



GARY HILL

Annotated list of works on display at Slought Foundation

Courtesy Donald Young Gallery, Chicago

Up Against Down, 2008

Installation with six projections:

Six-channel video/sound installation

Six video projectors, amplified speakers, six DVD players and six DVDs (color; stereo sound)

Front gallery at Slought Foundation: back/torso; right leg; left leg

Inside: face; right arm; left arm

Up Against Down consists of a series of projected images of various parts of the artist's body forcibly pressing or pushing against a seemingly infinite pure black space. Very slight reflections of the body parts are visible, but the depth and composition of the space remain ambiguous. As the body presses against the indefinable surface, multiple low frequency sine waves along with their sub-harmonics are heard, and the changing tension and force of the body's pressure modulates the waves of sound resembling a kind of shadow of primal drumming.

Wall Piece, 2000

Single-channel video/sound installation

Video projector, strobe light and strobe controller with steel floor mount, two speakers, one DVD player and one DVD (color; stereo sound)

In *Wall Piece*, the image of a man repeatedly flinging himself at a wall and speaking a single word with each impact is projected on the wall of a completely darkened space. During recording, a single flash of extreme high intensity strobe light (the only light source) “captured” the body at the moment of contact. These singular moments were then edited together to form a linear text and a sequence of a body in various positions up against a wall. In the installation, the same kind of strobe light used for the recording is mounted on the floor and focused on the projection. It flashes at approximately 60 cycles per minute, going in and of synchronization with the recorded flashes of light. At times, the light presages the image, echoes the image, or when in unison, obliterates the image.

Incidence of Catastrophe, 1987 – 88

Video (color, stereo sound)

U-matic; 43:51

Inspired by the novel *Thomas the Obscure* by Maurice Blanchot wherein the protagonist of the novel is the reader of the novel he is in (who may well be Blanchot himself). In the video, Thomas the protagonist is played by Hill which confounds the self-reflexive nature of the book’s relationships all the more, making the video something of a “transcreation.” The “reader” begins in the liquidity of the text almost as if he were waking from dreaming. Images of the sea ravishing the shore – small cliffs of sand eroding and collapsing – are inter-cut with extreme close-ups of text and the texture of the page and book itself being flooded with ocean waves. In scene after scene the reader attempts to re-enter the book only to find himself a part of intense dreams and hallucinations. Thomas/Hill reads the book, when, suddenly, he feels he is being watched by the words. The character then experiences the book as a forest of words he is fighting through. Another “chapter” finds him alone in his room at night, overcome by a strange illness, in which the vision of the text has him vomiting violently. The text infiltrates the reader’s entire experience. Thinking he is still capable of functioning socially, the character finds himself at dinner with a group of hotel guests. Their conversation turns into isolated words that, like the sand, erode and wash away with seemingly all possibilities of meaning. The final scene shows the reader in the form of Hill physically and mentally destroyed. Cowering naked in the fetal position, he lies in his own excrement on a white-tiled floor, babbling unintelligible sounds. The pages of the book have grown into monumental walls with colossal letters that menacingly surround and imprison the naked body.

Goats and Sheep, 1995 / 2002

Video (black-and-white, stereo sound)

DVD; 11:00 min.

Derived from the single-channel video *Goats and Sheep* (created for the limited edition *Gary Hill: Around & About: a Performative View*, Paris: Éditions du Regard, 2001), *Twofold (Goats and Sheep)* consists of two identical projections positioned horizontally side-by-side on a wall. The works use the original text and video source material of the installation *Withershins*, 1995, consisting of two simultaneous views of a person signing: the hands and arms are framed in one and the back of the head and top of the shoulders in the other. This latter view catches the hands when they refer to the head during signing. The text, which is written by the artist and ‘signed’ in the video, was derived from the original matrix of 420 phrases available in the interactive installation *Withershins*.

