

Published on the occasion of the exhibition:

Gerard Byrne: A state of neutral pleasure

Whitechapel Gallery, London
17 January – 8 March 2013

Bonniers Konsthall, Stockholm
3 September – 24 November 2013

Exhibition organised by Whitechapel
Gallery, London in collaboration with
Bonniers Konsthall, Stockholm

Whitechapel Gallery

Curator: Kirsty Ogg
Assistant Curator: Emily Butler
Gallery Manager: Chris Aldgate
Assistant Gallery Manager: Patrick Lears
Gallery Exhibitions Assistant:
Theo DeBoick
Senior Technical Officer: Richard Johnson
AV Assistant: Stuart Bannister
Exhibitions Trainee: Victoria Fenton
Exhibitions Intern: Hannah Gompertz

Bonniers Konsthall

Curator: Sara Arrhenius
Assistant Curator: Caroline Elgh,
Sarah Hansson

Catalogue

Editor: Kirsty Ogg
Assisted by: Emily Butler
Proofreading: Sarah Auld
Design: Peter Maybury
Captions: Gerard Byrne
Printed by: MM Artbook printing & repro

Published by Whitechapel Gallery
First published 2013

© The authors, the artists, the
photographers, Whitechapel Gallery
Ventures Limited

Whitechapel Gallery is the imprint of
Whitechapel Gallery Ventures Limited

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, or otherwise, without the written permission
of the publisher.

The editor and publisher gratefully acknowledge the
permissions granted to reproduce the copyright material
in this book. Every effort has been made to trace copyright
holders and to obtain their permission for the use of
copyright material. The publisher apologizes for any errors
or omissions in the above list and would be grateful if
notified of any corrections that should be incorporated in
future reprints or editions of this book.

ISBN: 978-0-85488-212-0

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

Whitechapel Gallery Ventures Limited
77-82 Whitechapel High Street
London E1 7QX
whitechapelgallery.org

To order (UK and Europe) call
+44 (0)207 522 7888 or email
MailOrder@whitechapelgallery.org

Distributed to the book trade (UK
and Europe only) by Central Books
centralbooks.com



Whitechapel Gallery



Bonnierskonsthall



eu2013.ie



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**



Sartre et les

UN ENTRETIEN AVEC CATHERINE CHAINE

La liberté sexuelle peut-elle être la condition de la réussite d'un couple ? Sartre en est convaincu. Mais si sa liaison avec Simone de Beauvoir a duré « toute la vie », si la jalousie n'a jamais eu de prise sur lui, c'est aussi pour d'autres raisons, et d'abord une certaine « ressemblance des cultures ».

Il s'en explique ici, tout en poursuivant son récit passionnant d'une existence où les femmes ont toujours joué le premier rôle

■ Cette liberté que vous avez instituée, dès le début, dans vos relations avec Simone de Beauvoir, n'est-elle pas aussi facile à vivre pour elle que pour vous ? C'est une question que l'on peut se poser en lisant son livre, « In Force de l'âge ». Ainsi, quand vous voyez « M. » aux États-Unis, elle se demande « avec terreur » si vous n'allez pas devenir des étrangers l'un pour l'autre...

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE. — Je crois qu'il y a eu à cette période un malentendu entre nous. Il s'agit de cette période où elle est venue en « M. » dit-elle, pendant ce temps-là, Simone de Beauvoir était allée en Amérique, à Chicago, où elle avait rencontré Nelson Algren. À son retour, nous nous sommes retrouvés à Copenhague où nous avons passé quinze jours, puis nous sommes allés ensemble près de Fontainebleau. Ce double changement, elle, Nelson Algren, moi, M., avait rendu nos rapports moins hâtifs. Mais ce n'était qu'un malentendu. Vous parlez de malentendu alors que vous vous disiez tout !



