

AUTO-BIO-GRAPHIK: Misreading the Body in Jeff Keen

Like shrapnel / The truth will out / The film of a man's life / Cooked in the can / & the flame of things to come' - Jeff Keen, 'RE-SHOOT THE PLASTICATOR



Jeff Keen (1923-2012) was a restlessly prolific, inventive and ranging artist. Whilst this short piece will focus on his filmmaking, Keen was also continuously drawing, painting, making collages, collecting, creating assemblages, working on artist's books, exploring photography, writing Beat inspired poetry, collaborating, experimenting in sound art, performance art, and above all – making and destroying in the momentum of art / life as process. Drawing from Dadaism, Surrealism, Fluxus and Abstract Expressionism, with connections to the London counter culture of the 60s, the poets and musicians around *Better Books*, and among the founding filmmakers of the London Co-Op, Keen was in correspondence *with* but never really *within* these groups.

MAGPIE MABUSE & MEAT MUTT

ER /// LITBIZ OF * BURST * RAY

these are my words from Keen's words ///NIB BIN /// or mine without JEFF

neither nown to be not owned to be but D IG


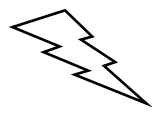
WRECK AGE OF T *HE* RO AD N OW

hoover GUTPUN CH AR "gee!" of the LIGHT

In regards to contemporaneous British artists, it would be possible to contextually reference the eccentric clowning, films and robot sculptures of Bruce Lacey, or the spray-paint and roughly collaged materiality, films and burning books of John Latham's conceptual art. Both men were, like Keen, conscripted for national service during WWII and these wartime experiences constitute a significant presence in their art. Keen's agitated films also bear the destructive fascinations of Gustav Metzger, the founding pioneer of 'Auto-Destructive Art' in

Britain. Or, you might mention the comparably singular and isolated vision of Margaret Tait, a filmmaker and poet who could not be further away from Keen in her aesthetic and content, but who shared the outsider reality of an artist working (primarily) at a remote distance from institutional support, recognition or easy categorisation, treading a path of her own making.

J. KINO KLIK flik thru 2 crater no
 OM ZAP FLAME :::CUT::: DOG
 TOONS WOUNDS :::ST::ITCH::: DAZ
 in hail! rubble poets FAN TO MASS ///////////////
 BOM FU MAN burn/in/the/cot CHU
 BOM
 BRED

‘o cancer live plastic
 down two tenths of a point
 you played me on the screen
 in a dream speedy mind
 sometimes i tire and live in memory’

– Tom Raworth

*with all the innocence of those filmic ghosts that are being born again, at this very moment,
 in the filthy shadows of Earth’s last cinema – Jeff Keen*

Focusing specifically on his filmmaking, Keen is far easier to contextually evoke in regards to the avant-garde of ‘New American Cinema’ from the late 50s onwards. Combining the hedonistic abandon and theatrical community of Jack Smith with the ‘Hollywood Babylon’ occult of Kenneth Anger’s mythologised histories of cinema; and equally, in parallel to the kineticism of Robert Breer’s animations, the Beat bohemia of Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie’s *Pull My Daisy* (1959), Rudy Burckhardt’s collaborations with the New York School poets, and the diary-inflected work of Jonas Mekas and Stan Brakhage – as well as Brakhage’s painted film work and busy montage and superimposition. Added to this constellation of American filmmakers, there is also resonance in Keen’s work with the American collage artist, Jess. Jess’ scalped comic strips and dexterously baroque vistas chime with Max Ernst’s graphic novels, with one eye trained on the Blakean cosmos and the other roving through the esoterica of American culture. Not unlike Keen, this was collage in conversation with poetry. Jess was the partner of Black Mountain poet, Robert Duncan, a poet whose mythic dance of syntax always sparked with the classical and occult; a poet drawing from Dante, Blake, Yeats, H.D., Pound, Williams, and Olson, as much as from Aleister Crowley, James Frazer and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Gnostic elements that, blink and you’ll miss them, also pervade the burnt peripheries of Keen’s films.

Arguably, Keen would have found far greater renown (or at least found it far sooner) if on the other side of the Atlantic. However, as David Toop (in an essay accompanying Keen’s ‘Noise Art’ album) recognizes, ‘Keen’s work drew from American influences yet seemed anti-American in its rawness, its intimacy, its deep connections with the derangement of comic anarchy and anger in postwar Britain.’

