

Larry Clark (Part One)

Interview

On the genesis of *The Smell of Us*, pornography, and how there's no such thing as safe search

“Are you down with Larry Clark?” this magazine wrote in 2002, by way of prelude to a discussion of *Ken Park* that underlined the particularly divisive nature of Clark’s art and personality. This was around the time that then-59-year-old Clark was in the news for dealing a decisive beat-down to Hamish McAlpine, head of the film’s U.K. distributor.

More recently, Clark has kept a low profile—though a spat with art collector Peter Brant did crack Page Six in 2013—but this is about to change. Clark’s *Marfa Girl* opens in New York on March 27, his first feature to appear in theaters since 2005’s *Wassup Rockers*, and its follow-up is waiting in the wings. This would be the Paris-set *The Smell of Us*, which recently screened at the Film Society of Lincoln Center as part of Film Comment Selects, and now awaits a sufficiently dauntless American distributor. (*Ken Park*, it should be noted, never did get one.)

Clark (born 1943) first made his name as a photographer, a trade that he learned by accompanying his portrait-photographer mother on door-to-door trips around his hometown of Tulsa, Oklahoma. As a teenager, camera buff Clark became addicted to amphetamines, and photographed his circle of fellow addicts in their middle-American dead-end purgatory. This biography in images, taken between 1962 and 1971, became his first book, *Tulsa*. More than 20 years later, Clark would make his feature-filmmaking debut with another document of heedless, in-the-moment youth, 1995’s *Kids*, starring the teenaged skaters who then congregated around Washington Square Park.

The Smell of Us returns to the skate-punk milieu, though in a radically different context. From a script co-credited to Clark and a young French poet named Mathieu Landais, the film looks at the comings and goings of a clique of skaters who convene around the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. Their numbers include Math and J.P. (Lukas Ionesco and Hugo Behar-Thinières), Paris skate-rats who sell their asses for a few Euros using an online service; Pacman (Théo Cholbi), a bully; Marie ([Diane Rouxel](#)), Pacman’s posh fashion-plate girlfriend; and Toff (Terin Maxime), the unofficial archivist of the group, who documents their skate jumps and sexual exploits. There is also a haggard hobo, Rockstar, played by Clark himself in one of the two roles that he takes on, and a troubadour played by *Bully* star Michael Pitt who, along with reVOLT, a band fronted by *Wassup Rockers* star Jonathan Velasquez, provides the soundtrack.

It is, in form, the most out-there, elliptical film that Clark has ever made—an approach demanded by the contingencies of the production, as he revealed in the course of an

interview last week. He was in Paris when I spoke to him via Skype about his present, past, and future projects, and was fighting fit.

I'd like to start by talking about the origins of *The Smell of Us*, which I know came to you initially through the screenwriter Mathieu Landais. Could you talk about the process whereby that started?

Well, actually it starts 20 years ago when I was at Cannes with my first film, *Kids*. We were in the main competition when there were only five films in the main competition. It was very special: I got to see my first film in the Grand Palais on a gigantic screen in this big opera house with four balcony levels full of people. I made the film in '94, and it came out in '95. It premiered at Cannes. Well, actually, we had a midnight screening at Sundance, but anyway. So I was hanging out with the people at Cannes—the French producers and distributors and directors. Harmony [Korine] and I came to Cannes a couple days earlier and didn't see any skaters at all, so we were keeping our eye open. We saw a kid walking on a little tiny beach in Cannes with a skateboard under his arm so we chased him down and started talking to him. We met his friends, and then we went out to his house and met his mother and met more of his friends, and talked to him a lot about what it was like to be a teenager in France, and they just told us all these stories. And I thought that I would like to make a film in France about adolescence. I mentioned this at a dinner to all these big shots, movie distributors and directors and producers and a couple of actors. I said: "I'd like to make a film about growing up in France." Immediately, they said: "That's impossible." And I said: "Why?" They said: "You're not French." So, I kinda took that as a challenge. It stuck in the back in my mind as a challenge.

