Cumming.

In him we have an artist who has turned everything inside out: he does bring art to the marginal and dispossessed. They after all participate in his plots, they improvise with him, they, in some cases, dictate their poses. We have perhaps something akin to John Berger's ideas concerning a social documentary basis for photography and its alliance with his literary project, in which he values realism for its low common factor cognition, which he believes allows widespread participation and an understanding, even identification with, the values, problems and aspirations of the many. But that as a justification for Cumming's approach has to be weighed alongside other factors, principally the value of what Cumming does as a form of catharsis for himself, in view of his personal history. Much can be understood when one knows something of his family circumstances but he also speaks of what he calls "Gothic Southern stuff" and says he was "brought up with Civil War culture, and the wreck of culture" and was "mad about war and violence by the time I reached adolescence."⁽⁵⁾All this has its piquant aspect, for he later moved to Canada as a means to resist the war in Vietnam. However, in his work, as well as personal catharsis, we have, obviously, a way of forcing the attention of the audience in a direction where it would prefer, certainly often in my case, not to go.

When I spoke to Cumming naturally I asked about what had contributed to the formation of his art and his particular areas of concern. He mentioned a number of things some of them, like those above, historically or generally culturally determined. He also mentioned his mother, whom he characterised as constitutionally a 'carer' and Julien, his brother, who is in Donigan's words 'mentally retarded'. "The reason I mention my brother is because I have become very attached to those I work with, it is a part of my gene package. I give them support, to present themselves and comment in a way not always possible. This is redemptive. You/they can see them not as ugly fucked up failures."⁽⁶⁾

This comes from an artist who says that "Art and empathy don't mix," yet obviously succeeds in mixing them, one who is castigated by one of his subjects (the alcoholic, possibly schizophrenic, Colin in *if Only I* berates him as "Donigan you sophomoric neophyte," when he does something to irritate him) and who occasionally feels as manipulated by his subjects as we feel they may be by him. One subject, Colleen, he describes as "highly manipulative." She is severely damaged, physically and emotionally, having jumped off a building and survived, much broken; she has had a drugs problem, a drink problem, she takes a whole pharmacopoeia of medication, is conventionally beautiful, and articulate. She speaks in a deliberate, highly grammatical, structured way and looks directly to camera, one held by Donigan Cumming, who says of her "All Colleen's problems are clichés. She is a complete construction, she creates a character for me; she decides which version to give. Colleen is manipulative."

And I feel, with the benefit of knowing a substantial amount of his work, something of the context and having had the advantage of several conversations with him, that what he claims is in all likelihood true. And this may be a major flaw in his work: at just whom is it pitched? Clearly its form, the video work probably more so than the photographs, renders it extremely difficult for the general, even the intelligent general, viewer to 'read' in the way that I (with all the advantages of the curator and critic, having previous and privileged access to both artist and anecdotal and other contextual material, plus of course, more time) believe it can bear to be read and understood.

Obviously another consideration is that we have to answer the question of whether Cumming might not be some species of colonialist, annexing the difficulties and suffering of others to his own ends. The customary riposte of the 'for their own good' argument is always going to be difficult to sustain but this too Cumming holds back from, keeping it in balance through the honesty evinced above. He is in this totally balanced himself in his approach to offering a kind of therapy to his subjects and engaging with them. We have to bear in mind that for most of us such engagement is impossible and that we find excuses, or reasons, for repressing any humanistic concern we might have, finding such subjects 'too raw', 'too problematic', 'too distasteful' and too unlikely to respond in ways we would find positive. The dismissive "why can't they help

themselves?" or, more subtly, "I'm doing something (at some remove; at a higher level... earning the money that allows me to be charitable - akin to the Thatcher 'Good Samaritan argument' this, etc., etc.) far more effective than engaging directly with them," is as ubiquitous as it is understandable. "You sober people who feel well armed against passion and fantasies and would like to turn your emptiness into a matter of pride and an ornament: you call yourselves realists and hint that the world really is the way it appears to you ... Your love of 'reality' for example - oh, that is a primeval 'love.' Every feeling and sensation contains a piece of this old love; and some fantasy, some prejudice, some unreason, some ignorance, some fear... There is no 'reality' for us - not for you either, my sober friends. We are not nearly as different as you think and perhaps our good will to transcend intoxication is as respectable as your faith that you are altogether incapable of intoxication."(7)

Interestingly, though I am sure this is coincidental, the



development of Cumming's oeuvre has shadowed, more or less exactly, the diminution and in substantial numbers of cases, the complete withdrawal of funds formerly designated by private foundations, governmental and quasi-governmental organisations for arts in social care programmes in the United States. There is little surprise in any of this. In the face of Reaganite-Thatcherite rhetoric (There is no such thing as society' etc.,) the funders decided to focus on 'quality art' rather than that for social



purposes. In the UK we are behind, in the sense that the money, although it atrophied, until augmented by lottery funds, was kept in play to fund quasi-(rather than effective) democratic activity. This in the usual subtle art of social control at which we excel; so that from behind the mask of political correctness, the 'quality argument' is just beginning to be heard. However, it is very noticeable that within the general framework of a decline in arts funding, arts funding for genuine applied humanistic and social purposes has evaporated ever more rapidly and there is abundant documentation of this change.

