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Narratus Interruptus: Gary Hill's 23:59:59:29—The Storyteller's Room

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exhibition review by Dore Bowen

Narratus Interruptus:

During and After Gary Hill's

23:59:59:29—The Storyteller's Room

On May 15th, after much anticipation and delay, Gary Hill's installation *23:59:59:29—The Storyteller's Room* opened at Capp Street Project. Hill, a longtime pioneer of video-based multimedia art, creates intense interactive installations that challenge the viewer to confront the mystery of memory and perception, intertwining the two in order to reveal an experience—not an object—for contemplation. Rather than using audio-video technology to create a linear narrative, Hill taps the poetic possibilities of the medium.

The work concerns time, and it takes time; in fact, nearly half an hour is required for the images to register with detail. This demands of the viewer a certain amount of patience and participation, something those of us raised with the immediacy of modern living—five-minute rice, quality time, disposable diapers—are terribly unprepared for. *23:59:59:29* may allude to the twenty-plus minutes it takes for the image and narration to recycle—the time of the story. On the other hand, as “military time,” this number refers to the penultimate moment before the bewitching hour of midnight—a fraction of a second before Cinderella becomes a pumpkin and werewolves roam the countryside. There is time to imagine and time to forget.

The intimacy of this particular installation is accentuated by its site specificity. By including both the space of the gallery and the viewer's own bodily experience into the work, the usual aesthetic detachment involved in art viewing—what is called “absorption” or “disinterestedness”—is diminished. In the midst of this installation the viewer becomes aware of the time involved in viewing an image and the length of a gallery wall.

In the darkened room of Hill's installation—momentarily leaning against a column, straining to see the dim image on the bare wall—I begin to wonder whether what I am seeing originates from the video projectors mounted on the beams above or my own psyche. Is that a tumbleweed, a car rushing by, or a figure walking through a barren landscape? Is it the texture of the brick wall on which the image is screened, or another viewer silently pacing the gallery floor? It occurs to me that my confusion in differentiating Hill's dreamlike video tableaux, the space of the room, and my own imagination is precisely the intent of this work. What is the story told here? It is a story about the act of reading a story; it is a story that addresses the difference between reading into, reading onto, reading between, and reading over. More precisely, the story is

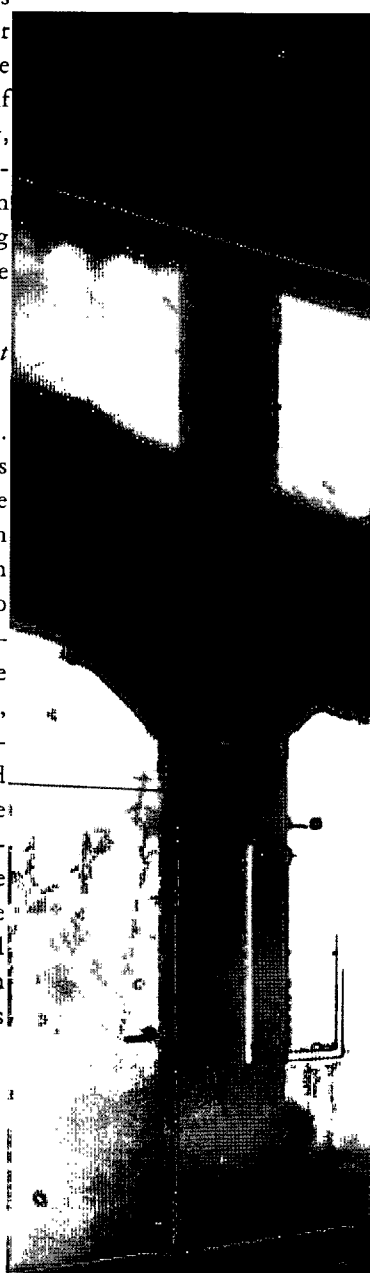
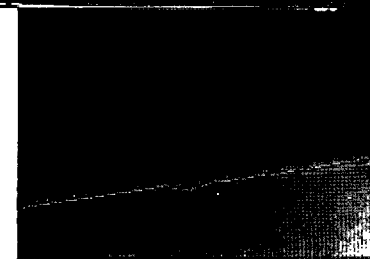
the space and time of the storyteller's room. I am the storyteller, feebly attempting to read this experience as language, to follow the image and voice to the site of meaning. The difficulty of this process speaks to the inherently double countenance of representation—the sign is both here and gesturing elsewhere—without resolving this contradiction.

