

LOWER YOUR TROUSERS!

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE FILMS OF CURT MCDOWELL



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'Curt was curt, cute, controversial, and not celibate. He was a barrel of laughs and a roller coaster ride to hell and back. Life for him was a fast track to fast times that included devilish detours into forbidden erogenous zones. He explored all those zones with a zealous zeal: painter, pornographer, poet of the plebeian and the perverse; you name it (or sing it since he also wrote songs) and it all rings true.'

George Kuchar

The Frisco Fornicator

Whenever we hear Curt McDowell's name mentioned among underground cinema enthusiasts, it usually resonates with a strange mix of familiarity and mystery. His films are very rarely seen and frustratingly difficult to get hold of. Accounts of their scarce screenings have earned him the reputation of being a one of a kind, truly underground, highly entertaining and highly sensitive filmmaker who committed himself to exploring sex using the medium of cinema. As filmmaker George Kuchar, a close friend and collaborator, once said, 'God gave him a calling in life and that was to make pornography'!

For a long time we had an image of him pieced together from quotes and references to him, mostly from Jennifer Kroot's documentary about George and Mike Kuchar, *It Came from Kuchar*. We also gleaned other bits of information generally thrown away by George in his many wonderful ramblings in interviews. Curt seemed like a sweet man with a huge sexual appetite who had a passion for making pornographic films, and who could talk anyone into doing anything, a good example is that he encouraged George to write and star in possibly the most famous film of both their careers, *Thundercrack!*

Thundercrack! is a film like no other that we love for its unapologetic excessiveness, it is a feast for our cinematic tastebuds, plus it features all our favourite Kuchar attributes – dramatic lighting, a trash-glamour sense of style, over-



the-top acting and the unmistakable torrents of dialogue bubbling with emotion which could have only been written by George. When we first watched it we admired Curt's direction for its sincerity and were intrigued to know more about this playful filmmaker who faced his subject head on, but we were still none the wiser about his real worth.

We then came across Jack Stevenson's *Desperate Visions*, a book which is dedicated to the films of John Waters and the Kuchar brothers, but which also contains a precious final chapter about *Thundercrack*'s leading lady, Marion Eaton. By telling us the Marion Eaton story, Stevenson describes some of Curt's other shorts and features and gave a few more clues to what his work is all

about. It took us a while but we finally got to see nine of his twenty-six films and managed to get a fuller picture of Curt McDowell.

Curt was born in Indiana in 1945 and came from a fairly conventional, hard-working family, who 'ate a lot' as he described in his film *A Visit to Indiana*. In his short film *Confessions* he describes how he started having sex from his early teens, trying all different kinds of sex, alcoholic drinks and drugs, which he concealed from his parents at the time from fear of hurting their feelings. In the late sixties he moved to San Francisco to study painting at the San Francisco Art Institute, but he soon became interested in filmmaking and transferred to the film department. He relished the spirit of sexual freedom, personal expression and artistic exploration that was very much the spirit of the times in San Francisco. He never stopped painting and drawing but film became his main creative outlet.

Curt never earned much money from his films (only *Lunch* seems to have given him some profit) so in order to make a living he usually worked at the Roxy Theatre. He made his films from the early seventies till the mid-eighties, and held a weekly film soiree at his flat on Thursdays, which a large circle of friends and underground film enthusiasts would attend.

However, he fell prey to the AIDS virus in the eighties and died in 1987 aged only 42, his last weeks were documented by George in his film *Video Album #5 The Thursday People*. Curt left all his work to his friend and owner of the Roxy Theatre, Robert Evans. He continued showing Curt's work at the usual Thursday soirees for a while, but when he later found that he too had contracted the virus he relinquished his ownership of Curt's films, drawings, paintings, collages and scrapbooks to a few friends who announced they'd established a Curt McDowell Foundation to make sure the work would be protected and given life. This foundation no longer exists and, as far as we can tell, his work is in the care of his sister Melinda.

