

“No intimation: Total representation”

“Gordon-Bennett”, by Alan Phelan, is a reflection and action on the propaganda of mass communications. The multiple narratives that run through this exhibition explore ideas, facts, or allegations spread deliberately to further an individual’s cause, to damage an opposing cause; as well as the public actions having such effects.

To our minds, the concept of propaganda is seen within the context of political powers. The manipulation of the media by political propagandists brought the role of mass media to a new level during the lifetime of Josef Goebbels. However it is not the sole remit of the politicians. Mass media is its own originator and perpetrator that continues its work even today. However, we need to ask if it is all-bad! The exaggeratedly serious self-promotion of the great egotists can also be seen for their comedic value. This is not an area of subtle intimation. It is total representation. This is at the centre of the theme chosen by Phelan for “Gordon-Bennett”, moulded in a mixture of styles, metaphors, and coverts that give the viewer the opportunity to avoid literal representation and to indulge the intimations provided by Phelan.

James Gordon Bennett, scion of the great 19th and early 20th century media age is not a unique character. Inheriting the New York Herald, Bennett continued on his path of playboy, daredevil, and philanthropist. But why then do we place him with the great propagandists? In a non-Freudian sense Bennett was the great über-ego. The New York Herald became the carnival mirror to this ego, and through shameless self-promotion Gordon Bennett entered the *lingua viva* that has survived intact even today. Bennett’s great monuments to his cult of personality are known to us: Stanley’s search for Livingston, the ill fated Jeanette expedition to the arctic, and the first international motor race in Ireland, still commemorated today. However, the great ego can grow to believe its own infallibility. In this Bennett was to be no exception, and from there we take the first steps into Phelan’s exploration.

Ardscull, *The Hill of Shouts*, a Motte and Bailey, a 12th/13th century site lofty above the plains of Kildare, proclaims itself to the landscape. What better place could Bennett have found to begin this international motor race. The great self-publicist occupied this territory with cars coming from across the world to pay homage to his foresight. Accidents of circumstance placed this road race in the narrow roads of Ireland. Lax restrictions gave Bennett the loophole that he required to run a race at speeds otherwise prohibited in the rest of the British Isles. Crowds flocked to the spectacle; lining the hedgerows and overpowering the grandstand view provided by a giant bridge-like seating construction placed across the route.

The ruins of this are now long gone. A simple stone plinth and bronze plaque are all that occupy the place now. Commemoration races hold little of the original excitement. However we do see a human need for continuation, for spectacle, for a realisation that we are alive and different. The superficial artifice of spectacle, of “boys with toys” continues the Bennett theme to modern day. The term “Boy Racer” once seen as derogatory now defines the identity of a sub-section of young male adults. Customised bodywork, pumped up stereo systems, pseudo “performance parts” manufactured in fragile fibreglass provide a new plumage in the mating ritual of the adolescent. A new vocabulary is being included in everyday language, and yet there is the question of brevity of existence. The solidity of this veneer of modernity by its very nature is impermanent and yet the underlying need is at the core of human nature.

The Great Bennett is dead and gone and yet his legacy lingers on. We see in a re-constructed fireplace the fecundity of crude manners and churlish ways. The solidity of great episodes in the life of the great self-publicist pulled apart and remade for each new generation. We are made to question the essence of this solidity. The camouflage of the benign covers an intricate web of complex concealment. It is not new that we cannot trust our key senses. We are made to understand that transparency is not a given right, instead it is a constant challenge that we must undertake to understand.

There is an archaeological and theatrical feel to the work but these disciplines do not inform the work directly. The cue instead is from the museum in general, the museum in ruins, from history that maybe never happened, from a history that is always up for grabs, to be constantly re-interpreted and misunderstood. Phelan’s work is post-production. This is the social art of derailed thoughts and endless digressions. Phelan claims to remove his individuality from the work, and yet we must ask if this is really possible. In this darkened mirror we see ourselves, our absurdities, our fears, and our hopes reflected. It is a post-action post-consumerist questioning that is directed specifically to the ‘id’, the source of instinctual impulses and demands for immediate satisfaction of primitive needs. Nothing is new here, there is nothing to see, and yet... we are being held accountable only to ourselves by the very provision of what is very much with each of us!

Noel Kelly – The Art Projects Network

Alan Phelan was born in Dublin 1968 where he lives and works. He graduated from DCU, Dublin, 1989 and RIT, New York, 1994. Solo exhibitions include a Tulca Visual Arts Festival, Galway Arts Centre, 2003-04; ‘Three Stories’, South Dublin County Council, ‘In Context’ public art project 2001; Limerick City Gallery and Triskel, Cork, 2000; Arthouse, Dublin, with Jim Dingilian, 1998. Recent group shows include ‘Country’, Equurna Gallery, Ljubjana, Slovenia and ‘EV+A Imagine Limerick’, Limerick City Gallery, 2004; ‘Appendiks 1’, Thiemers magasin, Copenhagen; ‘Affinity Archive’, The Metropolitan Complex, Dublin, and ‘Permaculture’, Project, Dublin, 2003;

'Crawford Open 3', Crawford Municipal Gallery, Cork, 'Perspective 2002', Ormeau Baths Gallery, Belfast; 'Fabulations of Form', Arthouse, Dublin. He co-curated with Jane Speller 'No Respect' public art project, 2004; with Tom Keogh 'Stand Fast Dick and Jane', Project, Dublin, 2001; and 'Things We Do', 2000, Arthouse, Dublin. He has also writes regularly for SSI publications and Circa magazine. Forthcoming projects include a Broadband commission for the Department of Communications, Marine, and Natural Resources.