

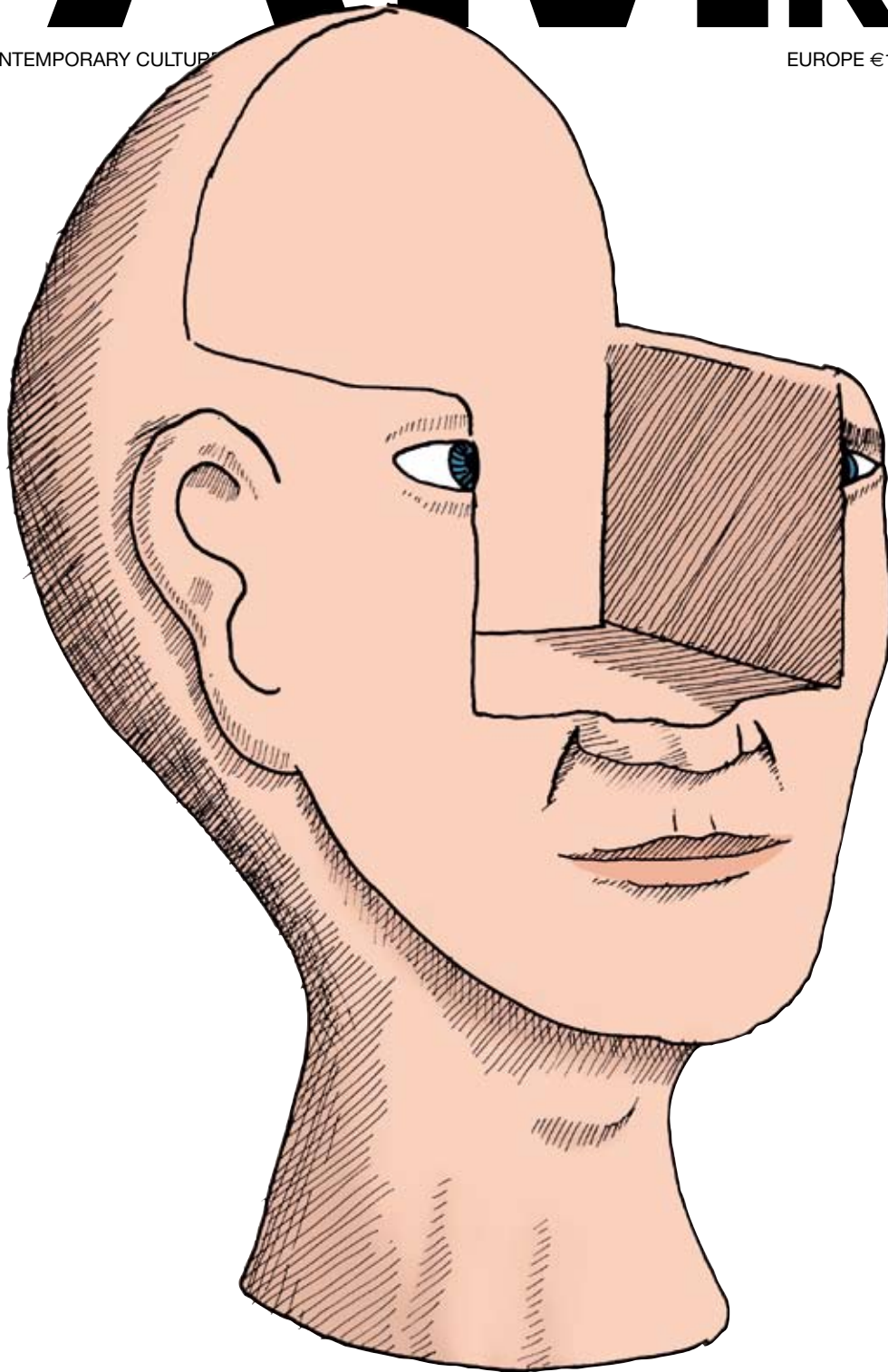
# DAMN



N°16

A MAGAZINE ON CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

EUROPE €12, UK £8.5 APRIL / MAY 2008



BIMONTHLY - APRIL / MAY 2008 - OFFICE OF DEPOSAL 9000 GHEENT - P508314

**David Byrne** - **Italian Design** - **BarberOsgerby** - **cloud9**  
**Joana Vasconcelos** - **Art in Argentina** - **Hilton Brothers**

# Art for All

## DAVID BYRNE - OR IS IT?

The traditional notion of public art is putting 'high art' in a place where ordinary people will see it. This act removes the high art from its usual context in a museum, art gallery or the home of a wealthy collector, and puts it - most often - on the streets. Traditionally this might be a bronze statue of a soldier or statesman - sometimes 'avec cheval'. This can serve several purposes: showing the sculptor's work; celebrating and justifying a war or a battle; ennobling the career of a politician. The horse doesn't come off too badly, either.