To a large extent what Donigan Cumming has succeeded in doing is redefining the social role of art from more or less the point at which decline began and he has maybe provided subtler and more resilient mechanisms for achieving social change. He forces us to consider not only new grounds for art but its very conventions and cultural framings. I cannot help feeling that compared with his work, the work of some of his younger British contemporaries (one thinks of Richard Billingham and Gillian Wearing) lacks both depth and any comparable complexity of resonance. One looks to an artist such as Jo Spence for as plausible an integration of documentary and genuine concern (rather than a type of voyeurism, which I sense as an element in theirs) as Cumming's. With him, as with her, there is the articulation of something approaching the establishment of a new genre. What further associates them in my mind is that she was also prepared to question the formal conventions of photography to achieve her political-cultural ends.

About the limitations of using the "family record" in teaching, Spence wrote: "Whilst such limited documentation of our private lives obviously gives us a lot of pleasure, it means that whole areas of our lives go by without being recorded in any way. For instance, a large part of our lives is spent working, yet the conflict, oppression, exploitation, power dynamics and achievements of this world are seldom recorded ... I would argue that the potential for family album work, for a kind of radicalised re-remembering, could be very profound, but the nature of the type of disclosures which might be invited might not be in the self-(or group) interest of many students ... But in teaching we need to remember that our students are often in the presence of members of another class, or another race, or of another sexuality, which is not always conducive to such safety..."⁽⁸⁾

Neither Spence nor Cumming has presented us with work conducive to too much safety, in any sense, but that it also engenders profound moral and ethical considerations is both in-built and enriching.

But we are driven to ask ourselves where the focus of Cumming's cultural operation is: indeed, we are driven even further back, to ask *what* it is?

In his essay Social Environment and Theatrical Environment, Raymond Williams dissects the word 'naturalism', in fact considers its application to a particular type of novel.⁽⁹⁾ Tracing the word's history, he notes its 'neutral' use when associated with a corpus of knowledge e.g. the natural sciences, natural history. Its use continued as a means of indicating those phenomena which were opposed to supernaturalism, hence natural laws, natural forces etc. As the move towards a secular and social literature became marked, in the late Nineteenth Century, he saw theories of naturalism in fiction and drama as "a conscious presentation of human character and action within a natural and social environment." Relations between different nuances of 'naturalism' in descriptions of works of art then are seen to be inevitably complex and clearly Donigan Cumming's work has a central place in the modern version of this dilemma articulated variously by Roberts, Berger and Williams. Apart from, now common, debates concerning the nature and objectivity of documentary and the extent to which the latter can ever be considered a product of neutral observation, he introduces a new factor.

Here we have a particular dilemma, one most vividly illustrated by literary/theatrical examples: Zola believed

that theatre ought to show a slice of life, with the author 'neutrally' showing life as it is. The implications of that for visual art and in particular photography, are obvious: the dead hand of realism and absolute naturalism is not at all conducive to art; this apart from the fact that authorial objectivity is never in any case neutral. Take the neo-realism of someone like Vittorio de Sica, in *The Bicycle Thieves* or *Two Women*, for example, the 'reality' becomes suffocating, boring, and Oscars notwithstanding, the annihilation of art. We do not actually need the seemingly endless epics of Wagner, Proust, Dickens and Balzac, enjoyable though they may be in many aspects, they are only art of an



uneconomical kind: we *have* reality, we need something more, particularly in faster centuries. If art is to be an effective spur to certain emotions or certain actions, it has to remember that it has hot competition from the mass-media and it has to be economical in its means. The artist has also to have gimlet eyes. There is no effective remedy to social problems in the dewy eyed response; tears *(mere* tears) are easily drawn:

