

Body-to-Body: The Works of Donigan Cumming

Introduction

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Body-to-body: the Works of Donigan Cumming is the first in a new series of digital publications edited by Vidéographe. Compiling the 26 videos that Donigan Cumming has produced to date, as well as images of his installations, photographs, drawings and collages, this publication updates and completes the 2005 DVD boxset *Controlled Disturbance*.

We wanted to present the different facets of Cumming's practice in order to highlight the common threads that unite his various bodies of work. Privileging an interdisciplinary approach, we have invited authors Zoë Tousignant and Fabrice Montal, a curator and programmer respectively, to examine his work from the perspectives of art and film history. We decided to use this web-based format because it allowed us to showcase a wide range of different type of documents, including texts, videos and images, sound works, scripts and an audio interview with Cumming by Jean Perret, a cinéma du réel theorist.

In Refuse and Refusal in the Art of Donigan Cumming, Tousignant approaches the artist's work chronologically, putting the cumulative nature of Cumming's works into perspective and drawing our attention to the profusion of elements that make up each project. Like the "characters" who reappear in different works over periods of 20, 30 or 40 years, Cumming's footage can be seen in multiple videos and collages, exhibitions turn into artist's books, and photographs become drawings. Tousignant portrays Cumming's artistic practice as being in a state of perpetual proliferation. She observes that this is more than merely a method of working: in constantly recuperating and transforming his own material, the artist mischievously and tenaciously thwarts the viewer's expectations.



Pretty Ribbons, 1993

In *Donigan C. and the Riches of Indigence*, Montal situates Cumming's work in the artistic and socio-political contexts in which it is rooted. The author also identifies the strategies that Cumming employs to vigorously critique so-called documentary truth. He demonstrates that the artist uses improvisation and the distancing effect to reveal that documentary productions are, in fact, staged and that they are too often based on power relationships between the observer and the observed. These power relationships are simultaneously exposed and critiqued by the shamelessness of the relationship between Cumming and his "protagonists".

Over the course of his interview with Cumming, Perret highlights the energy that activates his work. This is made palpable by the strong physical presence of the artist in his videos. We hear his deep breathing and his exuberant laugh. The camera continuously films the artist's interaction with his protagonists. Cumming compares this impatient and anxious camera to an animal that he holds in his hands and he sees no limits to what it can look at. Perret believes strongly that in showing what is never usually shown and in refusing to conform to the 'dictatorship of images' established by consumer society, Cumming is making a political gesture.

The texts by Montal and Tousignant, the interview with Perret, and the documents that have been selected for this publication give us insight into Cumming's creative fervor and his desire to destabilize the viewer and to ceaselessly draw from the margins of society, of what is watchable and of his own works. We are also struck by the artist's continued commitment to his protagonists, with whom he has maintained intimate, loyal and at times strained relationships. Even when his images of them are crude, sometimes to the point of revulsion, Cumming brings to them an affection that builds over time and that, as with all relationships, moves towards death in anger and joy.

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Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography, Part 1 (detail), 1986

Refuse and Refusal in the Art of Donigan Cumming

ZOË TOUSIGNANT

"I don't like waste – either of things or of human beings." Donigan Cumming uttered these words, in an apparently offhand manner, during a group meeting held at the Vidéographe offices to discuss the creation of this web project¹. But in the years I've known him, I've come to realize that in the case of this artist and his work, nothing is ever truly offhand. And, since the Vidéographe meeting, the statement has continued to resonate in my mind, further inflecting my understanding of his practice. In my view, it provides a key to explaining an "artistic attitude" peculiar to Cumming – the approach to art-making that shapes both the content of his imagery and the way he acts upon it. At once taunting and tender, it is an attitude that aims to constantly shift the ground of interpretation, destabilizing viewers and prohibiting them from ever settling into complacency. Although characterized by a recuperative dimension that makes the gesture of revisiting or reformulating previous work central, Cumming's approach should not be viewed as an example of a current phenomenon that sees artists, upon reaching a certain stage in their lives and careers, compelled to reflect on past production². In Cumming's practice, the distaste for waste, and its attendant desire to rehash and reorganize his own material, has been there from the outset.

¹ Cumming, Donigan. Presentation at Vidéographe, Montreal, July 11, 2019.

² On the phenomenon of artists reviewing and re-editing past work, see my essays "Revisiting," in *Serge Clément: Archipel* (Paris and Montreal: Éditions Loco and Occurrence, 2018); and "Gabor Szilasi: On Emotion and the Photographic Archive," *Ciel variable* 108 (Winter 2018): 22–31.



Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography, Part 3 (detail), 1986

It is generally accepted that Cumming first began developing his critical practice in the three-part black-and-white photographic series *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography* (1986). The series, published in catalogue form in 1986 to accompany a large-scale exhibition produced by the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, was also shown in smaller instalments throughout the early 1980s. At the core of this groundbreaking work was Cumming's personal argument with the tradition of documentary photography – a deep suspicion of but also active engagement with the notion of documentary truth that has remained a constant in his photographic and video work since. To enact the argument, he chose to focus his camera on a group of "disadvantaged" people living on the margins of society, several of whom would become important co-conspirators, appearing repeatedly in his works over the following decades³. The faces Cumming photographed in *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography* – both as sociological "types" and as individuals – have in fact come to define his oeuvre in the sense of being inseparable from it. As the first, forceful step in the creation of what has been termed Cumming's "invented community"⁴, the series may be understood as the foundation, the basic fabric, of what was to come.

