iText 4: A Matter of Live & DEF

iTexts 1 to 6 are a compilation of related texts accompanying the exhibition iPod Killed the Video Star

One of the features of the pop video explosion that occurred in the late 1980's was the interrelationship between cheaper, more user-friendly production technologies and increased broadcast possibilities facilitated through cable and satellite broadcast. Demand could be better met by newly available technologies and, in turn, the promise of supply could be manipulated to increase demand.

The apocryphal contract offered to Devo on the basis of their potential to deliver videos rather than songs highlights the shift towards recognizing the demand for   or demand that could be created for- an endless stream of music and images. The investment in companies such as those that would morph into MTV   a brand practically synonymous with music television in much the same way that any vacuum cleaner can be described as "a hoover" or any tissue as "a Kleenex"- testified to the belief that serious business could (accurately) foresee big profits in the booming (supposedly youth) pop music cultures.

A key phenomenon of this new type of television was a new kind of production. Using newer video technologies to meet tight budgets, a new type of production company emerged; small, lean, independent and based almost entirely in video (rather than film) production. MTV's wave of success would be largely built on the creative output of hundreds of independent mirco-companies and freelance individuals. An inevitable hierarchy would emerge as the high-risk experiment turned into solid business. The big record companies insisted on the bigger, increasingly corporate production houses to manage the special needs of their stars. But, in the early days in particular, the broadcast pop video existed in an oddly democratic world where the quirky art school offerings of a new generation of video makers sometimes made as favours for friends in hopeful bands- would gain equal air time alongside the big operators.

This fuzzy zone in which the outsider had the opportunity to capture the hearts of eager viewers, now largely a matter of history, created a number of interesting circumstances. One of these for example was the possibility that European bands, particularly those from the UK, on obscure independent labels that had previously stood little chance of increasing their circulation abroad might suddenly and unexpectedly have access to vast international markets, hungry for misunderstood iconography of the UK's punk and post-punk heritage. Needless to say, there is a certain irony that many of the more musically skilled and credible bands of the day   complete with punk pedigrees- that paid less exhibitionistic attention to their video presence- failed to pull in the ratings (and subsequent record sales) that previously unknown wannabes achieved.

One of the key punk legends tells of how people of limited musical skill could manage to care so little about social consequence that they could walk onto a stage armed with barely three guitar chords and raise a jubilant frenzy in the audience through their sheer rage and energy. Punk tells the legend of unaccomplished mavericks winning over the ferocious live audience.

The legend of the pop video era unfolds digitally. It is one in which attention-craving art school kids flee their grubby Hackney student flats armed only with the power of persuasion over a geek with a synthesizer and another art school friend armed with a video camera. Persuading, charming and, above all, being guided by denial and a blind confidence that can only come out of an unhealthy need for fame, the heroes of the first Pop Video Era legends managed to talk someone into recording a track. With the aid of the generation that would transform "styling" from a clumsy verb participle into a profession, and, probably, a few club freaks eager to populate the video, they somehow manage to capture a new self-image on Umatic tape. With a bit more charm and relentless effort, perhaps even a few sexual favours, something approximating broadcast quality acceptable to late mid-1980's MTV would eventually available. It's unexpected reception in Ohio, Bonn and, naturally, Japan, ensure that international fame   at least until the second album is released- is assured.

The difference in the legends is primarily one of the audience and of visual presence. In the punk legend, the immediacy of the audience

is essential, the live crowd. The Pop Video Heroes win over people they will never meet, many of whom live in places even more desperate than the ones they themselves have fled. Their looks, their pouts, their idiosyncratic or melodramatic gestures are what will define them; their chance to stand out against the next hopeful hitting the same screen in approximately four minutes.

In both legends, the music is both essential and almost incidental. Certainly, it is essential that music is involved. It is imperative that the heroes of both the Punk and Pop Video legends are seen to be 'doing' music, not necessarily that they are musicians, but that they connect in some way to the baseline legend of "the rock star" the seminal narrative of teenage rebellion through which by embracing and identifying- the viewer connects with a youth culture, identifies with pissing off the older generation. These are not actors or television personalities; these are the sons and daughters of Elvis and Buddy Holly.

However, it is not only essential that the heroes of both legends "do" music, but they in some way connect with the genre, the available classifications for the sound of a particular identity stance; to the sounds of now, to the sounds of being me, the me that is like the others like me.

