

Kunstmuseum
Wolfsburg



Gary Hill
A Question
of Perception

Booklet

Gary Hill. A Question of Perception

November 30, 2024 — March 16, 2025

Introduction

Images and language are deconstructed and regenerated, gestures are transformed into speech, colors are exchanged and manipulated, texts are spoken forwards and backwards. From a loudspeaker membrane slowly filled with sand, we hear that a voice is buried here... The exhibition *Gary Hill: A Question of Perception* shows how the American media conceptual artist has been revealing the essence of image and language through the medium of video for more than five decades.

Active since the 1970s, Gary Hill (b. 1951 in Santa Monica, lives in Seattle) is one of the key practitioners working with video, language and electronic media. With his inimitable feel for a medium's technical and conceptual possibilities, he helped establish the liminality between video, performance and conceptual practices in contemporary art. Long before the manipulation of media became commonplace, Gary Hill's videos repeatedly brought together the elements of image, language, and text, creating a special awareness of how we perceive and process different kinds of information. His work is particularly relevant today because of the ubiquity of electronically generated images and their manipulability.

Gary Hill's videos and installations do not tell stories; on the contrary, he uses technical means to orchestrate, modulate, and stage experiences or phenomenological phenomena. On the one hand, they create an expanded consciousness; on the other, they sow a deep skepticism about the construction of perception, meaning, or reality. Far beyond a mere critique of images and media, his works invite us to question our habitual patterns of perception and judgment. Through a strategy of discontinuity, he develops new visual and auditory modes of perception and communication. His art draws on everyday, personal, literary, scientific, and philosophical experiences and themes. For Gary Hill, the medium is never merely a means of representation, but always an invitation to reflection. He demonstrates that "images are not just there but emerge with the light of each moment" (Gottfried Boehm).

All of Gary Hill's video works are of powerful intensity and at the same time create great intimacy. In terms of content and their media dynamics, they never work towards a quick punch line or a specific climax. It is a special qual-

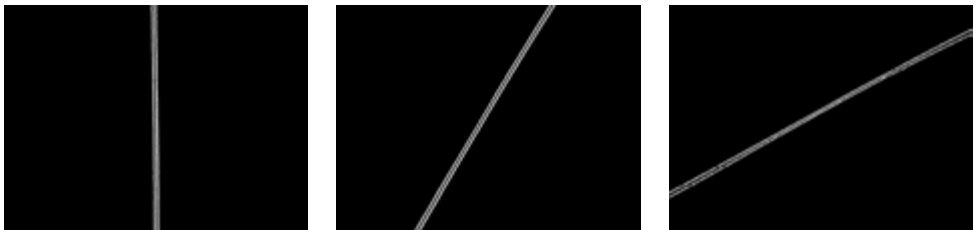
ity of his work that Gary Hill always maintains a productive balance between content and effect. This balance is particularly conducive to a conscious and intense experience of temporality. In some cases, the images literally burn themselves onto our retinas or develop such a strong physical presence that individual images and words reverberate in our memory for a long time.

With forty-six works spanning five decades, the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg has the largest collection of works by the American video pioneer in Germany. In the last few years, several more recent installations have been added to the collection and are now being shown for the first time in this exhibition.

Resolution, 1980

In *Resolution*, the medium literally revolves around itself. A white double line can be seen turning 180 degrees around its own (imaginary) axis until it returns to its vertical position. The diagonal movement is created by the individual dots of the double line “descending” in a stair-like manner over the 525 lines of the digital image space. The further the line moves toward the horizontal center of the image, the farther apart the dots move. On the horizontal plane, the line seems to break up completely for a brief moment, so that the individual dots are perceived only as fleeting electronic signals. The break with the previous line logic gives the impression that the signals are wandering through a different pictorial space. After a brief moment, the white pixels rejoin the regular image grid to restore the image of the rotating double line. Throughout the process, the image is reconstructed in real time with each movement in front of the viewer’s eyes.

With *Resolution*, Gary Hill uses minimal means to visualize his artistic concept. Like a scanner, the line scans the image space in ninety seconds, not only revealing the structure of the medium, but also pointing to a “hidden space” (Gary Hill) that can only be perceived through the media experience. When the line begins to dissolve in the video, Gary Hill literally allows us to see between the lines of the medium. For Gary Hill, the potential of the medium lies not in the visual, but in its mediating function, which is why he compares the properties of video to those of language. Like language, video is a means of communication that makes it possible to experience different contexts of meaning.



