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C R A C K

## Iain Forsyth & Jane Pollard: of memory & mixtapes

“There’s something about when you feel like you’re meeting the *personality* of the artist, as well as receiving a message that they want to tell you, and you can feel their joy in the production of what they’re making,” says Jane Pollard. Iain Forsyth and herself have been working collaboratively for the last 20 years, since they met at Goldsmiths.

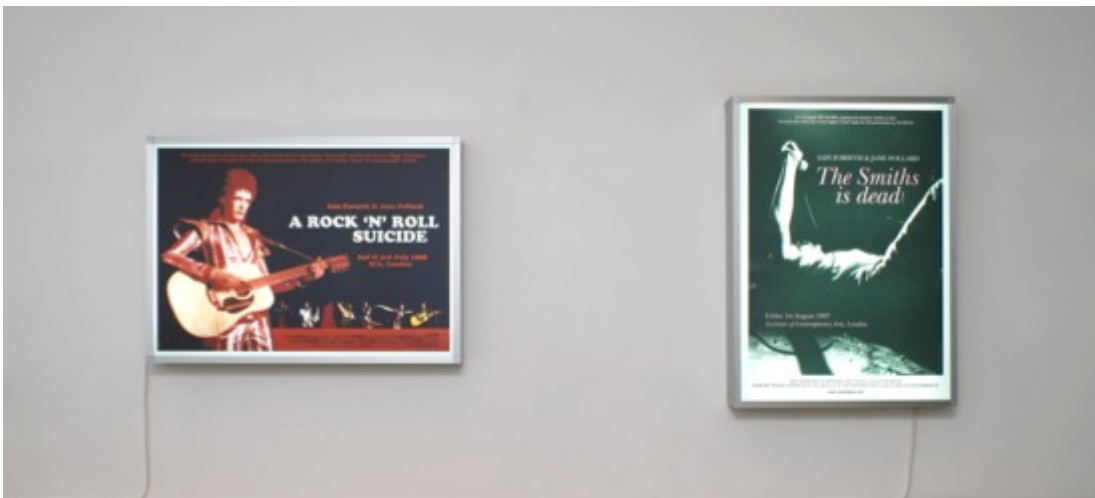


We’re in their kitchen, in a little terraced house tucked around a corner in Bethnal Green; Shoreditch is creeping down Roman Road, but it’s not here yet. Iain and Jane’s practice thus far has toyed with, among other things, pop music, temporal linearity and the power of emotional memory to disturb the space-time continuum.

Jane is talking about formative experiences: an Andrew Heard exhibition, a Gavin Turk exhibition and a Bruce Nauman artwork, *Good Boy Bad Boy*. There’s an argument to be made that these days the contemporary art landscape is cluttered with bloodlessness. Exhibitions of digitally rendered, trendy visual tropes, part of a recursive and impenetrable auto-discussion in a language that actually no one speaks, are

approaching ubiquity in London. In this atmosphere it's refreshing to hear someone articulate the importance of an emotional – human – dimension. To celebrate both feeling and reason.

This bloodlessness is something the artists could never be accused of. Their early work is marked by an interest in the power of non-verbal language, the capacity of culture to transcend linear time and consolidate separate moments into a third, emotional space. They explored this layering through the re-staging of seminal moments in pop music. A Smiths tribute band first, before more focused and impeccably choreographed re-enactments: Ziggy Stardust's last performance in *A Rock 'n' Roll Suicide* and *File Under Sacred Music*, a shot-for-shot remake of a Cramps' bootleg, made at a gig they played for the patients of Napa State Mental Institute.



Music's potential to act as a "psychological mnemonic device" and its accessibility as an emotional language initially came to their attention through mixtapes: "What mixtapes would unlock, in us and other people. The idea that this thing is loaded, because usually when you're making a compilation tape for somebody, it has a subtext." There's a 6 Music, fetishisation- of-the-past type quality to this sort of talk, but Iain dismisses nostalgia unbidden: "it's a really problematic thing, because it gets entwined really quickly with some sort of notion of a singular truth. To share nostalgia for something we first need to share a perspective on it; if we didn't see it and feel it in the same way we can't share the experience in nostalgia."

The tension inherent in creating a new emotional dimension through the overarching objectivity of shared subjective experience (as in, the physical, documentable qualities of a gig against each audience member's experience of it) is a key facet of their early works – in *File Under Sacred Music* they went as far as to record their remake in front of an audience invited through a mental health charity. In the past they've played off this tension through dogmatic adherence to (and painstaking research into) their source material, and it's through this that they've negated that nostalgia: the frankness of the re-enactment leaves no room for it.

The last two years have seen a shift in discipline, with the release of their feature-length documentary/portrait/fiction *20,000 Days on Earth*, a surreal and penetrating film about Nick Cave.

