NEW YORK

Gerard Byrne
LISSON GALLERY

Gerard Byrne's brilliantly imagined and rendered film In Our Time proceeds from a concept that is, in its basic shape, so simple and straightforward that it almost eludes description. Set in a commercial radio station, the film—originally commissioned for Skulptur Projekte Münster in Germany in 2017—focuses on a DJ with a graying goatee and a magnificently fuzzy cardigan performing his duties in auzzi cluttered control room: introducing pop songs, cueing commercials, reading news and traffic reports. Meanwhile, on the other side of a soundproof window, a few men and women fiddle with musical gear for what may be an upcoming performance. Projected on a single screen in the middle of a space replete with red drapery, the video is, the gallery noted, of "indefinite duration." It is not, however, without chronological structure. Indeed, the larger temporality it occupies—playing continuously all day each day and synced, like Christian Marclay's The Clock, 2010, to the time in the outside world—is only one of a number of complex tethers (and subtle dislocations) that Byrne orchestrates to unnerve effect in this spellbinding, gently bittersweet work of visual and textual parabola.

Just as I arrived, the announcer told his audience that it was 1:34 p.m., as it indeed was for me in Lisson Gallery's space. When I left, it was 2:38 p.m., both on Tenth Avenue and in the slippery time-space occupied by the DJ and his listeners. What had happened in the intervening hour was both reassuringly familiar and creepingly peculiar: a meditation on dispersion and fixity; a parenthesis to a disappearing mode of technologoogy and a form of notional community; a typically Byrnean project of examining the ways in which media structures our sense of facts and history, of making visible places, people, and/or moments and bringing them to (generatively embroidered) life.

There's obviously considerable sensorial disjunction in watching a film of a radio show, but the extent of the work's deep structural strangeness only fully revealed itself over time. The camera slowly tracked around the studio, lovingly capturing the various furnishings and objects orchestrated by Byrne to produce an unmistakable, but also unstable, 1970s to 1980s verissimilitude. And as the broadcast went on, the DJ's patter also started to wobble in its specifics. His name changed along with his location—Bill Tampton, Ron Lander; WYSR San Francisco, WWI New Orleans—while a segment of news bulletins meshed up real and fictitious events from different time frames. Then, roughly thirty minutes into my visit, the film began to perform a curious loop. The piece returned to its beginning, but while its interstitial moments—an ad for Camaros, a call-in segment with a high school student—remained constant, the previous sequence's song were replaced with new ones: Where the Everly Brothers had been singing "Cathy's Clown," Steely Dan were now reeling off "Peg"; the Kingsmen's "Louie Louie" substituted for the Carpenters' "We've Only Just Begun." And, in a further spatiotemporal disorientation, it slowly dawned that a second voice-over—perhaps the conversation of the musicians—had been going the entire time, emanating along the wall just at the threshold of audibility. As the DJ was reporting golfer Tom Watson's victory the previous day in the 1974 Western Open, I'm pretty sure I heard two men discussing something one had bought on Ebay.

In one of the most memorable scenes from George Lucas's 1973 American Graffiti—beneath its coming-of-age nostalgia, a beautifully rendered consideration of the complex intersubjunctives produced by the medium of radio—the college-bound California high-schooler Curt Henderson (played by Richard Dreyfuss) goes searching for the legendary DJ Wolfman Jack, whose radio broadcast serves as the movie's constant incidental soundtrack. The teenager wants the Wolfman to dedicate a song to a mysterious blonde driving a white Thunderbird; he has seen a few nights before, but when he goes to the studio hoping to meet him, the modest-seeming man he finds alone there (played by the famous DJ) claims ignorance of the Wolfman's whereabouts. When Curt persists, the man plays a tape with a recording of the announcer's voice and tells him, "The Wolfman is everywhere!" With its mix of nostalgia for and strategic deployment of the form and function of the radio broadcast, Byrne's In Our Time is similarly engaged with this kind of increasingly rare performer-audience nexus, a community of like-minded listeners structured around a single point of identity—a voice—fixed and unfixed in time and space, nowhere and everywhere at once.

—Jeffrey Kasner
Gerard Byrne: *In Our Time* at Lisson Gallery New York

By Wendy Vogel

Which material in the vast cache of popular media is judged to be timeless and which is discarded as ephemeral? And how does our consumption of such media structure our lived experience? The Irish artist Gerard Byrne often raises such questions in videos restaging cultural debates from magazines and newspapers that dramatise the ways in which the views of avant-garde heroes (from philosophers to science-fiction writers) fall in or out of step with contemporary mores. The video installation *In Our Time* (2017), commissioned for Skulptur Projekte Münster, is an uncanny mise-en-scène of an obsolescent media format: a broadcast radio station, complete with vinyl records and cassette tapes. While the installation seems more nostalgic than some of Byrne’s previous projects, it prompts viewers to consider how media formats influence social thinking.

First installed in a Münster library, *In Our Time* now occupies the smaller of Lisson’s two New York galleries. A single-channel rear-projected video documents Byrne’s recreation of a pop radio station’s control room, with a velvety-voiced DJ and a live band that occasionally sets up and plays a few bars. Period details – from the announcer’s oversize glasses to the record titles – date the scene’s era as the mid-1970s to the early 1980s (a period that spans Byrne’s childhood).

The gallery is a theatrical parallel to the wood-panelled radio station onscreen. Byrne has decked it out with heavy red curtains drawn against the walls, vintage speakers, a piano, sheet-music stands and freestanding microphone mounts. A nondurational work, *In Our Time* is structured with the cyclical cadence of 24-hour radio broadcasting. One could be fooled into thinking that the piece was a long loop, with pop music hits interrupted by repetitious commercial breaks, weather forecasts or news
updates with the same stories (Reagan’s nuclear deals circa the early 1980s, and the violent death of Alberta King, the mother of Martin Luther King Jr, in 1974). Yet it becomes clear that the piece is run through an algorithm: the DJ announces the actual local time during the station breaks, even as the same material is cycled through. Furthermore, the position of viewers in the space activates additional video and audio channels. When one lingers near the piano, for example, overhead speakers play a piano-and-drum track, and the band appears onscreen. Standing underneath a speaker at the back of the space, one hears an interview with an unnamed person about buying an amp.

The pop-music offerings the DJ plays veer towards the melancholic, if not tragic, hits of the era: Femme Fatale (1967) by The Velvet Underground, Janis Joplin’s Me and Bobby McGee (1971), Iggy Pop’s The Passenger (1977). Even the choice of schmaltzy wedding ballad We’ve Only Just Begun (1970) by the Carpenters is marked by Karen Carpenter’s gloomy delivery. Between the songs, vintage ads for record stores, The Gap and a Chevrolet Camaro have the warm patina of nostalgia, even as some of them betray a sexist undertone. Their macho posturing is underscored by the announcer’s exchange with a schoolgirl caller on the line, whose voice seems to be lifted from an archived recording. As the DJ presses her to reveal the identity of her new boyfriend, the tension rises to predatory levels.

The title In Our Time links Byrne’s lifetime to the heyday of pop radio. But it also alludes to how the 24-hour broadcasting cycle is organised through advertisers’ ‘buying time’. How are memories conditioned by such commercial interruptions, and what might we lose through the disappearance of mass-media public spheres?

Scholars such as Alison Landsberg, the author of Prosthetic Memory (2004), see the potential of mass media to create collective consciousness and promote progressive politics through the work of empathy. Most historical video art, however, has been firmly rooted in Marxist tactics. Byrne’s piece is a far cry from Richard Serra and Carlota Fay Schoolman’s video-as-poem Television Delivers People (1973), or feminist artist Martha Rosler’s videos of the 1970s and 80s deconstructing mass-media messages of torture and US foreign interventions. Yet Byrne also estranges viewers from a too-rosy view of the past. Nearly two decades into the twenty-first century, it has become clear that information silos have the potential to wreak political catastrophe. By fracturing the public sphere into niche markets, advertising can be more targeted, but public opinion can be also manipulated on issues such as Brexit. Byrne’s creation of a vintage pop radio station depicts, with ambivalence, what we stand to lose – mindless commercial breaks, perhaps, but also a sense of community.

Gerard Byrne: In Our Time at Lisson Gallery New York, 3 November – 22 December
From the January & February 2018 issue of ArtReview
A new video installation by Gerard Byrne situates artist and audience alike in the particular atmosphere and sense of time associated with live talk radio.

