
HOLDING SPACE

Literally thousands of people cooperated... What brought them together and induced them to cooperate... There was no commissar sending out offices, sending out orders from some central office... It was the magic of the... system; ... That is why the operation of the free market is so essential. Not only, to promote productive efficiency, but even more... to foster harmony and peace among the peoples of the world. ¹ (Milton Friedman on the wonder of the free market pencil — re-worked excerpt #1)

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There is, first of all, a white, white room. Or, let's say, a white *space*, presuming this will allow us more semantic latitude, more room. For no ordinary dimensions are evident here, no visible structures within which the coming actions can be contained. There are no limiting lengths and breadths. No apparent entrances or exits. There is freedom to move, but nowhere to go.

It is such an odd, unnerving species of empty space. On the one hand, it is radically *other*: alien in its gleaming blankness; a realm devoid of all rude materiality and substance; inhumanly clean. Yet, considered differently, this unquantifiable space may also be a known cultural quantity, an exquisitely neutral environment familiar from a variety of ostensibly dissimilar situations in film, television and our other attention-seeking media. What is presented here — a high-impact *nothing* that will be the stage-set for a series of speeches and performances conceived of and directed by artist-duo Kennedy Browne — could be reasonably recognised as a zone of 'infinite white': a special-effect space constructed as an imagined mystical or technological limbo, one that has been a recurring 'anti-landscape' in science fiction (often both freeing and confining in its connotations).² Equally, however, this vision of an unbounded and ungrounded white-on-white reality corresponds with prominent visual codes from the commercial world. For this form of space, or non-space is, of course, a regular design feature of today's TV ads, serving as a non-specific and 'pure' domain within which corporate fantasies and consumer dreams can be conjured unproblematically into vividly insubstantial existence — products and ideas and identities appearing in the context of a heavenly 'nowhere', a dazzling empire of emptiness, that is also our inescapable contemporary 'everywhere'.

¹ Original text of Milton Friedman's speech, which appears on page 33.

² In *The Matrix* (dir. Andy & Larry Wachowski, Warner Bros., 1999) superhero neophyte Neo is transported to such a virtual sphere, where he is given a life-changing tutorial on 'the desert of the real'. Also, George Lucas's dystopian debut *THX 1138* (1971) famously features an infinite white prison, the traumatised inmates striving to find a way out of an unending openness.

One such idealised media *milieu* has, then, inspired the pristine whitescape fabricated by Kennedy Browne as the luminous *mise-en-scene* for their new work *167 (Screen Tests)*. Following a number of recent projects in which these Irish-based artists have sought to ‘create incongruous territories’³ between real and imagined places (liberally re-interpreting, re-staging and re-locating assorted cultural fictions in a manner that might well allow us to ask, as we struggle to locate ourselves in today’s de-territorialized neo-liberal world, if we can now be meaningfully ‘based’ anywhere at all) this 2009 proposal from the Kennedy Browne strategic partnership employs the rhetoric and iconography of contemporary management and marketing philosophy, taking as a crucial point of departure a series of slick-but-simple online recruitment ads for soft-capitalist corporate superpower Google. These clips (freely accessible on Youtube) show easy-going employees standing in a sanctifying field of infinite white, talking straight to camera about the liberating openness of the Google regime. At Google, one of the beaming, solitary characters tells us, ‘everyone has a voice’. Another fulfilled team-member describes an ‘atmosphere of continuous brain-storming’. Google offices, we are told, are free thinking, ‘unfixed’ environments where all involved can relish ‘the feeling that every single thing can be improved’. The people in these pithy promos are likeable, friendly, optimistic. They speak English in an appealingly plural range of accents; they wear a range of regular, jeansy gear. Each of them could be anyone, anywhere. Yet Google has recently sought to establish a *particular* anywhere in which to ‘base’ an essential, strengthening strand of its operations. And, of all places, Dublin, Ireland, has been chosen, the company finding all it needed and more in this fast-changing city — a city that, over the last decade or so, has been hospitably open to capital’s global flows and speculative philosophies; a city that has undergone both jolting and joyous transformations in the make-up of its labour force as a result of intensive immigration; a city, therefore, that has become internally international, in which at least 167 of the world’s languages now add to the agitated soundtrack of everyday urban life. But — let us not forget — Dublin is also, all of a

sudden, a city braced for rapid and even devastating downturn: free-wheeling towards catastrophe as a result of late-capitalism’s seductive financial freedoms. Today, whatever direction one looks in, there is evidence of an extending emptiness. Horizons have been expanded, but now the visible terrain is disconcertingly featureless. Moreover, the outer limits of this crisis-landscape cannot yet be discerned; an already substantially rootless population may well have nowhere to run.

