

Architecture, television, archaeology: Gerard Byrne's *Subject*, 2009

Maeve Connolly

Taking the form of a three-channel video installation with a wall text, Subject (2009) seems to invite comparison with earlier multi-channel works by Gerard Byrne, such as New Sexual Lifestyles (2003) and 1984 and beyond (2005-07). All of these installations involve the use of TV monitors, with headphones attached, and the action is organised into a series of sequences ordered differently on each DVD so that it is not possible to fully experience these works without moving between monitors and viewing some sequences several times. In addition to this shared mode of display, there are similarities in production, as all three involve the use of 'scripts' derived from textual sources (including magazines and journals) dating from the 1960s or 70s, which form the basis for 'reconstructions' performed by professional actors and shot in modernist architectural structures. On closer examination, however, it is possible to identify important differences between Subject and the earlier multichannel installations, particularly in the relationship between script and location.

In New Sexual Lifestyles, a conversation between predominantly North American critics, advocates and analysts of sexual hedonism, published as a roundtable discussion in *Playboy* magazine in 1973, is reconstructed by a group of Irish actors. They are seated in a simple but dramatically sited Modernist

summer house overlooking a river in Enniskerry, Co. Wicklow. This structure was designed in 1972 by the architects Scott Tallon Walker for Irish art patron Basil Goulding, and the installation also includes lush colour photographs of its interior, devoid of occupants. The script for 1984 and beyond is similarly derived from a *Playboy* roundtable discussion, this time from 1963, in which an all-male group of science-fiction writers speculate about the future. In the reconstruction they are all played by Dutch actors, filmed in conversation at two different locations in the Netherlands: the Provinciehuis building (by Hugh Maaskant, from 1959 to 1971) in the city of Den Bosch, and the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo, which incorporates a sculpture pavilion originally designed by Gerrit Rietveldt for the Sonsbeek International Sculpture Exhibition (1955). While both locations are clearly identified in press releases, and might be recognisable to some viewers, the editing and sequencing of scenes suggests the existence of a composite space.

Crucially, there is no direct connection between the source text and the shooting locations in either of these installations. Instead, these transpositions in time and space direct attention to cultural flows between Europe and North America, which encompass but also extend well beyond the circulation of the 'International Style' of architecture. In Subject, however, there is a direct connection between script and location. Originally commissioned for the 2009 exhibition 'The New Monumentality' at the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds, Subject was shot (in black and white) entirely on the Brutalist campus of Leeds University, designed in the 1960s by the firm of Chamberlin Powell and Bon, responsible for the Barbican Centre









The Provinciehuis as it is today, and as it appears in a moment from a 1984 and beyond discussion about the population explosion.



Party on in the summerhouse'. The Irish Times, September 5th, 2002, photographed in the National Library of Ireland in 2009.

THE IRISH TIMES Property Supplement, Thursday, September 5, 2002

irishtimesproperty

ARCHITECTURE

arty on in the summerhouse







oyed by wind, rain and vandals ible to go back to the architecrank Fahy was the original site archiect and 30 years later he came back

it Basil's brief, according to Ronnie in, was to "do something of our ne, so there were no restriction apart, that is, from the site' Fallon searched along the narroy of a site on the south bank of the oking for rock anchors for hi red building. Sir Basil had a good idea what shape his new 160s and early 1970s the practice led lichael Scott, Ronnie Tallon and n Walker had designed what were ming Irish modernist landmarks: s new studios at Montrose, the Caractory in Dundalk and the Bank

on was a follower of Mies van the der Robe and the philosophy that archishould be an expression of the nd that it must reflect the dominant



☐ The Goulding Summerhouse, inside and out. Photographs: Paul Tierney

technology. Looking at the steep bank-side site Tallon would also be reminded and the steel-framed box structure is furof how Mies solved a similar problem with his famous cantilevered glass house in Chicago, the Ellwood Smith House, 1955 and his "Sketch for a Glass House on a Hillstone Control of the house juts out appar-House on a Hillside" from the mid 1930s. ently unsupported over the river. Sir Basil who was a well known busi-

In the end the architect found rock nessman, art collector and gardener was laid on top of the original joists and the 1970s where a temporary circular

became heavily involved in the project, actually working on its construction. Frank Fahy remembers that he took on nuch of the woodwork, including the laying of the floor joists and the timber nonist, says Fahy. "When we took up the floor we found that he had followed he plan for the joists to the last detail nd that all the measurements were per-

