



Interview with David Byrne, Vacant Gallery 10.12.10

It's afternoon in Harajuku, Tokyo. The first floor below me is buzzing with last-minute preparations before tonight's big art opening. Chronicling thirty-three years of creativity in the life of an artistic force like David Byrne is a tall order for any art institution, let alone for a recent arrival such as Vacant Gallery. Run by a core group of five young enthusiasts and barely two years into operation, Vacant has already proved its serious intentions by hosting some of Tokyo's most interesting exhibitions and events. Still, this is by far their most ambitious and high profile undertaking. All this is churning in the back of my mind, mixing with a heightened sense of anticipation as I sit down with David Byrne in the main exhibition area upstairs to talk about everything from his longevity in art, how high heels have changed New York and what buns in the oven can mean for your creativity.

Mathias Hatleskog Tjønn: The last time you exhibited in Japan in 2002, your artwork was put in place of advertisement in subway cars and stations, while this summer your *Moral Dilemmas* series was shown at bus stops in Reykjavik for their annual arts festival. What are your thoughts on exhibiting your artwork in public spaces versus in a "real" gallery with pristine white walls?

David Byrne: I love showing it outdoors like that, almost anonymously. In those two cases my name was not attached to the work, so you didn't know what it was, and I like that because that way it might surprise you. Maybe you think it's an advertisement for something; maybe it's an ad campaign, but you don't know what the product is; or maybe it's a public message from the government, but you don't know what agency it's from. Personally I think that's great because in an art gallery you *know* it's art, so you already walk in with a preconceived idea of what to expect, adjusting how you look and listen to things. When you're walking on the street, however, you have a different way of receiving, and so I thought perhaps if I exhibit my art outside of its normal arena there's a chance it confuses people a little, changing the perception of what they're seeing. Another positive aspect is that this way a lot of people that would normally never go to an art gallery, visit a museum or buy a catalogue or magazine about art would be exposed to my work. And sometimes they liked it. So I thought, "Well, that's interesting."

MHT: On the topic of people's perception of your art, do you create with an audience reaction in mind, or do you create solely for yourself?

DB: Well, when it's public art like that I make sure that my name or the name of the festival sponsoring the exhibition is not visible. That for me is thinking about the audience in that it's better they don't know who the sender is. But the rest of the time, no, I have no idea. As opposed to when I'm performing, when I can look out and see exactly who the audience is.

MTH: It's more of an instant-feedback kind of situation?

DB: Yes. I can see if they're old or young, if they're male or female. I also notice which ones are getting excited and which ones are not. But with my visual art output I really don't know. Of course I can read a criticism afterwards, but that's different.

MTH: That's more something that comes after the fact?

DB: Exactly, it's not an instantaneous thing.

MHT: We'll be premiering your *Guitar Pedal Piece* here at Vacant, a giant pedal board consisting of ninety-six guitar pedals. It's obviously designed with audience participation in mind, since you literally want people to pedal motion into sound. How did the idea for this piece come about?

DB: There's an art space in New York called Kitchen and they were having what I guess is called a benefit, where they'll have a dinner and a party and that kind of thing to raise money for the organization. In this case they were celebrating an artist named Christian Marclay who creates art with sound and vinyl records. He does a lot of very funny and wonderful things. I was asked to contribute and I decided, well, I'm not going to perform, but I could do something like one of his pieces. My original idea was to place it in a hallway you had to walk through in order to get to the exhibit space itself, so that everybody has to walk on it. But before the exhibit even got underway a person from the building management said, "Oh no, this is a fire hazard." People could trip on it and women with high heels might fall on it and so on. Then we made space around the edges so that women in high heels could walk around it, but he still said, "No, that's not good enough. Get it out of here."

MHT: Goes to show how much New York has changed.

DB: Yes, they used to be able to do anything. It's also because America is a very litigious society where everybody loves to sue everyone else. If somebody spills coffee on themselves they will sue instead of assuming responsibility for it.

MHT: I personally thought of it as a kind of tongue in cheek comment on David Byrne the musician and rock star.

DB: [Laughs] And I don't use anywhere near as many pedals as that. I think I might use five or something when I'm performing.

MHT: Vacant will also be exhibiting three new pieces from your lenticular series called *Correspondence*, where you combine several photos into one image, so what the person sees changes depending on the angle from they're viewing it.

DB: Yes. In these pieces there are three different objects, all more or less circular in shape. Depending on where you stand, you see one or the other and sometimes a combination of the two. At first I had the idea of doing this because I thought, "Aha, this way you get three pictures for the price of one!"

MHT: Giving the audience value for their money?

DB: Yes, more value for money [laughs]. If you hang one of these at home you don't get bored with it because every time you look at it you see something different. That was the original idea. When I first tried to do these, I wanted to combine three completely different images, viewed from here you see one thing, if you stand over there you see another and so on. I'm still experimenting, but I discovered that the lenticular-thing doesn't really do that well because you always get a little overlap. And at first I was disappointed - can't we have the images be more separate? And then I realized, "No, this is good!" Instead of me demanding what it should do, I now have to work with it and figure out how to take advantage of the fact that you can never separate the images completely, and let them kind of morph into one another, that way making it a little more confusing and mixed together.

MHT: So an added element was that you had to find images that would work together somewhat, but still be different enough to make it interesting to look at?

DB: Yes. Separate enough that you could move around and see that they were different objects, but still make it hard to identify them. And although we list the different objects on the sign, I think a lot of the time people are drawn to them because they go, "Ooh, what is that one in the middle? Yeah, I can tell what that one is, but I don't know what this one is." So you have a little fun looking at them. It also means that the audience has to walk around the exhibition space and not just remain standing static in one place.