Like a Man Helena Reckitt

Gerard Byrne has long treated recorded conversations as scripts to be performed. For the multi-part works *New sexual lifestyles* (2003) and *1984 and beyond* (2005-7), Byrne stages the transcripts of discussions published in *Playboy* magazine in 1972 and 1963 and films the results. The various translations and transitions entailed – between media, time and place – create a compellingly awkward effect. The spontaneity of the original discussions, and their urgent speculations about current and future events, contrasts with the stilted quality of their restaging, making time a subject in itself. Yet while Byrne's use of published transcripts has been thoughtfully discussed in terms of time and temporality, performance and performativity, his staging of gender in general, and masculinity in particular, in such works has received little attention.

In three video installations depicting male artists and/or intellectuals, Byrne foregrounds the performance of masculinity: *A man and a woman make love* (2012), *Homme à femmes* (Michel Debrane) (2004), and *A thing is a hole in a thing it is not* (2010), reverse Laura Mulvey's famous articulation of man as holder of the gaze and woman its object.¹ Instead, these works put men on show. Shifting the male subject from the 'unmarked' position that Michel Foucault argued provided the unseen locus of power, they depict men performing their public personae. Whatever candid moments do occur, these men know they are being recorded and are aware of their potential audience. They are also conscious of speaking as part of a conversation or group, performing with and for each other.

A man and a woman make love restages the first of 12 conversations about sex and eroticism initiated by André Breton in 1928 as the Surrealist 'Recherches sur la sexualité'. Designed for publication in the journal *La Révolution surréaliste*,

1. Mulvey, Laura. 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* 16.3, Autumn 1975, pp. 6-18.

this extraordinarily frank conversation amongst Surrealist group members ranges through various fantasies and fetishes, observations and opinions, always returning to the 'concrete facts [...] the most basic facts of love.' Acting as master of ceremonies, Breton takes a leading, if not to say controlling role in these soirées. He initiates most questions and, when conversations stray into uncomfortable terrain - such as Raymond Queneau's acceptance of homosexuality, to which Breton strongly objects - abruptly changes the subject. Ellipses in the transcript, and remarks by Breton, indicate that not everything said made it past him into the published version. And while accounts of the first two gatherings appear in *La Révolution surréaliste* 11, their omission from issue 12 in December 1929 suggests that the project had fallen short of Breton's expectations. Certainly Breton's ambition to generate 'objective' findings collapsed under the diversity of opinions that emerged. Perhaps he was wary of publicising such a disparate range of views in a project that he'd designed to reinforce group cohesion and identity. In classic Surrealist style, the non-appearance of 'Recherches' was acknowledged in the imprints of seven women's lips on the first half page of issue 12 beneath the caption 'Why *La Révolution surréaliste* had ceased to appear': the artists had been preoccupied with amorous relations.

Such relations, of course, were central to the Surrealist project. Whereas communists and anarchists downplayed sexuality, the Surrealists saw Eros as the path to revolution. Yet the group's gender politics put women in an ambiguous and often difficult spot: inspiration for male genius, route to the unconscious, and regularly depicted in male Surrealists' art, this idealised role made it hard for women in the movement to assert their independence. Indeed, most female Surrealists only became artists in their own right once they had left the inner circle. These sexual and/or political fault lines emerge clearly in the conversation dramatised in *A man and a woman make love*. While the discussions pivot on the question of reciprocity between the sexes, not a single woman takes part.²

2. Dawn Ades notes: 'There were no women participants in the first series, apart from the mysterious "Y" in the seventh session, who is clearly female; their absence was noted and regretted by, it seems, only Naville and Aragon.', in Pierre, José. *Investigating Sex: Surrealist Research*, trans. Malcolm Inurie (London: Verso, 1992), p. 186.

And when they turn to whether female sexual partners should be consulted as to their preferences, Breton rejects the idea as 'absolutely extraordinary, quite phenomenal. Talk about complications!', adding that it is 'quite out of place.'