5.

the improvised stage of a living room / a garage / the streets / pebbly beaches, pastoral Downs, bounding across the grey rubble of Brighton's municipal tip / the junk shop a flea-market tycoon of toy guns / plastic dolls / wobbling monster memorabilia, cuts of / refrigerated reel to snake-charm Jan Švankmajer & Roger Corman in a shoestring spaghetti western on a Sunday in the rain / spray paint, a burnt-out car / comics / and / so many /

4.

home-made props and costumes blowtorched into propulsive frenzy / inflamed gestures of melodrama / pulp heroes and villains / frenetic gunshots / what now is now forgotten / torn away / animated / reanimated / the spirit of Kurt Schwitters cajoles Joseph Cornell into the arms of the Incredible Hulk / the words / the dropping bombs, exploding planes / gulps / words / gulp deeper into the newspaper gullet of Hannah Hoch / with teeth / Karel Zeman & Ray Harryhausen watching Harmony Korine's *Trash Humpers* / flicking through catalogues of / words in / chew, saw and torch / graffiti, a revolving cast of B-Movie characters / alien /

3.

script / crossed out / masks / breasts / magazines / pads of paper / flapping pantomime purple cock / trouble with your mortgage? / man with a bag on his head / let's go to the movies / Flaming Creature Features / the circling motorbikes / Scorpio Rising from Wiltshire / friends & family / the mark-making / flight-path / performance art with diary film / concrete poetry cartwheeling into goon-show antics and the improvised carnivalesque of a cardboard epic /

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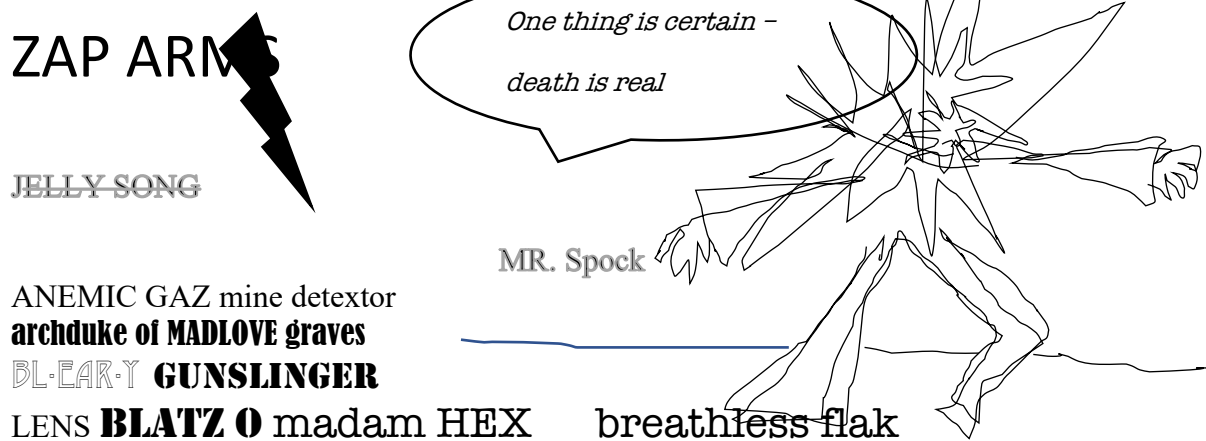
art-brut from deep in the amusement arcades / scatological / cassettes / violent / playful / speeding on / ever-lit fuse / dizzying / gunshot / clutter hawk / barbie melts / dust hound / camera shooting, shooting, shooting into the flamed mess of plastic with the cross-eyed glee of a pyromaniac let loose on an Ed Wood set / creating so much and destroying more / until all is kaleidoscopically forgotten / looping in paint séance with the viscera / strobe / goop and treasured debris of DIY optical surgery / light flickering / in the seaside lab of DR. GAZ!

1.GAZOOKS! ACT 1. THE BRAIN
TREMLES
ALLUVIUM HAWK IT'S HIGH NOON
MUSHROOM SEE LOUD IS
SKY NUDE LUGOSI
1 OF THE raw pulp a peel frm **WOLFMAN! MULLET! AVENGES!**
THE FINEST
PUG HAMMER
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BODY-BLATZ AND PLAYING DEAD

For films that are primarily diving through paper, paint, and inanimate objects, Keen's sense of physicality and the BODY is – even if visibly absent – always a sensorial and active presence. A discussion of the BODY in his films would easily sustain a whole book, all I'd like to do here is gesture towards the discussions that are not only possible, but prescient and often irrepressible when exploring such a contagiously energetic filmmaker. The BODY as scatological drive and jubilant abandon, flesh-pressing in the absurd and violent drives that take us beyond thought and into embodied intuition.

