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INTERVIEW WITH VICKI BENNETT

by **KENNETH GOLDSMITH**



(<http://foundfootagemagazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/V.Bennett-1.jpg>)

Since 1991 British artist Vicki Bennett has been working across the field of audio-visual collage, and is recognised as an influential and pioneering figure in the still growing area of sampling, appropriation and cutting up of found footage and archives. Working under the name People Like Us, Vicki

specialises in the manipulation and reworking of original sources from both the experimental and popular worlds of music, film and radio. People Like Us believe in open access to archives for creative use. In 2006 she was the first artist to be given unrestricted access to the entire BBC Archive. People Like Us have previously shown work at Tate Modern, Whitechapel Gallery, The Barbican, Centro de Cultura Digital, V&A, Sydney Opera House, Royal Albert Hall, Pompidou Centre, Maxxi and Sonar, and performed radio sessions for John Peel and Mixing It. The ongoing sound art radio show *DO* or *DIY* on WFMU has had over a million *listen again* downloads since 2003. The People Like Us back catalogue is available for free download hosted by UbuWeb.

Kenneth Goldsmith: It's clear that this project is inspired by Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project (Das Passagen-Werk)*,¹ yet it is commonly thought that his was unfinished, a mess of raw footage, not a finished work. However, there is another school of thought—one much less popular—that says that the *Arcades* was pretty close to being finished, that its fragmentary state was intentional and complete in its incompleteness. *Citation City*,² on the other hand, is a perfectly complete work, one which could have been much longer. How did you decide to finish where you did?

Vicki Bennett: Actually I could have done with a couple more years to make this thing, although if I'd had that extra time I think it might have turned into something else. The more I looked the more I saw and the more lengthy and specialised it became. Then reality stepped in by my having a deadline for the premiere performance. When sourcing from 300+ full length movies, trying to reflect upon somewhere like London which is depicted in so many films so often, it is like burrowing first one

tunnel, then the tunnel splits off, and you burrow tunnels within those tunnels, and so on, and each turn goes deeper, becomes more specialised. But they are far from dark holes, it's the opposite. I call these explorations *operations* because you're cutting into something; it's a laboratory for discovery. If the project had gone on as long as I'd have liked, it would have been pretty hard going to experience on the platform that I had initially set it out to be (a performance), it would have been hours long, indeed something else entirely. Its current form is *entertainment*, it's a concert. But it doesn't mean that one day it might not expand into something much bigger, given the opportunity. I'm not sure these large-scale process-led kinds of project are ever over. It's about a process that takes place that is never ending and any particular outlet is only a caption of time spent that is being reflected upon, in my case what was the year up to January 2015.

K. G.: Can you articulate your relationship to *The Arcades Project* in relation to the construction of *Citation City*?

V. B.: When I first saw *The Arcades Project* it was so inspiring to see Walter Benjamin's methods as familiar, the extent of his collecting and grouping of information. Lots of people make lists, but I love that he just kept going, on and on and on, this is what I felt in common with him, he was relentless. The spirit of this work is way beyond the words, beyond anything that could be summarized by theory alone. This is a piece of magic... a huge collection of thousands of people, their lives, their stories, the paths they walked in Paris, and in subsequent text they trod some new paths too. The sparks of electricity, the cerebral connections make this thing relevant, we all understand these stories beyond Paris and that time, they are our stories. There are only so many tales to be told and beyond that it is reiteration.

This is not a good or bad thing, quality of experience is never about who did what first, rather it's about how this makes you feel in its presence and how you may yourself respond to experiencing it in your time and place. We do the same things, we say the same things over and over yet it's always different, simply because it is never the same. When you place the same subject matter side by side on mass from unrelated sources it shows how we make connections, and how indeed we are connected. This is what happens in works of fiction too, in feature films—the same stories are told time and time again, and I wanted to see what the stories of London were. I can't remember how I got the idea that it would be great to make an excursion through London-based fiction, but it was certainly connected to hearing that you were making a book using New York as subject matter in homage to *The Arcades Project*. I actually first considered making one of New York, since that is also a film capital, but decided that London was equally good, plus it's a place where I far more familiar. Although I also think it doesn't matter if you know the place personally or not since it's about what you discover through the content you're discovering, not what you know in from own memory.

K. G.: Did you work according Benjamin's methodology? Did you go against it? Was it open to interpretation and/or misinterpretation?

V. B.: I made a list of convolutes, that is usually what I do usually, make a list of reoccurring content, and use this as the basis for *chapters*. But I didn't use Benjamin's convolutes or try to stick to any further structure that was used in *The Arcades Project*. In fact I looked at his convolutes then tried to forget what they were since I was curious as to whether in fictional London they would be similar, and it turned out they were.

