

Art in America

Up Close: The Bittersweet Dreams of David Cunningham

By Kevin Killian
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Exterior of David Cunningham Projects, showing Michael Damm's video projection *Incidental Films for an Accidental Audience*, 2008. Courtesy Southern Exposure.

I met the late David Cunningham while straphanging on the 27 Bryant bus that runs west from my office toward my home, from the industrial section of San Francisco they call South of Market on into the Mission. The janitorial firm for which I file and answer the phones bought our headquarters building in the mid-1980s, and it turned out to be on Folsom's lucky side—built on rock instead of landfill. Everything I saw from my window the day of the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake was subsequently demolished, buildings so weakened by the shake as to make human habitation untenable. New structures sprang up on the south side of Folsom, some of which we old-timers like and others we don't. David Cunningham lived in the condo development across Folsom from my office; we call it the "ice cube tray building," because it looks like a display of giant ice cube trays planted into the pavement, behind which dwell people with money who gaze back out at us, kings looking at cats for a change.

A brutalist dazzle of concrete, steel and translucent glass, the Yerba Buena Lofts, designed by Stanley Saitowitz, emerged in 2001 at a moment when ordinary housing was still widely available, when people scoffed at the idea of paying \$400,000 for a bedroom in an ice cube tray. Even though the project opened right after 9/11, the 200 units quickly sold, and lights went on inside each cube. On the ground floor you could open a shop if you dared, and some dog walkers, music teachers and day-care people did. I would see David Cunningham, himself an architect, coming in and out as I sat behind my desk longing for a bigger life. What is he selling, I wondered. Turns out he was planning an art gallery, something fabulous, a pleasure dome he would call DCP—David Cunningham Projects, the logo a Gothic ambigram on a shield, like something on the chest of an archangel. It was before the iPhone, before Facebook got hold of me. Obama was still a senator. J.K. Rowling was still writing her Harry Potter books. Cunningham himself had just turned 40: the age, maybe, when you decide to take some risks, go for the thing you're passionate about, open a "project space." Today, when I stumble among San Francisco's artists and writers and bohemians—frozen, paralyzed, in our crisis of hyper-professionalism and skyrocketing rents—I long to return to the idealism of David Cunningham and the opening of his cavern of dreams, the space that couldn't sustain itself.

Already there's a rich literature about the surrender of city life to globalism, and my friends have written much of it. New York novelist Sarah Schulman published her memoir *The Gentrification of the Mind* in 2013, reenvisioning the AIDS years as a war in which the death of thousands of people was a goldmine for speculators, who bought up whole neighborhoods at rock-bottom prices and tore down affordable housing to introduce a new, nearly unimaginable class of owners to luxury apartments. In a widely read essay in the *London Review of Books* (also 2013), San Francisco writer Rebecca Solnit decried the "Google buses," which transport city dwellers to suburban tech "campuses," with the connivance of a city government that would privatize if it could every existing civil service. When the campuses crept into the borders of our cities, like the invading creatures from *The War of the Worlds*, my wife, Dodie Bellamy, published "In the Shadow of Twitter Towers," in her collection *When the Sick Rule the World* (2015). Bellamy chides San Francisco for turning itself into a room with nothing in it but rich elephants—and an evicted underclass driven literally to killing each other below the gaze of an ever greater number of artisanal markets and shops.

Tasked with writing an account of the challenges faced by art and culture in San Francisco, I addressed the Graces, Solnit and Schulman and Bellamy, pleading, "What can I say that you haven't already said?" And the figure of David Cunningham appeared somewhere behind my irises, a specter, holding a strap on the 27, perfectly turned out in a suit of summer linen, to inspect the renovations he'd made to his new gallery space. He was from Ireland and spoke softly, as though fogs and spirits enveloped the space between his mouth and my ears.

The gallery Cunningham built was on Folsom Street, like his home, but it rose in a neighborhood very different, on what was then among the scariest blocks in the Mission. A huddle of ramshackle row houses, perpetually shrouded by petroleum fumes and gloom, whose salient feature was a set of gray, peeling, outdoor staircases that resembled the battlements in a desolate outpost of *Game of Thrones*. On one end of the block, a gay bar opened, a raunchy gay bar, in the battleship gray and cherry red color scheme that '80s video games stuck to like candy. "Truck," the bar sign read, in the logo of Tonka toys; yet no trucks parked at the curb, no truckers pushed through the door of Truck. It was a ludicrous name, born of some previous age of porn in which trucks and their drivers formed an aspirational model of sexual heat, as if San Francisco were still a factory town, a union town, industrial in any sense. And at the opposite end of the row houses sat the disused garage into which David Cunningham threw his heart and soul.