More recently, the typical example might be a massive ugly abstract steel object placed in the middle of a concrete plaza. Taste for this kind of public art is changing, but slowly. There is, in the placement of high art in a popular context, the implicit assumption that art is good for you. The arbiters of taste are, by making the art more accessible, offering a sampling of quality to those who might not otherwise run into it. There is an assumption that encountering these 'gifts' is somehow morally uplifting; viewing art - high art - will make one a slightly better person. And of course it is the class of patrons and collectors who have the discerning taste to determine which objects hold this mysterious and beneficial aura within themselves, and which do not. The fact that large public art museums - places where anyone can soak up highly concentrated doses of this aura - are supported by sizeable injections of state funds implies that governments agree with these ideas and notions.

Of course, this is all nonsense. Art isn't good for you. Art - viewing it or collecting it, at any rate - doesn't make you a better person or raise your moral standards in any way. (Actively making things, however, has been proven to be therapeutic and beneficial to people in other ways.) Art appreciation may, if it affords access to the right circles, work as a kind of social entry card, and eventually facilitate connections and friendships that could prove enjoyable and financially remunerative at some point.

Despite all of the above I am attracted to making work that engages the general public. In general I tend to make work specifically for this context, work that can easily be mistaken for something that is not art - a billboard, a metro advertisement or a corporate presentation, for example. For me, any power that the work might have exists in the moment when one is not sure if it is art or not. The instant when it might be mistaken for just some really peculiar ad campaign or joke minus the punch line; the moment before the aura of art descends and covers the thing with its power and predetermined perceptions. That confusing hesitation is the second when the brain has not made up its mind what the thing is, where to place it, what it is for, whom it is for or who is benefiting from it.

Likewise, on the street and in offices and such, I find 'installations', objects and 'drawings' that, for me, have a very similar effect. Though in most cases these objects were not conceived of as art and were not placed by some patron or art organisation, they too often fall into the gap where I do a double take and briefly say to myself, 'What a strange and beautiful piece—I wonder who made it?' Of course, I'm not stupid. I realise it's all a perceptual game I'm playing on myself and that my framing of my vision and photographing of these rooms and objects makes them look more like something they are not - or are they? If I could somehow pass on this (temporary) way of looking it would liberate the pleasantly jarring art experience from the grip of the market place. No one would have to go to museums anymore and architects would no longer have to put those ugly sculptures in the plazas.

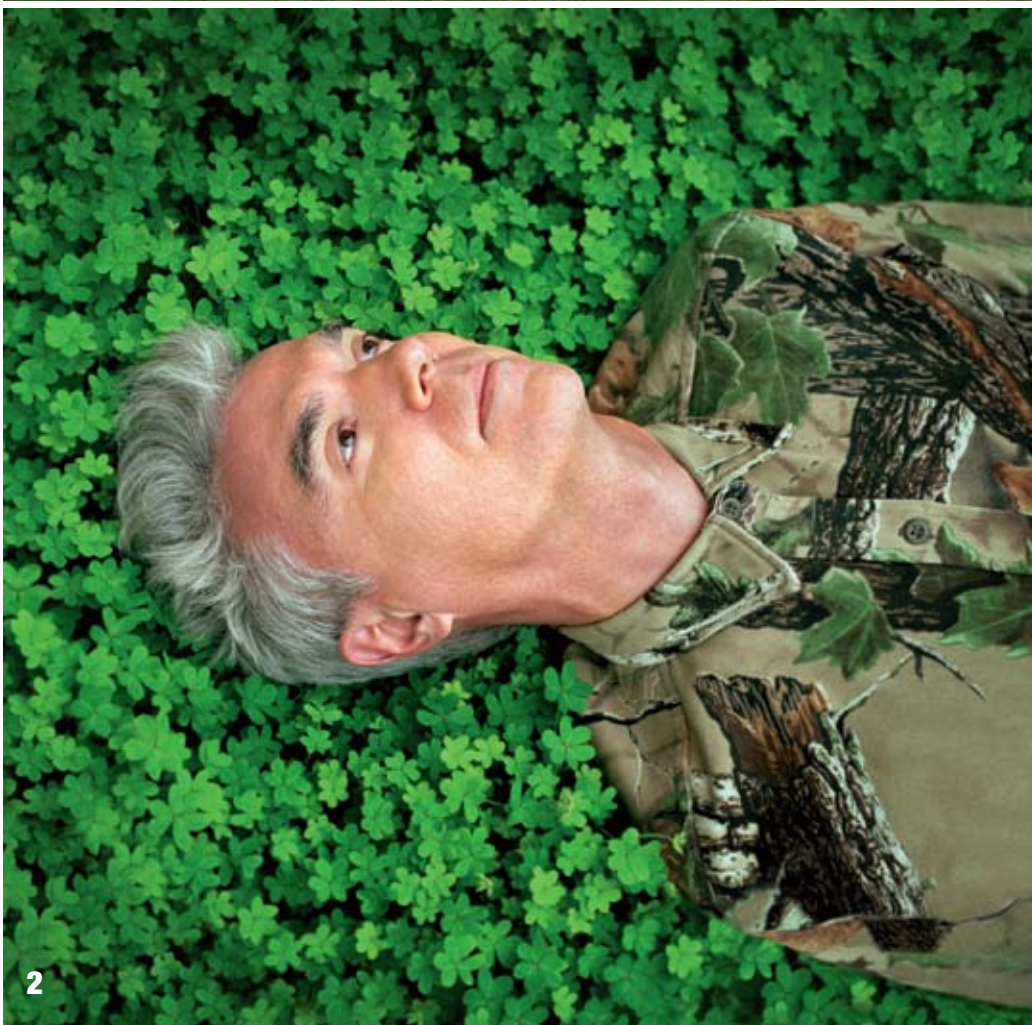
Though I may ramble on about looking at what's out there I sometimes can't resist an opportunity to create something new. This summer I will install an audio piece called *Playing The Building*\* in an empty ferry terminal at the foot of Manhattan. The idea is simple: mechanical devices - motors, air blowers and strikers - are attached to the infrastructure of this old building and the public is invited to 'play' the building via a controller (an old pump organ). I've done it once before, and it works! The sounds are surprisingly musical and the public seems to sense the inherent and latent sound possibilities in architecture. #