A direct offshoot of *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography* is the series *The Stage*, published in 1991 as a photobook and presented in exhibition form in *The Mirror*, *The Hammer*, and *The Stage*. Described by Cumming as "the laugh track behind the pictures," *The Stage* is a generous compilation of images he had made for the first series but left on the cutting-room floor. As a photobook, it consists of a dense sequence of 250 full-bleed, vertical photographs bookended by two short texts (or rather one text divided into two sections)⁵. Compared with the images of *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography*, those in *The Stage* actually seem less staged, or at least less static: while the former portrays its subjects in the guise of rather stoic statues, the latter is full of exuberance, spontaneous movement, and obvious jokes.

³ The series *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography* is made up of three distinct parts. The first pictures this group of people, who are living in difficult circumstances in Montreal and with whom Cumming's work has been closely associated, and the second presents, in similar poses, individuals living in the suburbs. For the third, Cumming cast his subjects as Elvis Presley fans and wove their portraits into a complex narrative involving a woman in Arkansas who believed that Elvis was communicating with her through the radio and wrote letters to him via a national tabloid.

⁴ See Scott Birdwise, "Contact and Community," in Donigan Cumming, ed. France Choinière (Montreal and Quebec City: Dazibao and VU, 2012), p. 7.



Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography, Part 3 (detail), 1986

What comes through most clearly, perhaps, is the fact that the shoots Cumming organized involved a fair amount of trial and error and, frankly, messing about. The standard power relation between photographer and subject, which one might imagine held sway in the initial series, is destabilized, and any presumption about the part each played within that relation turned on its head. This sense of destabilization is reinforced by *The Stage's* form, which, with its uninterrupted yet staccato rhythm, purposefully thwarts the natural impulse to read it as a story. Cumming, who by his own admission is allergic to art that is too easy or manageable, was deliberately aiming to frustrate, and he succeeded in making viewers uncomfortable, not only by avoiding linear narrative but by forcing them to rethink their perception of his work. Already, with this second major piece, the artist was provoking the suspicion that he cannot be relied upon to do the same thing twice, no matter how hard to digest the initial thing may have been.

In the mid-1990s, Cumming turned to video, a medium he has continued to exploit compellingly ever since. It was while shooting *Pretty Ribbons* (1993), a body of photographs created in collaboration with Nettie Harris, one of the subjects who first appeared in *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography*, that the artist began using a video camera. Harris died shortly after *Pretty Ribbons* was completed, so Cumming integrated the footage he had collected into the video *A Prayer for Nettie* (1995), a "grotesque elegy" (in the artist's words) that would later become a stimulus for new works. In 2004, he published the photobook *Lying Quiet*, which complemented *Donigan Cumming: Moving Pictures*, an exhibition bringing together a decade of video work that was presented at Toronto's Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (MOCCA) in 2005. Similar to *The Stage* in its composition, *Lying Quiet* is composed of 200 full-bleed, horizontal colour photographs (92 single images and 27 four-image montages) preceded by an essay by Peggy Gale, curator of the MOCCA exhibition, and followed by an afterword by Cumming.

⁵ The text relays passages from Cecil B. DeMille's 1956 film *The Ten Commandments*, as remembered by Albert Ross Smith, one of Cumming's principal subjects. See Donigan Cumming, *The Stage* (Montreal: Maquam Press, 1991). In 2014, *The Stage* was republished as part of the *Books on Books* series edited by Errata Editions, New York. Two additional essays, by Robert Enright and Jeffrey Ladd, complete the republication.



The Stage (detail), 1991

The photographs, assembled to function like an avalanche of in-your-face visual stimulation, are stills extracted from the 143 hours of footage recorded for the eighteen videos which Cumming had by that time produced. Consisting of “the images in-between the dramatic passages that constitute the edited tapes”⁶, many of them close-ups, *Lying Quiet* allows viewers the time to fully absorb the subtle corporeal details of the people Cumming has filmed and the depth of feeling they evoke, without the “distractions” of sound, movement, and individual personality.

Made after ten years of video work, but also after almost twenty years of engagement with a particular group of subjects, this photobook presents as a kind of meditative – though not restful – return to the muteness of the early photographic series⁷.

In 2003, Cumming began work on *Epilogue* and *Prologue*, two monumental photographic murals that would be completed in 2005⁸. Modelled on the compositional structure of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *The Suicide of Saul* (1562) and James Ensor's *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889* (1888), respectively, they are made up of innumerable photographic fragments culled from Cumming's previous series – or, as he puts it, “from garbage in the studio”⁹.

⁶ Cumming, Donigan. Afterword to *Lying Quiet* (Toronto: Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, 2004), p. 163.