Dickens absolutely misunderstands the significance of the conflict between capital and labour; he simply does not grasp that two irreconcilable forces confront each other here, and that the settlement of the guarrel does not depend on the good will of the individual. The gospel truth that man does not live by bread alone does not seem very convincing in a novel describing the struggle of the proletariat for daily bread. But Dickens cannot give up his childish belief in the possibility of reconciling the classes. He indulges in the illusion that patriarchal-philanthropic feelings, on the one, and a patient, self-sacrificing attitude, on the other side, guarantee social peace. He preaches the renunciation of violence, because he regards insurrection and revolution as greater evils than suppression and exploitation ... He transformed the healthy, unsentimental egoism of the older bourgeoisie into an adulterated, sugary 'philosophy of Christmas,' best summarised as follows by Taine: 'Be good and love one another; the feeling of the heart is the one real joy ... Leave science to the scholars, pride to the noble, luxury to the rich ...' Dickens did not know how hard the kernel of this gospel of love really was, and what the peace it promised would have cost the weaker classes of society.⁽¹⁰⁾

In its essence his was no more than the old fatalistic hierarchical everything and everyone in their place and

'God ordering their estate' stance.

I write about what might seem slightly peripheral at some length, because it is evident to me that Cumming's work succeeds in not only touching many of these dilemmas but answering them. His success in doing so is born to a great extent of his operating at the interstices of a number of artforms and of a number of intellectual disciplines too and in breaking down formal barriers. That he has the requisite gimlet eye, I think goes almost without saying. In purely formal terms he is an artist who uses video and photography, initially only the latter, but that is the simple seeming bit. He also uses himself as a performer, is a director and a 'social documentarian'. He creates and participates in a species of theatre. In no way can Donigan Cumming be considered a 'mere' documentary photographer: documentary photographers do not have contracts with their subjects!⁽¹¹⁾ Constantly 'changing the frame' and not allowing his subjects, themes and characters to become too familiar, he denies us the comfort of familiarities. However absorbed we may become with his world, we need to know that it is one that he has himself precisely determined. As if he had constructed a rigid frame, or a proscenium arch of the most conventional kind, he governs what is between us and them, his subjects. He may share from time to time their space-time frame but he denies the absolute capacity to do so to us. He is in this respect the supreme controller, determining exactly how much of each gestural nuance, as he does of the larger canvass, we are permitted to witness. He subverts us, our expectations, our attempts to reduce our experience of what he reveals to the familiar (which, as Marx wrote, is the essence of our cultural reception and which allows us ultimately to change nothing and do nothing).

If we're in agreement with Heisenburg's theory that

the act of measuring a phenomenon contributes an intrinsic distortion of what is being measured, then we have to accept that Cumming's output is also problematic in this respect. He controls, quite rigidly, at what and where he directs his lens. He succeeds in blurring the edges between what is spontaneous (in actuality not very much) and what is rehearsed, or in other ways substantially predetermined. He never plausibly becomes involved in any conventional sense in his subjects' lives; he is an outsider looking in and for the uncharitable, above, looking down.

This artist's own physical involvement in his theatre introduces another factor, again one which is not consistent throughout his work and one which serves to increase certain ambiguities. This is at its most marked when he appears as an 'actor' within the video frame, or when his very recognisable voice is heard, prompting, probing, questioning, teasing: do we hear a director or an equal participant in a collaborative work, or does his role change even within a single production?There are too other kinds of possible interference, those which may be occurring beyond the lens' or microphone's reach, those which might and probably have, occurred before the camera is even switched on.

There is nothing 'wrong' with any of these approaches; they are not intrinsically immoral and depend very much on how they are handled. And Cumming may create ambiguities but he does not deliberately mis-represent himself, although his approach does allow opportunity for those who misunderstand his work to do so and present him in an unappetising light. A 'wrong' in my book would consist of his mis-representing the circumstances of his framing, the degree of his management of his subjects, his rules of engagement, as it were. But he is transparent, although not obvious: his 'secrets' are there to be discovered. His contract with his collaborator/actor/subjects is furnished, with no reluctance, upon request. But I would not be writing this if I believed him to be any more an exploiter than the general run of artists are, or if I thought him merely a voyeur, or to be encouraging that stance. All these are judgements made of him, but they are superficial and can only be sustained, I believe, on the basis of a slight acquaintance with his work. However, we must be aware (and really we do intellectually appreciate that he is 'there') that even his, admittedly to us minimal, presence is not in effect 'neutral' in whatever scene he records - Heisenburg again. Clearly the extent of his interference will vary according to his intention and it does seem that he is excelling at perfecting a species of camouflage, invisibility and hence ambiguity, for he admits to 'being there' when the viewer would not otherwise have detected his presence and input, although, as I say, intellectually we know that he must be.

