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Barely in the Park





S_Z were in Korea last February to see Gary Hill's *Momentombs* exhibition in Suwon. Narita airport had been eerily quiet and empty when we checked in, and the Suwon museum also greeted few visitors as we were told that several institutions had already closed their doors and that Gary's show might not be able to run until its March 8th schedule end date. The Suwon Ipark Museum of Art had assembled the largest number of the artist's works for a one-person show and the results, displayed over two floors, were laudable. Both the breadth and precision of his installations and language apparatus concepts often benefited from the proximity between each piece, tracing a clear line from *Primarily Speaking* (1981-83) to *Place Holder* (2019), with other paths explored and expressed in different forms, notably in the works present on the second floor including *Attention*, and *Big Legs Don't*

Cry (both 2005), or *Circular Breathing* (1994). More significantly, it brought into the foreground how Gary Hill had become an artist who, while being a foundational presence for video art, could no longer be bracketed by a specific medium based discussion. Before us were video and media works that exist in the company of other practices including sculpture, performance (body and voice), writing and reciting. Allowing now for another reading of his work that places him closer to Vito Acconci and Chris Burden than to his famous video peers. I was also there because of an essay I would be writing for the catalogue, and for S_Z to prepare interview questions for the artist, which follows Z's introduction to the show, her first encounter on this scale with the art of Gary Hill. A French version of the interview and an accompanying text will appear in the Clermont Ferrand media art journal *Turbulences* later this July.

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The view of Hwaseong Fortress on the mountain from SIMA



The Church across the street of SIMA

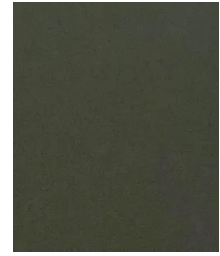
Suwon Ipark Museum of Art is located against Hwaseong Fortress constructed in the end of the 18th Century by King Jeongjo of the Joseon Dynasty, facing the Christian and Catholic churches across the street. At first glance one might expect a more traditional art-oriented preference considering the fashion and historical significance of the surroundings. However, since its opening in 2015, the public museum founded by one of the biggest Business tycoons, Hyundai Development Company, has more of a contemporary and audience-friendly orientation as it carries out exhibitions ranging from visual art to architecture and design. There have been a number of theme shows with local artists and some solo ones by established artists from home and abroad.

Gary Hill's recent solo show *Momentombs*, running from November 2019 to March 2020, was both dynamic and tranquil, just like the title seemed to promise. The whole body of work takes the moving image as a fundamental element, constantly and cunningly at play with time and spatial movements. The variety of electronic media (projections, LCD monitors, and CRT monitors) and their arrangements illustrate the refined possibilities of their dimensions, both through technical means and their physicality, which also provides a textbook lesson on that part of art history. Hand in hand with that dynamics is the sense of tranquility similar to that of landscapes. The 'slow motion' movement and the composition of the monitors of *Pacifier* (2014) and *Conundrum* (1995-98) allude to something between video, sculpture and hanging scroll /handscroll. The incomplete figure occupying most

of the screens in *Conundrum* is almost abstracted, as if a line of mountains from afar between the movements and flickers. In the piece *Crossbow* (1999), the three small CRT monitors hanging on the wall and their cables flowing forwards and form a pool in front of the audience, similar to the 'forest' of *I Believe It Is an Image in Light of the Other* (1991-92) and the glades of the speakers in *Cutting Corners Creates More Sides* (2012). Within the landscapes, the physical presence of the apparatus, the images and the sounds intertextualize with each other, constituting what Gary Hill terms 'language based art'.



Pacifier (2014)



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To my mind the exhibition was fundamentally about human beings. The first floor tilts to how media has opened up the ways we look and perceive, whereas the second floor gives more weight to the traits and poetics of what is human, using the languages expanded by the medium, such as the piece *Depth Charge* (2009/12) with monitors on the floor showing the artist in the midst of a psychotropic state talking disconnectedly but in a so very loving manner. Thus, it makes very much sense to have him flipping a coin again and again in silence in the piece *Place Holder* (2019) welcoming the audience at the top of the staircase from the first floor to the second. It is, of course, more than just a place holder. A work about holding a place, holding your ground and test the odds, in a venue that needed us to leave.

Z.



