

GERARD BYRNE: A LATE EVENING IN THE FUTURE

8 OCTOBER - 27 NOVEMBER 2016

In Samuel Beckett's one-act play *Krapp's Last Tape*, the curtain rises to the *mise-en-scène*: 'a late evening in the future'. For his exhibition of the same name, Irish artist Gerard Byrne employs a similar sense of drama: transforming ACCA into a theatre, and implicating the audience within an intricate, multi-sensory network of lights, flickering TV monitors, video projections and sculptural structures...

In the case of Beckett's character Krapp, the 'tape' in the play's title refers to audio recordings made by the protagonist as a younger man. Byrne's exhibition makes use of the metaphor of this history of recordings, bringing together a dense accumulation of his own video works spanning more than fifteen years.

Viewed across television monitors and sculptural projection screens, these distinct works are brought into conversation and controlled – together with other aspects of the installation – by a sophisticated programmable media player, according to a precise schedule written by Byrne. Normally used to as a device to play audio-visual content within galleries, the media player here serves as a mastermind control system, cleverly guiding the viewer's understanding of the exhibition space so that no visitor is likely to have the same experience twice.

Throughout his varied practice, Byrne has examined historical ideas, conversations and sites in order to consider their contemporary relevance and to blur distinctions between past and future, myth and reality. The first major survey of the artist's work in Australia, *A late evening in the future* builds on this interest in collective history and dramatic reconstruction, employing this device of a playback system to convulsively shuttle and scroll through moments of memory and cultural amnesia.

A late evening in the future is presented by ACCA in association with Melbourne Festival.

Curator: Annika Kristensen

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LIST OF WORKS

1984 and beyond 2005–7

three-channel DVD on LCD screens, vinyl wall text and silver gelatine photographs
Commissioned in 2005 by *If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution*
Courtesy the artist

1984 and beyond takes its title from an article of the same name, published in a 1963 edition of *Playboy* magazine, in which a group of twelve science fiction writers – Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke and Ray Bradbury among them – imagine the future state of the world from 1984 onwards.

Byrne has adopted the edited transcript of this conversation as a verbatim script for his own reinterpretation. Filmed primarily within the Gerrit Rietveld-designed Sonsbeek Pavillion at the Kröller-Müller Museum in The Netherlands – and featuring other modernist buildings including the Provinciehuis in Den Bosch and Gilmore Clark's Unisphere from the 1964 World's Fair in New York – the architectural surrounds echo the utopian aspiration of the writers' conversation.

Despite the contemporaneous relationship between the original conversation and the era of these buildings, we know that is unlikely that these discussions ever played out here. The choice of set bears little relation to the original text, apart from to highlight the porous nature between the culture of Europe and North America at the time and the ubiquity of modernism as a movement. Byrne has heightened our awareness of this by deliberately casting actors with Dutch, rather than American accents, and dressing them in a formal attire that is perhaps incongruous with the relaxing cultural attitudes of the time. These intentional details, much like the Brechtian technique of *Verfremdungseffekt*, have the effect of further distancing the viewer from the issues discussed in the printed article. *1984 and beyond* explores the idea of how the historical is visualised: a concept that is continued in the adjacent photographs and wall text.

'68 Mica and glass (a demonstration on camera by workers from the State Museum) 2008

16 mm film loop projection, silent
Courtesy the artist

'68 Mica and glass (a demonstration on camera by workers from the State Museum) is an exception among the moving image works in this exhibition, being the only one to be projected using analogue film technologies. The method of the work's display brings awareness to the viewer of the ways in which art is both presented and consumed within museums, mirroring the subject of the film itself: two conservators at Copenhagen's Statens Museum dismantling and re-assembling Robert Smithson's sculpture *Untitled* 1968.

