

BEST OF 2015

Volcano Extravaganza 2015

Stromboli, Italy

CHUS MARTÍNEZ

Opposite page: Stromboli,
Italy, July 18, 2015. Photo:
Giovanna Silva.

Right: Kembra Pfahler, *Fuck
Island*, 2012/2015. Performance
view, Stromboli, Italy, July 23,
2015. Photo: Giovanna Silva.



I HARDLY KNOW ANYONE who's not either doing yoga or planning to take it up. I'd never given this fact a moment's thought, but it recently struck me that more people than ever are seeking new forms of relaxation, meditative concentration, and somatic control. Though *new* is not the most apt term: Historically speaking, the popularity of this ancient practice in the West is a case of déjà vu all over again, for yoga was also all the rage at the close of the nineteenth century, when the trend resonated with a widespread fascination with the occult—yogis were viewed as the pop-cultural cousins of magicians or mediums. It's tempting to propose that this original yoga fad addressed a conceptual void that would later be filled by psychoanalysis and other twentieth-century Western models of self-knowledge, and that yoga's twenty-first-century resurgence is a result of those models' decay. Such, at any rate, were my reflections after a recent visit to the Sicilian island of Stromboli, a sojourn that prompted me to think about the relationships between mind and body, sense and knowledge.

Stromboli has surely been inspiring mixed feelings in visitors since ancient times. A place of forbidding beauty, it is also the site of an active volcano that has been ominously smoking for centuries. When I arrived there this past July,

however, my own ambivalence stemmed from a different source. For the second year in a row, I had come to Stromboli for Volcano Extravaganza, an annual festival of contemporary art inaugurated in 2011. While I'd had a good time the previous summer and enjoyed the program, I felt a certain skepticism toward the proceedings, largely because of the festival's remoteness. Stromboli is not easy to access, nor is it affordable. But my second visit to the island turned out to be one of the most rewarding experiences I had this year.

On the second night of my stay, I accepted artist Mathilde Rosier's invitation to hike to the top of the volcano along with a number of other visitors. After an arduous climb, we arrived at our destination, where two dancers moved to the metronomic beat of a drum as the artist recited a poetic monologue. Perhaps this sounds like neoshamanic New Age theater. But to perceive it that way would have required a certain degree of detachment, and the situation—to find oneself standing near the mouth of a volcano, at night, on this tiny island in the middle of the sea—made such detachment impossible. The setting, the movement, the rhythm, even the fatigue we all felt: These elements combined to induce the sensation of being in a dream or trance, at once dazed and hyperalert,

Right: Thomas Zipp, *Method of Limits for Determining Sensory Thresholds*, 2015. Performance view, Stromboli, Italy, July 21, 2015. Photo: Giovanna Silva.

Below: Mathilde Rosier, *Abstracting Attraction*, 2014. Performance view, Stromboli, Italy, July 18, 2015. Photo: Giovanna Silva.

The concept of occultism at stake here had less to do with Crowleyan magick than with an epistemology of the hidden, arcane, or obscure.



prompting us to attune ourselves to the very nature of perception and sensation. This was all in keeping with the organizing concept of this edition of the festival. Curator Milovan Farronato took his title, “In Favour of a Total Eclipse,” from a “prophetic manuscript whose author remains unknown,” per the press materials. The fact that Kenneth Anger was on the list of participating artists underscored the idea that this year’s extravaganza would possess a subtly occult sensibility. But while a screening of *Lucifer Rising* (1972) on a rocky beach showed Anger’s masterpiece to great advantage, and while the red-robed artist Brian Butler’s performance the same night had an unmistakably satanic vibe, the concept of occultism at stake here had less to do with Crowleyan magick than with an epistemology of the hidden, arcane, or obscure.

In some cases, obscurity became quite literal. Kembra Pfahler, for example, staged a performance in a cave. Pfahler and her fellow performers—bodies painted red, raven-black wigs teased into the bouffants that are the trademark of her band—*cum*—performance troupe the Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black—played loudly and vamped flamboyantly, their voices out of tune, their move-

ments reminiscent of hokey musical-theater choreography. They seemed at once incredibly awkward and fantastically at ease. It felt like a school play, amateur in the best and most honorable sense. The performance, she told us, was an homage to her philosophy of “availabilism,” which involves making use of whatever is available at a given time and place in order to produce art. In this case, what was available was the cave, a venue whose atmosphere and acoustics lent great intensity to the proceedings, transcending the campiness of Pfahler’s punk burlesque. You could feel the music in your bones. Pfahler’s ethos is the opposite of the availabilism that prevails in contemporary life, where we are always available, always reachable, never hidden, our whereabouts known to all or at least knowable—but, in a sense, we’re never actually *there*, never present wherever we happen to be, because our subjectivities are diffused through the network.