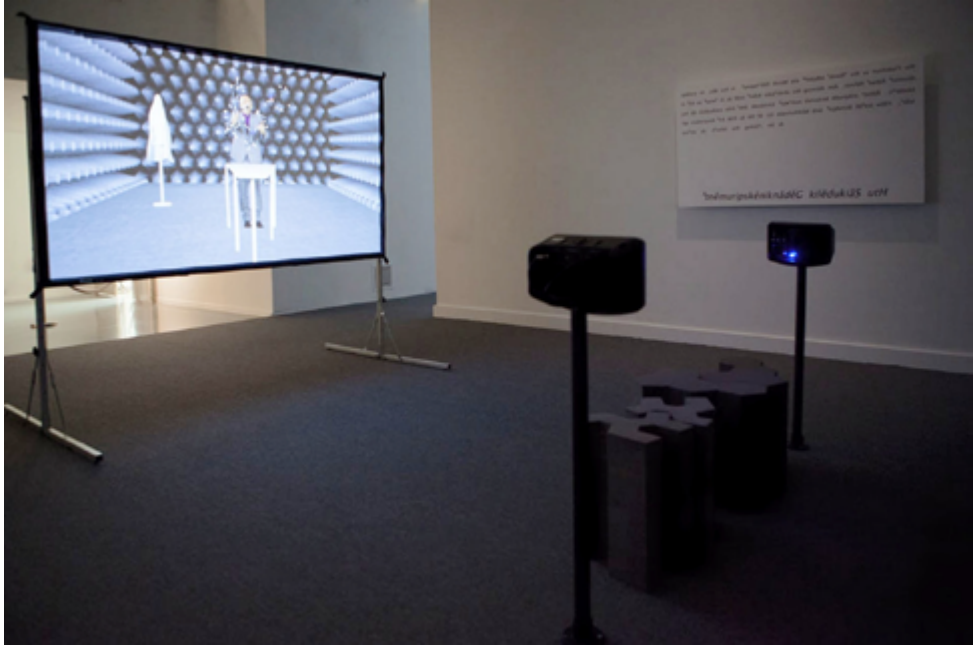
Resolution, 1980
Single-channel video, black-and-white, silent, 1:30 min.
Ed.: 3/30 + 5 AP

The Psychedelic Gedankenexperiment (single channel 2D version), 2011

“I take the liberty of declaring, as artists do, that lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) is the art experience par excellence.” With this provocative statement, Gary Hill addresses the audience directly in his “found performance,” in the style of Marcel Duchamp’s *objet trouvé* or readymade, to involve them in his psychedelic thought experiment. Even if the “life-changing” LSD trip and the promised spectacle fail to materialize, the physical and psychological perception of the performance is noticeably shaken: by the lack of temporal and spatial localization, by the movable seating furniture, as well as by the incomprehensible narrative and the disturbing action.

In the video, Gary Hill appears like a mad scientist, alchemist, or magician, clumsily assembling a folding table and a molecular model from elements scattered randomly about the room in a laboratory situation. The special seating, modeled on the structure of an LSD molecule, reinforces the impression of being part of an experimental setup.

Albert Einstein had already used the thought experiment as a scientific tool for his theory of relativity in order to theoretically simulate complex relationships. In addition to Marcel Duchamp’s idea of the readymade, Gary Hill’s installation also draws on this scientific tradition. *The Psychedelic Gedankenexperiment* is therefore less about the psychedelic high than about the potential of this experience in relation to art: Analogous to the sciences with their experimental setups, it is the task of art to create the conceptual framework for extraordinary and mind-altering experiences.



The Psychedelic Gedankenexperiment (single channel 2D version), 2011

Singel-channel video/sound installation, HD video projector, free-standing projection screen, media player, two amplified speakers, two stool variations in foam, wall text, color, sound, 22:48 min.

Projection dimensions variable

Ed.: 4/6 +1AP

Cognitive Processes and Knowledge

Cognitive processes play a key role throughout Gary Hill's oeuvre. Cognitive processes are the foundation of knowledge. To define them is challenging, to represent them almost impossible. Gary Hill takes on this challenge with his art. To create an awareness of these processes, Gary Hill chooses to approach them through perception, creating experiences that—like the processes themselves—are barely rationally comprehensible and demand a high degree of reflection.

The term cognition encompasses all mental processes involved in receiving, processing, and storing information: This includes, among other things, how we perceive information through our sensory organs and how we respond to certain stimuli and content. It also encompasses how our thinking works, how language is understood and produced, and how memories are stored and retrieved. All these processes can take place both consciously and unconsciously. The processes that involve the body in addition to the mind form the basis of human thought, action, and feeling.

In terms of content, Gary Hill's video/sound installations draw on the discourses of psychology, neuroscience, linguistics, and philosophy, for example when he explores the question of how the right hand can know what the left hand is doing at the same time (*Twofold [Goats & Sheep]*, 1995/2002). By using video as a medium, he deliberately guides and manipulates perception in order to make it itself the object of examination. In the moment of experiencing his works, an awareness of cognitive connections arises. In order to gain knowledge, it is also helpful to observe oneself while experiencing the works.

The Body

The body and corporeality are ever-present in Gary Hill's work. In its external form, the body is usually presented only in fragments: hands, for example, are filmed while performing gestures (*Twofold [Goats & Sheep]*, 1995/2002) or a repetitive activity (*Mediations*, 1979/1986). The mouth appears full-screen on the monitor while speaking (*Primary*, 1978). In Gary Hill's work, the fragmentation of the body always includes the invitation to complete it in one's mind in order to reflect on the complex relationships between the body, perception, language, and technology.