In 2010, I had a retrospective here at the Museum of Modern Art in Paris. I was hanging the show, and the museum would close, and I would have to go out the back way, which is the back of the Palais also, and there's a big, big courtyard there with a little pool. And there were like 50 skaters there. It was a skate spot. It was very funky, there was graffiti all over the place, and it was filthy. The pond had about three inches of green algae on top of it. It had turned out that the Palais de Tokyo and the museum were in a fight over who was responsible for this area in the back. Consequently, no one was cleaning it, and it was a skate spot. It reminded me of Washington Square Park in '92, '93. So I just wondered: "Gee, what happens to these kids when they leave here?" Because it was all different kinds of kids, all different ethnic origins, rich kids, poor kids just... like skaters.

So then Mathieu Landais came to my exhibition at the museum. We had a mutual friend in California who had sent some notebooks to Mathieu, because Mathieu was a poet and he likes notebooks. So this mutual friend, Joey Lou, who Mathieu actually never met—it was like an Internet friendship—gave me some notebooks to carry to Paris for Mathieu. So Mathieu came to the opening of the show and I gave him the notebooks, and I started talking to him. I read some of his poetry, and I said: "You know, I want to make a screenplay. I want to make a film about these kids in Paris. Would you like to help me write

the screenplay, or write the screenplay?" So we started talking about it. We figured that we had to meet the kids. Consequently, we met a bunch of kids, and then through them, we met a bunch of other kids, like 18, 19, 20, 21 years old. We went to the nightclubs with them, all the clubs for the young people to listen to techno and drink and do coke and do MDMA and ecstasy and all that, and party. So I went out quite a few times, got to know them and told them what I wanted to do. They all had seen my films, *Kids* and *Ken Park* and *Bully*, so they knew me. They were excited that I wanted to do this.

I went back the States, and then I came back to Paris like 10, 12 times, and Mathieu was writing. We were on the phone like every day for a year. He'd never written a screenplay before, but he's a writer, and writers can't stop writing. After about nine drafts, I said: "Mathieu, this is *it*. I'm going to shoot this. I've got enough." And then he kept writing. I think he ended up with 15 scripts.

As I got to know Mathieu, I found out his history, his story, and he had actually a really interesting story, and so I kept pushing him to put autobiographical stuff into his screenplay, pushing and pushing him that this would be better to make it like an autobiography, but to mix it up and fictionalize stuff, to mix characters together and so on and so forth. I also told him that I wanted the Internet to play a part in the film, and I wanted to show how kids get into trouble through the Internet. Every day you read in the paper that someone, some kid is in trouble because of the Internet because everything is recorded, everything is photographed, everything is documented. These kids go to a party, and they know there's going to be a little sex and drugs and rock 'n' roll and fights. Everybody films it with their camera, they document it. Today if there's a big party and all these things happen and no one films it, did it really happen? It's like a "If a tree falls in the woods" kind of analogy. So anyway, I wanted that in there, and I said: "I want to shoot some of the film through the kids' POVs, through their phones and their cameras."

I told him a lot of the stuff I wanted in it. We finally got a screenplay done. I think I picked the ninth draft out of 15 or 16 drafts. He kept adding. Just before we started shooting, he added this other character, Rockstar, this homeless, alcoholic bum spouting poetry all the time. He wanted Peter Doherty to play the role, and he met Pete and he agreed to do it. He was going to be Rockstar. He would've been perfect spouting all this gibberish, this poetry. But Pete's a junky, and he never showed up. I talked to him on the phone like 20 times, and we had seven or eight appointments for dinner, for lunch, for meetings, and he never showed. I never met the guy. So I ended up playing Rockstar at the last minute, which was one of the producer's suggestions, just in jest. I said: "No, no, no, I'm not going to do that. I'm not an actor." To cut to the chase, I played Rockstar because of Pete Doherty not showing up, that's how it started. Ask me another question. That was a long answer.

I'd also heard, and I don't know if this is true, that at one point Gaspar Noé was supposed to perform the toe-sucking scene.

