

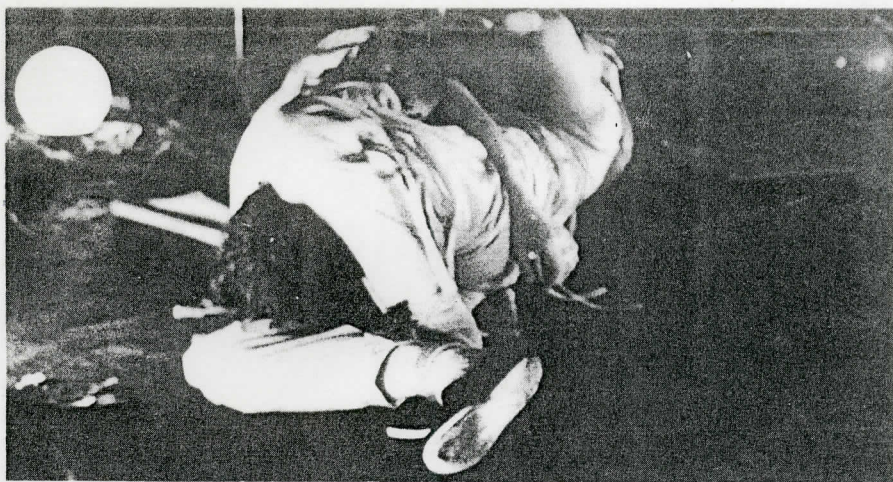
Review

The tantalizing title 'Zen Abbatoir' refers both to an event and a group. As an event it represents one of the prevailing trends of presenting an evening's entertainment in an alternative space with a wide variety of media. Not easily definable, it incorporates music, performance and cabaret of disparate variety and in this instance is held together by the continuous strand of video presentation. I went to see Zen Abbatoir at the London Film-makers Co-op. The other venues were the Hammersmith Idiot Ballroom and the Central 100 Club.

The scheme of the evening was well-worked out in theory. A programme listed all the events to be held with a Swiss delight in time-tabling and a poster noted these in outline — 'Noise Pop & Motion Pictures Performance Akshun Animations Slides/Tapes Evangelist Disco'. Inevitably the tight scheduling fell through in practice but this didn't really seem to matter as the main constituent parts all happened eventually. These featured a performance by Andre Stitt and Tara Babel, an appearance by Russ (alias George Formby/The New) and a musical set by the group Zen Abbatoir (perhaps better known as C.O.D.E.bmus by which name they produced a 12" single with Rough Trade). These live appearances were connected together by a video/disco continuation and a large notice at the entrance advertizing a raffle set the atmosphere for the evening — 'Everyone a Winner' it announced. 'First prize: A Night of Abuse.'

The videos themselves were screened on two television sets placed obliquely side by side and relayed images simultaneously to the accompaniment of records provided by the Evangelist disco. The most notable presentation here was a film of one of Alistair MacLennan's performances — the fish piece. It was fascinating to see his compelling and deliberate movements in close-up and even on a television screen, his presence was magnetic.

Stitt and Babel began the evening's live component with their latest collaborative performance 'Akshun — Terra Inc.' This carried on the use and theme of media that was so much a part of the event as a whole. Rather than relying on pure performance technique, the pair incorporated slides and film footage in this piece — an addition which worked very well considering the timing problems that this can so often present. The purpose of the 'akshun' was not explicit but as with other pieces by Stitt, some sort of clue seemed offered in the title. My personal feelings were that a meaning was invited and I took that to be an exposé of violence. ('Terra Inc'). As usual too, it seemed that shock techniques were required to get the theme across. Rather than taking physical measures of violent destruction that were used at the Cabaret Futura (dissecting a rabbit with a chainsaw), Stitt and Babel use a milder form of surprise on this occasion. The performance begins with a slide sequence



Stitt/Babel

Zen Abbatoir

showing them both nude and indulging in a series of sexual games showing a private activity to an unsuspecting public.

Innocent enough in itself, the action becomes more sinister when one realizes that the devices used to enhance pleasure (bondage gear — heavy studded leather belts, twine etc and toy guns) are of course suggestive means of causing pain. The slide sequence ends and immediately after this the two performers enter the room fully dressed in red costumes. They conduct a complicated weaving movement in which they each circle the floor but never allow themselves to meet, to a rhythm dictated by a synthesized drum beat. This leads to a silent communication with semaphore flags and culminates in a roll on the floor — a bodily contact that suddenly seems violent after the previous sequence. The sex/violence syndrome is then reintroduced in a film episode which involves a python. First, the phallic power of the serpent is suggested by an image of a human hand stroking its sides. Next the python is let loose and we see it stalking prey. A mouse is captured by a rapid coiling movement and is then hypnotized into total paralysis. Once this is completed, the python consumes the prey entirely whole through its gargantuan jaws — a feat of brutality that is nevertheless natural and yet has powerful sexual connotations. The film ends and the action is passed on to the live performers once more. They both retire to the back of the room and light smoke capsules. Suddenly the silence is smashed by a terrible noise and the two people leave their performance space by walking, almost bumping their way through the audience bearing fog horns and forcing the spectators to make way for them.

I was admittedly a little suspicious of this form of sensory assault as it can be an all too easy way of affecting the spectator but on the whole it seemed to fit in with the overall tenor of the piece. What did bother me though was the very unclear attitude to violence that underpinned the performance. Although apparently warning against the violence that leads to war and the situation in Northern Ireland, the attitude to sexual violence was ambivalent to say the least. These issues are too emotive not to be handled with clarity and Stitt's intention should be made more obvious.

The evening's activities were continued with more videos and a slide presentation followed by a short interlude given by Russ on guitar and shouting (not well received). More videos followed and then the third and final set of the evening took its turn to perform live. This was the group Zen Abbatoir and their contribution consisted of a series of songs accompanied by visuals. The feature of their music is that it is played on a variety of non-instruments — 'noise pop' as they call it. The drum kit for example, resembled a sculpture by Tinguely — bin lids, cake tins, scrap metal cymbals etc. were mounted high on top of each other and some of the other instruments were equally bizarre. The sound/noise concept although such a well used idea in the twentieth century was given a further dimension here by the group's incorporation of other media as an integral part of the performance. Slides and film reels were shown, sometimes simultaneously, and it was from these that the audience gained the gist of the group's meaning, rather than from the lyrics which were generally unintelligible. The first film showed sequences from televised news items interspersed with shots of a pig being dressed up in clothes and then decapitated. The second film was a rather effective animation made by members of the group depicting scenes from urban life. The overall theme that came across was an indictment of the ugly face of capitalism and of twentieth century power politics and the cacophony of sound showed the way they felt about it.

This kind of event as a whole is not for those who like their performances neatly rounded and highly polished. I would have preferred fewer delays but admired the commitment that brought it together in the first place. There is a lot of potential in live/media collaborations of this type and an evening spent this way offers a challenging alternative to more conventional ways of viewing the two.

All very basic stuff and the quality of the music was not exactly great. But, at the end of the day, there was a refreshing rawness in their approach — a directness and energy that seems rare in our apathetic 'Eighties.

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