

Te Adam
Pātaka Art
Toi Gallery

The distribution issue: Object Lessons Public Programme August–October 2010

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MUSEUM AND HERITAGE STUDIES
STUDENT PLACEMENT REPORT

Object Lessons: A Musical Fiction, co-curated by Mark Williams and Laura Preston, set out to explore the idea of 'the record' and to address the issues of documentation and distribution. The exhibition asked artists to respond to two narratives that exist within New Zealand's musical history. One being the beginnings of the famous and infamous Flying Nun Records; the other, the alleged dumping of the last vinyl press in New Zealand in Wellington Harbour in 1987. The idea of the record in this exhibition is double sided. Both stories relate to the literal music record (i.e. a music recording) and the metaphorical record - the residual memories left behind after an event has occurred. Story-telling is also at the heart of this exhibition. Such events as the vinyl press dumping, or the foibles of a punk-rock music label are bound up in the mythological fabric of New Zealand's musical history.

The five artists/groups who took part in the exhibition explored this theme in a variety of ways, but all addressed the problematics of the record as representative of a moment in time which, once it has passed, is unobtainable. This skewed image of time and the past was perhaps most pertinently exhibited in Fitts and Holderness' exploration on the case of a missing Icelandic girl, whose disappearance is shown through the eyes of various individuals, and becomes the inspiration for a music record. Police interview tapes remain un-translated from Icelandic, meaning that the viewer can never truly access the information being relayed. We are permanently distanced from the moment and the truth.

Like the stories that inspired its inception, *Object Lessons* was also double sided; an accompanying public programme was devised to compliment and perhaps at times challenge the exhibition. The aim of the public programme was to bring the ideas of the exhibition to people in the community associated with music production. As the exhibition explores themes that very much exist outside the gallery walls, it was important to engage the wider public, with particular emphasis on bringing the knowledge of the music community in to the mix. Perhaps because of the emphasis on the public programme with this exhibition, the concept of community became central. The gallery relied on networks within the music community in helping to facilitate the programmes. However, involving these external communities also raised interesting questions about the nature of the music industry, as well as what is expected of the contemporary art gallery in terms of exploring issues that push their boundaries.

One of the most pertinent and interesting issues confronting the music industry is how it is reacting and adapting to the digital age. The seemingly limitless potential of digital music distribution seems at once to present an enormous opportunity as well as a potential mine-field of copyright infringements and digital piracy. How music producers - especially the independent ones - address these very issues was of central importance to this exhibition and the public programme.

The first programme initiative was a panel discussion which sought to involve various voices within this industry, from Flying Nun founder Rodger Shepherd to a younger generation involved in various forms of digital distribution, such as the music blog. As a bystander and someone on the outside of the music industry, I find the tension that arises out the increasing desire for technological advancement and the nostalgic fetishization of the independently produced objects of music an interesting one. While these two things may seem mutually exclusive (especially if viewed in the parameters of a capitalist music industry), they can in fact exist side-by-side and indeed be complementary. What I observed in that first panel discussion was a melding of these two seemingly opposing facets.

The digital phenomenon in music has created an unparalleled opportunity for smaller independent music producers to reach a larger audience. The sharing of digital music offers a kind of consumer freedom, where

one can sample an ever-increasing amount of music without having to commit to purchasing a record or CD. While many argue that this piracy inevitably hurts the music industry, some indeed argue the contrary, asserting that this very freedom of accessibility can in fact lead to greater album sales.¹ Indeed, the recording industries general battle against the inevitability of digital sharing may 'be holding back the evolution of the music industry towards an ultimately beneficial embrace of the possibilities inherent in electronic distribution of music.'²

However, there are still strong voices who oppose the sharing of digital music. This was struck home to me with astonishing clarity when I read that this slightly amusing piece in *The Economist*:

'The recorded-music market is not so much dying as greying... America's bestselling album since 2000 is "1", a collection of Beatles hits from the 1960s. At one point last year four of the top ten albums in Britain were Beatles recordings and the number-one album was a collection of songs by Vera Lynn, who was then 92 years old. The bestselling album worldwide last year was "I Dreamed a Dream" by Susan Boyle, a middle-aged Scot'.³

However bleak this may seem, everything must be placed in its context. As a member of the group Wilco pointed out, when being questioned about their choice to release an album for free online: 'We live in a connected world now. Some find that frightening. If people are downloading our music, they're listening to it. The internet is like radio for us.'⁴ The parallel with the invention of the radio is an interesting one. When the transistor radio first became popular in the early twentieth century, there were fears that this would also spell the death of the record. However, as we have seen, the recording industry adapted to this threat. We can view digital dissemination in a similar light, as being complimentary to the music industry, in what might be called the 'exposure effect'.⁵ Indeed, the reported sales for the same album when Wilco eventually released it under the label Nonesuch, was higher than any of their previous releases. This kind of exposure is difficult to ignore: 'Granted the social good of wider and more efficient distribution comes at the expense of legitimate payments for royalties and performance, but it may nonetheless be questionable to ignore the marketing benefits that may accrue from such exposure, or the emerging markets that may actually benefit from such developments.'⁶

