Global Enterprise: Gerard Byrne and Willie Doherty at the 2007 Venice Biennale.

I have been haunted by an image while considering issues and debates around the forthcoming entries for the 2007 Venice Biennale. I do not remember the magazine it appeared in. The image was used to advertise a forthcoming art fair. Like most adverts, it was only given a glance. All I have to go on is what lingers.

The photograph featured two figures in a plush casino setting. A woman, dressed suitably for the occasion, is seated at the table. Standing over her shoulder is a male figure wearing a tuxedo. He is about to roll the dice. The gaze and demeanour of the female figure captivates. Her face is aged to the point where it hints at a knowingness born from life's choices. Her direct gaze confronts us in a manner similar to the young woman in Manet's *Bar at the Folies-Berègeres*. However, the blank innocence of Manet's figure is replaced by a jaded glamour, somewhat uneasy beneath the protective veneer of affluence. Her demeanour is in dramatic contrast to the assured authority of the older bearded gentleman. His is an image of the speculator taking his chances in a game he appears to have been amply rewarded over time.

The image is taken to be an artwork acting as an advert for the art fair. In this instance, art appears subservient to the demands of marketing the fair. I imagine the image is not even part of the fair other than as an orbiting publicity shot. Yet for all its peripheral status, a certain unease is registered on a number of levels. First, it captures all the art fair represents: the world of speculation and investment around the commodity status of art. Second, it exposes a familiar axiom in that the hierarchies of art have most often served, and been moulded by, the interests of a moneyed elite or hegemon despite the best efforts to subvert this. Third, the allure of the image lies in its ability to speak back to that world by registering the unease of the seated figure caught amidst it. And finally, if this latter point suggests a critical edge, the very fact that this is the fair's selling point should be cause for concern. Just as Coca Cola markets an illusion of freedom as a means to shift its product, the art fair sells us the illusion of the critical as a means to shift its goods.

Between Here and There

I would like to believe that the latter point is just not true: that contemporary forms of art deemed critical can speak antagonistically against the frameworks in which they perform. The selections of Gerard Byrne and Willie Doherty for the forthcoming Venice Biennale offer a useful point of investigation for this proposition since their artworks have been lauded in terms of their critical vision and international standing. Byrne's work has attracted the attention of leading critics such as George Baker and has been shown in major venues such as the Tate Gallery, London, and the Whitney Museum, New York. For the Biennale, Byrne is selecting to strike a balance between previously exhibited pieces and newer work such as the photographic project *A Country Road, A Tree. Evening* (2006 - ongoing). In the case of Doherty, this will be his third appearance in the Venice Biennale. He has already been selected to represent Ireland (along with Dorothy Cross) in 1993 and was selected for *The Experience of Art* in the Italian Pavilion for 2005. For this year's Biennale, Doherty will be showing previously exhibited works, *Closure* (2005) and *Passage* (2006), with a new commissioned piece for the exhibition, *Ghost Story* (2007).

The solid reputations these artists enjoy in terms of their actual practice, venues where this has been shown, and, the critical attention they have attracted would suggest that both artists are in a prime position to make a significant impact on this year's Biennale. It makes sense that rather than review the work of each artist as some kind of preparation for the forthcoming show, it is better to explore the frameworks in which such practices are to perform. Three such contexts can be identified.

In the first place, there is the context of the Biennale itself with all its razzmatazz, competition, networking and spectacle. The Venice Biennale is a major focal point in the contemporary visual art calendar and an important feature of cultural tourism in Venice itself. It seems fair to ask how the respective contributions to the Biennale perform in relation to this visual spectacle and the accompanying discourses surrounding it.

Secondly, there is the local context in the sense that each artist is representative of the two art administrations in Ireland, north and south. Byrne's exhibition is curated by Mike Fitzpatrick (Limerick City Gallery of Art) and is backed by Culture Ireland and The Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon. Doherty's show is curated by Hugh Mulholland (The Third Space) with the backing of the British Council and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland.

