PROJECT ARTS CENTRE

A VOO DOO FREE PHEN OME NON

Garrett Phelan

Curated by Tessa Giblin

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To wink in the sunshine of learning and religion

Garrett Phelan's newly commissioned project comprises two new video works and sculpture. One of the video works is divided between a storytelling monologue and a dramatically filmed grouping of ambiguous gold objects. The second is a throbbing animation, both hand drawn and computer animated, flicking through many of Phelan's most emblematic images. Real and imagined encounters with ancient monuments and relics here intersect with electronic objects and signifiers, becoming a ruse for a deeper exploration of personal politics, the desire to decipher the world, and the limits of our understanding.

The ancient sites around the world where monuments of prehistory have survived the ravages of time are enigmatic to their core. Their meaning, purpose and authority are beyond our conventional wisdoms, yet scholars from wide fields of study gravitate towards them as places of discovery or as mirrors of their knowledge. One of the oldest surviving sites, the 5,000 year old Newgrange in County Meath, Ireland, sits protected below a large mound of earth, an island-like territory bounded by the River Boyne. Long steeped in folklore, its survival may be due in part to the mysticism that grew around the site throughout the ages. Through orientation and construction, winter solstice sunlight is breathtakingly channelled through an opening above the entrance and into an inner chamber, as the rising sunrays extend over the nearby hills. Druids, archaeologists, astronomers, priests, pagans, politicians, midwives, scientists, artists and mystics have all found elements of their beliefs reflected in neolithic sites whether they attempt to unlock that meaning, or relish the conjecture and hypotheses such a site attracts.

Investments of imagination in these dark tunnels and majestic stones will conceivably continue. These sites are ancient manifestations of deep history that connect us to time, ecology and wisdom with an unnervingly tangible proximity. They are a portal to the belief systems that have populated human history, but are also portals to people. Lucy Lippard writes in her book *Overlay*, "When I cross a moor on which no tree, habitation or person is visible, and come upon a ring of ragged stones, a single roughhewn pillar, a line curving away over a hill, a gently rounded mound or cairn of stones, I know this is human-made. I think neither of a boundless nature nor of gods or goddesses, but of the *people* who made these places."

This mark of man was again traced by Icelandic runic expert Professor Finn Magnusson, at the famous Runamo rock in Sweden. As the sole scholar of the extinct language, Magnusson transcribed and translated the extensive inscriptions on the rock face, presenting an elaborate poetic description of an ancient battle victory to the world. These lines and etchings were subsequently and embarrassingly proven by geologists to be just cracks and shifts in the rock formation over time. And yet, Magnusson's debunked translations still have a profound influence on Scandinavian literature. As our spiritual and scientific belief systems ebb and flow, the next overwriting the one before it, these stones still remain standing around the world. As John Michell observes of Stonehenge in his book *Megalithomania*, it is as though "it was specially designed to accommodate every notion that could possibly be projected onto it." A deliberate, enduring tabula rasa to confound the minds of people throughout the ages.

Garrett Phelan, Ethereal Assemblage – Undiscovered Celtic Gold Neumann U86 Microphone and 1 Watt FM Transmitter Case with Schematics Carved Exterior 2500 BC, clay, 22 karat gold leaf, bronze glass 67cm x 73cm, water based matt emulsion paint, 15m microphone cable, three pole XLR connectors (male/female). A VOODOO FREE PHENOMENON, Project Arts Centre, 2015



Clearing away the decoding efforts, the unlocking of symbolism or carbon dating of fibres, there is an enormous attraction and liberation brought about by the unknown, by the mystical complexity rather than clarity. Garrett Phelan's journey through storytelling and the meaning we project onto these manifestations is as serious as it is wry. He understands these sites to be impervious to the cultural baggage we ourselves seem unable to shed, the stones repelling millennia of social, religious or political attempts at conceptual colonisation, and thus standing alone in space and time, beyond meaning.

Phelan uses the phenomena of meaning and purpose attributed to ancient monuments to question the power such ancient relics hold over us. He tunes us into their frequency, contradicting the aura of their ancientness, identifying them as things outside of time, or in his own words, in "the absolute present tense". He views these antiquated things as contemporary precisely because of the repetitive re-incarnation of their meaning – never known and thus never complete, reborn every time they are encountered, remembered or considered.

