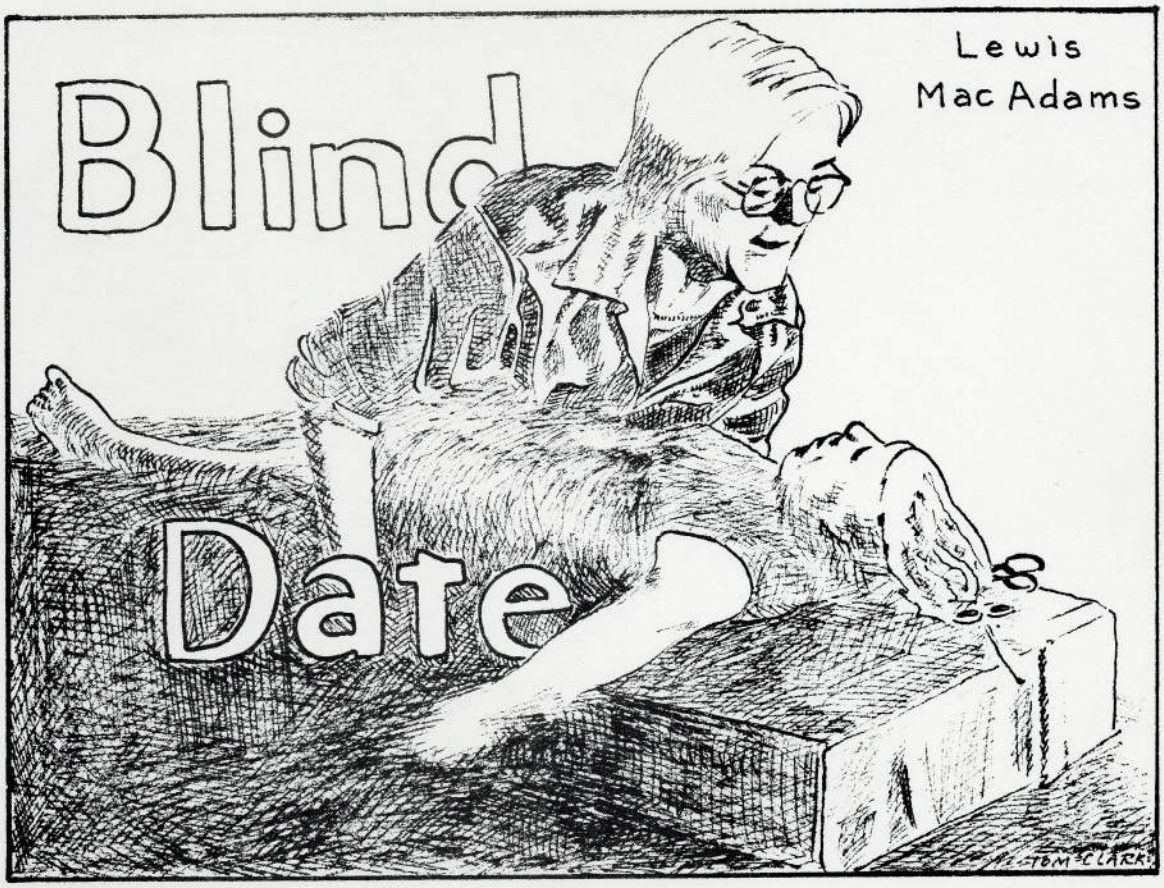
Blind
Date
Lewis
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BLIND DATE

Lewis MacAdams

Am Here Books / Immediate Editions

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John Duncan was trained as an artist, trained to be an artist, and he took his training to an extreme. He went to Tijuana, and tape-recorded himself having sex with a corpse. With what he later described as an "indescribably intense self-disgust," he returned to the United States to have a vasectomy, in order, he later wrote, "to make sure that the last potent seed I had was spent in a cadaver." He then scheduled a performance. He called it

BLIND DATE.

Many of those who had gathered in the raw brick warehouse next to the Atomic Café in Little Tokyo were friends of Duncan's and brother and sister artists. Others had been attracted by the intense gossip and wor-of-mouth surrounding Duncan's most recent pieces. In his performance, For Women Only, an all-female audience was shown a collage of 16 mm. hetrosexual porn, then invited by Duncan into an adjoining room to fuck him. Most of the viewers, reportedly, were repulsed. One took him up on his invitation. In another piece that Duncan called SCARE, the artist, wearing a wierdly snouted Beagle Boys mask and stocking cap, knocked on friends' doors in the middle of the night; and, when they opened, shot them with a blank-filled gun. "He shot and I slammed the door in his face. It blew me away," one of his victims recalled. "Until I realised that it was JOHN." Still, very few of those gathered in the warehouse were quite ready for the details of Duncan's Tijuana report.

