

Performance art, LSD and bent coppers in the Sixties

Jill Drower introduces her relaunched 2014 book on the 'swinging sixties'

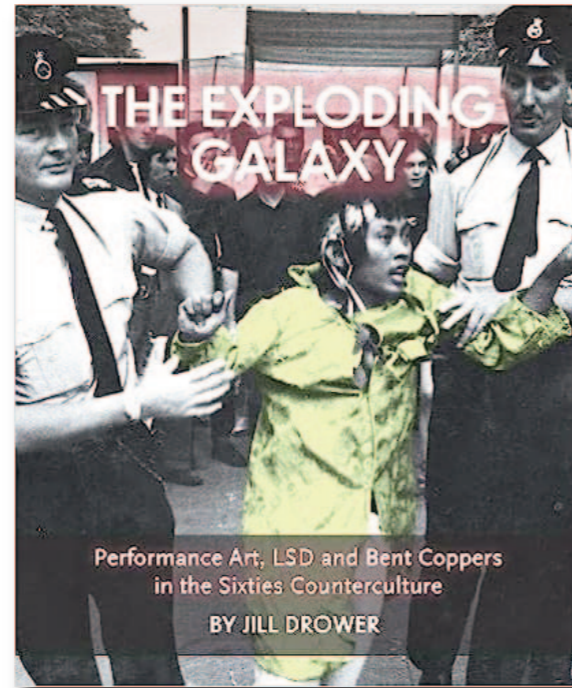
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IT WAS in the spring of 1967 that, at the tender age of 15, I started spending my weekends with the Exploding Galaxy. I would hop on the No. 22 bus at Putney Common and settle into the top-deck back seat. As we slowly plied our way across London, I would transform my appearance by donning hippie robes. Over time, flowing velvets and crêpe de Chine utility frocks gave way to more exotic garb such as a semi-circle of grey army blanket, closed at the front with a kilt pin; a cardigan knitted by my grandmother that was full of moth holes; a chiffon blouse carefully teased out through each moth hole, to resemble an Elizabethan doublet. Then there were the attachments - appendages made from found objects, each with its own meaning, which were tied to the outer layer, or pinned to my hair. Eight months in, these bus costume-changes had become much more complicated.

The Exploding Galaxy was described by Mick Farren as a psychedelic ballet company and by Jack Henry Moore as 'Britain's hope for anarchy in dance'. So it was probably just as well that, at the start, my parents did not know the exact nature of these weekend sojourns. I have been asked why my parents were so lenient with a 15-year-old daughter. It was partly, I suppose, because I went out accompanied by my older sister, and partly because they really did trust us to be sensible. Besides, they were used to their daughters' nights out as singers on the folk circuit. What they did not know was that the Exploding Galaxy was quite different. What started as a dance drama group soon turned into something all-encompassing. The street performances and the scheduled gigs, the evenings spent talking round the basement fire at 99 Balls Pond Road and the construction of artefacts all merged into a total and continuously aesthetic experience. By the end of 1967, I had become a component of a living artwork.

I first started to write about my experience of London in the late sixties when in 2006 Guy Brett asked me to provide a piece for a catalogue to accompany a Tate Gallery exhibition. The book was about the Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica, and since Hélio had stayed with my family in 1969, I contributed a short piece about living with him. This, in turn, led to an invitation from Rasheed Araeen to write an article about the Exploding Galaxy for the 'peculiarly British issue' of Third Text magazine. As I was writing it, the article seemed to be a synopsis for a book, so the next step was obvious.

Had I known the long and convoluted journey I was embarking on, I might have turned right round and started running, but what started with a few phone calls turned into a full-scale investigation, trying to make contact with people I had not seen for more than four decades. I traced ex-Galaxy members as far



asfield as Japan, Brazil and Canada. Like prospecting for precious minerals, once you have been at it for long enough, you feel you must keep going. Partly because I was still working, the journey took almost six years. Other Exploders, those on the fringes, were not personally known by me. It certainly would not have been possible to include everyone who was ever in the Galaxy, and my apologies go to anyone who feels they should have been included but have not been. To create some sanity in the research, I had to set limits. I have included profiles of those Galaxy members whom I considered to be 'core or otherwise particularly important and whom I was able to contact.

I immediately set about interviewing everybody I could - more than 40 people. In addition to Galaxy members, I spoke to those on the scene in the sixties who I felt would have something interesting to say and/or knew the Galaxy. Some of these interviews were over six hours long.

Quotes in the book that are not cited come from these interviews. I should say at this point that, although I have quoted from the interviewees, the views expressed in this book are not necessarily shared by these people. Even among ex-flower children, there is a very wide range of opinion on the subjects of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll. In addition, I should make it clear that not everyone in the Exploding Galaxy took LSD and not everyone took off their clothes in public. Another hard lesson for me to

accept during my dealings with ex-Exploders was that not everyone views our mutual past with the same degree of warmth. While some people cherish 1967 with the enthusiasm of trainspotters, others now find remembering that time irrelevant or painful.

The artist Caroline Coon and I had talked at length about the way in which women have been written out of art history. We both agreed that it was at the point of writing up that women were excluded from the canon. However this was only partly borne out by my own research for this book.

Of my tiny sample of 25 ex-Exploders - 13 men and 12 women - all the men, apart from David Medalla, agreed to participate. Of the remaining men, only one wanted more than minor changes, relating to factual information. As far as the women were concerned, however, two chose not to contribute, one agreed to a profile interview but then pulled out, another sought substantial changes and a fifth did not get back to me at the final stages. From the beginning, I found the women much more reluctant to give information during the question sessions, anxious about

being judged and much more concerned about the final wording of the completed profile text. These women had been through the feminist seventies as part and parcel of the women's movement, and been in spirit or reality on the barricades? It was exactly like the playground - the ex-Exploders' playground - where the boys occupy the centre saying, Look at what I am doing! while the girls play quietly in the corners. Two of these reluc. tants are painters of extraordinary talent and a third is remembered as the Galaxy's greatest poet.

The spirit of 1967 was to free everything up and give access and ownership to all. My great disappointment in doing this book has been to find to what degree we, the Exploding Galaxy, lost our battle. We believed that art could be a shared communal experience; we believed art could live independently of commerce; we believed that the ephemeral was exactly that, and that to preserve it in a museum was an absurdity; we believed that art history was the truth and not a version of events that had been agreed upon by a small circle of people; we believed that we could never be corrupted by the monster. How wrong we were. ■

