

Gerard Byrne

Whitechapel Gallery & Lisson Gallery, London, UK



Gerard Byrne, *Hommes à femmes (Michel Debrane)* (Men to Women [Michel Debrane]), 2004, DVD still

In 1960, at the Living Theater in New York, Robert Morris staged *Column*, a tall wooden box that stood upright for a time before being tugged by a discreet rope and toppling with a categorical bang. At this juncture, 30 years before Anna C. Chave's essay 'Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power' – which discerns machismo and aggression within the aesthetic – was published in *Arts Magazine*, Morris's tumbling *Column* probably didn't instantly allegorize a rapidly flopping phallus; it was meant as a substitute for a whole human body. Yet restaged (in period black and white) in Gerard Byrne's multiscreen video *A thing is a hole in a thing it is not* (2010), it now does so. Time and events did that: Chave, Post-Structuralism and morphing critical attitudes, but specifically also the way in which the Irish artist chose to contextualize his remake of Morris's scenario in his absorbing, mildly self-undermining retrospective, 'A state of neutral pleasure', at the Whitechapel Gallery. Byrne's linguistic system is one in which every noun is a modifier.

Projected onto a covey of neo-minimalist propped white cuboids – like plump, phantasmal Richard Serra – that served as projection screens in the Whitechapel's main downstairs space, *A thing is a hole ...* involves several other overlapping foci of attention. Periodically, one screen repeats the work's de facto chorus, a fictional reconstruction (cue footage of nocturnal scenery and an American car's lovingly photographed mid-century interior) of Tony Smith's famous night drive down the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike in the early 1950s. The artist's account of this is a foundational text for

Minimalism's expansions, wherein 'the landscape of the flats, rimmed by hills in the distance, but punctuated by stacks, towers fumes, and coloured lights [...] did something for me that art had never done'. Photographs in the show's catalogue present a view of the turnpike at that time: a jutting, forlornly incomplete bridge. The mind, coloured associative by Byrne, attempts wild ironical leaps: might Smith's turnpike itself read as another anticipatory humbled phallus in the prehistory of Minimalism?

Another screen presents a painstakingly art-directed and acted version of a moderated 1964 radio conversation between Frank Stella (cue cigar), Donald Judd and Dan Flavin, back when Minimalism was still being referred to as 'the time of the white surface' and conversations revolved, tentatively and a bit randomly, around the debatable importance of symmetry: the style here is, once again, just finding focus. Other projections, furthering the colloquy between eras, fast-forward into the present to show footage of careful modern-day installing and photo documentation of Stellas, Andres etc., now expensive aestheticized relics, in the white spaces of Eindhoven's Van Abbemuseum. At one point – echoing the anecdote that opens Chave's essay, concerning teenage girls kicking a brass Judd and then using it for a mirror – a couple of women walk blithely past them, talking of evening plans. They are followed by a slim younger woman, dressed in art-world black. The feelings beclouding her face as she appraises the art are alloyed, hard to read.

Two further lengthy films flanked this work. (Running in breaks between them were brief, chancy combinations of footage by 24 other filmmakers, including Peter Maybury, Paul McCarthy and Linda Quinlan, visual sorbets titled *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, 2013, in reference to Morris's modular 1969 work; Jonathan Monk's own use of its method eight years ago complicates the reference in ways Byrne probably enjoys.) The single-screen *Homme à femmes (Michel Debrane)* (Men to Women [Michel Debrane], 2004) reconstructs a 1977 interview from *Le Nouvel Observateur* between Jean-Paul Sartre – with Debrane playing the philosopher as a tender leering reptile – and journalist Catherine Chaine, kept off-screen while she probes his relations with the so-called Second Sex. Sartre may have co-architected Existentialism but his sexual views, evidence suggests, were, if complicated, less forward-looking: he has no problem with the notion of a kept woman, for example.