The presence of the human body can also be experienced when it does not appear visually as an image, but is suggested by actions such as speaking, breathing, or moving (*Sine Wave [The Curve of Life]*, 2011). In some works, Gary Hill deliberately highlights human characteristics to emphasize the importance of the corporeal (*Red Technology*, 1994). The physical dimension of speaking and thinking plays a key role in Gary Hill's work. Like a medium, images and language pass through our bodies in Hill's imagination to be further processed there.

The viewer's body is also actively incorporated into the media experience. Sometimes the experience is literally inscribed on the body. In particular, when strobe light is used, the images are burned into the retina, creating a physiological afterimage—an image created by the body itself (*Reflex Chamber*, 1996). The afterimage is also a memory of the image seen, which lingers while the viewer is simultaneously confronted with the presence of new images. Similar effects occur in the perception of sound. Depending on the form of staging, image and sound have the potential to make one's own physical presence tangible.

Twofold (Goats & Sheep), 1995/2002

The title of the work alludes to the distinction between those who are fit for a particular task and those who are not. In *Twofold (Goats & Sheep)*, Gary Hill addresses the crossed control of the hands by the cerebral hemispheres: The left side of the brain primarily controls the right side of the body with the right hand, while the right side of the brain controls the left side of the body with the left hand. Despite the crossed control, both cerebral hemispheres work together during complex hand movements. The speech center, on the other hand, which controls (verbal) expressions, can be located in either the right or left hemisphere of the brain.

Twofold (Goats & Sheep) consists of two identical views of a person gesticulating with their hands in sign language. The main theme of the work is the relationship of left and right handedness to movement, symmetry, and asymmetry. Gary Hill uses stereo sound to double his voice by delaying the sound on one channel by approximately one second. This acoustic doubling mirrors the visual double projection of the hands as well as the numerous puns and repetitions of the spoken text:

...
*and words reflect back
from one word to the next*

...
*and if
the left hand
knows
what the right hand is doing?*

...

By examining perception, language, and media, Gary Hill encourages us to think about the nature of knowledge and how it is communicated.



Twofold (Goats & Sheep), 1995/2002

2-channel video/sound installation, 2 video projectors, 2 loudspeakers, media player, black-and-white, sound, 11:38 min.

Installation dimensions variable

Ed.: 6/15 + 2 AP

Technology

Gary Hill's work critically questions the nature of technically generated images, particularly those of the media of television and video. Technology therefore plays a crucial role in his examination of the nature of the monitor or video image and its effects. He uses it as a medium to explore complex themes and correlations such as consciousness, language, and perception.

Gary Hill was one of the first artists to go beyond traditional video recording, using innovative technologies such as image/sound synthesis, high-speed multiplexing and de-multiplexing of electronic signals, 3D video cameras, and components of interactivity to explore the relationship between the body and mental activity.

He is particularly critical of influential everyday technologies, such as the ubiquitous television (*Commentary*, 1980). In later works, he also incorporated philosophical texts that dealt with his themes, such as the essence of technology (*Red Technology*, 1994).

Gary Hill often exposes the inner workings of the devices used to question the viewer's perception of self and reality. Or he places the viewer inside an imaginary camera (*Reflex Chamber*, 1996).

Language / Text

Since the 1970s, Gary Hill has rejected the label “video artist,” preferring instead to describe himself as a language or performance artist. During this time, and particularly under the influence of the American writers George Quasha and Charles Stein, he began to explore the mediating function of language and to interpret video as a form of language. The importance of language was also rooted in his distrust of anything visual, because for him “the image [...] is the real virus that has infected everything.”

Gary Hill is concerned with the material properties of sound, language, and communication: “The linguistic side of my work is largely concerned with the corporeality of language—its materiality, whether in spoken or written form.” In his work, language can therefore be experienced less as a carrier of meaning than as an event (*Red Technology*, 1994; *Primary*, 1978). Language is never used for narrative or representational purposes. Voices and sounds are either directly linked to the image or an action (*Mediations*, 1979/1986) or deliberately decoupled from it. Even the philosophical texts by Martin Heidegger or Ludwig Wittgenstein were selected not only for their content, but also with an eye to the artistic question of how they could be made palpable through the modulation of language. Many of the texts were written by Gary Hill himself (e.g. *Site Recite [A Prologue]*, 1989).

Language and pauses in speech give the images a rhythm that can be experienced as temporality (*Sums & Differences*, 1978). Rhythms of speech and sound can reinforce the action or deliberately interrupt thought, thus preventing the emergence of meaning.

