

■ Gillian Wearing

Interim Art London December 1 to January 25

One of the first questions often asked in an early session of psychoanalysis is, 'How do you see yourself in five years' time?'. Meant to catch patients off-guard, it is a multi-purpose opener with which Herr Doktor can quickly assess the subject's grasp on reality. The question is more important than the answer, as the patient begins to conceive of the future as one's own, self-determinable construction and to visualise a clean, long thread emerging from the sticky tangle of the past.

In her most recent series at Interim Art (also featured in the Summer, 1996 issue of *Documents sur l'art* magazine) Gillian Wearing asked the friends and acquaintances who have appeared in her previous work to evaluate their past four years – when the artist began asking and documenting people's thoughts – and project their expectations for the next four, stretching clear to the Millennium. Each response is represented by a hand- or type-written text paired with a single photo portrait. In some cases the photographs are cannibalised from an earlier Wearing work, for example *Take Your Top Off*, 1993, or *The Garden*, 1993, as if the artist were re-animating old works by enriching them with a voice, the way pop musicians take their previous tunes and reconceive or update them. These texts can be funny ('In four years' time I will have learned the lesson I should have learned five years ago') or cynical or confessional or sensible. Curiously, the assumption throughout is that past patterns will always, inescapably, persist. At best, happy bygone moments will be temporarily regained, but habitual fears and weaknesses cling fast even in the full pardon of a hypothetical, limitless future, as if they provided a kind of perverse security.

Like amateur sleuths dabbling in dimstore psychoanalysis and graphology, viewers like myself read much into the evidence at hand, and the five works on view are loaded with subtle clues. Notice, say, the markedly backward tilted handwriting in *Helen*, 1993/96: doesn't

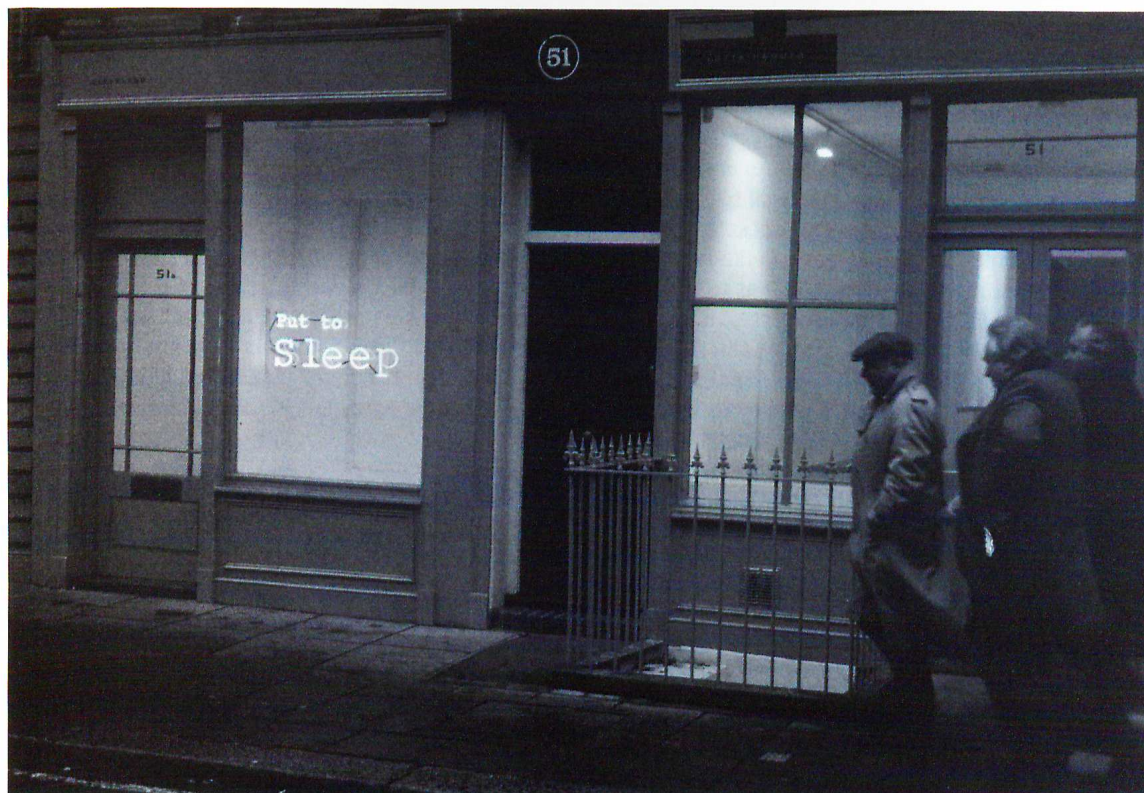
this telltale slant contradict the forward-looking content of the words, which allegedly plough ahead into the future? And what about the four adolescent boys who have scrawled 'Our Mum' in chalk on a schoolyard brick wall, two of whom hinge their futures on the prospect of 'meeting a nice girl'? Perhaps the boys hope to find a sweetheart just like the gal who married dear old dad, carving out a giant Oedipal cradle in which to wait out eternity.

