

Experimental Memoria, Part 1:

# George Kuchar

(Aug. 31, 1942 – Sept. 6, 2011)

Tuesday, March 20, 2012

Northwest Film Forum

Co-Presented by The Sprocket Society  
Seattle, WA

# Experimental Memoria

A special series commemorating the work of three notable experimental and underground filmmakers who left this plane in 2011.

**Experimental** (*Adjective. First known use: 15th century.*)

1. (Of a new invention or product.) Based on untested ideas or techniques and not yet established or finalized.
2. (Of a work of art or an artistic technique.) Involving a radically new and innovative style.

**Memoria** (*Noun. Latin: "memory".*)

"The treasury of things invented." – *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, 1 BCE (attributed to Cicero)

One of five canons in classical rhetoric; the discipline of recalling the arguments of a discourse. While partly a means of perpetuating past knowledge, it is more than rote memorization. Rhetoricians viewed memoria as including a deep understanding and command of the material so as to permit improvisation, response to questions, and refutation of opposing arguments. As such, memoria is memory not just preserved but living, integrated, and interacting with the present.

Tuesday, March 20, 2012

## **George Kuchar**

*The Devil's Cleavage* (1973)

*Hold Me While I'm Naked* (1966)

Wednesday, April 18, 2012

## **Robert Breer**

Visions in Motion: A Memorial Retrospective, 1954-2000

16 short films

Wednesday, May 23, 2012

## **Adolfas Mekas**

*Hallelujah the Hills* (1963)

*Information:*

<http://SprocketSociety.org>

<http://www.NWFilmForum.org/live/page/series/2088>

*Series curated by Spencer Sundell and Adam Sekuler.*

“Thanks for bringing us on the Hell planet, Mom.”

- G.K. while celebrating his 45<sup>th</sup> birthday, in his film *Cult of the Cubicles* (1987)

In 2011, Kuchar’s film *I, An Actress* (1977) was inducted into the Library of Congress National Film Registry...along with *Bambi*, *War of the Worlds*, *Forest Gump*, and Jordan Belson’s *Allures* (and others).

The Museum of Modern Art’s MoMA PS1 art center hosted the retrospective *George Kuchar: Pagan Rhapsodies*. Planned before his death, it included many of his most important works, including films, videos, and works on paper.

In February, 2012, the Anthology Film Archives in New York City hosted a six-program memorial retrospective featuring films provided and curated by Kuchar’s distributors: The Video Data Bank (Chicago), Film-Makers’ Coop (NYC), Electronic Arts Intermix (NYC), Canyon Cinema (San Francisco), the Harvard Film Archive (Boston), the Pacific Film Archive (Berkeley), and Anthology.

On March 8, 2012, the San Francisco Art Institute held a campus-wide special event, *Celebrating the Life and Work of George Kuchar*. An exhibition of his work, *Living in Studio Kuchar*, is now on view at SFAI’s Walter and McBean Galleries through April 21. For more information see the official web page at <http://www.sfai.edu/event/living-studio-kuchar>

Portions of George Kuchar’s epic *Weather Diaries* (1986–1990) were selected to be part of the 2012 Whitney Biennial in New York City, currently running through May 7.

### **The Critics Speak**

“On Bizarro World, a planet in Superman’s universe, people do everything backward and ineptly. If this anti-Earth had a filmmaker, that person would probably be a lot like George Kuchar.”

- Ken Johnson, “A Dissident Director of High-Camp, Low-Budget Films,” *New York Times*, Jan. 5, 2012

“Attempting to launch a formal analysis on this work is like trying to dissect a rubber chicken — entirely irrelevant.”

- Leah Churner, “The Kuchar Brothers,” *Reverse Shot*, no. 22 (April 2008)

“Douglas Sirk tells us, ‘Cinema is blood, tears, violence, hate, death, and love.’ Kuchar reminds us that cinema, like life, is also bedpans, earwax, sleazy fantasy, ineptness, compromise, and laughter.”

- Chuck Kleinhans, Gene Siskel Film Center

### **George Kuchar’s Parting Message to the People of the Future**

“Live in the past. It’s a lot of fun. But make sure that you have a past. Otherwise your future will be kinda bleak. You might as well get your head full of memories. Some of it dirty memories. But then you can always call in the priest and I think you get a benediction or something. They will forgive your sins. And make sure that you eat hearty. Remember also that vegetarianism is very good, too.”

YouTube video by “automatpictures,” recorded ca. August 2011.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2tO9I66BAPc>

### **A Note on Turds**

“Kuchar has said that the difference between his melodramas and documentaries is that the turds are fake in the melodramas, but real — and always his — in the documentaries. The melodramatic turds are fashioned from dog food.”

