

Conversations and Actions Whitechapel Gallery

Gillian Wearing
28 March – 17 June 2012



Gillian Wearing Self portrait at 17 Years Old, 2003. Framed c-type print, 115.5 x 92cm © the artist. Courtesy Maureen Paley, London.

Introduction

This resource was written by artist **Daniel Wallis** and the Education Department to support teachers and group leaders when exploring the **Gillian Wearing** exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery with participants of all ages. It introduces key concepts in the exhibition through suggested ideas for conversations and actions, designed to help you and your group explore the galleries through critical discussions and practical activities. Conversations and actions are applicable to multiple works throughout the exhibition and intended for use in the Gallery and beyond. We have focused on works suitable for all ages, but have suggested extended conversations and actions around additional works for older students.

Much of Gillian Wearing's work deals with the voices and opinions of young people and adults reflecting back on their youth in very direct ways. It can be a fantastic learning resource and way of stimulating discussion about social issues often dealt with in the PSHE and Citizenship parts of the curriculum. Through her work, Wearing encourages people to discuss things they have been affected by, inviting them to talk openly and honestly in a safe environment. Participants in her work often use very graphic vocabulary and strong language in discussing issues such as sex and violence in a direct way which some younger viewers may be sensitive to. The exhibition is laid out so that avoiding films you may not want to work with is easy, but ideally we advise you to visit the exhibition independently before bringing your group along.

The resource includes selected images from the exhibition, and quotes from Gillian Wearing. It is structured in three parts exploring key works in the exhibition. You can also use the conversations and actions as inspiration for creating activities and larger projects of your own. Much of the work in the exhibition is film-based so you may want to spend time simply watching and enjoying these, and discussing reactions with your group afterwards. We have included more information about these works at the back of this resource, so that you can decide on their suitability.

We hope you enjoy the exhibition.

Gillian Wearing

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Gillian Wearing was born in 1963 in Birmingham where she lived until she was 17 with her parents, sister and younger brother - portraits of whom appear in this exhibition in *Album*, (2003) Gallery 9. As well as her own family and other artists, fly-on-the wall television documentaries that Wearing watched as a child have had a big impact on her work. In particular, the *Seven-Up* series which followed 14 British children from a range of socio-economic backgrounds from the age of 7, with one episode every 7 years since 1964.

*'I think I'd find it very scary if someone was following me, taping me every seven years. I'd feel like I had this deadline by which to have a story to my life, to make it worthwhile being filmed. Everybody wants a happy ending.'*¹

Gillian Wearing

Another programme Gillian Wearing watched, *The Family*, followed the lives of the Wilkins, a working class family of 6 from Reading. People are used to this kind of television programming now, where reality TV frequently blurs the line between the public and private, but in the 70s and 80s it was a new phenomenon. Many people see *The Family* as a pre-cursor to modern reality TV programmes, but for Wearing (who would have been 11 when it was first shown on television), it was something very new and different:

*'It was unlike anything else on television. The people in that series were giving away a lot more about themselves than people tended to in everyday life, especially in the Seventies'*²

Gillian Wearing

Gillian Wearing moved to London when she was 17 years old, but only started studying art four years later at Chelsea College, where she did a B. TECH in Art and Design, going on to complete her BA in fine art at Goldsmiths College. She has lived in London ever since and some of her artworks are made in the areas she has lived in. *Dancing in Peckham*, (1994) Gallery 1 is a film in which Wearing dances in the middle of a shopping mall to a set list of music she had memorised. She has talked about how this space reminded her of her home city of Birmingham. In 1997 Wearing won the Turner Prize (awarded annually to a British artist under 50 for an outstanding exhibition in the preceding 12 months) and in 2011 she was awarded an OBE (Order of the British Empire) for services to art.

