




**Truth Wrapped in Trash
and Vice Versa**

**George
Kuchar
at Sixty-Two**

 pleasure DOME





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*Truth Wrapped in Trash
and Vice Versa*
**George
Kuchar
at Sixty-Two**

Pleasure Dome

Friday, July 8th, 2005

The Kingdom by the Sea, 20:00, 2002

The Celtic Crevasse, 32:00, 2002

---intermission---

Creeping Crimson, 15:00, 1987

Visitation Rites, 18:00, 2003

Storm Surge, 15:00, 2004

Supercell, 9:16, 2004

Programme Notes

by George Kuchar

(All tapes available from Video Data Bank)

The Kingdom by the Sea, 20:00, 2002

The spirit of poets permeates the space/time occupied by an assortment of dinner engagements that occasionally erupt into physical or verbal assaults on the taste buds. Flowers of evil are absent from this foray into the spoken word, as the message is one of courage in the face of carnivorous tendencies. An archivist shares his dream with us while the dreamers dabble in their own brand of munchies meant to nourish rather than negate. Mortality hovers over the hovels of the hungry as poetry becomes as concrete as the pastry offered we mortals on planet Earth.

The Celtic Crevasse, 32:00, 2002

Taped during the summer months in New York City and Provincetown, Massachusetts. This vacation video explores the restrictions imposed by dietary fears and the

need to appease fresh and rotten appetites. Encompassing both the splendors of a maritime nature and the land locked decadence of the delicacy dependent, the viewer is catapulted from a big city environment to a resort town mentality of mellowness and salt encrusted habits. On the journey to more sublime table manners we skirt the buttocks of repressed fermentation to get a whiff of more floral degeneracy inherent in the oceanic wonderland beyond the green cloud of a metropolitan melting pot. Come fry in the sun and splash in the fluff of summer's most sensual treats which are sugar free yet satisfying to those who relish aging meat with their cheesecake (which is in short abundance in this weight conscious concoction). There's some beefcake in need of tenderizing but the less said about that dish the better!

Creeping Crimson, 15:00, 1987

George visits his mother in the hospital on Halloween and contemplates the autumn colors.

Visitation Rites, 18:00, 2003

Alone in an Oklahoma motel room with a mute companion, the talkative one speaks the language of memory as pussycats feast from a canned cornucopia. Murals plaster the vacancy intrinsic to American angst as horse tails whip from annoyance the nagging gnats of tomorrow's dung: a heap of uncertainty made impotent by the swashes of chipped paint that depict a netherworld of faded dreams and nostalgic neurosis for the future impaired.

Storm Surge. 15:00, 2004

A sculptor dabbles in the wetness of his craft while the skies threaten a soaking to the winterized wonderland of a western shoreline. Words of wisdom issue from the mind of a maligned artist as his calendar of kitsch and comfort flap their pages amid a tempest of sea foam and pigeon wings. Shrimp is gnawed upon in dwellings of nutritional notoriety while the hunger of more carnal need feeds the mind with fantasies best left as fodder for a more potent farter.

Supercell, 9:16, 2004

Clouds dominate the sky over an abandoned motel in which a diet of canned crap and sugar-coated coagulants feed my passion while all else goes to hell in the Heartland East of Krakatoa and south of Kansas.

George Kuchar's Videos: Excrements of Time

by Steve Reinke

George Kuchar and his twin brother Mike began making small gauge films as teenagers in the Bronx. These films clumsily reconstruct and restage the tawdry melodrama and cheesy horror of Hollywood B film. I can't resist listing some titles: *The Wet Destruction of the Atlantic Empire* (1954), *The Thief and the Stripper* (1959), *I Was a Teenage Rumpot* (1960), *Pussy on a Hot Tin Roof* (1961), *Lust for Ecstasy* (1963) and *Hold Me While I'm Naked* (1966). Nine of these films have recently been recipients of National Film Preservation Foundation monies – along with Kenneth Anger's *Rabbit Moon*, they are the first experimental works to be honored.

