CHAPTER IX

# THE COMMUNICATIVE BODY: SEMIOTICS IN VIDEO ART

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## 1. Introduction

In the 1970s, the human body served as a communicative medium and a form of artistic language. This era witnessed a generation of artists utilizing their bodies to convey authentic, self-focused experiences. A decade later, body art reemerged within the artistic landscape, albeit in a transformed state characterized by technological augmentation, an inherent unnaturalness, and a fluid, mutable identity. In her seminal essay titled *Bodies and Subjects in the Technologized Self-Portrait* (1998), the esteemed art historian Amelia Jones posited that in the 1990s, the relationship between the body and the self underwent a process of individuation, primarily because of technological advancements and the proliferation of cyborg identity constructs.

In a similar way, Italian art critic Lea Vergine (2000), in her analysis of the 1990s, observed a notable surge in the phenomena of hybridization, technological integration, and shifts in identity. During this decade, the human body regained prominence as a locus for the manifestation and evaluation of multiple identities, despite being subjected to a reduced status as a distorted appendage of post-human condition and a fragmented interface with others (Vergine, 2000: 280).

Both theorists perceive the body and the self as undergoing a process of individuation that Jones calls the particularized body/self (Jones, 1999). This concept of a particularized body merits further exploration. It is important to note that the men of modernity managed to establish themselves as autonomous subjects, whereas in the postmodern era, individuals are increasingly

subsumed within a mass culture. This transformation can be understood as a natural progression, closely linked to the widespread dissemination and institutionalization of capitalism, which has become an integral part of our lives, significantly more so than during the early 20th century. (Mısır and Balta, 1998: 40)

The concept of the individual as a self-defining subject has been fundamentally transformed, largely due to the evolution of the capitalist structure, which has given rise to virtual realities. Furthermore, as articulated by Jones (1998), the emergence of cyborg identity politics has played a pivotal role in this shift. While Jones predominantly emphasized the technological dimensions of postmodern development in her approach to this ideology, it is noteworthy that both perspectives converge in their examination of the altered nature of the individual in contemporary society. She writes: "Technologies such as the computer have profoundly changed the temporal and spatial shape and meaning of our life-world and our own bodily and symbolic sense of ourselves transforming us as subjects and turning us into what I am calling particularized or techno subjects" (1998: 203) As Erol states, "while technology creates its own myth and become a projection of our endless desires of power and. Immortality" (2023: 61) art also evolves and centers around techno subjects more and more.

The objective of this paper is to elucidate the arguments articulated by Jones and Vergine in their exploration of the interplay between bodies and identities, with specific reference to the works of video artist Gary Hill, considered one of the pioneers of video art. To achieve this, I will employ a semiotic analysis to interpret Hill's artistic creations.

### *1.1. Methodology*

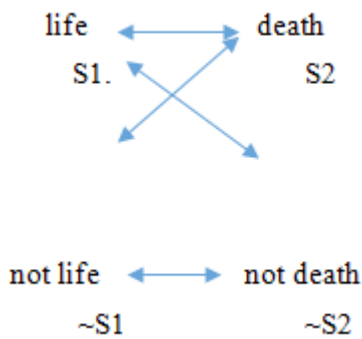
The model of the semiotic square, developed by A.J. Greimas and J. Cortes in their book *Sémiotique: dictionnaire raisonnée de la théorie de langage* (1986) represents a draft of a logical model and its schematization proposed to determine, classify, and demonstrate the abstract units that constitute the main structure of the universe of meaning and the connections between these units and their transformations. This model is a part of the semiotic project aimed at observing the process of meaning construction. The connections it serves to illustrate among abstract units play a crucial role in elucidating the primary semantic structure (comprising relations and oppositions) and the syntactic structure (encompassing the logical relationships between elements within these

relations and their subsequent transformations) (Tutal Cheviron, Çam & Kurt, 2015). Corso explains that "the semiotic system S is related to a contradictory system ~S. We can therefore draw structural, contradictory dimensions between S1 and ~S1, S2 and ~S2" (2014:71).

Greimas' own example is a simple one: opposing life (S1) to death (S2) and not-life (~S1) to not-death (~S2) (Corso, 2014:71). He then uses additional diagonal dimensions to end up with the "elementary structure of meaning" (Greimas and Rastier, 1968).

Greimas posits that all semiotic systems inherently assume a hierarchical structure and advances the notion that relationships among elements likewise emerge within a hierarchical framework. (Tutal Cheviron, Çam & Kurt, 2015). He undertakes an examination of the attributes associated with truth, falsehood, secrecy and deceit. This is what a simple semiotic square looks like:

**Table 1**: Semiotic Square Explained




In conducting a semiotic analysis of Gary Hill's vidoes, the utilization of semiotic analysis methodology proves valuable. This analytical approach, often employed in oppositional analyses, facilitates the refinement of analytical classification derived from the oppositions arising from the individualized body/selfness of the postmodern man.