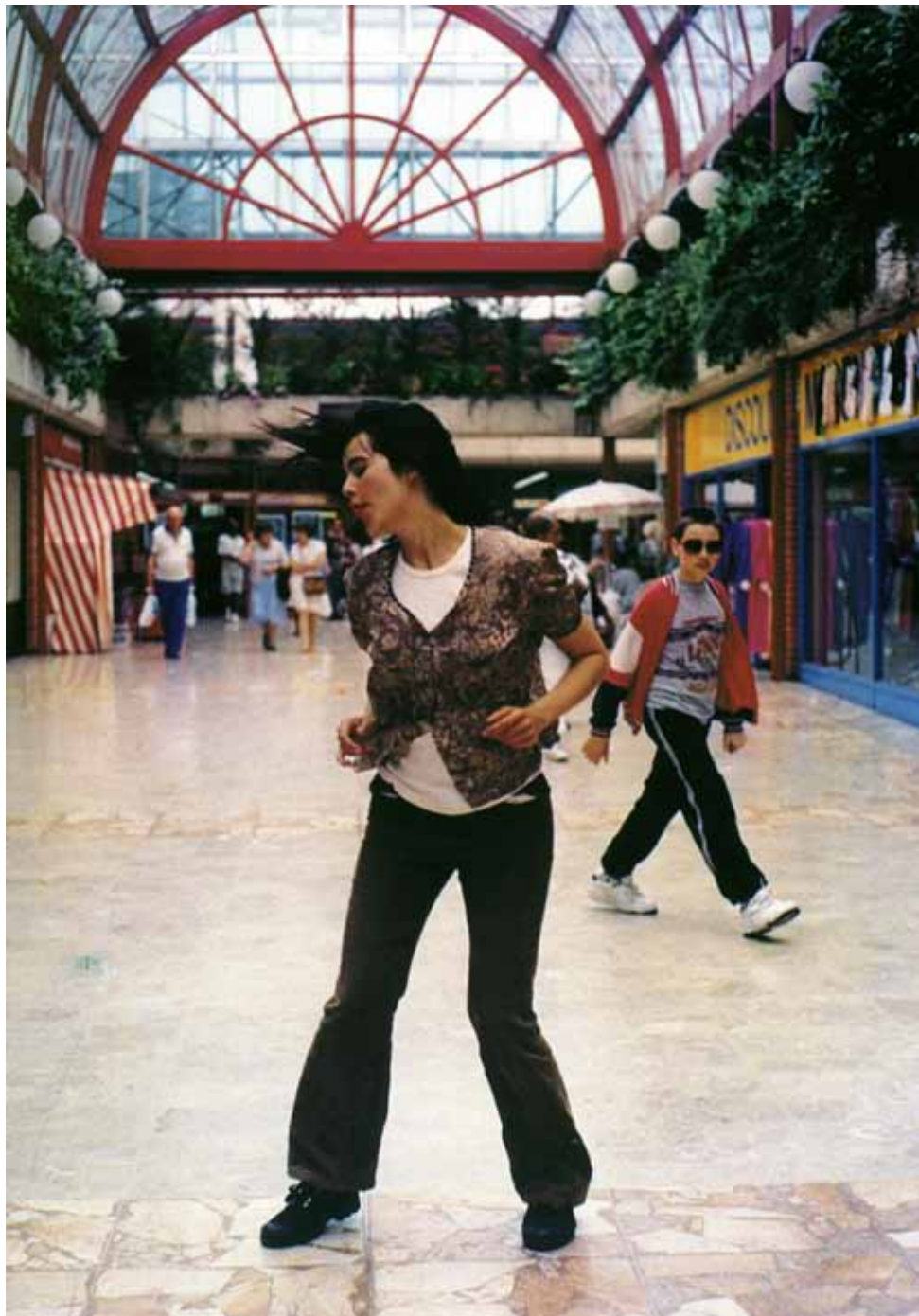
The exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery is the first major UK survey of Gillian Wearing's work - from her early photographs *Signs that say what you want them to say and not Signs that say what someone else wants you to say* (1992-93) Gallery 9 to her latest video *Bully*, (2010) Gallery 1, and also includes several new photographs made especially for the exhibition. Spanning 3 gallery spaces, this survey showcases Wearing's photographs and films in an installation that attempts to draw attention to the 'frontstage' and 'backstage' aspects of the artist's work. Curator Daniel Herrmann has described 'frontstage' as being the public face people uphold for a real or imagined audience - a performance, and 'backstage' as a space where people can step out of character without disrupting their performance.