You know, Gaspar is a friend of mine, and I don't know if I asked him to do it. Probably I did, and if I did, he didn't want to do it, I'm sure. I don't quite remember, but Gaspar is a good friend. I see him all the time. In Paris, he's omnipresent in certain scenes. He's always there. He's a good guy and he makes great films. But what happened in that scene... It was tough to cast the scene, cast the role, and we finally cast Bouli Lanners. He's a well-known actor and he's a director. He's at Cannes all the time for his films. Google him, man, the guy's at Cannes every year with a film. I talked to him on the phone—he's from Belgium—and he agreed to do it. Then, we were supposed to shoot that scene on a Monday morning, but Friday night at midnight, he called me up and said: "Larry, I'm really sorry, but I can't come and play the role. I can't travel, doctor's orders." What happened was, he had a foot infection. He stepped on something, something happened to his feet, and he got an infection and it spread, and so he actually couldn't travel.

So it's Friday night and I'm stuck. We're speeding through like crazy, with the location, everything set for Monday, and we have to shoot on Monday. I have a weekend to find an actor who will play this role, which was impossible to do. So Saturday morning, I said: "Fuck it." I was playing Rockstar with a big beard and long hair. I got a haircut. I got my beard shaved off. I got my hair dyed black. I got a manicure and pedicure and I said: "I'm gonna to do this." And I had no idea how to do it. I mean, the scene is just a mystery to me. Very odd. Monday, I went to the set and no one recognized me because I was all shaved and everything, except for the moustache. In the last minute, I asked the crew to cover all the mirrors because I didn't want to see myself, and I had the makeup lady shave my moustache. I hadn't seen my face without a moustache since I was in my twenties, and I hadn't seen myself without a beard for 25 years.

It was funny because when I talked to the actors about playing the role I said: "Maybe we'll sterilize his feet with alcohol, make sure he has no athlete's foot or any kind of disease. It'll be cool." We started the scene, and Lukas takes off his clothes and takes his socks off, and this guy's feet were filthy, man. After about a minute, though, there's no taste at all because you licked his feet clean. All I could think of when I was doing it was: "What'll my kids think about this?" I'm thinking about my daughter, who's 28 now, saying: "That's my dad." That was spinning through my mind as I was licking Lukas's feet. There was no plan for me to ever be in the film, and I wasn't going to be in the film, and now here I am all over the film. Because I'm a finisher. If I start a film, I'm going to finish it.

You mentioned that one of the things that was important to you was to integrate the effect of new technology into the script, and to make sure that was a part of it. In that respect, it seems like you're building on the short film that you did, *Impaled*, in 2006, with kids auditioning to shoot a porn. Again you're looking at the way that growing up with access to porn at a keystroke might impact somebody's sexual imagination.

The idea behind *Impaled* was that kids are going to have an experience of pornography before they are even interested, or able to really have sex, at 8, 9, 10 years old—they're seeing all this porno shit on the Internet. How has that affected their ideas about sex and, to take it further, their sexual life? These kids came in, they'd shaved off all their pubic hair—which was just mind-boggling to me because at that age everybody is waiting to get pubic hair, and then these kids shave it off because of watching porn. It's really a good film because it is a documentary with a question behind it. As I was talking, asking them questions, I was really interested in their answers. And so this film—as I say, you read in the paper every day about a kid getting in trouble through the Internet. They go to parties. They film each other fucking, or doing something to a drunk, naked girl, and then they post it. Or, like, kids steal something and then they post something online: "Look what I stole." It's just amazing. Kids can go on the Internet, as in the film, and prostitute themselves over the Internet, like they're applying for a job, and you read about kids doing that all the time. If you look at the porn sites there are advertisements, and guys pay kids to get together with them, get naked and do whatever they ask, and the kids get paid. There was a big article in *The New York Times* by a kid who did that for years: he was underage and he did it here for years. There was a big article about him, and how it fucked him up. That's why that's in the film. I met people here that had done that, that Mathieu and I had met. Pretty much everything in the film is true. It's fictionalized, but it's all based on real people and real events, and then mixing the people up, taking, in some cases, say three or four people's story and putting it in one person.

In some ways these kids peddling themselves online isn't vastly different from the kind of thing that you see in *Bully*, for example. In *Bully*, where you're dealing with a case that is now 20 years old, you have kids using what technology is then available to them—phone sex—to sell the only thing that they have that has some kind of value: their youth.