Whenever making projects I spend at least half the allotted time collecting and viewing content (in this case around 300 feature films set or based in London). As soon as I think I have found all the source material and taken notes, I print these notes and the project moves out of the computer and onto the floor, where I lay out all the printed notes of paper describing the content—the descriptions are cut into hundreds of snippets of separate information that I start to assemble into clusters to *gather my thoughts* and make connections.

When searching the footage of London feature films it was great to see which emerging subjects were important/popular and how much they were current in terms of our hopes and fears of today. *Citation City* tries to define the spirit or mood of a place—that could be found in a number of ways—by actor, movie genre, storyline, stage setting, icon, fashion, music, movie location. This location could be a named place or something more abstract like “the river,” for instance. By placing all these descriptions together like an unmade jigsaw you start to notice the relationship between narratives, what they have in common. You move the paper around, putting subjects then subsequent groups together. These are the subjects that I found:

- * Albert Hall & Memorial
- * Apocalypse, Floods, Natural Disaster, Plague, Alien Invasion
- * Big Ben, Parliament, Time
- * Broadcasting, Morse Code, Radio, BBC, Newspapers & Propaganda
- * Big Brother, Brainwashing, Hypnosis, Insanity
- * Ceremony, Tradition, Ritual, Magic
- * Horror, The Occult / Unknown, Satanism, Vampirism
- * Imprisonment & Evacuation
- * Photography, Voyeurism, Fashion, Art Gallery & Museum

- * Pollution, Fog, Smog, Smoke, Heavy industry, Docklands, Noise, Wasteland, Rubbish
- * Power Stations (Battersea & Lots Road), Illumination, Power Cut / Surge, Rooftops & Chimneys
- * Public Houses, Drinking, Prostitution, Crime & Gangsters, Poverty, Jack the Ripper, East End, St Paul's
- * River Thames, Bridges, Thames Embankment
- * Royalty, Grenadier Guards, Tower of London, The Mall
- * Shadows & Silhouettes, Mirrors, Being Pursued
- * Spying, Conspiracy & Intrigue, Detectives & Secret Agents, MI5/6, (New) Scotland Yard
- * Supermarkets, Arcades & Malls, Mass Production & Duplication, Consumerism
- * Surveillance, Tapping, Recording Technology & Storage (Domestic & Governmental)
- * Tourist Icons: Telephone Boxes, Letter boxes, Routemaster Buses
- * Trafalgar Square, Public Space, Pigeons, Nelson's Column
- * Travel, Heathrow (London) Airport, Immigration
- * Underground, Subterrain
- * War, Cold, 1st & 2nd, Terrorism, Murder

Making long paper-based lists had been constant in my work long before I knew about Walter Benjamin. Even pre-digital—for instance using Roget's Thesaurus to make new connections by looking up a word to see where it led me to next. I don't know why I love making such long and exhausting lists and massive projects but I find them beautiful to look at. It's also partly habitual, partly a humorous exercise in trying to be increasingly extreme or ridiculous, and perhaps partly showing off how hard I can work, often when I could possibly achieve the same effect in a way much quicker and easier for myself. When working with

pre-existing information, it's always been necessary to write down and describe the content of each fragment in order to visualize all the information at once. This may then go onto be another format, but that documentation of process can be quite something in itself too. *Citation City* is an audiovisual work, but it also exists right now as several hundred scraps of paper sellotaped together and thrown into the back of my cupboard. If subsequently printed out it might be book size.

There was also the issue of how much and where in this project I am (obviously) imprinting my own personality—how much is it about my taste. I have my own style and methods of communicating, and sense of humour, and am making this for a particular platform-performance, it's for a live audience with short attention span, and this is factored into the output. This will make it different to making something text-based because of the way that time works when experiencing it. The subject matter that I was finding was certainly in abundance for the list above, but if I'd been someone else, who's to say it wouldn't have been done completely differently? Probably it would. It was difficult to know how to treat the reoccurring actors in the films, for instance Michael Caine or Oliver Reed, this side of things was completely ignored due to the length of the project, whereas if I'd had more time I would have explored this, it's actually a project in itself, for instance focussing on one actor through all his movies. I did feel a lot of sympathy for Benjamin in terms of how long it all takes and how you could just keep going, but at the same time it was a wonderful project. There are whole sections that are in *The Arcades Project* that are not reflected in my project, because of the nature of the output platform. Even though of course we don't know for sure that *The Arcades Project* is a book or something else as well or exclusively something else.

