The Mechanics of Now

Maeve Connolly

> I'm interested in the mechanics of how our collective moment is constructed. Increasingly the idea of 'now' feels under threat as a twentieth-century concept, partly through the mass dispersal of media that relies on industrial-scale economies of production to function profitably. But it also relies on ideas like synchronicity, unanimity and shared identification with a given 'moment' to establish a profitable readership. I'm interested in the types of amnesia this produces.[1]

In this fragment of a conversation from 2013 with Kirsty Ogg, curator at the Whitechapel Gallery in London, Gerard Byrne frames 'the idea of "now"' as an ongoing process, characterised by a particular 'mechanics'. He understands the concept of 'now' to be historically specific and bound to an economic model – of mass readership, synchronous consumption and shared identification – that seems increasingly antiquated. Byrne has devised many different strategies to challenge the 'amnesia' produced by synchronicity and make palpable the historical and contemporary construction of the 'now'. Some of these strategies are well documented. They include his use of published transcriptions, of interviews and round-table discussions, as scripts to be followed in performance situations. But other script-based aspects of Byrne's work have received less critical attention, even though they are arguably as central to his engagement with temporality and its histories. Here, I'm referring particularly to the codes and scripts that dictate the form, structure and lived spatio-temporal experience of works incorporating video, such as *New sexual lifestyles* 2003, *1984 and beyond* 2005–7, *Subject* 2009 and *A man and a woman make love* 2012. These multi-channel installations, which are typically styled and shot to evoke specific television genres, are exhibited on spatially dispersed yet tightly coordinated arrangements of video and slide projectors, monitors and audio speakers. This coordination is dictated by a set of instructions (effectively, a script) implemented by a computer or other device, which can be used to control and synchronise multiple screens or monitors.

Byrne's video works have for many years utilised a segmented form, creating the potential for playback in various sequential permutations on several monitors or projectors, so each individual work is attenuated in space and time. But in recent years this segmented form has extended into the institutional and material architecture of the gallery. Various technologies are employed in the process of extension, such as synchronised lighting sequences, incorporating new or existing lighting systems, and the material alteration of display equipment, through the addition of tiny shutters over the projector lenses, cued to open and close on command. In Byrne's exhibition *A late evening in the future*, presented in different forms at Frac des Pays de la Loire, Nantes (2014), Kunstmuseum St.Gallen (2015) and, most recently, at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne (2016), additional permutations in playback were enabled through a variety of installation and programming strategies. For example, a common arrangement of display equipment and material supports – in which videos were projected onto an array of propped sculptural slabs – was used to present different works in sequence, and daily variations were also incorporated into the screening schedule. These strategies amplified and intensified the permutational logic already integral to the form of each work, making it

1
Gerard Byrne, 'Interview between Gerard Byrne and Kirsty Ogg', *A State of Neutral Pleasure*, London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2013, 10.

difficult (if not practically impossible) for any one visitor to consume the exhibition in its entirety.[2]

Initially working with relatively basic DVD scripting languages to achieve permutations in playback, Byrne has now evolved a much more complex and bespoke model involving Brightsign media players, which have been hacked and reprogrammed by his technical collaborator, the sound artist Sven Anderson. Brightsign technology was devised for, and continues to be used within the context of, retail or 'point of sale' situations. In its hacked form, this technology allows Byrne to compile complex schedules for daily playback, consisting of previously compiled media segments or clips, arranged in a timeline that incorporates cues for display equipment (projectors, monitors), triggers for lighting and also cues for the projector shutters. This timeline is converted, through a reader devised by Anderson, into commands for a 'master' Brightsign player. These commands constitute a script that determines and synchronises playback across all technologies utilised in the exhibition, functioning as the primary interface between the individual works and the institution's organisational and technological infrastructure. So permutations in playback are encountered at micro and macro level, structuring the sequencing of individual media clips, the ordered presentation of works in any given display set-up and the lighting scenarios, which help to structure and guide flows of bodies within and through the galleries. Miles of cable link the multiple hardware components, distributing power and also data that is stored locally on the Brightsign media players. Crucially, the master media player is connected to a remote server, controlled neither by artist nor institution, so that it can also be precisely synchronised according to time and date. This potentially allows for variations in the script to be played out over a specified time frame, both in relation to the duration of the exhibition and the calendar of the institution.

Byrne's utilisation of a (substantially altered) retail display system is perhaps not surprising, given his longstanding exploration of the textual and visual language of advertising, his specific interest in hybrid commercial media forms such as the advertorial, and broader fascination with what I am calling 'the mechanics of now'.[3] What does it mean to hack and redeploy a commercial retail technology when consumption is bound up with the harvesting, processing and storing of personal and social data? This question seems to hover in the background of Byrne's conversation with Ogg, which touches upon the gallery audience as an object of knowledge. Despite the widespread existence of public engagement and outreach programmes, Byrne points out that art institutions generally know less about their audiences than supermarkets or online stores (he cites Tesco and Amazon) who have a more 'precise sense' of their customers and 'the choices they make'.[4] He goes on to state that, within the physical space of the gallery, a 'relatively undifferentiated' audience can encounter 'very particular, even obtuse ideas'.