With most feminist scholars of the movement focusing on giving female Surrealists their belated due, Surrealist concepts of masculinity have largely gone unremarked.³ Yet the status and nature of male identity was an overriding preoccupation of the group. In a post-WWI context in which various Surrealists had returned from the front, and maimed and injured war veterans were a common sight on Paris streets, Surrealists struggled to accept a newly-fragile sense of masculinity. Moreover, by celebrating perverse and unstable gender positions, they challenged the post-war call for a return to order based on marriage and child-rearing and on fixed categories of male and female identity.

That said, it is hard not to be amused by attitudes expressed in *A man and a woman make love*. Benjamin Péret's desire to have sex in a church and 'profane the Host and, if possible, leave excrement in the chalice', but aversion to sexual intercourse with a nun because her habit 'disgusts me', is absurd. While Jacques Prévert's declaration that he would never pay for sex, but 'I have been paid' reeks of male vanity. The group's obsession with succubae, female forms that visit men in sleep, and *frôleuses*, who rub erotically against strangers, also strike the contemporary viewer as quaintly anachronistic. Byrne recognises the inherent humour of such statements. He includes video footage of amused audience members watching his performance of 'Recherches', along with footage of the set where it was filmed and the suite where it was edited, to capture the distance between the viewer and the original event.

For all their radicalism, the Surrealists were products of their times and their psyches bore marks of their socialisation. By revealing the sexist underpinnings of the movement, Byrne highlights the dialectical processes by which newness enters the world. As Penelope Rosemont remarks of the Surrealists:

3. Amy Lyford makes this point in *Surrealist Masculinities: Gender Anxiety and the Aesthetics of Post-World War I Reconstruction in France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), a book which goes a long way to redress this critical oversight.

Challengers of long-established repressive codes are not likely to get everything right on the first try. That which is new and revolutionary rarely emerges complete and all at once: it appears first in the trappings of the old, which it tosses aside as its self-confidence grows.⁴

In the palimpsest that Byrne creates, the Surrealists' contributions are overlain with his own actors' impersonations of early twentieth-century bohemianism. Replete with over-acting, hammy ad-libs, and parodic over-dress - cravats, bowties and colourful handkerchiefs - Byrne's actors project their fantasies of and onto the past.

Simone de Beauvoir criticised Breton for idealising women, claiming that he 'never talks about Woman as Subject' and that for him woman 'is poetry itself, in the most immediate sense, that is, for men; it is not said whether she is poetry for herself.'⁵ Yet in *Homme à femmes* (Michel Debrane), her lifelong partner, Jean-Paul Sartre, emerges as a figure just as shaped by contemporary patriarchal conditions as the Surrealists. The film shows Sartre, performed by the actor Michel Debrane, interviewed by the journalist Catherine Chaine. In a reversal of cinema's typically gendered point of view, Chaine speaks off-camera and never appears on film. When the piece is shown in a gallery, Chaine's voice comes from speakers located behind the viewer, while Debrane's emerges from behind the screen. As Tom McDonough remarks in an insightful essay, 'the camera is implicitly feminised'.⁶

'Most people generally feel they should discuss philosophy, literature or politics with you'. Chaine begins, 'I would like however to talk with you about women...'. Clearly comfortable being the centre of attention, and recorded in 1977 near the end of his life, Sartre is unfazed by this line of questioning. He admits to believing from an early age that women would always be organised around him, to being a male chauvinist, albeit 'a liberal male-chauvinist pig', as Chaine proposes, and to assuming the role of seducer since the age of six. He discusses the pleasure he derives from a lover depending financially upon him, so she feels that

4. Rosemont, Penelope (ed.). 'All My Names Know Your Lap', in *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1998), p. xivi.

5. de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Knopf, 1963), p. 375.

6. McDonough, Tom. 'Ladies Man', in *Gerard Byrne: Images or Shadows* (Dublin: Irish Museum of Contemporary Art, 2011), p. 47.



Were you ever a
handsome boy ?