Curt and George

There were a few important collaborators in Curt's work and life but the most significant seems to have been George Kuchar. George is one of the true legends of underground cinema and one of the few real geniuses in American cinema, there really is no one else quite like him. He grew up in the Bronx where from age twelve he and his twin brother Mike collaborated on making super 8 films together, mimicking the melodramas, epics and b-movies that they saw on the big screen but with their friends as stars and the Bronx as their set. Unlike other underground cinema of the time their films are not in opposition to Hollywood, they are an underground cinema in praise, admiration and celebration of the superstars and the big budget movies. The modes of Hollywood cinema became their tools for expression, a language that means something to them and through which they can communicate the dramas of their own lives. Pick any one of George's films and you will find references to all manner of mainstream movies mixed up in his very own low-fi aesthetic and infused with his own very personal fears, traumas and obsessions.

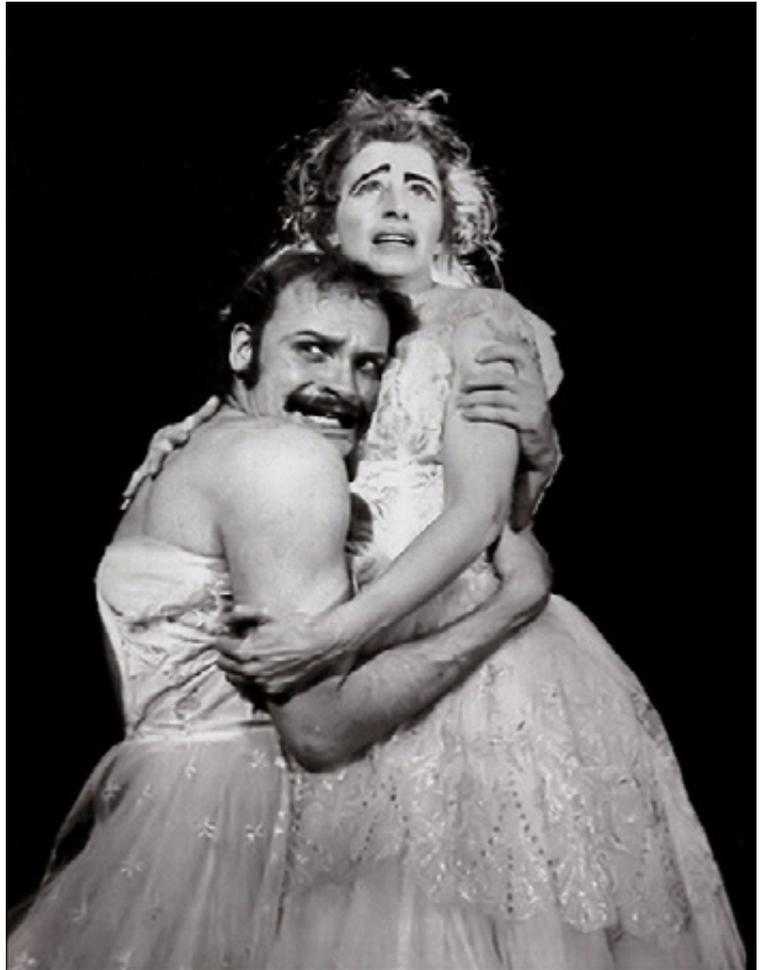
By the late 1960's George's reputation had travelled far and wide, at least in the circles of those interested in underground cinema. In 1971 he relocated with his dog Bock to sunny California to take up a teaching position at the San Francisco Art Institute, where he first met Curt.

'The first student I ever laid eyes on was the underground filmmaker Curt McDowell. He was sitting on my desk, wearing cut-off jeans and swinging his bare legs in the stuffy setting. He had on a teshirt and woven sandals of straw, looking very much like a big boy with a huge appetite for cinematic knowledge (and for his teacher).' George Kuchar

They quickly became close friends, lovers and collaborators, often appearing in and working on each other's films. Curt starred in and helped make George's feature length film *The Devil's Cleavage* and in exchange George wrote, acted in and did the make-up for *Thundercrack!* Curt was convinced he could make some money with another film as he did with *Lunch*, but George was sceptic, 'usually anything that I work in never makes any money'. *Thundercrack!* certainly is the shining moment in both George's and Curt's careers, even if financial rewards weren't forthcoming.

