The Present Tense Through the Ages

On the recent work of Gerard Byrne
This book has been co-produced by

Ireland at Venice 2007
Charles H. Scott Gallery / Emily Carr Institute, Vancouver
Farmleigh Gallery, Dublin
Green on Red, Dublin
Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf
Lisson Gallery, London
The Model Arts and Niland Gallery, Sligo

Contents

7
Foreword
Vanessa Joan Müller

17
History Pictures
Mark Godfrey

73
Two-Way Theatre
Catherine Wood

121
The Utopian Past
Lytle Shaw

138
Biography
The Utopian Past
Lytle Shaw

All past events are more remote from our senses than the stars of the remotest galaxies, whose own light at least still reaches the telescopes.
George Kubler

In 1963 Playboy magazine invited a group of eminent science-fiction writers to participate in a roundtable conversation on the subject of their special speculative expertise: futurity. Among the larger topics woven into stunning and largely inaccurate predictions were the development of space stations, encounters with aliens, space travel, longevity, as well as the future of sex, religion, the Cold War and daily life from 1984 to roughly the year 2000. As in Gerard Byrne's previous video works — Why it's time for Imperial, again and New Sexual Lifestyles — this one, titled 1984 and Beyond, also involves a dramatization of what was initially a purely textual artefact — a 're-' enactment' in which a range of information unavailable (or only partly provided) in our experience of the Playboy interview (the setting, the writers' physical appearances, body languages, tones of voice, clothes, and occasional bursts of laughter) is now not so much recovered archivally as invented. If this invention seems in some sense a realization, an honouring of the interview's ambitions through a move into real time and real space, it is also an awkward literalization. "The literal meaning," as Paul de Man argues, "asks for the concept ... whose existence is denied by the figurative meaning." Literalism derails the figurative by insisting — as if naïvely — on the grammar from which it must emerge. Part of the allure of the Playboy article (part of its figurative meaning, we might say) is the implication that a kind of epochal event has unfolded in their offices — the leading science-fiction writers, the leading producers of narrative fictions that stretch our imaginative relations to time and space — engage in live speculation about futurity. And yet the closer one looks at the fragmentary record, the letter, of this 'live' event, the stranger its own time and space become. This strangeness inheres, however, not simply in promises whose falseness must be exposed, but in models of thought and social interaction whose foreignness might be explored.

It matters, now, for instance, that all of these figures (Pohl Anderson, Isaac Asimov, James Blish, Ray Bradbury, Algis Budrys, Arthur C. Clark, Robert Heinlein, Frederick Pohl, Rod Sterling, Theodore Sturgeon, William Tenn and A. E. Van Vogt) come into view within the elegant (if narrow) sartorial horizon of the early 1960s Professional, even the subset, the Intellectual — thin suits with narrow ties, some with private eye overcoats, tight turtlenecks and fitted cardigans; that the leisurely and speculative ambiance of this gathering of experts is furthered, in that historical idiom, by the continual smoking of pipes and cigarettes; and that these conversations take place in a series of iconic modernist settings including Hugh Maaskant's Provinciehuis in Den Bosch and Gerrit Rietveld's Sonsbeek Pavilion (rebuilt in the Kröller-Müller...
Museum, where it now houses Barbara Hepworth sculptures). In these settings, the writers’ discussion of futurity seems closely paired with both the architecture’s and the sculpture’s polemical promise of new lifestyles emerging in relation to new man-made infrastructures and objects—an analogy also common in sixties films.

We have been taught for some time now to distrust modernism’s frequent claims, be they architectural, literary or filmic, to embody futurity. And it is easy, in a drive-by reading, to see 1984 and Beyond as structured around the ironic failure of many of the writers’ predictions: space stations on the moon by the 1970s; the U.S. becoming more socialist than the Soviet Union by 1980; the near disappearance of dull, routine jobs and advent of annual three months’ paid vacations by 2000. More, the article itself (like the others Byrne has turned into videos) marks a moment when an emergent cultural fascination has reached the stage where it can be administered to mass audiences through the pages of a wide-distribution magazine. But beyond these easy ironies are more powerful effects achieved by the selection and transformation of this specific moment of the printed past into the filmic present: first, in a sense thematically, we are made aware of our distance not just from a moment of naïve exuberance about futurity, but also from a widespread, speculative, open-ended debate about the kinds of future worlds that might be constructed—that is, about the social domain as shapeable, not simply imposed.

