

**From the *Mise en scène* of History to the *Dispositif* of the Gallery:  
On Gerard Byrne's *A Late Evening in the Future***

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Jean-Luc Godard once remarked that the screen is a place for assembling audiovisual documents, for laying them out flat and arranging them in relation to each other. This is the ideal of the screen treated as a *dispositif* or apparatus. The screen – whether the screen we compose within, or the viewing screen we project upon – is nothing holy, nothing to especially venerate in this model of things; rather, it is a way-station, a transit lounge.

Gerard Byrne plays with a similar conception of the gallery or museum space in his project *A Late Evening in the Future*. A space for art, institutionalised, sanctified? Sure, he'll take that on board. But the gallery considered, at the same time, also as an *apparatus* gives it another, less determinate character. No longer the crushing 'white cube' that so many artists vainly rail against, but more like an open-ended place where different kinds of materials (visual, aural, sculptural, architectural) appear and disappear, in a pre-set rhythm, within the stylised darkness and the everyday light ...

At the same time and by the same token, Byrne does not assume the gallery space as simply given, as a status quo or 'state of things'. Rather, his work also offers a critique of the art institution as something that serves multiple demands and economies, beyond those of the discourse of 'art history'. There are political agendas, civil pressures, ossified conventions of viewing and reception – an entire *social* history that weighs down upon the space and begs to be questioned, taken apart. Byrne, in this sense, combines the radical spirit of an earlier generation of artists with a more contemporary willingness to work 'from within' on the parameters of the institution.

As Byrne has often said, his work is very involved with ideas of theatre and theatricality. But not a *monumental* kind of theatre, not a transfixing, spellbinding spectacle – all eyes to the front, don't blink now. Byrne's elaborate installations create a pre-programmable but provisional, ever-dispersed theatre of operations – indeed, that provisionality is literally part of the programming, with its mobile scheduling tacked to the walls.

Like Godard in cinema, Byrne in *A Late Evening in the Future* assembles diverse audiovisual pieces in a gallery space. With this difference: Byrne's pieces are his own video works plucked from an already long history of making such material. There is, increasingly in his career, a kind of gap, a deliberate disunity, between the ever-changing self-curation of these pieces, and the overall situation of playback in the theatrical, gallery space where we encounter them. Sometimes there may be a loose theme, or variations on a theme, serving as an umbrella for the video works. But the essence of the act of exhibition is not to be found, as a spectator, in patiently waiting for and watching all this pre-existing material. This *dispositif* is less about the discrete works assembled – less about constituting Byrne's *oeuvre* as a video artist *per se* – than about their *presentation*, and especially about the spectator's heightened awareness of the *gesture* of presentation.

The unity of the work – let's call it a system, a logic – is to be found in the spatio-temporal experience of one's own passage, as a spectator, through these fragments, these documents. Byrne's debt to grand, modernist cinema (more than to modernist painting in the Greenbergian tradition) is there in his arranging of a new kind of *montage sequence* in the installation space – a sequencing that dares not only to question or critique the typical posture of the art consumer, but also to actively *reconstruct* it. Byrne designs his installations in view of the *modularity* of their elements – related, repeatable, but always different – which is an aesthetic praxis he absorbs from minimalism in all its forms.

This aspect of modular presentation, in turn, has much to do with Byrne's sense of history: the theatre of history, history as a show, an act of showing for a spectator or audience, a

performance that is never quite the same way twice in a row. This is the very opposite of an ancient obsession to which Byrne makes pointed reference: the belief, on the part of (among prominent others) the 18<sup>th</sup> century theologian Jonathan Edwards, that history, with everybody and everything in it, was predestined, that it faithfully, unerringly followed a script already long ago inscribed in some magical Book of Life.

What kind of documents does Byrne assemble – or rather, recreate? Many relate to a history of modern art – a popular, media-made history of that art, as one would find it in magazines or TV documentaries. What really matters to him in this archive are the moments in such media spectacles when a bit of history gets formed, labelled and passed on, whenever and wherever this occurs: when a phrase is coined, a 'primal scene' of inspiration is invoked, a movement is solidified in popular parlance – when a Face becomes attached to a Name. Surrealism, Pop Art, Minimalism, Abstract Expressionism ... It's all grist to the 20<sup>th</sup> century modernist mill. Ferreting around in all manner of archives, official and unofficial, Byrne extracts slices of theatre: a radio discussion, a TV segment, a roundtable transcribed and illustrated in *Playboy*. And then he restages them. But this restaging is not at all of the respectful 'period piece' or biopic kind.