Thundercrack! (1975)

Thundercrack! is a film that defies easy categorisation to say the least. Mixing porno with comedy and horror, this curious and unique film certainly seems to come directly from the meeting of the minds and bodies of the film's director and writer, of Curt's celebratory and very enthusiastic approach to sex and George's guilt-ridden and horrified surrender to lust and desire.



The film opens with flashes of lightening and crashes of thunder over a cartoon image of an American Gothic looking house. The staggering plonky piano and stock sound of rain makes the film feel more like you are about to watch an episode of *Count Duckula* than a surreal horror porno. Due to the severe weather, various young and sexually charged characters seek out shelter in a lone mansion where they meet Mrs Gert Hammond (Marion Eaton), a lonely middle-aged widow whose husband has died, devoured by a swarm of locusts, and whose son 'no longer exists'. She appears to have applied her make-up in the dark and staggers around her house in a black slip, she is somewhat reminiscent of Joan Crawford or Elizabeth Taylor but via a drunk Coco the Clown. She rambles aloud about her regrets and lost past in that unmistakable George Kuchar style, which is tragic, vile, hilarious and sensitive in equal measure. She invites her guests to change and make themselves comfortable as she prepares a meal for them. What ensues is a series of what would be standard pornographic scenes if it wasn't for the characters' constant monologues about their feelings while they do it.

About midway through the film arrives another guest to this house of melodramatic orgy, Bing, played by George himself, who felt that as he wrote the script he had an obligation to also get involved in the action! He arrives in a fluster, his truck veered from the road and crashed, releasing a group of troubled circus animals which he was transporting. One of whom, a gorilla named Medusa, is now madly in love with him and in hot pursuit. He warns the others of her rage and that there is nothing that will soothe her apart from his caressing embrace.

To call *Thundercrack!* a porno is probably misleading and incorrect, it does contain hardcore sex scenes (gay, straight, plenty of masturbation and a bit of implied bestiality between Kuchar and someone in a gorilla suit) but the film's aim doesn't seem to be arousal, it may arouse some but its intentions appear to go beyond this. Its concerns seem to be more about the psychology of the characters and how each of their psychological states manifests itself and is expressed through sex. It is a film that explores how our personal traumas effect and feed into our sexual impulses and behaviour. It is more a melodrama than anything else and the heightened exaggerated style allows all that is usually hidden and left unsaid to boil over to the surface and leave no dark corner untouched.



Confessions (1971), Loads (1976) and Ronnie (1972)

Confessions is one of Curt's first films, featuring himself and a cast of friends and made while he was still a student at the San Francisco Art Institute. The film opens with a shot of Curt laying in bed looking into camera as he makes a heartfelt confession to his parents. He describes, in what we imagine to be far too much details for them, a list of all of his exploits, mostly sexual:

'When I was 13 I jerked off with my cousin Dick and I kept doing it, with others, in my room. At 16 I drank, I tried liquor, all kinds, different kinds, I drank everything. Never told you of course. I got exposed to all kinds of wild sex when I was 16. I fucked women, single, under-age girls, married and I've eaten pussy and I've sucked dick, yeah. Even. I corn-holed everything and anything that would bend over and I'd even bend over sometimes myself. I've tried three ways, 4 ways, and gang bangs and circle jerks...'

He goes on like this and finally concludes, with tears in his eyes:

'...I love you folks more than anything else in the world and I never wanted to hurt you. But I just had to tell you. It's something I just had to get out of my system, that's all.'