This larger thematic concern becomes indistinguishable, however, from the novel social form this debate takes in 1984 and Beyond. As each writer proposes a hypothetical future, his subsequent commentators sketch its presuppositions as a springboard toward the more thoroughly alien (or simply different) futures they propose. Perhaps the most astonishing example of this process is the discussion of extraterrestrial life, which begins with Clarke re-examining the Playboy interviewer’s assumption that the chances of encountering life within our Solar System are slim: “Are [the giant planets like Jupiter and Saturn] really cold, as a matter of fact? It’s much more probable that, owing to strong gravitational pressure, there is some level in their atmosphere where it is hot enough for water to exist, and for the complex chemical reactions which animate life.” This leads Tenn to propose that after “sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists” have been called in and failed to explain how alien the aliens are, Washington will call the science-fiction writers, who might in turn complicate Washington’s implicit model of political alterity by insisting on degrees of sexual alterity: “Well, whether they are collectivists or individualists may not be nearly as important as whether they are asexual, bisexual, trisexual or products of precision manufacture.” From here, Heinlein returns to Asimov’s point about life’s chemical basis, asserting that far more conditions than we realize might in fact sustain life. Sturgeon and Anderson then develop this problem into a series of further aphorisms—moving from “Nothing is always absolutely so” to “Nature tries everything that the laws of physics permit—which in turn includes just about everything we can imagine.” For a series of professional imaginers, this is rather a vast claim. But rather than pause here for its impact to register Pohl inverts the problem yet again: “I think perhaps the laws of physics may subsume things we can’t imagine.” Here, the dialogic movement of thought produced by the group
must necessarily come to a brief halt: Byrne's transformation of print into filmic 'drama' gives each of these gaps a specific amplitude and duration — claiming a three-dimensional reality, that is, not only for the strings of statements, but also for their uneven reception, their effects.

Throughout, world historical paradigms are bodied forth in the air and then casually punctured between pipe puffs — the world itself (let alone the nation) often becoming a 'naïve' unit of measure in moves toward galactic and inter-galactic thinking. And yet these vertiginously morphing worlds and galaxies — spinning by in succession as a result of scale-jumps, reversals of figure and ground, and inversions of social expectations — take on collectively not so much a dire sense of chaos or evacuated agency as a kind of peppy ambient quality. This is certainly the result of individual optimistic statements in which man's resourcefulness and burgeoning technological prowess are figured as overcoming even the most difficult future situations. But it is also the result of Byrne's directorial attention to the group formation itself, the clear pleasure these professional predictors are shown to take in positing, developing, and radically revising hypothetical scenarios among their most esteemed colleagues. In this context, the actors' mild and almost unplaceable accents (they are all Dutch) might be read not just as an avant-garde estrangement effect (it is that too), but as evoking the use of agreed-upon and not necessarily native languages (Latin, French, English) for the professional work of an international discipline, like futurist studies.

But before we move too far into the future of this past, let us further consider its pastness: the tone of these science-fiction writers' conversation comes to us as a relic of a historical moment in the United States and Europe — just prior to 'escalation' in Vietnam — in which technological optimism not only held sway (despite debate), but was beginning to be bureaucratically parcelled among a range of professional discourses so that the public might savour futurity's various aspects as presented by its respective experts: outer-space (Austin Clarke), architecture (all of the then living modernists), energy use/alternative architecture, (Buckminster Fuller), sound (John Cage), cybernetics (Norbert Weiner) and so on. Futurity studies was in an early enough phase, however, that the science-fiction writer was not yet an antiquated polymath. Indeed his voracious imagination for interdisciplinary futurities positioned him as a kind of ideal cultural figure — hence this *Playboy* article. Moreover, many of the writers included in the *Playboy* interview were in fact credentialed in one or more futuristic disciplines and could thus contribute professional monographs to those fields (and of course participate in government or corporate think tanks) while also reaching the public more broadly through science-fiction novels: Asimov in astronomy, chemistry, and mathematics (among other fields); Clarke in space and sea exploration; Heinlein in plastics and space travel.

