



Still from *Wild Night in El Reno*, 1977. 16mm film, color, sound; 15 min. The Estate of George Kuchar

George Kuchar with Charles Bernstein on *Close Listening* (2009)

CHARLES BERNSTEIN: Welcome to Close Listening, Pennsound’s program of readings and conversations with poets and filmmakers, presented in collaboration with Art International Radio. My guest today for the first of three shows is George Kuchar, whose many films include *Hold Me While I’m Naked* (1966), *Pagan Rhapsody* (1970), *Devil’s Cleavage* (1973), and in recent years a set of self-documenting filmed video journals and another remarkable series of films called *Weather Diaries*. The IMDB database lists over 200 films of George Kuchar. He teaches at the San Francisco Art Institute. *It Came From Kuchar*, a documentary film of the life of George and his brother and collaborator Mike Kuchar, by Jennifer Kroot, was released this year. George—welcome to Close Listening.

GEORGE KUCHAR: Yeah, thank you. What’s that “Penn”? Pennsylvania State?

Bernstein: University of Pennsylvania.

Kuchar: Okay.

Bernstein: That’s where I teach. In Philadelphia.

Kuchar: I’ve been to Philadelphia. I like scrap-ple.

Bernstein: Penn is the oldest secular university in the United States, founded partly by Ben Franklin.

Kuchar: Oh wow. And the Liberty Bell is not too far away?

Bernstein: It is. Cracked.

Kuchar: Okay.

Bernstein: Did you ever read the autobiography of Ben Franklin, the self-made man?

Kuchar: No—I just know that he went to the Hellfire Club—a big sex club.

Bernstein: In London?

Kuchar: He was part of that.

Bernstein: He is known for doing everything himself, reinforced britches and all, that sort of self-inventing.

Kuchar: Okay. And then the thing with the lightning—very famous.

Bernstein: That’s right.

Kuchar: I am interested in weather.

Bernstein: IMDB lists 200 or more films. How many films do you count?

Kuchar: Well, let’s see, there are over two hundred videos—there is a whole pile of videos. Some French guy came over to the house, he wanted to have a big show in France and so I showed him a cabinet full of my videos and he changed the subject. I think there was too much to handle. So he left the house with no scheduling. That was the end of that show.... Maybe there’s forty or fifty movies—something like that. Somebody once did a compilation when they wrote the book. Me and my brother did a book, *Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool*.

Bernstein: Yes—wonderful, funny, terrific book.

Kuchar: I’m glad you liked it. I did the first

half, Mike did the second. And then somebody did a documentation of how many pictures there were and that was a couple of years ago so the thing expanded. The editor of that book... her baby-sitter was the Blue Dahlia or was the *Blue Dahlia* black? I think the *Blue Dahlia* was black and she got murdered and so the woman... I forget her name but that’s alright, she’s forgettable anyway. Her son has a mental disorder where he forgets what happens, you know like in *Memento*?

Bernstein: I guess the key is distinguishing *The Black Dahlia* from the *Blue*. But back to the count. How about the switch that you made from one media to another? From when you and Mike started in 8 mm and onward. How did you feel about each of the mediums you worked with and the differences that they allowed you?

Kuchar: Well you know I’m happy to jump mediums and in fact, it’s kind of like the Frankenstein monster, sometimes you can make a movie....

Bernstein: The film is the Frankenstein monster and you’re Dr. Frankenstein?

Kuchar: They can actually get a disease, they have that vinegar syndrome, and then in order to prevent that you have to have, like, a facelift. And so, you can now put it on digital—you can digitize all of your pictures. I guess in the old days they used to put the movies onto paper?

Bernstein: The earliest films....

Kuchar: The earliest films, you know? So now it gets digitized. I was always for that. I myself will probably deteriorate, like, rapidly....

Bernstein: As a human body... once you die....

Kuchar: As a human body, but people are more interested in the pictures so it doesn’t matter.

Bernstein: The pictures will live on.

Kuchar: I can go—the hell with that.

Bernstein: Are there particular things working with 8 mm versus 16 versus video that you liked? Let’s just talk about those three.

Kuchar: Oh yeah, well with 8 mm the image was small, my eyes were better. And so I was able to edit—even without a viewer.

Bernstein: You edited direct?