The camera and the microphone record actors reciting, re-enacting these found texts. As soon as we have a filmed image like this, with actors in a set, we have *mise en scène* – the art and craft of staging. In cinema (as well as in theatre), *mise en scène* is an older, more classical idea than that of the variable, heterogeneous *dispositif*. *Mise en scène* as a term conjures, for many, an almost lost ideal of unity and purity: the formal elegance of a time-space continuum meticulously recreated on screen, in which actors' gestures and speech fit perfectly with characterisation, with the fictional setting, with the telling of a story, and with the entire meaning of that story being told ... And this mode, furthermore, creates a comfortable place for spectators, on the receiving end of a more-or-less 'realist' image-scene: they receive the fullness of a time and a place, characters and emotions, themes and messages, all meticulously interwoven and telegraphed.

But this is assuredly not the type of scenic unity for which Byrne aims in *A Late Evening in the Future*. His camera work – whether recording a staged scene or wandering around inside a nature diorama – tends to be suspended, distracted, drawn to the strangest bits of materiality present, whether they belong to people or objects: a fabric, a finger, a patch of colour. We are always reminded, in one way or another, that the actors playing the part of some historical personage or other may or not 'fit' their role: an excess of detail, of presence, seeps out of the performances. As in Brechtian theatre, we are always aware of the act of recitation, the labour of forming written text into live speech. Faces and names, bodies and gestures, come unglued from their sedimented configuration as fully constituted 'characters' or personages in the history of art and culture.

Passages where nothing is clearly visible – looming up and punching a kind of hole in the representation – count just as much as when something (anything) is visible, and these mesh in with the preprogrammed sequences of blackness (where the projectors are literally shuttered) in the general installation space set up by the artist. Byrne does not aim for the dazzling spectacularity of a multi-screen bombardment (as one branch of contemporary media art does); the character of his aesthetic is indicated by the deliberately casual placement of chairs for viewing, and by the nature of the leaning 'slabs' (the word he prefers to 'screens') upon which images appear when projected – effects which are, of course, precisely planned and premeditated. Likewise, any 'sound bleeding' between screens is foreseen and structured into the experience.

Byrne's goal is never to recreate the past or to plunge us back into history in a 'touristic' sense. He tries to film and then work with (in both post-production and subsequent exhibition installation) the space-time between an imagined moment of documentation and the present in which we stand, the present which has memorialised, filled up and made use of such moments. Byrne returns to the complete transcripts of interviews and other surrounding archival traces not to fill in and cohere the imagined past, but to open it out. Ultimately, he seeks to re-immense us in the moment – in the materiality of that moment as we are able to imagine and perform it – before it was even solidified into a 'moment' *per se*; in other words, before it became a

monument or index of whatever sort, before it become too heavily symbolical or allegorical of something larger than itself.

Byrne often returns to a celebrated text of art criticism, theory and history: Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood" of 1967. He clearly admires its density, its marshalling (within its own literary *mise en scène* or *dispositif*) of so many people, places, names, works, quotations, citations, allusions, real incidents and speculative extrapolations. Yet Fried's central argument, at least in that '60s era, was against exactly what, in a certain sense, Byrne seeks to liberate in art today: its theatricality, its relational staging of parts, its montage methods. Fried, in 1967, was calling for some renewed respect for what the unique, indivisible artwork can create internally – for its capacity to involve the spectator in something particular, as distinct from hurling us out into the chaos of general relatedness.

Byrne is not an ironic artist, not a simple parodist – although he will cop to a taste for irreverence and provocation in his deployment of pastiche. I see his approaches to the art gallery, to history, and to *mise en scène* lining up along the same sensibility: he discombobulates these various unities in order to grasp some new, virtual potential that is lying around inside them. That is exactly what he's doing with Fried's polemic against theatricality: less 'turning it against itself' than liberating its hidden possibility.

