



A country road. A tree.
Evening. The road to
Glencullen between
the Glendoo and the
Tibradden Mountains,
Dublin Mountains,
2005–07, C-type
photograph,
88 × 110 cm

A country road. A tree.
Evening. Somewhere
between Tonygarrow
and Cloon Wood,
below Prince Williams
Seat. Glencree, Co.
Wicklow, 2005–07,
C-type photograph,
88 × 110 cm

Why It's Time for Realism, Again – Maria Muhle

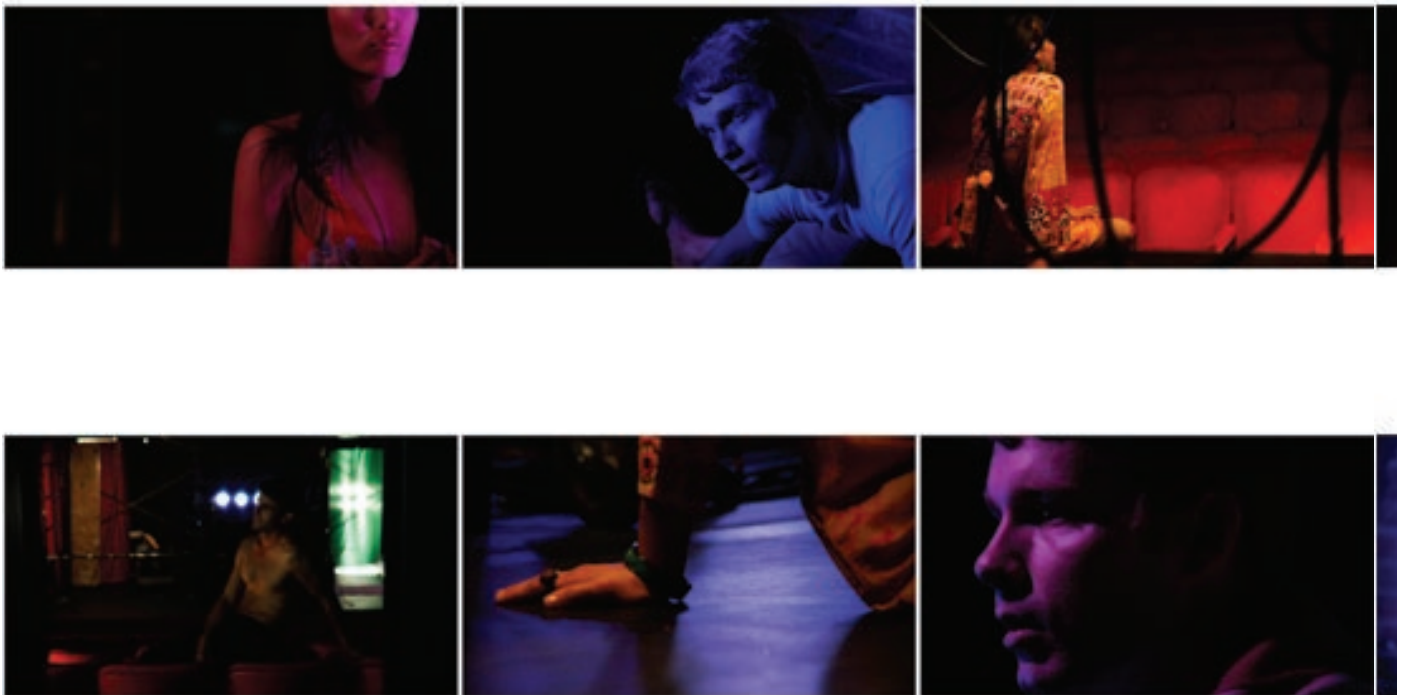
The current inflation of art practice that combines references to pop culture with modernist aesthetics has resulted in a profusion of works that, through a simple (sometimes simplistic) play of contrasts, reflect postmodern nostalgia – often accompanied by an unfulfilled claim to offer a critical perspective. Gerard Byrne's works include a multitude of popular references (science fiction, luxury cars, *Playboy* magazine, sexual practices, Frank Sinatra and familiar French intellectuals) and adopt a polished, modernist aesthetics, but he avoids focusing on simple contradiction or offering any hint of mourning, either for a past or present reality.