For *Goats and Sheep* and *Twofold (Goats and Sheep)*, Hill changed the color image into black-and-white; combined the two projections of the hands and arms and back of the head into a single alternating image which switches when the text makes reference to the ‘head;’ and re-recorded his own voice and “re-synchronized” it to the original signing. The stereo field is used to double the voice with about a second of delay added to the sound. This doubling mirrors the hands and numerous references and repetitions heard in the text.

Figuring Grounds, 1985/2008

Video (color, stereo sound)

U-matic; 5:30 min.

Color video camera, microphone and closed-circuit video monitor

Figuring Grounds was edited and completed on the occasion of the publication of *An Art of Limina: Gary Hill’s Works and Writings* by George Quasha and Charles Stein from three hours of recordings made at the Stained Glass Studio in Barrytown, New York, where *Why Do Things Get in a Muddle? (Come On Petunia)* was also taped. During the recording, performers George Quasha and Charles Stein monitored themselves on a closed-circuit system responding to a continuously changing image of themselves created by Gary Hill’s camera work. The improvisational search for voices passes through recognizable swarms of phonemes with a word or phrase briefly coming into focus now and then. Camera movements and continual focal play mirror the highly nuanced vocal expression, tightly coupled with body and facial movements. At times the image plane fills with rapid hand movements (“Somamudra”), blurred due to their speed and appearing like fire. The voices build upon one another, rising and falling in volume and pitch, sometimes in unison, other times in “conversation,” in a seeming attempt to let the primary roots of language speak for themselves.

Happenstance (part one of many parts), 1982 – 83

Video (black-and-white, stereo sound)

U-matic; 6:30 minutes

The opening sequence of this black-and-white work shows the square, circle and triangle as the basic elements of the formal repertoire. They are joined by letters and words, whose configuration suggests the shape of the triangle. Simultaneously sounds are linked to the visual elements: a bass drum to the square, crash cymbal to the circle and a kind of ‘twang’ sound to the triangle. After first concretizing themselves, amorphous electronic forms (almost like reading the stars, a bird, a fish, a snake and a frog seem to appear if for only moments) become lost in abstract structures as individual words and sentences play counter point. The interplay between language and image builds to a text filled page: “vanishing points” which shifts down the page into “points vanishing.” The letters, which initially morph to a pyramid, now turn into the humus from which grows a letter tree whose leaves fall to the ground as characters, partially forming words there. Hill is creating a kind of choreography of thought, which as already seen in *Videograms* (GHCR 43) – gives rise to an area of tension between the images and the spoken or written texts. At the textual level, he addresses the ephemerality of linguistic meanings inside the ‘nature’ of language. Musical and sound elements underscore the character of the individual passages and the complex intertextuality of the work.

Around & About, 1980

Video (color, sound)

U-matic; 4:45 min.

Two color video cameras, Dave Jones prototype modules (keyer, analog switches, color field generator, output amplifier), microphone and U-matic videotape edit/recorder

“In 1979-80, I was teaching in the Media Studies Department at the State University of New York at Buffalo, filling in for Woody and Steina Vasulka, who had left for Santa Fe. Midway in the year I abruptly had to leave my apartment and move into my office—a relatively small space with a desk, a couple of chalkboards, a couch, plus everything I owned, which was mostly media equipment. About all I could do was work, if only to keep from feeling claustrophobic (moving things around seemed to make the space bigger). *Around & About* came out of a ‘what if’ scenario. What if I were to cut images to every syllable of a spoken text? (A way to keep me busy?) A daunting task in the time of U-matic machines and sloppy controllers. I did it all manually, hitting the edit button for every syllable. With each rewind I would listen and anticipate the coming syllable, learning as I went along to adjust for delayed reaction. I learned quickly—every ‘mistake’ was a step forward and one or more back. Rather quickly I wrote—I could almost say scribbled—a text, driven by a personal relationship breakup, yet, more to the point, directed to an abstract other; that is, someone a viewer could identify with. Rather than separately recording and collecting images, I set the cameras up ‘live’ for each edit/syllable of the entire text, constructing it linearly from beginning to end. I limited myself to images of the room, mostly unmemorable moments of walls, furniture, and whatever else was lying around. It didn’t really matter; it was more about change and keeping the viewer occupied while I spoke. The speech was ‘automating’ the event, making whatever happened happen, at times drawing the view off the screen to the hypothetical space outside the box.”