Now that he has got this off his chest, there is a sense of relief, cut to footage of a girl conducting an imaginary orchestra, shots of a rose in bloom as dramatic, triumphant and climatic fanfare music plays over. This leads us to a very 60's rendition of *I'm Confessin' (That I love you)* which plays over some quick shots of a man taking his pants off, male and female body parts walking towards the camera and a girl smiling. This is followed by the second half of the film which is structured around two reoccurring sequences, shots of George walking through corridors and Curt interviewing his friends, asking them 'what's right and what's wrong about me?'. Their responses are cut with sequences that seem to respond directly to their answers, the editing and use of music is so perfectly placed, creating one of the most joyous sequences in all of Curt's films. The first interviewee answers:

'... you have this energy, it's like an explosion, you know, and when people think of you and your films and things like that, I think they have to understand, like, sex.'

Cuts to close-up shots of a man and woman having sex. The next interviewee answers:

'I'm not an enemy.'

Cut to shots of Curt with a doll on his knee and tinkly piano music playing, we can't hear him speak but he is talk-

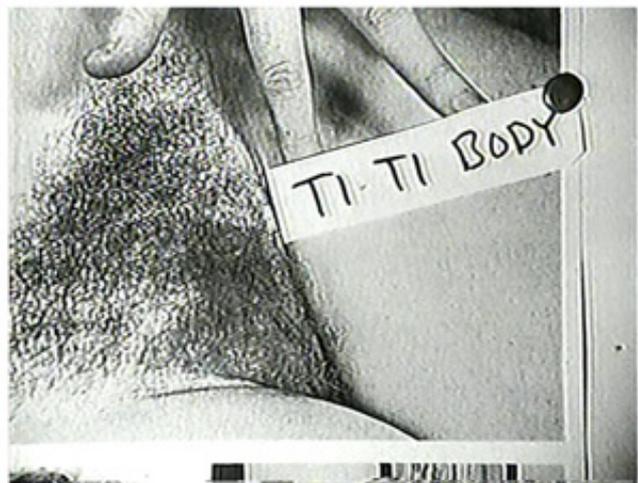
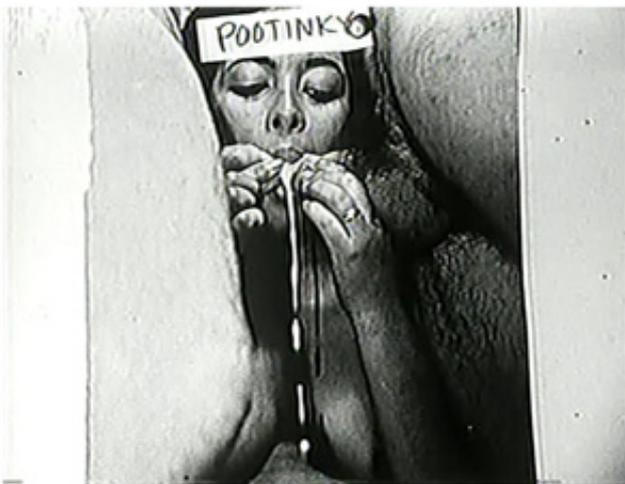
ing to the doll and looking at the camera reminiscent of a children's TV presenter, one gets the feeling he is telling a story. The film continues like this, people answering the questions then shooting off into quick sequences in response to their answers. Through the second half there are portraits of people, close up shots of sex, masturbation and friends posing naked. We get a real sense of who Curt is by the words spoken from his friends and the way in which he frames these within his own humourous and playful sequences. It feels like a very genuine portrait of a man whose friends feel a great affection for him and who all agree that he '...seems like you need so much more sex than other people'.

Formally this film is playful and experimental, it has an editing style that is reminiscent of much of George's work, with sound and music cutting as the image cuts, brief moments cut into a shot to comment on it in some way, often adding humour. It seems to be a self portrait not of an individual isolated from the world but of someone living in it fully, of himself in relation to his friends, family and lovers.

