

## The relationship between the medium of photography and Video in constructing people's identity in Gillian Wearing works

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Gillian Wearing (born 1963) is a British artist who got recognition through The Turner Prize in 1997 and exhibitions held all over Europe, United States and Britain. Wearing uses photography and video to share her thoughts and ideas. Her work is characterized as a kind of documentary, which does not intend to be impartial, of the popular culture of her generation in Great Britain using photography and video as a way of registration of people's thoughts and issues about life. More than pictures and video records, her work is meaningful by its action.

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The artist deals with life stories as in her work called *Signs that say what you want them to say and not signs that say what someone else wants you to say* (1992-



**Figure 1**

Gillian Wearing. I'M DESEPERATE from the series *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 print mounted on aluminium, 44,5 x 29,7 cm, 17 ½ x 11 ¾ in.

[<http://www.whitechapelgallery.org/exhibitions/gillian-wearing>]

This work consists in a series of portraits of people, who the artist got on the streets in London, holding a paper where is written what they should be thinking at that moment. To have a picture of yourself taken is very common

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as you deal with it all the time that you need a document as a prove of identity, but the difference here from Gillian Wearing's work is that she shows the most hidden thoughts and particular characteristics of people's personality, what is part of their identities. Actually Wearing is not interested only in photographic portrait but through the camera she subtly invades people's privacy concerned to their personality. It shows how the media is powerful in the narcissist relationship between people and the camera. The artist does not want to reveal who is the person but she wants to go into a deeper discussion concerning the way our society it is represented. All the participants made an effort to leave their comfort zone, as exposure themselves it is a difficult task.

Each person will interpret those images in a different way as they affect people according with their culture background and the context where they are seen. Therefore the picture can have multiple meanings as each time it is seen the person will create a different signification for it.

It has a lot of relation with semiotic concepts founded by Charles Pierce and Saussure, especially when the images significations are involved. The image represents the signifier that when is seen by someone this person adds a meaning to it, which is called signified. The signifier and signified composes a sign. A sign is an image full of signification. However the sign is produced through social, historical and cultural context. It is people's interpretation that gives meaning to the signs.

The meanings of a work of art are created through the relationship of the work, the viewer and the context where this work is seen. Besides the work of art to be load with a meaning already during its production. Then the artwork is encoded already and after is decoded by the viewer who will consume it.

It is interesting to bring Roland Barthes into this discussion through his book *The Death of the Author* (1967) and then question the position of the artist in her work. For him the author is nothing more then the person who says "I", the most important thing is who is going to read the book, it is this person who is going to give life to the story. As the most important thing for Gillian Wearing in her photographs is the subjects and not her manipulation on it, for example, during the process of editing the material recorded. The portraits with the signs gains another meaning when they are spread to many different places

as galleries, they are seen by other people which makes them not an unknown picture anymore as the photos on identification documents.

According with Barthes (1967) the unity of a text it is not its origin but its destination that is why it is necessary the death of the Author for a birth of a reader. The Gillian Wearing's artworks are only possible to exist because of the voluntary participation of people. It is through the viewers that the identity of her work is shown.

The artist is always waiting for peoples' confessions, for example, *Confess all on video. Don't worry you will be in disguise Intrigued? Call Gillian* (1994).



**Figure 2**

Gillian Wearing. *Confess all on video. Don't worry you will be in disguise Intrigued? Call Gillian* (1994). Version II. Video, monitor, colour and sound; duration: 35 min., 59 sec. Tate collection.

{<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/wearing-confess-all-on-video-dont-worry-you-will-be-in-disguise-intrigued-call-gillian-t07447>}

In this work people could wear a mask hiding them in someone else's identity to feel comfortable in telling their confessions to the public or to the camera. The personalities of people speaking mixes with the masks one. The oral and the visual are mixed. The masks give to the participants the status of anonymity, so they feel free to tell everything they want. People get emotionally release. In this work she addresses a big question, which is very inspiring for her that is: how people always want to neglected their feelings and desires. She plays the role of a storyteller but giving her personal approach to each story addressing anthropological aspects in peoples' lives. It means she addresses particular aspects of people's behavior and attitudes toward their lives. During the process of this work, Wearing gets close to people and even get involved by their stories, there is no intention to be impartial as a scientific research. She maps the social mass that

reflects the behavior of the British people at a specific time and period (London in the 90s).

The Bulgarian-French feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva (1984) says that identity is formed in the encounter with others. It means that our identity is expressed when is confronted with other peoples' identity, as the differences between each other are evidenced. In this case, it is through the masks that people's identity is revealed.

