Why is Samuel Beckett’s writing such a touchstone for today’s visual artists? Of all the great literary names of the twentieth century: T.S. Eliot, Marcel Proust, Bertolt Brecht, - it is Beckett's name that crops up constantly in lists of influences, in interviews or, as in the current exhibition at the Harris, in the titles of the works themselves.

Artists are not alone in venerating the Irish writer of course. It’s often said that at any given moment there are several plays in production somewhere across the globe, and in the thirty years since his death Beckett’s star has been steadily rising, so that his reputation is now in danger of eclipsing that of his mentor James Joyce. In the mass media too the elderly Beckett’s craggy, hawk-like features, peering out from one of the great photographs by John Minihan, have become ubiquitous.

Yet Beckett’s sudden impact in the art world seems even more pervasive and vital than elsewhere in the culture. So much so that it seems not simply a case of a body of work gaining in status and prestige over time, but rather of an oeuvre suddenly beginning to function in a new, more active way. Just as a shift in personal circumstances can dislodge memories, so that past events that had been forgotten begin to loom large, pressing in upon consciousness in insistent and sometimes troubling ways, so too artworks can abruptly start to register in the cultural present with increased force.

In the present moment, where value is assessed in exclusively economic terms, and the humanities in general are being hollowed out by a Dragon’s Den culture of enterprise, it is perhaps no surprise that Beckett’s lonely dedication to his art has assumed a kind of talismanic role. In such circumstances Beckett emerges as what has often been called the last modernist, a survivor of the great, revolutionary artistic movements of the early twentieth century. For those artists seeking a bridge or link between their own practice and that of Joyce or Duchamp, Beckett - who knew both men intimately - seems the ideal figure.

And yet artists like those in the current exhibition do not merely contribute to the ongoing canonisation of Beckett as secular saint of modernist art and literature. Such a canonisation is all-too-often a way of co-opting the work, reducing it to a formula that can be easily assimilated and leached of its power. And anyway Beckett is not really a modernist, late or otherwise. His major work comes after the great divide of the Second World War and continues right up to the 1980s. To associate Beckett solely with pre-war
modernism misses what is new and radical about his work, and erases the links between it and other challenging writers and artists in the 1960s and 1970s.

Beckett’s work is in a deep dialogue what have been called the neo-avant-gardes of the post-war period. Artists like Sol le Witt, Jo Baer, Joseph Kosuth, Robert Smithson and Bruce Nauman, reacting against the dominance of Clement Greenberg’s version of modernism (sent up in the current exhibition by Mel Brimfield’s *Clement Greenberg - Lee Krasner = Jackson Pollock*, explicitly reference Beckett in their work and writing. In the same period, roughly between the French publication of his most ferociously experimental text, *Comment C’est* (How It Is) in 1961, and the appearance on the BBC of his two magnificently weird, black and white TV plays Ghost Trio and ...but the clouds... in 1977, Beckett’s work - *Play, Film, Not I, Eh Joe, Imagination Dead Imagine, The Lost Ones, Ping* - partakes of the general atmosphere of provocation, generic border crossing and conscious experimentation that we now associate with a period we could call the Long Sixties. Once again, these texts, plays and films do not fit easily into the parameters of modernism, rather they have clear affinities, in their relation to philosophy, technology, the body, sexuality, transgression, politics and popular culture with what is going on in the visual arts at the time.

This, I think, is what artists like those in the present exhibition understand instinctively. They may be blissfully unaware of the latest fads in Beckett criticism, but they know what it is to make challenging work that both draws from the past and speaks to the present. These artists use Beckett’s work for their own purposes. They treat it as a resource, a tool-box, as Michel Foucault said other thinkers should use his own ideas. That this often involves a certain amount of irreverence can only be healthy, an antidote to the tendency of literary critics to treat the work as holy writ. For by using and sometimes abusing Beckett’s work artists can bring out aspects of the plays, prose and poems that are in danger of being overlooked or misunderstood by critics. Walking around the exhibition at the Harris I saw Beckett’s work being continually filtered, repurposed, distorted, cast in a new and revealing light. But most of all it was the links between Beckett’s often forgotten or sidelined work of the Long Sixties, the art contemporary to it, and the issues and agendas of the present that I noticed.

In Nathaniel Mellor’s absurd, hilarious film *Ourhouse Ep.-1: Time*, one character argues that ‘celebrities are stealing time from ordinary people’, and outlines a project to recover it so that, as he puts it ‘the period between the 1960s and the 1980s can happen all over again’. Here we have in a nutshell the thesis I am proposing. In current conditions, where the forward-moving, propulsive force of artistic innovation seems to have been arrested by media super-saturation, there is a hunger for the avant-garde culture of the Long Sixties. Indeed Mellor’s film, set as it is in what seems to be an abandoned brutalist bus-shelter, where an effete and ludicrous family are menaced by barbarians, feels like something from an abandoned work by J. G. Ballard, another figure from the past who has recently assumed huge significance for
contemporary writers and artists. By inviting such connections, Mellors' work, like that of the other artists in the show, invents a Beckett for the present.

