

## Michael Hanna: *Behaviour Setting*

by Declan Long

### 1.

One of the notable ways that contemporary art has functioned in the wake of Conceptualism has been as a space for the presentation of curious, unlikely or extreme propositions. “Art” has become a means of enabling eccentric articulation and open-ended action. Rather than concentrating on the presentation of clearly defined and resolved art objects, artists working in the conceptual slipstream have relished the opportunity to imaginatively speculate or artistically *instigate*, to make out-of-the-ordinary proposals or, in one way or another, to set processes in motion. Writing in the early 1970s, Lucy Lippard noted how conceptual artists had allowed themselves to be “unfettered by object status” and so became “free to let their imaginations run rampant.”<sup>i</sup> This freedom led some cool-headed conceptualists to take “a clear-eyed look at what and where art was supposed to be”, while allowing others, with somewhat wilder artistic inclinations, to propose visions of “a new world and the art that would reflect or inspire it.” One outcome of such hoped-for expansion of the place and potential of art was, in Lippard’s view, a promising, continuing sense that “the most exciting ‘art’ might still be buried in social energies not yet recognized as art.” Today, a great deal of surprising and engaging art is discovered and deployed in just this way, revealing itself in unexpected places, behaving in unorthodox ways, and crucially remaining, as the curator Nicolas Bourriaud has said of the ‘relational aesthetics’ of the 1990s, “on the edge of any definition.”<sup>ii</sup> In his recent book *What is Contemporary Art?* the American critic Terry Smith puts forward a set of loosely shared characteristics that might apply to the art of the present: “The most common forms of art today”, Smith suggests, are “provocative testers, doubt-filled gestures, equivocal objects, tentative projections, diffident propositions, or hopeful anticipations”<sup>iii</sup>. Such variously quizzical and critical tendencies, Smith argues, show how “in its forms and its contents, its meanings and its usages”, contemporary art has become “thoroughly questioning in nature, extremely wide-ranging in its modes of asking and in the scope of its inquiries.” Just as with “every other human activity”, he concludes, “art can be no more than provisional as to its expectations about answers.”

Such conceptual legacies — and such ongoing contemporary currents of thought and action — come to mind in the attempt to take account of the dizzying range of activities undertaken in the determinedly diverse art of Michael Hanna. In many ways, Hanna’s art continues to make much of the conceptual impulse to offer absurd speculations, taking unusual enjoyment in the inventive process of proposing small shifts in the ordinary state of things — one potential of which is to create little interruptions or glitches in what we casually understand as reality. And at the same time, Hanna’s art has appeal as an adventurously omnivorous way of engaging with our present-day reality. He takes on, or seems intent on taking on, almost everything: developing his art in the immediate context of his own body, or through tensions in personal relations, or by drawing from the strange depths and exciting surfaces of pop culture, or by looking to the study of linguistics or by auto-didactically learning from the psychological and sociological study of behaviour. There is no apparent limit to the possible array of scenarios within which his work might operate, as long as in

each case, perhaps, the art is somehow pressing against a pre-set limit *within* that scenario. At various moments, his art has sought to riskily test out the effect of particular actions in specific settings — considering, broadly, how the world works, and how, inevitably, it fails to work as you might wish it to — while also reflecting on the conditions of possibility of art itself. Hanna’s work has found novel — and even purposefully ludicrous — ways to wonder about how new things might come into being. He has sought to study how communication can take place — so too seeking to discover what the limits of ‘speech’ might be. And he has embarked on idiosyncratic research into how change can take place in the world, learning from the study of social manipulation, addressing the ways that behaviour might be altered, for good or bad.

## 2.

Perhaps my favourite moment in Hanna’s previous work is one that is typical of his knack for discovering the possibility of art in unexpected or inappropriate places, and for artistically behaving — or indeed misbehaving — in unorthodox ways. As part of the remarkable series *Calculated Errors*, which centred on his bizarre decision to “make mistakes in my life on purpose and secure funding to put right these mistakes,” Hanna indulged in one especially reckless screw-up: he resolved to say the wrong name when engaged in, let’s say, a moment of heightened intimacy with his girlfriend. Here, without doubt, is a striking attempt to exploit a “social energy not yet recognized as art.” But here too is a proposal to open a planned *idea* of art to a set of actual personal circumstances: the wrong name is spoken, the intimate ‘moment’ is lost, an argument perhaps ensues, old wounds may be opened ... who knows exactly what is entailed, who knows how this wrong name might cause damage as it is aired. (And this is of course a piece that combines ‘airing’ with ‘erring’.) Whether the artist’s partner had foreknowledge of the staged mistake or if she was caught in his conceptual act, the precise moment of mis-speaking commits a romantic *offence* and as such it carries a corresponding charge. Hanna’s mistakes, however carefully strategized in advance, trigger unpredictable consequences. Other episodes in this series allowed for equally radical — variously daring and daft — low-key calamities to take place in the name of testing an elaborate, serial art process. (Here, again, to use Terry Smith’s terms, are those “provocative testers, doubt-filled gestures.”) In one instance, Hanna made the purposefully foolish decision to have the word ‘unnecessary’ tattooed onto his torso; a mistake in itself, surely, but the main error on this occasion was that the word featured an intentional mis-spelling (an extra ‘c’ was added). It’s a gesture that points at a personal need to make a permanent statement, however trivial, but also at the hazards of such commitment. Another planned mishap saw him temporarily losing the ability to see, as a result of his decision to order a set of new glasses based on a wildly inaccurate and wholly impractical prescription. The resulting, ridiculous lenses would have strained the eyes and clouded any clear perspective. It’s an incident that could easily arise in daily life, but it might also be read as an irony-spiked allegory of a frustrating artistic struggle: new clarity of vision is sought, but the outcome is merely confusion and obfuscation.