In a number of pieces, the video Shelter being a notable example, he appears to disdain any such artifice. We do not see him but his voice heavily underscores his presence. In this video (which is to my mind one of the most ethically problematic) he even seems to tease us to the point of moral outrage as when he kitchily commends the suffering hit and run victim, binge-drinker's recourse to God, rather than himself offer the immediate help which everything suggests is urgently required. The assumption, our assumption in waxing indignant, is that the scene and story are substantially real and not the deliberately staged artifice which is a possibility. But the camera points always to the ground, as if to suggest that a frontal shot of the subject would be too obtrusive to get the desired result (or it may of course have been simple pragmatism, in that having a camera

lens pointing at him whilst he would have been *in extremis* might have enraged the subject to violence). We have no visual evidence of the victim and just minimal evidence of its even being a bus shelter and the only evidence of Cumming's actual presence, apart from his deliberately irritating probing voice, is a pseudo-frivolous, abstract impressionist dissolve, of an artist, scarf insouciantly flying, uncaringly vanishing in a complicated instance of what may be seen as successfully *passing by on the other side*.

Returning to those places where we in our squeamishness might prefer not to go: I think I might have offended him when I said that the *bottom-line* justification of his work would cast him in a role similar to that of the late Diana, Princess of Wales for she too, in her own way, forced us to look at that we might prefer to pass by and at those we might prefer to look over, rather than at. One thinks especially of the man dying of AIDS, those mutilated by mines, the sticky and unappetising, the battered and the dispossessed. Her caravanserai of press and publicity people may have passed on with her but the effects of *her* not having passed by on the other side were profound and resonate still. Cumming, like the late princess, does not entirely know the effects of his interferences on the lives of those with whom his work involves him. And neither do





we. But it seems, on the balance of probabilities, that although in individual cases it might have had adverse effects, on the whole the effects of his engagement are good. However, we can be clear that however he may be manipulated from time to time by a Nettie, a Colleen or a Colin, it is he who has the upper hand: he can, as he readily admits, walk away;⁽¹²⁾ there are other Netties, Colleens and Colins for him but for them there is only one Donigan Cumming. How much though would we have focused on *them* without *him*?

And he is a powerful force, which ultimately is able to alter the convention, shift the frame, change the subject and move to greater creature comforts and a control over his own destiny greater than any of his characters enjoy. We must be equally clear too that some freedoms are not his, for even he does not have the power to disengage his thought and we may be sure that whatever it is that really motivates and moves him cannot be switched off at will. He engages with what for most of us is instant hell on earth and its reality is there, alongside the theatre he constructs. Like most raw theatre, it is not completely controllable ... particularly during the long dark night hours. We must tread very carefully therefore if we are to impugn his motivation, for he has *at least* passed by, recorded, created and made us look and think. He has in my case changed the way I see, what I can look at and an attitude or two, *at least*.

Then there are the thoughts his work spurs: speculations ... art speculations... social speculations... technical speculations ... moral... ethical and aesthetic speculations: how much art can encompass so much?

Often Cumming has to deal with questions concerning the ethicality of what he does and he is remarkably patient about "the six most frequently asked questions," all of which seem to revolve around the ethical area.⁽¹³⁾ Is it rape; is it pillage, or is it voyeurism; do we suppose the same questions were asked of Goya or of Rembrandt? If we scan the history of Western art we frequently encounter images which are no less shocking, no less ambiguous and potentially no less voyeuristic, than those we encounter in Cumming's work. It and its processes of gestation are undoubtedly complicated and in exact proportion to the extent that we devote time to examining them, we are rewarded by the knowledge that he is a difficult and complex artist, one who revels in the fact and who delights in play, complexity and ambiguity and in not making things particularly literal and easy for the viewer. Cumming is an extremely intelligent

person, with a sharp eye for the cliché. I feel there not to be any intellectual arrogance, no deliberate attempt to mystify, no attempt to make the viewer feel inadequate intellectually (that is the English art village way), no attempt even to inculcate in us particular feelings of outrage or horror. Cumming in this sense is 'moral neutral'; he depicts and arranges his tableaux, complicated and ambiguous as they may be, and then leaves it to us. Although he stagemanages, he does not obtrusively stage-manage, and as I have said before, even though he may feature by voice or through his own physical presence, in a video, he still manages to set up situations conducive to things flowing and then records the flow. This in most cases is his point of control; this is when the frame appears but it remains a fact that we still do not know after all what is on the cutting room floor. I for one am able to give him the benefit of the doubt. I feel that Cumming's Achilles' heel, if he has the semblance of one, is his incapacity to avoid mischieviousness (if there is intellectual arrogance to be found, it is in this that it resides). One senses that, paradoxically, he feels the camera incapable of communicating other than the truth; that he himself feels naked in front of its lens. I have seen no photograph of him published or exhibited and indeed none of the video stills in which he features either, in which he behaves naturally. Always there is a veil of 'I am not me: I am acting'. Now this could be a ploy to avoid being 'naked before the lens' but just look into the eyes and it is clear that there is a sense of mischieviousness and that rare commodity in art, humour, shining through. So the 'this is not really me' element could be construed simply as a defensiveness but so intrinsic to the videos in which he acts has it become, that we find ourselves in an art or life? situation. This acts as a puzzle, deflecting or, rather

muting, to some extent the feelings of disgust, horror or revulsion we might otherwise feel. It may be a deliberate mechanism, like the 'aside', or relief of comedy in the middle of a Shakespearean tragedy, something to mitigate the horror fatigue and allow us to remain watching and thinking.

