

# 20 Questions, or: Leaving the 20th. Century (again, at last)

by Jez Welsh

1. In an early eighties video tape, (Leaving the 20th. Century) Californian video artist Max Almy portrayed a media sodden post modern limbo of a life style in which 'He left because there was nothing on t.v. In my case, I shall leave because there is too much on t.v. Always too much.

2: I'm standing outside my back door on a warm summer evening in the late summer of 1989, looking down at the garden as lengthening shadows engulf it, and from the kitchen the sound of the radio reaches out to me, inviting my complicity in a whirlwind tour of global culture. Charlie Gillet is speaking from a street in Tanzania describing a scene of desolation and melancholy. He introduces a peice of music - a piece of mesmeric, repetitively structured, eerily harmonised music that is at once strange and familiar. I've heard its echoes in so much contemporary Western music, and its authenticity is fragile and melancholic like the ghost town of the commentary. We have spent this decade in an orgy of consumption that has not stopped at the margins of the material world. We have consumed the globe in every aspect.

3: There's no point in making predictions about the nineteen nineties, for a variety of reasons. If nothing else, we shall all be sick to death of hearing Experts in the media telling us what it is going to be like. By the end of this year there will be precious little else on t.v. but predictions about the next decade, the next century. It is so pointless because we know it already. We have seen the future because we have been living in it for some time already.

4: It is, however, interesting to look back at some of the visions of the future from our recent history. Take for example Hal, the computer in 2001 A Space Odyssey. In the sixties we needed the image of a bid computer to convey a

sense of awesome power. As we enter the nineties we are more impressed by SMALLNESS and by the time we actually reach 2001 this process should be so advanced that Hal could be installed as a filling in the astronaut's tooth.

5 :Is there a foreseeable end to this process of minaturisation, especially with regard to INFORMATION which has increasingly come to exert its influence over culture? Culture treated as information can be miniaturised, stored, replicated, synthesised and amalgamated with other forms. Difference, Regionalism, Dialect, Ethnicity are reduced to the status of information, like so many varieties in the Breakfast section of a supermarket. We can choose to accept this process or to resist it. To resist is to refute the supremacy of Information. Like refusing to fill in the Poll Tax form. Is there a form of cultural action that can not be documented, recorded or preserved?

6: For any spectacular example of why it is necessary to resist the impulse to document, preserve and RePresent, we need look no further than the ICA's recent brush with the mortal remains of Situationism. I say Mortal remains, for the ghost was nowhere to be seen. As DeBord predicted, we are well and truly living in the Society of The Spectacle, and the Spectacle of Situationism reduced (minaturised, encrypted) to a system of design motifs (not even signs) is the perfect argument for the abolition of Art History.

7: The Void Act theory is a stratagem, disguised as an aesthetic discourse, that celebrates and seeks to encourage that which is at once profound and meaningless, or profoundly meaningless. No documentary evidence exists that this theory has brought forth any culturally determinable artefact in either the realm of the physical or that of the notional, and so it can be

and that it is hitherto in no way guilty of contributing to or otherwise perpetuating the processes of cultural production. However, now that it has been NAMED this innocence is lost, and the loss of innocence (seen as the acquisition or transfer of knowledge) demonstrates once again the destructive power of Information.

8: The fatal flaw of the Void Act Theory resides exclusively in the fact that it can be named, and thereby defined, described, measured, allocated a point at which to exist in the constellation of ideas. Those of us who have toiled under the sign of Video Art should appreciate this. Video Art is History and is even now settling (comfortably) into its new home, The Museum. Media Art is a problematic term, possibly even a contradiction. Independent Media is not even problematic, it is merely a contradiction. Media are, of necessity, INTERDEPENDENT. Video Art, Media Art, Television..... they are all somehow part of the same thing. Beyond this thing there perhaps lies something unnameable.

9: That which is unnameable belongs to a class of entities about which nothing can be said. Ideas that can be neither described nor formulated. It is at least theoretically possible that virtual technologies might offer us the chance to break free of language. (A project that Oscar Wilde might have described as 'The Unspeakable in pursuit of The Unnameable').

