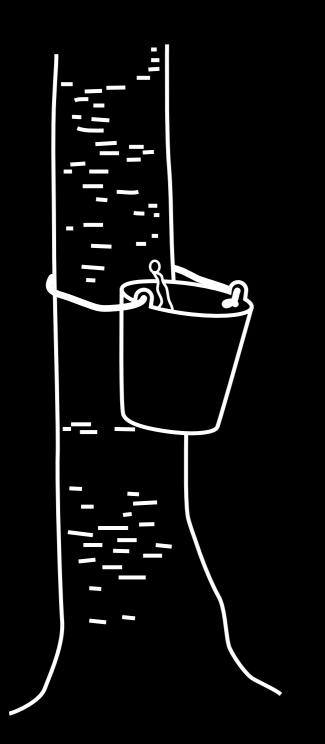SONG ARCHIVE PROJECT

SAP

WHO

Female, 70's
Retired

In grey jumper
with matching
cardigan

WHAT

"When I grow
too old to dream
I'll have you
to remember"

(0:50 min)

2007

WHEN

During afternoon
tea with other
Elderly ladies
at the Senior
centre in
Newtown,
Wales

Song for Newtown

SONG ARCHIVE PROJECT

550

SONG ARCHIVE PROJECT
Edited by Yvonne Buchheim
and Iain Biggs

CONTENTS

YOU ARE WHAT YOU IS
Alinka Greasley

1) Greasley, A.E., Lamont, A. and J.A. Sloboda. In press. Exploring musical preferences: An in-depth study of adults' liking for music in their personal collections. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*.

2) Sloboda, J.A., Lamont, A. and A.E. Greasley. (2009). Choosing to hear music: Motivation, process and effect. In S. Hallam, I. Cross and M. Thaut (eds). *Oxford Handbook of Music Psychology* (pp. 431–440). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

When people agree to perform in front of Yvonne Buchheim's camera in the Song Archive Project (SAP), they typically sing a song they hear/listen to frequently and like. But what influences whether we like or dislike a song? And how do people choose which song they are going to sing? We can gain insight into these questions by exploring the SAP performances in the context of recent research on musical preferences.

WHAT WOULD YOU SING?

Of the 900 performances Yvonne has captured on camera so far, there were very few examples of people choosing to sing the same song (the most frequent being *Somewhere over the Rainbow* which was chosen by six individuals). This is perhaps unsurprising given that research shows that people are listening to an increasing variety of music and have unique patterns of musical preferences. One study in particular has shown that people prefer up to 40 different styles of music and a wide range of artists within these.[1] So how then do people decide what to sing?

Music listening in everyday life is typically goal-oriented: we choose to hear certain types of music whilst travelling, or to help us get 'revved up' in the gym, or to relax after a long day's work.[2] The context of being approached in the street and asked to sing is atypical, and thus people's choices are based less on concurrent activities and more on aspects of self-identity.

Our musical preferences serve as a marker of identity which can play a key role in communicating information

EMBARRASSMENT IS THE MOST HUMAN OF ALL EMOTIONS
Jens Asendorpf

Charles Darwin did not only publish, in 1859, his theory of evolution but also, in 1872, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, which was the first comparative study of emotional expression. It is probable that Mark Twain had read this book when, in 1879, he made his often quoted remark, 'Man is the only animal that blushes. Or needs to.' This quote nicely captures the core feature of embarrassment. It is an emotional reaction shown in public situations when people recognise that they have not lived up to the standards of behaviour that they hold for themselves. Singing a song in public is such a potentially embarrassment-arousing situation, and therefore Yvonne Buchheim's Song Archive Project is fascinating, not only from an artist's perspective but also from the perspective of scientists interested in Darwin's quest for the expression of emotions since this project documents a great variety of expressions of emotion in a relatively standardised situation. In this project, Art and Science meet. Below, I will deal with a few frequently asked questions about embarrassment from my perspective as a scientist who is familiar with the psychological literature on embarrassment and has done a few empirical studies on embarrassment himself.

WHY DO WE ACT WITH EMBARRASSMENT, AND DOGS DO NOT?

Holding standards for one's own behaviour and living up to them is uniquely human and has probably evolved in tandem with the evolution of the human cognitive capacity to intentionally deceive, lie and cheat – a well-developed capacity that dogs lack, as do apes,

{E}QUALITY
Liam Devlin

'Let's talk of a system that transforms
all the social organisms into a work of
art, in which the entire process of work
is included... something in which the
principle of production and consumption
takes on a form of quality. It's a Gigantic
project.'
Joseph Beuys

The manner in which Yvonne Buchheim has collected the material that forms the Song Archive Project (SAP), and its subsequent treatment for exhibition, performance and, of course, the publication of this book, can be situated within the shifting relationship between the assumed positions of the artist and the audience, the speaker (or indeed singer) and the spectator. The challenge to the distinct positions of the artist/actor/speaker who embodies knowledge and action and therefore power, as opposed to the passive, receptive, powerless audience, has been an important foundation to radical art practices from the early twentieth century. From the Dadaist use of ephemeral mass media in their montages and Duchamp's readymades, to Beuys' declaration that 'we are all artists', there has been a concerted effort to create a more expansive understanding of artistic endeavour, to imbue art with a political and social agency, and to destroy the false boundaries between art and the everyday.