David James, in his indispensable *Allegories of Cinema: American Cinema in the Sixties*, writes about this early Kuchar work in relation to pop art (which it anticipated and influenced) as a critique of authenticity. It's worth

quoting at some length as we'll be returning to see how these strategies are developed in the video work:

... first, authorship is inscribed not in the narrative or the imagery so much as in the self-consciously domestic manufacture; second, in the quotation of industrial motifs, affection is indistinguishable from a self-conscious distancing that suggests but always short-circuits explicit criticism; and third, signification hovers between the generic stock and the hypothetical real life outside the film that the diegesis invokes but never asserts. . . . The films always reserve their own seriousness at some level, and so always preserve some degree of thematic urgency. The oscillation between lampoon and emulation strategically preempts the unequivocal affirmation of either; the authentic can be present in neither art nor nature, film nor life, but only glimpsed, fragmentarily, in the practice that slips desperately between them.

What is this practice, this apparatus, that has the amoeba-like ability to slip desperately between film and life, which allows one to be on all sides of the camera simultaneously? Video.

As camcorders became available in the mid 1980s, George began making videos: an outpouring of work that thankfully continues unstaunched. A few hundred titles, often more than a dozen a year, ranging from pop song to epic feature film length. They arrive by the U.S. Mail, often in groups of two or three, at the Video Data Bank in Chicago. In the envelope is usually a hand-written note containing tape descriptions. This is his description for *The Cellar*

Sinema (1994), selected partly for its brevity: "A descent into the blackness of the projected image and the curators who flick the switches and grease up all moveable parts for hot action when the lights go out." The condensed (one could say hard-boiled) hyperbolic language, the humor which is coarse and clever in equal parts, and the sexualizing of the cinematic apparatus are all typical.

Kuchar's video work can be grouped into two categories: student collaborations and solely-authored works. Kuchar has taught production for many years at the San Francisco Art Institute, as well as frequent visiting artist gigs at other American institutions. Steve Seid describes the student collaborations as "wildly ambitious, jerry-rigged epics that slash and burn their way through the Hollywood lexicon." Kuchar himself describes the process in 1989's *500 Millibars to Ecstasy*, which documents a visit to University of Wisconsin, Madison: "... like sleep-away camp with a lust-crazed zombie seeking unholy couplings with the gas- and bug-free residents of College Town, U.S.A." (Kuchar's comic persona allows for unrequited yearning, but not unrestrained coupling: the wished-for or attempted seductions of our horny pedagogue always go awry.) These works desperately try — with delirious results — to maintain their narrative drive against out-of-control libidinal drives. But flaming creatures must flame (or pretend to flame, however ineptly), so coherent storytelling becomes secondary. (The meticulous lighting and framing, the rag and bone shop props and costumes are,

of course, never secondary.) One of the funniest, *Evangelist* (1988), is also one of the most directly satiric, taking on the rise and fall of Jim and Tammy-Faye Bakker's PTL Club. Another favorite: the dark and complex *The Fall of the House of Yasmin* (1990). "A pile-up of human refuse and super-human powers permeates this hour-long canvas of bits and pieces documenting the smash-up of a house of healing as the physicians in charge short-circuit amid the electronic wizardry beyond the Panasonic barrier."

George's solely-authored works constitute the bulk of his production. As soon as he picked up a video camera in 1985, it seems as though Kuchar had decided to de-emphasize the autonomy of individual titles in favor of an expansive, continuing corpus of work that does not have fixed boundaries. One of his first titles is *Video Album 1* (1985), followed in 1986 by *Video Album 2, 3, 4* and *Weather Diary 1*. But even if titles aren't arranged in series, they tend to fall, broadly speaking, into categories.

