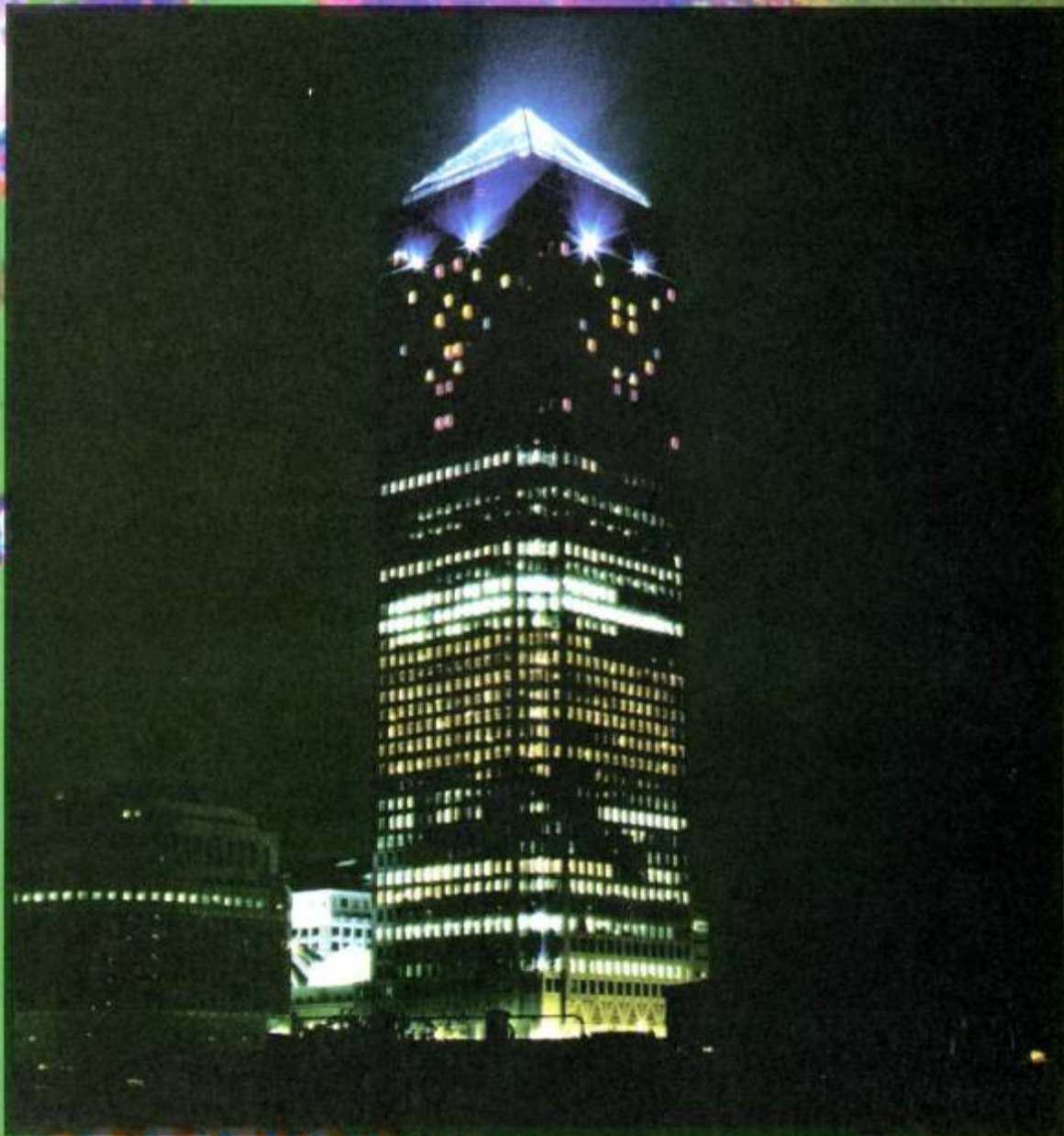


Transgressions

A Journal of Urban Exploration



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The personal focus of this issue of *Oblivion*, and of the Sunshine Boys' *Fanletter*, *Days Between Stations*, is justified in the latter by a quote from Raoul Vaneigem: "Megalomania is an important phase in the struggle of the self against the combined forces of conditioning". This leads me to my one point of criticism about these two journals. Because I think Vaneigem's statement is totally daft. Individualistic excess and narcissistic display are two of the central psychological mechanisms of late capitalist culture; they inform both the specialisation of creativity into 'art' and the wider process of commodity fetishism. And it is precisely because of its individualism, and 'anti-political' sub-text, that the Sunshine Boys' 'work' is, at times, but one small stumble from looking and sounding like performance art. What a fate!

