

POP
QUIZ

Dave Dymont Pop Quiz

Owens Art Gallery

Foreword

Jan Peacock once described Dave Dyment's practice as "weird rigor" and his project *Pop Quiz* is a brilliant example of what she may have meant. Combining a playful interest in pop culture with a commitment to process-oriented creative strategies rooted in structured repetition, the project takes a restrictive formula—every question from every song in the artist's music collection—and uses it to generate a peculiar, at times poignant narrative of perplexity, doubt, and yearning. For many years, the Owens Art Gallery has organized exhibitions and programs that explore and celebrate conceptual art practices of this and other kinds. In this context, and in so many others, we are delighted to present the exhibition *Dave Dyment: Pop Quiz*, which adds yet another layer to this enduring focus.

As always, an array of individuals and organizations work hard to make exhibitions like this one possible. We would like to thank Dave Dyment for his thoughtful and compelling work, and for his kindness and professionalism. We are also grateful to poet, comedian, and scholar Geordie Miller, whose engaging interview with Dyment provides greater context for the exhibition. This project would not have been realized without the vision of its curator Lucy MacDonald, the technical wizardry of Roxie Ibbitson, or the social media *savoir faire* of Rachel Thornton. Mount Allison University continues to provide the bedrock of financial support upon which the Owens Art Gallery and its programs rest. We are also extremely grateful to receive ongoing assistance from the Canada Council for the Arts through its Artistic Catalysts component, as well as funding from the Province of New Brunswick, the Town of Sackville, and a loyal group of generous donors also known as the Friends of the Owens. Finally, we sincerely thank our staff, student interns, volunteers, and supporters in the community of Sackville and the broader Atlantic region.

Emily Falvey

Director/Curator

Pop Quiz is a near-comprehensive collection of questions from the lyrics of songs in my personal music library. Isolated from the narrative or emotional arc of a song, the litany of questions become a kind of Dada-ist survey. The barrage of contemplative non-sequiturs range from the personal to the political, the philosophical to the confrontational, the rhetorical to the nonsensical.

The work is part self-portraiture, part exercise in 'ear-worm'. Borrowed from the German word 'Ohrwurm', this affliction—also known as 'involuntary musical imagery'—is the phenomenon of being haunted by the hook of a song. A couple of bars of music will burrow into one's head and repeat like a broken record, a closed loop.

Accordingly, if you happen to be familiar with the source song for these questions, you might find the melody and phrase lodged in your head, nagging at you long after you've left the gallery. In this sense, the work functions as a kind of Venn diagram of where my musical interests overlap with yours.

Pop Quiz was first screened as part of the traveling exhibition *Soundtracks* (2003), and has subsequently shown in London, Toronto, Calgary, and Philadelphia. Each time it is exhibited, it is updated to include new additions, as well as lyrics omitted from previous iterations. Originally twelve minutes, it is now almost four hours long.

Dave Dymont, 2018

Pop Quiz, Sackville

At the Owens, *Pop Quiz* plays on a near continuous loop. From dusk to dawn, it projects outward from an over-sized picture window into the night. During daylight opening hours, it plays in a darkened gallery, a never-ending stream of questions—a comprehensive list of every question from the lyrics of every song in the artist's music collection.

Pop Quiz is a rigorously conceptual, yet incredibly human work, one that mines the most personal of archives, one's own music collection. Each question, removed from its original context, stands starkly on its own. The result is poignant and puzzling. At the Owens, these questions playfully mix and mingle with the life of the university and the questions asked and grappled with across academic disciplines. Through the filter of *Pop Quiz*, we encounter shared touchstones—the enduring, revealing churn of pop songs—and consider the questions that preoccupy us and the ones to which we return, the clichéd, the deep, the difficult.

There is something about the instant of recognition—of a lyric remembered—in which a connection is made. *I know this song*. In that moment, you sing along, this is your song too, and you feel part of something bigger.

