Sätty is Dead By Michael Bowen



It was a cold day in February 1982 and the sun was going down over the bay casting its long shadows from the old military piers at Fort Mason onto the water and over the fishermen carrying their little buckets of the days bay catch. They hauled home the battered and rusty casting poles with their buckets of fish and crusty brown crabs strung on them slung over their shoulders quickly walking thru the intense dark and light of the giant buildings shadow. The scene reminded me of the eerie black and white shots in German director Fritz Langs grand film noir creations of the 1940s. I stood feeling the asphalt lose the heat of the day thru the soles of my Mexican huaraches as I waited outside of pier 2 for Satty. Tonight was the opening night of the Grand Exhibition, and my final attempt at a definition of Visionary Art. Norman Stieglemeyer, Phil Linhares and I were supposedly the originators of this weird little art movement. The landmark show that actually started Visionary Art was created by Phil Linhares a few years before at the San Francisco Art Institute Gallery. Norman and I were participants. I was involved because a strain of my work, as did Sattys deals with the subjective issues of psychic energy. Somehow I got stuck with the fame, or infamy of the Art Institute show. So tonight's opening was an attempt by me to define the pile of confused and commercialized images into something that represented what actually was being produced as the product of artists experiments with altered states of consciousness. Satty and I had known each other since the late 50s and early 60s, San Francisco's period of urban struggle and deep Bohemian renewal. I am happy to say that Michael Bowen and Satty had many adventures together, some were wild sexual episodes in the first of his many underground bunker rooms. In those pre aids days the amount of libidinous female nymphomaniacs flooding San Francisco's beat generation north beach during that early fertile artistic explosion was astronomical The first mirrored fur lined bunker cave Satty created was during the time he had a loft on the waterfront embarcadero. His loft, like the rest of our lofts on the

waterfront was his home and his party pad. Each of our lofts had a different ambiance.

Sattys was heavily jazz and all night party oriented. Others like Arthur Monroes and mine were full of giant canvases and the smell of oil paint, and heavy on banquets for our milieu from whatever fabulous foods luck and the Gods would bring us. There was Beat writer Jerry Kamstras loft, stuffed with books and rare photos, Big Daddy Eric Nord had the original party pad model right around the corner from Monroe, McCracken and I on Commercial St. Dr. Reidar Wennesland the great art collector and far sighted genius was a constant visitor at all of our studios, building what has now become the most important beat art collection in Europe. Dr. Wenneslands support enabled all of us to survive and keep on creating art. On one level, I think Satty developed the first of a long line of these underground bunker caves as a way to find a little romantic fun and privacy from the flow of people in and out of the loft scene. But Satty had a deeper more compulsive reason. He was driven by his childhood trauma of war and the consequent fear exposure on the earth's surface. He felt comfortable as deep underground as he could go. Along with the art of collage Satty had developed the Art of the Elaborate bunker. Over the years the Bunkers became more complicated and baroque. Satty many times told me of his admiration for the magnificent palaces and underground grottos built by Bavarias mad King Ludwig. His last, largest and deepest bunker cave become the talk of the town. Here he would meet his final tragic fate. Everybody who visited San Francisco or was part of the Citys hip scene from actor Mike Douglas to Herb Caen to Wim Wenders to me to the multitudes of assorted freaks, porn stars, lawyers, politicians and dope gangsters all wanted to crawl down the hole into Sattys Bunker. For a while it was the underground place to see and be seen. And then in the late 70s Sattys scene began to slowly crash. But before that, in the early days when it all began Satty was working as an engineer designing Bart, the San Francisco under ground rail system, coming home at night from that square world he would throw off his straight clothes and relax with a big joint or maybe a pipe of opium furnished by some of his Persian friends. One night when we were walking along the Embarcadero taking the air together as good friends were wont to do, he suddenly turned and told me he was quitting his job before Bart could fire him. At first I was a little shocked that he would throw away his gig and be scrounging for food like the rest of us off the backs of vegetable trucks or for grain which had leaked out of some bag during a ship unloading at the docks near our studio lofts. It was then he quietly began to tell me the story of his child hood in Nazi Germany. Of the cites burning, the chaos, the paralyzing fear as he watched the fires of Dresden's