- Steve Reinke, from *The George Kuchar Experience* exhibition catalog (1996)

# This Evening's Program

16mm film prints courtesy of Canyon Cinema (San Francisco)

## *Hold Me While I'm Naked* (1966)

15 min. / color / sound

Original running time: 17 min.

Directed by George Kuchar

With: Donna Kerness, George Kuchar, Stella Kuchar, Andrea Lunin, Hope Morris, Steve Packard, Gina Zuckerman.

"The voices are all dubbed by me as I guess I wasn't in the mood for company during the post-production phase... My mom appears at the end under the influence of my make-up palette. ...Once, in Boston, in the sixties, they [*the authorities*] closed the theater just because of the title...." – G.K.

No. 52 of the 100 Best Films of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, *Village Voice* Critics Poll (Jan. 4, 2000).

*The following excerpted from Will Heinrich, "Gloves Off: George Kuchar's 'Pagan Rhapsodies' at PS1," Gallerist NY, Dec. 6, 2011 (online at <http://www.galleristny.com/2011/12/gloves-off-george-kuchars-%E2%80%98pagan-rhapsodies%E2%80%99-at-ps1/>):*

*Hold Me While I'm Naked*, a 15-minute cinemasexual masturbation fantasy/*cri de coeur*, was released in 1966, three years after John Schlesinger's *Billy Liar* and two years after Susan Sontag's "Notes on Camp." A woman in a green ball gown is running behind a chain link fence, but as the camera pans to follow her, it crosses, in the foreground, an alluring teenage hood. Boys' names are written in graffiti on the wall: Willy, Joey, BD. Kuchar's grinning face fills the frame, and then credits, and then a series of minutely cut vignettes that simultaneously create and explode a narrative. (That narrative is about Kuchar's trying to make a softcore movie despite the lead actress's dropping out — "I am sick and tired of being naked in almost every scene!" — but also about living in fantasy as an escape from irreconcilable reality, the appeal of Hollywood, masturbating in the shower, the creative process and several hundred other things.) There's neither visual nor audio continuity in any simple sense, but Kuchar pre-empts your ability to actually experience any discontinuity with his impeccable timing. He knows exactly how long it takes to read a given image — two seconds, one and a half — and gives you exactly that much time with it, so that when, for example, he cuts from himself spinning in circles in the shower to a view of television antennas trembling in the wind, you can't decide whether the antennas, as a symbolically cinematic orgasm, are the second term of the shower scene, or the first term of something else. You don't have time. And because you can't decide, it has to be both: you're co-opted and pushed away in the very same gesture.

This also means that the work isn't "camp" according to Ms. Sontag's formulation, in which emphasis on style implies a slighting of content, a privileging of artifice for its own sake. Because Kuchar's isn't a style at all — it's a method, as endlessly flexible and concerned with communication as any natural language. It may be more comfortable to wear a costume because no one expects the costume to be real, but when, at the end of *Hold Me*, Kuchar emerges in a bathrobe with a handtowel turban and ascot, sits down to the hideous dinner his mother has cooked him, looks at the camera and says, "There's a lot of things in life worth living for, isn't there," he isn't taking refuge in make believe; he's using the performance of taking refuge to express himself directly. He's making the David out of meatloaf simply because that's what he has at hand.

## *The Devil's Cleavage* (1973)

122 min. / B&W / sound

Original running time: 130 min.

Harvard Film Archive preservation print running time: 108 min.

Written, directed and photographed by George Kuchar.

Starring: Ainslie Pryor, Curt McDowell, Katheleen Hohalek, Virginia Giritlian, Michelle Gross, John Thomas, Mark Ellinger, Ilka Normile, Ann Knutson, Janey Sneed, Al Wong, Charlie Thomas, Barbara Linkevitch

With: Diane Noomin, Bill Griffith, Sheri Milbradt, Jerry Polon, Michael Moss, Art Spiegelman, John Wallis, Laurie Hendricks, Kevin Vegas, Julie Feldman, Genevra Gilcrest, Bocko, Donna Kerness, Hopeton Morris, Bob Cowan, Jane Elford, Melinda McDowell

Additional Photography: Larry Huston and Mike Kuchar

Sound Technicians: Roy Ramsing, Christina Lunde, Mark Ellinger, John Eden, Thomas Brothers Studio

Hairstyles and Make-up by Mr. Dominic

Game machine designed by Bob Hohalek

One of Kuchar's few feature films, *The Devil's Cleavage* has been described by some as his *Gone With the Wind*, but George himself once called it his "white elephant," which may explain why he does not discuss it hardly at all in his later writings and interviews. Nevertheless, director Guy Maddin cites it as among his earliest and most formative screen memories, and it remains a favorite of many.