⁷ The exhibition *Donigan Cumming: Moving Pictures* included a video installation, accompanied by a soundtrack, based on the stills selected for *Lying Quiet*.

⁸ *Prologue* and *Epilogue* were first shown in 2005, at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, Toronto, and later at the Galerie Éric Devlin, Montreal, as part of *Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal*; in 2006, they were exhibited at the Canadian Cultural Centre, Paris; and, in 2008, in *Territoire mental*, at Le Musée d'Art moderne et d'Art contemporain, Liège, and Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery, Halifax. Both are now in the collection of the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec.

⁹ Cumming, Donigan. Presentation at Vidéographe, Montreal, July 11, 2019.



Lying Quiet, 2004

The artist painstakingly cut out thousands of figures drawn chiefly from *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography*, *The Stage*, and *Lying Quiet*, overlaying them in some areas with thick paint and gilt, and combining them to create two extravagantly layered, tactile collages of epic proportions. Borrowing a religious undertone from the paintings they emulate, both of which picture religious themes in contemporaneous settings, *Prologue* and *Epilogue* imbue Cumming's familiar subjects with a new symbolic potency, as though the cord that once tied them to the real was being finally and irremediably cut. Paradoxically, this instance of elevation to a sacred realm is the result of an essentially iconoclastic gesture – the act of debasing or destroying worshipped imagery. But the gesture is not levelled at individual images, or even particular subjects, but at the oeuvre as a whole¹⁰. It is tempting to see these works as an incitement by the artist, to his viewers, to once again discard the foundations on which their interpretation of his works had previously been based.

In the late 2000s, Cumming's work took another unexpected turn with a series of drawings titled *Kincora* (2008), named after Kincora Avenue, a street in downtown Montreal that was razed in the late 1980s and on which a number of his subjects lived. These drawings, which first appeared in print in a self-published artist's book, draw attention to the intense physicality of the iconoclastic gesture¹¹. As with *Prologue* and *Epilogue*, the *Kincora* drawings' source material is photographic, yet here the source has been utterly – and repeatedly – transformed by the artist's hand. Using broad, vigorous strokes of media such as pencil, charcoal, and watercolour, Cumming deformed familiar figures, taken mainly from *The Stage*, and adorned them with wings, perhaps recasting them as fallen angels.

¹⁰ Bédard, Catherine. *Donigan Cumming. La somme, le sommeil, le cauchemar* (Paris: Centre Culturel Canadien, 2006), p. 27.

¹¹ Cumming, Donigan. *Kincora* (Montreal: Maquam Press, 2008). The series has also been published in *Pencils, Ashes, Matches & Dust* (Quebec City: Éditions J'ai VU, 2009).



While the original photographs remain recognizable, there is a fervour and an obsessiveness to the act of transformation that renders them wholly different beasts. Together, the *Kincora* drawings create the impression that this act possessed a cathartic dimension, as though it were part of a private mourning process, a way of dealing with the death of the individuals depicted – and of others¹². Here, the iconoclastic gesture is not fuelled purely by aggression but also by what I surmise to be care, for no other reason than the time obviously involved in the process. It is a form of re-editing that, perhaps because of the facility of the drawing medium, speaks especially convincingly to the artist's own bodily investment.

Excerpts from the *Kincora* series have been included in one of Cumming's latest monographs, *Donigan Cumming*, a retrospective take on his career published jointly by Dazibao (Montreal) and VU (Quebec City) in 2012¹³. This selective survey, which also features images from *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography*, *The Stage*, *Pretty Ribbons*, *Lying Quiet*, *Prologue*, and *Epilogue*, is another recent example of the artist's creative reworking of his own material. This is not a new tactic, for, as we have seen, his own imagery has always been treated as fair game – not only in the production of new works but also in their reinterpretation via different modes of display. (It would be interesting to compare the many ways in which Cumming's various series have been exhibited and consistently refashioned within specific contexts of presentation.) To me, the impulse to re-edit is indicative of the kind of relationship he has had with his own work, but also of the relationship he has maintained with his viewers, whether real or projected. It may be that negative reactions to the more controversial aspects of Cumming's practice have had the effect of fuelling further provocations, of galvanizing the artist to continue to question the basis of such reactions. It may be that the act of destabilizing viewers has been part of a process of eradicating any form of reverence for the image – both the image as such and the images that compose his oeuvre. In this sense, there is no authentic moment, no original work of which subsequent ones have been copies. There is just work.

¹² On the theme of death in Cumming's work, see especially Peggy Gale, "Touching on Donigan Cumming," in *Lying Quiet* (Toronto: Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, 2004), p. 1-15 and p. 17-33.

¹³ Choinière, France, ed. *Donigan Cumming* (Montreal and Quebec City: Dazibao and VU, 2012).



Exit Interview, 2014

Donigan C. and the Riches of Indigence

FABRICE MONTAL

This is the work of an artist of rich complexity. How to approach it? We will take this opportunity to focus on his video works in particular, while permitting ourselves to drift, occasionally, to his photographic corpus. Donigan Cumming's practice interrogates and plays with the inherent subterfuge of the documentary image, whether photographic or videographic. Early on in life, he became aware of the spectacular and pre-constructed aspect that prevails in any documentary project, throwing bridges over the relatively tenuous – at times plainly non-existent – gaps between a reality "mediated" by a documentary process and an act of fiction in the strictest sense.

