

# From Biofreak to Organasm

Part 3 of an Eyewitness Account

by David Brody

I could just about see the site from my sixth floor studio window, a catty-corner block away. Over the next two months the mustard factory was gradually transformed. We'd filled a dumpster with truly awful and unhealthy junk and saved anything that looked usable — bits of erector-set metal, solid lumber, wire and decorative oddities. Anyone building an installation could put dibs on this bounty, and it gradually got parceled out without, by and large, anyone getting greedy. More than a few participants had shown up that first day when we opened the gates. They were responding to well-aimed word of mouth and underground propaganda which we'd left at strategic spots in the East Village and elsewhere. Lloyd had run off a business card on his Mac, for example, that read "When I hear the word culture I reach for my Petri dish" — I wrote the copy — with a malevolent close-up of an ant, and a contact number. Of the genial circus freaks, orphans, anarcho-slackers, and slumming studio artists who'd heeded the call possibly only a few of these last got my modestly learned reference to Artaud. But I began to realize that this was going to make for a promising mix. Soon a couple of guys from Limb, the performance commune on Avenue B, were torching a portal into one of the metal tanks, and mountain climber types were rigging things up in the rafters of the barn. When the torchers broke through — it had taken them hours — all activity elsewhere stopped, and the growing crew of participants came to witness. The hot half-inch steel hatchway was vise-gripped safely to the ground and one or two at a time people stepped inside. When it was my turn, I suddenly recalled a scene from childhood, how the guard inside the Baptistery at Pisa, next to the Leaning Tower, had shut the door and loudly and authoritatively demanded silenzio. The startled tourists shut up immediately. Instamatics fell to hips. Then in the purest voice, a Palestrina tenor, the guard sang out a note which lingered almost without decay long after he'd finished, the vibrations caught in the marble dome like a firefly in cupped palms. Now another note, a major third higher, now the fifth. All three notes, a multitracked major triad, hung in the air together as if three cloned voices were singing in harmony for a solid minute, sixty seconds of transcendently mournful diminuendo.

Inside the metal silo, I therefore whistled a note, stopped, and listened for the resonance, which was sour but impressive. Just as I was trying the third someone outside started banging on the tank, and instantly the whole crowd thought that was a brilliant concept and it was all I could do to stumble outside without going as deaf as Quasimodo. The wacky musical interlude snowballed as people flew in all directions to find bangable objects or structures. Twangs, thumps, boings, and bonks began to coalesce into a tribal rhythm, thanks to a dreadlocked conga player named Gennaro, who led the ensemble with two clean cow bones — part of someone's project — and a huge laundry tub. Dancing ensued.

Along the way I lost a battle with a sullen Basque stiltwalker for a fine hunk of metal that we both thought we'd reserved, but with assistance from a couple of stalwart sculptor friends, guys who could hoist multiple sheets of drywall or change the brakes on a truck, solid, reliable fellows, I found plenty of scrap to build a video platform. We'd chosen the (relatively) small blockhouse with its twenty foot ceiling because of its central location, but the slight bit of isolation was going to come in handy. The blockhouse was attached to both the barn and the main space, and you could pass through it going from one to the other. Its

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placement was thus roughly spinal but you could also go around by the yard, past the metal towers, permitting us to close off the blockhouse when we needed to. The platform was about ten feet high and fortresslike. We'd spot welded 55 gallon drums, diamond steel screen, and rebar into something like an unapproachable Fernand Leger colossus – tubular womanhood meets smokestack Arcadia. Not incidentally, the platform's height and mass would be necessary for protecting the video equipment from the crush.

Meanwhile, the bottle smashing machine out in the barn was proceeding, I hoped, apace. Alex was a young wiry male model grunge sculptor type - he could hoist sheetrock like a cowboy and change the brakes on a truck *and* stay out all night drinking and tomcatting. I'd taken it upon myself to target him for the important task of marking the hours with some sort of performative sculpture, because I knew whatever he'd come up with would be appropriately scaled, big and rough and nasty. He'd taken my entreaties to heart and was hard at work on the hour-marker of my dreams, but it was going to be a close call. In a couple of weeks the event would be unleashed, bottle smasher or no. He had a competent crew and it was interesting to watch their fatigued silent concentration on the problems which came endlessly to hand, especially in contrast to many of the freakier folks, who ran around excitedly like chickens on a hot wire half the time and idled listlessly the other, as if they had no place better to go, which they may not have had; in truth, there were people living onsite by now. Some of them were out-of-towners, but, well, others weren't from anyplace in particular.

