

NYFA QUARTERLY - Spring 2004

Article 4

Featured NYFA Fellow Interview:
Lawrence Brose

This issue's featured NYFA Fellow is Lawrence Brose (Film, 2003), an experimental filmmaker, visual artist, and the executive director of CEPA Gallery in Buffalo, NY. Brose's films combine formal experimentation with an exploration of the social framing of sexuality and masculinity. He has recently begun making prints of individual frames from his films.

NYFA Quarterly: Your work combines a rigorous investigation of film's formal properties with an examination of the conventions of queer and independent cinema. How do you reconcile these two approaches in your filmmaking? Has there been an evolution in your work from one to the other, or do they still hold equal weight for you?

Lawrence Brose: My art practice began in the arenas of structural film and poetic cinema. Yet from the beginning, I was interested in using film to explore my personal experiences of being gay. Little did I realize when I began moving in this direction in the early '80s that the AIDS crisis was just around the corner. The work I had made up to that point really prepared me, as a filmmaker, to have the presence of mind and ability to make *An Individual Desires Solution* (1986), which is a film that explores my boyfriend's struggle with AIDS.

More recently, my artwork has shifted from its early formal focus to foreground a critique of the social framing of sexuality and masculinity. I'm interested in using film to fracture boundaries established by a conservative gay movement and give a voice to the radical margins of sexual dissidence. Using home movies, my own original footage, early gay porn, and other culturally produced images, I then intervene physically on the surface material of the film, disrupting the image in order to redirect it under intense critical and aesthetic scrutiny.



Lawrence Brose
(Photo: Lauren Tent)

NYFA Q: How does the photochemical alteration of your own original footage along with imagery culled from found film and '70s gay pornography advance your exploration of sexual difference and transgression?

LB: *De Profundis* (1997) is the film that really explores these issues in depth. The altered and highly treated surface of the film enacts transgression in a couple of ways. It's a means for me to represent the dandy (here, Oscar Wilde), a superficial figure with transgressive undercurrents, and link what may seem like unrelated footage in order that a viewer might read across these variously produced images and make other kinds of connections. There are formal, cultural, and aesthetic influences at work in my process. Along with the soundtrack, they effect a shift in the logic of the image, a transformative staging that highlights the material nature of the film itself. This photographic alchemy, accompanied by a use of fragmentation and repetition, functions to wrestle images from their original moorings and tease out new or hidden meanings. With this method I was calling into question and exploring boundaries, identity, and the process/act of naming.

NYFA Q: Your work challenges conservative notions of queer identity and aesthetics both within the gay community and in US culture at large. Within this context, do you consider the recent trend of "metrosexuality" or the television program *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* progressive in that they highlight a queer perspective, or would you consider them more negatively as reinforcing queer stereotyping and exoticizing?

LB: Well, as you know, this is a complex question. I could go on about how I oppose gay marriage in principle because I think as queers we should be able to invent a new model. But I understand the political importance (as opposed to the radical politics of queer ideology) of the gains for lesbian and gay people in general. It's about choosing which battles can be won. As far as *QESG* goes, I find it radical in certain ways. Perhaps the most interesting thing about that show is that it's the only "reality TV" program I know of where its entertainment value doesn't depend on demeaning or demoralizing someone - there's actually a lot of kindness and fun in the show, and they really want the guy to succeed. I think *Martha Stewart* is dealing with style in a much more antagonistic and classist arena that I find totally offensive.

I'd also say that I find the Abercrombie and Fitch style for gay boys offensive as well - it promotes a kind of shame and a desire to "pass" as straight. If all the gay A&F-style bois were using it to undermine straight style and expose masculinity as a performance, then I would be all for it. But they're not. I also have to say that I love fem boys and butch girls because for me they are the true revolutionaries - they live it every day. And I also have to say that I don't mind being exoticized - it's kind of nice. I don't want to be normalized! This is the problem I have with the current state of the gay movement - it's not inclusive at

all. It's very exclusive and lacks real diversity. So I have a greater problem with current gay politics than I do with a few TV shows.

NYFA Q: For more than a decade, people have been talking about the obsolescence of avant-garde film with the rise of video and digital technologies, and as a result of a sharp curtailment in the production of 8mm and 16mm cameras and film stock. Are you worried about the disappearance of the medium in which you've worked for 20 years? Or conversely, has digital technology made it easier to produce and distribute avant-garde film?

LB: Good question. Avant-garde is not medium-dependent. You have artists working in dead mediums exploring their potential, and you have others embracing the most current technologies and venues like the web. Mediums are vehicles for ideas and expressions. Look at how many times painting has been declared a dead medium, only to be resurrected in a new and fresh way.

NYFA Q: In the past few years, you've started to make large-format Iris prints of individual frames from your film *De Profundis*. What were some of the reasons - formal and conceptual - for shifting into a different medium?

LB: The process driving the print project is a hybrid one, an organic result of my formal experimental film methods and my interest in translating moving images into a seemingly static medium. The Iris prints push translation into a more painterly medium while maintaining a trace of the original photographic image. This new form mirrors my film production, which involves contamination and transgression both in the chemical process originally set into motion and in combining frames - mimicking the effect of the "splice." The detail and complexity of each frame is revealed in this presentation, allowing the viewer to study individual frame-images and to contemplate the alluring space that disappears in the cinematic experience.

NYFA Q: You're the executive director of the Buffalo, NY-based CEPA Gallery. Do you find that being immersed every day within an art world milieu makes it easier to go home and do your own work? Harder? Logistically, is it difficult to find time for your own work given the responsibilities of a demanding day job?

LB: To have a life in this culture that's totally immersed in art is quite a luxury, and I'm learning to appreciate it. Yes, it has made it more difficult to produce complex films, but I've managed to create the large-format prints from my last film and I'm exhibiting them. And every day I go to work and produce important gallery exhibitions and raise funds for artists to create new work. I have also been given the opportunity to be a steward of a very important arts organization and to ensure its success and keep it alive and serving its mission. It's a good and hard life, but one lived with honor. And I get to work with artists every day.

It really doesn't get any better than this!

Through Artists & Audiences Exchange, the public service component of the NYFA Fellowship, Lawrence Brose will be giving a talk with Chris Burnett at the Visual Studies Workshop Gallery in Rochester, NY on April 21, 2004, from 6-7 pm. The talk will accompany an exhibition of Brose and Burnett's media art on view at the gallery from March 5-May 15. For more information, please contact the Visual Studies Workshop at 585.442.8676 or visit www.vsw.org.

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