

Willie Doherty
ENDLESS

Kerlin Gallery

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ENDLESS, a new film by Willie Doherty, is a sublimely powerful work and is the first film that Doherty has launched online. The film features a provocatively restrained performance by Christopher Eccleston as a man alone, someone and no-one, disappearing into shadows of black and white. ENDLESS evokes an atmosphere of restrictive containment and unrelenting repetitive constraint, of eternal limitation and infinite boundlessness.

ENDLESS is accompanied by a series of new black & white photographs, text-based works on paper and a related text by Dr. Declan Long, art critic and lecturer at The National College of Art and Design, Ireland.

The work is presented as a collaboration by Kerlin Gallery, Dublin, Alexander and Bonin, New York and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zürich, May 2020.

Kerlin Gallery

ENDLESS Declan Long



An interior. A man, alone. The set-up for Willie Doherty's *ENDLESS* is existentially stark: a solitary figure dressed in the plainest of plain clothes, encountered in the most basic of architectural environments. The building has bare brick walls, bare board floors. It is a place with a past — the elemental features of its design point to an earlier historical era, its interconnecting spaces suggesting an institutional setting of some kind — but all direct evidence, all overt indications of historical purpose have been stripped away. The man too may have a significant past. Positioned centrally in the austere, unadorned, introductory *mise en scène*, this is a character of probable consequence: a middle-aged man gazing coldly at the camera, as if, finally, facing down a pursuer who has tracked him to this non-descript, ascetic hideaway. But like the building, something of this individual has been erased, emptied-out. His simultaneously scruffy and formal clothes speak of reduced circumstances. There is nothing distinguished, and something diminished, in his appearance. Nothing about him stands out. Yet there he is, standing before us: someone and no-one.

Willie Doherty has long been committed to this style of assiduous artistic distillation. His films privilege stern, pared-back compositions and terse, tense dramatic situations — fragments, figments, of never-resolving narrative — that concern lives lived under unrelenting, repetitive constraint. Doherty's scenes and stories involve characters tethered to the past, whose thoughts and actions endlessly return them to the sadness, suffering or shame arising from earlier experiences. His characters can appear locked in — trapped in time, imprisoned by guilt or trauma — even when wandering through open spaces. *ENDLESS* shares these artistic ends, while adding a renewed, redoubled atmosphere of restriction and containment. The title itself evokes unlimited, infinite distance: unbounded reality. But 'endless' implies limitation too: life without change, conditions of permanence that might be, positively or negatively, binding. (Endless love or endless pain; endless patience or endless torment; endless power or endless struggle.) In *ENDLESS*, Doherty works within rigorously applied limitations, self-imposed parameters, some of which are less familiar as ongoing features of his work. The customary, meditative emphasis on cinematic slowness — so important to his films — is continued. Here, however, time has been further stilled. Throughout, the camera is mostly static. When not, it glides down tight corridors, going nowhere, hitting dead ends. And when our mysterious, troubled protagonist speaks, he does so from fixed positions. Movement is minimal: nothing more than passing moments of solemn, room-to-room meandering — desultory drift from one closed space to another. Watching, we become conscious of being inescapably *inside* — a strange spatial realisation in the context of Doherty's wider work. Wholly contained interiors are rare in Doherty's films: the expected, though not exclusive, locations of his elliptical stories are exterior landscapes — inner-city zones, suburban margins or rural hinterlands, in Ireland and elsewhere, territories charged by traces of dark, complex histories.



ENDLESS, by contrast, confines us to barracks (the actual building is on the grounds of the former British army base at Ebrington, Derry) and, in this regard, Doherty's approach is timely: limiting movement, locking us down. Shot after shot, up-close and distant, we see this same, enigmatic, self-isolating individual: a man with nowhere to go, with no way out. His situation is one of enduring solitude. There is extremity in the scenario and severity in its visualization: Doherty's decision to shoot the film in shadowy black and white — another strategic shift in style — adding emphasis to the self-conscious astringency of the scenes.