Within the world of theatre and performance, Bertolt Brecht challenged the traditional function of plays that sought an audience's emotional identification with its characters that usually lead to a climatic catharsis, believing they bred passivity. His theory of 'Epic Theatre' highlighted the constructed nature of theatrical production. Through *Verfremdungseffekt* or 'estrangement effect', Brecht hoped to provoke his audiences to adopt a critical perspective not only to the play itself, but also to the constructed nature of social relations in the world outside the theatre.

CONVERSATION (TO JOIN)
Iain Biggs and Yvonne Buchheim

IAIN BIGGS I want to suggest that this book might be understood as an invitation to join a conversation that I think is vital to your approach as an artist; one that makes your work unusually inclusive and outward looking. I use *conversation* because I think it's a more accurate term than the word 'discourse' for the kinds of exchange between artists I find most valuable. Good conversations are free form, open-ended, multi-layered – as much about listening as speaking. They accommodate factual argument, gossip, intellectual speculation, analysis, beliefs and accounts of experience. I think your work is similarly open in the various exchanges that are vital to its existence, not least because what you do is dependent on conversation and a willingness to listen. I suppose this emphasis on conversation is reinforced by the fact that the ideas behind the Song Archive Project originated with a conversation.

YVONNE BUCHHEIM Yes, a heated discussion that resulted from a request to sing a song in an Irish pub. I could only remember German Socialist marching tunes from my childhood in East Germany but I didn't think they were appropriate for a sing-song; so, in the end, I chose a Russian folk song instead. Afterwards, I was questioned about my identity because of my choice of song and that got me thinking about the relationship between our identity and the songs we choose to sing.

IAIN BIGGS In one sense, of course, the starting-point was that you were asked to make a work in response to Johann Gottfried Herder's *Volkslied*?

YVONNE BUCHHEIM Yes. I proposed to the ACC gallery in Weimar to undertake a contemporary response to Herder's song collection and theory from 1778/79. He suggests that the cultural identity of a people is reflected through their song traditions. The theory has to be understood within its historical context – as part of the search for a German identity – and was driven by the Romantic notion of folk or nation as a cultural rather than a political entity. I realised that the trouble with Herder's song collection is the narrowness of his concept of a *Volkslied* (folk song). He claims 'rarely does one find beautiful works everywhere and at all times' and that there needs to be a sense of beauty in songs. He even talks about 'the mob on the streets, who never sing or compose but only yell'. I oppose this view as I find it an exclusive definition of the role of song because it ignores many popular forms.

In response I asked ordinary people on the streets of Weimar for a song of their choice. I did not impose any limits on the type of song, the length or quality of singing, as long as it was sung from memory and performed on the spot in front of a camera. Herder's theories on identity and classifications became the starting point for a whole series of artworks under the umbrella of the *Song Archive Project* (SAP) where I juxtapose a distrust of classification and authority with a belief in personal expression and independence.

IAIN BIGGS The title of this book suggests an abbreviation of the Song Archive Project. Are there other meanings associated with SAP?

YVONNE BUCHHEIM The SAP title became playful and poignant in the process of making this book because of an attempt to reduce and distil to its very essence the Song Archive Project. Over the years, the song collection has grown somewhat monstrous and anarchic. Although I access the songs on a regular basis to edit works for exhibitions, I had never attempted to open this messy collection for research purposes. The process of turning it into an accessible archive was assisted by discussions with archivist Ellie Finch and by the design from Alex Rich: the Who What When Folders introduced a loose but coherent order. With this system, I documented a total of 905 songs and made 96 available to the contributors who subsequently chose the 21 songs that feature at the beginning of the book and can be viewed online (song-archive.org).

IAIN BIGGS When did the song collection turn into an archive and what is the relationship between this extensive song collection and your art works?

YVONNE BUCHHEIM The inception of the archive happened almost by accident. As the collection grew, with songs from different countries, I realised the physical and conceptual potential of the archive. Each period of song recording is also a process of research into a specific place and community where interventions and public events are used to trigger exchange and dialogue – conversations, if you like. The individual songs from the Song Archive Project provide a source for site-specific video installations, exhibitions and public events that allow me to look at a specific subject matter such as

to sing triggers a complex set of difficulties. However, the singers from songs nos. 500 and 558 don't seem to struggle with this disparity.