While prompted to play do-it-yourself psychoanalyst on this select group of strangers, we are also implicitly invited to perform this simple exercise ourselves, retracing what Jean Baudrillard termed (in *The Illusion of the End*, 1992, his essay on the Millennium) 'our compulsive attempt at rehabilitation'. Like Wearing's featured subjects, we would all unfailingly reconstruct our lives by plotting around the long-term, remembered dates of new jobs, haircuts, lovers or addresses; added to these would be a sprinkling of benchmarks – a death, an accident, a marriage, a crime, an illness or break-up, a successful party or holiday – orbiting like satellites around a sort of Möbius strip, rather than a flat time line, with which to visualise and connect past and future. The sense of the past as a personal archaeology from which to excavate and pinpoint just *when* things went awry ('I was until 1994 what you might describe as content', writes *Lynne*, 1993/96) is what Wearing's project formalises un-nostalgically. We observe how memory functions in deep-freezing certain events which skew the course of our lives forever in some uncharted direction but which can only be identified retrospectively.

Wearing's almost 'careless' presentation belies her instinctively effective formal decisions which account for much of the work's success. The texts, on plain lined paper, suggest a school assignment or the diary writing of someone very young or a letter, heightening the sense of exchange between artist and subject – like the relationship between a painter and (his) favourite models who recur and age in the canvases of the Old Masters. Wearing has not framed the original texts but has photographed them, encouraging us to see the writings as



Gillian Wearing
Brian 1996 (detail)



Craig Richardson
Put to Sleep. 1996

legitimate, full-fledged halves to each diptych rather than artefacts or mere captions. Moreover, by titling the work simply with the name(s) of the writer(s), a sort of intimate complicity is suggested, creating the kind of we-are-a-family atmosphere of Robert Mapplethorpe's or Nan Goldin's portraiture, which similarly insist on putting us all on a first-name basis. The photos – a friendly transvestite relaxing in bed; a backyard wet T-shirt contest complete with chesty ladies and garden hose; a gay couple – appropriately on the couch – are enigmatic, never simply illustrations to the texts. With their large format and care for detail, the pictures seem to admit to their voyeuristic fascination with the lives and bodies of others.

Since her early text-and-image pieces, like 'Signs that say what you want them to say ...', 1992-93, in which she asked passers-by to be photographed holding a board upon which they'd written a message of their own choosing, Wearing has acted as a kind of covert, subterranean talent scout. She draws out untapped 'human resources' as if we were all potential masterpieces, waiting to be mined for our concealed sensitivity, intelligence and wit. Once again with this new project, Wearing tests and extends her own set of questions, contributing to her by-now recognisable *opus* while avoiding the formulaic. Her themes boil down to a kind of democratic curiosity about the mechanics of ordinary experience and simple, overwhelming emotion – whether drawn from music, sex or trauma which the artist meets with genuine human empathy and a sort of good-natured, non-judgemental sense of humour and respect. Without lapsing into a cheesy, 'Family of Man' sort of bland universalism, Wearing always manages to get the ratio of dignity to embarrassment right in fleshing out her particular take on contemporary portraiture. ■

■ Craig Richardson

Cleveland London December 17 to January 15

The title of this show, 'Put to Sleep', is ambiguous. Does it signify the work of Thanatos or Morpheus? Are the connotations suggested by this phrase ominous or just somniferous? The first one that springs to mind, is the sanitised euphemism used for veterinary euthanasia. So, while encumbered with this rather sobering 'mind-set', the encounter with the neon sign 'put to sleep' (formed of lower case Gill Sans characters, and emanating a pale blue light) placed high up and to one side of the gallery window, evoked an image of the funeral parlour, or rather a Chapel of Rest – sleep and rest being synonymous in this context.

On entering the chapel/gallery the visitor was welcomed by the gentle ambience created by a background of synthesised sounds (realised in collaboration with the composer Edward Jessen) reminiscent of chimes and gongs, contrapuntal with a low refrigerator hum, the sound of which Andres Serrano would be familiar with, following his photographic forays into various morgues. Superimposed over these slight, somnolent sounds was the innocent chirping of children's voices. The contradiction was quite strident. The ambient sounds, appropriate as an accompaniment to the journey of the soul, were counterpointed by the sheer vivacity of the children's voices busily chanting the nine-times table, not chronologically or sequentially, but hopping and leaping around it in random fashion. Was this a form of therapy for insomnia, counting the multiples of nine instead of sheep? A woman's voice chipped in at irregular intervals, rather teacher-like or parental.

These sounds and voices emanated from four black speakers whose squat forms punctuate the space of the otherwise featureless white rectangular box of the gallery. Two speakers, fixed to the walls by brackets and elevated about a metre from the floor, were arranged asymmetrically on each of the two longest walls of the space. In

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