James Coleman
Irish Museum of Modern Art, Project Arts Centre, Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin

A collaborative venture involving three institutions, this is the first major exhibition of James Coleman's work in Ireland. It follows the successive presentation, over the past three years, of three projected image works in the Great Hall at IMMA. In the new show at IMMA, the video *So Different . . . and Yet,* 1980, was presented on a large outdoor LED screen similar to those used at sporting events or concerts. Museum visitors tended to move around this structure, often drawing close to the screen to examine the grid of tiny blue, green, and red bulbs that make up its surface. Their movements loosely echoed the actions of the young woman shown on-screen, who continually rearranges herself, occasionally addressing the camera directly. The work appears to play with technological obsolescence, through its pronounced reference to chroma-key visual effects and references to outdated fashion. But the outdoor setting at IMMA directs attention elsewhere, toward the relationship between television and public space.

The RHA provided the setting for three works exploring pictorial and narrative conventions. In *Connemara Landscape,* 1980, a single slide projection (an ambiguous, diagrammatic arrangement of white lines) both invites and frustrates interpretation because it appears to contain figurative components. The other works at this venue seem, by contrast, to delight in the pleasure of storytelling. *Seeing for Oneself,* 1987-88, a gothic melodrama complete with repressed desire, oppressive setting, and scheming stepmother, unfolds as a sequence of predominantly black-and-white projected images, accompanied by voiceover narration. Even though the plot races toward a resolution, much of the interest lies in the ambiguities surrounding the depicted gothic mansion, the layout and infrastructure of which has been designed by the heroine's father on the model of the human circulatory system. *Charon (MIT Project),* 1989, also combines projected images with voiceover. A sequence of scenarios organized around the persona of a photographer, its color images evoke disparate genres such as documentary, fashion, and corporate branding, drawing attention to objects and environments both as props and sets and as material possessions.

At Project Arts Centre, the focus shifted to time, performativity, and the materiality of bodies—whether depicted on-screen or physically present within the exhibition space. Installed in the Cube, a multi-purpose black box space often used for live events, *Box (ahhareturnabout)*, 1977, is a continuous 16mm film projection featuring archival footage of an infamous 1927 bout between American Jack Dempsey and Irishman Gene Tunney, then world heavyweight champion. As the two figures move around the ring, a voiceover seems to articulate Tunney's thoughts in the form of disjointed, breathless phrases. This audio track is punctuated by a rhythmic low-frequency pulse powerful enough to produce a perceptible physical vibration and synchronized with flashes of white light. This combination generates a retinal afterimage in which the two fighters appear briefly suspended in front of the screen. Such sensory overload provided a sharp contrast to *Untitled*, 1998-2002, a silent black and white video installation in the Project gallery and the most recent work on display. The abstract image, apparently suspended on the brink of motion, was projected directly onto the gallery wall. The high level of ambient light in the space (emanating from the open doorway into the foyer) meant that both projection source and gallery environment remained clearly visible.

The streaks of light that form part of *Untitled*'s abstract image recall an earlier moment in the history of video technology, when cameras often struggled to capture motion in low light and

instead recorded traces of their own presence. But it would be misleading to interpret this work wholly as an exploration of technological obsolescence. Significantly, Project gallery is the only space not transformed by the addition of screens, carpets, or acoustic treatments and, due to the minimal nature of the work and the mode of installation, the gallery itself seems to be on view. As a consequence, attention is deflected away from the array of literary and theatrical references that are embedded in Coleman's work, and from the questions of form and medium that have been widely theorized in relation to his practice. Instead, this exhibition asserts Coleman's interest in the architectural and institutional context of exhibition, providing a lens through which the particularities of three different public spaces - museum, academy and arts centre - come into focus.