

# REGEN PROJECTS

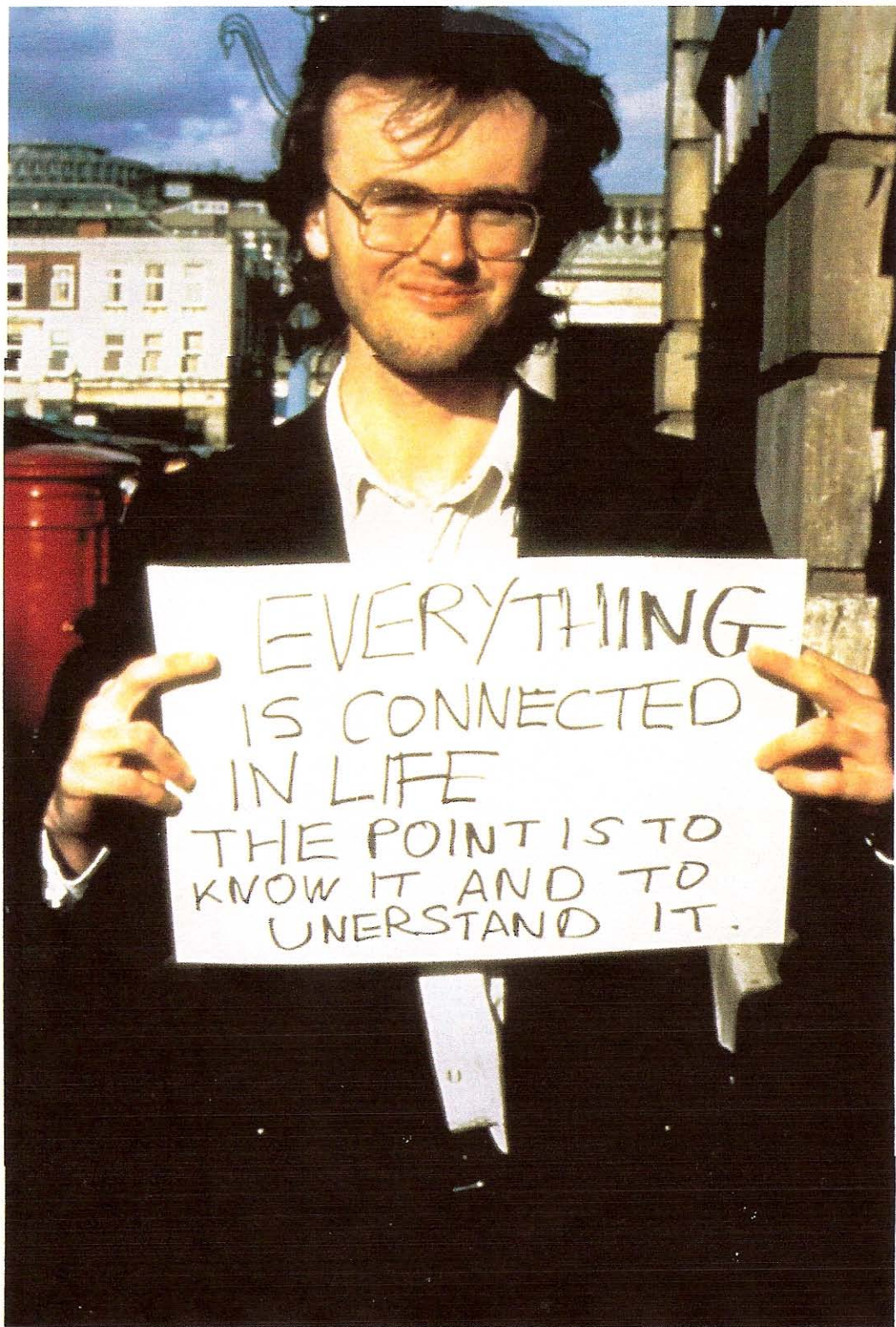
Cameron, Dan, "I'm Desperate: Gillian Wearing's Art of Transposed Identities," *Parkett*, Issue 70, pp. 90 – 107, ills.



GILLIAN WEARING, *MY SELF PORTRAIT AT 17 YEARS OLD*, 2003, digital c-type print, framed, 75 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 51 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> /  
MEIN SELBSTPORTRÄT ALS 17-JÄHRIGE, digitaler C-Print, gerahmt, 191 x 130 cm.

Gillian  
Wearing





GILLIAN WEARING, SIGNS THAT SAY WHAT YOU WANT THEM TO SAY AND NOT SIGNS THAT SAY WHAT SOMEONE ELSE WANTS YOU TO SAY, 1992-1993, c-type prints, 15 3/4 x 11 13/16" / SCHILDER, DIE DAS SAGEN, WAS MAN WILL, DASS SIE SAGEN, UND NICHT SCHILDER, DIE SAGEN, WAS JEMAND ANDERER WILL, DASS SIE SAGEN, C-Prints, 40 x 30 cm.

