

ARTFORUM

Gerard Byrne

LISMORE CASTLE ARTS, LISMORE, IRELAND

Brian Dillon



View of “Gerard Byrne,” 2010, Lismore Castle Arts, Lismore, Ireland. Foreground: *Column*, 2010. From *A Thing Is a Hole in a Thing It Is Not*, 2010.

IMAGES OR SHADOWS OF DIVINE THINGS, an installation comprising black-and-white photographs that Gerard Byrne has been making since 2005, limns the specific sense of anachronism one sees so frequently in the Irish artist’s work and served as an enigmatic introduction to this solo exhibition. Here is an America seemingly stranded in limbo between the mid-1960s and the present-day, an array of images at once familiar in terms of styles and subjects and vexed by a subtle disequilibrium. Street scenes worthy of Lee Friedlander or Saul Leiter abut shopwindows out of late Walker Evans and figures plausibly displaced from Robert Frank’s *The Americans*; there are hints of the New Topographics in the fragments of modernist architecture and a truck stop’s desert vista. Both the world depicted and the forms in which it is rendered appear four or five decades out of date, yet all—or rather, in a characteristic inflection, almost all—nineteen photographs were taken by Byrne over the past five years (though some were taken at his request by an American collaborator, Matthew Bakkom, a fact that the installation nowhere acknowledged). The whole seems a deadpan ruse by which the textures of the contemporary are shown to have changed little in half a century, and an ostensibly vanished past is arrested as it dreams of the future, our present.

Although this work focuses on a historically specific art form that persists as both artifact and unavoidable presence in contemporary times, a good deal of Byrne's work to date has been concerned with the reading and interpretation of actual texts—more exactly, he proceeds by turning a historical document or testimony into the script for a restaging or new performance. For example, his 2005–2007 video installation *1984 and Beyond*, shown at the Venice Biennale in 2007, recorded a dramatized reading of a discussion among science fiction writers concerning the future, originally convened and published by *Playboy* magazine in 1963; their predictions of mass space travel and economic ease are certainly outmoded, but the more fundamental estrangement is in the very fact of their confidence in the face of the future. *Images or Shadows* also relies in part on a text: an excerpt from Perry Miller's 1949 biography of the eighteenth-century American theologian Jonathan Edwards, the same passage that serves as the epigraph to Michael Fried's 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood." Discussing Edwards's reflections on prefiguration and repetition, Miller writes, "If all the world were annihilated . . . and a new world were freshly created, though it were to exist in every particular in the same manner as this world, it would not be the same." The passage adds a further suspicion to the historical intricacies of futurism and nostalgia in Byrne's installation, raising the possibility that what we are seeing is in fact a sedulous reconstruction of the past, with all the novelty unavoidably entailed in repetition.

The four new video works that formed the core of the show at Lismore Castle Arts take their place among a growing number of Byrne's films that react to or repurpose notable artworks of the 1960s and, more precisely, explore their fate among the protocols of the contemporary museum. (His 2008 film '68 *Mica & Glass*, for example, shows a stratified work of Robert Smithson's being assembled and disassembled, without apparent conclusion, at the Statens Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen.) Collectively titled *A Thing Is a Hole in a Thing It Is Not*—recently exhibited also at the 2010 Glasgow International Festival of Visual Art, which commissioned the piece with the Renaissance Society in Chicago, in collaboration with the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, the Netherlands—these four videos are variously oblique and direct responses to the origins and afterlife of Minimalism. In part, they might be seen as contrary extrapolations from Fried's assertion of the "theatricality" of Minimalist sculpture, its supposed tendency to throw the viewer back into his or her own contingent lifeworld. As often in Byrne's work, he arrives here at precise and far-reaching insights (into art, history, and art history) by recourse to a frankly comic literalism, illuminating an absurd disjunct between received art-historical truth and the testimony of his restagings.

In the first video (of three in the main gallery space), Byrne restages Robert Morris's 1962 sculpture-cum-performance piece *Column* at the Judson Memorial Church—former home of the Judson Dance Theater, for which Morris performed in the 1960s. Faithful but skewed reconstruction has long been a strategy of Byrne's—sometimes skewed because resolutely faithful, as in "A country road. A tree. Evening," the series of luridly lit landscape photographs, based on the opening stage direction of *Waiting for Godot*, that he began in 2006. With a comparable historical laconism, this video shows a replica of Morris's rectangular wooden plinth standing vertically for exactly three and a half minutes before it is abruptly jerked to the horizontal with the tug of a string, its pale gray planes at the same time cast into deep shadow. (For the original performance, Morris had intended to inhabit the monolith himself, but rehearsals proved perilous.) It's a tense and hilarious work; the object lies prone for a further three and a half minutes—in Byrne's video, close-ups of a stopwatch add to the sense of expectation—and one almost expects the thing, in proper slapstick fashion, to get up again. But the work is also a provocative literalization of the Minimalists' sculptural turn to the horizontal, and a jocoserious gloss on Fried's theatricality. In fact, Byrne's historically indeterminate restaging (the stage light trained on the object, for example, is of midcentury vintage) acknowledges that the official history of Minimalism and its discontents is already foretold and mocked in Morris's performance; it is from that inaugural anachronism that Byrne's own skein of citation and critique is unraveled.

