



# Gillian Wearing

BY JENNIFER HIGGIE IN REVIEWS | 04 MAR 97



Featured in Issue 33

Fired with a humanitarian impulse to explore the 'thoughts, dreams and desires' of a microcosm of London's inhabitants, Gillian Wearing, in her new work, fuses the questionable veracities of photography and autobiography. For this project, the artist photographed people who had participated in her previous work and had them summarise, in writing, their experiences of the last four years and their expectations of the next four leading up to the millennium.

'There is just as much social significance in a rock as in a line of unemployed', wrote Edward Weston in the 30s, 'All depends on the seeing'. Blown up and identically framed to match the size of the relevant portrait, the letters from Wearing's subjects disrupt the conventions of 'seeing' within the parameters of straightforward documentary photography. The viewers' vague, metaphorical interpretations of the image are kept in check by a literal reading of the parallel text.

Brian, for example, revealed in his letter that he is a mentally disturbed rapist who sees women as his only chance of salvation. Part of his unbearably bleak, phonetically structured letter reads: 'BUT FHIS I MEAT A LADY AND SHE CAN STOP ME DRICK AND STOP ME GO MAD I MAY HAVE A GOOD CHAR TO AT THE Millennium...'. The image accompanying the text is a grainy black and white photograph of Brian in the corner of a bare room, half dressed with his head wrapped and hidden in a T-shirt which prevents him from seeing out of the window towards which his body is angled. The interpretative possibilities of a man with his face obscured in a bleak room are limitless. The gulf between his apparent experience and his presence in the rarefied atmosphere of the gallery is so wide that the 'seeing' of him becomes suffused with a kind of empathic blankness, the embodiment of Barthes observation that the 'photograph cannot say what it lets us see'. Brian's life has become a generalised study of misery made flesh, a reinforcement of the paradoxical idea of the photograph and, by association, the subject of the photograph as both vociferous and mute. Wearing's inclusion of Brian's anguished rambling text, however, redeems the voyeuristic qualities of the photograph by revealing him to be more complex and vocal than such an image of stereotypical otherness would suggest.

Steven, Danny, Daniel and Ryan lean with their backs to the camera and their arms raised against a wall scrawled with the word 'MUM'. One of the schoolboys has pulled his pants down. In this case, it was impossible to identify who was who from the writing. Who would be more likely to write 'I would like to become a computer programmer and earn lots of dosh' or 'In the last four years I have had five bikes and most of them have been nicked'? The idiosyncratic elements of the letters which spoke, at times surprisingly tenderly, of mothers, sisters, school and ambition, both undermined and added substance to the light-hearted, rather predictable image of boyhood presented in the photograph.

It's a curious twist that most of these people seem somehow more visible in their letters than in their portraits. Lynne was photographed grinning in ebullient colour, clutching a glass and being hosed down by another woman in a suburban garden. Her wet T-shirt proclaims 'I may not be brilliant, but I have great breasts', creating an ironic, compelling counterpoint to the more detailed confessional text accompanying the photograph. Her letter to Wearing revealed none of the bravado and humour of the T-shirt, or the relaxed theatrics of the photograph. Instead she mentions people's cruel reactions to her transsexuality, her body's response to the drugs she's been prescribed, her depression and her fears that she will be dead by the millennium. Equally inscrutable is the image of Helen, who photographed herself topless in bed and wrote of her apprehension that she would be turning 40 in the year 2000 and her nostalgia for the 'good times'. Her eyes look at the lens with an intensity that is somehow more vulnerable, disturbing and ambiguous than her nakedness. I felt slightly unnerved, as if her gaze demanded a response to an enquiry I hadn't received.

Perhaps one of the most intriguing and frustrating aspects of photography is the contradictory knack it has of both fixing its subject in a state of flux, and accommodating myriad interpretations. The tension that Wearing reveals between words and images, how you look and what you say, seems to be more about the minefield of representation and the power relations inherent in the act of 'seeing' than about exposing any more than a brief insight into the thoughts and lives of Londoners. What is startling about this exhibition is its clear illustration, not so much of what photography is capable of revealing, but of what it chooses to withhold.



## JENNIFER HIGGIE

Jennifer Higgie is a writer who lives in London. Her book *The Mirror and the Palette – Rebellion, Revolution and Resilience: 500 Years of Women's Self-Portraits* is published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson, and she is currently working on another – about women, art and the spirit world.

