

Maeve Connolly (Exhibition review) Garrett Phelan, Mother's Tankstation, published in *Artforum*, September 2009, 304-305.

Garrett Phelan

Mother's Tankstation, Dublin

Garrett Phelan is an avid birdwatcher and his recent exhibition, "The Last Broadcast Revelations," drew on both folklore and ornithology in its depiction of the mynah bird as a prophet. Noting that the mynah has the capacity to go beyond mere imitation of human speech to create new sentence constructions, he explored the possibility that it could also predict the future. As the show demonstrated, much of Phelan's current work integrates aspects of personal experience with esoteric research into history or natural science, paralleling the practices of various artists in the recent Tate Triennial, such as Marcus Coates, Olivia Plender and Lindsay Seers. Unlike some contemporaries, however, Phelan is animated by methodology as well as mythology; his interest in the mynah forms part of a systemic ongoing inquiry into the reception and production of information. Images of the bird (generally voicing proclamations or warnings) recurred across a range of media in this show, including numerous monochrome drawings featuring reversed lettering, two animated videos, and three installations, *The Revelation of Benefaction*, *The Revelation of Ministration* and *The Revelation of Solidarity* (all works 2009), described by the artist as "Radio Sculptures." Incorporating a CD player, short range FM transmitter, and domestic radio along with other elements, each is designed to function as a miniature radio station within the gallery, emitting ominous utterances scripted, voiced, and pre-recorded by the artist.

Appropriately, given Phelan's concern with popular media, the drawings were also presented as a "deluxe double limited edition" zine, on sale during the show for the bargain price of ten euros and including an essay by ornithologist Glynn Anderson offering facts, figures, and folklore relating to the mynah. Just as real mynahs apparently congregate around communication towers, each "Radio Sculpture" includes a three-dimensional bird figure posed beside a microphone. Although crafted from mundane materials such as plaster, foam, wire and car filler, and spray paint, they are highly finished and loosely resemble folk artifacts. They lack both wings and legs and are smooth, elongated, and entirely black but for small yellow neck markings—more highly abstracted than the agitated figures that populate the drawings and animations. Despite the sound of the three audio installations, occasional moments of silence in the gallery seemed to conjure a space in which these creatures might listen and perhaps even speak, if only to mimic each other. The use of vintage microphones in two of the "Radio Sculptures" also introduced a hint of nostalgia, albeit fused with paranoia.

Many of the scripts and drawings incorporate references to an unnamed and threatening "IT", in the form of speech or written text. The nature of this entity remains ambiguous, and Phelan's use of language is deliberately open-ended, recalling many different genres of communication, from science-fiction to propaganda, advertising and rolling news coverage. The exhibition is clearly attuned to the shifting cultural status of broadcasting as the end of analog transmission draws nearer. In this context, the existence of multiple stations could refer in some way to the fragmentation of a communicative space once imagined to be cohesive. Phelan's work explores the propagation of fear and anxiety in this fragmented communicative space and part one of his zine ("The First Book of Crisis") features statements such as "MORE BAD NEWS!" and "THERE IS NO HOPE IN YOUR DARKNESS". The drawings in part two of the zine, collectively titled "The Last Book of Remedy," hint at the possibility of release by exhorting readers to "TRUST IN IT". But ultimately, Phelan offers no real solution to the 'crisis' he identifies – instead the final page leaves the reader with a pseudo-spiritual and deliberately unsettling endorsement of the unknown and the partial.

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