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Gillian Wearing

spiritual family album, DIVERSIONARY SCHADENFREUDE, midcareer survey, lascivious tittle-tattle, 'I LOVE YOU', grotesqueing, shambolically drunk, STRUCTURALIST UNDERPINNING, conflation and confusion, self-watching, SELF-POSITIONING, spanked his credit card, signifying intimacy, TORMENTING SCENE IN A PARK

words **SALLY O'REILLY** portrait **JUERGEN TELLER**

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There is a phenomenon in the artworld known as 'the art telly'. This is the small, shabby, old portable television set owned by a particular sort of artist, critic or curator. If you remark on it, it generally elicits the response, "Oh, yes, we just use it to watch films on, really." For some academically inclined people, television is the opposite of art – fast, unthinking entertainment led by audience figures and dubious trends – and this anti-TV attitude is performed to imply that their thoughtful, independent and creative enquiry never ceases. Gillian Wearing, on the other hand, quite comfortably claims to watch a lot of TV. It provides a view onto society, revealing what is on people's minds, even if, in part, TV is the thing that put it in their minds in the first place. Wearing has always been extremely interested in what underlies people's actions in the two-way street between psychology and society. Her practice probes the hidden parts of other people's lives, as well as her own, not as diversionary schadenfreude or lascivious tittle-tattle, but partly so that we might better understand ourselves, and partly to give voice to those who do not have access to the canonical conduits of power.

In the selection of works for Wearing's midcareer survey, opening at London's Whitechapel Gallery on 28 March, this remit of giving voice is particularly evident. Video and photographic pieces spanning the past 20 years reveal a distinct sociological turn in her practice, although this is regularly derailed by pieces of blatant fiction. In contrast to her early iconographic series *Signs That Say What You Want Them to Say and Not Signs That Say What Someone Else Wants You to Say* (1992–3), where happenstance encounters with strangers dictated the outcome, the video *I Love You* (1999) is a careful choreography of reenacted behaviour based on bruising observation. Two couples repeatedly arrive home late, one woman shambolically drunk, and her partner and friends in various states of horror, disgust, indulgence and complicity. It is the structure of the piece that conducts much of the meaning-making: the cycle of behaviour is the very depressing thing about it, and the erratic plasticity of relationships evidences the contingency and precariousness of our emotional lives. Although at first Wearing's practice may seem to be incredibly content-led, such a structuralist underpinning is not uncommon. *Sacha and Mum* (1996), for instance, in which the unsettling mood swings performed by a mother and daughter – the elder tenderly drying the other's wet hair and then using it to tug her to the floor – is made even more disorienting by continuously spooling back, without ever reaching a point of origin or primal cause, as if grotesqueing the psychoanalytic process.