Ebbing, flowing and overlapping in Phelan's work are contradicting elements: electronics and nature, the autonomous self and the voodoo-afflicted citizen, the great unknown and the innately known. The electronic field provides Garrett Phelan's most consistent companion object. The microphone has accompanied decades of his art-making, in drawing, radio, sculptures, photography, performance events and video, appearing again and again, as image, tool, prop, device. Phelan sees the microphone as a conduit or mediator, a bridge between the given and the unknown, a device that can distort, distend, transmit and amplify. With a visible, fixed cable, and extended, limitless amplification, the microphone holds a place in his practice that is as much an object as it is a functioning tool. Within his field of engraved stones, it connects all that is concrete about the stones and their engravings, to all that is unknown in the cavernous blackness around them.

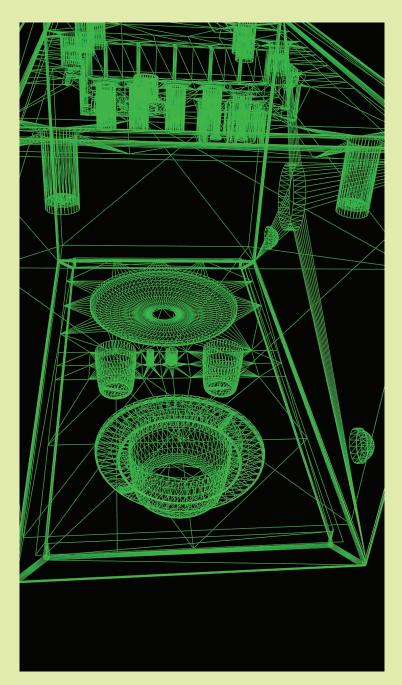
Phelan's approach in *A VOODOO FREE PHENOMENON* also echoes Magnusson's fanciful interpretations at Runamo. Amongst the gold-inflected objects, a one watt FM radioschematic becomes a language to be decoded, the obscure messages to be received. The effect of the filming recalls the illuminating light of a solstice channelled into a chamber where, as described by John Michell: "a watcher inside the chamber at dawn sees the entry of a thin, bright sunray which strikes the ornamented stones on the back wall and moves steadily across their faces, picking out one by one the various inscribed symbols. The effect is of a moving finger of light, spelling out a story in an unknown language." The roving eye of the camera

in Garrett Phelan's video, weaving in and out of the golden objects, revealing the curious electronic markings and creeping through the landscape, moves slowly – like a finger of light – and recalls the sensationally atmospheric and dramatic style of television documentary-making that injects life into the filming of very old things.

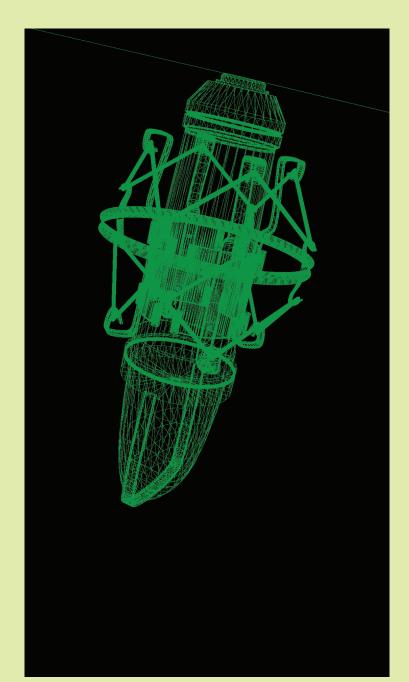
The elaborate objects and the monumental experience are, throughout the story, tethered to the presence of the artist's mother. His recollection of his anxious behaviour during his journey to the site during solstice, and his enduring regret for not getting her a place through the lottery-run admissions system, are almost as powerful as his remembrance of the event itself. As the memory of this extraordinary event becomes ever more deeply placed in the past, the emotion behind this most primal of mother-child relationships comes ever more closely to the fore – a naked conflation of the enormity of the unknown and the proximity of the innately known, and marking the sincerity of his desire to relate to both.

