

Ronan McCrea
General-specific - Project Arts Centre 2003

An essay accompanying general-specific by exhibition curator Grant Watson,
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1969 was the year when the Soviet spacecraft Venus 5 concluded its four-month flight to Venus, transmitting data to earth for 53 minutes. It was the year of Woodstock and the year when anti war protesters demonstrated in Washington and San Francisco. During this year a new black studies curriculum was piloted at Yale and the artist Christo covered a one -mile strip of coastline with 1 million square feet of plastic. 1969 was the year of the Apollo Moon landing and of the People's Park riots. In Belfast there were violent clashes between the police and Protestant extremists. General Electric produced its robotic 3000-pound walking truck and Samuel Beckett won the Nobel Prize for literature. (Abridged from Collier's Year Book covering the Year 1969).

1969 was the year that Douglas Heubler made 'Location Piece #1' photographing the airspace above the 13 states between New York and Los Angeles and Lucy Lippard received a postcard from On Kawara with the inscription 'got up at 12.17pm.' In this year 'When Attitudes Become Form' curated by Harold Szeeman was shown at the Kunsthalle in Bern and Joseph Beuys took responsibility for any snowfall between the 15th and theorized his 'Sentences on Conceptual Art' and Laurence Weiner lost the dummy of his book Terminal Boundaries. Vito Acconci made his following piece in 1969, promising to find a random person and follow him 'wherever he goes, however long or far he travels.' (Abridged from Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972 by Lucy Lippard).

In his essay 'Unpacking my Library' Walter Benjamin describes how the collector of books through the process of discovery, loan, purchase and inclusion gives the books a new life. The interior meaning of the book is superseded by its new context - its relationship to the other books in the library and the personality of its new owner. He sees this act of renewal as similar to the one undertaken by children when they claim objects through naming, customising and rearranging them in accordance with some internal scheme. In the exhibition *general - specific* the artist Ronan McCrea extracts photographs from an American encyclopaedia called "Collier's Year Book for 1969" which covers the events of that year in words and pictures and projects them onto the gallery wall. This book is in fact from his childhood. Documenting the year he was born it was delivered

to the door by a salesman and in this manner, haphazardly, become part of the index of information available to him growing up. McCrea cuts these images from the pages and pastes them onto the gallery wall (so to speak) in an act, which seems less of a critique and more of a creative gesture in which the artist in adult life gives the material a second chance. Projected, they emerge out of the pages to reveal themselves suspended in mid air like sequences from a silent film. The alphabetical order, captions and text that had had the effect of firming up their meaning, are gone so the images begin to inform one another directly - becoming like a surreal collage in which incongruous elements are joined to create a sequential nonsense. Their relationship now is with the other works in the show and the viewer.

The photographs in the context of the book communicate a world - view that is vintage Americana, and the artist describes how they introduced him to a way of looking at the world that originating from outside of his culture. Today it is possible that he sees them with a mixture of suspicion and nostalgia, suspicion that the books where give an uncritical representation of American culture and nostalgia for the youthful projections that this culture provoked. Perhaps there is also nostalgia here for the lost radicalism of those years, felt by many people now in their thirties (literally the children of the sixties) who missed out, by growing up in a more conservative era. Even the straight-laced Collier's Year Book for 1969 identifies this radicalism, presenting us in its authoritative but non-committal manner, pictures of sit ins, anti war demonstrations, labour disputes and rock festivals.

This radicalism of the 1960s was more sharply focused during the second half of the decade. Described by Foucault as 'five brief, impassioned, jubilant, enigmatic years,'ⁱⁱ that saw a concerted effort to overturn the dominant reality and replace it with something better. In art terms the end of this period witnessed the collapse of the mega styles of Abstract Expressionism, Pop and Minimalism into a plurality of voices, places, forms and subjectivities. 1969 comes bang in the middle of Lucy Lippard's 'Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object,' a book which documents how a group of artists became less interested in the materiality of the art object and began to emphasise the concept and context of their work. Interestingly this also gets a mention in Colliers Year Book for 1969 where under A for Art we discover that 'antiform, process art, earthworks, conceptual art, soft art and impossible art (are) manifestations (which) emphasise ideas and process rather than finished products.'ⁱⁱⁱ In Collier's the work is classified under A for Art and has nothing to do with the P of politics, F of Feminism or W of war, however, what Lippard meticulously documents in her book, is the release of art from this regimented setting. Not that the art context no longer existed for these artists but that this context became more elastic and could be overlaid like 'the imposition of a foreign pattern or substance onto existing situations or information.'^{iv}