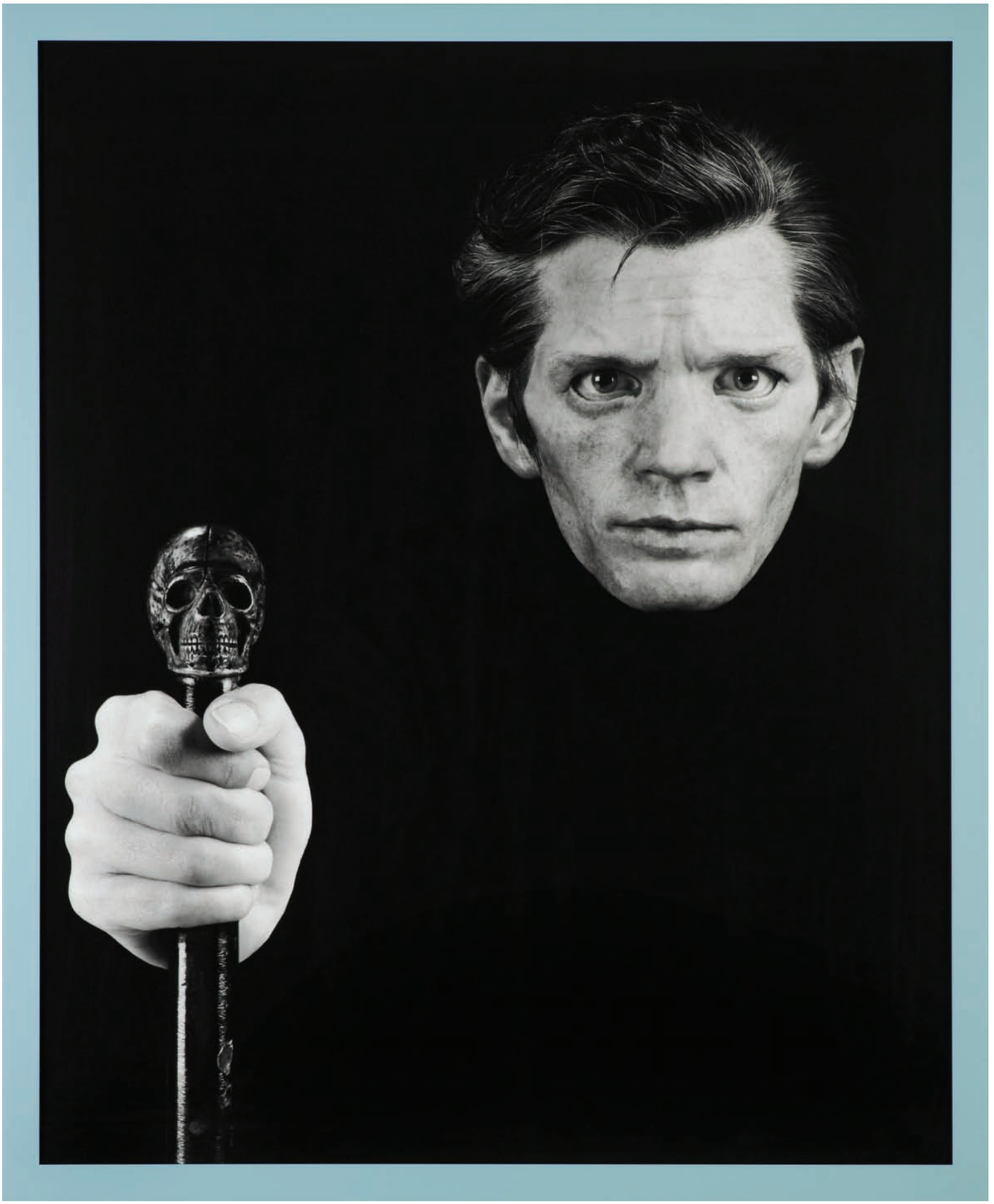
The division of works into documentarylike representations of reality and constructed fictions is not so clear. Not only does Wearing slip between the two modes, unfettered by the anthropologist's insistence on clear-cut objectivity, she also relishes conflation and confusion between them. Anthropology, she suggests, attempts to compress human subjectivity into scientific objectivity, which is neither desirable nor possible. Her approach, then, is to invite the mess and noise of individual articulations of thought, but also to set up situations that foreground the artifice of a situation rather than its authentic documentation. The fly on the wall has been swatted so that we might better assess how we go about presenting our emotions and experiences to others – and to ourselves.

above:
Sacha and Mum, 1996, video for projection with sound, 4 min 30 sec

below:
I Love You, 1999, colour video projection with sound, 60 min

It is this particular point of self-watching that has emerged as the main theme of the Whitechapel exhibition. Wearing considers the terms 'frontstage' and 'backstage' applicable not just to designated theatrical spaces, but also to the ongoing performance that is everyday life. As the sociologist Erving Goffman describes in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), when an individual plays a role – as mother, waiter, manager or whatever – observers are expected to take these performances seriously and believe that the traits apparent are indeed possessed by the performer. That the individual himself or herself is taken in by the performance is less of a given, and it is this awareness of a discrepancy between front-of-house presentation and behind-the-scenes 'reality' that is so productive for Wearing. Goffman expresses these ideas through theatrical terminology such as masks and scene setting, and throughout the exhibition both these phenomena feature greatly. Viewing booths wear their construction on their sleeve, with raw wood outsides that make no pretence of neutral invisibility; and all manner of masks, from the metaphorical to the actual, the hilarious to the uncanny, recur throughout the works themselves.