Such errors, like the others in this series, are, then, mostly recognisable from everyday life — there are websites, for instance, devoted to tattoos with spelling mistakes — but the effort to strategically sabotage ordinary situations in this deliberate way is nonetheless a powerfully unusual and perverse mode of artistic

articulation. Hanna celebrates the promise of low-key crisis. He thrives on comic confusion as a form of ‘creation.’ And indeed, allusions to assorted forms of creation appear quite regularly in Hanna’s work — with creation being at all times a possibility and a puzzle. In 2012, for an exhibition entitled *The New Adventures of Wonder Woman* at Belfast’s PS2 gallery, Hanna responded to Dara Birnbaum’s 1978 video work *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (also featured in the exhibition) by returning to the origin myth of this Amazonian superhero, pointing to the circumstances of her creation. According to the Wonder Woman legend, she was a princess brought into being by Greek Goddesses — her form being fashioned from clay and given extraordinary, preternatural life. Hanna used this story to stage a situation of non-spectacular creative correspondence: laying a wet clay floor in the gallery and thus proposing a site from which a new figure of fantastical potency might yet be formed. As with much of Hanna’s work, this Wonder Woman narrative prompts the elaboration of a simultaneously ordinary and open situation. Visitors to the gallery enter into a space in which a foundation for future potential ‘emergence’ has been laid, and they leave afterwards with traces of the allusively magical raw material clinging to the soles of their shoes.

Hanna’s study of superhero origins sets up a preparatory scene — and it is one that draws an implicit connection between the work of an artist and the mythical creative abilities of Gods. But the link is, of course, a bathetically comical one: rather than causing revelatory transformation of base materials, the ‘art’ here is merely an accumulation of dirt. As such, the elevated ideals of a customarily pristine gallery space are, arguably, brought down to earth. A similar tension is evident in the very different work *Mouth Tank* from 2009: a piece in which Hanna sought to study and demonstrate the ways in which speech sounds are generated in the human mouth. Using the International Phonetic Alphabet — a catalogue of all sounds used in all international languages — Hanna created an immersive sound sculpture which showed to those who entered the structure how the specific elements of speech are formed. The practical oral processes of creating contact and pressure, of employing lubrication and causing vibration, are mimicked within the enclosed sculpture. Viewers of the work — who are more like listeners or participants — sit inside, as if they are sitting inside a mouth, gaining (potentially) something of the sensation of what it might be like to experience the forming of language from within. Once again, Hanna might be seen as establishing a situation that contemplates conditions of creative beginning — exploring the distinct biological ways in which human communication occurs — and as such there is presumed fascination with the plural possibilities of articulation. At the same time, however, given Hanna’s abiding spirit of trickster-ish mischief, it seems no accident that the structure utilised to make the sound sculpture is a 6000 litre septic tank. The mouth is a complex system capable of producing all the manifold, extraordinary varieties of language in human society, but it is also, it seems, comparable to a processing mechanism for sewage.

### 3.

In his remarkable 2011 documentary *All Watched Over By Machines of Loving Grace*, film-maker Adam Curtis describes numerous theories that place human creativity within the context of wider systems of control and manipulation. Whether these are ideas of ecosystems or cybernetic systems or computerised financial systems, Curtis explores various ways in which modern thinkers have asserted the

authority of the non-human in advocating particular versions of progress, or have understood the ‘human’ in machine terms, driven to produce and connect not by reason but by ‘selfish genes.’ Among the incidents cited in the film is a story about an experiment conducted in 1991 by a computer engineer called Loren Carpenter, which involved gathering hundreds of people together in order to test the ways in which they might be able to act collectively. Carpenter gave each member of his audience a small paddle — green on one side and red on the other — and, on a large screen at the front of the auditorium, displayed a version of the early computer game ‘Pong’.

Discovering that the paddles affected the movement of the game when flipped from the green side to the red side, the audience gradually began to work together in two vast groups, teaming up to play on each side of the electronic bat-and-ball encounter, but without communication or planning. The successful game that resulted was a startling illustration of what was described as a ‘hive mind’ phenomenon — the participating players making their decisions collectively but apparently without collective agreement. For Carpenter, the experiment suggested that human organisation could emerge without imposed order; for Curtis, it revealed the extent to which human societies might be subject to large-scale manipulation.

In contemplating the creative interests and inclinations of Michael Hanna’s work, it is important to consider how he has begun to lately draw on theories that correspond to the type of research collated in Curtis’s film. In preparation for his exhibition at the Millennium Court, Hanna has eclectically employed behavioural studies and theories of social and urban planning to consider how forms of control insidiously operate — and he has developed novel technological (and once again immersive) means to articulate elements of these complex studies. As ever with Hanna’s art, the outcomes appear ambitiously ‘open’. Ideas and processes are set in motion. But there is also an inevitable degree of trickery, complication and tension. We are taken to the limits of certain strains of contemporary thought, but — as we often find in today’s art — there can be no expectation of easy answers.

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<sup>1</sup> From the preface to Lucy Lippard’s *Six Years: The Dematerialization of Art from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997; first published 1973)

<sup>2</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002; first published in French 1998), p.25.

<sup>3</sup> Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p.2.