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Feature Interview

Genre Begets Genre: In Conversation with Vicki Bennett (People Like Us)

Donatella Valente

I am very fond of lists... I like the idea of using ideas to make lists and lists to make ideas.

– Vicki Bennett, Interview

Over the last 20 years, audiovisual collage artist Vicky Bennett (People Like Us) has been forging ahead with the lineage of the avant-garde popularisation of cut-up culture. Starting in the mid-1980s by collaging film and paper and continuing into the 1990s by sampling music, sound and video, Bennett used cut-up VHS tapes and scratch video techniques, worked with AVI films and minidisks, and moved on to computer animation and multimedia digital compositing. She has been performing live audiovisual sets since 1996. Her work is reminiscent of some classic avant-garde collage pieces such as Stan VanDerBeek's *Science Friction* (1959), Bruce Conner's *A Movie* (1958), and Joseph Cornell's *Rose Hobart* (1936). Her film footage is mostly sourced from the Prelinger Archive, but she has also used, amongst others, A/V Geeks, the LUX Archive, The Internet Archive and the BBC Archive (*Trying Things Out*, 2007).



People Like Us (Vicki Bennett), *Trying Things Out* (2007).¹
Full video at <http://www.ubu.com/film/plu_trying.html>

In her latest live audiovisual set *Genre Collage* (2009), a collage/montage of genre film footage, Bennett speaks through the idiomatic language of 'folk culture' by creating discrete, idiosyncratic audiovisual sets and synchronic visual puns; she dismantles the specificity of iconic genre sequences with irreverent iconoclastic gusto, hence producing comedic effects which also hinge on the syncopation of its montage grammar. Thus, a postmodern representation of the effacement of boundaries between high and popular culture results in a visual language that incorporates the critical text: the 'ready-made', recycled, found footage becomes a signifier in a network of disjointed signifiers through which the artist challenges elitist propositions, such as the original text and the original idea.² Film archive quotations (documentary, industrial, educational, and genre feature film footage) express the objectivist impulse of cubist collage. They are symbols of the commodified popular memory and of mass culture reification, subject to de-contextualisation and re-appropriation through the recycling process.³

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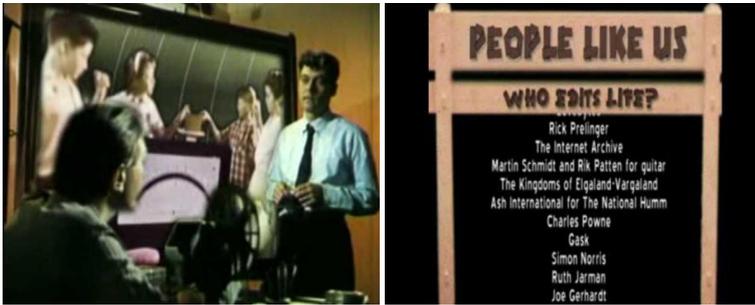
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People Like Us, *Genre Collage* (2009).

Extracts from *Genre Collage* at <http://www.peoplelikeus.org/2009/genre_collage.html>

Bennett's audiovisual sets suggest an epistemological relationship between the artist, a self-conscious and self-referential visual language (collage/montage), archive footage (original text/generic narrative), and the active spectator.⁴ This is also illustrated by *We Edit Life* (2002) and *The Remote Controller* (2003). These collage films show man — as a composite of artist, scientist, and computer designer — experimenting with the machine interface, producing new meanings and magical, surreal worlds whose dark undertones foreshadow the future of computer technology controlling man's physical and phenomenological environment.



