

Gerard Byrne

A Late Evening in the Future

6 June – 13 September 2015

I am working from the premise that what constitutes ‚historical‘ is constantly shifting, from one present to the next. Equally, the material I reference in the works [...] doesn't have a fixed value or significance. It reads differently at different times.

Gerard Byrne

With his laconic humor and fundamental questioning of the construction of images and narratives, Gerard Byrne (born in 1969 in Ireland) is considered one of today's most important photographic, video, and multimedia artists. After numerous solo exhibitions, including shows in 2011 at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin and in 2014 at FRAC des Pays de la Loire in Nantes, as well as Byrne's contributions to the Venice Biennale in 2007 and 2011 and Documenta 13, the Kunstmuseum St. Gallen is offering the first comprehensive overview in Switzerland of this artist's ambitious, multilayered, and idiosyncratic oeuvre.

Byrne masterfully succeeds in formulating his "stories" in a variety of media, tying them into a comprehensive whole, and presenting them in spectacular installations. With fleeting video images, spoken texts, and elaborate projections in impressive sculptural settings, Byrne creates unique, all-encompassing, temporal artworks that physically surround the viewer and put all our senses to the test. The artist takes a keen interest in the installation of his complex multimedia works. This allows him to go far beyond the conventions of video works, which are usually shown in a continuous loop in a black box. Instead, in their spatial structuring and temporal sequence, his sculpturally conceived installations approach performance-based works and point almost incidentally to the proximity of Byrne's video work to theater. This becomes evident particularly in his repeated references to Bertolt Brecht's epic theater or his use of disorienting effects like those that echo in the apparent temporal breaks and multiperspectivity of his narratives and constantly challenge and even overwhelm the viewer's perception: *I've been interested in making video works that somehow can't be wholly consumed. I mean that [...] in a sculptural sense. Even though I'm working with two-dimensional imagery, and by definition video is linear – one frame always follows the preceding one – I work at exploiting possibilities around the idea of repetition and difference in a fundamental sense. I make multiple edits from the same material, and I play around with the patterns by which these edits are relayed in a gallery space.* (Gerard Byrne)

In his work, a representative selection of which is on view at the Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, the artist deals with historical events, which he translates into the present in reenactments and elaborate scenes with an ironically distanced perspective and thus reveals their fundamental cultural and social conditions as well as the construction of bourgeois identities, while also reflecting on his own work as an artist.

The exhibition title *A Late Evening in the Future* points to the various temporal levels that come together in Byrne's narratives to constitute the present. From surrealist discussions to visions of the future and economic decline, Gerard Byrne's multimedia work essentially always questions the story behind the stories: *Working as an artist allows me to address the more abstract, systematic character of the construction of histories instead of presenting or reappraising what's deemed marginalised.* (Gerard Byrne)

Room 1

The two large-format photographs are from the *Newsstands* series, in which Byrne photographed newsstands in various cities around the world. These snapshots of covers, headlines, magazines, and pictures represent—albeit in a very direct manner—the topics with which a society is preoccupied at a certain moment. At the same time, this moment in the past becomes ever more distant from the present. The titles of these pictures allude to this fact and indicate—in a similar manner to the approach used by the conceptual artist On Kawara—the period of time that has elapsed since each picture was taken, and thus must be recalculated for each exhibition.

Why it's time for Imperial, again (1998–2002) is based on a Chrysler advertisement from 1980 in the magazine *National Geographic*. The advertisement for Chrysler's new luxury model features the two American icons Frank Sinatra and Lee Iacocca. In a printed—indeed, constructed—conversation, the two purportedly discuss the merits of a dream car. In his video, Byrne has two actors reenact the macho dialogue in a serious tone while walking down the crumbling, abandoned streets of Long Island City or sitting in a dilapidated diner. The unfathomable irony of the enacted conversation reaches its height when the two actors walk by a vehicle graveyard where an expensive car is about to be crushed. Both the actors and the subject of their conversation seem foreign to this desolate environment. Byrne demonstrates the absurdity of their boasts and exposes our naive trust in technology and the status symbol of the car. Using refined loops and slow motion, and by positioning the actors slightly offset from the action, the artist deconstructs the cinematic illusion by revealing its artificiality.

Room 2 / Seitensaal Nord

Byrne first presented the work *1984 and beyond* (2005–07) at the Venice Biennale in 2007. Under the forward-looking title “1984 and Beyond,” a panel discussion organized by *Playboy* magazine was published in the magazine in 1963 in which twelve science fiction authors discussed what they thought life would be like in the year 1984. This contemporary document attests to the post-war generation's enormous trust in the future, but today it seems both far-fetched and outdated. Byrne used the text of the article for a reconstruction of this group discussion in his three-channel video installation with the same title. In this work, twelve Danish actors dressed in the intellectual style of the 1960s play the role of the authors. The setting is the Provinciehuis in Den Bosch (1959–71, designed by Hugh Maaskant) and the sculpture pavilion by Gerrit Rietveld at the Kröller-Muller Museum (1955/2010) with sculptures by Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth. Only with time does the viewer of the videos notice that many things do not seem right: from the actors' exaggeratedly white teeth to their unconvincing American accent, their behavior seems all too formal. Alongside the obvious theatrics and the revelation of the temporal distance, the historical text, which Byrne brings into the present in his video, seems utterly out of date.