Kuchar: Yes.

Bernstein: On the film?

Kuchar: Oh, yeah for sure.

Bernstein: That is tiny.

Kuchar: Very tiny and, of course, I wear glasses now. That may have helped—you know what I mean—my deterioration of the eyes. But anyway I used to work with that and I enjoyed it. And then you had a little chart when you bought the film and it said... if it was bright sun you put on F16 and then hazy you put on F8 and stuff, it gave you simple instructions. So I used to like the simple way you had to make a movie. And of course, the film I think was \$2.65. So we had an allowance that we were able to make movies—my brother and I. My father gave us the allowance. And we had a camera that belonged to my aunt but my mother and aunt had a falling out, because of carnal activity with some of the other family members. And therefore, my mom got us our own camera, which was a Dejur. And

we began making movies with that.

Bernstein: How about when you moved to 16? Did you miss 8 when you went to 16?

Kuchar: Not at all. I began seeing the pictures that were done in 16 mm because I was going to the underground movie shows. I saw you could see all the leaves on the trees. You know with 8 mm you got an impression... We decided, oh, we were working now, we got jobs, so why not get a 16 mm camera? So my brother bought one. Originally, he had bought a big fountain that looked like something from a book jacket by Isaac Asimov, one of the science fiction things. It was a fountain and it dripped water. Then he realized that he spent five hundred bucks on that stupid thing. [*Phone rings.*] The phone is ringing but don’t pay any attention to that.

Bernstein: Well, we planted that, that’s part of... there’s going to be a number of tests on this program to see how you react. That was a quick reaction....

Kuchar: Oh yeah, I’m excited. Whenever the phone rings, I get nervous. I just don’t know what’s on the other end. Answering machines are very important because then you don’t have to be rude to the telemarketers. But in any case... my brother took the \$500 and he bought a camera. It was a Bolex and we embarked in 16 mm. He started a picture *Corruption of the Damned*. Then he abandoned it because he wanted to make sort of a sci-fi picture, which had more of a Hercules feel to it. So he started *Sins of the Fleshapoids* and I took over *Corruption of the Damned*. That began our 16 mm career. I liked 16 mm: the frame was bigger but then I began buying equipment for editing....

Bernstein: Like a flatbed?

Kuchar: Yeah kind of like a flatbed but you just had cranks, it was better for the muscles. You know because you were turning the damn thing.

Bernstein: And you would cut on that thing? You could cut and splice by hand.

Kuchar: There were no work prints then. Actually, I did one work print once, but I realized how ridiculous it was because you had to edit the movie twice. It’s hard enough editing once. Why do it twice? The first movie that I did in color, in 16 mm, was *Hold Me While I’m Naked*. I tried to follow the instructions how to do it right, so I got a work print in black and white because it was cheaper. Then, when it came time to edit the color, I edited it completely different because the color dictated the cut.

Bernstein: So in films of that period, there’s really only the original edited version—there’s not a work print?

Kuchar: No, no work print.

Bernstein: Where is that film for example—is that at Harvard now?

Kuchar: I hope so—it’s out of my closet. You know San Francisco houses burn down and they make them out of wood to make it a little more earthquake proof. But then they burn down. There was a fire next to my house... the first thing I would do would be to grab the cats. I’m not going to grab the films. There are too many of them in the closet and they weight a ton.

Bernstein: Too many cats or too many films?

Kuchar: I’ve got two cats and there’s like—fifty or sixty films? And a lot of them are in heavy cans so I realize, “Boy I’m in trouble, the films are in trouble.”

Bernstein: But all the films are now out and at the Harvard archives.

Kuchar: I got them all out of the house because all the labs closed down. The whole landscape has changed, much to the horror of people who went to film school and learned how to make movies.

Bernstein: Now a lot of filmmakers of your generation felt a kind of regret at the loss of the projected image in 16—going to digital. You don’t seem to feel that way.

Kuchar: No, because you can project video now.

Bernstein: Yes.

Kuchar: People say you fall asleep in video. Maybe it’s true but it’s healthier.

Bernstein: It’s certainly a lot easier for you to edit video on your home set-up.

Kuchar: You have a ball. With the machines, you have now, I have this machine that wedding videographers like. You can get a lot of software with it.

