

WHY I DID WILDE

BY LAWRENCE BROSE

Lawrence Brose is an experimental film artist who has created over 30 works since he began filmmaking in 1980. His films have been shown extensively at international film festivals, museums and art galleries in the United States, Europe and South America. His film *An Individual Desires Solution* is a "harrowing look at his lover's death from AIDS" and Brose's most recent work, *De Profundis*, is a 65 minute hand/alternative processed experimental film based on Oscar Wilde's text *De Profundis* with an original score by the American composer Frederic Rzewski. Brose is the Director of Public Art and Film Curator at the Center for Exploratory and Perceptual Art (CEPA) in Buffalo.

"ANYTHING BECOMES A PLEASURE
IF ONE DOES IT TOO OFTEN."

WHY DID I DO WILDE? First to try to recapture and examine the transgressive aesthetics of Oscar Wilde and to address the new conservatism in the Gay Community. That conservatism was in part consolidating around the policing of sex, monitoring behavior, and disassociating the marginal quality and power of queerness in the name of political activism (or at least expedience). The other reason is that I am interested in how people today use language to define their own identity (often unself-consciously and without any critical analysis) and how this relates back to the last century when much of this language was developed. And finally, to explore a broader range of deviant gender behavior and sexualities that can be seen at work in various trajectories from Wilde's imprisonment in 1895.

When I began research on the film it was at the same time that the '93 March on Washington for Freedom by Gays and Lesbians took place. What was interesting is that this was the real evidence of a consolidated conservative white gay movement. The organizers of that event kept all marginal people off the stage and away from the microphones and cameras. The Radical Faeries were silenced, Dykes on Bikes were nowhere to be found and the only drag queen on stage was Ru Paul and if you look at that closely enough, well let's just say that she was there for entertainment purposes only (the minstrel aspect is not too difficult to configure here). People of color were absent. There were no arguments for universal health care or other important issues. What we heard about was gay caucuses and the right to be in the military and the right to marry.

There were also people like Andrew Sullivan (*Virtually Normal*) surfacing in the gay community who are trying to convince the world that they really are normal, and if not for their desire for same sex relations they would be just like every other average white middle-class American male. Privilege! Loss of it is their greatest fear. Sullivan was also blaming AIDS on gay men's inability to marry (as if the institution of marriage keeps people from having other sexual encounters). I found this kind of movement in the "Gay Community" very dangerous and not representative of the multiplicity of gay identified people.

"BEING NATURAL IS SIMPLY A POSE, AND THE
MOST IRRITATING POSE I KNOW."

"WHEN YOU ARE ALONE WITH HIM DOES HE
TAKE OFF HIS FACE AND REVEAL HIS MASK?"

QUEER WILDE: I was interested in the trajectory of Wilde's aesthetics and philosophy before he was imprisoned, and in a way drew a line to today—100 years later. The debate between an essentialised gay identity and a socially-constructed fluid identity has been going on since Wilde and Andre Gide began it in earnest at the end of the last century. I have found the recent debates concerning the more conservative elements of the gay community and the more radicalized ideas of the queer theory evidenced in my film and I come

down on the side of queer theory advocates. I don't think that it is particularly useful to link your sexual desires into a defining principal of your identity. It doesn't necessarily liberate you and it functions to uphold a containment force that is easy to police (both by outside forces and even within the "gay Community"). Wilde could not have been imprisoned for homosexual acts if it had not been defined—named. And the third part of the film *De Profundis* questions the framing of a singular voice in the 1990's gay movement and thereby shatters an ideological framework of normalization, piercing the skin of a homogeneous unified voice. The entire film is about the act of naming, defining and ideas of containment (of masculinity, sexuality, and identity).

When I began this project I kept thinking about the aspects of Wilde's work that focus on political, philosophical and cultural critique. This questioning led me to read all of the biographies of Wilde (at that time there were approximately 7 or 8). I was left unsatisfied. The bio's were more about the prejudices, politics, and vanities of each of the authors and were more anecdotal than serious explorations of the writings of Wilde.

Wilde is often portrayed as insincere—a surface personality, a Liberator, a dandy with no depth—but I saw a social critic who understood that the masks that we wear, when removed, reveal yet another mask, another constructed self. I recognized a connection with Bakhtinian ideas of the carnivalesque and a subversive quality at work/play. Yet what I could not find was a real analysis of Wilde's writings in relation to these ideas and to his aesthetics. Fortunately I came upon two important texts: "The Epistemology of the Closet" by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and "Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault" by Jonathan Dollimore.