Smithson's work consists of glass plates separated by piles of mica: a silicate, rock-forming mineral used, among other applications, for the manufacture of electronics, thin film surfaces and glass. Smithson's work, an exercise in time and transformation, is here displayed undergoing its own metamorphosis. Presented as an ongoing loop, with no definitive beginning or end, Byrne's film – as well as its technical presentation – add still more layers to this meditation on differing temporal scales – geological, museological and filmic.

A man and a woman make love 2012

television production
Commissioned by Documenta 13
Courtesy the artist

Presented across five screens, *A man and a woman make love* borrows from the conventions of television drama to reveal multiple views of the same conversation between a group of French Surrealists on the universal, age-old topic of sex.

Gathered together in a decorative apartment – set as the quintessential thinker's lair – and dressed in period attire, the men drink, smoke and pontificate on themes of eroticism, orgasm, sexuality and mortality. The dialogue is based on a series of real-life round-table discussions held by Surrealists – André Breton, Jacques Prévert and Yves Tanguy among them – between 1928 and 1932. As with several other of his works in video, Byrne here adopts the published transcript of these conversations as a ready-made script for this work.

Filmed by RTÉ (Ireland's national public television and radio broadcaster) as a television play with a live studio audience, *A man and a woman make love* privileges artistic opinion by broadcasting the work of an artist, depicting a conversation between artists, to a wide public audience.

A thing is a hole in a thing it is not 2010

five-channel HD video projection

Co-commissioned by 2010 Glasgow International Festival of Contemporary Art, The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, and Lismore Castle Arts

Courtesy the artist

Across five sculptural screens a series of vignettes play out, unrelated but for a shared interest in the legacy of the art historical Minimalist movement. The work's title, *A thing in a hole in a thing it is not*, makes reference to a phrase by Minimalist artist Carl Andre in which he describes the conceptual idea of an object as a cut in space, thus inverting conventional understandings of positive and negative space.

One film relates to the Robert Morris work *Column* 1962, a performance in which the artist explored the idea of bodies in space through an upright column falling over onto its side. In another, a conversation plays out between Bruce Glaser and artists Donald Judd, Dan Flavin and Frank Stella, with the original audio recording playing over a visual reconstruction by Byrne. In the third, filmed in the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, works from the Minimalist collection are seen together with people coming and going: actors, cleaners, security staff and museum visitors among them. A fourth screen reveals film-maker Hollis Frampton writing a letter about Carl Andre, while the final film reconstructs sculptor Tony Smith driving through a New Jersey Turnpike in the early 1950s – a key moment that led him towards Minimalism.

At the heart of Byrne's interest in this field is Michael Fried's seminal critical essay, 'Art and Objecthood' (1967), in which Fried accuses artists including Morris and Judd of confusing the definition of 'object' and 'art' and of a tendency towards theatricality in their work. Byrne uses Minimalism as a means to reflect on the historical conditions of temporality in the gallery space: an idea that is further developed in the complex pattern of playback both of this work and the exhibition as a whole.

He searches for the contrary of saved 2014

single channel black and white HD video with sound

indefinite loop

Courtesy the artist

'A country road. A tree. Evening', so begins the voiceover of *He searches for the contrary of saved*, reciting the opening *mise-en-scène* of Samuel Beckett's famous avant-garde play *Waiting for Godot*. Over fractured black and white footage of a theatrical dress rehearsal, a voice reads out instructions to the actors, following those written into Beckett's original script.

Despite the paired-back scenography of the play, Beckett's stage directions are very specific – dictating not only the actions of the actors, but the cadence with which they deliver their lines. Directives including 'irritably', 'musingly' and 'with exaggerated enthusiasm' are peppered throughout the script, repeated here by the narrator of Byrne's video with a deadpan authority.

With the voiceover reciting stage directions alone, without the narrative of the characters' dialogue, and coupled with disjointed camera movement, Byrne's representation of the play appears chaotic, even abrasive. If Beckett was renowned for his minimalism and absurdist sense of humour, Byrne has taken these qualities even further. Indeed the presentation of *He searches for the contrary of saved*, infinitely set on loop, reflects the futility of the play itself. Here, instead of two characters waiting in vain for the arrival of a third, it is the viewer who now is denied the cathartic release that comes with the sense of an ending.