the story may have begun . . . beside me . . . under the influence of an image

Vague patterns emerge on and over the rough brick and aluminum structures that surround me. As I concentrate on one wall the image of an industrial landscape appears, and after a time there is movement—a train passes, a figure traverses the terrain, cars rush by on the freeway overhead. A strobe light illuminates the room. Again, darkness. Only now, without the distraction of light, do I hear the voice uttering fragments of a story. The words are stated matter-of-factly and with such loose and extended phrasing that the narrative thread is lost; the meaning of the story is as distant as a far-off train whistle. Like the dimly illuminated image, the voice does not allow me to read across it, to patch together the bits and pieces of this story and thus to render the plot intelligible. Rather, through the suspension of the narrative, reading itself becomes the object of inquiry. Watching, pacing, listening, remembering, and forgetting do not lead to a moral or message. I am left to loiter in a dark room. Across the long gallery I see the image flicker again on the opposite wall.

in cold silence I kept reading . . . and I kept from reading

This work operates through depth, not plot. The installation is an archaeology of this site, which includes the gallery and the urban exterior. The gallery wall acts as an opaque screen illuminating the scene both inside and out. The light from the video image reveals the space in the gallery—girders, beams, people—and projects the space outside—industrial waste, rubble, trucks, and train tracks. The video landscapes are taken from the environs around Capp Street Project—an upwardly mobile former industrial wasteland south of downtown, a district where empty factories have been renovated to serve as high-tech office buildings and the site of our future ball park. Yet it remains an empty, flat terrain where pothole roads and vaulting overpasses lead the traveler elsewhere.