The quotation by the literary historian Perry Miller at the beginning of art historian Michel Fried's famous treatise *Art and Objecthood* (1967) could also be appropriate here.

The videos shown on flat-panel screens in the exhibition are accompanied by black-and-white photographs of scenes from everyday life in America. They too seem to have a timeless quality due to their strangely uninhabited appearance. Though they were supposedly taken in the 1960s and '70s, the pictures show present-day scenes from the United States. It is precisely this temporal shift that fascinates Byrne: he questions the role of pictures in our perception of the past, present, and future. The photographs were created while Byrne was busy producing the video work. He calls them a kind of research, and in particular a way of engaging with the "American way of life," whose belief in the future is ironically broken in *1984 and beyond*.

Room 3 / Ecksaal Nord

The brutalist architecture of the University of Leeds is the point of departure for Byrne's engagement with the radical developments in the post-war period in the United Kingdom in his work *Subject* (2009). Here he once again refers to the utopias of the bygone modernist movement. *Subject* deals with the relationship between the individual and the architecture that surrounds him or her. In various sequences in this three-channel video work, both with and without sound, actors recite archival texts from the annals of the university in this impressive and monumental setting. The subject matter of the recited texts ranges from radio reports to television shows about the university and questions about spirituality or sexual relations on campus.

Video towers and walls are inserted into the series of works and elsewhere in the exhibition, in which the same image is split across several monitors. Byrne uses this no longer common technique as part of his strategy of fragmenting individual images and thus the experience of seeing in general. Unlike a traditional video wall, in which a large image is split across several monitors, the artist distributes the split channels across several rooms, which allows the image to be experienced across time and space, though it is ultimately almost impossible to reconstruct.

Room 4 / Oberlichtsaal

Byrne has installed two multichannel video works in a specially developed spatial structure of an extraordinarily sculptural quality, which are illuminated and overlaid by an elaborate system of projectors. Two consecutive video works are shown on these elements: the five-channel video work *A thing is a hole in a thing it is not* (2010) revolves around aesthetic positions and attitudes of minimal art, to which Byrne repeatedly refers in his work. Using a variety of approaches, Byrne addresses the ideas and ideals of this revolutionary genre of art in the 1960s, which dealt with the fundamental questions of sculpture. On a screen we see a reenacted radio interview from 1964 in which the leading representatives of minimal art (Frank Stella, Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, and the art critic Bruce Glaser) discuss these very ideals. Byrne uses the original radio voices of the participants. Another video shows a performance by Robert Morris in which he knocks over a monumental wooden column in order to symbolically question the vertical orientation of traditional pedestal sculpture.

Another video sequence, recorded at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, highlights works of minimal art in the context of the museum and addresses their relationships to space and the viewer. The last video implicitly refers to the sculptor Tony Smith. It shows a reenactment of an important experience for the artist which led him to minimal art: Smith's drive on the not yet completed New Jersey Turnpike. The enigmatic title of the multilayered installation is also a reference to minimal art and alludes to a statement by the artist Carl André.

In another spectacularly staged video work, *A man and a woman make love* (2012), the viewer becomes a participant in an illustrious group discussion about sexuality. The conversation between the surrealists André Breton, Benjamin Péret, Jacques Prévert, and Yves Tanguy published in 1928 in the magazine *La Révolution surréaliste* was reenacted by actors and filmed in a seemingly antique room. The men, dressed in suits and ties, speak in a serious manner about various aspects of eroticism and sexuality. They exchange views on the advantages of brothels, discuss homosexuality, and make assumptions about female sexuality—without any women present. Meanwhile, the camera not only records the conversation between the male interlocutors but also shows a view of cameras, monitors, and (female) spectators who witness the theatrical scene. Thus, Gerard Byrne not only deconstructs the patriarchal structures that remain inherent to Western culture even today, but also points to the proximity of his work to theater. With his multipart video projection, he makes references to Bertolt Brecht's epic theater and his use of disorienting effects. *A man and a woman make love*, first shown in the former ballroom of a luxury hotel, was indisputably one of the high points of Documenta 13 in Kassel.

The two video works are alternately projected on tilted walls that not coincidentally recall the aesthetic of minimal art. Here, however, they seem to be almost randomly arranged in the room. The viewers are thus forced to constantly move through the room to see all the videos in this multipart work. Byrne speaks of a double temporality: that of the individual films and the individual time constructed by the viewer in the exhibition.