IAIN BIGGS For me, there's a central question about interaction and participation throughout your work, about the shift in the role of the audience. Do you think that all SAP exhibitions and public events have some element of rousing a 'passive' audience into active participation?

YVONNE BUCHHEIM Many of my concerns link back to the Situationist International group with their interventions into mass media and advertising. I am interested in blurring the distinction between the passerby and the observer in a public space by turning the shopkeeper into a singer and encouraging the theatre audience member to become a stage performer. By shifting habits and presuppositions, we can experience another self, or at least imagine other possible selves. When witnessing someone performing a song, we identify with the singer's feelings of joy, excitement, difficulty or failure. We relate to their emotional expression in a very visceral, immediate way. Becoming active in this way stimulates people and normal conventions can be revealed or broken (song no. 404).

IAIN BIGGS Looking through the archive, I was particularly struck by the characteristics that two performances of the same song – for instance, *Somewhere over the Rainbow* from Wales (song no. 554) and Nashville (song no. 503) – have and don't have in common. The two women who sing may be about the same age, but what they project

as individual members of two very different 'regional' cultures – if that's the right term – seems to me very different. This seems to have to do with what I'd call cultural confidence, to name just one characteristic. Is this the type of aspect of the performances you want the viewer to reflect on?

YVONNE BUCHHEIM I am intrigued by how confidence and embarrassment are completely subjective emotional states of mind, which have, in fact, nothing to do with the actual (in)ability to sing. Often people start off very unsure of themselves and slightly irritated by the unusual request to sing unprepared in front of a camera. Then they gain confidence throughout the song, only to feel embarrassed by forgotten song lyrics a few seconds later.

IAIN BIGGS With *Stagefright*, your recent series of public events that combine performance and lectures, you're encouraging responses from people in different ways. Although the emphasis seems to be similar to earlier SAP works, *Stagefright* seems to be raising questions about issues around embarrassment and our capacity for deception in our social interactions.

YVONNE BUCHHEIM *Stagefright* developed out of a whole series of previous public events, all attempting to turn the audience into performers. It's been a real challenge and, at times, it seemed disastrous, for example, when attempting to transfer the concept of an Irish pub night into a German tavern. Improvised sing-songs are rather rare in my hometown of Weimar. Although the event was advertised in the local media and lots of people came to

cultural and, at times, political themes. The potential of the SAP lies in the structure it provides to develop very different art works that are based on exchange and collaboration. My ambition is not to record as many songs as possible, but rather present those songs as catalysts that activate people. That's where the archive becomes a living force rather than a closed or sealed archive.

IAIN BIGGS   Can you describe how you go about approaching people to sing and what situations and places you have encountered through the project so far?

YVONNE BUCHHEIM   I approach people in all kinds of public places with the request for a song. Most people decline but, over the sudden interruption of people's everyday situation is crucial, producing not only startled reactions but also prompting unexpected communication. Around one in fifteen people agree to sing on the spot with no time for preparation or rehearsal. I never suggest a particular song and, surprisingly, very few people choose the same song, so the collection includes all kinds of musical genres: pop, rock, indie, rap, punk, death metal, as well as lullabies, children's songs, advertisement jingles and surprising made-up tunes. I have recorded songs in different places: Weimar (2003), Cork (2005), Strasbourg (2006), Newtown and the Banw valley in Wales (2007), Nashville (2006) and Tehran (2005). I have also recorded in several locations in England over the years. This includes a journey from Southampton to Sunderland (2007) and the University of Essex in Colchester (2010). With each location comes a set of

differences that has more to do with the particularities of specific places rather than nation.

IAIN BIGGS   The SAP recordings seem to capture a shift of focus from *what* people sing to *how* they sing it. So what goes through our heads when we are asked to sing out of the blue in front of a camera?

YVONNE BUCHHEIM   Initially, I began with a focus on identity in a work entitled *Herder's Legacy*, which consists of songs recorded in front of a white neutral background to eliminate any reference to place, for example, in songs nos. 24, 152 and 302. Paradoxically, this reduction and focus on the singer led to the shift from *what* to *how* people sing, and the presence of the camera impacts on the performance in several ways. The camera gaze appears to offer an insight into how humans behave, how we deal with personal challenge, expectation and disappointment in oneself. For example, during a 2006 exhibition at the Cheekwood Museum of Art in Nashville the audience itself was invited to perform on a temporary stage while well-known song quotes were projected onto a screen. This installation was intended to tempt the viewer into a performance, which was recorded and screened via a live link into a different part of the museum. A potential performer must imagine herself performing the song before doing it. So she creates an image, a *Fremdbild* (a sense of how one is seen by others) before deciding to take on this personal challenge. The gap between the standards for behaviour we expect of ourselves and our actual behaviour is why, for many people, the simple request

the event, they were too inhibited to sing in public –
for hours it looked like a complete failure!

