

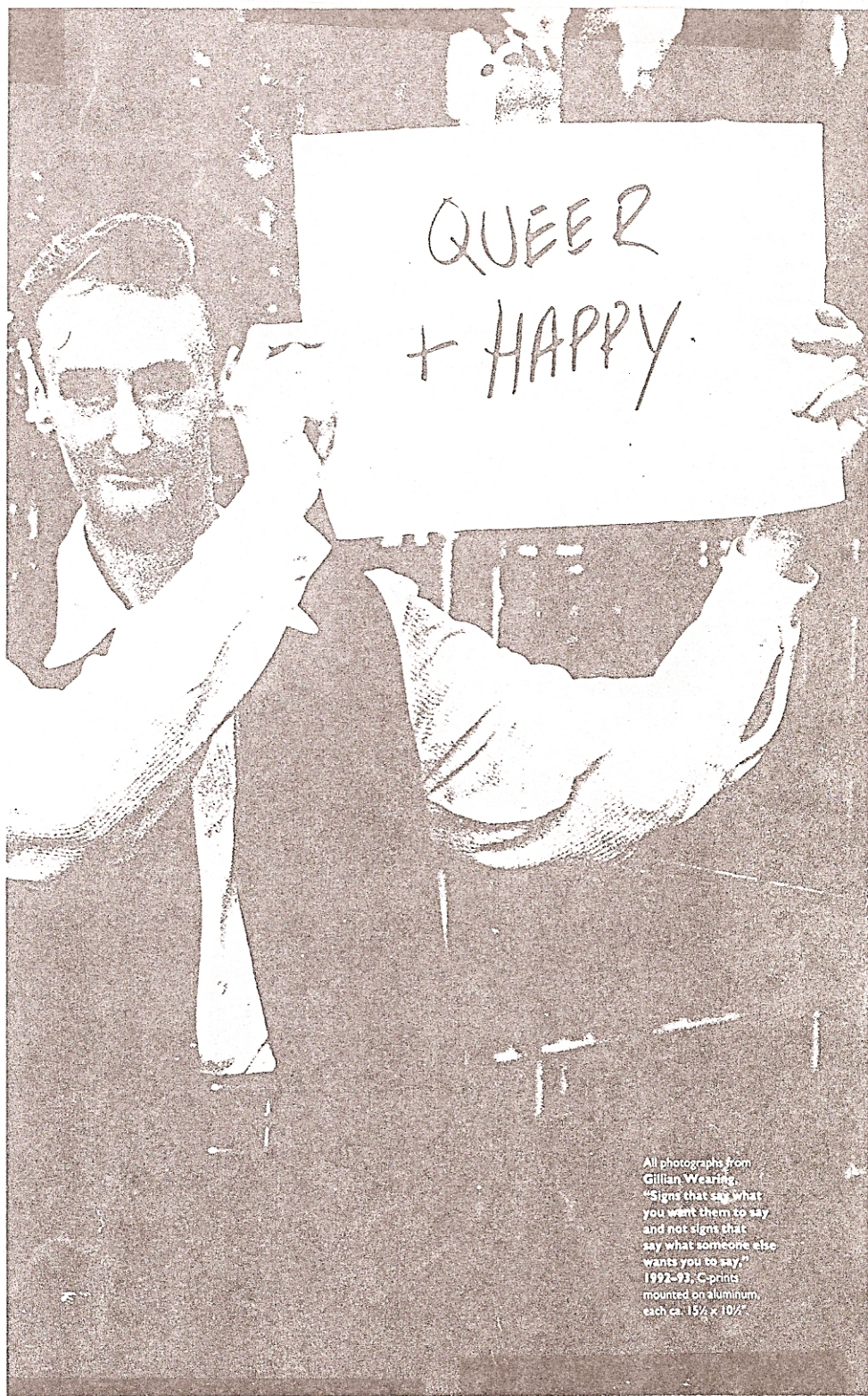
VITAL SIGNS

GILLIAN
