Vicki Bennett Interview Questions

1. Just to begin: what is the genesis of your project? I mean, when did you first start using found material, and why?

Collage has always been the central part of what I do, since the mid 80s, using magazines to make photomontage, then the audio mixer to collage sound, the video recorder to cut up images, the dual cassette deck to copy and edit, the cassette multitrack to put things on top of one another, the minidisc to fine edit/rearrange spoken work and finally (?) the computer multitracker/editor. This choice in description may indicate what my reason for working in this way was to do with - immediate access to materials for little cost. Also, I don't really fit in with any particular path or genre to the point that I would want to say I was a "musician" or "film maker"… so "collage artist" it is.

For me at least, the introduction to the word "sampling" came in the late 80s with hip hop (and the UK's On-U-Sound label), also avant-garde artists experimenting with found sound like Negativland, Nurse With Wound, The Tape-beatles and John Oswald. There was a big fear of publishing at that time - almost like an old wives tale that somehow if you pressed a record that contained samples that somehow "they" would find out and that you'd go to prison or maybe hell. Of course the "fear of commies" style paranoia exists now too. In the 80s and early 90s the DIY culture was strong and people were working with tape labels or just sharing home tapes domestically, there wasn't such a strong inclination for mass distribution, whereas now that we have the internet the playing field has levelled, enlarged, but there are also a lot more people playing on it. Perhaps it's actually a bigger version of the same, and as much as it is easier to be lost in a crowd it is easier to find what you want if you know what it is, because of the Search Engine.

2. You have worked in various media: in radio, in sound, in film, and more recently, in a text piece entitled *The Fundamental Questions*, made in collaboration with Gregor Weichbrodt and published as an excerpt in the *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice* 7.1 (2015). What is the relationship among these very different media in your work?

Working with appropriation and collage, across all media including language itself, seems very pure to me, even if to many it feels the opposite. Sometimes I wish I could work with text as a raw material, get rid of pre-recorded sound/film for a while. I wish I could make books in the way that I make films and sound. However, since my ideas are often parallel to people working conceptually with text, and also the humour/playfulness/meddling is often a strong factor in both communities, I figure if I find the right person to work with… this is what happened with Gregor. That book was essentially his in terms of building something in that medium, and we developed the concept together. He contacted me initially asking if I'd comment on his work, to see what I thought of it. At the time he was searching the content of a dating site, for all the first person quotes from users, all the "I am" definitions. It seemed to me that they were looking for answers to some of the fundamental questions in life and I reflected upon this to Gregor, and there began our collaboration. On that basis we searched the internet for what those fundamental questions may be - Who am I? What is my purpose? And so on, and then we looked to find the answers from these users. We had a 10-day conversation, all online in social media chat, and out of it came this big bible-sized book, full of thousands of searching souls who are alone yet together as one. This sort of working method is exactly the same as when I look for similar subject matter or stories when making moving image and sound, except it doesn't provoke memories in the way that a song or movie may.

3. Speaking of collaboration, along with *The Fundamental Questions* made with Gregor Weichbrodt, have you produced other collaborations? Is collaboration important to your practice?

Improvisation on the radio/live platform was for a long while a central part of creating new work - through improvisation with others you can bring in other viewpoints and methods that you wouldn't have otherwise thought of, and become immediately influenced and compromised by having to react because of the urgency of the platform (i.e. that it is live/on the air). I would visit California many

times between 1998 and 2003 and each time arrange radio sessions (KPFA, KSZU, KALX, KBOO), spending all my time preparing segments of sound and music sought from peoples houses there, that I could then play live with other people. We would always record these sessions then make post-production edits of to release online (and sometimes later, on CD) a few weeks after. Later, I recorded live shows on WFMU - the main one that comes to mind is with Kenny G (Goldsmith), we did a great three-hour session on his show Nothing Special. We were playing so many things at once (on LP, CD, CDR, minidisc) that we were just pressing buttons on and off randomly because the whole thing was running itself like a locomotive - it was perfectly disorientating radio. We did another show where we were tied together, gagged and blindfolded and had to do a three-hour radio show. It was very difficult, as well as sounding preposterous - a recording of an alarm clock that would go off every 20 minutes or so, and one of the WFMU staff would come into the studio and release us some more.