Room 5 / Ecksaal Süd

In this room, once again two single-channel video works are alternately projected on a large screen. *Homme à Femmes* (Michel Debrane) (2004) shows a reenacted interview with the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, which appeared in 1977 in the magazine *Nouvel Observateur*. In this conversation with the feminist journalist Catherine Chaîne, Sartre describes his relationship to women in general and to Simone de Beauvoir in particular, among other topics. Questions are asked from outside the frame—mixed with background noise from the film crew—to which the actor Michel Debrane responds in the role of Jean-Paul Sartre. In contrast to other video works, in which the actors are all too obviously playing their roles, Michel Debrane lends his character an extraordinary, nearly authentic presence. The English subtitles follow the official English translation, which however repeatedly varies from the original. The conversation reveals the famous intellectual pioneer's anachronistic attitude toward women, which is further underscored by the title *Homme à Femmes* (“lady's man”) and exposes the French philosopher in his “wounded and failed masculinity.”

In the second work as well, Byrne in a sense confronts “one present with another” by having two actors reenact sequences of a conversation. Unlike *Homme à Femmes (Michel Debrane)*, in *Untitled (acting exercise)* (2008) the cards are laid bare: it is immediately evident to the viewer that this scene is a theatrical performance. On a kind of theater stage, the actors rehearse various sequences taken from an interview by an American military psychologist with a German officer. The officer recalled the atrocities of the Nazis in the Second World War during the Nuremberg trials. With the refined conceit of an acting audition, in *Untitled (acting exercise)* Byrne helps make a historical event that is invariably described as unimaginable describable and comprehensible. Once again, this work poses the fundamental question of the ability to describe the world in images or text and the various interpretations revealed between the media. In the staging of the work, the theatrical artificiality also extends into the exhibition space itself: a tree-like object, which looks like a prop from a theater stage, in fact can be read as a historical reference to a work by Alberto Giacometti, who created it in 1962 for a performance of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* at the Théâtre de l’Odéon in Paris. Situated in front of the screen, Byrne uses it to break through the cinema-like single-channel projection and, along with the video towers also installed in the room, underscore the fundamentally sculptural quality of the exhibition.

Room 6 / Seitensaal Süd

Byrne sees magazines as a “barometer of a certain cultural moment,” in which the printed word in this fleeting medium loses its current relevance all too quickly. *New Sexual Lifestyles* (2003) is also based on a discussion published in 1973 in *Playboy* on the future of sex. The conversation is once again performed—or “reconstructed,” as the artist describes his approach of reenacting—by actors and interspersed with short text sequences. Here, too, the artist repeatedly reveals the patriarchal structures inherent in Western culture as well as our culture’s discomfort with talking about sexuality, as evidenced by questions such as “Do affairs ever help a marriage?” or “When many swinging couples get back together, is it true they belittle their lovers’ performance to decrease jealousy?”

However, the temporal breaks in the conversation become almost painfully palpable when participants in contemporary clothing reenact a discussion from 1973 in the United States with an Irish accent as if the strong Catholic church in Ireland did not exist and the outbreak of AIDS in the 1980s had never occurred. In this way, various social codes of our bourgeois society meet in a video collage. The setting of the Goulding Summerhouse, a glass pavilion in the middle of a forest landscape, which is shown in photographs and slides, adds to the disorientation, since it is one of the few examples of modernist architecture in Ireland, though it was built between 1971 and 1973.

Room 7

In the final work in the exhibition, *'68 mica and glass (a demonstration on camera by workers from the State Museum)* (2008), a 16-mm film projection is shown on a steel sculpture weighing several tons by Richard Serra, *Thelma is that you? (for Lena Horne)* (1983), a donation by Dr. Heinrich E. Schmid to the Kunstmuseum St. Gallen. The projection shows a film loop of the construction of a sculpture, a fragile glass work by the American land art pioneer Robert Smithson, *Untitled (mica and glass)* (1968), located at the Statens Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen. Glass meets steel, and a fleeting medium (film) meets a rigid one (sculpture). At the same time, at the end of the exhibition the contemporary artist Gerard Byrne encounters important works of modernism and representatives of minimal and post-minimal art, to which he repeatedly alludes in his multimedia oeuvre, as in *A thing is a hole in a thing it is not* (2010), which is projected not on steel plates, but on slanted walls and thus sparks a dialogue between various media and generations of artists. This work is further evidence that art always takes place in dialogue with art history, as Gerard Byrne impressively demonstrates in his exhibition *A Late Evening in the Future* at the Kunstmuseum St. Gallen.

Texts: Konrad Bitterli, Céline Gaillard, Claudia Hürlimann, Daniela Mittelholzer, Irina Wedlich

You are cordially invited to attend our public events at the museum.

Public tours

Wednesday, 10 June, 6:30 p.m., with Konrad Bitterli, Curator
Sunday, 5 July, 11 a.m., with Daniela Mittelholzer, Art Educator
Sunday, 13 September, 11 a.m. with Claudia Hürlimann, Art Educator

Tour du patron with reception

Wednesday, 19 August, 6:30 p.m. with Roland Wäspe, Museum Director

Art café / Kunstcafé

Thursday, 6 August, 2:30 p.m., with Daniela Mittelholzer, Art Educator