DOMINIC MOLON
NO WAY OUT

"Finn, again! Take. Bussoftlhee, mememoree! Till thousandendsthee. Lps. The keys to. Given! A way a lone a last a loved a long the… riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs."[1]
James Joyce, *Finnegan's Wake*

Thus ends and begins James Joyce's dense and labyrinthine novel *Finnegan's* Wake, the circularity of its narrative structure functioning as both a subtle allusion to the "recirculating" River Liffey that figures throughout the entire story and to further position the story as a dreamlike pouring forth of the linguistic unconscious. The use of this looping device serves to expand and extend the temporality of the narrative a tendency that informs Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler's recent video installations *Detached Building* (2001). *Eight* (2001). and *Single Wide* (2002). albeit in a more elegant cinematic fashion. These three works present situations that emanate from everyday life yet detour into perpetual cul-de-sacs of an uncanny déjà vu. Hubbard / Birchler demonstrate an acute understanding of the construction and deconstruction of architectural space in film as well as an exacting attention to charging their visual material with strategic sonic enhancements and intensifications. Like Joyce, their work rigorously reexamines and reimagines the condition of its creation from within while remaining committed to portraying the endlessly paradoxical nature of quotidian existence.

The three recent video projects represent a culmination of sorts of concepts and practices established in their photographic work of the 1990s. Hubbard /Birchler's earliest projects (created after they began working collaboratively in 1990) incorporated sculpture and theatrically staged situations for the camera that established interests in the architectural uncanny, cinematic structures, and an existential sense of psychological dread and anxiety that have characterized their work to the present day. The splitting of the picture plane by walls, floors, doors, and ceilings in their photographic series *Stripping* (1998), for example, demonstrates how structural interventions into both the visual and fictive spaces

of the images heighten the viewer's awareness of the highly mediated and constructed nature of the surroundings we encounter in the dominant popular media of television and film. Another series titled *Gregor's Room I-III* (1999), features staged photographs and a video based on Franz Kafka's famous short story from 1915*, The Metamorphosis,* that establish the sense of fatalism that pervades their human protagonists' unresolved situations in their later video installations. Given their inclination towards the production of serial still images that engaged in some form of storytelling, the progression to video could not have been more inevitable.

Eight began with a more sculptural idea of a "crying window" and indeed in what appears to be the beginning of the video a young girl's face is depicted looking plaintively out of a rain-soaked window. The subsequent events involve the girl moving through the house and into a backyard that appears abruptly as if the house had suddenly ceased to physically exist. After the girl peruses the remnants of a drenched birthday party, the table is shown in close-up and as the camera pans left the table becomes oddly and impossibly incorporated into a dry, interior setting. The girl reappears coming down a hallway and resumes her position at the window where she was first encountered.

The disquietingly surreal erasure of architecture that occurs as the camera follows the girl is matched only by the unreal sense of composure that the girl herself possesses. It's difficult to imagine that the birthday party could have been for anyone but her (presumably, given the title and her apparent age, her eighth), yet her behavior seems utterly inappropriate for a pre-teen whose birthday party has been unceremoniously (and quite dramatically) rained out. The notion of the crying window as the work's inspiration is telling since the dissolution of the architectural boundaries could be read as a displacement of the girl's feelings of rage, sadness and loss onto the surrounding domestic structure. Kept inside by the inclement weather, she fantasizes about the walls of the house suddenly vanishing. While the architecture in Hubbard / Birchler's scenario complies with this wish, the weather does not, and her pointless attempts to recover some of the items left on the table give the work an ultimately tragic and uncomfortable sense of futility, a situation underscored and exacerbated by the endless loop of the narrative.

Produced concurrent to *Eight* yet conceived slightly later, *Detached Building* presents a more subtle exchange between the architectural and existential uncanny, an affect enhanced by their focus on the cinematic illusion of "breaking through" a built space. The work features a slow camera pan through an empty American garage space furnished with guitars and a drum kit, into a backyard where the camera swings in a half-circle to capture a casually dressed young woman throwing rocks dispassionately at a building off-screen. Moving back inside along the same arc one sees a young man playing a bass guitar for his friends who groove along. Two more movements show that the woman has disappeared and allow the performance to conclude just before the view is interrupted once again by the wall of the building to begin the cycle again.

Throughout the video the wall separating interior and exterior serves as a sort of marking device of action and sound, almost as if it was triggering the events taking place. Only when this threshold is first breached do we see the girl throwing the stones, view and hear the performance of the bass line, notice the disappearance of the girl. And return to the vacated interior. The wall (which is flush with the perspectival plane) functions like the architectural structures in *Stripping* (1998). while serving an added function as the site of the self-sustaining narrative loop. The similarity to Alfred Hitchcock's use of obstructions to build his 1948 film *Rope* out of consecutive 10 minute takes has been previously noted, yet instead of characters' backs and cabinets, Hubbard / Birchler incorporate the set of the video itself.[2] Further consideration of the wall's contribution to the detachment of the building is suggested by the various levels of " detachment" that occur within the film and in the viewer's understanding of the narrative. In order to create the cinematic illusion of an effortless transcendence of space, the building structure itself must be understood a *priori* as "detached" in some way, with some sort of gap created (if the wall is an entire wall at all) to allow for a camera on a dolly-track to move in its consistent lateral motion. Another level of detachment that occurs is between the female and male protagonists of the video. The young woman is presented outside of the garage and therefore becomes understood (once the young men are introduced) as being denied access to their company and their activities. The dividing wall thus becomes a symbol for subtle separations of the sexes that occur everyday and the tensions inherent to that divide.