You could sit in Gerard Byrne's *In Our Time* for hours. When the work was first shown during Sculpture Project Münster, it occupied a warm music practice suite in the German town's enviable public library. Visitors descended to the basement and made their way to a small, darkened room, in which the noise was deadened by heavy doors and soundproofed walls. Within, Byrne's audio-visual work transported one to a comforting wood-lined radio studio in the US from which a deejay with a voice like diner coffee went about an accomplished live broadcast.

Now *In Our Time* is at Lisson Gallery in New York. Soundproofing and brick-colored curtain on the walls gently evoke the atmosphere of the Münster music room in Manhattan. For Byrne, both gallery and library play important roles as public spaces, which he sees as echoing the idea of "radio as public space." All are sites for the free sharing of experiences and ideas.
There is no precise where or when to *In Our Time*. Ever present, whether in voice or on screen, the deejay is dressed in a cocoa turtleneck and oatmeal zip-up cardigan. His goatee beard is neatly trimmed, but graying. Chipper, if a little world-weary, he goes through the familiar litany of commercial radio content—intros, songs, news bulletins, jingles, phone-ins, adverts—yet like Byrne's restless camera, they never settle in one time or place. Songs are announced, but the track cued up is from a different artist and a different decade; the news bulletins are non sequential; the deejay is drinking from a "Don't Mess With Texas" mug, but the jingles are from stations across the US. The one thing that adheres to a real-time logic in the work is time itself: unfolding over 12 hours, *In Our Time* literally takes place in our time.

Gerard Byrne, *In Our Time*, 2017. Photo: Damien Elliot, courtesy Lisson Gallery

"I was interested in radio as a model of time," confirms Byrne. "With radio, you turn it on, and it's usually in the middle of something. You listen for a while and then turn it off, usually in the middle of something else." Rather than a complete, structured, codified composition, radio is "an endless, modular, pattern-based structure," that you can dip in and out of. The broadcast is always there, seldom deviating from its familiar structure.

Byrne's previous works have frequently drawn on archival media. For *New Sexual Lifestyles* (2002) he restaged and filmed an intellectual debate on sexuality that had been published in *Playboy* in 1973. In *Why It's Time for Imperial, Again* (1997) he used the stilted text of an advertorial interview between Chrysler's chairman Lee Iacocca and Frank Sinatra that had appeared in a 1980 issue of *National Geographic*.

While not drawn from a specific era or existing text, *In Our Time* shares these works' uneasy retrospection. The physicality of the radio studio—with its vast mixing console and walls strung with instruments and equipment—is intoxicating, and Byrne's camera pans lovingly across the aged wooden panelling, plastic switches, and patinated surfaces. Like the deejay's wholesome cardigan, it evokes nostalgia for more innocent times. "Maybe it does hark back to an ideal of the public sphere—when you see the shrill Trumpian America of
today, you can see how clearly that has passed," says Byrne of the decades evoked in the work. "It's not necessarily smug generational nostalgia: the work is connected to ideas of the polis, of the public sphere pre-Facebook, where people listened to the same thing at the same time."

The parallel presence of the ongoing radio broadcast has been replaced, in our time, by a sense of the constant present: podcasts that start when you want them to, decades of music available to be discovered afresh by successive generations, bespoke 'radio stations' generated by Spotify algorithms that ensure that what you listen to in the near future always resembles what you've been listening to in the recent past.

The film itself was shot at the Westland Studios in the artist's hometown of Dublin, with the set built around the Studios' existing SSL 4048 E Series mixing console. In the adjacent recording suite, we occasionally see a group of female roadies setting up and testing instruments for a live session that never happens.

Building beneath the endless chat and retro comfort, In Our Time delivers a sense of permanent immanence and claustrophobia that recalls the enclosed dramatic scenarios created by Samuel Beckett. "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes," as Beckett's Estragon says in Waiting for Godot. "He does end up as this Beckettian character, trapped in his world," says Byrne of his deejay, ever-present on screen. "It's like going to the zoo."

Gerard Byrne: In Our Time is on view at Lisson Gallery, New York, through December 22, 2017.
STOCKHOLM
Gerard Byrne
MODERNA MUSEET

The ultimate aim of a representation is to be more “real” than what it depicts, so that people desire the image more than the objects it portrays. The insatiable drive toward ever-sharper high definition telescopes to this age-old impulse. So does the Biologiska Museet in Stockholm. Constructed in 1893 and designed by the architect Agi Lindgren, it

was one of the first museums in Europe to adopt a naturalistic approach to the display of zoological specimens. In one circular room, taxidermied Nordic animals appear in a 360-degree diorama, under natural light, against a backdrop painted by the once prominent nature painter Bruno Liljefors. The intention was to recreate nature in the city. This synthesis of art, architecture, and science was a great technical feat in its time, but the result is far from the actual experience of nature. One could never get as close as one does in this museum to wild animals without startling them away or perhaps being attacked. Yet the display evokes an idea of Nordic wildlife better and with significantly more ease than the real thing.

Equipped with one of the most powerful recording devices of our time, Irish artist Gerard Byrne entered into this antiquated visual apparatus to document obsolete optical technology with the level of detail only a twenty-first-century machine eye can achieve. Filmed with a high-definition camera and a Steadicam, and with every shot digitally joined—giving the illusion of a single seamless take in an environment that would not physically allow for it—Byrne’s *Telemagnesia* (video 25:49) [Film inside an Image], 2016, captures the high-tech visual apparatus of yesterday using today’s advanced technology. The film’s apparent simplicity masks the complex and painstaking process involved in its production, as though to mirror the staged ease with which the taxidermied animals of the museum occupy their most unnatural posthumous habitats. The film is accompanied by a soundtrack composed of ambient field recordings and animal calls taken from databases. Adding naturalistic sound to the silent diorama, the audio is a form of digital enhancement. However, because the animals in the video are so obviously taxidermied, that enhancement in fact points to its own artificiality, creating a Brochian distancing effect.

Byrne’s exhibition at Moderna Museet, which consisted of this single piece, the film was projected onto a screen that was part of a large, three-sided architectural structure resembling a Minimalist sculpture by Richard Serra or Robert Morris. This exhibition framework was an acknowledgment of video installation’s root in the durational character (or perhaps what Michael Fried perjoratively called the theatricality) of Minimalism, a subject Byrne explored in his 2010 work *A thing is a hole in a thing it is not*.

This new piece draws an unusable parallel between technological obsolescence and biological decay. The diorama, though fairly well maintained even after more than a century, shows evidence of aged colors, layers of dust, occasional cobwebs. The sight of such signs as vividly filmed dead animals evokes a sense of melancholy only heightened by the sharpness of digital video. And because this narrative of death and destruction is framed within a discourse of technological

progress (and eventual desuetude) in representation, Byrne’s piece simultaneously addresses the optimistic belief that technology can capture the world and make it legible, and the gothic sense that the present is haunted by the past.

—Yuki Higashino
Upon entering the Mead’s angular confines, I found myself called immediately to its furthest reaches by the squawking of geese and the shrill tweet of gulls. *Jielemeguuvie guvve gjisjelji* (2015–16), a deliberately unpronounceable title (at least for anyone who doesn’t speak the Nordic language of Southern Sami) that roughly translates into something approximating ‘film inside an image’, offers a panoramic Steadicam tour of the flora and fauna of northern Sweden, as represented within the Stockholm Biologiska Museet.

In this single-screen projection, we swoop past taxidermy terns, elk and owls in what seems like a continuous loop (but which is actually composited from five different shots). This is a real *nature morte* – most of these beasts were probably shot by the museum’s founder, and keen hunter, Gustaf Kolthoff – rendered all the more uncanny by its eight-channel ambisonic surround soundtrack. The Biologiska Museet itself is a rather quaint sort of place, strangely out of place in a world where National Geographic has its own TV channel, but for Gerard Byrne this museum is retro hi-tech, a quasi-photographic apparatus in itself.

When Kolthoff first opened the institution in 1893, he was able to offer up a representation of the natural world still unavailable to any camera then existing. The devices were too bulky to navigate Arctic cliffs tops, their exposure times too long to capture any but the most docile of creatures. But he presented his diorama as a frozen instant – birds are caught in flight or seemingly mid-conversation in a highly photographic manner. The display is also unusual in that it is lit entirely by natural light through a skylight roof. Hence the title of the work, with its suggestion of the *mise en abyme*.

*Jielemeguuvie guvve gjisjelji* is only superficially a departure from Byrne’s characteristic practice of restaging history in order to disturb the present, through the shock of anachronism and the memory of old vanguards. This work is just as keen to highlight its own contradictions and disturb its own narrative smoothness (the disjuncture between the stillness of the creatures and the fluidity of camera movements, between the dust-caked animal corpses and the lively, immersive soundtrack being but a few examples). If it is the only ‘new’ work here, the show rearranges several old works in such a way as to reinvent them as a single new installation.