K. G.: But you've done projects like *Radio Boredcast*³ where you've compiled 744 hours of audio, perhaps the longest radio broadcast on record. Too much is never enough for you. I like the idea of this being *entertainment* rather than an ongoing installation.

V. B.: I like the time-based urgency of an audience having to pay attention to something while you're there performing/broadcasting because it gives it a sense of event for the audience and participants. This is lacking sometimes in gallery type environments, making the atmosphere a bit sterile.

K. G.: And watching it, there's not a dull moment in it; it's the fastest 40 minutes I've ever experienced. So you have two modes: one of entertainment and one of *boredcast*. What is your relationship to audience?

V. B.: I think with either you have to help them in the door, show them the rooms, the windows, and provide some sort of basic structure for them to navigate, and then shut the door! With entertainment though it's like you're constantly giving them tea and cake whereas with boredcasting you can go away for the week and leave them in there. ^

K. G.: In both cases, you seem like you really consider the audience and their reactions as a primary determining aesthetic. And you're almost never *boring* in the *boredcast* sense of the word—even the most boring bits of what you do are not boring because they're absurd and humorous.

V. B.: Yes, I want to engage with the audience. Being able to engage makes the difference between success and failure in communication. This doesn't mean I want to go out of my way

but it's more like having a conversation with a person that you like and connect to, and to provide some sort of intelligent framework where some points of reference help people navigate on their own. Of course it won't always be a success and when you're working with non-*pop* references it is easy to leave some people behind or overload them if you're working in a deep or dense manner. Had I worked on *Citation City* for longer it would have been more engaging for less people. I'm not holding my breath on being hugely popular any time soon because I use too many different sources and people like only 2 or 3 elements at once, like in a composition where you have patterns and variations that are predictable. That is where humour sometimes helps though you can be playful and also go to some extremes that *seriousness* would not allow. However, the downside of humour is a lot of so-called intelligent people think you are not a serious artist. But those same people might well have criticisms of appropriation too.

Another thing about humour is you can elevate people into a more fluid mental state where they are willing to perceive things differently, in a non-straightforward way, particularly with collaged audio composition or radio. The incongruous nature of humour, and also collage, leave space for various levels of interpretation. Sometimes any *message* or thoughts I might have about something might be completely lost once sent out there, but the same goes for anything you try and do. It occurred to me only recently that you're in a minority of 1 when it comes to everyone else's perception of you and what you do, and so the most you can do is try and be clear, and also the most you can do to have any clue what other people might see you as being like.

K. G.: Playing devil's advocate: doesn't *humor* and *entertainment* go against the grain of traditional *avant-garde* practices? Isn't the *avant-garde* artist supposed to not care or despise her audience, feeling that she has something *important* to tell them that they *need to hear*? Of course I know you've thought deeply about this, but I think it would be helpful for others to explain your thinking about this.

V. B.: Wow, the amount of *avant-garde* performers that are full of joy or just hilarious, yet the audience is stone-faced. It's not a failure if the audience are smiling, it's because they are feeling sparks of recognition or inspiration, not because they are idiots. Humour in art can be used to break down barriers, and let people in when they might have assumed they did not understand. Humour is a serious business, it is not just *comedy*, it is complex and skilful; playing out like a composition, with texture, repetition, variation and timing. Because we all have humour in our lives it is not elitist. And maybe that word *elitist* might pinpoint the underlying problem.

Surely to say that there is a "traditional *avant-garde* practice" immediately negates what *avant-garde* actually is? The whole idea of experimentation assumes we partly do not know, i.e. we're in a process of discovery, examining the fixed and static, including the very notion of *genre* itself. Giving something a genre name and therefore defining or framing it sometimes signifies the end of/change in something, or at least the public understanding of a thing. Once something gets well-known enough that anyone *wants* to give it a name it's often either changed, or had its use and energy sucked out through commodification. Even the very idea of commodification can assume that has been fixed, which it hasn't... commodified things also decay. And if there is any place in that chain where

appropriation might be, it's at the very end, where everything has been thrown out. Which in turn is the very beginning, since appropriative work can flip that whole world upside down and tear it into pieces.

I'm just trying to say that everything changes all the time, we are all connected, and the people that pose as an authority on experimentation are doing so for their own end, and maybe that is why they might not care about who or what their audience is, and they ought to be careful that the chair that they are standing on doesn't get swiped from underneath them. And if there is any avant-garde then it's the person that swiped the chair.

K. G.: There have been rumblings about another version of *Citation City*, this time set in New York City. If this is true, how do you imagine going about it? And, if the idea is portable, from one city to another, could you imagine doing this for other cities?