And yet, despite the attempt to credential writers in futurity studies, the proliferation of futuristic discourses — with their inescapably speculative, literary qualities — in fact helped to call into question the authoritative disciplinary divisions, the discrete regimes of expertise, on which such a project of credentialing was ostensibly based. The more one read the novels of Heinlein, Clarke and Asimov,
for instance, the more fictional their own (and others') versions of 'science' sounded. However much these science-fiction writers saw themselves as hard scientists, still the blurring of literary and empirical boundaries their work produced now seems legible as part of a much broader debate (usually referred to as the linguistic turn in the humanities) about the authority of science in relation to other disciplines and, more specifically, about the inescapable linguistic and rhetorical dimensions of even the most 'objective' empirical practices. Asking scientists (whether or not they are also science-fiction writers) to discuss the future is a situation that necessarily exacerbates this dilemma, since science must now focus its powerful empirical lens on the non-existent specimens of futurity.

Though we perhaps think of science-fiction, too, as a domain for developing dystopian scenarios as modes of critique, it is significant that though most of the writers included had written dystopian novels, for the interview their predictions tended to share faith in technology and generally optimistic versions of futurity. Is this to be attributed to Playboy's steering or editing the roundtable toward what was presumably a more saleable outcome? Or did the writers feel this compulsion themselves? Either way it's interesting to note the interview's contrast with some of the more paradoxically dystopian writing that was at roughly the same moment coming out of official government think tanks - like Herman Kahn's 1960 On Thermonuclear War, which, though equally optimistic about technology, now sees its task as managing and developing concrete policy recommendations for a Byzantine series of grisly post-nuclear strike scenarios. Born in 1944, nuclear arms were in the late 1950s and early 60s entering their awkward and reckless teen years. It was during this period that their chaperones, or at least the professional advisors to their chaperones, began to undertake a more 'realistic' approach to what seemed the likelihood of their careening into use. Kahn's is the classic formulation of this attitude, a bureaucratized apocalypse; his endless scenarios are approached with new attention to a more refined and professionalized vocabulary of various destruction levels. Kahn has abandoned "not particularly illuminating" terms like "intolerable," "catastrophic," and "total destruction" - which presuppose overkill "factors of five or ten" - for more immersive, nuanced models, closer to specialists' recent calculations, in which a quarter to half of the population has been eliminated in a nuclear strike and the others have set to work rebuilding a viable economic and military edifice. "It is therefore important," Kahn concludes "to get a 'feel' for what the levels of damage might really be under various circumstances."

With its scare quotes building a bunker for our literal bodies (while allowing our nonetheless embodied imaginations to wander around in the wreckage), this last sentence is not merely a specimen of Cold War politics. Robert Smithson had such a 'feel' in mind when he claimed in 1966, of the art in which he was most interested, that "the New Monuments bring to mind the Ice Age rather than the Golden Age." The point for Smithson and others, though, was not just the literal picturing of disaster (past or future), but the attempt to open sculpture both to the time of its own making (process) and, especially for Smithson, to an infinite range of temporal displacements. "His standard crystallographic boxes," Smithson writes
about Donald Judd, "come in a variety of surfaces from Sartainian orchid—plus to wrinkle-textured blues and greens—alchemy from the year 2000" (20). Smithson would himself of course cloud such technological optimism, claiming that the temporality of his sculptures displaced one backward into geological dystopias rather than forward into technological utopias. And yet perhaps the most significant context for Smithson's gesture of negation was his moment's optimism about futurity.

