

Douglas Gordon



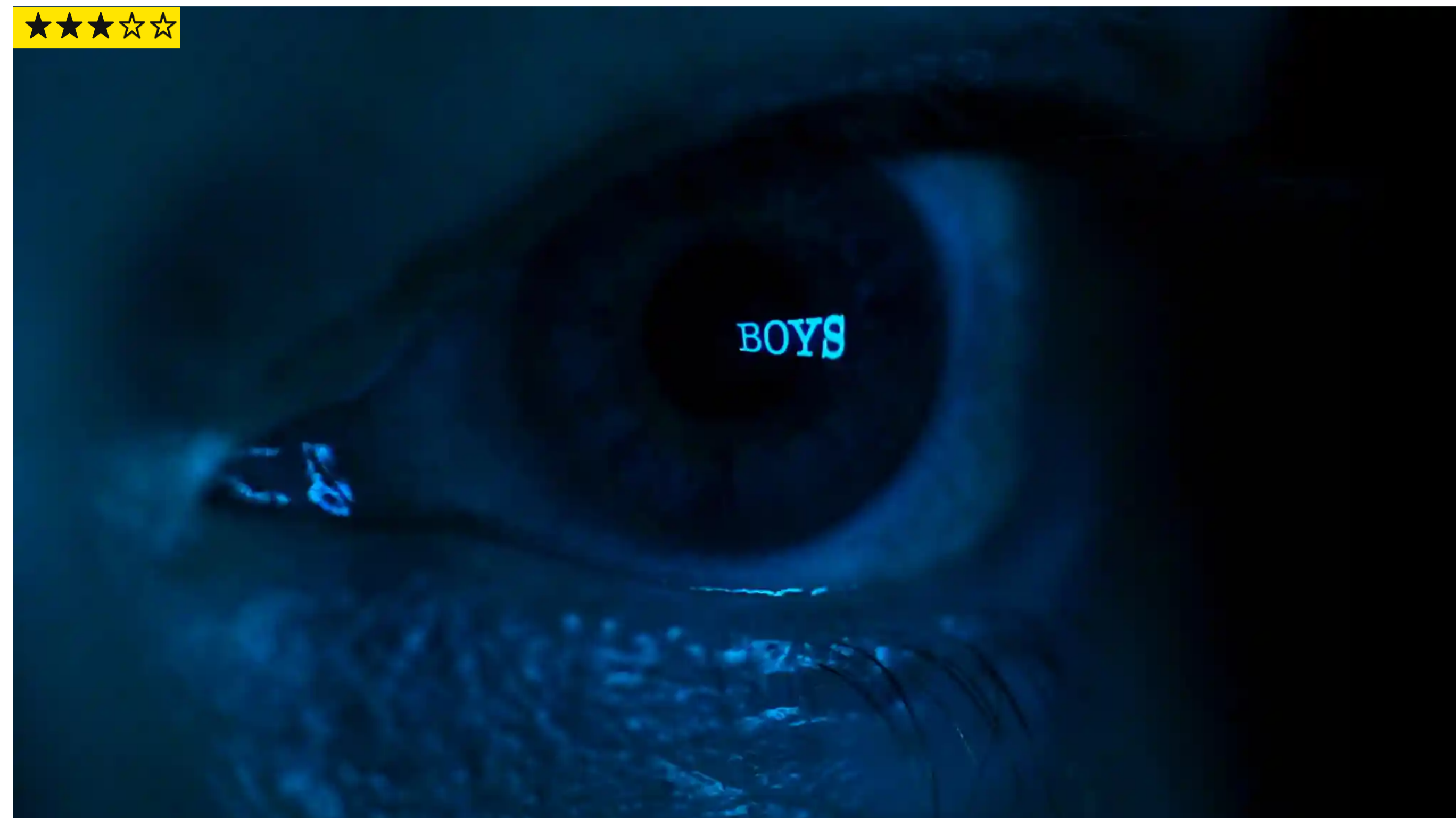
Jonathan Jones

Fri 2 Feb 2024 17:58 CET



Review

# An eye of Soho sinners: Douglas Gordon's All I Need Is a Little Bit of Everything review



Male gaze ... a still from 2023EastWestGirlsBoys. Photograph: Studio lost but found/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Germany 2024 Courtesy the artist and Gagosian

## Gagosian Grosvenor Hill, London

Four decades of video work ranging from Dr Jekyll to a red light odyssey showcase the Turner-winning artist's obsession with good and evil

Ethical beliefs drive plenty of 21st-century artists but Douglas Gordon is a different sort of moralist. The problems that haunt him are biblical. He is obsessed with the nature of good and evil, seeming to believe in sin and the existence of the human soul.