I have not expanded discussion of issues' of voyeurism and exploitation, huge subjects both, at greater length, or introduced as many artists as I might have done as comparators. Principally this is due to limitations of space but I also feel that different prejudices lead one to construe these considerations in very different ways. For instance, whereas I think that people make much ado about nothing





when waxing outraged or 'disturbed' at evidence of voyeurism or (self) exploitation in the cases of John Coplans, Melanie Manchot, Jennie Savile, Sally Mann and even Robert Mapplethorpe, I do experience profound difficulty over some of the work of Joel-Peter Witkin, Boris Mikhailov, Orlan (and no, I don't think that moral and ethical problems evaporate when you do it to yourself). It may well be that my tolerance threshold is higher for the many forms of depiction of sexuality, than it is over the depiction of physical deformity, in that I have difficulty, because I am a coward, or over squeamish. In any case for anyone interested in exploring this subject further there is no shortage of critical material to study.⁽¹⁴⁾

There is, I believe, in Cumming's work a challenge and a fundamental intellectual one born of humour, rather than arrogance. He is after all, operating in an area where humour seems entirely inappropriate, yet his work is suffused with it, much of it, ironically (and we should notice that) stemming from his subjects themselves. Even those elements in his activities which are debated as potential examples of exploitation, are I think, further examples of this challenge: his intelligence and particularly his sense of humour take him rather too close to the wind for our comfort, or indeed his. And this is one of the most potent essences of his art. Looking at the naked human body for sexual titillation or gratification has been legitimised by Western society to varying degrees and with varying degrees of permissiveness. Context seems to be all, as exactly the same subject viewed can be totally acceptable, naughty and to varying extents unacceptable, culminating in subtle hues and nuances of illegality. Clearly there is no objective standard: what is permissible or not is entirely culturally determined and equally culturally determined and conditioned by a wide spread of factors, including the context in which the subject is seen. And all these gradations of what is socially permissible and otherwise, have attracted labels quite impressive in their precision. For example, looking at the body of a human female is an immensely complicated activity; the gender and age of the viewed enter the equation established to indicate social legitimacy, as does that of the viewer. We have words like prurient, voyeuristic, paedophile (very fashionable just now), and prurience and voyeurism are much bandied about to characterise the looking by the same, as well as the opposite, sex upon its peer group. The looking of various kinds by older upon younger persons has in the main been accommodated but

with the delineation of precise boundaries (which have varied at different times), there have always been terms and phrases to describe these different forms of looking, and rarely are they pleasant. Oddly, for similar looking by the young, middle-aged and even old, upon the old there are no such precise labels. It is as if no one has felt the need to create a taboo by inventing such. Can it be that the activity is thought to be so unlikely that no words exist? Gerontophobia is rampant but the idea of gerontophilia seems neither to have entered the public consciousness nor the language. In general the disgust at processes of ageing and the revulsion caused by the sight of the resultant bodies engaging in intimate endearment, let alone carnal activity, engenders feelings ranging from embarrassment to horror. What we have is the breeding society's taboo around the whole notion of non-reproductive sex, the informing prejudice is: the old don't still, or oughtn't to, do it. An extension of this idea is that no one could possibly derive any emotion other than disgust, or at least distaste, from viewing old bodies, still less old naked bodies, expressing affection for each other and of course even less again at them actually 'doing it'. It is also too easy a disservice to justify Cumming's use of, say Nettie Harris in Pretty Ribbons, as a simple attempt to elevate ageing flesh into the canon of acceptedly beautiful. Although there is clearly a conventional aesthetic in play - cream and rose pastel flesh tones against chintzy floral fabrics - it is much more complicated than just that (again at least, both he and she may be playing with and enjoying the cliché).

This is then the seat of prejudice, which characterises Donigan Cumming's work as both exploitative and voyeuristic. The former too is an immensely complicated consideration, particularly when his models (which is what most of them



are, rather than unknown subjects), as we know, participate, suggest, sign contracts and so on. Indeed when one puts the prejudices outlined above aside and looks at the Nettie photographs just mentioned, it seems a conventional case of *vanitas vanitas* on her part. And when one considers Cumming's comments on Colleen, one has as a minimum to ask who might be exploiting whom?

