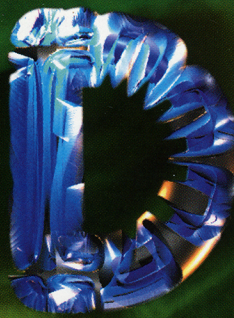


# M



2000

BRENDA LAUREL

TERRORVISION

DEEE-LITE



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*Now, it's true—  
people do use the word "weird"  
when referring to Brenda Laurel.  
In some cases it's because they*

*don't know her very  
well, and in others  
because they know  
her intimately.*

*But Brenda's  
seriously weird.*

*Weird as in the Weird  
Sisters—the Norns.*

*Weird as in prophetic  
and other-worldly.*

*But Brenda can also*

*be very this-worldly. She's a ready and  
eloquent public speaker, edited *The Art  
of Human-Computer Interface Design*  
(Addison-Wesley, 1989) and wrote*

*Computers as Theatre (Addison-Wesley,*

*1991). She's a formally trained actress,  
video game designer, and outrageous  
personality—and maybe most*

*remarkable, considering all this, she's a*

*wife and  
mother.*

*She changed  
my life. That's  
probably the*

*least she aims  
for—she's got*

*a Ph.D. in  
Interactive*

*Fantasy.*

*Nevertheless*

*she can be gut-level real. Her rants may  
seem fantastic, but they are dreams that  
are coming true. You'd better listen to  
Brenda Laurel.*

*—Sally Rosenthal*



MONDO 2000: I've seen you roll your eyes at Jaron's notion of becoming a "virtual lobster." Do you find that guys have limited ideas of what VR can be? And given no technical difficulties, what would you like to be?

BRENDA LAUREL: Me? Well, probably a lizard. Last time I hiked in the desert I noticed that I sprouted a long turquoise tail.

It's not "lobsterness" that bothers me about Jaron's rant. I celebrate "lobsterness!" The premise that you can mess with your self-representation is really central to VR. The thing that Jaron never wants to talk about is how the lobster got there. We as artists can't anticipate

everything you might want to be, and I don't think you want to make people write computer programs to enter VR. So we have to build systems with "virtual stuff" in them that people can shape from inside the experience.

**M2: But the male/female modalities in VR, boys & girls...**

BL: I've said it before and I'll say it again, I think that in general boys have had this fantasy about leaving their bodies. But I think that's a cultural artifact of the priesthood who gave us computers. And that generation is just passing away.

At Hackers in, I think, 1989, there was a woman's group. There were 13 women out of 300 attendees, so we all went. Some men too, mostly out of a sense of social responsibility. The girls were complaining about how much discrimination they'd suffered, and they couldn't get on the mainframe, and people turned off their password—the usual rants. And this one man, whom I won't name,

who's a brilliant programmer and a good friend said, "Well maybe the reason that we were in computers was to get away from you." That had a huge impact. Somebody finally had said it.

#### DROPPING THE DEAD MEAT

Even if it didn't have to do with getting away from women, it certainly was, in the early days, a profession that was chosen by people who weren't particularly interested in social intercourse. And so, as a result, the body didn't seem to be very important. I mean, the hacker stereotype doesn't come out of thin air, right? Over- or underweight, ill-groomed, unhealthy folks who consume nasty substances and live

their lives in the computer. It's no wonder their fantasy is to leave their body. [Laughter] They already have!

When a new generation of people comes in, young women and men, old women like me, there's a completely different paradigm. Which has to do with an implicit rejection of mind/body duality.

Now, there are people like Brian Hughes and Sandy Stone—not even young people, particularly—and the kids that I meet on college tours, who are *fusion people*. They have combined majors in ethnographic studies and computer science. It's a real new era. And although the dualism is largely historical, we have to remember the weight that our patriarchy carries: our old priesthood is now ensconced in big computer corporations. Although it's history, demographically, it still counts institutionally and we have to be aware of it—we have to be able to call it out.