V. B.: Yes. It was always a dilemma as to whether I'd do London or NYC. In terms of the amount of movies available, there are more for NYC but both run into thousands. I chose London first because I live there. First, in 2016, I will work on a (separate) new 10-screen/8 speaker audiovisual work—so that term, might take a while, but after that I will pursue making a *Capital*⁴ for New York City. It was always in my mind to cover NYC later, but recently perusing the pages of your book *Capital* I'm inspired about it all over again. I couldn't imagine spending over a year making something for somewhere other than London or NYC, although San Francisco might be interesting because of the amount of films covering that city too.

It's different, but if you're approaching as an artist it works equally well to make something on a place or subject that you don't know so well, since this is not about what you know, it's about the impressions of a place, the atmosphere, lots of subtle things, not just a list of facts. There are over 5000 NYC-based movies to choose from, and from that point I will rely upon the same sort of archives, search engines, forums, communities and websites and subsequently my own aesthetics to decide how to narrow it down to the point of using it as material. You don't have to enter into the work as any kind of authority; you're never going to find out everything and that's not the point—you just need a methodology and enthusiasm for these sorts of extensive and immersive explorations.

K. G.: Finally, on this point, Benjamin called Paris the capital of the nineteenth century and I have called New York the capital of the twentieth. My feeling is that the capital of the twenty-first century will be the Internet.

V. B.: That's interesting—the capital as the place where we go to get information, meet like-minded people, go shopping, discover museums, archives and libraries? I agree about the portability of places of meaning, that we carry it all around in our bodies anyway. It's also the place where we go to see the past, the old and obsolete, where along the way we might encounter all sorts of unexpected things on each street and avenue, getting side tracked, experiencing love and hate, falling victim to deceit and misadventure, and the zombie-world comments culture district. I also see the place of the twenty-first century as the digital and portable *archive*, the library, which is housed both privately and publicly. We might see information storage as *the past*, but if you consider that *the past* as an accumulation of everything we know until right now then the future is about access to

knowledge and networks who might be housing that knowledge. At the moment we use the Internet, but the twenty-first century internet may be unrecognisable even in ten years from now.

K. G.: Where does London fit into this configuration, if you feel that it does at all?

V. B.: There are so many versions of the cities. It depends where you live and what language you speak on how you might translate that content, it is also going to be different if it is in print to if it's music or moving image. *The Arcades Project* (and your project) ended up, or at least presently exists in print, whereas mine is moving image and sound. *Citation City* concentrates on well-known fictional movie narratives rather than documented reality, and in this context NYC and London are the film capitals, because of the way the movie industry works—it is a different *capital* entirely that dictates, Paris would not even come third.

If I were working in non-fiction, I should imagine the results would reflect London and Paris as important capitals in the nineteenth century for forward thinking and creativity—but all are equally cities of migrants... for economic and political reasons, and also as places of cultural refuge, which is why they are so vibrant, diverse, changing and energetic. But this particular reality is not my area—although of course reality and fiction rely upon and pose as one another. So to answer your question, if focussing on documented reality, on one hand Paris and NYC are capitals of the two past centuries but I think London is also a contender for the nineteenth century. In the fictional film world, purely from the point of view of an English speaking person focussing on the IMDB⁵ version of the movie world, the rules are

different and NYC would be first, London second and San Francisco or Los Angeles might be third as capitals of the twentieth Century.

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Vicki Bennett / People Like Us: <http://peoplelikeus.org/2014/biography/>
(<http://peoplelikeus.org/2014/biography/>) |
<http://peoplelikeus.org/citationcity> (<http://peoplelikeus.org/citationcity>)

Kenneth Goldsmith:

<http://www.writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Goldsmith.html>
(<http://www.writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Goldsmith.html>) |
<http://ubu.com> (<http://ubu.com>)

ENDNOTES

1. See: <

http://monoskop.org/images/e/e4/Benjamin_Walter_The_Arcades_Project.pdf

(http://monoskop.org/images/e/e4/Benjamin_Walter_The_Arcades_Project.pdf) >

2. See: < <http://peoplelikeus.org/2014/citationcity/>

(<http://peoplelikeus.org/2014/citationcity/>) >

3. See: < <https://wfmuplaylists.org/playlists/ZZ> (<https://wfmuplaylists.org/playlists/ZZ>) >

4. In reference to Kenneth Goldsmith's book: *Capital: New York, Capital of the 20th Century*. See: < <http://www.versobooks.com/books/2007-capital>

(<http://www.versobooks.com/books/2007-capital>) >

5. The Internet Movie Database (abbreviated IMDb) is an online database of information related to films, television programs, and video games, including cast, production crew, fictional characters, biographies, plot summaries, trivia

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