

In his text on *The Concept of Anachronism and the Historian's Truth* from 1996, Jacques Rancière argues in favour of a notion of anachronism, that has been jointly condemned by so different historical traditions as historicism and the *École des Annales*. For both, anachronism represents an inexcusable scientific error that relates, following Rancière, not so much to what has actually, historically happened, but to the possibility – or impossibility – of a specific event in a specific moment: 'The accusation of anachronism is not the claim that something did not exist at a given date. It is the claim that something *could not have existed* at this date.'<sup>1</sup> Anachronism thus relies on the idea of an epoch as a 'truth regime' in which specific things can happen and others cannot have happened. The example Rancière gives is Lucien Febvre's reading of Rabelais' anachronistic unfaithfulness: Febvre's question was not if in fact Rabelais did not believe in God, but rather he argues that as Rabelais' time, the 16th century, was completely determined by Christian religion, the idea of unfaithfulness was unthinkable, it could not exist in Rabelais' epoch. In Febvre's understanding, an anachronism thus presupposes an identification of men to 'their' time or epoch. For Rancière, on the contrary, 'to explicate a phenomenon by referring it to 'its time' means to put into play a metaphysical principle of authority camouflaged as a methodological precept of historical inquiry.'<sup>2</sup> And he thus opposes to this idea of anachronism the notion of 'anachrony' (*anachronie*), which he defines as follows: 'An anachrony is a word, an event, or a signifying sequence, that has left "its" time', and in this way is given the capacity to define completely original points of orientation [*aiguillages*], to carry out leaps from one temporal line to another.'<sup>3</sup>

Rancière's argument on anachrony thus seems twofold since for one, he argues that it allows for words and events to be repeated *outside of their context*, in an erratic context, and that this inadequacy represents an improper overlapping of times. And this implicates, secondly, that the idea of the epoch as a truth regime or of time as totality must be relegated to what Rancière calls in his writings on political aesthetics the 'representative regime of the arts' as opposed to the aesthetic regime that gives way to an understanding of time as composed by multiple temporalities.<sup>4</sup> In this line of thought, Giorgio Agamben has recently defined 'those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time' as 'those who neither coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands'<sup>5</sup> – the contemporary is not being 'part of one's own time', in the sense also criticised by Rancière, but it means being in anachrony with it: The untimeliness of the contemporary thus bespeaks of the splitting the one time or epoch into multiple temporalities that enter into various relations with each other.

This productive understanding of anachronism as 'anachrony', that Rancière and Agamben put forward, seems to be illuminating for a reading of Gerard Byrne's extensive work in regard to the question of temporality which, even though under quite different aspects, remains central to it; it engages more concretely with the potential of the anachronic repetition, that is: with the specific and improper repetitions that anachrony features, and the subsequent multiplication of different temporalities, its splitting up of the 'unitarian' understanding of time. Byrne's work is thus 'anachronic' in this precise sense inasmuch as it combines different times – the narrational time of the work, the time of

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Rancière, 'The Concept of Anachronism and the Historian's Truth', Imprint 3 (June 2015), 18.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Rancière, 'Dissenting Words: A conversation with Jacques Rancière', *Diacritics*, 30, 2, 2000, 122.