*'What people project as the human mask they are, is obviously very different to what goes on inside. There is always a disparity and I'm interested in that.'*³ Gillian Wearing

Some questions to ask:

- As you explore the exhibition, see if you can make links between Gillian Wearing's work and that of other artists you know.
- Can you also make links to TV programmes, adverts or other aspects of popular culture in her work?
- Has Wearing anticipated the way society's interest in people has developed?
- Have developments in the area of reality TV and communicating information affected her work?

Dancing In Peckham (1994) Gallery 1



Gillian Wearing *Dancing in Peckham*, 1994, Colour video with sound, 25 minutes © the artist. Courtesy Maureen Paley, London.

*'I first wanted to do the piece because I saw a woman in the Royal Festival Hall and she was dancing to a jazz band, and I was more fascinated by her than the jazz band! She was going wild and wasn't with anyone. She was dancing by the tables rather than where the dance floor was. It was hysterical and kind of weird, and she obviously might have known that, and I was thinking that was quite an enviable position to be in, to lose your inhibitions and not worry about what other people think. So it's about the idea of losing your inhibitions — or trying to, for me it's quite hard.'*⁴

Gillian Wearing

Lights. Camera. Action. Reaction. Gallery 1

Conversation *Dancing in Peckham* (1994)

- What is happening in this work?
- Why do you think Gillian Wearing made it?
- What do you find interesting about it? How do people respond to what she is doing?
- How does something you usually do in private change when you do it publicly?
- How has the act of creating a work like this changed since 1994 when it was made?
- Does it remind you of anything you've seen recently?

Actions In the Gallery

- Sit somewhere in the gallery space.
- Observe how people move around the space.
- Make notes or draw a map of people's routes.

- Do people walk around the exhibition in a particular way?
- What do you notice about people's reactions to the work? What can you see and hear?
- Can you begin to anticipate how people will react?
- What is the reaction if you or a group start to dance like Gillian Wearing in the film? Try it!

Actions Beyond the Gallery

- In pairs or small groups think of a simple action like dancing that you can do and repeat for 10 minutes. Find various locations around your school where you could do this. Try to get a mix of spaces - busy ones, quiet ones, open ones, narrow ones.
- Film one person carrying out the action for 10 minutes. Try this at different times of the day in the same space.
- Experiment with using a tripod to film the action. What difference does this make to how people become aware of what you are doing - do they interact with you more, or less?

Does the way the person doing the action is dressed (in uniform/ out of uniform) make a difference to people's reactions?

- Interview people who see the action happening - what are their responses? How did the person doing the action feel as time went on?
- Discuss how to best edit and display your film. You could edit bits together, focus on passers-by, create a short or long loop or only include screenshots.

Additional Action Secondary School Groups

Bully, (2010) first screening space on left, Gallery 1 sees a number of non-actors re-stage a real life event which contains strong language and some violence. The main character, James, directs the others to re-live a situation that happened to him, in which he was bullied. He is supported by Sam, a method-acting teacher who has been working with the group and suggests steps to help them think about what they are experiencing. Participants fulfil different roles - bystanders, bullies, victims, and are drawn into certain actions.

- How does restaging an event like this affect James?
- Does anyone intervene to prevent the bullying?
- Can you think of an event you would be interested in re-staging?
- What makes the work different to something you'd see on TV or in the cinema?
- How is it an artwork?
- In what ways does it link back to *Dancing In Peckham*, Gillian Wearing's earliest work in this exhibition? Look out for links between these two works and the rest of the work in the exhibition.