Fahy also discovered that the bones of the building were still in good condi-tion except for localised damage caused by exposure to rain. The steel beams were grit-blasted and repainted dark instead of the original deep brown. Much of the original tongue and roove cedar siding was still in place it it was badly stained with algae and was replaced. In the original design terior was also partially clad in wood but this was replaced with

The existing roof deck was in reasonably good condition and this was renewed and re-felted, while inside a and the Summer new suspended plaster ceiling replaces the original mineral tile. Mr Fahy replaced the broken glass with lami-

The biggest change to the Goulding now been greatly upon The original control of the internal layout. The front door now opens on to a among the rocks out tine pond has been put to stone fronted spounds of the front door now opens on to a mong the rocks out tine pond has been put to stone fronted spounds of the fronted spounds of eneer. Walk a few paces on either side make a smaller pond f the wall and you can see straight lawn at the front of the ugh to the back of the house.

This wall is one side of what now that it could now als rms the core of the house, which is accommodation or framed on two sides by stud walls clad in oak veneer, one facing the front door. the other facing on to the open-plan space. In between are a bathroom, a kitchen and a utility room and a fold-out double bed. Concealed sliding doors in now looking for suital property of the state o oak on either side of the core mean that

10-minute stroll from the main family house, so it could still be used as origi-

nally intended, as a party pavilion.

Mr Fahy remembers parties there in calls for it to be rest



77

in London during the same period. While the Irish and Dutch performers are clearly out of place in the locations featured in the earlier works, the actors in *Subject* generally have northern English accents and so might conceivably be from Leeds or the surrounding region. More, significantly, the script they perform is drawn not from a single publication but rather from multiple texts, many of which are linked to the university. These texts include Leeds University student publications such as *Union News* (1967-70), the student poetry journal *Poetry and Audience* (from the

mid-1960s), the poetry journal *Strand* (1963), published by university staff, and the poetry collections *Wodwo* (1967) and *Crow* (1970) by Ted Hughes.

Also cited are 'academic reports on the vernacular use of language amongst the English working class', including A Questionnaire for a Linguistic Atlas of England (dated 1952, 1964, 1983) and E.P. Thompson's The Making of the English Working Class (1963). A quotation from the preface to Thompson's book, largely written at Leeds, is also presented as a wall text:

te 1984 and beyond re-enactments, istinely presented at the Kröller iller Museum, Otterlo, in 2008.



THE QUESTION OF COURSE IS HOW THE INDIVIDUAL GOT TO BE IN THIS 'SOCIAL ROLE', AND HOW THE PARTICULAR SOCIAL ORGANISATION (WITH ITS PROPERTY-RIGHTS AND STRUCTURE OF AUTHORITY) GOT TO BE THERE. AND THESE ARE HISTORICAL QUESTIONS. IF WE STOP HISTORY AT A GIVEN POINT, THEN THERE ARE NO CLASSES BUT SIMPLY A MULTITUDE OF INDIVIDUALS WITH A MULTITUDE OF EXPERIENCES. BUT IF WE WATCH THESE MEN OVER AN ADEQUATE PERIOD OF SOCIAL CHANGE, WE OBSERVE PATTERNS IN THEIR RELATIONSHIPS, THEIR IDEAS AND THEIR INSTITUTIONS. CLASS IS DEFINED BY MEN AS THEY LIVE THEIR OWN HISTORY, AND, IN THE END, THIS IS ITS ONLY DEFINITION.

A quote from the forward to E.P. Thompson's 1963 classic *The Making of the English Working Class*.

The quotation explicitly frames Subject as an exploration of class and social hierarchies, shaped partly by property rights (and, by implication, architecture), and also provides an insight into Thompson's research methodology. It introduces two opposing strategies, loosely recalling the tension between 'structuralist' and 'culturalist' approaches in the development of the British cultural studies tradition.1 One involves stopping history to reveal the complexity and multiplicity of social experience at any given moment, while the other focuses on development over time. Although Thompson seems to recognise class as a construct that is itself historically determined, he nonetheless appears drawn to the position of observer, outside history.

