Burn, Gordon, "The Encounter with Reality," Parkett, Issue 70, pp. 108 – 123, ills.

Gillian Wearing

GILLIAN WEARING, SELF PORTRAIT, 2000, c-type print, 67 11/16 x 67 11/16"/ SELBSTPORTRÄT, C-Print, 172 x 172 cm.

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THE ENCOUNTER WITH REALITY

If, as with Emerson, Williams seems to "ask the fact for the form," the form, once it comes, is free of the fact, is a dance above the fact.
– Charles Tomlinson[1)]

GORDON BURN

For some reason every time I applied myself to thinking about Gillian Wearing and her work, I found myself thinking about William Carlos Williams—Williams, the poet of inarticulate America; a poet who distrusted articulacy—and his elusive, famous little poem—only 16 words—"The Red Wheelbarrow":

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens[2)]

Like Wearing, Williams, a family doctor for most of his life in small-town New Jersey, believed in embracing the immediate and the local, the what-is-to-hand in the where-we-are. The great attraction of Williams' poetry was its insistence that intelligence is inseparable from the whole range of immediate, physical, bodily perception. He set out to develop a language that was "an action upon the real" rather than a discourse of abstractions about it.

The blocked verbal facility of the people he encountered daily on his rounds was for Williams a constant rush and excitement ("It's the anarchy of poverty / delights me..."),[3)] and the artlessness of ordinary speech came to replace "high-end" aestheticized language and the conventional poetic formulas in his work. "Colleges and books only copy the language which the field and work-yard made," Emerson had said (in "The American Scholar," 1837). And "'the speech of Polish mothers' was where Williams insisted he got his English from"[4)]: "Anything is good material for poetry. Anything. I've said it time and time again."[5)]

"That words set in Jersey speech rhythms mean less but mean it with more finality," critic Hugh Kenner once observed was Williams' great technical perception.[6)] Which reminded me of something Gillian Wearing has said about her own work's investment

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in the completely defenseless simplicity of personal speech, and its implicit belief in a kind of heroism among damaged people and diminished things: "I'm more interested in how other people can put things together, how people can say something far more interesting than I can."[7]

Starting out, I had an idea that the matter for this essay on the awkward and, in important ways, unknowable work of Gillian Wearing was going to consist of "found" material like the sometimes funny, sometimes vulgar, often banal and uncomfortable thoughts and words of strangers that she incorporates into her gnarly photographic and video art. And one day when I should have been at home working on what you have in front of you now, I stepped out of a London restaurant into driving rain. Diagonally opposite the restaurant was a second-hand bookshop, and I ducked in there for shelter. It was musty-smelling, with a dinging door-bell and flattened cardboard boxes on the floor to take up the wet. The owner was sitting in a low, busted chair in his topcoat with the collar pulled all the way up, playing bridge or patience or another card-game on a grey box computer.

My eye was almost immediately drawn to some white writing on a red spine: "I Wanted to Write a Poem by William Carlos Williams."[8] It was the first edition of a "talked" book, published in 1958. Set on their own in the middle of the first page were five lines of the poem from which the book got its title:

I wanted to write a poem
that you would understand.
For what good is it to me
if you can't understand it?
But you got to try hard—

This book stood next to a long-forgotten novel by Djuna Barnes. And, slipped between them, a skinny filling in this melancholy modernist sandwich, an issue of the University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, number 24, dated 1963, subject William Carlos Williams. The pamphlet fell open to page 24, where "The Red Wheelbarrow" was reproduced. Page 25 carried a poem I hadn't come across before but which, for reasons that to even casual Wearing-watchers will seem obvious, wrote itself straight into this space:

Danse Russe

If when my wife is sleeping
and the baby and Kathleen
are sleeping
and the sun is a flame-white disc
in silken mists
above shining trees, –
if I in my north room
dance naked, grotesquely
before my mirror
waving my shirt round my head
and singing softly to myself:
"I am lonely, lonely.
I was born to be lonely,
I am best so!"
If I admire my arms, my face,
my shoulders, flanks, buttocks
against the yellow drawn shades, –

Who shall say I am not
the happy genius of my household?[2]

