

# Critique Supplement

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Elaine Byrne  
'RAUM'

Kevin Kavanagh, Dublin  
10 January – 9 February 2013

**AN** airy and hauntingly familiar structure greeted viewers upon entry into 'RAUM', Elaine Byrne's latest exhibition. The structure was reminiscent of a Mondrian painting. Its elements, painted in bright tones of red, white, yellow and blue, seemed to have been greatly magnified, pulled apart and re-assembled to create a dynamic spatial arrangement with a chimerical presence. Floating a few centimetres off the floor, it suggested a strange type of cloud. The eye-catching construct

inhabitant's humble belongings within that sophisticated space. Moreover, the objects displayed within that volume fall into two distinct groups. Byrne has grouped a collection of dust laden and dilapidated artefacts that includes practical objects and kitsch in one half of the structure. Artfully arranged, these items simultaneously complement and contradict the pristine planes of colour on which they have been placed. The other half of the structure holds a set of C-prints that document the present state of decay in the cottage. Just the idea of these pictures suggests lifelessness, but rather than reveal materials denuded of colour and purpose, these vibrant images bristle with detail and provide ample evidence of activity. The eye gets joyfully lost surveying the tonal richness and textural intricacies, and the plant growth sprouting from decaying furnishings, signs of insect infestation, and actively flaking layers of paint and peeling wallpaper all belie any notion of stasis. An accompanying wall text shows how Kiesler decries the state of the urban environment. In this excerpt, taken from his 'Manifesto on Horizontalism', which appeared in a 1925 issue of *De Stijl*, he likens houses to coffins and views the city as a place defined by its walls, walls and walls. In response, he sought to disengage the city from its earthly mooring.

The conjunction of Harty's dwelling and Kiesler's exhibit design engenders speculation on the various ways we think about and manage space. It, for example, juxtaposes elements that urge consideration of what is real or imagined, long-term or provisional, private or public, retrograde or progressive, simple or complex. One setting has been cobbled together by a woman with little formal education who found security in a domain cluttered with religious pictures and wistful decorative objects. The other was developed by a university-trained architect and designer. Its bright, unadorned and suspended partitions redefine space and, by extension, our experience of it. Rather than define limits, it advocates spaciousness. Kiesler described these stripped down forms as 'architecture on a diet' and attributed its development to the austere conditions of post-war Vienna. His designs are linked to notions of hygiene and form an aspect of the war against germs and grime.<sup>1</sup> Yet, despite being poles apart, the co-occurrence of these two structures exacts a kind of synthesis that echoes in the strange mix of traditional and modern that informs much contemporary domestic architecture. These newly constructed buildings typically distort and romanticise the past. Byrne's presentation, on the other hand, conveys poignancy in the way that it speaks about the dreams and desires of two people from very different times, places and cultures. The installation never seems trite, nor is it jarring. Subtle correspondences of colour between the objects and the surfaces that support them also mitigate the disparities. Though the work conveys an air of melancholy, its impact is thoroughly illuminating.

**John Gayer is a writer and artist based in Dublin.**

#### Notes

1. Austrian Frederick and Lilian Kiesler Private Foundation [www.kiesler.org](http://www.kiesler.org)
2. P. Chew, *Light, Air & Openness: Modern Architecture Between the Wars*, Thames and Hudson Ltd, London, 2007, 53



Elaine Byrne, that was her bed, she'd have no other, 2012



Elaine Byrne, Suppose that was the thing then, everyone did it, 2012



Elaine Byrne, RAUM, 2012



Elaine Byrne, No, she never went anywhere, 2012

was made up of an interconnected set of partitions, open framework, platforms and shelves, and had been modelled on the exhibition design 'Raumstadt' (City of Space) Austrian architect Frederick Kiesler devised for the 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes in Paris. But, whereas Kiesler's structure showcased proposals for new theatres, stages sets and costumes by Austrian architects and artists, Byrne's re-articulation contains objects, images and sounds drawn from a ramshackle and abandoned County Limerick dwelling once occupied by Hanni Harty, an Irish traveller. As such, it forms a most incongruous presentation that nevertheless draws viewers into its maze of spaces and treats them to oft startling views of a domestic space in the process of being re-appropriated by nature.

Bi-lateral relationships, in fact, inform all levels of this exhibition. Byrne has, for example, scaled the size of the structure – which operates both as display system and sculpture – to that of Harty's cottage and situated examples of the former



# Uncovering stories in a deserted cottage

**Aidan Dunne**

An installation of a lost Limerick dwelling links exhibitions in Dublin and Vienna

Elaine Byrne's installation *Raum* stems from and fuses two diverse sources: one is an abandoned, dilapidated cottage near Askeaton in Co Limerick, and the other is a 1925 architectural construction by the distinctly unorthodox artist, architect and designer Frederick Kiesler, a pioneer of the modernist avant garde.