Video Album 5: The Thursday People (1987, the last of the self-titled *Albums*) documents, without sentimentality, the final days of underground filmmaker, and ex-Kuchar student, Curt McDowell, as well as the days following his death. I have never seen a better depiction of mourning as a social process. Also in 1987, the incredibly sad *Rainy Season*. Here, Kuchar uncharacteristically drops his affable comic persona. It is one of the few tapes in which he

has sex; alas, his lover falls into a deep post-coital depression and Kuchar is powerless to help him.

There are many other San Francisco tapes which document George as he visits friends (artists and art students, often). They eat, they talk. Notable titles include *The Big Ones Hurt* (1990) in which George visits friends in the aftermath of an earthquake. *The Pagan Angel* (1998) contrasts George's domestic life, which is structured around his relationships with his cats (living and cremated), with his professional and social life. He searches for some manifestation of what he terms, reasonably, "our hidden needs, etc."

A similar set of videos take place in the Bronx and Manhattan. Here the friends tend to be older and more idiosyncratic and George's mother is often featured. In *Cult of the Cubicles* (1987) George visits old friends and classmates. "We see what they have become or are becoming or already became." Or *Letter from New York* (1990): "A mother sews; a son yearns for meat; a friend relives the past via glamour shots of a forgotten slab of cheesecake that ferments off-camera. A slice of life with the bowl of cherries missing. A brief visit to a corner of the world that locks itself away with crunchy carbohydrates and six inch protein protuberances." The recent *Burnout* (2003) features George wandering the Bronx during a massive black-out.

For the *Weather Diary* series, George annually visits Reno, Oklahoma in tornado season and "storm squats" in a motel. My favorite is perhaps 1988's *Weather Diary 3*, with its sharply

delineated, if never satisfied, yearnings. It is also, arguably, Kuchar's most sophisticated use of in-camera editing (discussed below).

These groupings could go on. Kuchar travels frequently (though, apart from rare visits to Toronto, only in America) and individual videos are often structured around specific trips. Most years also yield a Christmas video. And Halloween is rarely neglected, though which Kuchar's predilection for alien abductions and Big Foot, Halloween-like activities can occur all year around.

Although his work has been widely screened and celebrated, (Kuchar is famous and beloved in the independent media world) it has been slow to get the critical attention it merits. Some impediments to it being taken "seriously":

1. The body of work is so large, critics can't easily master or consume (let alone watch) all of it.
2. Individual titles often rely on their relationship to his body of work for their complexity to be appreciated and their impact to be felt. They are not autonomous. George is like a *belles-lettrist* in a world that appreciates only novels.
3. As George is the fundamental presence in almost every title, (simultaneously author, narrator and subject) the restlessly protean nature of the work — it adopts and abandons strategies with nonchalance — often goes unrecognized: the work can seem all the same, just George being George.
4. George's persona is essentially comic; he's a clown,

melancholy but affable. And clowns are always slow to get respect.

5. The work is unabashedly homemade, celebrating the technological possibilities (and reveling in the limitations) of consumer equipment. Despite the consummate skill Kuchar employs in all aspects of production, by industrial standards it is amateur rather than professional.

There is a genre of independent video that has acquired the unfortunate name "autobiographical documentary," largely as it is considered a sub-genre of documentary practice. There is a wide gap between the adjective "autobiographical" and the noun "autobiography." Almost anything can be thought of as being autobiographical, as almost everything contains aspects that are reflective of, or determined by, the life of the person that made them. "Autobiographical" is too tentative a term to be useful as anything other than a starting point. "Autobiography" is more solid. We can define it as a retrospective narrative told in the first person (the author and narrator must coincide) which attempts some kind of personal understanding, a deeper level of self-awareness. Autobiography is already necessarily documentary.

The camcorder allowed Kuchar to exceed the limits of filmic autobiography and documentary. Steve Seid observes:

...the camcorder allowed Kuchar to be everywhere at once. He was behind the camera cajoling innocent by-

standers, before the camera pouring out heart-rending confessions about spent youth and intestinal juices, and somewhere in-between adding campy layers of in-camera observation.

