

Up Against Time

—Reflections Between—

*This essay follows upon the publication of our new book, **An Art of Limina: Gary Hill's Works and Writings** (Barcelona: Ediciones Poligrafa, 2009; Foreword by Lynne Cooke)¹, written over the last fifteen years in collaboration with Charles Stein. Here I follow the basic critical stance of that book; namely, "what we call **the further life of the work**, an extension of the creative energy and interest that the work itself actually projects through its own instance.... In short, we intend that our writing about his work contribute to the very possibility which the work opens up. The theory is that critical alignment with a work brings that work out, brings it forward to possible participation. The further life is also an active dialogue with the ongoing work itself." I have chosen here to write on a single Gary Hill work in its American premiere, noting that the other pieces in the exhibition, such as Wall Piece, an installation, and the various single-channel works have been discussed in the book, excerpts of which will be posted on the Slought website.*

The entry of Slought's exhibition, "Art of Limina: Gary Hill," is a large room with a single installation of six projections that overflow into a second room, *Up Against Down*², comprising 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.

The body in space, a full-tilt engagement in bodily struggle to *be* a certain way, an obviously *personal* all-out effort that is so curious in its uncontextualized behavior as to also seem abstract and *non-personal*—these characterize Gary Hill's world of severe, even austere, physicality. There's a **concreteness** so focused and complete in its intensity as to seem *purely ideational*—like mysterious ideas being birthed before our eyes. Yet it's a birth that never ends, a spatially emergent force of embodiment released into an eternal moment. We feel it in our own watching bodies as energy transmitted directly from imaged event to cerebrospinal neural network. A contagion of this fierce concentration might indicate a hell realm, as if we had stumbled darkly into a previously unknown rung of Dante's *Inferno*. Indeed, where are we?

¹ The title of Slought Foundation's exhibition in Philadelphia, "Art of Limina: Gary Hill" (March 21-May 1, 2009), co-curators George Quasha, Aaron Levy, and Osvaldo Romberg, derives from this newly published book by George Quasha and Charles Stein. The exhibition, for which the present essay was commissioned, comprises ten works, including, in addition to *Up Against Down* (2008), the installation discussed here, *Around & About* (1980), *Happenstance (part one of many parts)* (1982–83), *Why Do Things Get in a Muddle? (Come on Petunia)* (1984), *Figuring Grounds* (in collaboration with George Quasha and Charles Stein, 1985/2008), *Incidence of Catastrophe* (1987-88), *Site Recite (a prologue)* (1989), *Goats and Sheep* (1995/2001), *Wall Piece* (2000), and *Big Legs Don't Cry* (2005).

² *Up Against Down*, 2008: "Installation with six projections" is a six-channel video/sound installation, using six video projectors, amplified speakers, six DVD players and six DVDs (color; stereo sound), here installed in two rooms with interconnecting open doorway.

Or when? Is this even *space*? Is endlessness of such intensity more like space than time? Space-time, since Einstein, rolls easily off the lips in an abstraction that never quite matches experience—except, perhaps, at moments like this! You could almost say, here in this dark situation, “There’s a guy up there in his several parts, locked in the frustration of his spatiotemporal person-trap.” For the time of art, here an uncircumscribed duration, he may never come out. Perhaps this says something about why eternity does not always come highly recommended.

The notion that the separation of space and time might be inadvisable did not begin with modern physics but instead seems to have been registered in human reflections from time immemorial. Take the Japanese word *ma*, which in the original Chinese (kanji), the ideogram showing the sun shining through a gate, meant space, but in a range of Japanese usage, from architecture to music, it can refer to either space or time—or both. It refers, in fact, to the *between*, the interval, the intervening reality. Hence the liminal zone comprising the margins of space and time, negotiable according to site, situation, circumstance.

In Kunio Komparu’s great work, *The Noh Theater: Principles and Perspectives*³—a book of real importance to Gary Hill in the mid 1980s—a chapter is devoted to *ma* in which the range of meanings (from architecture to music) plays out as fundamental to the whole, quite ancient, phenomenon of Noh.

As an expression of space, *ma* can mean space itself, the dimension of a space, or the space between two things....
As an expression of time, *ma* can mean time itself, the interval between two events, rhythm, or timing....

This variability, or what I prefer to call *axiality*, suggests that in the case of *ma*, a long-standing usage recognized that the polarity of space and time is “polar” in a very special sense. Space and time are at once separated and linked by a pole in the sense of axis, a common hinge on which they swivel into “normal” appearance, now as space, now as time, depending on the perspective—and, in a sudden anomalous moment, as space-time. Physics, broadly speaking, produces this anomaly in mainly cognitive/conceptual and abstract terms, whereas art (Noh, as Komparu’s analysis suggests) presents it sensorially/intuitively and concretely. And *this* polarity, no doubt, has a hidden axis as well, a swing point within *ma* viewed as *principle*, suggested by Komparu’s architecturally focused distinction in the subtitle, “*Ma: The Science of Time and Space*.” The science in the art becomes indicator of an art dimension of science—a liminality function at the level of *ma* as principle, which shows up in the dynamic marriage of science (as theory *or* technology) and art, and, indeed, a certain indifference to the distinction.⁴

In *Up Against Down*, Gary Hill presents an actual, though “impossible,” *limen/ma*—a space-time threshold. In the dark a bright figure presses against unbounded dark. The slight reflection of the agent pushing—head, shoulder, hand, foot—calls out the interfacing of light/dark, and yet it could be, as it appears, that one resides within the other (the reflection of the lighted figure is an artifact of its “facing” into the dark), or that they are paradoxically of the same nature, a coinherence. Contrary action without full opposition? Perhaps, but the urgency of the action that says continuously, “I’m doing this with all my might!,” bespeaks utter contention, and no breaks, no relief, no let-up. Toward what end? There’s no indication of *end*, no ending, no goal, no telos, no evident teleology. Only the event itself.

