

## Malcolm McLaren

By GLENN O'BRIEN

THE FATHER OF PUNK WON'T STOP UNTIL HE'S CONQUERED THE ART WORLD, UPSTAGED PORN'S SEX SCENES, AND PUT A DEAD FRENCH FASHION DESIGNER IN A BROADWAY MUSICAL

ABOVE: STILLS FROM MALCOLM McLAREN'S *SHALLOW*. COURTESY OF CREATIVETIME.

Malcolm McLaren is a young artist whose video work *Shallow* was the surprise hit of this year's Art Basel in Switzerland.

Well, okay, McLaren is not really young. He's just a new artist. And actually, he's not really new at all. McLaren has been on the leading edge of art since the '70s, but back then, it wasn't so easy for people to understand that managing a rock band, even one that was a total media event—the Sex Pistols—could be art. But now he's come out of the closet and made it official: Malcolm McLaren is an artist.

That should have been apparent from the shop he operated with then-girlfriend Vivienne Westwood. The clothes the duo designed for Sex, later called Seditious, defined the look that came to be known as punk. It should have been more apparent when he took another punk band, Bow Wow Wow, and added ritual African drumming and a 14-year-old Lolita vocalist to produce a huge hit ("I Want Candy"). Or when he mixed square dance and Afro beats with hip-hop in collaboration with some Muslim DJs, the World Famous Supreme Team. Or when he mixed electronic dance music with Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*. I mean, I knew he was an artist then. But to most people he was just a fast-talking recording artist.

# Interview

I think McLaren was a little embarrassed to make it official, but that's what he did a year or so ago when he contributed to a group show in a Chelsea gallery curated by the artist Stefan Brüggemann. McLaren's piece was titled *Shallow*, as was the group show, and it consisted of eight short color videos. These were assembled from clips of '60s erotic film, re-edited, slowed down, and set to music mixed up by the man himself.

And this was the idea that came to fruition at Basel with *Shallow*: 21 short films by Malcolm McLaren, a McLaren double-album's worth of art-music videos—all appropriated from porn, soft or hard or commercial, and all with scenes that took place either immediately before or after the "action." The films are beautiful, funny, abstract, and strange. M.M. has a great eye and he found odd, revealing, resonant imagery that he transported through re-timing to another level of consciousness, and then wed to music that has been similarly estranged from its source—radical remixes that mine the riches of pop niches and give us miscegenational tracks of pure, post-pop genius.

I gabbed with the maestro in New York before he hopped yet another in that endless stream of jets.

MALCOLM McLAREN: Okay. Okay.

GLENN O'BRIEN: I saw your installation last summer at Art Basel. I loved those films; they're very mysterious. It took me a long time to figure out that you didn't actually shoot them.

MM: Maybe that's because they were very slowed down. It certainly wasn't an intention. I didn't think the source was really important. I was just looking for a way to create some kind of *map* of feelings, really. The project started when I was asked to collaborate in a group show titled *Shallow*. It wasn't my word or my idea—they came to me and asked if I'd do something using the word *shallow* as the theme. At first, I really wasn't sure my finished product worked. For the first time in a very, very, long time, I was extremely shy about showing any of my work! I finally went down to the gallery to meet the other artists who were installing. I showed one—only one—which was just two people watching other people having sex, to gauge the reaction. They liked it. I was very happy. That's how it all began. Then the project went to Art Basel. I thought, Oh, I can't just show these few pieces. Maybe I should really make this *epic*. I'll do it as big as I can. I wanted to make as big a statement as I could, so I thought, I'll show so many that no one will be able to watch them in one continuous moment in time—they wouldn't actually stand in the room that long. People could jump in and jump out. It wasn't narrative-based so it didn't really matter. That's how I ended up with 21; I think I decided on 21 because I liked the number, really.

GO: I have an oblique relationship to this project because the original curator, Stefan Brüggemann, is a fan of my writing. I was introduced to him by Aileen Corkery. When I met him I was finishing up a novel called *Shallow*.

MM: Oh, wow!

GO: Maybe it was a coincidence, or maybe he liked that title.