It isn't that Kuchar is physically everywhere at once (as important as his presence is) but that he simultaneously occupies three usually separable positions: author, narrator and subject. This is particularly apparent in his groundbreaking works of the mid to late 80s, which are constructed through in-camera editing. "In-camera editing" is really a term from film. It refers to works that are shot sequentially and not subsequently edited. In films which employ in-camera editing, we are assured that each shot is profilmically consecutive, that is the events of the second shot occurred prior to the events of the third shot. Video, with its instant playback and erasability, can inscribe time with a greater degree of flexibility and ambiguity. George's use of in-camera editing (we really should have a different term for it as it so fundamentally differs from in-camera editing in film) involves taping long shots, rewinding the tape, and inserting new material. In this manner George creates a kind of eternal present: events and his commentary on these events seamlessly woven together in a way that makes George always present in the text (as subject and narrator) and separate from it, as an authorial presence providing commentary (author and narrator). If autobiography is necessarily retrospective, Kuchar developed techniques that make it simultaneously immediate and retrospective.

Weather Diary 3 (1988) is all about anticipation: waiting for the fulfillment of desires which will never be fulfilled. Our protagonist, George, both wants and doesn't want. He wants to experience extreme weather, but only at a safe distance, and mediated by television. (As he says, he is a "storm-squatter" rather than a storm-chaser.) Likewise, his sweetly unrequited desires for the boy next door are touching because they are so unlikely (and funny as their object slowly becomes aware of George's attraction to him). Any desires that can be realized are consigned to the realm of disgust: hot dogs, pizza, as well as the resulting feces. The nature of desire, to be perpetually present as long as its object remains unattainable, finds a profound correlative in Kuchar's use of video. He is in the moment, documenting and enacting desire and outside of the moment, posterior to it, able to provide commentary. But he is also able to be anterior to the moment. In one scene he masturbates in the shower. This long shot is identified as the present. The cut-aways (a guy mowing the lawn, etc.) are added later in the process, to humorously suggest what Kuchar might have been thinking as he jerked-off. But as he shakes the semen from his hand, he hums the music that later occurs extra-diegetically. If the cut-aways are posterior, the humming is anterior, anticipatory. Kuchar pops in and out of time, the profilmic time of the documentary event. At the moments when this time-popping happens, humor is often produced. After the shock of laughter: a certain deep and ordinary sadness.

The camera becomes an extension of George. Everything is constructed in relation to his body. Sometimes it's said that the camera is a surrogate eye. In George's case (as with Sadie Benning and others) the camera is more like an appendage, not just observing, but actively moving through the world, placing itself and being placed with agency, and often with an obstinancy that borders on aggression. An arm which precedes the body (there are many shots of George walking, his arm thrust ahead in a comically lo-tech version of a reverse dolly), or a penis which likes to look at other penises.

But really there aren't so many penises, and if we see one it is likely to be George's. We're much more likely to see his dirty underwear. In the final scene from *Cult of the Cubicles* (1987) George displays a pair to the camera after a confrontation with his mother: "Dear Lord, I'm sorry I fight with my mother, but my underwear is my business and the business of my audience. They ain't that yellow." Why is it our business and not mom's? This is not a confession, but a mock confession, sleazy entertainment masquerading as a confession. The mock confession can never be submitted to the institutions of power, or it will become an actual confession and the carnivalesque joy will be drained out of it. The physical and moral abjection would then be subject to various regimes of control and correction. Mom must never know.

This is the nature of disgust, of the scatological, in Kuchar's work: to side-step confession and avoid the various regimes of control. The clown may take responsibility for his own melancholy, but for nothing more. From *Scarlet Droppings* (1990):

Just take it for what it is. You know it's not like a person. Maybe you're better off with a person, maybe not. They both bite your head off. You know the way animals are. You just have to accept them. You can't make any kind of judgements. They're run by instincts. You can't expect them to behave morally. It likes to eat, it likes to have sex and it likes food. Don't expect too much from a thing like that. Just take it for what it is.



