

NAME IN LIGHTS

Mary Paterson considers the meanings of fame in a new national competition and art installation by artist Joshua Sofaer, produced by Fierce! Festival in Birmingham.

Elvis Presley. Nelson Mandela. Posh and Becks. When is a name more than a person? And when does a person deserve A Name? This spring, in a national competition devised by the artist Joshua Sofaer, a new name will be written onto the public consciousness. Entry is open to all, and the prize is to see your name – or your mum’s name, or the name of your favourite celebrity – emblazoned in lights, twelve foot high, in Birmingham city centre. Each nomination for a name must be accompanied by up to 150 words which describe why that person should be chosen. There are all the normal ways to enter – email, text and post voting – and nominations will be judged by a panel of famous media experts. So far, so familiar. The prize offers instant celebrity, or at least notoriety, but the project’s web address – www.notcelebrity.co.uk – hints that all is not as simple as it seems.

Seeing your name in lights is an old fashioned way to be famous. It harks back to the days when Music Halls and Picture Houses advertised their stars’ names above the door. Maybe that was a better way to be famous than today’s high-speed celebrity turnaround – having your name in lights is more permanent than page 15 of Heat magazine. But whereas celebrity magazines nowadays feast on the ordinariness of their subjects – Britney with no makeup! – Paris eating a burrito! – the big celebrities of the past were defined by enigma and control. There is a poignant roll call of those whose name in lights disguised a private tragedy: Judy Garland, Marilyn Monroe, Billie Holiday.

The truth is, fame as an industry hides just as much now as it ever did. The managed, studio fame of the forties and fifties has simply been replaced by a managed, paparazzi fame of the nineties and noughties. There was nothing permanent about most music hall stars, just like there is nothing normal about the people featured in celebrity magazines. And yet there is something anachronistic about Sofaer’s combination of a contemporary format (the ubiquitous celebrity competition, itself in the midst of its own 15 minutes) with an old-fashioned prize (the industrial physicality of the name itself). However similar the mechanisms that create them, these are in fact the trappings of different definitions of fame. And by drawing the two elements together, *Name in Lights* not only explores these different meanings, but also examines the ways they are made.

Celebrity competitions are impossible to ignore. A new one starts just as another ends, following the same tried and tested format. Eager competitors (either people who want to be famous or people who want to be more famous) vie for an intangible prize (usually, but not explicitly, more fame); they are judged by a famous panel of ‘experts’, and voted for by you, the member of the audience. It’s a complex setup that *Name in Lights* seems to follow – centred on audience participation, but backed up by press coverage, supplementary programmes and the self-perpetuating fame of the judges and hosts.

In *SFMOMA Scavengers* in 2006, Joshua Sofaer organised a huge scavenger hunt throughout San Francisco. Members of the public were given tasks in the form of clues, and instructed to collect various materials in the hope of winning a cash prize. The winners took the cash but all the participants' entries were shown the next day in a temporary exhibition: Joshua Sofaer's exhibition. His visitors paid him so they could bring him the tools of *his* show – in return, they got a unique 'art experience' and a day of games around the city. Just who is in control here? – the artist, with his prescriptions for our enjoyment, or the public, on whose complicity the whole project depends?

Likewise, *Name in Lights*, and the make-me famous TV extravaganzas that it imitates, depends not just on our complicity in an artist's project but also, and more importantly, on our acceptance of the duplicitous mechanism of fame. There is a hidden winner in Sofaer's project. Basking behind the assumed democracy of mass participation, and the unexplained edifice of the 'life-changing' prize, is the artist himself. Ostensibly, the prize will make someone (else) famous, but the only certainty is that it will raise Sofaer's profile. Perhaps he has become an art world Simon Cowell – the industry insider who pretends to fulfil someone else's dream while he lines his own pockets.

Certainly, *Name in Lights* seems to reproduce the process at its core more faithfully, and less self-consciously, than *SFMOMA Scavengers*. The earlier project was a parody of the art world, which both feigns meritocracy and thrives on the spin of 'art stars'. But it was deliberately playful and deliberately dramatic: its participants were likely to remain in the know. *Name in Lights*, on the other hand, is less enclosed. Both the competition and the final piece will exist outside of an art gallery, and publicity will be distributed widely – beyond an art audience. Its constituent parts – the nominations, the intangible prize, the famous panel – are almost carbon copies of the devices used in TV talent shows: so where's the ironic distance of parody? More to the point, *Name in Lights* exists in real time, in the 'real world', while *Scavengers* condensed a process into a ticketed, weekend event. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, and what could be more postmodern than a high-art copy of a derided, low-art form?

But if Sofaer is imitating *The X Factor*, then he's made a few deliberate mistakes. Firstly, there is no TV show. In fact, there is nothing to hold on to apart from co-operation itself: no audience payoff, in other words, except for taking part. With no promise of entertainment or group activity, the competition lionises the concept of fame, and encourages participants to define their own boundaries. This is where Sofaer makes his second deliberate mistake: the 'public' that *Name in Lights* courts is intensely individualised. We vote in our millions for *Celebrity Big Brother*, and are reassured that our vote counts. The weight and autonomy of our involvement is so well communicated, in fact, that more people vote for these shows than in the general election. But there is only a limited, stereotyped range of goods to choose from – the pretty one, the gay one, the one with the annoying laugh – so that the sheer numbers of voters coalesce into that anonymous, amorphous entity: 'the public.' *Name in Lights*, on the other hand, gives us the whole world to choose from (in theory) – and then it trusts us each to make up our own reasons. We don't vote as a public, we nominate as individuals. The competition has been stripped down to its bare bones, both amplifying its importance and enfranchising us, as individual members of the public, with real freedom of choice.