Three videoworks – *New Sexual Lifestyles* (2002), *Subject* (2009) and *He searches for the contrary of saved* (2014) – are split among six video monitors and a carousel of projected slides, dotted about the space. The works occupy sometimes three, sometimes none, sometimes all of these screens, alternating and interrupting each other according to a bewildering choreography programmed in advance and set down in minute detail on a schedule handwritten on the wall. Finally, the light in the room changes throughout the day, from blue to green to deep red, making the final work in the show – a set of seven photographs detailing the historical development of *Kodak’s Wratten filter system* (1912–2012) (2013) – almost impossible fully to make out.

A beguiling complex in all, the various parts resonate peculiarly with a quote from E. P. Thompson’s 1963 *The Making of the English Working Class* projected on the wall (as part of *Subject*, a study of Leeds University during the 1960s). Were we to freeze the show at a given point, then, like Thompson’s formulation of ‘class’, there would be no exhibition, ‘but simply a multitude of individuals [or individual works]’. But if we watch these works over an adequate period, ‘we observe patterns in their relationships, their ideas, and their institutions’. This is a tangled, occasionally frustrating web, but there’s rich sustenance in the unknotting.

*Robert Barry*
1/25 of a Second, 2016 (installation view). Courtesy the artist and Mead Gallery, Warwick Arts Centre, Coventry
Gerard Byrne at the Mead Gallery reviewed

Writer and researcher Dominika Mackiewicz reviews an exhibition comprising new and existing works by Irish artist Gerard Byrne at the Mead Gallery, Warwick Arts Centre.

A strong sense of time’s playfulness and inauthenticity dominates the exhibition space in the Mead Gallery on the occasion of the Gerard Byrne’s show 1/125 of a second. Upon arrival, seven television screens scattered like theatrical props in half of this L-shaped gallery make my eyes wander curiously before I choose how to interact with the images and sounds that seem to be unrelated. Some of the films have already started playing while other screens remain switched off. Before I sit down to watch one of them, another monitor turns on; both seem to play the same film at a different moment. It is a playground that showcases the illusionistic nature of the photography, language and art itself. This challenging exhibition is an intellectual stimuli, where viewers involuntarily take part in sensorial spectacle. Even written on the wall (in a less-than-obvious place) A Structure for Organising Time at the Mead Gallery, Warwick Arts Centre, Between January 18th and March 12th, 2016 does not elucidate in which order it is best to view the show. I am left to my own instincts within the fluidity of the medium.
Gerard Byrne, an Irish artist who works primarily with photography, film and multi-screen installations, uses a variety of intertextual references to confuse time’s platforms with images and texts. Concerned with the ambiguities of language and its performative character, he restages in New Sexual Lifestyles (2002) an intellectual debate about sexual behaviour, published in Playboy in 1973. Even though the actors impersonate Americans, they sound Irish and speak in a lofty and sensationalised manner that casts doubts on the authenticity of the dispute. The summer villa where the conversation takes place is disorientating in its modernist style and clinical appearance. Occasionally, we get a glimpse of the villa’s geometric structure, exposed from the inside through languid camera movements that spontaneously turn away from the speakers to the wilderness outside the house, leaving the agitated voices hovering meaninglessly in the air. There is a conflict of nature versus nurture, in which every attempt to define the instinctual ends in a pastiche.

Similarly, in viiitew sueviawe sueviawen (Life inside an image), Byrne plays with the idea of a camera being a medium between the truth and the illusion. Shot in the Biologiska Museet in Stockholm, the film shows a 30-metre high and 360-degree diorama, built for visitors to engage with the landscape of the Nordic wilderness. Punctuated by the beclouded images of taxidermy animals and birds, this prototype of the camera loses its illusionistic power in the different time, space and context of the art gallery. The surround sounds of the real animals seem a desperate attempt to sustain the impression of the real. Faced with this illusion within illusion, once more I question the phantom of the real within the world of the fake.

The exhibition runs until 12 March at the Mead Gallery, Warwick Arts Centre, University of Warwick, Coventry, CV4 7AL
INTERVIEW WITH
GERARD BYRNE


Byrne's new exhibition at Warwick Arts Centre centres around a new work, entitled JIELEMUGUVVIE GNIVUE GUVIHE SISJINELI - FILM INSIDE AN IMAGE (2015). The film takes a display as its starting point – a large-scale nineteenth-century diorama in a half-forgotten natural history museum in Sweden. The diorama, which dates from 1883, depicts the Nordic wilderness in 3D fantasy form, with painted oceans, papier-mâché cliffs and taxidermied birds. Byrne gives us the title twice, first in Southern Sami, a disappearing Nordic language from regions rendered by the diorama, since there is no word for 'film' in Sami, the translation is an askew: 'Film becomes 'Life'. A selection of other films are also displayed on various monitors, shuffled together in a sequence that I can't seem to decode, I later discover this was Byrne's intent.

Now in his late 40s, Byrne has exhibited internationally, recently representing Ireland at the 2007 Venice Biennale and undertaking solo shows in London (Whitney Gallery, 2013) and Dublin (IMMA, 2011). His practice hinges on a series of films that reanimate conversations from the archive: NEW SEXUAL LIFESTYLES (2003) also plunders PLAYBOY, this time a 1970s symposium with porn industry professionals; SUBJECT (2009) with transcripts of 1960s students at the University of Leeds, and A THING IS A HOLE IN A THING IT IS NOT (2010), which refigures debates around minimalism in the 1970s.

My own conversation with Byrne takes place backstage at the Warwick Arts Centre, in a dressing room furnished with a Hollywood mirror studded with bulbs. Byrne, dressed in a teal-blue knit and casual pair of jeans, is cheerful and loquacious as he narrates the thought processes behind his work. To my alarm, just as we begin talking, a brass hand springs to life in an adjacent room – a trumpet and sax rehearsing fragments of a concert piece. Between the trumpets, stage bulbs and mirrors, we are conscious of the orchestrated nature of our encounter, the interview as a performance on both sides.
Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Your latest work, HELEMEGUUVIE GUUVIE SIISINJELI - FILM INSIDE AN IMAGE, takes as its starting point a diorama at the Biologiska museet in Stockholm. Why were you drawn to the diorama?

A GERARD BYRNE — I first encountered the diorama ten years ago, on a residency in Sweden. The building is a pointed wooden structure made to resemble a gothic stave church, and inside is a cylindrical viewing space, a 360-degree diorama of the Nordic wilderness in a condensed form: seascape, cliffs, bogland, forest, all filled with taxidermy animals. There’s this very rich and complex relation between the diorama and photography. I think of the diorama as a kind of technology - an imaging technology - and I’m interested by how photography and the diorama inform each other. The diorama was proto-photographic, but this one is from 1883 when photography was well underway. The vision of birds suspended in mid-flight totally connects to the evolution of photography, because through Eduard Maybridge and his motion studies we were able understand how animals move. But when this diorama was built, it was actually more advanced than photography - because at that point, film wasn’t fast enough to capture wild animals. So I’m really interested in this dialogue between photography and the diorama, which is more complex that it might seem at first. The film itself is a loop around the space, one breathless shot inside the diorama, and there’s a strange dynamic between duration and suspension of time, or between film and the still image.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — One of the complications of early photography was the long exposure, which required the sitter to hold still for several minutes – so you have this duration within the image. It makes me think of a particular genre of photographs called ‘Hidden Mother’: holding a child to be photographed, the mother is covered in a carpet or brocade so as to disappear into the backdrop - almost like a puppeteer. What’s interesting is that the onlooker of the day wouldn’t see the hidden figure - as if they didn’t know how to read it. (See Geoffrey Batchen’s essay in THE HIDDEN MOTHER, MACK, 2013)

A GERARD BYRNE — That chimes with a publication I’m working on with the writer Mike Speerling. Mike’s text includes an anecdote about a nineteenth-century photographer who made family portraits. And if the portrait didn’t work out for some reason, he would give the sitters another person’s photograph – and they didn’t notice! It shows that photographic images are culturally mediated, that we learn to read them. I’m interested in this idea of legibility, and the way our relationship with photographic images has altered radically in the last ten years. Because of photography’s proliferation, there’s a sense that our relation to specific images has diminished - and perhaps one day we’ll return to the point where we can no longer read a photograph in the way we do now - that we won’t recognise our own face. These points in the past show that our relation to images is conditional - that’s why I find it valuable to look back to these moments in past.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — You often cite Michael Fried’s 1967 essay ‘Art and Objecthood’, which critiques minimalism. The thrust of his argument is about duration over time: of minimalist objects being ‘theatrical’ – having a kind of stage presence that needs constantly to be renewed – rather than existing in the ‘perpetual present’ he claims for great works of art. Would you say your work - maybe your whole practice - is activated by this rub that Fried sets up, between a ‘perpetual present’ and the theatrical or performative, which exists in time?