#### NEXT: REPTILE SEX

**M2: So you deny there's a masculine and feminine modality to the composition of virtual worlds?**

BL: The male-female differences I see in authoring are mostly cultural artifacts, and I think they're passing away. The place where it's most obvious is in the issues around sexual applications of VR, because women are just finding a way to have a voice around their own sexuality. To own it and find it OK to make representations about it. Because you can't do sex in VR until you have tactile feedback [laughter]... but you can do erotica and porn. The people who are expressing that desire now and formulating its content are men because they're more comfortable with that. But I think that's changing fast. This may be a medium where women have a chance to explore this stuff more.

And that leads me back to my lizard. I mean, I've done trans-sexual. Now I want to do trans-special, you know?

#### CYBORGS ALREADY: THE FUSION FOLKS

**M2: For people who are not familiar with Stone or Hughes, describe this "fusion person" that is currently emerging.**

BL: Well, I think it has to do with the power of VR as a cultural paradigm. Computing didn't attract these renaissance folks the way interactivity as a medium is now attracting them. There are a lot of people who know how to work with media and who have interests in media and concerns about media, right? And that's a more pan-gender, pan-cultural thing. That's part of it, but that's not all of it.

Sandy Stone's been a cyborg since Day 1. She is in a relationship with technology in a way that's extremely interesting, and is at the same time off the scale in terms of humanistic energy. She's a very current, very fast-thinking, fast-moving philosopher. She's been thinking for a long time about the ways tech relates to culture, bodies, sexuality, art. She's known all along what the rest of us are just finding out. Tech wasn't interesting to artists and culture hackers when von Neumann was doing it. It's interesting now, because folks like Sandy have given us some context, and because tools have been developed to the point where non-technoids can actually start to do something.

#### THERE'S A PARTY IN MY MACHINE

**M2: In your latest book, *Computers as Theatre*, you make the point that you don't consider these things tools, but that you consider them a medium.**

BL: Well a medium can comprise tools. A medium can also comprise agents and companions and friends and worlds, right? I mean that's Alan Kay's notion of the medium, and I subscribe to it.

Ambiguity is a  
key to the  
engagement of  
the imagination

Ivan Ilyich uses this word "conviviality," to mean that a medium is accessible to everyone as an author. Writing texts became convivial a few generations after Gutenberg. Authoring moving images is becoming convivial with video cameras, although technology for editing still isn't affordable or usable enough. Authoring in interactive media is starting to become convivial because people have bothered to develop higher-level tools, and people like Bill Atkinson say to Apple, "You gotta ship HyperCard with the machine."

**NOW THE COMPUTERS  
KNOW THEY'RE MEDIA**

Where it has to go is the way of the printed word. The way it gets accessible to everybody is where there's no difference between the authoring language and the presentation language. You don't write a book in a different language than it's printed in. When you make photographs, you work in the language of images. There are technical skills to master, but the tech gets more convivial as the medium takes off. Computers just figured out in the last decade that they're a medium. The new kind of folks who are using them know that's what they are.

**M2:** This brings to mind Burroughs' idea that when you hold up a picture of a rose you immediately know what it is, but when you hold up a card with the letters "r-o-s-e" written on it, in your head you read "r-o-s-e" first before cognition. So there's another level of translation involved. Do you find a similar dichotomy between hieroglyphic and phonetic language as there is between presentation language and authoring language?

**BL:** Ideally what will happen to our personal languages—*mano-a-mano*—will be that we will come to have a better way of integrating visual imagery into the way we communicate with each other. It's interesting. In film it was true and in computers it was true: one of

the first things that happens when you introduce visual imagery is that there's an immediate thrashing about for a syntax. And I think that's well on the way. In a perfect world, the tools for being flexible enough with visual imagery in the way that we construct communications for each other will become available enough that the syntax can "grow legs." Evolve, the way it always does in a culture.

**WHAT DO YOU SAY, DEAR,  
AFTER YOU LEAVE SYMBOLIC?**

My husband says, which is instructive, that people talk about this as "post-literacy." That's another bone I have to pick with Jaron—he talks about "post-symbolic communication." There's no such thing! Unless you want to become an invertebrate! Everything is



symbolic, everything has syntax, as my friend Terence McKenna says, [affects Terence's nasal lobe] "What if the world is text?" So it's not a question of post-symbolic, it's a question of post-Iron Maiden, post-technology-specific.

there's an utter numbness to personal culture, family culture, local culture—any kind of context for us as human beings. "The Brave New Teenager," you know? And the Brave New Teenager is at risk if they sever the cord of spiritual continuity from their individual and family and national and ethnic cultures.

