A MANNER OF SPEAKING

AN INTERVIEW WITH GARY HILL

LUCINDA FURLONG

Although he is better known for his videotapes and installations, Gary Hill has also been prolific as a sculptor. Born in Santa Monica, Calif. in 1951, Hill moved east in 1969, and in the early '70s began making videotapes at Woodstock (N.Y.) Community Video. Like many artists in the late '60s and early '70s, Hill's earliest tapes reflected a highly experimental approach in which the capabilities of various electronic imaging tools were explored. For the most part, this kind of video was visual in orientation, and Hill's work was no exception, drawing as it did on conventions of abstract expressionist painting. Eventually dissatisfied with the limitations of such an approach, Hill began to make tapes that integrated the audio and video components so tightly that sound became almost visually apprehensible. This concern—in which the immaterial is somehow made physical—is central to all of Hill's video installations and tapes, and to some extent, is derived from his background as a sculptor.

In his most recent work, however, language and thought—rather than electronics—are the immaterial entities that are given form. Hill's tapes since 1980 are of two types: short, descriptive, often convoluted passages which are sparely "illustrated" by abstract black and white imagery; and extended monologues that directly address the viewer, to which video is rapidly edited to the beat of Hill's voice. Though they differ greatly in tone, these tapes reveal Hill's exacting—almost obsessive—weighing of image and language as carriers of meaning. At the same time, they are richly evocative pieces that variously resemble poems, stories, and soliloquies. Hill's installations, too, bespeak his interest in setting up

thing that really overwhelmed me was a show at the Met called "1940-1970." It was the New York School. I was knocked out, and went through a lot of different attitudes in my own work. I still used the same materials, but I went from making cage-like structures with human forms—almost Bosch-like—to abstract biomorphic shapes mixed with geometric shapes. Pretty soon it was all geometric. I started using wire mesh, spray paint, welding armatures for shaped canvases which were incorporated into the work. I would make shapes, pile them into a corner, and then work with them later. It was like being my own factory. I went through a complete cycle of color. I slowly started to add color to the metal. I got very extreme using fluorescents, and later I toned down to metallics, essentially monochromatic, and finally back to the natural color of the material—copper-coated steel welding rods. I started improvising large constructions in the exhibition space, usually working off a wall and down to the floor into a kind of sprawl. I was working a lot with moiré patterns, and the sheer density of layers and shapes. Experimenting, burying myself in the process, working *all* the time. It wasn't intellectual. It was more like—how far can I take this material as a worker?

LF: How did you get involved with video?

GH: I got into sound first. I discovered the sculptures generated interesting sounds, lots of different timbres. The overall texture seemed to mirror what I was seeing. I worked a lot with loops and multi-track audio tapes, which later became an integral part of the sculpture.

Getting into video isn't so smooth in retrospect. I think at the time I was getting frustrated with sculpture. I needed a change. I was drawn more and more into working with sound. Around that time, Woodstock Community Video had been established. I walked up the stairs, knocked on the door, and said, "Gee, I'd like to try that. Can I take out a Portapak?" So I did a performance/environment piece with a friend, Jim Collins. For four or five nights in a row, we painted colored rectangles in the town of Woodstock—all over everything, stores, private property, public property. They slowly appeared,'til we got caught. I did a little—not really a documentary … I just went out and talked about it with people, about what they thought. Should there be more colored rectangles? Should they go away? I really enjoyed the whole process, the experiential aspect of that little thing up there next to my eye. It seemed like there was a high energy connection to whatever I was looking at. I guess I became obsessed with that electronic buzz [laughs]. It was like a synapse with the rest of

Top: frame from *Rock City Road* (1974-75), a videotape by Gary Hill. Bottom left: *Untitled* (1973); bottom right: *Untitled* (1967), both sculptures by Hill.

dichotomies between sight and sound, language and image.

Hill has received production grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, and PBS-station WNET in New York. In 1981, he was awarded a video artists' fellowship from the Rockefeller Foundation. A 1982 recipient of the United States/Japan Exchange fellowship, Hill will travel to Japan next fall. This summer he will be teaching video at Bard College's recently established M.F.A. program in video.

The following interview was edited from transcripts of two meetings in Barrytown, N.Y. on Oct. 28, 1982 and Jan. 5, 1983. The interview incorporates Hill's additions and revisions.

—*Lucinda Furlong*

Lucinda Furlong: You worked in sculpture for a long time before you became interested in video.
**Gary Hill:** I got into sculpture in 1969, when I was 15, while I was still in high school in Redondo Beach. I had always been interested in art, and the brother of a friend of mine—Tony Parks—was a sculptor. He welded. I saw him working and was immediately drawn to the process. I had a summer job at a hamburger stand on the beach—a surfer's dream—so I saved money to buy welding tanks and started welding. Soon after that I was set up making sculpture in all my spare time, except for a little surfing. It's not that easy to give up.