Bernstein: What’s the name of that?

Kuchar: The MacroSystem—they come out of Boulder, Colorado, so the people are nice. Because you go to Boulder and they got that Buddhist place and stuff. Anyway, mellow people. Then you have this machine: it doesn’t do e-mail or anything else.

Bernstein: It’s a dedicated editor.

Kuchar: It’s a dedicated editor.

Bernstein: So you enjoy editing on this and making videos more than you did with 8 mm and 16 mm?

Kuchar: No, I loved 8 and 16... I loved getting your hands on the picture and I loved editing. Then when that went out the door... alright that was fun—this is a new one and this is more fun too. You know what I mean? You don’t touch it but you have to hit the buttons.

Bernstein: But there must be a number of things that you do in video that you don’t do—that you couldn’t do or didn’t do—in 16, and vice versa.

Kuchar: Yeah, you know what? When people are looking in the wrong direction, you can flip them without the damn thing getting blurred. Because when you flip the film, the emulsion was on the wrong side. And also you can turn the stupid thing upside down... the image... and if people look particularly ugly, you can make them look uglier and therefore when people see them in person they look better. I once did an interview myself and I looked so hideous and I saw the footage and I decided to split the image in half and so my Adam’s apple was up near my chin. It was horrible, like monster footage. But somehow it was more acceptable. So you can do all these different tricks. I think with the whole editing thing, if you get enough software, it’s like a giant band-aid kit. You know where you can fix up images and stuff.

Bernstein: I think about your films in the con-

text of the full history of Hollywood films, but less so in terms of television. But now you are doing video. There must be a connection to TV. What is your sense about how you relate to TV in your work? There are a lot of times that TVs are on in your videos in a very eerie way. You have people, especially in those tornado/weather videos... you have a lone TV with an evangelist on or somebody watching it. The TVs are very desolate signals from some far-off place, very often unpleasant material on them. So you use televisions when you shoot stuff, but how about television as a way that you otherwise think about the video work that you do?

Kuchar: Well you know that my televisions are all black now because I didn’t bother converting to digital signals—and what a relief! I grew up on television and I liked it you know, the shots were long and they had long talk shows. Tex [McCrary] and Jinx Falkenburg and stuff like that. I grew up on television—black and white. I never minded when pictures were colored because I would decolor them on my television, since I didn’t get color television until way after it was invented. But television was important.... I make these weather diaries and people say “I want to see twisters.” Well the only way you are going to see one is by looking at the screen where I am photographing a television, because you know those storms are kind of hard to get and once they’re there, you have to head for a cellar. You don’t want to become like a pin cushion, full of splinters and stuff.

Bernstein: What sort of TV shows stick in your mind from the 40s and 50s?

Kuchar: I like the talk shows that were in the morning. They were very long takes and sometimes they sat out on patios with a pool in the background. And Tennessee Williams would be on and he would have his two dogs with him and they’d be slobbering and making all kinds of noises and so during the commercial break, which weren’t too many, they would take the dogs away and you would see him sitting alone. I liked that and I also liked whenever they had a man come on—I forget his name but he used to stencil eyebrows onto people and I loved that idea—it was like an art project. You just stick a stencil onto your face and women would know what kind of eyebrow—they would just follow the lines. I enjoyed shows like that. Then I was envious of women who could stay home, they didn’t have to go to work and could watch all these television shows. Then they used to have Yma Sumac on, and they were experimenting with color. And she would come on and you got to see that exotic woman singing. Then in the evening, of course, you had Milton Berle, the Texaco Star Theatre. Television is important for growing up. Now I don’t watch the damn thing because I am getting older and I’m going to drop dead soon, you know what I mean? I can’t sit in front of the TV all the time, except when I go to a motel and I’m making these weather diaries. Then the TV is on because I get cable. I get like two or three weeks of cable and that’s it.

Bernstein: While you are here in Provincetown, you are watching Fox News. What do you

find interesting about Fox News?

Kuchar: Controversial—they are in your face and they got pretty anchor ladies... the lip-gloss. And Megyn Kelly, she did a whole thing on Fox. I watched it and then I was so flattered that there I was on Fox, like they had a poster from *Thundercrack!* Of course, I was an unwelcome segment because I was considered a pervert who was poisoning the cultural landscape. And that’s fine. Because you know in the old days, if you ever you got a good review in the New York *Times* or another paper, it was a sign, “Uh oh, you are in trouble because your picture is bad.”