We can advocate and move towards global culture, but global culture has to be IDIC [*"Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations"*—the Vulcan slogan invented by Surak and touted by Spock]. It has to be the Vulcan standard. We cannot throw out the baby with the bath water. It's too late in the game to have to reconstruct our spirituality and our ways of communicating and revering our elders. And it's dangerously wrong to say, "I don't care what the Inuit believed, because I'm a Global Villager."

**TODD RUNDGREN IS  
GLOBAL AS HELL**

I was talking to Todd Rundgren last week and he said "I'm a global citizen, and I don't have a country and I don't have a culture." And in a major way I'm behind that. Certainly my country has failed me in a lot of ways. Irrevocably failed me. But I do have an individual culture and I have a family culture and I have an ethnic culture.

And I have gifts to give. And if we decide that any gift which has a colored or cultural nametag attached to it is not an acceptable gift, then we are in deep shit! So when I stand in a neo-Dionysian rite, with sampled sound which has no connection to rap or funk or ju-ju or jazz, I gotta say to myself "We have thrown out the baby." And it's no surprise to me that there is a complete absence of eroticism in these gatherings.

**M2:** Oh, yes! You've finally helped me piece some of this together! That's the big thing that they play up: nobody has to hit on each other, but nobody wants to *meet* each other either.

**BL:** Yeah!

**SAMPLED WORLD**

**M2:** It's regressed below the Village People—there's not even an Indian and a construction worker anymore. And when you're so completely devoid of culture, sampled sound, like Gary Numan in the early 80's with his hit, "Here in my car, Here in my car..."

**BL:** It's not just sampled sound, it's sampled *information*. It's sampled experience. Neil Postman, of course, is the master at articulating this, but the evening newscast fragments what we might learn about the

world into a sample. It's utterly meaningless. It doesn't have enough depth or length to support any kind of content that might hook one up.

And so my advice is, "Let's not throw out the baby." Let's get radical. Radical isn't saying, "I have no paths, I have no future, I have no identity, I have no



country." It's saying "I have all these things, I have my wisdom, I have my personal power, and I am placing these in the *service* of a global community. That's completely different!

**M2:** Another aspect that nags me about the Raves is that you walk into a room filled with any species of this week's technology that they can

THE JESUS AND MARY CHAIN

# HONEY'S DEAD

THE NEW ALBUM

WATCH FOR THEM ON  
THE LOLLAPALOOZA TOUR  
THIS SUMMER.



BLANCO  
Y NEGRO



## Vegas Throat BARKMARKET



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possibly manage to fit—all of it blinking at you at once.

BL: There's a tremendous amount of élitism in the producers of these scenes. Because they believe the "Gee Whiz" factor is enough. In fact, to be fair, it may not be elitism—it may be some sort of magical realism, you know? Just: "If I show the outward and visible sign of this new technology it will alter everybody's consciousness."

Now if somebody wanted to carefully and lovingly craft a communal virtual reality they could do it. And in fact, I want to, I'm working on it. But to say "I'm gonna blast you one from somebody else's VR experience," or "I'm gonna give you sampled CG," is just Gee Whiz bullshit! It's right up there with crack for stupid.

### THE TECHNO-WEENIE SPEAKS

**M2:** Well, tonight they're rioting in the streets of California. Does it make you, also, think of the need for a kind of telepolitics, a kind of teledemocracy?

BL: In my role as techno-weenie, right? I think it could accomplish a global revolution. The electronic agora, the electronic town hall, the electronic meeting with Ross Perot...

**M2:** Well, we're talking about a discourse...

BL: The numbers are wrong for there to be deep discourse with everyone. But if we believe that we talk to each other well, and that Joe Beets from Iowa and Juanita Jones from California can do an OK job of representing us, then it could work.

