

Backyard Music Machines and Other Devices

HOLLY WILLIAMS in conversation with VICKY BROWNE



Over the years Vicky Browne has made large psychedelic installations, co-hosted radio shows and pressed playable records out of unlikely materials. Now based in the Blue Mountains, her work fits neither the description of quirky, nor crafty, although at times it comes close to both. There is a critical rigour in her work that belies the ad-hoc materials she favours. Browne finished her Master of Visual Arts last year and I took the opportunity to discuss the impact of this on her practice as well as her ongoing fascination with the technologies of sound.

Holly Williams: The theme of this issue is *expectation* and I've been thinking of your work with this in mind—that it confounds expectations through ambiguity and humour.

Vicky Browne: I like making collections of objects that talk to each other in a room, I guess in this way I think of myself as an installation artist, but I don't necessarily know what the conversation will be. I use 'props' and 'methods', which can trigger or facilitate this conversation. These 'props' include theatrical devices such as backdrops, costumes, and the 'methods' include humour or jokes in the form of word play and double meanings. I try not to convey one meaning, but instead to leave a space for multiple meanings. Ambiguity and open conversation cause the work to eschew expectation; the familiar object is re-contextualised into something 'other' which can expose its use or history in an unexpected way.

HW: I also have a sense that you are interested in the impact of technology, how we interact with things and the way this changes as the technology changes—your work *Manual Teller Machine* (2010) from your exhibition *Come Down From The Mountain* at MOP last year is an good example of this.

VB: The outside of this work is a handmade, cardboard money machine, a familiar object rendered in a backyard way. The inside is made into a retro style office, where a transaction can be made. The work highlights the relationship between the self and everyday technology, our reliance on it and our relationship to it. It also explores how we embrace technology without giving it much thought; technology is digested by the masses. The history of technology is revealed by remaking the object in a shonky DIY fashion: that way it can remind us of its design, its place in history. The handmade replica is a parody of the object and can reveal what it means to us, it gives us space, a moment to pause and to think. Money machines and iPods are interesting because for all their ubiquity they hold our personal secrets. Personal play lists, records of finance—these are things that contribute to our sense of self and our identity.

HW: *Manual Teller Machine* is a nice extension of the giant *My Pod* (2008-2009) and *Indoor & Outdoor iPods* (2008-2009)—scale is something you've toyed with too ...

VB: I've played with both the miniature and the gigantic. When you miniaturise something transcendence occurs. When looking at a miniaturised object you gaze at a contained world, it is a cultural site to peer into. The gigantic, on the other hand, is heavy and

earth bound, it can only be known in parts or at a distance. Within the realm of pop culture the gigantic highlights consumption, mass production and abundance, it is spectacle. These attributes of the miniature and the gigantic are played out in my work.

HW: You also employ traditional handicrafts and use technology but you've resisted the urge to make handicrafts hi-tech, can you talk a bit about the dynamic between the personal or handmade and mass produced, user-driven devices?

VB: In a way my work talks about the hi-tech objects that we use every day. Hence it is domestic in its temperament, I'm not really interested in technology at a hi-tech level, I am interested in it at an amateur level, not quite luddite but pretty close. A few things happen when you remake a slick, mass-produced object in a backyard 'craft' way. It can highlight the object's history, origin and use in an unexpected way. For instance in the work *Dead Wood* (2006) I made a record out of a pile of sticks, it can mean different things to different people; those who are familiar with the object see a record, people who are too young see simply a circular pattern of sticks. It maps the change from analogue to digital, most of us no longer put needles on turning machines, now it is all mathematics, at a push of a button.

The re-making of sound devices in this backyard fashion, with sticks, glue, paper, wood, etc., casts the net wider than just music culture and sound technology. The art object mutates the device so it now operates in a different mode of communication, revealing such notions as fetish objects, political statements, coded mediums, desiring machines and abstract apparatus of capitalist production and expansion.

HW: You have a background in sculpture and you often work with sound. Do you think about sound in a sculptural way—with spatial considerations of sound at the forefront or in a more kinetic, performative sense, or in another way entirely?