But I think I should end this review by quoting from the 'Glossary of sunshinespeak' (p.46). Although the language, however parodic, gets a tad pretentious in this appendix, some revealing distinctions do emerge, especially between ...

America I — A zone (or zones) of Baroque complexity and varied micro-ambiences conducive to pedestrian pleasures and peripatetic spatial practices. A field of traversal that is rich and resonant with emotive elements, epiphinal triggers, enchantments, and conducive to encounter.

America II — The geography of Nowhere. Flat. Obvious. Cartesian. Sleek. Gentrified. Striated (in the Deleuzian sense). Mass replicated. Stripmaled. Suburban. A-localized. Autogeddon. Most likely, the place from which you are reading this right now.

The Book of Sodom

by Paul Hallam, 1993, New York, Verso.

gordon brent INGRAM

Just like that Big Red song of the mid-1980s, Sodom "is a place where nothing really happens." Given that the actual sex that was said to have taken place in Sodom was never described in the *Bible*, it is safe to assume that much of what we have come to associate with this place is largely the stuff of fantasy, paranoia and, perhaps, a bit of yearning. Certainly, Sodom has been more about the heterosexual than any sort of homosexual imagination. If there is to be a queer archaeology, how we confront the fragmentary descriptions of and narratives around Sodom will have a central bearing on our sense of history, community, and place. In western culture, the biblical history of Sodom represents the genesis of a central pillar of homophobia; the notion of places that corrupt, and, in turn, the careful misrepresentation of gay male, lesbian, and bisexual experiences.

Sodom as mythic place has always been more about the fantasies of reactionaries than a site of sexual deviance or even sexuality. Film-maker Paul Hallam's compilation of writings, from supposedly original descriptions (perhaps foreshadowing queer travel narratives), to present-day fantasies, confirms this. In the Talmud, we learn of a plain with up to five cities inhabited by "men of evil actions" (p.105). In Genesis 18-19, the Lord states that the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah are

“very grievous”. But nowhere in these texts are there any concrete descriptions of the sex. Were these ancient Hebrews just too shy? This is highly unlikely given that cultural obsessions with, and phobias against, sexuality were only just emerging. These stories of Sodom may have simply used homosexuality as a cover, a decoy perhaps. Sodom was probably originally perceived as simply a place of envied urbanites, some of whom were selfish consumers hostile to suburbanites. Sodom was the first mythic place for the construction of the vicious myth of the rich, self-centred fag - a stereotype that today the religious right is still using.

But the fantasies of queer sex may have been used to cover a deeper story of sexual abuse. Lot, Lot’s wife (who turned to salt for looking back) and their daughters were also in the Sodom formula. The bad family dynamics, including incest, that emerged in the fleeing of Sodom, as mentioned in Genesis 19 (pp.31-38), have been curiously forgotten. Homosexual acts have been used to distract from the weakness of the narrative against incest. The ‘Sodom’ legend, therefore, symbolises a particular form and use of homophobia — as a distraction from male violence. Certainly, the incest connection to the story of Sodom remains the most enigmatic part of Genesis. Voltaire notes (p.187) that other local stories have suggested that it was one of Lot’s daughter’s fleeing incest who, while gazing at Sodom, was punished. In this narrative she was transfixed as a tree. In several other versions the woman continues to menstruate.