MHT: You seem to have a very keen interest in symbols and rituals, both sacred and secular. Do you have any specific rituals yourself that you go through when starting your creative process?

DB: There are certain things I do when I begin working on a project: I clean the house. Make space. Get everything organized and make sure all the materials I might need are very close at hand. Whether it's music or drawing or

something else, I try and make time and answer all my emails. Sometimes I'll also tell my office I'm not going to be around for a while.

MHT: You make sure to clean the slate before you start something new?

DB: Yes.

MHT: Is that something you've always done?

DB: No, I think it gradually developed without me being conscious of it. Only recently did I notice that I kind of always do this before I begin something new.

MHT: Where do you think it comes from?

DB: I remember an episode with my ex-wife: Just before she had a baby she got down on her hands and knees and was cleaning the oven. Of course we didn't know at the time, but it turned out that it was only one day before she gave birth. The expression of someone who's pregnant is you've got one in the oven, but this wasn't a joke. She was simply thinking, "I really have to clean the oven." To me that's too much of a coincidence. I think it's biological in the sense that you clean or clear a space for something that you know is coming.

MHT: That allows you both the physical and mental space to accomplish something new. Or in her case in order to...

DB: Give birth. But you know when someone is making something they're giving birth in a different way. To music or art or some other creation.

MHT: The human face seems to be one of the returning themes in your art, showing up in everything from your Talking Heads lyrics, as a political/artistic statement in the *Political Flesh* series and as a way of exploring where humanity begins and where it ends with your *Voice of Julio* installation. Could you tell us, what it is about the human face that makes you come back to it as a motif?

DB: Maybe it's me, but I felt for some years that I didn't have a natural understanding of how people's expressions work. I found it really fascinating how expressions were meant to convey an interior emotion, but you could still cheat. You could make an expression and feel no emotion. You could be an actor and just learn to make the expression the role dictated. Also sometimes depending on the culture, the same expression means different things. So I thought, "This is really strange, how does a face work? I'm not really sure I know how." It's a really fascinating thing because it communicates more than oral language is capable of. We get so much out of that kind of unspoken communication, reading what a person is saying to us and what their intention is. So it's a very powerful...what would you call it? Icon, visual, tool.

MHT: Is that what you've been trying to do? Illuminate different uses of the human face?

DB: Occasionally, but sometimes it was just a way for me to decipher it.

MHT: So it started out as a conscious effort on your part to, in a very logical fashion, try to understand how the face works?

DB: In some ways, yes. Sometimes you make things to try and understand how they work, or you take pictures of it to try to understand what you're looking at. I was really drawn to that concept.

MHT: Throughout your long career as an artist you've worked in multiple media. Obviously the visual arts, your previous time with Talking Heads, as well as your current musical solo career. I was wondering how you view yourself and your creative output as you move from one method of expression to the other. Do you differentiate between how you express yourself one way? Do you sort of compartmentalize it - use one media to express one thing and another to express something else? Or are they more facets of the same creative statement?

DB: I think there are overlaps. But you can communicate some things in certain media that you can't in other. I find it really difficult to make an obvious political comment in a song, but I can do it if I say, make a poster. That kind of thing is easier to do with an image than with a song.

MHT: Musically it becomes too much like sloganeering?

DB: Yes. With a song it becomes too one-dimensional. It's too direct. With an image you can make it a little more ambiguous.

MHT: Perhaps because in a song, as soon as the words are sung they're in the past. But on a poster there's time to digest the message.

DB: Especially if something is purely visual, then you don't have words to tell you, "This is what it's about." Even if in a song I think that the words are only half of the message, the music being the other half. But often text tends to dominate so it's nice to get away from it when you can. These pieces [gesturing towards another series of lenticulars called *Corporate Signs*] do have text in them so people tend to assume the text is what it is all about. Which in a way it is, but...

MHT: Not exclusively?

DB: Not only, yes.

MHT: I read in a previous interview that when writing songs, you consciously try to move out of your comfort zone in order for the process itself not to become stale? Is that also part of the reason you've worked in all these different fields?

DB: Getting out of my comfort zone forces me to be more creative and actually deal with what's there, not relying too much on familiar techniques and patterns that I might fall into. Often times I go, "Ok, I always do the same thing with this." However when I start to do something different I have to think about it in new ways. My usual approach might not work.

MHT: I assume a part of that is overcoming a certain level of fear, or if not fear then maybe apprehension that it might not succeed?

DB: Which is also exciting.

MHT: Throughout your career you've managed to stay very current. Is that something you consciously strive for, or are you more just going about your business and letting the world catch up?

DB: Certainly in music I can say that new things I hear people doing constantly inspire me. The younger generation is creating music that I find very inspiring, making me want to do something new as well. Not necessarily exactly like what they're doing, but it's almost like a challenge: You can't just do what you've always done, you have to come up with something new now.

MHT: In order to not be one-upped?

DB: Well, I don't know about that. It's more of a personal challenge. But it doesn't necessarily always work, some things are more successful than others and people like them more, or they simply work better as art. But it's not boring that way, because you just keep going. I've learned that failure is ok. It's ok to have something not pan out as planned. I just keep going and make something else and try not to get depressed about it [laughs].

MHT: So is it true then that you try to take the longer view? Each individual project and how it's judged is less important than the overall arch of what you're trying to do?

DB: At least for me personally it is. An audience might place more importance on a certain song or artwork that I've done, and that's not surprising. But for me it's vital to make a life of creating. Which is pretty exciting.

MHT: Because I'm guessing you're not in it for the snap-shots of your career, you're in it for the long haul.

DB: I hope so. I've been doing it long enough.