People Like Us (Vicki Bennett), *We Edit Life* (2002)
Full video at <http://www.ubu.com/film/plu_edit.html>



People Like Us (Vicki Bennett), *The Remote Controller* (2003)
Full video at <http://www.ubu.com/film/plu_remote.html>

Genre Collage is both mimicry and parody of genre: Bennett at once celebrates and mocks its 'mannerisms and stylistic twitches'.⁵ Through a collage aesthetic on the one hand Bennett humorously compiles the original content by complying with generic rules of repetition and difference, the process of discarding and reassembling archive footage disrupts those rules on the other.⁶ Such a process propels the viewers, sited in an immersive environment, to reinvent and negotiate generic worlds through the trickeries of memory and their experience with the audiovisual representation and the cinematic space. Both the discrete quoted text and its audiovisual language therefore become the generic, (a)critical, open text.⁷

In *Genre Collage*, Bennett playfully enhances the ironic consequences of de-familiarisation from the original content. She refers to classical editing rules, such as the eyeline (mis-)match between the robot in *Tobor the Great* and Ingrid Bergman in Hitchcock's *Notorious*. Bennett also quotes the 'experimental' Kuleshov effect,⁸ whilst simultaneously questioning spatial continuity through digital compositing⁹ that juxtaposes heterogeneous media and genre films.¹⁰ Lev Manovich would define this aesthetic as 'stylistic montage' and 'spatial montage'.¹¹



People Like Us (Vicki Bennett), *Genre Collage* (2009)

As a performed piece, *Genre Collage* is infused with a burlesque attitude to genre film which undercuts the solemnity and high seriousness of multitudinous iconic film genre sequences. The irreverent slant of their micro-narratives connives with the carnivalesque mood of Bennett's live performances, and takes the audience on a festive ride through themes and icons of popular culture from genres such as sci-fi, drama, comedy, film noir, and the western. The performance could be seen as an updated incarnation of Mikhail Bakhtin's theories on comedy and the carnival tradition:

Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part.¹²

Vicki Bennett's genre is animated by dynamic and expandable ideas, by a process of becoming. Her audiovisual collages suggest stories without closure, which are neither univocal nor stable.



People Like Us (Vicki Bennett), *Genre Collage* (2009)

The Interview

Donatella Valente: Is the pseudonym 'People Like Us' meant to denote the collective efforts converging in the production of your audiovisual collages and popular culture in general? How did your *nom de plume* come about?

Vicki Bennett: There seemed to be three words appearing midway through sentences where the person felt strongly about something. For instance 'it's always people like us that...' — and as a result I was also able to use not only found sounds of this expression in action in my audio/radio work, but it was also amusing to hear it in the media; I could pretend they were speaking of or involving my avant-garde work. So in other words, it's a name about feeling and belonging.

DV: Which visual collage artist(s) or art movement has informed your practice?

VB: I started making collage when I was about 17, in the mid-1980s. The only work on a par with this would have been the visual collage of David Hockney and Gilbert and George, and also the moving image animations of Terry Gilliam. It is only by accident that I have stumbled upon my genre, or even known that I was a part of it. I didn't find out about any of the above until ten years later. After initially starting out as a film and paper collage maker, the 1990s were generally taken up with the making of audio and radio works, and I'd say I have far more in common with people in this area than in moving image, at least on a conscious level.

DV: The format of your live-collage sets, based on performing music to a film presentation, can be associated with avant-garde forms of live cinema, performed and expanded cinema, where both artist and viewer create a virtual experience of cinematic space and screen/s space.

VB: I do call my work 'live cinema' — not as a preferred description — but more as a basic explanation of what I do to present an audio-visual situation to an audience in real-time. Any connotation this may have beyond my wanting to be understood on a very basic level isn't intended. As an artist, my first intention is to communicate and make a connection with the audience, providing them a portal through which to engage in that communication. Beyond that, I wish the exchange to be total and all-encompassing. This is why I use collage, so that I can appeal on many levels in more than one way, and sometimes at once. It is

like going into the house and going into all of the rooms, sometimes more than one at a time. The cinema space to me is a comfortable place with the pre-conditioned understanding that the viewer is respectful of one's surroundings and quiet when viewing. This is what I require in order to deliver a live set, which sometimes has just verbal dialogue. It also separates me from other genres using popular music/culture for just entertainment value, which I don't want to be a part of. My work is art and I want it to be presented in an appropriate environment.