In the fresh-from-DOCUMENTA(13) *A man and a woman make love* (2012), meanwhile, a 1928 conversation (published in the journal *La Révolution surréaliste*) between an all-male group of Surrealists again intertwines progressive and regressive attitudes, as speakers including André Breton, Benjamin Péret, Jacques Prévert and Yves Tanguy ponder topics including homosexuality ('disgusting as excrement', except for De Sade); whether a woman can possibly tell that a man has had an orgasm; night spurts caused by succubi (female demons appearing in dreams); and brothels (variously 'not very good, but they're better than nothing' and 'a very, very good thing'). Meanwhile, the perspicaciously

rendered but oddly British Edwardian drawing-room *mise en scène* – typewriters, snug chesterfields, wooden globes, brandies alongside African masks – and costuming of cravats and smoking jackets is, in some of the multiple projections, closed in upon, while in others the camera pulls back to reveal other cameras filming the actors on set, and in still others, we see the action playing out on monitors in different contemporary rooms containing women. A couple watch the playlet amusedly on TV, sipping from mugs, in a middle-class lounge; a woman works on her computer while on another screen in the room the long-gone Surrealists self-importantly pronounce, ignored.

Clearly all the above works engage sexual attitudes in the last century – moments when the culture appeared propelled forward in some ways and lastingly hidebound in others. Such contradictions, seen from a distance, have been a fascination for Byrne ever since *New sexual lifestyles* (2003), displayed upstairs, which stages a roundtable discussion on sexual experimentation originally published in *Playboy* in 1973. The chief virtue of this retrospective was that it snapped into focus the artist's nexus of interests around modernity and objecthood and objectification. If Byrne turns to theatrics against objecthood (and thus against the Michael Fried of 'Art and Objecthood', 1967), it is also against an objectifying that exceeds the art work and in which modern artists, in this context, are seen to be complicit. The object as bugbear, in this ambience, even imposes itself onto *Why it's time for Imperial, again* (1998–2002), Byrne's mordant single-screen staging of a 1980 Imperial Motors advert from *National Geographic* – a supposed conversation between the head of the company and Frank Sinatra, the former convincing the latter to buy a car during the 'energy crunch' by listing all its then-futuristic, now-comical qualities. Thirty years on, of course, we have too many cars cruising down too many turnpikes and a resultantly wrecked environment.

The latter work is 'early' Byrne in that its Brechtian alienation techniques are both blunt and ingratiatingly comic. (The salesman keeps forgetting his lines.) The artist has become more severe in this regard – the road travelled is one from here to the anachronistic baseball cap worn by a participant in *New sexual lifestyles* to the pointed 'reveal' of the cameras in *A man and a woman* (which, in yoking Modernist art to sex, is pretty much *New sexual lifestyles* crossed with *A thing is a hole ...*), and the explicit exclusion or inclusion of women in the scenarios. The humorous treatment of representational issues in his initial productions, which refines over the years into sophisticated wryness, is missed; but Byrne obviously doesn't want to appear a mere clown. In the catalogue's conversation with the exhibition's curator, Kirsty Ogg, he confesses that his thinking is marked by deconstructionist theory, and it's wholly apparent here: there's a moral tone to Byrne's *oeuvre* when seen in depth and allowed to converse internally.

And yet his art doesn't win one over in its large thinking; its critical arcs are not what one comes away cherishing. When Byrne points out that the past is modulated by the present, or that time perpetually

creates cultural amnesia, or that Modernism wasn't wholly progressive, or that – if we extrapolate – we ought to examine our own attitudes too, there's less a sense of actual profundity than that of someone cleverly combining from deconstruction's toolbox. What we respond to most in Byrne, I'd say, is less his original thinking than his superb voicing skills: his ability to find great illustrations for ideas, his research élan and fine detail work. He's more a craftsman than a philosopher, and there's nothing wrong with that. The bogus Surrealist talking, in an anomalous accent, of wanting to make love in a church – and, if possible, of leaving excrement in the chalice – outweighs the exposed fact that there's a cameraman filming them; the cameraman's wispy ponytail and bald patch somehow contributing more than both.

Martin Herbert