

■ Now What? Dreaming a better world in six parts

BAK Utrecht

November 1 to December 14

Review. Martin Vincent. Review: 'Now what? dreaming a better world in six parts'.

Art Monthly, pp 2
December–January 2003

The World Question Center (Reloaded) is a re-rendering by curator Jens Hoffman of James Lee Byars' original work from the late 60s. Byars' aim was to elicit questions from the 100 most brilliant minds of his day, believing questions to be a far more important than answers in the evolution of knowledge. In the 1969 version, filmed in a Brussels TV studio, Byars is positioned as high priest, flanked by beautiful women, acolytes sitting on the floor in a circle, and everyone is wearing shimmering robes. It is an astonishing historical moment. People around the world are telephoned and Byars speaks to them using a microphone strung round his neck. His manner, though unfailingly polite, is never chummy, and respondents frequently struggle to grasp the nature of his request for a question.

Hoffman's reload replaces the Age of Aquarius trappings with a symposium model: a desk faces an audience on rows of chairs and, in place of a charismatic leader, a curatorial team takes turns to make calls to a list of names compiled through wide consultation. It is more democratic, maybe, more bureaucratic, certainly. While Byars' 1969 performance, shown here on a monitor alongside the results of its recreation, is all about the act of questioning itself, mining the essence of the interrogative through repetition, misunderstanding and ritual, Hoffman shifts the emphasis towards the content of the questions, writing them up on blackboards and checking the wording with the questioner. The compelling tension is lost, and what is gained, aside from some interesting questions, is an awareness that curators and artists have not yet become interchangeable.

The performance was in Utrecht's former Courthouse, whose many unrenovated spaces also accommodate 'Fantastic Prophecy', the curatorial contribution of Annie Fletcher and Liutaurus Psibilskis. As the title suggests, the 11 artists here counterbalance Hoffman's clerical methodology with a more visionary approach. Even when they too are making someone else's work: the video of ... *Twenty Women Play the Drums Topless* (to abbreviate its poetic title), 2002, documents a 'performance by Fabienne Audéoud and John Russell based on an original idea by Wayne Lloyd' (see AM260). Since neither Audéoud nor Russell is actually performing and it is not their idea, their claim to authorship derives from their administrative input. So can artists complain when curators start remaking art? Maybe an idea like topless drummers, so very questionable on so many levels, can only be brought into the world through such nebulous attribution. The work's spectacular and relentless presence, however, demotes such arguments to footnotes.

Hypnotic in a different way is Tobias Bernstrup's *Untitled (Friedrich Passage)* 2001, a digital reconstruction of a real shopping mall. Thumping music marks the camera's passage through the deserted spaces, which becomes a journey into a virtual purgatory of anticipation, eventually emerging into blinding light. No such happy release in Paddy Jolley & Reynold Reynolds' *Burn*, 2001. In this claustrophobic, dreamlike film, the characters are oblivious to the fire that is consuming their home, carrying on as if this were just another tiresome irritation. In memory the film is

in slow motion, but that is just the resigned indolence of the residents, damping the flames which flicker up spontaneously on their clothing. For once, the metaphor resonates. It is like watching the years of your future life turn to ashes before your eyes.

Hlavajova has curated 'On Hope and Other Misunderstandings' at BAK and Flatland Gallery. The green shoots in Lois & Franziska Weinberger's *Garden/Moving Landscape*, 2003 are hardy weeds planted in wheeled metal containers, which bear the names of small European towns such as Yeovil and Kaluga. This is portable hope in its raw form. Though not quite as raw or portable as in Gelatin's two photographs. They both depict lone men standing in wild landscapes, naked from the waist down; their erect penises following their gaze into the distance, striving forward like priapic oracles bearing the seeds of the future.

What is successful about both exhibitions is the combination of the everyday and visionary dreams, often in the same work. The documentary strand is strong. Deimantas Narkevicius's *Energy Lithuania*, 2000, looks at the city built around an electricity generating plant in the Soviet Union in the 50s and 60s, and the construct of simple optimism in the inhabitants' lives – dreaming a better world is not enough. Arturas Raila digs further into similar territory, resurrecting engrossing film from the Lithuanian Image and Sound Archive of the people at work and play. In contemporary Geneva, Kamel Aljafari weaves a mesh of narrative around the now deserted office of Iraqi Airways.

'Now What? ...' has been heavily workshopped in its preparation, and the series of public conversations is