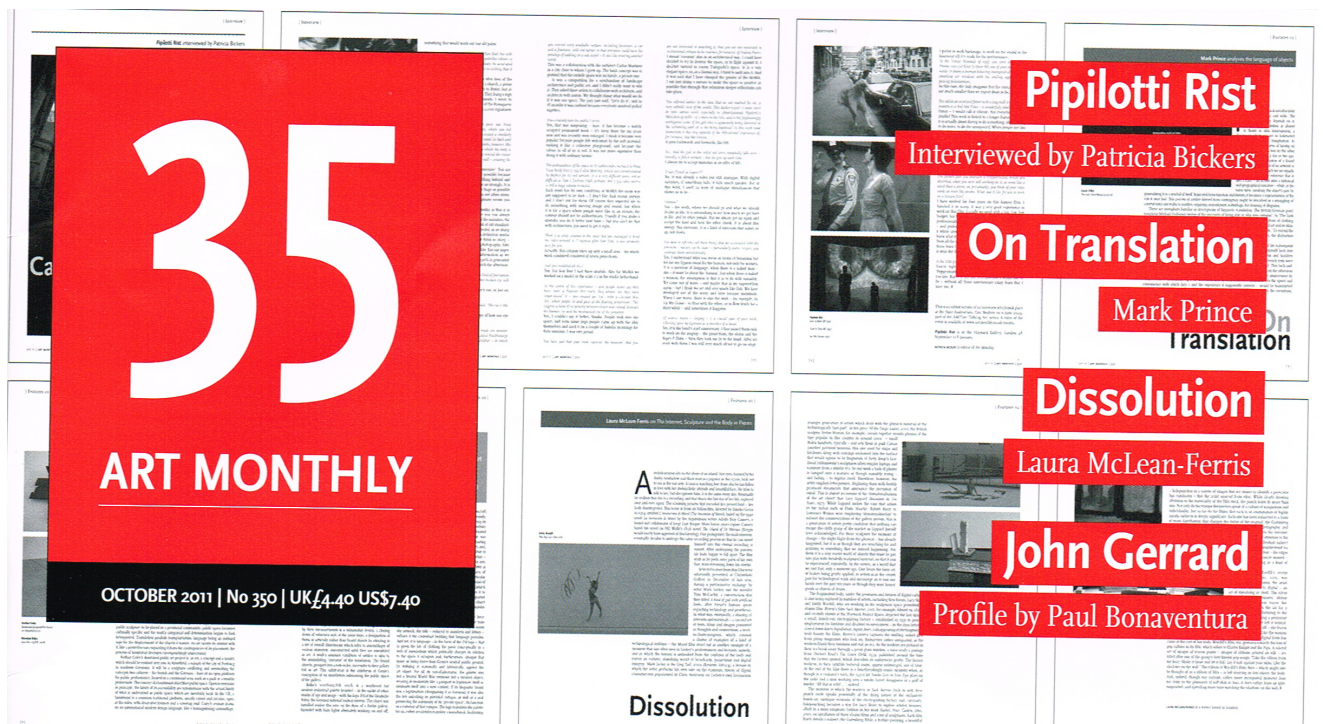


THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Paul Bonventura, 'John Gerrard', *Art Monthly*, No. 350, October 2011



THOMAS DANE GALLERY

John Gerrard



Live Fire Exercise (Djibouti) 2011
computer-generated video
commissioned as a stage
set by choreographer Wayne
McGregor for his ballet *Live
Fire Exercise* at the Royal Opera
House in 2011

opposite
*Oil Stick Work (Angelo
Martinez/Richfield, Kansas)*
2008
computer-generated video

Sentry (Kit Carson, Colorado)
2009
computer-generated video



At the bottom of Brazennose Street, a short, tree-lined thoroughfare in the middle of Manchester, a lone male figure goes through an array of callisthenic exercises. A pigeon lands in front of him, but he takes no notice of it. Nor does he pay any attention to the gaggle of pedestrians who congregate nearby, transfixed by his behaviour. Thoughtfully and methodically he follows his routine, kneeling, pivoting and bending in a sequence of fluid, dance-like repetitions.