Truth Wrapped in Trash and Vice Versa: George Kuchar's Video Diaries

By Jon Davies

In an age when Hollywood and America are virtually indistinguishable, George Kuchar finds poetry in the gap between our painful, banal, shame-laced lives and the promises of beauty, success, and fame offered by our cinematic mythmakers. Kuchar's practice offers a model of a transformative way of seeing others with an empathy based on a shared sense of failure and shame. Through his cinematic gaze, Kuchar democratizes glamour and imagemaking while creating an affecting persona from artifice and trash.

George Kuchar has characterized his childhood in the Bronx as one of constant humiliation by teachers and classmates. He and his twin brother Mike escaped to the movie theatre, spending hours watching an "adult" world of violence and debauchery, monstrosities and sex. They consumed a steady diet of silver screen spectacles, with their favorites the seamy and lurid exploitation and B-grade

Hollywood movies. Beginning in the 1950s, the precocious brothers Kuchar began making zero budget 8mm films with trashy titles such as *I Was a Teenage Rumpot* and *A Town Called Tempest*. Using friends in homemade costumes and props, they employed the codes and conventions of their beloved trash spectacles on the roof of their Bronx tenement apartment. These cinematic endeavours – which David James considers successful failures at reconstructing Hollywood (149) – were a survival strategy to escape from the mundane and often hostile life of the brothers' urban queer childhoods. As Jack Stevenson puts it, if escaping the Bronx of the 1950s failed, the Kuchars could "make it over, colourize it, give it plastic surgery and drape it in cheap tinsel and leopard skins" (162). The early films were also a nascent form of George's diaristic video world-making that would eventually show his daily life both stimulated and shamed by cinematic dreams of glamour and adventure. George eventually left New York to teach at the San Francisco Art Institute in the 1970s, where he continues to champion the rejected, junky and bad films that are suppressed from the film history canon. Each semester, he and his students produce a "classroom film," which resembles his earlier no-budget smut epics. He also continues to churn out video diaries.

George Kuchar picked up a video camera in the mid-1980s and began working in the medium precisely because it was considered trashy, ugly, and cheap: "a despised medium, a despised format" (Kuchar in Cantrill 63). Kuchar com-

compares the arrival of consumer video with a floodgate of delicious abjection being opened up: "The camcorder revolution was just what the doctor ordered ... a laxative of cheap non-stop imagery endowed with high flatulating fidelity. I finally lowered my briefs and let drop the digested dollops of diaristic diarrhea. My video career had begun" (Kuchars 123)! Kuchar's diaries do not try to represent the same stories of scintillating sex, dastardly deeds, and cataclysmic terrors of his earlier films, but on a formal level they are haunted by the absence of these spectacles. Steve Seid characterizes this switch to video as Kuchar's realization that his everyday life was as "maudlin" and "fecund" as anything that Hollywood could turn out (18).

Kuchar carries his camera with him at all times, creating his dramatized video diaries using his surroundings as source material. Kuchar tries to recreate the intensity of the B-movie in the diaries by applying its structure of feeling to his life: his own body, his friends, children, animals, tchatchkes, junk food, consumer products, and of course, the ever present media landscape. Whether an advertisement for the Gut Buster, a decorative ashtray, a Reese's peanut butter cup, a stray dog, his own soiled underwear, or Bruce Conner, all are treated as equally fascinating characters in the Kuchar universe.