A GERARD BYRNE — I think what’s at stake in Fried’s text is whether the artwork is transcendent. Fried says the best artwork will transcend the time it endures. He argues against minimalism, against duration, and said it’s all about presentness, which will defy time and space and allow for a complete experience. That text - I keep coming back to it. I’ve tried to address it very directly in some works like A THING IS A HOLE..., but even in projects when I’m thinking about completely different things, they seem to operate under the sign of that text, or at least those kinds of issues. But as just as we talk, I realise there’s nostalgia in play when I read Fried’s essay - because while I’m compelled by his arguments, I also think this idea of a complete experience is an impossibility. And my work is animated by the idea that you can’t have a complete encounter.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — So the work is incomplete?

A GERARD BYRNE — Well, it’s something which becomes palpable in my current exhibition [at the Mead Gallery]: the works are dispersed across various monitors, and there’s a schedule on the wall. But the viewing experience is continually interrupted, and it’s purposely set up in a way to frustrate any attempt to view the work from beginning to end. There is no efficient way of encountering the work, and it’s impossible to have a comprehensive experience. It tries to acknowledge the fact that there’s a temporal form - that the show is authored in time as well as in space.
Q THE WHITE REVIEW — You mentioned nostalgia — and, perhaps more generally, your works re-enact moments in the past as a way to think about the imagined future. I'm thinking in particular of NEW SEXUAL LIFESTYLES or AND BEYOND. Today the future seems so closed down - capitalism seems so total, and despite recent economic crises, we can't seem to imagine our way out of it. So are you nostalgic for a time in the past when the future seemed more open? For points in the past when the future was still up for grabs, at least imaginatively?

A GERARD BYRNE — In general, there's a risk that you can over-instrumentalise your own impetus. I work a lot with textual sources that are situated historically and I'd say one of the bigger artistic gestures is to confront the present with the recent past, as a way of challenging ideas about the present. There's a lot at stake in looking back and re-inhabiting a previous moment — I have to believe that. Finding something that reflects on a fork in the road, a path that wasn't taken - my works are an acknowledgement of that. To talk about NEW SEXUAL LIFESTYLES, which takes as its starting point a conversation from the 1970s, you used the word 're-enactment', but on some level there's an attempt at a kind of recovery rather than re-enactment. Re-enactment suggests ideas around reconstruction - the ability to tell a proper order, which I find really tricky. Whereas 'reconstruction' implies that we'll never go back to that moment. We can recover things we didn't take the first time, maybe - but we can't go back.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Your reconstructions are uneasy. They're weird, they feel out of time, because there's a dissonance between the present in which the actors exist, and the present of the 'original' dialogue. So in NEW SEXUAL LIFESTYLES you have this 1970s debate from PLAYBOY magazine, but set in Ireland in a modernist house, and some of the actors are women, others wear baseball caps - the elements jar. Do you see your films as collages? As a set of citations from different moments in time?

A GERARD BYRNE — The dissonance you describe ties in with the distinction between re-enactment and recovery. I appropriated a lot of the working methods of film production or TV production - working with small film crews, with journeyman actors - but I didn't necessarily sign up for all the rules and value judgments that went along with those genres. So that's why you get a dissonance between what you think should happen and what actually occurs, and it's why you get that awkwardness. There are moments where the staginess becomes very explicit - in another work, an actress screws up her line, but she's a professional so she just continues, expecting that I'll edit it out. I guess I'm more interested in actors in a conceptual way.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Is all this awkwardness an attempt at a means of creating distance? So we are reminded all the time that we are watching something: the viewer can never suspend disbelief.

A GERARD BYRNE — Yes, But at the same time, there's a lot of humour in there. In NEW SEXUAL LIFESTYLES the staginess is meant to be funny. And with the diorama, I tried to bring out the humour with a soundtrack which is naturalistic - bird cries and wind, but it's overdone, and so it parodies the latent narrative potentials in the image. At one point, you see two birds on either side of a broken egg, and the soundtrack enacts the narrative, the birds fighting over it, squawking at one another.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — There's a 2004 essay by Sven Lätticken called 'Planet of the Remakes', in which he makes a compelling argument about the remake having a dormant potential as something to be perverted. Could you think of your work as a kind of productive perversion?

A GERARD BYRNE — Sven Lätticken and I have actually been drawn together on various occasions - he's written about my work, and I'm totally at one with his arguments. The word perversion is part of my vocabulary - I think of the spirit of the perverse as the spirit of exploring possibilities, ones beyond the sanctioned possibilities. The idea that you come to understand something by exploring all the permutations of what it is and isn't. Or knowing a rule by also understanding the exceptions - these kind of ideas.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Did you ever consider making theatre, rather than video work?

A GERARD BYRNE — The exhibitions are iterations of the work, and they are definitely influenced by theatre, even in the way they are technically achieved - the lights, the choreographed monitors. Maybe at some point I might end up making a play. But I borrow from so many different mediums...

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Brecht said that we should 'think of the others who will carry on the work'. Do you think of your works as unfinished?

A GERARD BYRNE — I made each work for the present moment that I was in. So when I show NEW SEXUAL LIFESTYLES, which is now over ten years, I have to start to reflect on what that means. The present moment of the show has to be on some level significant - and that's the conceptual rationale built into it: that it was made to be installed, that there's an active character to the presentation. I'm one of those people who can never let go of something.
The great pretender

Sinatra selling cars, a tree from Godot, Playboy-chaired discussions about sex: Gerard Byrne's re-creations of odd moments in time and culture can be gobsmaxing, says Adrian Searle

Surrealists are pondering sex with nuns and the mysteries of the female orgasm. Minimalists are going on about how good paint is when it's still in the can. There are men everywhere, pointing with pipes, imagining the future, discussing cars - what it is you want from a limo, the redundancy of chrome...

They're all at it in Irish artist Gerard Byrne's A State of Neutral Pleasure, opening today at the Whitechapel Gallery in London. There is no end to this parade: the founder of Screw magazine, a pontificating professor, sci-fi authors, hot young artists. They're all men performing their public selves and living up to type, doing it for themselves and doing it for each other.

Byrne's video installations are neither theatre nor documentary, although he uses actors and takes his scripts from events that actually happened. His reconstructions of filmed interviews and public discussions range from a debate about sexuality, convened by André Breton in March 1928, to a famous 1964 New York radio talk featuring artists Frank Stella, Donald Judd and Dan Flavin. A sense of unreality prevails, amplifying the preposterousness of all that opinionating and point-scoring.

If the actors seem stilted, it is because the scripts they're working with were already massaged for publication. Translated, edited down and conflated, they never did conform to natural human speech.

Byrne's material also includes a Playboy round-table discussion about sexual lifestyles (here at last we see some women); and another on visions of the future. These are rich, complex affairs. The simplest and most direct concerns an interview with the elderly Jean-Paul Sartre, played by French actor Michel Debrane, but even this is full of psychological complexity.

In an advertorial that appeared in National Geographic magazine in 1980, Frank Sinatra and Chrysler boss Lee Iacocca discussed the new Chrysler Imperial. In Byrne's treatment, two actors wander a sorry-looking city, passing vacant lots, industrial zones and long-abandoned rail tracks. Spouting the script taken from the advertorial, they ponder the Imperial's virtues in a seedy diner and even continue the discussion in the restroom doorway as Lee takes a leak. How they go on, like a couple of Beckett vagrants.

Time and temporality - the now and the then - are a constant theme for Byrne. He does much more than replicate historical documents and
transcripts. It's all in the staging, the direction and the projection. His work is full of traps, subtexts and references. It is easy to get caught out, however farcical, tragic or parodic Byrne's subjects might be. When I mentioned it in a review of the Glasgow International in 2010, I completely misread the multi-screen installation A thing is a hole in a thing it is not (the title is a quote from the US minimalist Carl Andre). Now it fills most of the Whitechapel's main ground-floor gallery. It is hard to take the whole thing in. Screens light up and go dark. Sometimes you have to scurry around looking for the action. By the time you get there, the screen's gone dark again. You have to stay mobile.