Where Fried's canonical essay merely ghosts this first video, the second contrives a more explicit dialogue between image and document, proving that Byrne's literalism with respect to the "scripts" of art history is exactly what allows him to turn a historical document into a philosophical and formal perplex. Here the starting point is a conversation between Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, and Frank Stella, concerning "the evolution of the new abstraction," first broadcast on WBAI-FM, New York, in 1964. The hour-long recording is well known as a document of nascent Minimalist doctrines and controversies, though listening to it now (playing from an isolated overhead speaker in front of Byrne's video), what is striking is the way in which the three principals skirt the thematics floated by moderator Bruce Glazer, giving short shrift to notions of "purity" and "symmetry." Meanwhile, something similar

is at work on-screen. Byrne's camera pans around a contemporary recording studio—the room is tricked out with vintage equipment, glasses of whiskey, and overflowing ashtrays—and lingers on four actors who gesture at one another but are never seen to speak the dialogue in the 1964 recording. The intimate disparity between “script” and picture is disconcerting in a way that is familiar from works such as *1984 and Beyond*. But here the departure of the image from the historical document is more explicitly embodied: The camera keeps lighting on artifacts and fixtures—sound-baffling surfaces, light fittings, and microphones—whose forms and colors suggest half rhymes with the Minimalist works conjured on the sound track. Minimalist sculpture starts to seem an emanation of the everyday fabric of 1960s America.

This proposal of an accidental, frayed, and quotidian Minimalism is taken up again in the most ambitious of the first three videos, filmed at the Van Abbemuseum, where works by Carl Andre, Flavin, Judd, Morris, and Stella were arrayed together at Byrne's request. Taking his cue from the Minimalists' typically exacting requirements about how their works were documented, Byrne has a photographer carefully prepare to photograph Andre's *Twenty-fifth Steel Cardinal*, 1974—the work's square plates appear upside down as they are framed by the view camera. The same work is approached by a museum invigilator, who addresses the sculpture uneasily before stepping onto it as the artist intended, while a colleague discovers a small clump of dust among the metal uprights of Morris's *9 H-Shapes*, 1968, and calls a cleaner on his walkie-talkie to come and restore order. The hushed art-historical precinct of Minimalism is interrupted and delicately mocked by the microcomedy of everyday life in the museum—members of the public peer bemusedly at Stella's *Tuxedo Junction*, 1960; the same artist's *Effingham I*, 1967, is seen half-crated—but is also again related to the infrastructure that frames it: fluorescent lights and electric outlets that resemble nothing so much as small sculptural interventions in competition with the art proper. There is a larger ambition here, too, though, in the hammy performance of one particular actor—viewers of *1984 and Beyond* will recognize him as one of that video's sci-fi writers—who faces the camera and appears to lecture on the aims of Minimalist artists. The actor's idiosyncratic reading of the movement is taken by Byrne from a Dutch newspaper review of a Minimalist show—yet another of the artist's wry declarations of the vagrant meanings attached to such works at our present historical remove.

More often than not in Byrne's restagings, the rigors of the new medium liberate for the viewer some fresh historical resonance in the source material. The fourth video in *A Thing Is a Hole in a Thing It Is Not* is one such instance: a brief nighttime drive on the New Jersey Turnpike—complete with the stock televisual cues of an actor in profile, close-ups of his hands on the wheel, and a blur of lights in the distance—for which the voice-over was taken from “Talking with Tony Smith,” Sam Wagstaff's famous 1966 interview with the artist (published in *Artforum* that year). So much a part of Minimalist mythology, Smith's early-'50s excursion to the unfinished highway is rendered in a visual style that approaches certain drifting, ennui-laden scenes in the TV series *Mad Men*, so that you suspect Byrne has in mind the masculine individualism and romanticism that the artists of the 1960s, for all their rejection of aggrandizing tendencies among their Abstract Expressionist predecessors, had not entirely left behind.

The video installation in Lismore's project space, a municipal hall off the small town's main street, is a departure for Byrne in terms of its historically fraught source text, but in its formal and technical specifics it might be said to cast light on the main body of the exhibition: As with the reanimation of the Smith interview, it is once again a matter of a historical document cast in conventions (in this case theatrical) that approach cliché. *Untitled Acting Exercise (in the Third Person)*, 2008, is based on psychiatric interviews with a Nazi war criminal at Nuremberg; an actor rehearses the prisoner's self-serving answers, interspersed with a director's instructions. For the passages between the actor's speeches, Byrne contrived a special blackout shutter so that not only the screen turns dark but the whole space, too. It would be crude to say that the resulting moments of audience suspense are merely exemplary intensifications of the chronological enigmas into which Byrne's art habitually casts us; his use of the same technique in *A Thing Is a Hole in a Thing It Is Not* causes the viewer instead to doubt whether the work itself will resume. As ever with Byrne, this show revealed an artist rigorously intent on leaving us hovering between times.

Brian Dillon is UK editor of Cabinet magazine and the author of The Hypochondriacs (Faber & Faber, 2010).