"In the *Video Diary* and *Video Nation* TV spots," Wearing has said, "you see people acting silly in their own homes—and that's since camcorders have come out. People have wanted to record themselves being wacky; this is the 'true' them. But they're doing it in private. I'm sure that many people have done a lot of dancing in their bedrooms, but taking that fantasy and putting it somewhere it's alien—that's where you can start questioning."[9]

The 25-minute video DANCING IN PECKHAM (1994) shows Wearing herself dancing to a soundtrack (Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit," Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive") that she is unspooling silently in her head. The "alien" environment the spectacle unfolds in is the placelessness of a small shopping mall arcade—a locus of the new form of solitude endemic in what Marc Augé has defined as "the space of non-place."

"A person entering the space of non-place [motorways, airport lounges, cineplexes, destination

GILLIAN WEARING, DRUNK, 1999, stills from the 23-min. DVD 3-screen projection / BESOFFEN, Szenen aus der 23-minütigen DVD-Dreifachprojektion.

retail 'experiences'] is relieved of his usual determinants," Augé writes. "He obeys the same code as others, receives the same messages, responds to the same entreaties. The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude."[10] To give vent to unembarrassed self-expression and self-display in such a non-place then becomes an act of willful and (this is the implication) punishable transgression.

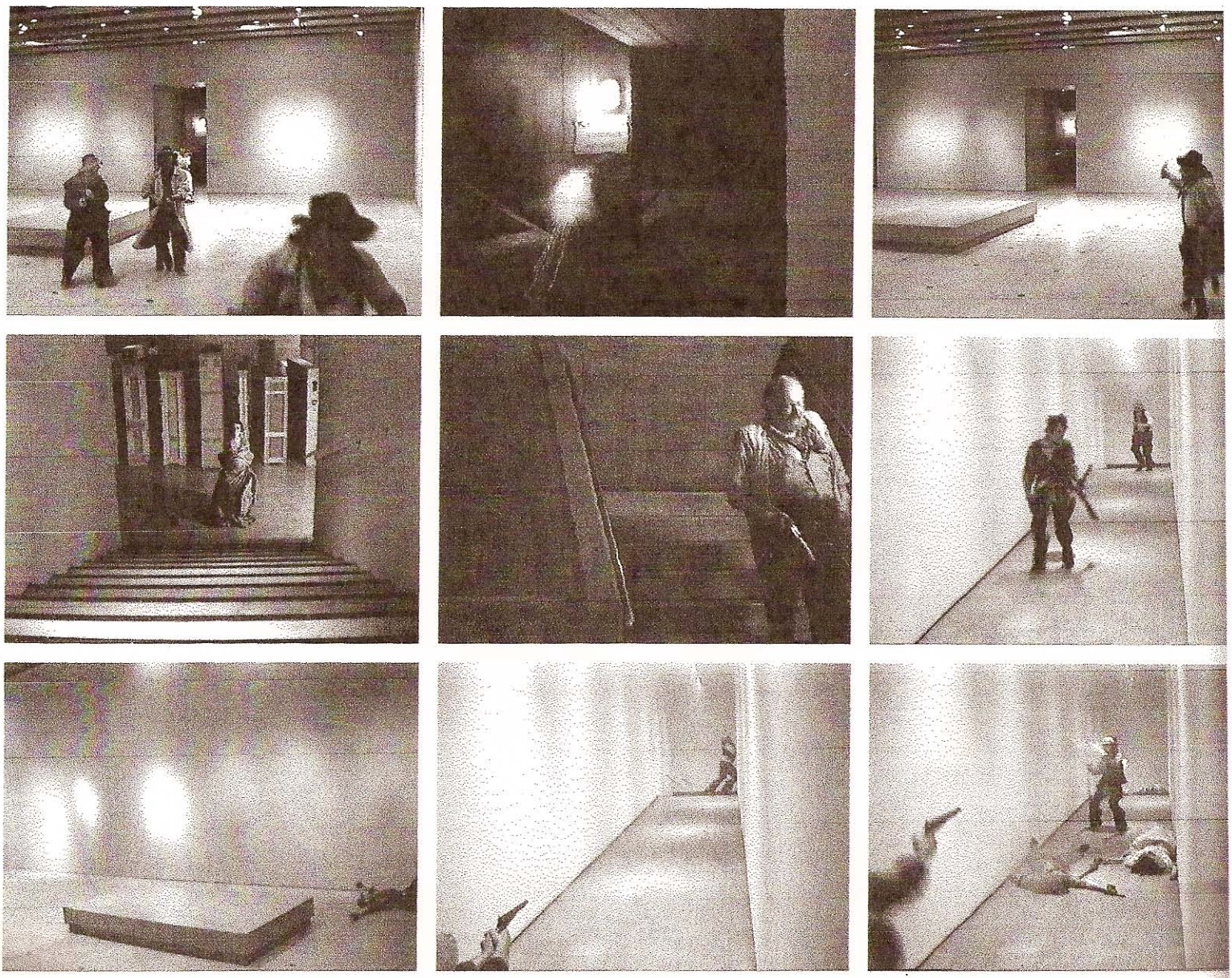
It has become a commonplace in the environment of the image that images accumulate sensation around themselves the more they are reproduced and repeated; they grow an aura. And, thanks to a number of high-profile murder cases in Britain in recent years, a suggestion of the uncanny—the specter of death stalking through the center of life; the notion of demonistic or magic forces—has attached itself to suburban malls like the one where Wearing filmed herself disco-dancing in south London. (She had previously used the down-at-heel, no-longer-modern Peckham mall as a background in SIGNS THAT SAY WHAT YOU WANT THEM TO SAY AND NOT SIGNS THAT SAY WHAT SOMEONE ELSE WANTS YOU TO SAY, 1992–93).

