

Tomorrow never dies

It begins with a woman in her seventies, dressed in a time-evasive fashion of a scarf and a beige trench coat. She's looking straight at us. At the end of the video, she's there again and still looking, seemingly unaffected by all that has occurred in between. She was there in the library room of the Crawford Art Gallery, lost in her own thoughts. We saw her peer into a small painting by Nathaniel Grogan (*Banditti around a campfire*), with all its revolutionary stirrings going nowhere in its gilded frame. She was also there in the factory, gesturing to a group of others. And now she's here again, with that same anxious stare.

She is looking at us, but she has no way of seeing us exactly, has she? Through the camera lens in front of her (out of sight from the rest of us), surely she could only have imagined that, some time later, our eyes would be looking back at her? Could she really have foreseen this occasion, in this darkened room? Could she have foreseen herself projected like this?

In the 1930s – a decade that witnessed the revolutionary technologies of sound and colour in the film industries – Walter Benjamin wrote of “the new anxiety” of actors that faced the camera rather than the live audience. He cited the Italian dramatist Luigi Pirandello, who described the affect upon actors performing to a camera as an “inexplicable unease, stemming from the fact that [her] body has lost its substance, that [she] has been volatilized, stripped of [her] reality, [her] life, [her] voice, the noises [she] makes when moving about, and has been turned into a mute image that flickers for a moment on the screen, then vanishes into silence”. Perhaps it's this same anxiety that we're seeing now, almost ninety years later, in the face of this woman? It's an anxiety of dislocation between dramatic action and its playback—an anxiety of the body, technology, and time.

Throughout the twelve minute duration of Martin Healy's *A moment lived twice*, we see the same woman again and again, in scenes that slip back and forth between the portals of past and present; between the anticipations of actions that are about to happen and the spectre of action itself. The anxieties and anticipations of the camera are only one dimension of the work, however. The video's method, structure, and script are enveloped by another early twentieth century reference: J. W. Dunne's *An Experiment in Time*, a small book published in 1927 on the subject of precognitive dreams. In this book, drawing on his own experience of envisioning catastrophic events in his dreams before they would actually occur (a volcanic eruption in Martinique, the derailing of the Flying Scotsman), Dunne put forward a theory that linear time was nothing but an illusion. It was our waking human consciousness that prevented our access to viewing events such as our own birth or momentous occasions of the years ahead. The scientific community remained sceptical, but Dunne's ideas were popularly received at the time and became important evocations for authors such as Aldous Huxley and J. B. Priestley, whose play *Time and the Conways* from 1937, directly referenced Dunne's *An Experiment with Time*.

There are lines from Dunne's writings that are spoken in the voiceover throughout *A moment lived twice*. There are also lines which reference letters written by members of the public to J. B. Priestley in the 1960s, who sought to share their own experiences of precognition. Their haunting words and experiences, channeled into one softly

spoken female voice, provide a further dislocation and disembodiment of lived time. It is implied that the voice belongs to the woman on camera, but this is never made certain. “I can remember looking at the grass shining in the sun’s rays. There was a cool breeze and my whole body and head seemed to be open and full of light, and you asked: ‘What are you staring at?’ ‘I’ve seen all this before’ I replied.”

In the library room of the Crawford Art Gallery, we see the woman look out of the window at the world beyond. It’s a world that appears bright, white, and without detail; in every way it’s a contrast to the library room itself, with its dark wood-paneled interior, its brass desk lamps, glass-fronted cabinets, and other 19th century styled fittings. It’s a room that would be anachronistic, old-fashioned and out of step, if only we could be sure that we were looking at a scene from the 21st century. There’s little here to confirm this. It’s only the high resolution and smooth tracking technology of the camera that returns our sense of contemporaneity. We see close-ups of the woman’s fingers touching the cracks of an ageing work surface, as if tracing a memory or summoning something of the future. Is she privately recounting her past experiences of this place or reconciling a premonition? Is she lost in the folds of time, just like the rest of us?

The Nathaniel Grogan painting from 1796 (*Banditti around a campfire*), hanging in the same room, provides no compass either. The painting depicts a small group of armed men and a dog, huddled around a camp fire. One of the men is silhouetted by the light of the fire and has the attention of the others; his arms are flaying and he is suggestively animated with the rousings of revolutionary action. We might have the date as a marker of time-historical certainty, but the painting was misattributed to William Sandler until recently, when art historians recognised Grogan’s compositional habit of placing a central figure in front of a light source. In certain sequences of the video, the camera dizzily scans the surface of the painting as if trying to re-dimensionalise the scene, coaxing its energies and its warmth into full-bodied reality.

Grogan’s compositional arrangement does return again in a different variety, when later in the video we see the woman, dressed in the same scarf and trench coat, among a group of elderly people that have gathered in what appears to be a disused factory unit. Standing in front of the group, she seems to be instructing them, her hands making a re-semblance to the gestures of the leading “bandito” of Grogan’s painting. There is lighting equipment and other evidences of a film set, as though the group were preparing for some kind of cinematic re-enactment.

If Dunne had a belief that the past, present, and future were all available to us, at once, then it’s this same logic that informs the narrative structure of *A moment lived twice*, where we see the preparatory work for things that have already taken place in another form; where we see actions and consequences that line up in no particular order; where we see a history unfold that already seems to have been unfolded.

It would be wrong, however, to suggest that Martin Healy is seeking to either illustrate or validate Dunne’s theories of time and precognition. Like previous photographic and video works that have explored the mysteries of the Bermuda Triangle (*It looks like we are entering white water... we’re completely lost*, 2010) or architect Paul Scheerbart’s 1907 designs for a machine that could produce “free

energy” (*Aether*, 2014), Healy is more concerned with how the camera functions in relation to speculative principles, rather than how it affirms historical credibilities. In using Dunne’s ideas of dream precognition as a framework, *A moment lived twice* is a work that just as much reflects on the limits of the camera’s representation, the futurity of photographic technology, and the embodiments of spectatorship itself.

In another space, on another floor, but at the same time, a video titled *Harvest* plays in a continuous loop. In this work, we see a man wiring a contact microphone to a large-leafed plant in the National Botanic Gardens in Dublin. We see him water the plants, before he disappears from view and the camera focuses on scenes of luscious vegetation; the sound of water falling through the leaves becoming more pronounced and manipulated as the time goes on. The sound soon climaxes into a strange apocalyptic storm, imposing the video’s sequence of images of the gardens with a sense of looming synthetic horror. In *Harvest*, what starts as a set of recognisable constructions (the placing of microphones, the processes of watering the plants, the gardens themselves) quickly turns into an impenetrable fiction of sights and sounds.

“The storm is what we call progress” Walter Benjamin once wrote. A similar paradox of technology’s powers of illumination and redemption have occupied much of Martin Healy’s work to date.

Matt Packer

Director, CCA Derry-Londonderry