In Cumming's work, we find ourselves confronted with poverty and the limits of human existence, not by way of a quickly sketched portrait or a subject directly exploited, but through their consequence, their drama we might say. And everything depends on the artist who creates it, who sculpts from his material this misery, this decay or this mortality, more through reflection than conjecture.

Donigan Cumming, born in 1947 in Virginia, could existentially be seen as a product of the 1950s. He arrived in Montreal at the start of the 1970s, an immigrant from Florida, a young American rejecting the Vietnam war and the violence of the society in which he had grown up. He devoted himself to photography and, in the 1980s, his work brought him international recognition.



Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography, Part 1 (detail), 1986

Photography occupied a considerable place in his creative practice until 1991, when, long after having dabbled in Super 8 in 1968, he revisited the moving image and used a camcorder to relay his relationship with Nettie Harris, one of his preferred models who had previously been an actress and journalist, recently deceased in *A Prayer for Nettie* (1995) ¹.

An art student in the United States in the 1960s, he could not escape the influence of the movements that came like tidal waves: counter-culture and the civil rights movement. If we focus on this implicit aspect of his work we can find a number of values pertaining to them: a critique of consumerism and the spectacle, a compassion, the surpassing of set limits of existence, the development of a community, an interest in the socially excluded, antipsychiatry, respect for human dignity, the famous *'here and now'*, experiments in theatre in many forms, the Fluxus movement and action art.

Some of the individuals that he has us watch and listen to, who certainly appear poor and unwell, with whom he builds his theatre of cruelty (which we should re-baptise the theatre of honesty after having followed his work for many years) belong to this past. They belong to the generation that confronted the powers that be, often violently, in demanding an end to war and racism.

¹ "My movement from photography to video has surprised some people but actually I made my first film in 1968 in collaboration with Robert Forsyth. It was an eight-minute film against a two-and-a-half-hour soundtrack called *Tennessee Street*. The soundtrack began with extracts from Calvin Tomkins's *The Bride and the Bachelors*; then we proceeded down the commercial strip in my van, stopping to talk to people, buy some doughnuts - the whole trip took about three hours. We were very much against editing so we put the film on a loop over the full duration of the soundtrack. Bob and I took it out on a brief tour. The last stop was in Columbus, Georgia, where the film was not well-received. It took me 20 years to make another one." Donigan Cumming, text from the conference given by Cumming on the occasion of the French tour, *Donigan Cumming : Continuité et rupture*, a series of video screenings organized by the Canadian Cultural Centre and Transat Vidéo, presented in Paris, Hérouville Saint-Clair, Strasbourg and Marseille, from 25 October to 2 November 1999. Reused by Hors champ, <http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/2004/Emulsions/rupture-cumming.html>, consulted on 11 August 2019, English version on https://offscreen.com/view/continuity_and_rupture retrieved on 1 October 2019.



A Prayer for Nettie (video still), 1995

Here is what Cumming had to say in 2000 on the subject of his own practice:

"All of the work that I do is set loosely within the framework of social documentary – work that interprets social attitudes and individual response. Within the category of social documentary, I include every aspect of the work – its whole affective life, including its production and its reception – questions of critical and popular reaction, professional ethics, narrative devices, symbology, rhetoric, myth, and so on. The continuity in my work is to raise questions about documentary practice – to challenge assumptions – even as I present the realities of social conditions. In short, the work comments, often very critically, on the documentary tradition that feeds and houses it. Its overt artificiality and lack of orthodoxy are the first signs of rupture – fiction infiltrating the house of truth, and vice versa. The issues that I began to raise in *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography*, a large body of work first shown at the Centre national de la photographie in 1986, are still with me today, as are the people who posed for them. The living and the dead."²

We understand, consequently, that this text, and the fact that you are reading it and reflecting on Cumming's work, as well as the sometimes violent and repulsed reactions that his images provoke, indeed the plethora of critical essays that have been written about his work for more than 30 years, are an integral part of an ethnographic creative process that he established decades ago, in which the observer finds himself as implicated as the observed. A global approach, certainly, but a fascinating one: an attempt to surpass a documentary protocol that he finds too reductive and judges unfit to report on the complexity of social reality.

² Ibid.



The Seven Wonders of the World (video still), 2018

In video as in photography, Cumming interrogates the social representation of the self. His narrative strategy consists in creating dialogue about the interior and exterior, the immobile and the mobile, the dead and the living, the normalized and the unconventional, the public and the private, the Montrealer and the universal, with a rawness that cannot, and should not, leave you indifferent. While poses that imitate classical painting or sculpture recur in his photographs – think of *Les Pleureurs* (1994), acquired by the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec – his videos seem dependent on the simplicity of the video recording equipment available to him or, rather, with which he has decided to work: the MiniDV, whose intrinsic qualities he profusely exploits. The skilful photographer voluntarily chooses poor quality video imagery and has also decided to participate in his videos while holding the camera in his hand. This generates a *hic et nunc effect*, accentuating the illusion of "veracity". At times, for instance in *Locke's Way* (2003), which is essentially constructed from this hyper-subjective perspective, we feel as though we have found ourselves inside a brain affected with logorrhea.