In what was to be the last hour of her life, the popular television presenter Jill Dando was caught by CCTV cameras shopping for an ink cartridge for her printer in King's Mall, close to the BBC. The grainy stutter-frames of the three-year-old James Bulger walking through the central precinct of the Strand shopping center on Merseyside hand-in-hand with his two schoolboy killers became some of the most deeply ingrained images of recent times.

There is an aggression involved in every use of the camera. And inevitably there is an evidentiary quality—a stary cold stoniness—to the Dando and Bulger pictures. Although mechanically captured, they imply the slyness and patience of the snooper, the stalker, the lurking feral paparazzo photographer. They suggest the privileged view vouchsafed the killer, crouching, unseen, in the bushes in the front garden of Jill Dando's house at Gowan Avenue in Fulham.

Perhaps it was these conventions that Gillian Wearing was testing when she put on a bandage mask and had herself spy-cammed as she walked to the local shops for HOMAGE TO THE WOMAN WITH THE

GILLIAN WEARING, WESTERN SECURITY, 1995, stills from 30-min. DVD for 10 security monitors /
WESTLICHE SICHERHEITSMASSNAHMEN, Szenen aus der 30-minütigen DVD für 10 Überwachungsmonitoren.



GILLIAN WEARING, HOMAGE TO THE WOMAN WITH THE BANDAGED FACE WHO I SAW YESTERDAY DOWN WALWORTH ROAD, 1995, still from 7-min. DVD for back projection / HOMMAGE AN DIE FRAU MIT DEM VERBUNDENEN GESICHT, DIE ICH GESTERN AUF DER WALWORTH ROAD SAH, Szene aus der 7-minütigen DVD für Rückprojektion.

BANDAGED FACE WHO I SAW YESTERDAY DOWN WALWORTH ROAD (1995). The visual vocabulary that, as regular television grazers, we have all internalized—the extreme graininess, the ethereal streaks and smudges—is in evidence. The snatched quality of such footage has come to be seen as a guarantee of its authenticity. The rawness of the pictures (often combined with ticking digits at the top of the frame or the bottom) has become code for the real world happening in real time—for reality caught off-guard, in what we might think of as the in-between moments, when crimes and catastrophes happen. Much of their power derives from the fact that they were never meant to be seen. Only the calamitous events to which they have become connected have led to them being retrieved.

The difference in this instance is that Wearing herself is the embodiment of the uncanny, if you accept the psychoanalytical interpretation of the uncanny as being "something that ought to have remained secret and hidden but which has come to light"[11]—"a sense of something new, foreign and hostile invading an old, familiar, customary world."[12] And another difference: the woman in the bandage mask returns the gaze; stares down the starers; she looks back.

