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## Donigan Cumming at The Shooting Party

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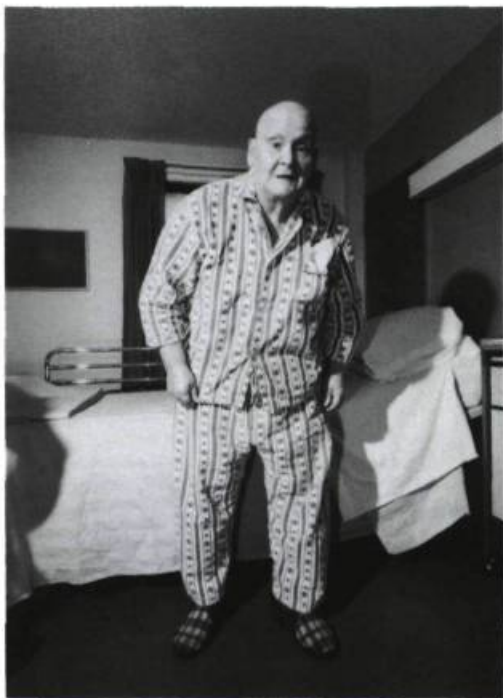
*Zones critiques,*  
Maison de la culture Mercier, Montréal,  
September 6 to October 8, 1989 —

"Life is so extraordinarily pleasant for those of us who were fortunate enough to have been born in the right place. Ought it to be so pleasant for so few of us? (...) there is going to be a trial of strength sooner or later, and supposing it did come, some great trial, might it not cleanse us of our materialism, our cynicism, our lacks and lazy hypocrisies, make us go at our sinews and find simplicity again? And then should we not be fitter afterwards to make a better world for that must be what we are here for, to leave the world a better place than we found it?"

John Ruskin

So reads the introductory passage dubbed over the opening credits of the 1985 British-made film entitled *The Shooting Party*. Although *The Shooting Party* bears no direct relation to Montreal's recent *Le Mois de la Photo* (except for a shared celluloid-based medium), invitation to analogy was too strong to pass up. In the movie a group of aristocrats passed their many leisure hours in the hunt — tracking and indiscriminately killing whatever prey they came upon. The underlying theme of the film was a questioning of the morality and apparent senselessness of this unrestrained 'sport'.

Similarly one might question the merits of the 'overkill' (more than 250 photographers, approximately seventy exhibition sites) that was *Le Mois de la Photo* — a proliferation of images far beyond the capacity for appreciation of even the most devoted connoisseur. Generally speaking the vast majority of images fell into one of two convenient catch-all categories, either documentary (i.e., the factual reporting of the human condition) or fine art photography (i.e., the photo employed as a largely creative artifice). A preoccupation with photography as a 'vehicle' tended to belie any moral inquiry (this is not to belittle the efforts of the 'artists' such as Evergon, Pellegrinuzzi, Cohen...). Most of documentary *exposés* focussed on third world causes (civil war in Nicaragua or Honduras, unrest in El Salvador, Guatemala, Chile or China, apartheid in South Africa...) but unfortunately these issues are far removed from our North American 'reality' and so what might have been affecting images became statements of political concern or simply situations to record. Only the work of one photographer distanced itself from this forest of sameness. With an almost carnivalesque shock strategy, Donigan Cumming exhibited excerpts from his ongoing *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography Series* (began in 1985) — images of our (i.e., Montreal's) mentally or physically incapacitated, our destitute, our unloved. Working from what has been described as a "hidden agenda of hostility towards his subjects" (i.e., subjects are "shot"



Donigan Cumming, June 8th 1988, 76 x 112 cm.  
Photo: Donigan Cumming

and metaphorically "wounded") Cumming has effectively 'anthropologized' our neighbours'. He has cast each of us in the Other and has thus caused us to consider the more pitiful side of our own social interaction and vulnerabilities. The large-scale compositions are abhorrent but they nonetheless rivet our attention to the fact that we too often conveniently forget our responsibility as safekeepers of our own suffering minorities.

If we must heed the custom of paying homage to great individuals or significant events whose anniversary ends with the digit '0' in 1989, let us collectively celebrate not only the occasion of Daguerre's invention but also John "Truth to Nature" Ruskin's 1819 birthdate, Sigmund Freud's 1939 deathdate, and the twenty years since the Woodstock love and peace festival. We may do so through the brutally graphic and psychologically disturbing photographs of Donigan Cumming — images that call to mind one of Woodstock's most mournful of lyrics: "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child" [Richie Havens].

Annie Paquette

### NOTE

1. See Robert Graham and Martha Langford, *Donigan Cumming* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1986)