James McCann: Monomania
The Black Mariah, Cork
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James McCann’s *Monomania* opened at the Black Mariah on July 22nd 2013. People talked about it. Immersive, sticky, disorientating, this show had a duration beyond itself. It imparted an audiovisual aftertaste that was carried out of the gallery and on into the rest of that day and the next. Just five days later it closed. People kept talking.

For *Monomania*, three components were installed in the long, narrow gallery space. 1) On the end wall: a projection with sound. 2) In the corner, at the opposite end of the room: A 26-minute music video sequence. 3) Between them: A sculptural object. This layout demands that we encounter the videos—aurally if not visually—first. We start there.

7/31/99
1 A man reverses into a garage. Gardening implements hang against a freshly plastered wall. The floor is clean. Something is about to happen. But first, before the camera opens on this shrine to domestic order, we catch what passes as a slice of accidental filming—a mechanical shriek and a partially occluded sliver of a bicycle wheel or its shadow, even. It lasts just an instant. Then the screen goes black and opens again on that utilitarian interior. In the apprehension of what follows, we might well forget we ever saw this but the 30 videos that follow it are rife with such moments of apparent accident and error. They establish the register for the entire exhibition. Though it never comes back into view, that bicycle wheel (an object hardly devoid of art connotations), is pressed into performing a crucial sonic service. Its squeaking revolutions, which grow increasingly cacophonous, soundtrack the whole piece, making what looks only strange into something which registers aurally as deeply unsettling.

Back in the screechy garage, a figure (McCann himself) is reversing into the frame. He takes up position before a rake with the kinetic precision of one relocating a pre-designated chalked mark. Taking a deep (eye-widening) breath, he steadies himself. He adjusts his footing and then, raising his hands to waist-height, begins to twirl. The effort he expends in doing so seems incongruous. His movements are painfully deliberate; his expression an agony of proprioception. On the second revolution, he covertly wipes his forehead. Gradually gathering speed, his arms are pulled higher; his gait grows less clumsy and his footwork more deft. But all the while, his pained facial expression sets the tone of this balletic whimsy curiously askew. Once having achieved a critical velocity, there is grace—or something approaching it. Then, some inscrutable lesson learned or a secret battle won, the dance ends. He holds his final stellar position for a moment, then turns and reverses back out of the frame. The camera lingers a while on the space he has just vacated, and the wheel screeches on until, via another glimpsed swipe of a hand across the lens, blank blackness is restored. And, all the while, since ever the spinning man found fluid movement, the word ‘PARADOX’ has been flashing in rainbow polychromy across the middle of the screen.

[Direct cut]
2 All the screen is a face. An electronic track loops a stately bounce with springs and a barbiturate-infused raspberry sounds like a helicopter. Lips move, immense and undulant.

[Blackness; sound outlasts vision]

3 The word ‘nothing’—digitally rendered into a percussive bark—is repeated over (and over) a series of regularly-spaced sharp claps. Footage of an upturned hand bursting from fist into open (empty) palm is spliced into images of water glancing off a knife held under a running tap. In the interstices, a black screen announces the same nihilist mantra in an invocation of tautological overkill.

[Direct cut]

4 In the American accent common to mass-produced automatons, an answering machine plays back the message: ‘We find camaraderie in the mundane. The more mundane, the closer we get. Our love is like fucking in a call centre. Our love is literally fucking in a call centre’. The adverb, inflected with the slightest tonal emphasis, pushes an otherwise affectless machine delivery into deadpan comedy.

[For the briefest instant, ‘Nothing’ is re-instated]

5 Jonas’s Vertical Roll is remade, en bref. In place of a feminist critique of the fetishizing atomization of female flesh, we watch a bouncing still of the male artist’s face, caught here in an expression of supreme ignominy. The incessant clang of the original has been replaced with an equally aggressive, though much less minimalist, dance-track.

[No interlude]

6 The camera pans across a murky field. Hearing only the amplified near-white noise of wind in a microphone, wrecked cars are seen through a wire fence. Over all of this is printed the incongruous legend: ‘GLORY OF THE LORD’.

[No interlude]

7 Behind a semi-solarized hand, the artist’s face shows through in a pixellated blur. Having been displaced earlier, Jonas’s industrial clang (or an indirect sonic citation thereof) arriving here, two video-tracks too late, and quickly disintegrates into something else. The outstretched hand reaches towards a sun which repeatedly cedes opacity to an eye that breaks or burns through it. Watching, we are watched. We will be watched again.

We’re not yet nine minutes in, and we’ve watched just 7 of the 31 videos. The pace, acidic palette and uneven texture of the sequence makes for exhausting viewing as we are forced to recalibrate eyes and ears 30 times in 26 minutes. Sometimes the sound stops before the image vanishes; sometimes the opposite is true. Sometimes a black screen marks the end of one and the start of another; sometimes they directly abut in jarring tessellation. Often, we need to look away. And since the music videos shown here represent just a part of the much bigger 99 music videos project, this seems as good a place as any to stop and appraise that project at large.

