SMASH HITS

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I met Fang when I was looking for buskers. I went to an event at the Southbank where I spotted him and went up to him as I thought he looked quite interesting. He took part in *Did you Kiss the Foot that Kicked You?*, and during that I got to know him a bit. For his audition he came in and sang Black Sabbath's "Paranoid", it was amazing. He thinks the *Fang Sang* project turned him into a local celebrity, but he was already a celebrity, he'd done that for himself. He'd taken this name Fang, actually changing his name to Fang by deed poll, it says it on his bank cards and stuff. He's created this amazing identity for himself, wearing a set of false teeth in his ear, and incredibly rude things on his t-shirt. He was a front man in a band for ages and used to wear ladies underwear on stage. He says the gods named him Fang before time existed. I don't know when he changed his name, he'd never give you a straight answer on something like that, he doesn't tell people how old he is or what his real name is.

We did an open mic night after the *Fang Sang* project; some students from the Byam Shaw School of Art sang, and Fang sang the tune of k.d. lang's "Constant Craving" mixed with the lyrics of "Anarchy in the U.K.", so it was "Craving Anarchy", and it just did something really weird, it was so much better than any of these mash-up remixes, it was really beautiful. We were packing up when one of the young librarians said, "I'd like to sing a song." He sang "Ain't No Sunshine", it was really surprising in such an unlikely situation. Some of Fang's old bandmates came as well, he hadn't seen them in 20 years, they performed together.[1]

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"Wurlitzer really smashes them!" the advertisement exclaims exuberantly, while a man hefts a sledgehammer over his head down on the splintered shards of what used to be a jukebox. In an action and a forthright promise almost unthinkable today, the company gleefully make this guarantee, to "enable Wurlitzer Music Merchant everywhere to make more money". In 1938, the emphasis was the future, on inventions, innovations and improvements imminently arriving; part of their self-perception of integrity was to simply destroy any jukebox models that had been superseded. They openly promote their violent destruction of the past; today, it seems taunting and ludicrous to willingly erase these cultural artefacts. Their clerical decision tells the story they want

[1] All quotes in bold from an interview with the artist and the author conducted on 2 May, 2011.

to present: that every Wurlitzer you encounter will be a new one, the latest model to the highest standards. They happily disclose the mechanisms through which they enforce the narrative. But behind that is the sound of thousands of destroyed jukeboxes.

"Conscious tinkering and remaking is only a small part of the shaping of the past. When we look closely at the construction of past time, we find the process has very little to do with the past at all and everything to do with the present. Institutions create shadowed places in which nothing can be seen and no questions asked. They make other areas show finely discriminated detail, which is closely scrutinised and ordered. History emerges in an unintended shape as a result of practices directed to immediate, practical ends. To watch these practices establish selective principles that highlight some kinds of events and obscure others is to inspect the social order operating on individual minds".[2]

It is the "noisy silences" that help inform Ruth Ewan's practice. Hidden corners, suppressed figures, and forgotten facts from the past make some of the starting points for her work. These cultural moments are re-animated and re-placed in the present, often as a series of actions, events and performances, which then curiously branch in two diverging but interrelated directions. On one hand, they work on an impersonal, historical level. Dealing with archives and records, her practice seems to work against the grain, throwing up the incongruous and unexpected, things unfamiliar to us in the present. Not so much about explicit suppression or subversion, there is more the sense of things that could or should have been better remembered, or might have had more importance. This is the strongly historiographic element to her work, her research which informs a broad structural critique. It exposes a similarly violent, but quieter, version of Wurlitzer's operations. In seeing these forgotten words and marginalised figures, we can become aware of the forces of institutional amnesia, of the undisclosed mechanisms that allow us to see these things in the first place. Exposing these structures, this aspect of Ewan's practice questions how dominant histories are created, and how other stories are both actively and passively allowed to be forgotten.

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One of the buskers was called Anna-Maria Tkacz, an IT programmer who had been a junior accordion champion as a kid. When she won, she was like, "Well, what do I do now?" She put her accordion away in the attic. When she saw the advert asking for buskers, she said she'd always wanted to busk but she'd never had the confidence. So she decided to do it, and she got her accordion out. She hadn't touched it for 15-20 years. She told me a bit about the history of it; it has such an odd place, a completely anachronistic thing. It's mentioned in literature placed in the wrong time period; it wasn't actually patented until late

[2] Mary Douglas, *How Institutions Think*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986, pp. 69-70.

19th century, but it appears in things like "Pirates of the Caribbean", which is supposed to be set in the 18th century. My mum told me, after I'd completed the busking project, that she'd found out that her uncles, who were Italian immigrants to Scotland, busked on the streets of Glasgow with accordions. That's how they made their money.

Loads of the buskers who took part in *Did you kiss the foot that kicked you?* still sing the "Ballad of Accounting" song. One of them said, "I only know three songs, this is number four!" Rachel from Artangel, who commissioned and managed the project, was at a squat party in Camden a few months ago, an open mic event, and someone had said, "I was involved in this project a few years ago...," gave this little introduction and then played the song, so it's still germinating. Some natural collaborations came up as well on the rehearsal days. There's no busker's organisation where people can come together, loads of buskers are quiet loner types anyway. Even on the underground network, the buskers don't know each other even though some have been playing on the underground for thirty years. Then, all of a sudden, they're in this one room together, so they started performing together. There was an amazing African drummer and this young vocalist who got together to do their version of the song and they got offered a gig when they were out performing.

