

One and One and One and One

'Women can't add he said once jokingly, when I asked him what he meant, he said for them one and one and one and one don't make four. What do they make I said, expecting five or three. Just one and one and one and one he said'.

Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

The American painter Philip Guston once recalled a remark that he later attributed to the composer John Cage; *'When you start working, everybody is in your studio - the past, your friends, your enemies, the art world and above all your own ideas - all are there. But as you continue painting they start to leave, one by one and you are left completely alone. Then if you are lucky, even you leave'.* (1)

For the artist Lyndall Phelps, this proposition is quite the reverse to a working practice that she has developed over the last ten years. Despite often working solitarily in the context of her own home it seems that Phelps, psychologically at least, invites those friends, family members, strangers and acquaintances, living or dead, to share with her in the very act of making itself. They are 'summoned' in spirit through Phelps' tireless research into historical records, archives and the pages of well-thumbed manuscripts, congregating in the artist's living room-cum-studio, in those grabbed hours between life's necessities of working, eating and sleep.

This re-visiting of historical events, both private and public, is fundamental to Phelps' art. She is adept at plundering the junk-shop world of curios and distilling from its refuse poignancy and purpose. Much of the work grows tenderly from anecdote and narrative, uncovered through research and word of mouth. There is often an undercurrent of injustice that permeates these stories particularly with reference to the subjugation of women and their representation throughout history. Not that these are sensationalised or overtly political, rather they are the events, the customs and recollections that are half-forgotten, half-observed - archaeological digging in a scrapbook of fragmented lives.

Her source material conveys a daring eclecticism and wide field of reference: scientific journals, hunting magazines, needlework, criminology, militaria, entomology etc. *Enigma* for example, the prefix for a number of Phelps' recent works, is taken from a publication entitled *The Ladies Diary* that remarkably dates back to 1704. Within the publication, written by men and marketed to women, is a regular feature comprising of puzzles or cryptic clues, 'enigmas' awaiting solution. These are not the stuff of serious scholarly practice, but populist science, the one-word answers to which, taken from journals spanning a one hundred and fifty year period, create a compelling litany...

Alphabet
Shadow
Echo
Oyster
Fire
Bastard
Darkness
Jealousy
Pen...

nouns, verbs, adjectives - a 'ready-made' stream of consciousness inviting individual speculation and meaning. Phelps has taken this word-list as the starting point for *Enigma 3: The Entomologist* (2004) in which she has hand-embroidered onto satin the individual words, encasing them in a sample box sourced from an entomology supply store and used for the collection of butterflies and moths. Presented formally in a grid within the gallery space, its perceived order and internal logic, paradoxically, only serves to create new questions, new codes, new enigmas. It is as much a mystification as it is a de-mystification. Her patient needlework is a reciprocal investment of the time and energy of the women's original endeavour.

In this respect Phelps' practice is forever at one removed from direct re-making or re-enactment, it is not a literal interpretation but an empathetic gesture to recall or to align oneself with a historical position. Her work succeeds in maintaining equilibrium between the potency of history and its interpretation into artistic form, making it relevant and purposeful to contemporary audiences. The artist Paul Ramirez Jonas writes; '*I think that when I retrace other's endeavours, I become implicated and imagine that I am sharing the similar feelings and thoughts as the original source.*' He goes on; '*something quite frightening happens in this process. In some measure, individual time is destroyed. I can feel an overwhelming feeling of identification with its maker. I can be taken over by a lack of differentiation between myself and that other me of a couple of thousand years ago.*' (2)

The scientific reference continues in *Enigma 2: The Scientist* (2004) in which Phelps presents a row of 100 test tubes, its linearity in the gallery a tide-mark on the wall. The work derives from a once familiar needlework custom of stuffing the unused thread-ends into glass rods that were later wax-sealed. Their purpose is at once decorative and diaristic; the pattern of the amassing colours, the result of fate and yet the trigger for strong personal associations logical only to their makers recalling a specific time and place.

