

## THE LOOK OF LOVE Carlo McCormick

Best known as the videographers whose dedication to and documentation of the New York music scene produced an epic catalog of rare live concert footage, Emily Armstrong and Pat Ivers brought their prescient understanding of the emergent media of video and broadcasting (via local cable television) to the similarly and simultaneously emergent cultural forms of the city at that time. It's easy to recognize this in the extensive catalogue of concerts they captured as hosts of their own *Nightclubbing* show on Public Access TV and as the first VJs at the first Danceteria, where they would record the bands playing in the club downstairs for patrons in the video lounge. And yes, of course we like that in NYC, where sometimes it's just not enough to lurk towards the very back of the concert with our arms crossed and a slightly bored expression on our faces, we might actually prefer to distractedly watch the whole thing from a couple of floors away on a television monitor. This potent confluence of a culture and its mediation however hit a sublime note of personality and provocation in Armstrong and Ivers lesser-known triumph, *Alone at Last*, a document of something even more outrageous and outré than the punk scene of their music videos.

Intended to engage viewers with a kind of then unheard- of interactivity, which of course proved far more costly and involved than technology could allow in that era, *Alone at Last* was never properly presented to the public and has languished lost and forgotten for more than a third of a century since. This too, like so much else about this work, seems emblematic of that era, where creative riches met fiscal impoverishment and artistic ambitions struggled constantly against budgetary restrictions. Time has served this undue absence well, for what would surely have been defining of its era and somehow iconic is now more a relic of curious heritage and obscure function—a talismanic invocation to a distant past and near-extinct society. What was meant to be some sort of Rorschach test to measure desire and locate identity in an age when these things were considered a bit more fluid if not outright migratory exists now like some antiquated medical instrument of dubious purpose—something less useful for our own self-examination than revelatory of the way we used to be.

If the early 80s were still in continuance with a sexual revolution that had already been waged by a few generations at that point. People (especially in a city like New York) were working with a slightly better map but still finding cause for experimentation and exploration to more fully fathom the dimensions of human sexuality. This frisson between knowledge and mystery is something that seems kind of quaint and even cute now in what is otherwise a very adult, even confrontational project. Decades later our level of understanding then seems clumsy and incomplete, built off of polar dichotomies like gay/straight, boy/girl, top/bottom that fail the more complicated and nuanced models we require these days. There should be no cause for nostalgia in this, but surely we can appreciate the kind of underground subcultural currency that difference once represented before society allowed the issues of gay marriage and LGBT rights to normalize this formerly fraught field of diversity. Perhaps we may applaud ourselves for a far more sensitive, aware and tolerant perspective and toolkit to parse out the variables of personal proclivity, biological hardwiring and social membership that come to define us, but let us still appreciate that time and space where all this diversity could come together and celebrate difference, find pride in what others shamed, and even embrace these old stigmatizing notions of deviance as their own aesthetic paradigm.

*Alone at Last* is a fifty-plus person portrait of desire as we understood and acted it out in those very last days of America's great sexual awakening before AIDS wiped out the most adventurous and permanently changed the attitudes and behavior of most everyone else since. But it is also something wholly more. Cast directly out of the community, *Alone at Last* features the artists, musicians and nightlife personalities that constituted the heart and soul of the New York scene then. These were the friends of Pat and Emily, and just as crucially though perhaps harder to remember now, the friends of friends, because such was the integrity and intimacy of Downtown New York—just being there was the terms of participation. And though this work does not speak to it directly, it manifests the discrete libertine currency of sexuality and youth where a large portion of us worked in one form or another for New York's booming adult entertainment industries. If at times it feels a bit like a peep show or exaggerates and exacerbates the unhealthy symbiosis between exhibitionism and voyeurism that has always motored our televisual experience, well, this was very much the vernacular of the time. Emily Armstrong and Pat Ivers were artists and media radicals who knew how to seize the tools of mainstream representation and use them to portray and promote the underground. Here then are the come-ons that media always uses to sell something let loose as its own poetic language of lust, a kind of post-modern Dating Game redirected from the prudish and prurient gaze of Middle America to the perversities at the fringe, a way to resist the homogeneity of our ongoing bedroom farce with a brutal cut-up of our backroom fantasies. ■