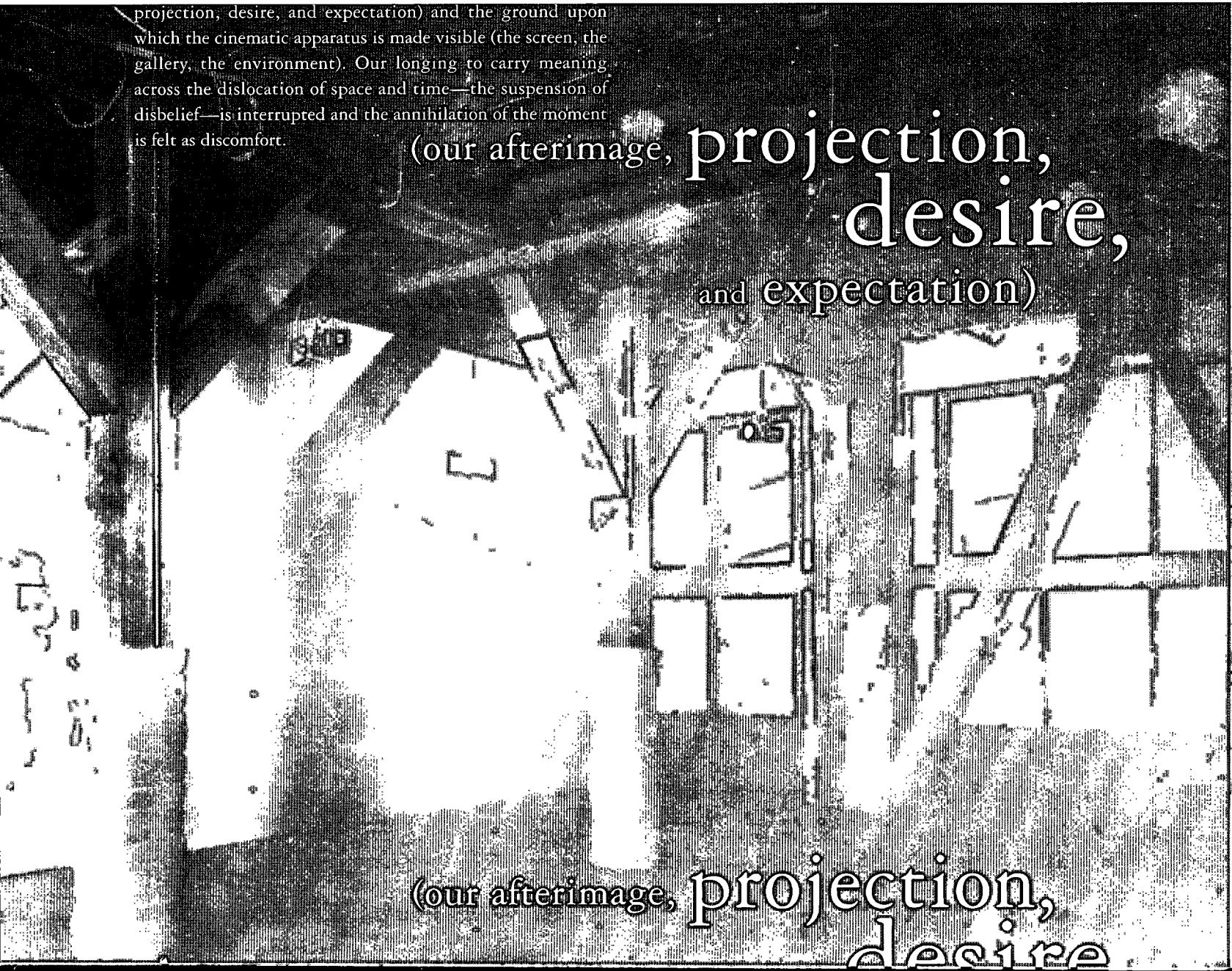
... (our afterimage, projection, and expectation)

A moment of intense illumination. After the strobe light, my retinal afterimage blends with subsequent specters. I see the moment prior, an image of a tall man standing with arms outstretched, a landscape I remember hurrying past hours ago, the texture of an aluminum door, and I feel my body as it moves through this dark chamber. As the images shift from wall to wall I wander among them. Columns are padded with foam so that my inevitable contact is buffered. I am impatiently pacing now. I am hungry for meaning.

There is something cruel about this severed plot, this narratus interruptus culminating in a fabula rasa. And Hill has done this before. *Suspension of Disbelief (for Marine)* for instance, a 1995 installation at the Guggenheim Museum SoHo, both offers and denies the viewer voyeuristic satisfaction. In this installation, close-up images of two naked bodies—one male and one female—flow back and forth across monitors suspended above the floor. As the bodies drift across the span of screens, their movement is interrupted by an electronic mechanism that fragments the anatomical forms. By refusing us the expected visual cohesion, Hill exposes us to ourselves (our afterimage, projection, desire, and expectation) and the ground upon which the cinematic apparatus is made visible (the screen, the gallery, the environment). Our longing to carry meaning across the dislocation of space and time—the suspension of disbelief—is interrupted and the annihilation of the moment is felt as discomfort.

When 23:59:59:29—*The Storyteller's Room* closed on June 20th, Capp Street Project, for years the locus of San Francisco's most experimental exhibits, closed its doors as well. Capp Street Project will terminate its artist-in-residence program and merge with the California College of Arts and Crafts. Hill's installation is an interesting finale, for, after much effort and delay, this work successfully enables the viewer to experience the time and the location of this public space in a particularly intimate fashion.

Dore Bowen is an artist, art critic, and Ph.D. candidate in the Visual and Cultural Studies Program at the University of Rochester. She is currently teaching at San Francisco State University.



(our afterimage, projection,
desire,
and expectation)

(our afterimage, projection,
desire