Homme à femme (Michel Debrane) 2004

single-channel DVD projection

Commissioned by Maria Hlavajova for BAK, Utrecht, for the exhibition *A country road. A tree. Evening*, 2004

Courtesy the artist

Continuing Byrne's interest in the reconstruction of historical conversations, *Homme à femme* depicts a discussion between the philosopher Jean Paul Sartre and feminist journalist Catherine Chaine, first published in a 1977 edition of *Le Nouvel Observateur* – a French, centre-left weekly news magazine. A year later, a translation of the same conversation appeared in *Playboy* magazine, revealing Sartre's complex relationships with women and the feminist movement to a wider, English-speaking audience.

Homme à femme references both versions of the text: Michel Debrane, the French actor cast to portray the aging philosopher (and himself a subject of this work's title), reads from the original, while the English subtitles added by Byrne are taken directly from the *Playboy* transcript. The combination results in a curious fracture, with ellipses appearing in the subtitles over lengthy periods in which the actor continues to speak. At times, this may be uncomfortable for the non-French speaking viewer and raises broader questions about the limitations and frustrations of transferring meaning across languages, as well as cultures, context and time.

Sound, as well as language, is further used to create a sense of awareness within the viewer: with the voice of Sartre emanating outward from the screen, while that of Chaine sounds behind the audience. The body of the viewer is thus positioned between the two, as if observing Sartre through the eyes of Chaine. This alignment of the viewer with a feminine perspective works not only to consider Sartre's attitudes of the time when viewed through our own present lens, but how they may have appeared to his female contemporaries, at the time of the original conversation.

New sexual lifestyles 2003

three-channel video shown on monitors, seven photographs

Commissioned by the Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin

Courtesy the artist

Shot at Goulding Summerhouse, a Mies van der Rohe-inspired residence south of Dublin, *New sexual lifestyles* presents a restaging of a conversation published in a 1973 edition of *Playboy* magazine under the headline 'New Sexual Lifestyles: A Symposium on Emerging Behaviour Patterns, from Open Marriage to Group Sex'. Involving a panel of experts, including journalists, psychologists, professors and professionals from the porn industry, the discussion is revealing of both sexual and broader cultural attitudes of the time.

New sexual lifestyles is one of several videos for which Byrne utilises found conversations as a ready-made script for his own work. Despite *Playboy's* tabloid reputation, and the fact that it was banned in Byrne's home country of Ireland until the 1980s, the magazine was – at the time that this article was published – gaining reputation as a source of serious, progressive opinion pieces and debates.

While the actors in this piece remain loyal to the published transcript, Byrne deliberately avoids a straightforward period reconstruction. Subtle, yet intentional details – including the actors' contemporary costumes, and Irish rather than American accents – reveal a disjuncture between the time of filming and that of the original discussion. In reconstructing these conversations in settings distinctly at odds with their original context, Byrne creates an uncanny space for the viewer to question, with hindsight, the lifetime of the ideas discussed.

Subject 2009

three-channel work for monitors

Commissioned by the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds

Courtesy the artist

Commissioned by the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds, and filmed at Leeds University (a Brutalist campus designed by the modernist architecture firm Chamberlin, Powell and Bon), *Subject* differs from other works by Byrne in that the script directly relates to the setting of the work. Here a cast of actors engage in a dialogue drawn from multiple texts each relating to the university, and penned near the time of the campus' construction – including student periodicals and poetry journals, as well as academic reports discussing issues of class in Northern England.

Subtle clues allude to the fact that *Subject* isn't a straightforward historical representation. Byrne employs devices used in both Brechtian theatre and television to reveal the constructed nature of the situation. The same actor at times plays different characters, occasionally 'breaking the fourth wall' to directly address the audience. Costumes can appear at odds with both the period and context. From time to time production crew – a camera operator or radio engineer (themselves assumed to be actors) – appear in shot. Reality blurs into fiction, and history into the present tense.