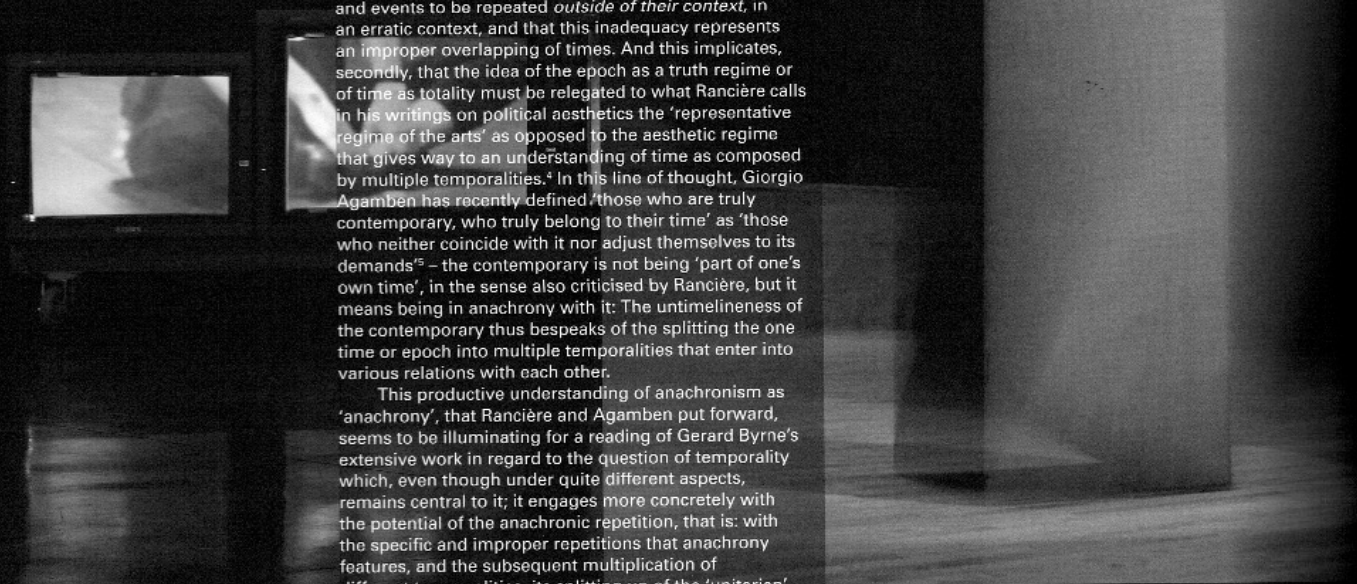
<sup>3</sup> Jacques Rancière, 'The Concept of Anachronism and the Historian's Truth', 17.

<sup>4</sup> For the distinction of the three regimes of the arts, see Jacques Rancière, 'The Distribution of the Sensible' in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, London, Continuum Press, 2004, especially the chapter 'Artistic Regimes and the Shortcomings of the Notion of Modernity', 20–31.

<sup>5</sup> Giorgio Agamben, 'What is the Contemporary?' in *What is an Apparatus? And other Essays*, Stanford University Press 2009, 40.

## Gerard Byrne's Anachronic Reproduction. Repetition between Art and History

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the exhibition space and thus of the reception of the work, but also the historical time in which the work is somehow embedded or to which it refers – but also and foremost because it problematises the relationship of different temporalities or temporal modes. This involves the suspension of time on the one hand and the duration of time on the other, as well as the aesthetic dogmas that they implicate through specific forms of repetition. Because the 'repetitions' Byrne uses both as a technical and aesthetic tool follow the logic that Rancière describes, inasmuch as they relate to something already said, written, represented, that is 'restated' or 'stated out of context, inappropriately'\* – or, reformulated in contemporary aesthetic terms: they relate to texts and images that are already there and that are being 'appropriated'. But it is not only because they relate to art-historically improper subjects, that they might seem improper, but also because they are 'mere' repetition, i.e. recreation or re-enactment, and do not put forward the pure creativity of the artist as author.

The engagement with this kind of repetition and the consequences it might have for traditional notions such as the 'author' or the 'work' are present in one way or the other in all of Byrne's work over the last 15 years. They appropriate, repeat and re-enact different kinds of mostly textual, but also visual elements – interviews, panel discussions, advertisements. But there is something of a self-reflexive note in two different works that 'represent', 'repeat', 're-enact' or 'reconstruct' discursive constellations explicitly addressing art-historical discussions that are key debates for his own practice. For instance, take the debate between modernist art and minimalism that is on different levels central to Byrne's artistic understanding, as well as, more recently, the debate around the diorama as a proto-photographic and proto-cinematic medium that therefore addresses the artistic (and again: technical) rivalry between still and moving images. Both debates are themselves deeply embedded within the problematisation of a specific artistic temporality, as in the opposition between modernist instantaneousness and literalist duration that plays a key role for the different modules of *A thing is a hole in a thing it is not* from 2010. Or in the opposition between the frozen, photographic time of the diorama and the moving images of the camera travelling through it, as in his newer work *Jielemaguvvie guvvie sjisjnelli* (*Film inside an image*) 2016, shot at a large-scale 19th century diorama at the Biologiska Museet in Stockholm. It is thus this opposition between the standstill of time and time unfolding or being set in motion that seems to be fundamental to Byrne's work in different aspects: Firstly as the opposition between the still and the moving image, such as it is represented in the diorama work, but also through the different photo series such as 'Newsstands' that somehow comment or interact diagonally with his video works. Second in regard to the opposition between instant and duration in terms of aesthetic experience – and the discussion about time-based media that originates here. And last in regard to the question of history or historiography which is also crucial to Byrne's work, and that can also be read through the lens of the opposition mentioned above – an opposition that in all three cases should be understood against the backdrop of the Rancièrian notion of anachrony.