To paraphrase Dr William Stukely in his celebration of the Druids' achievements at Stonehenge, who had 'advanced their inquiries, under all disadvantages, to such heights as should make our moderns ashamed, to wink in the sunshine of learning and religion', Phelan is also winking in the golden light of these enigmas, but asking, chanting, inscribing, even demanding, can we ever really be free from inherited social practices? From the conditions and belief systems that shape and accompany us through our formative years and thereafter? Can we be free from institutions? Free from symbols? Free from cause? Free from history? It is an agonised position and these are agonised questions. But they are questions asked around the proximity of neolithic stones, of enduring objects which in Garrett Phelan's way of thinking may have achieved this idea of freedom. For they are things we know in part only.

Tessa Giblin, Curator of Visual Arts, Project Arts Centre



Garrett Phelan, Still from animation featuring a Neumanns U86 Studio Microphone – A VOODOO FREE PHENOMENON – Animation, 2014/2015



'High Hell', EUtopia: Agonised freedom

"Can we ever really be free from inherited social practices? From the conditions and belief systems that shape and accompany us through our formative years and thereafter? Can we be free from institutions? Free from symbols? Free from cause? Free from history?" The questions posed by Tessa Giblin in the context of Garrett Phelan's exhibition *A VOODOO FREE PHENOMENON* entice exploration.

Aldous Huxley prefaced his prescient 1932 satire, *Brave New World*, with a quote from the Russian philosopher, Nikolai Berdyaev;

Utopias seem to be much more attainable than one would have believed in other times. And we currently find ourselves faced with a different kind of agonizing question: How can one avoid their definitive attainment? ... Utopias are attainable. Life leads us toward utopias. Perhaps a new century will begin, a century in which ... [we] will dream again of ways to avoid utopias and to return to a non-utopian society, one less "perfect" and more free.²

Utopia is a *non-place* that has become – paradoxically – achievable. When an imagined form of an ideal is actualized, in contradiction to its definition as a *not-possible*-place, a realized utopia is a construction of intentional and potentially fulfilled desires. The logic and impact of this act of realization of a willed *impossible* produces a conflict in our sense of freedom, linking the notion of being free to feelings of both attainment and loss, constraint and release... 1. The desire to live free from *conditions* and *determinations* that might restrict each one from the 'good' of realizing their 'perfect freedom'. 2. The desire to be free from the 'evil' of an *unconditional freedom*. Such freedoms are seen to restrict the 'free flourishing' of the individual or community, through domination by the freedom of a sovereign will or state, by the 'masses', or by any one being or ideology.

Garrett Phelan,

A VOODOO FREE PHENOMENON
production image, 2014



A religious-existentialist thinker, Berdyaev based his philosophy on an ideal of 'free-thinking' and the power of 'unrestricted creativity', fused with the model of the Christ-like individualized-self as 'creator' (divine incarnation). This notion of 'creation' celebrates the idea of the artist as author of his own world and destiny; a universal-singular Humanism.

So... what do we talk about when we talk about freedom? What is at work when we talk as if we know what we're talking about when we talk about being free?

Is freedom something we *choose*, *have*, *lack*, or something we *are*? Is it an essential quality, an entitlement or an exemption from restriction? Is it something inherent in what makes us what we are, or something to be attained, acquired or granted?

Seeding what we now call *democracy* in all its simplified complexity, Article I of the 'Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen' (the first commandment of the French revolution), stated that "men are born and remain free and equal in rights". The first principle of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights is to recognize that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." The two declarations base themselves on a foundational language of 'rights and freedoms'. Upon these most basic tenets is built what we call 'modern society' in the historical context of secularized humanism: i.e. post-enlightenment, globalised, Europeanised society. Here absolute freedom can present itself as the most strived for aspiration, the ultimate impossibility and the most basic foundation and right – all at the same time.

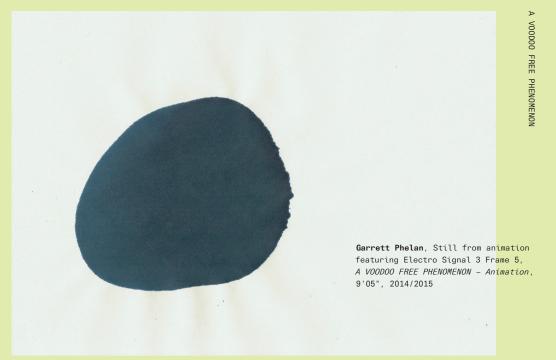
In this context, as posited by Immanuel Kant, the 'free-thinking individual' has a *duty* to assert his autonomous reason over dogmatic rules and dictates under the 'guidance of another' (as critical thinking rather than through pre-judged formulas). This statement ushered in the cultural space that allows us to assume that questions such as "can we ever really be free from inherited social practices ... conditions and belief ... institutions ... from cause ... from history?" are rational and possible to even *ask*, let alone answer.

