

Michael Hanna, 'Behaviour Setting'
By Slavka Sverakova

Delightful generosity of spirit and academic erudition of Dr Declan Long, who wrote the catalogue essay, have not prepared me for the visual beauty of the animation of patterns in Gallery One, nor for the immersive environment in Gallery Two. There, in the dark blue darkness one screen starts at the beginning, its close neighbour at the end. In an elegant overview of Michael Hanna art practice before the current exhibition, Long's thoughtful focus reflected on the historical and theoretical scaffolding of Hanna's three previous exhibitions.

Two of Long's rich list of concepts would appear as a universal frame in relation to Hanna's Behaviour Setting. One is Lucy Lippard's belief that "the most exciting art might still be buried in social energies not yet recognized as art" and the other is Terry Smith's proposition "The most common forms of art today are provocative testers, doubt-filled gestures, equivocal objects, tentative projections, diffident propositions, or hopeful anticipations". Navigating between excavating buried exciting forms and most common forms, is akin navigating between Scylla and Charybdis, a rock and a whirlpool. The insecurity of an open-ended negotiation of possibilities lost its elitist status somewhat, when it re-appeared also in some pop lyrics (The Police 1983 ad Trivium 2008). Important contemporary art can originate anywhere and in any form. This silent reference to F. Nietzsche received recently unintentional support. One method for successful navigation between exciting and common has been insistent image. Some artists repeat fragments to gain new meaning through new juxtapositions. Currently, there is one exhibition dedicated precisely to the idea of recurrence as life affirmation. The Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art celebrates its 30th anniversary with The Insistent Image: Recurrent Motifs in the Art of Shepard Fairey and Jasper Johns (access on <http://www.halsey.cofc.edu>). Both Fairey and Johns recycle elements and repeat fragments transforming something common into something exciting by reworking the surrounding, the environment within each format. Shepard Fairey (b 1970) proposes that his images celebrate and critique Americana like the emphasis on cars, gas stations, oil logos. Jasper Johns (b 1930) trusts recurrent motifs and themes including flags, targets, galaxies, gestures from American Sign Language, and fragments of works by famous artists such as Picasso, Holbein, da Vinci, and George Ohr to forge a meaning strikingly different from the expected. However, insistent images are not markers of a particular style. Rene Magritte even added a cognitive play to stress the sovereignty of concept over a particular motif or style. *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (1928/9) insists on the gap between the object and its painted image. Equally though, it puts strong emphasis on the relationship of the visual and verbal. Applying "une" and not "la" dissipates the semantic range to any pipe. In turn, that open-endedness makes the first relationship between the visual and verbal compromised. I find that Hanna harvests some of the salient points: that an image has a stable semantic relationship with the verbal is not secure each comment on the other and both play with our instinctive need for a bind between them a deliberate didactic to subvert our habit to think that words are less ambiguous than images; like Magritte, Hanna demonstrates that the verbal is neither true nor wrong in relation to the visual.

Hanna also embraced the Fairey – Johns model in both installations and their immediate environment. He commented in an email: "The Arts Centre had extensive work done leading up to the exhibition to enable full environmental control. The visual material is a

combination of text, video and animation, all batch processed to uniformity.” (9 January 2014). The word “uniformity” does not mean a boring sameness, rather I sense in it a search for aesthetic impact, hinted upon in his other comment: “one of the interesting findings for me in making this work was that due to the production process (which includes the complete removal of the colour red) the video is extremely sensitive to the particular piece of technology on which it is shown, varying widely and refusing any form of colour ‘correction’.” (email 10th January 2014) That would explain the warm earth colour, and not this green hue, when I watched it.

The exhibition officer Geraldine Boyle described, and illustrated the changes with the four following images:

Michael made a number of significant changes to the gallery environment for Behaviour Setting. In Gallery One the roof window panels were blacked out to make the space significantly darker and to control the light. The windows at the front of the building were also covered but using a lighter material to allow some light through (see photo: Entrance and walkway entrance)

There are usually three entrances into Gallery 2; two entrances from gallery 1 and another from a back hallway. However for this exhibition Michael covered one of the entrances to Gallery 2 (see photo: door)

– this doorway is probably the most used leaving the ‘walkway bridge’ entrance relatively unused. The doorway was covered to encourage audience (especially returning visitors) to use the walkway entrance (see photo: entrance and walkway entrance) thus changing and manipulating the regular flow of the space. On the wall above reception Michael installed a large panel of acoustic foam to dampen the sound downstairs (see photo: foyer).

The large custom built wall/screen in gallery 1 measures height 3.6m x width 6.4m.

The single large screen in Gallery One

Gallery 2 – This space is completely dark – we picked a very dark blue paint to coat the walls and ceilings making the space even darker – this colour matches the carpet in Gallery 2 making it a unified space. Michael used soft beanbags for seating in Gallery 2 instead of wooden benches. There are two screens/walls in gallery 2 – each measuring height 2.56m x width 4.55m (the screens meet the ceiling).

The sound volume is slightly different between the two spaces but the same sound flows through both galleries simultaneously. The video piece in Gallery 1 is approx. 22 minutes and differs from the two videos in Gallery 2. The video pieces in gallery 2 are the same as each other but one runs backwards. (email 10th January 2014)

The relationship between the two installations, one large screen in Gallery One and two smaller screens in darkened Gallery Two is a wonderful play on what lingers in memory when watching one first and then the other. The same sound, the same images, somewhat altered, yet, admitting identity. The dissimilarity of the similar (borrowed from V. Shklovsky, Bowstring) forges the cognitive and aesthetic ground for delights of instant discoveries.

The animation is fast and witty.

There is a grid, truthfully flat, then it lifts of the plane and scurries behind the screen in a convincing optical illusion.

Hanna juxtaposes behaviour of parts in a whole in both the rationally two-dimensional pattern or patterns of a living organism.

There is lightness, humour, wit, play, hard nosed research, virtuosity of the lens based work – all relishing in the visual force, the electronic sound clearly staying in the supporting role. It is quite beautiful sound.

The recurrence of insistent element/image/word crosses over from sculpture to the lens based medium, for example 'uh-oh' exists as plastic relief and as a ephemeral screen.

The stills I use here are only inept illustration of the feast for the eye and soul I experienced when visiting this superb exhibition.