Text and images by David Byrne

\*[www.davidbyrne.com/playingthebuilding](http://www.davidbyrne.com/playingthebuilding)



1



2



3



4



5

what gets me going



6



12



13



7



8



9



14



15



10



11



16



17



18



19



20



25



26



- A) Parade Viewing Stand  
パレード見物の特等席
- B) Amish Torture Device  
アーミッシュの拷問具
- C) Scrap Iron Merchant Sign  
くず鉄業者の看板

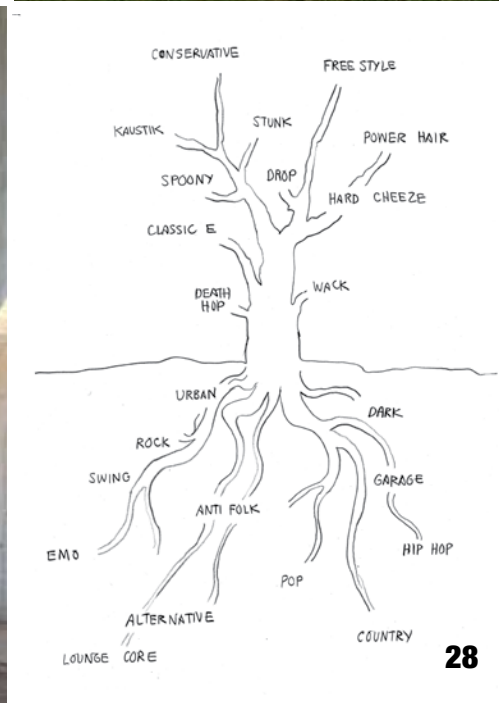
21



22



27



28



29



23



- A) Terrorist Bombs  
テロリストの爆弾
- B) Street Performer Equipment  
大道芸人の小道具
- C) Canadian Luggage  
カナダ人の荷物