The BODY in war – memories of WWII, the Vietnam war as experienced through film and media, the threat and fear countered with activist resistance in Bomb Culture, the paranoia and propaganda of the Cold War...the BODY as conscripted, as puppetry, expendable, on mass and alone; the Body memorialized; the bodily thunder of widespread destruction and the NOISE of mechanized warfare; the BODY dehumanized, anonymous, and stripped of agency; the BODY as emboldened FORCE, deluded & used / surging with adrenaline. The warring in, and of a BODY.



The BODY as MATERIAL in, and of, change. The transmutation and flux of fluids, layering and tearing as somatic histories. The BODY visited upon and metaphorically present in the inanimate: the bubbling spill and warp of plastic, ripped and burning fabric, sheets washed with colours, spiked with the glyphic and graphic, soggy paper, curling, creasing and reduced to ashes.

The storytellers have not realized that the Sleeping Beauty would have awoken covered in a thick layer of dust – Georges Bataille

The BODY in, and as, waste. The rubble of the tip. The recycled devouring of art that gathers again, playing the same footage in different orders, through a different flesh of colour, under a soup of noise and interference. Collecting the dust and debris of what culture has stubbed out, still glowing, re-purposed but without purpose, flung in PLAY. The decay and destruction of MATTER as inseparable from its recreation. As the BODY breaks down it gives LIFE.

[A] *mass of torn, charred prayer books strew the stone ; the statues, tumbled from their niches, have broken in pieces; rafters and rubble pile knee-deep. But often the ruin has put on, in its catastrophic tipsy chaos, a bizarre new charm. – Rose Macauley*

The BODY of film, skin blistered light, to be scratched through by hand, by time, by accident, recording the process of where recording disintegrates, revealing the BODY of its own collapse. Tape and celluloid, the chemical trace of, the imprint, fossil-waking in the mark of MOVEMENT. The EYE sees through MOVEMENT.

My eye, then, inspiralling, fractioning style-wise, being instrument for striking sparks
– Stan Brakhage



Photo from [Ocula](#), Kate MacGarry

In his first film, *Wail* (1960, 5 mins, bw, silent, 8mm), the restless camera joins a ring of bikers...it brings to mind Anger's *Scorpio Rising* but predates it by 3 years. The rest of the film then rattles through a kinetic back and forth between bikers and stop-motion sequences, a nod to a pulp noir framing, and increasingly rapid montage speeds. In these 5 minutes, the film races through many of the ideas and images that will continue into, and characterise, Keen's filmography. Without any reading of the film whatsoever, an important feature to note is the sheer speed and innovative stop-motion style that, in 1960 (and still, now, today), announces Keen's filmmaking with an all-ready jaw-dropping energy and unique dexterity – as close as it is to clinical cut-up as it is aleatory chaos. Whilst Keen's films can be *read*, in a literal sense text (headlines, names, titles, concrete poetry) flashes through the montage and animation, they simultaneously resist the connotations of reading. Considered, theorised interpretation and intellectual efforts are scrambled in favour of a more bodily response: the failure to read, to catch the word as it flies or digest what is already regurgitated, forces each film into a simultaneity of language and its disruption. This then doubles as creation and destruction / desire and revulsion / waste and recycling...each möbius strip reeling into the next, speeding through the gate to be seen as metaphor and its annihilation, all possibilities in, and as, PLAY.

The rushing of what can and cannot be read or what is seen but not registered, draws our (struggling to keep up) attention to encounters with MOVEMENT and MATERIALITY. Everything is at once contingent – about to be burnt away, cut up or painted over – *and*, paradoxically, always on the cusp of showing its own flesh – the image is an advert, is now the material paper of the advert, now cuts to footage of that which was represented in the advert, the comic book spills into life and the words are chewed. As Bridget Penny suggests, in her wonderful essay 'light travels faster than words': '[r]ather than trying to negotiate the

tricky gap between words and what they describe, Keen creates a seamless work where both are unstable and can appear simultaneously, often in the process of transforming into something else’.

