

REGEN PROJECTS *

Craddock, Sacha, "Gillian Wearing," tema celeste, September/October 2002, pp. 46-51, ills.

tema celeste

gillian wearing

with sachal craddock



▲ Gillian Wearing 2 into 1, 1997, still from video.

Sacha Craddock: You have been making art a long time, Gillian. Are you enjoying yourself?

Gillian Wearing: Sometimes there are too many choices, and the enjoyable bit is going out and doing it. It's difficult—some ideas seem to come feeling more complete than others. I can have an idea for two or three years and then it clicks. Everything I have done has a history; the ideas sit in the back of the head. *Drunk* was something—I tried it in 1997, did tests, and then sat on it.

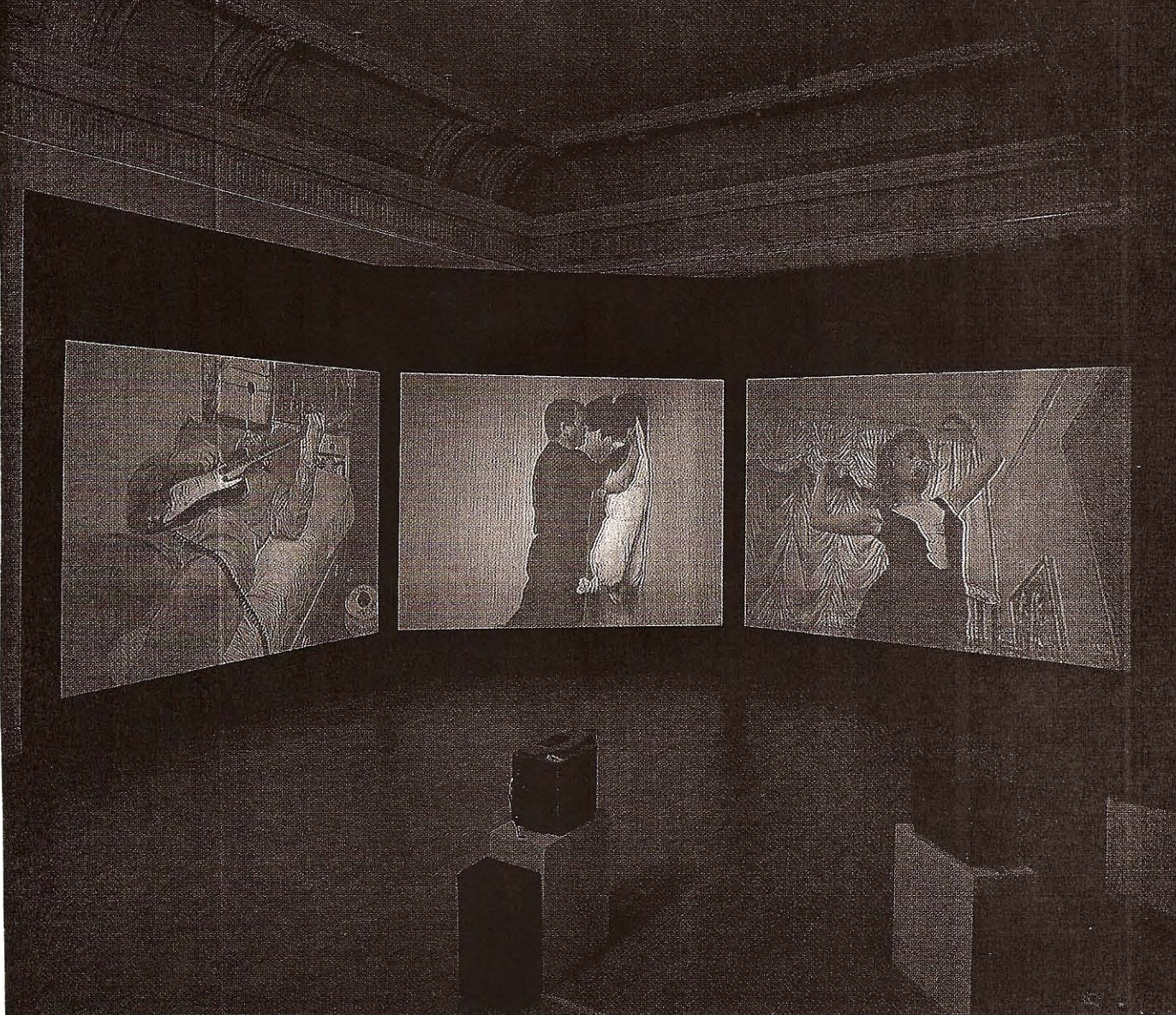
SC: How has your relationship changed with the people you are filming? It must be very different asking people to take part now that you are a well-known artist.