Basically, one-way broadcast culture is fading out. The suits who talk about "interactive TV" think the big bucks will be in stuff like tele-shopping and 900 numbers. I don't think they get what's happening to the culture. "Interactive TV" is about two-way, multimedia conversation. It replaces one-to-many with few-to-few, or one-to-one.

### ELECTRONIC TOWN TALKSHOW

I'm so impressed by John Hawkenberry's new NPR national call-in show. There's an 800 number and people call in from all over the country. NPR and PBS give huge amounts of time to the stories that they deliver, compared to the commercial broadcast networks. And Hawkenberry's *Talk of the Nation* has topics from abortion to funding of public television to what women dream about. What he does as a talk show host is he engages each caller in a long dialogue. It's the best! Even though the numbers are wrong—in terms of ten million who want to talk and one bandwidth, one broadcast channel—representative democracy works that way. I think it might be, actually, way cool. Even though I have huge issues around Ross Perot's personal funding of his campaign, and even though he is kind of an asshole—his comments about gays and "adulterers" are either political pandering, stupidity, or insanity—I just might vote for him for two reasons. One, because he has proposed this Electronic Town Meeting thing, which is such a good idea. And two, because I want to blow up the two party system. This election is a cruel joke. I mean, now Bush has an urban policy, and Clinton is out there interviewing moderate white boys for VP. Some of my best friends are white boys, but this oligarchy has got to come down. I don't believe in not voting, even when the election is absolutely Pythonesque, so maybe a vote for somebody like Perot will shake things up.

**M2:** It bothers me that he doesn't tell us how he's going to implement this Electronic Town Hall Meeting without invading our privacy. He would have to have a PPIT—positive personal identity technology—in place. Which is where it starts to get scary...

BL: Yeah, it's something we need to think through. In reality, the first

We have the opportunity to learn the syntax of multimedia information, and the more we reduce the granularity of information through multimedia, the more that becomes an Esperanto of the imagination.

#### WALL STREET FINDS ITS OWN USE FOR THINGS

**M2:** What signals will we see as language evolves toward this construct you're talking about?

BL: It may be that this country declines into some combination of economic recession and political repression such that people don't get to

develop in this way. But assuming that they do, the sign that it can happen is, in the near future, that a regular person can capture and store personal imagery in a random-access format. The big bottleneck in multimedia right now is that I can't capture my world in moving images or still images and add that to the database of a multimedia product. OK?

And in virtual worlds it's just the same. If I can't put *my* images in there, then interactivity is constrained to the world of changing form and structure. And you never get to introduce *content*. But content is what it's about. So one way we'll know that it's going the right way is if somebody announces next year that there's an incredibly cheap form of read-write optical media.

And if that happens, which it will—in a world that's not overly regulated and constrained in bizarre ways—the street *will* find its use for things. And we will have a different dialogue as a culture. We won't have a few information providers which we must all interpret, and an

information world in which we're only represented as numbers in a poll. We'll have a world in which we're having discourse!

#### POLYGONS DON'T MAKE IT

**M2:** Let's talk a bit about your current projects.

BL: Well, Rachel Strickland, [the videographer] and I got a grant from the Banff Centre for the Arts in Alberta, Canada, so we're going to build a virtual world next summer. Expect it to be pretty non-standard. It'll give me a chance to challenge just about everything that I find wrong at the moment with VR. It's time for somebody to change the water.

And so we got this thing approved called *Virtual Coyote*. We're going

to be working with a lot of texture-mapped natural imagery for purposes of ambiguity, actually—because we think that ambiguity is a key to the engagement of the imagination. You can see faces in rocks and clouds but Polygons just don't make it. That's one thing that we're testing. And another thing that we're testing that we didn't know that we were testing, is the whole problem of the trendiness of multiculturalism. Because, we've based the design of this world on a lot of Native American stories. We were trying to disrupt the average American's notion of time and space by presenting them with a context that was "other than." The one that we were exploring had to do with mostly coastal California Indians.

