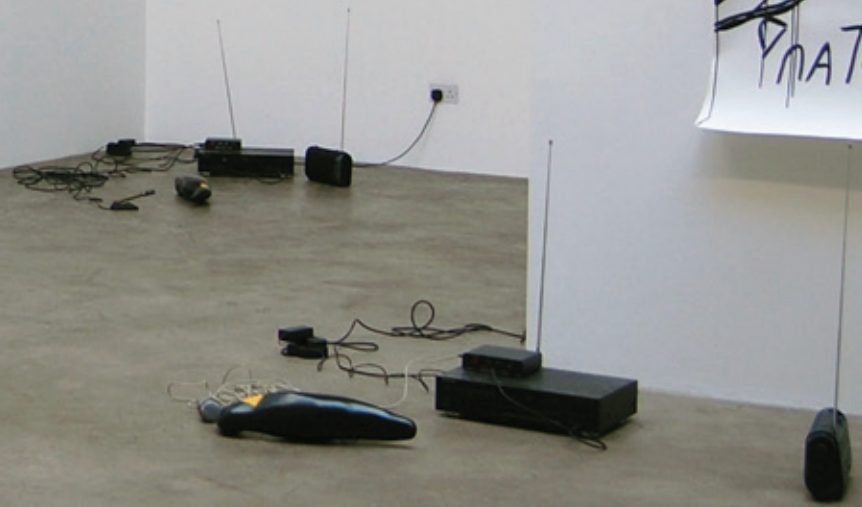


GARRETT PHELAN
THE LAST BROADCAST REVELATIONS

APRIL – MAY 2009





The Last Broadcast Revelations Installation view, mother's tankstation

REVOLUTION IN THE AIR?

'The assertion of one's own particularity requires the appeal of something transcending it.'¹

'emit ni detalever eb lliw noitamrofni erom'²

In organising a coup against any ruling government, the first act should be to seize the radio station. The gesture is practically obligatory, like a statement of intent or allegiance to previous uprisings, continuing to signify the forced transition of power.³ Through taking over the airwaves, the prospective leaders broadcast their newfound authority, whether by appealing for calm or calling to arms.

The works of Garrett Phelan fall into the latter category. His mynah birds, perched on microphones and distinguishable only by the slightest change of markings and plumage, mimic the slogans of an obscure, revolutionary ideology. They are wrapped in scrawled, backwards writing – messages to be de-coded and deciphered by the chosen. "Come clean before IT". "Trust in IT". "Do not stand in the way of IT". Ominous and impenetrable allusions to the 'I' and the 'Collective' recur throughout the texts and are replicated in Phelan's audio recordings and animations. A series of sculpted wooden birds, reminiscent of hunting decoys, lie motionless on the floor, their beaks leaning into microphones. Nearby, CD players and radios transmit (human) invocations to surrender one's individuality to the masses and the coming insurrection. Step forward to listen and the broadcast flickers and distorts as the respective signals overlap and absorb one another (apparently, mynahs are known to roost in radio towers and aerials, their presence interfering with transmissions, almost as if by design).⁴ In the adjacent room, a brief and jittery animated film makes their intentions clear: a mynah digs its talons tight into a disembodied hand, drawing blood and addressing the viewer straight-on. "Thank God for Us". The revolution is being televised.

In a strange way, though, it feels like you're intruding in the gallery. The disembodied voices and opaque language, buried in the hiss and crackle of the radios, and the repeated motif of the bird, surrounding the viewer on all sides, from all fronts, accords the setting a sense of disquiet. These communications are not for us, except as a warning. On the other hand, such revelations, relayed through these so-called 'messengers of God', remain unclear even to their initiates; they simply possess faith in an eventual realisation.

'[They] place themselves out of the common, but they have this in common: they say they are in immediate and intuitive relation with a mystery. And they wish to attract, seduce, lead toward the mystery and by the mystery... The revelation or unveiling of the secret is reserved to them; they jealously protect it. Jealousy is a major trait here. They never transmit the secret to others in everyday language, only by initiation or inspiration.'⁵

The imminent revelation is simultaneously projected and protected; as a threat to others – its promise of fulfilment ever-present yet essentially unknown – and as a way of determining the exclusivity and identity of its bearers. It is portioned out to both sides in gnomish utterances and double-edged implications, as a reminder of its inevitability. The propagation of ideology is also key to Phelan's practice, via radio and online projects and numerous artist publications, and is





The Revelation of Benefaction
Plaster, foam, wire, car filler, cable, cd player, paint, radio, plug sockets, electro voice, 649b vintage Dynamic microphone and stand, 1/4 watt FM transmitter
Dimensions variable 2009

represented here in a small, 'unlimited edition' fanzine. Like the samizdat literature and Xeroxed pamphlets of various underground movements, the work seems to be intended to go out, to spread the word. And yet its crypto-apocalyptic drawings and terminology could be more readily associated with survivalist factions or doomsday cults, like a bedsit anarchist's version of *The Watch Tower*.⁶ While this combination of mass dissemination and wilful obscurantism may seem paradoxical, there are plenty of political and religious precedents. As Ernesto Laclau has pointed out, revolution requires ambiguity in order to extend the particular (say, a specific interest group or concrete motivation) into the universal (the hegemonic power). The original message is necessarily diluted in making it palatable to a larger audience, even if it effectively empties out any initial purpose or integrity.