So then why should looking at an ageing body, even one *in extremis* be regarded as voyeuristic? *Pretty Ribbons* itself, by virtue of the disposition of certain illustrations, suggests that to look at old and dying bodies is such an intrinsically disordered activity that it may be construed as voyeurism. But surely it depends on the viewer and the

intention, never easy to establish, of the artist? Who imagines that Rembrandt's The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicholas Tulp at the Mauritshuis in the Hague, is an illustration of either an anatomy lesson, or is an attempt to engender outrage, or gratification? No, rather it is a slightly unconventional portrait of the bourgeois onlookers, not one of whom is looking at either surgeon or corpse. We can tell that from looking; we can tell it from the temper of the place and age. Again, surely only the most stimuli deprived sadomasochist could derive satisfaction from Grunewald's Eisenheim Crucifixion, even though the image might be nearly identical with ones in fetishist magazines? Religious 'mystics' such as San Juan de la Cruz or Santa Teresa de Avila might get very excited, for whatever reason, but for most of us, the context overwhelms, our conditioning kicks in and what we see is either humiliated Man or suffering Lord. When then we survey the whole of Cumming's output, surely there is a consistency and even a scientific objectivity which more than neutralises any suggestion that his motivation is a base one? If we come to such a conclusion as the latter, it seems to me that we are requiring him to conform to unreasonably high standards which we fail to apply to other artists and few other human beings either.

In those cultures where bone chapels, if not common, are an acceptable part of death in life, depictions of death and life at the edge, cause much less trouble than they do for those whose cultures are northern European Protestant derived. We prefer to pass as much of our life as possible shutting our minds to our lives' ends and do not want reminding that our ends tend to be miserable and brutal. Hence our disgust with the signs of age as death's harbinger *{Timor mortis conturbas me}* and by extension those in situations perceived as squalid and disgusting.

An excellent recent television series titled *Disgust* covered much of this ground. The word clusters adhering to 'disgust' in relation to old age and sexual taboos and revolving around exposure of the ageing body were immensely rich. *Squalid* and *disgusting* featured, as did *shame, guilt* and *anger*. In *vox pop* interviews about *Age,* a work of Melanie Manchot's, only one, of about ten people interviewed, saw anything approaching beauty in the billboard photographs of her mother (and yet not dissimilar photographs of Nettie Harris have been described as conventionally beautiful!). The programmes illustrated how our earliest moral conditioning concentrates on enforcing notions of what is clean and what unclean, what pure and what the reverse. They pointed out the political dimension of the annexation of notions of what is disgusting.

The marginalisation of 'deviance' has been a highly successful device in the creation of that furtiveness and guilt on which capitalism thrives; we have the paradox of a society profiting from what it most excoriates. Similarly it is obvious that the dejected, society's dispossessed and otherwise socially wounded, are harnessed in order to develop reject mechanisms in the consumer drones, as a means to marginalise digression from the broad high road of the Janet and John norm and keep us in earning, fucking and spending, consumerist order: "there but for the grace of God and good self-management go I." But of course there is no death and no squalor in Legoland. We eliminate reality by avoiding confronting it. Thus our training in disgust tricks us into thinking we must on no account become like the unproductive marginalised, dispossessed, we must continue to be neat and clean and tidy, producing in order to consume, keeping age and death at bay as best we can. Becoming old is a failure, being old and infirm more so; if you die, do it discreetly, cleanly, aesthetically, in an institution ... at a distance; if you do it in a doorway, make it a dark or a deep one.

So then, when we look at Cumming's work is any feeling of 'moral concern' we express truly motivated by a concern over his supposed intrusiveness and exploitation, or is the recoil from his subjects a cloak to protect ourselves from society's realities? Our concern that his 'disempowered' subjects are being exploited is bi-dimensional and passive. If *our* motives are so pure, what is our role in the alleviation of their lot? They may be in Montreal but their kindred are everywhere. Giving to charity, as one does, is a 'clean' activity; buying a *Big Issue* brings the possibility of being marginally 'dirty' (physical contact with the vendor is a possible contamination but alleviates a degree of our social guilt); knuckling down and doing something practical and hands-on to alleviate the lot of outsiders is the province of the few, an activity which most of society resists.