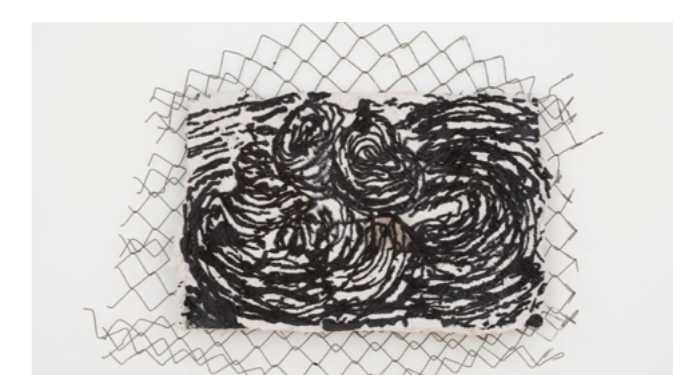
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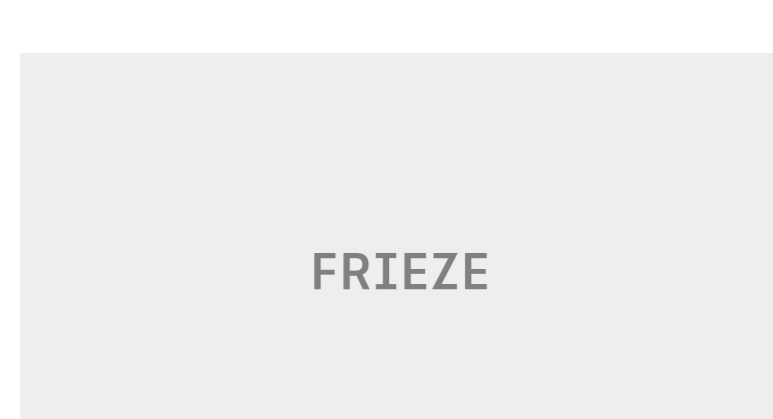


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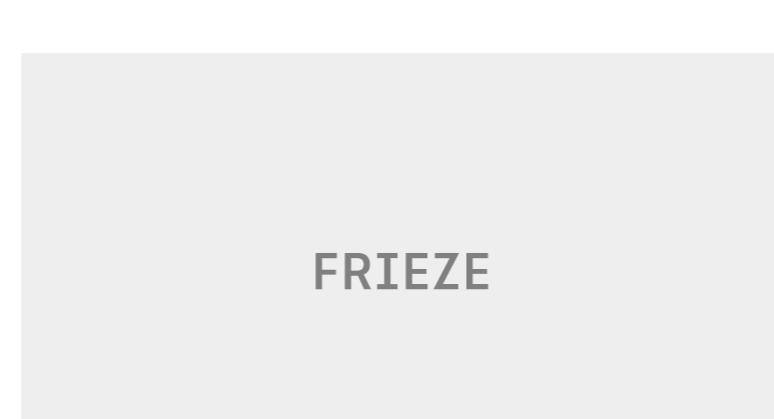


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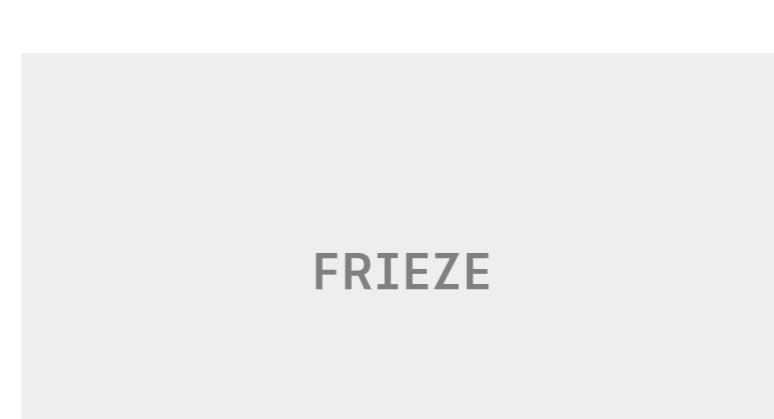
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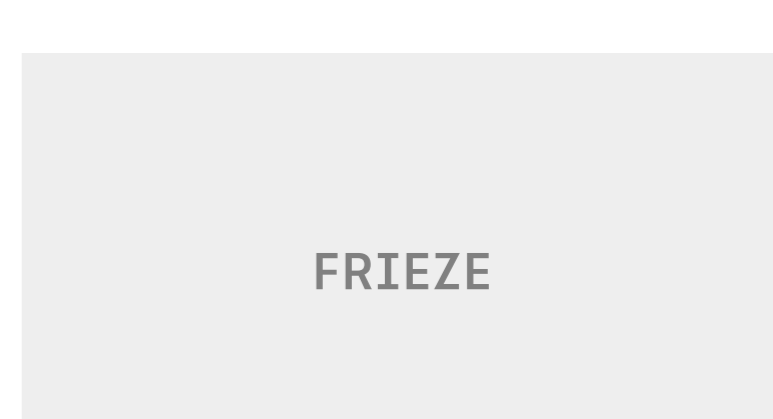
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