Dressed in generic army fatigues, the figure we are looking at is virtual and features in a new moving-image work by John Gerrard called *Infinite Freedom Exercise (near Abadan, Iran)*, 2011. Gerrard's life-sized military avatar finds his roots in the world of gaming, and he is endlessly active beneath a scorching digital sun, which rises and sets on Iranian local time. Yet despite the computer-generated heat he fulfils his duties without a murmur of complaint. He has his orders. Not the orders of his immediate superiors, but those of the artist, programmers and producers who have created every detail on the screen.

The action plays out against an arid, lifeless landscape whose hyperreal monotony is relieved only by a line of skeletal telegraph poles and the hulking shell of an empty building. The figure himself stands on a gun-barrel-straight asphalt road whose appearance subtly echoes Brazennose Street, and every so often the simulated landscape merges seamlessly with its real-life counterpart, taking our eye on a journey across a Mancunian panorama that has been subjected to a sudden episode of desertification.

A photograph of an Iranian soldier watching burning oil refineries in the city of Abadan during the Iran-Iraq War provided Gerrard with the template for his landscape. Correspondingly, the routine that his avatar executes has been extrapolated from more than 150 images of mostly US servicemen reacting to outgoing mortar fire during training operations in the Persian Gulf. Working with the acclaimed choreographer Wayne McGregor, Gerrard has assigned 3D motion capture to performer Davide di Pretoro's interpretation of these images, generating a richly textured spectacle in which movement and narrative is one and the same thing.

This year has been something of an *annus mirabilis* for Gerrard, with solo shows at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art, Ivorypress in Madrid and Void in Derry preceding the premiere of *Infinite Freedom Exercise* at the Manchester International Festival. In May he collaborated with McGregor on a new piece for the Royal Ballet called *Live Fire Exercise*, 2011, which focuses on the physical and psychological responses of soldiers as they deal with the shocks of explosions, and

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

he has just been awarded the Legacy Fellowship, a major new production residency at the University of Oxford and Modern Art Oxford celebrating the award to London of the Olympic Games (Artnotes AM349). Linking all these projects and more besides is the artist's long-standing interest in how the expression of energy and power can be articulated using computer graphics and motion capture.

Gerrard was born in Dublin in 1974 and first experimented with 3D scanning and portraiture while studying at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art in Oxford. He went on to take a postgraduate degree in fine art at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where his focus shifted to technology and the body, and a further degree in computer science at Trinity College in Dublin. It was while he was at Trinity College that he came to appreciate the necessity of working with dedicated teams of programmers and producers.

'I think the system of working I use is very similar to making films,' Gerrard says, 'in that a group of specialists is assembled under a director to make something. As with film one needs to make many decisions in advance, which can be difficult when one is feeling one's way conceptually with a piece, but the benefits are quite simple: making these works is beyond the capabilities of any one person. The collaborative computer science/cinema model is the only possible way forward.'

In 2002 Gerrard was selected for a Pépinières Residency at Ars Electronica in Linz. There he experimented with gaming engines and developed his first works in real-time 3D, notably *One Thousand Year Dawn (Marcel)*, 2005, an image of a hooded figure on a beach staring out to sea at a sun that is perpetually striving to climb above the horizon. Like the earlier *Slow Fall*, 2003, in which the death throes of a video game soldier are extended over several days, *One Thousand Year Dawn (Marcel)* relies for its impact on an encounter with and experience of duration, and it is these two pieces that signal the emergence of the artist's current concerns.