For Kant however, 'the spirit of freedom', also connects the idea of the individual to that of the enlightened sovereign monarch. The sovereign (power, state or king) sets, guides, protects and polices the parameters of individual freedoms. Famously, Kant wrote his 1784 essay, 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?' by addressing the Prussian king, Frederick II:

But only a ruler who is himself enlightened and has no fear of phantoms, yet who likewise has at hand a well-disciplined and numerous army to guarantee public security, may say what no republic would dare to say: 'Argue, as much as you like and about whatever you like, but obey!' This reveals to us a strange and unexpected pattern in human affairs (such as we shall always find if we consider them in the widest sense, in which nearly everything is paradoxical). A high degree of civil freedom seems advantageous to a people's intellectual freedom [Freiheit des Geists], yet it also sets up insuperable barriers to it. Conversely, a lesser degree of civil freedom, gives intellectual freedom enough room to expand to its fullest extent. Thus once the germ on which nature has lavished most care – man's inclination and vocation to think *freely* – has developed within this hard shell, it gradually reacts upon the mentality of the people, who thus gradually become increasingly able to act freely. Eventually, it even influences the principles of governments, which find that they can themselves profit by treating man, who is more than a machine, in a manner appropriate to his dignity.3

This gives rise to the question of the individual subject's rights and how these freedoms and tensions manifest when there is more than one person involved. Seen in one way, the liberal question thus becomes one of a 'being-at-war': how can we be liberated from the restrictions that others' freedoms and other things put on our freedoms? Article 29 (2) of the Declaration of Human Rights states: "In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and

10/11



freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society." This notion and ideal of this form of 'democracy' is based on an attempt to conceive of a democracy *with* autonomy, where 'individual freedoms' and society are bound together, often antagonistically. It explains why a major concern of 'law' is 'property' – the question of what is proper, and to *who*?

So, what do we talk about when we talk about freedom? When we ask the questions: can we ever be free from ...? or can we be free for ...? or free to ...? are we speaking about the same thing? Are we just free as we are, to choose what and how we are to be? ... is this something that can be given to or taken from us, or can we give it away? Is freedom a right or a privilege, and which freedom do we have a right to? If there are freedoms in the plural, then ... what do we talk about when we talk about a singular notion of Freedom? Is 'it' a feeling or an affect, a legal state, a fact or an attitude, an existential state, a way of being or an experience or a practice? Or is it an illusion? Did modernity 'invent' the sense of freedom when it identified the free-thinking individual? Was this a liberation from the servitude of being a part of something other than the individual? Or is being free to be set apart from an autocratic self-rule? Is it possible to invent a sense?

Does 'to be free' mean anything at all or is it a freedom from meaning? A freedom from all determination and a being free to determine? But, is freedom from all determination an impossibility, or an absurdity, or a fundamentally descriptive truth prior to all determinations? At the very least, we could say we are determined by our finiteness, by the fact that we will eventually die. Regardless of what we define our 'being' as, regardless of our position in relation to 'free will', regardless of what we hope, decide or choose, the fact that we will no longer be, is something we can consider as an essentialising unfreedom. It is an unfreedom that we are constituted by, that challenges every idea and ideal of freedom and free will. And yet it is precisely this finite being that is the very sense of being free. Whether it exhibits itself as anxiety, indifference, denial, avoidance, disgust, rejection, fear, disavowal, acceptance, 'flying in the face of...', or amor fati, our relation to death is perhaps the ultimate and most basic example of our situation – we are (not) free (to choose) to avoid our unfreedoms.

Before 'inherited social practices ... conditions and belief ... institutions ... cause ... history', *finitude* and *mortality* and *context* define our relation to freedom and existence. They also therefore define our relation to both our singularity and our commonality. For no-one emerges into life with no circumstances, attachments, history or precursors. No-one 'creates' the particular conditions that gave them their particular fact of 'being'. When someone dies, what happens to what 'remains' – the legacy and memory as much as the literal corpse – tells us about the rituals and values of the groupings they belonged to. In this way, the *unfree* state of being finite gives us an awareness of 'the sense of freedom' as our possibility and impossibility.