From this research it became clear that a similar debate was occurring in the late 1890's to ones currently underway within the gay/queer studies world: the split between the Depth Model idea of identity (that your sexuality—what the sex of your object choice is—determines your identity) versus the queer idea that resists linking identity with the practice of sex. I think one of the arenas that Wilde's philosophy engages, within this debate, is one which acknowledges gender as an involuntary performance and sexual identity as a constricting concept. He understood and exploited the artifice of identities and social positions. It is the idea of the artificial nature of wealth, privilege, and class that Wilde used in his writings to lampoon and expose the moral conflicts at play in the high society of Victorian England. In fact, I believe that Wilde was imprisoned not for bugging boys but for freely crossing class lines with rent boys and lower class faeries and not upholding certain codes of upper class appearances. We must remember also that he was an outsider by virtue of being Irish.

**"IT'S THE SPECTATOR, AND NOT LIFE,
THAT ART REALLY MIRRORS."**

HOW I DID WILDE: The opening story sequence in the film is key. The story is about the first time this Faerie has sex in a public place (movie theater) that is not a "queer space." This draws attention to and

questions the idea of public/private and the act of naming, identifying spaces, and identities. It is also a descent into the underworld of cinema which was fully born the year of Wilde's imprisonment.

The film became an exploration of boundaries, identities, and the process/act of naming. Wilde lived in a time that was obsessed with the categorization, cataloging, and the taxonomy of everything. It was an era that invented Homosexuality—by naming it. Before homosexuality was invented as a category (and therefore by implication gave birth to heterosexuality) a person's identity was not associated with a sexual act, in fact, before this naming, people were much freer to explore their various sexual desires than they are today.

The prison letter of Wilde became my ideological nemesis and I refused to give it the reading of romantic existentialism that the music of Rzewski helped to support. I wanted to show options to the struggle, not just the guilt and repentance. I am much more interested in the resistance, the refusals, the defiance, the absolute will to live uncompromisingly that people who inhabit the margins of society bring to bear on their lives. So I added a Prologue and two additional parts to the soundtrack which focus on language. The soundtrack in Part I consists of loops of Wilde's aphorisms in order to focus attention on the transgressive aspect of his language while exposing the paradox of inversion that his aphorisms turn on.

Wilde was imprisoned in the year of the birth of cinema so I wanted to address cinema in its infancy, and the earliest images of cinema are home movies. I have also found this to be true of early gay erotica and muscle boy movies like the Athletic Models Guild films. I wanted to tease out other readings of these home movie images I acquired of men and boys on a boat—the boat acting as a container just as the framing and language are containers. I also wanted to take something private (home movies and porn) and make it public—continuing the friction between those two arenas. Think about it, what is "coming out" but an act of revealing, to exhibit, to make public. This is also the impulse of cinema—it desires a public arena.

I also want to address the idea of fragmentation. Laura U. Marks, in an article in *Cinemas* titled "Loving a Disappearing Image" raises an issue dealing with identification with a cinematic image which is always disappearing from our view. She asks, "To have an aging body, as we all do, raises the question of why we are compelled to identify with images of wholeness... what is it like to identify with an image that is disintegrating?" And later postulates that the primary identification may be an identification with dispersion, with the loss of unified selfhood. I think that this issue is another key to deciphering *De Profundis*. I have created a cinema that presents a partial image, that continues to disperse, that resists a wholeness. Perhaps this is what is essentially queer about the film—not the desire for completeness or wholeness but to revel in the uncertainties of fragments. ☒

**"ART HAS NO INFLUENCE UPON ACTION.
IT ANNIHILATES THE DESIRE TO ACT. ART
THAT THE WORLD CALLS IMMORAL IS ART
THAT SHOWS THE WORLD ITS OWN SHAME."**



ELMHERST

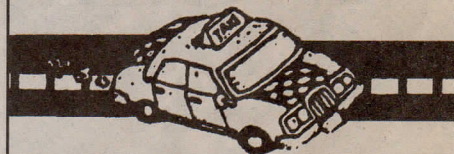
FAMILY RESTAURANT

1599 ELMWOOD AVENUE, BUFFALO
716-873-8733 • FAX 716-873-8549

NEED A CAB INC.
Stefanie's Limousine Service

883-8849

Six Passenger Limo • Nights on the Town
Stags & Stagettes • Affordable Rates



24 HOURS • 7 DAYS A WEEK

By Appointment (716) 886-4663

Douglas M. Scheidt, Ph.D.
Licensed Psychologist

482 Linwood Avenue
Buffalo, New York 14209



PAUL RYBARCZYK

**MASSAGE
THERAPY...**
pleasure
that helps
get rid of
the pain.

- PAIN RELIEF
- SPORTS MASSAGE
- STRESS REDUCTION
- EMOTIONAL WELL BEING

881-6196 LICENSED MASSAGE THERAPIST