It features sculptor Tony Smith, or someone like him, driving a Hudson Pacemaker (there really was a car called that). Smith had an epiphany driving through the New Jersey night, with only a female student in the car for company. He thought the road and the industrial landscape were better than any art he knew. On another screen, stand-ins play Stella, Judd and Flavin recording that 1964 conversation about minimalism (the voices we hear are original, though). Meanwhile, further screens (big, white plywood boxes leaning together in the manner of Robert Morris's 1960s sculptures) show us minimal artworks being installed, photographed and looked at in the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. A thing is a hole ... is exceptionally rich. One of the tenets of minimalism was its visibility: what you see is what you get. Byrne plays with this, both beguiling and frustrating the spectator.

Amid all this aural, filmic and sculptural complexity, you might also detect that Byrne is pitching his own work against his artistic forebears and against critical history - especially a kind of modernist history that was largely written by men. He's drowning in time, too: he never stops manipulating works that might be regarded as complete, reconfiguring and editing pieces every time they're shown. He's been at it again here for the last couple of days.

Byrne has chosen to use the same arrangement of plywood boxes in the Whitechapel to project his most recent work, first shown at Documenta last summer, based on discussions the early surrealists had about sex. Not a single woman took part. The whole multi-channel recording was made for Irish TV with a live audience, and one sees the cameras and crew alongside the actors. The conversation they recreate is gobsmacking, though the ironical posturing of Breton, Raymond Queneau, Yves Tanguy and the rest is somewhat lost in the English translation. As they swill their drinks, lounge about and pontificate, they often come across as homophobic, sexist bores.

Sometimes, as here, Byrne piles it on. There's a lot we might miss. Did you catch Robert Morris's Column thwunking to the ground in the Judson Church? Did you notice the sculpture's-eye view of a spectator in the Van Abbemuseum? Did you catch the modernist masterpieces in the Kröller-Müller Museum in the Netherlands, where various sci-fi authors were placed by Byrne to replay their 1960s imaginings of the future (which all came to naught)?

There's much more to Byrne than a parodic deconstruction of masculinity, though that's one thread - and an inevitable consequence - of the material he is working with. Reconstruction, using the real words of real people, is by now a common theatrical form, from TV docudramas to theatrical reconstructions of trials, tribunals, riots and enquiries. It seems to me that, despite all the artifice, Byrne is trying to capture something real: something to do with measuring time, how the past persists, how the new becomes old. He's trying to make it new again, or at least to see things afresh, using a technology and modes of staging that will soon become outdated themselves, and in a voice that will also come to look quaint. It is a work without end.
The Dublin-born artist Gerard Byrne represented Ireland at the 2007 Venice Biennale and, more recently, he showed a work at dOCUMENTA (13). His national background and interest in the dialogic form created by his works are the subject of an interview with Tirdad Zolghadr. In particular, he examines masculinity and sexuality, as investigated by the Surrealists in the conversations that constitute the complex installation at Kassel and that were selected by the artist on the basis of the inherent potential of language.
LONDON - Gerard Byrne

Let's start with what you think of Berlin. Have you lived there for many years? Surely there must be lots there.

Gerard Byrne: Berlin. Not a clue, really. I live on the periphery. At least sometimes, a place that you can constantly return to.

I'm a case in point, I've never been in Dublin. I don't even know if it's the periphery.

I don't think there's any great point to make beyond the fact that there's a whole load of artists whose working contexts are not marketable within the economies of symbolic geography at work all throughout the art world, whether in Berlin or...

Teban.

But Dublin's a strange case. A grey area I suppose, generally grey skies.

It sounds a bit like Lithuania. You have a few famous names, but you don't know what the working conditions are like in the grey area.

Lithuania is a good analogy. I did a show in Vilnius in 2007 and of course it was different, but there were a lot of things that felt unnecessary familiar. It reminded me of Dublin in the nineties. In 2007, Dublin was a boom town and Vilnius reminded me of a nascent moment of that, likewise emerging out of a declinist past. In the case of Vilnius, it was the post-communist moment. In Dublin, there's no such concept as 'Communist' or 'post-communist' but I grew up in a nationalist, post-colonial, deeply Catholic kind of place that was in its own way quite literally grey. The possibilities were very limited.

I have a generic question about identity, about the local scene in Dublin. I did this four year project with Noa Dabrowski about the role that class plays within the field. Do you play a role in Dublin? Or is it mangled by other factors because it's more complex...

The legibility of class is of course extremely slippery especially among the bohemian set. There's a kind of mania that directly refers to that. But it's a factor in terms of who gets to art school. I was not the only one from the more deprived corners. Not at all. But certainly it wasn't the most obvious thing to do. I went to art school with people whose parents were artists. I had never met an artist when I started in art school. Certainly there was no foreseeable possibility of graduating school and actually working as an artist professionally.

So it sounds like it's an expression of where you grew up in Europe as a large.

Your sense of the register of class that you gained from working with Noa on that project in the UK is probably largely applicable here. Even though it's smaller in size, the modalities are probably less extreme at the upper end. There's not that many really wealthy people here. I was in London yesterday and you sense that there's a critical mass of money around the art scene since that seems to decay the logic of a lot of activity. Ireland has been and continues to be a tough place to practice for many artists, especially those on government funding. There isn't a historical tradition of visual art patronage to call on, unlike in many otherwise peripheral cities in Europe. Social upward mobility and contemporary art didn't quite manage to get it on in the recent boom.

Speaking of being in the Dublin context, how does that feel now being the working embodiment of Ireland in a place like Venice? We have an ambivalent pressure weighing on your shoulders, or is it just another show?

Of course it's not just another show because there are all these artists around you that don't encounter when you're doing just another show. The minister for culture and his advisors, etc. My argument in that situation was that I was principally advocating within Ireland for the importance and validity of a visual arts community. People talk about the Venice pavilions being nationalistic, but they're sort of scared local in terms of what's at stake. For instance, with your pavilion, above all else, it had to register back in the UAE.

I think they underestimate the radical potential of that idea. It's not a black sheep or a fool in making other exhibition venues look bad and real.

I totally agree. It's funny, this dismissive critique. As if these other venues weren't...

...charged and loaded...

Going back to your question about the burden of representation, so to speak, I did sense that it was advocating on a political level, here in Ireland, for the importance of the visual arts. I was advocating on an international level as well. I'm not going to pretend it was selfish, either. There were palpable benefits to me, but that's all explicit, I think, anyway. I tried to shift the terms of the debate away from national representation to a 'communist' representation...

I like the idea of being asked about your work. Can you speak about what it's like to have your work within such a formidable apparatus? What I thought your work did brilliantly was to confront that challenge head-on and to see it in its own right. It's a work that makes you see, in just the right way, I think a common sense how traditional money works in the highest masculine social bonding. A particular sense of power that comes from power, a particular kind of hierarchy and competitive intellectual dynamics, and then it's to say something about the heart.

On the other hand, in the last sentence you did draw away from identifying whether you had a problem with the kind of historical scenarios that you described. There was a little in the eye of the artist. You were leaving.

I don't know if you clarify the lingering ambiguity, but one ambition was to make a work that was about artists. About the idea of the type of knowledge that artists are capable of producing, as a class, as a cluster, as an exchange. Kassel felt appropriate to do something along those lines, in that Documenta is one of those kind of ritualistic moments that defines the art. It refers the cultural status of the artist as one who can make works that speak truth to the world.

Excellent piece.

The grand aspirations of the great, late humanists...

You didn't make a difference between visual artists and artists in general...

In the discussion I stopped, the participant shared a recognizably artistic information and, whatever they were doing, they were artists. They were artists in the broad, humanist sense of that term.

They were also truth seekers...

They were also artists. I work from original texts in the André Breton archive in Paris. They were published originally in French in book form in the 1910s, and in the 1996 an English translation was published. Had the book for a long time before I actually did anything with it. There were in the 1910s or 14 of these Surrealist conversations that are transcribed and meant to be published. In the end only two of them were published in La révolution surréaliste in 1928. I very quickly narrowed down my selection to the only two published conversations. As with any other work, I was interested in material that had its own history of the encounter with it. In the end I worked in reference to the conversation between only three men. It's a bunch of men talking about sex and women. They may have taken drinks too.

They drink too about men having sex with men...

They do, but they gloss the topic, which is interesting in its own right. The Surrealists were no hetero.

I have so many questions and so little time. So I'll ask the one question that the world is asking of Gerard Byrne. What's up with the sex?

What's up with the sex?