Working in ambiguous opposition to the broad historical sweep of Ewan's work is the punctuation of irrevocably intimate moments. Her carefully researched and constructed actions and installations stop at some point, to give way to melodies that stir up rousing emotions, or coincidences of accidental discovery. The utopian, socialist dream might be at the heart of many of the figures and historical moments she explores, but in being replaced in the present their political force is left open and ambiguous. If she creates structures within which to re-release these moments from the past, they are only activated and made living by moments of personal insight by those who participate and experience the projects. It is these personal moments of insight, connection, and reverberation that lie within each of her works, numerous but often hidden and unrecorded. It is a few of these moments I have collected and tried to let them be heard here.

"Thus the presences and absences embedded in sources (artefacts and bodies that turn an event into fact) or archives (facts collected, thematised, and processed as documents and monuments) are neither neutral nor natural. They are created. As such, they are not mere presences or absences, but mentions or silences of various kinds and degrees. By silence, I mean an active and transitive process: one "silences" a fact or an individual as a silencer silences a gun. One engages in the practice of silencing. Mentions and silences are thus the active dialectical counterparts of which history is the synthesis" [3].

[3] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, quoted in Charlotte Line, *Working the Past: Narrative and Institutional Memory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 196-7.

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It is at the back of the *Jukebox of People Trying to Change the World*, or maybe at the very front, that we find the song of "The Cutty Wren". Though its origins are unknown for certain, it is the song dated back the furthest in the Jukebox's catalogue. The story, which has innumerable variations on its lyrics, tells of two men on their way to hunt for the diminutive wren, also known as the "king of birds". It has become known as the first protest song, sung in association with the peasant's revolt of June 1381. But like the song, the origins of this claim are elusive, themselves mythologised. In a pamphlet published in 1944, A.L. Lloyd, a writer and singer central to the folk revival of the 1950s, gave a brief history of folk protest music. "The Cutty Wren" is the very first song he mentions. With a dramatic and quite cinematic backdrop to the song, he says "The outbreak of lawlessness which followed the dislocation of town and country life, with its consequent labour troubles, filled the green woods with outlaws and rebels. It was about this time that people began singing a song called "The Cutty Wren"...Pretty certainly this was originally a magic song, a totem song, which about this time took a strong revolutionary meaning".[4]

I've known Fred for six years, he was only four when I met him. Fred and I spoke about the content of the song "The Cutty Wren", and did some research into the Peasant's Revolt. It was oddly appropriate, because Richard II, the King at that point, was fourteen years old and that's one of the reasons the revolt happened. His tax men were trying to take control of things from this kid. Fred went off and did his own research, and got on with it. The day before the royal wedding in April, his primary school was having a "royal" party, and he said to his mother, "I don't want to go to it, because I'm anti-monarchist." So he made a placard, and wore his ripped jeans as an act of rebellion. I spoke with him about the wren, what the symbol of the wren is, and how there's some disagreement about what it means. He said he thought it represented the King.

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I bought the first jukebox from a pub in Sunderland. All the ones I've got from pubs really stink, of smoke. You open them up and this smell just hits you. The jukebox in Seville, it's the same, or a very similar model, to the one that's in the Rover's Return pub in the television soap-opera, Coronation Street. It's a very British jukebox; when people from other countries see it, they say it looks like a cigarette machine. The thing with CD jukeboxes is that they actually don't hold that much material, so I constantly have to edit. I could convert it to mp3, a digital jukebox, but then it's changing the form. I quite like it being sort of in between technologies, it's such an uncomfortable proposition, the CD. It's

[4] A.L. Lloyd, *The Singing Englishman.* London: Workers Music Association Ltd., 1944, pp 7-8.

like the digital and analogue joining up together. Sound Leisure from Leeds make the oddest models, they've not gone for that Americana diner bubble jukebox, they just do quite wild designs in their own way, or at least they did for a period in the 1980s-1990s. They're still producing, but they do these digital jukeboxes that are centrally controlled and you can't just add your own homebrew. That's what someone called my CDs, "homebrew" CDs.

At the New Museum the staff - particularly the security and cleaning staff - really enjoyed listening to it and all had their own favourite tracks. It was their piece of work, and when the museum opened really early in the morning the cleaners were cleaning the shop space and they'd turn it on to listen to it in the background. The New Museum kept it on after the *Younger Than Jesus* exhibition for another 6 months or so for the staff, because people at the front desk, and the security guys were like, "Yeah, Tool's on there!" There was a whole section of songs about "Work", so I hoped they'd be listening to union songs but they were probably just listening to Beyoncé.

In Escape the Overcode, Brian Holmes states that, "when a territory of possibility emerges it changes the social map, like a landslide, a flood, or a volcano do in nature. The easiest way for society to protect its existing form is simple denial, pretending the change never happened: and that actually works in the landscape of mentalities. An affective territory disappears if it isn't elaborated, constructed, modulated, differentiated, prolonged by new breakthroughs and conjunctions".[5] Within Ewan's layered releases, resoundings, and reverberations, what comes forward is the attempt to give sound to these silences, to play them out loud so that these elaborations, differentiations, and breakthroughs might occur. Her work asks what we make of the potential when we quietly catch a few lyrics, humming words that carry something for us privately; can this moment also have a wider meaning? Ewan reposes the paradox of how a song can potentially mean something both historically and personally, on how it can resonate on both levels at the same time. It is at this juncture Ewan makes the space for a series of individual moments that gather to the possibility of an active, aggregate cultural meaning in the present.

Text about exhibition *Ruth Ewan. The Ephemeral Past* (Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, 30 June – 16 October 2011).

[5] Brian Holmes, *Escape the Overcode: Activist Art in the Control Society*. Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2009, pp. 14.