GW: I feel far more self-conscious now. The worst time was after the Turner Prize; it became a drag working with real people—before then I was far in the background. But gradually you find your anonymity again. Making *Drunk* was patchy at the beginning—it was confusing to feel known, to be aware of how people perceived me. *Signs* was a success at the beginning because I was inadequate to the job; there was no rulebook approach. I only realized why when I got good images back. I had felt idiotic, pathetic, and vulnerable, but as soon as I became confident, and my approach became more like a sales pitch, it became less interesting. A lack of self-consciousness benefited the work. This is something you can't manufacture—you are unsure, you make mistakes.

SC: Your wonderful film piece *I Love You*—with its long shot of the end of a street, a car coming into focus, a woman falling out of the car, and a great deal of confusion and embarrassment at what is seen and heard—had a clear beginning, middle, and end. Can you tell me about your use of narrative?

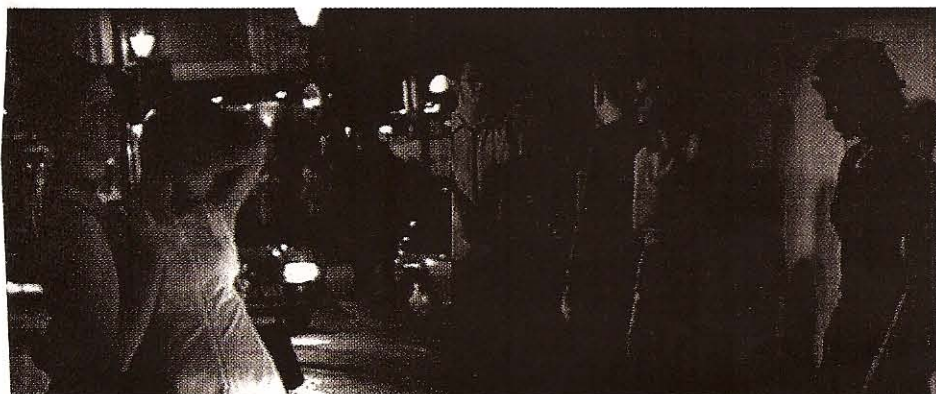
GW: Some of the people who saw it only saw one take. There are so many short films now with elements of surprise—it's a different take on narrative. The story is in the middle of something; cutting off the narrative leaves a mysterious element building up in between. Voyeurism is part of it—it's a quiet suburb, and you are embarrassed at spying on the woman, the relationship. It was a bit of an epiphany. I had seen something like this when living with Anya Gallaccio: She was out, and I saw someone screaming—it was an in-between moment. I was going to do it for the Chisenhale Gallery but it was a struggle to make it work. It didn't feel straightforward; I had been mixing memories. It is difficult to know which character to relate to; there is empathy with the woman but nothing is straightforward. There are cases in which a woman is murdered or stabbed and nobody does anything about it—nobody reports it to the police. Why won't decent people do that? Is it all about a fear of voyeurism? We are used to watching violence on TV, but I've got gates on my door now, everything to protect me from





▲ Gillian Wearing *The Unholy Three*, 1997. Installation view at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London.

◀ ▼ Gillian Wearing *Broad Street*, 2001, stills from video.



the outside. You see it all the time here.

SC: Does the use of actors in some of your films and set pieces provide a level of distance from disturbing subjects?