Bernstein: Well it’s odd that they picked *Thundercrack!* from 1975 to launch an attack on the NEA.

Kuchar: Yeah. They didn’t want tax money going to.... It wasn’t about the movie because the movie wasn’t done with tax money. It was a few students who got together and wanted to make a picture and they paid for it. They were the producers. But Fox was mad that a venue that was getting tax money was showcasing that kind of garbage. I was so delighted because the rumors of that picture still had impact after all these years. Plus they quoted a line from the poster I designed: “Ecstasy so great that all heaven and hell become but one Shangri-la.” And there I was, I was quoted on that show.

Bernstein: But at the same time, it’s kind of frightening isn’t it? The right wing attack....

Kuchar: No, the more the merrier... People want to see the picture, because it becomes a source of interest.

Bernstein: So you don’t find Fox News, and this kind of right-wing attack on the values that you might have, disturbing?

Kuchar: No not at all. Because otherwise the values would have no value. In other words, you have to have a different kind of value system. And then there could be the clash of the values. **Bernstein:** Do you think of your films as political? Do you think that *Thundercrack!*, which of course, is not your film alone, but you wrote the screenplay, as political?

Kuchar: No. They are mainly heartfelt or gut felt, some of them....

Bernstein: Your heart is a very different heart than the way we imagine hearts to be for more conventional film representations of....

Kuchar: Yeah but I see a lot of conventional films. They are a jumping off point. And then you can put in things that you didn’t see in pictures, like toilet bowls and turds....

Bernstein: So you don’t find that your work offers a necessary alternative view to the way that reality is usually presented, say on television?

Kuchar: Yeah, not necessary....

Bernstein: ... yup, necessary was the key word there.... [*Laughter.*]

Kuchar: You know you pay a price if you want to go in and see something. But, no, not necessary. Because sometimes the plots are... they are there, but I begin with an idea and then the plot may go off someplace else and, also, some of the characters you may not remember from previous scenes. I found that out in one movie. I had the same people in the movie and people didn’t

know it was the same people.

Bernstein: Your work creates a joyous and extremely funny view of ways of life that many people, in the United States anyway, consider immoral.

Kuchar: Yeah probably just because part of my life was a little bit off the tracks somewhere. I didn’t mean it to go that way.

Bernstein: What do you think is off the track? You grew up as a Catholic? Certainly a lot of the things that you think now would not be in keeping with the religious views that surrounded you growing up?

Kuchar: You know the best things are to be thrown out of all these places. I always feel that it’s kind of interesting if you get thrown out of places. It’s a little more freedom.

Bernstein: Thrown out of places in what sense? Not being admitted into the company of....

Kuchar: Yeah... you really wouldn’t be a welcome guest and that’s sort of like... that’s all right because I have other things to do. I can take a walk. I can make a picture and stuff. I don’t have to be trapped somewhere. So I never minded that. And then if these organizations are there, that’s fine, because they can throw you out. Then you can be freer.

Bernstein: They give a little structure or something to bounce off of?

Kuchar: Well yeah but then you always have a model and you can use that model and then make your version of it? Whatever becomes an obsession... I know I can go off the track but hopefully not for a major crash. Although major crashes do help in making other movies.

Bernstein: And yet part of your generation, especially in San Francisco but also in New York, is thought of as creating an alternative culture or counterculture. And there is some connection to what you do that gives a—I want to say voice because I’m on the radio—but, gives eyes to something that’s astonishing, something that’s not otherwise presented. A range of possibilities for human interaction, human community....

Kuchar: Oh yeah, well that’s your audience. You make movies and then eventually you find your audience. Some of them, you are completely ostracized from, even ones that are highfalutin....

Bernstein: Do you have a specific audience that you can identify? Who do you imagine to be the community that you speak to and for? Or do you not speak to and for any community that is in your mind?

Kuchar: Whoever comes into the theater. Whoever pays the money, you know? Once there was a showing of *Thundercrack!*, which is a porno picture, and it played in a museum. But they didn’t bother to advertise it that it was a porno picture. So these two elderly ladies I saw buying tickets, and I was going to say, “Oh, do you have any idea that this is pornography?” And I expected them to go out but no—they stayed through the entire picture, which gave them the opportunity to see a porno picture without anybody thinking they had gone into one.