When I was a kid, there was none of that. When I was a kid in the Fifties, nobody told me anything, and if you asked a question, likely as not you got slapped, you know: "Shut up, smart ass. Go in the other room and sit in the corner. Just keep your mouth shut." It's totally different because now there's everything you want to know, you can immediately find out through the Internet. It's a different world, and it's interesting to me—I have kids that grew up with it. My daughter was like 9 years old, they were using Internet at school, and she was using it, and she might type in "My Little Pony," the cartoon for kids that she loved, and a woman fucking a Shetland pony might pop up. You just don't know what's going to happen with the Internet. So it has always been interesting to me because of my kids, and it's a new way to grow up. And it's not a problem, it's just their world. They're born with it, so it's natural to them.

One interesting character is Toff (Terin Maxime), who's the photographer of the group.

There's always a kid filming skating. They can skate and film, and they all shoot each other. They do it for a few hours and then they go home and watch the whole thing, all the tricks and the skating that they've done. And as I said earlier, everybody films everything at parties and everything. You look at concerts, or go to a concert, and I'm probably exaggerating, but it looks like to me that 90 fucking percent of the people are filming it and watching it through their phone. I couldn't do that. I like to watch the fucking concert. I don't want to film for two hours. But it's like second nature to everybody.

So Toff, in the screenplay, he was the kid who videoed everything. And when we started shooting, I started thinking: "Well, you know, when I shot the stuff in *Tulsa*, my friends weren't posing for the camera, but it was real, you know, documentary photography." How can the photographer be there without breaking that reality? I was there because I was one of the guys in the book. I was just one of the guys. So it was normal for me that I just happened to be in a place where, if I didn't have my camera, my friends would say: "Where's your camera?" It was just a part of me, I always had it from the time I was 15 years old. During the filming, I said: "I'm going to make Toff me, and I'm going to have him be in places where he can't be." Even in a scene where he couldn't possibly be there when, like, Math is getting fucked in the ass, he's there. Because I wanted him to always be there. He's also there when Math is getting his toes sucked. And Toff is me. The film became more personal to me because now I'm in the film, and there's a character in the film who is me.

There's another version of the film that's going to come out in five or six months in September, which we're going to call the Director's Cut. It's the same film, except I'm in the film as myself, like breaking the fourth wall, and walking through the film on many occasions. There's a scene in the end of the film where I'm in it as myself again. I'm talking to kids... well, you'll see it. That's going to come out in September, and then we're going to do a box set of both DVDs, which will be interesting. Because the Director's Cut... you've never seen anything like it, I've never seen a director do what I did. I got so into it that it became something else, again.

Halfway through the film, a little more than halfway through the film... luckily I'd shot everything that I needed to shoot with Lukas and with Hugo, with JP and Math, but they didn't get paid for the first two weeks, and after two weeks they got paid. And what did they do, of course? They just bought drugs and partied. They'd never acted before and they never made a film, and they didn't realize how much hard work it is, and how intense it is. And I actually made the film for them. Because we couldn't get enough money. It was a little more than half the budget, and I knew it was going to kill me. I said: "If I was 50 I could do this, but I'm 70, I can't do this, I can't do a film in half the time for half the money, it's just impossible." But the kids... they sent me e-mails, just begging me, calling me to make the film, and I told them I was going to make the film. And we had spent like a year-and-a-half getting ready to make the film, and I said: "OK, I'm going to make it for these kids." But their life is, like, staying up all night partying and drinking and taking drugs. And so after

two-and-a-half weeks or three weeks, they're dead tired. So, Hugo and Lukas and Theo went on strike. This is a very French thing. It's the French thing to do, everybody goes on strike, and if you've ever been to Paris, you see demonstrations every day, someone's on strike everyday. Yesterday it was the doctors, the fucking doctors were on... some big demonstration.

So, anyway, they go on strike. The producers freak out, we go to lunch and I see them all shaking. I said: "Look, we're going to keep going, we're going to keep shooting." They said: "What are you going to shoot?" I said: "I'll just keep shooting, I'll just re-write the whole end of the movie." So I did. I mean, we have contracts, everything is legal and signed off on a contract. The producers were calling the agents and e-mailing the agents and the agent sent back an e-mail saying: "Larry Clark's film is finished. They're not coming back." This is their agent. So I said: "Fuck it, they're all fired and I'm going to finish the film." So then I just re-wrote the rest of the film and finished the film.