Obviously, music within any apparent genre can be compared against a range of qualitative perceptions; can be discussed as music on its musical merits. However, thank god, this can be left to music journalists and straight men without girlfriends. But, to comply with the legends of either Punk or the Pop Video Era, in depth qualitative measurement of a band's tracks remains relatively unimportant. It certainly didn't seem to matter to a cohort who wax nostalgic about their heightened experiences of punk gigs in the 1970's. In hindsight, they could barely distinguish one group's tracks from those of another. Fuck, no, it was punk!

And, indeed, it certainly didn't matter to the isolated wannabe club kid trapped in rural Idaho that one tinny electro pop melody sounded much like another. What mattered is that it sounded like nothing anyone else in my town could appreciate! And, more importantly, it was offered by people who looked like nothing anyone in Bumhole, Idaho or Armpit, New Mexico would think was a good way to look!

For the legend of the Pop Video, it is primarily the latter that would become pivotal.

If punk historically presents at least in the way its memory is conceptualized- a more homogenous look and sound, then the sounds and looks of the Pop Video Era only stand to reinforce the fundamentally visual nature of the pop video music revolution.

A scan of the looks and sounds of what were considered to be hip or at the very least "credible" at the time are far more heterogeneous than during the preceding punk phenomenon. What many of the "stars" of the pop video have in common though is the emphasis on a strong visual presence. This could be the wild-haired LSD-driven expressionless grimacing of The Cure or the pouty, cutesy bounciness of Clare Grogan, the po-faced fringe fest of Phil Oakey or the crypto drag queen gesticulations of Pete Burns, or the pretty boy grins of Duran Duran, or even the camp theatrics of Kid Creole and the Coconuts...

Exactly what the look was, was obviously important. But having a definitive look was always more important than the definitive look. The Pop Video Era's almost obsessive preoccupation with the idea of individualism and individual creativity no doubt had some bearing on the promotion of this heterogeneity. After all, the notion that true individual style or one's own "look" would hardly seem tenable in a scenario in which a pluralism of visual presentations was not allowed. Indeed, allowing for a range of hip "looks" and "sounds" was essential to the construct.

Romanticism in the 19th century presents a number of contradictory elements. On one hand it is often associated with revolutionary forces sweeping across Europe contemporaneous to its appearance, yet the emphasis of the heightened individual experience is simultaneously problematic. In a revolution composed entirely of lone heroic figures, what becomes of the masses?

Similarly the early Pop Video Era perhaps not so coincidentally also the era of the New Romantics- was an era in which the heroic individuals of the post-punk scene were

frequently divorced from obvious political content or stance. Certainly, a strong and conceptual political strand runs through the ways that more committed, 'intellectual' groups of the period would exploit these technologies. But on the whole, groups were very much focusing on developing a performative identity for the performer/s that often seemed to be more effectively communicated across time and distance than it could be in the context of live performance. Given the confines of a live stage performance, performers may not be as easily able to manipulate how they wished to portray themselves compared with the possibilities of video and its box of technological tricks.

This difference between the early punk narrative with its emphasis on the live experiences and the Pop Video era, with its emphasis on a visual identity communicated technologically is an important one. It has subsequently consciously or through near accident- become an area of interest to a number of contemporary artists engaging with pop music cultures. Although it may not be the only, or even the primary, concern for a number of them, it is interesting that it remains a thread connecting a number of currently practicing artists.

Perhaps one of the clearest examples of this is the practice of Iain Forsyth & Jane Pollard. Earlier works seemed very clearly concerned with the way in which popular culture and its identities could be formed through a process as in an early video work in which Iain its 'transformed' on screen in real time. He is turned into a semblance of Robert Smith from The Cure by Jane, using hair and make-up techniques deployed by hundreds of thousands of The Cure fans around the world.

Subsequent works seemed to show more of an interest in the nature of the meaning that objects and icons associated with popular music could assume. In some cases, these explored very personal meanings such as in the work relating to personal compilation tapes. In others, it seemed to focus on the meanings attributed by pop cultures in a more shared way, for example as in the video 'Damaged' in which Iain reads Kurt Cobain's suicide note directly to camera.

In earlier video works, the use of video and the camera is not the central concern; it is not about the formal nature of film, video or the moving image. To quote Iain Forsyth himself, these works seemed to be far more concerned with the 'poetic potential' of the objects and activities associated with pop music cultures and how individuals structure them to create very personal, yet oddly easily communicated, meaning.

As if to underscore the emphasis on this aspect, a subsequent period saw them shift away from producing video objects altogether. Focusing instead on the setting and activities in which such meanings are created, they set about a form of anthropological engineering in which environments in the form of rock concerts- were recreated. These explore the potential to synthesize experiences in which the audience could go through a process of attributing meaning or experiencing the states with which rock mythology is often imbued. Growing out of an initial work with a Smiths tribute band, there followed a series of recreations of rock gigs of legendary stature, culminating in David Bowie's famous last Ziggy Stardust gig , recreated at the ICA in London as the work, "A Rock 'n Roll Suicide".

