

WHAT HAPPENS BUT ONCE by Ciara Healy
 Reflections on Gavin Murphy's *Sketches for a Light/Heavy Monument*

'What then shall we choose?' asks Kundera at the beginning of his novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. 'Weight or lightness?'

The delicate space between absence and presence, between what is remembered and what has been forgotten has been explored by many philosophers and thinkers over the centuries. According to Parmenides the qualities of the world were divided into positive and negative opposites: the existent and a non-existent. Desire unites these opposites and creates the world of Becoming. When desire is satisfied, the existent and the nonexistent oppose each other and the things pass away.²

Nietzsche's myth of eternal return, with which Kundera opens his book, relates to 'the profound moral perversity of a world that rests essentially on the non-existence of return.' Nietzsche considered reality as an endless Becoming, he saw the other world as an illusion, and instead of worshipping gods man should concentrate on his own elevation. In claiming that God is dead, Nietzsche presented us with the possibility of filling our daily lives with a 'splendid lightness'.³ As there is no afterlife, we will only have one chance of Being on this earth. Therefore every moment we spend on it is light, because it will never happen again. However, this lightness can, at times be unbearable because it means that the past disappears too quickly, events become intangible and increasingly difficult to grasp and hold on to. Di Stefano echoes this idea when he claims Longing is a perpetual process of attempting to appear. That which disappears is, for a displaced person, in a state of potential reappearance by virtue of the desire to have it reinstated.⁴

Gavin Murphy's *Sketches for a Light/Heavy Monument* draws inspiration from the paradoxical complexity and simplicity of Being. The attributes of lightness and heaviness are explored in his exhibition, which took place at the Four gallery and various other locations around Dublin city. Using folded bundles of newspapers heaped neatly on top of each other to create steps; Murphy presented a recreation of a monument built in the nineteenth century on Killiney Hill. On each corner and on each step of the newspaper bundles, neon strip lights illuminate the ascension towards the ceiling of the gallery. Suspended above the top step of the newspaper monument hangs a sign that says MMVI, the Roman numeral for this year, 2006. The sign echoed the style of presentation used to display the date on the original monument in Killiney, which was built circa 1815.

This work looks at the mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms that have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically throughout the passage of time. The lives in Kundera's novel are shaped by irrevocable choices and fortuitous events. Coping with both the consequences of their own actions, desires and the intruding demands of society and the state, Kundera's characters struggle to construct lives of individual value and lasting meaning. Their world is a place in which everything occurs only once and then disappears into the past, where existence seems to lose its substance and weight. This idea is very clear in Murphy's work and is most especially visible on the front pages of the bundles of newspapers. These pages talk of murder, lottery wins, car crashes and lovers' trysts. They are a provocative look at the ways in which events and history momentarily impinge on individual lives. The newspaper monument also

WHAT HAPPENS BUT ONCE

DAS SCHWERSTE GEWICHT (THE HEAVIEST WEIGHT)

WHAT, IF SOME DAY OR NIGHT A DEMON WERE TO STEAL AFTER YOU INTO YOUR LONELIEST LONELINESS AND SAY TO YOU: 'THIS LIFE AS YOU NOW LIVE IT AND HAVE LIVED IT, YOU WILL HAVE TO LIVE ONCE MORE AND INNUMERABLE TIMES MORE'. WOULD YOU NOT THROW YOURSELF DOWN AND GNASH YOUR TEETH AND CURSE THE DEMON WHO SPOKE THUS? OR HAVE YOU ONCE EXPERIENCED A TREMENDOUS MOMENT WHEN YOU WOULD HAVE ANSWERED HIM: 'YOU ARE A GOD AND NEVER HAVE I HEARD ANYTHING MORE DIVINE'.

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, *The Gay Science*, 1882



DIE ZEIT IST DAS FEUER IN DEM WIR BRENNEN (TIME IS THE FIRE IN WHICH WE BURN)

WHAT WILL BECOME OF YOU AND ME
(THIS IS THE SCHOOL IN WHICH WE LEARN...)
BESIDES THE PHOTO AND THE MEMORY?
(...THAT TIME IS THE FIRE IN WHICH WE BURN.)

DELMORE SCHWARTZ
Calmly We Walk Through This April's Day, 1937



ONCE AGAIN, YOU WILL BE BORN FROM A BELLY;

ONCE AGAIN YOUR SKELETON WILL GROW; ONCE AGAIN THE IDENTICAL PAGE WILL REACH YOUR SAME HANDS; ONCE AGAIN YOU WILL FOLLOW THE SAME COURSE OF ALL THE HOURS OF YOUR LIFE UNTIL THAT OF YOUR INCREDIBLE DEATH [...] THE FINITUDE OF THE UNIVERSE AND THE INFINITY OF TIME MAKE THIS SEEMING PARADOX POSSIBLE.

DANIEL BIRNBAUM, *Chronology*, 2005

highlights the notion that monuments created to represent specific events and experiences in history can develop alternative meanings and interpretations over time. When the original purpose for their creation is forgotten, the history they once stood for becomes displaced. Like coins which have lost their image and matter now only as metal, no longer as coins.

According to Murphy the initial purpose of building the monument was to commemorate George John Frederick Sackville, the fourth Duke of Dorset who fell from his horse in a hunting accident in 1815 and died close to where the monument now stands. The Dorset title became extinct soon after his death. However, for those who grew up in Killiney oblivious to this original history, the monument absorbed other, more local myths and stories instead, becoming a memorial site for that illicit first kiss, the secret smoke or can of beer, romantic picnics, football, hide and seek and all the many other moments recalled by those who pause to draw breath on the steep climb up Killiney Hill.

