



## Molly Corey's *Live Like Him!*

By Juli Carson

*Time appears to have stopped, disappeared...He stands outside of and apart from his familiar ego, all its protective barriers having been shed; and this can lead in some to transcendent experience, while in others to a deep panic. To those for whom their ego is their only possible self, the only possible mode of consciousness, its disappearance is a kind of death.*

- Gerald Heard, *Psychedelic Review*, 1963

Molly Corey's video installation *Live Like Him!* begins with a visual catachresis. As a steady-cam sweeps up the Great Western Staircase of the New York State Capitol building in Albany, a male voice-over incongruously describes the effects of a bad acid trip:

*In August of 1969 Mary, David, Terry and I dropped the most powerful psychedelic drug I have ever in my life taken...and it destroyed my ego. It was a completely devastating experience because I told David that he was gay and needed to come out. I told Terry and Mary that Terry was dominating her and that they were going to break up. I was Cassandra. I told the truth and I spoke the future, but I spoke it 6 to 8 months before any of it had happened. I came out of it with a psychotic break. I didn't know what I was going to do. And so sometime in late October, which would have been after the Days of Rage, we had this young man who we called Mike passed onto us by a bunch of people...so Mike came to stay with me.*

Thus begins the story of Mike, the phantom subject of *Live Like Him!*, which structures the background "narrative" of a video documenting the architectural details of a building designed in the revival style of 11<sup>th</sup> century French and Spanish Romanesque, and erected in the years just following America's Civil War. As the narrative unfolds and the gap between image and spoken word increases, we learn the details of a love-story between our narrator and Mike, a young man who turns out to be an exile of the infamous Weather Underground Organization. Committed to a radical alteration of the policies of the U.S. government during the twilight years of the Vietnam War, the Weathermen took their name from Bob Dylan's song "Subterranean Homesick Blues" wherein he famously declares: *You don't need a*

*weatherman to know which way the wind blows.* Corey's conflation of 19<sup>th</sup> century Neo-Gothic architecture with 20<sup>th</sup> century Psychedelic and Left undergrounds is strikingly curious. Curious, that is, until our historical consciousness is piqued. For upon closer examination, these two moments, exactly 100 years apart, exhibit near identical cultural crises and aesthetic sensibilities.

But there is more to consider here. Hanging adjacent to the projected video is a picture within a picture, bringing to mind our own moment of historical reflection. In a larger than life-size photograph, Corey stands holding a family photo-album opened to expose an image of Mary, the artist's mother, along with her fellow communards as described in the video's audio-track. Standing in front of an American flag, they appear to be holding vigil before a figure that is cut out of the image. Upon this excised figure someone has typewritten the words "Live Like Him!" In reality the cutout figure is that of the fugitive Mike. But in the context of Corey's installation it is also a general stand-in for the phantom ideal of a 60s lifestyle and political stance, a specter that haunts the current crises over civil liberties in the context of America's ongoing war with Iraq.

### In search of better times...

In Situationist terms, *Live Like Him!* represents an act of *détournement*. Accordingly, elements of well-known media are re-used by Corey to create a new work with a new message in direct opposition to the original. The effect is a psychic drift through history where any linear notion of dialectical time is dismissed. And yet such evocations of the past necessarily activate a certain sense of *longing* or even "homesickness" in us, the very state of homesickness the Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer had in mind when he invented the word "nostalgia" in 1688 to describe a mental disorder. Ever since then the word has been associated with an idealization of an "authentic" past vis-à-vis a so-called "inauthentic" present, relegating nostalgia to the prison house of Humanism. Humanist notions of longing typically belong to the arena of historicist time in which temporality is constituted by/from a discrete point of (meta)retrospective. Based upon the successivity of events first articulated by Thucydides, this model of history operates upon classic teleological narration whereby a transcendental position of "now" operates as the platform from which the historian retroactively posits a succession of clearly delineated "befores" and "afters" in relation to a given contemporary event.

Indeed, for Guy Debord, the founder of the Situationist International, there was a way in which Europeans lived *before* the capitalist "event" of the U.S. Marshall Plan. As he famously put it in 1967: "The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*." Hence "all that once was directly lived has become mere representations."<sup>1</sup> As an antidote he proposed the ad hoc construction of "situations" intended to rupture the spectacle through the "construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into a superior passional quality."<sup>2</sup> One year later, the events of May 68 exploded in France and reverberated globally. Consequently, from 1968 to 1972 an international generation of students, intellectuals, workers and others transformed through direct action their longing for a better, alternative form of life that they perceived to have existed before post-war modernization. Strategies for a pre-industrial lifestyle, however, differed amongst those who constituted the Left in the 60s. Whereas Debord followed the mature writings of Georg Lukács on class-consciousness, ideas influenced by Lenin's belief in tactically working *within* the bourgeois world, the American Weather Underground followed Lukács's earlier affirmation that revolutionaries "proclaim a total break with every institution and mode of life stemming from the bourgeois world."<sup>3</sup> This was the radical communist backdrop for an American 60s psychedelic culture that "dropped out" of societal norms in favor of collective living, free love and open experimentation with mind-altering drugs.