Non-live collaboration is something that has come about more recently, first working with the artist Jon Leidecker (Wobbly), and then with Ergo Phizmiz. I've never worked with Ergo in the same room. We create ideas for projects with a back and forth email conversation over the course of an afternoon or a few days, zapping short replies back and forth, often so fast that they overlap one another! Sometimes we work things out in live text on Skype etc. It's a very fast and fluid way of thinking up ideas, I think better than a verbal conversation, it has less physical trappings or distractions, is more pure. We collaborate by uploading multitracks and then back and forth altering the sessions and gradually compose that way. It works really well. I've not found many people I can work with that well though, but I live in hope of finding more.

4. Perhaps related to collaboration: why do you call yourself "People Like Us"? Why pluralize yourself?

It was a long time ago, 1990 - for a few reasons, some which became later apparent. At the time I liked the idea of being completely anonymous, to the point of even blurring the ideas that the content was being made by a whole "band". Also, I the idea that people might project their own misconceptions into the equation - thinking it was a bunch of blokes, which they often did. Also, "people like us…" turns up mid-sentence in conversation as a soundbyte, something that I could reflect upon and amuse myself with when it did… often popping up in relation to feeling a strong sense of identity or passion about something; "it's always people like us that have this and that happen". At the same time I didn't really think too long about the name when I thought it up, it was one of many, just something to put on the spines of cassettes, and little did I know that 25 years later it would still be around. I also like the idea that as a band I would have a problem splitting up. A lot of other People Like Us groups (- unrelated to me) have come along since - a radio/tv comedy series, a blockbuster movie, global gay and lesbian organisations, a gay disco group, a theatre group and a jazz band.

5. Much of the appropriation art of the 1980s was read as a form of political critique—e.g., Richard Prince's appropriation of advertising images was considered by many as a critique of consumer culture, and Cindy Sherman's work was situated as a feminist investigation of social identity and the cultural representation of women. In the 21st century, conceptual writers who use appropriated text (such as Kenneth Goldsmith) have been criticized as being apolitical (or even, complicit with the dominant political order) in their approach. Do you see your work as having any political orientation?

Have thought about this question a lot - it is what delayed me answering this interview for a couple of weeks! I've come to the conclusion that even if our notion is that we create as a reflection for our audience, that actually the biggest perspective on what we create comes from anyone and everyone BUT our self. Although we make the work we are in fact a minority in the experience of it, which is a strange thought, and I only just considered this out loud. I really appreciate the undiluted purity of many who are apolitical/separate/art-for-art's-sake in their approach, and I am that too sometimes. One can feel that sensitive and loaded subject matter is game as "material", almost in equal measures, no matter what that may be, but of course that is not the case for most people receiving the message -

especially when we are appropriating. It can come as a shock when someone objects - it could be because the framing of the work changes through reiteration, duplication and so on or maybe they saw it how we did and didn't agree with the content. When we are mass producing-distributing (through internet and newspapers) to people who don't have personal contact with us we are in a dichotomy where we might be making some folk art but we don't have a community in the local context. When publishing across the internet or through mass media short fuses can ignite regardless of intention of the maker, as well as praise, of course, and then politics and law and all kinds of things we may wish to avoid come into play whether we like it or not. Whether one should carry on with creative work regardless (art-for-art's-sake), with the attitude that all good artists will be misunderstood and later appreciated I don't know… am not sure if I can support that view since the only time that is real is the present and isn't it best we are understood now? But surely that does not mean "dumbing down" or compromising ourselves in any way to feed the status quo, but it's important to be aware as much as possible of potential implications of what we do, especially when dealing with appropriation, when we are reframing and making new juxtapositions.