DV: By using the 'found film' genre, your latest audiovisual live set *Genre Collage* appropriates and compiles a collection of genre film footage. Can you tell me about its genealogy: which films inspired you most?

VB: I chose the films that are best known and engaging to most people in the western world — for me, this makes the most effective journey for the content — and for the audience to know what sort of journey I'm taking it on, wondering where it may have come from. It is also humorous to see who meets who along the way. However, I consider it just as effective if the viewer does not know the film — he or she would almost certainly recognise the actors or connect with the content in some way. I played *Genre Collage* in the Czech Republic at the end of last year and I wasn't sure what sort of reception I would get. It turned out to be the best so far, even better than in America.

DV: The historical referent is virtually absent from your film collages. Do you think that the collage artist treats archive footage as a 'ready-made' and handles it as a hypermediated object, with no connection to its social, cultural, historical context? Rick Altman argues: 'Genre is fundamentally ahistorical in nature.'¹³

VB: Yes, it is a ready-made in that I am mostly not referencing other than what is actually going on in the scene; there is very little reference to the rest of the film. There are reasons for this of a very practical nature — I had to keep themes simple and focussed in order to group them into subjects together. Unless the subject had something to do with the history of a person or place or object it would not be relevant to my working process. It is very much the process that makes the product, and only through watching the films do I get my ideas. Without this I have nothing!

DV: Conversely, in *From Iconography to Ideology*, Barry Keith Grant argues that 'Genre movies are always about the time and place in which they are made'.¹⁴ How do you think your A/V genre collage film captures our contemporary zeitgeist?

VB: Like most of the titles I use, *Genre Collage* has more than one meaning (many of my titles are also puns). It is reflective of the times in which we live in the same way that folk art is. I would not say it is 'culture jamming' since I am not rebelling against the subject matter, nor am I particularly feeling negative about it; in fact, I am always paying homage to it, since I never use anything that I don't actually like in some way. So this is why I say it is folk art. Folk is about re-using and sometimes recycling. I am doing what Bob Dylan was doing in the late 1960s in the folk clubs of New York City. He would sing a song that had been written by someone a week before two blocks away, and would add a new verse or change a line or two. Then one week on, someone would change what he had done. And so on. Unfortunately, after publishing those works, recycling was prohibited and on one level things changed. But on another, they didn't; we still recycle, but in the kind of world more obsessed with ownership and financial gain, regardless of cultural and artistic growth. Dealing with this situation cannot escape dealing with the times we live in, even if that is not one's intent.

DV: Frederic Jameson argues that the artist does not simply 'quote' B-Hollywood films, genre literature, 'degraded landscape of schlock and kitsch'; the artist incorporates them into the artwork's texture and substance.¹⁵

VB: The artist does challenge boundaries. This has to have been one of the things that we have all had in common. The avant-garde starts on the outside, eventually becomes popularised, absorbed, becomes a commodity. I say that without any judgement whatsoever. It is a circular process.

DV: Which today also captures the latent desire for access, preservation and accumulation.

VB: 'Preservation and accumulation vs. access' would be a sign of where we are. We can only recycle and sample what we have access to, regardless of the medium.

DV: Popular culture was often criticised for its lack of originality, sophistication and authenticity. Would you say that your multimedia collages represent a critical aesthetic, one that helps expose the ideology of generic conventions deemed as commodified products?

VB: This would very much depend on the film viewer's point of view. It would be true to say that *Genre Collage* is a number of things — that is the nature of collage, it is not one-dimensional, it is capable of comfortably being many opposing things — a dialogue within itself. A hundred different films and characters meet in a way that they never did before. The results are engaging, often humorous, and hopefully enchanting. Originality means nothing to me — I am interested in what is energetic and inspiring. Sophistication and authenticity - if this could be translated as well delivered and sincere then I couldn't have done it any better. Reflecting the past without having a foot in the present is nostalgic. Looking at the past with thoughts about the future is the ideal. Folk art will always be turned into a commodity, but since things forever change there is nothing that we can do except keep moving and looking for new ways to... say the same thing.