Amateur musicians played melodies inspired from
specially prepared beer mats but only when someone
started singing controversial East-German songs, the
whole pub began to liven up and entered into a heated
mix of singing and discussing songs.

In contrast, *Stagefright* is a much more constructed
concept. Through 'tips on how to overcome stage
fright', the audience learns odd facts about singing and
human behaviour before being tempted on stage for a
spontaneous solo performance. It combines elements of
performance, video screening, a lecture and audience
participation through fictional practical exercises. This
is not as serious as it sounds: at one point, the whole
theatre audience grunts, howls and neighs in an attempt
to create an animal orchestra.

IAIN BIGGS   How have the contributors to this book benefited your
art practice and what inspires the material for the lecture
component of *Stagefright*?

YVONNE BUCHHEIM   A lot of the knowledge and theories in the *Stagefright*
lectures stems from the collaborations in this book.
In order to find contributors to the book, I looked at
research on the periphery of my own interests and
offered the SAP as a starting point for dialogue. I was
curious as to where art meets behavioural psychology,
neurology, philosophy, fiction, and art criticism. I was
intrigued by how each contributor viewed the same

songs but extracted different information from them
and created a context through their own research field.
In *Stagefright*, I pass on some of these insights and
I add questions about how we live our lives and deal
with normative conventions. The request to sing a song
publicly turns into a catalyst to engage people and
reflect on their own views.

IAIN BIGGS   How would you characterise the role of the camera
in your work, both in relation to yourself as the artist/
facilitator and for your participants? I ask because you
have infrequently stepped out from behind the camera
and appeared in front of it. What changes when you
yourself become a performer and in this way part of the
archive?

YVONNE BUCHHEIM   As a non-singer, I leave my safety zone by stepping out
in front of the camera, and put myself in a vulnerable
position where anything can happen. I attempt to
sing and I am faced with issues of failure and loss of
control. I understand that singing in public is a personal
challenge and am confronted with my own insecurities. I
am intrigued by the shift that one undergoes in knowing
the camera is switched on. The 3-channel video
piece *Before and After Presence* uses footage of this
transition. It also shows how lyrics provide the basic
standard by which most people judge their performance
and, when one forgets, suddenly the structure of the
song falls apart. People deal with this situation very
differently.

Another attempt to identify the role of the camera happened during my residency at the University of Essex. This remarkable counter-modernist, purpose-built campus outside Colchester houses one of the few functioning paternoster lifts in its library building. I was intrigued by how the open cubicles can become like a stage set that one cannot escape from if a camera is placed in a very visible position directly in front. By introducing very small shifts from the everyday, for example, standing slightly awkwardly or bringing an unusual object into the lift, a spontaneous play unfolds: amateur actors, following a loose script, merge with other unknowing lift companions. Sometimes bystanders will become amused observers. Some have even felt compelled to document the scenario on their mobile phone.

IAIN BIGGS   Could you explain what the political dimensions of the SAP are?

YVONNE BUCHHEIM   In most places, political issues surfaced in some form or other: in Strasbourg, Cork and Weimar, history became apparent through the chosen songs and, in Wales, the use of language often seemed a political decision informed by a strong sense of identity.

In a very different way, in Iran, the simple request to record songs became inadvertently contentious due to the restricting law on female public singing. The fact that I was recording the song on camera and therefore could show it to a mixed audience turned the performance into a prohibited act and only a few women were prepared to take the risk and defy the ban (songs nos. 298 and 299). It made me very aware of my own country's history and my position as a woman in a foreign country, and I consequently decided to perform a German folk song *Meine Gedanken sind frei* (*My Thoughts Are Free*) in public places in Tehran. This particular old German song, with its roots in the 13th century, was banned both during the German Revolution in 1848/49 and the Third Reich.

IAIN BIGGS   SAP is moving into a new phase with this book, finding another way to be an open research field rather than a closed archive. How does this change the way you intend to work in future and how do you envisage the archive's users engaging with it?

YVONNE BUCHHEIM   Well, I guess, making the book has presented me with an analogy to the sap taken by a forester: I intend to scrape back the bark, drill a small hole, wait a while, collect the sap and turn it into a whole range of surprising objects that people can enjoy and interact with. In other words, I intend to keep my work open for exchange and collaboration, and envisage that this book and the interconnected *Stagefright* performances will bring the SAP to a wider audience and act as a catalyst for new ideas and projects.

What song do you dislike and why?

Question No. 13, Free Cake for a Song Story, 2007

Dyna ti yn eistedd y deryn du, Brenin y goedwig fawr wyt ti

Song No. 559, Song for Newtown, 2007

Nothing is as bad as your fear of it

No. 21, How to Overcome Stagefright, 2011

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Photography