And yet 60s Psychedelia wasn't the first instance of socialists dropping out in pursuit of a better way of life. In political attitude and aesthetic sensibility, they were re-enacting key principles of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Arts and Crafts movement, inspired by the neo-gothic writings of John Ruskin popularized in the 1860s. Reaching its height in the 1880s, the same decade that the New York State Capital building was finally completed, the Arts and Crafts movement inspired a life of pleasure through the idealization of Pre-Raphaelite craftwork. As one of its primary proponents William Morris put it: "The new society will not be hag-ridden as we are by the necessity for producing ever more and more market-wares for a profit...it will produce to live not live to produce as we do."<sup>4</sup> In this spirit, Morris designed furniture

Cover: *Live Like Him!*, (detail) bench fabric, 2007

Left: *Live Like Him!*, (detail) chromogenic print, 2007

Center: *Live Like Him!*, (detail) video installation, 2007

Right: *Flower Garden*, Woven silk and wool. Designed by William Morris, 1879

inspired by the craft ideals of Ruskin, who had earlier asserted: "The right question to ask, respecting all ornament, is simply this: was it done with enjoyment?"<sup>5</sup> Practitioners in the Arts and Crafts movement went on to produce tapestries and wallpapers that would later influence Art Nouveau, and both movements became key influences on the characteristic patterns of 20<sup>th</sup> century psychedelic culture. These mid-19<sup>th</sup> century aesthetic and political sensibilities converged with the first wave of American civil rights activism in the years following Andrew Johnson's ascendancy to the presidency after Lincoln's assassination in 1865. And convergences between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries didn't end there. More than a century before the Summer of Love, 1855 marked the year the Free Love movement took off, when Mary Grove Nichols argued that marriage was the "annihilation of women" because it constituted a form of social bondage.

#### Time appears to stop...

Entering Room Gallery, we are invited to sit on benches that Corey has designed to reflect the crossroads of Arts and Crafts and Psychedelia aesthetics. Perched there, sitting and watching the video, time seems to stop before our eyes. Classical linear time, that is. For the manner in which Corey returns to these historical moments departs from the humanist models of nostalgia noted above. Through a series of strategic audio and visual edits, a structural operation unfolds that endlessly defers any discrete historical moment lived *before* now. This operation loosely follows Jean Luc-Godard's claim from his film *In Praise of Love* that history and love are both defined by four moments: meeting, passion, separation and reconciliation. Certainly, in *Live Like Him!*, this trajectory is mirrored by the narrator's love story. As Corey's camera-eye slowly wanders up the Grand Staircase of the Capitol Building, we hear how the pair first met. Mike was a fugitive. We hear of their passion. Mike saves the narrator from a fall into deep psychedelic psychosis. We hear of their separation. The narrator spends years looking for facsimiles of Mike. And finally we hear of their reunion in the space we are looking at – the top of the Grand Staircase:

*Mike and I climbed up the stairs together, talking about history. And a lot of our conversations about what went on with us took place in this amazing monument to a very progressive moment in American history. He's now very much involved in progressive politics and anti-globalization. He looked wonderful. He looked like Abraham Lincoln with white hair.*

And just at that moment of cinematic "suture," when the protagonist is finally described in the space that we see, we are thrust back to the beginning of the video, at the bottom of the stairs, once again looking for Mike in an historical-libidinal labyrinth. When Corey syncopates this four-part operation with the three historical periods evoked by the narrator – the 1860s, the 1960s and 2007 – any sense of time defined by discrete categories of "before," "now" and "after" collapses. For the moment we are given to look back on is the moment of *looking back* itself, just as the narrator today looks back to his world of the 1960s, which in turn looked back to the world of the 1860s. Like Mike's figure cut out of Corey's family photograph, these moments are only ever present through their simultaneous signification, which is to say their mutual *effacement*. This sleight-of-hand initiates in us a psychic game of *fort-da* (or

gone-there) *not* in order to search for lost times but for the ability to clearly *grasp* a singular moment before it retreats into an endless regress of non-differentiated historical periods. Again, this operation is activated by Corey's three-part editing strategy. When the narrator recounts his psychotic breaks, the steady-cam meanders through the Grand Staircase in a succession of disorienting pans. Each time the narrator mentions particular people from the 1960s, the various "protagonists" of the love story, Corey gives us still shots of the faces hand-carved into the Grand Staircase's brown sandstone a century earlier, faces of revolutionary heroes like Abraham Lincoln or Susan B. Anthony. And finally, with each mention of our phantom Mike, the screen goes blank.

Ultimately this blank screen serves as a placeholder for our own historical contemplation. Just how *do* we live now? There are so many nostalgic, romantic returns to the 60s today, but there is no turning back to previous times, as Lukács, Debord or the Weathermen might have liked. This is the strength of a project like Corey's, one that posits temporal simultaneity against historical chronology. Today one can either be dialectical in the service of nostalgia – this moment versus that one – or one can posit these moments as continuously breaking down, allow them to do so and then point them out. How is this a critical, aesthetic strategy in contemporary art production? Simply put, the reason that humanist nostalgia is so troublesome in the current political and aesthetic landscape is that even though a progressive thinker might be attracted to the politics of Debord, his brand of nostalgia produces the same problematic account of history as those conservative political figures today who dialectically posit myths of a "then" versus "now," a "here" versus "there" and, by ideological extension, "democracy" versus "terrorism." In reality, for a certain branch of critical aesthetics where a more deconstructive take on historical consciousness reigns, it is taken as a *self-evident truth* that historical presence represents the *real* "quagmire" from which there is no escape. That said, it is not a war "over there" that should befuddle us as cultural producers, but the conflation of the Right's historical fabrication with the Left's historical memory. On this note, *Live Like Him!* provides us with a critical space in which to *breathe life* between such poles of thought in service of a better way to live.

- 1 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, (New York: Zone Books, 1994), p. 12.
- 2 Debord, "Toward a Situationist International," in *Situationist International Anthology*, (Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), p. 22.
- 3 Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), p. xiv.
- 4 William Morris, cited in Kenneth Frampton's *Modern Architecture*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), p. 42.
- 5 John Ruskin, cited in Frampton, p. 43.

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