DV: Through your inter-textual dialogue and self-referentiality, you address the triangular relationship between artwork, audience and artist, which produces an interesting tension with the 'found film' genre. While pointing to the recycling process itself, you ask the viewers to participate in that creative process, to make up their own narratives and genres. This suggests an open-ended process.

VB: Through collage, both artist and viewer can be creative in the way that they perceive what is going on, and it is not important to lead the way, with one narrative, and in fact it is impossible to do so with found footage; the viewer already taps into her or his personal memories of a specific film that I have cited by using the limitations of the original content.

DV: Rick Prelinger states: 'Remixing is estrangement... And yet the raw material remains familiar and recognizable. It's at once a subversive and reassuring process.'¹⁶ From *Burning* (1999) to *Story Without*

End (2005) and *Skew Gardens* (2008), would you say that your collage films testify to the recrudescence of generic film conventions ghosted by the twist of a cautionary tale?

VB: They do seem a little like fables, indeed. Really, the dark areas of these films are the injection of humour — wishing to undermine or tamper with the plot or status quo in some way. It is more an anarchic or slapstick approach — with a collage aesthetic.



Story Without End (2005)



Skew Gardens (2008)

Full videos at <http://www.ubu.com/film/plu_story.html>
& <http://www.ubu.com/film/plu_skew.html>

DV: Do you think that your *Genre Collage* piece is the culmination of over 15 years of a different genre collage practice, while working with industrial, instructional, ephemera, feature films, and computer/digital animation?

VB: Yes. I grew tired of working with the former, and wanted to approach editing and source footage more in the manner that I do with my musical work, using popular culture rather than more obscure sources. Also, I used a lot less animation and more straight-cut editing. It was liberating and kept me more in touch with my ideas because it was a faster way of working rather than the laborious animation.

DV: And how did you come to use the play on words with 'avant-retard' when referring to your sound collages?

VB: 'Avant-retard' refers specifically to my radio show on WFMU called 'DO or DIY'. The show collages avant-garde/difficult audio with popular/easy audio. By fusing them we have avant-retard. We retreat and advance at the same time, we stand still, we fall over all at once. In a way it is a zen way of looking at movement. By moving everywhere at once we remain in the same place. Or the reverse. It is also a rhyme with 'avant-garde', making it a humorous pun. However, it would be true to call much of my music 'avant-retard' and if there is any genre that I have invented, this has to be a contender! There is once again the deeper reflection that there is no such thing as 'popular' or 'unpopular' — it is all about context. Only one element need be introduced (for instance a sound effect) to make it the opposite.

DV: You co-curated the programme on the 'recycled film' genre at the A\|V Festival in March titled 'Nothing is New, Everything Is Permitted', a pun on William Burroughs's phrase 'Nothing is True. Everything is Permitted'.¹⁷ Here the dada thread in the appropriation and reconfiguration of visual and aural images is apparent. Can you tell me more about this programme and its aims?

VB: The festival theme was 'Energy' and one area of this was 'Recycling' — and I was able to input into this part of the festival, including getting to select a few artists and play a concert as part of the festival. The title says it all really. I was trying to think of a fast way to convey the idea that we should let go of the old idea of originality, which is very restrictive and based upon possession of an idea, when an idea is fluid and made to be shared and changed. No one owns an idea; it always has a previous existence. There are no exceptions.

DV: In *Films Beget Films*, Jay Leyda quotes Hans Richter who clarifies how compilation/essay film explains and presents an idea: 'the essay film must collect its material from everywhere; its space and time must be conditioned only by the need to explain and show the idea.'¹⁸ How does your genre-bending practice in *Genre Collage* relate to this theory?