If the initial two contexts suggest a certain polarity between the local and global circuits of practice and knowledge, it should be noted there is a significant blurring of the terrain not only between the local and the global but between state-funded art infrastructures and the commercial interests of private galleries. This is the third context to be considered. These commercial interests are not bound by national or regional remits (even though those based in Ireland have a distinct interest in promoting their local stable of artists on a wider platform). In some cases, they have been supported by state funding. This appears to be an increasing trend, particularly in the light of decreasing opportunities for state organizations to mount national representations at major Biennials. The recent shift to dispense with national representation in favour of a curatorially-led exhibition at the Sao Paulo Biennial is significant in this respect. The dilemma for the Arts Council and Culture Ireland now lies in how best to fulfil their remit when the international visibility of artists relies more and more on the influence of market forces. Caught in such a bind is to be ever more vulnerable to criticism. One such criticism is that it compromises the Arts Council's commitment to attaining the highest standards in the visual arts (and the problems of how this can be defined) by allowing market principles to shape such standards. A retort to this is that it seems obvious to state that one definition of successful local practice is to witness how it flourishes on the international stage. This inevitably entails an engagement with the wider art market.

Either way, there are echoes of the grander relationship between contemporary art and neoliberal forces shaping the cultural economy that has been the focus of much discussion. Julian Stallabrass, for example, adopts Derrida's notion of the supplement as a means to clarify this relationship. He argues that, 'art has a disavowed affinity with free trade, and the supplementary minor practice [contemporary art] is important to the operation of the major one [free trade]'[1]. His conclusion makes for an interesting touchstone for questions at the heart of this essay:

> It may be concluded that the most celebrated contemporary art is that which serves to further the interests of the neoliberal economy, in breaking down barriers to trade, local solidarities, and cultural attachments in a continual process of hybridization. This should hardly be a cause for surprise but there is a large mismatch between the contemporary art world's own view of itself and its actual function.[2]

In this light, it is important to acknowledge that both representations receive significant backing by a number of galleries. Byrne is attached to the Green on Red Gallery and the Lisson Gallery (London). One only has to look at the list of artists attached to the Lisson Gallery (Anish Kapoor, Tony Oursler and Sol LeWitt among others) to get a sense of the prestigious company Byrne now enjoys. In fact, the Lisson Gallery is taking a lead role with five other partners in producing the catalogue that will be launched at the Biennale. The catalogue will then accompany the subsequent shows in Sligo, Dublin, London and Vancouver. Likewise, Doherty has associations with the Kerlin Gallery, Matt's Gallery (London), Galería Pepe Cobo (Madrid), Peter Kilchmann (Zurich), and, Alexander and Bonin (New York), with the latter gallery backing the production of Doherty's new piece to be premiered at the Biennale (*Ghost Story*, 2007). *Passage* (2006) has recently been on show in New York and, along with *Closure* (2005), is included on the current tour of Doherty's video works in South America. There is a mix of vested public and private interests surrounding the work of Byrne and Doherty and the prestige of the Biennale should be to the mutual benefit to all concerned in the business of art.

This is taking us some way from the traditional coverage of representations from Ireland at the Biennale. Here, a discourse of Irishness – the tendency for multiple debates around art and culture to gravitate towards questions of Irish history and identity - has dominated. But already it seems that the view of the Biennale as being defined by the problematics of national sovereignty and modes of representation deemed significant in relation to this may not be wholly appropriate. The combination of the international profiles already enjoyed by Byrne and Doherty, the public/private partnerships that stretch beyond the immediate remit of national representation that have been trusted to the respective commissioners, and, most importantly, the nature of the artwork on show make the question of Irishness somewhat peripheral.

Competing for Visibility

The concern with the problematics of state and nationhood is not specific to debates within the visual arts in Ireland. The Biennale remains one of the few major international art shows where national organisations are invited to mount their own exhibitions. Its roots lie in the nineteenth century penchant for spectacular shows. By the early twentieth century, many of the national pavilions were established, beginning with the Belgian pavilion and quickly followed up with British, German, Hungarian and French pavilions. The assertion of national, imperial and cultural prestige is echoed in the architectural forms deemed appropriate for each. These range from the vernacular (with its associations with ethnicity) to the classical (the language of empire) to the international style (utopian aspiration). The imperial bent at the heart of the Biennale’s history is brought to light most glaringly by the infamous Biennale of 1934 when Hitler visited the German pavilion before meeting Mussolini for the first time in the Italian pavilion.