Indeed it is striking that the Beckett works alluded to in the exhibition come so often from the sixties and early seventies. Hence Pavel Buchler’s *Once Again* and Broomberg and Charanin’s *Rudiments* both bear the traces of the mime works *Act Without Words 1* and *II*, first produced in the very late 1950s. Buchler’s enigmatic, elegant construction, a reception bell muted by a bow-tie, suggests the play’s concerns with stimulus and response, but also recalls Beckett’s sustained resistance to the concept of servitude and work. Similarly, the short film *Rudiments* contests disciplinary power by interrupting the military training of cadets with the pratfalls of a bouffon. Elsewhere, Beckett’s 1961 play *Happy Days* is an obvious precedent for Sally O’Reilly’s *The Harris Garulatrix*, though the surrealism of the former is pushed still further, and instead of a women buried up to her neck in the earth, the monologue issues from the fetish-object of a single shoe. Also Mel Brimfield’s *Death and Dumb*, with its obscene, disembodied ranting mouth, clearly draws upon *Not I*, first staged in 1971.

But this concern with Beckett’s work of the 60s does not mean that the earlier and more celebrated work is ignored. John Bock’s *Monseiur et Monseiur* and Pierrick Sorin’s *Pierrick et Jean Loup* are classic examples of what Beckett himself called the pseudo-couple. In this device, which Beckett used in *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and *Mercier et Camier*, two individuals who act as the halves of an impossible whole. Both Bock and Sorin develop the idea in their respective films, each of which stages relations of dependence and reciprocation between two characters, investigating, as Beckett did, the limits of both selfhood and community. Another piece that engages with a persistent Beckettian theme, already alluded to above, is Mladen Stilinovic’s *The Artist at Work*, which records a performance celebrating the life of what the French call le voyou désœuvré, the lazy rascal who makes a virtue of the refusal of work, as Beckett’s characters do in Murphy, the Novellas and many other texts.

Common Culture’s *I can’t go on I’ll go on, I can’t go on I’ll go on (Dave)* makes use of one of the most famous of all Beckettian phrases, taken from the end of *The Unnamable*. As with Bock, Sorin and most of the other artists in the exhibition, humour is important in the piece, yet it is worth noting how Common Culture question the efficacy of comedic performance even as it is enacted. A stand-up takes to the stage in an empty theatre, his routine becoming increasingly desperate in the absence of the confirmation and approval of an audience. Similarly, in Hilde Krohn Huse’s *Hanging in the Woods*, the artist records a performance piece that goes badly wrong, leaving her screaming for an absent assistant to come and release her. In both cases a performance is attempted but fails, and the failure itself becomes the performance. Such a procedure is very Beckettian indeed, and it marks one of the points at which his writing departs from the more general post-war avant-garde faith in art as an active and successful intervention in the world. This is brought out still further in Mel Brimfield’s *Semiotics of the Kitchen*. Here Brimfield stages Martha Rosler’s famous feminist short film of the same name.
from 1975, a parody of a TV cookery show where a deadpan Rosler violently demonstrates the use of knives, forks, icepicks and rolling pins. Brimfield’s photograph parodies Rosler’s film in turn, and seems rather more disenchanted with the idea of art as activism. Like Beckett’s work, Brimfield’s piece both affiliates itself with radical experimental practices but also carries within itself a sometimes sorrowful, sometimes humorous sense of the limitations and failures of art and performance.

Beckett is a writer that provides visual artists with a set of co-ordinates within which, in a time of tremendous diversity of practice, they can make sense of their own work. Now that the catch-all term ‘the contemporary’ has displaced previous notions of the styles and agendas through which artists were defined, Beckett stands as a connection back to a time when avant-garde movements could still polarise and mobilise opinion. Yet his writing also carries with it a sceptical vigilance about claims for art’s virtue that seems absolutely appropriate for our own melancholy conjuncture.

Dr. Conor Carville is Associate Professor at the University of Reading. His research focuses on Irish writing since 1800, particularly Yeats, Joyce and Beckett. He is also interested in the impact of theory on the study of Irish literature, specifically those approaches drawn from Marxism, psychoanalysis and post-colonialism. He has published on contemporary Irish poetry and continues to work in this area as well as in the fields of post-war British and American poetry. At the moment I am writing a book about Samuel Beckett’s interest in the visual arts.

‘Samuel Beckett, the Long Sixties and Contemporary Art’ is commissioned by Harris Museum & Art Gallery. Nothing Happens, Twice (Feb-Jun 2017) was curated by Clarissa Corfe and included artists Samuel Beckett, John Bock, Mel Brimfield, Broomberg & Chanarin, Pavel Buchler, Common Culture (Ian Brown, David Campbell and Mark Durden), Steph Fletcher, Pat Flynn, William Geerts, Hilde Krohn Huse, Nathaniel Mellors, Sally O’Reilly, Hardeep Pandhal, Pierrick Sorin, Mladen Stilinovic, Bedwyr Williams. The exhibition is part of the Dance First, Think Later contemporary art programme.