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Kenneth Anger, Curtis Harrington, Larry Jordan in conversation - last night  
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They were on stage at the Getty Center's Harold M. Williams Auditorium. The rationale for having them was the Center's ongoing Modern Art in Los Angeles project into which they were somewhat awkwardly shoehorned as "L.A. Beat Filmmakers". One could quibble that Jordan is the only bonafide card carrying "Beat" among them, and he's surely a representative of the San Francisco scene, and is there such a thing as Beat movies in the first place? Would you call Robert Rauschenberg a Beat combine artist?

The presentation of seven films, and the conversation that followed, answered such questions in unexpected ways. What was most poignant for me was the momentary recovery of the International Avant Garde as it was dreamed about by Westcoast kids immediately postwar. I loved that they were turned on to their life's work initially by secondhand word of mouth alone: Parker Tyler's reviews of "Experimental films" in "small magazines" were cited by all; and eventually the rented MoMA 16mm prints of Cocteau, Bunuel and Dali, Man Ray, and homegrown pioneer Maya Deren that fell into their hands (a film librarian who sent them gratis -can't remember her name, but not Iris Barry- was singled out as patron saint).

A small tribe of alternative folks was simultaneously gathering under the surrealist-experimental-alchemical-archetypal-mind expanding-call it what you will but avant garde will do banner. What's striking is how disparate were the personalities who flocked to the same gurus in those days. Joseph Cornell was the American touchstone. Anger made a point of reminding us all that Cornell was the greatest and wisest, and you can see what he meant to him early on as distilled in the wonderful 1949 PUCE MOMENT (a dazzling fragment, like virtually everything else in Anger's oeuvre, from a never to be completed work in progress - in this case a portrait of a Clara Bow-like Silent Star, here seen rifling through her wardrobe and posing with her wolfhounds above Sunset Boulevard...having the eponymous moment), and how the sophisticated campiness/naive fannish adulation of Cornell's film and assemblage fetishistic Hollywood star homages clicked...not just with him and partner in crime Harrington ("Creative Film Associates" as they billed themselves in publicity sent to the Partisan Review), but with young Andy Warhol back on the East Coast, as well: the screentests, the superstars are eerily predicted by the Anger clip, and explained by the parallel paths the two followed.

For Jordan and his highschool pal Stan Brakhage, Cornell meant something related but seen from a rather different (seemingly non Gay) point of view: both kids sought out and apprenticed with Cornell as a sort of Wise fool, a guru. Enlightenment through unmediated vision was their beat and Beatitude, a Quest. Cornell as the keeper of the original Surrealist flame was their teacher.

The terms may have been different, but the films shown (a pity Brakhage wasn't around to round out the evening and fill out the spectrum) resonated in wonderful, unexpected ways. Anything with Anger involved is bound to become a cleansing, clarifying ritual just by his presence at the center of it all. That's his Crowleyan inclination. Beyond that he's also the one figure who holds all the strands together of the original USA avant brief. It was a surprise but no surprise to hear of the great artist and poet Jess and his partner the beat Robert Duncan as another waystation towards the alchemical grail for him and Jordan and Brakhage. Jess is best remembered perhaps for his proto-pop (everything produced in these underground enclaves in 1949 came to seem proto pop and psychedelic by the end of the

evening) collages: Xacto-blade re-renderings of physical culture musclemen into macrocosmic impossibly-cepped ubermenschen and of DICK TRACY Sunday Funnies into TRICKY CAD, all American Max Ernst Fascist Space Cop. The artist's microcopic touch when it came to seamless excising and recombination of the banal into the scarily unreal (which only underscores the underlying reality of the all american banality and shows it to resensitized senses -like tasting a Big Mac with an open mind for the first time and recoiling with the horror of what we've mindlessly glossed over all these years)...is far in advance of and alien in spirit to the most excessively scrupulous German and Swiss cutter and pasters...as is the "is this a put on?"- American Bucolic outsider artist sublime spirit. It's a missing link in our cultural history. Getting down to brass tacks, it's also seemingly touched by dream-reality inducing rosy fingered pharmaceuticals in a way the Europeans could only theoretically approximate and simulate: amphetamine-realism mixed with the peyote fueled variety.

Drugs. That's another connecting strand amongst the assembled crew. "But peyote is NOT a drug!" the much mellowed but still characteristically enthused Anger proclaimed. "Nature creates it and holds it in store for the true, determined seeker! It's not a mind numbing substance produced in a laboratory. It's a gift, a ritual necessity, for the ceremonies when they arise. It's so powerful, it makes you so violently ill, that it's not something you'd idly want to trip on. This is serious stuff!" "A once in a lifetime experience?" the interviewer tentatively interjected. "Five times in my case" the professorial Jordan somewhat sheepishly admitted.

His peyote film was the cinematic highlight of the evening. Not to take anything away from the others, but the evening closer TRIPTYCH IN FOUR PARTS (dig those experimental artsy titles) was entirely unfamiliar to everyone in the audience who knew Jordan, if at all, from his transcendent animations and therefore the major revelation (For the record, Anger showed the versions of FIREWORKS, PUCE MOMENT, KUSTOM KAR KOMMANDOS we've seen before; more on him and Harrington, anon).

