

CHARLES BERNSTEIN



The George Kuchar Reader, ed. Andrew Lampert

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[Primary Information](#) has just published *The George Kuchar Reader*, a 336 page Kuchar extravaganza, chocked full of color and black and white images from letters, reviews, publications and including Kuchar's comics and visual art and much in Kuchar's own handwriting. It is a must have book for anyone interested in Kuchar and a great introduction for those new to his work. The book ends with a set of emails written in Kuchar's last years that provide a glimpse into the personal life of this relatively private man, who made an essential contribution to the art of the movies. And

while movies are the center of Kuchar's work, this book makes clear what a great writer he was -- and what a madcap graphic artist.

Thanks to the Primary Information, here is Andrew Lampert's introduction. [You can order the book here.](#)

I Introduction by Andrew Lampert

It's hard to say more about George Kuchar than what he conveys himself in this jam-packed volume of undiluted self-expression. In short time, readers will discover that George is by far the best one to relay the biographical facts of his colorful life. As editor of this book, it is my job to not stand in his way. George has a lot to say.

A collection of commentaries, comics, and reminiscences, *The George Kuchar Reader* is a crazy quilt attempt to encapsulate a hyperactive existence of creative commotion. The pages ahead contain writings, art works, and photos that take us from George's 1950s teenage days in the Bronx, up to his death in San Francisco at age 69 in September 2011. In that 50-plus year span, he created an acclaimed, altogether inconceivable body of nearly 350 films and videos that have illuminated cinemas, museums, festivals, galleries, and schools the world over. Whether making dozens of his own 16mm shorts and features, collaborating with his equally incomparable twin brother Mike on their early 8mm films, scripting and co-starring in the bisexual porn epic *Thundercrack!* for his partner Curt McDowell, producing semester after semester of unfathomable movies with students at the San Francisco Art Institute, or churning out video documents of his ongoing adventures and holiday gatherings, George tirelessly transcended the visual and verbal limits of aesthetic acceptability, puckishly undermining generic templates of dramatic form. He had a good time doing it, too.

Outlandish 8mm classics like *I Was a Teenage Rumpot* (1960) and *A Town Called Tempest* (1962) established the Kuchar brothers as favorites among the downtown New York City cognoscente, but it was George's second solo 16mm effort, *Hold Me While I'm Naked* (1966), that brought him wider recognition in both the burgeoning underground cinema world and aboveground media. To this day it remains his most rented title and largest cultural footprint. A clip from the film featuring George even turned up in the annual scroll of dearly departed during the 2012 Oscars telecast.

In the shadow of this greatest hit, George relentlessly built an outrè oeuvre of films and videos teeming with ribald humor and unswerving illogic. As exceptionally inspired and simultaneously befuddling as his work can be, virtually every piece George made contains at least one new invention or innovation. With a refined sense of the absurd and a "no budget, no problem" attitude, his decades of ceaseless output frequently mined curious motifs including UFOs, bad weather, forbidden passion, and defecation, among scores of recurrent themes. As George grew older, his video diaries became more intimate and profound in their acknowledgement of aging, loneliness, and the benefits of staying busy.

Looking back on it all, George generated more joyously demented, impishly perverse moving images than any aficionado can ever experience in one lifetime. With the exception of a few acolytes, even the most devout Kuchar fan has only ever seen a fraction of his gargantuan filmography. How did he continuously produce so much work? For George, it was not a matter of quantity, but rather a desire to maintain good work habits. Forever enthusiastic about his "next picture," he was more concerned with forward motion than the fate of any individual piece.

George's compartmental personality and unique ability to bounce between projects without losing momentum extended beyond his filmmaking accomplishments. Trained as a commercial artist at Manhattan's School of Industrial Art, George's drawings and paintings are incredibly assured even if their subjects and all-around perspectives are a bit bent. He had an affinity for landscape and eye for portraiture, but also a fondness for derelicts, harlots, canines, yetis, and mythical beasts. His drawings are inspired by the comic books, pulp novels, and b-movies that he and Mike ingested as children, but they are ultimately very mature and finely rendered realizations of fixations found throughout his creative endeavors. While George's canvases and pen drawings are largely unrelated to specific films, they are nevertheless cinematic, like studies or stills from

feverish works that he never got around to unleashing.

The essays and autobiographical statements collected here readily demonstrate that George was as accomplished with words as he was adept at visual language. His easy, forthright wit and improvisatory prowess came in handy when authoring blurbs, concocting dialogue, spilling gossip, and keeping notebooks. Much of his writing was first and final draft, exactly as the words poured out of him. Acutely self-aware and always conscious of his audience—or in this case, his reader—even George’s diaries feel as if they were composed for others to digest. These texts have a charm and immediacy that is an organic extension of his everyday patter. Reading George on the page is very much like chatting with him over dinner in a Chinese restaurant.

The George Kuchar Reader is (mostly) organized in chronological order to better present the unfolding narrative of George’s creative, geographic, and professional development as he more or less lived it. Unless otherwise noted, George authored all the verbal and visual matter assembled here. The contents were gathered over two years from a wide swath of generous colleagues and institutions. It contains no material from the essential, currently out of print memoir, *Reminiscences From A Cinematic Cesspool*, co-written with Mike. In terms of selection, the goal has been to opt for never-before-published writings and art alongside pieces previously available in obscure and now often expensive magazines and journals. Many of the illustrations were first published during the 1970s San Francisco underground comix heyday while others come from of his personal notebooks. Most of the photos contained herein come directly from George’s assorted scrapbooks, which include photos (mostly of himself), clippings, and other mementos.

The book concludes with what is undoubtedly the most touching prose George ever authored: his late life emails to classmate and longtime muse Donna Kerness. She was George’s epistolary confidant, and this tell-all testimonial of his long-term late night lover was written to her with the intention that it would one day be published. Losing his battle with prostate cancer and facing the inevitable, George (ever the Catholic, even if lapsed) wanted to confess his perceived sins and uncork pent-up anguish over cloudy love affairs. Besides providing romantic advice and emotional support, Donna was a sympathetic sounding board for him to vent about his decline. In these remarkable and very vulnerable letters, we are granted complete access to a highly introspective interior life that he rarely exposed in any great depth, not even in his most personal diary pieces.

From his first film to final video, George’s on-screen presence was almost always a heightened version of George Kuchar, which is to say, an acutely self-aware portrayal created by a person who recognized that he was a real life character. It only takes watching a handful of his movies or reading a few of the texts here to feel, in some strange way, like you know him. No matter what medium he employed, George’s signature subject matter and heartfelt irony were instantly familiar. His comedy was one of precise intonation and expert timing. George makes us laugh because he is laughing with us. He naturally understood that pathos is hilarious, and nothing is funnier than blotched eyeliner and an approaching funnel cloud.

[GEORGE KUCHAR \(1942-2011\)](#)

[GEORGE KUCHAR VIDEO INTERVIEW \(NEW YORK, APRIL 2010\)](#)

[GEORGE KUCHAR'S OTHERWORLDLY HUMANITY](#)

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