Until this summer Gerrard was arguably best known for *Oil Stick Work (Angelo Martinez/Richfield, Kansas)*, 2008, which was shown at Canary Wharf Underground station in London over an entire year from spring 2010. *Oil Stick Work* develops in actual time, like all the artist's more recent pieces, and it will continue to do so for the next three decades. Commuters joined the scene two years into its slowly unfolding story on a virtual Midwest prairie. At daybreak (Pacific Standard Time), the tiny simulated figure of Angelo Martinez, a Mexican-American labourer, arrives at an isolated corn silo and carefully paints a black square on the outside wall with an oil stick crayon. Working a six-day week, Martinez will painstakingly cover the entire building, transforming it into an indelible silhouette on the digital landscape. His task will be finished in 2038 when he will finally put down his crayons and depart, but the silhouette and prairie will endure forever.

'In practical terms real-time allows me to work with actual time in a very rich and valuable way,' explains Gerrard. 'The medium moves beyond the realm of consumable in a sense, and involves much more inhuman timespans, which cannot be watched like a film. It connects and intersects with other types of time, other types of endurance and other types of simultaneity.'

Oil Stick Work was one of a triumvirate of pieces that made up 'Animated Scene', Gerrard's contribution to the 53rd Venice Biennale. In 2006 the artist discovered an archival image of the North American Dust Bowl in the Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin. This inspired an interconnected group of digital animations documenting the industrial-agricultural landscapes of the American Great Plains, including *Dust Storm (Dalhart, Texas)*, 2007, and *Grow Finish Unit (near Elkhart, Kansas)*, 2008. These were exhibited alongside *Oil Stick Work* in a converted space on Certosa Island, while a related portrait of a pumpjack called *Sentry (Kit Carson, Colorado)*, 2009, was shown in the 'In-Finitum' exhibition at the Palazzo Fortuny.



Gerrard acknowledges that 'Animated Scene' was the first body of work to employ the various skills he had acquired over the previous ten years in a sophisticated way, where the conceptual imperative was greater than the technical means. The same is true of *Infinite Freedom Exercise* and *Live Fire Exercise*. Debuting at the Royal Opera House, *Live Fire Exercise* is not a ballet about war, but it is shaped profoundly by violence. At the back of the stage, a screen shows Gerrard's simulation of military trucks and diggers being ravaged by shellfire. Luke Jennings of the *Observer* takes up the story: 'Over the 19 minutes of the piece we experience a virtual tour of the event, watching as a vast orange flame rolls silently skywards before resolving itself, infinitely gradually, into a pall of smoke over the carbonised desert floor. In front of this, six dancers perform a traumatised lament to Michael Tippett's *Fantasia Concertante on a Theme of Corelli*. The contrast between Gerrard's film event and Tippett's gentle pastorelle is brutal in its irony, but McGregor's neo-balletic vocabulary, with its anguished grapplings and cradlings, unites the two.'

With all these works we are clearly in the domain of the moving image yet the artist remains unsure as to whether they should be regarded as films or sculptures. 'It depends on how strongly one values tangible form,' Gerrard confesses. 'Using a very strict definition of sculpture, the worlds I create and the elements within them are very sculptural. And we must remember that the worlds retain their three-dimensional nature inside the computer; a single image is grabbed (up to 80 times per second) and allows us to witness conditions in the world, but there is a stage or landscape that exists within the machine. Interestingly this moment, this fraction of a second, is sent to the screen and immediately thrown away. The work exists as a memory, and the base condition for creating this memory is a piece of software. On balance I would have to place the works in a sculptural category of some sort, but the issue of their presence does need some critical scrutiny.' ■

John Gerrard's current exhibitions include 'Twenty' at IMMA, Dublin until 31 October and 'Beyond' at the Art Museum of Estonia, Tallinn 7 October to 8 January.

PAUL BONAVENTURA is senior research fellow in fine art studies at the University of Oxford.

11 DUKE STREET, ST JAMES'S, LONDON SW1Y 6BN

TEL +44 (0)20 7925 2505 FAX +44 (0)20 7925 2506 info@thomasdane.com