The desire to question the authority of national pavilions in the light of such events has ensured that the organizational principles of the Biennale have not gone unchallenged. This has been encouraged by profiling avant-garde practices from the post-war period onwards and by the growing participation in recent years of regions emerging from the legacy of colonialism. The central role of this more recent dynamic is typified by Beral Madra when she proclaimed the following:

> Two issues should be considered in answering the question of the validity of the national pavilions. One is to find out to what extent the transnational (migration, diaspora, displacement, relocations) and translational (how culture signifies or what is signified by culture) is reflected in the national culture. And the other is to detect the pluralism (recognition and endorsement of differences) within the post-modern democracies. In the case of the absence of

> these two aspects, the national pavilion negates the concept and essence of the Biennale.[3]

One might not agree with the severity of the final point but it is clear how this dynamic has characterized recent Biennales, particularly in relation to its central hub in the Giardini.

However, there is another dynamic at play that helps counter this primary concern. Its roots can also be found in the origins and development of the Biennale. It lies in the spectacular and competitive nature of the event. The Biennale will run for six months this year before awards are handed out, thereby extending the tourist season for Venice. The financial implications are obvious, particularly when considering the proliferation of participating countries and fringe events in recent years. Moreover, newer participants are now paying an extra €25,000 to be part of the collateral events. While participating countries are obliged to tailor their exhibitions to the curatorial theme of the Biennale, the recent emphasis on grand, and often sprawling, curatorial themes ensures that, in effect, anything goes (Szeemann's 'Plateau of Humanity' in 2001, Bonami's 'Dictatorship of the Viewer' in 2003, and, Martinez's 'Always a Little Further' and Corral's 'The Experience of Art' in 2005).

The Biennale is also characterized by the sheer razzmatazz that marks its opening days of press launches, parties and fringe events taking place throughout the city. Artists, curators, arts administrators, critics, dealers and buyers all fly in to party, gossip, network and do business amidst the scramble for invites to the more exclusive gatherings and launches. And all of this is before many in the business fly off to the next art event on the calendar.

It is amidst this social glitz and the growing commercialization of the Biennale that the art on show competes for visibility and sustained attention. Alison M. Gingeras cites the notion of 'festivalism' as a means to account for a certain attention seeking that characterizes much work on show. She identifies the tendency for artists to devise snappy one-liners as a means to rise above the sheer excess of material on show[4]. Tino Seghal's dancing guards in 2005 seems a good case in point. Not surprisingly, critical reactions to recent Biennales are often jaded if not melancholic. Benjamin

Buchloh, for instance, has gone so far as to lament the misguided assumptions of much art set within the Biennale experience:

> … it somehow still anticipates a traditional humanist subject as its primary spectator – someone willing to be enlightened, desiring to be provoked, wishing to remember, for example. That kind of subjectivity is now more alien to the reality of contemporary spectatorial behaviour that it ever has been in the post-war period.[5]

Once again, the memory of visitors being more interested in getting their hands on the free Agnes B bag at the Arsenale for the 2003 Biennale than considering the sheer density of material in *Utopia Station* adds credence to Buchloh’s point.

The tension between this sprawling, spectacular nature and national concerns distinguishes the Biennale from the other major exhibitions that will be taking place this summer. *Documenta* has built a reputation over the years based on an astute, politically informed reading of contemporary culture. *Liste 07: the Young Art Fair in Basel* chooses the glamour of youthfulness as its marketing hook, limiting participants to galleries less than five years old and artists under forty. The *Műnster Sculpture Project 2007*, by contrast, is organized around the idea of art in public spaces.