Cumming also often parodies what is referred to in Hollywood as an "*establishing shot*" (*Cut the Parrot*, 1996; *Culture*, 2002) in his video tapes. This is where, in order to situate a protagonist for us, he creates a panoramic or sweeping shot, like a drone flying over the domestic chaos of the room in which they live. It is intrusive but helps us to assess the situation. Cumming does not play with moral precepts. It is up to us to draw our own conclusions. Is that not the aim of his provocation?

He is provocative, certainly, but not without purpose. In interviews he often talks about the influences of double-bill theatres, of detachment, of cruelty and absurdity in his visual art practice. What Cumming has to say about his relationship with his amateur actors and the staging is quite evocative.



The Stage (detail), 1991

"Besides moving up or down the economic scale, or in and out of polite looks, another kind of mobility is created by this community of untrained actors, through storytelling and roleplaying. I use a lot of theatrical metaphors when I make and talk about my work. I'm not interested in spectacle for its own sake, but there are certain aspects of the theatrical experience that are crucial to what I do. This is basic social theory, but it's also a function of my training and early influences. I have a kind of mixed background coming out of the legitimate theatre - meaning Beckett, Artaud, Brecht and Ionesco - and moving through the performance art of the late sixties when Fluxus and Funk were also in the air."³

Cumming stands out for having built a somewhat family-like dynamic with his models. We might say it's almost genealogical, when he describes the gestation of these individuals' time in front of his lens.⁴

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ 'I have been positively inspired by the revolution in ethnographic film that acknowledged the participation and the inevitable effect of the filmmaker's presence. The documentary photographer's presence is felt frame by frame, but also in a larger, long-term affect which has serious ramifications. My photographs and tapes are made in an improvised community of migrating figures. These people did not form any kind of coherent community before they were recruited to pose as types in what I saw as a fictional documentary work. But the nature of photography determines its share of reality; a community had been formed and I have continued to know and work with its members ever since.' Donigan Cumming, *ibid.*



The Stage (detail), 1991

In truth, the connections that he has maintained with his models far surpasses the temporary contact that often takes place in the world of professional filmmaking and then fades after the shoot. Whether the stories of their lives as they are told to us are true or false, and their pains or derelictions real or not, he has maintained close relationships with them. If Cumming believes all fiction to be a lie and that the same can even be said of documentary, he plays with this in his videos and offers us narrative works with a biographical flavour to situate the protagonists for us. But the pact that he seems to have made with the members of his community is this: "Bare yourself, offer yourself up to my lens, submit yourself for a few minutes to my scrutinizing gaze, we are going to play a truth game. And with an array of tools, we are going to candidly reflect the image of the human condition and combat the lie upon which the majority of social representations have been constructed."

Cumming will deepen his group dynamic still further and will remain loyal, even after their death, to these men and women who, in offering to his camera lens with as much shamelessness as generosity, the extremity of their lives, their physical injuries, their material deprivation or their nudity, have irreversibly changed the course of his life. He demonstrates this, using a process that employs both anamnesis and allegory, in major works such as *Prologue* (2005), *Epilogue* (2005), *Lying Quiet* (2005) and *Kincora* (2008).

This proximity allows him to express situations that the distance between the observer and the observed would have rendered impossible. But we also understand that these protagonists intercede on behalf of an observer whose pursuit dates back many years.

Cumming's brother features in his video *Locke's Way*. He has suffered intellectual disability since childhood. Having spoken about it in numerous interviews, it seems Cumming has always carried this with him and developed his entire oeuvre with this existential dimension in the background, attempting to understand the marginalization and exile imposed on certain people by others. He has devoted himself to understanding the issue by looking at other lives in distress that have been left behind by most of society. He has therefore magnified, in both size and glorification, those destined to be outcast by giving them a *raison d'être* and, in drawing them out of the vicissitudes and absurdities of life, he has provided new material for humanity. A questioning, yes, but also a game.



Cur the Parrot (video still), 1996

Over the last decade, Cumming's work has changed; he multiplies perspectives, recycles his images. With *Kincora* he delivers a troubling conclusion in which the protagonists of his videographic and photographic acts find themselves transformed into angelic figures. Viewers who are familiar with his older works find themselves destabilized once again because the symbolic dimension of the angel, as a supernatural figure, contrasts considerably with the warts-and-all realism, the rawness and cruelty of the situations portrayed in his previous photographs and videos.

But this is a fallen angel, an angel of mercy on welfare, an angel of the compassion administered by civil servants. He comes to visit the *Petit Jésus* (1999) who is called out to by Pierre Lamarche, who remains invisible and who, clearly, will never return.

This integration of drawing can be seen in his latest videos, in which he has inserted sequences animated by his own hand. More recently still, in 2019, he exhibited his drawings and inks along side photographic prints.