In *Wail*, during the climactic montage, at one point a cut out image of a cat has paint-brushed laser-lines animated out from its eyes and then we cut to actual footage of a real cat. This is then followed by old footage of an equally old woman cradling a dog (that looks like it might be a small bear? or at least a bear-like dog), this then cuts to the cut-out image of an old man cradling a pug, which is then knocked out of the frame by an animated but real hammer. These quick slaloms between illustration (the cut out image), a layer of artistic interaction (paint), and then the mirroring appearance of the former illustration as moving footage – as a kind of actuality, constantly circle throughout Keen’s montages. The MOVEMENT between creates a shifting palimpsest that plays on the tension between MATERIALITY and its representation. Any MATERIALITY is always in MOVEMENT, just as any MOVEMENT can – at any moment reveal its (illusory or actual) MATERIALITY...a dynamic that is at once analogues to notions of meaning in language (through deferral and difference we constitute what is meant from what is always elsewhere, finding form in the formless search for form) which also brings to light ludic dimensions of Surrealism, and also, in complete opposition to such interpretation, a dynamic that prioritises its embodied sensation. PLAY, MOVEMENT and MATERIALITY. Or, as Keen puts it, in a poem from his *ARTWAR Reader*:

& Energy into Form
It’s Auto-Bio-Graphik
But not an Autobiography
Direct Projection
& not an illustration

The restless MOVEMENT of ‘Energy’ transmutes into the MATERIALITY of ‘Form’, cumulatively emerging as the ‘Auto-Bio-Graphik’ – the self-expressive body and its visual art. It is an embodied poetics of film with its emphasis on the making and its imminent destruction, the flux and noise of movement. All of which could be theorised along the lines of Dadaism, Fluxus, Phenomenology, Surrealism and any a whole host of frameworks, but to do so would betray the spirit and sensation of the art/life momentum in Keen’s films – the compulsive and haptic thrill, to be there, in the riotous speed of its happening.



Photo from Ian Heames' [tribute](#) to Jeff Keen

Earlier in its frantic montages, *Wail* hurtles through: a photo of Dalí, images of Jazz musicians, quick-fire pencil doodles, cowboy comics, planes, rockets, doodled explosions as a peppering of more humorous Vorticism, Creature-Features (the face of WOLF MAN), a disembodied baby's head that floats grinning beneath a parachute, anatomical illustrations that animate a skeleton, boxing, bull-fighting, snapping dentures, photography from eye-surgery (a darkly comical take on the 'blink and you'll miss it' combined with the evocation of *Un Chien Andalou*...also rhyming with the release, in that same year, of George Franju's poetic surgical horror, *Les yeux sans Visage*), car catalogues, war graves, newspapers, fashion shoots, the death of James Dean, mechanical fetishism, car crashes, dramatic headlines that flash and disappear (MY NIGHT OF TERROR / - KILL HER), and spurts of paint that flick across the frame like blood. In this moment the paint-as-blood becomes a murky fluid, a swilling viscosity that fades into the paragraphs of print on a turning page. Physicality and the word merge, literalised in a cross-fade...the insides of BODY consume the page and darken the frame. Anticipating Keen's later reappearing character, Motler the Wordkiller, as in *Rayday Film* (1968-70) when the phrases 'Kill the word before the word kills you' and 'How right Motler was to kill the word' flash into view.

The word becomes a site for Keen's mischievous confluence of comic-book exclamations and speech bubbles, advertising slogans, histrionic headlines and the influences of concrete poetry. In particular, the textural, visual and sound poetry that Bob Cobbing spearheaded at *Better Books*. Cobbing collaborated with Keen, alongside Annea Lockwood, providing whispering and incantatory sound poetry to *Marvo Movie* (1967). The WORD is in opposition to the BODY, whilst also stamped, sprayed and torn in its MATERIALITY and so made bodily – it is the reversible and unresolvable connection between physicality and language that types/calls/writes/projects ACTION! One of Keen's lines of poetry (from 'Will Yr Brainstem Leave an Imprint?') was 'Light travels faster than words'...was film away to transcend language, to antagonise its shortcomings or reanimate its potential...plastic letters are burnt, and yet arguably the insistence of the word dominates – flying into view like a flawed superhero (DR GAZ!THE CATWOMAN / MOTLEY WORD KILLER / SILVERHEAD / OMOZAP) or in one last stand, the embattled villain. The constant barrage of text and its (in)comprehension throughout the films, stages an elemental tension between LIGHT, MOVEMENT, WORD and the BODY as its theatrically thrown into the explorations/explosions of mad, expressive conflict. Or, more in keeping with Keen's language, ARTWAR erupts.