Though obviously fascinated by the temporal speculations of the Playboy writers, Byrne, like Smithson, destabilizes any progressive claim about futurity. This happens especially in the photographs Byrne presents with 1984 and Beyond, which suggest a pocket of alternate temporality (circa the interview date, 1963) located within contemporary quotidian life—most in unidentified rural and suburban areas, others in interiors, a few in New York City: black and white images of the Hemispheres Dome from the 1964 New York World's Fair, antiquated bagel stands, drive-ins, bowling lanes, picket fences. Despite over 40 years of 'progress,' the characteristic look of the early 1960s can rather easily be found within the inconsistently (re)built world. Much as Ian Hamilton Finlay can go out into his garden and 'find' Claudes, Rosas, Poussins, Altdorfers and Ruisdaels etc., so Byrne shows contemporary life to contain vast reservoirs of early 60s visuality, recalitrant or overlooked spaces that now become temporal displacements simply by adhering to their own long-vanished presents.17 By framing the video installation of 1984 and Beyond in relation to these photographs, and thus freezing the moment of the interview, Byrne does not, however, bring us closer to the 1960s—closer to an attractive and vanished ambiance. Rather, as islands of temporal stasis, his photographs corrode the rhetoric of the interview, suggesting that the interviewers, who debated only the kind of future that would overhaul everything in sight, were unable to conceive of a future physically laden with residual pasts.

In selecting this moment—1963—Byrne is also rendering infinitely static precisely the moment when new modes of temporality decisively enter art. This entrance has to do not only with exploring how time might be unhinged from the grand narratives of progress, development, or teleology, as Smithson suggested. Time was also a new kind of social frame for more immediate corporeal struggles. 1960s art famously (and infamously, depending on who was commenting) began to insist on the role of viewers' bodies as the necessary ground for experiences of sculptures, environments, happenings and a whole range of temporally based physiological processes that operated on the body in various ways (Op art is perhaps the most prominent example).18 Underneath this familiar shift toward embodied, real-time viewers, however, is a larger question about just what these viewers might do with their hard won participation—how the rhetoric of self-awareness, interactivity and freedom emergent in 1960s art might relate to a range of claimable and even realizable aesthetic—becoming—social possibilities. This, I think, is the real-time dilemma that viewers walk into in Byrne's In Repertory, comprised of various stage sets for Oklahoma!, Mother Courage and Waiting for Godot.

It is not a question, any longer, of fighting the good postmodern fight of theatricality against the Friedmans.19 In practice at least, theatricality won.
In Repertory engages this historic triumph in a novel way. Though first an insult hurled at the minimalist by Fried, the term theatricality later became a banner under which a range of interdisciplinary, real-time art practices could rally. What happens, however, if one imagines it literally as a desired condition for sculpture? Does it produce, as Robert Morris asserted the minimalist object did, a "more extended situation" in which "physical participation becomes necessary?" In the documentary videos that comprise the second phase of In Repertory we see viewers wandering tentatively over the sets, uncertain whether to touch surfaces, uncertain whether to laugh or scowl, uncertain more generally about whether it is the frames and props that are on display, or their own movements in relation to these.

Byrne's somewhat perverse reading of minimalism is even more explicit in Nominally an installation, a performance, or an event, a piece comprised of the public installation of a wooden dummy version of an untitled 1987-88 Donald Judd sculpture by two workers. Byrne's gesture here is wilfully to collapse the distinction between the installer and the viewer as a way to tap into another, even more awkward, form of 'theatricality' perhaps latent in the social domain of minimalism. Unlike In Repertory, there is here for the labourers no uncertainty about how to act in relation to the object; the emerging sculpture seems to control and dictate everything, including the moments of (otherwise potentially disruptive) contact with it. What Byrne stages theatrically, then, is the script that Judd, cruelest of playwrights, has carefully written for his installers, who appear accordingly not as liberated improvisers in public space, but as quiet functionaries completing their assigned tasks. That the results of both of these pieces are bleak and passive is not, I think, a matter of Byrne trying to distance himself from the ambitions of time-based 1960s art.

One possible exit from the theatrical dilemma posed in these two pieces is a kind of inverse project that gets its title, A Country road. A tree. Evening. from Samuel Beckett's description of the setting for Waiting for Godot. Here, Byrne photographs actual trees (along real roads in the early evening) in the areas in Ireland and France in which Beckett lived before writing the play. The self-consciously absurd proposal of locating the actual model for the Godot tree seems to give way to a process of converting non-descript natural scenery (through lighting and framing) into theatrical backdrops. The particularity of the tree always operates in a subversively specific relationship to the generality of Beckett's literary description. As in In Repertory, this literalness embarrasses us. But if the literal stage sets framed within arts institutions are weighted down and rendered static by their awkward status in relation to their viewers, the infinite stage sets appropriated in Byrne's photography seem to give rise to a freedom associated precisely with his contingent act of framing them. Under the winking pretence of uncovering a historical origin, Byrne instead shows that origin as subject to near infinite fabrication.

