

Stefan Szczelkun

Volcano!

September 26th to October 3rd 1998, South London

London's *Volcano Film Festival* is the nearest that Britain has to a lowbudget film festival that is truly independent from both public and commercial sectors. This year it was organised, without any public funding, by six London based 'underground' film groups. *Volcano* has a critical edge and raw excitement that other festivals, from the BBC's lifeless 'British Short Film Festival' to the ponderous 'London Film Festival', can never hope to attain. This year it had box office attendance of over 2500 people who went to 19 events over 8 days. 280 films and videos were projected, plus dozens of performances and many installations. It was international, with attending groups from Germany and New York. Perhaps the most distinctive thing about this festival and the London underground film scene generally is the way that film isn't isolated as a media. In *Volcano* film co-existed with music, performance, clubculture, publications, market stalls, cabaret, installations, debates, food and what have you. The films themselves are also as diverse as the contributing groups which range from the relatively upmarket *Hallowe'en Society*, which shares some of the 'production values' of mainstream short film culture, to the Kung Fu cultism and no-messing street-wise attitude of *Shaolin*.

This is the festival's third year and the first time there has been a base for guest shows in a single venue. The Oval House Theatre in South London pro-

vided serviced space, box office and cafe facilities in exchange for a 20% cut on ticket sales and the beer and food takings. We didn't make any profit but it was good to have the luxury of a base for all the guest shows. The organising groups each put on their own shows around London in venues of their own choice—some days this meant that four shows were going on simultaneously.

The first Saturday night of the festival was dedicated to a Jeff Keen retrospective. This Brighton based film-maker is a master of the multiple exposure, along with animation and studio based performance. Veering wildly in style from raunchy home-movies to exquisitely composed drum rolls of coloured light and collaged form, his Super 8 films oscillate between the lyrical and the banal—retinal roller coasters. Keen, who has been making movies since the early '60s, appeared looking somewhat awed by the adulation of the younger audience. His film works were avoided by the film establishment in the '80s and '90s, perhaps because of his occasional pop art use of naked women and soft porn icons. This was his first show in London for over 10 years. His most recent work was a live multiple projection using stock he had digitally recoloured. It appeared to be attempting an escape from the limits of the screen—jittering, flashing and jumping the frame like a cinematic demon. It was this latest stuff that the younger audience seemed to like most.

The next day saw the 'Death of OMSK' in Hoxton. A danceclub/cinema hybrid run simultaneously in three venues: the roomy '333' club and two nearby pubs—OMSK is a place where 'anything can happen'. The organiser Steven Eastwood had decided to put this project aside for the next year and make a movie, so this was to be the last in the series. It had over 800 people on a Sunday night—what a way to go! Just about every type of artist had a slot in this extravaganza, from poets to VJs, with inbuilt cinemas in each venue running alongside dance floor, bars and chill-out spaces.

Down in deep South London, *Real Fiction's* 'kinetic candlelit cabaret', organised by Paul Johnson, showed fifteen Gothik films and four ethereal performances above a pub in Balham. That same evening, at the base camp at Kennington Oval, lanky Ian White, who has made a name running the *Horse Hospitals' Kinoculture* programme, put on his own 'transgressive' evening of hyper-camp with The Divine David and author Dennis Cooper.

Monday night saw the *Hallowe'en Society* do their regular show at the glitzy Notre Dame Dance Hall off Leicester Square. Philip and Tim do things properly, right down to projecting from a Beta VCR rather than the VHS machines most of the groups make do with. Each film is introduced by an MC—who also runs a quiz with daft prizes—while the audience sit around tables drinking, diverted by the occasional cabaret act.

Back at the Oval, hot off a plane from Havana, Robert Robinson was running the *Renegade Arts* show in the upstairs theatre. *Renegade* is an international exchange of work with an emphasis on what slips off the mass media menu. It shared the Oval with a double bill by Jack Sargeant who has a couple of books out by *Creation Books* and is an expert in the area of

mainly US underground which is obsessed with death, schlock horror and the so-called dark side.