When I met her at David's memorial last month, at the nonprofit artist-run space Southern Exposure, I asked the writer and curator Christian L. Frock for her impressions of the man we came to mourn. "When I picture him," she responded, "I see a shy smile and very attentive eyes, looking right back at me whenever I looked in his direction, nodding in agreement with whatever outrageous thing I'd just said."

The gallery at 1928 Folsom was that poignant paradox, a sensation slow to catch on. Entering the space was rather like returning to the Paradise Garage or one of the other old dance clubs in New York in the late '70s—shifting mixtures of light and darkness making for an illusion of infinite space. With so many different media at play, there was a richness of surface that intrigued, cajoled, seduced. Cunningham was rather a quiet person, and it was hard to tell what he was feeling from moment to moment. But watching him survey his creation, you could sense his pleasure in it. His first two shows, "Strange Weather" and "Animal Rites," downplayed what he called the "human-centric" approach to issues such as climate change, in favor of less judgmental, oneiric readings, hardly a single

person represented in any of the artworks. There was whimsy, too, mixed into the wonderment: Liz Hickok's large-scale photograph of a glowing Camelback Mountain (Scottsdale, Ariz.) presents a model made entirely of Jell-O, looking as serene as a John Ford desert landscape. Pondering the haunted solitude Cunningham's curation proposed, I thought of Kubla Khan in Coleridge's romantic poem, decreeing a stately, yet sublime underground:

The shadow of the dome of
pleasure
Floated midway on the waves;
Where was heard the mingled
measure
From the fountain and the caves.
It was a miracle of rare device,
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves
of ice!

But really DCP was more like *Xanadu*, the notorious Olivia Newton-John/ELO musical, a "place where nobody dared to go" (its shoddy, seedy neighborhood), in which Gene Kelly plans the greatest roller disco of all time as a way to meld his dreams of the past with the urban reality of the present. If you looked closely, looked into the corners of the space, you were looking at kitsch, at theater space, a glorious, foolhardy show. "Strange Weather" and "Animal Rites" opened in the autumn of 2007, and by 2010 the place had closed its doors, after a dozen memorable and ambitious shows. Cunningham had the knack of making you want to see whatever he presented. My sister, while visiting, said that going to DCP, and burrowing through the mean streets one took to get there, was unsettling but ultimately rewarding, as if the house of Fabergé had built their famous eggs in the dust and noisome mud of the gutter. During its run, you just had to go and see what was coming out of Cunningham's imagination.

I wrote about one exhibition for the blog *Open Space*, sponsored by San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's education department. Cunningham gave artist Anne Colvin the run of his gallery to curate a group show in homage to the UK dancer Michael Clark, in particular to his collaborations with the post-punk band the Fall. Colvin's take on Clark's ballet *I am Kurious Orange* had a group of Mission-based artists, led by Karla Milosevich, plowing through cover versions of the Fall's classics at one event, and during another Colvin presented a messy, perplexing, visceral performance work by artist Marc Arthur and two of his troupe, orange-clad Gage Boone and Stephen Boyer. They looked like Creamsicles melting in the hot lights, vicious Creamsicles, the color of old-fashioned baby aspirin, but so alive.

Did David Cunningham plan to make money from DCP? Collector Michael Schoolnik thought not. When Schoolnik wanted to buy a piece from one of the shows Cunningham staged, "he put me in direct communication with [the artist]. He negotiated the price and refused a commission. I still have our correspondence."

So the gallery couldn't have made much money?

"My wife and I had the very same discussion over lunch. She said the farthest thing from David's mind was money. His passion was artists first."

But presumably if sales were made, then the artists would be happier?

“I don’t remember a single price list at DCP,” Schoolnik avowed.

