I’m interested in the mechanics of how our collective moment is constructed. Increasingly the idea of ‘now’ feels under threat, as a twenty-first century concept, partly through the mass dispersal of media that relies on industrial-scale economies of production to function profitably. But it also relies on ideas like synchronicity, unanimity and shared identification with a given ‘moment’ to establish a profitable relationship. I’m interested in the types of immersion this produces.1

In this fragment of a conversation from 2013 with Kirsty Doug, curator at the Whitewater Gallery in London, Gerard Byrne frames the idea of ‘now’ as an ongoing process, characterised by a particular ‘mechanics’. He understands the concept of ‘now’ to be historically specific and bound to an economic model - of mass media, synchronous consumption and shared identification - that seems increasingly antiquated. Byrne has dovetailed many different strategies to challenge the ‘amnesia’ produced by synchronicity and make palpable the historical and contemporary construction of the ‘now’. Some of these strategies are well documented. They include his use of published transcripts, of interviews and round table discussions, as scripts to be followed in performance situations. But other, more subtle aspects of Byrne’s work have received less critical attention, even though they are arguably central to his engagement with temporality and its histories. Here, I’m referring particularly to the codes and scripts that dictate the form, structure and live-spatial-temporal experience of works incorporating video, such as New Sexual Lifestyles 2003, 1984 and Beyond 2005-7, Subject 2006 and A Man and a Woman Make Love 2012. These multi-channel installations, which are typically staged and shot to evoke specific television genres, are exhibited on spatially dispersed yet tightly coordinated arrangements of video and slide projectors, monitors and audio speakers. This coordination is dictated by a set of instructions (effectively, a script) implemented by a computer or other device, which can be used to control and synchronise multiple screens or monitors.

Byrne’s video works have for many years utilised a segmented form, creating the potential for playback in various sequential permutations on several monitors or projectors. In each individual work is attuned in space and time. But in recent years this segmented form has extended into the institutional and material architecture of the gallery. Various technological are employed in the process of extension, such as synchronised lighting sequences, the material alteration of display equipment, and the addition of tiny shutters over the projector lenses, cued to open and close on command. In Byrne’s exhibition A Taste of History, in the future, presented in different forms at Free de Pays de la Loire, Nantes (2014), Kunstmuseum St. Gallen (2015) and, most recently, at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne (2016), additional permutations in playback were enabled through a variety of installation and programming strategies. For example, a common arrangement of display equipment and material supports in which videos were projected onto an array of propped sculptural slabs was used to present different works in sequence, and fifty variations were also incorporated into the screening schedule. These strategies amplified and intensified the permutation logic already integral to the form of each work, making it

The Mechanics of Now
Maeve Connolly
difficult, if not practically impossible, for any one visitor to consume the exhibition in its entirety.

Initially working with relatively basic DVD scripting languages to achieve permutations in playback, Byrne has now evolved a much more complex and bespoke model involving Brightsign media players, which have been hacked and reprogrammed by his technical collaborator, the sound artist Steve Anderson. Brightsign technology was devised for and continues to be used within the context of retail or 'point of sale' situations. In its hacked form, this technology allows Byrne to compile complex schedules for daily playback, comprising of pre-recorded media components or clips, arranged in a timeline that incorporates cues for display equipment (projections, monitors, triggers for lighting and other cues) for projector shaders. This timeline is converted through a reader developed by Anderson into commands for a 'master' Brightsign player. These commands control a network that determines the synchronicity of playback across all technologies utilised in the exhibition, functioning as the primary interface between the individual works and the institution's organisational and technological infrastructure. So permutations in playback are encountered at a micro and macro level, structuring the concrete of the sequential media clips, the ordered presentation of works in any given display setting and the lighting scenarios, which help to structure and provide flows of bodies within and through the galleries. MEGA's cable links the multiple hardware components, distributing power and data that is stored locally on the Brightsign media players. Crucially, the master media player is connected to a remote server, controlled neither by artist nor institution, so that it can also be precisely synchronised according to time and data. This potentially allows for variations in the script to be played out over a specific time frame, both inside and outside the physical location of the exhibition and the calendar of the institution.

