

## Up Against Time

—Reflections Between—

*This essay follows upon the publication of our new book, **An Art of Limina: Gary Hill's Works and Writings** (Barcelona: Ediciones Poligrafa, 2009; Foreword by Lynne Cooke)<sup>1</sup>, written over the last fifteen years in collaboration with Charles Stein. Here I follow the basic critical stance of that book; namely, "what we call **the further life of the work**, an extension of the creative energy and interest that the work itself actually projects through its own instance.... In short, we intend that our writing about his work contribute to the very possibility which the work opens up. The theory is that critical alignment with a work brings that work out, brings it forward to possible participation. The further life is also an active dialogue with the ongoing work itself." I have chosen here to write on a single Gary Hill work in its American premiere, noting that the other pieces in the exhibition, such as Wall Piece, an installation, and the various single-channel works have been discussed in the book, excerpts of which will be posted on the Slought website.*

The entry of Slought's exhibition, "Art of Limina: Gary Hill," is a large room with a single installation of six projections that overflow into a second room, *Up Against Down*<sup>2</sup>, comprising a series of projected images of various parts of the artist's body forcibly pressing or pushing against a seemingly infinite pure black space. Very slight reflections of the body parts are visible, but the depth and composition of the space remain ambiguous. As the body presses against the indefinable surface, multiple low frequency sine waves along with their sub-harmonics are heard, and the changing tension and force of the body's pressure modulates the waves of sound resembling a kind of shadow of primal drumming.

The body in space, a full-tilt engagement in bodily struggle to *be* a certain way, an obviously *personal* all-out effort that is so curious in its uncontextualized behavior as to also seem abstract and *non-personal*—these characterize Gary Hill's world of severe, even austere, physicality. There's a **concreteness** so focused and complete in its intensity as to seem *purely ideational*—like mysterious ideas being birthed before our eyes. Yet it's a birth that never ends, a spatially emergent force of embodiment released into an eternal moment. We feel it in our own watching bodies as energy transmitted directly from imaged event to cerebrospinal neural network. A contagion of this fierce concentration might indicate a hell realm, as if we had stumbled darkly into a previously unknown rung of Dante's *Inferno*. Indeed, where are we?

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<sup>1</sup> The title of Slought Foundation's exhibition in Philadelphia, "Art of Limina: Gary Hill" (March 21-May 1, 2009), co-curators George Quasha, Aaron Levy, and Osvaldo Romberg, derives from this newly published book by George Quasha and Charles Stein. The exhibition, for which the present essay was commissioned, comprises ten works, including, in addition to *Up Against Down* (2008), the installation discussed here, *Around & About* (1980), *Happenstance (part one of many parts)* (1982–83), *Why Do Things Get in a Muddle? (Come on Petunia)* (1984), *Figuring Grounds* (in collaboration with George Quasha and Charles Stein, 1985/2008), *Incidence of Catastrophe* (1987-88), *Site Recite (a prologue)* (1989), *Goats and Sheep* (1995/2001), *Wall Piece* (2000), and *Big Legs Don't Cry* (2005).

<sup>2</sup> *Up Against Down*, 2008: "Installation with six projections" is a six-channel video/sound installation, using six video projectors, amplified speakers, six DVD players and six DVDs (color; stereo sound), here installed in two rooms with interconnecting open doorway.

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Or when? Is this even *space*? Is endlessness of such intensity more like space than time? Space-time, since Einstein, rolls easily off the lips in an abstraction that never quite matches experience—except, perhaps, at moments like this! You could almost say, here in this dark situation, “There’s a guy up there in his several parts, locked in the frustration of his spatiotemporal person-trap.” For the time of art, here an uncircumscribed duration, he may never come out. Perhaps this says something about why eternity does not always come highly recommended.

