



Review: Willie Doherty, Gerard Byrne, Judith Wilkinson, Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland, Venice Biennale, Venice, June - November 2007

Author(s): Judith Wilkinson

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WILLIE DOHERTY
GERARD BYRNE

Gerard Byrne
from 1984 and beyond
2005 – 2007
black-and-white photograph
courtesy Ireland at Venice



Confirming many of Gavin Murphy's dispirited predictions in *Circa's* Summer issue, the shortcomings of this year's *Venice Biennale* have already been well documented by the art press. Ex-MoMA curator Robert Storr's bewildering exhibition premise, *Think with the senses – feel with the mind, art in the present tense*, is a conceptual frame spread so wide as to be able to include virtually any model of art practice, in any medium from any time period. Confronted by artists as disparate as Valie Export, Malick Sidibe and Elsworth Kelly, viewers struggle to make connections amidst such unlikely groupings. In addition to the marked lack of curatorial coherence present at both the Arsenale and Italian pavilion, the inclusion of the Cornice Art Fair (a full-blown commercial enterprise) left the 52nd *Venice Biennale* feeling more like Frieze Art Fair than the innovative art event on which its reputation is founded.

Operating with an assured awareness of this potentially tricky territory, the Republic of Ireland's representative, Gerard Byrne, managed to negotiate the complex dynamics of the Biennale setting with intelligence and wit. Showing a new film entitled **ZAN-*T185 r.1: (Interview) v.1, no.4 – v.2, no.6, 19 (1969 – Feb.1972); Andy Warhol's (Interview) v.2, no. 21 – v.3, no.9, 2007*, commissioned by Mike Fitzpatrick for Ireland at Venice, a new photographic work, and several other key pieces such as *1984 and beyond, 2005–07, Homme à femmes, 2004, and A Country road. A tree. Evening., 2005 – 2007*, Byrne occupied the airy upper floor of the Istituto Provinciale per L'Infanzia.

Situated a stones throw from the Grand Canal and Saint Mark's Square, these beautiful buildings were home to Northern Ireland's pavilion in 2005. This year they house both the Republic of Ireland

and Northern Ireland, and the selection of Willie Doherty by third space curator Hugh Mulholland creates an interesting dialogue with the works of Byrne.

Far from being arbitrary selections, Gavin Murphy in his article characterizes both artists as inhabiting a particular position in relation to the forces of publicity and spectacle at work in the *Biennale*. As artists who have garnered international attention and prestigious gallery representation, Byrne and Doherty are poised to challenge the Biennale's outmoded demands for a display of Irishness. Yet Murphy also signals the dangers of participating in a generalized and mobile field of production that too easily accommodates the transaction demands of the art industry.

Do Byrne and Doherty then face the unappealing choice of either retreating to the confines of their respective nationalisms or being unwitting accomplices to the commercialism of a *Biennale* turned art fair? In his essay 'The Story teller: notes on the work of Gerard Byrne', the art critic George Baker proposes a more optimistic role for the engaged image-maker. Baker claims that contemporary artists have the capacity to rekindle the avant-garde critical aspirations of Bertolt Brecht or Walter Benjamin. Central to Baker's hopefulness is the conviction that some artists have taken up Brecht's challenge to develop a new realism, one capable of confronting an age of floating capital. Against the false choice of either a nostalgic return to a pre-spectacle age when images really meant something, or an acquiescence to market forces, Baker suggests a third option exists. It rests on the recognition that the abstract is in fact a necessary tool for considering social relations that are themselves increasingly beyond the grasp of conventional realism. He highlights a Brecht quote that

Byrne himself incorporates into his work: "...less than ever does the mere reflection of reality reveal anything about reality. A photograph of the Krupp works or AEG tells us next to nothing about these institutions." Contemporary artists, those that take on the challenge, are in the position, according to Baker, to cultivate new revelatory powers of the image.

An example of this strategy, Byrne's work has long been committed to an examination of the theatricality of capitalist production and media forms. In his **ZAN-*T185...*, appearing for the first time in Venice, Byrne again deploys his method of using actors to reconstruct a textual source. Derived in this case from early editions of Andy Warhol's *Interview* magazine, the interviews profile the lives of young performers who are believed to be on the brink of celebrity. Showing them in candid situations, warming up or discussing intimate details of their careers, the piece exposes the mechanics of fame production and the blurry line between performance and sincerity in this supposedly documentary media form.

The strength of Byrne's work lies not in a straightforward exposure of artifice, but in a recognition that the substance of the real very often incorporates the workings of fiction. His three-channel video installation entitled *1984 and beyond* is based on a round-table discussion from a 1963 issue of *Playboy* magazine featuring twelve of the world's most eminent science-fiction writers, Arthur C Clark and Rod Serling amongst them. The authors' speculations on scientific and technological developments reveal how their dreams for the future are heavily conditioned by the Cold War and industrial circumstances from which they emerge. Byrne generates a glimpse of reality exposed through a fictional image of the future.

While not as explicitly tied to these theoretical touchstones, Willie Doherty exhibits a similar ability to produce images that are both alluring and critically engaged. Showing three video works in Venice, *Closure*, 2005, *Passage*, 2006, and the newly commissioned *Ghost story*, 2007, Doherty provides a space for quiet reflection with his poignant examinations of life in Northern Ireland.

Ghost story, 2007, is a deft demonstration of how the political and the mythical entwine themselves within collective cultural memory. Taking the viewer down an anonymous tree-lined path, Doherty's camera pans slowly through the dense foliage as it searches for signs of life. The viewer who observes the passing scenery from the seat of an imaginary car is informed that these forests are populated by wraiths. When spotted, these curious creatures signal the imminent death of those that encounter them or one of their close

friends or relatives. Comparing these mythical apparitions with the unnerving experience of viewing images of the recently deceased published by the media, Doherty highlights the absurdity of such widespread and unnecessary violence. The spectral presences which haunt Doherty's images serve to remind us that the complex history of his homeland continually evades the exacting eye of history and spills out into the lore of its people.

While overall the *Venice Biennale* is less than inspiring, the national contributions of the Republic and Northern Ireland (and a few other pavilions) help restore some faith in the art-exhibition format. Both Byrne and Doherty confirm that Baker's optimism and the aesthetic and critical role he assigns for contemporary art are not only possible, but more necessary than ever.

Judith Wilkinson is an independent curator and PhD candidate at Goldsmiths College.

Willie Doherty
Ghost story, 2007
duration: 12 minutes looped
installation: one 16:9 video projector, one DVD player, one stereo amplifier, two speakers, on DVD (colour, sound) projected to a size of 1.3m x 2.3m onto wall of self-enclosed space
courtesy Northern Ireland at Venice