Marketing Difference

It could be argued that the location of Byrne and Doherty’s shows outside the Giardini and the Arsenale protects them from the worst excesses of the Biennale experience. Both Fitzpatrick and Mulholland have secured floors in the Istituto Provinciale per l'Infanzia ‘Santa Maria della Pietà’. This is in a central location in Castello, just off a main thoroughfare. Mulholland is using the same venue as last time, albeit a different floor, having recognized the value of the location in terms of continuity and accessibility to a visiting public. Ireland’s representations over the years, by contrast, have shifted from venue to venue, with some shows securing a higher profile than others. Given the appearance of an independent representation from Northern Ireland at the 2005 Biennale, comparisons with Ireland’s entry were inevitable. The general consensus seemed to favour the former's site as a suitable location. Hence the scenario where the two events are taking place under one roof. The implication of this with regards to questions of nationality seems to be less contentious than previous years. Indeed, the very fact that *The Nature of Things: Artists from Northern Ireland* appeared as a collateral event whereas Ireland's 2005 representation fell under the rubric of a participating country, reminded us once again that Northern Ireland is not a state. All in all, the set up is very Good Friday.

Yet, the idea that the current location offers a reprieve from the noise and clutter of the Giardini and the Arsenale is one left unresolved. Both representations must still compete with the burgeoning array of participating countries and other offsite projects and forums organized by private galleries, various foundations and universities eager to accumulate research points. In other words, the question of location must be seen as one element in the larger issue of publicity. Again, it could be argued that the shared location, the established profiles of the two artists, and the publicity boost to be gained from the combined interests of multiple national cultural organizations and major international private galleries sets the stage for each show making a significant impact within the Biennale. The grounds are promising, but ultimately, the kind of impact these shows can have remains to be seen.

What does emerge at this juncture is how the notion of a positive impact on the Biennale and, by extension, on the international art scene, is predicated on a successful publicity drive. It is assumed that success can come to those who manage and publicize the work most efficiently with an appropriate budget.[6] It is the means by which this can be done that there can be found a distinct confluence with models of business expansion and the practices of advertising. It is a confluence that many in the artworld feel uncomfortable with since it clashes with an older division between aesthetic pleasure and the pragmatics of doing business. It is also a confluence that fuels critiques of contemporary art since marketing is often seen to take precedence over an inherent critical vision.

It has long been acknowledged that corporate involvement with the visual arts is based in part on finding in the latter a counterpart to the entrepreneurial pursuit of new products and markets. As Barthes noted, 'meaning is what makes things sell'.

Yet despite the promotion of entrepreneurial vision in the business world, the old adage of finding out what others are doing successfully and then copying that so to take a modest slice of the pie still holds strong.

This tension between the illusion of risk-taking and the pragmatics of conformity is echoed in visual art debates regarding the critical standing of works of art. Miwon Kwon, for example, has argued that artworks are now subordinate to a discursively determined site. This new site specificity is less defined by location or a politics of place than as a discursive field 'organized intertextually through the nomadic movement of the artist' within a globalized art network.[7] Kwon's point is underpinned by a sense of the introverted nature of the artworld: that artworks ultimately perform to those with the knowledge of, or social standing within, the international network. Indeed, Sherman Mern Tat Sam in a review of the 2003 Biennale noted how the Kenyan entries seemed out of time and place as the artwork on show did not display the signposting common to the international artist.[8] Another critic, Gao Minglu, when commenting on contemporary Chinese art, has also noted the emergence of 'a pragmatic neo-avant garde that strives to transcend the local in favour of acceptance in the international arena'.[9] The tension between conforming to and negotiating with a learned and restricted discourse within a global cultural economy makes for a compelling definition of contemporary art.

Critical Voices

This is quite a den to throw the work of Byrne and Doherty into. But it is to recall the central theme at the outset of this essay regarding the critical role of art and its antagonism towards the circuits in which it performs. It is significant that the works of both artists are not bound by questions of national identity and avoid the performative excesses often demanded by a biennale context. It is also significant that their work can be located within the drift from a concern with place-bound politics and cultural difference towards more globalized and homogenous forms of subjectivity and identity.