holocaust burn from a distant hill during the children's evacuation.. The American and British air fleets bombed the civilian population of Dresden. They purposely created a firestorm by the bombing pattern they chose in the incendiary attack. Thousands of people who sought shelter in the underground subways were melted and turned into liquid human sludge by the heat of the fire. As a child Satty was helpless to understand what monsters could do such a terrible thing. As an adult Satty was hurt and bitter that there had been no Nuremberg trials for the American and British war criminals who had created this crime against humanity. It always bothered him that Dresden's subways had not been engineered deeply enough underground. As an engineer of air conditioning and air flow he believed it was his duty to bring this dangerous deficiency to the attention of his bosses at Bart. They told him to shut up or they would fire him. So he quit. The more I thought about what he was saying the more I began to realize exactly how right he was. He could not identify them, but he realized some of the human race could not be trusted. Some humans are bent on a path of greed and cruelty to others that passes all normal understanding. He knew that Bart could be dug deeply and air conditioned efficiently enough to shelter people from all kinds of disasters. Satty had a noble spirit. It was from this point in his life, his firing from Bart, that he really became an artist. He needed a way to express his deep feelings and insights and he began to develop his art of collage.

Now it was Feb. 1982 The name that Ferlinghetti and I had chosen for the show was flapping in the wind from a huge banner we had hung across the entrance to the pier. "The First International San Francisco Armory Show. Ferlinghetti wanted to recapitulate the original Armory show in New York at the turn of the century. I think he was really trying to create a place for himself as an artist in history. Strangely enough he and I and Jackson Pollack and some others including Ginzberg for his manuscripts and Burroughs for his manuscripts and Franz Kline and Larry Rivers and my old comrade Arthur Monroe were all together in the Whitney Museums "Beat Culture and the New America" exhibit which traveled the U.S.A. from New York to the De Young Museum in San Francisco in 1996. Of course Sattys work should also have been included in that landmark exhibition. Ferlinghetti and I had tried originally to get the City to give us the old mediaeval Armory building deep in the Mission district, but the City needed it to house some of the thousands of hungry and destitute people who were now part of the normal peacetime San Francisco environment. It was Oct 1982 and I was freezing standing in the cold in front of the exhibit hall.

I was anxious about Satty. Where was Satty?

When Ferlinghetti and I first conceived the exhibit Ferlinghetti had been coming over to my studio at 2140 Pine St. I had rented the place from the Jamerson family. They were a black family who originally got the property when the Japanese owners were put into concentration camps in world war 2. Mrs. Jamerson had always rented her houses to white artists or musicians. I never could figure out if she thought of us as white trash, or geniuses, or what. She had been the patron of Bill Hamm who invented the light shows in one of her basements. Her artistic son Jamie was always trying to fix the places, but there were too many deteriorating parts of the dilapidated Victorian for one man to maintain. Jamie Jamerson was a friend of Sattys, and like Satty he was a noble man. Ferlinghetti called me up one day and asked me if I would give him painting lessons. Red bells should have gone off in my head right then since he had cheated me in 1970 out of royalties for my City Lights book "Journey to Nepal" which is now in 1998 a \$100. Classic collectors piece. Ferlinghettis treatment of poet Bob Kaufman whose work he published made me feel bad about doing anything with him as well. I remembered how Bob Kaufman wandered broke and hungry lost and mumbling for years in the streets of north beach, while City Lights sold his poems. Nothing came to Bob. Certainly not his basic needs. Except for the few friends who would give him money every day, he was left to starve and pick up cigarette butts out of the gutter, while a block away Ferlinghetti sold Bob Kaufmanns thoughts to tourist from Europe and Japan. The tourists customers never realizing that they had passed the tattered black genius author in the dirty streets as they clutched his poems in their plastic City Lights tote bags on the way back to France or wherever...

But my excuse is that I was living with a crazed porn star named Serena who was making my world tremble, so I guess I was originally tempted by Lawrence with the possibility of making some money and getting out of her financial claws. Ferlinghetti had wanted to charge admission to the Armory show, kind of like going to a circus. I thought maybe this would be a way out of the backrent I owed Mrs. Jamerson at 2140 Pine St ,and maybe some money to fix the ceiling in my studio which kept falling in on the household. Rama, one of my kids, actually had to wear a football helmet around the house to protect his head from pieces of the falling ceilings which had mysteriously and crazily been patched with concrete in the distant past.