24

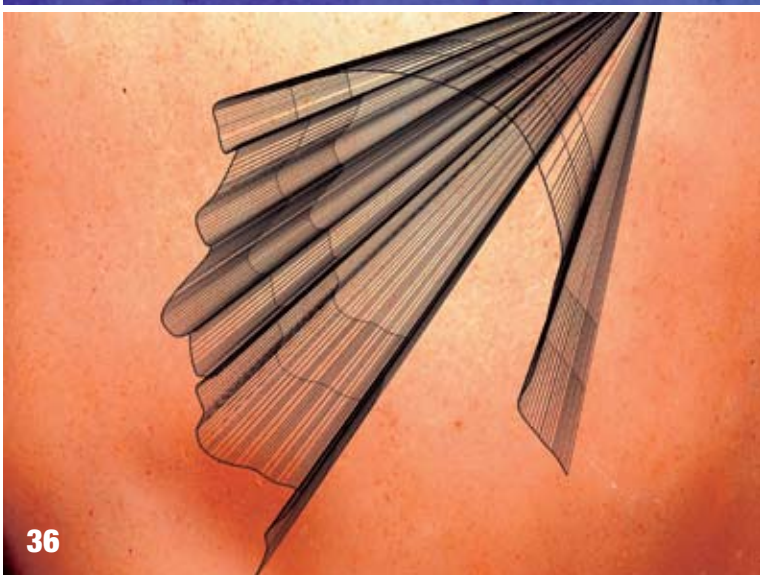
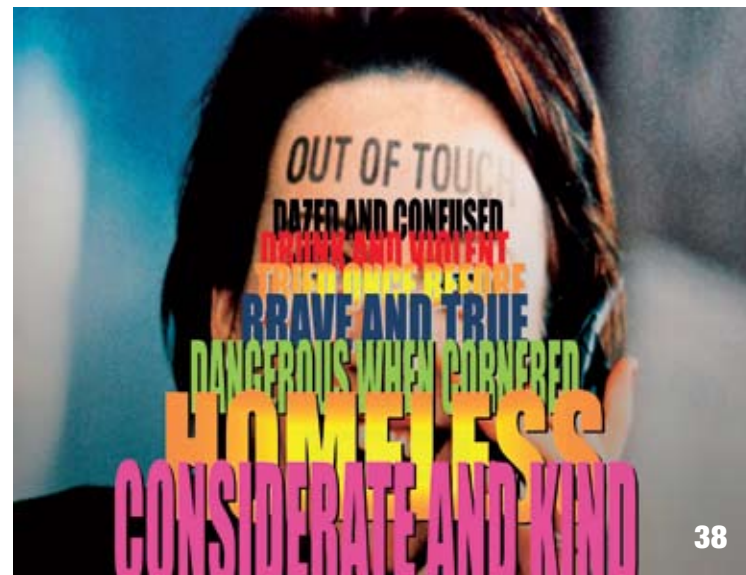


- A) Victorian Crack Pipe  
ビクトリア朝クラック・パイプ
- B) Medical Ether Administrator  
医療用エーテル吸引器
- C) Hairball Receptacle  
毛玉入れ

30



31





45



46



47

1. G's house, Iceland, 2007
2. Photo of DB by Mark Johann, 2005\*
3. Scary Yard, 2007
4. Kudzu Family, 2007
5. Corporate Signs: Trust (By DB and Danielle Spencer), 2003\*
6. Playing the Building (mock-up), Battery Maritime Ferry Terminal Building, NY, May-August, 2008\*
7. Nordic Tree, 2008
8. Installation view: Playing the Building, Färgfabriken, Stockholm, Sweden, 8 October-13 November 2005\*
9. Better Living Through Chemistry: Acid Trip, 1995\*
10. Installation view: motor, Playing the Building, Färgfabriken, Stockholm, Sweden, 8 October-13 November 2005\*
11. Double Sofas, Los Angeles, CA, 1984
12. Political Flesh: Dubya, 2001\*
13. Cups Flag Reverse, 2007
14. Eastern Window Display, 2007
15. Teeth on Lava, 2002
16. IKEA apartment, 2007
17. Stairway to Heaven: Paredes e Poder, 1996\*
18. Austrian Tree, 2007
19. Chairs: File Cabinet, 2005\*
20. Stump Chair, 2006
21. What is it? - Parade Viewing Stand, 2003\*
22. Split Bamboo Mohawk, 2004\*
23. Mystery Object, 2007
24. What is it? - Terrorist Bombs, 2003\*
25. The Wedding Party: Tio Guillermo, 1998\*
26. Laundry Thing, 2007
27. Austrian Tree, 2007
28. Music of the Future, 2002\*
29. Doggie Chew Toy Chair Embroidery, 2006\*
30. What is it? - Victorian Crack Pipe, 2003\*
31. Molecule Chair, 2006\*
32. PowerPoint still: Sea of Possibilities, 2003\*
33. Baseball Field, 2007
34. Guest Room Carpet, 2007
35. Stairway to Heaven: Blue Blood, 1996\*
36. PowerPoint still: Physiognomies, 2003\*
37. Nude Diorama, 2007
38. PowerPoint still: The End of Reason, 2003\*
39. Anchored, 2007
40. Big Baby, 2007
41. Installation view: The New Sins, public light-box installation, Sydney Festival, Sydney, Australia, 5-26 January 2002\*
42. The New Sins, Bulgarian edition, Prima, 2003\*
43. Options, 2007
44. The New Sins, installation view, Holiday Inn, Cleveland, OH, 2002\*
45. Award-winning pickle, 2007
46. Sun Shade, 2007
47. Installation view: Everything Is Connected, Saks Project Art, Saks Fifth Ave., NY, 2002\*

www.davidbyrne.com/art  
 All images: Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, NYC  
 (\*) images of artworks of David Byrne,  
 all other photographs made by David Byrne