Bernstein: Does identity politics plays an explicit part in the way that you imagine your work?

Kuchar: No, I don’t think so because the identities are all—a lot of them are me. You know different aspects of my personality—the people in the movies.

Bernstein: Do you have multiple identities as a filmmaker?

Kuchar: In the movies you make, you have your alter egos, and they’ll come on and stuff. A lot of the diaries, of course, I’m in the diaries. I always want to be an actor. So, no alter ego intended. There’s the real person. But then of course you have your face, because you have your real face. But, you know, it’s like a burlesque show: if you take all your clothes off right away, who’s interested? [*Laughter.*] You have to peel off a little bit at a time and then there has to be magic and mystery. Maybe you go behind a screen or something. So, it’s the same way with movie image. I may appear on the picture, but that’s not really the total me. The total me may be quite horrifying, in points. But there’s always a mystery of the person and it should always be there.

Bernstein: You’re part of a generation, and maybe the generation older than you, of North American filmmakers who transformed movies, creating a dwelling place for innovative, independently made film. What are some of the breakthroughs that you associate with some of your contemporaries and the generation before you in alternative and independent filmmaking? Who are the filmmakers that you feel closest to?

Kuchar: Well, you know, it’s a weird community because nobody’s that close. [*Laughter.*] They’re all doing different work and stuff, then they get together once in a while and of course there are—

Bernstein: You don’t feel that you and Michael Snow are doing exactly the same thing? [*Laughter.*]

Kuchar: No, but I like him. I enjoy his work. He used to come to the showings and of course I used him, he came to a class movie and he was playing a musical instrument. And then he and his ex-wife, Joyce Wieland... they made strange movies. I would go over to their loft and they were playing scientific films in 8 mm that were showing how electrodes will activate a frog’s leg and cause it to kick. And they were there with Hollis Frampton. I found their inspiration with these scientific 8 mm movies so interesting. And then you go hear other people, I mean, I’m in school and I find out that commercials are actually activating the imagination of some of the students, that they like underwear commercials and stuff like that and they want to incorporate that kind of style in their movies.

Bernstein: Well, vice-versa, of course.

Kuchar: Yeah, and then eventually it switches over because you see an underground movie and the cameras are moving in all kinds of crazy ways, and then you see it in commercials and other things. So, I love that kind of cross-over of people getting inspired by everything else. And the underground filmmakers—I’ve known a few—and they’re kind of interesting. Stan Brakhage, he was a big influence because

whenever I got sick, he had so many illnesses that he would say, “Oh, this one ain’t important. There are worse things that you can go through.” He was like an uncle. Ken Jacobs, I remember, he had a picture and he didn’t bother cutting the ends off into the little, the punch-holes, to show what kind of film it was on. I asked him about that—“How come you kept that in?”—and he said that he liked the way it looked. Then I realized, yeah, it did look good. So, when I was editing *Hold Me While I’m Naked*, I saw those holes and I liked it also. So, you know, things open you up. You just go to movies and then, in a way, you’re a receptacle and then in your own digestive juices, you spill out something else, you know, incorporating a lot of stuff. It’s a great tradition. One of the great, flattering things is if somebody has seen your picture and they are actually reproducing their version of a similar kind of thing. Because people kept telling me: “David Lynch, he stole your big lips thing. You know, putting lipstick on people. Aren’t you mad?” And I would say, “No, I’m really flattered.” I doubt if he got influenced by me. I think sometimes there’s something in the air where people latch on to something. Because you find in a lot of inventions—sometimes they happen simultaneously. So, maybe that’s it. Otherwise, I’m always flattered. Like, please, do take.

Bernstein: You’re a remarkable sound editor. I wonder what you think about, well, let’s talk about your recent films, for example, *The Weather Diaries*, and how you’re using sound. Sometimes you’re using movie music....

Kuchar: Yeah.

Bernstein: ... that you have from LPs. You overdub and so on. How do you see the relation of sound and image, Mr. Kuchar?

