



WIDE ANGLE IN MEMORIAM
OWEN LAND

After years living in obscurity, the acclaimed avant-garde filmmaker found a last surge of creativity in his final years

By Mark Webber

Owen Land (formerly known as George Landow) was one of a number of filmmakers who emerged in the mid-1960s in a loose group centred around Jonas Mekas in New York. This younger generation constituted the second wave of American avant-garde that followed in the wake of post-war pioneers such as Kenneth Anger, Maya Deren and Gregory Markopoulos. Land was one of the first to make films in which not only the form but also the content was dictated by the medium. His *Film in Which There Appear Edge Lettering, Sprocket Holes, Dirt Particles, Etc.* (1965-66) does exactly what it says on the can: it foregrounds the physical material of the filmstrip and those imperfections that laboratories and projectionists usually work so hard to conceal. The film became one of the touchstones of experimental cinema and a prime example of 'structural film' – a term that Land (like many others) rejected. Over the next decade, he mocked this and other theoretical discourses, using wit and visual invention to make films that are among the most popular and widely accessible works of the avant-garde.

All the films made during this main period of activity were credited to George Landow, but towards the end of the 1970s he began to use the name Owen Land. The reason for this name change is one of many biographical details that remain unexplained following his death last year – Land(ow) has always been something of an enigma, a mysterious character who had a habit of disappearing, suddenly leaving jobs, relocating to different cities or severing contact with friends and colleagues.

In the late 1990s, two decades after his last-completed work – *On the Marriage Broker Joke as Cited by Sigmund Freud in Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious or Can the Avant-Garde Artist Be Wholed?* (1977-79), a film just as magnificent as its title is long – he materialised in Berkeley, California, and began working on an ambitious 16mm feature. *Undesirables* was inspired by a conversation Land once had with Stan Brakhage, in which they speculated which actors would portray avant-garde filmmakers in the Hollywood version of their lives. (Orson Welles would of course be Brakhage.) About 40 minutes of footage was shot, but all that survives is a rough, 11-minute edit done for fundraising purposes. It's a hilarious inside joke: thinly veiled caricatures of recognisable filmmakers appear in scenes that are stylistic parodies of classic avant-garde films such as *Pull My Daisy* and *Critical Mass*.

Though his earlier films were regularly being shown, Land himself slipped from public view in the 1980s. Having left his teaching position in Chicago, he spent a year-long residency in Japan, made two rarely seen videos and returned to college to study painting. My first contact with him in 1997 coincided with the



A modern affair: 'Dialogues' or 'A Waist Is a Terrible Thing to Mind'

preparatory work on *Undesirables*. Two years later, I invited him to introduce a solo screening as part of the Whitney Museum's 'American Century' exhibition. He agreed to travel to New York and make a rare public appearance, but six weeks before the event, letters were returned undelivered, his telephone was disconnected and Land was nowhere to be found.

When a VHS tape of excerpts from *Undesirables* surfaced three years later, it was shown in the 40th New York Film Festival. This was an unauthorised screening, organised in the hope that if Land were still alive, he might attend or at least make contact; when the festival passed without incident, there was speculation about his untimely demise.

Then in 2003, I chanced upon a phone number I suspected might be his mother's. I dialled the number and explained I was a calling from London in the hope of finding a filmmaker who I thought was her son. Asking about Owen Land proved fruitless, but when I mentioned George Landow, I was surprised to hear her call him over. What felt like minutes passed, but eventually a very frail-sounding man picked up the phone. Owen was surprised, if not shocked, that I'd found him. Though he never told me directly, he had suffered a stroke which left him so debilitated he'd gone to live with his elderly mother at a retirement community in Florida.

Land was resident in this facility for assisted living while we collaborated on the 'Two Films by Owen Land' and touring retrospective 'Reverence'. These projects revived interest in his work within the film and art worlds, and

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revitalised his creativity. In 2006, planning to make a new feature, he moved to Los Angeles, where members of the local film community rallied in support. Eventually he settled in the tiny apartment where we finally met in person a couple of years later, but our contact became more sporadic – other people were helping now, not least the Belgian gallery Office Baroque, which had begun to represent him. Production on his new film was intermittent and often troubled (see *In the Land of Owen* on Vimeo, a funny featurette made by disgruntled crew members), but it was completed with funding secured through Kunsthalle Bern, where it was to premiere in spring 2009.

Land described *Dialogues* or *A Waist Is a Terrible Thing to Mind* as his take on the legend of Parsifal, in which the protagonist is a "pure fool" who thinks he can find the Holy Grail "between a maid's legs". The reality of viewing the film isn't quite so poetic – it's a relentless sequence of some 50 discrete episodes shot in the harsh clarity of digital video. Despite brief glimpses of idiosyncratic absurdity and some genuinely inspired visual ideas (like the *Arforum* cover brought to life), it's unfortunately tainted by crass, sexist humour. Many scenes fall flat at dead-end jokes, or seem to be constructed only for the purpose of having yet another young woman take her top off.

Having said all that, there's much about *Dialogues* that I enjoy, and Owen's determination to make this last film against all odds is certainly admirable. He died destitute in his LA apartment in June 2011; the circumstances are still unknown. *Dialogues* is the epic swansong that concludes a remarkable body of work. It's a long two hours, but you can be certain that you'll never see anything else quite like it.

i Owen Land's final film 'Dialogues' or 'A Waist Is a Terrible Thing to Mind' is showing at London's ICA on 19 September