

Mishapes: *Virtual Jarvis* by Iain Forsyth & Jane Pollard

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STORY BY SUSAN CORRIGAN

P **Blur and Damien Hirst? Pet Shop Boys and Sam Taylor-Wood? No doubt about it, pop stars dabbling in art is a bad idea. But what happens when the roles are reversed? Brass bands playing KLF hits and Kylie tributes, that's what.**

Who says that 'throwaway' Top 40 pop hits can't be the legitimate launch-pad for serious art? The '90s have seen gaps between so-called high and low culture closing, and fast. Who better than artists - talented peers grooving alongside us at clubs, processing meaning out of the gigs and pop flotsam everyone holds precious - to see that these supposedly wide gulfs are filled at last? The coming wave of younger American and British artists have confidence in pop culture; their obsession with the soundtracks underpinning our lives forges a cool, inter-disciplinary approach to art and life alike. Jane Pollard, of artist/curatorial collaborators Forsyth & Pollard, echoes the feelings of this next generation with total accuracy and a refreshing devil-may-care attitude: "Sometimes we'll do a project and ask ourselves, 'Just what fucking level is this on?'"

"Not many people of our generation haven't grown up surrounded by pop music; for me it was the best way to escape, whether at a disco or at home listening to Morrissey in my bedroom," muses Georgina Starr, probably the most famous British artist flirting with pop today. "I made *The Party* because I wanted to throw a party just for myself when I moved into my studio, so I put together all the songs I really wanted to hear. If I'd actually played most of them at a real party everyone would have got pissed off and left. Part of my video *HypnoDreamDruff* is called 'There's Something Going On In The Sculpture Studio, Mr Reynolds', my remake of Lionel Richie's *Hello* video. I sculpted the head of a famous German artist who was coming to visit me as if I were the >



Images by Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard; Jeremy Deller courtesy of Cabinet Gallery; Georgina Starr courtesy of Anthony Reynolds Gallery; Jessica Voorsanger courtesy of Athony Wilkinson Gallery and Modern Culture Gallery, 2011

►blind student who falls for Lionel Richie in the video," she laughs. "I think the memory of songs is so important, so when you work with memory as I do, records like *Long Haired Lover From Liverpool* slip in and are impossible to ignore, whether you use them to instigate a piece or use them physically by performing, re-enacting or re-writing them."

Historically, the marriage between art and pop is problematic. Despite the tradition of the British art school as a melting pot for ideas and a meeting place for disciplines, the snobbishness of culture vultures means that deeply Romantic work such as American artist Elizabeth Peyton's studies of Liam, Jarvis and Kurt Cobain or Jessica Voorsanger's idolatry of David Cassidy often meets with short shrift. Yet we know pop stars thirst for the credibility derived from dabbling in art. Often these ambitions merely aspire: witness David Bowie's wallpaper or those regrettable Groucho Club commissions - Dave Stewart courts Damien Hirst; Blur, despite a shared Goldsmith's pedigree, misfire doing the same; Siobhan Fahey buys into Sarah Lucas' bad-girl aesthetic. Credibility happens only when that pretentious aura of mutual self-congratulation isn't present, as in Sam Taylor-Wood's enjoyably straightforward videos for the Pet Shop Boys' recent Savoy Theatre shows. Despite the art-school tradition shared by today's visual artists and clued-up musicians from Sonic Youth to Jarvis Cocker, few of the '90s link-ups have the same resonance as the efforts of Warhol and Peter Blake over 30 years ago; perhaps today's musical movers and shak-

ers are too self-absorbed and career-conscious or inhibited by irony and the past to come up with anything truly ground-breaking.

Artists inspired by pop, however, see music and its stars as a rich seam worth mining at every opportunity. Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard are 24-year-old obsessives with Goldsmith's degrees and a flat packed to the rafters with records and memorabilia. As artists and curators they've consistently referenced the soundtrack to their lives - and ours. "Taking inspiration from pop music acknowledges something that everyone uses as a tool of self-expression and communication," Jane enthuses. "There's very little in our work that's contrived. Most of it comes from real life. I've Built My World Around You came from being apart for the first time over Christmas; Iain made me lots of tapes and it progressed to the point where we bought a wooden holder and made 100 tapes. As a piece of work, it's so obsessive that it overlaps any kind of sentimentality you'd get from making a compilation tape, that's meant to have a mutual meaning. Another piece, *Why Can't I Be You?* dredging up Iain's memories of gallivanting around Kent as a teenager in a Robert Smith drag, links Iain and Jane's cataloguing of shared passions to their next preoccupation: live arts installations focusing on the 'shared experience' of the tribute band and audience identification with the Stars In Their Eyes world of the tribute performance. Events like *Doing It For The Kids*, a Fantasy Band League playground where 'Kylie Minogue' and 'David Bowie' carry out the duets record company executives only dream about, or *The World Won't Listen*, capturing the strange emotional landscapes of Smith's fans on-stage and off, are playful and - most importantly - fun.