A ribald, sometimes scatological, pastiche of post-war Hollywood melodramas (particularly *Butterfield 8*), the story centers on a pent-up nurse named Ginger (Ainslie Pryor), whose marriage is on the rocks. Leaving San Francisco behind, she heads for new misadventures in the rollicking town of Blessed Prairie, Oklahoma.

Swerving from earnest homage to dark satire, Kuchar simultaneously imitates and savages the legacies of Sirk, Preminger, Hitchcock, and Minnelli that inspired him. "We end up with a marvelous hybrid," writes Chuck Kleinhans, "as if Sam Fuller and Sternberg had collaborated in shooting a script by Tennessee Williams and Russ Meyer." Co-starring Curt McDowell, the film includes cameos by Bill Griffith, Art Spiegelman, and other notables of the early 1970s San Francisco scene.

*The Devil's Cleavage* was made at an important turning point in Kuchar's life and career. He had relocated to the city in 1971, ostensibly for a one-year stint as a visiting artist teaching filmmaking at the San Francisco Art Institute, at the invitation of experimental animator (and SFAI instructor), Larry Jordan. After one of Kuchar's students – Curt McDowell – circulated a petition, Kuchar was hired permanently and he continued to teach at SFAI for nearly 40 years, until forced to retire by his failing health in 2010.

Kuchar and McDowell grew to be good friends and frequent collaborators. After McDowell's help on *The Devil's Cleavage*, Kuchar returned the favor by working closely with him on *Thundercrack!* (1975) – the legendary/infamous underground horror porno movie. Kuchar gave the film its title, and wrote the initial script with a ballpoint pen (to "preclude erasures and the spectre of eternal rewrites," according to Jack Stevenson) during a prolonged stay at an Oklahoma YMCA. He also assisted with production chores, and played the part of Bing, "the psychosexually troubled gorilla keeper."

## George-on-George Action

“George Kuchar was born in New York City in 1942 and is one of a twin (Mike Kuchar is the other half). At an early age the twins made pictures on paper and on 8-mm movie film, and later attended the High School of Industrial Art in N.Y.C. (which is now the High School of Art and Design). Employed in the world of commercial art in Manhattan, George Kuchar was later laid off from work and never went back to that snake-pit; instead, he embarked on his movie career full-time. Having been introduced to the avant-garde film scene in the early 1960s, he acquired an audience for his low-budget dramas and was hired by the San Francisco Art Institute to teach filmmaking. In 1985 he began making 8mm video diaries and has completed over 50 works in that medium. These works are edited in-camera and there are no post-production embellishments to bloat the budget, so the low-budget tradition continues in full swing.”

- G.K., as quoted by Electronic Arts InterMix, <http://www.eai.org/artistBio.htm?id=313>

“I owe my love of the movies to my mom, Stella Kuchar. She took me and my twin brother, Mike, to Frankenstein pictures, Spencer Tracy and Barbara Stanwyk vehicles, and action movies starring John Payne. My dad, George Sr., mainly slept during the day because he was a truck driver and mainly hauled goods at night. But dad had a wonderful collection of soft cover pocket books that were dramatically illustrated with film noir-looking artwork on the covers. The rendering of semi-clad men and women, in various modes of social and spiritual decay, inflamed my imagination because of the depth of emotions depicted. Also the grungy and deeply shadowed settings, made slightly luminous by cigarette smoke, excited me visually and made the world of ‘the big people’ appear quite enticing.

“My young life was also a haze of church incense and the flickering candles of Catholic devotions. I suppose this dichotomy fed an energy to make moving pictures from start to finish. And I always made sure to finish them, even if a wayward and lurid lifestyle threatened to redirect that energy. I just cleaned up and resumed good work habits. Unfortunately those habits always weren’t so good as you never knew when to stop, etc. I suppose like the shadow side, it’s just another obsession you have to deal with. But at least it featured finished, crafted expressions, and not just a head of filthy memoirs. I always felt comfortable working in the shadows, in the closet, in the night because then when you come out in the light it’s like a stage appearance: you can be a clown or a saint and maybe even a rarely seen ghost. Meanwhile the magic made in the dark weaves its own spell to speak to people you may never get to meet. Like an elephant trodding to that legendary burial ground, I head back to the dark places too; the hidden places. That’s where you can find all the valuable ivory among all that rot and bones.”

- G.K., from the program notes for *A George Kuchar Celebration*, Harvard Film Archive, Aug. 13-15, 2010.

George Kuchar made over 60 films and 90 videos, including extensive video diaries. In 1964, at age twenty-two, George and Mike Kuchar had their first retrospective, at the New Bowery Theater in New York, purportedly the first time 8mm films were shown in an art-house context. At the San Francisco Art Institute between 1971 – 2010, George taught the classes “AC/DC Psychotronic Teleplays” and “Electro-graphic Sinema,” making two films a year with his students. His honors include the American Film Institute’s Maya Deren Award for Independent Film and Video Artists, a Los Angeles Film Critics Award, a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Chicago Underground Film Festival, and a Worldwide Video Festival First Prize Award. He was also awarded production grants by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Rockefeller Foundation.

