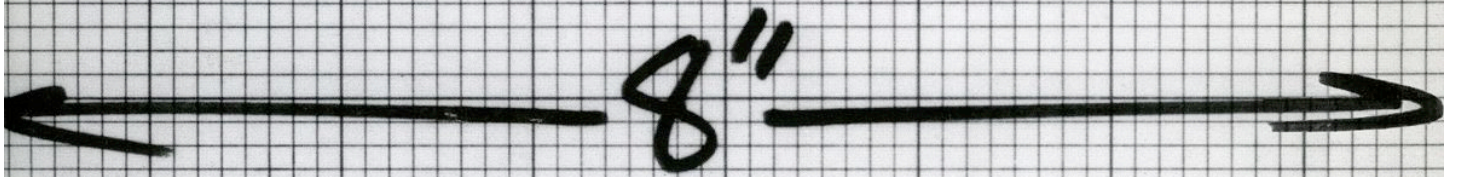


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Michael Minelli

Gillian Wearing at Regen Projects,
Los Angeles

Gillian Wearing, from *Prelude*, 2001. Courtesy Regen Projects.

In this most recent exhibition entitled *Prelude*, Gillian Wearing presents a haunting representation of loss. Part eulogy and part chimera, Wearing's video portrayal of the deceased Lindsey, a London "street drinker," offers a compelling memorial and examines how catharsis may operate within the arena of spectacle.

Flickering restlessly upon the wall of a darkened Regen Projects is a large, black-and-white projection of Lindsey. Her silent, yet disturbed motion is accompanied by an audio-track testimony of her surviving twin sister. Bordering on the uncanny, Wearing's projection appears ghostlike, echoing a certain eeriness that one senses in silent films from the turn of the century. In *Prelude*, Wearing succeeds in reuniting the twin sisters for one last time through the single image of a self they share.

During the filming of *Drunks*, an earlier project for the Serpentine Gallery in London, Wearing had worked with a group of young British "street drinkers" (i.e., drunks). The artist had shot some preliminary footage of Lindsey and was hoping to work with her further when Wearing was informed of the woman's death just two weeks prior from cirrhosis of the liver. Wearing also learned at this time that Lindsey was survived by a twin sister. It is the grieving sister's voice that provides the audio track for *Prelude*. As she gives a detailed account of the discovery of Lindsey's body, we experience her trauma through the narrative. At one point, the conspicuously unnamed twin tells of a grim prediction that Lindsey had once made when the two were young. Like the infamous Siamese Twins, Chang and Eng, Lindsey foretold that the two sisters were destined to die "upon their separation." With Lindsey's restless image listing from side to side upon the gallery wall, we hear how this prophecy has fostered its own trauma, prompting the surviving twin's fear

of her own death.

Wearing understands the politics of authorship involved in representation; the pitfalls of this territory often swinging predictably between guilt and exploitation. Whether it's the ol' Sally Struther's feed-em-and-weep approach, or the more recent, I'm-gonna-film-some-young-Japanese-girls-on-a-basketball-court-wearing-Issey-Miyaki-things, the *auteur's* intent remains, more often than not, suspect. Don't get me wrong, Wearing is ultimately the one who gets the Turner Prize and the cash and cachet that goes along with it. But in the case of *Prelude*, Wearing's prescience (or the absence) serves to benefit her subject more than what her own ulterior agenda may be. It is within this egalitarian, almost democratic space—between the subject and the author, between the author and the audience, and, hence, between the private and the public, where *Prelude* avoids the usual “misery loves company” trope that so often accompanies docu-melodramas of this sort. In the case of *Prelude*, identification comes about specifically because the audience is an afterthought.

The projection that is Lindsey, or rather “the twins,” plays continuously. Sometimes they play to the occasional gallery goer, but most often they perform—over and over again—for themselves; Lindsey as drunk...as dead...as mirage...as memory. The voice of her unnamed twin swears “never to forget”; as if repetition somehow begets catharsis. In any case, the viewer's presence appears incidental. Identification occurs exactly because they wish *not* to be identified with. *Prelude* constitutes a form of identification that breaks with the usual “I am you and you are me and we are all together” scenario. In this piece, Wearing's Lindsey-twin dishes it out for herself, and our position as viewer, as voyeur, as *not* Lindsey is precisely what elicits compassion.

What remains to be seen (and may appear pathetically ironic in this era of Compassionate Conservatism) is whether or not we will continue to trip over our collective feet to “testify” on the latest incarnation of Rikki-cum-Jerry-cum-Oprah-cum-Maurey-TV. Will the desire for “confession” and its dutiful, perhaps more Judeo-Christian partner, “judgement” remain the number one spectator sport? In what form will “the real,” as represented in shows like MTV's *The Real World* or the Brits' *Big Brother*, rear its “real” head? (Quite frankly, all of this shit was pretty damn tired from day one, it's only “real” value was in seeing how class was represented with respect to the rise in cable subscription.) One can only hope that Wearing's oddly nostalgic memorial to a dead drunk may signal a more compelling alternative to spectacle as catharsis.

There's no question that Death sucks; and however “loss” occurs, the residue that is grief often leaves all concerned “at a loss” as well. The rub, in *Prelude*, is that as far as Lindsey and her heartbroken twin are concerned, we're not concerned. I didn't know Lindsey (who apparently drank herself to death), and I don't know the surviving twin (I'd be hard pressed to understand her grief). However, it may just be that disconnect, that otherness, that compels one to share in her-their-its despair.

What is it about this disturbing spectre of a drunken, broken hearted, pissed-off, melancholic, smiling, carefree and possibly contemptible bitch that “speaks” to us from beyond the grave? The answer may lie in those seemingly coincidental moments when Lindsey’s restless image lip-synchs her twin sister’s grief. It’s at these points when memory and the remembered collide; rendering one singular and profound portrait—at once defiant and despondent, both dead and alive.



The term “apartheid” is peculiar because it is one of only a very few words that designates something most of us find irredeemably evil. No amount of moral relativism will help us countenance a white minority’s oppression of a black majority. Apartheid is shameful, disgraceful, despicable, we say as we shake our heads gravely, literally without thinking. For what is there to think about?

I wonder. Not about apartheid’s immorality—on that, predictably, I agree with the consensus. It’s the other part that gives me pause: the part that responds to apartheid’s name with reactive righteous indignation, that wants or needs to categorize apartheid as so profoundly malevolent as to be beyond normal ideas of evil.

Certainly, it is appropriate to think of apartheid in this way: apartheid is vile. Nonetheless, I cannot help wondering whether the reactive quality of our outrage speaks of a defensive othering in the ethical realm: does an unconscious knowledge that our ideologies are not always color-blind drive the decisiveness of our indignation? Is our shock at the actions of Botha and de Klerk in part a shock of recognition that, like them, we harbor unwarranted intolerances? Does our intransigence here betray ambivalence?

William Kentridge’s strength is that he foregrounds this issue of ambivalence. Consider his identity: he is often described as a “South African artist,” but what does this mean? As Lewis DeSoto observes in a recent review of the Phaidon

Charles Reeve

William Kentridge, *WEIGHING...and WANTING*, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, August 5 - October 29, 2000; *Eight Soho Eckstein Films with Memo, Hotel, and Ubu Tells the Truth* at Cinematheque Ontario, October 21 and 24, 2000.

William Kentridge, drawing from *WEIGHING...AND WANTING*, charcoal, pastel on paper, 1997-98. Collection: Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego.