Like Thompson, Byrne engages with 'historical questions', but although he is clearly interested in the patterns that might be discerned in social relationships, ideas and institutions over time, he explicitly rejects the position of observer. Instead, he uses a range of formal strategies and techniques (sometimes drawn from Bertolt Brecht) to disrupt and disavow any claim to neutrality or objectivity. In New Sexual Lifestyles and 1984 and beyond these strategies include the use of 'nonnaturalistic' acting styles, deliberate geographical and historical anachronisms in the staging, and repetition of elements in the editing of the DVDs. He approaches both of the Playboy documents as a theatre or television director might engage with the script for a play, taking liberties with the staging and the setting. That is the case particularly in 1984 and beyond, which includes sequences bearing little relation to the content of the roundtable. Subject, however, involves a far greater degree of fabrication, as there is no link to an 'original' discursive situation. Instead, the same actors appear in disparate scenarios, while loosely recalling dramatic and factual genres associated with radio and television, such as 'vox-pop' interviews, local news broadcasts, daytime chat shows and arts programmes. While this can produce an abrupt shift in tone, a sense of continuity is created through the recurrence of location shots of the campus, typically at night.

In contrast with the earlier works, the acting in Subject appears relatively naturalistic. But from the outset, Subject is marked by a highly selfconscious approach to both casting and performance. One of the most prominent sequences is an interview between a friendly young female presenter and a slightly pompous male guest identified as 'Mike Harnett', director of a student production of Brecht's Mother Courage and Her Children (1939).2 In the course of the dialogue, presumably taken from a published interview in a staff or student journal, Harnett complains that it would be much easier to work with a cast from 'secondary-modern' school. This is because, he claims, 'students suffer from being over-intellectual' and so cannot offer the kind of 'earthy, direct' performance most suited to Brecht's objective the creation of 'real-life characters within the social situation'. This dialogue reveals the extent to which the university was imagined as a place in which students (deliberately or inadvertently) became dislocated from 'real-life' and from their prior social and class identity. In addition to this direct citation, Subject is also characterised by the use of various techniques intended to draw attention to the construction of representation, which might be described as 'Brechtian'.3

The Henry Moore Institute in Leeds displays *Subject*, an anthology of filmed re-stagings, from the nearby Leeds University campus.







'The student approach to Brecht... Mother Courage', *Union News*, Friday November 24th, 1968.

opposite

above Mother Courage's cart, reconstructed after the 1963 Broadway production, starring Ann Bancroft and Gene Wilder, is here staged as part of *In repertory* at the Lenbachhaus Kunstbau, Munich, in 2006.

below 'Marijuana and the student', a special investigation in the *Union* News, Friday 20th October, 1967 The same actors reappear in different roles, often wearing costumes that are not entirely convincing and several shots are also carefully framed to include camera operators and radio engineers, who are also (presumably) actors. There are potential parallels here with the ideology of Brutalist architecture, which sometimes emphasised the overt display of the means of construction, such as the marks left by wooden supports on the surface of poured concrete. Yet Byrne does not seem overly concerned with this aspect of Brutalism and does not linger on the material surfaces of the buildings. Instead, by using shots of the exterior to link the action sequences, he hints at the ways in which the architecture of the university, whether physical and institutional, might subtly shape the production of students as subjects.

Many sequences in Subject pointedly involve the use of 'direct address' in which reports, comments and questions are directed towards the viewer. Some of these sequences are textual form, which might be an academic article, poem or student newspaper feature. In one item, a young woman bearing a microphone stands near a campus walkway as though she is about to conduct an interview. She refers to a survey about sex, involving the participation of 'hundreds of people', and the action then cuts to individuals in entirely different locations speaking awkwardly about their own experiences. The reporter implies that the university may be complicit in the normalisation of sex outside marriage, but her authority is undercut by the slightly sensationalist tone of the report, amplified by the on-screen use of text. At one moment, for example, the word 'EXTREME' flashes up in a vaguely 1970s-style typeface, while a young man describes his encounters with women. This is just one of a number of sequences focusing on social behaviour. In general the participants are not named, but one interview is attributed to 'Jack Straw', the former UK Foreign Secretary who was president of Leeds University Union from 1967 to 1968, and of the National Union of Students from 1969 to 1971.4 This reference to Straw is a forceful reminder of the fact that 'extracurricular' activities at university are often integral to professional progression, particularly in the fields of media production and politics.

shot in the campus TV studio, and are distinctly televisual in their assertion of a shared time and space. Often, however, the script retains aspects of its earlier







te audio studio of Leeds University vision Centre, actors re-enact scripts from *The Language of Fifteenold Children*, originally recorded by Rutherford for the Nuffield Foreign juages Teaching Materials Project 369.