The room was dark and Duncan visible only from the waist up as he began reading from a prepared text. "Try to imagine," he begged his audience, "how it feels to be bodily thrown out into the street from a porn store after asking them to find you a corpse. People look at you like you are scum. But after the third or fourth store, you don't feel a thing." But eventually Duncan found what he was looking for -- for ten dollars someone gave him the phone number of a compliant Tijuana mortician. Duncan called him. For eighty dollars, the mortician agreed to supply him with a corpse.

Duncan described for the audience the feelings he had as he manuevered his old Buick down Interstate 405 toward Mexico: "Driving down the Interstate, you're numb with hatred for yourself. You just want the whole thing to be over. Every time you pass a bridge, you wonder why you don't just steer your car over the side." In Tijuana, Duncan found himself a cheap hotel, then went to a drugstore and bought some vaseline and a box of condoms. Then he made the phone call. In a few minutes, a pasty-faced mortician's assistant arrived to take him across town to the mortuary. The assistant led him into a workroom, then wheeled in the paper-covered cadaver. The assistant checked Duncan for cameras, took the eighty dollars, then left him alone with the body. "The first thing you notice," Duncan told his audience, "is that the body is female and that it is intact. Her face shows that she worked hard for a long time. You were half-expecting to see the mangled result of a traffic accident. You look for some sign of her death. When you find no marks, you feel a numb relief." Duncan also noted a faint smell of formaldehyde in the air as he stroked himself erect. Then he fucked with death.

Alex Grey is a young performance artist from Columbus, Ohio who now lives in Boston. He began to investigate death in his art work in 1973 when he accidentally hit a dog with his car on a freeway and killed it instantly. He stopped and loaded the dog into a plastic garbage bag and hid it by a river. Five weeks later he went back and got the dog and took its picture. Then he kicked the dog into the river. In 1975, Grey says, he found a job in a morgue doing embalming and other preparation of bodies. At the time, he says, he was heavily into reading Elisabeth Kubler-Ross who wrote that the fear of death was the primary fear, that to overcome fear we had to overcome the fear of our own deaths. Grey began to do art in the morgue -- a piece called Deep Freeze in which he locked himself in a dark freezer with twenty dead bodies for three minutes; another called Life, Death and God in which he tied one end of a rope around his ankle, the other end around a corpse's ankle, looped the rope around two screw-eyes seven feet up a wall, then somehow suspended himself and the corpse, perfectly balanced and upside down, for one minute. "I saw it," he said later, "as the ultimate resolution of the ultimate polarities -- life and death. It was like a metaphysical yearning. If you could love death, I figured, you could accept and love life more fully."

One night in 1975, Grey had a dream: "I was fucking a seductive and beautiful living woman who rapidly aged and died as we were making love. Suddenly, she clamped her arms around me and the sides of our bed became the enclosures of our coffin. The dream was terrifying," he reported, but it forced him to take his death pieces to their conclusion. On March 16, 1976, Grey and his wife Allyson, herself a performance artist, a photographer, and what Grey calls "an active participant in my craziness" snuck into the morgue. While his wife took photographs, Grey picked out a female corpse, one missing its brains and the top half of its skull. Why one that had been so mutilated? "I guess because it horrified me. I guess that's what I wanted to experience." Then he and the dead woman made love.

"Did you come in the corpse?" I asked Alex. There was a pause at the other end of the line. "I'd rather not talk about that. I can't say anything about how I got into the morgue, or what actually went on when I was with the corpse." As he spoke I stared down at the photo his wife had taken while he was on top of the body. "You appear to be grinning," I ventured. "I wasn't really smiling," Grey insisted. "It was just a wierd camera angle." I asked if I might speak to his wife. In a moment, she was on the line. Allyson and Alex Grey have been together six years. I asked her if it made her jealous to photograph her husband making love to a corpse. "No, not at all. Because I knew the piece was less about sex than about exploration." "Were you afraid?" "No," she insisted, "I was only afraid of Alex getting caught," Almost as an afterthought she added "Like many of the things Alex does, I started out saying 'Don't do this;' but by the end I understand why." I asked Alex if he were afraid. "After doing the morgue pieces," he replied, "I felt a lot less afraid of death. On the other hand, I felt a lot more afraid of the moral and karmic consequences of my actions."