While we sense what it means and how it feels when we speak of 'being free' or 'having' freedom, there is perhaps a more overtly physical and palpable feeling in the injustice of not being free. We even have the saying 'a taste of freedom'. What does it mean then to say we sense we are free or unfree? Misquoting Augustine's famous quote (on Time) we could say 'what, then, is freedom? If no one asks us, we know; if we wish to explain to him who asks, we know not.' Or as Jean-Luc Nancy says in his book The Experience of Freedom, "nevertheless we know – by means of another knowledge no less incontestable but kept in some way discreet, if not ashamed – that "freedoms" do not grasp the stakes of "freedom".

Freedom is often defined as a 'negative' condition, getting its sense in relation to an absence: an absence of some restriction, a privation or a renunciation, freedom as a condition of not being, or of not being restrained from. (We hear this in the phrase "to give free rein to..." as well as in the puritan-consumer spirit of our "free-from" food products).

Is freedom always tied to the striving between mastery and slavery, enfranchisement and entrapment? Are these the same agonistic set of relationships, bound together in a dialectical struggle where each defines the other?

What images or symbols come to mind when thinking about freedom from 'inherited social practices ... conditions and belief ... institutions ... cause ... history'? Images of looking out towards the open horizon? A sea or desert, an open road or mountain range stretching out before us, without any barrier restricting our view or holding us back from our potential progress towards an undetermined future? Gazing across an 'ocean of possibility' is often one of the most familiar metaphors or images of freedom. I was contemplating Tessa's questions which stemmed from Garrett Phelan's exhibition and the influence that the culture and history of autonomy have on the 'object' of contemporary art. In the context of the current crises of freedoms, three images or symbols imposed themselves on me, trapped my thinking, making me feel paralysed, while at the same time accentuating the sense of my freedoms. Each image seems tied to the next;

1

Caspar David Friedrich's iconic painting *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* of 1818. A man stands centred with his back to us, in a celebration and embodiment of the humanist ideal of the romantic artist. A literal end-point of one-point perspective, perhaps he has or *is* the camera, recording his experience of 'wandering above the sea of fog'... apparently disconnected from 'inherited social practices... conditions and belief... institutions... cause... history'.

2

Turner's painting *Slave Ship* (*Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On*) with which he paired with lines from a poem he was writing entitled 'Fallacies of Hope';

Aloft all hands, strike the top-masts and belay; Yon angry setting sun and fierce-edged clouds Declare the Typhoon's coming.

Before it sweeps your decks, throw overboard The dead and dying – ne'er heed their chains Hope, Hope, fallacious Hope!

Where is thy market now?

Garrett Phelan, Ethereal Assemblage – Undiscovered Celtic Gold Neumann U86 Microphone and 1 Watt FM Transmitter Case with Schematics Carved Exterior 2500 BC, (detail), 2015, clay, 22 karat gold leaf, bronze glass 67cm × 73cm, water based matt emulsion paint, 15m microphone cable, three pole XLR connectors (male/female). A VOODOO FREE PHENOMENON, Project Arts Centre



3

The phrase "cause of death: hope". From the safe distance and comfort of my home, I encountered this phrase in an article in Der Spiegel Online International⁶ entitled 'Tourists and Refugees cross paths in the Mediterranean'. It is an epitaph engraved on a commemorative plaque: a memorial to Moharam Walid and five other Egyptians who died in 2013, drowned in waters off the Lido Verde beach resort after attempting to cross the Mediterranean sea. After a significant period of time wandering, I imagine these six singular individuals, with different stories, had looked out to sea towards 'EUtopia', sharing dreams of having a share in its enfranchisement. But EUtopia is a franchise which is granted by historical and political circumstances... 'inherited social practices... conditions and belief... institutions... cause... history,' and only then can be 'taken for granted' as a right. These rights may allow us, if we wish, to question the 'inherited social practices... conditions and belief... institutions... cause... histories' and politics that lay claim to us, that become restrictions to our and other's 'freedom'.

