

Gerard Byrne - Reviews - Art in America

The centerpiece of Gerard Byrne's exhibition at Lismore was a four-channel installation titled *A Thing Is a Hole in a Thing It Is Not* (2010; all four films have audio tracks; total running time approx. 2 hours). This major new work constitutes an unusually focused contribution to contemporary debates concerning the legacy of Minimalism. One film reconstructs Robert Morris's 1961 performance *Two Columns*, in which a 6-foot-tall wooden box was made to fall onto its side. Another film restages, with actors, an interview Bruce Glaser conducted in 1964 with Donald Judd, Frank Stella and Dan Flavin. The third is composed of a sequence of clips presenting photographers, critics, cleaners, handlers, guards and gallerygoers, all attending to an installation of Minimalist objects in various ways. The fourth is a cinematic reconstruction of Tony Smith's famous car ride along the then-unfinished New Jersey Turnpike, during which the esthetic potency of the industrial scenery made Smith consider art's relationship to such extraordinary everyday spectacles. Byrne's installation was accompanied by his ongoing series of black-and-white photographs, "Images or shadows of divine things" (begun in 2005), and by *Untitled Acting Exercise (in the third person)*, 2008, shown off-site. Here I will concentrate on *A Thing Is a Hole in a Thing It Is Not*, which was first presented at the Glasgow International festival this past spring.

Such artists as Anthony McCall have long used the basic elements of film to encourage perceptually heightened encounters with three-dimensional geometric forms that unfurl and transform over time. Byrne's conjunction of Minimalism and film, however, does not share this emphasis on phenomenological experience. In strong contrast, too, with sculptures by Andre, Judd and Morris, to which Michael Fried famously attributed a sense of open-ended theatricality, Byrne's work has a specified duration. Nevertheless, Byrne shares with many Minimalist artists an acute interest in exploring the specific properties of his medium, even if his model of reflexivity is more indebted to Bertolt Brecht's. (Indeed, the relationship with Brecht is fairly explicit in the disturbing *Untitled Acting Exercise*, which explores the process of theatrically reconstructing the testimony of a Nazi war criminal.) In *A Thing Is a Hole in a Thing It Is Not*, Byrne uses the formal language of film to examine how Minimalist art has been shaped by discursive, mnemonic and institutional frameworks.

Since its inception, Minimalism has been analyzed and extended in numerous ways, from the unruly materiality of the work included in Lucy Lippard's "Eccentric Abstraction" show (1966) to Dan Graham's investigation of postwar suburban architecture in *Homes for America* (1966-67) to the institutional critique of Daniel Buren and Michael Asher. Byrne's installation operates in a deconstructive mode, prompting the reflection that the meanings and effects of Minimalist objects were never produced and sustained by direct perceptual encounter alone.

Photo: Gerard Byrne: A Thing Is a Hole in a Thing It Is Not, 2010, video, approx. 2 hours; at Lismore Castle Arts.