Kuchar: Well, it’s very important because sometimes a scene is on too long and you like it but it needs something else. So I found that if you just have music, it’s not that good, but have a song with lyrics, then people are able to accept the long length. I once had an actress and she had very long pauses between her sentences, and it was just a little too long for the pacing of the movie. So, when she mentioned fog, I spliced in foghorns going, and stuff like that. So, sound is very important because it helps carry the image and keeps the rhythm of the movie. I never objected to music behind people either. People say... oh you know.... But I say when you go to an opera, you don’t say, can you please lower the music I want to hear the voices. You know what I mean?

Bernstein: The balance, between the words and the music.

Kuchar: Yeah, like there’s too much music in this opera! Plus, I enjoy music. A lot of times I play it when I’m washing dishes and when I’m editing and you can hear it in the background. I got a giant record collection, and music is very important.

Bernstein: So, all the music that you use, for example, in *The Weather Diaries*, is from your collection?

Kuchar: Yeah, from the collection. I have so

much and that’s going to be horrible when I try to move. In the early days, I had a boom box, and I had tapes and I would bring specific tapes along which had, you know, mood music. And I knew what mood I was going to shoot this particular scene in, so I would line up a tape and then when people were talking and it said something kind of sad or important, I put the music on and it would pipe into the room like a loudspeaker. Of course, it wasn’t a loudspeaker because it came from a boom box, but it was loud enough and it had no fidelity, but it aided the mood that I wanted. Therefore I didn’t have to edit music into the picture later, because it came actually from right there when you were shooting it live.

Bernstein: You are better known as a filmmaker than as a writer. Do you think of writing as a primary thing, or just something that contributes to the films that you’re making?

Kuchar: It’s another expression. In other words, I loved writing because actually you can compose, you know, when you’re writing, it’s composing the shot of the sentence. You can get the sentence rhythms and the repetition of sounds of the words. It’s a lot of fun to move words around like in editing. And I love writing: it’s cheaper, a hell of a lot cheaper than making a picture. And also, you get all these mental images and you try to convey what you’ve seen via words and get that whole mood. So, to me, it’s a wonderful form of expression. I really liked it. And every once in a while I get the opportunity. Mainly now I write because people, students call up and they say, “Could you give me a recommendation?”

Bernstein: Yes, I have that too: *The Collected Letters of Recommendation*.

Kuchar: Yeah, they come as a barrage. So, I’ve been writing them and I have now a whole collection of recommendations. And it’s really a lot of fun because you think of the person, then you try and get the words that represent the ba-

sic feel of the person, but also make it sound like a movie poster. Like these words blast out at you, and the talents that the person has.

Bernstein: And your titles themselves, the hundreds of titles that you created, are themselves a kind of poetic masterpiece, it seems to me.

Kuchar: Yeah, well, you know what you have to do, Charles? You have to think and break the ice. There’s nothing more horrifying than you finish your picture and now what the hell is this title going to be? And so if you break the ice and just keep writing down things, even the most horrible titles... And the worst one I ever had was *Unstrap Me*. It was for a love story. [*Laughter.*] And I said I couldn’t get that out of my head. It was the worst. So, I had to break the ice and I said, no, this is it. We’re going to call it *Unstrap Me*. And so, it became that. You know, it hits you. Like, this is it. This is the title. Sometimes you get it and it’s just a matter of rearranging the words in the previous examples when you were writing, and then you just rearrange it. And then, this is it, you know. But that’s usually the final stage. I should save a lot of these, because sometimes I’m writing and I come across some good ones that don’t quite fit the movie, then I throw away the whole list. I should save them for pictures to come.

Bernstein: You’ve been listening to George Kuchar on Close Listening. The program was recorded on August ... what is today’s date?

Kuchar: Well let’s see, I don’t know, I leave in a couple of days but I....

Bernstein: August the 13th....

Kuchar: Okay—and it’s not a Friday....

Bernstein: ... 2009, in Provincetown, Massachusetts with thanks to the Chaim and Renee Gross Family Foundation. For more information on this show, visit our web site, writing.upenn.edu/pennsound. I have a tendency to be Charles Bernstein. Lighting and costumes by... Close Listening.

Still from *Wild Night in El Reno*, 1977. 16mm film, color, sound; 15 min. The Estate of George Kuchar