Sartre and de Beauvoir pose in front of **August Rodin's Monument to Balzac** (1891), photographer and date unknown



'she owes everything to her relationship with me', while acknowledging the extremity and machismo of his attitudes. When Chaine suggests that de Beauvoir found his frequent liaisons more painful than he found hers, he admits this might be true, but shrugs it off with 'it was just a misunderstanding.'

Sartre emerges as a man at ease to the point of smugness with his contradictions. By owning up to his male chauvinism while hinting at his own femininity, he aims to pre-empt and deflect potential criticism. Here we have the famous pipe, which Byrne's camera makes much of, as Debrane tamps the tobacco, plays with matches, lights the pipe, and puffs in ruminative silence. We see Debrane organising and flicking through books, rather fussily, in his wood-paneled room, and reading from *Le Monde*. McDonough comments on a certain 'preening' in the performance. He also notes the significance of Debrane's name being part of Byrne's title. It is Debrane's interpretation of Sartre that we see, not a transparent representation, and certain gaps open up between the actor and his role. When Debrane refers to his appearance - 'you said I think of myself as rather ugly. You're very kind. I think of myself as very ugly' - the self-satisfied posturing that McDonough observes in the actor's performance emerges clearly. For Debrane is a picture of distinguished literary poise, appropriately dishevelled. Only when he steps outside in the film's final moments do we catch a different side of him, as a frail elderly man facing an unknown future.

In *Being and Nothingness* (1943) Sartre theorised self/other relations, claiming the discovery of himself as an object for others as a necessary condition.⁷ This emphasis on objectification as a path to self-discovery and reflection comes to the fore in an anecdote recounted in *Homme à femmes* (Michel Debrane). When Sartre was a child, his grandfather took him for a haircut. On returning he saw, through his grandmother and mother's horrified reactions, that he was ugly. The long golden locks of his youth that 'softened' his unattractive face had gone. Sartre's need to see himself through the eyes of another, we realise, is a motivation both for this interview

7. Jean-Paul Sartre quoted in Sutton Morris, Phyllis. 'Sartre and Objectification' in S. Murphy, Julien (ed.). *Feminist Interpretations of Jean-Paul Sartre* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 1999), p. 74.

and for the 'secondary' or 'transitory' relationships that he pursued throughout his life: each 'representing a different country' for Sartre, and which provided so many encounters with the self. In *The Second Sex* (1949), de Beauvoir explored how the other can be experienced simultaneously as subject and object. In contrast, the Sartre performed here seems motivated by the discovery of self 'through' but not 'of' the other. His need for woman to provide a reflective and reassuring mirror is not so different to that of the Surrealists.

In *High Price*, her book about the contemporary art world, Isabelle Graw considers artists who enact their artistic identities within communities of peers. Although postdating the eras of Surrealism, existentialism and Minimalism, Graw's observations shed light on the aura of celebrity that now accompanies artists as they negotiate the demand that they perform themselves 'as' artists, and take on object-like characteristics. Drawing implicitly on Pierre Bourdieu's conception of 'habitus', and his concern with learned, embodied behaviours, Graw explores how artists become legible within specific social and cultural contexts through performance.⁸