Even though I had vague notions about the avant-garde, I really wasn't aware of American art. I was looking at Giacometti and Picasso. Picasso was a god to me.

I had lots of support from my friends and parents, in particular my high-school teacher, Mr. Pelster, who just let me do my thing. He was a big reason why I even finished high school. I didn't see much point in it, and almost quit. When I got out, I saw a pamphlet for the Art Students' League in Woodstock, N.Y., which described it as an idyllic artists' colony. I came out for a month on a scholarship, but I didn't do sculpture. I just drew and painted, made thousands of drawings. Then I went back to California to go to a community college—partially for a draft deferment—but decided I would get out *another* way, and college definitely was not for me. I quit in about two weeks.

My teacher at the League—Bruce Dorfman—had invited me to work independently with him. So I packed my belongings and hopped in a driveaway car. I experienced my first fall, first snow, first being cold-as-shit, first super struggle. I didn't stay in that situation very long, though. I got jobs. Actually, I've been pretty lucky in terms of being able to do my work with very little struggle.

About that time, I began to see art in New York, and the
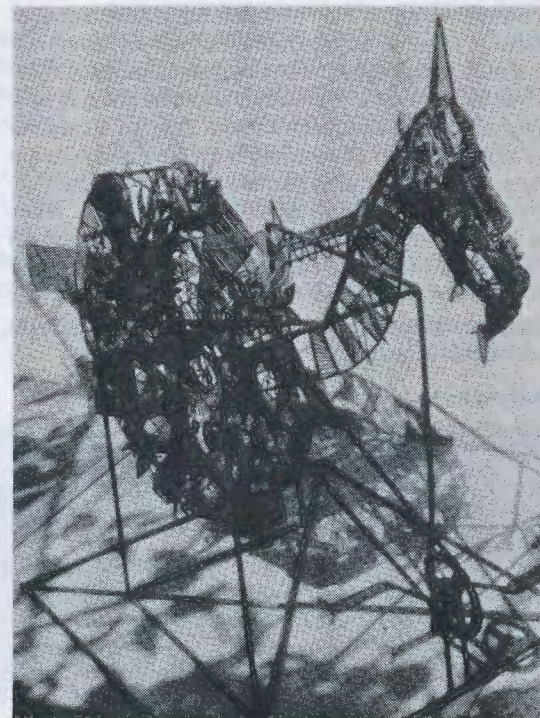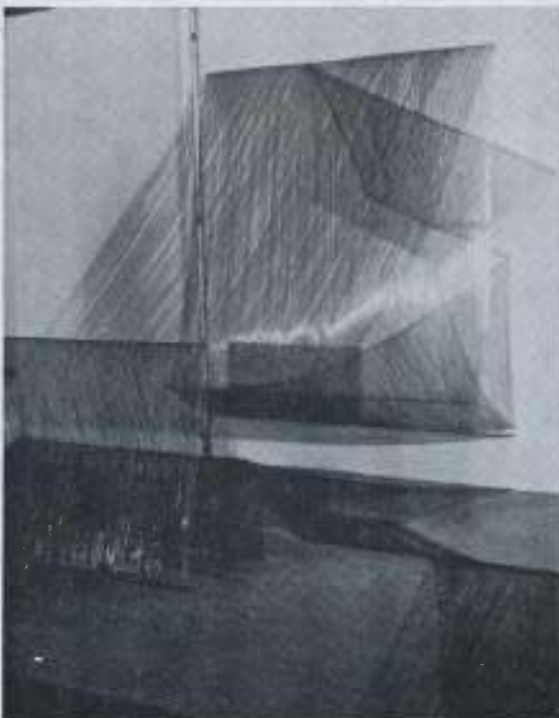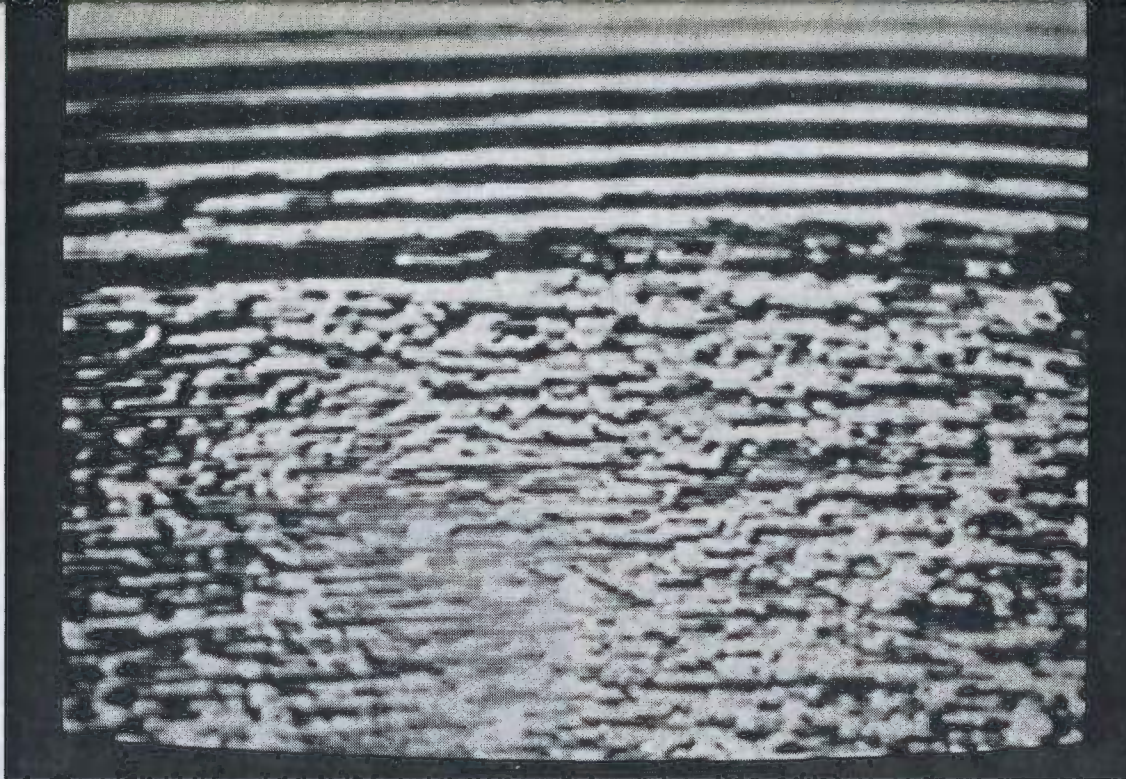
LUCINDA FURLONG, a videomaker and video critic, is currently working on a history of image-processed video.
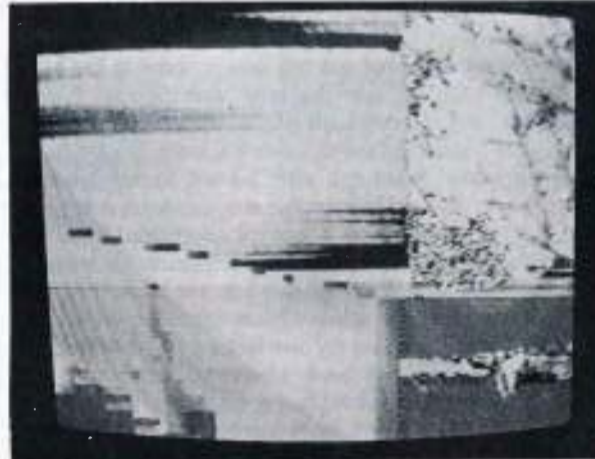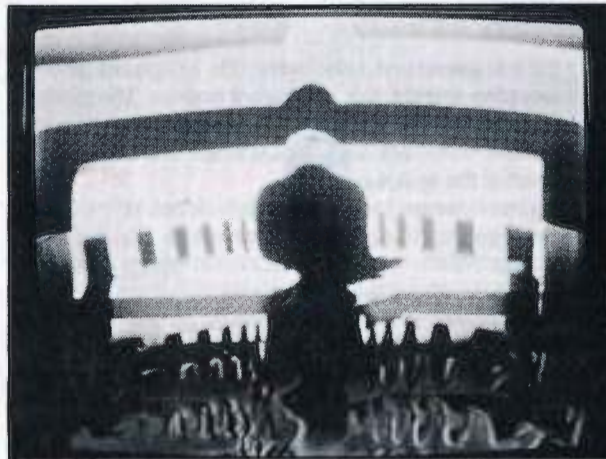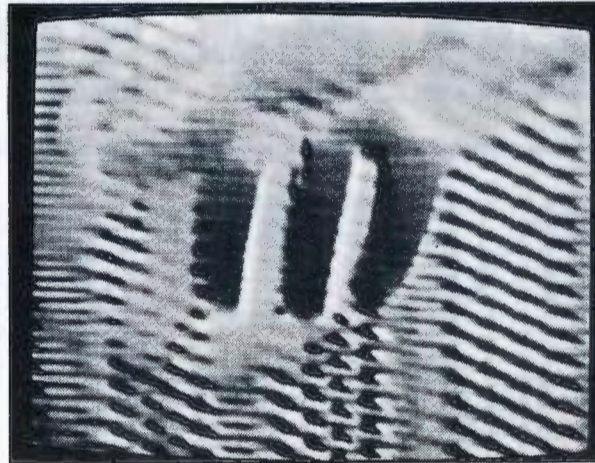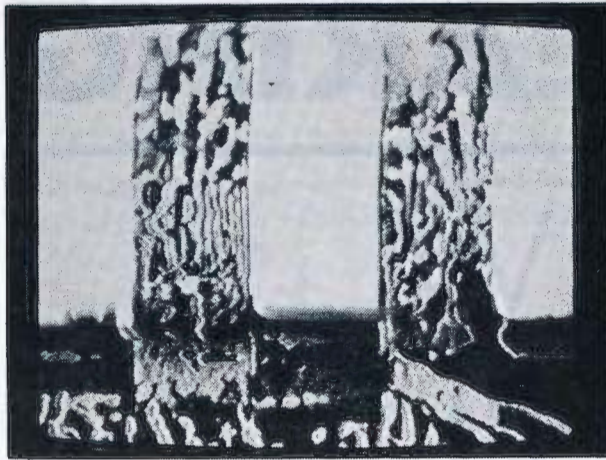
Frames from videotapes by Gary Hill. Top left: *Oriental Culture* (1975); top right: *Air Raid* (1974); bottom left: *Earth Pulse* (1975); bottom right: *Windows* (1978).