One wing of the Trip-tych only was properly Peyote-oriented, I hasten to add, but the whole film unfolded like Grunewald's Isenheim Polyptych as seen in a transcendent state. It's set to Tabla and Sitar, ritual objects bow in and out of view swallowed up in opposing mirrored image. We smile for a moment as interpolated images of quaint 1960s Haight bearded, furry freak types and their pads continue that received hippy impression, but the flow and lap of images, the rhythms and tempos lull us, and then the emerging vision once our senses adjust and clear simply blows one's mind (as does the revelation that this wasn't shot in 1968 but Nineteen FIFTY Eight!!! Can that be a typo in the program? I hope not. If true, the sixties was just broader access flowing to a tribal nation of what was already in place in every detail among a handful of Beat adepts a decade before)

The Peyote vision (I should include a SPOILER here) is a roadtrip undertaken (we discovered after) to find the source of the sacrament one could once obtain from a Native American church via a small print ad in the back of better periodicals. What's filmed is the end of a several month quest as the farm comes into view on the TexMex border, and then we're in the harvesting hands of the guy who processes and peels away the button heart of the plant. I won't describe further except to say that it's the real, pure version of what certain early REM videos (like the one with the Folk artist in his statuary garden) copied later (if Larry Jordan made those videos, then amend my comments accordingly). This is utterly fresh and exciting recording

on film. One wants to make movies or art after watching this, or just look at the world more openly and attentively.

To sum up the rest in brief.

Harrington was the comic relief, a very affable guy, fondly remembering his and Anger's early travels and travails (lots of finishing of sentences between them). His 1946 FRAGMENT OF SEEKING (probably the first real film made at the fledgling UCLA filmschool, though the nominal teachers there took no interest in fostering it in the first place or even watching it after it was made) is an endearing student film that sums up all that's scary about earnest experimental juvenilia but has the saving graces of being fluidly made and making it funny...possibly on purpose. Harrington quoted the reviewer from the Communist Daily Worker (radicals made for strange bedfellows in those days)"with the appropriately Proletarian name, Jack Tank": "It's like an arty version of those Army Venereal Disease scare films!" "Ah the vicissitudes of being an avant gardist", sighed Harrington.

Jack Tank was right, though. It's basically a MESHES OF THE AFTERNOON inspired dream rebus slantwise confession of a closeted gay (the "outsider", a man of mystery/nerd in trenchcoat, fedora and coke bottle glasses in the suffocating heat) confronting his sexuality as various Jungian personas dart around his vaguely and openendedly delimited hacienda. The great climax features the elusive and mysterious vampy blond, always a flipped hairdo and a stiletto step away from face to face confrontation, who suddenly shows up on his bed (a locus for vaguely or explicitly masturbatory reveries in these experimental films) heaving her thighs in the rather put out Monty Clift-like guy's direction. Her liver lips beckon. The trench coated one is suddenly outside himself alienated watching her close in on his double with those devouring dentata...and BOOM she's suddenly a scary skeleton with a blonde wig in a Horror Movie shock shot! Mrs. Bates avant la lettre. Hero does a Charlie Chaplin sped up banana peel run towards the Gents room of Angers FIREWORKS nextdoor.

The hints of humor and the taste for horror as well as the talented artiness was gratifyingly confirmed I should add in the other Harrington offering, the much more assured 1949 ON THE EDGE, a perfect short film long on atmosphere and ominousness but kept strictly to the point by a Chas. Addams punchline. From this evidence alone you could easily guess which director of the bunch would make a smooth transition to the fringes of mainstream Hollywood (and a segue to the next Getty L.A. Beat event, Corman's BUCKET OF BLOOD, not Harrington per se but the milieu he came out of and moved into)

And Anger. The films are as striking as ever. A good thing because one wonders between viewings how so much legend can be built on such slender output (in terms of numbers). KUSTOM KAR KOMMANDOS was the one that elicited the shock of recognition among the uninitiated (that little tessera alone puts so much of the current filmschool advanced curriculum in place...and in its place), but all three did what they were supposed to.

The man himself was definitely not Angry this evening, but warm and retrospective, and expansive (though time constraints alas cut his story flow into soundbytes as we were moved along...but he endearingly managed to jump over the barricades thrown his way a number of times to toss in the latest version of his James Whale stories, or a mild curse or six or seven at Rohauer and all the other pirates who've robbed him blind and bled him dry). The bits of his you'd never have heard before were created

by the configuration of elements the tarot hand drew this particular night. I mean the particular mood he was in and how he interacted with these old friends (Jordan being very much a wild card in the deck and a catalyst for many original connection-making surmises)...but also, favorite Anger element, Fire, subspecies The Fires devouring LA. The chill and drizzle that had entered the air moments before we entered the building added to the uncanny effect needed for the impression that things might indeed work in strange, mysterious ways. The fire allowed Anger to associate the purely destructive and clarifying aspects of its force: the legendary painter Cameron who Harrington documented in an early film (her works are only visible in this one movie) who burned her paintings to free them; the photographers and filmmakers who Anger has known whose life's work has been devoured by So Cal firestorms. One lone survival of such a wreck, a collage portrait of the young Anger atop a canyon, is now deposited at the Getty: "I am very proud to say"

What's salvaged from the wreckage is central to Anger's life and work in profound ways too sad to relate. I found this offhand comment very moving: Anger rescuing a little bit from a lost soul of the underground and depositing it for safekeeping in a 'creme de la creme' institution (he and Harrington have a real love-hate thing going with the elite who they courted when young and who often rejected them.) This evening was such an event for all those who attended. Anger, obviously implying a parallel, remembered how he and Harrington would go to a fringe theater in Hollywood where the old, ghostly movie pioneers would introduce their silent pictures, and they'd briefly flicker anew and show the way for the discriminating few. That's how I felt myself, yesterday evening.