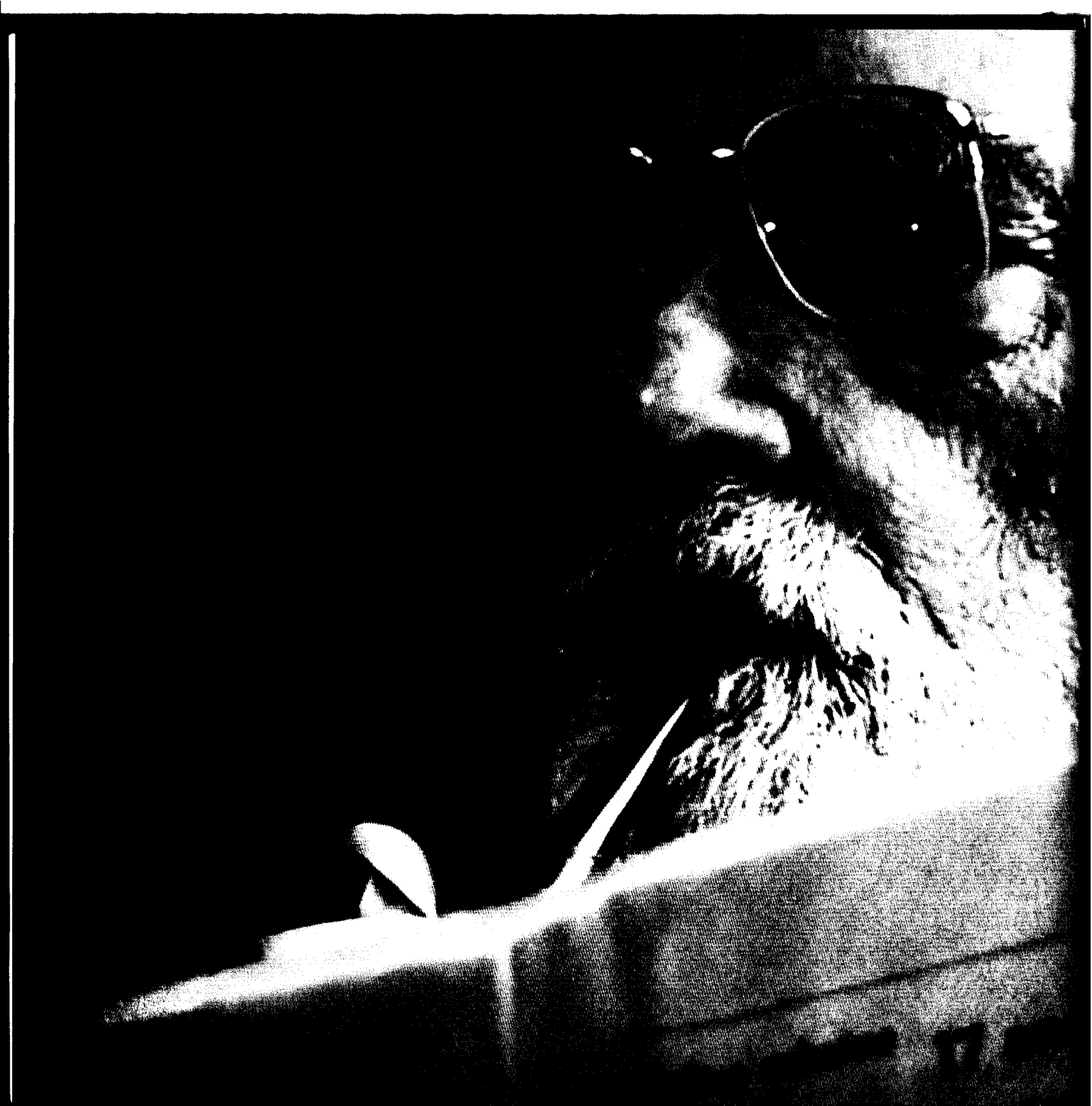
The performance of artistic identity comes into sharp relief in Byrne's *A thing is a hole in a thing it is not*. This complex work comprises five films each of which traces aspects of Minimalism's emergence and impact: one film presents a dramatisation of Robert Morris' *Column* of 1960; another replays Tony Smith's epiphanic account of driving on the as yet unopened New Jersey Turnpike; another depicts Minimalist works being installed and exhibited at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven; a fourth shows correspondence being banged out on a portable typewriter; while the longest piece centres on a radio show in which Dan Flavin, Donald Judd and Frank Stella discuss their stakes in Minimal art. Each section highlights performativity, in relation both to Minimalism's presumed theatricality and to the philosopher J. L. Austin's concept of performative utterances.

8. Graw, Isabelle. *High Price: Art Between the Market and Celebrity Culture* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), p. 215.