# Preservation of Films by George Kuchar

Over 30 films by George Kuchar (including a number co-directed with his brother, Mike) dating from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s are in the collection of the Harvard Film Archive (HFA, Boston). About a year before his death, Kuchar also deposited his video masters with HFA, including his student productions, *The Weather Diaries*, and other diary videos.

HFA has partnered with the Pacific Film Archive (Berkeley) to create 16mm preservation prints and negatives from the original master film elements in their combined holdings. This work is still ongoing.

Anthology Film Archives (New York) holds a number of the brothers' early 8mm films. Sixteen-millimeter preservation prints have been made of a number of these, some with their soundtracks on separate CDs to preserve the original "wild sync" viewing experience.

Most of this preservation work has been funded through grants from The Film Foundation and the National Film Preservation Foundation.

Works by Kuchar are also in the collections of the British Film Institute (London) and the Museum of Modern Art (New York).

Sixteen-millimeter film prints are distributed by Canyon Cinema and the Film-makers' Cooperative, while later video works can be obtained from Electronic Arts Intermix (New York) and The Video Data Bank at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

## **Select List of Preserved George Kuchar Film Titles**

### Anthology Film Archives

*The Slasher* (1958)\*  
*The Thief and the Stripper* (1959)  
*I Was a Teenage Rumpot* (1960)\*  
*Night of the Bomb* (1962)\*  
*Sylvia's Promise* (1962)  
*A Woman Distressed* (1962)  
*Anita Needs Me* (1963)\*  
*A Town Called Tempest* (1963)  
*Leisure* (1966)  
*The Oneers* (1982)

### Harvard Film Archive

*The Carnal Bipeds* (1973)  
*The Devil's Cleavage* (1973) – 108 min. version  
*Asphalt Ribbon* (1977)  
*I, An Actress* (1977)  
*Power of the Press* (1977)  
*One Night a Week* (1978)  
*Club Vatican* (1984)  
*Motel Capri* (1986)

\* Co-directed by George and Mike Kuchar

## **Please Support Film Preservation for Experimental Works**

Please consider making a donation to support ongoing efforts to preserve important and rare cinema works for future generations.

National Film Preservation Foundation

<http://www.filmpreservation.org/support>

The Film Foundation

<http://tinyurl.com/FilmFoundationDonation>

Center for Visual Music

<http://www.centerforvisualmusic.org/Donate.htm>



## George's Practical Advice for Cheap Filmmakers

*Excerpted from Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool by George and Mike Kuchar (Zanja Press, 1997), pp. 54-55.*

...Make your movie look like a “found” lost classic that has somehow been restored as best as possible. This way, little imperfections will not be so annoying if they are engulfed in a major wear-and-tear veneer. The audience's brain will filter out the noise and seek the meat beneath.

When there is music in your picture, just cut right into the voice track, which means that the actors shut up at this point and the orchestra takes over. The orchestra is lifted off old used records that are too weird or obscure to ever be remembered by anyone. Take advantage of record flaws such as the needle skipping and repeating a musical phrase endlessly by creatively editing to that flaw or using it to score off-kilter climaxes.

Never use actors. Just use your friends and light them dramatically and use makeup to suggest emotional expressiveness. Have them handle props that convey what they can't muster up via facial muscles. Keep the dialogue to a minimum or else make up a “foreign” language so that no one realizes their dramatic delivery is

so poor or non-existent. People respect foreign pictures more than something they can understand.

...If you haven't any friends to use in your movie, I see nothing wrong with hand puppets. In fact, you can mix hand puppets with live people by just putting close to the camera lens and cutting down your aperture for greater depth of field. It was a shame to see hand puppets become extinct after receiving a wonderful showcase for their uniqueness on the air waves of the 1940s and 1950s television. Puppets on strings are okay, too, if your film is scratched enough to camouflage their means of support.

Always use dummies for stunts and keep them around as stand-ins or extras in crowd scenes. Be sure to go to toy stores and see the latest stuff they have for kids because everything is getting so realistic now-a-days that the junk passes for real when filmed at the right angle. I didn't say right ways...just angle. Making movies the right way is a no-no and way too expensive.



Remember to work in obscurity and never have your first film become a giant hit because then you are in trouble and in danger of being a major flash-in-the-pan. Become a big soft plop-in-the-bowl, but create such a stink with your picture that people cannot ignore it. Things that stink become even more potent with age, and therefore, your plop will create ever-widening concentric rings and reverberate throughout the ages. Also, if you are out of the spotlight for most of your career there will be no need to spray hair on your head if your scalp decides to call it quits and to shed its mantle of insulation. Likewise, you can avoid fat farms and diets because no one really cares what an unsuccessful person looks like. But remember to make your commercial failures interesting and creative expressions of your shortcomings.