WEARING'S
TALKING
PICTURES

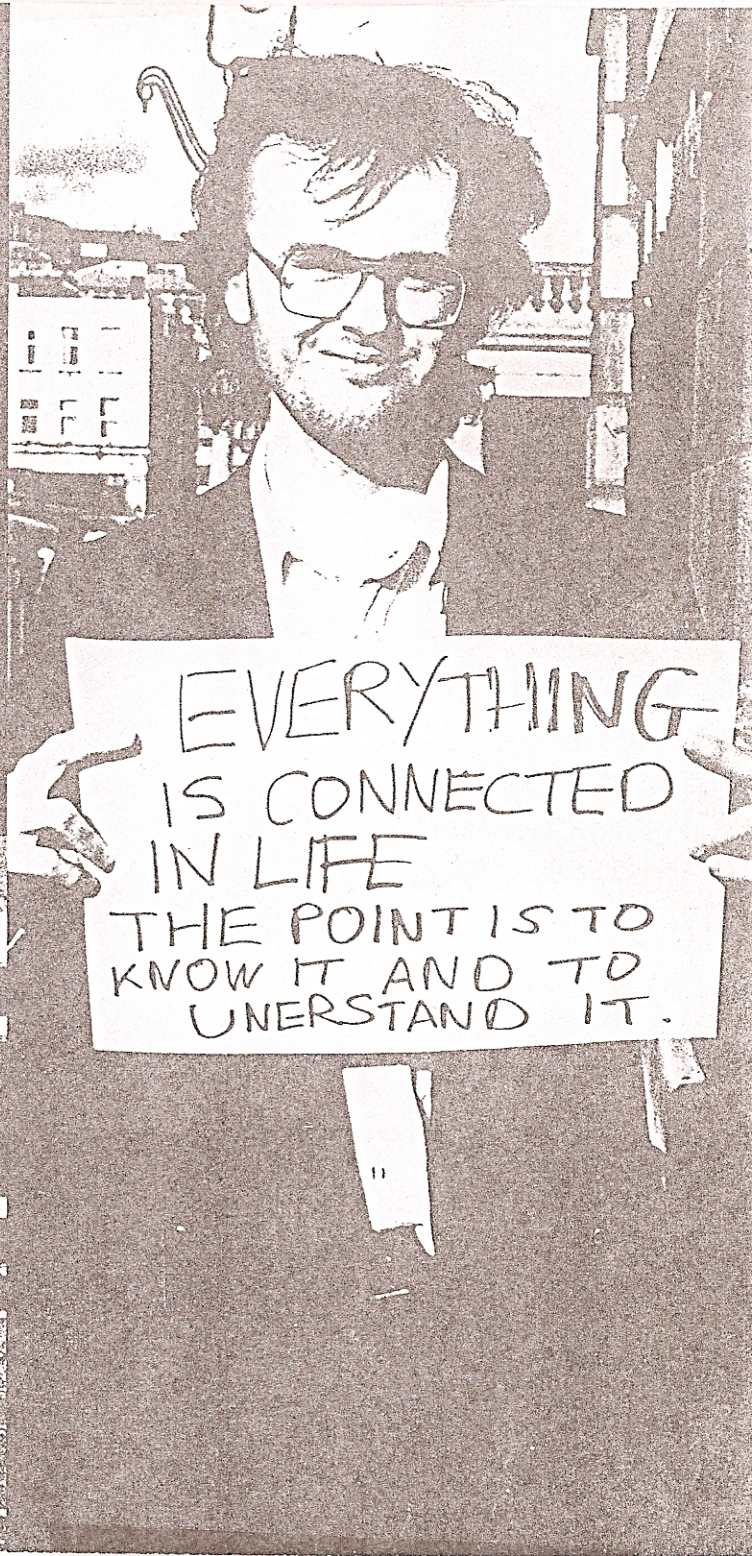
