

\* THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART/  
SAN FRANCISCO CINEMATHEQUE

# Big As Life

AN AMERICAN HISTORY OF 8mm FILMS

TYPE X



# Pieces of Eight: Interviews with 8mm filmmakers

## Donna Cameron

*Between spring 1996 and summer 1997 film/video artist and painter Donna Cameron conducted nearly two dozen interviews with 8mm filmmakers. Space limitations prohibit us from including all of those interviews here; to do so would necessitate the publication of an entirely separate volume. Therefore, I've selected what to my mind are twelve of the most revealing and informative interviews given the range of works included in the exhibition. The interviews are ordered so that they trace, loosely, the historical path of 8mm film art and the concerns of 8mm filmmakers as they've progressed from the late 1950s through the 1990s. I'd like to extend my gratitude to all of the filmmakers who participated in the interview sessions and, of course, to Ms. Cameron, whose enthusiasm for this project nearly surpassed my own. —Ed.*

## George Kuchar & Friends

George: Heyuh, Donna! These are some 8mm film people I'd like you to meet. Jim Brawley here makes 8mm religious pictures. He's doing a whole series now on the Holy Land. New Age Christian tapes. Very soothing on the nerves. And Larry Liebowitz—used to make cannibalism films in 8mm. And you know Floraine Cohen (aka Connors). Floraine was in some of our early pictures.

Larry: I've known the Kuchars since 1942.

George: Larry was from the Bronx and interested in cannibalism.

Larry: No, not really.

George: His mother ate his father or vice versa.

Larry: I made one of the first cannibal movies, before the *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* or *Night of the Living Dead*. I made an 8mm cannibal film back in the early sixties. Unfortunately the audience was grossed out when I showed it there. They ended up getting up and walking out, even though there were some other films that were going to be shown. My film kind of left them like they had just watched some kind of a I-don't-know-what... It was called *The Dark Tunnel*. I had my father in it and my mother only had a small part so she wouldn't come. And my sister's friends and Mike and George were in it—they had multi-parts. George played a tall girl, a drag queen.

DC: Sounds like a real classic.

George: It is. It was a first.

Larry: A cannibalistic "Brady Bunch."

George: "Splatter Bunch."

Larry: It was explicit.

George: Anatomically correct... Wasn't George Romero originally from the Bronx?

Larry: Yeah, he was from the Bronx. A lot of 8mm filmmakers were from the Bronx. Francis Coppola was from the Bronx. In fact he was from the old neighborhood.

George: Where did you read that?

Larry: You *know* that. He did stunts. He threw something off the roof also.

Jim: Yeah, I'm trying to remember...



*George & Mike Kuchar, c.1965*

Larry: Coppola made 8mm films. Allen Ginsberg made 8mm films too. In fact, he gave me my first joint, my first hit of marijuana. I thought, hey, this guy's so big, he can't be giving me poison, but that was the times. And there was another guy there...his name was Abbie. Abbie Hoffman...he wanted me to help him make movies. So I went to his place there on the weekend. And I went over there, you know he had a couple of girls—this was the sixties—and he tried to film and he did lousy openings. The openings there were like supposed to be shot at f6.8 and he took them at something like f1.8 with floodlamps and he took those pictures and they didn't turn out. Then he tried again, we were driving to Rockaway Beach. Ginsberg was there. And I met Ginsberg again about a year ago and I got an autograph from him. He didn't remember me...at that time though, he was wearing his American flag hat. It was a golden era.

DC: Why did you stop making 8mm films?

Larry: I had to take my 8mm projector and my tape recorder—reel-to-reel—and I had to synchronize it whenever I had a showing.

DC: Where did you show these?

Larry: I don't know. Red Grooms saw it.

George : Where did you play that thing? My class, one time... ?

Larry: Yeah, I had a showing there, and I showed somewhere else, where there was a big audience.

George: Where?

Larry: I don't know... there was a big audience. I showed it and it grossed them out and they left.

George: That was the 8mm Motion Picture Club.