#### THAT INDIAN IN THE WINDOW

Then suddenly I realized that it looked a whole lot like appropriation, that we could be misinterpreted as presuming to represent those cultures. So, there's this new challenge in the project, which is to make it clear that the purpose of our representation is to learn. And partake. But not to warrant that we have now understood, or to submit what we're doing as an *example* of multiculturalism. I mean putting an Indian in the window does not constitute multiculturalism! And I know that the hard way, by putting an Indian in a window in the Guides project. It was a valiant effort, but it looks pretty silly—this great Native guy in his wonderful wild clothing looking out at you from a neat little Macintosh window.

Multiculturalism, trust me, is the big buzzword of the multimedia industry at this moment. IBM has invested about \$5 million in a project that brandishes multiculturalism. And their new slogan is "Multimedia is Multicultural."

#### WHEN I HEAR THE WORD "MULTICULTURAL"...

Well, this makes you nervous! "We'll go deal with the problem of cultural diversity by putting it on PCs." [!!!] You know? Well, I don't want to be party to *that*. But at the same time, the reason that they're finding it important to co-opt that energy is because it's *real* energy and it's because we as mainstream Americans find ourselves suddenly in the absence of an oral culture, in the absence of a culture at *all*, that we had anything to do with. And how do you recognize what your culture really is? And how do you recognize your power to create culture but by looking at other cultures?

**M2:** Do you have a strategy for implementing this?

BL: [Laughter] No, I have a *philosophy*! The next year is about figuring out what the fuck the strat... Well I do have a strategy in the sense that I'm working on a "multicultural" project with Simon & Schuster in the multimedia world. And the strategy is to make the authors of the content also the authors of the structure and the interface, to the extent that we can. So that we're not appropriating content and putting it into White Western form and structure. But that we're working like mad to create tools that are free of our cultural biases. And that may be utterly impossible, but it's worth trying.

**M2:** So, now we know the strategy, what about your *philosophy*?

BL: The philosophy that we should recognize and respect and honor other cultures is an incredibly important one in the world today.

#### ANOTHER RANT ON RAVES

**M2:** Why don't you like the Rave Scene?

BL: It's that they put this emphasis on *global* culture. And we don't know what that is, except that we think that we're constructing it. And

Tech wasn't  
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It's interesting  
now.

instance of something like this would be more like a text version of a radio call-in show than a truly interactive forum, and the hairy part would be coming up with a smooth protocol for selecting among much more "incoming" traffic than could actually be displayed. But like a radio caller, it seems to me that you could identify yourself to whatever extent you were comfortable with. For polling purposes, people could voluntarily provide a sufficient amount of information—certainly less detailed than what you'd give the census folks. To me, the bigger issues are how to reform our contorted notion of representative democracy so that referenda like this would actually count for something, and how to provide access to people who don't have computers or cable television. Public kiosks might work. In any case, you're right, doing this well would require big changes in both technical and political infrastructures and a serious dollar commitment. But if the result was enfranchisement, then it would be worth it.