'How does this mechanism operate? Let us consider the extreme situation of a radical disorganisation of the social fabric. In such conditions... people need an order, and the actual content of it becomes a secondary consideration. 'Order' as such has no content, because it only exists in the various forms in which it is actually realised, but in a situation of radical disorder 'order' is present as that which is absent; it becomes an empty signifier, as the signifier of that absence. In this sense, various political forces can compete in their efforts to present their particular objectives as those which carry out the filling of that lack. To hegemonise something is exactly to carry out this filling function.'⁷

The ambiguity of such language could develop in a number of directions. Just as the malleable, inclusive terminology lacks specificity and encompasses all particularities, it maintains the potential to contract and squeeze out any pockets of dissent. There is a persistent threat, to be exercised on anything which falls outside of this notion of 'order'. However, as in Phelan's installation, this threat is all the more effective for not being completely transparent. The mynah birds are essentially stand-ins, ciphers for the transmission of otherworldly messages, and yet possessors of a unique ability to manipulate and moderate speech. Are they merely mouthpieces, or are the revelations indicative of an evolutionary latency, a claim to human linguistics and independent thought? Again, such secrets are jealously protected.

"It is not of my understanding" reads one of the large, backwards-written drawings, hung by bulldog clips from the gallery walls. An admission of powerlessness, a ruse or double-bluff, a surrender of individuality to the collective flock, harbinger of times to come; each possibility is concealed in language, in the deferral of meaning. This stance leaves itself open to any event, all outcomes. The gesture recalls those sects which regularly and confidently predict the end of the world at a particular point, only to revise their predictions as a misreading of the text or a metaphor or allegory, before marking down another, more definite, date. This time, for sure. Even the non-completion of prophecy only confirms the correctness of the revelation, being outside of normal, human understanding, and the unshakeable foundation of their faith in the face of all evidence.

How does one argue with this logic that evades criticism simply by leaving open the terms of its realisation? Phelan's work provides not an answer (nothing ever could) but an approach, an attempt to 'recover a lost wholeness, an unaccounted-for truth in its various chaotic systems.'⁸ While the promise of revelation waits for a radical, absolute solution to disorder, for this very reason, it will remain always on the horizon, perpetually unfulfilled. It is the desire to transcend confusion, to overcome the conflicting and contradictory particularities of existence in favour of a never-present and impossible order, that motivates the revolutionary and the revelatory. One need only remain patient, to gather strength and numbers, and wait indefinitely for the moment to come. "In the

presence of something that surpasses individual human capacity". "The wisdom of the collective". "The fortitude of the collective". "The concurrence of the I".

Chris Clarke

¹ Ernesto Laclau, 'Subject of Politics, Politics of the Subject', in *Emancipation(s)*, (London: Verso, 1996), p. 48

² Text from Garrett Phelan's drawing, 'More information will be revealed in time', black Indian ink on paper, 2008

³ Issues of control over media outlets have played a major role in recent coups in Mauritania (<http://www.menassat.com/?q=en/news-articles/4373-mauritania-coup-blocks-state-radio-and-tv-newspapers>) and Thailand (<http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=35023>)

⁴ Glynn Anderson, 'Mynah Birds' in Garrett Phelan, *The First Book of Crisis: Mynah Broadcast Revelations*, (Dublin: Garrett Phelan, 2009), p. 2

⁵ Jacques Derrida, 'Of an Apocalyptic Tone Newly Adopted in Philosophy', trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, eds Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (New York: SUNY Press, 1992) p. 33

⁶ House publication of Jehovah's Witnesses, an Adventist religious sect who believe in the eschatological idea of the imminent end of human history

⁷ Ernesto Laclau, 'Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?', in *Emancipation(s)*, p. 44

⁸ The full quote is worth citing here: "The work is provisional, but it is not simply engaged in a puerile deferral of meaning for its own sake. It is troubled, marked by the various attempts it documents to recover a lost wholeness, an unaccounted-for truth in its various chaotic systems." Daniel Jewesbury, in *Garrett Phelan: NOW:HERE* (Dublin: Pallas Heights, 2003), p. 3



The First Mynah Broadcast Revelation Drawing 3
Assorted black pens on paper 29.5 x 20 cm 2008

The Last Mynah Broadcast Revelation Drawing 2
Assorted black pens on paper 29.5 x 20 cm 2008



The Revelation of Ministration (Detail)
Plaster, foam, wire, car filler, cable, cd player, paint, radio, plug sockets, Vintage Uher M-533 microphone,
1/4 watt FM transmitter Dimensions Variable 2009