It maybe serendipitous perhaps that the term 'enigma' refers back to the Second World War and the achievements of a large number of women who worked to crack German military code at Bletchley Park. Later thanked by Churchill as 'chickens' who laid 'without clucking', their duties, as well as intercepting intelligence, included the calculation of firing tables to determine the timing and trajectory of missiles. Coincidentally, a recent project *Untitled* (2003), takes the form of 'target balls'. These are blown glass, hollow spheres, exquisitely crafted and etched with the artist's name. Pre-dating clay pigeons, they were first used for shooting practice by Victorian huntsmen and women. In this work and other recent projects, despite Phelps' near recluse lifestyle, there is an intriguing readiness to engage other professions and disciplines, be it glassblowers, engravers, horticulturists, engineers, marksmen or antique dealers - the practice becomes increasingly inclusive.

The glass balls contain plumes of feathers that explode with the impact of bullet hitting glass, giving that moment of death a more sinister reality. The sculptural beauty of these objects and their graceful arching flight belies the violence and sobriety of their eventual fate. It is a device often employed by Phelps; the creation of an exquisitely crafted object, its beauty cloaked in pathos and subverted by negating its everyday function; a threadbare safety-net (*Safety-net*, 2003 – ongoing) crocheted by the artist and suspended too close to the floor to break a person's fall. Or an emergency rope (*Rope*, 2001 - ongoing) that grows like a fairy-tale beanstalk and disappears into the ceiling, and a ladder, its wooden rungs substituted with hollow glass bars, rendering it useless.

There is a fragility, a quivering moment of impending danger that lingers in the work and yet the conversation of 'death' is also invoked in other ways. Phelps' art is one of quiet reflection and contemplation, it is a witness to time as much as a measure of the hours and days invested by the artist. The British painter George Shaw once said that '*we work to fill the space that we leave behind when we die.*' (3) Here it seems that each stitch made by the artist, each threaded bead marks a specific time and place embodying a dark acknowledgement of time's mortal conclusion.

In *Enigma 1: The Anthropologist* (2004) Phelps appears to be warding off the inevitable eventuality. Suspended from the ceiling are fifty tear-drop-like, glass-blown sculptures. They are proportioned to be cupped in the palm of a hand, to be taken with you to the grave and referred to by the artist as 'amulets' articulating a world of superstition and myth. Each object is tirelessly worked on and has hanging from its base a rosary-like string of beads, all hand-threaded, the pattern and order seemingly illustrating a distinctive code or logic. Although there is a remarkable intensity in this work and the sheer volume of invested hours is a vital component, for Phelps the idea of an all-encompassing 'work ethic' never quite becomes the focus of the artistic content but rather the method through which objects are realised - the labour is subservient to the narrative.

In a new body of work currently being developed, Phelps' consciously engages the obsessive tendency in her own practice. Here she has created a suite of embroidered canvas panels each carrying a pre-selected text, again hand-embroidered and sourced from psychoanalytical text. They take as their subject matter the comments of patients with obsessive compulsive disorders, using their statements directly as the content of the artwork. They read; '*I spend a lot of time each day repeating things over and over again*' and another; '*I usually count when doing a routine task.*' The panels are exquisitely self-referential, embodying an engaging internal logic. For Phelps the relationship between invested work and 'product return' is an ambiguous terrain, but it would be wrong to suggest that the hours devoted are ultimately a statement of its futility or pointlessness. For there is always a governing logic, a wider historical context and a rationale that validates the artist's endeavour.

Indeed, there is no worthy sentiment of working for working's sake; in a time-poor culture, Phelps' art is quietly subversive. It is an act of accumulation and continual investment. It is an evolving document that bears witness to a practice that is often solitary, refined and possessing a modesty that belies the profundity of its engagement with the very heart of human experience. It would be remarkable to count the seconds, the minutes, the hours that has gone into this body of work, but for the artist they remain simply seconds, minutes and hours, there is no sum of its parts, no final solution to the 'enigma' - there is just a means if not quite an end.

Michael Stanley
Director, Milton Keynes Gallery

Commissioned by firstsite, Colchester, to accompany *Enigma*, 2004.

1. Barry Schwabsky, *One Percent Frize*, Bernard Frize, Ikon Gallery, 2003, p.6
2. Paul Ramirez Jonas, *Everybody One at a Time, All the Time*, Paul Ramirez Jonas in dialogue with Daniel Bozhkov, *Heavier Than Air*, Paul Ramirez Jonas, Ikon Gallery, 2004
3. Taken from a conversation between George Shaw and Michael Bracewell from *What I Did This Summer*, Ikon Gallery, 2003, p.12