Making cheap video productions is easy because you'll automatically be thought of as cheap as soon as you purchase a camcorder (even though some of them go for a hefty sum).

Buying a video camera will definitely cause other artists' creative juices to flow, especially other filmmakers who will gladly spit at you with those juices. You will be beneath contempt and can therefore work unimpeded in the lower depths while the self-inflated egos of Eros and Ektachrome drift above the surface of moral existence, dangling their poisonous tentacles in your direction.

Buy a video camera, read the instruction book and press all the buttons that come with that Godless gizmo, that tool of Satan. Work at home with new-fangled gadgetry of a plastic persuasion and rejoice in the majesty of Magnavox, the paganism of Panasonic and the terror of Toshiba. Turn your living room into an altar of Japanese juju boxes and liquid crystal confessionals. Learn what wires go where and why! Let thine halls ring out with the song of Samsung and the hymns of Hitachi. Fear not the inquisition, for hell hath no fury like a scorned Sanyo!

## Movie Factory

By George Kuchar

*From Radical Light: Alternative Film and Video in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945-2000 (Univ. of California Press/Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 2010), edited by Steve Anker, Kathy Geritz, and Steve Seid.*

In the early 1970s I moved out to California from the Bronx, New York, to teach at the San Francisco Art Institute. I got the job because the students seemed to want outside blood to infuse the film department with new vitality (at least that's what Curt McDowell said — although other bodily fluids may have been higher on his agenda). Curt, who had taken a summer course I taught there on a temporary basis, felt that a permanent position should be maintained for my gangling frame. In those days I was a lot thinner and closer to the age of the enrollees.

At that time in history the school had drinking on the campus and dogs sniffed the halls unleashed. Some female teachers wore floor-length prairie dresses that hid their combat boots. The male faculty appeared casual and muscular beneath frequently unshaven jaws. As for the appealing student body: long, scraggly

tresses on both boys and girls failed to hide bedroom eyes, and hand-rolled cigarettes dangled from lips that frequently puckered and puffed on more potent pleasures. The campus was a pleasant, sun-drenched environment, with any hint of tears and sweat kept to a minimum. At least on the surface. But like the earth beneath our feet, the California experience was riddled with potentially violent cracks that could shake one up pretty bad. Making films was a way for me to sidestep the physical and psychological angst inherent to that place. When my colleagues decided that the film students were fed up with theory and wanted action instead, I was only too happy to oblige them by volunteering to shoot movies in the classroom. My group was to lens the dramas, while another class, run by one of the other instructors, was to edit the results. It did not

turn out that way, as my students didn't want alien digits diddling with their doings.

We were going to grind the productions out from start to finish, and so the student-teacher movie factory opened for business: the business of education, art, entertainment, and creative expression on a shoestring budget; a kind of trash cinema that used actual trash for sets and strived to elevate the garbage into excrements of excellence. We aimed high and plopped all over the place, but only time will tell if the stench was worth it. Our first picture was black-and-white with no sound track. I narrated the thing whenever it happened to be screened (which wasn't often).

Instead of starting out modestly in terms of plot and overall conception, the movie was about an ill-fated rocket voyage to Saturn (a planet populated by badly choreographed humanoids). One of the students played the captain of a spaceship whose cohorts on Earth were involved in buffalo stampedes, robot assaults, Indian massacres, and a tornado disaster. It all ends in a violent showdown between lovers at the Academy Awards in Hollywood, where one of the stars is knifed in the back and the other machine-gunned in front of a mortified crowd. The rest of the plot involved gangsters, a man-eating plant, and asteroid bombardment. The budget for *Destination Damnation* (1972) was \$200.

I recall one girl in the class who was rather sweet, yet somewhat ebbing in brain waves. A story circulated that one night she had returned home to find a stranger in her pad. She was startled and inquired as to his motivation, asking what he wanted: "Do you want to rob me?" No response. She rattled off a couple of other possibilities and then asked the tongue-tied intruder if he wanted to rape her: "Is that it? Do you want to rape me?" At this suggestion he seemed to respond in the affirmative, and so she proceeded to bring to fruition the act that her probing pinpointed. This episode eventually found its way into the plot of another production I made about a decade later.