The group of works *A thing is a hole in a thing it is not*, which borrows its title from a quote by Carl André, as well as the photo series *Image or shadows of divine*

*things* (2005–ongoing), seem to be fundamental when it comes to discussing the temporality in Byrne's work in terms of its anachronies. Both take as their object of reference the textual or discursive constellation centred on Michael Fried's critique of minimalism and advocacy of modernism in his seminal text *Art and Objecthood* from 1967: The video work *A thing is a hole in a thing it is not* is composed of different modules each referring to a specific moment or event in the dispute about minimalism: the 'reconstruction' of a 1964 public radio broadcast entitled 'New Nihilism or New Art?', with Frank Stella, Donald Judd and Dan Flavin; the 're-dramatisation' of the performance *Column* from 1961 by Robert Morris; the 'dramatic reconstruction' of Tony Smith's driving through the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike in the early 1950s recounted by Fried; and a video of an exhibition at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven of iconic minimalist works from its collection. These films on minimalism address, or re-enact, re-dramatise, reconstruct, etc., a commonplace of minimalism as established by Fried's critique.

The practice of enactment, re-enactment, dramatisation or staging of existing pop cultural phenomena, often textual and taken from popular sources such as *Playboy* magazine, advertisements, TV interviews, etc., is a central element of Byrne's work that at once refers back to the discussions around this form of repetition. Practices of re-enactment are traditionally described as hyper-mimetic strategies, that imitate a past event in its most unimportant details and therefore produce a kind of historiographical mimicry. This tends to negate the temporal gap between the past and the present and condenses time within the contemporary instant. The duration of re-enactment – its extension in time – is thus aimed at the negation of the historical gap between the present and the past, giving way to the instantaneousness of a 'true' historical experience. In contrast, the recent profusion of re-enactments within the realm of contemporary art often deconstruct this idea of historiographical authenticity and instantaneousness by introducing some error, false note or variation within the repetition. This is done in order to shed light on the fact that total truthful reproduction is impossible and that there is always a creative, or subjective, surplus that finally deconstructs the conservative understanding of re-enactment – and of history, we might add. Here, the duration of re-enactment is thus aimed at unfolding a difference between the past and the present. But Byrne's art historical re-enactments such as he presents them in *A thing is a hole...* do neither of these things: they do not try to negate time through the production of ahistorical instantaneousness, nor do they aim at unveiling the hidden differences between a critical present and an ignorant past. Instead, the repetitions Byrne enacts are marked by the paradoxical entanglement of these different temporalities: historical and narrative time, as well as instantaneousness and duration – as we can most clearly see in his reenactment or reconstruction of Fried's *Art and Objecthood*.

As it is widely known, Fried, in *Art and Objecthood*, channels his critique of minimalism among other elements through the question of its specific temporality: Fried rejects minimalism, which he calls 'literalist art,' because of its aiming at an engagement with the physicality of the spectator, and argues that the 'literalist espousal of objecthood' amounts to 'a plea for a new genre of theatre, and theatre is now the negation of art'.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Names of History*, (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1994), 30.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood' in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 153. (Originally printed in *Artforum*, vol.5 no.10 [June, 1967].)



This is so because literalist work is concerned with 'the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters'<sup>8</sup> it – where actuality means the coexistence of the work and the spectator in a specific and concrete time-space. For Robert Morris, quoted by Fried, this coexistence implies the establishment of specific relationships: '[the beholder] himself is establishing relationships as he apprehends the object from various positions and under varying conditions of light and spatial context'.<sup>9</sup> Literalist art thus displaces the viewer's experience from an aesthetic engagement within the artwork (an experience of absorption: 'what is to be had from art is strictly located within it') into a 'situation' outside of the artwork, a relationship between the work and the beholder 'extorted' by literalist art through its 'stage presence'.<sup>10</sup> The literalist and concrete presences of the minimalist objects infringe upon the imperative of the (modernist) artwork to 'defeat or suspend' its objecthood through form, and therefore undo the force of art and its 'presentness and instantaneousness,' its ability to lend itself to be experienced 'in all its depths and fullness, to be forever convinced by it [...] in a single infinitely brief instant.'<sup>11</sup> While the 'modern' aesthetic experience is instantaneous and located within the work, the 'literalist' situation of aesthetic experience is durational and extrinsic to the work – the spectator experiences the work by becoming an actor in the temporal and spatial situation produced by minimalist sculpture – much like re-enactment strategies that produce immersive situations, 'that draw the spectator into an experience' in a similar way as minimalist sculpture 'extorts' a 'complicity' from the beholder.<sup>12</sup>

