"Gillian Wearing: Mass Observation"
at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago
(on view through January 19, 2003)

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She got a TV eye on me
She got a TV eye
She got a TV eye on me, oh

—Iggy Pop and the Stooges, c. 1970

British artist Gillian Wearing in her precarious artistic methodology seems constantly to be saying: let's touch these two pretty little wires together, ever so gently, and perhaps the whole damn thing won't blow up in our faces. Wearing's video works address the social, lived environment without succumbing to either pretentious proselytizing or trite sloganeering. Wearing emerged from the era dominated by the Young British Artists (or YBAs), won the Turner Prize in 1997, weathered admirably the attendant hype, and has continued to work often in a more low-key and subtle fashion than a number of her "Sensation" colleagues such as Damien Hirst, Tracy Emin, and the Chapman brothers.

Wearing's breakthrough piece was 1992-93's *Signs that say what you want them to say and not Signs that say what someone else wants you to say*, a series of modest portraits of people randomly chosen on the street presenting their own handwritten comments—scrawled in black felttip marker on sheets of white paper—directly to the camera. Forthright, charming and utterly deadly, these images made Wearing's reputation as one of the most inquisitive and unusual artists of the nineties. In the Chicago exhibition, these images are displayed grouped together on one wall, stacked snapshots accumulating into a larger grid of voices: "I will end this sentence but never my thoughts"; I have been certified as mildly insane"; "I'm desperate"; "Everything is connected in life the point is to know it and unnerstand (sic) it."

In the stunning *Drunk* (1997-99), a large three-screen video projection, an assortment of inebriated protagonists parade their way onto/into the stage/frame: a bickering couple, a Chaplinesque skinhead, a group of five 'lads.' At one point a fallen, unconscious drunk spills into all three screens, and this becomes an odd and stately moment, recalling Caravaggio's close-up depictions of ordinary models as saints. The syntax used by Wearing's participants is generally composed of slaps, coughs, curses. Thick British working class accents are further slurred by drink. Pointedly this isn't a runthrough—yet again—of the clichéd theatrical conventions of drunkenness, but an attempt to record some approximation of the "real thing."

An implicit threat of violence is present throughout the work, especially when we see the youths begin a shoving and grappling match, sending their cans of lager flying. But afterwards, a bit later on, we see two men embracing, tenderly; stumbling apart and then back into each other's arms. This is a poignant display of drunken camaraderie and awkward homoeroticism, one of several instances in which human warmth and caring

pierces the arctic chill of Wearing's set-up paper backdrop. (Another occurs when one of the drunks urinates onto the same paper.)

This isolating structural conceit works if only because this is a video not a still photograph, which often seems more pristine and antiseptic (and troubling) as in Richard Avedon's work. Here in fact we see the drunken "actors" lurching, stumbling as if they might somehow erupt forward out of the screen, just as they are often rambling out of our view—crossing out from the frame and into the space beyond: restless sleepwalkers, their dreams punctuated by tremors and yawns.

It remains difficult to really know what we are able to determine from viewing Wearing's "subjects" excepting the rather superficial attributes, or "signs" of drunkenness, just as in the earliest work on view we see brief *Signs* ... displaying quick glimpses recording several people's everyday thoughts.

In *Trauma* (2000), numerous people recount narratives of horrendous past experiences, revealing ways in which they were traumatized sexually, emotionally, violently. However these witnesses wear grotesque, plastic masks in order to disguise their actual identities. *Trauma* is a quiet, calm tape which becomes ever more excruciating to listen to by the second. Voices and "faces" don't match, as they tell tales of repression, angst, and horror. As a viewer, one can become curiously addicted to hearing of such awful incidents. Nevertheless, the now-popular, and generally obnoxious "reality TV" programs pale in comparison to this work. (Wearing sought out volunteers for her project via a newspaper advertisement reading: "Negative or traumatic experience in childhood or youth and willing to talk about it on film. Identity will be concealed.")

Broad Street (2001), a five-channel projection, featuring a busy area of nightlife in Birmingham, England appears a cross between security camera documentation and street photography unfolding in real time, as we see a mixture of the mundane, rowdy, and melancholic. If we were to take this footage for its mere evidentiary value, we might determine that this is a territory defined simply by the prevalence of bad hair (slicked down bangs, askew ponytails), bad clothes (halter tops and loud jewelry) and bad music (Abba and Billy Joel). Depending on one's point of view, *Broad Street* depicts either (A) various people having a good time on a night out, or (B) a nightmarish vision of provincial hell, Hieronymus Bosch goes clubbing.

Artist Barnett Newman was fond of stating (in reference to painting): "It's not about size, it's about scale." And so it is with Wearing's video projections—questions of scale are paramount but not only in terms of presentation on one level, but how to modulate scale and alter it effectively according to the demands brought about by each individual piece. The near-overwhelming triptych of *Drunk* contrasts dramatically with the claustrophobic, cubical-style viewing space used for *Trauma*, devoid of even a bench to sit on, while one views Wearing's compendium of tales unravel.

Perhaps Wearing's eventual goal is a simple one: how to best figure out ways to infiltrate the experience of others. Curator Dominic Molon cites a quotation from another—the most?—inquisitive photo-artist Diane Arbus: "What I'm trying to describe is that it's impossible to get out of your skin and into somebody else's. And that's what all this is a little bit about. That somebody else's tragedy is not the same as your own." Similarly to

Wearing, Arbus was reportedly shy—to a point—but her work as a photographer allowed her to don a more forward, interrogative persona.

The chief vehicle for going about this task is the camera, that all-seeing eye, attached to a mechanical—now electronic—apparatus, an awkward box-like appendage used as surrogate for further physical contact, capturing and revealing glimpse after glimpse. Ultimately Wearing's videos address human boundaries and limitations and, in the process, yield challenging and difficult images. In the increasingly unsettling (but often moribund and reactionary) climate of the early 21st Century, can we as viewers really ask for more?