³ “Time and Space in Noh: Apposition and Fusion,” Chapter Seven (New York: Weatherhill/Tankosha, 1983), pp. 70-95.

⁴ Komparu himself was first a Noh actor in a long family lineage, who unexpectedly turned to writing as architectural critic, and just as unexpectedly returned in time to the Noh theater as actor. As one who crossed and recrossed a threshold between apparently incompatible disciplines, he was well-positioned to expose an infamous liminality within architecture itself in its science/art polarity—often, indeed, a struggle. He does this in part by focusing on the profoundly architectural aspects of Noh.

Event? That would mean outcome or point-specific event in some cases—e.g., physics:

A phenomenon or occurrence located at a single point in space-time, regarded as the fundamental observational entity in relativity theory

—an end-point in its very existence. But such a static notion of event doesn't handle the experience of *Up Against Down*—or even the dynamic contrariness of the contentious title, which points to the nerve-racking energy of what's seemingly happening. The stance, *the* happening, the—let's say—happenstantiality, or, even better, the happenstantiation. The thing is not letting up. The pressure is on to stay on. It happens to be unending, relentlessly interminable—a happenstance of the eternal between. Yet it *takes time* to be so doggedly *in place*. The ordinary at the heart of the infernal impossible—like waiting for the wee-hours last bus on a dark cold night way the hell out in nowhere, and it never comes.

Time seeps back into the artifact, even when banished by cyclicity, eternality, or some other presumptions of sameness. The time of viewing merges with the state of the event, yet as long as I'm not fully entranced I'm aware my mind is also pushing—*against this time*. I try to remind myself that that's not me doing all that pushing, but I'm not convinced. There's identity slippage. The *ma*, the gap, can seem a prison between two unreachable shores. The strange time of unattaining alters the sense of space—something is sucking the space away. The frenzied pushing may be demonic, and that unidentifiable immeasurable blackness may hide a vampiric emissary of some black hole—and here we stand at the edge, the event horizon, peering into the abyss. This is a fantasy of desperation—and it's no better or worse than any claim of clarity or analytic precision or hermeneutic elegance *here, at this site, in this time and place*.

Ma also eats language, or translates it into primordial groan. Here

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.

Up against oblivion, the saying transmutes. Mute trancelike concentration drums on itself. There are haunting sounds in Noh drama too that translate transmogrifying times—there are *many times* there (condensed, slipping, vanishing, reversed, split) registering the many crosshatched dramatic *spaces* (shifting, oscillating, flowing, expanding and contracting) of intervening phantasms and psycho-temporalities—sounds that bespeak the unspeakable. Pushed time presses into space and alters it beyond recognition.

And what *this* artist is *doing* before our eyes is *pushing back* against time, and against the irremediable onslaught of the other side of time—emptiness itself. The push-space is the limen of being/nonbeing. The big edge itself. And the person in the total push is always at the limit of identity, and about to go over the edge, but that the sheer force of the unknown resists total contention with equal force.⁵ And at the center of the action, the hyperlocal center felt in any intervenient person, is the pointless point of singularity. And all that blind effort, the doing that does everything it can and in the end endlessly does nothing—ejects us, the slipped identities in the space of time slippage, back out of identification and strands us in the middle. Right here.

⁵ It becomes evident after a little observation and thought that nature only abhors a vacuum in certain moods, and that to the extent that it does seem to display such emotion, it may be an artifact of the misbegotten word "vacuum." At certain vantages of experience and thought *the empty*—zero point—might invite rather different interpretations. In "zero point physics," for instance, it's the source of unlimited energy.

And in conclusion... well, we might be feeling a bit *pressed* by now and have begun to lose our taste for grand literary wrap-ups. A work like *Up Against Down* renders meaning itself liminal. It puts a threshold in the place of thought. Whatever one's interpretation, the fact of an artist attempting an apparently absurd or impossible act, particularly on an enhanced scale, constitutes a statement of sorts. But that statement includes the unsaid and even the unsayable. What is not said may seem to invite speculation, such as the question of what moves an artist to create such a work. And one might consider the inexpressible unlimited frustration and sense of limitation that leads to such a pure gesture of "failed" action as going up against the void. Here we might notice that, in this work, the non-saying is not only equal to saying in sheer force, it's *inseparable* from saying. By analogy, a mouth opening to scream but producing no sound is equal to the scream. It's not only failed sound but also a dimension of scream and something potentially far more intense than literal sound. One might think of Munch's *The Scream*—in its eternalizing moment of sheer despair, no actual sound is heard. Or a dream of momentary powerlessness when the effort to scream is all the more terrifying because no sound comes forth—and frozen, it lasts, and lasts. There is such a "thing" as absence that is far more poignant than recognizable presence—and far more present.

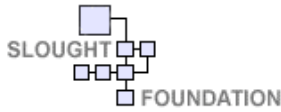
Time under such stress may seem to ooze across the scene as if to liquefy space upon contact—a fused substance of unknown viscosity. Space, so intensely countered, hammers time into sheets of articulate sine waves that carry viewing into the ears, the pores, the nerves. Let everything be known by way of its oppositions, its fixtures of energetic escape in a happening substance, its ups against its downs.

Ma.

The bounding line between space and time is a hard flow. Like liquid crystal that is self-bounding when pressed and *reflects*, it remembers where it has been and knows exactly where it is.

March 15, 2009 (the Ides), Barrytown, New York

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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."