Loads is perhaps the best-known of Curt's short films. This film diary documents a series of straight men that Curt has managed to pick up on the street and convinced to come to his apartment to masturbate or be blown on film. The film is shot in grainy 16mm black and white and is accompanied by a voice-over in which Curt lets the viewer into the workings of his mind and the nature of his fantasies, his narration also describes the process and experience of making the film:

'I met this... bodybuilder at the coed baths, and he was there for women, which was real obvious. He was very friendly to everybody, and there weren't very many women to go around. Eventually he took second best. And I didn't mind, because I really get... turned on by straight men. Anyway, I asked him if he wanted to make some money, and he said, "Doing what?" and I said... "jerk off on film." And he said, "Sure." He came in, and I didn't know what to have him do. I wasn't prepared for anything, but I just sort of walked around the room taking movies of him while he jerked off looking at sexy pictures of women. And he had a really terrific... chest and... ass.'

Loads, like *Confessions*, has two distinct halves but, unlike *Confessions*, *Loads* is about strangers rather than friends



and family. The first half of the film covers the picking up of six straight men (on separate occasions). We see them in his apartment, posing, masturbating and walking around while Curt in a voice-over describes how he met them, what attracted him to them and what he did with them or got them to do for the film. The second half of the movie is a montage of all the men masturbating while on the soundtrack we can hear Curt breathing as he masturbates and mumbles his fantasies. The film ends like *Confessions*, with ejaculation.



The structure of these films represents the sex act, starting with the seduction, the sex and ending with the climax. Once the climax has been achieved the films abruptly end. This is a perfect marriage of form and subject, they all drive forward to that brief intense moment that is anticipated from the very first frame.

An earlier McDowell film, *Ronnie*, seems to be a precursor of *Loads*. *Ronnie* is a portrait of an encounter with a straight guy that Curt picks up in the park and invites to take part in a film. He films him posing naked, smoking cigarettes and drinking a coke. On the voice-over we hear Ronnie reflecting upon his experience of making the film, he makes it very clear that 'I don't do this, what he done to me I don't do it, but being as it's a film you have to do it.'

This seems to be a key to one of the main explorations taking place in the films in which he picks people up, the film becomes a tool for instigating experience, for allowing fantasies to become real, would it have been as easy for him to pick up a straight guy if it wasn't for a film? Possibly it could be but the making of the film becomes something that both Curt and his subject can direct their attention to. Now this could be seen as a criticism, that he uses films just to get sex, but we think this is exactly what is so interesting about them and that it is one of the things that makes them so much more than a cheap sex film. For Curt cinema is a tool for engaging with life, a tool used to explore his existence and the experience of himself and those around him. He questions and explores his subjects and situations with fascination and joy, without shame and guilt. *Ronnie* is an intimate, direct and honest portrait of a person and a moment, the film could be seen as an argument for the one night stand, proof that a brief encounter can be a meaningful encounter.

Naughty Words (1974)

This one minute film opens with a title card that reads 'Educational films presents, Naughty Words by Curt McDowell with some ass-istance from his sister Melinda'. We see still photos taken from the pages of porn magazines while off-screen we hear the voices of Steve Nordstrom, Wendy Miller and Michele Gross as they read out a list of naughty words corresponding to the images. Between each image it cuts to black like we are watching a slide show. This film doesn't fail to bring out the naughty child in us and like the voices on the soundtrack it's impossible not to laugh!

This is a wonderful film that expresses some of Curt's childlike playfulness and silly humour that makes all of his work so enchanting. That it is presented as being an educational film adds to the overriding theme in his work of studying the act of sex not just as a physical thing but looking at how it manifests in various forms within our lives. His investigations of sex extend to the emotional effect it has on us, how it is present in our relationships with friends, family and lovers, its social and political implications and, in this instance, the language used to describe it.