the world in a removed way, yet attached at the same time.

So I exchanged work at Woodstock Community Video—recording town board meetings, or whatever Ken Marsh [the former director] wanted—in exchange for using the equipment. Sooner or later I got a job there, because NYSCA [the New York State Council on the Arts], which had been heavily oriented toward community video, switched to the art route—in video at least.

LF: When was that?

GH: Around 1973-74. I was given a salaried position as the TV lab coordinator, helping people to use the equipment. They had a few devices—a broken genlock unit and a keyer—put away because they didn't really work. So I asked

LF: Is that around the time you made *Windows*?

GH: No, the first tape I made using any digital processing was *Bathing* [1977], which was all done through the analog-to-digital converter. [In *Bathing*, a color tape shot in real time is intercut with stills rescanned with a color camera and digitized. Different placements of color and gray level are derived from rearranging the digital-to-analog output.] I'd record something, take the circuit board out, resolder the wires, and try it again until I got the images I wanted. It's just another way of working. It's like when I started at Woodstock Community Video: you mess around with the innards, where all this stuff really happens. It was a process of trial and error. Since I wasn't working so much with preconceived images, "control" wasn't a problem. There were always surprises—images

trol. No tapes. I was still working intuitively, feeding off the images, seeing an image, liking it, working with it.

In those early tapes, though, I was distracted by the phenomena of electronics—several tapes were really part of that learning process. I'm glad I went through it—to have the knowledge and to feel free to do what I want within the medium. But if I never do something strictly imagistic again, it wouldn't matter. The knowledge of how things work is embedded now; it applies itself to whatever I'm doing.

LF: Those early tapes seem to fit what has become a genre of video art—image processing.

GH: I think there's a big problem even with the term. What does "image processing" refer to? Any tape that has processed an image electronically?

LF: It is too broad. It can mean video put through a time-base corrector or something that's been colorized.

GH: Yeah, but when someone says "image processing," what automatically comes to mind is a heavily mixed collage, like *Windows* [laughs], that I can't possibly decode—in fact I can't even see the point of using color. When you look at a painting, you can't always verbalize why the artist used a color or shape, but you feel some kind of visual tension, something getting at you. So much that I see that falls under "image processing" I can't even fathom.

When I first started working with machines, and exploring images—around the time I was working with Walter Wright—I remember him calling tapes *Processed Video I, Processed Video II,* etc. But process had no reference to machines. It had to do with the process of working, an improvisational situation in which devices could be patched in a number of different ways. Image processing suggests taking known or fixed images and processing them, sort of like food processing. I think for *some* people who are put in this category, it was an open method of working—dialoguing with the tools in search of images.

LF: Did others think of it this way, too?

GH: I don't know. The Vasulkas had to be among the first to experiment with the properties inherent to video. They were certainly more methodical than anyone else. Whatever machine they had, they explored it to the nth degree. When I think of their work chronologically, the development is razor-sharp, didactic, yet mysteriously powerful, especially Woody's. Steina, I think, became more idiosyncratic, and that's probably why they present themselves as two separate artists now. Between the two of them they've covered a lot of ground.

This experimental notion of dialoguing with tools has its tradition, though. It's like what filmmakers did. That's why—in the end—it was no longer interesting *for me*. OK, it's video, it's electronic, it functions differently, it has different properties—but it's the same approach that photographers and

Ken Marsh if I could come in late at night and see what I could make them do.

I totally got into that. Everything half worked. The keyers would put out really harsh, broken edges. I don't know *what* the genlock put out, but there was always something. I had monitors all over this little studio—rescanning everything, starting and stopping the tape, manipulating it with my hands. Everything was open. It was a very free feeling. Discovering how to manipulate this material was amazing.