Against this expanded and ambiguous background (alert to the novelty of finding a science-fictional corporate culture suddenly ‘at home’ in Ireland, and conscious of the uncertain-but-confining circumstances of the unpromising present) Kennedy Browne have come forward with a curious invitation. In the spring of 2009, citizens of this newly open society who live their daily lives speaking more than one language — the strong swimmers in what has been called the ‘multilingual pool’ of contemporary Dublin⁴ — were offered an opportunity to speak up and act out, to demonstrate the distinctiveness of their voice and the conviction in their actions — and to do so ‘freely’, in a sense, while at the same time working within a specific, constrained context. A call for auditions was issued — Kennedy Browne seeking applications for participation in an oblique, double-coded promotional video project that would, during each of its distinctive stages, superficially encourage proselytizing for the values of global capitalism while also, potentially, functioning more antagonistically, creating an anxious space for critical reflection on individuality, labour and the contemporary conditions of liberty. Members of Dublin’s general, pluri-lingual public were welcomed to Liberty Hall — the city’s tallest building, troubled home of the labour movement and treasured icon of architectural modernism in Ireland — where inside Kennedy Browne had constructed a film set designed to transfer the prospective actors to the disconcerting, dramatically minimal world of ‘infinite white’. Here in the heart of a televisual nowhere the candidates would improvise a presentation in response to two undemanding requests: firstly, each performance should start with a single line borrowed by the artists from an infamous speech —

a sermon on the power of the free market widely celebrated in the corporate world — and secondly, a mundane task relating to this text would be undertaken, every auditioning actor being asked to pare a humble pencil, nothing more. In these ‘formless’ pure-white surroundings, specific individual mannerisms, verbal and physical, would be brought into sharp relief, while the sharpening of the pencil itself, this rarely contemplated chore, could be made to seem suddenly strange and even subversive — variations in the theatrical intensity of the performed action allowing, in the end, for a range of implied meanings and psychologically complex readings, while the residue from the turned, worked implement, the stray shavings of wood and crumbling graphite, necessarily fell as a material, littering affront to the immaterial perfection of the serenely vacant artificial setting.

Highlights from these events would eventually become the engrossing *167 (Screen Tests)* compilation — but one successful applicant would become further highlighted. Much later, out on the vertiginous roof terrace of the modest Liberty Hall skyscraper, the actor finally chosen by Kennedy Browne then featured in a further low-key, one-chance performance — a more focused and challenging act that formed the steady symbolic centre-piece of the subsequent, differently accented, short film *167*. Alone beneath the open sky, with the open, vulnerable city beyond, this selected representative of the new Dublin would once more set about paring a pencil. In this case, however, the action would take place in circumstances of stern, resistant silence. This time, the task would be undertaken free from contextualising narration, ‘free’ from the free market voice that had served as the auditioning actors’ initial point of contentious inspiration. And, crucially, at one point Kennedy Browne’s film would show this isolated figure labouring diligently on a generic model of pencil, vital to this project’s matrix of cultural allusion, paring it back repeatedly in a severe, protracted sharpening effort, reducing this charged object to an undistinguished stump, to a more humble, seemingly impractical point.

Look at this lead pencil. There’s not a single person in the world who could make this pencil... The wood from which it’s made, for all I know, comes from a tree that was cut down in the state of Washington. To cut down that tree, it took a saw, to make the saw, it took steel, to make the steel, it took iron ore. This black centre... graphite... I’m not sure where it comes from, but I think it comes from some mines in South America... the eraser... probably comes from Malaya, where the rubber tree isn’t even native. It was imported from South America by some business men, with the help of the British government.