'New Nihilism or New Art?', the interview with Flavin, Judd and Stella, was moderated by the critic Bruce Glaser and broadcast on WBCY radio station, New York, in February 1964. Unusually for Byrne, what we hear is the original recording, not a re-enactment. In response to Glaser's prompting, the artists expound their ideas about the emerging minimal art, touching on the aesthetics of presentness and abstraction. As the interview develops, their opinions become more confident and divergent. It is, as art historian James Meyer remarks of the recording, 'as if the artists, under the pressure of declaring their positions, were seeing them for the first time.'⁹ Following its broadcast, the interview was published in *Artnews* in September 1966, or at least, an edited version appeared. Re-titled 'Questions to Stella and Judd', Lucy Lippard had worked on the transcript and, at his request, removed Flavin's reticent contribution. Lippard also added material from a later conversation recorded at Judd's studio. Beyond these practical changes, Lippard shaped and sharpened the text. As a result the published account is far more coherent than the unedited tape in which major discrepancies between Stella and the others emerged. Subsequently anthologised in Gregory Battcock's 1968 *Minimal Art*, 'Questions to Stella and Judd' became a key lens through which this new movement was seen, interpreted and defined.

By returning to the original interview, Byrne underlines the improvised nature of the artists' speculations, and how they reached their positions through dialogue and debate. Unsettling the text's canonical place in art history, Byrne points to a moment before artistic positions had ossified. He also recalls how artists of the time helped lay the ground for their work's reception. Judd was an established critic before his work became recognised, and his critical activities lent authority to his art as well as providing terms for its discussion. Following the art world's expansion in the Fifties, and even more so in the Sixties, criticism took on a newly influential role, providing a key for baffled viewers of challenging new art, and helping its entry into the market.

9. Meyer, James. *Minimal Art: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 87.



Right: *Lilith*, c. 1925-30, a lithograph on oriental paper by **Henry Keen**, depicts a mythical succubus of the kind that so pre-occupied the Surrealists who met on the 6 May 1928.

Left: *L'Eglise cubaine?* Michel Debrane in a pensive mood as Sartre in Gerard Byrne's *Homme à femmes* (Michel Debrane), c. 2004.



Language had gained new importance. As Barbara Reise lamented of Battcock's anthology, 'the direct experience of art works got lost in a plethora of words [...] these accounts now mediated one's encounter with the work itself'.¹⁰ Revisiting the artists' pronouncements, Byrne also highlights how critics made use of artists' accounts for their own ends. How Michael Fried, for instance, in his hugely influential 1967 essay, 'Art and Objecthood', conflated remarks by Judd and Morris, to avoid having to 'litter the text with footnotes'.¹¹

Byrne treats the interviews, discussions and statements that he appropriates as readymades, returning to his source materials with almost pedantic fidelity. All the texts he uses have been broadcast or published already, and the processes by which they are made public become integral to his art's form as well as its content. In *Homme à femmes* (Michel Debrane), the absence of English subtitles in some sections reflects cuts made to *Le Nouvel Observateur* interview when it was translated into English for *Playboy* magazine. Whereas in *A man and a woman make love* part of the Surrealists' discussion is skipped, this reflects mistakes made by the actors' during performance, rather than Byrne's intention. Throughout his work Byrne constantly draws attention to conditions of production, recording and circulation, such as in *A thing is a hole in a thing it is not* where a video of three men in a radio studio, drinking, smoking, and speaking out of sync with the broadcast, accompanies the soundtrack.

Returning to moments when new positions are being formed, Byrne aims to counter historiographic stasis. This sense of latency, of the past as unfinished business, operates in the tense of future anterior when, according to Jacques Lacan, 'I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming'.¹² Byrne's concern with potential and process is mirrored in his practice of editing his videos right up until they are exhibited, and beyond. Returning to his footage as a theatre director to a script, Byrne claims to stop altering his film works only once they've been sold.¹³ Highlighting the means by which histories are made, Byrne gestures to what gets told and what gets lost. 'All my work concerns absence', he has said.¹⁴

10. Reise, Barbara. quoted in Meyer, *ibid.*, p. 249.

11. Fried, Michael. 'Art and Objecthood',
Artforum, Summer 1967, p. 23.

12. Lacan, Jacques. *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Anthony Wilden (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1981), p. 63.