Kuchar's mind is unabashedly colonized by the Movies, and his desperate reliance on these Hollywood dreams is the structuring fact of his identity and his work. In his diaries

we see glamour productively exploited and transformed into a queer way of seeing the world. Kuchar takes the formal techniques that Hollywood employs in its construction of a closed, seamless world of perfection and applies them to subjects and objects that fail to achieve this perfection. Through these gestures, Kuchar is acknowledging, even celebrating, our dogged determination to achieve the glamour and beauty that Hollywood constructs as exciting and liberating. He is also suggesting that the glittering dream world created by Hollywood is a means of dressing up and transcending its own bad reputation as trashy low culture. The painful, awkward, and sad moments of being human can be transformed into a "show" and Hollywood can reveal how.

Kuchar's video diaries refuse the masterful and closed glamour of Hollywood with low production values, imperfect bodies, awkward conversation, mundane landscapes, and an emasculated auteur. The gauche settings of dingy fast food restaurants, messy apartments, office cubicles, university classrooms, and run-down motel suites further contribute to the distance between his prosaic reality and Hollywood gloss. Kuchar's cinema of poverty, with its rough edges and straight cuts, is simply "good enough." It refuses superficial perfection. Pam Cook argues that "Kuchar's films are like blemishes on the face of the American dream: persistent, unsightly and fascinating" (283). He represents big dreams with modest means, reflecting the real disenfranchisement of many slovenly

average Joes from the mythologies of the American dream and “bigger is better.”

Kuchar is constantly present as narrator and as performer. He is always the center of attention whether he is visible or not. His distinctive nasal voice narrates with a passion for adjectives, alliteration, yiddishisms and melodrama. Large, balding, bespectacled and mustachioed, Kuchar makes his body's presence felt in his video diaries, a body that is abject and grotesque. He regularly farts, films his bowel movements, and discusses his digestive problems, foot fungus, bruises, mucus excretion, rashes, and poor health in general. He presents his own middle age body – chubby and hairy, a “flabby mass of pain” – in sultry glamour poses befitting Rock Hudson or Lana Turner. Kuchar is polymorphously perverse; his gender and sexuality are fluid to allow greater dexterity in identifying with and mimicking mass culture. He literally strips himself bare for the camera, revealing his naked body and his deepest fears, anxieties, hopes and dreams.

Kuchar's persona is vulnerable, self-deprecating, and emotional. He derives his sense of humour – which Seid describes as “a wit impressed by the intrinsic sadness of life” (19) – from his sense of shame. In Kuchar's performance, shame comes from the realization that one's body is not “real” because it fails at being desirable and glamorous by Hollywood's standards. Kuchar is ensuring that the messy bodies of regular folk such as he and his friends are not

erased from the history of cinematic representation, even if it is just no-budget video. Delivered with his impeccable comic timing, Kuchar's laments such as, “my face is so oily and the night is so lonely” (*Chili Line Stops Here*), and “the light shames me” (*Cult of the Cubicles*) are painfully funny but also just plain painful. His videos are unimaginable without his self-deprecating humour, which contributes greatly to the construction of empathy based on a shared sense of shame.

The events presented in Kuchar's video diaries run the gamut from the trivial to the momentous. They range from his playing with animals, tossing out garbage, and excreting waste, to the death of his lover and collaborator Curt McDowell (*Video Album 5*), his mother's stay in the hospital (*Creeping Crimson*), and endless road trips to either weather-watch or tour with his films to universities and film festivals. Partly because they are shot on video and partly because they are narrated by the oft-miserable Kuchar, even the life-altering moments do not seem to live up to the intensity with which such events would be presented on the silver screen. This represents the necessary but tragic failure of the real to meet the dramatic standards that many have come to expect from watching movies. There is a palpable and extremely moving sense of inadequacy that pervades the characters' funny and sad attempts to live up to the Hollywood standards with which they identify so strongly (Scott MacDonald 300). Close-ups with Kuchar's camcorder do not reveal spotless perfection bathed in divine light but instead simply

a more magnified view of a flawed and weathered creature. Formally, Kuchar is most interested in the tropes of low-brow and B-movies: melodrama, science fiction, and horror. He uses such expressive formal devices as their musical cues, overly dramatic dialogue, lighting, and props to bring something cinematic, and thus meaningful, to his degraded medium, life, and surroundings. Kuchar has stated: "Most of us see life in the form of a Hollywood movie anyway ... And so in diaristic videos you can add music at just the right time ... and orchestrate the shots of mom making potato blintzes so that it looks like she's in a Brian DePalma movie" (in Seid 20). By consistently foregrounding how he can shape the meaning and resonance of the content through his formal interventions, the diaries reach the point where representation itself is demystified.