What is it with Wearing and masks? "Celebrity," John Updike has written, "is a mask that eats into the

face." Unlike a number of her friends and contemporaries among the Young British Artists pack, Gillian Wearing hasn't become a promiscuously photographed party presence, an instantly recognizable household face. In SELF PORTRAIT (2000), though, she wears a mask that reads as a photofake, digitally doctored version of her own features (it is in fact an actual mask made of her face). It has no physical texture; none of the complicated tonality of a living face; none of the greasy luster of living skin. The hard-shadowed eye sockets and deep caves of the nostrils are unnerving. The face appears virtual; incorporeal. Less Lara Croft than Larkin's stone effigy on an Arundel tomb.

In these ways SELF PORTRAIT, and the more recent self portraits as various members of her immediate family (SELF PORTRAIT AS MY MOTHER JEAN GREGORY, 2003, and so on) are reminiscent of the computer composites that Nancy Burson has made, using "wrinkle masks" taken from the family members of long-missing children to digitally "age" the children's faces in order to give an approximation of how they might look in the unlikely event of them still being alive.

In the work of an earlier generation of English artists—the portrait paintings of Francis Bacon and Lucien Freud, most notably—the body-shape is clearly modeled by the life inside it; there is a sense of internal pressure pushing the skin into its uniquely complex shape. But with Wearing, as with a number of other notable artists of her generation, you never know whether there is a (real) face or only a ghastly void behind the crude disguises and prosthetic masks.

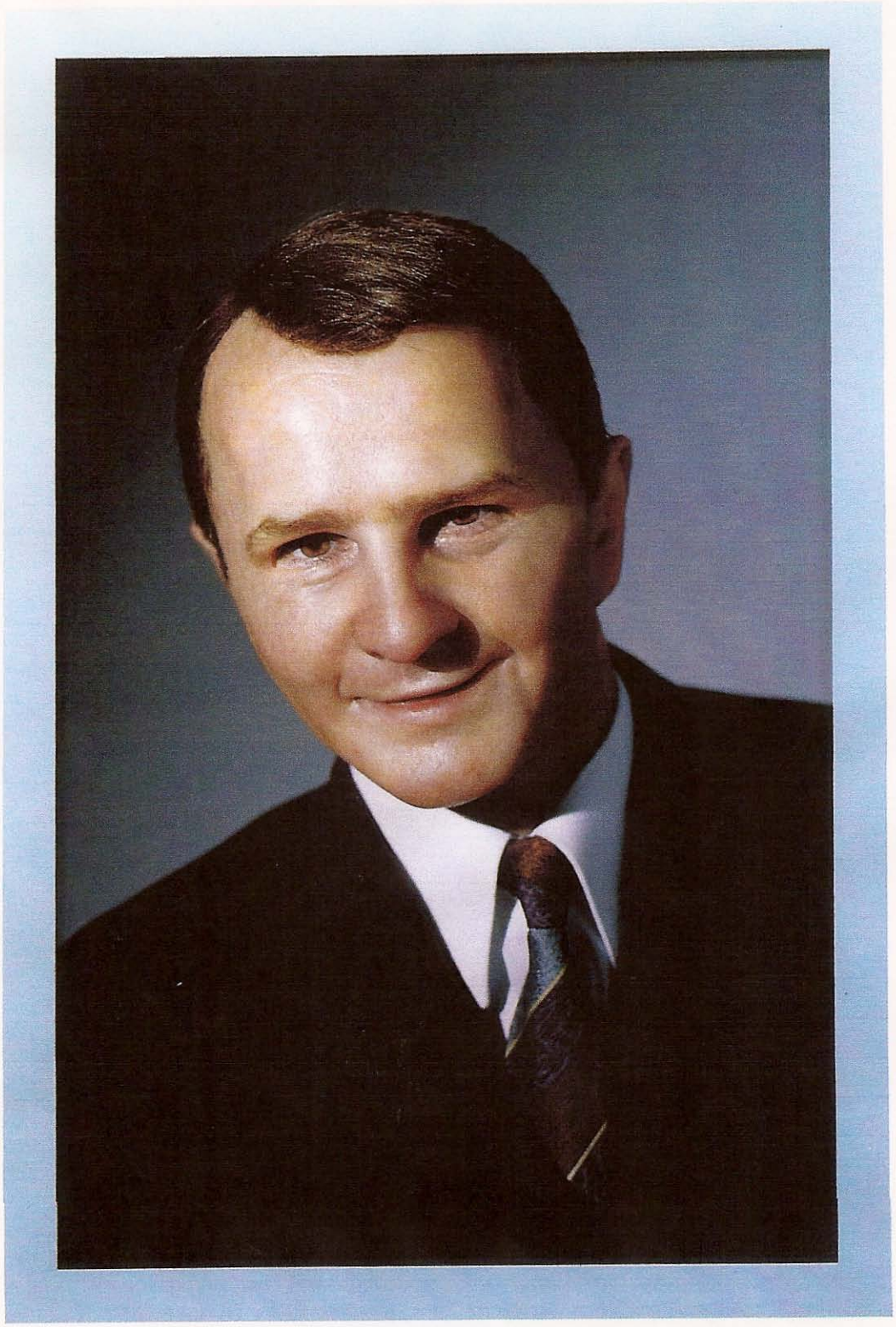
In his 1991 novel, *Mao II,* Don DeLillo has the following passage: "He knew the boy was standing by the door and he tried to see his face in words, imagine what he looked like, skin and eyes and features, every aspect of that surface called a face, if we can say he has a face, if we believe there is actually something under the hood."[13]