Red Technology, 1994

Gary Hill's work is characterized by an innovative and experimental approach to video technology. He engages with the technology itself and explores the possibilities of the medium. This includes above all the deconstruction of sound and image and the development of new forms of "writing" with image and sound carriers. Screen and projection are seen as a new "canvas" for painting with moving images. For Gary Hill, technology is therefore not just a tool, but an integral part of his artistic work. He uses it to create new forms of expression, to explore perception and, as in *Red Technology*, to reflect on the medium itself:

Static images of a left and a right page from the German edition of Martin Heidegger's (1889–1976) essay *Die Frage nach der Technik* (*The Question Concerning Technology*, 1954) are projected in the corner of a room. The philosopher's text is read word for word by an unseen person, with pauses and silences electronically edited out to create a continuous flow of spoken text. When all the sentences of the two pages have been read, the book "turns" to the next two pages. The two pages/images alternately flicker on and off at a speed of 1/30 of a second. This causes the images to vibrate continuously, accompanied by an extremely loud reading of the text.

Martin Heidegger's essay *Die Frage nach der Technik* deals with the essence of technology and its significance for human existence. Heidegger aims to prepare a "free relationship" to technology by questioning its essence. He argues that only through a deeper understanding of technology will humans be able to relate to it in an appropriate way. Gary Hill's staging of the text makes the essence of technology as described by Heidegger tangible.

epistēmē zusammen.
Beide Worte sind Namen
für das Erkennen im
weitesten Sinne. Sie
m e i n e n das
Sichauskennen in etwas,
das Sichverstehen auf
etwas. Das Erkennen gibt
A u f s c h l u ß. Als
aufschließendes ist es ein
Entbergen. Aristoteles

unterscheidet in einer
besonderen Betrachtung
(Eth. Nic. VI, c. 3 und 4)
die *epistēmē* und die
technē, und zwar im
Hinblick darauf, was sie
und wie sie entbergen.
Die *technē* ist eine Weise
des *alētheuein*. Sie
entbirgt solches, was sich
nicht selber hervor-

Red Technology, 1994

2-channel video/sound installation, 2 video projectors, DVD player, DVD, control unit, amplifier, 2 loudspeakers,
black-and-white, sound, 59:20 min.

Projection dimensions: each 366 × 274 cm

Ed.: 2/2 + 1 AP



Reflex Chamber, 1996

In *Reflex Chamber*, Gary Hill creates a visual examination situation in a black box. The cubic space is designed to resemble the interior of a single-lens reflex camera. In the center is a white table with a square surface. A moving image is projected onto a mirror mounted on the ceiling at a 45-degree angle so that the video image is reflected onto the table. These are short and sometimes abstract-looking sequences of landscapes, a drive through a tunnel, buildings, subway rides, and a video lens that someone moves in front of their face.

The orientation of the image changes constantly and is experienced topographically through the view from above. The projection is less an image (window) to stand in front of than a physical presence. A spoken text is interrupted by shorter and longer pauses and cuts. During the speaking time, stroboscopic lights flash and outshine the image. For a moment, everything seems to be “thrown out”; you look at each other and see that everyone is staring intensely at the white table. Then there is total darkness again, and only an afterimage remains. Sometimes the stroboscopic light marks the beginning and end of an image sequence. The image then seems to pulsate, giving the impression of floating. The overall impression suggests a place where thoughts, heard as language, connect with the image, interact with it, or disrupt it. It is about “gaps” in thinking and seeing, where no rhythm develops—rather, one is constantly pushed off the path one has taken to understand the nature and meaning of the images.

Reflex Chamber, 1996

Single-channel video/sound installation, video projector, mirror, strobe light, laserdisc player, 4 speakers, 2 amplifiers, graphic equalizer, metal support, white laminated table, color, sound, 11:09 min.

Room dimensions: 460 × 460 × 460 cm, table: 86 × 152 × 152 cm

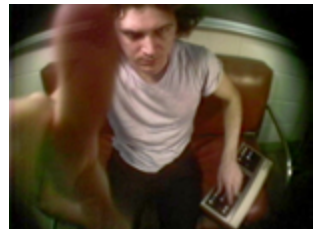
Ed.: 1/2 + 1 AP

Commentary, 1980

Gary Hill critically examines the parameters of our everyday perception of technically generated images, especially those of television. This is also the case in *Commentary*. The artist can be seen in various positions in front of a camera. His sometimes absurd behavior results from his critical attitude towards the medium of television, which he describes as follows:

“This work is something of a ‘manifesto in jest’ against television... I’m a sit-in viewer looking slightly up at the screen making simple gestures into the camera. The mood is ambiguous as I seem to be watching a mirror, covering my face, reaching out to the camera, obstructing my head with a harsh (interrogator’s) lamp, and maybe more. The image, distorted through a fish-eye lens, gives the impression of a concave monitor, as if the whole act were seen through a peephole or pinhole camera. In some sense I ‘play’ both sides of the screen—performer and viewer attempting to ‘connect’ either way. As ‘commentary’ it’s two-way, making it also a commentary on commentary.”
(Gary Hill)

Commentary is an attempt to explore the topic of technical communication. Television claims to provide this, but in reality communication only takes place to a limited extent, or as Gary Hill puts it at the end of his video: “Television is a hologram with a hollow sound.”