And yet, however much Doherty's art — here and elsewhere — tends towards insistent limitation, there is always something of it that convulses and overflows. His work is skillfully distilled, but derived from volatile substances, producing unpredictable effects. The first words spoken by the lone, desolate presence in ENDLESS — “As a child I was always prone to exaggeration” — initiate a complex, expansive soliloquy, a forceful and fragmented monologue that becomes, gradually, a bitter inner dialogue. These are the private thoughts of a single, tormented mind; but it is a consciousness that seems to contain and disclose multiple personalities, multiple histories, possibly real, possibly imagined. If understatement is crucial to Doherty's methods, so too are excess, exaggeration, the presentation of unstable identities, the proliferation of mixed messages. The speaker recalls, in terms relevant to his current predicament, a childhood punishment for fabricating stories — “I see myself, sitting on the cold, dark stairs ... banished in shame, a liar” — but his clipped, hesitant sentences also express, in a radically compressed manner, an unmanageable overload of pain: “The tears. The cries of injustice.” Nothing much is said, but each abrupt statement points to roiling, surging undercurrents. Doherty's script, delivered with such precisely measured anguish by Christopher Eccleston, takes us, from these formative moments of rage and humiliation, through a series of self-lacerating adult reflections. But each step in this merciless process of personal analysis is, in a sense, self-destructive. As the man ‘opens up’, he begins to disappear as a coherent character. This ostensibly stable, visibly present, spatially situated subject, splits apart and fades away.

His story is one of deceit, disguise and disgrace. He tells, in non-specific terms, of constructing an identity and colluding with others in a “choreography of deception”. His life is a lie: but we are given few precise details regarding what manner of life this is. References to the denial of “historical facts and objective truths” — to the ease with which someone might “lie with impunity” — point to the brazen, unapologetic corruptions of present-day politics: to the enraging, reality-rearranging conduct of contemporary autocrats — or shameless, chaotic, wannabe autocrats — and their ethically untroubled cronies. (In his most recent book *What Comes After Farce*, Hal Foster contemplates contemporary conditions of political dishonesty, citing the philosopher Harry Frankfurt, who argued in a 1986 essay, that



“the liar lies knowingly, and so maintains a relation to truth, whereas the bullshitter cares nothing about veracity, and so is all the more corrosive of it.” For Foster it is essential to note that a “post-truth politics is a massive problem ... but so too is a post-shame one.”¹).

The clues we gather regarding identity and context in *ENDLESS* are not defining. They solve nothing of the film’s deepening mysteries; there is one man, but more than one story. The narrative, like the camera, stays temporarily fixed, before drifting on. And as it does, the rational limits of filmic realism — underlined, potentially, by the documentary connotations of back-to-basics monochrome — are loosened, opening up new ambiguities about the closed world we have entered. A memory arises of how the man was “taken out in the end”, his cover blown, a fake identity revealed. Suddenly, it seems, the remembered deceptions are those of an informer: an agent who has lived a double life. Yet as we are given the grim details of his eventual, violent death — “I screamed, I prayed” — we realize that we have switched genres, swerving from crime-drama to ghost-story. (A move that we have seen, of course, in film-to-film developments during Doherty’s artistic career.) The script becomes the testimony of a spectre: an impossible, post-mortem statement. These are recollections from beyond reality — from beyond life’s definitive *end* — but they have, at the same time, a real-life dimension, echoing actual historical events. One life-story brought to mind by this fictional informer’s fate, for instance, is that of former Sinn Fein official and IRA volunteer Denis Donaldson: a trusted, long-serving figure within the Republican movement who, in December 2005, was exposed as a British agent. Over a period of twenty years, Donaldson had lived a lie: leading a double life as a paid asset of the British security forces. Four months after the revelations were made public, he was found dead in a remote Donegal cottage: shot four times after being found in the isolated place where he was hiding from the world, doing his best to disappear.

