

## Commissioned essay by Francesca Gavin

In response to *Big Talk* (2019) moving image collaboration by Susie Green and Simon Bayliss.  
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'The pop music you listen to as a child in some way transforms you. Like a worm, it wiggles its way into your consciousness and helps to create your ideas of romance and emotion, sex and drama. Pop somehow forms the blueprint of our ideas of culture.

When electronic British pop group *The Shamen* released the track *Ebenezer Goode* in 1992, it became one of the most controversial pop songs of the decade. The huge No. 1 hit was initially banned by the BBC for encouraging use of the drug Ecstasy due to its catchy, playful chorus, "Eezer Good, Eezer Good / He's Ebenezer Goode," which was seen as a thinly-veiled reference to taking pills and how good Es were. It was the video to *The Shamen*'s earlier breakthrough track *Move Any Mountain*, however, that feels like a natural precursor to the work of Susie Green and Simon Bayliss as *Splash Addict*.

The video for this 1990 acid house single opens with the members of the techno group emerging from the sea, followed by a psychedelically vibrant colourful montage of them performing in a Mediterranean landscape in Tenerife. The directors employed every video effect then possible in the promo. Washes of vibrant colour were superimposed over the landscape. The band often performed in front of a green screen, cut out in front of a techno-fantastic landscape. All the while, the thumping bass and ascending keyboard chords play alongside.

This collision of technology, nature, electronic music and pop are all echoed in the recent art-music collaboration by artists Susie Green and Simon Bayliss. The duo originally met during a residency at Wysing Arts Centre in Cambridge, *The Syllabus*, an alternative learning programme. Towards the end of the year-long project they began to collaborate, Susie having approached Simon to learn how to use the music program Ableton, and they began making tracks together in 2016.

Their collaborative process has continued despite the fact they live in two different parts of the country. Susie is in Newcastle, while Simon is in Cornwall. Writing and editing happens both remotely and as they travel for performances or recording. "When we're writing a track, I'll send Susie some ideas for melodies and then she'll send me some ideas for lyrics back, and it will form from there. You don't have the excitement of working together, but at the same time, it makes it calmer to work together. It allows me to be quite thoughtful." "I'm not overwhelmed," Susie concurs.

There is a playful element in their collaboration too. In *Big Talk*, their clothing is covered in text, adding a sense of punch and humour. "I want it to be fun. I want it to be light and playful, because I think between us, we can still bring out the angst and whatever else naturally. I don't think either of us put any effort into bringing out the tragic," Simon notes.

Music is the starting point for what they do, but as practising artists sound also spills into other media, notably film and performance. Yet in many ways, despite often existing in an art context, the project is very much a straight musical one. "I think of the videos as music videos essentially. I think of them as gigs rather than performances. Because we're both artists, we're being shown within this kind of nexus of art," Simon explains.

Technology is something innate in their sound, in both their approach to aesthetics and process. Though sometimes using a quiet corner of her studio, Susie also often records on the voice memos app on her phone. The piece originally grew out of a conversation Susie had with a friend about her relationship. “She said, ‘Oh, you need to have a really good talk about what’s happening with it.’ I started thinking about what she said. I wrote down lots of versions, which are in the present. Like ‘they’ll have a big talk; we’ll have a big talk.’” The repetition built into the lyrics echoes the rhythmic nature of early pop house tracks.

*Big Talk*, like their earlier collaboration *Love Immersion*, focuses on intimacy and the emotional: “little points where things can feel really intense and then points where I might feel frustrated,” explains Susie. Part of that frustration is how present or not present someone is in person and, in contrast, remotely through digital communication. “It’s sort of like a very lonely feeling that can come from it, and other times, it’s like a really excited feeling. There’s a certain adrenaline that can come through the phone,” she observes.

In their latest film, there is a recurring image of a blank pink screen whose fleshy, cosmic emptiness Susie and Simon are constantly touching. Green-screen technology was the main process they used to insert themselves into space and play with this sense of layering. “I painted one of my walls green in my studio, because I just wanted to try it, I think. I don’t think I’d used green-screen before, and it went from there,” Simon explains. The result plays with the idea of emotional gaps—the idea that something is there but not there. It is an interesting reflection on the everyday weirdness in our relationships that have emerged from the screen. We are all constantly projecting.

The colour palette in the film has a particular take on the day-glo; a pastel version of acid colours that feels very late-80s acid house. One of their references was Prince’s video for the song *Alphabet Street*, which again has a distinctive use of colour. “I didn’t want it to be completely saturated throughout,” Simon continues. “I like the sort of sand colours and muted colours. I think if it was all acid it would be a bit much.”

Late acid house was a strong influence on their sound. “I started listening to *The Prodigy* and late-90s jungle when I was about 12 or 13 and then started making music when I was about 13 or 14 and going to raves from about 15 around East Devon and West Dorset,” Simon remembers. “There was a group that called themselves *Club Diversity*. It started off as breakbeat and then moved on to hard house and drum and bass. They carried on for maybe ten years, putting on some really big nights all around East Devon. I used to DJ drum and bass and jungle, but I used to also go to these hard trance and techno raves.”

Susie’s foray into house was rather through Top of the Pops, with the occasional trip to rural trance parties. “I suppose at the time I was an adolescent, it was like *The Shamen*, and I had a tape called *Hardcore Ecstasy*, which I adored, [which included] Utah Saints’ *Something Good* that sampled *Cloudbusting* by Kate Bush,” she remembers. “But really, I don’t like the idea of being nostalgic.”

Their separate art practices both live outside of their collaboration, yet the latest film does reference the idea of making art both as creative process and in some of the visual motifs it uses. The duo hold and rip pages, touching on the materiality of art-making. The burying of sheets in the sand was a nod to the Jean Cocteau film *Orphée*. The rips came out of experimentation. “I’d been doing things like clothing unzipping; things opening to reveal a next scene. That ripping was like a reveal. I guess it’s like screens within screens within screens.”

Everything returns to the screen. It is how they work together and communicate while apart. On the big screen, they pull apart, rip and prod the fleshy organic phone screen while lyrically reflecting on its emotional fallout. Despite their playful poses and swipes, their work emphasises that the screen will never quite let us in’.

## Francesca Gavin

Francesca Gavin is a curator and writer based in London. She is the Art Editor of Twin, editor at large at Kaleidoscope and contributing editor at Good Trouble, Beauty Papers and Semaine.com. She was the co-curator of the Historical Exhibition of Manifesta 11 and has curated exhibitions internationally including The Dark Cube (Palais de Tokyo), E-Vapor-8 (Site Sheffield), and The New Psychedelia (Mu). She put together the Soho House group collection for seven years, amassing over 3000 artworks. Gavin has written six books including Watch This Space, The Book of Hearts, 100 New Artists and Hell Bound: New Gothic Art, and contributed to numerous publications including The Financial Times, Dazed, wallpaper\*, Mousse, AnOther and Newsweek. She has a monthly NTS Radio show, Rough Version, on art and music.