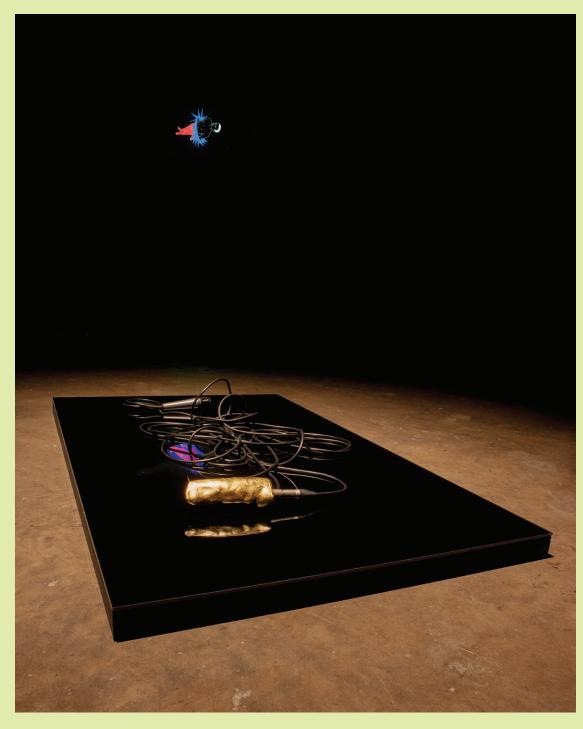
Has being free now become reduced to mean the freedom to choose to use that freedom as a protection mechanism to ensure our own freedoms? Has the freedom of the individual come to mean a reduction to the situation of a slave which, unlike being under an obligation and freed by a set of support structures, can only happen through being atomized and "forcibly removed from all those networks of mutual obligation and debt in which ordinary people acquired their outward identities. This was why... [slaves can] be bought and sold"?

Sometimes a typographic error can appear more evocative than any intentional writing. In the article in Der Spiegel Online International, the tension created by our different senses of what we talk about when we talk about freedom is summed up in one typo: "She watches female tourists walk past her in high hells..." An imperfect haiku to the confusion and agony felt in our different ideas of freedom[s].

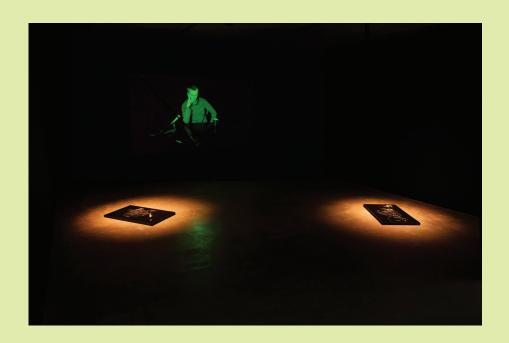
Sinéad Hogan

- Giblin, Tessa. Exhibition text accompanying A
 VOODOO FREE PHENOMENON GARRETT
 PHELAN, Project Arts Centre, Dublin: 30 January
 – 9 April 2015
- 2 Huxley, Aldous, Brave New World. Rosetta Books Electronic editions, New York: 2000, p.13.
- 3 Kant, Immanuel. An Answer To The Question: 'What Is Enlightenment?'. (Trans. H.B. Nisbet), Penguin Books: London, 1991, p.9
- 4 http://www.un.org/en/universal-declarationhuman-rights/
- 5 Nancy, Jean-Luc, The Experience of Freedom.

- (Trans. Bridget McDonald), Stanford University Press: California, 1993, p. 2–3
- 6 Article by Özlem Gezer, Frank Hornig, Martin Knobbe, Walter Mayr, Maximilian Popp and Helene Zuber. Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan. http://www.spiegel.de/ international/europe/tourists-and-refugesscross-paths-in-the-mediterranean-a-1046969.html (accessed 10/8/2015).
- 7 Graeber, David, Debt: The First 5000 Years. Melville House Publishing, 2014.



Garrett Phelan, installation view featuring Ethereal Assemblage — Shure S-2020 Microphone and Undiscovered Celtic Gold 2500 BC and A VOODOO FREE PHENOMENON — Animation, Project Arts Centre, 2015



Garrett Phelan, Still from A VOODOO
FREE PHENOMENON, film, 2014

Garrett Phelan, Installation view featuring two Ethereal Assemblage sculptures and A VOODOO FREE PHENOMENON, film, Project Arts Centre, 2015