We shot these movies in 16mm using the school's Bolex camera. On the next picture it was decided that color was needed to render a

story of lovers lost in time travel. The heroine of this production winds up in a prehistoric jungle while her boyfriend inadvertently transports a cavegirl into the twentieth century. The movie's Tyrannosaurus rex was drawn on paper and had a slit cut in the area of the lower jaw so that another sheet of paper, representing his bottom teeth, could slide up and down, making it look like the thing was chewing. A cone of black paper stood in for the inevitable erupting volcano, and this construction was filmed upside down so that we could spill glitter and red paint through the opening, which looked effective when spliced into the film right side up. The string of firecrackers the crew decided to ignite for the final convulsion blasted the prop apart and leapt into full view as the paper shredded. The students made real flaming torches for a sacrificial dance routine and held them high in the classroom studio (which today forbids even the striking of match to cigarette).

What seemed odd to me was that while we were engaged in this somewhat childlike endeavor, behind the scenes my student teaching assistant was taking the principal players, his colleagues from the student body, and showcasing them in filmed sex acts for his own movie. I got to see some of the students in a whole new light, and I didn't quite know how to switch gears to deal with the detour. This was a facet of the San Francisco film scene in the early seventies that was both disconcerting and enticing.

Since we had attempted color on *The Carnal Bipeds* (1973) it was now time to tackle a sync-sound movie. The Art Institute had a nice big 16mm sound camera that was pulled out to make *I Married a Heathen* (1974). The idea for this plot was generated by a student whose relatives had owned a lucrative hamburger business. He was nice-looking and had a hunky brother who was in the class, too. His girlfriend was also enrolled, and she had her sights set on an acting career. They were all in cahoots with my teaching assistant, who was starring them in his tawdry epics. It was quite a hotbed of inbred talent, and the picture was chock-full of talking heads spouting endless monologues about sexual frustration and marital woes.

Rents in the neighborhood of the school were cheaper then, and so we shot on location in some of the students' apartments. They enjoyed placing huge, artificial turds in their toilets and splashing fake vomit on the bathroom fixtures. This film was a sprawling talkie and led to our collaborating on other sync-sound movies. In those days the film-devouring sound camera and tape recorder were in great demand as film stock was as cheap as the trashy plots we lensed. Many of the heavily made-up talking heads appeared in films I made outside of the classroom; these energetic students helped me create *The Devil's Cleavage* (1973) and other obscure potboilers. This was always a great tradition in the film department of the San Francisco Art Institute: students formed close-knit crews to help each other out in the various chores of moviemaking both behind and in front of the camera. It is a custom that continues today, although maybe it is not as inbred and laced with hanky-panky as before. Many more rules of conduct have descended upon the academic environment that have frozen spontaneous actions. But that may be easing up of late as new generations mutate.

Well, that was the 1970s. In the 1980s the students and I continued to grind out two films a year even while in the grip of unwholesome addictions that were sweeping the nation. Perhaps the films were more like therapy sessions than anything else, as tawdry deeds of the week were reconstituted in psychedelic displays of chiaroscuro lighting and grotesque staging that had us all in stitches. There was plenty of personal material to mine for these sordid tales of spiritual upheaval and sexual abandonment. Once, when I had brought in a real-life psychotherapist to portray a character in one of our dramas, a female student approached the woman after class and broke down in tears. She needed advice on the road to womanhood and sought her expertise (not realizing that the therapist herself was a nut case). Nuts, it seemed, were welcome in these classes because making a movie is crazy anyway, and everyone appears normal in such a setting. Mental anguish and emotional immaturity are the hallmarks of superstardom, as the camera

sometimes reads these flaws as electrifying magnetism.

The 1980s were also a time of transition from film to video. Although the new medium was looked upon as a threat to the throne of celluloid, I actually welcomed its entrance into our low-budget world. You couldn't get any lower than that in the eyes of my peers, and so it helped ostracize the class to the Friday boondocks (a time slot devoid of any interaction with fellow colleagues in my department), the day of the week noted for burnt-out students and noisy parties. The class was quarantined like a sick sibling who drooled bile. Our bile splashed onto the screen after each semester, as a picture started should always become a picture finished. The movie was the main impetus for being there, no matter how rotten the circumstances. And some of them were pretty rotten: political intrigue and anal attentiveness would occasionally smear my name with a litany of the usual slurs deemed damning for the times. These only helped inflame our so-called transgressions with extra passion and more exposed rear ends to pay attention to!

In the 1990s mini-DV came into prominence, and the computer joined our list of gadgets to mold these collaborative concoctions. The actual stock we worked on had shrunk, but the pictures got bigger in scope. Character development and plot took a backseat to digitally manipulated sequences designed to please the graphic sensibilities of our editor, Dr. Butcher. Since usually no one understood our pictures anyway (being that the original cast sometimes didn't show up for shooting sessions, and the plots had to mirror who or what was available at the time), no tears were shed over this new development. I, by the way, was Dr. Butcher. Somebody had to try and save those monstrosities from being complete disasters, and I took it upon my shoulders to carry these world-weary visions to a place of rejuvenation via the technology of tomorrow. Yesterday and today were fine, too, but we were supposed to be the avant-garde — so why the big stink about electronic experimentation? The videos certainly didn't stink any more than the films!