I can remember being totally naked, lying on the floor with a tripod over my head pointing a camera down on my mouth and another camera lying on my stomach. I would make kind of a primal sound with my breathing, raising the camera on my stomach so that it would reveal my head from the bottom view, making this sound. This was all somehow mixed through a special effects generator. In a manner of speaking, I was practically fucking the equipment. Some time around then I made *Rock City Road* [1974-75].

LF: Were you colorizing the tapes?

GH: There was no colorizer there at first, but Ken was friends with Eric Siegel, and he got a Siegel colorizer fairly soon. About the same time, I found out about the Experimental Television Center [now in Owego, N.Y.]. I didn't know about the equipment there; I just had heard that they had all these possibilities. With the tools I was using in Woodstock I saw an infinity of image-making possibilities, and they had a whole set that was much more sophisticated.... So I went up there and met Walter Wright [artist-in-residence at the Experimental Television Center from 1973-75], and became very good friends with him. We did some multi-media performances together called "Synergism" [1975-6], with Sara Cook, a dancer in Woodstock. Then we started fantasizing about having our own machines, but it didn't really happen until 1976. Ken thought that Woodstock Community Video was going to be a media-organization-in-residence at Bard College. Everyone involved moved over to Rhinebeck, but it fell through at the last minute. So for a short time Barbara Buckner, Steven Colpan, and me all lived together as artists-in-residence. There we were in this big house and we weren't using all the rooms. I made Ken a deal—I asked if I could have David Jones come down to build some equipment, and I would pay extra rent [Jones, a video tool designer and builder, is now affiliated with the Experimental Television Center].

LF: What did he build?

GH: First we put together four input amps and an output amplifier. The main thing Walter and I wanted was a multichannel colorizer. Ironically enough, we never got to that. David had designed an analog-to-digital converter, which led to other things, culminating in a small frame buffer with a resolution of 64 by 64. One day I came home and David was gone. He had left the equipment on, and there was this digitally stored image on the screen of him smiling and waving. Suddenly colorizing seemed superficial, next to having access and control over the architecture of the frame in real time.

wasn't a problem. There were always surprises—images that happened outside of control, things you wouldn't dream or think of.

LF: How did the converter change the image visually?

GH: Radically. It remaps the gray levels of an image and it also remaps the color you're mixing with it.

If it had any imposed framework, *Bathing* was centered around vague ideas of painting, taking traditional subject matter—a bather—and exploring it with the notion that any one frame could be a painting. *Windows* [1978] was the first tape in which I explored the idea of mixing analog and digital images together. I did it as a study for an installation that would have been similar in nature—dense, layered images, structured compositionally, but on several monitors. The images would pass between monitors, all under automated con-

Frame from *Sums and Differences* (1978).

ties—but it's the same approach that photographers and filmmakers already applied. I started to see it as a dead end. I wanted to dialogue with my mental processes, consciously, self-consciously.

LF: How important do you think it is for viewers to know the technical circumstances under which a tape was produced?

GH: It's an element, part of the information that's valuable. But I think that for anything to work, it has somehow to translate that. Some works do and some don't; all the explaining in the world and all the complex electronics and knowing the insides of the machine won't do anything. It's a difficult question. You can't sidestep the mechanics of the medium, but it's not what makes something. A whole different shift occurs in putting a work together—materializing it—and perceiving it. If a piece really works for you, your response goes beyond a

Installation view of *Mesh,* a 1979 installation at the Everson Museum, Syracuse, N.Y. Right: frames from individual channels.

question about how it was made, though it might come up later as extra information.

LF: I agree, but it's something I think a lot about when I look at tapes that are exhausting or investigating the properties of video. They stop at a certain point. I "get it"—I understand what that tape is "about," and it ends there. It seems that *Primary, Elements, Mouth Piece, Sums and Differences* [all 1978], and *Objects with Destinations* [1979] not only investigate the properties of video, but how video and audio function both separately and as an integrated unit. They illustrate well how the two can operate on one another.

GH: But how video and audio function separately and together *are* the properties of video. What I was getting at is something else, granted a little more difficult to talk about. I think *Sums and Differences* really works in terms of sound

rated. There's a simultaneity of seeing and hearing.

If I were only investigating the "properties," I wouldn't have digitized the images, electronically generated the instrumental sounds, or used additional frequencies slightly out of phase with sync that slowly roll through the picture. These were also digitized, which created thin horizontal lines on the edges, that at certain times I associate with "strings." There's an overall energy constructed from a lot of subtle modulation. The question here becomes—Did I *add* things that weren't there, circumvent my own concept, seduce you, the viewer, into believing something that wasn't there? I think from this tape on a basic theme in my work became physicality. I no longer wanted to be behind the glass, playing jazz with my friends. I wanted to, you know, communicate—reach out and touch someone.

game, too. What I discovered in doing that piece was that there are these invisible properties—properties of language—that I could work with, rather than essentially mechanical or electronic properties. Structurally, perhaps even organically, in some way linguistics seemed related to electronic phenomena. I remember calling it "electronic linguistics." I really began to think of the mind as a kind of muscle, and wanted to physicalize its workings in some way. But I don't feel there was a jump from working with the elements of video to a plateau where I said, "Gee, I'm working with ideas now." I don't have any hard-and-fast rules about how I work.

