

Soltan Karl (1985 - 2011)

An account by Maximililan Le Cain
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A tape arrived at the (so to speak) offices of Close Watch Films yesterday containing what can only be identified as another piece of video work by my cryptic acquaintance Soltan Karl. And the only identifying feature was the handwriting: the address on the envelope (a tatty white envelope with no padding, a corner of the mini-DV cassette already poking through the paper...) and what I take to be a title scrawled on the tape's label: *Coming Soon*. Anyway, I've now added a title card which brings this epic up to forty seconds in length. It's a simple, intense, slightly brutal juxtaposition of flesh and stonework textures and is comprised of shots lasting no more than a few frames each - a video as eloquently terse as its maker.

Yes, I have met him. When I last spoke to him on the 'phone, I asked if I might write something about him here - impressions more than facts, as he's nothing if not stingy with hard information about himself. He responded as I predicted he would. An amused, dismissive snort. When pressed, he elaborated this into a staccato and rather nasty snigger. 'Do what you want - I'm above it, anyway...' That was my interpretation and if there's one thing I'm sure of, it's that, for some reason, he's given me the right to interpret him. And if he disapproves of what I say, I'm certain not to hear about it.

He first contacted me last year in consequence of having seen my Youtube videos by accident. No direct praise, of course, but a request to see more of my work because he's suddenly got more time to get stoned these days and it's good to have something stupid to watch while doing so. Delighted that someone had finally found a good use for my videos, I posted a stack of DVDs to the specified P.O. Box in Gibraltar - and promptly forgot about him. Two months later, I received a parcel of four NTSC and three PAL mini-DV tapes along with a handwritten note. He was 'throwing out some old shit' because things had suddenly become 'precarious' for him. He thought I might have fun with some 'stupid stuff' he shot while 'messing around with a camera years ago'.

This didn't quite ring true. The tapes were new looking and well preserved, even if their content was chaotic. Then there was the relative technical and artistic sophistication of some of the videos they contained. I

used his comments as a cue to make some personal inquiries. How old was he if this stuff was made 'years ago'? Did he ever exhibit his work...?

He was - and is - twenty-four years old. 'Exhibit'!? As if he was a fucking artist or something? Are you kidding? Like this 'shit' is art? This is fooling around with a camera... And, anyway, who gives a shit about art?

Well, I suppose I do. At least enough to digitise his tapes into Final Cut Pro and create short, self-contained pieces out of the best sections. I sent him a DVD of this modest preservation / restoration effort. His response was a witty list of titles for each video and the suggestion that, seeing as I had gone to all this trouble, I could put my 'Close Watch presents' brand on them. I asked if I could show them to people. His next email was a link to some of these videos which he had now posted on Youtube, albeit in the wrong aspect ratio.

I asked him if he had a camera, if he was still shooting stuff. He told me that he had spent the past few years working in an offshore gambling enterprise in Gibraltar, before their lenient tax laws recently tightened. He was still living there, now unemployed. So he wasn't from there? No, he'd 'sort of grown up in the States'. And was he still shooting videos? Contemptuous snort. This was our first phone conversation.

His voice is flat, accentless, almost machine-like. Nothing to identify it as American. In fact, not much to identify its origins at all. This voice is also remarkably changeable, going from a barely articulate, expletive-rich mumble to an almost computer-like matter-of-fact drone to a defiantly witty pugnaciousness. Each mode comes with its own level of grammar and characteristic vocabulary.

The next contact we had alarmed me somewhat. A phone call at 9.45 one Tuesday evening in which he casually announced that he was in Ireland and would come down to visit me the following evening. He wanted me to recommend a hostel, which I did.

In person, Soltan is small, skinny, boyish with a pronounced facial bone structure that makes him appear undernourished. His eyes are big and blue, his expression deeply serious, his hair cropped very short and bleached. When I first met him he was wearing a navy blue tracksuit. The following day he was in a cheap, grey business suit. The lack of difference these contrasting

costumes made to his presence was striking. Everything about him gave an impression of being ill-fitting, not just the clothes.

I'd noticed his three distinct modes of speaking on the telephone but it was only in attempting to converse face-to-face that it became apparent that speech itself was uncomfortable for him. Silence was his natural and preferred state. However, in talking to him, I was able to discover that he had been born in Europe, of European parents, but nothing more specific than that. Throughout childhood and early adolescence he was possessed by a consuming obsession with violence, weaponry and the theory of explosions. This had led to a brief, disastrous stint in the US armed forces in which he found the reality of his obsessions viscerally abhorrent. A nervous breakdown, which he claims was feigned, led to a discharge. But the circumstances of his leaving the US were left so murky that I can't but wonder about the strict veracity of this account. What was apparent, however, was a great sensitivity that seemed to suffer in crowds, flinch at loud noises and sudden movement, and prefer night to daylight.

The first evening, he asked to see some of my recent videos because there didn't seem to be anything else to do in this fucking town other than watch shit DVDs. Yet when I put the DVD on, he sat silent, utterly transfixed by the screen. Then he asked to watch certain videos again, some up to four times. Occasionally, he muttered to himself. Once or twice, he seemed to sing to himself and gently rock his body. In any event, his absorption was total. Afterwards, he reached into a small sports bag that he always carried and took a beer from it, which he offered me. He drank beer constantly, never seeming the worse for it. It was in the following hour and a half, before he left for his hostel, that I came to understand his silence. We barely exchanged a word, yet it was a relaxed silence, completely without awkwardness. He spent much of this time leaning on the open sash window, gazing out into the night. Occasionally he slouched on the couch, now and again cracking a joke. His jokes were esoteric to the point that it was often hard to tell if the joke was finished or not, still less to understand its punchline.

Between his long silences, he held forth at length on the subject that had obviously replaced his obsessive youthful ambitions to lethal mayhem. Sea life in the Pacific. This was when his technically precise, computer-like matter-of-fact drone would surface. He described sea

conditions and underwater creatures with a numbingly pedantic attention to detail. One day, he would go there - one day. Just see if he didn't. One day...

In all this time, he didn't ask a single question about me or about the place he was visiting. It appeared that he had no interest at all in information about his surroundings unless he could perceive it himself. He looked deep into the immediate reality that surrounded him, but seemed pathologically indifferent to its context. I never found out what he was doing in Ireland, although I suspect visiting me was the trip's chief purpose.

And, of course, we never discussed his filmmaking. I was still unable to ascertain when or how his videos were made. But, on the second evening of his visit, I did see him make a video... We had run into my friend and collaborator John McCarthy, the leading man in a lot of my films. Soltan seemed to take a shine to John, so we went for a drink. Soltan talked about Pacific sea life or kept quiet and stared out of the window. It was during one of these distant silences that John told me a story in which he pulled an exaggeratedly anxious face. Neither of us thought Soltan was paying any attention. On leaving the pub, we called into a late night shop to pick up some provisions before going our separate ways. Soltan suddenly pulled a camcorder from his beer-carrying sports bag and requested that John pose in several different spots in the shop while displaying the anxious expression his face had assumed in the pub. This became Soltan's *Night Vision 1-4* videos.

The next afternoon, I called to Soltan's hostel only to find that he had gone and had left his bill unpaid. Occasionally, he sends me links to websites about Pacific marine life. One thing he did tell me is that he is unable to swim and has never been in salt water in his life...