Place Holder (2019)

Interview

- 1. While the eighties were an intensely active period of single channel works for you and your peers, the nineties is the decade when a number of video artists of your generation truly become part of the larger contemporary art world (not simply collected by video departments). How do you remember that decade, what were key shows or events?**

I think your question dismisses too much that happened, at least for me, in the eighties. For example: *Hole in the Wall*, 1974; *War Zone*, 1980; *Glass Onion*, 1981; *Primarily Speaking*, 1980–81; *Equal Time*, 1982; *In Situ*, 1986; *CRUX*, 1984–87; *Disturbance (among the jars)*, 1988. In other words I made more installation work than single-channel works in the eighties. As far as why the acknowledgement of what was happening in media and how it went from the media/video ghetto to the so called “art world,” that is easy to pinpoint at least in hindsight. Even *Metropolis: International Art Exhibition Berlin*, 1991 at the Martin-Gropius-Bau installed all the media work on the lower floor (basement) completely segregated from other works. Most definitely the turning point was Documenta 9 curated by Jan Hoet that did it. Along with *Tall Ships* there were works by Dara Birnbaum, Mathew Barney, Stan Douglas Tony Oursler, Bruce Nauman and Bill Viola that together stole the show so to speak. After that video installations were everywhere. A couple of years later was the Venice biennale in which Viola occupied the United States Pavilion and I received the Golden Lion for sculpture for the interactive installation *Withershins*.

As an aside and going way back, perhaps one of the most interesting media exhibitions to take place, and very early I might add (1986), was Video As Attitude. That was well before the Video-Skulptur retrospectiv und aktuell 1963 – 1989 at the Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne, Germany, 1989.

2. As you point out, everything changed for installations at the turn of the nineties and we agree that artists were making installations in the eighties and before, which were shown more exclusively within a video art context, like that beautiful 1989 show in Cologne. Could you talk about the type of dialogue you had with curators at that time, many of which were 'organizing' exhibitions while being head of the video and media department of their institution (Pompidou, Stedelijk, MoMA)? While this still exists today, galleries, art centers and museums etc. collaborate with guest/free lance curators who are able to both curate and write the text, whereas before there would be a critic or theoretician who would provide a conceptual reading. Did such a change affect the conversation for you?

The reality is I didn't have many in depth conversations with curators, particularly with the ones you allude to. Most of the time they are about logistics. For the most part I'm appalled by how most curators view my work and talk about it but in a way that doesn't surprise me. I would imagine most artists have similar thoughts...except perhaps those who label themselves artists, curators and writers—haha.

Seriously, I think it has to do with where and why the creative act takes place—the artist is in the “culture” as it were—they are in the madness of what an act of faith is. The critique of that is well after the fact and there emerges all the coined terminology that may or may not randomly apply. Then there is the very bottom of curatorial “writing,” where the curator cuts and pastes from texts of the past and tries to sneak it in, sneak it by as some kind of encompassing blurb.

For whatever reason, video was subsumed by the matriarch in the beginning. Back in the day—Christine Van Assche/Pompidou; Dorine Mignot/Stedelijk; Barbara London/MoMA; Kathy Rae Huffman followed by Carole Ann Klonarides/Long Beach Museum of Art; Julie Lazar/MoCA; Fujiko Nakaya/Video Gallery SCAN; Anna Kafetsi/EMST and now Megaron and there are more. All great supporters in general but none of them except for Anna Kafetsi were theoretical writers per say. Once you look beyond what was then the “closed circuit” of video, the writing got more interesting. I’m thinking of Paul Ryan, Corinne Diserens (not limited to media) and Raymond Bellour, though he could never let go of film in a meaningful way. George Quasha and Charles Stein’s writings on my work are by far the most intelligent and original but that is a very special case in the sense that they have followed the work intensely for years coupled with the many times we have collaborated.

3. Your work is associated with language, poetry, literature, philosophy, as well as sculpture and performance, with a clear formal intention. Formalism became a tricky word to use. Is that aspect of your work as important to you today?

Not so sure about the formal connection...What exactly is my clear formal intention? Maybe if we were to look at a single work or thread of related works, we could find common ground where "formalism" exists. For example, take *Around & About*, is it formalism to change the image with every syllable or that in some instances the images move left to right, or that suddenly there are doubles of the image changing with every syllable? Couldn't we actually say the brain is a formal structure and that just about anything anyone does that in their right mind is somehow linked to formalism? It would seem that any self-conscious choice then would be a formalist one. I can't even find a consistent reading of the word. There are several attempts quoted in Wikipedia, some of which are almost comical.

4. By the end of the nineties, a number of trends had appeared, changing the practice of video and media and how it would be discussed: low tech, video diaries, socio-political corrections of histories (Walid Raad, Laura Poitras), the arrival of film actors in installations that were moving closer to cinema (from Isaac Julien to Jesper Just)... Where you paying attention to this? What were your impressions of these shifts, of video moving away from an exploration of the medium?