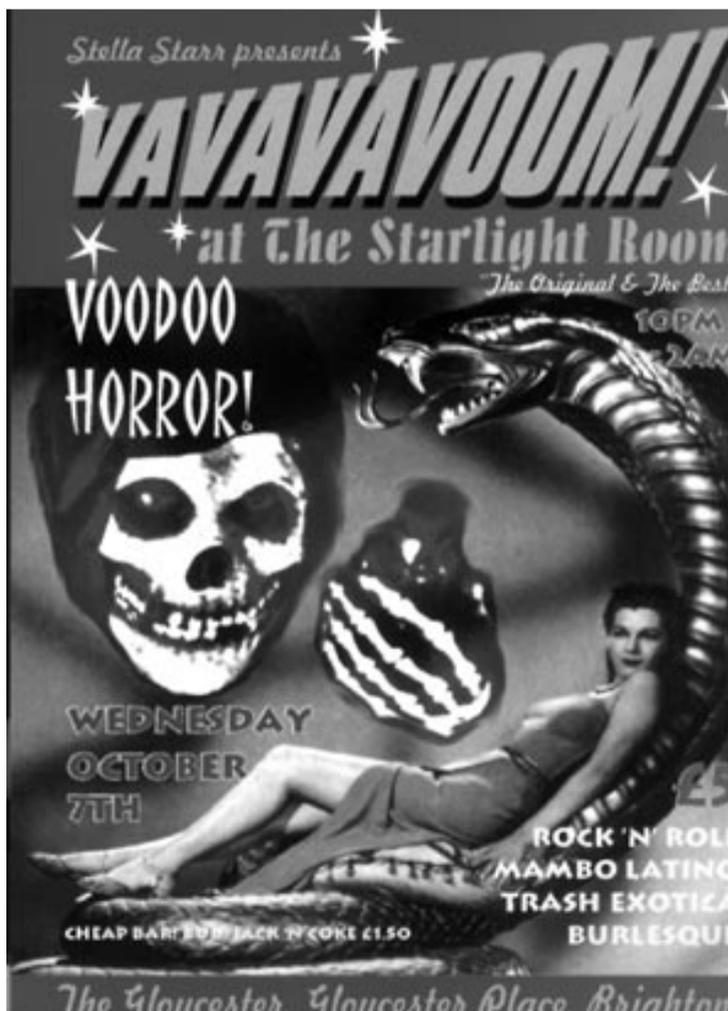
Tuesday was the turn of the *Exploding Cinema*—the only group with a firm open access/ no selection policy. The *Exploding* crew had taken over one of their old haunts the George IV pub, near the infamous prison on Brixton Hill, swathing the interior in lights from a myriad of slide projectors and Super 8 loops. More uncomfortable, raunchy, and unpredictable than the *Hallowe'en Society* they showed 16 works including four by collective members. Back at the Oval, James Stevens, proprietor of the open access cyberarts workshop *Backspace*, was running his chaotic *Blink* show—apparently programmed and organised on the spur of the moment. *Backspace*, situated on the riverside near London Bridge, is home to the *Volcano* web site amongst others.

Attracting a more youthful audience, Wednesday saw Ben and Jap of *Shaolin* do their show at The Foundry near Fleet Street. Along with the showcase of obscure Kung Fu movies one of the things that distinguishes *Shaolin* are the live computer fighting games which are projected on a big screen. An amphitheatre of virtual combat; is this some kind of nascent ritual resolution of male aggression...? At the same time in the way-out South East, *My Eyes! My Eyes!* run by Clive, Grace and Damian, ran a show of home-grown underground classics to a mostly local audience, built-up in the last two or three years. Clive was the layout whiz who had designed our slick poster/programme which had given *Volcano* a high profile front-end reminiscent of the old Scala Cinema's programmes.

The main international guests were the notorious *Filmgruppen Chaos*, (est. 1975), who had come over in force with members of the Munich based *ABGE-DREHT*. For their Wednesday night show they decorated the passage to Oval's main theatre space with a variety of environmental projections: Rotating mirrors threw images over the walls and ceiling. A chattering face was projected onto a polystyrene head on a high shelf creating a surreal illusion. Inside the theatre large Gothic picture frames contained lurid loop projections. The main show, with three presenters, was a quirky mix of animation, cryptic drama, collage and found footage made all the more interesting by the lively presence of the film-makers.

The same night at the Oval, Philip from *Hallowe'en* had programmed a selection of short film and video from the USA in the theatre upstairs—saturation point! Audiences varied from the local to the 'cult'. One way the underground might be defined is by its diversity and inclusiveness, especially to outsiders.

From here on in the Oval became wilder and wilder. Next evening was taken over by the *Frank Chickens* who are now a broad London based collective of about 20 Japanese women, cultural refugees who not only show films but also VJ, sing, dance and do uncategorisable performances. In parallel with the *Jap-chick* madness downstairs *Hallowe'en Society* presented *Rocketfish*, the quirky films of Mark Locke and Guy Powell from Tamworth, Birmingham in the theatre upstairs. Lower class suburban culture at its most idiosyncratic and fascinating.





TOP: Arthur Lager
ABOVE: Caroline,
Exploding Cinema

There was also a debate set up by Duncan of *Exploding Cinema* at the Lux in Hoxton on the Thursday evening. This was meant to confront the radical establishment and funding agencies of the so-called independent film and video. Film-makers turned up in force but the establishment didn't. Nonetheless, with just a few of them there, it was like trying to have a debate about political change with the police in attendance. For a while it revolved around the question of labels and especially the fluffy notion of 'independence', a category which has come to include major features and even high-tech ads. By the time I stood up to speak I found myself shaking with rage, frustration and incoherence. My outburst was followed by several people who, in the presence of funders, wished to distance themselves from any 'political' intentions. In spite of the atmosphere of timidity a few good points were made from both sides. The academic Jon Thompson pointed out the need for writers who could articulate a critical and historicising discourse. Jennet Thomas, of *Exploding Cinema* made a good point about how the rise of the professional curator had meant that art was mediated by a professional caste and that artists rarely had control of resources. This led to what Colette Rouhier called an 'exhibition lock-down'. The historically pernicious nature of a professional or elite third party management of culture was pointed out but unexplored.