McCrea used the entries for 1969 in Lucy Lippard's book to make an artwork at the Glassbox Gallery in Paris called 'Seminal 1969 (after the artist's birth and Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972...);' writing them onto a window, only flipped around, so that they faced out onto an inaccessible courtyard. The suggestion is that our relationship to the tradition that these seminal works represent has become complicated by time, distance and altered circumstances, making it impossible to recreate the conditions in which they were first viewed. Other works produced by McCrea at around the same time take a less inverted approach. Nodding in a more general manner at American art from the late sixties early seventies, a series entitled '*Everything (multi coloured neon version) boxed*,' spells out the decades from the second half of the Twentieth Century in coloured neon numerals. Shown individually, collectively and sometimes stacked together inside a cardboard box, they resonate with meaning beyond the simply numerical and deliver a narcotic hit that seems to encapsulate the decades in their entirety. The viewer is likely to read their own personal history into these works, collecting together complexity of each time frame into a neat abstract logo, which reflects back their take on that decade. Placed together in the cardboard box, their jumbled message reflects both the portable character of meaning and the flimsy carriage in which it is temporarily contained.

For the exhibition *general - specific* McCrea has produced another generation of signs related to 'Everything' but made from glass tubes emptied of colour and light. These works are more equivocal and idiosyncratic, slipping out of the straight jacket of the decades to occupy the years in-between. The late fifties early sixties, late sixties early seventies, the late seventies early eighties and the late eighties early nineties are presented with no illuminating element, making them function as elegant but empty shells. A side effect of their positioning is that they cease to operate exclusively as texts and instead become things on the gallery floor. The viewer stands beside them, stoops to look at them, circumnavigates them, works out an uneasy Gestalt in relation to their haphazard cross - referenced of time and place. A series of three drawings in pencil and correction fluid are shown in connection with these sculptural works, depicting the face of the artist's dead father laid out at his wake. McCrea made these drawings from photographs projected onto the wall of his studio in an attempt to reorganise the representation of his father's face; to recover what seemed to have come out all wrong in the process of embalming and photographing. He set out to achieve this first by rubbing out sections of the image and then by cutting and removing circular segments from the paper itself. The final drawing in the series is so completely made up of holes that the result is a simultaneous dematerialization of both the image and the material on which it is supported. In this process the artist's inability to counter the inauthentic image of his father with anything more affirmative than gaps and holes, reflects the fallibility of memory and the almost immediate emotional and perceptual complications that can occur in the recording process.

With the artist's birth and his father's death forming opposite poles of this exhibition, a theme that strongly emerges is the unlikely pursuit of personal significance within calendar time, the passage of days, weeks, decades, years, centuries and millennia which almost always guarantee us anonymity. The historical documents that attempt to stem this tide, to give it form and significance are vulnerable to revision and reinterpretation and as the works in the show testify, unable to defend themselves against wilful manipulation by future generations. McCrea explores the question of personal agency within this process. By linking up the mechanics of the calendar to the reality of lived experience he demonstrates how these two planes can interpenetrate and mingle. By playing with existing structures and re ordering them to reflect his own position, McCrea constructs a personalised recording machine, which produces new data in the form of artworks. The exhibition proposes a temporary free zone where the artworks can function on their own terms in a loose constellation of meaning. The license to do this and the methods and models employed, originate in part from events that took place in the art world and beyond during 1969.

i Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, Fontana, London, 1982, p59

ii Foucault, Introduction, *Deleuze and Guattari, Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Athlone Press

iii Maron L. Waxman, (ed), *Collier's Year Book, Covering the Year 1969, USA*, 1970, p116

iv Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*