So here I was waiting for Satty as night finally fell and the people came trickling in to pay their five bucks for the Visionary artists freak circus. Satty had been the first person I asked to participate in the Armory Show. All the others except Satty, Spain, Ferlinghetti,

George Herms and myself, had been asked to pay a rental fee of \$200. The idea was to mix the unknown artists with the known to give the former a ittle prestige they ordinarily would never get. There were 50 artists, so that came to around \$10,000. To run a months show at the biggest pier in San Francisco it was not enough. Naturally the ones who made money by selling their paintings to the public were happy, the ones who didn't became very paranoid and attacked the Director. Who unfortunately was me. I got left holding the bag, as they say. Ferlinghetti had scooted when he saw that controversy coming down, only to appear at the last moment in time for the press photo op on opening night and then, poof, gone in a puff of smoggy yellow smoke. As I was waiting for Satty and shivering there in front of the giant maw like door of pier two I was remembering that first request I made to Satty to be a part of this now gigantic show. I went to his studio to let him know about what Ferlinghetti and I were planning at Fort Mason and invite him to participate in the Armory Show. I found myself knocking on his studio door for half an hour. His phone had been disconnected, the windows were taped over with some opaque something. It was general knowledge in our mutual circles that he was behaving more oddly than usual. So I knew he was having problems. I really wanted to help him if I could. I guess by that time we had known each other for 25 years or more. Many times we shared were rough just to survive, but many other times we laughed and exulted together at the changing society we thought we were bringing about. Those early days we lived together were full of youthful power and determination.

Sometimes we just spent getting high with each other on the good old time Mexican pot, and walking around our magical San Francisco soaking in the beauty of an anomalous American city which seemed to us to have been transported from a fabled realm in another universe to this benighted U.S.A. Now the Monsters rule America and beloved San Francisco is full of trash, disease, madness, lurking killers, indifference and gibbering idiots on every corner left to roll in their own filth every night in the doorways of our once wonderful San Francisco. As for Mexico, its pot is as bad as Mexico has become.

But that fateful day I pounded on his door until my knuckles hurt. Anxiously pounding that door for so long opened an insight into my psychic feelings. I somehow knew that there was now a cold ice running thru our Karma. For Satty some mysterious force had manifested and become powerfully present. This force isolated him. How this came about I do not know. Sometimes I wonder if Satty himself let in this mysterious deadly power. His new associates in the 70s and 80s were either less intelligent than he or were part of a legion of dark energy. There was Anton Levy the high priest of Satan, and

the Dracula like black cape wearing Dr. Caligari who didn't have a shred of humor in his being. One evening Satty told me casually that Dr. Caligari had jumped off the Golden Gate bridge. Satty remarked that maybe Dr. Caligari thought he was really Batman instead of Dracula as his cape flapped in the bay wind as he headed for the hard icy water. Others who I would meet at Sattys in those latter days gave me such a case of the creeps that, sadly, I went to see him less and less. When he would come to my house he almost seemed relieved. Life for Satty had gotten bad. His faithful wife, dear sweet Martha had left. Martha was gone. With her going new weakness grew in Sattys life, like holes in a leaking Dutch dike. The flood of disasters had begun an irreversible momentum which arose like a giant Tsunami woodcut by Hokusi pushing Satty toward an inevitable sea of despair and death. Satty had an auto accident. An incredible auto accident that should never have happened. One could almost say an accident that only could happen with the help of diabolical forces. He drove in his car with morons who were inhaling ether. Satty tooled his car up the wrong way on the pre earthquake Broadway freeway exit ramp which spilled out in to North Beach its daily load of smog belching cars. Sattys car roared head on into an oncoming truck ,crushing several bones in his foot. When I saw him that last time his foot was not getting much better, several people had tried to get him out in the air and into some kind of activity, Gene Schoenfeld, the famous Dr. Hip would go by to check on his medical state.

My knuckles were really hurting now. He finally opened the door and furtively asked me in with a kind of quick glance down the street trying to see if the kids from the housing projects had followed me. He shut, bolted and locked the door. He began to tell me how the local project people had broken in and stolen and smashed some of his things. Satty didn't have the standard objects that thieves desire. TV, new stereo, jewelry. So they just spent their energy tearing up priceless manuscripts. The ignorant bastards even wiped their asses with pages from Goethes works from one of Sattys 19th century books.