We are not in any way just making this work for ourselves or we would just be hobbyists. However much I can't stand the copyright law and particularly the reasons one may say it is wrong to copy, it is for many the central question from others about what I do. Regardless of the fact that if I were using material that was undoubtedly legal (- it is not illegal, but is a legal challenge) I'd be working in the same way, which I suspect I would but don't know for sure since it is not. It frustrates me that if "working with archives" was legal/cleared that somehow it's not a question any more, that somehow the same material is different all of a sudden and almost not an issue. But I'm not working like this because it's legal or it's taboo. I am interested in stories and how well-known stories crop up in the most popular forms of publishing, and how these stories can be combined to make uber/ur-stories, and that by performing this operation one can look deeper into what these repetitions of theme and content might mean. Although *I* know that I am using pre-existing material to demonstrate the connections between things, and feel beyond and perhaps above the law, it is clear that other people may think I am doing it because it is "illegal" or to be provocative. So does that mean I then turn around and focus on making "political" art in response to this projection in my direction or do I just carry on and try harder to show that I am not? One day I might embrace the fact that I have something to say about this within the work rather than in conversation, but that day hasn't arrived. I've always felt I want to stand aside and outside of any particular group, including politics (and I've not even talked about the fact that I'm a female artist), but it is a fact that one reason why I am turned down for some commissions and publishing work is because of other peoples paranoia and fears about "what may happen" in relation to the copyright law. Maybe one day I will get so fed up with this ridiculous situation that it will actually make me want to express how frustrating this is within my work. Perhaps that time may not be so far away since I just got turned down for a commission last week because of this exact same issue. They really liked my work but…

6. This year your film *Citation City* premiered in Berlin. The film opens with a citation to *The Arcades Project* by Walter Benjamin. What is the general significance of Benjamin's writing, and *The Arcades Project* in particular, to your work?

Selecting and cutting things into list has always been the central part of what I do. In the 1980s I remember using a Roget's Thesaurus to find tangential connections between subject matter, as well as puns, which are also making connections between incongruous elements. I had no knowledge of Walter Benjamin back then, it just seemed natural to use a tool that was readily available to help create works. When using audio tape and destructive tape editing (i.e. you can only record once and not "undo") it was important to make paper diagrams and lists to see the bigger picture of all the elements that might make up a narrative, whether that be spoken word or concrete/musical elements. In the digital age it is just as important to make notes. All these notes end up on the floor. A table is not big enough to hold all of this information, and a computer screen would never allow you to see the whole map. These lists are apparent both in my moving image and sound work and also in the radio shows/stations that I've curated. For instance Radio Boredcast (wfmu.org/playlists/zz) required a huge amount of collating of information to be sure that I was making the right connections between

programmed material and not leaving anything out when curating a 744 hour radio station all about ASLSP. I was already aware of The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility, and have often said that sampling is Folk Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction. On discovery, The Arcades Project was a beautiful, delicate and magical thing to me, not unlike a thesaurus or encyclopaedia in the way it encourages and highlights tangential connections - whether or not it was ever going to become a book under Walter Benjamin's steam I wouldn't want to guess but I can appreciate the process that he was undertaking, and how if you don't have a very clear deadline and outside pressure to finish you would just keep burrowing more and more tunnels and finding more and more treasures, and behind those treasures you find more tunnels. The book is an extreme reflection on the process that many of us undertake when creating work - I like to call these "operations". When you operate you are making an investigation to see what is inside. When you look inside you get your hands dirty, and see what was otherwise hidden. Also, I am very interested in the stories that people tell, whether in a film or a song, a book or something passed by voice alone. There are only so many stories and I love to see how they reoccur and vary on different platforms, in different clothes or in a different frame. Once again it demonstrates our connection to one another.