It is no longer a stark choice, in Byrne's system, between (as Fried once put it) the *presentness* involved in *theatricality* (being thrust 'outside' the work to view it as a spectacular object, such as minimalist sculpture aimed for), and the sense of *presence* guaranteed by *immersion* (being brought 'inside' the work, to savour and appreciate its form and meaning, as 'authentic' Modernism, for Fried, achieved). After all, both concepts in Fried posit a necessary, active spectator, and a dynamic process of reception; the open question hinges more on (as it were) the *balance of power* in that relation, the respective 'share of responsibility' we are willing to give the spectator vis-à-vis the artwork. And that is a matter not only of the materiality of art, but also the politics of the art institution.

Ultimately, all these terms and concepts – theatricality, immersion, inside and outside, even the aesthetic itself – are up for grabs, inviting new definitions and, even more so, strategic uses that will recast their role in art history, and for our cultural future. Beyond Fried's binary of *presence* and *presentness*, Byrne works more in the spirit of what Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has called the potential *presence effects* of contemporary art, and the possibilities they raise.

The distance and difference between Fried's argument in the 1960s and Byrne's practice today can be measured using a formulation that the film critic Serge Daney coined during the 1980s: any official call for an 'return to order' and convention in art, to wholeness and universal, supra-humanist values, to mastery of technique and the sure 'capture' of the spectator – what Daney calls the regime of *passion*, passion as the rule of narrative, with all its religious connotations – is always a rear-guard reaction seeking to eradicate the troublesome, radical, critical outburst of the regime of *desire*, with "its *dispositifs*, its assemblages, its *montage*". It is along the line of such montage-desire that we will best locate Byrne and his work.

At the beginning of "Art and Objecthood", Fried places a passage from a biography of that theologian I've mentioned, Jonathan Edwards. A peculiar conviction compelled Edwards: a belief that, "if all the world were annihilated", it would then not return as before. And that, given this, we must assume, therefore, for the sake of sanity and order, that "the existence of things every moment ceases and is every moment renewed" – renewed exactly as it was before. Edwards' grand model of existence was literally ahistorical – it denied the facts of duration, lived time, things persisting and decaying: the very flux which makes any freedom, any accident, any change possible. His vision was the dead opposite to one that embraces the spectres of discontinuity and fragmentation – everything that creates variety, surprise and true renewal in reality.

Byrne's *A Late Evening in the Future*, and the way it offers itself to us, also activates a sense that things at every moment cease and are renewed: but, for him, this is what the flux of real, material history is all about. The big difference here is that history, in the view of this artist, is no longer unfolding in continuous reproductions of an original, primal image. Every staging, every

reproduction, even every projection finds itself as part of a new configuration. There is the threat (to some) of chaos in that, but there is also a precious freedom, and the hopeful possibility that things might sometimes turn out better than they currently are.

Let us return, at the last, to the reference point of cinema with which we began. Cinema has always posed an enormous challenge (usually ignored or suppressed) for the Friedian system of art: as his philosophic fellow-traveller Stanley Cavell proposes in *The World Viewed*, adapting but altering the terms of Fried's theory, aren't movies (he insists on that popular, everyday term) these strange objects which have enormous power to 'draw us in' emotionally whilst, simultaneously, constantly reminding us that the world is something lost to us, resolutely apart from us, locked inside the past tense of a picture?

For Cavell, the 'projection', in all senses, required for this 'world viewed' on film to truly function – projection of image onto screen, our personal projection into what we behold as spectators – is also a matter of spacing, of relation, of multiple pieces and parts. Distance and involvement combine in a new way here, within the potentialities of the filmic medium. Cavell's language in the early 1970s even anticipates Daney: "My feeling is that we have forgotten how mysterious these things are, and in general how *different* different things are from one another, as though we had forgotten how to value them. This is in fact something movies teach us".

Today, art such as Byrne's or Godard's which traces a critical path from the wholeness of *mise en scène* passion to the multiple, montaged desires of the *dispositif* takes these possibilities further than even Cavell could have imagined. *A Late Evening in the Future* is, in this sense, a type of *post-cinema*: cinema multiplied and splintered in the age of a thousand diverse technological, audiovisual apparatuses – but still seizing our attention in a complex interplay of fascination and criticality, immersion and distance.

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