VB: I use and think about sound in many different ways depending on what I am making. In this way sound is just another tool I employ. However, as a tool sound is a very important part of my practice. Sound is ubiquitous; it surrounds us in the natural world and it shapes our culture on many levels, which is why I often use it. I am interested in music culture and all that encompasses, but at the other end of the scale I may make field recordings of birds that form part of my sculptures. I don't see myself as a sound artist. However, I do like a lot of sound art and have exhibited in sound art exhibitions, but I don't want to be limited by the title 'sound artist'.

HW: Together, sound and technology raise notions of transmission and reception as well as more politically charged acts of surveillance and propaganda and the evocative process of capturing fleeting sounds in perpetuity.

VB: New sound devices are often greeted with suspicion as if the dark stain of surveillance and propaganda are present in the object; whether in an historical sense, a misunderstood sense



Vicky Browne, *Manual Teller Machine* (outside view), 2010, mixed media. Photo: Michael Myers.



Vicky Browne, *Manual Teller Machine* (inside view), 2010, mixed media. Photo: Michael Myers.



or, existing as an actual function of the device. For example, the dislocated radio voice from nowhere yet everywhere had, for some people in the past, an aura of black magic; they believed it was rocked by the devil's hand. This fear of radio was connected to the fear of new technology's effect on the body: an uncontrolled force, a Frankenstein moment.

HW: I suspect your work disrupts viewer's expectations at times because some objects don't always function (say by making sound) the way someone might presume. Indeed, I've been to shows where several of the pieces no longer work the way they did at the opening—you seem pretty comfortable with this, is it a strategic device?

VB: I used to intentionally make work that would break. In one show I had an old Apple computer, a se/30, the all-in-one kind, and on the screen it said 'help me' and on the back a sticker stated 'kick me', which several people did until it stopped functioning. This work highlighted the way we throw away technology and rapidly take up the next thing. Also, it was kind of sad seeing

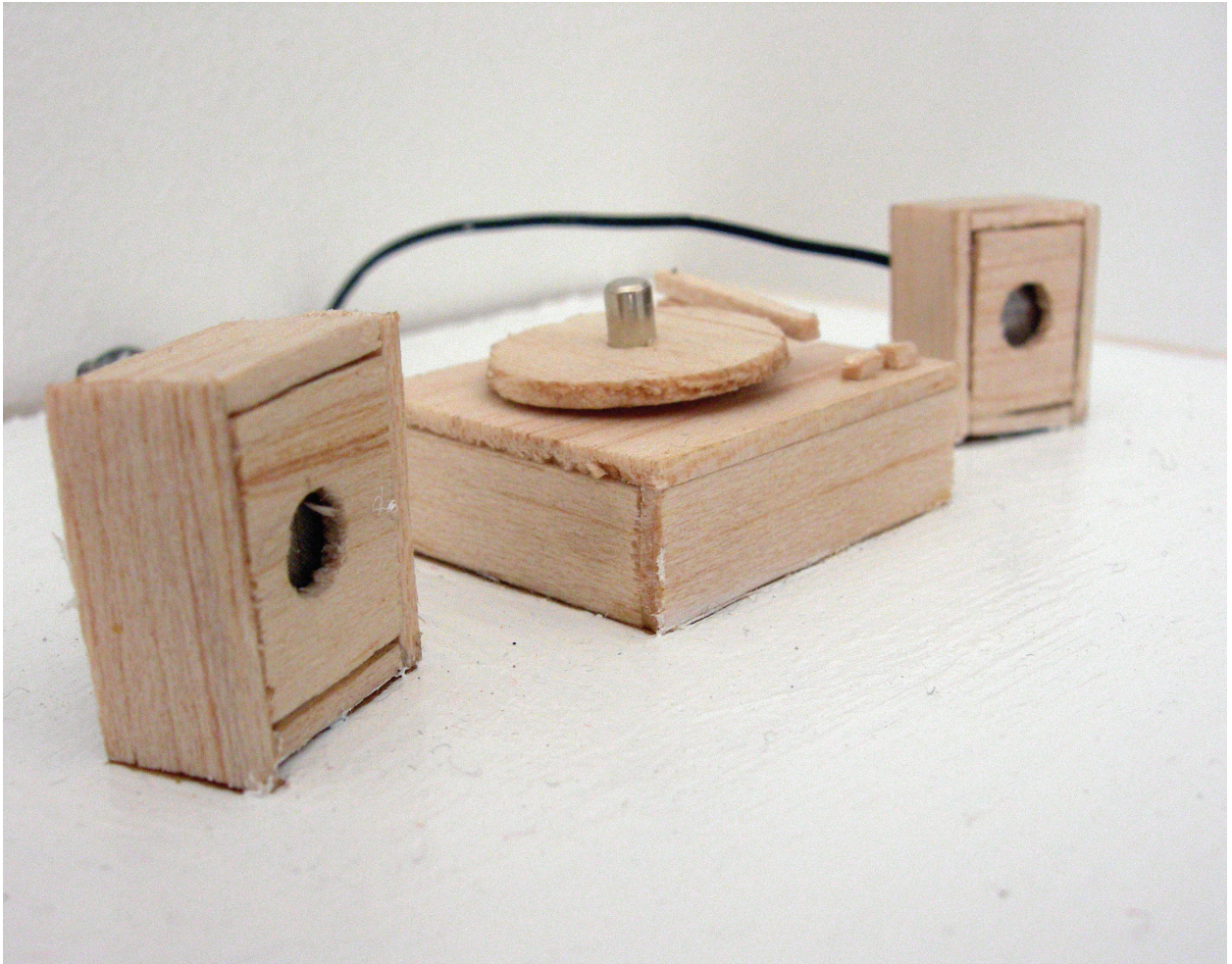
something 10 years old and from my past being destroyed. Other work that has broken down has just frustrated the hell out of me! Because my aesthetic is handcrafted at times the objects don't last, mostly I'm fine with it. However, I think my work is becoming more stable and better made, and less breakable—maybe it's me getting older.