One wonders what has motivated this move to a pure pictorial approach, particularly as he has adopted an expressionist stance. What is the urge that drives him, if there is an urge? Perhaps a solution can be found in these late drawings. Rarely have we seen an artist revisit past work and rework it with such fervor.



Biography

DONIGAN CUMMING

Donigan Cumming deals with themes of the body, truth and fiction, taboos of representation, and social engagement. A multimedia artist, he uses photography, text, sound, video, drawing, painting, collage, and animation in artworks, installations, projections, and books. Cumming locates his artistic practice in a created community formed over many projects and sustained over decades. These close working relationships have allowed him to explore the social and ethical implications of the observational image. His work constitutes an ongoing analysis of the reality effects of documentary film and photography, and the realities of the subjects they depict and describe. Donigan Cumming's practice is therefore marked by an interest in the threshold between the public "onstage" and the private "backstage"—the psycho-social performances of all the actors, including himself, as maker.

Cumming was born in Danville, Virginia, in 1947. In 1970 he came to Canada to resist the American War being fought in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. He moved to Montreal, Québec, where he resumed his art practice. In 1978, he obtained a BSc from Florida State University (Tallahassee). In 1985, he completed a MFA at Concordia University while working on the cycle of photographs and sound recordings that became *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography* (1986). This project was previewed in a number of solo and group exhibitions, notably at the NFB/ONF Photo Gallery/Galerie de l'image, Ottawa; The Photography Gallery (TPW), Toronto; Coburg Gallery, Vancouver; and Blue Sky Gallery, Portland, Oregon, sparking critical debate in leading art magazines, such as *Parachute*, *Vanguard*, *Canadian Art*, and *C Magazine*.

Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography was launched in its completed three-part form in solo exhibitions at OK Harris and 49th Parallel, New York, and the Centre national de la Photographie, Paris, both in 1986.



Out of Kerr's Suitcase (video still), 2016

Organized by the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, the show toured in Europe, the United States, and Canada, with excerpts from *Reality and Motive* included in influential group exhibitions, such as *Photography: Suggestions and Facts* (Mandeville Gallery, La Jolla CA), *Foto(con)tekst* (Perspektief Gallery, Rotterdam), and *Culture Medium* (International Center of Photography, New York).

The next major projects were premiered in solo exhibitions: *The Mirror, the Hammer, and (virgule) the Stage* (Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago, 1990); *Diverting the Image* (Art Gallery of Windsor and CIAC - Centre international d'art contemporain de Montreal, 1993); *Pretty Ribbons* (Les Rencontres internationales de la photographie d'Arles, 1994), *Moving Stills* (Mois de la Photo à Montreal, 1999, and International Film Festival Rotterdam, 2000), and *Gimlet Eye* (Chapter Arts Centre and Ffotogallery, Cardiff, 2001). Cumming's work was featured in key, discourse-enlarging exhibitions, notably *Real Stories: Revisions in Documentary and Narrative Photography*, from the Museet for Fotokunst, Odense, Denmark (1992); *The Body/Le Corps* (Kunsthalle, Bielefeld, Germany (1994) and Lutz Teutloff Modern Art, Köln, Germany (1994-5); *The Dead*, National Museum of Photography, Film, and Television, Bradford, England (1995); *El cos, la llengua, les paraules, la pell: Artistes contemporains de Québec*, Centre D'Art Santa Mònica de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain (1999); *Le cadre, la scène, le site, Centro de la Imagen*, Mexico, and Mexican tour, 2000-2002); *Portraits intimes*, Foto Instituut of Rotterdam, The Netherlands (2002); *Immodest Gazes*, Fondació la Caixa, Barcelona, Spain (2000); and *World without End*, Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia (2000). Cumming's ground-breaking work from this period has featured in important museum exhibitions from their collections: *Beau: a reflection on the nature of beauty in photography / Beau: une réflexion sur la nature de la beauté en photographie*, Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Ottawa (1992); *Une aventure contemporaine, la photographie 1955-1995*, Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris, France (1996); *Bearing Witness: works from the collection*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver (2010); *La photographie d'auteur au Québec - Une collection prend forme au Musée/Auteur Photography in Québec: A Collection Takes Shape*, Musée des beaux-arts de Montreal, Montreal (2013); *From Ferron to BGL: Contemporary Art in Québec*, Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, Québec (2016) and *Photography in Canada: 1960-2000*, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (2017).



Fountain (video still), 2005

In 2005, the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (now MOCA, Toronto) presented *Moving Pictures*, a major exhibition surveying a great variety of Cumming's work. Curated by Peggy Gale, the exhibition premiered two monumental panels, *Prologue* and *Epilogue*, a collage constructed from the artist's photographic and video archives. *Prologue* and *Epilogue* were also the centrepieces of *Donigan Cumming : La somme, le sommeil, le cauchemar*, curated by Catherine Bédard for Le Mois de la Photo à Paris (Centre Culturel Canadien, Paris, 2006). A survey of Cumming's work in multimedia, photography, and video was presented in the 2008 exhibition *Ex Votos* at Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery (Halifax).