LF: I'm not trying to impose any final categories on the development of your work, but as an observer of your tapes, I think that while your working process may have been the same, the end result isn't.

and image actually becoming one another. [In this tape, four separate video images of four musical instruments and their corresponding sounds are sequenced together at a continuously increasing rate. Normally, a video image is scanned on the video raster at 60 cycles per second. As the rates of change increase, starting at about one cycle per second, switching becomes faster than the time it takes to scan the complete image. This produces an effect whereby all four images appear simultaneously on the screen in four, 8, 12, etc. horizontal bars. When the switching rate is at higher frequencies, the different sounds, including the switching frequencies, become blurred into one, just as the different images become one image.] In that tape, audio and video can't be sepa-

LF: *Picture Story* [1979] seems to represent a shift to how language is used to construct meaning. [In this tape, Hill's didactic voiceover describes a quality shared by four letters of the alphabet—H, I, O, and X. Whether they are written upside down or backwards, their readability, and meaning, is essentially unchanged. As we hear this description, rectangles containing words referring not only to video, but to narrative and pictorial representation, randomly collapse into horizontal and vertical lines and points, whereupon a hand traces them. At the end of the tape, the four letters are used to draw an image of an ox. The letters thus form not only the basis of a story, but a picture as well.]

GH: It really wasn't a shift. Language simply became fair

GH: In terms of development, *Ring Modulation* [1978] was just as pivotal as *Picture Story*. [In *Ring Modulation,* the video screen is divided into three sections. In the bottom portion, there's a close-up of hands holding a welding rod, attempting to bend it into a circle. As this happens, Hill's mouth vocalizes an "Ah" sound, which becomes distorted by the effort of bending the rod. In the upper portion of the screen, one box contains a full image of Hill bending the rod. The other contains a wavering circular image from an oscilloscope, generated by mixing Hill's unsteady voice with a steady electronic signal. If, instead of the voice, the second sound was a cosine of the first electronic signal, a circle would be produced.]

In *Ring Modulation,* there's a paradoxical struggle: trying to sculpt physical material into a circle and simultaneously trying to form a circle electronically with non-physical material—waveforms. It's impossible to do. I did it as a kind of alchemical ritual, trying to change this "material." In this light, the copper coating of the welding rod took on other meanings in relation to the phosphorus green of the oscilloscope. When copper rusts, it turns green. *Ring Modulation* was, again, returning to working more physically, using sculptural concerns, getting back to things I had left hanging.

The installation *Mesh,* which I worked on during the same period, had similar concerns—trying to merge physical material and concepts into some sort of unifying tactile resonance. It was a fairly complex installation, in some ways a culmination of burying myself in circuit building. [In the installation, layers of wire mesh were mounted on walls; each layer contained one oscillator which generated a certain pitch depending on the size of the mesh. The pitch generated would pan between four speakers mounted on each layer of mesh. Hill used small (3-in.) speakers to give a metallic quality to the sound and to give the effect of the sound being "woven" into the mesh. Upon entering the space, the viewer-participant activated the piece, became "meshed" into it when a camera

Top row: frames from *Picture Story* (1979, photo: Lucinda Furlong). Bottom row: Sequence from *Ring Modulation* (1978).
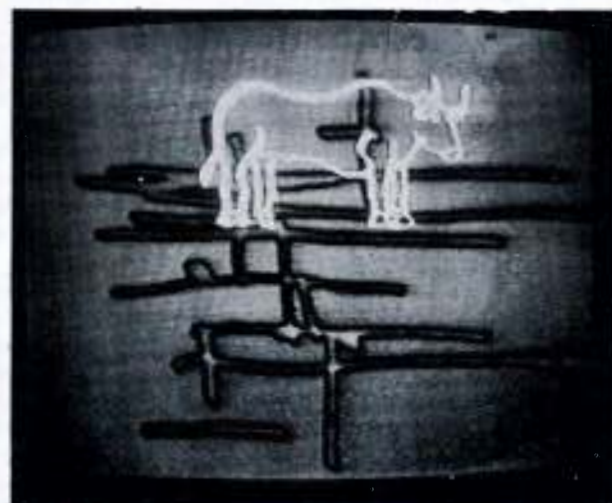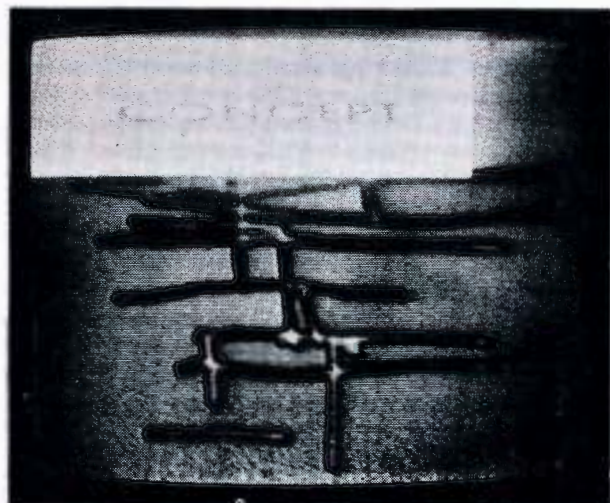
AROUND AND ABOUT
(1980), scored frames from
the opening sequence