MM: I think you're probably right—artists are fantastic at copying ideas from other kinds of artists.

GO: Well, I'm flattered because it's a good title. The book I wrote was kind of based on my experiences in the fashion world. But I think he probably just liked the word *shallow*.

MM: He just kept going on about this idea of shallow. He really loved the word. This was the word he was going to use to bring in all these disparate elements of different artists' activity in a show. He certainly was very insistent.

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GO: How did you get the idea to slow the film down?

MM: Simply one reason, Glenn: I couldn't find images that sustained in real time the length of the pop songs that I had already cut up and remade. That was their length. I couldn't find images of people about to have sex that sufficiently interested me for that length of time. But if I slowed the image down, it started to make sense to me. It didn't matter to me that they didn't move to the groove or to the rhythm—in fact, I was glad for that because I didn't want them to fall into sync. So, slowing them down didn't matter to me. I just sort of more or less worked toward something in the three- to three-and-a-half-minute range of time, and then, I just slapped one of these cut-up musical pieces on it that I felt might work. I instinctively went for what, at that second, seemed like marrying the two—the image and the sound. But the slowing-down process made the actions more painterly. When the gallerist wanted to know what to call them, I said for God's sake, don't call them videos—it's such a mass word now. I called them musical paintings, because of the slowed-down nature of them.

GO: They're kind of in the tradition of the Warhol screen tests or his film of the Empire State Building.

MM: I didn't think of that connection but you're right. What the Royal Academy found when the curators came around the Art Basel booths was the connection to William S. Burroughs and his attack on mass media. They found all the cut-up techniques, which are now being shown on MTV's jumbo screen in Times Square, “anti-MTV.” So in one sense they're old-fashioned but it certainly wasn't the intention. And I think the slowed-down process actually makes them very seductive. It forces you to look at them—you have to cooperate, you have to give up yourself a little, you have to focus. The eye-candy aspect has been removed. For the vacuum piece, it's just that guy Hoovering the carpet, a very generic, bland image, but as you focus in on it, it forces you to use your imagination, and then finally, you get sexually seduced—just the arm of that Hoover becomes amazing. It's such a sexual implement. The whole concentration of the guy, Hoovering this piece of red carpet, the wallpaper behind him—you notice all these things. I started to notice them more as I was editing them. I thought it was very funny because he's waiting for a knock at the door, he's cleaning up the room, and in comes this girl who he's going to actually have sex with. It ends with his head turning away from Hoovering, 'cause he's heard a knock at the door. That's it. It says everything I wanted to say. In that sense, it became a kind of painting. The music I put on was “Ride a Fashion Horse,” which was the lyric that I'd written and recorded on top of this old Sonny Boy Williamson song. It's great, the way it worked with the sound of the Hoover. It just took on the resonance, and that was purely instinctual.

GO: I think slowing them down makes them so intense. People say when you're in an automobile accident that everything slows down. It ratchets up the tension and you're just waiting—what's gonna happen, what's gonna happen . . .

MM: Your anticipation is stronger.

GO: The Hoovering bit is sort of the part that they have to throw into the porno film just for the setup.

MM: It's the preamble. All of those film parts have been extracted from those setups. And in many instances, I had to cut out dialogue. Any lips moving would just *destroy* the picture. I had to cut around that sometimes with great difficulty. Looking for those odd moments, I tell you, was not easy. You really do have to troll a lot of films.

GO: How many films did you look at?

MM: Maybe several hundred, actually. And to tell you the truth, I think that was about the sum total in the history of erotic cinema during that period. And I chose specifically that period because it was a period I conjured up in the back of my mind from when I was at art school in the '60s and the dawn of the '70s. After that period, whenever I witnessed sex movies or pornography, they were far more brutal with the story setup.

GO: Well, you're a romantic, Malcolm.

MM: [laughs] Maybe. But I just remember so many of those moments watching those things when I was living in squats in and around London. We used to screen them on 8mm projectors. I think those movies are not really commercial anymore. For most people, they just don't do the job, I suppose.

GO: That one where the girl's tossing her head around in slow motion kind of does it for me.