Confessions of a Justified Sinner, the video work that won him the Turner prize back in 1996, distils his metaphysical concerns perfectly. It's one of the oldies but goodies, playing on a colossal mound of TV monitors at the Gagosian, part of a portable anthology entitled Pretty Much Every Film and Video Work from About 1992 Until Now, updated since it was shown at the Hayward two decades ago. The face of Fredric March, slowed down, shown split screen in "positive" and "negative", transforms from Dr Jekyll to Mr Hyde, from the mixture of good and evil that makes up most of us into a creature of pure distilled evil.

The title of Gordon's take on Robert Louis Stevenson's 1886 story of Jekyll and Hyde is borrowed from an earlier Scottish horror story, James Hogg's The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner, in which a Calvinist is so convinced he is elected by God, he believes he can murder people without being punished. This double reference to Scottish tales of duality seems to imply that Gordon's own art is peculiarly Scottish, his torment not so different from the dilemmas of generations of predecessors torn between fleshpots and Kirk.

In his film 2023EastWestGirlsBoys, though, he is a long way from home, and the simple choice between right and wrong doesn't offer any guide. In short he is in London's Soho. The looped 10-minute movie, showing on a cinematic scale, "recalls the erotic entertainment industry of Soho", as the press release puts it. What we see, filling the screen, is one of Gordon's own eyes, filmed in fleshy but ethereal colours: moist, receptive and mostly wide open as the lights of Soho illuminate it. It's not just the colours of the electric city night that redden and green this male eye. Neon words from Soho strip joints and clubs appear on the eye itself, as if so impacting his gaze they stay there, imprinted indelibly. What does this eye desire? "GIRLS", "BOYS", and delights that are "NON-STOP". Other signs burning themselves into the eye say "HEAVEN" and "HELL".



Channelling the past: Pretty Much Every Film and Video Work from About 1992 Until Now ... by Douglas Gordon. Photograph: Lucy Dawkins/ Courtesy Gagosian/Studio lost but found/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Germany 2024

Gordon's eye is a passive, receptive mirror of these temptations: the exhibition after all is called All I Need Is a Little Bit of Everything. In the fourth decade of his career it seems the simple duality of Jekyll and Hyde has given way to absolute moral chaos. Who is he anyway? "J'ai oublié tout", "I have forgotten everything", confesses a text in an alcove, written over and over so the words, French and English, merge in an amnesiac fog.

Other multilingual messages are painted, printed, carved or glowing around the gallery. "It's coming," threatens a red neon in Japanese. "I am the author of my own addictions," he acknowledges in English chiselled into the gallery wall. "What do you need to know?" he asks in Ukrainian and Gaelic.

These alarming questions and declarations in a Babel of tongues create a tension that puts you on your guard. It is as cinematic as his screen work: the neons cast eerie colours into the space that make you feel you are in a fictive world where a drama is being projected.



Installation view of All I Need Is a Little Bit of Everything, 2024. Photograph: Lucy Dawkins/Studio lost but found/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Germany

But it's not fiction. The endless doubt the texts create reflect our world right now, where doing or even seeing the right thing has never been harder. It's fitting that among the appropriated movies in the next room is The Exorcist. This bombardment of mysterious words in many languages could be a restaging of the tongues that come from the devil-possessed Regan. My name is Legion for we are many.

This atmosphere of perturbation is disappointingly absent in a public art version of Gordon's text works that has just gone on view at the Tottenham Court Road Elizabeth line station, on the edge of Soho. Here the words in multiple tongues move across a screen that no one seems to take much notice of, becoming a bland celebration of the city, at least according to Transport for London, which says it reflects "many of the most spoken languages of the people who make London the dynamic, multicultural city that it is, reflecting the vibrancy of Soho".

Well, that's nice. The installation feels horribly compromised, lost amid the mildly dystopian chill of the station's pretentious architecture, a proof perhaps that modern life is getting too bizarre for modern art to compete with.

Elsewhere at the Gagosian, you can look through a peephole drilled in the wall to see a string of phrases that remix words, including "God", "Good" and "Bad", allowing you to learn that "God is Bad".

Figures.

At Gagosian Grosvenor Hill, London until 15 March. Undergroundoverheard is on display at Tottenham Court Road tube station