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Clemens von Wedemeyer: 
*The Fourth Wall*

The Curve, Barbican Art Gallery, London 
29 May – 30 August 2009

Reviewed by Leon Marvell

In 1971 Western anthropologists made a 
remarkable discovery that created headlines 
around the world. In the rain forests of 
Mindanao in the Philippines a small group of 
people, the Tasaday, were found to be living in a 
manner seemingly unchanged since the Stone 
Age. The anthropologists who had uncovered 
their existence were the Tasaday people’s first 
contact with civilization.

By the mid-1980s the Tasaday were again 
in the headlines, but for very different reasons. 
Prominent anthropologists and journalists 
denounced the ‘Stone Age culture’ as an 
elaborate hoax perpetrated by local tribes-
people and an individual working for the 
Philippine government.

Clemens von Wedemeyer’s *The Fourth 
Wall* is a film-based installation that 
elaborately restages this ‘first contact’ with 
the Tasaday. In doing so, he utilises the notion 
of the illusory ‘fourth wall’ that encourages 
an audience to believe that the drama they 
are watching is real, like a kind of thematic 
differential device. Von Wedemeyer uses the 
Barbican Centre itself as the location for 
a series of eight inter-related short films, 
all of which form a pseudo-anthropological 
exploration of authenticity and artifice.

The first film, *Intro*, is a black and white 
16mm loop in which a woman, dressed in 

PHOTOFIt.E 69
'primitive' attire (strikingly reminiscent of McLaren and Westwood's '80S punk primitive chic), is being prepped for a promenade around the Barbican building. An art director and stills photographer fuss over the actress's beads and feathers while the woman herself stares stone-faced down the barrel of the lens. As an opening gambit it works very well: a clear statement about 'staging the primitive.'

Von Wedemeyer next presents a film made by journalist John Nance, one of the reporters who first travelled to Mindanao. In A Message from the Stone Age (1983), Nance talks of the Tasaday living "in harmony with birds and bees and nature." "The Tasaday are us and we are them, all members of the human family," intones Nance earnestly. By the time Nance made this short film, the Stone Age had evidently transfigured into Utopia. This piece of journalistic naivety nicely sets the audience up for one of the strongest works in the installation.

Party is a triple digital projection showing the celebrations following the opening night of Von Wedemeyer's stage piece, The Gentle Onus. The party was held in the Barbican's Conservatory, a huge interior space of exotic plants, ponds of giant koi and hi-tech equipment maintaining the sub-tropical ambience. Here we see actors performing as cave-dwelling primitives and mingling with London's cognoscenti, the entire event being filmed by a television crew. The camera wanders through the crowd, creating a seamless montage of images and sound-bites: cocktails being served by the hired help, tuxedos juxtaposed beside ochre-smeared bodies, and the director of the television crew announcing that everybody should "act natural." Amongst the lianas, toffs and primitives someone is heard to say, "A perfect show... Maybe too perfect!"

At the core of the installation is the film of a stage play by Von Wedemeyer based on transcriptions of audio tapes made by John Nance. The Gentle Onus documents the rehearsal of a group of actors playing the Tasaday. We see them memorising their lines, exploring the stage and spouting clichés. Von Wedemeyer has the actors actually live on the large, bare Barbican Theatre stage in an effort to make their performances seem even more convincing. This self-imposed isolation of the actors reflects the 'theatrical' isolation of the tribes-people who 'performed' the Tasaday, and also reminds us of the spectacularity of the primitive, and of the search for an elusive authenticity.

Three shorts displayed on television monitors clinch the deal. Against Death is a short narrative where Von Wedemeyer gets to show-off his film school chops. An explorer explains to an anthropologist friend how he undertook a ritual that granted him immortality. Like a Twilight Zone episode written by Tom Stoppard, Against Death plays nicely as a story that loops back on itself, but plunges us into cognitive dissonance when coupled with the next film. Here Von Wedemeyer interviews the fellow who played the anthropologist, where he is noted as being an ethnographer, actor and friend of the Brazilian Indians. Now we are in a pickle. Is he an actor playing an ethnographer or an ethnographer playing an actor?

The standout film however must be Von Wedemeyer's brilliant interview with Ruggero Deodato, director of the infamous exploitation films, Cannibal Holocaust and Last Cannibal World, both of which were evidently inspired by the discovery of the Tasaday. Deodato's reminiscences of the production of his films are fascinating and often hilarious, and Von Wedemeyer thankfully allows Deodato to expatiate at length about the controversial reception of his movies.

Ordinarily one might suppose that an exhibition that unashamedly sets out to explore Big Ideas: Authenticity, Reality and Truth in one sitting is setting itself up for a big fall. The various 'exhibits' in Von Wedemeyer's The Fourth Wall however, combine to produce a degree of complexity and challenge that is both intellectually and aesthetically exciting.