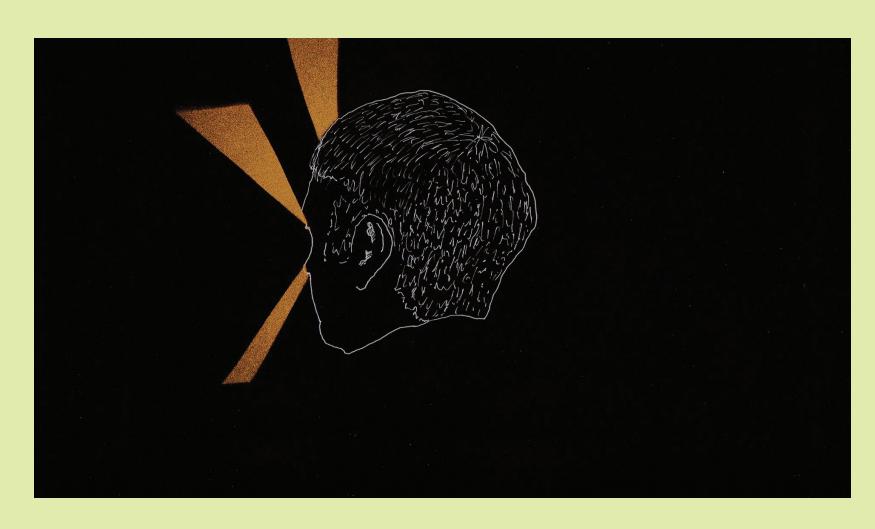


List of Works

Garrett Phelan

- 1. A VOODOO FREE PHENOMENON, 2014 Film, Duration 28:31
- 2. A VOODOO FREE PHENOMENON, 2014/2015
 - Animation, Duration 9:05
- 3. Undiscovered Love Menhir Celtic Gold 2500 BC -A VOODOO FREE PHENOMENON, 2014 Clay, 22 karat gold leaf
- 4. Ethereal Assemblage MD-4000 Microphone and Undiscovered Celtic Gold 2500 BC - A VOODOO FREE PHENOMENON, 2014 Clay, 22 karat gold leaf, 15m microphone cable, three pole XLR connectors (male/female), 6mm black glass 130cm × 80cm, mdf plinth 4cm × 130cm × 80cm
- 5. Ethereal Assemblage Shure S 2020 Microphone and Undiscovered Celtic Gold 2500 BC - A VOODOO FREE PHENOMENON, 2014 Clay, 22 karat gold leaf, 15m microphone cable, three pole XLR connectors (male/female), 6mm black glass 130cm × 80cm, mdf plinth 4cm × 130cm × 80cm
- 6. Ethereal Assemblage Undiscovered Celtic Gold Neumann U 86 Microphone and 1 Watt FM Transmitter Case with Schematics carved exterior 2500 BC - A VOODOO FREE PHENOMENON, 2015, Clay, 22 karat gold leaf, bronze glass 67cm × 73cm, water based matt emulsion paint, 15m microphone cable, three pole XLR connectors (male/female)





Garrett Phelan, Still from animation featuring figure head, A VOODOO FREE PHENOMENON – Animation, 9'05", 2014/2015

Biographies

Garrett Phelan (b. 1965, Dublin) has developed a distinctive practice through ambitious, site-specific projects that include drawing, independent FM radio broadcasts, sculptural installations, photography, animation and text ephemera. Recent solo exhibitions and commissions include HEED FM, ART 2016, Arts Council of Ireland, Dublin, 2016; THE HIDE PROJECT, Fingal County Council, Dublin, 2016. A VOODOO FREE PHENOMENOM, Project Arts Centre, Dublin, 2015; NEW FAITH LOVE SONG at Irish Museum of Modern Arts. Dublin, 2012; ELECTROMAGNETIC PHENOMENON at Context Gallery, Derry 2011; Between two ITs, SMART Project Space, Amsterdam, 2010; and group exhibitions at EVA International, Limerick, 2014; Palais des Beaus-Arts de Bruxelle, 2013; AIR de Lyon, Buenos Aires, 2012; Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 2012; 11th Biennale de Lyon, 2011.

Sinéad Hogan is an art researcher, and lecturer on the Art and Research Collaboration MA (ARC) and the BA in Art programmes, Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire. Her writing, teaching and research concentrates on the cross-over between art and philosophy, with a particular focus on the role of aesthetics in an 'other-than-Art' context.

A VOODOO FREE PHENOMENON

Garrett Phelan

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