Lunch (1974)

Lunch is Curt's most conventional film and for this reason it is not surprising that it is his one commercial success. It features 'lots of close-ups that really bring you into the action', according to Al Goldstein quoted on *Lunch's* poster. The film is made up of a series of heterosexual sex scenes all taking place in an apartment building. There are a couple of funny lines and interesting moments but it lacks the challenging and exciting form of Curt's other work and seems to be designed specifically for arousing an audience turned on by rather ordinary straight sex scenes. At a stretch we could look at this as being a portrait of heterosexual love making and if that's the case Curt seems to be pretty unexcited by the whole thing. Although, in truth that would be too much analysis of a film at which we wouldn't take a second look if it wasn't for what we know about the director from his other work. It's interesting to

see a couple of his acting regulars such as Mark Ellinger, and it has a pretty stylish title sequence and song, but other than that it isn't worth too much attention and more than likely was treated as a way to make some cash.

Boggy Depot (A musical for the whole family) (1974)

Boggy Depot is a musical comedy about two mean brothers (Curt McDowell and Mark Ellinger) who have a grudge against their house guest Damon (George Kuchar). Damon is in love with the sweet all-American gal Lulu (Ainslie Pryor) who doesn't even know he exists. For fun, the mean brothers hypnotise Damon using the magic phrase 'more cream in your coffee?' and command him to hang his underpants on a doorknob. He hangs his underwear on Lulu's doorknob, writing on them 'I love you, eat me mamma Lulu'. She finds them and falls in love with him. The mean brothers are confronted by a meddling neighbour (Kathleen Hohalek) who blackmails them and gets them to take her out on a date.

George steals the show as Damon with his absolutely charming off key singing, later in an interview he said 'He would use me in his pictures, in musicals and stuff like that which gave me an opportunity to sing even though I can't hold a note.'ⁱⁱⁱ Curt is also great as one of the mean brothers. The titles and exteriors are painted in a distinctive black and white style similar to *Thundercrack!* but, unlike *Thundercrack!*, this film is as the title suggests for all the family. Here Curt plays with the typical innocent love story of Hollywood musicals but very much executing it in his own idiosyncratic way. It really is a hilarious film and it just doesn't go on long enough. The songs are written to go with popular tunes probably taken from other film soundtracks and really stick in your mind, we were singing them for weeks!

A Visit to Indiana (1970)

A Visit to Indiana consists of Curt's super 8 home movie footage shot while on a trip home. This film employs a device used in many of his films where there is a voice-over, recorded separately from the images, which reflects upon the themes and subjects of the image, adding unexpected readings by the chance encounter of the things being said and the footage shown. In this voice-over we hear Curt being interviewed by his friend Ted Davis who sounds like an all-American guy and does pretty much all the talking as Curt shyly responds. He asks Curt about his family, seeming to know them or at least know of them fairly well. There is an interesting moment in the film when Ted asks Curt about his sister Melinda, Ted makes some suggestions that maybe Melinda, who at this time was still in high school, has got to the age where she is starting to have sex but Curt is defensive and doesn't (or at least pretends not to) understand what he's suggesting, he is certainly uncomfortable with the topic. A few years later Melinda was to star in *Thundercrack!* and other of her brother's films in which she has sex, but at this time we assume this was unknown or unexpected to both of them.

Like *Loads*, *Ronnie* and *Confessions*, this film can be seen both as a portrait and a diary, in this instance focusing on his family and life back home. In Curt's shy answers he seems very young and innocent, quite different from the charismatic guy picking up straight guys on the street. It's an interesting insight and maybe one that many of us can relate to – that period in one's life when you move away from home for the first time and you start to become your own person, but in those first few times of visiting home there is a split, you become the child again and can often fall back into that role. This film documents and expresses this strange transitional phase beautifully.

