

Interview with Gerard Byrne | The White Review



I FIRST ENCOUNTERED GERARD BYRNE'S EERILY DISLOCATED FILMS AT TATE BRITAIN, where *1984 and Beyond* (2005–7) was shown on loop for the best part of a year. In the piece, Byrne employs actors as mouthpieces for a panel discussion about the future, first printed in *Playboy* in 1963. Danish actors in woollen vests and bow ties drift around a modernist villa in the Netherlands, ventriloquising the conversation as printed in the magazine. The atmosphere is uneasy, as if time and authorship have slipped their moorings.

Byrne's new exhibition at Warwick Arts Centre centres around a new work, entitled *Jielemeguvvie guvvie sjisjnjeli – 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 (Whitechapel 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* (2011), which refigures debates around minimalism in the 1950s.

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 band 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

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— Your latest work, *Jielemeguvvie guvvie sjisjnveli – Film inside an Image*, takes as its starting point a diorama at the Biologiska museet in Stockholm. Why were you drawn to the diorama?

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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 imagining 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 Eadweard Muybridge and his motion studies we were able to 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 than 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 Sperlinger. 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 the 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?

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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 argued 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?

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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 1984 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?

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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 restoration – the ability to go back to 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 awkward, 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.

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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 work, 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 Lütticken called 'Planet of the Remake', 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?

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GERARD BYRNE

— Sven Lütticken 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?

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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 old, 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.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

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