Promoters of tribute bands claim to give audiences the opportunity to see groups which no longer exist or have become inaccessible. Iain and Jane were attracted not to the camp irony of seeing Virtual Jarvis down the local pub; instead, they were intrigued by the distance from the idol, twinned with the immediacy of fan-worship. "I like tributes because they take one step away from the 'real' thing," laughs Jane. "Your relationship to groups happens on a fan level - the big gigs, the record sales, the investiture in an icon - but your relationship to the tribute is shared because the people on-stage are massively obsessed fans." Iain agrees. "It's really endearing watching people trying so hard." Their next installation, *The Smiths Is Dead*, at London's ICA, returns again to The Smiths on the tenth anniversary of the group's demise, rich pickings for obsessives. "We like putting the band into a place, building a scene and bringing in

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Call that art? Left to right: *Acid Brass* by Jeremy Deller; *I've Built My World Around You* by Iain Forsyth & Jane Pollard; *David Cassidy Letters* by Jessica Voorsanger; *David Cassidy Memorabilia* by Jessica Voorsanger; *David Cassidy Letters* by Jessica Voorsanger; *Why Can't I Be You?* by Iain Forsyth & Jane Pollard.

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the fans," Jane enthuses. "It's a happening and a hellishly accessible one."

Jeremy Deller's relationship to pop idolatry is infinitely more troubled. Inspired by martyrs such as Brian Epstein and Keith Moon or agitators like The KLF - "people who know what they're doing in the middle of the pop world and can actually exploit it" - he's ever-conscious of the deadly serious undercurrent to pop life, no more so than in *The Uses Of Literacy*; his collaboration with teenage Manic Street Preachers fans who responded to his requests for Manics-based art and writing. "To be a fan is to be amazing and amazed, to stigmatise or victimise fans isn't fair. You have to be extra-sensitive to their material because it's so heartfelt," Jeremy emphasises. "The Manics operate on the same level and territory that The Smiths did in the '80s; to be a fan of a band like that is a lifestyle choice. Some of the writing and art in that show was beautiful so I wanted to make sure the proper respect was accorded to it. Credit was given to the artists instead of me and that meant really young people who might never have been to London in their lives could see that they were artists too. For them it was an adventure and a journey, and that's what art should be."

Tribal Gathering revellers might be familiar with Jeremy's latest project, *Acid Brass*. Combining the seemingly disparate worlds of Acid House and Northern collectivist brass bands, Jeremy's keen to play up the links between the Old Labour world of the colliery brass band and the dance scene. Both arise as products of cultures of dissent, so when the tuba player kicks out the 303 line from The KLF's *What Time Is Love?* it's a poignant link that ought to be emphasised even in these Feelgood Factor days. So impressed were Bill Drummond and Jimmy Cauty with the ideas behind

the project, a KLF-in-all-but-name remix will be released this month with an album to follow. "It's all about history," asserts Jeremy. "Initially it could be seen as kitsch, but it's nice to win people over from that standpoint and show them the political implications and resonance. Anybody who goes to an Acid Brass concert sees that it's really intense and moving. It is heavy business."

Obviously, the next step for many of the artists working in and around the pop arena is the production of their own music. Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard have made a CD single, *Never More Than This*, as their contribution to this year's *New Contemporaries* exhibition; directing a group of musicians into making a boy bandesque track that belies their status as total indie kids and offers dance remixes. Unnervingly polished, it is their first attempt at writing songs. "It had to be done," confesses Iain. "Being an artist, you can do these things because it's a launch pad from which you can do whatever you like."

This transition also comes naturally to Georgina Starr. Trained as a dancer and singer in her teenage years, Georgina's art concentrates on memory, escapism and selfprojection; a launch into the music world constitutes a logical progression. "For me, pop stars are like religious leaders and the music they make is the religion. One of my comics, *Starvision*, allows the love songs of certain pop stars to dictate how people live. Hence: 'Gold, always believe in your soul.' But now I've explored that I want to continue writing songs and even musicals as part of my art. One, *Tuberama*, has actually been conceived as a musical about emotions and the realisation of potential, even in people on the Tube who might look bad to begin with."

Perhaps the best and most honest lesson to be learned from these artist obsessions and inspirations is the importance of accessibility and lack of pretension in any artistic sphere, not just the seemingly oh-so-rarefied circles of the art world. Increasingly, the world creative people move in is becoming smaller and more readily linked; those at the cutting edge of culture are simply paving the way for the rest of us. "People have a good time and wind up thinking closely about art and we're benefiting from having the freedom, as artists, to do whatever the hell we want," laughs Jane Pollard. "If we don't stick our collective necks out now to follow our interests, we're wasting chances. Or maybe we're just young enough to get away with it!"

What Time Is Love? by Acid Brass is out in early August; *Never More Than This* is available from *New Contemporaries '97*; *Starvision* is available from Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London W1; *The Smiths Is Dead* is showing at The ICA, London SW1 from August 1.