GW: There are certain things that need to be done by actors. The first thing I wanted with *Sacha and Mum* was the ability to make things extreme, to use repetitive actions. It needed to be very dramatic. I had a clear storyboard with stick drawings. I was going to repeat certain actions, the hair pulling and the towel around the face, and I managed to find one actress through a friend. I then auditioned three young women—it was spontaneous. One had just washed her hair off-camera and the hair pulling was improvised that day. I have also had difficulties with actors. We've had problems with auditions, with actors saying, "I've worked with Mike Leigh, and nobody has asked me to scream 'I love you' before." I have lots of tapes of people screaming "I love you," such an overused and abused phrase.

SC: You have always said your influence comes especially from seeing the first fly-on-the-wall documentaries—*Seven Up*, *The Family*, etc.—on television as a child. How would you say that genre has changed with the recent spate of reality programs like *Big Brother* and *The Cruise*?

Have you found your work consciously or unconsciously affected by them?

GW: Things are much more similar now—it gets harder to get your point out. I much prefer documentary to film; there is a great history here. When they said they were closing down the documentary section at the BBC, I was shocked. Now they are shedding jobs, getting rid of reality TV; it's all about fashion. *The Video Diaries* are the best example—people didn't know what they were doing. Old *Blind Dates*, too, from the '80s, with real people really trying to find each other. Now it is a boring ten seconds of people trying to be celebrities, taking their trousers down.

SC: *The Unholy Three* is a great favorite of mine. Some works remain and are showed again and again, other fade—can you talk about one or two you have let go, and why?

GW: That is also Maureen Paley, my dealer's, favorite. Mainly it is down to curatorial suggestions. I have to think of a way it can be shown again. I have always wanted to show *Western Security* again.

SC: You are almost exclusively known for pieces like *Confessions All on Video* or *Sacha and Mum*. Does the persistence of certain pieces, to the detriment of others, annoy you?

GW: *Signs* is requested again and again and shown, too.

Dancing in Peckham is also requested again and again.

It has become part of instant historicization, perhaps.

Maureen Paley makes a point of saying to galleries that I have been making work for ten years. Certain pieces are easier to show, perhaps. Museums need an interpretation, curators need a hook, but I have sat on panels and there is often no correlation between the words and the work; a lot of times they don't match in any way.

SC: Many people, over many years, have accused you of varying degrees of exploitation. What do you say to that?

GW: I got it from the beginning with *Signs*. I was considered a true jerk and attacked for using "real" people.

When they are actors it is considered fine, but it is implied that I dupe real people into being open. This is because I have difficult subject matter—people who are drunk are embarrassing; they have emotional reactions. People question whether it is right to listen—with no voiceover saying this is bad or this is a crime, they are left to build their own ideas, their own thoughts.