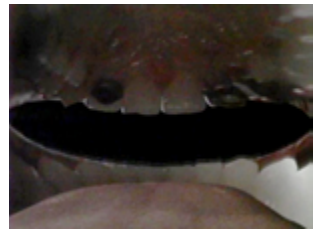
Commentary, 1980
Single-channel video, color, sound, 1:01 min.
Ed.: 3/30 + 5 AP

Site Recite (A Prologue), 1989

Gary Hill's work is characterized by a profound engagement with human perception. He uses innovative technical means and spatial stagings to question familiar ways of seeing and to open up new perspectives on the perception of image, sound, and space.

On a round table, bones, skulls of small mammals, butterflies, nuts, and other vegetable substances are spread out, as if found on a nature walk in the forest, but also shells and scraps of paper. These are relics that symbolize the cycle of life, as seen in cabinets of curiosities or vanitas still lifes.

The camera circles this place, capturing the objects that, due to the shallow depth of field, are successively highlighted from the panorama of the collection gathered there: a bird's skull, a piece of bark, a crystal appears in razor-sharp focus; then the point of focus changes and a shell emerges contoured from the shadowy surroundings. In this way, the camera discovers the fleeting beauty of each object in turn, capturing it for a split second before losing it again as it focuses on the next structure. The final passage of the work "transfers" the viewer to the mouth of the speaker, who looks outward: As the narrator opens his mouth and speaks, light falls into the speaking mouth cavity, the tongue moves, and the teeth chew the final words of the work: "imagining the brain closer than the eyes."



Site Recite (A Prologue), 1989
Single-channel video, color, sound, 4:10 min.
Ed.: 3/30 + 5 AP

Color

Gary Hill uses color in his work as an important element in his exploration of perceptual processes and to question the relationship between image, language, and consciousness. He deliberately uses color as a means of perceptual research, exploring the limits of visual perception and researching how we cognitively process colors.

To achieve this and to break with habitual ways of seeing, Gary Hill incorporates philosophical perspectives (*Bemerkungen über die Farben [Remarks on Color]*, 1994) or manipulates and inverts colors in his video works. These alienating effects draw attention to the process of perception itself and question the matter-of-factness with which we perceive and interpret the colors in our environment. At the same time, he reveals the construction and potential manipulability of media images and the viewer's consciousness.

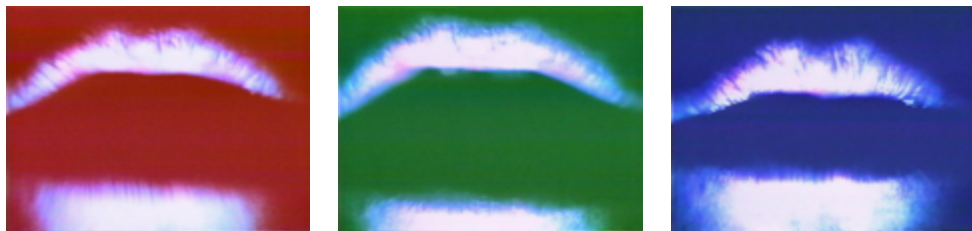
Through his innovative use of color in combination with other elements such as language, movement, and space, Gary Hill helps to push the boundaries of the medium of video, opening up new perspectives on the perception of color and its role in visual communication (*Bathing*, 1977; *Primary*, 1978; *Windows*, 1978).

Primary, 1978

Gary Hill manipulates and inverts colors in his video works to break through familiar ways of seeing. Through these alienating effects, he draws attention to the process of perception itself and questions the matter-of-factness with which we perceive and interpret colors in our environment.

The artist's mouth fills the entire screen. As Gary Hill repeatedly forms the words "red," "blue," and "green" with his lips, the color of the screen changes in a constant rhythm from red to blue to green. Only the lips, which appear white due to polarization, stand out from the monochrome surroundings. The spoken words are electronic combinations of the words "red," "blue," and "green," forming a continuous litany. The individual words are barely intelligible, merging into a single soundscape so that they can only be read from the uniformly moving lips. With this work, Gary Hill continues his exploration of the elementary possibilities of articulation on the verbal and visual levels.

The primary colors of CRT (cathode ray tube) monitors and of three-tube projectors are red, green, and blue (RGB), not red, yellow, and blue, because light colors use additive color mixing. The classic primary colors red, yellow, and blue, on the other hand, refer to the subtractive color mixing used for paints. Red, green, and blue as primary colors allow a wider color space to be represented than with red, yellow, and blue. This allows for more efficient and accurate color reproduction on display screens.



Primary, 1978
Single-channel video, color, sound, 1:19 min.
Ed.: 3/30 + 5 AP

Bemerkungen über die Farben [Remarks on Color], 1994

A child reads for forty-six minutes from the first part of Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1889–1951) *Bemerkungen über die Farben* (Remarks on Colors). The text is a philosophical work on the nature and perception of colors. In it, Wittgenstein reflects on various aspects of color: color perception (how colors are perceived and understood), color logic (analysis of the logical relationships between different colors and color concepts), and linguistic aspects (how we talk about colors and the role of language in our understanding of colors).

