

HEROIC FEELING
DISAPPEARANCE
JUNE - JULY



GARRETT PHELAN
LIFE AGAIN. LIGHT AGAIN. LEAF AGAIN. LOVE AGAIN

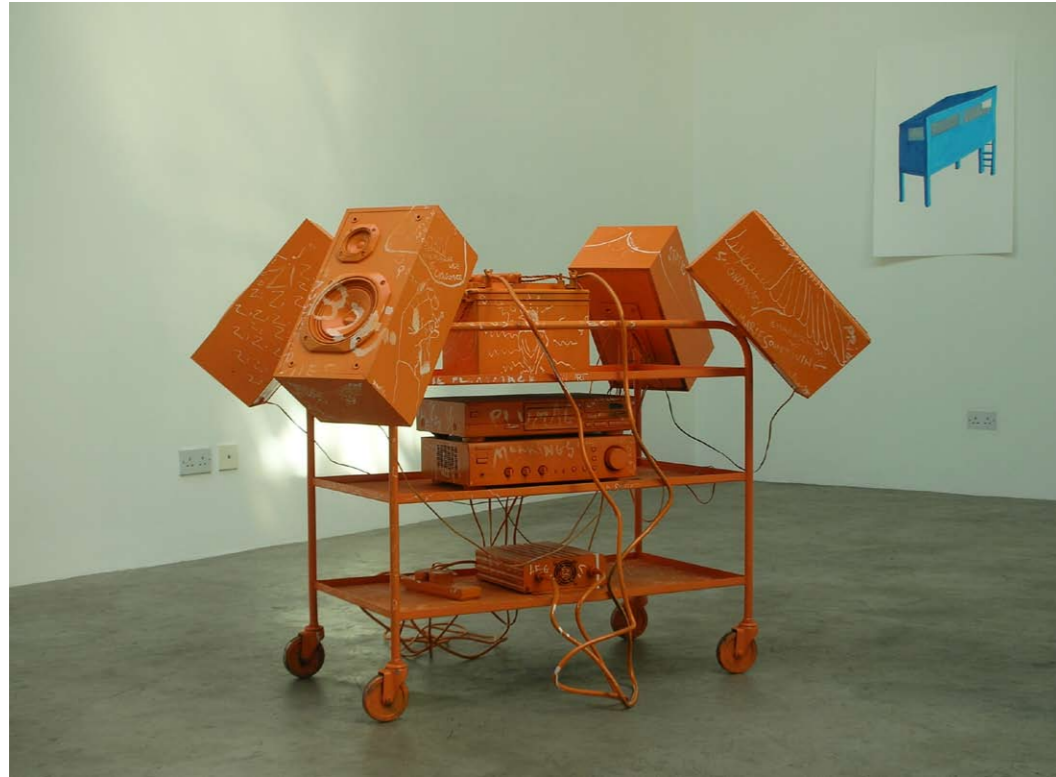
MAY - JULY 2006

SPECIES OF FICTION: FIELD CRAFT AND THE ELECTRO SKYLARK

Picture in your mind's eye, a reserve of land that extends out from the edge of a metropolis towards the sea. Along the southeast stretch, running adjacent to the mouth of a wide river, the land curves in the direction of a broad strand. Above the strand is a low man-made hill covered in wild flowers, with a retired dump behind it; before it an industrial docklands stretches out in the distance. In this terrain vague, urban space disperses into what we name 'the outskirts', 'the periphery', 'the fringes'. This is Pasolini's Roma. The place farthest away from the centre, where the boroughs meet, unclothed and unprotected. Stripped bare, this location is apt for meditation, recuperation, and drama.

In the one of two audio works created by Garrett Phelan in 2006, *The Electro Skylark* recounts a spectacular event apparently witnessed by Phelan himself somewhere along the margins of city space. Possibly due to either a sudden surge or gradual increase of electromagnetic activity in the area, an environmental mutation causes a singular skylark to levitate, aglow with energy. In the second sound piece, *Field craft*, Phelan brings us to a similar setting, where he pays homage to both nature and the naturalist. As with *The Electro Skylark*, *Field craft* enacts a fiction, rendered through recorded sounds and first-hand observation. Yet, to understand either work as purely fictive is to fail to appreciate the proximity of fiction to testimony. Of concern here is not whether Phelan's specialised narratives are true, but how the assimilation of visual and aural imagery imitates and signals the real. In her work on subjectivity and virtual reality, Margaret Morse writes, "Subjectivity can never be real or full, as it is always based on simulation I." The spatial and temporal divisions between you and me, here and now, are fictive gaps that we use to smooth out the contradictions "between the world and language." Our tacit agreement is to enact a process of simulation, or what Algirdas Julien Greimas calls the "enunciative fallacy." What surfaces in both *The Electro Skylark* and *Field craft* is a tendency for speech to disrupt, for memory to dislocate, and for sound to sublimate our perception of 'reality' as we receive, anticipate, and recover a narrative structure. Speech here is an act of simulation, a way to represent a reality that corresponds with what we already imagine. Through language Phelan approximates the world, communicating and relating his memory of events that never actually took place.