I changed the ending. I changed the reason Math may be feeling what he's feeling—we have an inkling, so the audience can kind of understand why Math is doing what he's doing, because Math does not need the money. I want backstories on my characters. One thing I wanted to do when I made the film was that I wanted you to understand maybe why these people were acting like they're acting. That's very important to me. So we see in Diane's character, Marie—she was a rich girl slumming with the skaters, and we see her go back to her nice flat with her mother, and we see her and her mother at a fashion show, and then we see Math at home asleep with his mother.

That was all brand-new. That was not in the script. Mathieu Landais had a whole other reason for Math being like he was, which I didn't want to shoot. In my mind I said: "I'm not going to shoot this, I cannot shoot this." There's a book, a *The Smell of Us* book, which has 120 stills from the film and then Mathieu's original screenplay in French... so if you read that you can see how I changed the movie completely. And by the way, Mathieu kept saying: "I don't want anybody to know this is autobiographical, we have to hide all of this..." and then he names the main character Math. Which is kind of bizarre in the first place. But his payoff was when Math was 9 he got raped by a man, he got butt-fucked by a man. Now, I don't want to shoot this. I just don't want to shoot it. I had a couple of kids come in, and one kid was gonna do it, and his father was with him. He was cast, and then I started thinking: "You know, a 9-year-old kid isn't old enough to make this decision." He doesn't realize that when he goes back to school, all of his classmates are going to make fun of him and he's going to be known as the kid who got fucked in the butt, and he's going to be miserable, and it might follow him when he's grown up. And so I called him and his father back in and I explain all of this to him and I say: "You have to go back to school and kids are going to make fun of you and you have no idea what you're getting into..." So anyway, I didn't want to shoot that and I kinda questioned the parents who would allow a thing like this, allowing their kid to act in my film... even though if I had shot it, I would've shot it going into the sun with lens flare, you wouldn't have seen anything.

But anyway, I cast this actor Dominique Frot, as Math's mother. She only had a few lines, it wasn't a big scene. But I got this idea, because Dominique is such a great actor. So I took Lukas outside and I talked to him and I told him what to think about and what Dominique was going to say—kind of, because I didn't know what she was going to say, and she didn't either. So I told Lukas what to think about when it was happening, and then I got with Dominique and I told her some ideas about what to talk about and what to do in a very general way, and then Dominique came out and I said: "I want you to improv." And so she goes over to the corner for half an hour, and she puts music on—she's a piano player also, a classical pianist. She puts her earphones on for literally half an hour with her eyes closed and just stood up and we were ready. And she just went off. We had 11 minutes left on the card, and we shot for 11 minutes with no cuts. And so she was kind of forced to keep going and keep going and keep going and in that one scene she steals the fucking movie, man, it's so fucking good. We had exactly 11 minutes left, and after seven or eight minutes, she looked at me and said: "Larry we have to cut it, and what am I supposed to do?" And I wouldn't cut. And I'm biting my hand, because it's so intense, but I won't cut. So she had to keep going, and then she really went all out, and it was so incredible what she did, and at the end of the scene when the glass breaks, when she's trying to give him some wine? The glass actually broke in her hand, there was glass all over the place, right after the glass breaks we ran out of time on the card.

I love improv. I love just to take an idea and go with it. When I made *Marfa Girl* in Marfa, Texas, all I had was little notebooks with ideas I had from going to Marfa three or four times. I had maybe 30 pages of writing, characters and things I saw in Marfa that I wanted to put in the film, and I made that film just with my notebooks, no screenplay. My producers said: "Larry, I've got to have something, some kind of something so we'll know locations, how many characters in a scene, how many days..." so I took my notebooks and made a 20-page script, double-spaced, which was just enough so that we can find locations and days to shoot, and they can figure out a shooting schedule. Then, basically, I was flying by the seat of my pants on *Marfa Girl* and just made up the film, which really helped me when we did *The Smell of Us*, because I just came out of a film where I made it up as we went along and so I was already in the groove, so *Marfa Girl* helped *The Smell of Us* a lot.

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