With these works, Forsyth/Pollard chose not to produce video documentation; to not offer a subsequent object in lieu of the event. The work was located firmly in the live experience and the kinds of meaning often attributed to such events. Just as video itself was not the real subject of the early video work, re-enactment was not the subject of these works. Obsessive in the detail of their recreation, certainly, but, as Jane Pollard pointed out in a recent talk about the duo's work, the issues of replication and authenticity, often of interest to artists involved in reenactment art, was never the point of these works. Both the artists and those attending the events were always clear about the limitations of any such recreation. Instead, what was being offered was a facsimile environment in which the kinds of experiences and subjective states were actually the main focus of attention. Social structures and rituals leading to personal and communal meanings remain at the heart of these works. Their artistic concerns remain far more closely aligned to a personal understanding of social and human sciences

than to the body of works dealing with formal concerns. This is particularly evident in the work, "Everybody Else is Wrong" with its snappy MTV vox pop docu-style.

If this body of work was clearly concerned with the live pop music experience, then the work 'File Under Sacred Music' appears to be concerned with the way in which technology communicates or is believed to communicate that 'live' state. Surveying extensive footage of live music events, the duo were struck by the way in which badly filmed bootleg videos could often be experienced as being more immediate in communicating a sense of a 'live' music event compared with large budget films of such events. One video in particular, a bootleg of The Cramps performance at the Napa Mental Institute in California that took place in 1978, particularly seized their attention.

Working from the bootleg and other source materials, Forsyth/Pollard set about recreating the event inside the ICA in London. Involving a replica band, members of mental health arts organizations and a rough 'bootleg' style camera, they set about recreating the bootleg. Whereas the previous performance works had been very much about the viewer/audience's live experience, this event was 'closed', with only those involved and a few press members being present on set. The work would exist as the video object alone.

As Jane Pollard has also observed, this work marked the return of the camera to the role of an active agent in their work. None of the extensive preparatory activity or on-screen action would have taken place if it were not for the camera's ultimate presence. In this aspect it differs from the preceding 'live' works, not only because of the ultimate work left by their practice, but perhaps because it does indicate an interest in the nature of the moving image production that is not present before.

This notion of how a film's 'surface' can be read and hold meaning for an audience also emerges in the most recent work, "Walking After Acconci (Redirected Approaches) " a reworking of the famous 1973 work by Vito Acconci. Here the active decision has been made to use postproduction that will render the film's 'surface' with a look and feel associated with certain genres of urban music video in order to reinforce certain associations in the audience.

The body of work produced to date by Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard demonstrates a number of shifts in central concerns and practice. However, the contemplation of 'live' versus 'recorded' is a thread snaking through the work. A substantial part of the work is concerned with the nature of the live pop music experience and how we make personal meaning of it. But, equally, it is almost that conclusions are drawn through partly examining the counterpoint; the nature of what is captured by the camera and what remains.

Jeroen Offerman's work can also demonstrate a preoccupation with the 'live' versus 'recorded' experience of popular music. However, his work seems to be more concerned with these issues in relation to technology, mechanics and viewers' cognitive perception than sociological aspects. Rather than making us think about how social meaning is created, his works are more closely aligned to an area of conceptual practice that challenges the viewer to think about how s/he is experiencing the work; technically, mechanically, biologically.

His work, "The Stairway at St Pauls" and the related work "Stairway Live Performance" is a bit of a red-herring in its engagement with the pop video and popular music culture. Although popular music culture is a alluded to in other works such as "Lacquer" (2002/3), his work is largely concerned with the material nature of things and the technologies driving perceptual experience.

In the video work "Stairway at St Paul's" Jeroen Offerman stands on the stairs of St Paul's Cathedral in London. He begins to sing the famous Led Zepplin song "Stairway to Heaven", his voice sounding odd. As other people move on and off the screen, backwards, the viewer begins to connect the possibility that he might be singing the song backwards and the film could be being shown backwards. We begin to understand that what we are seeing is the work of an artist who has phonetically learned to sing a song backwards and composed the work in this way. Or do we?

A contemporary audience's suspicion off what is 'authentic' on film, is partly down to

the fact that the pop video probably more than any other form has shown us the potential for digitally manipulated realities.