Byrne makes photographs, videos and installations of pristine appearance, adopting as a starting point published texts (interviews, roundtable discussions, advertisements or theoretical essays). These are then articulated in relation to modernist aesthetics, both in the 'content' of the artworks (through the use of a specific architectural background, for example) and their 'form' (through the works' clean, stylised presentation).¹ Probably the most immediate and productive way to approach Byrne's work is by drawing a comparison with Bertolt Brecht's notion of epic theatre. Two recent videos, *Homme à Femmes (Michel Debrane)* (2004) and **ZAN-*T185 r. I: (Interview) v. I, no. 4 – v. 2, no. 6 ... no. 21 – v. 3, no. 9.* (2007), make the parallels between the two especially evident. Both works restage interviews with famous people (or people who aspire to be famous) that were originally printed in periodicals, and in both the setting is similar: an actor, who plays the role of the interviewee, occupies the frame, and answers questions posed by an invisible interviewer. In *Homme à Femmes* the screen shows a white-bearded, elderly man answering questions in French to a female voice – questions, as she points out, not about 'philosophy, literature or politics', as she hints could be expected, but 'about women'. The man calls himself a 'liberal male chauvinist', and speaks about his love for women as well as his awareness of his ugliness and his early vocation as a seducer (which he discovered at the age of six). At some point in the conversation, possibly after the interviewer asks a question related to 'the semi-autobiographical *Les Mots*', or, even more clearly, when the name of Simone de Beauvoir comes up, we realise that the white-bearded man is Jean-Paul Sartre. After reading the exhibition handout we learn that the actor is interpreting Sartre in an interview with journalist Catherine Chaine, published by *Le Nouvel Observateur* in 1977, towards the end of Sartre's life. During almost forty minutes the actor calmly answers the journalist's questions, some of which are rather harsh; the camera moves around him, showing bits and pieces of what looks like a Parisian apartment, some of them 'typical' of a French intellectual environment – a copy of *Le Monde*, old paperbacks, a radio, a cup of coffee, a pipe. Some voices can be heard in the background, perhaps people entering the apartment. The actor moves from one room to the other, opens a drawer and flicks through a book while he explains in rather sexist terms his relation to women: how he likes to protect them, help them, etc.

¹ These characteristics were evident in Byrne's recent exhibitions at the Irish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale (10 June – 21 November 2007) and at the Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen in Düsseldorf (5 May – 8 July 2007). Most of the works I will be referring to throughout the text were included in these two shows.

In **ZAN-TRIS r.1* the printed interviews are not from an intellectual publication such as *Le Nouvel Observateur*, but from a vocationally popular title, Andy Warhol's *Interview*.² Here Byrne re-enacts six short interviews with professional actors performing on an empty theatre stage. This lack of props, together with the absence of an audience, the visible lights, cables and scaffolding and the eccentric delivery by the actors – which resonates with Warhol's figure and the narcissism and candour of the 'real' aspiring actors in 1970s New York – creates an intense impression of artificiality. In between two interview sequences, Byrne shows the actors, one by one, doing warm-ups offstage at the New York Theater Workshop, where the piece was shot last year. The actors (as in other works by Byrne) forget their lines, stammer or simply stop; the camera meanders, changing its angle and alternatively focusing and unfocusing on their faces, intensifying the impression that we are assisting a rehearsal, an audition or maybe a theatrical screen-test.

When watching both pieces, it is unclear whether what we are seeing is the fictionalisation of a real event – the original interview – or the filming, in a documentary style, of a fictional dialogue, purposefully created for the film. This ambiguity is perhaps the crucial mechanism in Byrne's work, both in his videos and, in a slightly different way, in his photographs. Even though it is always made explicit by the accompanying texts and press material, and sometimes even by details in the videos themselves, that Byrne



is creating fictional reconstructions, this uncertainty seems to be part of his intentions, and incites the viewer to consider the ancillary texts as an essential part of Byrne's work (as if they had been written, made up by him).

This means two things: first, Byrne is using tools of fictionalisation inspired by Bertolt Brecht's notion of epic theatre, through which he produces a fiction without illusion or mimesis. And, second, by doing so – again like Brecht – he shows the contingency of the 'real event' and opens up the possibility of another 'real'. This action of opening up is what I would like to propose as a 'new realism', obviously inspired by Brecht, but enhanced by a certain sense of irony or pop-cultural cynicism. Byrne himself documents his relationship to the Brechtian epic theatre in two colour photographs of his series *In the News* (2000-ongoing), shown in Düsseldorf next door to the video installation *Why it's time for Imperial, again* (1998–2002). These photographs, subtitled

² The interviews took place in 1973 and 1974.