This returns us to 1984 and Beyond. Byrne speaks of the time frame governing his magazine re-enactments (from 1963 to 1981) as 'living memory.' This period is certainly 'alive' in the sense that much of what was articulated during the New Social Movements (even as they were disseminated in popular magazines) remains utterly unrealized, a collection of promises to be extracted from the future. What is
not living, however, in our relation to this past is an inevitable connection – a collective conscious memory that presses its concerns to become ours. This is less a tragedy that could be avoided than an inescapable condition of historical inquiry.25 Rather than tapping into a living memory, Byrne seems to have reanimated a dead one.

Such pasts lie everywhere inert, now merely physical residues (as Byrne’s photographs for 1984 and Beyond remind us). It is only the act of selection that builds continuity between one of them and a present, a link that then gets retroactively imagined as always having been there. Claiming such a link to the 1963 Playboy interview of 1984 and Beyond is of course a bizarrely mediated operation. What poses as a connection, or even a more neutral repetition, is also the same kind of self-consciously literal reading practice Byrne explores elsewhere by minimalizing theatre and theatricalizing minimalism.

Every bit as literal, 1984 and Beyond is, however, different. Here, the ‘realization’ of the script leads to a strange excess rather than a lack, a superfluity of imagined futures instead of a waning of freedoms in the present. Certainly the dramatic re-staging – the according of event status, to a thin, print-ready occurrence – does make for a new kind of abstraction out of ‘realistic’ video footage. Certainly this process wins back an element of narrative, or story, from the media that had come to own and administer it. But neither of these terms – abstraction or story – will quite frame what’s most compelling about 1984 and Beyond.26 Could we see it instead as a careful archival selection and moving dramatization of previously forgotten, but increasingly relevant, social desires? Partially. However attractive and relevant, these desires – for a kind of open-ended, improvisatory (though informed) dialogue about a shapeable future – are remade across a vast historical gap that separates us from a moment in American culture when utopian speculation was emergent not residual. This moment has thus not simply been recovered and represented. It has, instead, been brought into the present only through Byrne’s characteristically excessive literalism.

In approaching his objects, Byrne insists that we not jump immediately to their rhetorical registers, their favoured sense of themselves: the ‘public’ quality of the minimalist object that activates ‘physical participation’ in viewers; the boundless temporal and spatial possibilities of the science-fictional worlds. Literalization allows us to remain focused, instead, on more ambiguous actualities: docile subjects interacting with institutional environments; worlds comprised entirely of (not by) science-fiction writers. But while the practice of literalization also implies a level of uncontestable actuality to which one can appeal (like Paul de Man’s grammar), Byrne’s emphatically present stage sets, Judd sculptures and magazine scripts give rise to performances that, in pretending to be the literal truth or actualization of the objects, can always be but rhetorical readings (or counter readings) of them. And yet this partiality under the sign of the literal also has its salutary effect. In the more temporal context of 1984 and Beyond, it becomes a figure for how pasts are always remotivated and instrumentalized in the present – how, for instance, mute roundtables in obsolescent magazines, seen as excessive utopian scripts, can wind up showing us the irredeemably ‘outmoded’ as the yet-to-be realized.

2 The term 're-enactment' is George Baker's. He develops it in his essay "The Storyteller: Notes on the Work of Gerard Byrne" in Books, Magazines, and Newspapers (Verlag, 2001), p.66. Baker argues that these works seek to "release a 'new' form of narrative, a set of truly postmodern stories...[by attempting] to extract narrative and the story from the very entities [the modern mass media and the rise of 'information' as a communicational mode] that have eroded the story in the first place." By "autoromizing further these already autoimated structures...[Byrne produces] second-degree abstractions" (p.68). I see the key term, however, not as narrative but as dialogue, which operates along a spectrum — Why it's time for, Imperial, again being the most instrumental, 1964 and Beyond the least. That is, while we're securely distant from the outmodedness both of the 'product' and of the staged social encounter (whose would-be spontaneous would sell it) in Why it's time for, Imperial, again, we are progressively less so with New Sexual Lifestyles and 1964 and Beyond.