The artist is capable of transforming the position of significance given to a monument at any given time, Murphy's other works experiment with this concept using a variety of media. He records transitory and mundane events, making them permanent through photography or looped video. However their permanency is undermined by the fact that these fleeting events are only available to be viewed by the public for one day. An ephemeral moment in time is made permanent through art, but is set free again to be momentary through its presentation.

Part of *Sketches for a Light/Heavy Monument*, for example, was set up for one day in the foyer of The National College of Ireland. This video work was made up of two large square monitors, presented on top of each other, creating a monolithic type form. Both screens documented, in slow motion, a solitary figure in a fast food restaurant eating dinner. This everyday occurrence is presented as a monumental occasion on the large screens; the movements of the figure are slowed down, emphasising his isolation, and in a heart wrenching way his fragility in the garish surroundings of the restaurant. The man is quite heavily built, but holds his food delicately in his fingertips, yet another reference to the interlacing themes of light and heavy, fragile and strong that becomes increasingly apparent in Murphy's work.

The sound that accompanies this work is the slowed down sound of the street outside the restaurant, its sometimes-distorted drones and screeches only add to the vulnerability of this man. These visual contradictions successfully highlight the complex revolving relationship between presence and absence, strength and weakness, permanent and lost.

'There is a certain part of all of us that lives outside of time. Perhaps we become aware of our age only at exceptional moments and most of the time we are ageless.'⁵ This idea is echoed in the fact that despite being a static entity, the monument on Killiney Hill transcends received notions of ageing as it embodies the many alternative memories offered it by those whose lives have interacted with it at one point or another. Presenting a recreation of the monument in the Four gallery space emphasises the importance of re-reading the past in order to re-write the present. This concept is described by Professor Declan Kiberd as the archaic avant-garde.⁶

Making history contemporary through the medium of art is, for artists like Murphy, a means of celebrating unofficial cultures and intangible histories in conjunction with what is often termed as 'official history.' This creative approach directly addresses the polarities of existence, bringing

IN THE SUNSET OF DISSOLUTION, EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED BY THE AURA OF NOSTALGIA, EVEN THE GUILLOTINE.

IF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION WERE TO RECUR ETERNALLY, FRENCH HISTORIANS WOULD BE MUCH LESS PROUD OF ROBESPIERRE. BUT BECAUSE THEY DEAL WITH SOMETHING THAT WILL NOT RETURN, THE BLOODY YEARS OF THE REVOLUTION HAVE TURNED INTO MERE WORDS, THEORIES, AND DISCUSSIONS, HAVE BECOME LIGHTER THAN FEATHERS, FRIGHTENING NO ONE. THERE IS AN INFINITE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A ROBESPIERRE WHO OCCURS ONLY ONCE IN HISTORY AND A ROBESPIERRE WHO ETERNALLY RETURNS, CHOPPING OFF FRENCH HEADS.

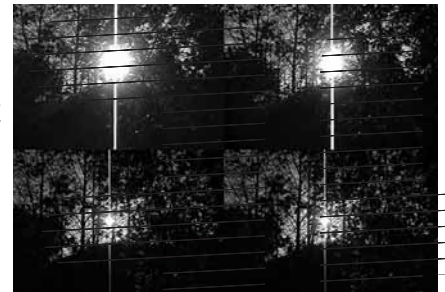
LET US THEREFORE AGREE THAT THE IDEA OF ETERNAL RETURN IMPLIES A PERSPECTIVE FROM WHICH THINGS APPEAR OTHER THAN AS WE KNOW THEM; THEY APPEAR WITHOUT THE MITIGATING CIRCUMSTANCE OF THEIR TRANSITORY NATURE. THIS MITIGATING CIRCUMSTANCE PREVENTS US FROM COMING TO A VERDICT. FOR HOW CAN WE CONDEMN SOMETHING THAT IS EPHEMERAL, IN TRANSIT?

MILAN KUNDERA

The Unbearable Lightness of Being, 1984



Die
zeit ist
das feuer in
dem wir brennen



together, momentarily, the remembered and the overlooked. In the final scene of Kundera's novel, Tomas and Tereza find themselves in a small country hotel after a rare evening of dancing. When Tomas turns on the light in their room, 'a large nocturnal butterfly' rises from the bedside lamp and circles the room in which they are 'alone with their happiness and their sadness.'²

Sketches for a Light/Heavy Monument is a strong visual metaphor for the opposing components of existence. It also presents the notion that Being can be transformed in the landscape of human memory over time. Alone with their happiness and sadness, Tomas and Tereza embody all the opposing experiences of their lives. As they stand together in a dimly lit room, they, like Murphy's *Sketches for a Light/Heavy Monument* present Being as an eternal indivisible oneness, an unbearable lightness. CH 12.06

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1. Kundera, Milan, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Faber, 1990.

2. Banerjee, Maria Nemcova, *Terminal Paradox: The Novels of Milan Kundera*, Grove Weidenfeld (New York), 1990.

3. Kundera, Milan, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Faber, 1990.

4. Stefano, John di, *Moving images of home - video recording about homelessness*, Art Journal, Vol. 61, No. 4, Winter 2002, pp. 38-44.

5. Kundera, Milan, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Faber, 1990.

6. Kiberd, Declan, *The Celtic Revival - An Irish Renaissance*, National Museum of Ireland lecture series in conjunction with the Neo-Celtic art exhibition, Tuesday 26 October 2004.

7. Kundera, Milan, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Faber, 1990.