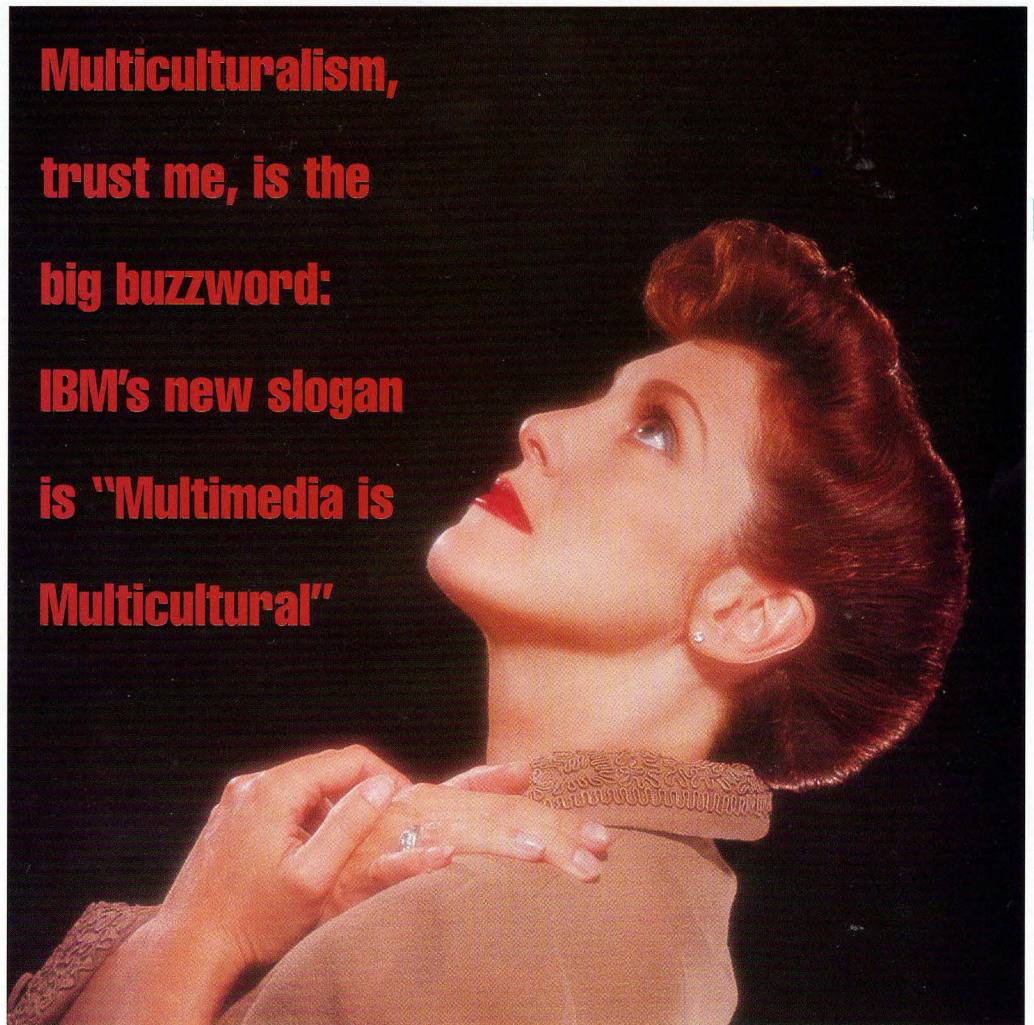
**DON'T CONFUSE US WITH  
DETAILS: WILDER PALMS**

**M2:** Now you have some involvement with a TV show due to air in Spring.

**BL:** VR plays a role in the show. Yeah, it's funny; just my luck—breaking into TV when it's about to croak. It's a television series that began as a comic strip in *Details* magazine by a guy named Bruce Wagner. He wrote an amazing novel called *Force Majeure* and has done several screenplays. The story involves a conspiracy to use VR to—well, to continue to bludgeon us with the current TV paradigm. It's a nightmare of one-way VR. I met Bruce, and he made me a character in his *Wild Palms* strip. I guess he liked me. So I started showing up in the strip, under my own name, and then he wrote a treatment of it that's loosely based on the strip and got Oliver Stone to agree to produce it. And they sold it to ABC as a six-hour mini-series.

Then Bruce hired me as a consultant for the script of the series, because it had to do with VR of the future and he wanted to know what that might be like. And as we worked on it he said "You ought to audition for it." So I have this strange involvement with it as a script consultant and bit-part actor in the series.

The reason that I chose to work on a series that portrays VR in a very negative light is because I think it's *important* that we consider VR in a very negative light! And also that we understand, as Stone keeps trying to tell us, that there *are* conspiracies in the world. Casual or formal, conscious or unconscious, they exist. So that's what I'm doing. I'm going on this weird odyssey with these Hollywood guys. It's scheduled to air on ABC starting in February. Now, I've gotta go take my thorazine. **ME**



Photographs by Bart Nagel assisted by Heide Foley, Styling by Travis Jagers, Hair Styling by Francis Sorenson, Make-up by Jake, Vintage clothing by Jennifer Parker, Jewelry courtesy of Brooke Battle, Set construction by Lloyd Whittaker, additional location assistance by Jacqueline Neuwirth, Location: Zymyth Studio, SF.



BRENDA  
the Laurel  
LARA  
Queen

by Jas. Morgan

Photographs by Bart Nagel