"There are signs everywhere [in US fiction] of the end of what I would call the physiognomy tradition," the novelist Charles Baxter recently wrote. "In writers like Don DeLillo, there is the... suggestion that the individual face simply has no importance any more... In DeLillo we enter a world where we cannot really know much of anything, particularly about other people. Other people may have some sort of individual reality, but it is not very likely to appear on their faces or to be visible anywhere else... If there are no real individuals left, why bother describing their faces. You will have to find something else to describe."[14]

We have come to a point where more and more of us, not only the famous, benefit from packaging ourselves in congenial forms. The packaging, like the masking that is such a feature of Wearing's work, is a form of self-protection. Because it can be perilous to go out there as yourself in a time when personality has replaced output as the measure of fame.

Confess all on video. Don't worry, you will be in disguise. Intrigued? Call Oprah, Jerry, Kilroy, Trisha. Come on. You can be real or fake-real so people think they're seeing reality when they're seeing something they invent. We are all creatures of the electronic limbo. Call Gillian.

1) Charles Tomlinson, in his introduction to William Carlos Williams: *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 16.
2) From William Carlos Williams, *Collected Poems: 1909–1939,* vol. I, copyright 1938 by New Directions Publishing Corp. Reprinted by permission.
3) Opening lines of Williams' poem "The Poor."
4) Tomlinson, op. cit., p. 16.
5) "Mike Wallace asks William Carlos Williams Is Poetry a Dead Duck?," an interview published in *The New York Post,* 18 October 1957, also included by Williams in his long poem "Paterson," (Book V, 1958).
6) Hugh Kenner, cited by Tomlinson, op. cit., p. 16.
7) Interview with Donna De Salvo, in *Gillian Wearing* (London: Phaidon, 1999), p. 11.
8) William Carlos Williams, *I wanted to write a poem: the autobiography of the works of a poet,* reported and ed. by Edith Heal (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958).
9) Interview with Ben Judd in 1995, reproduced in *Gillian Wearing* (London: Phaidon, 1999), p. 119.
10) Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995), p. 94.
11) Friedrich Schelling, quoted in Anthony Vidler, *Rachel Whiteread's House,* ed. James Lingwood (London: Phaidon, 1995), p. 71.
12) Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), p. 7.
13) Don DeLillo, *Mao II* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991), p. 203.
14) Charles Baxter, "Loss of Face," *The Believer,* issue 8, November 2003, p. 17.



GILLIAN WEARING, SELF PORTRAIT AS MY UNCLE BRYAN GREGORY (ALBUM), 2003, digital c-type print, framed, 48 13/16 x 32 1/2" / SELBSTPORTRÄT ALS MEIN ONKEL BRYAN GREGORY, digitaler C-Print, gerahmt, 124 x 82,5 cm.