The layout of the scene, the child's clothing and hair color, and the bright red book itself create visual references through the reading that allow the viewer to experience color," "language," and "play" in a new way. The child's reading of philosophical questions about the essence of color reveals an unusual "coloring" of Wittgenstein's idea of the "language-game," as he referred to his writing. Gary Hill explores the interface between thinking and seeing, virtual space and real experience.

While Ludwig Wittgenstein was critical of the linguistic comprehension of the colored world, Gary Hill transfers his reflections to the horizon of a child's understanding. This illustrates the process of appropriating reality through language, one of the central themes of Wittgenstein's thought.



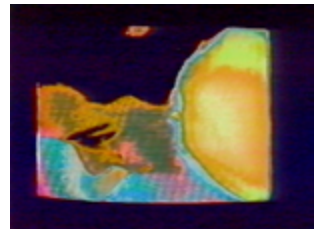
Bemerkungen über die Farben [Remarks on Color], 1994
Single-channel video, color, sound, 46 min.
Ed.: 2/5

Bathing, 1977

A woman lies in a bathtub with her eyes closed. The running faucet splashes in the background. The camera, which places the viewer in the role of a voyeur, moves over the woman's body, stopping on her face, which is just above the surface of the water. The woman runs both hands through her hair. The movement is frozen and remains for a few seconds as a monitor image with a black border and an alienated color. Then the camera resumes its observation. The woman begins to wash her hair with shampoo. Again, the image freezes for a moment. She continues to wash her hair, dips her head under water a few times, and finally leans forward to remove the remains of the shampoo from her hair.

The process is repeatedly interrupted by the freezing of the moving image at particularly “picturesque” moments. While the natural and relaxed movements of the subject are transformed into extremely light, pastel color gradients, the darker colors of the still images recall familiar motifs from art history, such as “Susanna in the Bath” and others, as they are known primarily from Impressionist painting.

In this video work, Gary Hill uses a camera and image processors to explore the manipulability of electronic colors and image density in line with his media critique.

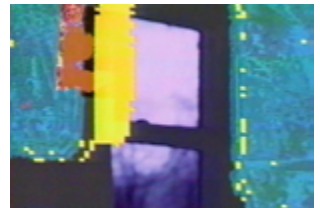
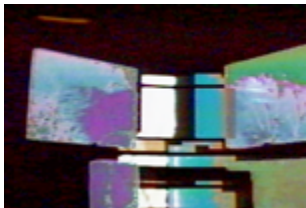


Bathing, 1977
Single-channel video, color, sound, 4:30 min.
Ed.: 3/30 + 5 AP

Windows, 1978

In *Windows*, shot in real time, Gary Hill experiments with the classic motif of the window. While in traditional painting the picture surface itself functions as a (static) “window” or thematizes the relationship between interior and exterior space, Hill juxtaposes moving views of window fronts with fixed shots by means of superimposition. In the latter, moving details of landscape, trees, and branches occasionally become visible. Manipulations of the digital signal produce distortions of colors and contrasts (polarizations). At short intervals, images of windows fade in and out, which, like the screen surface itself, appear as experimental color fields. Interior and exterior views are superimposed, creating fantastic-looking spatial nestings. Soon after, the image disintegrates into individual pixels, the surfaces begin to pulsate and flutter, to dissolve, and gradually new color patterns with moving content can be discerned. In this way, Gary Hill draws attention to the processual, fleeting, and, not least, uncontrollable aspects associated with the view through the window.

Here, too, Gary Hill manipulates and inverts colors in order to break through familiar ways of seeing. Through these alienating effects, he draws attention to the process of perception itself and questions the matter-of-factness with which we perceive and interpret the colors in our surroundings.



Windows, 1978
Single-channel video, black-and-white and color, silent, 8:24 min.
Ed.: 3/30 + 5 AP

Sound

Gary Hill describes the use of sounds in his work as a bridge between his original focus on sculpture in his early work and video art. In his work, he emphasizes the physicality of sound and explores ways in which sound can be electronically altered.

In this sense, his works explore the relationship between spoken words and visual elements (*Mediations*, 1979/1986), often using (altered) sound to create tension and interaction with images.

In some of his works, he also deliberately uses the sounds of musical instruments to modulate tones and relate them to image sequences (*Sums & Differences*, 1978).

For Gary Hill, sound and language have a multidimensionality that allows them to interweave and interpenetrate with other elements of the video in the media space. This creates a multilayered relationship between image, sound, text, and language. The combination of all these elements creates an awareness of certain phenomena, perceptions, or questions.

Here, Gary Hill uses deconstruction as a strategy, i.e. the analysis and critical questioning of (familiar) sound. It influences the viewer's perception by changing the relationship between sound and image, thus creating new meanings. When sound and image do not match, a dissonance is created and with it an unusual dynamic that makes the viewer reflect on their own perception. In addition, sound can be experienced as an independent theatrical event that goes beyond the traditional meaning of language and voice.