# *I'm Desperate*

## GILLIAN WEARING'S ART OF TRANSPPOSED IDENTITIES

DAN CAMERON

Each of us, at one point in time or another, has felt the compelling urge to become another person. But whether or not we hope to be someone in particular, or merely somebody other than ourselves, or whether we envision this change for an evening or a lifetime, the impulse to negate our own reality in favor of another's is not, in fact, a terribly alluring proposition. Considering how immensely difficult it is for many of us to establish a deep empathy for another person's point of view, it would seem to be exponentially more difficult to actually inhabit their skin. To truly feel someone else's emotions and sensations in place of our own, to open one's mouth to speak and have another's voice emerge, would involve such a profound displacement of one's sense of self that afterwards it might be impossible to fully regain per-

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spective as a unified self. Worse still, we might never again be satisfied with staying within the confines of our individual shells.

Despite its versatility and resourcefulness, Gillian Wearing's art seems to be dedicated to the sole proposition that the possibility of entering into another person's reality can be both instructive and deeply disturbing. Using multiple perspectives and techniques, Wearing continuously revisits the same set of issues, probing the delicate border zone where her individuality ends and another's begins. Beginning with the work that first established her as an artist of consequence, *SIGNS THAT SAY WHAT YOU WANT THEM TO SAY AND NOT SIGNS THAT SAY WHAT SOMEONE ELSE WANTS YOU TO SAY* (1992–93), Wearing set out to undermine the hidden dynamics of the documentary, in which the purported objectivity of the form is in fact a subtle means of manipulating the subject while the author remains safely off-camera. Inviting passersby to create their own text, which she

GILLIAN WEARING, *2 INTO 1*, 1997, 4 min. 30 sec. video  
with sound; video still of Lawrence speaking with Hilary's voice /  
*2 IN 1*, 4½-Minuten-Video mit Ton;  
Videostill von Lawrence, der mit Hilary's Stimme spricht.



then recorded with her camera, Wearing ensures that the eventual viewer of the piece becomes implicitly aware of the negotiations that took place behind the scenes. Wearing is not showing us what she found in the world and asking us to accept it as an objective fact; rather, she has enlisted others in the completion of a task, while making it clear that she is fully complicit in the outcome. If the results surprise us by revealing much more than one expects to see from photographs of strangers in a neutral setting, this is largely due to the degree to which the conventions of the photographic document have become so deeply rooted in our cultural experience. At first we think we are seeing something that falls safely within those conventions, only to discover that the rules have been emphatically turned upside down.

Many of Wearing's works provoke a marked degree of discomfort in the viewer, by creating perspectives that produce in us a feeling of unexpected intimacy with her subjects. Rather than deflecting or shielding that intimacy, however, the slippage of identity that is central to Wearing's project reminds us that we don't need to know who someone is to feel that we've trespassed on their most intimate thoughts and feelings. In one of her more harrowing videos, *2 INTO 1* (1997), she delves into the emotional conflicts between a mother and her two sons by inviting both sides to discuss their situation frankly and openly, then switching their roles, so that the mother

appears to speak in the sons' voices and vice versa. Because each side ends up representing the other's point of view, the dilemma becomes at once more upsetting and more vulnerable. We find ourselves embracing the illusion that the ability to speak in another's voice gives us the power to internalize their feelings, even when the fairly straightforward device Wearing uses conspires to make the divide more dramatic.

At a certain level, Wearing's work appears to question just how fixed our grasp on our respective identities really is. Through such devices of exchanged identities and masks, she enables us to literally experience two people at once, with the subsequent ambiguity between speaker and subject serving as a charged reminder of just how unsettlingly fluid the exchange can be. *10-16* (1997), one of her most celebrated videos, began life with a series of tape-recorded interviews with children from the ages of ten to sixteen, exploring the problems of growing up and trying to adjust to the shifting demands of family, friends, and school. After editing the audio portion of the work, Wearing then contracted adult actors to lip-synch to the children's voices on video, giving the distinct impression that the former have grown up to become the individuals whose faces we see. In this way, "the child is father to the man," one of psychoanalysis' central precepts, is taken as a point of departure for an elaborate fiction that nonetheless conveys a poignant fable of childhood's fears



GILLIAN WEARING, *2 INTO 1*, 1997, 4 min. 30 sec. video with sound; video still of Alex speaking with Hilary's voice / *2 IN 1*, 4½-Minuten-Video mit Ton; Videostill von Alex, der mit Hilary's Stimme spricht.