A building that remains unseen but is nonetheless sonically implied by the young woman hitting it with stones is also a "detached building:' a structure withheld from the camera's perspective yet engaged by the woman's cathartic activity. Finally, there is the viewer's own sense of "detachment", with the camera's representation of the "action" in one steady mechanical move serving to create a sense of emotional distance. Departing from the occasional close-up in *Eight,* which promotes a sense of intimacy and identification with the young girl, *Detached Building* fixes the perspective at a certain remove, intensifying the lonely stalemate between the divided sexes.

Single Wide combines *Detached Building's* unilateral movement of the camera to spatially define the cinematic condition of the work with the synthesis of architectural and psychological instabilities featured in *Eight.* It "begins" behind a wall and moves into a room where a woman with a large bag of personal effects negotiates the disorder of the space into the kitchen. The cause of the disarray becomes apparent: an automobile has crashed through the house. Passing through a bathroom, we see the woman checking herself in the mirror for cuts and bruises (sustained, one assumes, in the automobile crash). The camera moves outside of the house to capture the woman walking towards a pick-up truck, sitting alone in the dead of night. Sweeping around the truck, we see her compose herself and her things within the cab while her cell phone rings (she ignores the call). Moving back towards the house, we hear the truck start up and drive away and the camera goes back into the house which now bears none of the damage witnessed before. Ordinary sounds-telephones ringing, water dripping, and clocks-are eventually drowned out by the sound of the truck returning to the house. The camera moves outside to show the woman crying inside the truck, circles the truck as her behavior becomes more extreme, resulting in her driving the truck into the house. A pan once more through the house reveals the damage done by the crash, moving outside to show the woman attempting to get out of the truck, and back inside the house where the narrative begins anew.

In *Single Wide* (the title an allusion to the specific type of house featured in the film) the architectural structure becomes more than a mere backdrop. The movement of the camera in three discrete circles through the house and outside- and one smaller; sub-loop around the truck-imbues the space with the same dysfunctional tendencies and emotional strain of the distressed woman. As in *Eight,* the experience of space appears to be that of an externalization of the psychological torments and traumas occurring within the human protagonist. The constant shift between interior and exterior and the shifting condition of the space evokes a similar sense of indecision and anxiety that we assume the woman to be feeling. Sound also plays a significant role in this regard, with certain noises occurring or being amplified at critical moments in the visual presentation as if to foreshadow certain events or create an intensified level of tension within the viewer. *Single Wide* exaggerates the sense of existential crisis in its suspension of the details of the woman's circumstance-a condition aided immeasurably by the closed narrative. The cause of her injuries is never fully determined, whether they are the result of unseen domestic violence (a likely cause, perhaps, for her extreme behavior with the truck) or of the crash into the house. By collapsing the story through the cinematic loop, Hubbard / Birchler ultimately withhold any easy resolution of this situation.

Their elegant use of the tracking shot in all of the video works to slowly reveal dysfunctional scenes and architectural interventions recalls the major cinematic moments such as Stanley Kubrick's steadicam shots through the hotel in *The Shining* (1980), Jean-Luc Godard's measured pans throughout *Sympathy for the Devil* (1968), the classic opening of Orson Welles' *Touch* of *Evil* (1958), and Alexsandr Sokurov's incredible single-take through the Hermitage Museum in *Russian Ark* (2002). This effect resembles, to some degree, Theodor Adorno's description of the deleterious effect of the filmic flow of images:

Whatever psychological problems of fate the film may present, through parading the events past the viewer on the screen the power of the oppositions involved and the possibility of freedom within them is denied and reduced to the abstract temporal relationship of before and after. The eye of the camera which has perceived the conflict before the viewer and projected it upon the unresisting smoothly unfolding reel of film has already taken care that the conflicts are not conflicts at all. In so far as the individual images are played past in an uninterrupted photographic series on the screen they have already become mere objects in advance. Subsumed as they are, they pass us impotently by. [3]

Hubbard / Birchler, however, resist the kind of passive reception of cinematic spectacle that Adorno describes by creating a level of doubt about what takes place before and after through their use of the looped narrative. Conflicts that arise within their works replay themselves in perpetuity, prompting the viewer to become actively engaged in determining their endgame and, eventually, accept their resistance of resolution.

Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler invoke visual and narrative techniques that counteract the viewer's desire for absorption within the flow of a story. Exquisitely complex architectural sets only intensify the overall effect of emotional distance that characterizes their minidramas of alienation and psychological frustration . Despite the calm movement of our perspective in and around banal. Everyday spaces, Hubbard / Birchler take us quietly into places that we swear we've been before but can't be too sure. One of the many typically dense phrases from Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* cited at the beginning of the essay (and coming at the physical end" of the book) is "tillthousandendsthee" - an acknowledgment perhaps of the novel's own circular structure and the "thousand ends" that it inspires. *Detached Building, Eight,* and *Single Wide* similarly create a thousand ends, or rather, a limitless number of ends and beginnings and beginnings and ends, dropping the viewer into warped spaces and uncanny everyday situations that produce an endlessly unsettling suspension of temporality.

1 James Joyce, *Finnegan 's Wake (1939).* New York 1984, p . 628.

2 See *The Uncanny Potential:* A *Dialogue Between Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler and Martin Hentschel,* in: ex-cat., *Teresa Hubbard / Alexander Birchler: Wild Walls,* Krefeld, Amsterdam, St. Gallen and Kiel. Bielefeld 2001, pp. 75- 87.

3 Theodor Adorno, *The Schema* of *Mass Culture* (1942). in : J.M. Bernstein (ed.) : *The Culture Industry.* London 1991, pp. 71-72.