Site Recite (a prologue), 1989

Video (color, stereo sound)

U-matic SP; 4:00 min.

Appearing as a hazy horizon laden with strange objects, the scene comprises bones, skulls of small mammals, butterflies, nuts, and other botanical “finds” spread out on a round table. These are objects of the kind that one might collect on a nature trail in a forest—but also shells and crumpled notes. They are relics that suggest the cycle of life in a way familiar to us from vanitas still life painting and natural history collections. The camera moves around the table, picking out objects which, because of the shallow depth of focus, stand out one after another from the panorama of the jumbled collection. A bird’s skull, a piece of bark, or a crystal appear needle-sharp in the picture, whereupon the focus changes and the contours of a shell emerge from the nebulous background. In this way the camera discloses the transient beauty of the items one after the other, capturing the beauty of each for a fraction of a second before focusing on the next object. This precise focusing/unfocusing continues for the duration of the work, while a narrator explores his momentary state of consciousness and relationship with the world, verbalizing his own thoughts as transient objects in an ontologically focused vanitas of mind. The rhythmic vocalized syllabics synchronize with the focusing and blurring of the image. And the final tableau places the viewer inside the mouth of the speaker looking out. Just as the narrator opens his mouth and speaks, light enters the speaking cavity, the tongue moves, and the teeth masticate the last words of the work: “imagining the brain closer than the eyes.”

Why Do Things Get in a Muddle?

(Come on Petunia), 1984

Video (color, stereo sound)

2-inch reel-to-reel; 32:00 min.

This tape is the first of Hill’s works for which he deliberately wrote a screenplay. The title defines the piece’s starting point: Alice in Wonderland asks her omniscient father why things get in a muddle. They then talk on a metalinguistic level (i.e. about language using language). A glimpse through the looking glass reveals an inversion of the customary order of things. The father ingests the smoke from his pipe, Alice does not so much blink her eyelids momentarily open as stare wide-eyed, and the playing cards fall out of the air in an orderly manner into the girl’s hand. The language of the two protagonists is strangely slurred and partially incomprehensible. Gradually the reason for these phenomena becomes clear. Almost all the passages are being played and spoken backwards, and the tape can likewise be played backwards, with the result that at first sight the action appears plausible. This also explains why at second glance the movements of the protagonists’ bodies look strangely mechanical. Hill made phonetic notes of the texts spoken backwards by Alice and her father. At the end of the tape, when Alice is standing in front of the looking glass, the letters of the subtitle (“Come on Petunia”) logically regroup as “once upon a time.”

Big Legs Don't Cry, 2005

One 45-inch (or larger) 16:9 format LCD monitor and wall mount, one DVD player and one DVD (color; silent)

Dimensions variable (45-inch monitor: 25 ½ h. x 43 w. inches [65 x 109 cm.])

Although related to the earlier series entitled *Liminal Objects* (1995-98), in which specific iconic pairs of black-and-white, computer-generated animated objects continuously pass through one another via their shared geometries in virtual space, the works in this recent series (which include *Big Legs Don't Cry, 2005*; *Attention, 2005*; *Church and State, 2005*; and *Spoonful, 2005*) are rendered in color and created specifically for a wide-screen format, flat-panel 45-inch (or larger) LCD screen. These works involve objects that, in a sense, violate each other's borders in unpredictable ways, with the repetitive interaction and circular logic of their movement suggesting different readings of these veritable micro-scenes. Hinting at elements of symbology, they are "objects on the threshold of being something other than objects, 'animated' in a sense deeper and stranger than the technical."