To Kuchar, everything looks like something else through the camera. Every object is both itself and representative of something either far more important or far more ridiculous. Each object becomes meaningful in some unexpected way, unexpected because the meaning usually dramatically exceeds or falls short of the apparent or commonly accepted value of the object. Kuchar constantly – desperately – gives his humble reality an aura of idealization and shows how all that is high and revered can very easily be lowered into trash with a simple change of vantage point. It is awe-inspiring to see the meaning of cultural detritus transformed through a simple change of perspective, to see beauty and value relativized. In *Weather Diary 2*, Kuchar places a

McDonalds cartoon cutout in front of an equally kitsch, yet holier, poster of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* suggesting that the two gastronomic situations are more closely aligned than we might like to think, and existential crises can be provoked from a heady mix of Dinty Moore stew, powdered milk, and marshmallow pie (*Weather Diary 1*). There are constant slippages between food, sex, art, media; anything consumable can have its meaning transformed through the cinema. Kuchar eats up the world around him, greedily assimilating everything in sight into his playfully existential narratives. If trauma has become banal thanks to media over-saturation, if all hierarchies of significance are diminished in the landscape of an image culture where every shot is a commodity, then meaning and value are up for grabs. In the scene from *Weather Diary 2* that gives this essay and this programme its name, Kuchar addresses both his beloved tabloid newspapers and his future dinner of ham wrapped in a Hefty garbage bag as "truth wrapped in trash and vice versa."

Culled from a lifetime at the movies, Kuchar has absorbed the conventions of film acting and is adept at performing a virtual catalogue of affects: seductive, abusive, despondent, ecstatic, frightened, nostalgic, etc. Each emotional state is simply another cinematic technique. Instead of transforming Kuchar's persona into pure fiction, this emotional dress-up illuminates rather than eclipses his "real" emotions. Kuchar's persona is able to be trash and truth at once, complicating authenticity in an age of media over-

load. He understands the importance of artifice, play, and imagination as queer world-making tools, working in the service of people with real desires, dreams, and tangible lives. Kuchar's ironic gaze is always heartfelt. Kuchar is emphatically a part of the kitsch mass American culture that he films: His passions for junk food, his rural Oklahoman friends, garage sale treasures, tabloid TV, UFOs and the occult are genuine. Kuchar's gaze is affectionate and engaged yet self-conscious and critical, the source of his intelligence and sensitivity. Perhaps my favorite moment in his video work occurs in a startling gesture of reflexivity when he stares out at a streetlight, a beacon in the night sky in *Weather Diary 2*, and solemnly declares: "A ray of hope in this sea of misery." Unsatisfied with his delivery, he announces "let me say that with a little more feeling." He then repeats the statement with greater affect. Kuchar means what he is saying, but he knows the codes that construct a feeling of authenticity in the movies and is willing to explain them to us. He distances us from the cliché but not from the emotion behind it that is left with no other way of expressing itself but through cliché.

Cinema is a survival strategy for Kuchar, and presents a world where dreams can overcome, or at least cover up, any obstacle. It is the cinema that is able to bridge the apparent chasm between trash and truth, inhibition and exhibitionism, and fiction and reality. Kuchar shows how any of us can transform the key to a sardine tin into the key to happiness, and through his lessons in the world-making potential

of the movies he is able to cast light on the ruins of our lives. I will conclude with a statement from Kuchar: "If you're desperate enough, you can make the dream come true. How can you find something true and genuine if you're not dirty first? Sometimes, atrocious deeds pay off – a genuine thing comes out of it" (in Finch 85).