(Milton Friedman on the wonder of the free market pencil — re-worked excerpt #2)

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An appropriated text, a mundane task and a particular object: as in all of Kennedy Browne’s mischievous and multi-layered works, these core components come laden with complex associations, gathering new meanings, and perhaps casting away once-primary connotations, as they are re-contextualised or re-enacted under new and unexpected conditions. (It’s of course obvious but not unreasonable to recall here Jorge Luis Borges’s tribute to the fictional author Pierre Menard whose ‘verbally identical’ later version of Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* is said to be ‘almost infinitely richer’ than its antecedent — ‘more ambiguous, his detractors will say, but ambiguity is richness.’⁵). For *167* and *167 (Screen Tests)*, the source document — the script presented to each auditioning actor — is a speech on the power of the free market first delivered by ultra-libertarian economist Milton Friedman for a 1980 US television series entitled *Free to Choose*.⁶ With breezy optimism, Friedman describes the easy communion of workers, nations and consumers — the convivial confluence of diverse peoples and unhindered forces — that is fluidly created and evenly fostered in the production, distribution and purchasing of everyday commodities: his ostensibly non-complex example being the basic lead pencil. Though from one perspective a technologically primitive object, this nonetheless potent cultural tool is held up by Friedman as a remarkable and exemplary product of capitalism’s supposedly unforced co-operative processes: any single pencil arriving anywhere in the market-place as the accessible result of numerous ‘invisible hands’. Speculating freely (as is the wont of such *laissez-faire* theorists), Friedman muses on the origins of the slender object he holds in front of him (and this is, of course, the very one cited in *167*), composing a possible life-story for its composite parts, tracing likely origins for the pencil’s material make-up across diverse regions of the globe and across great stretches of historical time.

⁵ Jorge Luis Borges, ‘Pierre Menard: Author of the *Quixote*’, in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings* (London: Penguin Classics, 1970), 69.

⁶ Available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=R5Gppi-03a8/

It should be noted, perhaps, that this loose biography of the pencil has itself an identifiable origin, since Friedman's comments draw eagerly on Leonard E. Read's 1958 article *I, Pencil: My Family Tree*,⁷ a more fulsome elaboration of this faith-in-the-free-market theme. There is also, however, a curious correspondence between Friedman's self-satisfied little lecture and a typically frolicsome section of Vladimir Nabokov's 1972 novel *Transparent Things* during which a very plain pencil ('not a hexagonal beauty of Virginia juniper or African cedar with the maker's name imprinted in silver foil'⁸) becomes the object of a prolonged 'act of attention'. Nabokov's narrator gives us the story of the pencil in glorious costume-drama detail, showing us the ground graphite beginning as 'pressed caviar' and becoming 'one continuous appetizing rodlet', granting us a glimpse of this central pencil 'lead' as it is cut into lengths, then baked and boiled in fat ('here a shot of the fleecy fat-giver being butchered, a shot of the butcher, a shot of the shepherd, a shot of the shepherd's father, a Mexican'⁹) before being finally fitted into snug, encasing wood:

Here's the tree! This particular pine! It is cut down. Only the trunk is used, stripped of its bark. We hear the whine of a newly invented power saw, we see logs being dried and planed. Here's the board that will yield the integument of the pencil in the shallow drawer... Thus the entire little drama, from crystallized carbon and felled pine to this humble implement, to this transparent thing, unfolds in a twinkle.¹⁰

Nabokov's text might well thrill a *litterateur* in the same extreme measure that the Friedman screed would likely offend any leftist, but there is perhaps another minor comparative point arising out of this intertextual coincidence that might say something about the rhetorical *style* of late capitalism and also provide points of connection to general conceptual objectives of the Kennedy-Browne enterprise. For isn't it striking to see highlighted alongside the novelist Nabokov's

⁷ Leonard E. Read was the founder and president of the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE), a neo-conservative think tank founded in 1946. His influential pamphlet *I, Pencil* was first published in a 1958 issue of *The Freeman*. For a complete reproduction of this text, including an introduction by Milton Friedman, see www.econlib.org/library/Essays/rdPncI0.html/

⁸ Vladimir Nabokov, *Transparent Things*, (London: Vintage, 1989), 6.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 7–8.