One day, while I was trying to figure out where to thread co-ax, there was a big commotion. I heard sighs of doom all around, as people returned from outside with their heads down. FDNY. I came down off the platform and poked my head outside to see Sharon and Eric negotiating at the gate, stalling off the inevitable. In time the battalion chief came swaggering into the yard with his men in their heavy kickass boots and rubber coats, some of them even shouldering fire axes and crowbars for extra effect. With the huge red diesel humming outside we felt like pirates being boarded by the Royal Navy. I disappeared into my wiring, so as not to seem like there was any cause for concern. Let Sharon and Eric handle those guys, I told myself, they're experienced. And evidently, they came across as professionals, because it could have been much worse. The chief left us with a bunch of violations, and from then on everything was going to be legal – assembly permit, exit signs, occupancy counts, the works – but it seemed do-able. Still, they could close us down whenever they wanted. They could say okay for now and close us down in mid-event. They could do it for spite. Surely it had been a good decision to purchase our electricity instead of "patching into the grid."

"Assholes" said the Construction Mother. "Those motherfuckers. Why can't they just let us immolate ourselves if we so choose?"

Lloyd had also walked into the blockhouse. "It's all part of the surface of interface, Marco. Now the Fire Department is part of the system. We're the mitochondria and they're the endoplasmic reticulum."

"More like the sphincter," muttered Marco, with a maniacal grin. Apparently the man had studied some biology. "Hey Ben," he continued in a suddenly businesslike manner, purely for comic effect. "Where the fuck does the red cable come out of the wall?"

"There is no red cable. Oh, you mean the purple one? This one? That doesn't go through into the big room yet, but we can sling one through the tube."

"Give me cable, baby. Oh honey I need it so bad."

"Sing it, man, sing it to me!"

"Don't egg him on, Lloyd," I pleaded. "I'm way too sober."

"C'mon, Marco. sing it. C'mon Ben sling it. A singin' and a slingin' all night long."

Lloyd was even more tone deaf than Marco. I turned the amp on to drown them out, and lo and behold the damn thing worked. I mean there was a nauseating feedback screech at top volume from every speaker on the system, into the far reaches of the complex. I quickly turned the volume knob down, and then there was total silence, or maybe it's that no one could hear for a little while. "Wow," I said. "Lloyd, you'd better check and see if anyone fell off a rafter."

I used to be the sort who invites lots of people to a party and only considers the consequences at the last minute. A hoard is going to materialize. Locusts. A storm. Once it begins there will be no time to get more toilet paper. Any valuables and personals left exposed will be swept away on a tide of beer. You stuff everything into a closet and duct tape the door shut. No one comes for an hour but just when you think you didn't invite enough people, the bell rings. And once it starts, they keep coming and coming and coming, like a bad Nor'easter swamping a canoe. After a certain point the door to the street is just left flapping in the breeze. It's a foolproof method for meeting new people, most of whom, fortunately, you've forgotten by next light.

In the case of Organasm, they were lining up outside, so I was informed, well before the 6 o'clock opening. Hundreds already. The doors were going to open and I was arguing with this prissy Dance Queen about the video projector. The three-eyed son of a bitch weighed 200 pounds (the projector, that is), was worth several thousand dollars, and belonged to a friend who had entrusted it to me only after profound oaths had been taken. We had finally succeeded in rigging it from the ceiling oh so delicately and aiming it at the wall but the Dance Queen wanted it aimed, it turned out, at the other, larger wall.

"Don't you understand? This tape was made by a very important video artist" — she mentioned a name I'd never heard of, but already I knew I wasn't going to like his very important work — "and it was made specially for this event, for this choreography. It's a great honor. I need it to be on that wall."

I was panicking, but I was also pissed off, so I went with that. "No way. Can't be done even if I wanted to. It would take an hour of constant labor, and I don't have two minutes. Maybe if you'd shown up once or twice to rehearse when you were supposed to we could have worked it out."

"You can do it. Please. Look at all you strong men." She brought out her million dollar smile. That really pissed me off. My sculptor and wiring friends alongside me up on the platform paused in their activity to see what I would do.

"That bullshit is not going to work," I intoned, as if I were an exorcist addressing the incarnation of Baal. "Get it through your head: it's not just a matter of carpentry, you have

to aim and focus the thing. There's no time. You should have been here earlier." And I returned to the Amiga to see if I could figure out how to turn it on.

"I want that projector moved! You have to move it! *I'll* move it!" This was a new tack. She was actually ascending the ladder, and with grim determination.

If I'd had a gun I'd have unbuttoned the holster about now, like a mate on the Titanic. "If you so much as breathe on that projector I will physically harm you." She backed down. "I suggest you rehearse while there's still a few minutes left. Let me know when you want me to start the tape."