HW: Your work draws on the aesthetic of handicrafts and nostalgia (for say the 1970s), it strikes me that you use this as a conceptual device rather than a stylistic one, would you agree?

VB: It's really weird but sometimes I try very hard not to have a 1970s aesthetic but my work seems to come out that way ... so maybe it is stylistic. However, the 1970s aesthetic for most people, even if they weren't born before then, conjures up nostalgia, which can be a powerful thing. It can be funny and sad at the same time, it can evoke a feeling of loss. It can make us think of the environment, of speed, of values and identity; even in its most cheesiest and tacky form.

Above: Vicky Browne, *Executive Stress Necklaces*, 2010, mixed media. Photo: the artist.

Facing page: Vicky Browne, *Untitled Tiny Turntable*, (with sound), 10 cm x 4 cm x 4 cm, balsa wood and electronics. Photo: the artist.



HW: Potentiality comes to mind across the spectrum of your works, both conceptually and physically. Some of the objects appear almost shamanistic, particularly in your show *The Orator vs. The Warrior* at ICAN in 2009. The work appeared energised by a kind of experimental or performative potentiality. Again, I saw this in *Family of Four* (2010), which featured four giant homemade iPods in front of a huge poster of Stonehenge, establishing a juxtaposition between ancient power objects and today's personal consumer goods.

VB: I think placing objects near each other sets up conversations; it generates potentiality within the works, not finality. Also that 'shamanistic' quality can add humour to the work. I don't believe you can look at that huge poster of Stonehenge with the pathetic homemade iPods in front of it and not think of that scene in the film *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984). They are really stupid ... I was once told that I made 'dumb art' by someone, I think I agree it is dumb in its humour and the term dumb is pushed further considering I make art with sound or music references. This dumbness, which sprouts from humour, reflects a kind of dumbness that has seeped into our society, it mimics the people who complain about the dumbing down of society, a dumbing down which is often attributed to our reliance on technology.

HW: You've said 'it is typical for artists to expand the boundaries and capabilities of technology. Artists deconstruct machines, they reinvent them, exposing their meanings via misuse of the technology's function or action it performs'. I've noticed that your work focuses less on virtual technology such as software, the internet etc. and much more on physical objects of technology from recent history.

VB: It's kind of like I'm interested in the objects that make sound more than sound in itself. I like making physical objects and part of the way we form our identities is the way we use devices. I'm thinking here of the iPod; people put it on like a badge along with other paraphernalia and it becomes part of their sense of self. We live in a physical world and our interaction with the virtual is via objects. It is precisely this interaction or juncture that I'm interested in.

1. Vicky Browne, 'Images of Sound and the Sound of Images' (Master of Visual Art diss., University of Sydney, 2010), 16