

Lux: A Decade of Artists' Video and Film

Edited by Steve Reinke and Tom Taylor, 373 pages, YYY Books, co-published by Pleasure Dome, Toronto, 2000

"experiMENTAL" was a button designed by Nora Currie, then an officer at the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre (CFMDC), for a screening of artists' works more than a decade ago. It was her cheeky way of saying that you had to be a little crazy to want to make or see fringe films. Rising to the challenge, a motley crew of filmmakers and their lovers, professors and friends all showed up to see a nice collection of films from the CFMDC collection. So did the media, revelling in this particular form of hijinks.

In the years since Currie's very successful screening, a host of groups and festivals have sprung up to promote the wonderfully marginal activities of filmmakers and video artists who prefer to make work blissfully free of societal constraints. Apart from the Images Festival, no organization has been as vigorous in its promotion of artists' films and tapes than has Pleasure Dome.

Set up as a curatorial collective in 1989, Pleasure Dome has sponsored annual New Toronto Works Shows and Open Screenings Under the Stars of very off-beat films and tapes. It has organized window installations, performance art pieces and evenings of experimental animation. Local hero Mike Hoolboom, collagist Larry Jordan, pixel-vision practitioner Sadie Benning and sexologist Annie Sprinkle are just some of the artists who have been given one-person shows by Pleasure Dome.

Nor has it forgotten quirky titles or unique spaces in its quest to bring the public to works it might otherwise overlook. The artists' gallery A Space, Martin Heath's CineCycle—a unique bicycle repair shop/screening room—the 360 Legion Hall on Queen Street and the Art Gallery of Ontario have all hosted Pleasure Dome screenings. The titles of some of the curated evenings have read: Queer Subversion, Beat the Dead When They Are Cold, Video Con Carne and the Toronto-Post-Punk-Anarcho-Industrial-Late-1980s-Early-'90s-Super 8 Thing.

"experiMENTAL" indeed.

So when Pleasure Dome decided to commemorate its first decade of guerrilla warfare with the media and society by creating a book, expectations were high. *Lux: A Decade of Artists' Video and Film*, the anthology that has resulted, is a mixture of artists' texts, documents, interviews, semi-fictional pieces and critiques culled from the ranks of the cognoscenti who have attended or participated in Pleasure Dome screenings during that time. Steve Reinke, a well-known video artist, and Tom Taylor, Pleasure Dome's administrator, have taken on the task of being *Lux's* editors. In their introduction, they admit to only one failing in the book—that it isn't longer with "more ideas, more art, more video, more film, more thinking, more writing, more audience members." While one can appreciate their enthusiasm, *Lux's* problems as a book would only be partially solved by becoming bigger.

How can writers address the activities of a curatorial group over a period of a decade? It's like trying to catch quicksilver. The



beauty of Pleasure Dome as a quirky programming body is that each particular screening adds to the total impact of what the group is trying to achieve. The diversity of the film and video-makers featured over a 10-year period can only partially be represented in a book.

Lux is designed as a container, honouring Pleasure Dome's achievements. While a few pieces do attempt to take on what Pleasure Dome has done, the vast majority only deal with individual artists or particular screenings. That's fine when an artist's text is involved, but proves to be inadequate when dealing with critiques of particular directors or curated programs.

Fortunately, there are three pieces that brilliantly encapsulate the Pleasure Dome experience. Laura U. Marks's "Ten Years of Dreams About Art" shifts effortlessly from her very quirky dreams (can you imagine a group of jazz musicians who are bugs?), through a look at the image-making scene in Canada in the 1990s to a considered critique of the whole viewing process using C.S. Peirce's semiotic theories. Kim Tomczak's and Lisa Steele's "She" sets up a puzzle in which a woman picks up a notebook dropped by a man she has noticed at a number of Pleasure Dome screenings. Juxtaposing notes from this fictitious character's journal and newspaper items from the dates of Pleasure Dome's events with accounts of the woman's changing responses to her quarry, Tomczak and Steele have crafted a tale that evokes the mysterious appreciation that an audience has to art. Robert Lee's aphoristic "Lux," the "title track" of the book, is composed of a series of apparently discontinuous sentences that deal with spectatorship. Intensely personal and poetic, this piece conveys a lot about the creating avant-garde work without critiquing anything specific by a film or video artist.

Lux also features artists' works by the witty videomaker Colin Campbell, the sexually adventurous Wrik Mead and the nastily hilarious George Kuchar, essays by the ubiquitous Mike Hoolboom and an interview by *Take One's* own Barbara Goslawski with structuralist filmmaker James Benning. While the book is uneven, the virtues of *Lux* far exceed its flaws. This is an essential book for anyone interested in where "experiMENTAL" artists have taken us in the past 10 years. •