"There is a point to all this," John Duncan told his audience, which was by now either squirming or in a state of shock. "The point is that death is at the center of the myth of man." Then Duncan turned on the coital tape. "It just sounded like a bunch of furniture being moved around," Linda Burnham, the editor of High Performance, remembered. Somebody else remembered it sounding like an alley full of bowling balls. Duncan's piece ended with the audience in shocked silence.

Barbara Smith is a performance artist whose own works have pushed out at the edge of human conduct. The daughter of a mortician herself, she once did a piece called Piercing The Corporate Veil, which required her to lay in a coffin, naked under a pink organdy party dress, for nineteen hours, while viewers were allowed in to view her one at a time. Although nearly twenty years John Duncan's senior, she lived with him for two years after he graduated from Cal Arts. She was in the audience for Blind Date. "Each person just sat there coping with John's piece the best way they could. Myself, I couldn't deal with what he was saying at all, because it was so destructive to my life. I just sat there and turned it into pure sound." Paul McCarthy, who has himself been labelled "the reigning ogre of extremist performance" by critic Peter Plagens, listened to Blind Date from outside. "I felt obliged to appear," McCarthy said, "because John is a friend; but I felt the piece was socially self-destructive. It certainly made John a pariah in the downtown art community. And I think there's a danger in being rewarded for a self-destructive act. There's NO WAY BACK if you want to keep on getting that kind of attention."

After Duncan's performance, the shit hit the fan. The word spread fast. There was talk of pressing some sort of charges against the artist, although nobody could figure exactly what sort of charges to bring. A short-lived call for a trial of Duncan by his fellow artists died of guilt and embarassment. But when Duncan brought the prepared text of Blind Date to Linda Burnham for a documentary issue of High Performance, Burnham refused to publish it. "I found the piece highly morally objectionable," Burnham explained. "I didn't want to be responsible for putting that material in front of anyone, especially my own daughters. By publishing his documentation, I would be continuing the piece. And I'd rather be guilty of censorship than that. What John did was attack a woman. She was only dead a few hours," she continued plaintively, "How do you know that the spirit was gone from her body?"

Winos lurched dangerously around the corner of Fifth and Wall Street and illegal sweat shop sewing machines hummed downstairs as I knocked at the metal door of John Duncan's loft in downtown Los Angeles. Duncan greeted me with a firm handshake and led me across a greasy cement floor to his cold, windowless loft room. In his sensible brown work shoes, his khaki pants belted high above the waist and his shirt buttoned at the wrists and collar, Duncan looked every inch the Kansas Presbyterian he once was. He smoked a pipe full of Philosopher-brand tobacco contentedly and stared off into the middle distance as he played me his notorious tape. First came the sounds of the corpse's paper wrapper being crumpled up and removed, then came what sounded like wild dogs gnawing endlessly at human flesh. It was an excruciating twenty minutes.

"The whole point of the piece was to get a message across," Duncan explained quietly after the tape had run its course. "I wanted to show what can happen to men when they are trained to ignore their emotions. I wanted to show by example how divorced men in our culture are from their own feelings. I disagree entirely with Linda Burnham. I thought it was less like rape than having sex with a living sheep or cow would be. Having sex with a dead body is like having sex with meat." Duncan poured us two big mugs of cinnamon tea. "I wanted to have sex with a woman who was cold." "But why call it an art piece?" "Because I was trying to objectify my becoming numb and self-destructive."

"When I started out in Ohio, when I began to work as an artist," Grey told me, "I was a painter; but I began to be influenced by Otto Muhle and Herman Nitsche and the Viennese Actionists. Nitsche's just been flinging animal guts around now for the last twenty years; but at the time I was very young and the emotional content of their work somehow touched me. I decided painting wasn't adequate to what I wanted to do." "What did you want to do?" "I wanted to reflect the sadness and the psychological discomfort of living today."

Duncan looked down at my tape recorder. "Now just a minute," he insisted. "None of what I'm saying is actually an admission of having actually done it." "Right," I concurred, "But making it with a corpse - was it actually a turn on?" "No, not really. I had to fantasise alot to keep myself hard. But I've used some of the same fantasies with women I've fucked who were alive." "What sort of fantasies?" "Oh, you know. Just fantasies about women I've never had sex with." "Do you consider yourself to be a necrophiliac?" Duncan took the pipe out of his mouth and smiled. For a second I felt as if I were interviewing an Oxford or Cambridge Don. "I suppose I would be if I continued to practice it." "Do you plan to continue to practice it?" "No." I asked him about the complete Grove Press works of de Sade that I had noticed on one of his metal bookshelves. "I was reading de Sade," he said thoughtfully, exhaling pipe smoke, "to understand about a man who tried to separate sex from love." He shook his head. "But de Sade was written so long ago, it doesn't seem as if love meant the same things then that it does today. I couldn't get into it." A well-thumbed copy of Club Magazine on the floor was open to a beaver-dominated centerfold. "Been getting any lately," I wondered. I looked around his cold, damp loft. "No, as a matter of fact. I haven't made love with anybody since I did this piece."