To my mind both the organisation and context of the proceedings was counter productive. Underlining our incoherence rather than producing the conditions for constructive expression and discourse. The Lux is a prestige building which, as Mark Saunders pointed out, was put up as part of the property development of Hoxton in which Art became integral to a strategy for raising property values. It manages the mediation of underground culture and its history, inheriting the

radical kudos associated with the early *Film Makers Co-op* which was, in stark contrast, artist controlled and democratic. This new institution now sucks in much of the funding resources allocated for this area and controls the presentation and historicisation of underground film in an antiseptic environment which is beholden to state funding and interests. Autonomous discourses are certainly required, but in this form of debate very few people can speak. Speakers are expected to be calm and restrained and arguments can never flow dialogically because of the queue of people wishing to speak.

Friday night at the Oval was a double bill of Arthur Lager and *VaVaVoom* downstairs and Jane Gang's personally presented selection from the New York underground upstairs. The *VaVaVoom* evening had been set up by Colette of *Exploding*. This outfit is Brighton based and is a kind of sleaze cocktailbar cabaret with swamp/ Goth undertones. Lots of skulls and writhing around half naked. I'm not sure they were at their best in the Oval theatre, as there was not enough room for a table based audience, nonetheless they did provide the perfect environment for Arthur Lager's first retrospective. Arthur is a kind of suburban greaseball '90s version of Jeff Keen the beatnik. His Super 8 films also use goofy pop imagery along with multi-layering and animation. There is a lot of coarse and comical sex between unlikely creatures and seaside pier humour. All of which comes at you like a luminous freight train sometimes accompanied by live drumming. Arthur has been an *Exploding* favourite for years and Colette's inspired programming with *VaVaVoom* made it an unforgettable occasion. Nevertheless Mr Lager was, contrary to his presence on screen, his usual surly nervous self. Upstairs, the tattooed lady, Jane Gang had her New York 'Zipper' show. Two of the film makers had come over and where somewhat shocked at our lack of basic hospitality for international visitors. US underground festivals can be much better resourced although they don't sound as much fun. Nor do they include the transmedia live dimension that made *Volcano* so alive. *The Zipper show*, which was a 'best of' selection, veered from the darkly comical to the horrifically vulgar. Annie Stanley and Patty Chang produced 'Hub Cap' in which two women have sex in a motor car. Cut! Their limp and naked bodies are draped across the seats. The cops arrive. Horror enough? No way! A cop then proceeds with a variety of graphic necrophilic acts. Too plainly unpleasant for any metaphorical appreciation. But, well made. Oh God...

On the other hand, Mr Mean's 'Glamour Puss: How to Keep Your Man Happy' was a delightful and funny celebration of sexual seduction for the over seventies. Mrs Means enjoys trying a variety of increasingly creative and hilarious seduction techniques on her newspaper hugging spouse. Finally he cracks. Yippee!

Upstairs and down, this was a wild night indeed. The large Oval cafe was packed and even had market stalls selling wares which ranged from dominatrix bone china mugs to second-hand super eight cameras. Sandwiched in this cacophony of commerce was Mark Pawson with his lurid selection of publications and pop trash ephemera. *VaVaVoom* had brought

their own Techila cocktail bar and an inordinate amount of cleavage.

The final night's *Aftershock* was curated by Grace of *My Eyes! My Eyes!* Every corner of the Oval House building was used for installations and a continuous series of performances. The range of work on show that night was mind boggling. In a dark room a weird group, including a eight year old girl with a false beard, played cards around a table bathed in red light. Behind them was an audience of rigid (dead) rabbits seated on raked chairs. Very strange and unsettling. This was 'Toolroom Salon'. Just around the corner Tim Flitcroft had a sound lab in which recordings of the previous evening were transferred to film mag stock which was looped and passed through a series of table mounted professional film editing pick-up heads. The resulting sounds were then modulated by a small team. An evocative electronic music experience which seemed like it had come straight out of the '70s arts lab scene. And so it went on, in every corner of the building, using the full firepower of *Volcano's* combined projection resources. The ambience was of a cross between some underworld street market and a primitive pagan festival of light.

This third *Volcano* was a milestone for autonomous film distribution in London. Of the 280 movies shown at *Volcano 1998*, and the 1200 works shown by the *Exploding Cinema* since 1991, almost all are unavailable. Little of this rich body of work can be accessed for study or pleasure. It will not be a part of film history and so anything but the barest outline, understanding and representation of autonomous grassroots film production will be lost. History is now a question of multiple viewpoints not just the over bearing narrative of the high and mighty. Counter to this is the view that the underground scene is an oral culture defined by its very outsider status. A culture which relies for its immediacy on a mythopoetic compositing of its past—whose organic traditions reside in human form rather than in institutions.