literary attention to the intricate made-up-ness of his textual universe, the shrugging here's-how-it-is-ness of Friedman's baleful 'realism'? There is a giddy, near-erotic delight to Nabokov's lavish and loopy pencil-portrait, a startling precision that endlessly turns our attention to new, associatively emergent worlds — to other understandings of reality, indeed to other realities. Friedman's text on the other hand — though *of course* not designed as a subtle and interpretatively supple work of literature — is contentedly *off-hand*. His narrative is happily littered with glib acknowledgements of imprecision or incorrectness — 'for all I know; I'm not sure; probably; I haven't the slightest idea' — as if what he is referring to is so natural as to require only the most cursory, coasting summary. The gaps and inaccuracies in his account do not so much demonstrate doubt as announce the irrelevance of all doubt and the unimportance of accuracy. They articulate only an unworried '*whatever*' — Friedman's underlying assumption being that he is right even when he is wrong.

**Look at... the world... the state of Washington...
This black centre, we call it... America. This... isn't even
native. It was imported... by some business men, with the
help of the British government. ... Literally thousands of
people cooperated... People who who practice religions...
who... hate one another... When you... buy this... you are
... induced... from some central office... so that you could
have... the free market... to promote... efficiency...
among the peoples of the world.** (Milton Friedman on the wonder of the
free market pencil — re-worked excerpt #3)

Kennedy Browne have identified a key guiding impetus of their work as the wish to ‘generate a different sense of the present.’¹¹ They take largely forgotten bits and pieces of cultural iconography or ephemera and, with methodical, eccentric commitment, subject such found things to new stresses, reconstructing them according to new criteria: imagining alternative circumstances of display, performance and reception, creating fresh worlds for and from their curious chosen material. On certain occasions this has involved the direct *detournement* of images and soundtracks from diverse spheres of popular entertainment — and crucially, they have described the ‘popular’ as important not only as source material, but ‘as a field of agency within which to act.’¹² (Their emphasis on acting and casting, might also, incidentally, place them within that vital recent tradition of meta-cinematic art practitioners such as Pierre Huyghe and Omer Fast). On other occasions, lived environments and distinctive architectural forms become employed as functional readymades, the artists reconfiguring specific places through unusual forms of occupation. For example, in *Penguin Pen* and *Airport Oasis* (both 2005), the artists take up temporary residence in peculiar public spaces, becoming the awkward objects of their own surveillance in contexts that combine a sleek modernist design aesthetic with an unavoidable sense of constricted liberty.

Such physical locations perhaps, and each of Kennedy Browne’s resonantly ‘post-produced’ image-realms, undoubtedly invoke or engage with similar ‘species of space’ — versions, in various ways, of that infinite white universe that serves such a substantially insubstantial central purpose in *167 (Screen Tests)*. In describing the motivations of their practice, these artists have occasionally made reference to an idea of a ‘holding space’, an intellectually or ontologically uncertain locale somewhere between how things are and how they are envisaged to be. And though this notion of a conceptual in-betweenness might call to mind something of the liminal lightness of what Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello have referred to as ‘the new spirit of capitalism’¹³ (our endlessly open, ungrounded, creatively ‘flexible’, and wholly precarious

¹¹ see ‘*Dallas, Belfast*: Sarah Browne and Gareth Kennedy interviewed by Colin Graham’, *The Irish Review* 39 (Winter 2008): 75.

¹² *Ibid.*, 75.

¹³ Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, (London: Verso, 2006).

contemporary reality) the holding spaces found and forced open by Kennedy Browne might well sit subversively in relation to the indeterminate ‘structures’ of contemporary capitalism. The ‘serious play’ of these films, collaborative projects and other performative interventions, productively marks out the very kind of ‘incongruous territories’ that today’s critical art practices might yet create and occupy.

**Look... There’s not a... world... Not at all... for all I know
... that was cut down... cut down... to make... this black
centre... I’m not sure... but I think it comes from ...
probably comes from... where... I haven’t the slightest
idea where it came from... the black... don’t speak... go ...
a few minutes... a few seconds... orders from... the...
system... cooperate... make this... the world.** (Milton Friedman on
the wonder of the free market pencil — re-worked excerpt #4)