Sparkle's Tavern (1976/84)

Sparkle (Melinda McDowell) and her brother Buster (Jerry Terranova) run Sparkle's Tavern, a burlesque nightclub that also offers blow job services in the suck stalls backstage. Even though Sparkle and Buster en-



joy their sexual freedom they can't bring themselves to be truthful with their loving, old-fashioned mother (Marion Eaton) so they lie to her about what they're actually up to. They find themselves in trouble when a rough customer discovers their secret after raping Sparkle and threatens to invite their mother to visit the tavern and see what her children truly are. Sparkle runs home to reach her mother first but when she gets there something unexpected is already taking place. A strange visitor, Mr Pupik (George Kuchar), who seems to know all of the family's secrets, has convinced her mother to take part in a ritual which he calls an 'instantaneous trip', in which her utmost desire will come true and her wishes for inner peace will be fulfilled. Sparkle is shocked to see her prudish mother having an orgasm as she slides off the chair onto the kitchen floor, which Mr Pupik explains is just an after-affect of having instantaneously lived her whole life over again exactly as before, except that 'she was allowed to let the pressures and standards of society slip off her like waters off a duck's back'.

Sparkle's Tavern is a highly autobiographical melodrama that came about because Curt wanted to make a pro-sex film about his family. Jack Stevenson has suggested Curt was creating 'a séance as much as a movie'ⁱⁱⁱ, digging deep into his own feelings towards his family, and recreating and reliving a situation from his life, so for Curt the film performs the same role as Mrs Blake's 'instantaneous trip' does for her. At one point in the film, Buster, Curt's alter ego in the film, hears from a lonesome stranger how difficult it can be to be honest about yourself:

'I figured I'd rather lose my wife, my children, everything... before I could bring myself to lie to myself, or them, about who I am. So I told the truth. And I tried to make her realise that whatever I did I loved her just as much as always and that my feelings for her hadn't changed one iota. But she was raised completely different from me... I'm open-minded you see, and she... well, she just wasn't.'

Buster and Sparkle don't feel guilty about who they are but they feel guilty that who they are will bring unhappiness to their mother. However, the film has a positive outlook on this dilemma and presents a solution, expressed by the creative, healing character of Mr Pupik that brings about change, open-mindedness and acceptance to their mother's heart by allowing her to also find out new things about herself. This funny and endearing film feels like it was a way for Curt to deal with the effect his lifestyle had or could have had on his family and it seems like an attempt to take charge of his anxieties and transform the situation into a positive one.

Final Word

Curt McDowell is unfairly missing from most histories of cinema, his name occasional pops up with a brief mention of *Thundercrack!* but he certainly isn't as celebrated and studied as much as he deserves to be. We suspect that the lack of interest from the serious-minded film scholars is due to the limited availability of his work, it is unlikely that most of them have seen his films. If any they may have seen *Thundercrack!* which we wouldn't be surprised is dismissed as a quirky low budget porn novelty. It is only when you see more of his films that you can understand the depth of his explorations of sex through cinema, how *Thundercrack!*'s concerns with trauma and guilt differ from *Confession*'s openness and joy, how in *Loads* and *Ronnie* he shows us the experience of the pick-up and that the brief encounter, even if not always totally a pleasure, can be a meaningful experience. No other filmmaker that we can think of has made such a serious study of sex, and of the role of sex in a particular culture at a time when the act of free love was a political act and an expression of freedom. We believe it is time for Curt's work to be given new life, it is also probably time that we are reminded that sex once had a different role in culture, it wasn't always about selling products or a fear of sexual disease, it was about people engaging with each other, about trust and intimacy. In his films you will see a truly deep affection for other human beings, an openness, honesty, sincerity and closeness that we haven't seen in any work of cinema for a long, long time. That is what he inspires in us, that is what he celebrates and it's time for his films to be seen again.

i. G. Kuchar quoted in Jack Stevenson, *Desperate Visions 1: Camp America – The Films of John Waters and George & Mike Kuchar* (London: Creation Books, 1996) p.192

ii. G. Kuchar quoted in Jack Stevenson, *Desperate Visions 1: Camp America – The Films of John Waters and George & Mike Kuchar* (London: Creation Books, 1996) p.177

iii. Jack Stevenson, *Desperate Visions 1: Camp America – The Films of John Waters and George & Mike Kuchar* (London: Creation Books, 1996) p.246

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