Signs that say what you want them to say and not Signs that say what someone else wants you to say (1992-93) Gallery 8



Gillian Wearing Signs that say what you want them to say and not Signs that say what someone else wants you to say. (from clockwise) ME MY GRIP ON LIFE IS RATHER LOOSE I REALLY LOVE BEAUTY PARLORS WORK TOWARDS WORLD PEACE WILL BRITAIN GET THROUGH THIS RECESSION? 1992-3, C-type print mounted on aluminium, Dimensions variable © the artist. Courtesy/Maureen Paley, London.

'I'm transfixed by people that I see that do stand out, whether they want to or not.'

Gillian Wearing

'I couldn't bear the idea of taking photographs of people without their knowing... I wanted something that involved collusion'

Gillian Wearing

What's on your Mind? Gallery 9

Conversation

Signs that say what you want them to say and not Signs that say what someone else wants you to say (1992-93)

Take a good long look at the photographs in Gallery 9. Do you think participants are writing things they really want to say on the signs? Why?

How does someone's appearance and pose influence your interpretation of what they are saying?

How does the location of the photo influence you?

When Gillian Wearing first explored the idea behind this work she made vox pop videos, where you could see people writing the signs. What additional information would live footage bring to your interpretation?

Originally Wearing asked her friends to write the signs but she found that too funny, so started to ask people she didn't know. How is asking strangers to do this task different to asking friends?

How would you feel if you were approached to do this in the street by a stranger?

Would you participate if Gillian Wearing approached you to do this today?

What would you write, and how would you pose?

Actions In the Gallery

- Write two signs about what's on your mind. You will be asked to share one of them with your group, but the other can be private. Put your private sign away and all the others in a pile.
- Choose a random sign from the pile and stand in a circle holding it, so that everyone can read what's written on all of the signs.

How does holding up someone else's sign feel? Can you connect with the sign you are holding? Is it something you could have written yourself?

Think about your private sign. How does it differ from the one you shared?

Can we ever really be honest in front of people we know, or are we always wearing a type of mask?

Action Beyond the Gallery

- Invite people to do the action above at break-time in school. How does it feel when asking people to write the signs? Is it easier when you don't know them that well?
- Photograph students with other people's signs, using the same process as above.
- Once you have collected a number of signs, organise or group them thematically as if you are a curator putting up an exhibition. Display them in groups around the classroom.
- Re-use the text in your display. You could write a poem or a song, or use collage or Photoshop to add the signs to photographs of locations or famous people. Experiment with different colours and fonts.

Additional Action Secondary School Groups

Social media sites are forums in which you can say things that you want to say, and not always things other people want you to say. They allow a freedom that isn't always possible in face to face conversations, and often encourage complete honesty in the way people communicate with each other, especially when responding to people's work and ideas. Do you agree?

- Go to telligillian.com or [facebook.com/WhitechapelGallery](https://www.facebook.com/WhitechapelGallery) and find out what people are saying about the Gillian Wearing show (and themselves!) Do you think people are being honest? How far should social media go in inviting everyone to have their say about things?

Alternative Portraits Gallery 9

'I don't have any children, but if I did, I probably would use their pictures in this series. It's made me think about how people in years to come will be lucky, because they'll have photographs that go back through generations and generations of their family... In the future there will be amazing family albums spanning hundreds of years,' Gillian Wearing

Conversation

Look around the room at all the portraits. Without looking at the labels, who do you think they are of? All of the photographic portraits in Gallery 9 are of Gillian Wearing disguised as and in the role of someone she is connected to in some way. Do you see these portraits as portraits of the people Gillian Wearing is disguised as, or as portraits of her? Some are family members and some are famous artists who she admires and have had an influence on her.

What sort of impact do you think these people have had on her life? What does pretending to be these people allow Gillian Wearing to do? Are these portraits more about her or about the people she is pretending to be?

