T.J. Demos, "Opening: Gerard Byrne," *Artforum* (Summer 2007), pp. 478-480.

"*Everybody's first orgy is mind-boggling. I remember mine. Half of me was thrilled, the other half terrified. I didn't know what the social rules were. What should I wear? How should I get out of what I wear?*" So confessed radical feminist Betty Dodson during a 1973 Playboy roundtable, which gathered several notorious personalities of the day, such as Screw magazine editor Al Goldstein and porn star Linda Lovelace, for a "symposium on emerging behavior patterns, from open marriage to group sex." In thirty-eight-year-old artist Gerard Byrne's three-channel video *New Sexual Lifestyles*, 2003, amateur actors restage this conversation from three decades ago in a building of the same era: the Goulding Summerhouse, a stunning modernist construction of glass and steel built by Scott Tallon Walker Architects on the outskirts of Dublin in 1972. As important a context, however, is the one provided by Byrne's own practice. The piece is one of several historical "conversations" the artist (who represents Ireland at the Venice Biennale this summer) has brought to life in his works, ranging from *Why It's Time for Imperial, Again*, 1998-2002, a fictional exchange between former Chrysler chairman Lee Iacocca and the "chairman of the board" of the entertainment industry, Frank Sinatra, taken from the text of a 1980 advertisement in National Geographic, to *Homme à Femmes (Michel Debrane)*, 2004, which re-creates an interview with Jean-Paul Sartre regarding his attitudes toward women that was originally published in *Le Nouvel Observateur* in 1977.

The researched representation of events from earlier times is hardly unusual in contemporary art, where it often serves to place the present in critical relief or to reveal the fascinating alterity of history. For Byrne, however, reenactment provides a means to stage a paradox, simultaneously evoking both our proximity to and our distance from the past. Formally, he makes reality seem elusive and fiction ubiquitous, quoting historical episodes in a consciously artificial manner: *New Sexual Lifestyles*, for example, flaunts its lack of realism with its Irish cast; it's significant that Playboy was banned in Ireland until 1995. And in their content, Byrne's conversations similarly unsettle any firm sense of cultural chronology: It might be tempting, for instance, to dismiss as of a completely different era the chauvinism of Goldstein's statement, "If my wife cheated, I'd kill her. She's part of my property. . . . I feel I own her, the way I own my car." But a moment's reflection reminds one that the *Playboy* discussion took place relatively recently (and among members of a generation still living), about the time of Byrne's childhood. Like many of the artist's works, it taps into the formative culture of our own time. When returned from the repressed, such recent history assumes the form of "images in parentheses"-as the artist describes his work. The promiscuous theatricality of Byrne's presentation of historical material only further erodes the boundaries between reality and theater as well as between past and present in his restagings.

Given that Byrne's practice revolves around the uncertain status of his framings of representation, it's not surprising that his installations exploit similar ambiguities. For *In Repertory*, 2004, Byrne filled the gallery of the Project Arts Centre in Dublin with reconstructions of famous stage sets, including the schematic white tree Alberto Giacometti designed for a 1961 production of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and a painted backdrop from the 1943 Broadway production of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* Standing in for the missing actors, visitors to the opening were recorded as they walked around the hybrid mise-en-scène in uneasy contemplation-providing video footage that was

projected into the space for the rest of the exhibition run. Eliciting the audience's critical distance rather than inviting its empathic identification, the work seems successfully to deploy Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, or technique of estrangement-but without its original didactic and ideological purpose. Like the props, Brechtian strategies appear as historical relics: They too are in parentheses, deployed as formal elements divorced from the politics that defined their historical urgency. This repurposing suggests that one can no longer count on a critical distance from either the present or the past, as for Byrne even the radical tools of modernism are easily assimilated and appropriated.