Subject examines the 1960s as a time of radical change – socially, culturally and technologically – set within the context of a university: a place in which 'subjects' are both a thing that is taught and a public that is formed. In displaying the work across three disparate monitors, making it impossible to watch the work in its entirety without physically moving around, Byrne extends this notion of the 'subject' to the audience, themselves in a process both of learning and transformation.

Untitled acting exercise (in the third person) 2008

single channel HD video projection, custom projection shutter, Dolby 5.1 sound

Commissioned by the 16th Biennale of Sydney, 2008

Courtesy the artist

Filmed in a theatre, amidst props and sets, *Untitled acting exercise (in the third person)* reveals an actor recounting his lines. The text he is reciting has been taken from a published account of a 1946 interview between an American military psychologist and German P.O.W. – the latter of whom reflects upon his involvement with the Nazi party and his current trial at Nuremberg. The actor – playing the German officer – answers questions from the psychologist: a voice that appears off-camera and doubles as a disembodied narrator.

The voice of a female director can also be heard, offering instructions to the actor. This, coupled with the artificiality of the rehearsal space, suggests to the viewer that these voices are speaking in the past tense and also, in the case of the narrator, in the third person. Such distancing effects confirm to the viewer that this is a dramatisation and yet through the use of close-ups and various cinematic devices, the viewer is pulled into the narrative. *Untitled acting exercise* is both a reconstruction of past events and an exercise in the forms, techniques and inherent illusions of acting, theatre and film.

Why it is time for Imperial, again 1998–2002

single-channel video projection

Courtesy the artist

In *Why it is time for Imperial, again* two suited men appear engrossed in conversation – discussing the sophisticated technology of the 1981 Chrysler Imperial, in a post-industrial location that appears at odds with the glamour of the car. On abandoned train tracks and park benches, in playgrounds and at a diner, the men earnestly discuss the mechanics and characteristics of the new vehicle. Yet despite the enthusiasm of their words the discussion between the pair sounds wooden, almost comical, as if reading or speaking from memory, rather than engaging in genuine conversation.

The text in fact comes from a lengthy printed advertorial, published in a 1980 copy of *National Geographic* magazine, reflecting a supposed discussion between Frank Sinatra and Lee Iacocca, President of Chrysler at the time. In faithfully reenacting this text, and embracing slippages and repetition, Byrne reveals the constructed artifice both of his own work and the published advertisement.

Byrne's interest in temporal shifts extends from the date of the original ad and the later making of the work, to also consider the present (and eventual future) in which the work is exhibited. These differing time zones result in a reflective mediation on continued conversations around industry and urban decay – now, then, and in the future.

**ZAN -T185 r.1: (Interview) v.1, no. 4 - v.2, no. 6, 19 (1969 -Feb. 1972); (Andy Warhol's (Interview) v.2, no. 21 - v.3, no. 9 2007*

multi-channel HD projection

Commissioned by Culture Ireland for Ireland at Venice, 2007

Courtesy the artist

Employing a documentary format, and filmed by award-winning Australian-born cinematographer Christopher Doyle, **ZAN -T185 r.1...* reconstructs interviews with six young actors on the cusp of fame, that appeared in Andy Warhol's *Interview* magazine between 1969 to 1972.

**ZAN -T185 r.1...* can in many ways be seen as a reflection on the conventions of dramatisation and acting. In casting professional actors to reenact the words of fellow performers, and setting the work in an empty theatre – in which the actors go about their ritual warm-ups and routines – Byrne encourages us to consider the artfulness of performance, and the blurry boundaries between reality and fiction, art and life.

This reference is carried further into the lengthy titling of the work, which refers to complex cataloguing numbers used in the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, established in 1965 as one of the world's largest collections of materials relating to the dramatic field.