Let me finish up with this brief exposition: Making pictures with students at the San Francisco Art Institute was an adventure in terror with some moments of horror thrown in. It was also a hell of a lot of fun — with HELL in capital letters! Thinking of plot development and lines of dialogue on the spot will hopefully be a factor in warding off the onset of Alzheimer's as I inexorably age, and maybe the close proximity of the young will rub off onto my crinkling flesh like a Revlon elixir. These class productions stand as moving yearbooks that should be delivered in plain brown wrappers. We put our hearts and souls into these movies, along with the rotten acting and inept direction.

Without all these elements we would not be human, and even though puppets and dummies were used when the humans refused to show up for class, we forged ahead and didn't look back. For if we had we would have been depressed at the mess we made of the studio (it was just about impossible to keep things neat and clean). I rationalized the disorder by saying that we made junk art and therefore needed a trashed environment for aesthetic sustenance. But the truth is that junk and trash are both garbage, and only time can sanitize all three. So I wait with baited breath, as the stench is too pungent to inhale right now.

## What's the key to unleashing filmic creativity?

“Very little money, a miserable personal life and no script. If you don't have these things, don't despair: just pray for a flop so you can be kicked into the gutter with other imaginative minds. Remember...the vapors from a sewer always aim skyward. Chemicals in the body have a harder time being generated when everything is going smoothly. Filmic chaos and panic can be exhausting, but very seldom do they lead to constipation.”

- GK interview, *Damage* (San Francisco punk zine), ca. 1980



*George Kuchar in 2010. Photo by Felix Bernstein.*

# Sources and Suggested Reading

## Writings by George Kuchar

George and Mike Kuchar, *Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool* (Zanja Press, 1997) 182 pp – A memoir, with rare photos, original illustrations, extensive filmography and bibliography. Out of print.

George Kuchar, "Movie Factory" in Steve Anker, Kathy Geritz & Steve Seid (editors), *Radical Light: Alternative Film and Video in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945-2000* (Univ. of California Press/Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 2010).

George Kuchar, "Tips on Directing," *Wide Angle*, vol. 13 no. 3-4 (July–Oct. 1992) – Part of a special issue devoted to San Francisco filmmakers, incl. Bruce Conner, Bruce Baillie, Craig Baldwin, and others.

George Kuchar, "Cans and cassettes," *Journal of Film and Video*, vol. 57 no. 1-2 (2005).

## Selected Comic Books

"A Reason to Live," *Short Order Comix*, no. 2 (Sept. 1974). Published by Head Press. Reprinted in the *New Yorker* (Aug. 23-30, 1993).

*Arcade - The Comics Review*, no. 1 (Spring 1975), no. 2 (Summer 1975), no. 3 (Fall 1975), no. 4 (Winter 1975). Published by Print Mint.

*Graphic Classics: H.P. Lovecraft* (*Graphic Classics* vol. 4) (Eureka Productions, 2002; expanded 2nd ed. 2007) – Anthology includes Kuchar's "bio" of H.P. Lovecraft, originally published in *Arcade*.

## About George Kuchar

Jack Stevenson, *Desperate Visions: The Films of John Waters and the Kuchar Brothers* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. titled *Desperate Visions 1. Camp America: The Films of John Waters and George & Mike Kuchar*) (Creation Books, 1996). Includes essays, interviews, misc. articles and writings, filmography.

Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* [vol. 1] (Univ. of California Press, 1988) – Also includes John Waters, Beth and Scott B, Hollis Frampton, and others.

Steve Reinke (ed.), *The George Kuchar Experience* (Pleasure Dome / YYZ Artists' Outlet / Video Data Bank, 1996) – Catalogue published to accompany an exhibition of the same name in Toronto. Available direct via [https://www.yyzbooks.com/?page\\_id=3&category=6&product\\_id=71](https://www.yyzbooks.com/?page_id=3&category=6&product_id=71)

Jack Stevenson, "The Day the Bronx Invaded Earth: The Life and Cinema of the Brothers Kuchar," *Bright Lights Film Journal*, no. 26 (Nov. –Dec. 1999). Archived online at <http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/26/kuchar1.html>

Deborah Allison, "Hold Me While I'm Naked: Notes on a Camp Classic," *Senses of Cinema*, no. 32 (July–Sept, 2004). Archived at [http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2004/cteq/hold\\_me\\_while\\_im\\_naked/](http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2004/cteq/hold_me_while_im_naked/)

Steve Lafreniere, "George and Mike Kuchar," *Vice* vol. 16 no. 9 – An interview, archived online at <http://www.vice.com/read/george-and-mike-kuchar-138-v16n9>

M. Finch, "You can do good, you can do bad, or you can do nothing" and "Uncaged culture – George Kuchar," *Monthly Film Bulletin*, no. 656 (vol. 55, Sept. 1988).