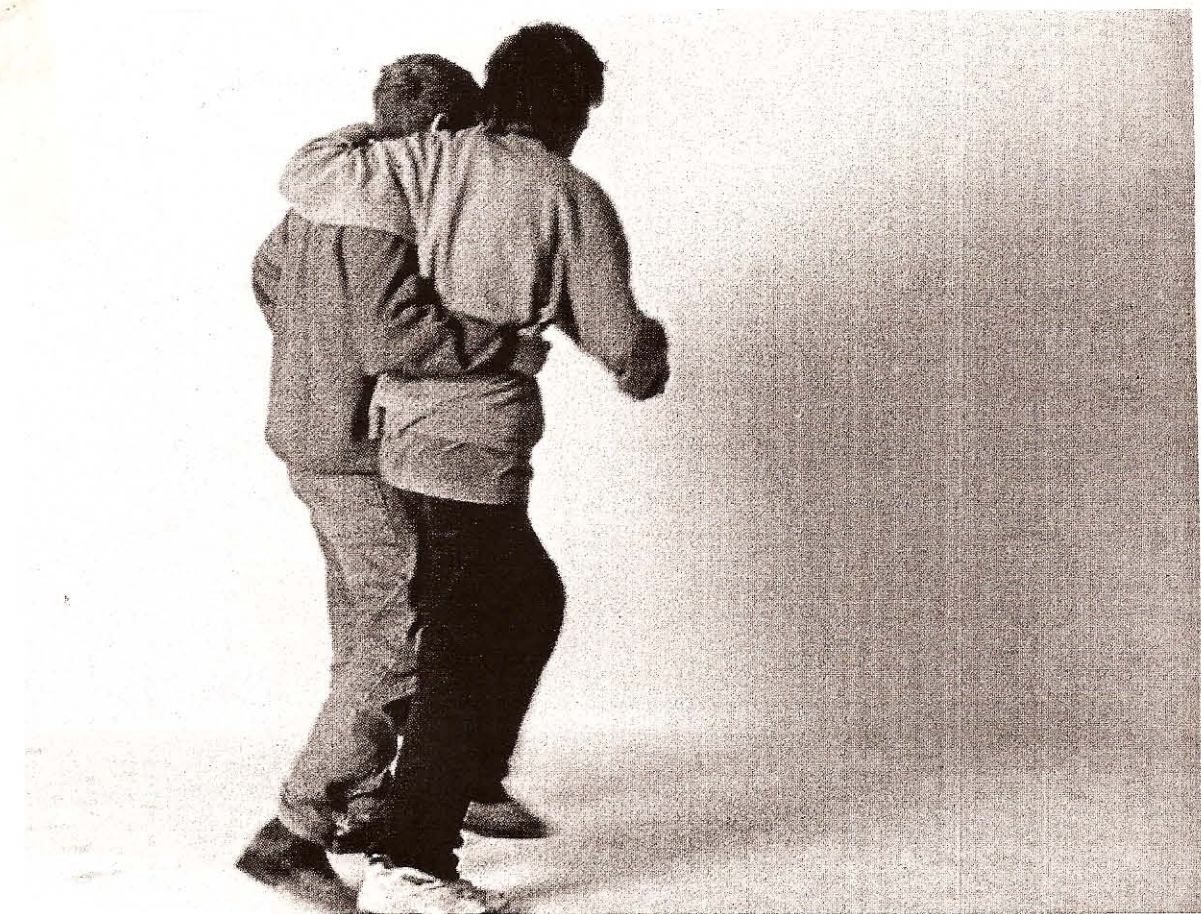
SC: Where do you think the art world's attitude toward the portrayal of real people comes from? Do you want to talk about those early moralistic attacks?

GW: I was accused for going up to people in the street and then for selecting and editing the images.

People thought I was laughing at others. It is amazing that something so harmless is found so offensive. I didn't intend to provoke sensation with a picture of a young man who has



4 ▲ Gillian Wearing *Drunk*, 1999, stills from video.





written, "I thought about being a gigolo but worried about the health risks." There was no real context for *Signs* at the time. I was in the M.A. program at Goldsmiths College, and I got such a backlash; it was like mass hysteria. I had to stand my own ground—to defend myself.

Art should be about freedom of expression.

SC: Do you ever imagine yourself doing something else?

GW: People always say they are giving up art, but art really helped me when I left school.

The world I'm in now is much better than that of a secretary or insurance clerk. Artists feel frustration, not with the art world really, but with themselves. But you can escape:

You're not running a company, so you can take a year off.

I've always liked the idea of trying something else, but

I will never get it together.

SC: What are you showing at the Museum of Contemporary

Art in Chicago?

GW: *I Love You*, *Sixty Minute Silence*, *Trauma*, and *2 into 1* but also *Broad Street*, which is about Birmingham nightlife. It is quite different, since I filmed it without the usual collaboration. A camera was placed inside a club; at first people knew it was there but soon they became immune to it. I also filmed in the street from a distance, for which there was no consultation, and subsequently edited six or seven days of filming down to twenty minutes.

For the Chicago show I specifically chose certain pieces that have not been seen in America, but nonetheless it's clear the way the works blend; they are about family relationships, disharmony, the domestic, and surveillance.

Gillian Wearing was born in 1963 in Birmingham. She lives and works in London.

Photo Credit: Maureen Paley Interim Art, London.