The fortuity is both part of the process of creation as the final result; there is no previous planning to be followed or/and no specific result to be obtained. She depends on people's participation and sees how the work goes.

According with Sally O'Reilly (2009), author of *The Body in Contemporary Art*, the boundary between the human body and the world at large is not very clear and often difficult to identify. It is not simply the physical barrier of the skin as both the psychological sphere that exists beyond our basic corporeal boundaries and the reciprocal relationship between self and context.

Most of the time Wearing is in a comfortable position like holding the camera and putting someone's life on the spot as she is more interested in people's emotions rather than hers. In a certain way exploiting the subject ("real" - I mean not famous- people) as she goes in people's intimacies and reveal it to the public in a gallery space. Even when she puts herself on the spot for example in *Homage to the woman with the bandage face who I saw yesterday down Walworth Road* (1995) (figure 3), which the artist walks on the street wearing a mask made of bandage, she appropriates another personality so is not actually Wearing there. That is why her works are moving between fact and fiction. She does not want to hide from the spectator the re-interpretational and re-presentational character of a specific situation that called her attention. As William Ewing (2004), from Hayward Gallery in London, says the cynicism has become standard fare for both producers and consumers of images. Therefore the contemporary photographers started working in a spirit of skepticism playing with the illusion and the falsehood.



**Figure 3**

Gillian Wearing. *Homage to the woman with the bandage face who I saw yesterday down Walworth Road* (1995). Video projection, 7 minutes.

[<http://bombmagazine.tumblr.com/post/5451679003/gillian-wearing-homage-to-the-woman-with-the>]

In her work, Wearing tries at the same time to capture the peculiarities of the everyday people lives as well their relationships, as she did in *Take your top off* (1993).



**Figure 4**

Gillian Wearing. *Take 1* from the series *Take your top off* (1993). Three photographs, color, 73,5 x 99,5 cm. Londres, Phaidon, 1999.

[[http://phomul.canalblog.com/archives/wearing\\_\\_gillian/index.html](http://phomul.canalblog.com/archives/wearing__gillian/index.html)]

This work is a series of photographs of the artist lying down on a bed with transsexuals. In doing that she is breaking down cultural and social issues as Wearing is touching in a non-discussible issue. Our society prefers to forget it instead bringing it to the spot, discuss and care about it. In this work she invades a private space and bring it to the public.

Wearing chose to work with transsexuals because they experience both genders at the same time, which means they sexuality is much more open than everybody else's. It is a world very different from hers. What makes Wearing feels uncomfortable with this not conventional situation. The fact they are not conventional people also attracts her and it could be related with the work of Diane Arbus when she photographs people with a different appearance, not common, with a certain abnormality. For example, the portrait *A Jewish giant*

*at home with his parents in the Bronx, N.Y.* (1970) (figure 7). Her images are very disturbing; they established a dialog with the spectator who tries to discover the personalities behind that faces in a game of subtleties.



**Figure 7**

Diane Arbus. *A Jewish giant at home with his parents in the Bronx, N.Y.* (1970). Black & White photograph.

[<http://diane-arbus-photography.com>]

Gillian Wearing said that she has always been interested in people more than in herself. She likes to find out many facets as possible about people.

Wearing wants to explore the relationship between personal experience and the social construction of identity (gendered, raced, classed, sexed and others).

Julia Kristeva (1984) conceives the nation as a site of repression, which the question of identity troubles.

It is interesting how Gillian deals with the photography through her “multiple faces” and how she deals with the dialog between people and spaces. Her works come basically from personal questions and people’s everyday lives. She goes beyond the images, but deep in psychological and behavioral profiles.

Photography had been used during history, especially in the nineteenth century when it was created, to document social behavior and it is exactly what she incorporates in her work. The same happens with video, it is just a matter of paying attention on how we are surrounded by cameras nowadays. Everywhere that you go, for example banks, stores, elevators, there is a security camera watching you. What Wearing proposes is do not hide the camera of the spectator even making the person aware of it and ask for the participation of the public in revealing their intimacies.

Gillian Wearing’s photographs wants to inform, show us about “real” (not famous) and at the same time eccentric people’s life and a little bit about the



world outside. What she perceives from it. There is no right or wrong, the camera can make exotic things look near, close and familiar things look abstract, strange. It allows us to participate while confirming our alienation (Sontag, 1979).

According with the American writer Susan Sontag (1979) Photography is a powerful narcissistic instrument but at the same time a powerful instrument for depersonalizing our relation to the world and both are complementary.