If we consider what attracts Phelan to the peripheral wastelands that circumvent our urban spaces—those man-made 'naturalised' environs formed by jetties and landfill that are as much a feature of the city as its buildings and streets, and which (whether we like it or not) are part of our habitat—we realise he does not arrive at this place by accident. He has been here before, using the interceding and intermediary frequencies of radio. While architecture is the more obvious urban intervention, our will to reconstruct our surroundings in almost every conceivable way is evident everywhere. Even in protected passages of countryside, cables, electricity towers, roadways, and drains infiltrate the land, the air, the sea. Wherever architecture appears—even where it disappears—these energies concentrate and disperse. Gas expands, sound waves, electricity transmits. Unseen energies literally channel our existence. Through invisible wavelengths that permeate our airspace, we can all tune in.



Field craft. 2006. Etched hospital trolley, spray paint, speakers, amplifier, battery, CD player, sound work (20 mins)
life again, light again, leaf again, love again. 2006. Marker on paper, each 70 x 100cm





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This proximity was intensely developed in *Black Brain Radio* (2005), a month-long programme broadcast daily on Dublin's 89.9 fm. From our cars, our homes, our places of work, we received a hypnotic stream of references read aloud by Phelan as he surfed through various weblogs. Shifting without segue from Jesus Christ to quicksand, lung disease to Uganda, *Black Brain* is our experience. *Black Brain* is us. It is this potential for sonic frequencies to describe a temporal interplay of social relationships, more akin to a map of incidents than a map of geographies, that characterises much of Phelan's work, from *RACER* (1997-2003) and *NOW:HERE* (2004) to *Black Brain Radio*. And it is through a similar ungroundedness that Phelan carves out a politics based on collectivity and communality. The public that *Black Brain* summons is both multiple and contingent, fluid and co-dependant. This notion of a collective conveys a kind of apositivistic epistemology where knowledge is the opposite of science or reason, but is the accumulation of sensory perceptions that can potentially disorganise and disturb 'official' information. In the case of *The Electro Skylark* and *Field craft* each narrative touches on a Romantic desire to 'be at one' with nature. However, in doing so Phelan incites a contest between our capacity to continually interpret and mediate our surroundings and our willingness to ignore extraordinary signs of danger and beauty. In a similar vein, 'site' enters these works through psychological residues that build up over time. A 19th century fort. The basement of a listed building. City offices. A disused flat. These are provisional places that exist in the in between. They are private and public, material and spiritual, personal and communal.

As we project onto our surroundings 'locations' emerge through the particularities of individual and collective histories. These subjectivities form our collective reality, like lines drawn through space. Urban and rural, city and country, industry and nature are among the virtual realities that we create and habitually reinscribe for one another everyday. Once revealed, this matrix is capable of producing an epiphany (*The Electro Skylark*) and a sobering up (*Field craft*). "Even reality itself and paramount reality is already a kind of fiction. It is a different fiction than say a movie or a novel, and it is dangerous because it can have material effects – but it is no less a fiction."² Our surroundings change us, but most importantly, we imagine and create ways to change our surroundings.

Through a proposal of multiplicity and modality Phelan enacts a process of resistance to the institutions, technologies and architectures we encounter everyday. Built into a portable sound system constructed out of an old hospital trolley, orange spray paint, an amplifier and speakers, *Field craft* brings us outdoors into 'the field' where we accompany Phelan on a bird-watching expedition. We hear the crackle of footsteps, the occasional rustle of the microphone, and birds chirping in the distance. In a low voice, Phelan whispers directions to another person, "Sorry, can you just move your microphone there... yeah... that's good..."³ He carefully identifies birds in his midst, adopting the authoritative tone of the expert, describing their markings, extrapolating on their behaviour. We picture him with his companion, binoculars raised, paying homage to the avid birder, playing the naturalist/narrator, sharing his observations, encouraging us to see with him. In actuality, Phelan is not on an expedition. His companion is imaginary—a fictive device. Like the birds that we hear in the distance, Phelan's observations are part of a



Faux Amis. 2006. Hospital trolley, spray paint, stuffed Cormorant, limestone, scratching & tipex
Suspect. Marker on paper

pre-recorded mix.