Larry: I don't know. It was 1965. All I know is that I

was showing it and all of a sudden the guy moved the projector while the film was showing and all of a sudden the film is on the ceiling because the idiot decided he was going to move the projector, and I'm trying to sync the sound—turn it off, turn it on—I couldn't do nothing about it.

George: Ho! Too bad.

Larry: Yeah. And you know, I had a hard job at the time, you know I was working in a machine shop. I was really tired.

George: Yeah, Larry's mother was a big star in all Larry's pictures. She was a Mom who didn't mind acting in her kids' pictures.

Jim: Yeah. Frances Liebowitz. She was in *A Town Called Tempest* [by the Kuchars].

Larry: She was very willing. She did things there that you wouldn't believe. She played like Shelley Winters there like *Big Bad Mama*, with a machine gun.

George: A Bronx mother...going all out for the pictures. I did my film with the family there, and his cousin also, she was like a shaved Sasquatch, the alien Zelda.

Larry: She was kind of cute there but now she's kind of six feet tall and uh...

George: Big. Big. I just met her in Chicago and I used her as a wind barrier. The wind was coming off the lake and I just walked behind her. She was in our 8mm movies and then she went on to make a 16mm movie with Andrew Meyer, who later directed Lorne Greene in a Japanese disaster movie.

Larry: Yeah, something.

George: Donna, James here did 8mm. Now he does videos on transcendental religion. He uses Christian imagery. He does it out of the kitchen of his housing project in Queens...

Jim: I paint.

George: He put a robe on himself and then he grew the beard.

Jim: I look like Moses in one picture. In another one I look like someone in diapers. You know my face has changed a lot.

George: He went from UFOs to a near-death experience in which Jimmy died, or was close to death and was brought back to life on the operating table: he'd had a heart attack. And now he recreates these transcendental or out-of-body experiences. He was always religious. Now he makes 8mm pictures about it. And he doesn't go to the Holy Land, he does it all in his kitchen.

Larry: What's cooking? Something's cooking.

Jim: Toast. I was making toast.

Floraine: Oh! Something's burning.

DC: Stella [George and Mike's mother] told me that you always liked the movies, that you were crazy to make movies, even when you were little kids, and that you wanted a camera for your twelfth birthday.

George: Yeah, well, that was because I used to get it from my aunt, and my mom and my aunt didn't get along. So that was an important turning point there: I was to get a camera so that I didn't have to get it from my aunt anymore.

Larry: Hey, I brought my camera, so if you want I'll take some pictures.

DC: Take some pictures.

George: The Museum of Modern Art is having an 8mm show. That's where you should show your pictures.

DC: You should show your pictures in the show, Larry.

Larry: I don't want to be in it because I don't want to

have any problems with the synchronization of sound.

George: Oh stop with the worrying about the sound.

DC: You should do it before the sprockets shrink so bad that it won't thread.

Larry: I haven't had any trouble with the films, my films are from the fifties.

DC: Then you're very, very lucky.

Larry: It's just the way I keep them there...maybe it's the conditions. The colors haven't faded...

DC: You're probably right. If you don't ever show them you don't take them out of the can. Then the oxygen won't get to them, and the polluted air doesn't catalyze their disintegration.

George: If anybody wants to preserve them they are welcome to.

Larry: I keep them in a cool place, and I'm trying to get your picture. I'm sorry...

George: It's a double conversation.

DC: I have a camera too, but it only has B&W film in it. It's a Minolta, the last model they made in the 1980s before the camcorders hit. It has an intervalometer...

George: This is really light and streamlined.

DC: Maybe with all these cameras we'll get a picture.

George: I knew a guy in the Bronx and he was making 8mm CinemaScope movies. He had an anamorphic lens...

Larry: Let's see. The best opening here is...

George: John Keel, the science fiction writer, used to make 8mm films and he showed them with us at the 8mm Motion Picture Club in the 1950s. It was a

fuddy-duddy group. But they were renting huge ballrooms in hotels with big chandeliers and they got all dressed up for the event. It was run by a man who used to be named Joe Hollywood. He was a guy in his late sixties...

Larry: A used car salesman.

George: And you used to win a prize at the Mineola fair if you submitted your 8mm movies. I won something there. So 8mm was very big. It took over from 16mm. Floraine has beautiful 16mm movies of her honeymoon...everything's on a tripod.