Wearing's work remembers Cindy Sherman regarding to the way the artist works more specifically with portraits incorporating feminine stereotypes. Sherman uses characters from the Hollywood scene, for example, Untitled Film Still 58, 1980 (figure 6), incorporating garments, but constructing a biography on each photo with a touch of subjectivity and is exactly where it is her poetics. These photographs are not meant to look natural, they are posed, but in a way as if they were part of the scene from a film, it drives the viewer to construct narratives through their photos.



**Figure 6**

Cindy Sherman. Untitled Film Still 58, 1980. Gelatin silver print, 20.3 x 25.4 cm, edition 1/10.

[<http://www.cindysherman.com/images/photographs/UntitledFilmStill58.jpg>]

Gillian Wearing (2000) sometimes reference the portraits carried out by Diane Arbus regarding the way she captures peoples' emotions in her photographs. Her work goes deeply into the documentary having people performing their own lives. To Wearing, video and photography are tools that an open field full of possibilities of artistic creation.

It is possible to notice an influence of television in her work specifically by programs, which were about everyday life, for example, *SevenUp*, at 1970s. According to the curator Lisa G. Corrin (2000) from Serpentine Gallery this program traced the development of a group of British children every seven years. This program is kind of *reality show* which the TV invites people to invade other people's lives and reflect about their own through it. The people's intimacies that should be private now it is open to the public.

Therefore Wearing started to try video besides photography. The artist is really interested in popular culture. For example in her work called *Dancing in Peckham* (1994) (figure 5) which shows Wearing dancing in a shopping arcade without any song playing just the one inside her head. She discusses about public and private as she put herself in a private moment (dancing) in a public space. This work expresses the relationship established between the public space and the Wearing's thoughts.



**Figure 5**

Gillian Wearing. *Dancing in Peckham* (1994). Video, 25 minute duration, Londres, Phaidon, 1999.

[[http://phomul.canalblog.com/archives/wearing\\_gilian/index.html](http://phomul.canalblog.com/archives/wearing_gilian/index.html)]

Gillian Wearing's work is a portrait of the British society in the 90s through people's unstable emotional and economic relationship. She shows this society with all its faults, follies and concerns.

There is a constant relationship, dialog between Wearing's work and the spectators as they actually see them there. The artwork is about their realities, desires, anxieties and conflicts.

It is a very interesting approach of a British artist, as this nation is known historically for been reserved. They never talk about themselves. At the same time people break paradigms with the freedom expressed in the way they get dressed, the British society is still very conservative related to sexuality freedom and the naked human body exposure. There is still a lot of censure going on nowadays. They live at the same time with freedom and repression.

Another two interesting video works of Gillian Wearing are *2 into 1* (1997) (figure 8) and *10 -16* (1997) (figure 9).





**Figure 8**

Gillian Wearing. 2 Into 1 (1997).

Color video, duration: 4 minutes and 30 seconds.

{<http://www.theartsdesk.com/visual-arts/gillian-wearing-whitechapel-gallery>}



**Figure 9**

Gillian Wearing. 10-16 (1997),

video projection, 15 minutes, ed. 3,

exhibited at Jay Gorney Modern Art,

New York. All images courtesy of

Jay Gorney Modern Art, New York

and Maureen Paley/Interim Art,

London.

{<http://bombsite.com/issues/63/articles/2129>}

Both works talk about social conflicts. The first work focus on the institution called *family*, as the video shows a mother dubbing the voice of her twins sons and vice versa. They basically talk about the way they see each other in a very honest approach, specially the twin boys when they say about her mother. They are very critical as well. It shows how the relationship between parents and sons is bankrupt. Wearing also play with the identities, as the voices are exchanged. It also happens with her work called 10-16, in this work we listen to teenager between 10 and 16 years old talking about their conflicts represented by an image of an adult. However, Wearing constructs and deconstructs their identities. She plays with the spectator. It was not the first time that she uses actors in her works, as Wearing also used actors in *Sixty Minute Silence* (1996) (figure 10).



**Figure 10**

Gillian Wearing. *Sixty Minute Silence* (1996). 60 minute silence 1996 Video single screen 60min Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London. <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/exhibition/turner-prize-retrospective/exhibition-guide/turner-prize-96-97>

It is a video where 26 actors pretend to be part of the British police. They are posing for the video camera as a formal picture, so they have to be quite for 60 minutes. In this work the roles are reversed, as the spectator will be watching the police, trying to unravel them. People will look for their weakness, their normal human being characteristics on that unquestionably pose and status. They will try to read their personality.

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