According to Thayer's Bird Guide to North America, there are two basic ways to learn birdsongs. One is to memorise the song by listening to a recording. Another is to use mnemonics. This involves associating a word from the English language with a specific birdcall, for example: teacher, teacher, teacher (ovenbird), or quick, three beers! (olive-sided flycatcher). Phelan begins *The Electro Skylark* with a phonetic incantation, and it is the first instance in the narrative where nature and technology converge as a sonic event: "I don't know if you're familiar with the sound of a skylark. It's beautiful. It's really lovely that song. You can almost hear some type of video arcade... Space Invaders... pssewpssew-pssew-pssew-pssew. Prhrh-cheoo. Prhrh-cheoo."⁴ In his work on sound practice Rick Altman writes, "To record is to recall to mind, as the dictionary would have it, but like most mnemonic devices, sound recordings must heighten some aspects of the original phenomenon at the expense of others. So-called recordings are thus always representations, interpretations, partial narratives that must nevertheless serve as our only access to the sounds of the past."⁵ The conversion of recorded material in *The Electro Skylark* (the sound effect of *Space Invaders*) into oral material occurs through tapping into a collective experience, which emerges in the narrative as sound effect and memory, mnemonic device and representation. Phelan asks us to remember and through this complex template of electronic synapses we discover a spontaneous affinity with the text. Listening to *The Electro Skylark* we commune, not with nature, but each other.

In a remarkable philosophical encounter entitled, *The Instant of My Death/Demeure: Fiction and Testimony* (2000), Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida each delivers a text that, coupled together, profoundly explores the relationship of authorship to experience. The first essay is *The Instant of My Death*, a short narrative written by Blanchot in which he recounts a moment when a young man who has been brought before a firing squad during World War II suddenly finds himself released from his near death. The incident, written in the third person, is suggestively autobiographical—owing to the title and several remarks in the text, and also to a letter Blanchot wrote about a similar incident in his own life. Insofar as the story raises questions about what such an experience might mean, the accident of near death becomes, in the instant the man is released, the accident of a life he no longer possesses. The second text, *Demeure*, is an extended essay by Derrida, which reads Blanchot's story in the context of questions of literature and bearing witness. Its contextual inclusion repeats a question of what it means to write about a (non)experience one cannot claim as one's own, linking the problem of testimony to the problem of the secret and to the notion of the instant (when a secret is no longer "one's own"). If we are to consider both *The Electro Skylark* and *Fieldcraft* as narratives that both claim and subsequently displace Phelan's ownership or authority over the text, we can begin to understand testimony, memoir, and autobiography in his work as a process of transposing subjective experience onto reality as a means to understand. He predicates the narrative on his own imagination—an imaginary 'I' speaking to a fictional 'you'. As such his first-person narrative works in a similar way to Blanchot's third person, organizing communication, but also marking the event where narration breaks down. Phelan recorded *The Electro Skylark* while sitting at a piano. The final mix emits a crescendo of birdsong coupled



life again, light again, leaf again, love again. #8 2006. Marker on paper, each 70 x 100cm
life again, light again, leaf again, love again. #18 2006. Marker on paper, each 70 x 100cm



with the high, gentle trill of alternating keys. Throughout the narrative, he builds upon various descriptive phrases. Without naming a particular location or site, he describes the clouds, the lack of smell, the sudden flight of a kestrel. At a certain point the narrative shifts its focus to the skylark:

...I could make its form out, and I noticed it was absolutely still; I could just see its wings, this kind of feathering, this blurring feathering on both its wings and its little tail. And then all of a sudden it just started to glow. Bright white with this orange hue around it. It was the most extraordinary sight I've ever seen. You could see this kind of electromagnetic resonance bounce out from it, and then fade. But for quite a distance... Suddenly all around it, very peculiar, it made no sense to me whatsoever, all the other birds connected. And then this kind of shape of all the other skylarks came up in this incredible chorus of skylarks... 6

Pasolini often used the word 'sacred' to describe the images that he excluded from the frame. What we see is merely one part of reality – the truly essential remains unseen. Just as Pasolini (an atheist obsessed with religion) adapts the gospel, Phelan exploits personal testimony to unravel collective-subjectivity. As episodic narratives *Field craft* and *The Electro Skylark* imitate the cause and effect logic of horizontal storytelling, yet in doing so they effectively conceal one secret to reveal another. There is no sonic indication that what we are listening to is not 'real', yet the skylark's display—the very focus of testimony—and Phelan's imaginary companion serve to alternately establish and subvert his own 'presence' in the text. Vision and visuality enter in, but only through descriptors that codify the narrative. We identify through listening (a technique used by birdwatchers too), which produces a contiguous interchange between several species of fiction that inhabit each text. The experiential incongruities of those moments where the world reveals itself to us are precisely where revelation exceeds experience.

Sarah Pierce

1. Margaret Morse, *Virtualities*, (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1998), pp. 11
2. *Ibid.*
3. Garrett Phelan, excerpt from *Field craft*, 23 min. audio CD (2006)
4. Garrett Phelan, excerpt from *The Electro Skylark*, 6 min. audio CD (2006)
5. Rick Altman, *Sound Theory Sound Practice*, pp.97
6. *Op cit.*, Phelan



life again, light again, leaf again, love again. #12 2006. Marker on paper, each 70 x 100cm
life again, light again, leaf again, love again. #11 2006. Marker on paper, each 70 x 100cm



life again, light again, leaf again, love again. #22 2006. Marker on paper, each 70 x 100cm
life again, light again, leaf again, love again. #6 2006. Marker on paper, each 70 x 100cm