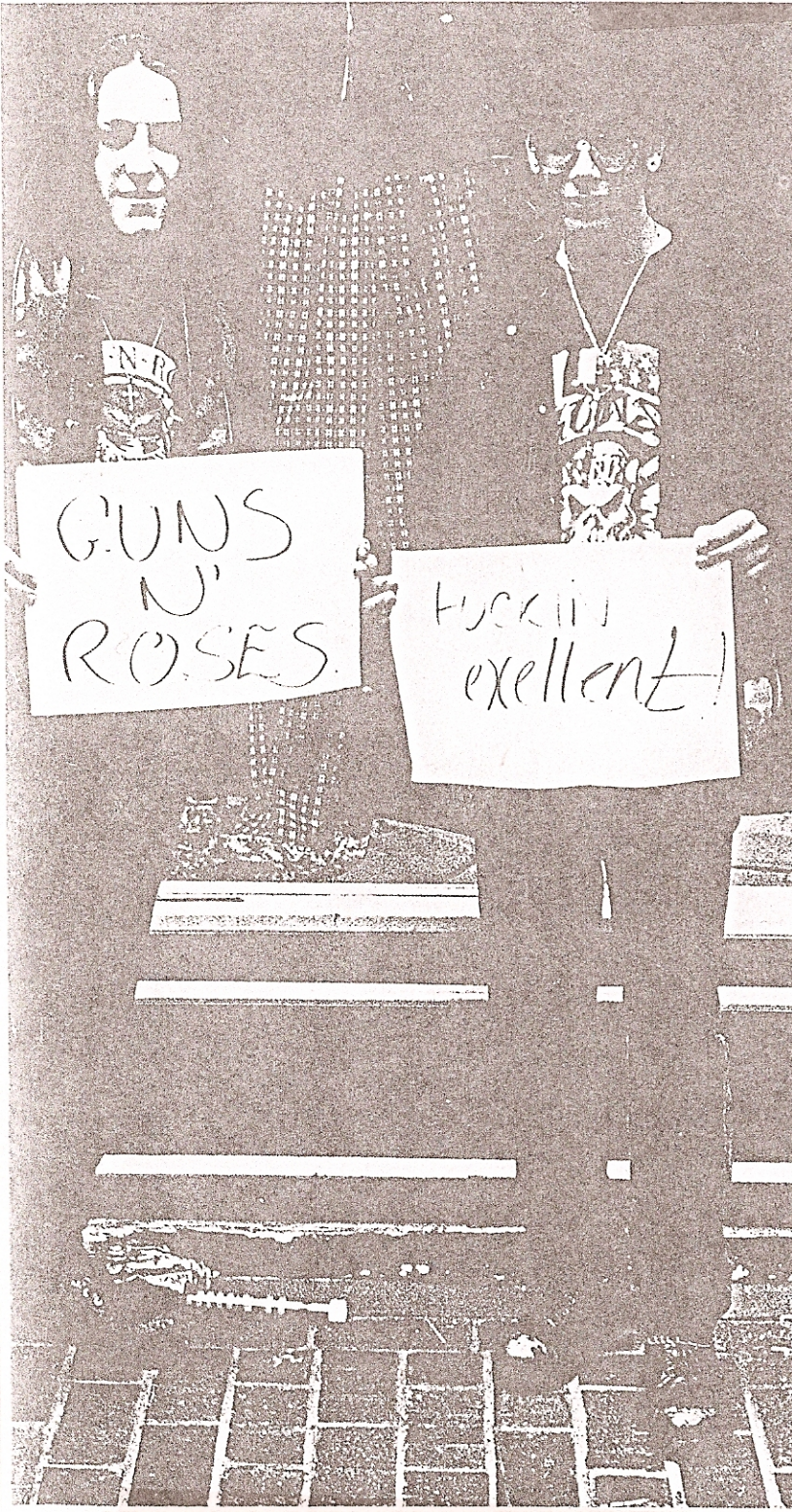
Jon Savage