![Image](image.jpg)


The 99 Music Videos are defined (in terms of form, concept and content) by their simultaneous alter-existence as a series of sporadically released numbered uploads in what Sabine Maria Schmidt has called the ‘transgeographical exhibition space’ of the Internet (‘At the right place at the right time? A brief report on current video art’, 2006). Specifically, McCann promulgates this project via Youtube: natural habitat, in the post-MTV-epoch, of the music video form. Though embedded here within a specifically curated installation, the videos are available for consumption in as many formats, locations and even configurations as the camerawielding Youuber seeks to sample. In a subversion of artworld conventions, the mass mediatization of these video artworks took place not subsequent to, but before, the show’s opening. The edit incarnated in the exhibited DVD object enjoys no hierarchical privilege over the freely available video singles on McCann’s channel. Furthermore, representing just a fraction of an eventual 99, what we get in the gallery is not alone a multiple, but further auratically compromised

by its metonymic relation to a still-growing whole.

Categorically music videos, they are videos for sound. However we might, in the gallery context, privilege the visual experience to the neglect of what is happening aurally, ‘watching them’ on mute deprives them of their motive power. Installed on a small television with low-grade integrated speakers, the videos act in the gallery much as music-videos used to do in the home: as a flickering, peripatetically attended to or distracting stream of audiovisual output. Made to sell singles and ads, the return on the energy and expenditure involved in the production of commercial music videos is an index of viewer-numbers—an economy made publicly explicit by Youtube’s derivation of advertising costs from the numbers displayed on the onscreen view-counter. Although music videos may be free-to-view, the function of the form is still (perhaps even moreso) inherently commercial.

Cognizant of (and, in the 9th video, directly referencing) this money-spinning motivation, the 99 Music Videos simultaneously invoke the other side of Youtube: its domestic interiors, lo-fi DIY production, homemade tutorials, mimed paens from fans to their musical heroes and virtuosic displays of minor talent. At the same time, McCann’s videos draw attention the diaristic focus on the video-maker—and on his/her body: the solipsism common to Youtube content and the history of video art. McCann’s intervention into the discourse on our status as what Kate Mondloch calls ‘screen subjects’, is neither naïve nor cynical. Establishing their frame of reference from the outset in the intersection of art-historical and pop-cultural axes, these videos articulate a challenge to Rosalind Krauss’s hasty diagnosis, in her 1976 essay ‘Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism’, that the artworld ‘has been deeply and disastrously affected by its relation to mass-media’. Contra her despair, this work playfully critiques video’s diaristic impulse—as it manifests variously among video-artists and the video-ing public at large.

Untroubled by anxiety at the prospect of an institutionless, curatorless, collectorless global web as art venue, McCann exemplifies the form’s formal potentialities. Claims made in the 1970s and ’80s regarding video’s emancipatory capacity to attack ‘two critical targets at once: the elitist, middle-class concept of the originality of fine art, and the deadening consumption of mass media’ (Dieter Daniels, ‘Video/Art/Market’, 2006) are dramatically outdone by Youtube’s global accessibility—both to producers and consumers. Youtube’s immediacy and its democratic porousness to amateur, inexpert production makes it a true medium of the masses.

McCann’s videos are all identifiable shot on a camera phone. The audio production is similarly lo-fi and homemade. A small keyboard constitutes his house-band. Beyond delimiting (or, rather, unlimiting) its audience, the Youtube platform also imposes a constraint that is extrinsic—even inherently at odds with—the corporeal, performance art-invested history of video art. In marked contradistinction to the contemporary art gallery, the use parameters of Youtube forbid nudity. Conspicuously devoid of any inherently provocative or disturbing images, the considerable visceral impact of these videos is achieved entirely formally. The shock it provokes—the work it does—happens in the conjunctions (alienating, humorous, unsettling) it constructs between sound and image.

Notwithstanding this stricture, the (appropriately clothed) body of the artist (or part thereof) is the sole near-constant across the videos. His voice, often heavily distorted, is further entfremdet made strange by its ventriloquization via answering machines, voicemail functions and vocoders. When a voice is relayed reasonably directly—as when a closely miked but otherwise un-manipulated voice sings ‘If I could make up a war, to make you move a bit faster, Then I would make up a war and you would fight it perpetually’ to a small plastic figure— it arrives (even out of these basic TV speakers) as rawly intimate. Visually as well as aurally, the videos are


conspicuously highly processed. This homemade aesthetic is specifically not a naturalistic one. Images overlay others, fragments of the underlay break through, are erased and recur; a glitch page surfaces beneath an image of an outdoor scene. Starter-package editing effects adulterate most of the footage. In these videos, as in McCann’s extensive sculptural practice, what is superficially whole is repeatedly revealed to be thick with and leaking alternative images, and replete with traces of its manufacture. Nothing is ever complete or closed off. Through the deployment of an arsenal of blunt processing tools, the seamless fictions of pictorial illusionism and diaristic truth are systematically undone.