The sense of ontological insecurity in Byrne's work is particularly clear in his series of photographs, "*A country road. A tree. Evening,*" 2006-. Taking as their title and inspiration Beckett's description of the setting for *Waiting for Godot*, the crepuscular scenes show roadside trees in those areas of Ireland and France that were familiar to the playwright. Whereas In Repertory presented reconstructed stage sets as real objects for inspection, here nature itself is theatricalized by means of on-site colored lighting that illuminates the trees. The visually seductive photographs thus reveal the hidden power of antinaturalism: The critique of illusionism has rarely reached such a gorgeous pitch as in these dramatically tinted landscapes. At the same time, the large, beautiful prints seem deliberately to address how such stylistic conceits can be reconciled with the slick production values prized by the commercial art market-a conclusion sanctioned by Byrne's always heavily mediated and considered relation to the presentation of his work.

The unstable relationship of reality and theater enters the public sphere in the artist's video and performance *An Exercise for Two Actors and One Listener*, 2004. At the opening of the 2004 ev+a Exhibition of Visual Art in Limerick, Ireland, two actors playing a couple mingled with visitors while holding an improvised conversation loosely inspired by movies, particularly Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974) and the final scenes of Bryan Singer's *The Usual Suspects* (1995). Not only did the audience hear snippets of the performers' conversation in passing but a live feed of their dialogue was transmitted to a single set of headphones that visitors passed around among themselves. A video of the occasion, with the audio of the actors' conversation, was then on view during the exhibition proper. The piece mixes Hollywood identifications into the spontaneous unfolding of a gallery opening, but it also evokes Conceptualist task-based performance, resulting in a scrambling of discourses, a wavering between the playing of scripted roles and everyday life, avant-garde and culture industry, that allows each to estrange the other.

Byrne returned to another *Playboy* conversation in *1984 and Beyond*, 2005-2006, which is among the works on view this summer in Venice. The video documents amateur Dutch actors rendering a 1963 roundtable in which sci-fi luminaries-including Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov, and Ray Bradbury-speculate about the world's future. Dressed smartly in period outfits, the actors converse in short vignettes, often highlighting, with hammed-up seriousness, some outrageous claim concerning a future that never came to pass: manned bases on the moon; imminent contact with alien races; the inevitable elimination of the need for sleep; and the bizarre anticipation that "so-called unnatural sex practices-both hetero and homosexual-will become legal, ethical and, who knows, even patriotic in years to come." The inauthenticity of Byrne's elaborate reconstruction is again deliberately accentuated: The Dutch cast mispronounces some English words, and their overarticulate deliveries smack of edited prose rather than spontaneous speech. Moreover, the camera cuts directly to each speaker already in focus, with a precision that betrays careful choreography. As in *New Sexual Lifestyles*, the forward-looking idealism of the conversations

is mirrored in the work's modernist architectural setting: 1984 and Beyond was shot at the 1964 reconstruction of Gerrit Rietveld's Sonsbeek sculpture pavilion in the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo, the Netherlands. Here again, the way in which the transparency of structure and the "honest" use of materials are modified by the Minimalist-like stylization of simple architectural forms resonates with the disjunctions between the real and the artificial in Byrne's restaging itself.

Engaging in representational critique and exposing how aspects of revolutionary modernism live on as bourgeois artistic enjoyment are only part of Byrne's project, however. In the re-created *Playboy* conversations Byrne might aim Brechtian distantiation against *Playboy*'s seductive utopianism, and, conversely, *Playboy*'s antielitism against avant-garde obscurantism, but the resulting work does not collapse into a void of pure negative criticality. Despite the profound cultural changes that have taken place since the '60s and '70s, and despite occasional lapses such as Goldstein's chauvinist outburst, there is still an emancipatory charge (rather than merely a melancholy sense of lost possibility) in that era's openness to unconventional ways of life. (Indeed, it is especially startling to discover it in *Playboy*, whose interviews with figures such as Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer, and Malcolm X sit uneasily with its pornographic images.) Byrne's reframings revivify this radicalism, as if he has somehow managed to bend his parentheses backward so that they enclose our own time, too. His maneuvers theatricalize the present as well as the past, revealing both to be contingent and denaturalized, artificial and changing. In this way, the recovery of obsolete imagined worlds serves Byrne's ultimate goal: the reinvention of the present (and, with it, the future), which he makes possible by creating for his viewers a space of play-one that is open, unscripted, and undetermined-between art and life.

T. J. Demos's new book, *The Exiles of Marcel Duchamp*, was published last month by MIT press.