The man we meet in *ENDLESS* might be a version of such a notable, newsworthy *someone*, but he ends up as no-one. “Don’t be fooled,” he warns us, “there is no real me ... I simply am not there.” Nevertheless the more he tends towards nothingness — drifting deeper into the dark shadows of this incarcerating interior — the more he begins to recreate himself, imagining a recoverable, renewable life: “My guilt has never been proven. I was innocent. I *am* innocent.” The moment hints at upbeat possibility, even as it also speaks of denial, delusion, continuing deception. Perhaps even now, he reasons, redemption is possible. Or maybe, with nothing left to lose, the only real solution is to construct another fiction — to find another, better, bigger lie to tell.

¹ Hal Foster, *What Comes After Farce* (London: Verso, 2020), p.13.

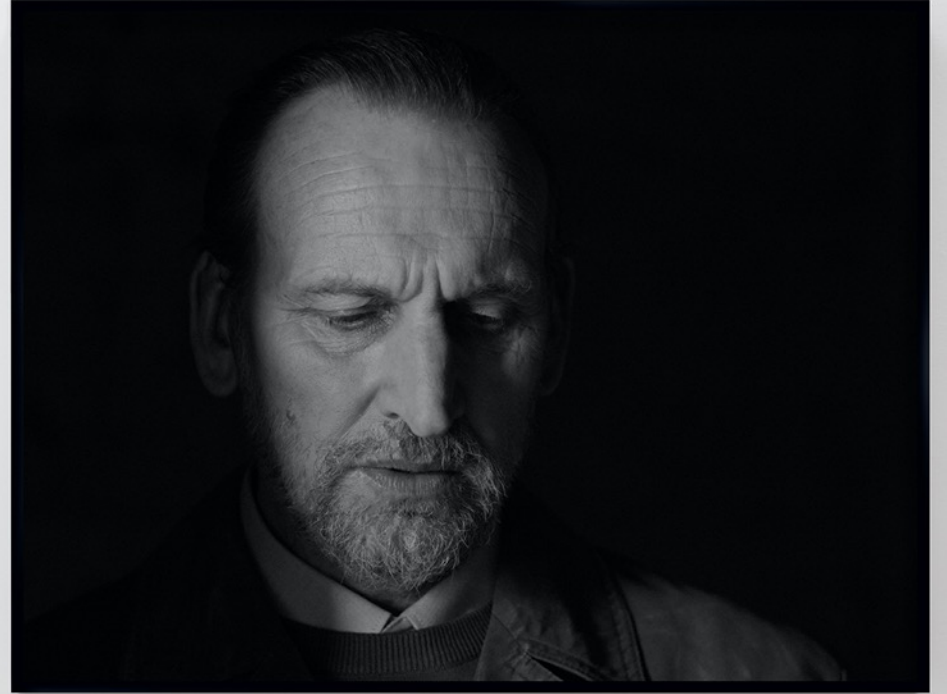


ENDLESS I

2020

diptych: pigment print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag 308gsm, 100% Cotton, white, acid free, framed
edition of 3

50 x 66.6 cm each / 19.7 x 26.2 in (image size, each)
52 x 68.6 x 3 cm / 20.5 x 27 x 1.2 in (framed size, each)



ENDLESS II

2020

diptych: pigment print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag 308gsm, 100% Cotton, white, acid free, framed
edition of 3

50 x 66.6 cm each / 19.7 x 26.2 in (image size, each)
52 x 68.6 x 3 cm / 20.5 x 27 x 1.2 in (framed size, each)



ENDLESS III

2020

diptych: pigment print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag 308gsm, 100% Cotton, white, acid free, framed
edition of 3

50 x 66.6 cm each / 19.7 x 26.2 in (image size, each)
52 x 68.6 x 3 cm / 20.5 x 27 x 1.2 in (framed size, each)