In her aforementioned essay on video art, Krauss identifies in it ‘a narcissism so endemic to works of video that I find myself wanting to generalize it as the condition of the entire genre’. McCann’s videos are only too painfully aware of this, the historical hamartia of the medium. His artist’s eyes and hands repeatedly loom into view from behind other images, shimmering incongruously in the background or interjecting, with apparently careless casualness, into filmed material. They irrupt openly into their products. If, as Krauss argues, ‘video’s real medium is a psychological situation, the very terms of which are to withdraw attention from an external object—an Other—and invest it in the Self’, then McCann’s attention is dedicated to a knowing conceptualization of the mediated Self as Other within the 21st-century exterior of the digital-domestic. In place of the narcissism which Krauss attributes to performance videos, in particular, the 99 Music Videos represent the artist as a hapless, fumbling failure—a figure deliberately inexpert in his various performed functions. This preoccupation with the bathetic banalization of the artist—his subjectivity, his body and his occupation—is endemic in McCann’s performance and production.

THE FRAME

A large gold frame hangs from the ceiling. It is empty but encloses what is projected on the wall behind it. It stands both as an independent sculpture (a frame to look at) and a device (a frame to look through) via which the projection’s cyclical metamorphoses are viewed. The armature from which it is suspended contrasts dramatically with the object itself. Bald links of brushed steel clipped around the ceiling beams hold the frame at eye level, provoking a clash between the utilitarian pragmatism of these chains and the ornate but functionally void, vacant frame. Traditional display conventions, as embodied in the frame, and the alternate, though equally constricted aesthetic of the contemporary white cube—with its poured cement, brushed steel and blank walls—here collude in the hanging of a void. In addition to allowing the frame to serve the projection, its placement in mid air also invites us to view it in the round. The disparity between the aspect that presents itself to the public attention and its reverse is startling. Evoking classical allegories of deception—in which beautiful surfaces give way to obscured ugliness and decay—the unsprayed back of the frame reveals the impoverished means and materials of its manufacture. A vision of opulence gives way to rough wood, chicken wire, a fabric that is evocative of bandages, and effusions of spray insulation all of which (on one side at least) has been coated in bubbled and cratered layers of gold spray paint.

If McCann’s practice is driven by any monomaniacal tendency, perhaps it is most apparent in his repeated selection of building materials, found objects and detritus as materials for the construction of distinctly unsettling objects—such as the Seraphim (2010), Monomania objects (2010) and O (2011). Other works deal directly with the deviant mechanics of obsessive cognition. In These cunts are controlling my mind (2012), obese, defaced and faceless bodies are painted over, scribbled upon or dripped over with a sticky whiteness and interspersed with images of cemeteries, phone-box advertisements and the obsessively repeated drawings and phrases of McCann’s Bastard Diagrams (2009). Gleaming porn-pink bodies

are blurred or obscured into anonymity or rendered into Bellmerish configurations of breasts and genitals. Another prototype for an eventual large-scale production, this book presents a sort of physical manifestation of the compulsive, paranoid conflation and colocation of disparate concepts which drives the editing of the videos. Aggressive framing strategies make heavily worked-over pages into cage-like grids. Mischievous aesthetic analogues are pulled together, coherencies are forged between unrelated things. As in the videos, the base found materials that compose the work are laid identifiably close to the surface. Throughout his entire practice, impoverished, industrial and ugly materials—things designed with strictly utilitarian concerns in mind—are conscripted into conspiring in the construction of objects that are, in spite of themselves, freakishly appealing.

Returning to the golden frame, its colour, tarnished in patches with a black patina, connotes the ancient and precious. However, upon closer scrutiny, extravagant decoration betrays itself as a massing of organic forms: a tumorous excrecence. Knotted ropes and swags loop from horizontals and twist around verticals. Beaded skeins stretch between peaks and over crevices. Globular drips fall in suspended animation from every surface. Thus colonized, the frame exceeds its own borders—its outermost edges encroaching into the gallery space just as its interior edges invade the potential picture space. Introducing this empty frame into the installation space simultaneously invokes the picture-frame’s sanctification of illusionistic space and launches an affront to its primacy in art. If the frame is the traditional transmitter of the claim ‘This is art’—an object whose very embrace conveys Art status—then the empty frame is an allegory for the baticheic proposition that the transcendental signifier ‘Art’ is, in fact, an empty one. And yet, all around it, art (albeit of a sort that seeks to do down, undermine, to problematize its own value) is going on.