As an artist-in-residence at Centre VU (Québec), Cumming produced *Kincora*, a vast suite of prints based on drawings of his photographs, which were exhibited at VU (2008) and Galerie Éric Devlin (Montreal, 2008). This transition also took form as a magazine work for the "Alive: Artist Pages" of *BlackFlash* (2008), a project for *Cinematic Folds: The Furling and Unfurling of Images* (Pleasure Dome, 2008), and as an outdoor multimedia installation for ATSA's *État d'urgence 09*, Place Émilie-Gamelin, Montreal, Canada (2009). Animation also flowed episodically into medium-length and short video work, starting with *Pencils, Ashes, Matches & Dust* (2009). *Too Many Things* (2010), combining observational documentary and animation, premiered at the Cinémathèque québécoise in a six-year survey of videos, *Donigan Cumming : preuves nouvelles et choses trouvées*, accompanied by an exhibition of associated prints and drawings, all emanating from his imagined community *Kincora*.

In 2011, Cumming and Matthieu Brouillard conceived a co-curated two-person exhibition to explore intersections between their works. This resulted in a touring show and an artists' book: *Coming Through the Fog: Les rencontres de Donigan Cumming et Matthieu Brouillard* (Centre Sagamie éditions d'art, 2012). Cumming has also published several artist's books, including *The Stage* (Maquam Press, 1991), *Gimlet Eye* (Chapter Arts Centre and Fotogallery, 2001), *Lying Quiet* (Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, 2004), *Kincora* (Maquam Press, 2008), *Pencils, Ashes, Matches & Dust* (J'ai VU, 2009). An artists' book, *Kerr's Suitcase* (Maquam Press, 2015), and a video, *Out of Kerr's Suitcase* (2016), evolved from an imagined collaboration between Cumming and David Kerr (1945-2007) and the exercise of remembering.



Culture (video still), 2002

Cumming took up video in 1995, following the death of his collaborator and model Nettie Harris. In 1993, a documentary film by Bruno Carrière, *Séance avec Nettie/A Session with Nettie*, had given witness to their creative collaboration during the making of *Pretty Ribbons*. Cumming's *A Prayer for Nettie* (1995) was his elegy. Conceived and widely circulated as a photographic and multi-channel video monument, the work was edited into theatrical form and premiered at the Festival du Nouveau Cinéma (Montreal) in 1996, winning the Telefilm Canada Video Prize for Best Canadian Discovery. His videos have since screened in Canada and internationally, both in theatrical and continuous projection. In 1998, the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR) featured Cumming's work in its program *The Cruel Machine*. In 2000, his video installation *Moving Stills* was featured in IFFR's Exploding Cinema program, while his work *Fountain* premiered at IFFR in 2005. Cumming's videos have screened at New York festivals and houses for experimental film: the New York Video Festival, the Whitney Museum of American Art, Anthology Film Archives, Museum of Modern Art, and Millenium Film Workshop. Programs of his work have been shown at Lux Centre for Film, Video, and New Media (Shoreditch Biennale, London, UK), Pleasure Dome (Toronto) and Méduse (Québec).

Continuity and Rupture, a VHS collection of his video works, was published by Cinéma Libre in 1999, leading to a series of screenings in France and a complementary publication, *Donigan Cumming: continuité et rupture* (Centre Culturel Canadien/Ambassade du Canada à Paris, 2000). A DVD box set, *Donigan Cumming: Controlled Disturbance*, with essays by Catherine Bédard, Sally Berger, Peggy Gale, Marcy Goldberg, Marie-Josée Jean, Jean Perret, Nicolas Renaud, and Yann-Olivier Wicht was published by Vidéographe, Montreal, in 2005.

Cumming's controversial work has been the subject of critical examinations and retrospectives, including programs at the Pacific Film Archive (Berkeley CA, 2002) and at Visions du Réel (Nyon, Switzerland, 2002), as well as several monographs: *Splitting the Choir: The Moving Images of Donigan Cumming* (Canadian Film Institute, Ottawa, 2011), *Donigan Cumming: Monographie* (Dazibao and Vu, Montreal and Quebec City, 2012); and *Donigan Cumming: The Stage: Books on Books #19* (Errata Editions, New York, 2014). He has participated in insightful interviews for publication with Robert Enright, Jean Perret, Mike Hoolboom, and Philippe Gagan. In 2015, the Cinémathèque québécoise, in collaboration with Vidéographe, presented a two programs and a master class of Donigan Cumming's works.



My Dinner with Weegee (video still), 2001

The same year, his video *Culture* was included in the program *L'œil du photographe : la photographie et le documentaire poétique / A Photographer's Eye: Photography and the Poetic Documentary* (Rencontres internationales du documentaire de Montreal, 2015).