In his interview with Dyment, Geordie Miller sets up a *Pop Quiz*-like scenario, posing a series of single questions in an email exchange. Each question posed, and each response left to linger. Miller asks, "Why is music such a pleasure?" Dyment's response draws on neuroscience, biology, and the complexities of culture, but ultimately the answer is elusive—we simply don't know why. Music, and how it functions is, however, a subject that Dyment references time and time again.

The systems that Dyment creates and works within set the course for intensive, research-based projects often spanning years, if not decades, as in the case of *Pop Quiz*, and even then, the work is ongoing. In *On This Day*, Dyment takes on a seemingly impossible task—to build a calendar from stills taken from film and television that capture images of dates that correspond to each day of each month. Images include calendars, correspondence, and newspapers, among others. In Dyment's words, "The work aims to piece together a calendar year made up of fragmented time from fictional pasts and futures." To date, Dyment has collected 448 stills, and while this number includes many duplicate dates, a calendar is starting to take shape.

HAS THE WORLD CHANGED
OR HAVE I CHANGED?

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO
ALL OF THE HEROES?

DO I REALLY HAVE A HAND
IN MY FORGETTING?

AIN'T LIFE UNKIND?

IS IT ENOUGH TO GROW OLD?

WHAT WILL IT TAKE TO
MAKE YOU CAPITULATE?

In the lead up to the opening of *Pop Quiz*, Dymment will present an excerpt from *On This Day* as a 'takeover' of the Owens' Instagram account (@owensartgallery). This project inaugurates a new initiative that approaches social media channels and online spaces as venues for the presentation of new work. The presence of *On This Day* will be ephemeral—it will ring in the New Year on January 1st and continue with a sequence of images for the first ten days of January. As a series of daily posts, it offers a subtle intervention into the marking of each day, an enigmatic presence within the stream of social media content.

Together, *Pop Quiz* and *On This Day* explore the potential of alternate venues for encountering art, be it a window or a phone. Both signal an outward look—extending the reach of our exhibition spaces beyond the walls of the gallery, to consider art as part of the everyday, to be happened upon while checking the latest on Instagram, or walking across campus.

Lucy MacDonald

The Robert V. and Grace Barritt Curator
of Education and Community Outreach

Making the Question

An interview with Dave Dyment

What makes a man attend to the questions his music collection poses? A kettle whistles in the next room, as if demanding answers. Perhaps *Pop Quiz* repurposes the screen? This was my first thought—of the screens that reify life. Fragments as facts, organized by algorithms. You have known them all already, known them all. Here, then, a forgotten kind of knowing. A poetics of indeterminacy. No cup of tea.

I am tired of thinking through pop, so I think of Prufrock. T.S. Eliot's #1 love song stuck in my head. All those anxious, belated questions as Prufrock withdraws further and further into himself. "Do I dare / Disturb the universe?"¹ As if. J. Alfred Prufrock as failed serial artist, trapped inside a stagnant catalogue? Knowledge is also paralyzing. I digress ... I digress ...

Indeed there will be time for a hundred decisions, visions, and revisions, however long you linger over these loops. Do they formulate you, sprawling on a pin, wriggling on the wall? Or are you liberated from one logic—of pop songs and personal archives—into another, whose vague outlines you sense as you're stranded in contemplation?

Even if you recognize the song, there will still be more questions.

Geordie Miller: What is a good question?

Dave Dyment: I don't really have a means to evaluate the quality of a question, and the nature of *Pop Quiz* is—by being a comprehensive list of every question from every pop song in my music collection—that I didn't have to. The questions are not ranked or ordered, just presented dispassionately. I suppose divergent questions are favourable to convergent, but the aspect that I find most interesting is the shift in context. My favourite work by James Lee Byars is a 1969 performance broadcast on Belgian radio and television called *World Question Centre*. The piece involved trying to get the 100 most brilliant minds of the time into a room together and having them ask each other the questions that they had been asking themselves. It was a total shambles—most of them hung up on him or refused to take his call—but the take-away for me was the notion that a question could be improved when redirected.

¹A few other phrases in this section were also lifted from T.S. Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915).