I have to give her credit. Unused to not getting her way, she regrouped with relative equanimity and got her embarrassed dancers into position. We closed off the doors to the blockhouse and cut the lights and I started the tape, which turned out to be just as artsy-fartsy as I'd expected. Whatever important video artist had showered her with his genius — one pictured a tenured ex-hippie at some way upstate campus — he was still enamored of analogue feedback effects that were already cliched in the sixties, those aimless, pointless meltdowns that were the visual equivalent of the wah-wah pedal. Now that the bloom was well off the rose, such shapeless drool didn't seem remotely psychedelic, more like the antithesis. But still, it was compelling stuff compared to what the Dance Queen's graduate choreographic training had wrought. You know, Dance.

We all stopped to watch, though, transfixed in a combination of wonder and mild lust. Young girls and boys were cavorting for the sake of art. The Dance Queen herself, her dark hair cropped and her black leotard snug, was, I remarked to myself, kind of hot.

"Now that's a woman," said Mavic to me. My chiseled Balkan sculptor friend, dragging on an unfiltered French cigarette, had the appetite for combat typical of his homeland (how little we knew then) and was married to a bit of a firebrand himself.

"Yeah," I said. Was I just noticing the Dance Queen's lithe appeal for the first time, or was it the mystery brownies I'd scarfed down a little while ago? "Yeah, she's definitely interesting." What I was really thinking was that we would be married, completing the yearning interlock of our souls, and live happily ever after. I was certain of it.

Someone was pounding on the door. Lloyd. "Five minutes to insemination! Ready or not, here they come. Strap In! Strap On! Strip Down!"

"He must have stayed up late working on that," said Brandon, the macho electronics whiz, sotto voce. Just because Brandon liked helping out the freaks more than working on arena rock shows, that didn't mean he wasn't a skeptic. A living witness to the decline of the waterfront working class, Brandon had actually grown up in the neighborhood. His dad might well have been a steamfitter or a navy yard welder. The statistical likelihood is that he died of lung cancer and drink; in which case, Brandon was hell-bent on being a chip off the old block.

"There's at least two thousand out there," Sharon announced, a second galloping herald. "And we're just getting started. When're you going to crank the music?" she shouted at me.

"Not my job. Eric's all hooked up and ready to go. I've got him patched through. Tell him."

"Sorry, Belinda" I added to the Dance Queen after Sharon had zoomed off on her rounds. "Rehearsal's over. Hope you got what you needed. Trust me, it's going to be great." She actually smiled up at me. The lively dark beauty of her eyes was paralyzing. My heart raced, but I had to think about how to get this text feed to work. It had been purring like a kitten yesterday, thanks to Brandon. I began looking stupidly at a spaghetti of oddly colorful cables. They seemed to be ... *slithering*. Where had Brandon gotten to? Then it hit me again: She was THE ONE. Oh Jesus, what the hell did they put in that brownie? Maybe they were using a recipe Alice B. Toklas never dreamed of – and God help us all if it came from Tim Leary's cookbook. I decided to take stock. From an experimental standpoint the situation was unpredictably reactive. My barnacle-encrusted clamshell of a heart had been crowbarred open and the secret, gooey interior, greedy for freedom, was about to be cooked – Where the hell was Brandon? The doors were opening any minute! – in a cauterizing adrenaline bath.

But what if, somehow, I was right? What if by some decree of outlandish and inscrutable fate she WAS the one? No, I reminded myself, that kind of delusional thinking feeds on itself like an avalanche – and it requires the same sort of roadrunner footwork to avoid going under. I knew very well from repeated personal research that apparitional love behaves like gas in a cosmic vacuum, that it can hyper-inflate like a red giant of manic self-satisfaction only to collapse viciously inward upon its own dead weight, all that wishful thinking whirpooling bitterly into the psychic equivalent of a black hole – whence no light escapes. No light, no nothing. But that didn't mean I was able to resist. Because what if this just happened to be one of those miraculous ordinary moments when eternal soul mates stood revealed to one another? Belinda and Ben. Ben and Belinda. Maybe we'd look back together fifty years from now in wonder. I dared not meet anyone's eyes, least of all the Dance Queen's, so I pretended to study the cables again, but they wouldn't lie still, fidgeting obscenely in vivid chromatic animation as if they coded for the circuitry of my thoughts.

There was a crash, a quantity of glass being broken. We all turned apprehensively toward the barn, then another crash and another, six in all. It was the bottle smashing machine and it had struck the hour. A rebel yell went up and the first trickle of hand-stamped celebrants came rushing toward the blockhouse. The music was up, the thing had begun.

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