I think what you refer to as "trends" have been around from the beginning. "the arrival of film actors," "moving closer to cinema" are extremely reactionary to me. I'm surprised you didn't list Doug Aitken or Douglas Gordon as well. Some of this, not all, is artists "standing on

the shoulders of giants,” which could be an attempt to forge a new moving image or a kind of hip appropriation of some kind. “Exploration of the medium?” Video, as such, along with performance art is more like the art crossing the Rubicon. Medium specificity is dead. It was intermedia/intramedia (cross-disciplinary) from the beginning.

5. On that note, how did your collaboration with actress Isabelle Huppert come about?

Ronald Chammah, Isabelle’s husband and manager organized a retrospective of Isabelle’s films and photographic documentation of her over the years. He asked five artists to do works with her. *Is A Bell Ringing in the Empty Sky* was derived from my experiences doing *Viewer* and to a lesser degree *Tall Ships*. Basically, we stood and took each other in—acknowledging the “here and now” as a continuously opening space. When I first proposed the work to her, I remember quite vividly her saying how boring it sounded but not fully dismissing it. Afterwards, it was a different story, she said it was the hardest thing she’d ever done. It’s easy to see why, over a long 25 minutes or so, the question of being natural, how to act, what to act, how to be with presence (of another), doing everything and nothing became a long internal negotiation. It was like peeling an onion—so many layers until exhaustion sets in and “being” emerges.

6. At the turn of the century, video artists of your generation were the objects of important exhibitions, you had received the Venice prize... Was there still a sense of a video community for you at that point? Or had the conversation stopped long before that?

There are still video communities cross-pollenizing, much having to do with DIY and new technologies. I'm vaguely aware of what's going on but not very active with all that. In terms of making work I feel a little bit like we're ships passing in the night— about the time I started to use speech and language in my work my kinships shifted. Since my focus became poetics, language and I suppose somewhat more engaged in philosophical themes like ontology and epistemology rather than technics per say. In some sense 'video artist' was like an albatross around my neck and I've spent 25 years trying to shed that identity or categorization—I haven't made video art, at least how I think of it, since the mid-seventies.

7. You've had a long relationship with France, and in the earlier days, the only French artist working with video and shown in institutions was Thierry Kuntzel. Since then, artists such as Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno have become signposts for the expansion of transdisciplinary work, between art, media and science. Has that development been of interest to you?

That's perhaps true from a certain art world view and by that, I mean it *is* timing and it *is* who you know and where you live and just how much time one wants to spend networking and greasing the palms that feed. That said, art media and science or transdisciplinary work has been alive well and growing in the states and Asia for quite sometime. The artists you mention as signposts could have been plucked from a hat of a hundred doing equally interesting "trans"-disciplinary work. A few

examples: Stelarc, Ken Rinaldo, Paul DeMarinis...

8. How would you describe your current relationship with galleries? Could I ask how many represent your work internationally? Have the conditions changes, are the generations very different from one another?

After Donald Young passed away, I didn't pursue any sort exclusive representation. He was a very close friend and a perfect dealer and I couldn't imagine trying to replace that. I've stepped back from that but have maintained long time gallery connections like Lia Rumma (Milan, Naples); Fabienne Leclerc/InSitu (Paris); James Harris (Seattle). Recently I exhibited with bitforms gallery in New York. I have independent curatorial friends too that have occasionally placed my work in various exhibitions. I didn't use to think it mattered where I live but Seattle is far away from any international art scene and it's not as easy to stay visible without a full-time gallery especially when you're not the current trend as they say. After all, I make a certain kind of visceral esoteric art laced with a lot of language which is not everybody's cup of tea.

9. You've had key collaborators during the course of your career, from tech to poetry. Is this still the case today and if yes, who are they, what role do they play? Has your studio gotten much bigger? Are you still very much hands on, keeping up with cameras, software, projection apparatus...

It's all quite project specific. I don't have full time assistants. I contract

out work when I need something done that I can't do or don't have time or want to do. I still work with Dave Jones on occasion. I recently completed an artist book, *Inasmuch as It Has Already Taken Place* for Juxta press in Italy that involved "last words" that I conjured up. The title of the book aside from being a later sculptural work is the flip side of *Inasmuch As It Is Always Already Taking Place*. These two from about ten are recorded into the grooves of a record in such a way that as you hold it in the light certain ways you can see the words. Dave wrote a program that turned an image into precise frequencies and amplitudes to encode the record with. There's actually a long story behind the making of the book which became the content of the book —many email exchanges.