For Thomas Zipp, what was available was tradition—namely, the tradition of religious procession. He appropriated this ritual form in order to stage an anticapitalism parade. White-clad marchers wended their way through narrow

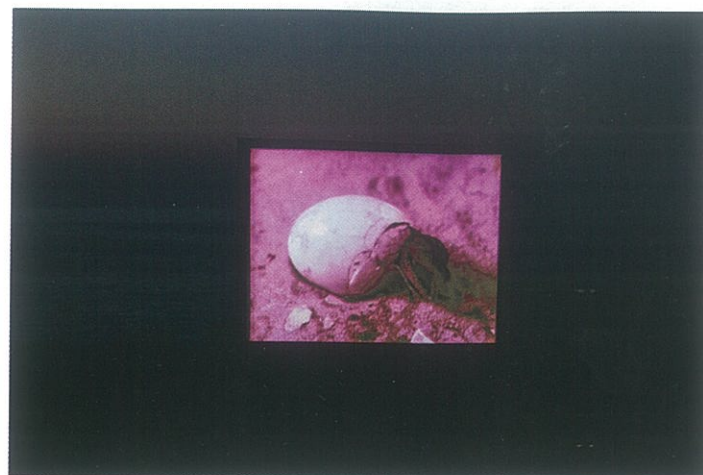


Left, top: Goshka Macuga, *Where Is My Alien?*, 2015. Performance view, Stromboli, Italy, July 25, 2015.

Left, bottom: Raphael Hefti, *Quick Fix Remix*, 2013. Performance view, Stromboli, Italy, July 19, 2015.

Right, top: Kenneth Anger, *Lucifer Rising*, 1972, 16 mm, color, sound, 29 minutes. Installation view, Stromboli, Italy, July 17, 2015.

Right, bottom: Brian Butler, *Choronzon Working Destroys Minds*, 2015. Performance view. From Volcano Extravaganza 2015. Photos: Giovanna Silva.



village streets, playing drums and flutes and carrying placards decrying the fact that “lethargy . . . is the characteristic feature” of contemporary existence. Like Zipp’s, Goshka Macuga’s piece—a comic monologue for an alien, using the befuddled extraterrestrial’s point of view as a pretext for exposing earthlings’ absurd abuses of their advantages—critiqued the conditions of late-late capitalism. Throughout the program, there was a dynamic counterpoint between such critiques and works that sought to activate some chthonic or Dionysian force, like Rosier’s mountaintop ceremony, Pfahler’s performance, or Raphael Hefti’s simulation of a volcanic eruption. How can art engage types of knowledge that have been occluded? And how can it do so without creating a kind of visibility that is too easily recuperated, too easily incorporated into existing narratives, markets, contexts? These are questions raised by the occultism of “In Favour of a Total Eclipse.”

It is not quite right to call Volcano Extravaganza a performance festival. Rather, it is something that we need more than another festival: an encounter. That is to say, it is an experience that is quite distinct from the usual engagements

with art in institutional or public spaces. The Stromboli event (which is the work of the Fiorucci Art Trust, a London-based organization that commissions artists’ projects and funds residencies in various locales, among other activities) is neither one nor the other. The daily rhythm of the program, the relatively small scale of the event, and the comparatively intimate interactions among audience members and artists created an environment conducive to researching and testing perceptual possibilities beyond presentation and representation. Deliberately unscheduled “nights of reflection” enabled us to better imagine the actual world present to our senses against the foil of the world we access through the exercise of imagination, and to see whether, in this dance between the two, there is hope for a different set of possibilities for knowledge and for art. Whatever the case, such knowledge does seem to demand a reexamination of ideas and attitudes that might ordinarily arouse our sense of irony or our skepticism—which is why, though I don’t think I’ll ever don a pair of Lululemon pants, I have been contemplating taking up yoga. □

CHUS MARTÍNEZ IS A WRITER AND CURATOR AND THE HEAD OF THE ART INSTITUTE AT HOCHSCHULE FÜR GESTALTUNG UND KUNST, BASEL.