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My Antidote, The Antidote

by John Forget

On a sweaty Sunday Parkdale afternoon in the summer of 1999, I found myself begrudgingly agreeing to accompany a friend to his version of heaven – Home Depot. This friend had very recently turned fifty and had just that morning christened himself “HALF-A-CENTURY MAN.” His mission: to build himself his own birthday present. I didn’t want to see his “crisis of aging” take any darker turns, so I went along for the ride.

I have no recollection of the details of his construction project, but one moment of our Home Depot frenzy remains vividly captured - framed - in my memory. Jutting out from a ten-foot-tall display of “blade and mulch”-based outdoor equipment was a peculiarly long, black, thick rubber lever, the gearshift of a riding lawnmower.

(I should confess that my mood, impatient and melancholy, wasn’t solely a result of finding myself amidst a cavalcade of supplies and equipment designed to bolster the

rancorous “manhood” all around me, but instead rooted in the fact that in my closet were hours of video footage not seeing the light of day. I just couldn’t figure out how to finish the works, take them out of their shoebox and in front of an audience. This dilemma was less a case of my amusing lack of technical ability than simply not having the courage.)

My despondent trance seemed to deepen in the middle of that aisle beside a fifty-year-old man straddling a series of riding lawnmowers on a raised platform. To his credit, “HALF-A-CENTURY MAN” elected to attempt to snap me out of it by gripping the bizarrely long, black rubber lever at his ankle and launching into a dramatic mock electro-shock convulsive seizure!

Of course, I burst out laughing (however morbid to passersby in retrospect) because I could immediately discern from the mischievous grin on his face that his performance was telling me I must shock myself out of my own haze if I am to realize any of the glittering potential contained on the tapes in my shoebox!

What I find so wonderful, apart from the fact that he was so painfully correct, is that his observation came as a direct result of the absolute flight-of-fancy and deliberate moment of silliness as the self-proclaimed “HALF-A-CENTURY MAN” atop a display of riding mowers. It was his way of laughing at himself without diminishing the real

pain, fear and disillusionment that he was feeling. To this day, I really believe that if I had been only in the presence of _____ and not, "HALF-A-CENTURY MAN" that I wouldn't have benefited from such a piercing, motivating observation, because the t-r-u-t-h of it was a direct product of the absurdity behind it.

Soon after came word from John Topping, an artist friend in New York City, of a film that would change the course of my artistic practice (and outlook) forever. The film was called THUNDERCRACK and George Kuchar was the writer and star.

To me, the entire movie was a testament to self-imposed absurdity and hyper-tragedy as an antidote to t-r-u-e misery and the universal tragedy of simply being human. Also, the passionate celebration of BISEXUALITY in the movie was equally liberating. The real revelation, though, was discovering in Mr. Kuchar and his illustrious comrades an artistic force that took t-r-u-e pride in sex as well as craziness... and presented both as the t-r-u-e-s-t antidotes in life and for life. When it comes to his video diaries, George is to home video what Banting and Best were to DIABETES: Fighting the scourge of "America's Funniest Home Videos" and the catatonic grins of Bob Saget...George is our best hope!

Viewing THUNDERCRACK gave me the courage I needed to take pride in my own craziness and horniness and con-

tinues to fuel me to embark on and finish my own work. For the record, I would even spend another afternoon in Home Depot...if George was with me. I consume as much George as I possibly can. He makes me laugh my head off, and even in the art world – ESPECIALLY in the art world – that is something that can't be valued enough.

JOHN FORGET is currently living in Toronto - his videos are distributed by VTape at www.vtape.org.

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For more information on George Kuchar, contact:

Video Data Bank
112 S. Michigan Ave.
Chicago, IL
USA 60603
www.vdb.org