THE PROJECTION

A black dot appears at the centre of a soft ball of light, its circumference delineated by an infrathin line of light. Smoothly, this dark circle expands until it has blotted out the light—leaving only that tiniest sliver of an outline. For a moment it appears to pause. We wait. There is a momentary illusion of stasis. Then, at the centre of the black circle, a tiny dot of light appears. Developing at the same even pace, this light expands until only the slightest trace of an outline remains. Again, there is a moment’s pause before a black dot appears at its centre and the whole sequence begins again. It is an eclipse, an aperture and its reverse; the dramatization of a mechanical, Sisyphean tournament between dark and light. Throughout the lifespan of Monomaniac’s installation, this doubled duel replays ad infinitum on the wall-cum-screen. Its rehearsals of the same action—now rendered positively, now negatively—are soundtracked by the vaguely subaquatic ululation of a slowed-down siren-whine. Emanating from two speakers behind the gold frame, this sound piece is an aural analogue for the oneiric panic at once urgent and bizarrely decelerated; for catastrophes experienced at an excruciating half-speed. Indeed, like most dreams, this projection produces a lingering temporal disorientation.

Projected in an infinite loop onto the bare wall of a gallery space naturally lit by overhead skylight windows, the installation necessarily existed at all times in an interrelation with the diurnal passage of light across the room. However hermetic its own choreography might have been, the programmed sequence was always subject to the vagaries of light and dark as they acted upon the gallery space. Prolonged exposure to the projection provokes an unsettling claustrophobia. The audio track makes of the potentially meditative cycles of black on white on black a cosmic agony of inevitability.

For Margaret Morse, the circumscribed temporality of installation art, with its necessary implication of eventual de-installation, is implicitly bound up with ephemerality (Margaret Morse, ‘Video Installation Art: The Body, the Image, and the Space-in-Between’, 1990). Here, the frame that marks the absorption of a piece of art into the institution—temple to enduring value—frames a paradoxically ouroboric projection of endlessness that itself exists only in the temporal circumscription of its installation-duration. Similarly, the videos being televised in the corner are part of a whole that is, as yet, inscribed only in the future anterior and, on Youtube, in the continuous present.
IN-BETWEEN

Entering Monomania, we are immediately suspended between components which exist in a triadic interrelation. In order to attend to the video piece installed on the floor, we must turn our backs on both frame and projection, and vice versa. Our contemplation of any single component is always divided: distracted, enriched or complicated by its co-habitants. In devious illustration of the viewing regimes imposed by media screens in installation art, this configuration of exhibition-elements demands that we turn our backs on Art to watch telly. The art audience is made complicit in Monomania’s challenge to art’s primacy over mass culture. Forced to choose between visual spectacles, the opposite injunction pertains at the aural level. One set of speakers broadcasts the projection’s drone, while across the room the videos cut rapidly between violently variegate song units at intervals of 30-90 seconds. Between them, the frame alone hangs mute; its aperture the site of a clamorous performance of sonic double-penetration. The visitor’s desire to ‘see the show’ entire is delayed or denied by their entrapment within an aural crossfire.

McCann’s Art Man video-as-artist’s-statement is comprised of still, largely found images, which are narrated by a vocoded voiceover and soundtracked by vague keyboard noodling and the barking of a dog. Fierce and funny, its subversive charge inheres in the juxtapositions it creates between machinic statements and ascerbic images. In a riposte to the posturing rhetoric of the artist’s statement form, McCann mutely mocks the claims made by his ‘art man’ contemporaries: claims to involving communities, challenging preconceptions and pushing the boundaries of aesthetics and politics. He ridicules the automatic, almost unconscious citation of references to Greek mythology and political activism as a means to shorthand relevance. The artist’s status—the value of the proposition ‘I am an art man’ is broken down in a sequence which collages Margaret Thatcher, Britney Spears, an ad for Domino’s pizza, a sculpture by Donald Judd, the apparent live birth of an infant mannequin, and a display of dog faeces on that ground zero of banality, a kitchen floor. In the background of no.14, the artist’s voice is heard to ‘confess’: ‘Yeah I’d like...I just...Yeah, I set myself goals, deadlines, and y’know ... I’m not great at keeping them.’ To this faux-plaintive lament, comes the response: ‘That doesn’t mean you’re mental though—it just means you’re a fucking flaky artist, like.’

Sarah Hayden is IRC Government of Ireland Postdoctoral Fellow at the School of English in UCC, where she is currently editing her book, Curious Disciplines: Mina Loy and Avant-Garde Artisthood, for publication with University of New Mexico Press. James McCann: Monomania was on view 20 – 27 July 2013. McCann’s 99 Music Videos can be viewed online at http://www.youtube.com/user/jimmyfitzpants.