Byrne and Ogg's discussion of audience differentiation is perhaps especially relevant to the Whitechapel Gallery, given its location on a busy London high street. But references to the 'street' also appear in a conversation between Byrne, Sven Anderson and Cassandra Edlefsen Lasch, published alongside a multi-part exhibition at PRAXES, Berlin. PRAXES gallery was then situated in a largely residential area, but Byrne emphasises the proximity of the street. He specifically frames his approach to the exhibition of video as a rejection of the 'contrivance of the gallery turned into a cinema', and an embrace of 'something much more connected with the street [...] to the outside.'[5] At the end of the PRAXES interview, Byrne states: 'People come to the gallery from the street and go back to the street when they leave'. This statement might be read as an acknowledgement of continuities between gallery and street. But Byrne is attuned to separation as well as continuity, embracing the formal and institutional potential of the gallery as a setting for material and spatio-temporal exploration. More generally, his work often engages with the gallery as a physical and institutional context in which it is possible to encounter objects, and media, associated with different historical and cultural moments, which retain associations with earlier architectures, infrastructures and practices of media production, distribution and consumption.

To what extent are Byrne's strategies of spatio-temporal scripting actually legible to exhibition-goers? Some of the material devices used by Byrne in exhibitions such as *A late evening in the future* are impossible to miss. They include the projector shutters that open and shut, the propped slabs that obstruct or produce certain sightlines, and the physical supports used to synchronise the exhibition hardware, such as the cables connecting equipment.[6] The timelines determining the sequencing of works might seem to be less accessible, but Byrne's specific interest in the scripting of time and space is suggested in various ways. For example, when videos are displayed in sequence (using a common arrangement of equipment and supports) a self-consciously casual document – handwritten or otherwise basically produced – is often pinned to the gallery wall, listing the playback order. These documents are formally distinct from the printed (and often branded) matter generally produced by institutions to publicly announce the details of screenings, performances or other time-based events. As Byrne points out, these lists do not speak in 'the voice of the institution.'[7] They are rarely, if ever, encountered in online documentation or mediation of Byrne's exhibitions, belonging to the physical space of the gallery, as opposed to the larger and more diffuse formation of the art institution.

Byrne has also deployed other, more explicitly art historical, strategies to foreground and contextualise his interest in 'the mechanics of now'. For example, at Kunstmuseum St.Gallen, he utilised a sixteen-monitor video wall – dispersed in fragments throughout the galleries – as a kind of parallel display system, allowing the simultaneous display of works installed elsewhere in the galleries. This scattered video wall, enabling duplication and fragmentation, disrupts the conventional impulse to manifest an artwork in a singular and specific form, even when this artwork is not bound to a particular technology of display. It also offers a point of connection with Kunstmuseum St.Gallen's own permanent collection, which includes Nam June Paik's *Beuys-Voice – A Hole in the Hat* 1987. Originally commissioned for Documenta 8, this work is permanently installed on a video wall in the museum. In common with many of Paik's multi-monitor video works, it uses techniques of duplication and repetition, somewhat similar to those found in artists' closed circuit TV installations from the late 1960s and early 1970s, which often sought to explore the mechanics of television broadcasting and reception.[8]

2
This challenge to consumption is noted by Byrne, *A State of Neutral Pleasure*, 14.

3
Gerard Byrne's interest in hybrid media forms recalls aspects of James Coleman's works, particularly as theorised by Rosalind Krauss in '"And Then Turn Away?" An Essay on James Coleman', *October* 81 (1997): 2-33.

4
Byrne, *A State of Neutral Pleasure*, 10.

5
Gerard Byrne, in conversation with Sven Anderson and Cassandra Edlefsen Lasch, *PRAXES Cycle 1: Paper No. 2*, Berlin: PRAXES, 2013, 8.

6
Byrne has also, elsewhere, drawn attention to use of (altered) Brightsign display systems. In 2015 he created a work titled *Bright Sign* for Steirischer Herbst Festival in Graz, Austria, curated by Tessa Giblin, responding specifically to the display system of the GrazMuseum.

7
Byrne, *PRAXES Cycle 1: Paper No. 2*, 12.

8
Such concerns are central, for example, to Frank Gillette and Ira Schneider's *Wipe Cycle* (1969), one of the best-known early uses of closed-circuit technology. See David Joselit, 'Feedback,' in *Changing Channels: Art and Television 1963-1988*, ed. Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien and Matthias Michalka (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2010), 67–78.