Cunningham was both in and out of the art world proper, and that seemed fittingly San Francisco, where the landscape that surrounds us shuffles a series of stunning vistas with sometimes sordid contrasts. If there’s an art scene here at all, it often seems accidental, makeshift, the work of exhausted if scrappy survivors of our region’s regularly scheduled seismic disasters. It’s a culture in which local collectors ignore the artists around them and buy in London, Cologne, New York, while great artists throw together gimcrack, perplexingly homemade objects or enact DIY performances with other amateurs. There may be artists here with MBAs and Koons-like factories: there probably are, but from my point of view, the signature artists of this city are those like Jess, who painted his frames, who painted the walls on which his collages would hang, who painted the piano of Pauline Kael’s daughter with colorful scenes from the Oz books. Or Sargent Johnson, who learned from Ralph Stackpole and Benny Bufano how to make massive sculptures that wed modernism to pan-Africanism and ultimately to black pride. Or Ruth Asawa, who turned, after internment in a Japanese war camp and a stint studying at Black Mountain College, to the simple crochet knot, a move that instantly condemned her career to patronizing neglect—for who but a domestic artisan would prefer hemp to steel when creating a sculpture?

In her survey of postwar art in Los Angeles and the Bay Area, *Secret Exhibition: Six California Artists of the Cold War Era* (1990), Solnit attributes the contingent aspects of this art to a situation in which rent was cheap but people were broke anyway. There was, bottom line, no market whatsoever. This had the curious effect of encouraging unlimited experimentation, which included artworks made from permeable, unstable materials, bound for the scrapheap soon after they were created. Obsolescence was built in, which made them unlikely objects for investment. And when a market presented itself, or even beckoned, as in 1959 when curator Dorothy Miller included Wally Hedrick and Jay DeFeo in her star-making “Sixteen Americans” show at New York’s MoMA, the artists sent their wares dutifully but didn’t bother to attend. In the generation after Hedrick and DeFeo, we had the soi-disant Mission School, in which renegades like Barry McGee, Chris Johanson and Margaret Kilgallen would wait until dark, then draw and spray directly on the fences and hoardings of industrial slowdown sites and walk away, leaving their work to the four winds and luck.

In a June 2011 post for *Harriet*, the blog of the Poetry Foundation, poet and editor Garrett Caples revealed a spectacular example of this tendency. Bruce Conner’s 1991 painting *Homage to Jay DeFeo* now stands against the fence of a back garden in Noe Valley, its legatee blocked by terms of the gift from selling the work or acknowledging it as Conner’s or even preserving it from the elements. Gloriously the work revels and rots in the rain and the wind; soon—within our lifetime—it will be reduced to a muddy stain, a sludge. “Close inspection,” writes Caples, “reveals the ravages of the three and half years HOMAGE has thus far spent outside: the bottom has rotted away, a greenish mold creeps across its surface, an almost cartoonish rip runs down its right side, as if planned, between the two black shapes that dominate the canvas.”¹ Until recent times there was a Bataille quality to our art-making, our art-collecting and art-wasting, a continual return to the indigenous potlatch—which was, at least as Bataille described it, an excess of giving and destroying, an all or nothing practice closely linked to the sublime. But, today, in the monetizing climate of San Francisco?

Cunningham died of cancer on Aug. 29, 2015, at age 48. At his memorial service mourners whispered that he died still in debt from loans incurred while trying to keep DCP afloat; that the costs of his illness were not paid for by medical insurance. It was seen as a telling note that he actually died on a plane bound for Ireland, under the watch of his father—returning home to die, and then not even making it all the way home. At the memorial a striking, composed friend carried Cunningham’s pet dog in her arms. The wiry Yorkie hybrid wore an exquisite embroidered jacket; on either side, in heraldic lettering, it sported the initials “E.G.” I asked what “E.G.” meant and was told that was the dog’s name, an affectionate abbreviation of Eileen Gray. Cunningham’s hero was, like him, something of a visionary: an Irish modernist architect and designer, under-recognized in her lifetime, Gray created the Bibendum chair and the E-1027 table, and reveled in comfort and the body. This year a decades-long restoration of her masterwork, a villa in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, France, that she also called E-1027, opens its doors to the public. (Perhaps someday David Cunningham Projects could be restored: there are enough photos and documents in the archive to make it happen.) E.G., the dog survivor, seemed simultaneously sleepy and curious, as though her master’s friends, crowding around her to pet her one last time, were rare animals themselves.

1. poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2011/06/sincerely-bruce-conner-a-final-work-in-progress/