Kiesler is the subject of a major exhibition currently running in Vienna. His construction *Raumstadt*, known as *City in Space*, was conceived as "a temporary exhibition system" and, simultaneously, a utopian vision of a futuristic, floating city, devised and made for an exposition of decorative arts and design in Paris.

Byrne's scaled-down reconstruction of it taps into both meanings. *Raum* began a couple of years ago, during a residency at

Askeaton Contemporary Arts, and developed into a concurrent exhibition, *Feralis*, at the Belltable Arts Centre in Limerick. In the company of curator Michele Horrihan, Byrne chanced upon a deserted cottage on a bank of the river Deel close to Askeaton. "The house was built with mud from the river. It felt like part of the landscape. It had been unoccupied since the mid-1990s, and the landscape was reclaiming it."

Byrne was keen to look inside and Horrihan approached a relative of its final occupant. That occupant was Hanni, a settled Traveller. Her nephew, Willie Harty, lives nearby. He readily gave permission and accompanied Byrne and Horrihan to the cottage. "It was extraordinary," Byrne recalls. "He had lived there himself for some time. Everything had been left as it was when he closed the front door in 1995, and this was the first time he'd returned. He became very quiet and reflective while we were there. It was clear that the place, and everything about it, held strong personal memories for him."

Byrne documented the interior of the cottage in photographs. While it's a scene of inexorable decay, with layers of paper and paint peeling away from the walls, a sycamore sprouting from a mattress and ferns from the floor, it is also curiously homely and warm. Byrne quotes Virginia



■ that was the bed she'd have no other, part of Elaine Byrne's *Raum*

Woolf: "What people had shed and left... those alone kept the human shape and in the emptiness indicated how once they were filled and animated." As Harty began to recall life in the cottage, Byrne recorded his voice-over video footage.

"I got the sense that in being there we were looking at someone's story. Each detail has a meaning in terms of someone's life: Nora's cake top, Dolly's chair... Willie's recollections gave a glimpse into these lives and into a way of life that is gone, real-

ly. He says the days he spent there as a child, in a small, crowded cottage lacking what we would think of as even basic facilities, were the happiest of his life."

Byrne has always been interested in, "The idea of making space. How we go about making the spaces we live in." What struck her initially when she came across Kiesler was: "He had this conviction that we should put human needs and concerns at the centre of architectural practice." His slant on utopian modernism was very

much his own and he was generally seen as a bit of an outsider.

Born in the east of the then Austro-Hungarian empire in 1890 (not in Vienna, as he claimed at one point), Kiesler was Jewish and, with his wife Stefanie Frischer, moved to New York in 1926. He eventually died in 1965. Although he taught throughout his life, he has few completed architectural projects, and it's fair to say that mainstream acceptance eluded him. While he has always had his champions, it is only relatively recently that he and his ideas have attracted serious scholarly attention.

Byrne cites a fairly dramatic quotation from him: "What are our houses but coffins towering up from the earth into the heavens. Cemeteries have more air for the skeletons of the dead than our cities for the lungs of the living."

She married Kiesler's grand construction *City in Space* with the altogether more modest utopianism of Harty's family, his grandparents, parents and aunts, in setting out to create their own dwelling with air "for the lungs of the living".

Harty's articulation of a remembered past in Limerick is linked to a representation of that past in the Kevin Kavanagh Gallery. Colour photographs of the interior and details of Hanni's cottage and objects from it are displayed in a scaled-down rec-



reation of *Raumstadt*. Kiesler's exhibition framework, as Byrne sees it, becomes a model dwelling space that you have to inhabit and negotiate.

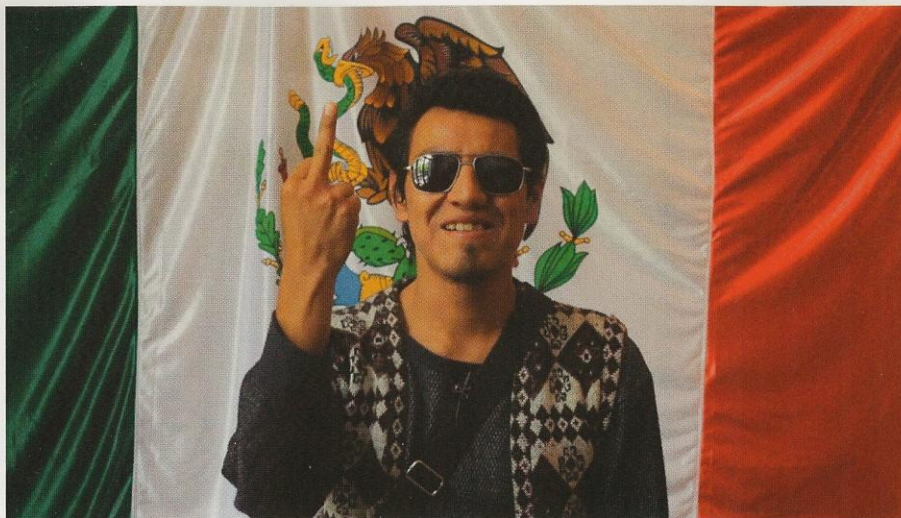
## “The final occupant of the cottage was Hanni, a settled Traveller”