The ongoing 'spiritual family album' photographic series (2008–) exemplifies the idea of self-presentation as a series of masks or adopted personae. An extension of an earlier self-portrait series, where masks transform Wearing into transgenerational members of her own family, from brother to grandmother to herself age three,



Me as Mapplethorpe, 2009, framed bromide print (based on the Robert Mapplethorpe work *Self Portrait*, 1988, © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, New York), 159 x 131 cm

Me as Warhol in Drag with Scar, 2010, framed bromide print, 156 x 133 cm

the spiritual family album identifies the artists with whom she relates art historically, Diane Arbus, Robert Mapplethorpe and Andy Warhol among them. Wearing describes how the masks inform the attitude of the body by extension. The original Mapplethorpe photograph was a self-portrait, for instance, and so Wearing enacts a similar sense of control; the Arbus, she says, is 'more of a slump'. A person's carriage is instrumental to self-expression, before even a word is uttered; in fact, although language offers us particularities, details and corroboration, she points out, a verbal description of an emotion has a paucity that cannot approach the convolutions of subjectivity. These masked portraits are particularly curious images, though, since they spotlight Wearing's art-historical self-positioning. There is a point to be made here about an equivalence between genetic and cultural inheritance, and artists do often declare their influences, and yet to step not into the shoes but the faces of canonical greats is comically bold.

STORIES OF PATRICIDAL THOUGHTS, CHILD ABUSE AND SEXUAL EXPERIMENTATION TUMBLE FROM THE INANIMATE MASKS, THE EYEHOLES REVEALING THE SUBJECTS' DISCOMFORT BEYOND

Confess All on Video. Don't Worry, You Will Be in Disguise. Intrigued? Call Gillian... (1994) is a series of talking heads in which participants found through an advert in *Time Out* tell stories of theft, drugs and transgressive sex in various degrees of makeshift disguise. One of the more interesting episodes is recounted by a woman, her face absurdly bound in Sellotape. It's not so much the story that is astonishing – it is about her and another woman who, when they discovered they had both been two-timed, stranded the man in question naked in a hotel room and spanked his credit card – but the way it's recounted. The tone and manner of delivery suggest that this story has been told more than once, perhaps as an anecdote signifying intimacy to new friends. And so, although her identity is disguised, we see another mask peeled back to reveal still deeper layers of socialised behaviour.

Such layering is teased out further in the recent video *Bully* (2010), developed from a previous video project, *Trauma* (2000), in which people bearing masks made to look like their younger selves relate traumatic episodes from childhood. There is more at stake in *Trauma* than *Confess All...*, and the subject matter darkens appreciably: stories of patricidal thoughts, child abuse and sexual experimentation tumble from the inanimate masks, the eyeholes revealing the subjects' discomfort beyond. Wearing uses masks here not only to provide protection for the wearers, but also to empower them, paradoxically employing anonymity as a means to express identity. *Bully* extends this empowerment of the subject – a young man who was appallingly bullied as a child – by providing the means not only to announce his identity but also externalise his experiences through improvised theatre techniques. We are aware of the layered registers of construction and reconstruction, but the young man visibly slips between reenactment and reliving as he directs performers to recreate a tormenting scene in a park. He is moved to tears as he finally gets to live out a fantasy of control and verbal retribution, while the cast inhabit the uncomfortable role of having created tension in a fictional realm that has had an effect in a real one.

Perhaps surprisingly, when we spoke Wearing aligned this odd concoction of social realism and surreal slippage, the disjunction between frontstage and back, with the work of René Magritte: "I always felt that his Surrealism actually felt more real than the 'real'. We're so used to the way that things are that we can no longer see them. In a way you have to disjoint reality to see it properly." The contemplation of the back of one's own head, in this case then, becomes a Möbius metaphor for the contortionist move of catching a glimpse of one's own self-watching.

An exhibition of work by Gillian Wearing is at Whitechapel Gallery, London, from 28 March to 17 June

above:
Confess All On Video. Don't Worry, You Will Be In Disguise. Intrigued? Call Gillian...,
1994, colour video for monitor with sound, 30 min

right:
Signs That Say What You Want Them to Say and Not Signs That Say What Someone Else Wants You to Say, HELP,
1992–3, c-type print mounted on aluminium, dimensions variable

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