Algis Budrys (Rien Stegman) and Robert Heinlein (Michiel Nooter) discuss inter-planetary human settlement in 1984 and beyond.

While much of the scripted material in Subject seems to have been drawn from student publications, there are number of scenarios in which the interviewee is required to answer a series of ambiguous questions, sometimes responding to gestures hidden from the viewer. In one such sequence the interview asks: "If you didn't shave here, you'd soon have...?", repeatedly receiving the same tentative response-"Whiskers?" The interviewees are also invited to complete statements about traditional village trades and occupations, rituals associated with death and patterns of school attendance, but the focus seems to be on vocabulary (or perhaps accent) rather than social custom. These interactions draw attention to the university not only as institution for the production of research but also as a site of potential social mobility, and heightened self-consciousness in relation to markers of class.

The content and form of these interactions, involving an interplay between on-screen and off-screen space, underscore the importance of phenomenological, linguistic and semiotic frames of analysis in shaping concepts of subjectivity and socialisation, which were often directly relevant to the study of film and television. It was during the 1960s that media studies first became widely established within British universities, partly through the journal Screen Education, which was founded in 1959. Even after it was re-launched (as Screen) ten years later with a more explicitly theoretical focus, many of the contributors were practitioners whose work in cinema or broadcasting was motivated by an interest in radical social and political change.

Subject is not the first work by Byrne to communicate an interest in the history of television. Both of the *Playboy* roundtable discussions respond to shifts in domestic consumption and leisure that were partly shaped by the rise of television. The explicit content and meandering flow of the discussion in New Sexual Lifestyles, with participants shot at close quarters, is also deliberately reminiscent of the Channel 4 show After Dark, a late-night live discussion programme intermittently broadcast between 1987 and 1997, which was often characterised by rambling conversation and 'adult' content. More recently, in A thing is a hole in a thing it is not (2010), Byrne has used material from radiospecifically a discussion between Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Frank Stella and presenter Brian Glaser, broadcast in 1964.



Subject is, however, more explicitly concerned with the exploration of the forms and conventions specific to broadcasting at a given moment. The early and mid-1960s were marked by radical change and experimentation in British television, as BBC television was facing significant commercial competition for the first time. In his critical history of television drama from this period, John Caughie notes that many theatre practitioners migrated towards TV in the late 1950s in search of larger (and broader) audiences, but struggled to develop a distinctly televisual language. Caughic argues that the arrival in London of Brecht's Berliner Ensemble in 1959 generated interest in non-naturalistic approaches to staging and performance amongst British TV producers and writers.⁵ He also specifically highlights the drama documentary as site for the exploration of these ideas. This form had been employed in cinema since its inception, and in left-wing theatre in Britain and the US since the 1930s, when the Living Newspaper offered a means of 'performing the news'. But the drama documentary could also take a more instructional form, particularly in television, and Caughie notes that this double identity was exploited in TV productions such as Peter Watkins's Culloden (1964), and in three of the most influential works in the Wednesday Play series: Up the Junction (Loach/James McTaggart, 1965) Watkins' The War Game, suppressed by the BBC in 1966, and Ken Loach and Tony Garnett's Cathy Come Home (1966). These productions went on to form part of the canon of television studies, and continued to be cited in debates around realism, popular culture and memory well into the 1970s and 80s. While Subject does not directly

address this history, it clearly acknowledges the significance of theatre (and the newspaper) in the development of television's characteristic modes of address.

By focusing attention on a Modernist university campus and evoking an array of televisual genres that belong to an earlier moment, Byrne might be accused of nostalgia for broadcasting, for the welfare state or even for the lost dream of universal education. In Subject, moments from past, present and future are brought into proximity with each other, and the fact that the actors are depicted in spaces once occupied by the writers and original readers of Byrne's source texts only highlights the distance that exists between the imagined future of the 1960s and the present situation confronted by students and lecturers, a gulf that has widened even further since the work was made in 2009. Yet even though it draws heavily upon the formal language of a very familiar medium, Subject does not offer a straightforward or reassuring image of the past. Instead, through its sustained emphasis on the campus as a site in which social conventions are learned and practiced as well as occasionally contestedit offers an archaeology of the university that is both unfamiliar and quietly unsettling.

opposite

Chamberlin Powell and Bon's Leeds University campus, broke ground before and was built alongside their more widely known Barbican centre project. Although both projects share many concepts and aspirations, Leeds University has fared less well in terms of preservation.

below

The War Game (dir. Peter Watkins, 1965) and [right] Culloden (dir. Peter Watkins, 1964).