## Online Media

P. Adams Sitney interviews George Kuchar, *Arts Forum*, WNYC-FM, Jan. 2, 1976. Streaming audio at <http://www.wnyc.org/blogs/archives/2011/sep/13/george-kuchar/> – Discussing the film *Thundercrack!* (1975), his creative process, the pornographic nature of his films, and other topics.

Charles Bernstein, "Close Listening: George Kuchar," *Close Listening*, ARTonAIR.org, Sept. 28, 2009. Streaming audio at <http://artonaair.org/show/george-kuchar-interview> – Kuchar discusses the role politics plays in his work, and other topics.

*George Kuchar*, PennSound, Center for Programs in Contemporary Writing, University of Pennsylvania. <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Kuchar.php> – Several MP3s of interviews and readings, and numerous streaming videos of his films and videos.

Selected Films by George Kuchar, UbuWeb – <http://www.ubu.com/film/kuchar.html> Streaming video of 12 films and videos, 1965-1999.

*George Kuchar: An Interview*, Video Data Bank (Chicago), 2005. A 42 minute "historical interview" by Steve Reinke. Also included on *The World of George Kuchar* DVD set (see below). <http://www.vdb.org/titles/george-kuchar-interview>

*George Kuchar: Always and Forever*, Mulherin + Pollard Gallery (Chelsea) – An online gallery of original painting, comic book art, drawings, and photos by Kuchar, shown at the 2010 exhibition. [http://mulherinpollard.com/George\\_Kuchar.html](http://mulherinpollard.com/George_Kuchar.html)

## Home Video

*Color Me Lurid: The Weird World of George Kuchar* (Connoisseur, 2000) VHS – Long out-of-print anthology includes *Hold Me While I'm Naked*, *The Mongreloid* (1978), *Forever and Always* (1978), *A Reason to Live* (1976), *Wild Night at El Reno* (1977), and *I, An Actress* (1977).

*The World of George Kuchar* (Video Data Bank/School of the Art Institute Chicago, 2006) 5-disc DVD set with booklet – Collects 27 video works made between 1987 and 2005, including installments from his *Weather Diary* series. The booklet includes essays by Gene Youngblood and Steve Reinke. Available direct via <http://www.vdb.org/node/12383> Reinke's essay can be read on his web site at <http://www.myrectumisnotagrave.com/writing/kuchar.htm>

*Treasures From American Film Archives 4: Avant Garde Film 1947-1986* (Image Entertainment / National Film Preservation Foundation, 2009) 2-DVD box set with illus. book – Includes Kuchar's short film *I, An Actress* (1977), recently inducted in the National Film Registry.

*Futurist Life Redux* (Microcinema, 2011) DVD – A "recreation" of the only Futurist film ever made, *Vita Futurista* (now lost), by giving 12 filmmakers – including George Kuchar – a one-sentence description of a segment, a few surviving stills, and a four-week deadline to shoot something. [http://www.microcinemadvd.com/product/DVD/1275/Futurist\\_Life\\_Redux.html](http://www.microcinemadvd.com/product/DVD/1275/Futurist_Life_Redux.html)

*Thundercrack!* (1975) Region 2 PAL DVD (NjutaFilms, 2004) – Kuchar co-scripted and appears in this legendary (or infamous) horror/porn parody directed by Curt McDowell. A poor-quality transfer of the short version, but currently the only available home video edition. Synapse Films has promised a high-definition restoration of the long version, but release has repeatedly been delayed.

*Sins of the Fleshapoids* (1965) DVD (Other Cinema Digital, 2005) – Out of print. George co-wrote this legendary film with his brother Mike, who directed. Also includes Mike's shorts *The Secret of Wendel Samson* (1966) and *The Craven Sluck* (1967).

## Documentaries

*Legendary Epic Yarns and Fables, Part 4: The Kuchar Brothers* (Stephen E. Gebhardt, 1969), 16mm, 13 min. – A one-take "interview." Shown at NWFF as part of our *Focal Points* program in Oct. 2009.

*George Kuchar: The Comedy of the Underground* (Cinemasque Productions, 1983), 16mm, 60 min. – Directed by David Hallinger and Gustavo Vazquez, former students of Kuchar's.

*It Came From Kuchar* (Tigerlilly Pictures, 2009) 86 min. – Jennifer Kroot's fine and widely-known doc about George and Mike Kuchar. Official companion site at <http://kucharfilm.com/>

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