MM: That's a really special thing, isn't it? That was about texture, really. It was just a constant looping that really was the trigger point for me. But it was the hair that killed me. It's the body language that really starts to define character. The question was how to really get into the soul or character of these people. They were inevitably all nonactors, ordinary people, maybe wannabe actors. I think that often it was the case of looking at the body language that really revealed so much. I don't know if you ever saw the very last one, which was about masks. It was from a movie about wife-swapping. It's just all these people in masks, in disguise, exchanging girlfriends or wives. The body language of the women and the body language of the men was amazing; when you slowed it down and kept repeating the action, it was fantastic.

GO: So you finished the films, and then you put the music on?

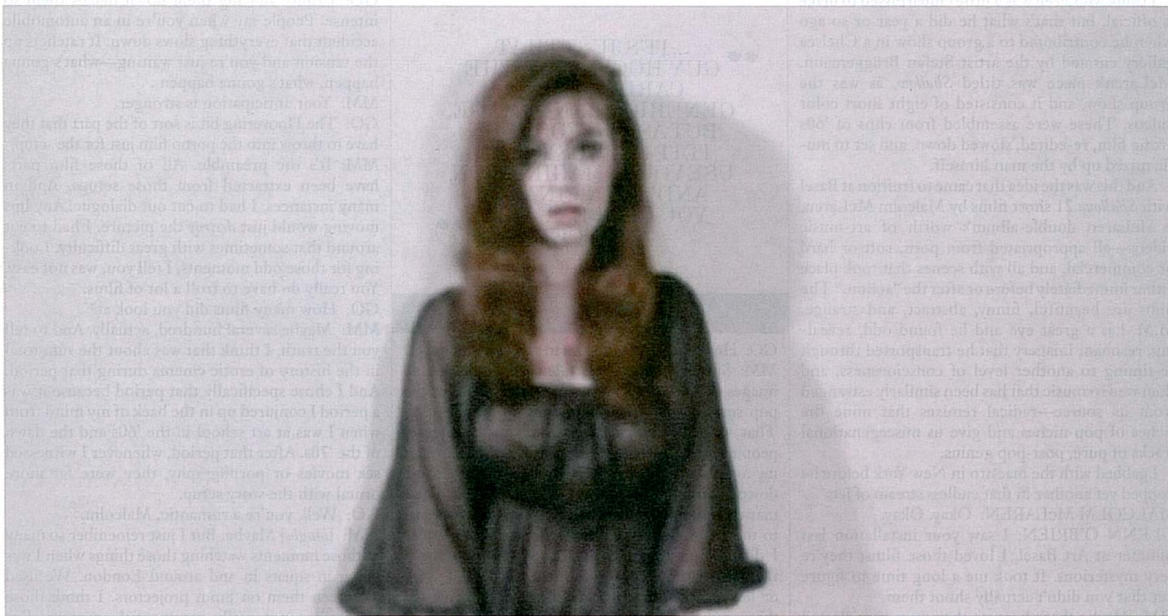
MM: The music was made first, but with an intention, and the intention was that I just wanted to bury myself into the bowels of pop culture and grab-bag it, reinvent it, cut it up, and destroy its product. You know, how songs in the end become products and clichés, and the value is lost. The outlaw spirit is gone—all that you initially picked up on at the very beginning when you first heard those songs. I knew that if you could grab-bag a chorus here, a verse there, a little backing vocal from somewhere else, and just stick it on some generic groove, then you could make these things have a different kind of resonance.

GO: Those tracks are amazing. I don't know if you can release that stuff, but—

MM: It's the whole rights issue, isn't it? It'd be a nightmare to troll through. I don't know whether I would bother.

GO: I thought that Staple Singers track was a hit.

MM: I had a very similar feeling. I actually got some singers in London and had them cover the vocals. I buried the Staple Singers because someone said they were very religious. But most of the time, I just left them naked wherever I could—Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, Chet Baker. I just had to change the



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tone. It sounds like Chet Baker is 16. It's a beautiful recording of "My Funny Valentine"—and I put it with Debbie Reynolds singing "Tammy." I really adored that track. The music was a lot of work. But it's all sort of a cultural moment. Who would have thought that one would be cutting up old records and sticking them together more or less inside a computer.