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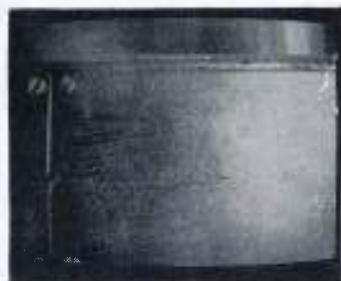
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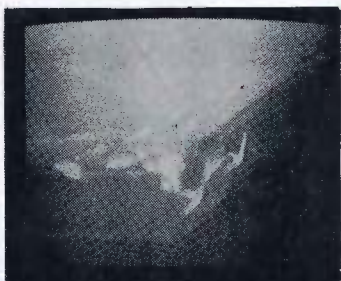
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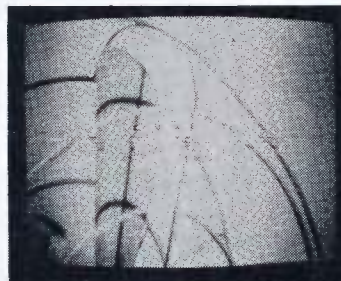
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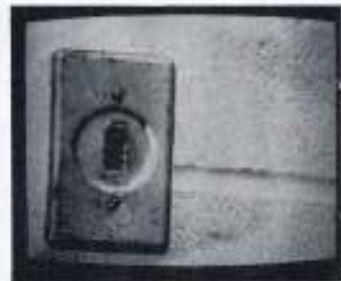
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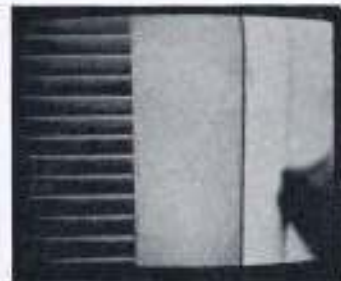
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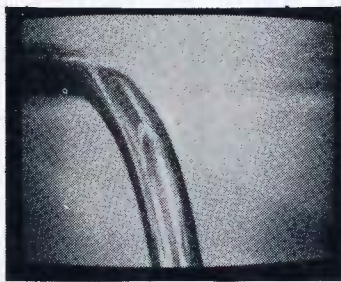
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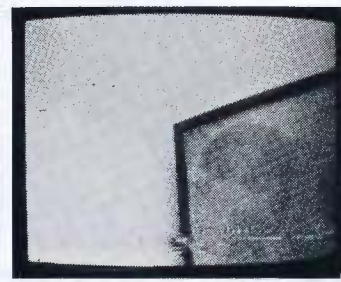
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picked up their image. This image was digitally encoded, producing a grid effect, and was then displayed on the first of four monitors. Each person who entered the space generated a new image, which, when, displayed on monitor one, cycled the previous image to monitor two, and so on.]

I didn't use discrete multiple channels in that piece—or *Primarily Speaking* and even *Glass Onion*. It's all dynamically controlled and inter-related, so that you're taking information and moving it in space, which is really interesting. I want to take this idea a lot further.

LF: You mean a kind of layering? I'm remembering *Soundings* [1979], where you put sand on an audio speaker, and it vibrates as the sound comes through. Then you go through

piece contained reverberations of drawing, painting, sculpture, video, and conceptual art. What made it even more interesting at the time was that an art critic, Irwin Touster, mentioned the piece in the local paper, *The Woodstock Times,* with a statement like "Hill's *Hole* is a monumental act of hostility in the guise of art." I sent a letter to the editor which simply read: "Re: Irwin Touster's review … a rebuttal," with a large photograph, taken in the gallery, of my ass sticking through the hole.

So that was my first installation.

LF: Getting back to how your work changed, *Around and About* seems like a big leap.

GH: It was. I was talking in the first person directly to the

vibrates as the sound comes through. Then you go through variations—water, burning the speaker.