The writer Gabriele Guercio curated/edited a series, *Afterlife*. At the time I was doing a lot of archiving which seemed to have something to do with "afterlife" and that's how it all began. I did a number of glass works (*Aloidia Piorm*, *Klein Bottle with the Image of its Own Making (after Robert Morris)*, *Untitled Fat Man & Little Boy* and *Inasmuch As it Has Already Taken Place*), all 2014 during a three-week residency at Pilchuck in which I didn't intend to produce anything! In any event, all these works were made with and could not have been made without the assistance of master glass workers.

I can't really say I keep up with technology *and* with the philosophical questions that seem to go along with it. I seem more attracted to miniaturization than the current state of the art. The work *Dream Stop*, 2016 involved mounting 31 hidden cameras in a two-meter diameter

aluminum “dreamcatcher” with 31 corresponding projectors splaying one’s image along with anybody else’s in the space all over the place. I can see working with augmented reality more than say VR but all that could change on a dime really.

10. In recent years you have been more present in Asia. You had made work in Japan and had shows there, but when did it start with China, Korea, and how do you think your work is perceived and discussed over there?

I first went to Mainland China in 2016 for the first media biennale in Beijing. What started out as an invitation to participate with a work or perhaps two morphed into showing about ten works in about two weeks time—my first taste of the Chinese way which I suppose is shared somewhat by other Asian countries but the exponential last-minute thing is most pronounced in China. Over the last couple of years I’ve learned from the first generation video artists that my work has had a tremendous amount of exposure and was supposedly instrumental in the early growth of the medium there. Perhaps they are exaggerating but its water under the bridge now with the younger generations engaged in new media like I’ve never seen—the energy is intoxicatingly inspiring. At times it leans heavy on spectacle for better or for worse—technology definitely over-shadows concepts but at times it’s so powerful it simply convinces. I’ve done a few workshops there and gave an exercise to record in real-time for three-five minutes. As “foreign” a request this was, many managed to still come up with very fresh ideas. I’ve really enjoyed working with young artists there. Many are truly committed; some very adept technicians and they love to collaborate.

Stephen Sarrazin, February 2020

Quick Questions on the exhibition *Gary Hill: Momentombs*, Suwon Museum of Modern Art

1- How did the show come about and how long did you have to prepare?

Johann Nowack, the co-curator, knew the director—conversations I guess started some time ago then in March 2019 it seemed like things were going to go forward.

2- How were the works selected?

A combination of what was available, lending institutions, equipment available, budget etc. They did request 2 works and frankly, I don't know the reasoning. They were *Primarily Speaking* and *Twofold*.

3- Did the issue of a Korean audience play a part in conceiving the show? Did the museum have any particular intent?

To some degree thinking about language but then again I still included *Cutting Corners*...

4- Do you see a formal/thematic principle for each floor?

Not really. I decided the layout and basically went with what looked best in certain spaces, not so much about grouping pieces together. I could make a case for that though I suppose. There are many

considerations and perhaps the sound was the most deciding factor.

5- Which work was the most challenging to install in this venue?

I Believe... is always a little challenging but nothing was particularly difficult.

6- How does this show differ from other major exhibitions you've had?

It's certainly the largest exhibition I've had. Perhaps, the fact that it came up so fast didn't allow much time to think about it too much which might have been a good thing. Contracts weren't signed until end of September/beginning of October. I didn't think it would even happen when September arrived and there wasn't an agreement.

7- Did you have time to do a live performance during the exhibition? Does 'acting' come into play into your performances (ie *Depth Charge*)?

I did a very short impromptu performance at the opening. There is no "acting" in *Depth Charge*. I'm on a very large dose of LSD. I didn't intend to make a work. My wife, Magdalena, came home and found me on the studio floor and started recording me. When I looked at the material days later I thought it had a level of intimacy and vulnerability that I hadn't experienced in my work so directly so I started thinking about a work...

8- Has the relationship with technology and the process of

installing works become simpler over the years? Are you still working with some of the same collaborators?

Not really—cables can still be bad! I still work with Dave Jones on occasion.

9- Depth Charge has a Vasulka quality to it; were you working on the exhibition when news came of Woody's passing?

If you are referring to the image of the guitarist (the guardian angel) backdrop of *Depth Charge*, it actually has nothing to do with Vasulka other than it uses a Rutt/Etra. That "effect" is more or less a preset on that machine. The show opened on November 26. Woody passed December 23.

10- were you thinking of a particular choice/decision to make when you were flipping the coin over and over in Place Holder?

No.

11- Seoul is very much of a video history city; what critical reactions did the show receive?

I have no idea. They haven't sent me any press yet.

12- the museum had to close one week before the end of the show, because of the virus issue. I imagine this was a first for you? What's next in Asia for you?

A first for sure—not sure what's next due to the virus but I'm supposed

to have a large exhibition at OCAT in Shanghai.

Interview by S_Z

March 2020

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