Cumming is no 'enabler' in the sense that he gives his subjects the ability to speak directly, in their own voice but he is an enabler in the general sense of enabling the transaction: that of our attention being drawn to an area of his concern. Our role is to listen, see, decipher and decode his messages. To effect this he shifts his paradigms, stops us in our tracks and startles us, not merely with the horror of it all, that would be too easy: he keeps us on an edge of uncertainty. We may be gazing in horror or revulsion at some aspect of a depicted world but invariably he will startle us by frustrating our expectations. The device by which he does so may be, variously, horrifying, sordid, squalid, or frightening. It may even be cerebral (as when we suddenly realise, in *Shelter* for instance, that all could be artifice), as he occasions a new train of thought or speculation. On occasion it can even be Christ-like, as when he peels back the flesh of the hell or the horror, in what becomes a redemptive moment of intelligence, or humour, or joy, or care. He invests in us the idea of our great human capacity to make a heav'n of hell, a hell of heaven.

Donigan Cumming gets closer to those whom he is taxed with exploiting than most of us would ever feel able to. Although we may accept that beauty as well as intellectual validation can lie as much in shit and squalor as more conventionally accepted beauty, the mere photographing of squalor is not enough. It may upset the squeamish, that's true, but it is not intrinsically shocking. There is need for consistency in the underlying message, which is what we have with Cumming but not with some of those with whose work his is sometimes compared. Taking as an example that of Boris Mikhailov, there appears to be an amorality, too wide a focus and an obsessive recording of almost anything that is sordid and freakish. He appears to operate over too wide a field, so that one's reaction is, sadness for some of his subjects maybe, but that he is too obviously and shockingly 'shocking': voyeurism indeed! I wrote above of the' flatness' of Gillian Wearing and Richard Billingham's work, in comparison to Cumming's. In various ways, the photography of the dispossessed is a minefield. In a lot of documentary and quasi-documentary photography often too much is visible. Literalness does not invariably present us with the truth of a situation any more than it results in great art. This is what distinguishes Cumming from Billingham and Wearing and others too (in a way that it doesn't an artist like Jo Spence). His framing is such that we see much but not everything is what it seems. This may make his art more complex, it makes it, at least in the

intellectual sense, enjoyable and ultimately it renders it no less comprehensible. Martha Langford writing of Billingham and Anna Fox uses an interesting expression: "As an interested recorder of a social phenomenon, Fox is susceptible to an anthropological trap: the inaccurate translation of shared experience into observed experience..." She then continues: "Pseudo-science in a social documentary frame raises our expectations of results. Event, eventuality: if gaze we must, then our gaze must be taxed for social benefit. We are generally satisfied when the photographs themselves perform the task, when poverty is dignified, or the vicissitudes of life are brought to order. Such satisfactions are denied by these bodies of work."⁽¹⁵⁾

So are they denied by Cumming's.

This then is the answer to the abiding question posed about it: does Cumming as an artist 'move on' any more than the late princess, any more irresponsibly than a curator moves on to the next subject, or a 'concerned' journalist does the same? It may be said that the latter are the true caravanserai people: they rarely make return visits, do follow-ups or feel any lasting responsibility for their subjects. New subjects, new novelties; another day another show.

But we, having no magic mirror allowing it, cannot judge either their consistency or their commitment. So how can we presume to dissect Cumming in this regard?

The difference between the curator of an exhibition and the audience is that the former in the course of selecting, negotiating and developing the concept of a show gains insights into the life and motivation of an artist that the audience and even the critic rarely have. How much of this can ever be introduced into the public realm is

debatable. A knowledge of certain aspects of an artist's life is plainly a good catalyst in furthering an understanding of the work. It is evident that there is a profound and probably necessary, discrepancy between Cumming's lifestyle and his art. In the face of the dis-order, unpredictability and drama of his subjects' lives he is the observer, one who gets particularly close to his subjects but the ostensible coolness and objectivity he usually displays is disturbing: we know he interferes and arranges things, to what precise extent is less clear. What comes across is an involvement that is calm, ordered, methodical, seemingly quite detached, and this he manages to combine with physical closeness to his subjects but also there appears to be mental intimacy too. Cumming is one of the most controversial artists working today; he is the one whom all concerned in the organisation of this exhibition feel that they have probably discussed more than any other.

NOTES

1) Of *voyeurism:* this word and its variants occur frequently in this essay. Mine is a personal, and probably highly idiosyncratic, definition of voyeurism, so I had better explain what I mean. Although simple, as it is, in what follows it is of fundamental importance. I take it to mean a lack of plausible engagement (whether social, political or even sexual) on anything other than a highly transitory, superficial level. In the present context the voyeuristic artist is one who 'merely' draws our attention to the subject (be it squalid, sordid, distressing, glorious, or whatever), there is as much commitment to achieving change thereby as evinced by the average journalist viz. none. No greater or continued personal involvement and no intent other than to engender passing outrage, disgust, horror or delight on the part of the audience. There is no consistent philosophical position and no structured agenda; the artist points out and passes on. For me it is the *mere* scandal, the *mere* sensationalism etc.; the province of the *mere* grotesque, entertaining, interesting, always merely that, with no commitment (rhetoric maybe notwithstanding) to secure meaningful change, whether social political or, if it comes to that, aesthetic.