Floraine: I am really glad that I did that. It's wonderful to look back...

Larry: OK, everybody look over here. I hope I get the right opening. I had to use a blue filter so that the hole will be correct...I don't have a flash, I hate flash...

George: Well, in 8mm, if I brought the film to be processed in a local drugstore in the Bronx, the pictures did not last the decade. The emulsion was greenish and it cracked after about ten years or so. But if you sent it to Kodak and you got it back it lasted for decades. Otherwise it looked like a decaying fresco.

Larry: Well there was something about color films there... they said that any films taken in the fifties, there's no survivors. Whether you kept them in the darkness or the lightness, they changed. They faded out there. And they were asking for any survivors, if there were any pictures left that didn't change, they wanted them. They said please give them to us because they wanted samples of the pictures that were taken in that era...

George: I've got movies from the fifties, that I had sent out to Kodak. But the local processing was crap.

Floraine: There's no way of preserving them?

George: Yes, but it's expensive.

Floraine: Are we going out? Where are we eating?

Larry: I going to have to ask everybody not to move a fraction—I'm at 1/8th of a second, so that the hole will be correct.

Floraine: You have B&W. Do you have color? Do. You. Have..?

Larry: Color? Yes, because I don't have a flash. She has a flash. Is that OK? You're the one who asked me to bring my camera. Do you want to take a self-portrait?

Floraine: No, take. Take of everybody. I have to go to the photographer, anyway. I need pictures for my acting career.

George: Floraine's in a big picture, *Welcome to the Dollhouse*. It's good. It's a big hit.

Floraine: It's at the Plaza. Funny, I never even knew there was a Plaza until they were playing my movie.

Larry: Is it a big role there?

Floraine: It's a cameo. At the end. The director was...wonderful.

George: Hey, we'd better get something to eat. Do you want Chinese or Vietnamese? Or where was that Afghan place, remember?

DC: There's something open around here at this hour?

Floraine: George, you pick. You're the birthday boy. It's George's birthday.

Jim: Happy Birthday, George.

Floraine: Well, not really, but we'll celebrate it anyway. It's a little premature.

DC: Larry, can I move yet? Did you get the picture?

Larry: I got something, I hope....I hate flash...

George: I'm looking up Afghan in the phone book. *A-f-g-h-a-n*. It's on 2nd Avenue.

Larry: I'm ready.

## Mike Kuchar

### **"Insignificant despised mediums...an eternal trend."**

"It was Regular 8mm back in 1956, before Super 8 came in. My mother asked my brother and me what we would like for our twelfth birthday and we said we'd like a movie camera, because we went to the movies a lot. I remember that it was evening and we were under the Third Avenue El in the Bronx. There were a lot of department stores there, and I remember she bought a Dejur metal camera, which we still have. It still works. This is Regular 8mm. Super 8 came in about 15 years later. When Super 8 came in, by that time I'd made so many 8mm movies that I decided that maybe I would change to 16mm which I found out about when I was introduced to the Underground...

"We did narrative, costume epics. *The Wet Destruction of Atlantis* was the first one. We would pull my mother's drapes off the windows and use them as togas, and we would go up on the roof, playing hooky—I was a notorious hooky player—eleven and twelve years old. Also, we would raid my mother's make-up from her bureau. We would put on Egyptian eye make-up and use her lipsticks as rouge. A few times she caught us—she was usually working 9 to 5—and in a total embarrassing panic our friends who played hooky with us scampered away with a scolding. We shot the outdoor scenes—we needed forests and mountains—in the Bronx Park, the Bronx Botanical Gardens and the Bronx Zoo. We used that place for our thirty-minute war picture, *The Naked and The Nude*. We were in high school at that point. We went with friends with surplus army equipment and costumes from an Army-Navy Store. But they were narrative pictures. They are narrative because I was raised on narrative pictures from 20th Century Fox and Warner Brothers. My favorite movies were the science fiction monster movies from the fifties, like *It Came from Beneath the Sea*, also the CinemaScope and romantic adventure pictures were fascinating to me. Movies in general, Biblical