You're walking down a busy Central London street, hurrying through stress, noise, fumes, crowds. When a young woman comes up to you out of the chaos, you flinch; your first instinct is to brush past. But as soon as she begins speaking you realize she's not hassling you for money or information—what she wants is more complex.

Handing you a marker and a sheet of card, she asks you to write down what you're thinking, what you're feeling. Then she'll photograph you with the card. How do you respond? Do you write the first thing that comes into your head, however banal, or what you think you ought to, mindful of the fact that this is a public space, that this could be a public act? Do you write something that's really on your mind, taking the opportunity for some real communication? Or do you seize the opportunity to take the stage and act out? The banality that immediately pops into your head, of course, may actually reflect what you "really feel," while a carefully pondered pronouncement of what you "really feel" may be just as



All photographs from
Gillian Wearing.
"Signs that say what
you want them to say
and not signs that
say what someone else
wants you to say,"
1992-93, C-prints
mounted on aluminum,
each ca. 15 1/2 x 10 1/2"



mediated as any public statement—indicative of a self-image Gillian Wearing's camera may in fact subvert.

The people in Wearing's photographs span these possibilities, and the range between them. How else can you account for the young man who holds up **QUEER + HAPPY** with a twisted grimace, or the tracksuited geek who casts himself as **WICKED AND WILD!**? Other responses are humorous, lateral, philosophical. **EVERYTHING IS CONNECTED IN LIFE THE POINT IS TO KNOW IT AND TO UNDERSTAND IT** is the message from an unshaven, bespectacled young man. A joker, his grip staggily effeminate, holds up **PLEASE DON'T FEED ME OR GIVE ME ANYTHING TO DRINK**. Two ill-matched working-class youths pose in a South London high street: **YARD + GRO SAY DIVERT THE DIVERTED**—surrealism worthy of Bob Dylan's elliptical placards accompanying "Subterranean Homesick Blues" in *Don't Look Back*.

Sometimes Wearing's approach is seen as a challenge, taken up with bravado. **ME AND MY BROTHERS SAY BOLLOCKS** is the collective reply of three drunkards on a sunny day (in England, always the license for Dionysian behavior). A black pair fresh from McDonald's hold up a 'YUK' apostrophized into ambiguity. And two awkward suburban youths, captured in the teenage theme-park of Carnaby Street, display the badge of their tribe—**GUNS N' ROSES, FUCKIN' EXCELLENT!**

Photographing, framing, then placing on view, Wearing creates a space between words, facial and bodily expression, and city background. As in any good storytelling there are gaps into which you can project. For each banality there is a message that forces the realization: people are rarely what they seem. In a society like the English there is bound to be a disparity between the public face and the inner feelings—and indeed this is the theme of much English art and politics, whether in recurrent parliamentary sex scandals (recently among Conservative ministers) or in English rock, with its raging emotions expressed from behind a blank, stylized facade. Thus a young man, apparently the embodiment of all that England's aggressively Conservative government could wish, stands in the off-the-peg suit, carefully colorful tie, security tag, and short haircut of the junior company employee. His message: **I'M DESPERATE**. So is the Conservative rhetoric—of back-to-basics, back-to-the-'50s—exposed as a rotten lie.

Wearing's photographs, selected for exhibition from about 400 taken over the last 18 months, build up a picture of contemporary London faithful enough to be used in the future as social documentation. They show a city saturated in American culture, a city in which people are scared about the future—**WILL ENGLAND GET THROUGH THIS RECESSION?**; where pleasure must be snatched—**STUFF YOUR FACE IN CAMDEN**; where a sideways sense of humor offers much needed mental space within claustrophobia. Most of all, they show London as a city of the homeless. The extreme social divisions described by Dickens are back. Many of the homeless are quite used to writing their thoughts on placards, and it is they who provide the most immediate, even eloquent messages: **GIVE PEOPLE HOUSES THERE IS PLENTY OF EMPTY ONE'S OK! I SIGNED ON AND THEY WOULD NOT GIVE ME NOTHING. POLICEMAN NO BLOODY GOOD, DO NOT HELP. I HAVE BEEN CERTIFIED AS MILDLY INSANE. COME BACK MARY LOVE YOU GET BACK MARY.** □