GH: I meant taking one or more images from cameras or tape and directing them out into different spaces, different monitors. Moving images in space. The work came about because I'd used a lot of mesh in my sculpture, and was interested in overlapping things to make a third element or pattern. Literally, the title refers not only to the material—the mesh—but compressing sound and image together. What was different about both *Mesh* and *Ring Modulation* was not only this preoccupation with physicality, but that an underlying concept was becoming increasingly more important. In the earlier works, there was much more of a visual orientation.

LF: Was *Mesh* your first video installation?

GH: Actually, the first was *Hole in the Wall,* done in 1974 at the Woodstock Art Association. Unfortunately, the only remaining element of the piece—a tape—was destroyed by accident. You have to see it in light of the political-social context of the Woodstock Art Association, where there's an old guard, and there are always new people around who want to get in. When I was involved with it, it was always a hotbed of controversy.

I set up a camera and zoomed in on a wall, framing an area approximately actual size when displayed on a 23-in. monitor. On the video screen, you saw a hand with a ruler drawing a frame on the edge of the screen. A matte knife entered the frame, cut the muslin surface on the wall, and then various tools were used to cut through a number of layers—plasterboard, fiberglass, etc.—to the wall outside. At one point, we reached structural beams. The camera zoomed in and framed a smaller frame. Then that was cut through to the outside. At the opening, a monitor was fitted into the hole, and played back the tape performing the action. When the camera zoomed in, I took the big monitor out, put a smaller one in, and then at the end of the tape, when you see outdoors, I took the monitor away.

Besides the fighting between the older, established artists and the younger ones trying to break into the scene, the Woodstock Art Association didn't consider video an art form. It wasn't until the mid-'70s that they accepted photography! So the political implications are obvious, and formally the

GH: It was. I was talking in the first person directly to the viewer. When I was making *Windows,* for example, I never dreamed—it was the farthest thing from my mind—that I would use language. Now language seems like it will never go away. It's like a monkey on my back.

In the summer of 1979, I just started writing. I wrote the texts that ended up in *Equal Time* [the tape was done in 1979; an installation of the same title was shown at the Long Beach Museum of Art in March 1982], *Picture Story,* and a few of the *Videograms* texts. In the first month of 1980, I made *Processual Video, Black/White/Text,* and then, shortly after, I made *Around and About.* That was a very prolific time for me.

LF: Someone told me *Around and About* came from your frustration with your class at the State University of New York at Buffalo—that you couldn't communicate with the students.

GH: That's not true. I had to move suddenly, and I was also going through some heavy changes in a relationship. I had to move all my things, my studio, into my office at SUNY. Those two things coinciding put me on the edge. I had a lot of anxiety, and was paralyzed in terms of what to do. I sat down and wrote the text very quickly, as if I were talking out loud. I think the idea of editing the images to the syllables of my speech came out of this frustrating situation. It was almost as if I wanted to abuse the images, push them around, manipulate them with words. Maybe I was trying to expand this tiny little space, persuade the woman I lived with of the art-life paradox in plain English. On both accounts, I failed. I did the whole thing in my office, and each shot was set up and edited as I went along.

LF: So you wrote the text, laid it down as an audio track, and then plugged in images as you were shooting?

GH: Right. Even the concrete wall—where there's one layer of wall over another? I had two cameras. I would set up the matte, then zoom in the camera, then set it up again for each edit. And I edited it by hand. I didn't use a controller.

LF: That's amazing, because it looks like you used sophisticated equipment.

GH: People ask me if I used a Quantel. It's great to tell people how it actually was made—especially students—because then they don't feel intimidated about equipment.

The thing about *Around and About* is that I was able to use the image and the text as a single unit. Suddenly I began to

think about how far the images could get from what I was saying and still have the tape work. The images could be whatever I had at hand. Of course, the tape was also determined by the frustration of being in this closed space—stuff was everywhere. I couldn't have done anything else anyway.

LF: There seem to be two different strains in your most recent tapes. While they all are made from texts with non-synchronous video, some—like *Around and About* and *Primarily Speaking* [1981-83]—make use of direct address. You establish an I/you relationship, and it's very confrontational. On the other hand, *Videograms* and *Processual Video* [1980] are much slower, descriptive, and you use the third person.

GH: There's an urgency in *Around and About* and *Primarily Speaking,* whereas the others are much more timeless, almost about beauty. *Videograms* and *Processual Video* are much more object-oriented—"Here, look at this." There's a relationship between these words and this image.

LF: When you make the *Videograms,* do you write the text first, and then sit down and figure out images? [In *Videograms,* abstract black and white images undergo subtle transformations as Hill recites short passages whose simplicity and compression resemble Haiku poetry. Because the pas-

BASS DRUM   CYMBAL   HAND CLA

(voiceover)   THIS   THAT   AND   THE   OTHER

(character-generated text)

HAPPENSTANCE
(work in progress,
scored excerpt)