7. Aside from the homage to John Cage in its title, your film *4'33" the Movie* re-purposes only a single other text: John Huston's 1948 film noir *Key Largo*. Your film *The Sound of the End of Music* superimposes the opening scenes from two films: *The Sound of Music* and *Apocalypse Now*. And *Citation City* uses a wide range of sources—perhaps even numbering in the hundreds. Could you elaborate on the difference between films which use one, two, or many sources in your work? How do you consider the process of conceptualizing and making your work in any media, from the point of view of the number of sources that you use?

With pop music, if you mix more than two or three elements it starts to distance the average listener because it is too taxing - the most popular forms of musical composition, as least with pop have been very sparing in how many sources they use - two elements being the most ideal. The whole mashup movement was part of the older appropriation/plunderphonic movement but in lightweight therefore popular form. Almost to the point of being transparent in terms of what might have been transformed to make a "new" piece. The mashups are often so seamless that unless you know the music that is being sampled you don't even know it's a mashup. When mixing together moving image I find some of the above conclusions also applied. *4'33 the Movie* and *The Sound of the End of Music* are two of the most watched/screened films that I've made, and I'm convinced of the fact that it's because I'm keeping it simple, therefore not muddying the conceptual water, keeping things "pop". This isn't a positive or negative reflection by the way. The more elements you add the more you take the chance of leaving people behind, that's just how it is. Certainly I was concerned with Citation City that the more I immersed in the subject matter and therefore specialised more in particular things the more I may leave a lot of people looking in from the outside while I was just there alone in some deep pit that I'd dug for myself. Depending on the frame or platform that you are using it is sometimes OK to immerse this far but when you're creating a concert, usually for a foreign audience, you have to think seriously about how you are telling the story that you want to tell, to be true to the project but also engage with your audience.

The smaller amount of elements you use the more you may be dependant up an "idea", which the two piece that you mention definitely are based up - they were both existing conceptually before I even made them. However, if you use lots of sources you may have an umbrella subject but you are more dependant upon process and chance. I try and pay attention to the fact that I need to take my audience with me on this journey of discovery, that the audience may not care about London or Walter Benjamin, and that it is important to define the entrance into a piece and show the way around so as to give people a chance to experience it, but at the same time think the real value lies beyond the idea, and in the journey itself, which may bring about ideas later, ideas that might not even come from you, but from the audience.

8. John Cage pioneered the use of found text in post-war American writing, visual art, and music. He also studied Zen Buddhism with D.T. Suzuki. More recently, Marcus Boon's *In Praise of Copying* links the contemporary repurposing of found text in the arts to Mahayana Buddhism. You have just become a *Mitra* with the *Triratna* Buddhist Order, and are also a long-term meditator in the Buddhist context. Does your spiritual practice as a Buddhist have any relevance to your cultural production?

Yes, before I even realised, this work has always been Buddhist. Collage reflects on the relationship between things that don't necessarily go together in an obvious way, making connections between disparate elements. And if there is anything that my art does, it is that - making connections, showing how these things might relate to one another, how possibly all things relate. The act of copying reflects that no one is an island and that ideas are inhaled and exhaled like breathing and if we should not hold our breaths or say that the air is ours.

There is a lot of tragedy (presented in a humorous way) in my work, and I see this as a reflection upon dukkha. In the performance The Magical Misery Tour, which consists entirely of horror films, I noticed how not only are the oppressed unhappy, but so are the oppressors. In horror films most people are having a bad time but there is a duality presented as if some people are "alright" and some are not. And life is like this, we can often feel separated from other people when we are not happy, we isolate ourselves and feel that we are the only people who are struggling.

Also, there are many reflections upon nothingness, and silence, the removal of language or meaning, and once again it is reflecting upon the duality of content in relation to lack of. Lastly, humour is to me a divine thing, something above and beyond verbal or written language, demonstrated by being disintegrated when analysed or explained. Using humour as a tool, bring incongruous elements together to humorous result is another way of collaging reality in order to tie it all together, like a big quilt.