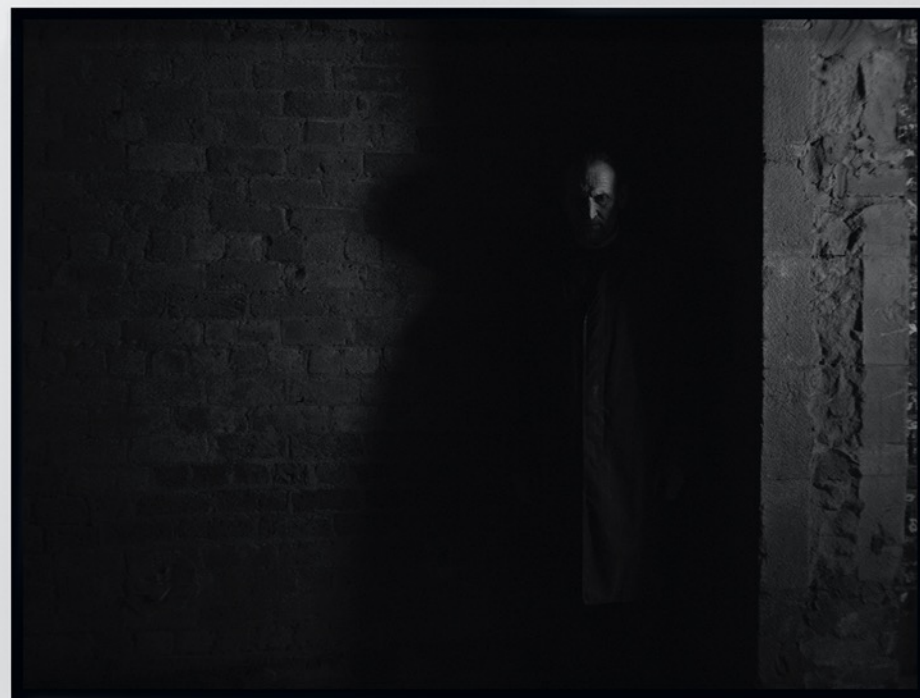


ENDLESS IV

2020

diptych: pigment print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag 308gsm, 100% Cotton, white, acid free, framed
edition of 3

50 x 66.6 cm each / 19.7 x 26.2 in (image size, each)
52 x 68.6 x 3 cm / 20.5 x 27 x 1.2 in (framed size, each)



ENDLESS V

2020

diptych: pigment print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag 308gsm, 100% Cotton, white, acid free, framed
edition of 3

50 x 66.6 cm each / 19.7 x 26.2 in (image size, each)
52 x 68.6 x 3 cm / 20.5 x 27 x 1.2 in (framed size, each)

ENDLESS
Willie Doherty

As a child, I was always prone to exaggeration.
Fond of making up stories.
I see myself sitting on the cold, dark stairs.
Shivering.
Laughter... muffled voices from below.
Banished in shame.
A liar.
The tears... the cries of injustice.

Now I am lost to the world.
In the place where lost bodies lie.
Narrow enough.
Deep enough.
Sufficient for a body.

Among the little dams of twigs and brown leaves that gather in the dark cavities.
Waiting in the gloom.
Dead still.
The end of all.

I believed that God could see me.
At some level, I still believe that he can look into my soul and see who I really am.
Nowhere to hide.
Not under the cloak of darkness.
Not in the shadows of bright sunshine.
Not behind closed eyes.

He can see underneath everything.
He can see inside everything.
I know, and he knows that my soul is tainted by sin.

I am addicted to the sweet thrill of transgression...
quickly followed by the bitter agony of guilt.
The feeling that I am walking on the edge of a steep precipice
and that I might slip and fall into an unending pit of disgrace.

I used to worry that my guilt was visible to the whole world.
Gradually, I learned to live in this labyrinth of lies
and discovered that there were many willing to collude with me.
My skills in deception and collusion were widely shared.

I was silently initiated in the use of an unspoken code.
The mutual recognition of furtive gestures... evasive body language.
The choreography of deception.

Ultimately, I was alone.
Membership of this group could never be acknowledged.
Each member consigned to bear the burden of sin and deception alone.
Never to lose face.
A camaraderie, inspired by fear.
Embracing the tangled nature of secrecy.
Day after day.
Night after night.

I withdrew.
Erased myself.
Existing on the margins... silent and watchful.
An interminable vigil.