In Byrne's words you have Seminar's sex life. Playboy magazine, Seminar sex talk, a sensual kiss and much more. What's interesting about it is that it's interesting to people. I don't mean that in a conventional, cynical way.

You're making yourself look a d**k, or hair...

No, I mean it in the same sense... Well, to talk about it renders it absolutely banal. When it enters language it enters a realm of banality, in a profound
sense. To talk about sex is not the same thing as to have sex, it's a completely different enterprise.

But even talking about sex can be anything from sophisticated to super-primitive. I don't think it's necessarily undermining to talk about sex.

But what I think is interesting across these different registers, texts, and sets of references that you've listed is that there's a strange linguistic game, or naturalisation, shall we say. Language holds a promise, a potential, do you know what I mean? But actually in trying to fulfill that promise... I'm not saying it always fails flat...

...and on the other hand the ability to empirically describe it in a discussion. The discussion is based on empiricism. You're qualified to speak based on experience. So you've got a weird contradiction between transcendentalism and empiricism. Leaving and returning to your body, and that then being legible linguistically.

In comparison to your preference for sexual metaphors: does masculinity have a function that is equally clear?

Normally my starting point for that question is the feminist informed perspective that language bound to the authority of history is patriarchal. Mostly the texts I've worked with are written by women, located historically. Whether it's Frank Stella or Frank Sinatra. The texts and, by extension, the figures who lead their bodies to the texts, are part of the public realm. There's also a very conscious masculinity to most of the characters I've always felt comfortable with the seeming commonsensical of my productions, which seem to rest away at the authority, if not of the figures cited, then certainly of their historical representation. But doesn't this seem like a really reductive way of engaging with an ongoing practice?

You're making us sound like a "really nice chap". "Broad-minded", like progressive hip hop or something. When the work is a lot more complex than that. I'm sorry, I made you sound that way. I feel awful. I should never have agreed to this interview.

Please don't be sorry Tidjani. I know you didn't mean it.

Because the promise, even if it's unfulfilled, is part of what makes it interesting.

Yes, I've probed through lots of old magazine articles for my work, where you think this is going to be amazing, this particular way of interview or roundtable. And then somehow it's not interesting because it's strangely illegible. Cultural details, the things that are at stake in a given discussion, somehow no longer resonate. What are the factors that actually make something interesting? I guess something needs to be at stake in the present tense of the reader. The availability of sex for example?

But you make talking about sex sound like talking about art. That's where I see the promise that is never fulfilled. When you sit down to talk about a particular piece... We've been talking about it, but we've been moving away and talking about the ideologies and references and structure that generate, rather than the artefact. And when you do talk about the artefact, you sometimes talk about the politics and that talk to turn something very generic. It's hard to talk about sexuality, as if it's a certain point, it's about my experience. Where it is with sex is a general in its own order of knowledge. You want to give back to the conversation, which is so comparable with having sex at all, it's just in another way.

Yes it's quite interesting to think about the ways in which they might connect. Thinking about the radio conversation I recorded with Stella, Judd, and Hudson, the quality of the language itself, quite apart from its art historical significance, is amazing. Just the quality of the discussion on its own terms as a piece of radio. These artist guys sitting around talking in a way that feels very specific, and also feels strangely obtuse. And somehow ambiguous. There's a tension back and forth between specificity and ambiguity, even in the way that they grapple with terminology. The preoccupation in not with the artwork itself but with the terms by which it can be described. Any discussion about sex seems to share that quality. The Sexual Subject was probably my first work in that series, insular as it is a series as you've articulated it. What was really compelling about that source material from the self-glorified sexual revolution roundtable was the freedom, shall we say, of being yourself that is promised in this free love moment of...

...emerging out.

...Jetisoning...

Courtesy: the artist and Lisson Gallery

Right — A man and a woman make love, 2012.
Courtesy: the artist and Lisson Gallery
It is comparatively easy to set up a basic model for epic theatre. For practical experiments I usually picked as my example of completely simple 'natural' epic theatre an incident such as can be seen on any street corner: an eyewitness demonstrating to a collection of people how a traffic accident took place" – Bertold Brecht, "The Street Scene" published in Willelm J. "Brecht on Theatre", London 1964 2008. Courtesy: Galerie Modern Art, Berlin/Stockholm
L'artista dublinese Gerard Byrne è stato portavoce dell'irlanda alla Biennale di Venezia nel 2007 e, più di recente, ha presentato un lavoro a dOCUMENTA (13). Il suo background nazionale e l'intensa per la forma dialogica sviluppata dalle sue opere sono alla base dell'intervista con Tiziano Zaughdr, che, come indagata dai Surrealisti nelle conversazioni che compongono l'articolo testuale, è stata scelta dall'artista sulla base del potenziale visivo del linguaggio.

Tiziano Zaughdr: Iniziamo con una domanda su Dublin. Sono stato lì per molti anni, a cnto sono lasciato un segno.

Gerard Byrne: Dublin? Non ma ho idea, davvero. Vivo in Irlanda. È cresciuto un po' in Irlanda, ma non di nascita. Quale è la gente sorvegliata in continuazione.

Tiz: Io sono una di quelle, non sono mai stato a Dublin. Non sorrideva se si parlava.

GB: Non c'era molto da dire se non c'era niente da dire e non c'era un sacco di artisti. Il contatto lavorativo non ha un dettaglio nel mondo dell'arte, ma è stato tratto da Dublin.

Tz: Taharat.

GB: DaDublin è un caso strano. Un'area grigia, immagine, con un dettaglio grigio.

Tz: Ricorda un po' la Lituana. Ci sono dei palini di grossi nani, ma non ci sono delle combinazioni di lavoro sul posto.


Tz: Ho un dominio sullo specifico della scala di Dublino, sull'ambiente artistico. Ho seguito un progetto di quattro anni con New Art nel ruolo della classe sociale e dell'ambiente. Gioca un ruolo importante a Dublino? O è amministrato da altri fattori più rilevanti?

GB: La percezione delle diverse classi sociali non è molto evidente, specialmente tra gli artisti. C'è una mia opinione che si tratta proprio questo spettacolo. Ma a richiedere che non ci si aspetti di studiare arte, lo provatoviano da un ambiente buono che sviluppo, ma raramente non è stata la cosa più scontata decidere per gli artisti. I miei
compagni di studio arrotondi figli di artisti. Non avevo
mai avuto la possibilità di imparare a conoscere la carriera da artista, in modo professionale.

TZ: Quindi direi che è piuttosto rappresentati
di artisti, invece di soccorso in tutta Europa.

GB: La tua percorrenza delle classi sociali, che hai acquisito il tuo perno nel Regno Unitò con Nave, è possibile che abbia ampliamento applicabile qui e qui. Siamo tutti pescatori di tutte le classi sociali in questo senso.

TB: Sì, è vero che hanno un'importanza sociale diversa, ma è un percorso che si sviluppa a livello locale delle classi sociali in tutta Europa.

GB: Certo che non è un'osservazione qualificata, perché dell'arte è una cosa che dovrebbe essere una cosa diversa. Per esempio, essere una cosa diversa, è qualcosa che ha un impatto significativo che ha di rivelazione. È un percorso che è stato un percorso. È anche una cosa che è stata menzionata in quel modo specifico, che è stato un percorso. È una cosa che ha un impatto significativo che ha di rivelazione. È un percorso che è stato un percorso.

GB: Sono totalmente d'accordo. Rifai, questa critica di riabilitazione, come se le altre idee non fossero.

TB: ... compromessi e pericolosi di significati ulteriori...

GB: Per tornare alla tua domanda sulle idee di questo sociale o di questo sociale, in realtà ho avuto l'opportunità di rendermi a livello politico locale di rivelazione. E la fonte delle classi sociali in tutta Europa. E una battaglia che è stata combattuta anche a livello internazionale. Non c'è dubbio che è stato un percorso. È anche una cosa che è stata menzionata in quel modo specifico, che è stato un percorso. È una cosa che ha un impatto significativo che ha di rivelazione. È un percorso che è stato un percorso.

GB: Ciò che è interessante è che di questo lavoro è interessante. E non intendo che la mia è un attentamento voluto, coinvolto.

TB: Io farei un bilancio, un'osservazione...

GB: No, intendo nel senso... Beh, parliamo di un'interazione incredibilmente banale. Quando entri nell'ambito del perno verso le regole del bene, fino alla sua essenza. Parliamo di senso non è la stessa cosa che farlo, è un'impresa completamente davanti...

GB: Ma anche parlare di senso può andare dal massacro al rifugio al terrore. Non credo che parliamo da poco interessante per definizione.