Why is music such a pleasure?

It's doubtful we'll ever be able to fully answer that question, but neuroscientists determined a few years ago that the brain releases a dopamine rush and euphoric reward similar to that of sex, good food, or addictive drugs. They just don't know why. From an evolutionary standpoint, there's no (yet known) biological imperative. The way that music functions is a question I think about possibly more than any other. How does one song become a hit, and another—with near identical qualities—languish in obscurity? A good half of my work aims to explore this question, or at least in the broader sense, of how culture is formed. The artworks I've made sometimes feels like spinoffs from this investigation, what memory foam is to space exploration.

Continuity: something to be refused or ... ?

Hahaha. There's a construction crew outside my window making a lot of noise. Not sure I'll be any good at answering these more abstruse questions ...

(When) does the viewer become captive?

The captive audience is the advertiser's dream (the classroom, traffic, an elevator, a bus shelter, a urinal), but not necessarily mine. My videos are often feature-length, but their content can be gleaned quickly, if necessary. With *Pop Quiz*, I'm happy if someone pokes their head in and ponders a few questions before leaving.

Can art make information more interesting than art?

I don't know. Information is pretty interesting already; I don't think it needs art. I suppose art can sometimes serve as an entry point. It's often said that artists communicate visually when they're unable to verbally, but most artists I know are pretty articulate, and many of them also write, or indeed include writing in their artworks. I just think it's a different type of access point into an idea. There are certain concepts that are difficult to grasp for many people (by which I mean me) and art can sometimes bridge that gap. I'm thinking of things like 'nothing' or 'infinity', which can be difficult to wrap your head around. Sometimes an artwork can illuminate something where the simple facts could not. Perhaps similar to the way that comedy, in the last decade or so, has helped shape people's understanding of politics.

But also, there's Martin Creed's notion that there are enough things in the world and I have no desire to make more (I'm paraphrasing, poorly). I can relate to that idea. I prefer collecting and shuffling.

Video killed the radio star?

My friend Carl Wilson wrote brilliantly about the use of this song in Sarah Polley's film *Take This Waltz*, which is itself named after a song lyric (by Leonard Cohen). I hated every minute of that film while watching it—the contrived serendipity mostly—and then I couldn't get it out of my head afterwards, for weeks. I realized that I've never seen a film where a female character leaves her boyfriend unless he's first seen having an affair, disliking her children, or kicking a dog. Casting someone likeable like Seth Rogen as the boyfriend complicates things even further. "Video Killed the Radio Star" plays when they visit Centreville on Toronto's Centre Island, something I still do yearly. This song would've come out around the time of my first visits and would have certainly played while I rode the Scrambler like the characters in the film. But it's not empty nostalgia about it that works for me. It's somehow just the perfect choice, despite a very specific title that's not relevant to the story at all. *We can't rewind, we've gone too far.*

Should we ever stop asking?

No?

Biographies

Dave Dymment is a Toronto-based artist whose practice includes audio, video, photography, performance, writing and curating, and the production of artist's books and multiples. His work mines pop culture for shared associations and alternate meanings, investigating the language and grammar of music, cinema, television and literature, in order to arrive at a kind of folk taxonomy of a shared popular vocabulary. Recent projects include *'Ere Long Done Do Does Did*, a bookwork compiling source material for Smiths songs, and a remake of *Night of the Living Dead* using footage of the horror classic being watched in other films.

Dymment's work has been exhibited across the country and sits in many private and corporate collections, and in the libraries of the AGO, the National Gallery of Canada, and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Examples of his work can be seen at www.dave-dymment.com, or heard on the YYZ Anthology *Aural Cultures* and the Art Metropole disk *New Life After Fire*, a collaboration with Lee Ranaldo of Sonic Youth. He is represented by MKG127.

Geordie Miller is a poet. He also teaches as a Contract Academic Faculty member in the English Department at Mount Allison University. His book (*Re:union*) was published with Invisible in 2014. He has been writing about visual art for two years and asking questions for thirty-four.

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