Numerous theoretical works and reference books address Cumming's work, including *Contemporary Photographers* (St. James Press, 1996), *The Photography Book* (Phaidon, 1997), *Art and Photography* (Phaidon, 2003), *Faking Death: Canadian Art Photography and the Canadian Imagination* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), *Das Lexikon der Fotografen* (Knaur, 2003), *The Photobook: A History, Volume 2* (Phaidon, 2006), *Scissors, Paper, Stone: Expressions of Memory in Contemporary Photographic Art* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), *Touching Surfaces: Photographic Aesthetics, Temporality, Aging* (Brill Rodopi, 2008), *100 Video Artists/100 video artistas* (EXIT Publicaciones, 2009), *The Visual Arts in Canada: The Twentieth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2010), *Une Collection. Maison européenne de la photographie* (Actes Sud, 2015), and *The Thames & Hudson Dictionary of Photography* (Thames & Hudson, 2015). Scholarly studies of his work include Scott Birdwise, "Life Support: The Documentary Means Without End of Donigan Cumming," (Carleton University, 2010); Élène Tremblay, *L'insistance du regard sur le corps éprouvé. Pathos et contre-pathos* (Forum Edizioni, 2013); and Florence Le Blanc, "Les Épaves scintillantes": emplois autofictionnels de la photographie au sein du récit filmique," (Université Laval, 2019). Cumming's extended portrait of Nettie Harris, *Pretty Ribbons*, continues to attract scholarly and artistic attention, including Kathleen Woodward, "Performing Age, Performing Gender," (2006), Vicky Hodgson, "Stereotypical Representations of Women and Ageing: A Review of Literature and Photographic Practice," (2018), and GraceGraceGrace, the three-person British artists' collective, in their *GraceGraceGrace explore gen-age* (2019).

Donigan Cumming's photographic and video works have been acquired for the permanent collections of major institutions in Quebec, Canada, and abroad, including: the Museum of Modern Art (New York), the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography (Ottawa), the Maison Européenne de la Photographie (Paris), the Musée de L'Élysée (Lausanne), the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec (Quebec City), the Musée d'art contemporain de Montreal, and the Museum of Contemporary Art (Los Angeles), as well as national museums in Belgium, Britain, Denmark, France, Switzerland, and the United States.



Harry's Diary: Extract From *Pretty Ribbons* (detail), 1993

Cumming's work was initially supported by fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, followed by project and visual arts grants from the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade of Canada, Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec and the Canada Council for the Arts, including a Long-Term Grant (2008–10). The Canadian Discoveries prize of 1996 was followed by the Telefilm Canada Prize for the Best Canadian Short or Medium-Length Film or Video (1998 – *Erratic Angel*); Barbara Aronofsky Latham Memorial Award, 11th Annual Dallas Video Festival (2002 – *After Brenda*); and The Best Quebec Documentary, Québec Cinema Critics Award (2002 – *My Dinner with Weegee*). In 2008, his short video *Monument* was commissioned by Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian for a DVD collection, *Tão Perto / Tão Longe [So Close / So Far; Si Proche / Si Loin]*, Lisbon. Highly productive residencies include VU, centre de diffusion et de production de la photographie (Québec) and PRIM – Recherche et Création Expérimentale (Montreal). In addition to artist's talks and workshops, Cumming was a member of the visiting faculty at the École de Photographie de Vevey (CEPV) in Switzerland from 2011 to 2017. His work is represented by Galerie Michel Guimont (Quebec), La Castiglione (Montreal), Vidéographe (Montreal), and Video Data Bank (Chicago).



Harry's Diary: Extract From Pretty Ribbons (détail), 1993

Biographies

ZOË TOUSIGNANT

Zoë Tousignant is a photography historian and an independent curator specializing in Quebec and Canadian photography. She holds a PhD in Art History from Concordia University and an MA in Museum Studies from the University of Leeds. She has worked as an associate curator of photography at the McCord Museum and as a curator at the contemporary art library Artex. Her recent curatorial projects include *Serge Clément: Archipel* (Occurrence, 2019), *Gabor Szilasi: The Art World in Montreal, 1960-1980* (McCord Museum, 2017-18), *Canadian Photography Magazines, 1970-1990: Reconsidering a History of Photography in Print* (Artex, 2016), *Marisa Portolese: Belle de Jour III - Dialogues with Notman's Portraits of Women* (FOFA Gallery, 2016), and *Campeau, Carrière, Clément: Accumulations* (Galerie Simon Blais, 2015). Her essays have been published in *Ciel variable*, *Canadian Art*, *Archivaria*, *the Revue de Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec*, and various catalogues and monographs. She recently edited the book *Gabor Szilasi: The Art World in Montreal, 1960-1980*, published in 2019 by the McCord Museum in collaboration with McGill-Queen's University Press.

FABRICE MONTAL

Fabrice Montal has an academic background in history and cinema. He was involved in the founding of two film organizations in Quebec City, Antitube and the Festival des 3 Amériques, and worked as a programmer at both, staying at the former for a period of 14 years. A musician and improviser, he has been closely associated with artist-run centres Obscure and Avatar. He has written numerous texts on visual and media arts and oversaw the editing of the first written work about Quebec filmmaker Robert Morin, which was published by Vidéographe in 2002. He was appointed Programmer-Curator at the Cinémathèque québécoise in February 2009.

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