Sums & Differences, 1978

Gary Hill uses sound as an element on an equal footing with the visual components of his work. He strives for a close connection between the visual and auditory levels, in which both elements complement and reinforce each other. This is also the case in *Sums & Differences*.

The title of this work, *Sums & Differences*, succinctly summarizes Gary Hill's method: Effects are achieved through addition and subtraction. This video piece is based on three black-and-white still images of musical instruments: a keyboard, a flute, and an African drum. The motifs—the images thereof—are alienated through the reorganizing of bits generated by an analog to digital converter.

The alternating images are accompanied by simple sound sequences of the instruments shown. A solarization effect caused by sweeps of the digital images changes with the tones. As the work progresses, the tempo increases significantly. For this video, Gary Hill works with mathematically structured image sequences and varying speeds to challenge the viewer's perception. The images and sounds follow each other in ever-shorter succession until a melody of the three instruments emerges. The pulse frequency of the video images continues to increase, causing the images to pulsate faster and faster until they gradually overlap, and the interference creates a moving image effect. At the same time, the frequency of the melody increases, and seconds-long fundamental tones develop, until the tone changes into new sounds and the monitor surface is divided into vertical fields in which the three basic motifs can be seen in sections, depending on the sequence of the tones.



Sums & Differences, 1978
Single-channel video, black-and-white, sound, 8:24 min.
Ed.: 3/30 + 5 AP

Mediations, 1979/1986

In *Mediations*, as in *Sums & Differences*, Gary Hill strives for a close connection between the visual and auditory levels, although the tonal component here is not the sound of musical instruments but the spoken word.

A voice addresses the viewer from a loudspeaker that fills the entire screen. A hand enters the picture and slowly trickles sand onto the loudspeaker. As soon as the voice is heard, the grains of sand begin to bounce off the vibrating membrane of the loudspeaker. The spoken text echoes what the images show: “A hand enters the picture.” “A bare voice lies in the sand.” With this simple process, Gary Hill makes the voice “visible,” establishing a direct relationship between hearing and seeing. The hand trickles more and more sand onto the loudspeaker until it disappears completely, and the voice changes its character so that it only emerges muffled. Finally, the voice whispers to the viewer that it is buried in the sand.

Here, the use of sand alters the sound waves produced by the loudspeaker and results in a modification of the sound. The sand acts as a physical element that distorts the sound and creates a new acoustic texture by influencing the vibrations of the loudspeaker membrane.



Mediations, 1979/1986
Single-channel video, color, sound, 4:26 min.
Ed.: 3/30 + 5 AP

Time

Gary Hill consciously uses time as an artistic material. By manipulating time sequences, he challenges the viewer's cinematic viewing habits. Using techniques such as slow and fast motion, freeze frames and repetition, as well as the fragmentation of image sequences, Gary Hill alters the usual cinematic temporality in his works. He creates temporal spaces that disrupt the linear perception of time. For example, image sequences are presented in mathematically structured time sequences in which the image sequences slow down and speed up (*Sums & Differences*, 1978). By forcing the audience to deal with unfamiliar temporal structures, Hill makes them question their own perception.

But continuous movement such as the light of a lighthouse (*Searchlight*, 1986–1994) or the rhythm of breathing also become important elements in his artistic exploration of perception, consciousness, and the relationship between body, space, and time. This is particularly evident in works in which the performance artist Gary Hill also carries and directs the action in a physical sense (*Sine Wave [The Curve of Life]*, 2011). The rhythm and temporality of language also play a key role in his works, which are also combined with visual elements to create complex temporal structures.

Localizations

In Gary Hill's video works, the theme of one's own localization, one's own position, repeatedly takes on a particular intensity in both a conceptual and a physical sense. His works are often located in an intermediate space—between cinema and installation, between sculpture and video, between language and image.

In this context, the spatial arrangement of the image-generating elements also plays a central role (*Searchlight*, 1986–1994). Hill locates the electronic images in a quasi-natural space, in which he succeeds in superimposing or merging the real exhibition space with virtual (media) image spaces. Viewers are encouraged to reflect on their own (physical and mental) position in relation to the work.

It can be said that Gary Hill creates spaces in which seeing, hearing, and physicality enter into a complex interplay. At the same time, he allows the question of one's own position in relation to language, image, and space to arise in a variety of ways. Thought spaces are created that stimulate philosophical and conceptual reflections on the relationship between perception, consciousness, and communication.

Sine Wave (The Curve of Life), 2011

A sine wave describes periodic processes found in nature and technology. Time, motion, breathing, and tides, as well as sound, light, and electromagnetic signals, are all subject to such regularly recurring processes. In mathematics, such complex processes are modeled in wave-shaped function graphs. In *Sine Wave*, a selection of elementary processes that can be described by a sine wave are reflected at different levels.

The up and down motion of the sine wave is suggested by the installation's two concave and convex projection surfaces. They also replicate the curves of the glass from the video. The curved projection surfaces also contribute to the panoramic experience and a more intense perception of the movements in the video by supporting peripheral vision. The panoramic effect is supported by the double projection of the video and the way it is turned on and off, while also being revealed as a visual effect.