However, the benefits to be found in the online environment stretch well beyond the financial gains. It has the potential to create a community that extends on ones immediate surroundings. Indeed, this idea of community seems to be evolving at an increasingly rapid pace. Most of us are members of some online community, if not several. These are not simply the typical networking sites of Facebook and Myspace, but the blog. The importance of the blog in creating contemporary web-based communities cannot be underestimated, especially within the younger generation. Blogs set trends, inform, and connect us to a global network of likeminded others. Blogs become obsessions. They have become the essential way to follow, connect, and communicate. They make the world smaller. In a New Zealand context, they make us feel like we are not so far away. Musicians are increasingly using these sites as a means to launch themselves on the world. A musician can record a piece of music, put it on the web and within moments potentially reach countless listeners worldwide. The idea that 'music is both reflective of place yet also transcend(s) the nuances of place'⁷ is essential here, and perhaps never as applicable as in our current age of digital communication. The connection most of us experience online on an everyday basis is phenomenal - we have the capacity to experience events that are happening all over the world simultaneously.

So, where do the objects of music sit within this brave new world of computers and the technologically savvy? It may seem as if objects such as album art are doomed to failure in the shadow of digital sharing,

downloading and piracy. Indeed, speaking as one individual, 99% of my music collection exists only in a digital form. While the convenience and accessibility of this format is without question, I do not believe that the objects of music are disappearing. Indeed, perhaps as a direct result of the digital onslaught, a certain nostalgia for independently produced music and its accompanying objects is thriving.

The final event in *Object Lesson's* public programme, a music fair held at the Frederick Street Sound and Light Exploration Society, indeed verified this thought. The event was aimed at countering the faceless digital music file with the multifaceted and fertile independent Wellington music scene. It was intended to showcase the wares of these producers, as well as providing the Wellington community with the opportunity to support their local music scene. The success of the day and the general outpouring of enthusiasm and interest was a testament to the fact that the objects of music have not become obsolete. Objects such as vinyl, or rare, collectable records are finding an entirely new audience in the twenty-first century. While perhaps the 1980s and 1990s belonged to the CD, there has been a renaissance in the market for the 'old-school' paraphernalia within my generation. More and more musicians are releasing limited edition records, and more and more people are buying: 'figures released in the United States in early 2009 showed that sales of vinyl albums nearly doubled in 2008, with 1.88 million sold-up from just under 1 million in 2007.'⁸

The music fair at Fred's was designed to focus on such objects. The variety of wares presented on the day was vast, and the quality of the handmade objects was astounding. Present was a plethora of zines, CDs with handmade covers, vinyl records, handmade gig posters, and a host of other lovingly created handmade goods. Once again the concept of community emerged as an essential component. Because of this, the Fair itself seemed to grow of its own accord as an increasing number of musicians and artists came forward to participate. While we as the organisers were happy to watch this unfold, we were very conscious of the Fair developing as a particular kind of music 'scene'. We wanted to present the fair as an interesting cross-section of Wellington music production in a broad sense, perhaps even surprising participants and fair-goers alike with what was on offer. In attempting to open up this wider community, it was interesting just how difficult this was to do. It became increasingly obvious that while we had tapped a particular music community, getting the attention of others was easier said than done. However, the small scale nature of the Fair meant that focusing primarily on one music niche was more than enough.

I believe engaging with this public programme was an important exercise for the Adam Art Gallery. As curator Laura Preston said, it represented the Gallery 'coming down off the hill' to engage with a wider community who otherwise may not have been involved with the exhibition. As previously mentioned, it raised interesting questions regarding the role of the contemporary art gallery in discussing current concepts and ideas that in essence belong to a community that exists outside the gallery space. While the gallery itself is an important forum for such discussion, it was exciting to see this dialogue move outside its comfort zone.

1. Gopel Sudip Bhattacharjee, Ram D. and G. Lawrence Sanders, 'Do Artists Benefit from Online Sharing?' in *The Journal of Business*, vol. 79, no.3 (2006), 1505.
2. Easley, Robert F., 'Ethical Issues in the Music Industry Response to Innovation and Piracy' in *The Journal of Business Ethics*, vol. 62, no. 2 (2005), 163.
3. 'What's working in music: Having a Ball' in *The Economist*, vol. 397. No.8703 (2010), 101.
4. Jeff Tweedy quoted in 'Ethical Issues in the Music Industry Response to Innovation and Piracy' 165.
5. Stan J. Liebowitz, 'The Elusive Symbiosis: The Impact of Radio on the Record Industry' in *Review of Economic Research on Copyright Issues*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2004), 97.
6. Easley, 166.
7. Laura Preston, 'Belief in Soothsaying' in *Object Lessons: A Musical Fiction*. Wellington: Adam Art Gallery (2010), 16.
8. Bernard Zuel, 'Just for the Record' on *The Sydney Morning Herald* website, accessed 3/12/2010

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