Much of Paul Hallam’s book is about the early and contemporary coalescence of gay male public space in London and the creation of a ‘new Sodom’. The book’s major contribution lies in its chronicle of the reconstruction and application of the Sodom myth to places of male contact and sexuality in Anglo-Saxon writings. Lesbians are largely spared this one. By the end of the nineteenth century, the idea of Sodom was widely employed as a way of conceiving of sites of homosexual contact in London as alien. The concept of Sodom, as we now know it, became a device for English reactionaries, over the last three centuries, to suppress and regulate the early formation of ‘queer space’.

Aside from the twisted nature of the stories, what makes this painful compilation so compelling, and gives us a bit of hope, is Hallam’s personal narrative on London ‘Sodom: A circuit walk’. It is here that the undercurrent of competition for urban public space emerges clearly. ‘Sodom’ is also the code word for places where heterosexuality loses its dominance. Hallam notes, “Any city worth its salt has been called at one time or another, Sodom” (p.15). And Sodom, as a neighbourhood within the city, is always the big Other, “the unwelcome guest, the import of impurity. The rabid taint of Sodom, its contagion” (p.30).

The Book of Sodom is important because it begins the process of considering the means and value of a ‘queer’ inverting and reconstruction of the Sodom legend. Unfortunately, there are few examples of the transformation of such dystopias of fantasy into blueprints for new forms of community. Such a project would be onerous and fatally flawed — though potentially marketable.

The book also contains some curious trivia on the geography of the Dead Sea region and its natural history. The inhabitants of the towns of those plains may well have been destroyed by a rain of burning asphalt from volcanic fissures. Perhaps, as

the older gay ghettos are increasingly transformed from sites of resistance to isolation and consumerism to high priced and only slightly queer Disneyworlds, Proust's 1929 essay is the most relevant to our own *fin-de-siecle*:

I have thought it as well to utter here a provisional warning against the lamentable error of proposing (just as people have encouraged a Zionist movement) to create a Sodomist movement and to rebuild Sodom. For, no sooner had they arrived there than the Sodomites would leave town so as not to have the appearance of belonging to it ... They would repair to Sodom only on days of supreme necessity, when their own town was empty... (p. 104)

Vermeer II

Exhibition by Stewart Home at workfortyheeyetodo 51 Hanbury Street, London E1
July 27th-Sept 7th 1996

Luther Blissett

Vermeer II is Home's latest onslaught against the art establishment. It follows on from his denunciation of the Cezanne exhibition at London's Tate Gallery in *The Big Issue*. This he denounced as "a sort of fast-food culture where the big names of art are delivered up for mass consumption". He even suggested that a lot of art professionals disagreed with this sort of 'blockbuster' show, but were too worried about their jobs to say anything.

"Although Norman Rosenthal was unable to bag Vermeer for the Royal Academy, Stewart Home is bringing him to workfortheeyetodo", the invite boasted. "Home is exhibiting degenerated photocopies of Vermeer's work. Thus blockbuster conditions are effectively stimulated without spectators having to suffer the inconvenience of being pushed and shoved by a milling crowd". The twenty-two pieces consist of photocopies suitably daubed with florescent paint. The invite claims that Home's treatment invokes the detoured paintings of the Danish philosopher, Asger Jorn. However, on examination they are much closer to Jorn and Arnaud's *La langue verte et la cuite*, where black and white photos are overprinted with blocks of colour to emphasise certain features. Home's pictures proved to be surprisingly 'pretty' and many were snapped up for £25 at the opening.

If Home's exhibition can be marked as a success, unfortunately the performance which accompanied it fell a bit flat. Without official announcement, rumour had ensured that people arrived by 4pm, for that was when John Fare was scheduled to put in an appearance. Home had been involved in promoting Fare's 'intervention' at the Tate's Cezanne exhibition. Dressed in rags Fare had himself led around the exhibition in a blindfold telling all who asked that he was "taking in the aura".

This sort of prank relies on the naïveté of the audience, and while middle-aged Tories in their Marks and Sparks' best might rise to the provocation, the audience at the opening constituted the 'cream' of self-styled 'critical art' in London. So when Fare eventually arrived blindfolded, everyone stopped talking to watch him 'perform'. Deprived of a response beyond the passivity of a traditional audience, Fare could do little. He started sniffing ostentatiously, eventually finding the table with the wine and