If the viewer of the work has any residual suspicions about how Jeroen Offerman's work was created, then perhaps "The Stairway Live Performance" documentations counteract that. In these videos we clearly see him appear on stage, the throbbing live crowd jeering and cheering, backwards, as he runs through his carefully rehearsed, inverted performance. Perhaps.

But have we not now reached the stage in which even this level of video evidence could be viewed with suspicion? Is this a real 'live' experience or has it merely been doctored to appear as if it were captured that way whilst being produced through another means; a digital Frankenstein's monster fashioned from 'dead' parts? Could it not be another conspiracy?

One drive of Jeroen Offerman's work is to prompt us to think about how what we see was created. So perhaps broader cultural factors also highlight some of the underlying allusions of the work, its subtle connection to the stories of Satanic messages impregnated into the grooves of records, awaiting release when played backwards.

The work's layers penetrate. One aspect is certainly concerned with materials, with science, but it is also concerned with the paradoxical beliefs about science in its very audience. Unproven and irrational beliefs about subliminal recordings have actually fed processes resulting in court action. Is there not a level on which Offerman's work asks us to consider the paradoxes of a society in which, despite our technological ability to fashion objects using the laws of science, we remain able to project occult beliefs onto the very fruits of our rationalism?

By contrast, the video works of Ari Versluis and Ellie Uyttenbroek appear to have a narrower focus, even though the issue of 'live' action is very much part of them. On the most simple level it is the movement, an indicator of 'live' action that distinguishes these works from the body of work for which they are best known; the extensive 'Exactitudes' photographic series.

Whereas 'Exactitudes' uses stillness, the frozen moment, to allow the viewer to zoom in on the ways in which body and dress codes play a role in creating and defining group and individual identity, the video works use movement as an intrinsic element. More specifically, they focus on the relationship between music cultures and dance styles to form an identity statement, such as in the "Fukin Hostile" video, in which the distinctive Rotterdam underground Gabber dance culture is the starting point for the work.

Naturally, movement an added dimension- brings new types of complexity. There is a level in which these works are more abstract, more of a personal examination of the moments of poetic beauty in the movements of the human body. And they also allow for more humour, more tongue-in-cheek scrutiny of the way in which male identities (thus far the works have involved filming male dancers) constructed with the aid of live movement are open to interpretations that might genuinely horrify their creators. For example, at what point do supposedly aggressive male movement cultures become homoerotic or just butch drag? Or, more generally, how are movement codes used by subcultures to inform its members of what is hot and what is not? And what were they thinking when they decided?

Although photographic work may be able to broach such questions in a more subtle, implied way, the interaction between a filming camera and a male dancer or, of course, between male dancers, may be able to emphasise such aspects much more clearly.

In the video works, Ari & Ellie turn their (moving) camera on popular music cultures. It is not dissimilar to the way in which they have turned their photographic camera on other popular cultures. But now, the 'live' actions of these cultures is moved to the top of the agenda. Their construction is not one that really asks us to question how the image was made, but rather to focus on the identities of those in the images and how their living movements -their dances- play a role in defining who they are, or more importantly, who they want us to believe they are. The question is not historic. It is not about their relationship to the past or preceding subcultures. We are asked instead to consider how a specific, still recognisable subculture uses movement (in combination

with music, body and dress codes) to identify itself in an almost continuous present tense. And, perhaps, by implication to think about how any subcultural identity expresses itself in the living moment.

In Marcelle Price's work, "Mean, Mean Man", the moment is also frozen. Like Ari & Ellie, Marcelle Price usually deploys an element of documentary practice turned in the direction of subcultures. But, whereas Ari & Ellie's work is often engaged in documenting the codes of subcultures to which they themselves do not belong, Marcelle's work is often engaged with subcultures with which she herself identifies or participates; Teds and Rockabillies. The documentary strand in the work can sometimes be deceptive. This is not an artist always seeking to make a statement about 'the other' but often one using documentary processes to come to a statement about her own identity within a subcultural context. The fact that she is not always present on screen does not mean that she is not present.

This notion of auteur presence may be well established as a critique of documentary practice as a whole; that the maker is always personally present in some way. But, whereas accepted mainstream documentary practice seems to focus on constraining the individual presence of the maker, this is not so in Marcelle's work.

In fact, the apparent documentary aesthetic in some of her work is merely a mode of presentation. It is often a clever means of side-stepping the problems that can arise when addressing some of the issues that her work often does such as fetishism, sexuality and the sexually-potent meanings of motifs and fabrics associated with subcultures. Certainly, works such as "Ready Teddy" show that she is unafraid to address sexuality very directly. She sometimes chooses a presentation mode that does not trigger immediate titillation. It may be an attempt to actually help the viewer be guided to thinking about the processes at work in the images rather than responding psychosexually.