13. Byrne in conversation with the author,
November 2012.

14. Byrne in conversation with the author, *ibid.*



Viewers imagined by Minimalism are aware not just of their own bodies, but of the gallery as a space through which they self-consciously move. Feminist critiques of art that emerged in the wake of Minimalism, such as Mierle Laderman Ukeles' *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!*, called for a simultaneous awareness of the structures that support the artist and the art business. *A thing is a hole in a thing it is not* takes on board such critiques. In the Van Abbemuseum section, the camera pans through galleries as Minimalist works are unpacked, installed, photographed, monitored by security staff, and swept around by a janitor, focusing on elements of lighting and decor that rhyme with the art on view. Members of the public enter the museum, one carefully contemplating the art on view, others practically ignoring it. A man faces the camera, reciting an English translation of reviews of Judd's 1970 exhibition at the museum. Byrne's camerawork constantly draws attention to aspects beyond the apparent subject of attention, roving curiously and distractedly to dwell on details of furniture and architecture, recording equipment and clothes, glasses of whisky or swirls of smoke. Similarly, speech becomes object-like, its materiality becoming tangible as it migrates across temporal, cultural, and geographical contexts. Underscoring the process by which human subjects become objects, Byrne also evokes the agency of objects themselves.

Claiming to 'covet' aspects of theatricality, Byrne embraces the durational and anthropomorphic qualities of Minimalism that Fried roundly dismissed.¹⁵ Borrowing the hollow plywood forms of Morris' sculptures as projection screens for his films, Byrne breaks Minimalist rules by combining the sculptural with the pictorial. He takes the idea that Minimalism functions 'between media' one step further. The visitor to Byrne's exhibitions shares some of the dizzying dislocation that Minimalism first provoked in viewers, while also encountering degrees of disorientation and frustration that Minimalism did not court. Watching loops repeat across the five screens of *A man and a woman make love*, being plunged into sudden

15. Byrne in conversation with the author, *ibid.*

darkness as all screens go blank, the viewer worries that she has missed certain passages, and wonders how long she needs to stay to see the work in its entirety. This sense of curious yet fractured spectatorship is very different to the 'what you see is what you get' claims of Frank Stella's version of Minimalism. The unstable quality of Byrne's works calls forth subjectivities that are equally unsettled and questioning.

Holding up the artistic and cultural past for reconsideration, Byrne upsets received historical accounts. He opens up the possibility that new associations, meanings and debates will emerge. One key absence in discussions accompanying Minimalism's emergence was that of gender. Minimalism's deliberately anti-expressive aesthetic excised all mention of sexual identity or identification. Yet despite, or perhaps because of, this disavowal, Minimalism became a flashpoint for gender-inflected debates. While Clement Greenberg accused Minimalists of adopting macho poses to cover or compensate for their effeminacy, Judy Chicago complained that Minimalism's presumed neutrality left her no space to express herself as a female artist. Anna C. Chave went even further in her polemic of 1990 when she denounced Minimalism as the 'face of capital, the face of authority, the face of the father'.¹⁶ Byrne's restaging of Morris' *Column*, in which the sculptural plinth collapses halfway through, recalls another Minimalism. It evokes phallic surrender and a refusal of authority. By relocating Morris' piece to the Judson Dance Theatre company Byrne points to the nascent feminist aesthetics Morris helped to develop with the group. Suggesting that the sexual politics of this and other Modernist movements deserve further thought, Byrne opens up the past to deeper considerations of gendered subjects and their enactment.

16. Chave, Anna. C. 'Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power', *Arts Magazine*, January 1990, p. 51.