Byrne's *1984 and Beyond* (2005), to take one example, restages an interview that took place between twelve sci-fi writers and subsequently appeared in *Playboy* in 1963. The topic of conversation considers the kind of future that can be imagined beyond 1984. This ranges from fantastical speculations (from lunar real estate to uncovering the secrets of eternal life) to participants revealing their cold war and racial paranoia. The film element of this installation visualizes the text, removing it far from its kitschy origins to restage it amidst different locations. These include the Sonsbeek sculpture pavilion in the Kröller-Müller Museum which, interestingly, has its origins in Helene Kröller-Müller's dream of a 'museum-home'. The film can be seen as a present reconstruction of a past's dreamed future of where we are now. Various strategies characterize this piece such as the geographical shift to film the piece in the Netherlands, the use of Dutch actors, the modernist backdrop, the attention to actors' gestures and grain of the voice, the shifting locations, the mise en scène, and, various jump cuts. These temporal, geographical and cultural fissures ensure a form of distantiation characterizes the viewing experience. What is striking about this work is how past writers' fantasies of an imaginary future are rooted to historical fears and desires. While these are hopelessly bound, their shifting place between an old and new internationalism is not. This creates a void that can only be filled by a self-conscious consideration of our own utopian aspirations, if indeed we have them at all.

Doherty's work can also be seen in terms of the drift from a politics of place towards negotiating an international circuit less bound by the subtleties of geopolitical difference. His earlier phototext works from the 1980s are charged by a socio-political reading of the local landscapes of Derry and Belfast. *Non-Specific Threat* (2004), by contrast, is less dependent on an intimate knowledge of location. The video installation centres on an image of a male figure whose appearance falls in line with media characterizations of the working class tough nut. The camera pans 360˚ degrees around the figure in a darkly lit and non-descript urban setting. The visuals are accompanied by an audio soundtrack that helps define our perception of the figure. The uniform rotation of the camera keeps the figure at distance while the audio consistently traverses the boundaries between viewer and subject ('I am inside you … I am unknowable … I am beyond reason … I am everything you desire … Your death is my salvation … I disappear in a crowd'). The contradictions, sense of foreboding and threatening ubiquity of the figure are mixed in with allusions to wider global conflict ('There will be no television … there will be no water … there will be no flights … there will be no oil … there will be no art'). What results is a spectral other haunting the spaces between us and them, paranoia and terror, empire and jihad.

This discernable drift away from local concern in the work of Byrne and Doherty goes against the grain of critical voices insisting on the centrality of Irishness as a marker of value in contemporary art practice. Consider, for example, Lucy Cotter's prescriptive tones for Irish art practice:

> A critical engagement with the notion of Ireland as a former colony could lead to a renegotiation of Irish art's critical position within international art discourse – both historically and currently – and give new critical direction to contemporary Irish art practice.[10]

One senses a retreat to post-colonial models of thought that took root in Ireland from the mid-1980s at the very point when much Irish art practice in the new millennium can be found deserting it. Cotter's claim is motivated by her objection to the institutional drive to promote certain forms of Irish contemporary art on an international stage that match governmental notions of innovation and dynamism. However, Byrne and Doherty's practices are not bound by an accompanying historical amnesia that Cotter finds unpalatable. Nor are they bound by notions of Irishness. Rather, it has been shown how their work negotiates the problematics of new subjectivities and identities as a critical act within an international circuit.

This tension reminds us of the enduring dynamic upon which art practice and art criticism rests: that each holds the capacity to undercut as well as support the other. Most often, the art that can be found most intriguing is that which confounds the contours in which criticism traditionally operates. Accordingly, the assumption that the work of Byrne and Doherty represent a robust form of critical practice from these shores should equally fall under scrutiny. For one has more sympathy with Cotter's recognition of the problem - the issue of globalization - than her proposed solution.