Byrne's utilisation of a substantially altered retail display system is part of his ongoing redefinition of the exhibition, and its longstanding exploration of the textual and visual language of advertising, his specific interest in hybrid commercial media forms such as the advertorial, and broader fascinations, with what he calls the mechanics of now?' What does it mean to hack and redeploy a commercial retail technology when consumption is backfiring up against the here and now, processing and moving at the speed of personal and social data? This question seems to hover in the background of Byrne's consideration of Ogg, which touches upon an everyday reality as an effect of knowledge. Despite the widespread existence of public engagement and outreach programmes, Byrne points out that artists' institutions generally know less about their audience than supermarkets and even places like Tesco and Amazon, who have a more 'precise sense' of their customers and 'the choices they make'. He goes on to state that, within the physical space of the gallery, a 'relatively undifferentiated audience can encounter a very particular, even obtuse idea'.

Byrne and Ogg's discussion of audience differentiation is particularly relevant to the Whitechapel Gallery, given its location on a busy London high street. But references to the 'street' also appear in a conversation with Byrne, and curator andカメラer Cassandra Edelstein Latch, published alongside a multi-part exhibition at PRAXES, Berlin. PRAXES gallery was then situated in a slightly residential area, but Byrne's emphasis on the proximity of the street. He specificallyframes his approach to the exhibition of video as a rejection of the 'contrivance of the gallery turned into a cinema', and an embrace of something much more connected with the street [...] to the outside.' At the end of the PRAXES exhibition, Byrne stipulates: 'People can only come to the gallery from the street and go back to the street when they leave'. This statement might be read as an acknowledgment of the connection between gallery and street. But Byrne is attuned to separation as well as continuity, embracing the formal and institutional potential of the gallery as a setting for material and spatial-temporal interventions. In general, the formal and institutional relations work often engage with the gallery as a physical and institutional context in which it is possible to encounter objects and media, associated with different historical and cultural moments, which remain associated with earlier architectures, infrastructures and practices of media production, distribution and consumption. It is the artist and Byrne's dialectics of spatial-temporal scripting actually legible to exhibition-goers? Some of the material devices used by Byrne in exhibitions such as :In late evening in the future is impossible to miss. They include the projectors shutters that open and shut, the prismatic bars that obstruct or produce certain signifiers, and the physical supports used to synchronise the exhibition hardware, such as the cables connecting equipment. The timelines defining the sequencing of works might seem to be less accessible, but Byrne's specific interest in the scripting of time and space is suggested in various ways. For example, what video is displayed in sequence (using a common range of equipment and supports) and a self-consciously casual document - handwritten or otherwise basically produced - is often pinned to the gallery wall, listing the playback order. These documents are formally distinct from the printed (and often branded) matter generally produced by institutions to publicly announce the details of screenings, performances or other time-based events. As Byrne points out, these lists do not speak 'in the voice of the institution.' They are rarely, if ever, encountered in online documentation or mediation of Byrne's exhibitions, belonging to the physical space of the gallery, as opposed to the larger and more diffuse formation of the art institution.

Byrne has also deployed other, more explicitly art historical, strategies to foreground and contextualise his interest in 'the mechanics of now'. For example, at Kunsthalle St. Gallen, he exhibited a monitor video wall - dispersed in fragments throughout the galleries - as a kind of parallel display system, allowing the simultaneous display of works installed elsewhere in the galleries. This scattered video wall, enabling duplication and fragmentation, disrupts the conventional impulse to manifest an artwork in a singular and specific form, even when this artwork is not bound to a particular technology of display. It also offers a point of connection with Kunsthalle St. Gallen's own permanent collection, which includes Nam June Paik's Boys Yellow: A Hole in the Headwork, originally commissioned for Documenta 8: this work is permanently installed on a video wall in the museum. In common with many of Paik's multi-monitor video works, this piece involves elements of duplication and repetition, somewhat similar to those found in artists' closed circuit TV installations from the late 1960s and early 1970s, which often sought to explore the mechanics of television broadcasting and reception.