

ARTIST'S COMMENTARY

GARY HILL

Viewer 1996

b. 1951 Santa Monica, lives and works in Seattle USA

by Glennis Israel

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Tall Ships

'I happened to see an old photograph taken in Seattle around 1930 of a "tall ship"... I immediately associated those huge masts and full sails with people standing, like the people I was working with. The thought of that kind of ship on the high seas- that frontal view of extreme verticality coming towards you. There's a majestic quality to it that when applied to the human figure projects a kind of power and grace. That person, however vulnerable, will come forth no matter what. It's the simplicity of the idea - humans approaching humans in a space of a work that is always slightly haunted by the notion of "ships passing in the night."

Tall Ships "is simply the idea of a person coming up to you and asking "Who are you?" by kind of mirroring you and at the same time illuminating a space of possibility for that very question to arise. Basically I wanted to create an open experience that was a deliberate and at the same time would disarm whatever particular constructs one might arrive with, especially in a museum.'

'And for everything which is visible there is a copy of that which is hidden.'

Interview conducted by Regina Cornwell.

Quasha, G and Stein, C. *Tall Ships*. Station Hill Arts. Barrytown Ltd. New York, 1993, 1997

COMMENTARY

Gary Hill's video works are essentially concerned with the play between images and language, the communication systems of human beings. He uses modern technology to recreate the aura of physical presence. He combines visual and spatial experience in time, with the effect that the audience almost believe that his human beings exist in the room with them.

The human body emerged as a major component in the video installation *Crux 1983-7*, where he attached video cameras to his body to record the movements of his feet, hand and head as he wanders through ruins of a castle then dives into a lake. This "journey" symbolises the suffering of life itself, the dive into waters, of death. The recordings are then played on 5 video monitors in the configuration of a cross on a stark white wall.

From 1987 with *Mediarite* his installations became "projectives" in that they involve recorded video that is projected onto walls or other surfaces. Now a commonplace technique within video art, for Hill, these projected works act as meditative spaces. His works often induce a uniquely disorienting experience for the receptive viewer/ participant. With *Beacon 1990*, full-scale figures are projected to take over the space itself so that the actual room becomes the projective medium. His work from 1990-93, including *Tall Ships* and *Learning Curve* challenge the significance of the spoken word, instead emphasising the body itself and its physical presence and the importance of writing and sound. Another important issue in Hill's work is the power of silence, a strategy that allows body language to actually speak and communicate more freely. This silence also helps focus and reveal our unconscious responses to other people.

Hill enjoys spaces of complete darkness. These spaces disorientate the viewer. In *Tall Ships 1992*, which is a 16 channel video installation with 16 modified monitors, 16 projection lenses, computer- controlled laser disc players and switching runner mats for interactive triggering the viewer/participant enters a completely dark, long corridor-like space. Sixteen black and white

images of people of varying age, gender and ethnic origin are projected onto the walls and one at the end of the corridor. The figures are first seen at a distance but as the viewer advances, the images appear to walk forward until life size until the viewer moves on to activate a similar advance of yet another figure. Thus the figures seem to react to the viewer's presence personally. The viewer feels they are being looked at or made contact with. How one relates to standing in front of a total stranger in a rather intimate eye contact (although the soft focus prevents a direct confrontation) depends on the personality and experiences of the viewer. The experience is unsettling and can reveal much of one's self and prejudices.

Similarly in *Viewer* 1996, the viewer is confronted directly with a line of 17 men who seem slightly larger than life as they emerge from the oily black ground that surrounds them. They face the viewer, standing silently and moving slightly from time to time. There is a sense of unease here. Where as earlier works featured friends and acquaintances, this work is composed of men recruited from the homeless people near Hill's studio. What is the purpose for this spectacle? These 17 day labourers present for inspection as much the same way as in a classic police line-up. The seeming anonymity of the subjects of our gaze is confronting. What do we want from these men? However the power of their gaze is also confronting. What do these men want from us? We are not only viewing but are also being viewed or surveyed ourselves. To help make sense of this unnerving experience we are forced to project an obviously fictional and ameliorating narrative onto the postures, visages and costume of these men. The focus and endpoint of these narratives is constantly shifting just as our eyes constantly scan the images that flicker in our midst.

Hill's *Viewer* is a stunningly simple work with epic formal and thematic reverberations. *Viewer* examines one of the central mantras of contemporary practice, that is the powers and manifestations of the gaze.

FURTHER READING

Lynne Cooke, "Gary Hill: 'Who am I but a figure of speech?'," *Parkett* No.34, 1992, pp16-27
Michael Duncan, "In Plato's Electronic Cave" *Art in America*, Vol 83, no.6 June 1995, pp 68-73
Lucinda Furlong, "A Manner of Speaking: An Interview with Gary Hill", *Afterimage* 10, March 1983, pp 9-16
Susan Kandel, "Gary Hill, Museum of Contemporary Art", *Artforum*, Vol 33. No 8, April 1995, pp 86-7