

THE SPEAKER

SUSAN HAWKINS

15.3.19 – 29.3.19

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For Patti Smith's¹ 21st Birthday, Robert Mapplethorpe² crafted her a goatskin tambourine tattooed with the astrological symbol of Capricorn, Smith's birth sign. She cherishes this object and other relics and pays special attention to the symbolic and spiritual power of inanimate things, especially those imbued with the creative power of those who produced or used them (this information is sometimes vaguely divined rather than known). She often makes pilgrimages to the graves of artists, poets and musicians. This is a sign of respect to those who have dedicated their time to art but also an attempt to see if in this close proximity she might feel what lives on in them, or of them, in herself. Among her favourite things are a signed first edition of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, a rare carte-de-visite of Charles Baudelaire and a coffee cup much used by her late father. "All these things, they're memories. They all speak of someone."³



Some of Patti Smith's favourite things. Photograph: Steven Siebring

Susan Hawkins's studio is down the end of a long driveway in an industrial estate in Wakerley. She works from a temporary office container behind the warehouse of a telecom infrastructure business where she sources many of her materials. Our moment in history is sometimes termed 'post-industrial' but places like this continue to prove otherwise.

¹ Patti Smith (1947-) is an artist, writer, poet and musician born in South Jersey. She is perhaps most well known for her debut Album *Horses* released in 1975, a punk blend of beat poetry and rock and roll.

² Robert Mapplethorpe (1946-1989) was a photographer known for highly stylised black and white photographs including celebrity portraits, still life and nudes. He also documented BDSM and gay sub-cultures in New York in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

³ Smith, P. "Patti Smith's Favourite Things" *WSJ Magazine* (New York), August 1, 2016. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/patti-smiths-favorite-things-1470069472>

We still rely so heavily on manufacturing and the management of various ‘things’. Like most artists Hawkin’s often works outside of business hours and when I visit her there she stops next to some racking and tells me about the sound she hears whistling through a stack of parts when the wind is up and the estate is quiet on the weekend. I have an image of her there, listening to the poems of this unlikely place, not really alone at all but still and smiling.

The giant harp, drums and speaker in *The Speaker* all derive in some way from parabolic antennae. Curved shapes that send and receive the electromagnetic signals basic to radio, telephone and television technologies. These objects are external sensory organs; feelers extending our listening and speech across the world. In his book *Marvelous Clouds: Towards a Philosophy of Elemental Media* John Durham Peters suggests that Media are “vessels and environments, containers of possibility that anchor our existence and make what we are doing possible.”⁴ They are “ensembles of natural element and human craft.”⁵ Hawkins recuperates these media objects from their fate in our minds as blandly utilitarian. She listens and watches for glints of meaning from these speechless things. The media infrastructures of this show are all partly dismantled or built upon, de and re-commissioned; no longer relayers of our messages but as instruments with songs of their own, returned to the indeterminate melodies of their elemental origins.

A portrait of Patti Smith’s goatskin tambourine graces the cover of her album *Twelve*, the seventh track of which is a cover of Nirvana’s *Smells Like Teen Spirit*. The opening lines of this track are the basis for Joseph Burgess composition for *The Speaker*. It opens with a slow walking bass line taken from Smith’s song overlaid with the syncopated pluck of a violin and the twang of a biscuit tin guitar built by Hawkin’s son Ned. Smith’s version was termed a “bluegrass dirge”⁶ by one reviewer and there is something of that here - though Burgess’ composition seems to grow into something more cautionary and mystical. The suspended rhythms, scratchy string melodies and occasional burst of buzzing distorted sound produce an enchanted eeriness. The giant instruments in *The Speaker* hang in this atmosphere, vibrating with past, present and possible future expression. We creep by, humbled a little and wondering.



Biscuit tin guitar build by Susan Hawkin’s son Ned. Photograph: Susan Hawkins.

If we care to scale up the intimate material devotion modelled by Patti Smith, Hawkin’s objects hold such enormous resonance. They are monuments to our vast connectivity and Hawkins has brought them down the beanstalk for us.

Kate Woodcroft

⁴ Peters, J. D. *The Marvelous Clouds : Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015: 2.

⁵ Peters, J. D. *The Marvelous Clouds : Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media*. 2.

⁶ Klein, J. “Patti Smith: Twelve.” *Pitchfork*. April 20, 2007. <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/10137-twelve/>