GB: Al di là delle gamme di registri, testi, insie- mi di riferimento che hai delineato, credo che ciò che è interessante del fatto che accade un percorso, ha un impatto significativo, diciamo pure un qualcosa di importante. Il linguaggio racchiuso in se una prontezza, un potenziale, capace che intendo? Ma poi, nel momento in cui tenta di soddisfare quella prontezza... non dico che è sempre sbagliato...

GB: Perché la promessa, anche se non soddi- sfacente, è uno degli elementi che la rende interessante.

Mind the gap

From the history of men’s magazines to the Loch Ness monster, Gerard Byrne’s playful video installations mark him out as one of the most erudite and ambitious young artists today, argues Brian Dillon

ARTS

In July and August 1963, Playboy magazine published “1984 and Beyond”: a two-part round-table discussion concerning the future, involving 12 science-fiction writers. Among the authors involved were Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury and Robert Heinlein. It is a document at once of its time and oddly out of it. Speaking in the midst of global and national perplexity - the Cuban missile crisis had come to a head the previous October, the civil rights march on Washington took place in August, and US confidence was to suffer a catastrophic blow in November of that year - the 12 seers are almost comically optimistic regarding life as it might be lived two decades hence. They conjure a world of routine space travel, lunar colonies, economic ease and social and sexual freedom - though predictably, this last seems to apply mostly to a sci-fi avatar of the standard male Playboy reader.

Quite the most striking anachronism in the article, however, is not the fanciful detail of the writers’ predictions, but the very fact of their feeling so confident in the future itself; such happy divinations seem now decidedly out of date. It’s partly this historical strangeness that inspired the Irish artist Gerard Byrne to make 1984 and Beyond: a three-screen video installation, first shown at the Venice Biennale in 2007, which takes the Playboy piece as the script for a wryly stilted sort of drama. Twelve Dutch actors of varying competence, dressed in stagey approximations of 1960s attire, play the writers in question. They speak their
lines with a knowing Brechtian distance from the source material, even as they lounge around smoking and warming especially to the theme of erotic liberation. And the whole is set among postwar modernist interiors in Holland, so that the viewer is still less sure which historical milieu the artist intends and how it might relate to our own present.

Byrne was born in Dublin in 1969 - he still works in the city, and teaches in Copenhagen - and, since the mid-1990s (but especially since representing Ireland at Venice), he has amassed a body of work with an amazing range of reference and subtlety of style. On the evidence of recent and current shows in Glasgow and at Lismore Castle in Waterford, he can be counted among the most erudite and ambitious young artists at work today. 1984 and Beyond was recently installed at Tate Britain, where it provides an austere and enveloping introduction to the work of an artist of supreme intelligence and wit: a rare conceptualist whose videos, texts and photographic series are both visually ravishing and intellectually complex. His work often concerns itself with the history of art and exhibitions (in this respect, he's hardly alone among contemporary artists); but at the same time he maintains a level of playfulness and humour that can be surprisingly accessible and engaged with popular culture, whether it's the history of men's magazines or the "evidence" for the Loch Ness monster.

Part of the fascination of Byrne's art lies in his deadpan approach to his sources. 1984 and Beyond is but one of a series of works that take old magazine articles as their starting points. In his 2002 film Why it's time for Imperial, again, based on a 1981 Chrysler print advert that featured Frank Sinatra and Chrysler CEO Lee Iacocca, he had two actors earnestly repeat the original's macho advertorial guff as they wandered the decayed streets of Long Island City. And in New Sexual Lifestyles (2003), he set another Playboy discussion - this time on the future of sex - in a modernist glass pavilion in the Irish countryside. Here, the native actors' accents are somewhat absurdly at odds with the 1970s libidinal utopianism of the likes of Linda Lovelace and Al Goldstein, editor of Screw magazine. For all their laconic humour, these films are also devious essays on just what constitutes a script, or even a literary artifact.

Indeed, Byrne can sometimes seem a very literary artist, fascinated by the ambiguities of language and by precisely what is gained or lost in the translation from text to image. Theatre has long been a preoccupation - an early installation seemed scurrilously to combine props from Brecht's Mother Courage and Rodgers and Hammerstein's Oklahoma! But such references are never merely a matter of homage or reconstruction. Something more ambiguous is afoot, for example, in his photographic series A country road. A tree. Evening, begun in 2006. Taking his title from the opening stage direction in Waiting for Godot, Byrne photographed anonymous stretches of roadside in the Dublin and Wicklow mountains: such places as might have been frequented by Samuel Beckett as a young man, on his habitual walks with his father. Lit by luridly coloured theatrical lights, these scenes are both hilariously literal and distinctly un-Beckettian; they use elaborate visual means to say something elegantly minimal about the act of turning words into performance, while cunningly reminding us of Beckett's throwaway claim that he based the set of Godot on Caspar David Friedrich's Man and Woman Observing the Moon.

At times, Byrne's written sources are less high-flown or historically telling, at least on the surface. Perhaps his most playful and absurd project to date has been Case Study: Loch Ness (Some possibilities and problems), a continuing investigation of the documentary enthusiasm brought to bear on the mysterious waters and their apocryphal tenant. In a series of texts, slide-shows and audio recordings, Byrne traces the history of the Nessie craze whipped up in the pages of the Daily Mail in the 1930s. Again, it often comes down to the treachery of language.
The loch-side investigators' ludicrous efforts to describe what they have (or haven't) seen sound a lot like Hamlet and Polonius arguing about cloudscapes: "a camel... a hedgehog... a serpent with a horse's head".

On the face of it, Byrne's most recent work looks to be engaged at a more arcane level with the history of art itself. *A Thing Is a Hole In a Thing It Is Not* was first installed in April at the Glasgow International Festival of Visual Art and is currently on show at Lismore Castle Arts in County Waterford, the contemporary art gallery founded by William and Laura Burlington in 2005. Byrne has made work before about the legacy of American artists such as Robert Smithson; here, he takes his title from an enigmatic statement by the sculptor Carl Andre. There are four videos in the installation, each a more or less oblique response to the impetus and afterlife of the minimalist sculpture of the 1960s. Byrne's videos are all about the ways that minimalist works resist and give in to their own staginess, and how they cope today with the contingent setting of the modern museum.

If that sounds a topic only for art-world insiders, consider the first film that greets you at the Lismore show. In 1960, the minimalist artist Robert Morris staged *Column*, a performance in which a large grey sculptural plinth stood vertically; a string was pulled and the thing crashed to the floor. The original staging was both a demonstration that sculpture— as Morris himself argued— was then tending more to the horizontal, and an extremely minimal sort of choreography. (Morris had intended to stand inside the object himself and tip it over, but hurt himself badly in rehearsal.) Byrne's seven-minute re-enactment, interspersed with shots of a theatrical light and a stopwatch that ensures the sculpture falls after precisely three and a half minutes, is certainly an art-historical witticism— but it's also genuinely tense and very funny. He's contrived something like an inanimate slapstick, reduced to the simplest kind of pratfall, while in the strict timing and meditative shadows there are echoes of Beckett's play *Catastrophe*, itself a semi-sculptural reflection on stage conventions.

The stricture and accidents of museum display have also been a recurrent theme in Byrne's art, represented in the current exhibition by a video shot at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. Byrne's camera pans elegantly over sculptures and paintings by Morris, Andre, Frank Stella, Dan Flavin and Donald Judd. Museum invigilators and members of the public interrupt the pristine setting, photographers frame shots of the works, and the camera regularly cuts away to discover light fittings and electrical fixtures that resemble the art itself. The minimalist artists were rigorous about the cool visual terms in which their work was photographed, but here the sculptures invade each other's space, moving bodies ruin their pure lines and a cleaner arrives to remove a small drift of dust from the ordered precincts of a Morris piece. The whole is punctuated by an actor's slightly hammy delivery on-screen of a newspaper review of a minimalist exhibition.

The most engaging, though initially bewildering, of these videos is based on a radio discussion between Flavin, Judd and Stella broadcast in New York in 1964. The hour-long conversation forms the soundtrack to Byrne's imagery, with the three artists answering questions on "the evolution of the new abstraction", while on the screen three actors in a radio studio drink whiskey, smoke cigarettes, look intensely at one other and conspicuously do not ever speak the dialogue in the recording. The disjunction between acting and documentary is disorienting, but in place of the absent artworks being described on tape, Byrne encourages the viewer to focus on the textures of clothes and sound equipment, the shape of microphones and the swirl of smoke: material things that somehow rhyme with the blank, symmetrical sculptures we cannot see.