10: The unnameable could be the new or the so far undiscovered. One of our most pressing problems is that we think we have discovered (almost) everything and that there is nothing NEW anymore. Our loss of faith in The New coincides with the collapse of The Modern as an ideal or a goal. From a loss of faith in modernity it is but a short step to the rejection of progress, or at least a rejection of the (ideologically determined and ethically motivated) idea of progress in the social sphere. As we face a new decade and another century we must think about the choice that faces us: to accept the failure of modernism

as we understood it and the consequent impotence of a post modernism that is no more and no less than the disintegration of modernism itself, and to dare to imagine beyond this point, to find meaning and to seek progress, to rediscover the challenge of the new. Or else to accept that the process will continue, that things will remain the same, which is to say they will only get worse.

11: Recently in Yugoslavia I had a discussion with Lorn Falk, director of the Arts Residencies programme at the Banff Centre, Alberta, Canada. We were both attending a 'Video Colony' (cross between a workshop and a festival) in the south of Macedonia and were aware of two things: one, that we were looking at a different culture that might just elude out NATO frame of reference, and two, that we were aware of a crisis of ideas in the western culture we both belong to. Lorn described this as the 'Theory Soup'. You are either a noodle floating around in the soup, passive and prey to any change in the environment, or else you are something like a shark that feeds off everything else in the pot.

Perhaps there is also a third category; some kind of tadpole, that is waiting to grow legs so it can get out of the soup altogether - climb up onto the lip of the bowl and see what kind of a world lies beyond.

12: In some way, Video Art has been an ongoing document of the whole process of social/cultural implosion in the eighties. When J.G. Ballard wrote 'The Atrocity Exhibition' in 1969 critics saw it as an illustration of the traumatised psychological landscape of modern man. By the eighties it did not just describe a psychological condition, it functioned as a script for a wahol culture, and too much video art has been little more than a series of electronic footnotes to Ballard's text.

13: The Atrocity Exhibition is still running, of course. Not just the endless stream of actual atrocities, violations of humanity and nature, that constantly assail us from the Media, but also the

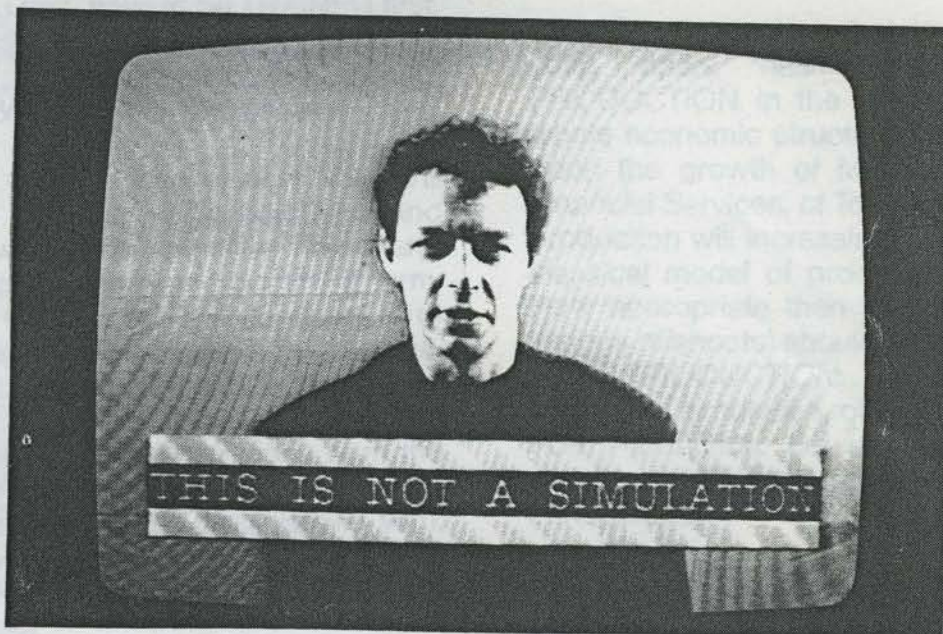
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conscious spectre of the 'Death of The Social' and the abolition of 'the real', reported by Baudrillard among others. Video artists should proceed with caution; the playground of Virtual Technologies, Virtual Cultures may turn out to be a minefield, or the threshold of a new place where you have to leave the baggage of your philosophy, your morality, at the hat check. For an image, an object, an idea that exists in the virtual realm, supposedly stripped of, or indeed conceived in the absence of referents, may turn out to be a poisoned sweet. Simulations are not developed for fun and virtual environments are not designed with the best interests of humanity in mind. Video itself was developed as a military technology and the computers we play with are a spin off from the space programme, from weapons research. We have of course already confronted this problem with regard to video and its effect upon the body-as-image. When addressing the problem of video it is no use bewailing the fact that it causes bodies to disappear, to dematerialise. This function is fundamental to video as a technological form. It reduces the body to a ghostly emanation, to information in fact. Video surveillance systems are quite precisely devices for turning bodies into information. So the Body in Video Art can both distinguish itself from the disappearing body that is caught in the duplicitous mirror of surveillance. And when it re-emerges, rematerialises, as energy, information, it is only one element in a flux of signals.