I shivered in the bleakness of his loft. "But the real danger in doing the kind of work I do," Duncan went on, "is that concentrating on these extremes can be so addicting that one seeks life situations which constantly reenforce ones sense that the world is bad off. And I do think it is that bad off." For the first time I noticed the notorious Beagle Boys mask from Duncan's piece Scare: it was hung from a dummy head, staring at his bed. "I think you ought to move to a new place." He ignored me and continued. "A number of people who do the kind of work I do feel that in order to continue living, they have to look for a way of feeling and expressing love." He puffed on his pipe. "And that is very difficult to do when you see life as so bleak. But the culture we are living in is in such a state that artists must take extreme action to make their work so striking that people will pay attention to it. But it's a risk." Duncan got up and went to his stereo and put on a record: the medieval English yodelling of Public Image Ltd.'s Paris Au Printemps, I asked Duncan "What have you risked?" "What have I risked? I've risked the ability to accept myself. I've risked the ability to have sex, which I enjoy a whole lot. And I've risked the ability to love."

Duncan's losing the ability to love is what worried his old friend Barbara Smith. "I keep wondering," she said "where is John in all this? Where is John going?" I suggested that maybe Duncan hates women. She dismissed the notion. "When we lived together, he was always extremely sensitive to my feelings, and from the beginning he was very sympathetic to the womens liberation movement. He was one of the first men I know to join a men's group. If he would have fucked a man, it would have been the same thing. What he did was an insult to the life force. What John is doing is mortally dangerous."

"The piece was powerful and incredible," agreed his friend Paul McCarthy, "and it really made people think. But it put John in a social no-man's land. Alot of his friends don't want to be around him anymore."

For Linda Burnham the issue was clear: "John has created something that most of us felt was wrong. He should not have performed that action. It was a crime against humanity."

I asked Duncan if he thought his soul was in mortal danger. "No," he laughed, "but I think the piece was a step toward my own death. Towards committing suicide."
"Are you going to commit suicide?"
"No. And I'm not going to have sex with a corpse again either." "Do you think that you have violated a taboo?" "I wasn't thinking about taboos at the time. But if I hadn't violated something people wouldn't have been this upset. One of the things this piece showed me though was that people don't accept death. Until the body is completely dust, people can't accept the fact that someone is dead. To me the corpse was like solid matter that had nothing to do with the person who had occupied it."

"I only wished I could have talked to Duncan before he did the piece," Alex Grey lamented. "I might have been able to spare him so much mental agony. Four years after I did the necrophilia piece I was on a heavy LSD trip, and I hallucinated a trial of the souls involved with the piece. I met the soul of the women I had sex with. She was extremely angry and screamed at me, saying "Didn't I know I was violating her and that she was a person just as I was even though she'd been dead two weeks?' I was so sorry, disgraced and disgusted with myself for having used her body for my own work that I cried and begged forgiveness. But she did not forgive me, and I was put on a kind of probation by the judges for the rest of my life. They said I was only to do positive, not harmful or negative works. A day has not gone by when I haven't thought of the necrophilia piece. I feel like I'll be working out this karma forever."

The physical and metaphysical violence in America is churning up a new generation of saddhus, artist-detctive-mad-and-holy-men bringing back reports from the nether world, triumphant victims of their own metaphysical yearnings. It is easy and attractive to say that art has become the religion of our era, but it is also possible to believe that art has become our era's science, too. If one does not dismiss Alex Grey, for instance, as a madman, then one has to pay attention to the fact that he has gleamed some of the hardest evidence yet that the mind exists beyond the body. But can we even take art further? Has art replaced morality as our common, given body of instinct-feeling-thought? Has art carved out a territory for itself where art is the universe and art a good enough reason for any act? Alex Grey wouldn't say so. The judges have put him on probation. John Duncan doesn't say so. "I think art is within morality," he concludes. "I think that Blind Date was positive morally, because it caused so many people to think strongly and respond." But both men know that they have violated something very strong and very profound. Both men know that they will always be known as men who fucked the corpse. "And I haven't finished my investigation of death," Alex Grey insists. Grey and Duncan are among our bravest investigators. Yet there is something in the universe that seems almost to be pushing back as these artists push forward, something that for want of a more modern word we still call taboo. What is this force that says "Halt! Your spiritual journey has gone quite far enough?"