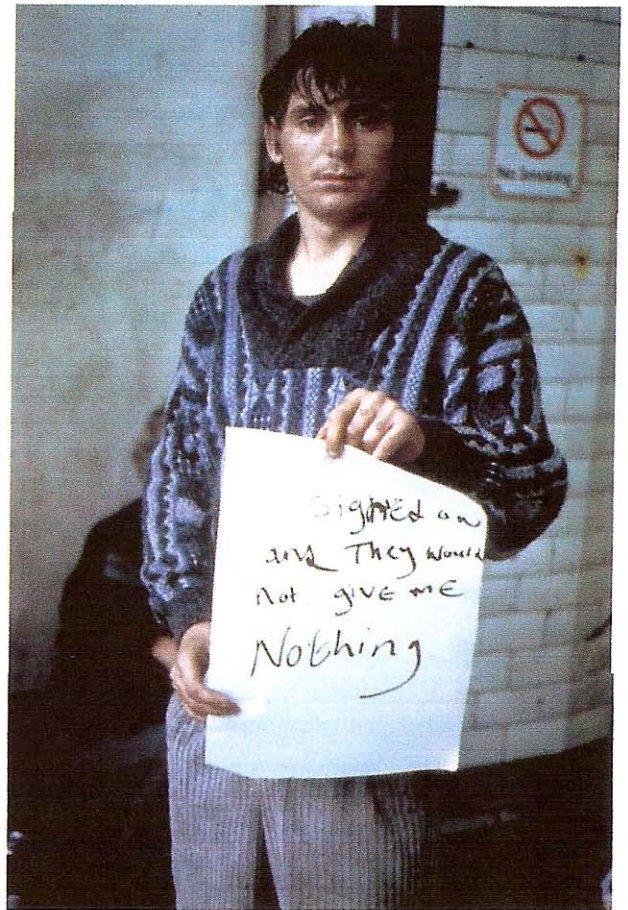
and anxieties simmering below the surface of adulthood's travails. Similarly, in *CONFESS ALL ON VIDEO. DON'T WORRY, YOU WILL BE IN DISGUISE. INTRIGUED? CALL GILLIAN* (1994), Wearing uses anonymity as a tool to entice people to reveal their darkest secrets. Rather than showing them as identity-less, however, Wearing leaves the choice of mask to the confessor, thereby setting up a two-tiered reality in which the story and the disguise intersect in unexpected and jarring ways.

Following her success using the lives of other people, it was probably inevitable that Wearing would eventually turn her powers of examination to the subject of her own identity. With her most recent series of photographs, *ALBUM* (2003), Wearing engages in her most elaborate masquerade to date, in which an array of prosthetic masks, makeup props and scenography are used to transform herself into each member of her family. The challenge here was not merely to represent her parents, siblings, and other close relations, but to duplicate their likenesses as they appear in specific family photographs. Thus, it is not enough that Wearing becomes her father's double—she must become him as he is seen in a particular photograph, one that he has accepted as a token of his likeness at a particular moment in time. In the final version of the work, with all six photographs together, one can appreciate that each of the sitters is in fact the artist, but only by looking closely into her eyes. Certainly,

Wearing also wants us to be aware that within a family, the separation between self and others is a more subtle distinction, since in purely genetic terms we are the result of the mixing of our two parents. Yet, rather than serve as a release from the tension of *ALBUM*, the similarities between Wearing and her kin make the impersonation more disturbing, as if she was, at some level, creating a simulation of herself from the components of her actual self.

As Wearing's art has evolved, its deeper messages have emerged with more clarity, subjecting the constant scrutiny of self within society to an open-ended campaign of skepticism and doubt. One of the most astute artists focusing today on the contours and borderlines of identity, Wearing's importance is tied directly to the fact that she approaches her investigations in an unwavering spirit of experimentation. She makes art not to reinforce already held convictions, but to investigate the extent to which even the most firmly rooted belief systems are tied into a core of identity that can be shattered through trauma or dissolved by crisis. As part of an information-driven society wherein the protocols of status are determined by the unshakeable knowledge that one is who one claims to be, Wearing's art opens up the possibility of greater benefits (but also heightened uncertainty) to be derived from the possibility that one is a composite of many people at once, including the anonymous stranger in the street.

GILLIAN WEARING, SIGNS THAT SAY WHAT YOU WANT THEM TO SAY AND NOT SIGNS THAT SAY WHAT SOMEONE ELSE WANTS YOU TO SAY, 1992–1993, c-type prints mounted on aluminum, 15 3/4 x 11 13/16" / SCHILDER, DIE DAS SAGEN, WAS MAN SAGEN WILL, UND NICHT SCHILDER, DIE SAGEN, WAS JEMAND ANDERER WILL, DASS MAN SAGT, C-Prints auf Aluminium aufgezogen, 40 x 30 cm.





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