VB: *Genre Collage* is put together as a compilation of little self-contained sketches — it has about 7 or 8 parts on the timeline. They aren't really related but fit together by the smallest of threads at times. So each part is exploring just one or two subjects, for instance driving scenes, flying/falling, staring/looking, and so on. From those subjects some play between characters, and also the music tells stories of similar subjects, each part meaning little on its own, but it all creates a jigsaw. There are ideas in what I do, but it is also a compilation of similar subjects. I am very fond of lists, I used lists (of films and film genres) to make the work to begin with. I like the idea of using ideas to make lists and lists to make ideas.



'The Look of Love', *Genre Collage* (2009)

Birkbeck College, University of London

Notes

- All images and video reproductions are made with kind permission of the artist.
- Fredric Jameson, 'The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', in Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 54.
- 'Although the technique itself is ancient, collage was introduced into the 'high arts' [...] by Braque and Picasso as a solution to the problems raised by analytic cubism, a solution which finally provided an alternative to the 'illusionism' of perspective which had dominated Western painting since the early Renaissance [...]. The interest of collage as a device for criticism resides partly in the objectivist impulse of cubism.' Gregory L. Ulmer, 'The Object of Post-Criticism', in Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), p. 84.
- 'I like to imagine a philosophy of experimental cinema, which emanates from the cinema of attractions and expanded film, and includes the electronic, the computer, the active spectator, sculpture, collage, dramaturgy, narrativity and representation.' Jackie Hatfield, quoted in 'Narrative Exploration in Expanded Cinema', as at <<http://www.rewind.ac.uk/expanded/Narrative/Home.html>> [accessed 14 May 2010].
- Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', in Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, p. 113.
- 'Generic specification starts therefore with a consideration of the way in which equilibrium and disruption are articulated'. Stephen Neale, quoted in Pam Cook, *The Cinema Book* (London: BFI, 1999), p.143.
- 'The question of post-criticism was first posed [...] by Roland Barthes [who] explained that the modernist poets, beginning at least with Mallarmé, had demonstrated already the unification of poetry and criticism — that literature was itself a critique of language, and that criticism had no 'meta'-language capable of describing or accounting for literature. Barthes concluded that the categories of literature and criticism could no longer be kept apart, that now there were only *writers*'. Ulmer, 1983, p. 86.
- 'The Soviet filmmaker Lev Kuleshev [...] came up with a series of 'experiments' in constructing spatial relations by eliminating establishing shots [...] his careful study of this possibility has caused film scholars to call 'the Kuleshov effect' any series of shots that in the absence of an establishing shot creates a spatial whole by joining disparate spatial fragments.' David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), p. 208.
- 'Digital compositing exemplifies a more general operation of computer culture — assembling together a number of elements to create a single seamless object. Thus we can distinguish between compositing in the wider sense (the general operation) and compositing in a narrow sense (assembling movie image elements to create a photorealistic shot).' Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2001), p. 139.
- 'Montage aims to create visual, stylistic, semantic, and emotional dissonance between different elements. In contrast, compositing aims to blend them into a seamless whole, a single gestalt.' Manovich, p. 144.
- Manovich, pp. 158–159.
- Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Comedy and Carnival Tradition' (1968), in G.J. Palmer (ed.), *Comedy: Developments in Criticism* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 97.
- Rick Altman, Henry Jenkins and Kristine Brunovska Karnick, 'Introduction: Golden Eras and Blind Spots — Genre, History and Comedy', in H. Jenkins and K. Brunovska Karnick (eds), *Classical Hollywood Comedy* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 1.
- Barry Keith Grant, *From Iconography to Ideology* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), p. 6.
- Jameson (1991), p. 55.
- People Like Us, 'On the Virtues of Preexisting Material by Rick Prelinger', 2008. As at <http://www.peoplelikeus.org/2008/on_the_virtues_of_preexisting_material_by_rick_prelinger.html> [accessed 24 February 2010].
- People Like Us, 'People Like Us Play AV Festival', 2010. As at <http://www.peoplelikeus.org/2010/people_like_us_play_av_festival_2010.html> [accessed 12 March 2010].
- Jay Leyda, *Films Beget Films* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p. 31.

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