At root, globalization can be recognized as a multifaceted, unresolved and contradictory phenomenon. A key aspect of this dynamic centres on the advances of multinational capitalism, the supposed obsolescence of the nation state, and, US hegemony. In terms of contemporary art, the role of biennales is a particular cause of concern. For Stallabrass, they help bind art practices to the model of corporate internationalism by extolling the virtues of globalization:

> The filtering of local material through the art system ultimately produces homogeneity. This system … tends to produce an art that speaks to international concerns. More specifically, it reinforces neoliberal values, especially those of the mobility of labour and the linked virtues of multiculturalism.[11]

Similarly, Kwon's identification of a new site specificity is troubled by the question of whether, at the end of the day, this is 'a form of resistance to the ideological establishment of art or a capitulation to the logic of capitalist expansion'.[12]

These wider examinations of the context within which contemporary art performs cast a dark shadow over claims of a vibrant critical art practice. The Venice Biennale is as dependent on maintaining a sense of, if not an illusion of, art as a critical force as it is on spectacle for cultural prestige and tourism. At best, to perform therein is live out the contradiction of being a critical agent and servant of the international art market; caught between, as one critic put it, 'the hope of making a difference and the risk of colluding with forces beyond its control'.[13] At worst, it is to be complicit with the illusion of critical practice: that in the end, the various manoeuvres amount to little more than fluff in the furnace of capital and empire. It is in the light of this final point that I am beginning to get a sense of why the initial casino image has haunted me. I am too long in the tooth to believe artworks really can overturn the grander social order and not cynical enough to believe them to be mere bunting on life's journey. There will always be a pleasure in viewing imagery no matter the context in which they operate.

The pensive character of the work of Byrne and Doherty lies in how each navigates a new terrain that is as yet uncharted by contemporary criticism in Ireland. To acknowledge international market forces at play in each exhibition, and in the Biennale as a whole, is also to recognize the limits of Irishness as a marker of value in contemporary circumstance. In an era of an expanding research culture in Ireland, there is an opportunity to explore these new contexts and practices in some detail. Much criticism will continue to limit its scope to analysis of exhibited works alone. Important as this is, it seems equally important to begin to explore our notions of the critical in art if only to challenge ubiquitous attributions of value serving the art market and the wider forces of which it is complicit. The forthcoming shows of Byrne and Doherty offer excellent case studies for this.

Gavin Murphy is a lecturer in Art History and Critical Theory at Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology.

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[1] Julian Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004, p.6.

[2] Ibid., p. 186.

[3] Beral Madra, 'Dark Rooms and National Pavilions', *Third Text*, 57, Winter 2001-2002, p.105.

[4] Alison M. Gingeras, 'Stealing the Show', *Artforum*, Vol.44, No.1, Spetember 2005, p.268.

[5] Benjamin Buchloh, 'The Curse of Empire', *Artforum*, Vol.44, No.1, Spetember 2005, p.254.

[6] This is not always the case. The shifting trends of international taste also have a significant bearing. See, Anne Pontégnie, 'Debt Collectors', *Artforum*, Vol.44, No.1, Spetember 2005, p.269, for a fascinating account of the success of the Central Asia Pavilion at the 2005 Biennnale.

[7] Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, p.3.

[8] Sherman Mern Tat Sam, 'The Dictatorship of the Viewer: Some Thoughts on the 50th Venice Biennale', *Third Text*, Vol.18, Issue 4, 2004, p.316.

[9] See, Mónica Amor, Okwui Enwezor, Gao Minglu, Oscar Ho, Kobena Mercer, Irit Rogoff, 'Liminalities: Discussions on the Global and the Local', *Art Journal*, vol.57, no.4, Winter 1998, p.36.

[10] Lucy Cotter, 'Globalisation, Cultural Baggage and the Critical Direction of Irish Art Practice', *Circa*, Online Article: http://www.recirca.com/articles/cotter/index.shtml, p.4 of 6.

[11] Stallabrass, op.cit., p.42.

[12] Miwon Kwon, 'One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity', in, eds. Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung, *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2005 , p.40.

[13] Niru Ratnam, 'Art and Globalisation', in, eds. Gill Perry and Paul Wood, *Themes in Contemporary Art*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, in association with The Open University, 2004, p. 310.