- 1. For a discussion of this history see Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms', Media, Culture and Society, no.2, 1980, pp.57-72.
- 2. Written in 1939, Brecht's play is also referenced in Byrne's work *In repertory*; 2004-06. First exhibited at Project Arts Centre in Dublin, this work involved the display of a collection of scenic elements, drawn from three specific theatre productions (the 1947 Broadway production of *Oklahoma!*, the 1961 Odeon Theatre [Paris] production of *Waiting for Godot* and the 1963 Martin Beck Theatre production of *Mother Courage*).
- 3. For a discussion of the deployment of Brechtian techniques in film during the 1960s and 70s, as well as a useful overview of debates around realism, see Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake, Film Theory: An Introduction, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989.
- 4. In 2000, Leeds students voted to withdraw his lifetime union membership because of his role in 'curtailing civil liberties', BBC News website, updated 7 December 2007 http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/7133 364.stm [last accessed in June 2011].
- 5. John Caughie, *Television Drama:* Realism, Modernism, and British Culture, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, p.68.







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TEXTS, PARATEXTS, HYPERTEXTS

Books have forewords or introductions, periodicals have editorials. The three types of texts share a goal: outline, explain, suggest, set up or introduce what is to come. They require to be read in advance of the other texts (although the reader can choose not to), serving as a sort of instruction manual that helps 'using' what comes after. The topicality that normally characterises editorials is substituted in the introductions and forewords—more often than not—by a tone that suggests permanence, as if its contents were to be relevant for posterity, or at least for a future that lasts.

Gerard Byrne's work has often taken texts originally commissioned and published by periodicals as its basis, cultural products that may or may not have been significant in their time, but that, when recuperated, reconstructed, reworked or restaged, thirty or forty years later, in a different context (an art context in general, or the context of this or that video or photographic installation in particular), constructs a history and a certain legacy. This is a legacy for Byrne's work itself, and perhaps also for a general cultural history (of the West, or of artistic or cultural modernity).

Making a history yours or for yourself requires some constancy and a manifold strategy. The operation that takes place in Byrne's installations involves analysis, exegesis and deconstruction as well as a clear fascination a fascination that to an extent frustrates attempts at understanding both the material and the time that gave birth to it. The works seem to say that it is important (for Byrne, and possibly for the viewers) to learn how to appreciate things we don't understand, and that, by promoting a curiosity for such things, we might open the doors for something else to happen.

In this sense, if this foreword or introduction is a paratext that frames the other, principal texts—like the colophon, the title, the afterword or the acknowledgements, all demanded by the form of the book in general and this

book's specific institutional origin— Byrne's works, as well as the rest of the texts in this book, are palimpsests: texts that are constructed on other texts that don't exist any longer, but of which traces remain; texts that are reused or altered but that still bear visible traces of their earlier form. All these works, the texts printed in this book and the images that accompany them present, hopefully, more than a set of intertextual references, quotations and allusions to literary, artistic and intellectual history, but a transtextual range of articulations that show not only how a work can explicitly refer to another, but how it can also elaborate, expand, modify or transform the grounds where it stands.

Books, like artworks, are also of their moment, and this book can be seen as a toolbox that gives clues (because curiosity, in order to emerge, needs at least some information), as well as an attempt at summing up, or at least to take stock or provide a record of sorts in relation to the work Byrne has produced to date. It functions then, in the manner of Arthur Miller perhaps, as an advertisement of the work itself-in this case done not by the author, but by others who stand in his place. However, if it is the case that these texts and images not only function as tools for understanding the works, and through them the things, events and time they refer to, but also rewrite, redraw and reconfigure the texts' relationship to the works and the times, this book might then articulate both a story or several stories of a time and, simultaneously, a set of ways in which the story of a time can be told, and made yours.

PABLO LAFUENTE

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Art

Art

Aras
NuaEalaíne
na
hÉireann