The notion that the separation of space and time might be inadvisable did not begin with modern physics but instead seems to have been registered in human reflections from time immemorial. Take the Japanese word *ma*, which in the original Chinese (kanji), the ideogram showing the sun shining through a gate, meant space, but in a range of Japanese usage, from architecture to music, it can refer to either space or time—or both. It refers, in fact, to the *between*, the interval, the intervening reality. Hence the liminal zone comprising the margins of space and time, negotiable according to site, situation, circumstance.

In Kunio Komparu’s great work, *The Noh Theater: Principles and Perspectives*<sup>3</sup>—a book of real importance to Gary Hill in the mid 1980s—a chapter is devoted to *ma* in which the range of meanings (from architecture to music) plays out as fundamental to the whole, quite ancient, phenomenon of Noh.

As an expression of space, *ma* can mean space itself, the dimension of a space, or the space between two things....  
As an expression of time, *ma* can mean time itself, the interval between two events, rhythm, or timing....

This variability, or what I prefer to call *axiality*, suggests that in the case of *ma*, a long-standing usage recognized that the polarity of space and time is “polar” in a very special sense. Space and time are at once separated and linked by a pole in the sense of axis, a common hinge on which they swivel into “normal” appearance, now as space, now as time, depending on the perspective—and, in a sudden anomalous moment, as space-time. Physics, broadly speaking, produces this anomaly in mainly cognitive/conceptual and abstract terms, whereas art (Noh, as Komparu’s analysis suggests) presents it sensorially/intuitively and concretely. And *this* polarity, no doubt, has a hidden axis as well, a swing point within *ma* viewed as *principle*, suggested by Komparu’s architecturally focused distinction in the subtitle, “*Ma: The Science of Time and Space*.” The science in the art becomes indicator of an art dimension of science—a liminality function at the level of *ma* as principle, which shows up in the dynamic marriage of science (as theory *or* technology) and art, and, indeed, a certain indifference to the distinction.<sup>4</sup>

In *Up Against Down*, Gary Hill presents an actual, though “impossible,” *limen/ma*—a space-time threshold. In the dark a bright figure presses against unbounded dark. The slight reflection of the agent pushing—head, shoulder, hand, foot—calls out the interfacing of light/dark, and yet it could be, as it appears, that one resides within the other (the reflection of the lighted figure is an artifact of its “facing” into the dark), or that they are paradoxically of the same nature, a coinherence. Contrary action without full opposition? Perhaps, but the urgency of the action that says continuously, “I’m doing this with all my might!,” bespeaks utter contention, and no breaks, no relief, no let-up. Toward what end? There’s no indication of *end*, no ending, no goal, no telos, no evident teleology. Only the event itself.

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<sup>3</sup> “Time and Space in Noh: Apposition and Fusion,” Chapter Seven (New York: Weatherhill/Tankosha, 1983), pp. 70-95.

<sup>4</sup> Komparu himself was first a Noh actor in a long family lineage, who unexpectedly turned to writing as architectural critic, and just as unexpectedly returned in time to the Noh theater as actor. As one who crossed and recrossed a threshold between apparently incompatible disciplines, he was well-positioned to expose an infamous liminality within architecture itself in its science/art polarity—often, indeed, a struggle. He does this in part by focusing on the profoundly architectural aspects of Noh.

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Event? That would mean outcome or point-specific event in some cases—e.g., physics:

A phenomenon or occurrence located at a single point in space-time, regarded as the fundamental observational entity in relativity theory

—an end-point in its very existence. But such a static notion of event doesn't handle the experience of *Up Against Down*—or even the dynamic contrariness of the contentious title, which points to the nerve-racking energy of what's seemingly happening. The stance, *the* happening, the—let's say—happenstantiality, or, even better, the happenstantiation. The thing is not letting up. The pressure is on to stay on. It happens to be unending, relentlessly interminable—a happenstance of the eternal between. Yet it *takes time* to be so doggedly *in place*. The ordinary at the heart of the infernal impossible—like waiting for the wee-hours last bus on a dark cold night way the hell out in nowhere, and it never comes.