Wary and cautious.
“Whatever you say... say nothing.”
No good could come of it.

“You can’t dispute an historical fact or an objective truth.”
That’s what people used to say.
Facts have become irrelevant, no matter how damning.
Presented with incontrovertible facts, I choose not to accept them.

I lie with impunity.
My default position.

The truth has to be constructed, part of a fictional narrative,
to be managed and controlled.
The pursuit of the perfect fiction grips me,
and I bring to it a methodical zeal for the truth of my craft.

Words carefully selected, sentences calibrated until a suitable
distance is created from any potential threat.
Words, made of individual meaningless letters, become the smoke
and mirrors of refusal and evasion.

I was taken out in the end.
Brutally... ruthlessly, and without mercy.
Back of a car.
A country road.
Beaten to within an inch of my life.
I screamed.
I prayed.
Then, eliminated... neutralised.

I couldn’t expect anything else.
I knew the rules.
My luck ran out.
Careless talk.
Whispers.

Up until that point I had been good at getting myself out of scrapes.
I was extremely loyal and efficient.
Well connected... indispensable.
I was in control.
No one suspected me.
I thought I was above the law.
I thought I was invincible ... above the law, so to speak.
The normal rules didn’t apply to me.
Ironically, I broke my own rules.
Complacency?
Arrogance?
I had compromised myself.

It was inevitable someone would do something about it.
There was no way back for me.
“ Who’s the big man now, eh?
You fuckin’ deserve this.”

The hardest thing is knowing when to stop.
Heart beating... heart still beating.
I began to believe my own version of events.
The fiction became the reality.
Nothing was more real.
Nothing else mattered.

I no longer think about those I put in an early grave.
Collateral damage
There’s no other way to deal with it.
It was them or me.

My self-pity is the ultimate deception.
My personality unformed and unreliable.
Constantly dissolving and reforming into something else.
My conscience disappeared many years ago.
My self is fabricated.

Don’t be fooled.
There is no real me.
I simply am not there.

Endless, sleepless night.
All silent and empty.
Lost... dead.
Even more dead.
My hopes evaporated.
My heart turned to dust.

Losing sight of the edges of things.
The incriminating sharpness gives way to an obscuring softness.
Shapeshifting.
No boundaries.
Lies spread faster than truth.

My guilt has never been proven.
I was innocent.
I am innocent.
An innocent man.
I like the sound of that... an innocent man.
A second chance.
Start again.



LOST TO THE WORLD

2020

Inkjet print on reverse of 160gsm acid free paper, framed
21 x 29.7 cm / 8.3 x 11.7 in (unframed)



LOST BODIES LIE

2020

Inkjet print on reverse of 160gsm acid free paper, framed
21 x 29.7 cm / 8.3 x 11.7 in (unframed)



NOWHERE TO HIDE

2020

Inkjet print on reverse of 160gsm acid free paper, framed
21 x 29.7 cm / 8.3 x 11.7 in (unframed)



LABYRINTH OF LIES

2020

Inkjet print on reverse of 160gsm acid free paper, framed
21 x 29.7 cm / 8.3 x 11.7 in (unframed)



NO WAY BACK

2020

Inkjet print on reverse of 160gsm acid free paper, framed
21 x 29.7 cm / 8.3 x 11.7 in (unframed)



THEM OR ME

2020

Inkjet print on reverse of 160gsm acid free paper, framed
21 x 29.7 cm / 8.3 x 11.7 in (unframed)



EVEN MORE DEAD

2020

Inkjet print on reverse of 160gsm acid free paper, framed
21 x 29.7 cm / 8.3 x 11.7 in (unframed)



THE EDGES
OF
THINGS

THE EDGES OF THINGS

2020

Inkjet print on reverse of 160gsm acid free paper, framed
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Anne's Lane, South Anne Street, Dublin 2, Ireland

T +3531 670 9093 F +3531 670 9096 gallery@kerlin.ie www.kerlin.ie



For further information please contact
Darragh Hogan / darragh@kerlin.ie