Byrne is an artist who often leaves
OPENINGS

T. J. Demos on
Gerard Byrne

"EVERYBODY'S FIRST ORGY" is mind-boggling. I remember mine. Half of me was thrilled, the other half terrified. I didn't know what the social rules were. What should I wear? How should I get out of what I wear? I so confessed radical feminist Betty Dodson during a 1973 Playboy roundtable that gathered several notorious personalities of the day, such as Screw magazine editor Al Goldstein and porn star Linda Lovelace, for a "symposium on emerging behavior patterns, from open marriage to group sex." In thirty-eight-year-old artist Gerard Byrne's three-channel video New Sexual Lifestyles, 2002, amateur actors restage this conversation from three decades ago in a building of the same era: the Goulding Summerhouse, a stunning modernist construction of glass and steel built by Scott Tallon Walker Architects on the outskirts of Dublin in 1972. As important a context, however, is the one provided by Byrne's own practice. The piece, which is accompanied by a suite of photographs, is one of several historical "conversations" the artist (who is representing Ireland at the Venice Biennale this summer) has brought to life in his works, ranging from Why It's Time for Imperial, Again, 1998-2002, a fictional exchange between former Chrysler chairman Lee Iacocca and the "chairman of the board" of the entertainment industry, Frank Sinatra, taken from the text of a 1980 advertisement in National Geographic, to Homme à Femmes (Michel Debran), 2004, which re-creates an interview with Jean-Paul Sartre regarding his attitudes toward women that was originally published in Le Nouvel Observateur in 1977.

The researched representation of events from earlier times is hardly unusual in contemporary art, where it often serves to place the present in critical relief or to reveal the astonishing alterity of history. For Byrne, however, reenactment provides a means to stage a paradox, simultaneously evoking both our proximity to and our distance from the past. Formally, he makes reality seem elusive and fiction ubiquitous, quoting historical episodes in a consciously artificial manner: New Sexual Lifestyles, for example, flaunts its lack of realism with its Irish cast; it's significant that Playboy was banned in Ireland until 1993. And in their content, Byrne's conversations similarly unsettle any firm sense of cultural chronology: It
might be tempting, for instance, to dismiss as of a completely different era the chauvinism of Goldstein's statement, "If my wife cheated, I'd kill her. She's part of my property... I feel I own her, the way I own my car." But a moment's reflection reminds one that the Playboy discussion took place relatively recently (and among members of a generation still living), about the time of Byrne's childhood. Like many of the artist's works, it taps into the formative culture of our own time. When returned from the repressed, such recent history assumes the form of "images in parentheses," as the artist describes his work. The promiscuous theatricality of Byrne's presentation of historical material only further erodes the boundaries between reality and theater as well as between past and present in his restagings.

Given that Byrne's practice revolves around the uncertain status of his framings of representation, it's not surprising that his installations exploit similar ambiguities. For In Repertory, 2004, Byrne filled the gallery of the Project Arts Centre in Dublin with reconstructions of famous stage sets, including the schematic white tree Alberto Giacometti designed for a 1961 production of Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot and a painted backdrop from the 1943 Broadway production of Rodgers and Hammerstein's Oklahoma! Standing in for the missing actors, visitors to the opening were recorded as they walked around the hybrid mise-en-scene in uneasy contemplation—providing video footage that was projected into the space for the rest of the exhibition run. Eliciting the audience's critical distance rather than inviting its empathic identification, the work seems successfully to deploy Brecht's Verfremdungseffekt, or technique of estrangement—but without its original didactic and ideological purpose. Like the props, Brechtian strategies appear as historical relics: They too are in parentheses, deployed as formal elements divorced from the politics that defined their historical urgency. This repurposing suggests that one can no longer count on a critical distance from either the present or the past, as for Byrne even the radical tools of modernism are easily assimilated and appropriated.

Formally, Byrne makes reality seem elusive and fiction ubiquitous, since he quotes historical episodes in a consciously artificial manner. The sense of ontological insecurity in Byrne's work is particularly clear in his series of photographs: "A country road. A tree. Evening."*, 2006-. Taking as their title and inspiration Beckett's description of the setting for Waiting for Godot, the crepuscular scenes show roadside trees in those areas of Ireland and France that were familiar to the playwright. Whereas In Repertory presented reconstructed stage sets as real objects for inspection, here nature itself is theatricalized by means of on-site colored lighting that illuminates the trees. The visually seductive photographs thus reveal the hidden power of antinaturalism: The critique of illusionism has rarely reached such a gorgeous pitch as in these dramatically tinted landscapes. At the same time, the large, beautiful prints seem deliberately to address how such stylistic conceits can be reconciled with the slick production values prized by the commercial art market—a conclusion sanctioned by Byrne's always heavily mediated and considered relation to the presentation of his work.

The unstable relationship of reality and theater enters the public sphere in the artist's video and performance An Exercise for Two Actors and One Listener, 2004. At the opening of the 2004 e v a Exhibition of Visual Art in Limerick, Ireland, two actors playing a couple mingled with visitors while holding an improvised conversation loosely inspired by movies, particularly Francis
Ford Coppola’s *The Conversation* (1974) and the final scenes of Bryan Singer’s *The Usual Suspects* (1995). Not only did the audience hear snippets of the performers’ conversation in passing, but a live feed of their dialogue was transmitted to a single set of headphones that visitors passed around among themselves. A video of the occasion, with audio of the actors’ conversation, was placed on view during the exhibition proper. The piece mixes Hollywood identifications into the spontaneous unfolding of a gallery opening, but it also evokes Conceptualist task-based performance, resulting in a scrambling of discourses, a wavering between the playing of scripted roles and everyday life, avant-garde and culture industry, that allows each to estrange the other.

Byrne returned to another *Playboy* conversation in *1984 and Beyond*, 2005–2006, which is among the works on view this summer in Venice. The video documents amateur Dutch actors rendering a 1963 roundtable in which sci-fi luminaries—including Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov, and Ray Bradbury— speculate about the world’s future. Dressed smartly in period outfits, the actors converse in short vignettes, often highlighting, with hammed-up seriousness, some outrageous claim concerning a future that never came to pass: manned bases on the moon; eminent contact with alien races; the inevitable elimination of the need for sleep; and the bizarre anticipation that “so-called unnatural sex practices—both hetero and homosexual”—will become legal, ethical and, who knows, even patriotic in years to come.” The inauthenticity of Byrne’s elaborate reconstruction is again deliberately accentuated: The Dutch cast mispronounces some English words, and their overarticulate deliveries smack of edited prose rather than spontaneous speech. Moreover, the camera cuts directly to each speaker already in focus, with a precision that betrays careful choreography. As in *New Sexual Lifestyles*, the forward-looking idealism of the conversations is mirrored in the work’s modernist architectural setting: *1984 and Beyond* was shot at the 1964 reconstruction of Gerrit Rietveld’s Sonsbeek sculpture pavilion in the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo, the Netherlands. Here again, the way in which the transparency of structure and the “honest” use of materials are modified by the Minimalist-like stylization of simple architectural forms resonates with the disjunctions between the real and the artificial in Byrne’s restaging itself.

Engaging in representational critique and exposing the ways in which aspects of revolutionary modernism live on as bourgeois artistic enjoyment are only part of Byrne’s project, however. In the re-created *Playboy* conversations, Byrne might aim Brechtian distanciation against *Playboy’s* seductive utopianism, and, conversely, *Playboy’s* antielitist against avant-garde obscurantism, but the resulting work does not collapse into a void of pure negative criticality. Despite the profound cultural changes that have taken place since the ’60s and ’70s, and despite occasional lapses such as Goldstein’s chauvinist outburst, there is still an emancipatory charge (rather than merely a melancholy sense of lost possibility) in that era’s openness to unconventional ways of life. (Indeed, it is especially startling to discover it in *Playboy*, whose interviews with figures such as Betty Friedman, Germaine Greer, and Malcolm X sit uneasily alongside its pornographic images.)

For Byrne, there is still an emancipatory charge in a previous era’s openness to unconventional ways of life.

Byrne’s reframings revivify this radicalism, as if he has somehow managed to bend his parentheses backward so that they enclose our own time, too. His maneuver theatricalizes the present as well as the past, revealing both to be contingent and denaturalized, artificial and changing. In this way, the recovery of obsolete imagined worlds serves Byrne’s ultimate goal: the reinvention of the present (and, with it, the future), which he makes possible by creating for his viewers a space of play—one that is open, unscripted, and undetermined—between art and life.