

# Sculpting *with* Sound

*An Interview with Susan Philipsz*



Susan Philipsz has connections to PEM that even she wasn't aware of until she created FreePort [No. 003] in East India Marine Hall. Turns out her great-great-grandfather was an official Dutch pirate, allowed to raid ships that came to port and split the booty with the Dutch government. He eventually sailed to the East Indies — yes, the same East Indies that spawned the name of the museum's original East India Marine Society.

Also, the song Philipsz recorded for her project, *The Daemon Lover*, comes from the Child Ballads. The compilation of Scottish and English ballads was amassed by Francis James Child, an esteemed Harvard professor whose early studies in Germany were financed by J. Ingersoll Bowditch, son of East India Marine Society member Nathaniel Bowditch. Coincidence? Doubtful!

"It's kind of eerie, isn't it?" says Philipsz, who then breaks into song that sounds a lot like the theme for *The Twilight Zone*.

Born in Glasgow, Scotland, Philipsz and her siblings started singing in church. She studied sculpture in college and was good at drawing. She began working with sound when she pursued a master of arts degree in Belfast. "Singing is a sculptural experience," Philipsz says. "Think about what happens when you project sound into a space, how it can be shaped by architectural areas."

Philipsz, who won the prestigious Turner Prize in 2010, also works with video, film and photography. She favors public spaces over galleries but sometimes needs that controlled indoor environment. "It's more interesting when people happen upon a work unexpectedly. People don't expect a disembodied voice singing like you'd sing on your own. I'm an OK singer but I don't have a trained voice. That's pretty obvious when you hear it. I leave the breaths of moments in between, and sometimes it's not perfect pitch. I think people can identify with the voice more when it's like that, a more intimate sound."

Her work has been at the Guggenheim, Tate Britain in London, the Hirschorn Sculpture Garden, a former observatory in Oxford, and on a hillside in Artesina, Italy. Most recently she was at the Isabella Bortolozzi Galerie in Berlin with *The Cuckoo's Nest*; the Ludwig Forum, Aachen, Germany, with *Seven Tears*; and in October 2012 at the MAXXI in Rome.

Here, Philipsz talks about her FreePort project, frozen peas and sculptural sound.

Susan Philipsz. Photo courtesy Eoghan McTigue.

**WHEN YOU WERE APPROACHED ABOUT INSTALLING A PROJECT AT PEM, DID YOU KNOW YOU WANTED TO SING THE CHILD BALLAD KNOWN AS *THE DAEMON LOVER*?**

No, the song wasn't in my mind at that point. I was feeling out the space and thinking about it being a seaport and known for the witch hunt. I quickly lost interest in the witch aspect. It was more the fact that Salem was a seaport and all the wonderful architecture and all the wonderful portraits in East India Marine Hall.

**WHY *THE DAEMON LOVER*?**

I knew the Child Ballads at home. I only just discovered that Francis Child was from Boston and then I listened more deeply. It's such an old, old song and it came to America. The verses are so compelling. I thought I'd do eight of them. There are others, but Francis Child published eight different versions in his collection of ballads. At first you hear all eight. Eventually it drops out to one voice. At the center you hear all the voices intermingling and merging and overlapping, like waves. It's a strange effect.

**HOW DOES THE SONG INTERACT WITH THE ROOM?**

It gives voice to the objects on view and you start to see them in a different way — the portraits of sea captains, figureheads, things from their voyages and their ships.

**DO YOU THINK THE FIGUREHEADS ARE LISTENING?**

Yes, in a way, like witnesses. The voices in the ballad suggest the crew from the ship with the Daemon Lover and his long-ago love. The mariners gradually disappear until it's just the two of them on board. Until the last voice is there to tell the tale that she drowns and is never seen again. It starts off almost like a chantey.

**WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MUSIC AND WHAT YOU DO?**

When you listen to music at home or at a concert, you're transported by the music. When you listen to my installations, you become very much aware of the space you're in and yourself. It's a simultaneous experience of being with the sound but also grounded in the present. You become aware of how the sound defines the architecture and draws attention to it in a new way. You maybe have experienced the space many times before, but, with an untrained voice like mine, you hear something intimate and private in a public context. I'm interested in how the sound works in that way more than what music would do.