Reassuringly, Sofaer is no Simon Cowell. He gives us the egalitarianism that the fame industry pretends, but never quite delivers. And yet this exaggeration of the familiar competition format also exposes its sleight of hand. There is a false alchemy required to reconcile mass adulation on the one hand, with the belief that everyone can become famous on the other. Famous people are special, runs the paradox of modern celebrity, and everyone deserves to be famous. Here, the judges' authority stems from their own fame, and it is never made clear what criteria they will use to decide the winner. Instead, as audience and participants we must either all agree, implicitly, what it means to be famous – perhaps there is a calculation based on hair length and wealth-to-age ratio – or we must trust, implicitly, some famous people to make the right decision. In fact, just as limited choice allows the producers of ITV to control who the next pop starlet will be, unlimited choice gives Sofaer's judges the chance to decide the conditions of fame. The individuals who sent in their nominations have become re-aggregated, through the judging process, into an amorphous public.

Distilled in this way, the celebrity competition appears duplicitous and manipulative, but it is still no closer to defining fame. At some point, that decision is always made by something outside the perceived democracy of the competition – by a judge or a producer. And once fame has been bestowed, it gets naturalised. Paradoxically, fame's ever-decreasing currency survives by not being questioned, while the allure of fame depends on it being seen as an unquestionable right: celebrity as a way of being. And this is the magical allure that the second part of the project refers to. While the competition element exists conceptually – through the call out to participants, associated talks run by the BBC and Ikon Gallery, and each self-determined nomination – the prize will be an awesome spectacle, an astonishing piece of public sculpture. Huge, glittering, magnificent, the object itself will be an unmissable symbol – a symbol of Somebody Important.

It is unusual nowadays to be famous for a name alone: they usually come accompanied by a photograph. In fact, to be known as a name and not as a body confers a special, sombre status, usually reserved for politicians or for people who have been famous for so long, and on such a scale, that they become synonymous with the concept. However many Michael Jacksons there are in the world, for example, they will never reduce the excitement associated with the singer's name. His name has become a totem for celebrity: Michael Jackson means fame.

This relationship of meaning does not just work one way; our names also have an inexorable effect on our behaviour. If they don't define us fatalistically, they do affect the choices we make and the ways we are perceived (just imagine sharing a name with Margaret Thatcher or Tony Blair). In 2004, as part of *Namesake*, Joshua Sofaer travelled to meet the only other Joshua Sofaer in the world; the other one's a New Yorker, and a member of Jews for Jesus, an evangelist group dedicated to 'saving' Jews by introducing them to Jesus. 'Joshua Sofaer' means 'Saviour' and 'Scribe' in Hebrew, so which one has best lived up to his label - the missionary or the artist? And would either of them be doing what he does with a less unusual name, or a less Jewish one? It is tempting to hope that the person whose name goes up in lights will have travelled on an irrevocable journey of his or her own towards stardom. A name destined to be famous, a name with 'star-quality'.

But the setup of Sofaer's project has already proved that fame has no stable meaning, and the chosen name won't be anything more than a symbol of whatever fame means to whoever is looking. In this part of the project, as in the competition, Sofaer has stripped down and amplified the symbol of 'fame', exposing both its power and its failures. The name in lights will be huge – twelve feet high – much bigger than the names above theatres that advertise their stars. And, just as the competition has no TV show, the name has no context. The winner will not be starring in a West End production; she or he will not be coming to a screen near you soon. There is no advert, no performance – nothing but fame itself.

That is not to say that the type of name won't necessarily have an effect on which one is chosen. But the decision rests, again, with the whim of the judges and their circular relationship with celebrity. Perhaps they will be swayed by political correctness – choosing a Middle Eastern name, an Eastern European one – or perhaps they will just choose a name they all find easy to pronounce. Perhaps they will choose a name that belongs to someone who is already famous.

Of course, it is not the judges, or Joshua Sofaer, or even the entrants, who will ultimately decide what fame means, but the audience itself. When it is up, the name in lights will say little about the person it belongs to. It will be both an overwhelming piece of public sculpture and a mysterious indication of something unknown; a fetish object; a floating signifier that means 'fame' but gives no indication of what fame means. Perhaps the final act of *Name in Lights* will be a metaphor for the fame industry itself – a lumbering industrial process that is constructed entirely of the audience it must manipulate. Because it is the audience, buying into the implicit belief in the fact – if not the definition – of fame, that is the real star of this performance. By combining and refining anachronistic elements of the construction of fame, Sofaer shows us the term has never been static. Moreover, it cannot be defined by the process that makes it, nor the systems that prop it up. *Name in Lights* removes the mundane surety of the endless mechanism of celebrity, and does something magical: it puts the mystery back into fame.

Mary Paterson, February 2007

Mary Paterson is a writer and curator based in London. She writes for international art journals *Real Time* and *Circa*, and is sub-editor and reporter for *Fringe Report*.