Time seeps back into the artifact, even when banished by cyclicity, eternality, or some other presumptions of sameness. The time of viewing merges with the state of the event, yet as long as I'm not fully entranced I'm aware my mind is also pushing—*against this time*. I try to remind myself that that's not me doing all that pushing, but I'm not convinced. There's identity slippage. The *ma*, the gap, can seem a prison between two unreachable shores. The strange time of unattaining alters the sense of space—something is sucking the space away. The frenzied pushing may be demonic, and that unidentifiable immeasurable blackness may hide a vampiric emissary of some black hole—and here we stand at the edge, the event horizon, peering into the abyss. This is a fantasy of desperation—and it's no better or worse than any claim of clarity or analytic precision or hermeneutic elegance *here, at this site, in this time and place*.

*Ma* also eats language, or translates it into primordial groan. Here

multiple low frequency sine waves along with their sub-harmonics are heard, and the changing tension and force of the body's pressure modulates the waves of sound resembling a kind of shadow of primal drumming.

Up against oblivion, the saying transmutes. Mute trancelike concentration drums on itself. There are haunting sounds in Noh drama too that translate transmogrifying times—there are *many times* there (condensed, slipping, vanishing, reversed, split) registering the many crosshatched dramatic *spaces* (shifting, oscillating, flowing, expanding and contracting) of intervening phantasms and psycho-temporalities—sounds that bespeak the unspeakable. Pushed time presses into space and alters it beyond recognition.

And what *this* artist is *doing* before our eyes is *pushing back* against time, and against the irremediable onslaught of the other side of time—emptiness itself. The push-space is the limen of being/nonbeing. The big edge itself. And the person in the total push is always at the limit of identity, and about to go over the edge, but that the sheer force of the unknown resists total contention with equal force.<sup>5</sup> And at the center of the action, the hyperlocal center felt in any intervenient person, is the pointless point of singularity. And all that blind effort, the doing that does everything it can and in the end endlessly does nothing—ejects us, the slipped identities in the space of time slippage, back out of identification and strands us in the middle. Right here.

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<sup>5</sup> It becomes evident after a little observation and thought that nature only abhors a vacuum in certain moods, and that to the extent that it does seem to display such emotion, it may be an artifact of the misbegotten word "vacuum." At certain vantages of experience and thought *the empty*—zero point—might invite rather different interpretations. In "zero point physics," for instance, it's the source of unlimited energy.

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And in conclusion... well, we might be feeling a bit *pressed* by now and have begun to lose our taste for grand literary wrap-ups. A work like *Up Against Down* renders meaning itself liminal. It puts a threshold in the place of thought. Whatever one's interpretation, the fact of an artist attempting an apparently absurd or impossible act, particularly on an enhanced scale, constitutes a statement of sorts. But that statement includes the unsaid and even the unsayable. What is not said may seem to invite speculation, such as the question of what moves an artist to create such a work. And one might consider the inexpressible unlimited frustration and sense of limitation that leads to such a pure gesture of "failed" action as going up against the void. Here we might notice that, in this work, the non-saying is not only equal to saying in sheer force, it's *inseparable* from saying. By analogy, a mouth opening to scream but producing no sound is equal to the scream. It's not only failed sound but also a dimension of scream and something potentially far more intense than literal sound. One might think of Munch's *The Scream*—in its eternalizing moment of sheer despair, no actual sound is heard. Or a dream of momentary powerlessness when the effort to scream is all the more terrifying because no sound comes forth—and frozen, it lasts, and lasts. There is such a "thing" as absence that is far more poignant than recognizable presence—and far more present.

Time under such stress may seem to ooze across the scene as if to liquefy space upon contact—a fused substance of unknown viscosity. Space, so intensely countered, hammers time into sheets of articulate sine waves that carry viewing into the ears, the pores, the nerves. Let everything be known by way of its oppositions, its fixtures of energetic escape in a happening substance, its ups against its downs.

*Ma.*

The bounding line between space and time is a hard flow. Like liquid crystal that is self-bounding when pressed and *reflects*, it remembers where it has been and knows exactly where it is.

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