**DO YOU WATCH PEOPLE INTERACT WITH YOUR WORK?**

You do spend time watching, especially when you have to document the work. In Glasgow, under the bridges, people had



Susan Philipsz imagines her voice wrapping around the architecture of East India Marine Hall. Photo by Walter Silver/PEM.

an incredible response. They bring their own stories to the work. One person saw someone drown there, a man in a suit on the way to work threw himself in the water. They were on the bridge looking down and he just disappeared. People bring things to the piece that I don't know.

**HOW DOES THE EXPERIENCE VARY IF THE INSTALLATION IS IN A GALLERY OR OUTDOORS?**

The Turner Prize work was under the bridges in Glasgow. When it moved to the Tate Museum gallery, people would close their eyes, lie down and spend more time with the work. I considered that presenting the work in its pure form. Under the bridges you have the added sound of water and trundling trains but you couldn't lie down. You'd get mugged.

**DID YOU SING ABOUT FROZEN PEAS IN A TESCO'S SUPERMARKET?**

*Philipsz sings: Get your frozen peas here, half price, half price.* No, but I did make an intervention of the PA system and sang melancholy pop songs once an hour. It's my only live performance. I was three stories up in a little office and not able to witness the response. The video documentation is funny. When people are in the supermarket, they're on autopilot, not thinking about their surroundings. When you hear this voice singing melancholy songs you think, should I be hearing that? That sounds private.

**DID PEOPLE RECOGNIZE THE SONGS?**

When you strip it down to just the voice, you change it a lot.

Someone asked if the Radiohead song I sang was an old Scottish ballad. No, it's not. I hear the instrumental in my head. I'm interested in the idea of grounding people in the present and becoming aware. People really did stop in their tracks and listen. They found it wonderful and curious.

#### **DO YOU PERFORM LIVE?**

Not normally. It's very different to perform when people are watching you. It's important that they hear a disembodied voice.

#### **DID YOU START OUT USING SOUND IN ART SCHOOL?**

I trained in every medium — woodcarving and casting, arc welding, glass and steel and found objects. When I went to do my MA degree at the University of Ulster, I introduced sound.

#### **DO YOU COMPOSE THE SONGS?**

I don't write my own music but have arranged sounds, like the violin and glass you hear in *If I With You Would Go*. I draw on

existing music that had a life somewhere. It's like working with a found object that has a history and then taking it and putting it in a particular context. That can change the meaning.

#### **DO YOU MISS THE PHYSICAL ASPECTS OF ART?**

Yes, sometimes. I have a very clean practice, but I do assemble some things. In Berlin, one part of the installation at Isabella Bortolozzi has a sculptural element. There are two cuckoo clocks and the chains are intertwined. As the pendulums go down, the tangle gets worse. The clocks are side by side, almost talking to each other. The cuckoo is a woman; the stag is male. *False True Lovers* was inspired by the Brothers Grimm, Hansel and Gretel opera, which was written by the German composer Engelbert Humperdinck.

#### **DO PEOPLE UNDERSTAND YOUR WORK?**

I think most people get it. Everyone can identify with the human voice and how it can be a trigger for memory.

#### **WHAT FEEDBACK HAVE YOU RECEIVED?**

*The Lost Reflection* has been running since 2007 in Münster. It plays every hour on Sundays. Many people came up to me and told me their stories of listening to it and how it made them feel. They liked how an ugly place was transformed into something magical. Some people listened every day on the bridge. One woman said she went there after a row with her husband and it made her feel better. Hearing all these stories is a bit overwhelming.

Interview conducted by Lisa Kosan, PEM director of editorial and design.

Susan Philipsz's FreePort [No. 003], *If I With You Would Go*, is on view at PEM through November 6, 2011.

At the River Clyde where she installed *Lowlands*.