What has been your experience of wearing masks? Do you think we can be wearing a mask and pretending to be someone else without actually wearing one? Can this be helpful or is it problematic?

Action In the Gallery

- Draw your family tree. How far can you go back?
- Choose someone from your family tree. Can you imitate the facial expressions or body language of that person? In pairs, perform your imitation for a partner.
- Draw an alternative family tree of 10 people you know or famous people who inspire you. How would you present them in a portrait? Talk about why you have chosen them. How can a celebrity or someone you aren't related to be classed as a type of family member?

Action Beyond the Gallery

- Use a camera phone or video camera to record the reactions of people in your group to the exhibition.
- Conceal their identity in some way, making a mask with what you have with you or can find in the classroom. You could do something with clothing, bags, sketchbooks or paper. Alternatively, think about filming their hands as they talk and not their faces. What can hand gestures or body language reveal about what someone is really thinking?
- Restage an old family photograph or an image from a well-known event with one person or just a few people in it. Work with other people - one can be directing the positioning of the other(s) for example.
- Think about the setting, background and props.
- Focus on taking on the role of the person in the image and get into character. Think about your body language and clothing.

How can dressing up as someone else tell us something about you? What can you learn about the person you are dressing up as?

Additional Action Secondary School Groups

In 2 into 1, (1997) Gallery 9 two brothers speak with their mum's voice, while she speaks with their voice. How can you make a film like this? In what ways does it change our understanding of what is being said? The children and their mother initially had private conversations with Gillian Wearing, which were then made into this work. How does what the child's voice is saying also tell us about other family members such as their dad? In what ways will repeating the sons' words back to camera alter her feelings towards what he has said? Would he say these things to her face?

Do you think people may make up or exaggerate stories when they are involved in Gillian Wearing's work or are they being totally honest? How does being a participant in her work bring out these responses?

Afterword Information about content of film work

Some works in the exhibition not directly referred to in this resource feed in to the conversations and actions suggested throughout, could be useful for particular discussion topics, and as a teaching tool in curriculum areas such as PSHE and Citizenship. These are outlined below.

We advise you to view these films in advance of bringing your group to the Gallery, to help you prepare for the best way to use them. Many of the films contain strong language, nudity, violence and discussions of topics that are not suitable for younger visitors. Free access for teachers and group leaders to the Gallery for this purpose is available by contacting the Education Department in advance.

Gallery 1

Bully (2010, 7 mins 55 sec) sees a number of non-actors re-stage a real life event in a park where the main character, James is bullied. Contains strong language and some violence.

I Love You (1999, 60 min)

Depicts a repeat staging of a very drunk woman being escorted to a house by her friends.

Sasha and Mum (1996, 4 min 30 sec)

Features a mother at times being violent towards her daughter.

Prelude (2000, 3 min 55 sec)

Deals with death, homelessness and family relationships.

10 – 16 (1997, 15 min)

Involves adults speaking the words of young people aged 10 to 16 years old, discussing issues including abortion, homosexuality, underage drinking, obesity, masturbation. Also features some nudity.

Gallery 9

Trauma (2000, 30 min)