It could be seen as symbolising the disparity between modernism's utopian idealism and the prosaic reality of domestic life. But Kiesler was sympathetic to that domestic reality, to human priorities. For her, the project is about memory or, more accurately, remembering. "The idea of placing Hanni's cottage in a beautiful White Cube space like the Kevin Kavanagh Gallery initially felt wrong. But it seemed to me that if I combined it with something else from the past, with a dream about a possible future, that offered more possibilities." What it offers, she hopes, is a prompt for us to think about the kind of spaces we want to inhabit, and the kind of lives we hope to live.

*Raum*, an installation by Elaine Byrne, is at the Kevin Kavanagh, Chancery Lane, Dublin, until February 9th. Byrne's *Feralis* is at The Belltable, O'Connell Street, Limerick, until January 25th







**ELAINE BYRNE**  
DUBLIN, IRELAND

In what makes for an engrossing sojourn, Elaine Byrne's *Message to Salinas* juxtaposes present-day Mexico with its recent past while directing attention to one of Ireland's most elusive residents [Oonagh Young Gallery; January 21—February 19, 2011]. Researched and produced during a residency at Mexico City's SOMA in 2010, the work scrutinizes the legacy of ex-president Carlos Salinas de Gortari's programs and policies. On the surface, the exhibition intimates a polarized state of affairs, which soon gives way to a much more complex—and ultimately rewarding—view mixing personal account and opinion.

The low scale of the gewgaw-like *I'm Yours for Money*, 2010, and its proximity to the entrance almost makes you trip. The abrupt encounter forces us to notice the title's four words, a theme that runs through the presentation. Illuminated in neon, the words wrap a black Perspex cube to form a slick conversation piece that recalls the unbecoming conduct of numerous leaders.

Standing in the center of the gallery, we occupy a position between the rich and the disenfranchised. To one side, several photographs of trash collectors idling on the roof of an overloaded garbage truck evoke entropy. The goods have been organized to suggest that the vehicle doubles as a redistribution center. *Solidarity*, 2010, is installed on the opposite wall. Its title derives from the program that Salinas devised to address a broad range of basic community needs. Here, Byrne focuses on the government's collusion with big business and its fraudulent intentions by cutting the title's letters out of a Mexican flag. The openings reveal portraits of individuals who made huge financial gains from Salinas' initiatives. While the irony conveyed by these static elements is certainly engaging, their abstract nature mitigates their impact. They take a secondary, supporting role to the time-based and textual components that not only share the exhibition's title, but also form its core.

The video and publication *Message to Salinas*, both

2010, stem from an invitation Byrne distributed through Facebook, encouraging all Mexicans to participate in a collective artwork to be shown in Dublin, Carlos Salinas' current city of residence. Messages could be sent by video or email. The collected responses, left unedited and supplemented by English translations, run from the astute to the inane. Many are heartfelt; some show respect. They can be callous or damning. Class distinctions also become apparent. Some emailers indicate that they operate businesses or are highly educated. These messages tend to be more supportive of Salinas. They praise him for bringing Mexico into the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Several merely reference websites on topics such as "Mexico's narco-political corruption" or "the Bush-Salinas connection," and an appendix includes emails from journalists interested in the project.

The video messages, on the other hand, communicate other forms of information. They enable the reading of facial expressions and the detection of emotional content in people's voices. Whereas some urge Salinas to restore Mexico's prosperity, others accuse him of theft. One woman speaks of his son Emiliano, a kind and handsome boy who assisted her with homework at the American school. The most disturbing accounts tell of family members who have been kidnapped or fallen into drug addiction. One woman even fears retaliation simply for participating in this art project.

*Message to Salinas* presents a compelling view of Mexico that sharply contrasts with recent news reports of rampant drug-cartel violence. A portrait of its people, it offers a heady blend of fact and fiction tempered by a host of feelings, desires, and intentions that, in its frank delivery, blatantly contradicts the clandestine lifestyle of the figure it addresses. Unlike the countenance projected by the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) during Salinas' term, Byrne's work is truly demo-

cratic. In speaking for themselves, the people remind us of Mexico's deeply convoluted history and the challenges that face this nation. Curiously, *Message to Salinas* also echoes developments in Ireland. In the early 1990s, the peace and prosperity effectuated by Salinas had convinced people they had joined the first world. Similarly, the Celtic Tiger convinced the Irish that they would never again be poor. But with the bursting of the economic bubble, financial havoc ensued.

—John Gayer

ABOVE: Elaine Byrne, still from *Message to Salinas*, 2010, DVD, 13 minutes, edition of 5 (courtesy of artist and Oonagh Young Gallery, Dublin)