David Byrne once interviewed himself using video editing tricks and six disguises (figure 1, 2) in a televised promotion of *Stop Making Sense* — Talking Heads’ concert film directed by Jonathan Demme. Wearing an oversized suit used to make his "head appear smaller," Byrne questions himself about the stylistic and thematic ideas behind the film and the music. In Neo-Dadaist manner David mocks the formality of an interview as well as the spontaneity of a typical interview’s question and answer dialogue. By interviewing himself — supplying both questions and answers — Byrne deconstructs the hierarchy of an ignorant interviewer probing an erudite interviewee, putting both on equal footing. Also, Byrne breaks the dynamic relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee through the use of video cuts, replacing the chronology of real time with that of the finished video production. Byrne employs the audience’s perceptions and expectations as media to sculpt his artistic rebellion against tradition and convention¹.

In Modernist tradition, Byrne constantly "criticizes from the inside"² through his appropriation of non-artistic media. Byrne turns the limits of media in on themselves as in *E.E.E.I* (2001-2004) (figure 3, 4), a purely aesthetical PowerPoint presentation, in order to push the boundaries of those very media. In *Sea of Possibilities* (figure 4), a still from *E.E.E.I.*, the chaotic tangle of multicolor ClipArt arrows laid upon a placidly horizontal wood grain exemplifies the restrictive freedom of PowerPoint’s user-friendly creativity. Through the capitalization on PowerPoint’s restrictive yet productive operation, Byrne paradoxically expands the imaginative restrictions inherent in its design.

¹ David Byrne. *Stop making sense* promo, b. URL http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dE-mxVxFXLg


Figure 1: Stop Making Sense Promotional Video: David Byrne's Disguises

Figure 2: Stop Making Sense Promotional Video: David Byrne Self Interview (body double used)

A thematic allusion to Kurt Schwitters’ Merz work of the early twenties and beyond, and also to the assemblagists of the 50’s, the connotational baggage that PowerPoint carries exhibits itself in the catholicity of the medium. In contrast to Schwitters’ anecdotal Merz work with "not only formal, but also expressive significance through literary and symbolic allusions," E.E.E.I relates more closely to Rauschenberg’s "referential associations of his derelict and banal objects but, unlike the Surrealists, did not capitalize on the narrative overtones produced by their juxtapositions." Through E.E.E.I., Byrne manages to reflexively criticize the limiting professionalism of PowerPoint, as well as the elitism of art produced for erudite "taste bureaucracies."

In Byrne’s expropriation of media, he deconstructs the media’s contextual role into one of raw material, mere fodder for his catapult aimed at the public’s expectations and values. In his hands advertising becomes a canvas, found photos become a paintbrush, the public becomes paint, and the city is transformed into a gallery. What is It? (2002-2003) (figure 5) takes the object out of the context, and in this process the subtext disappears leaving pure media to mold. Byrne’s annotations pose three possible answers as to the identity of the object and his answer, the title of the piece, apportions a new context onto the photo. His commentaries on the photos project Neo-Dadaist satire onto the absurdity of design. Drawing on the gullibility of its audience, the Tokyo subway display of What is it? (2002) (figure 5) relies on the faith of the public in the verity of mass media to recursively challenge the role of advertising.
In this self-referential criticism, the Greenbergian model of Modern art elucidates itself, but in Byrne’s appropriation of new media he turns Greenberg against himself. Greenberg’s belief:

That the task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the specific effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art. Thus would each art be rendered ‘pure,’ and in its ‘purity’ find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence. ‘Purity’ meant self-definition, and the enterprise of self-criticism in the arts became one of self-definition with a vengeance.7

Byrne’s self-criticism derives from the satirical employment of new, often public, media in order to comment on the limits of artistic media. His art criticizes both the traditional (conventional) use of his media, as well as the Greenbergian ‘purity’ of art and media. With such a maneuver, Byrne’s art “borrows from the medium”8 of not even art, but of pragmatic societal media — a debasement of Greenberg’s Modernist vision of art’s direction in 1960. In this sense, Byrne’s Postmodernism distorts the traditions of Modernism in much the same way that his art deconstructs professional media into artistic tools.

Just as Byrne’s non-traditional media challenge the accepted norms of art, his public exhibitions question the limits of the gallery and in this inquiry a criticism of the boundary between art and life arises. The Tokyo train display of What is it? (figure 5) preys on the perceptions and presumptions of an unsuspecting public — one that is foreign to David Byrne and his art — in order to scrutinize the current pervasive role of advertising and design in every aspect of life. Not even the tired commuter can escape capitalist media trying to sell an idea, just as the Tokyo public — a foreign and naïve audience — cannot even escape the art and satire of David Byrne. In such exhibitionism, David Byrne not only uses the media of advertising to degrade the integrity of marketing, but he also breaks down the restrictions of the gallery. Byrne’s brandishing of his art in a Tokyo train allows him to test a virgin audience, while simultaneously dismantling the Occidental “taste bureaucracies.”8

Byrne’s 2003 solo exhibit of What is it? at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art came a year after its Tokyo debut. In contrast to the Tokyo display, the SCCA show embodies the archetypal museum exhibit presented to a self-selecting critical aristocracy. To go from the most viewed public art on the busiest train line in the world9, to a sedate museum exhibit in the States creates a contrast that challenges the critical power of museums and galleries and the very hierarchy of art institutions. In such a maneuver, Byrne poses a question that may not have an answer: Is having you work seen by

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8 Ibid.