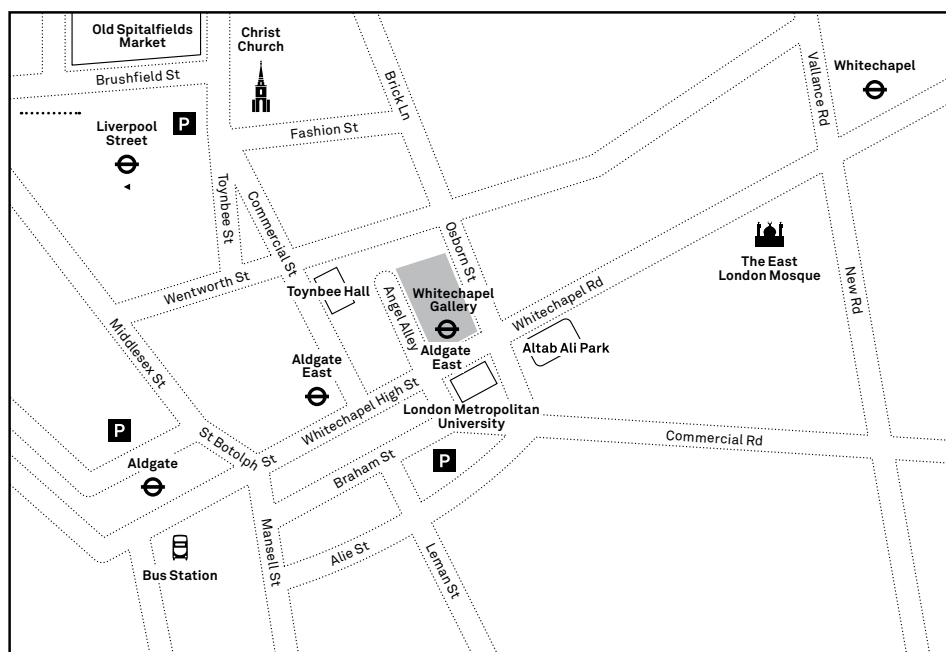
Features adults hidden behind masks discussing issues that affected them in early life, including divorce, suicide, physical and sexual abuse, self-abuse and mental breakdowns.

Secrets and Lies (2009, 58 min 55 sec)

Depicts adults revealing secrets about relationships, affairs, sexual desires, child abuse, going to prison and murder.

Confess all on video. Don't worry, you will be in disguise. Intrigued? Call Gillian... (1994, 30 min)

Involves different people discussing revenge, committing crimes, sex and witnessing violence.



Find out more

A catalogue accompanying Gillian Wearing at the Whitechapel Gallery is available from the bookshop. For more information please go to our website: whitechapelgallery.org

To book your free group visit and use our Education Space (available Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday during term time) please call Education on 020 7522 7888 or email education@whitechapelgallery.org.

More information on School, Family and Young Peoples' Programmes linked to the Gillian Wearing exhibition are available here whitechapelgallery.org/education.

The website recreativeuk.com is an online community and resource that explores contemporary art. It was partly developed by members of the Whitechapel Gallery's youth programme, Duchamp & Sons. Many of their projects appear on the site, as can the work of anyone who joins. Explore and join the site yourself, feedback to others and upload some of your coursework to see what other people have to say about it.

An Activity Pack for families with more activities for children has been devised by Eva Sajovic & Rebecca Davies and is available from the Information Desk.

If you have enjoyed this Conversations & Actions or have any other feedback please do let us know. For more Conversations and Actions visit whitechapelgallery.org/education

1 *Keeping it in the Family*: Gillian Wearing interview by Matt Lippiatt. Originally published in The Times: T2 supplement, October 3rd 2006. Also used by the Maureen Paley Gallery as the accompanying text to Gillian Wearing's exhibition Oct 10th - Nov 19th 2006.

2 *Keeping it in the Family*: Gillian Wearing interview by Matt Lippiatt. Originally published in The Times: T2 supplement, October 3rd 2006 Also used by the Maureen Paley Gallery as the accompanying text to Gillian Wearing's exhibition Oct 10th - Nov 19th 2006

3 Slyce, John: 'Wearing a Mask', in: Flash Art, vol. 31, no. 199, 1998, p. 91.

4 *In conversation with Leo Edelstein* © Copyright, Journal of Contemporary Art, Inc. and the authors.

5 *Daring Wearing*, by Miranda Sawyer, The Observer, 3 September 2000

6 Gillian Wearing catalogue, Whitechapel Gallery, 2012.

7 *Keeping it in the Family*: Gillian Wearing interview by Matt Lippiatt. Originally published in The Times: T2 supplement, 3 October 2006. Also used by the Maureen Paley Gallery as the accompanying text to Gillian Wearing's exhibition 10 Oct - 19 Nov 2006.