4 For an account of how Maaskant's high modernist building was received in the changed climate of the late 1960s and early 1970s, see Michelle Provost, "Mr. Maaskant Meets the Long-Haired Critics" in Mart Stam's Houses: Stories behind the Scenes of Dutch Modernism, eds. Crisman, Michael Spaks and Gerard Hadders (Rotterdam 010, 1995).


7 In Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in the East and West (Cambridge: MIT University Press, 2000) Susan Buck-Morss compellingly reads the early Soviet Union's debates about self-representation in art through the problem of temporality. She suggests, for instance, that what has traditionally been understood as Lenin's hostility to the radical formalism of the avant-garde might better be seen as a new attempt to ensure that avant-garde art's (historically disruptive) temporality "could no longer attempt to disrupt the continuities of history as defined and led by the party." (p.90).

8 Current 'public' discussions about futurity seem, by contrast, to debate only about nates of what are taken as inevitable processes — global warming, population increase, the increasing speed of microprocessors. 9 "Utopian form," which is for Frederic Jameson intimately tied to the genre of science-fiction, and not simply to the beliefs of science-fiction writers, is "itself a representational mediation on radical difference, radical otherness, and on the systemic nature of the social totality, to the point where one cannot imagine any fundamental change in our social existence which has not first thrown off Utopian visions like so many sparks from a comet" (Arealogies of the Future [London: Verso, 2005]), p.xii. My interest here, however, is not how these writers' works relate to Jameson's model, but rather how we see something like a real-time version of utopian form emerge in the staged, re-interpreted encounter among these thinkers of futurity.

10 For an excellent account of shifting concepts of group formation in the New Left of the 1960s, see James Miller's "Democracy is in the Streets": From Post Human to the Siege of Chicago (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1987).

11 This is not to suggest that no tension or competition exists; William Tenn's character in the first interview, for instance, is shown as struggling awkwardly to get a word in and then hold the floor. But his status is perhaps an exception that proves the general ability. 12 For instance, Clarke's 1900 Profiles of the Future, explicitly mentioned in the interview, seems to have been one of the main precedents for the Playboy article.


17 Finlay does this in Nature Over Again After Poussin, a 1977 installation at the Tate and a 1980 book. By selecting those features of the landscape that had become the signature compositional devices of the landscape painters — from Ross's lighted stumps to Claude's celestial vints — Finlay suggests that these painters do not so much represent landscape as weave a small cross-section of landscape features into signature compositions whose ready quotability proves his point.


20 A surprising number of critics, however, seem never to tire of trotting out the specter of abhorrent "modernism" to authorize and site their favorite art's transgressions against it.


22 Exercise for two actors and one listener presents a less bleakly bounded real-time dramatic situation.

23 Though Fried did not make the distinction, it was actually Robert Morris, not Judd, who, in "Notes on Sculpture," developed what was taken as the theatrical claim of the minimalist object focusing attention away from its object status toward its environment: "The quality of publicness is attached in proportion as the size increases in relation to oneself" (Battcock, p.230).

24 There is obviously nothing inevitable or final about Byrne's playful proposal that sets by Brecht, Rogers and Hansenstein, and Beckett might somehow picture sculpture's fantasy desires. We are, of course, to imagine more experimental sets; just as we're free to uncouple the ambitions of the term theatricality from any literal stage set. The term was, after all, a pejorative hurled at Judd, Morris, Tony Smith and the others, not a self-selected designation.

25 I will not try to engage the large critical trajectory in historiography that develops this line, sometimes unfortunately termed "relativism," except to point out that after Nietzsche's well-known On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life (1874) the works of Carl Becker and Charles Beard develop anti-foundational arguments that actually precede the work of the better-known Annales and post-Annales historians in France. Becker's historiographic work can be found especially in the posthumous collection Detachment and the Writing of History (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958). Though Beard's methodological writing is found largely within his larger studies, one concentration is The Economic Basis of Politics (New York: Knopf, 1922). On Becker and Beard see also Peter Novick, That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession (Cambridge England: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

26 These are George Baker's terms in the article described in footnote two.