The circular movements in the video are not mechanical but produced by the artist himself as he balances the half-empty, half-full glass on a board on his shoulders and sets it in motion. His presence is perceptible only through his regular breathing, which—together with the horizontal movements—in-scribes the work's temporal rhythm. Other temporal intervals can be experienced simultaneously through the passing vegetation, the changing light, and the movement of the water in the glass. Gary Hill also placed the camera on the board, so that the glass always remains in the center of the frame, while the lush green vegetation passes by in the background. Only through the rhythmic sloshing of the water in the glass do we realize that it is actually the glass that is moving.

In terms of content, the video takes up a problem posed by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), who, in his fragmentary collection of thoughts, *Bemerkungen über die Farben* (Remarks on Color), explores, among other things, the question of how one can imagine the color of a transparent glass. Wittgenstein discusses the problem of color in relation to the glass itself, its contents, and the objects behind the glass.



Sine Wave (The Curve of Life), 2011

2-channel video/sound installation, free-standing concave and convex shaped wooden projection surfaces, 2 video projectors, 2 amplified loudspeakers, computer, sound, 7:08 min.

Object dimensions: each 213 × 163 × 103 cm

Ed.: 1/3 + 1 AP

Searchlight, 1986–1994

Gary Hill first transports the viewer to a “zero point” of vision. The searching eye, initially disoriented in the darkness, identifies with the searchlight of a rotating metal tube, which allows a part of reality to appear for a moment in the center of the wall: a moving water surface, the sky, occasionally a boat. Then the image dissolves, blurs as if in fog, only to reappear. Only for a brief moment, when the projection hits the wall through the lens of the metal tube at a 90-degree angle, is the image clearly recognizable and the lapping of the ocean waves can be distinctly heard.

The course of the projection clearly corresponds to human visual perception: The radius of the light image moving back and forth, which is almost 180 degrees, is comparable to the maximum field of vision that the eyes can perceive without moving the head. The field of vision is blurred at the edges and most precise (“sharp”) toward the front (i.e. in the center). Another fundamental analogy is the human conditioning to the horizon as an orientation parameter, which forms the dividing line between air and water in the projected image.

Gary Hill takes into account the fact that reality only becomes visible through the impact of light by allowing light and the recognition of reality to become one.



Searchlight, 1986–1994

2-channel video/sound installation, 3-inch black-and-white monitor, aluminum tube, laserdisc, 2 laserdisc players,
3 loudspeakers, black-and-white, sound, 14:59 min.

Room dimensions variable (minimum 7 × 12–15 m floor space), object dimensions: c. 134 × 96 × 96 cm

Ed.: 1/2 und 1 AP

Experiment(al)

Gary Hill's approach is to treat each video or video/sound installation as a new experiment to further explore technical and conceptual possibilities (*Resolution*, 1980). Ideas, movement sequences, actions, technical effects and manipulations, fragments of speech and text, and scientific and philosophical questions appear like individual set pieces in ever new constellations.

In order not to compromise his video experiments, Gary Hill proceeds like a scientist, with methodical precision and sensitivity, developing a unique structure for each work. The viewer, who often becomes a subject in the process (*The Psychedelic Gedankenexperiment*, 2011), is therefore unable to discern any clear patterns in the structure of his works and thus cannot formulate any expectations or assumptions that would distort the course of the artistic experiment. The closeness and intimacy conveyed by his videos draws the viewer in almost imperceptibly. It is only later that one realizes that at some point one has unconsciously crossed a threshold to become part of the experiment. Experiencing such borderline moments is a recurring theme in his art (*Twofold [Goats & Sheep]*, 1995/2002).

Unlike film and television, Gary Hill conceives each work with the goal of organizing and enabling genuinely new experiences. This generative aspect is important in understanding his art. His works are not meant to be demonstrations or interpretations, but to generate immediate interaction through temporal experience. The works are not only an invitation, but always also a stimulus for reflection. Like any empirical experiment, Gary Hill relies on perception and self-observation.

Colophon

The booklet is published on the occasion of the exhibition
Gary Hill. A Question of Perception

Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, November 30, 2024 — March 16, 2025

Curators

Holger Broecker and Elena Engelbrechter

Texts

Holger Broecker and Elena Engelbrechter

Translation

G rard A. Goodrow

Copy Editing

Ute Lefarth-Polland, Anja Westermann, Holger Broecker and Elena Engelbrechter

Graphic Design

Nando Kukuk

All works:   VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2024

Photo credits

Unless otherwise indicated, the following applies to all illustrations:

Courtesy Studio Gary Hill;

p. 14, photo: Nic Tenwiggenhorn, Berlin

p. 32, photo: Helge Mundt, Hamburg

Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg
Hollerplatz 1
38440 Wolfsburg
Tel. +49 (0) 5361-2669-0
Fax +49 (0) 5361-2669-66
info@kunstmuseum.de
kunstmuseum.de