GO: I love the idea that you took the part of the erotic film that everybody was just waiting to be over, the part that's considered totally extraneous—

MM: And lengthened it! [laughs] But I do say, they can be very seductive. It's shallow, so there you go. That was my contribution to that world. I felt it made that word sound magnificent by the end.

GO: What other music are you working on?

MM: There's a project I've been working on for quite some time. It involved a story I was told that took place in Paris between 1947 and '57. It's a story about how rock 'n' roll emerged as a force that really changed the face of France, of Paris—of their industry, their luck, their haute-couture instinct. That fascinated me because of how Paris attempted after the war to regain its position as the center of civilization, trying to bring back La Belle Époque, and not knowing how to do it in those postwar austere times. And meanwhile America was knocking at their door, this whole postwar culture of desires rather than necessity, in the form of products that we never knew could exist before—this whole youth culture, rock 'n' roll, blue jeans, and icons like Marilyn Monroe.

GO: Yeah.

MM: So here you have this house of haute couture, the house of Christian Dior that opened in '47 on the coldest day they'd seen in 50 years in Paris, with people freezing in the salons and watching this display of clothes that really sent ev-

erybody back to the dark ages of La Belle Époque. These hourglass-shaped women, these full skirts, these padded thighs, these false icons. But that ultimately became something embraced by Hollywood to be used as an image to convey the new teenage rock 'n' roll lifestyle. Now how did they do that? How did they take something made by this man—Christian Dior, who was already middle-aged and trying to reinvent his mother's costumes—and wed that to every James Dean and Elvis Presley look-alike in Hollywood, and make this clothing that was almost a symbol of reactionary thinking into a symbol of the outlaw spirit and of rebellion and the youth culture? That idea just fascinated me. I began to really read about Paris after the liberation, and about what happened, and about what its youth was, and then suddenly I saw a story that really could define music and fashion and how it all happened after the postwar and where it all went. And if I could do that, and trap it, inside this house of Christian Dior, from its birth in '47 to Dior's death in '57—that seemed to me something worth really investigating as a musical. And if I didn't have to do it in the way that musicals were made in the past, then that would be something I would really fight for. So it was a question of coming up with the vision of how to do that. The cutting up of this music is really a reflex and part of that process. I was trying to find a way to reinvent those moments without having to worry exactly about time, 'cause today time in the music culture is gone. It's like the generation gaps: They don't exist anymore. But I needed to figure out a way to tell the story. It's a sexy story about the time and inside the house and the life and times of Christian Dior.

GO: Are we going see Dior singing and dancing?

MM: [laughs] I don't know. I can't quite imagine that yet, but hey, who knows? It's possible. His favorite song, believe it or not, was "Que Sera Sera," so whatever will be will be. [laughs] Okay. So there you go. I'm only three or four rungs up the ladder on this one.

GO: If everything goes according to plan, when will we see this?

MM: It will probably take a year and a half, two years, something like that. It has to be radical in its presentation, I think, and it has to build its own audience. Broadway could start to rev up, because there have been a lot of movies turned into musicals and that has brought a different appetite to Broadway. There are several generations now going to the theater. When that happens, it means that the door is a little more open.

GO: I also I think that whole Parisian thing is something that people are really interested in.

MM: The legacy between Yves Saint Laurent, who just recently died, and Dior, that's everything we're still living under. Maybe the only other thing there, once upon a time, was punk and all the deconstruction in fashion. That's a kind of postmodern thing. But in terms of the straight line, from the La Belle Époque prom dress to the shift or the chemise, not much else has ever really happened. Those are the two big cultural landmarks, and these two guys actually made that happen. You know Yves brought in youth culture in the '60s, Dior brought back the pre-war age of glamour and the La Belle Époque. If you think of what the look of music was, you're inevitably going to fall between those two doorposts.

GO: Your sequel could be "Margiela the Musical."

MM: That's definitely coming, absolutely.

ABOVE: STILL FROM SHALLOW, COURTESY OF CREATIVE TIME.