14: Perhaps there are people in some remote place where westerners do not go, watching Sky Television from a satellite receiver, and perhaps they are not passive recipients of our cultural colonialism. Perhaps they can see us very clearly reflected in what they regard. Perhaps they can tell us what is going on. Perhaps we can learn how to listen to them.

15: In a very short time, you the video artist, the film maker, the computer image maker, will be in a position where you can make your work available in small discreet packages for people to consume in the privacy of their own PERSONAL SPACE. Which is not to say IN THEIR OWN HOME: rather in the exclusion zone they create around themselves with the aid of headphones and miniature tv screens. The little private spheres that will float round in what used to be SOCIAL SPACE. This is what is meant by the death of the social. (This is also why the Beat Box, the Ghetto Blaster, is a more radical medium than the Walkman.)

16: Before the 'workshop sector' decided that it would be best occupied in providing 'training' to enable people to work in 'the media' (now who really believes there will ever be that many jobs available in t.v.) it was motivated by a desire to get people involved. Training is what is practised upon circus animals or military personnel; involvement has to do with communities. The



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involvement motivation was not concerned with professionalism in any sense, the point was that people could use video (or any other medium) to communicate, to share experience. Many of the programmes made in this way were of course very boring to anyone not directly involved, but this was not the point either. They were never made to entertain a distant audience. But when the workshop sector went professional it had to junk all those ideas of open access, it had to spop people from indulging in unstructured 'free expression' and it had to demand that if they want to say something they have to be TRAINED first. This is another aspect of the Death of the Social, for the social always grants that people ALREADY KNOW HOW TO SPEAK.

17: First there was the idea of ALTERNATIVE MEDIA whose means of production and dissemination would be separate from and constituted in opposition to the dominant form. Then there was the idea that the dominant form could be infiltrated and modified from within. Then there was the acceptance of the 'grammar' of the dominant form. Then it was assumed that because a crossover had taken place from the margins to the mainstream, the margins no longer mattered and could be dispensed with. Then the circle was closed and the idea of ALTERNATIVE MEDIA was once again nothing more than an idea.

18: Similarly, when Art has abandoned all of its old weapons - critique, subversion, irony,

ridicule, self righteousness etc. - and substituted them with MIMICRY then it has accepted that the dominance of the dominant form is so unshakeable that to parody it (and to hope that this intellectual game is transparent to the viewer) is the only form of address that remains. At this point, Art, along with the Social (and God, whose demise preceded both) can be declared dead.

19: Societies that suffer overt oppression live on bread and create poetry. Democracies live on sugar and produce soap opera.

20: The production that is the replication of soap opera has nothing to do with PRODUCTION in the industrial sense. As the whole economic structure becomes predicated upon the growth of Media, of Information, of Financial Services, of Tourism, this kind of (post) production will increasingly come to eclipse the classical model of production or Manufacture. How appropriate then that VIDEO ART (or its various offshoots) should be so dependent upon POST PRODUCTION. The precise moment of control, of simulation, of manipulation occurs in Post Production. Let us say that for present purposes, MEANING can be said to be POST PRODUCED.