Seven years after *Wail*, Keen's frenzied animation reaches another level of mastery in the dizzying and intricate collaged stop-motion of *Cineblatz* (1967, 3 mins, colour, sound 16mm). The colours are vivid, the collaged cut outs are clear and animated with an unrelenting (impossible to follow) speed. Interviewed by the filmmaking entity, Daniel & Clara, William Fowler (who collaboratively worked with Keen, on the BFI Jeff Keen boxset, *GAZWRX*) remarked that Keen 'transposed the William Blake maxim 'energy is eternal delight into celluloid matter. Too fast was not fast enough'. A year after *Cineblatz*, Keen made *Meatdaze* (1968, 8 mins, colour, sound, 16mm), which ambitiously incorporated numbered sections that built upon the stop-motion collaged animation. In *Meatdaze* the animation led into, and integrated with, unforgettable sequences of the slow-motion naked bodies of three of the regular 'players' (including Jackie Keen), sequences that rove around the cluttered workspace of Keen's art (burnt dolls and drooping plastic fans, endless plastic sheets and bags, propellers and aviator goggles) and one eerily slow shot of clustered bubbles (of the fairy-liquid, children's party variety) hanging over the destroyed cross-section of a

doll house. In these films the presence of the body becomes a violent and libidinous energy, poised between PLAY & WAR / DESIRE & DEATH... brimming with cartoon, aggressive, joyous and unnerving Freudian impulses.

In *Cineblatz*, the crunching sound of radio static chews between stations, each micro-itch of no signal fidgeting towards a sense of something about to come through, a release that never arrives. Mechanical diagrams are juxtaposed with the drool of melting plastic, while fashion adverts and glamour models cavort over rows of crosses to commemorate the fatalities of war. The scatological stutters into a kind of politicised parataxis: the averted eyes of a mascaraed white model cuts back and forth with the frowning face of a black child; the simplified, childish painting of tower blocks rise again and again, above smiling nuclear families, above bleak stretches of white paint; war and advertising; sex and food in advertising; pulp violence and real violence; consuming all of it, burning through to new layers, painting over, editing, erasing; crude visual innuendos elaborate themselves in breakneck turnarounds, and the silly jaunt of Spike Milligan humour intercuts with a sense of grotesque assault.



Clamping rows of lipstick snap together like red jaws in a visual rhyme of the rows of memorial crosses; consumerism and fashion are aligned with the libidinous violence of war but with a frantic ambiguity that prevents anything ever seeming didactic. It does feel at times like the nightmarish unconscious of Futurism (its militancy, lusty veneration of mechanized warfare and fascism) has been reanimated to haunt the headlines of the Vietnam War, in turn haunted by Keen's memories of trialling experimental Tank and Plane engines in WWII. And yet, for all the compulsive repetition and tensions between disappearance and re-appearance, it still feels misplaced or clumsy to impose a narrative of trauma. Keen had a lifelong obsession with guns and war that was full of pulpish glee, his own wartime experience and a love of comic book drama; equally there is also a sense of the abject or frightening realities behind that and yet – always – the films avoid any polarising binary or fixed critique. One bites through into the other, and it can be as joyful as it is deeply troubling. The violence is at once comic book and real, its articulation cathartic, playful and disturbing. These films are not oblivious to their contradictions but realise, in the abandon of their art-making process, that contradictions are not *worked out* in the art but *worked through*, continuing in, and as, a process.

Both films use audio to compound or confuse the uneasy scattergun of images: whether it's the uncomfortable crunch of radio static in *Cineblatz* that begins to feel like the gasped swallows and hiccups of a malfunctioning throat, or the bombardment of constant artillery shots, explosions and a crackling cut up of orchestral grandeur in *Meatdaze*; both escalate the

visual overload with a similarly restless auditory landscape. In both the visual and audio, Keen emphasises a textural depth and friction. When combined with the overwhelming speed and quantity of images, this textural detail (much like Švankmajer's films) lends a further, innately tactile dimension. Keen's sound art (de) composition used recordings he had made in cinemas (enjoying the hollow reverberations of space around the staccato screams or explosions of whatever film he was sitting in) or just wandering around Brighton, audio jottings in the margin. As detailed in William Fowler's essay, 'Aural Meat', Keen also used a Binso echo unit (as used by Syd Barrett), a guitar amp, a Wasp synthesizer, and various other electronic tools.

Grabbed in the rush of haptic sight, too fast to conventionally comprehend and too busy in its tangible stimulation to avoid encountering our act of looking for what it is, a bodily sensation, we are dragged behind. As much of what is looked at is not *seen* (even with a remote control to stop and start, things are missed, deranged from easy assimilation), I've noticed Keen's films tend to unravel again in dreams; their sped-through excess reawakening from subliminal absorption into vibrant and internalised films – gun stuttering dust in the unconscious.

*In neural playback
The track follows
Trickster gateways
This way - that way
Cries the Blatzman
Each day will trace
Its true dimension*

- Jeff Keen, 'WILL YR BRAINSTEM LEAVE AN IMPRINT?'