The film is remarkable not just for its focus on Cave, but for its rigorous exploration of performance as profession, its success at simultaneously demystifying the creative process whilst sustaining the mythology of the icon whose twenty-thousandth day on earth it follows. It is essential viewing – not just for fans of The Bad Seeds, or rock and roll, but for anyone with an interest in the business of creation.

**“To share nostalgia for something we first need to share a perspective on it; if we didn’t see it and feel it in the same way we can’t share the experience in nostalgia” - Iain Forsyth**

A more conventional film – documentary or biopic – might struggle to dodge the kind of sentimentalised nostalgia Iain and Jane dismiss, but through a curious inversion of their usual MO, this film continues their explorations into memory and experience. Where their usual re-enactments are characterised by a borderline-pedantic adherence to documented detail, this work dispenses with any regard for everyday truths entirely.

“The decision to pay no heed to the truth was something we made really quickly. We’re not getting into conversations about whether this film features one person enough, because the moment we start to play that game we can’t any longer find a new language, a new way of trying to represent somebody.” Iain adds: “The moment you try and privilege one version of the truth it becomes about something completely different, and there’s no space to be creative. It becomes about fact, it becomes about journalism, and that’s a very narrow road to go down.”

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As Jane points out, this sort of filmmaking requires the full complicity of the subject, a willingness to allow truths to bloom out of the structured unrealities set up by the artists. This complicity extends the collaborative web further. “The relationship had to be conspiratorial,” says Jane. “We’re not looking, we are creating something in the act of doing this with them. And we just weren’t sure what that was going to be, really, until we started to try out ideas.”

These experiments comprise two of the most powerful set pieces in the film: a session of psychoanalysis between Cave and Darian Leader, and a trawl through the semi-fictional Nick Cave Archive. In both instances, whilst the circumstances were contrived, the conversations were unscripted. “It was from that, really, that we started to find the themes that were interesting. We found things that surprised us; the idea of how to look at Nick, to maintain the mythology or extend that mythological language so that the fan is watching something, rather than trying to peel away the layers of it.”

The success of *20,000 Days...* has changed things for the pair. Whilst they deny that it signals a shift in disciplines – “It doesn’t feel like a move, it feels like another possibility opening up” – it seems as though the opportunities it affords must inevitably impact on their practice as visual artists.

Their latest show, currently on at Kate MacGarry gallery in East London, would seem to confirm this. Called *Idiot Box*, there’s a slight feeling of the swan song about it.

Nine big black television monitors have been put in, piled up like a wall. This bank of screens operates logically within their visual lexicon; instantly comparable to the monitors at the start of *20,000 Days...* that flash jarringly through the first 19,999 of Cave’s life.



The works shown, nine films in all, include only one by the artists themselves. The films themselves are brilliantly selected; funny and poignant and weird, the show is like a mixtape. “It’s a language of putting things together,” says Jane.

The videos selected comprise a fairly wide range, from a David Shrigley animation to odd little avant-garde films. In Forsyth and Jane Pollard, *File Under Sacred Music*, 2003, single channel video, duration 22 minutes. In Forsyth and Jane Pollard, *Silent Sound*, 2006/7, Custom built sound, variable dimensions 54 commissioned for TV in a time when the medium’s institutions seemed to have more confidence in their audiences.

Also included is a YouTube video, although its status is unsigned within the sequence. The inclusion of an ‘internet readymade’ might be worth some words, but in this show it doesn’t feel relevant. Discussing it, In and Jane dwell extensively on the idea of the work as mixtape – in fact, in spite of the YouTube video’s inclusion, this exhibition feels more like an homage to the analogue than anything else. A wilful engagement with linearity, and a rejection of the high download speed, unfiltered information overload many visual artists are currently using their practices to try and parse.

“Somehow the user navigated experience and all choice was utopia. And of course it’s not utopia, we’re shit at making decisions.”



John Smith, *Gargantuan*, 1992

In their roles as curators here, they’ve compiled a mixtape crossed with a self-portrait. The work fits into the narrative of their own practice, but the inclusion of only one of their very early films changes them, in this instance, from creators to selectors.

The overarching humour, aesthetics and ideas recognisably tie it to them, and in many ways perhaps it's appropriate that their only presence as makers is a film from their degree. If they are, for now, transitioning from the gallery to somewhere else, it's not at the cost of the ideas they've been exploring throughout their career. At the end of *20,000 Days...* footage of Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds playing in the Sydney Opera House is cut through with footage from throughout his career. Jane says: "That entire song pays total debt to our live art. That idea of past performances pushing in, that is an articulation of an idea that we were trying as 22-year-olds to work out; what happens when the past and the present are superimposed on one another, or you oscillate between them at a speed where there's a blurring of what you're watching."

What's clear about the duo's creative output – whether it be as filmmakers, visual artists or curators – is that the singularity of their vision brings them in line with their own influences, that "you can feel their joy in the production of what they're making ... you get the attention to detail and the joy in the act of actually making it."

By Augustin Macellari, Crack Magazine, 01/04/15