2) Gwerin y graith: I am grateful to Rogelio Vallejo of the University of Bristol Hispanic Studies Department and Lleucu Siencyn of the Arts Council of Wales for bringing me to a precise understanding of this expression. I had supposed it referred to the writings of such as Richard Llewellyn and A.J. Cronin, whose novels about the deprivation and dignity of slate and mine-workers at the end of the Nineteenth Century led to a certain romanticisation of working class life, as various lachrymose films [How Green Was My Valley) and plays [The Corn is Green) demonstrate. However, I learn that its origins are older. Originally, I am told, gwerin simply meant 'folk', without any class connotation (as in Folk Museum). Later a second meaning emerged, as a result of the radical religious-political awareness engendered, initially through non-conformist religious ideas and latterly through the growth of trades unionism, during the late Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries. At that time, we had the potent marriages of those very Welsh virtues (of temperance, the assertion of the value of education and political radicalism) occur. The phrase itself is William Williams's and comes from his poem 'Gwerin Cymru', in which he refers (Gwerin y graith, bonedd pob gwaith / A pherthyn i honno 'rwf fi) to the gentle and proud common people of the scarred land. Certainly it is possible to see a certain idealisation of working people in this but for people of my generation and earlier it represents a reality, one which is a dignified and thoroughly admirable part of our history. Now, later but related scars like Aberfan notwithstanding, in the process of 'New Labour' bourgeois homogenisation, it is being gradually effaced from the popular memory. For me it remains something for which I am immensely proud.

 Judy Levine - Art as Social Service: Theatre for the Forgotten (essay in Outsider Art: Contesting the Boundaries, ed. Zollberg, Vera, L Et Cherbo, Joni Maya, Cambridge U.P., 1997). 4) John Roberts - The Art of Interruption, Manchester University Press, 1998.

5) In an interview with the author, Montreal, 1999.

6) Ibid.

 7) Bill Burns and others - When Pain Strikes (essay: Goodeve Nichols, Thyrza, quoting Friedrich Nietzsche, You Sober People) University of Minnesota Press,
 1999.

8) Jo Spence - Cultural Sniping the Art of Transgression (essay: Reworking the Family Album 1990), Routledge, 1995.

Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (essay: Social 9)

Environment and Theatrical Environment), Verso, London 1980.

10) Arnold Hauser, *TheSocial Historyof ArtVol.IV*. Routledge, London, 1962.

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(Witness)

12) Donigan Cumming - "The Subject of the Artist: Created Communities/ Fault Lines," paper presented at the Third Cardiff Symposium; in *Syne* ~ *Cardiff Research Documents in Fine Art*, Centre for Research in Fine Art, UWIC, forthcoming.

13) Ibid. Cumming's text contains the six questions, and their answers.

14) A good standard reference is Chris Townsend, *Vile Bodies: Photography* and the Crisis of Looking, Prestel-Verlag, Munich/New York, 1998.

15) The curator and writer Martha Langford, who is Cumming's wife, deals with this in an interesting essay; see *Interior Britannia: Richard Billingham* ft *Anna Fox* (essay *Eventlessness, Eventuality: Odd Moments in a Documentary Mode*) Liane and Danny Taran Gallery, Saidye Bronfman Centre for the Arts, Montreal, Quebec. 1999. List of works in Passing by on the Other Side:

Page 8 - video still, Erratic Angel, 1998.

Page 10 -'August 12, 1983', Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography, Part 1, 1983.
Page 11 - 'October 6, 1984', The Mirror, The Hammer, and The Stage, 1990.
Page 13 - video still, Cut the Parrot, 1996.
Page 14 - 'May 21, 1992', Pretty Ribbons, 1993.
Page 15 - 'May 30, 1990', Pretty Ribbons, 1993.

Page 17 - 'April 24, 1996', Barber's Music, 1999.

Page 19 - video still, if Onlyl, 2000.

Page 20 - 'July 7, 1985', Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography,

Part 3, 1986.

Page 21 - 'December 21, 1984', The Mirror, The Hammer, and The Stage, 1990.

Page 22 - 'August 29, 1991', Harry's Diary, 1993.

Page 23 - 'May 3, 1989', Pretty Ribbons, 1993.

Page 25 - 'April 27, 1991', Pretty Ribbons, 1993.