

Carlo McCormick

Then as Now

Long before that September aggression took down the ugly towers, formally ushering in the terror of a new millennium, and having the unfortunate effect of having America decide that it actually loves New York City, there was an earlier ground zero in town. One could suppose with our predisposition for violence and war, as well as our ever-escalating accumulation of armaments and appetite for atrocity, there have been many ground zeros, with likely more to come. Ground zero marks the spot of impact, a place where things began or came to an end, and while it is more easily imagined as a bomb-like crater in the ground, it can also be a modest hole in the wall coffee-house or bar where new ideas and strategies of an equally explosive nature are hatched. For my generation our Ground Zero was a gallery by that name on the north side of Tomkins Square Park in the East Village. Much was born there, and in full honesty just as much came to an untimely end there, murdered in the massacre of creativity.

Regardless of the endless malapropisms of George W. Bush, that president who got us into two wars in a frenzy of fear without ever quite being able to pronounce the word nuclear, it is wonderfully the very same word that describes our most unthinkable of weapons as our most basic of social units. And somehow when I think of the Van Cook-Rombergers these terms converge for me into the nuclear bomb family. Or is that the nuclear family bomb? This then is a story from that time before, when most Americans quite rightly loathed New York, and the feeling was reciprocal. And because it just so happens to be the easiest way to weave time into an epic narrative, it is the story of a family that lived before and after the invasion of normalcy in New York City. Maybe not quite the stuff of those sprawling multigenerational sagas that become bestseller books and blockbuster movies, it is perhaps something of the sidewalk stoop reminiscences by which the memories of a neighborhood are passed down to weave a more solid identity of place against the urban onslaught of change.

Ground Zero's brief and brilliant lifespan occurred within the equally short-lived heyday of the East Village art scene. Part of an impossibly unsustainable overgrowth, the gallery James Romberger and Marguerite Van Cook launched was more rooted by their tenure in the neighborhood, something more like the thorny undergrowth that could not be so easily cleared away by the commerce paths of the art market. Their gallery was part of a spectacular flowering, but one too fecund to last, a time like the overripeness of late summer evenings redolent of decay and almost wistful in its abiding sense of mortality. No doubt Marguerite and James might see it quite differently, but their whole project seemed reactive to the populist, commercial, touristic and kitsch tendencies within the scene. It was anything but friendly in that way. It was hardcore, the sum of all our antisocial aspects exponentially magnified by the community of our collective discontent.

It's hard to fathom what exactly the mandate of Ground Zero might have been, though I suspect if you asked James and Marguerite back then they would have said it was just about showing their friends and the art they believe in. Surely there couldn't have been much of a business plan as the art was the most difficult work of that time in just about every way imaginable, but if we would ascribe a single aesthetic to the art, then the absolute negation of ground zero would be as apt descriptor as any. Yes, the gallery was largely an experimental laboratory for the work of its artist-owners, but what they allowed there was often beyond the pale. Mike Osterhout, one the scene's most irascible conceptual artists, created an ominous and uninviting installation called "Hell" that consisted of covering the walls with red satin drapes and the floor with gravel from which emerged a single propane-fueled flame. Even more outré was the collaboration

Carlo McCormick

Then as Now

between Richard Kern and David Wojnarowicz that featured Kern's gory and gruesome film *You Killed Me First* amidst an equally ghastly and grizzly installation by Wojnarowicz that recreated the dining room/abattoir of the film's family slaughter with gut-wrenching fidelity.

You Killed Me First was the story of the ultimate in dysfunctional family dinners, starring Wojnarowicz as the emotionally remote dad, Karen Finley (who I remember telling me in this time that the only reason to go home for the holidays was for more "material" for her trauma-informed performance art) as the shrill mom, and Lung Leg as the abused and misunderstood daughter who screams the film's title as she finally slaughters her family. And it's hard not to laugh about this now as the kind of living room drama that might play out in the lives of this family of James, Marguerite and Crosby. This was the kind of 'home-movie' that played well in our demimonde of bohemian transgression. There are other memories I might associate with Ground Zero and this most atypical family, all so vague as to be highly doubttable today. I remember some LSD shows, and even taking this family with me on a show I curated down in Richmond, Virginia around then where all the artists were given a nice dose of acid and let loose to wreak havoc on the gallery. It was in all a spectacular explosion of id over the boundaries of ego, but while all the other artists sprawled their madness all over the walls, James and Marguerite took a more modest space in the midst of it all, fuming with whatever anger was fueling them that day, creating an otherworldly little smudge of minuscule drawings and tiny texts which we all presumed constituted some sort of horrific fight/bad trip the two happened to be having never so much uttered as allowed a given form in a smear of amorphous confusion.

They say it takes a village to raise a child, and indeed if some of these stories make you think of the need for child services please know that, however unorthodox as it must have appeared, Crosby was loved and looked after by many. Nothing about the whole family, child-rearing thing could have been easy for any of them, not that it ever really is, but the neighborhood wasn't exactly child-friendly back then. Heterosexuality wasn't quite the norm, serious coupling suspect of bourgeois sensibilities, and people with children dismissed as breeders. The few playgrounds the neighborhood had were more frequented by junkies shooting up than toddlers actually playing, and while everything about this lawless zone seemed so well suited to our radical childishness, little of it would seem safe or sane for an actual child. And when it came time for that soul-crushing homogenizing process we call schooling, they were the very first enrollees in a new kind of school here that would try to reflect our community's social enlightenment rather than its economic impoverishment. Many years later my kid would go to that same school, now quite a hard place to get into, as would even the child of our neighbor and *You Killed Me First* auteur Richard Kern.

Perhaps in all that we've learned from the art Marguerite and James have made and shown over the years we've also learned so much more about what to do (and, by worst example, not to do) in terms of raising a kid in the city and in a way that reflects our values without unduly scarring them. Even though they live in spitting distance from my place, I don't see James or Marguerite all that often these days. I do however see Crosby with some frequency, he's a super cool kid making amazing shit and hitting the scene with an intensity and integrity you just can't fake. Sometimes, when I squint I can see both his parents, still fighting and making love within him. And sure, in those times I see how he's just as crazy and full of crap as we were, but by any measure I know of, he came out great. All our lives have gone on since that misspent youth, and for many that did involve having families that were biological and lifelong in ways that were both

Carlo McCormick

Then as Now

decidedly different from and yet profoundly inspired by that communal family we all cobbled together out of our mutual discontent those many decades ago now. Few of us however ever had this dysfunctional conversation that is a family in so public a way, or shared so generously the gift and curse of the nuclear family with everyone around us. That they continue to be a family in their amazingly weird way, and that they can now share this conversation as a body of collaborative work made between them, is something like that impossible gift that just keeps on giving.