Satty looked terrible, his face and hands were bloated and splotchy from the cheap vodka which he drank for the pain in his foot straight out of the bottle ala Alan Watts. His studio was crammed with work he had been producing all alone one floor above his dark and final bunker cave. Satty had created the elaborate Chinatown series, complex dynamic masterworks of collage. A tremendous pile of finished originals about San Francisco lay on his desks and worktables. so much priceless art, such a hopeless situation. I began to become absorbed into his depression.

Satty, like most of us in our north beach bohemian group, had relied on the old artists trick of parties to bring the people to bring the sales. For years it worked for him. But lucklessly his patrons increasingly became the idle San Francisco rich. The normal modus operandi of these society folks is to run faster than rabbits in heat when things get serious. And events did became very serious for Satty. Sitting in his wing backed chair in front of me was one of my oldest comrades in life who had now fallen on such hard times. Life for Satty had become suicidal and self destructive as well as just plain tough. The only gift I had to offer him other than a sympathetic ear and buyers for his work was the exhibition that I was cooking together with Ferlinghetti. At that point I thought I could count on Ferlinghetti at least about Satty, and maybe about the show as well. Satty and I stayed together in his studio for about two hours. He went on talking about conspiracies and desertions and the danger of media overload in the society especially children and adults mixing pot and television together. Satty believed this combination would create a direct channel into the brain for the conditioning and imprinting of the population by the monsters that would soon control America. I agreed with him. I still agree with him. I think for America it is already too late. The dumbing down of the majority of the population has already occurred. So we talked, and I left with his promise that he would participate in the Armory Show some months hence. I desperately wanted to give him something to look forward too. I called some people I knew who were interested in buying from Satty. But it was useless also. They went by his studio and pounded and knocked until their knuckles hurt. Finally they just went away. That's the last time I ever saw my noble friend

Its February 1982 and I am still shivering in front of the giant pier, waiting for Satty. But now I feel he is not coming. Somebody walks by eating a sandwich, I can smell its hot meat, Tom Albright the art critic walks up, we talk, "IM waiting for Satty" I say, He lights a cigarette, funny I think to myself, didn't Tom have a lung removed from lung cancer? Tom flips his cigarette into the darkness like the Raymond Chandler character he was, he walks away. Some stupid socialites walk by making stupid remarks, I see Ferlinghetti heading for the door of pier 2 and the waiting press photographers. I think I should say "Hey Lawrence, IM waiting for Satty" But I don't, too useless. George Herms the assemblageist who has come all the way from L.A. for the show walks by lugging a grave marker he found somewhere for his "Shrine to the Unknown Artist". When George walked by with the gravestone I knew Satty wouldn't be coming that night, or any night. I knew that Satty was dead. The signs were clear, the night was cold, I started to walk into the big building. Now night has fallen. There is no Moon Alex Geluardi, my friend, Sattys friend,

and the poets patron, runs up to me, breathless, panting. " Michael, Satty is dead."

Satty died on opening night at a show he was never meant to give in an accident that everyone who ever went to Sattys studio worried might happen to themselves, namely falling down the precarious ladder one had to make ones descent on to reach the bunker cave.

Now its 1998 I am sitting writing this story far away from San Francisco. American students rank lower in academics than any industrial country on earth. American citizens celebrate the American dream by eating out of garbage cans in every city of every state of the union. American homeless are a new class, along with American homeowners. The President of the United States, Clinton, who our deluded Psychedelic minds believed might be the first president with an expanded consciousness, has just sold American nuclear secrets to China for some cheap election money. Condemning us all to a new future of thermonuclear duck and cover neurosis. Something is very wrong in America the land of the free and the home of the brave. The Monsters do rule America now Satty was right. But nobody listened. Satty was a noble man. He fell down a hole and died







Michael Bowen - May 1998

Notes to Images

- 1. the woman with the paper "satty is dead" is alex geluardi (she is the poet patron in the story who gave me the news of sattys death, i added the caption to the paper she was holding in my photo)
- 2. the photo of pier 2 was taken by chris felver as we began to work on the building for the 82 armory show.
- 3. the collage, sepia tone is the "magician," 1963 first published in Bob Brannamans "Fux" magazine from that period.
- 4. the announcement and clip about "visions of elsewhere." this landmark show occured about 10 years previous in 1971.

Add/View Comments to this page.

Wilfred Sätty

Copyright 1998 Michael Bowen