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9 Ltd. 2dk Co. Tokyo international forum 5th anniversary tokyo art jungle train. URL http://www.2dk.net/exhibition/e_taj_train.html
more than a million ignorant observers more poignant than having far fewer lettered critics? Byrne constantly challenges the boundaries of the gallery and the distinction between art and... everything else.

In 2008, the Department of Transportation in NYC held a competition to design a bike rack to replace the current standard. Byrne was chosen as a judge but, inspired by the competition, decided to sketch imaginative designs for specific neighborhoods. The DoT responded to the sketches with an offer that if Byrne made them, they would place them in the city for 364 days until they will be sold in Byrne’s gallery.10

In this spark of opportunity, Byrne’s avid love of biking and his vanguard artistic drive overlap in a public display functional beauty. Byrne’s practical yet referential designs (2008) (figure 6, 7) — a dollar sign for Wall Street, a stalwart dog for the Village, and a high heel for 5th Avenue boutiques — further obscure the bounds of media. Steel has been a sculptural material for decades, but it is not the steel that Byrne appropriates as his unconventional medium, but rather the institution of the bike rack. Such a pragmatic structure remains a banal utility unless it is borne of the gallery, yet publicized in the street. The publicity of the bike racks distinguishes them from traditional contemporary sculpture (i.e. the industrial minimalism of Judd or Oldenburg’s grandeur) since their municipality preserves function and their form perpetuates individuality. Byrne’s studio manager realized such a contradiction when she asked: “Well, David, these are practical, how can they be sold as art?” he said. ‘I didn’t have a good answer for that.’”11

Byrne’s use of the medium itself, rather than anecdotal reliant contextualization and conceptualization, turn mundane profanity into the sacred exotic. The assemblagists of the 50’s rely on the un-
derstated implications of each component of combines as well as the contextualization of the gallery. Rauschenberg’s Pilgrim (1960) (figure 8) utilizes a common chair, which Rauschenberg subsequently streaks with paint and places in front of an abstractly painted canvas. The painted chair assumes the identity of an ordinary piece of furniture until Rauschenberg submerges it in his combine, situating it in front of the suggestive canvas contained in the milieu of a museum. Once localized in such surroundings, the chair evolves to artistic media inheriting the intrinsic connotations of the medium while “their original identity [was] stolidly kept.”

Unlike Rauschenberg and the Junk artists such as Kaprow and Dine, Byrne does not try to privatize the reality of street in a gallery, but rather publicizes his art, which in turn adds a new dynamic aspect to his bike racks: the spontaneous and constantly evolving interaction of pedestrians locking unique sizes, styles and color of bikes to the racks. By placing his bike racks all around NYC, each with its specific referential neighborhood, Byrne has expanded the gallery to encompass the entire city, utilizing the public and societal constructions (Bike racks) as his media.

The "Environments" of Kaprow and Dine recruit the walls of the gallery to frame the alleyways and trash of the city, much in the same way that Cezanne used the frame of the canvas to draw attention to spatial and designed elements of his still-life. In framing the city, Kaprow declares that by his artistry and the authority invested in the gallery the trash from the city assumes an anecdotal significance just as Schwitters gave his Merz objects "the care that bibliophiles give to first editions, that bereaved families give to Grandmother’s hair." The "environments" use the gallery to construct borders around their art and by "capturing" (bottling) the street in a gallery they create a contextual canvas on which newspaper becomes a medium and an alleyway becomes an artistic statement due to the connotations and denotations that an exhibition instills in the audience.

The "Environmentalists" and the assemblagists appropriate the gallery as a canvas in order to showcase their work for people to view it as art. Byrne turns the world into his canvas through his self-referential media. It is this universality that elevates Byrne’s public art into the omnipresent gallery that is an entire city, or even country (as it the case with his Tokyo train art) and through this ascension into the artistic context, his work develops a whole new set of connotations and contexts in addition to those “traditional” ones it already has.
References

Ltd. 2dk Co. Tokyo international forum 5th anniversary tokyo art jungle train. URL http://www.2dk.net/exhibition/e_taj_train.html.


David Byrne. Stop making sense promo, b. URL http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dE-mxVxFXLg.


