



Art

MONTHLY

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Lawrence Abu Hamdan

Interviewed by Chris McCormack

Crowdthinking

Bob Dickinson

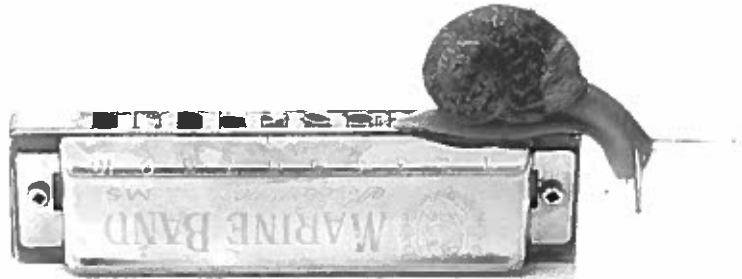
Plastik Festival

Morgan Quaintance

Letter from Venice

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WAGSTAFF'S

18/02/17 - 25/06/17

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Fernando Ortega. Piano. 2008. Courtesy of the artist and humanzutto. Mexico City

Exhibitions

Wagstaff's

Mostyn Llandudno 18 February to 25 June

Artists have long aspired to the impact and effect of music, its catchy, seemingly direct access to both the dancing body and the brain's mushy, emotional zones. Music, Jean-Jacques Rousseau claimed in his 1768 *Complete Dictionary of Music*, 'paints all, even the objects which are only visible, by a transformation almost inconceivable, it seems to place the eye in the ear', while Victorian essayist Walter Pater famously suggested that 'all art aspires towards the condition of music'. Which is to say, artists don't use music, music uses them.

Cue the perennial music-themed group exhibitions, from last summer's 'Infinite Mix' to Natasha Ginwala's touring 'Museum of Rhythm', that attempt to explore the endless ways

art relates to music – or, more usually, the way art tries, and often fails, to be like music. 'Wagstaff's' took up the broad theme with a sense of both history and humour, delivering an exhibition with some thin one-liners (like glibly reworked album covers and isolated piano keys as sculpture) but with much more of its rewarding substance murmuring just below the surface. The starting point for the show springs from the fact that for 31 years the Mostyn gallery rooms were used as a piano and musical instrument dealership, founded by the eponymous Vin Wagstaff; a set of photographs, concert posters and ephemera from the shop itself sits snugly here alongside sculpture, video and installation by 22 contemporary artists.

The set-up poses an interesting potential cross-generational encounter where Llandudno residents who might remember Wagstaff's, which ran in total in the town for 40 years, could come and perhaps reminisce about a concert they caught or a harmonica they bought there. The show is set up roughly like a haphazard musical showroom, jumbled with vitrines and instruments, with a grand piano greeting you at the entrance, and titles to designate sections of the show typed on cute musical notation staves that border the walls: Original Scores, Sound Waves, Instruments, The Band. But having entered with this nostalgic conceit, visitors soon encounter a decidedly younger approach to today's musical soundscape, because thumping throughout the exhibition is the dance soundtrack to Torbjørn Rødland's video *132*



'Wagstaff's'
installation view
Mostyn



'Wagstaff's'
installation view
Mostyn

BPM, 2005, in which tree branches and flashing lights move comically in time with the fast rhythm of the title. Leaning against one wall is a bright orange tube of foam, headphones over its top tinnily blaring a shouty rock tune that gives its angle the slouch of a moody teenager. The iPod strapped to the midriff of Cory Arcangel's *Emo Kid*, 2014, informs us it is My Chemical Romance's 'I'm not okay (I promise)' on indefinite repeat. Gone are the music halls and shared listening sessions of radios and gramophones in the sitting room to be replaced by personal devices streaming songs to one otherwise-oblivious individual. Perhaps, 'Wagstaff's' suggests, the gallery space can provide a communal meeting point for these seemingly different worlds.

Though what kind of encounter that might be, parts of the show suggest, could be like a dreary hymnal singalong or a joyous jam session or even a bad cover version. In the grainy video *Baldessari Sings LeWitt*, 1972, the lanky conceptual artist tries to animate the dryness of Sol LeWitt's *Sentences on Conceptual Art*, 1969, by singing them to the tune of 'Camptown Races', 'Deep in the Heart of Texas', 'Auld Lang Syne', 'La Cucaracha' and 'Memory' from the musical *Cats*. It doesn't quite work, as Baldessari mumbles out of tune and stops and starts, which is maybe why it makes such an easy idea funny. On the opposite wall are two A1-size fake obituaries for Rod Stewart and Malcolm McLaren – and while both texts are full, I'm sure, of small twists to the facts, one of Adam McEwan's works (*Untitled [Rod]*, 2002) remains a tongue-in-cheek nudge at Stewart's hyperbolic career, while the other (*Untitled [Malcolm]*, 2004) was written six years before McLaren's actual death, and now feels more like an oddly smirking gesture. Both Baldessari's and McEwan's sets of work are light-hearted jabs at different legacies, but also serve as reminders that one anorak's fandom is another's obscure in-joke.

It's around this time that you might hear the irregular tapping coming from above, where a snare drum is suspended

upside down on the ceiling. Two drumsticks stuck to its edges seem to magically begin moving, making an uneven drum roll of sorts, while underneath it you can barely make out a violin, or some other noises that are coming from within the drum itself. The haunted rhythm tapped out in Anri Sala's *Moth (in D)*, 2015, is created by the reverberations of the music held inside. It is this sense of secreted meanings, of music's hidden or internal effects, where 'Wagstaff's' and its past as an instrument shop are most effective. Sitting innocuously in one corner is a small construction of semi-circular pieces of dark wood dotted with various stones – an enigmatic, silent presence that feels like a reconfigured cemetery headstone. It turns out that Jacqueline Bebb's *Heavy Minor Chords*, 2016, came from a pilgrimage to sites in the north-west US that were part of Kurt Cobain's life, picking up stones from each place. As much as Nirvana invites its own broody melancholia, the sculpture in such a light becomes for me more a memorial for our own obsessions and the devotion that we pour into such abstract vessels as songs. Punctuating all this was an occasional, indefinable sound that was ambiguously mournful: an extended murky, swooshing, almost gurgling sound. Hannah Rickards's *Thunder*, 2005, a typed piece of paper informs us, is the sound of a flute, trumpet, cello, trombone, viola and violin emulating the sound of thunder – their 11-minute composition compressed to the eight-second duration of the original thunder they were seeking to mimic. It is this sound that seems to best hold what might be 'Wagstaff's' legacy, as well as music's restless place in the gallery: in hidden transformations that recall and reshape distant phenomena, and that place the ear in the mind. ■

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