"Mean, Mean Man", however comes out of a more recent body of work in which Marcelle has been exploring the ageing process in the context of subcultures. And this is very obvious here as we are offered a series of frozen photographic images of ageing (or disturbingly young) Teds, Rockabillies and subcultural fellow travellers. The result it a cruel warmth. It gives a very human representation of men who, judging from their clothes and hairstyles, want us to still accept them as cool cats and swinging rockers. Marcelle's presentation simultaneously holds up a burning mirror and offers warm understanding.

The decision to present a 'video' of frozen images is an interesting one. The use of the rock soundtrack takes it even further in the direction of the pop video. This heightens the art historical context. Or perhaps more accurately, introduces a dialogue about the history of visual cultures of subcultures. Some of the men featured in 'Mean, Mean Man' as they are now may very well have appeared in the seminal photo essays of the 1950's or 1960's. At that time a new generation of post-war British photographers first sought to document the emerging pop cultures free of the judgements and horrified rage of the reactionary media. The result is that one gets the feeling that the artist is acutely aware -perhaps even boastful- that the hip visual cultures offered by any contemporary generation may not, as they sometimes claim, be something entirely new.

Subcultural identity is also at the centre of The HuMobist's (HuMobisten) work, "HuMobiza". However, here, the live moment is far less of interest than a subculture's music and video culture, more specifically, the music and video culture of Ibiza rave. On the simplest level, the work is a puerile parody, covering not dissimilar ground to their 'porn droid' video in which the cultures of sci-fi and pornography were parodied. But if other work is largely occupied with the actual live expressions of members of a subculture their living moments- then the HuMobists are concerned with their residues, the objects they leave behind them.

Relying on the same vein of irreverent, arguably nihilistic, humour of Bas Jan Ader or Gilbert & George, the HuMobists have constructed a manipulated artefact of the Ibiza rave culture. They have written a bangin' dance track and filmed a video, partly, in the milieu drug-influenced visual language associated with the house refugees who flock to the Balearics. Or wish they could whilst actually flocking to some deserted

warehouse in Kortrijk, Bournemouth or Bielefeld.

And, perhaps, it is in the 'partly' that the most interesting artistic practice arises. For, just as Bas Jan Ader's absurd actions occasionally, maybe almost accidentally, allow us to trace an immediate lineage to and understanding of the actions of preceding artistic movements, so too the Humobists arrive at something beyond a mere parody of a visual culture associated with a recognisable subculture. The nightmarish horse heads, for example, can be easily understood in terms of the low production values of music videos created for one-hit-wonder dance bands coming up with that one track that will make them the toast of a particular summer on the islands. There is something almost endearing about the way in which dodgy music video makers have attempted to convey the dance drug experience with tacky editing effects and cheap carnival props. And perhaps this is something that the HuMobists recognise; the depths to which humans will fall in a genuine attempt to communicate their most intense personal experiences.

But, more importantly, like Bas Jan Ader, perhaps the HuMobists understand the fundamentally pathetic results driven by a desire to arrive at a profound expression. This is actually what unites cheap video culture and some of the lauded art movements of the last century and a half. For every success story attributed to the Futurists, Dadaists and Surrealists to pick on only those whose visual languages pop up in the work of the HuMobists- a lot of ugly crap was produced in the name of art.

Much of twentieth century art saw a shift away from the focus on craft towards ones on process and concept. We are taught that motifs are important because of their role in the attempts by artists to express certain ideas. So how then do we measure the motifs and attempts at expression by artists against those of popular cultures? With notable and actually relatively few- exceptions, the artefacts and objects left behind by many 20th century art movements do not necessarily have high production values or stand up in measurement against more craft-based criteria. How, or more importantly, why should they be measured favourably against the artefacts of mere subcultures?

The Humobists have constructed a fake artefact for a subculture we all instantly recognise. Perhaps their intention is merely to poke fun. But it could also be that they want to prompt questions about the relative cultural values of artefacts produced by 'high art' and subcultures.

If the work of Forsyth/Pollard and Ari Versluis are often concerned with the 'live' aspects of popular music cultures, then perhaps the HuMobists respond more directly to the pop video style personas and cultural identities existing almost entirely digitally.

The lines intersect. The legends of the punk era emphasise attaining an identity before a live crowd. The personas of the Pop Video Era stars highlight the importance of residues left on tape. Some contemporary artists intrinsically or directly address this historical context in their practice.