At the core of this series of re-enactments thus lies the specific relation that Fried had described between the minimalist work and its beholder as one of total dependence and confrontation: a constraint or enforcement of the beholder through the work that, in its opposition to the autonomy of modern art, obviously horrified Fried. This 'theatricalisation' of the relationship between the artwork and the viewer radically opposes the experience of the 'true and authentic' modernist artwork involving the suspension both of objecthood and of the sense of duration of time. The cardinal sin of literalist art is thus its time-based quality, the fact that its experience persists in time. Literalist art is essentially endless, or indefinite, in duration, as suggested in the recurring reference to Brancusi's *Endless Column*. The literalist preoccupation with time – more precisely with the duration of the experience – is paradigmatically theatrical, and marks the difference between literalist work and modernist painting and sculpture. While the experience of the latter has no duration, because at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest, 'the experience of the [literalist] work necessarily exists in time,' as Fried writes, paraphrasing Morris. And he continues: 'The literalist preoccupation with time – more precisely, with the *duration of the experience* – is, I suggest, paradigmatically theatrical, as though theatre confronts the beholder, and thereby isolates him, with the endlessness not just of objecthood but of time [...].'<sup>13</sup> Byrne's re-enactments or reconstructions specifically highlight those characteristics of minimalism that, following Fried, excluded it from the realm of art: its temporal duration as well as its historical and spatial situatedness. At the same time, these re-enactments also realise a critical remediation of the minimalist performances by transposing them into the medium

of film and thereby undermining their 'ephemeral' character – which has long been one of the essential dogmas for the self-understanding of performance art.

*A thing is a hole...* is therefore not only a critical commentary to Fried's high modernism, but also to the dogma of minimalism and its idea of an aesthetic situation. Thus the re-enactment of Tony Smith's drive to the turnpike following the quote from Fried's text addresses this question of the *situation* and its ephemeral experience as opposed to the modernist dogma. At the same time, Byrne's reconstruction also paradoxically insists on the fact that his technical reproduction of this aesthetic situation is totally improper with regard to the aesthetic experience featured by minimalism's imperative request: 'you have to experience it'. In a similar way, Byrne dominantly features, in the video of the Van Abbe show, the camera as the time-based medium par excellence, recreating the situation of 'the experience of literalist art' through various re-enactments that he refers to as 'dramatisation', 'fictionalisation', 'dramatic representation', 're-staging', 'reconstruction' and 'recreation.' The camera shows actors and non-actors playing or being viewers, technicians, art experts, photographers, a cleaning lady and museum guards who enter the exhibition space and engage with the works in different ways by looking at them or experiencing, explaining, cleaning, installing or documenting them. The video shows these trivial scenes in a rather monotonous mode, with the camera slowly following the action taking place within the frame, suggesting that there is no such thing as a specific and autonomous aesthetic experience or a specific time or position from which to experience aesthetically, but only different forms of interaction with the works or sculptures. Byrne thus reconstructs, as if following the indications in Fried's text, a small artificial world that obeys the minimalist *dreiklang*, the triad formed by the work, the space and the spectator (as it is mentioned by the 'art expert' in the video).

While this video thus focuses on the question of the beholder – and documents how he is 'drawn' into the work – the 're-dramatisation' of the performance *Column* from 1961 directly addresses the temporary dimension of minimalism. For his performance, which took place at The Living Theatre in New York, Morris built a grey, hollow, plywood plinth, measuring two feet square and eight feet high. The plinth stood on an empty stage in a vertical position for three and a half minutes, after which time Morris toppled it with the help of a string tied to the plinth's top. It then remained on the floor, horizontally, for another three and a half minutes. Morris' performance is often read as proposing an exploration of bodies in space, and was inspired by the artist's interest in choreography and dance, or, more generally speaking in art as happening, which was triggered by his insight that art making is a just record of a performance done by the artist in the studio.

Now, Byrne's re-enactment is an exact reconstruction of the original performance, also performed in seven minutes, in which not much happens besides the toppling of the column. The only 'dramatisation' Byrne introduces is through the stage lights, as well as through the shots of a ticking watch that the artist uses to measure the time of the re-enactment, which concurs with the original time of the performance and is therefore isochronic: it is a scenic discourse or narrative event that thematises its own temporal mode. Isochrony, as Gérard Genette writes, is a

- 8
- Ibid.
- 9
- Ibid.
- 10
- Ibid., 155.
- 11
- Ibid., 160, 167.
- 12
- See Ibid., 155.
- 13
- Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 167.