To achieve this, I have selected two of Gary Hill's videos, namely *Crux* (1983) and *Inasmuch As It Is Always Already Taking Place* (1990). These videos, through the representation of oppositions, prompt inquiries pertaining to the body, spatial considerations, and the viewer's engagement. Therefore, anchored in these three fundamental concepts and employing the semiotic square methodology, I intend to conduct a semiotic analysis of these two videos.

## 2. Gary Hill

Gary Hill (1951), widely acknowledged as a trailblazer in the realm of video art, dedicated the initial years of his artistic journey to a profound examination of the unique properties intrinsic to the medium of video. Commencing in the 1980s, his creative endeavors shifted toward a deliberate deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction of the prevailing images and ideologies disseminated by Western culture. Within this context, Hill delves into the interstitial realms that exist between the articulated and the unarticulated. Positioned at the juncture where the intellectual and material domains converge, he forges a space conducive to the development of a language -comprising visual, auditory, sensory, and interrelational elements- that paradoxically manages to be both unified and fragmented. In this manner, he nurtures an environment that facilitates the experience and contemplation of an entirely novel language.

This approach has guided his exploration of seminal works by figures such as Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida, and Gregory Bateson, alongside a deeper engagement with Gnostic writings (Ferreira, 2017). Within the framework of his artistic practice, his works pivot amidst inherent contradictions and oppositions, traversing domains encompassing construction and deconstruction, speech and silence, meaning and nonsense, dialogue and misunderstanding, absence and presence as well as fragments and wholes.

## 3. In-Depth Exploration of the Video Artworks

### *3.1. Crux (1983-87)*

In 1983, Gary Hill conceived *Crux,* a video installation laden with rich symbolism, exploring the intricate conundrums of human existence. The title Crux encapsulates the essence of this work, denoting both a knot of difficulty and a profound question. Hill's artistic endeavor in Crux entails the attachment of five video cameras and accompanying microphones to his own body, meticulously arranged in the configuration of a cross. This configuration facilitates the recording of his limb and head movements rendering a captivating visual narrative.

Upon mounting the monitors on a wall, a central void within the installation invites contemplation. The tape commences with Hill departing from the ruins of a castle, embarking on a serene sojourn through wooded landscapes to ultimately encounter a tranquil body of water, potentially an ocean. Throughout this expedition, the viewer is granted access to the nuanced movements of Hill's feet, head, and hands while the remainder of his corporeal presence remains conspicuously absent from the frame.

**Figure 1:** Crux (1983-87), five-channel video/sound installation
**Source:** Gary Hill's personal website https://garyhill.com/work/mixed_media_installation/crux.html

Upon reaching the water's edge the artist enters its enigmatic depths, suspending both himself and the viewer in a state of metaphysical reflection. The auditory dimension of the installation amplifies this introspective journey, featuring a soundtrack characterized by the rustling of leaves, the branching of trees, and the whispering of the wind. This immersive odyssey unfolds over a duration of approximately 26 minutes.

It is worth noting that the initial presentation of this installation took place within an auditorium stage, followed by a subsequent exhibition within the hallowed confines of a medieval church chapel. Gary Hill's *Crux* thus emerges as a multifaceted exploration of human existence, employing video art as a vehicle for profound philosophical inquiry.

### *3.2. Inasmuch As It Is Always Already Taking Place (1990)*

**Figure 2:** Inasmuch As It Is Always Already Taking Place (1990), sixteen-channel video/sound installation
**Source:** https://garyhill.com/work/mixed_media_installation/inasmuch.html

In the video artwork *Inasmuch As It Is Always Already Taking Place* (1990), a compelling visual tapestry unfolds, comprising an array of 16 monitors, each varying in size, ranging from a mere few centimeters to approximately fifty centimeters in diagonal span. These monitors collectively unveil a mesmerizing portrayal of fragmented human bodies, rendered in stark black and white. The visual composition consists of isolated body parts, encompassing shoulders, backs, mouths, ears, legs, and various other anatomical elements. Accompanying this captivating visual montage is a whispered soundtrack, aptly characterized by Gary Hill as the debris of speech. The auditory landscape also features the distinct, evocative sound of pages being turned, originating from the monitor capturing a finger engaged in reading a text.

As the viewer approaches this installation, thoughtfully positioned within a niche that almost mimics the still-life tradition, a subtle vibrational quality animates the forms of human anatomy depicted on the screens. These nuances and dynamism lead the viewer to a profound realization that these fragmented images are, in fact, evocative portrayals of living entities. The inception of this groundbreaking video installation dates to the year 1990, marking a significant milestone in Gary Hill's exploration of the intersection of art, perception, and the human condition.

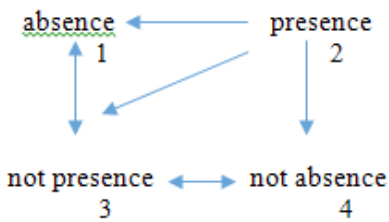
## 4. Semiotic Analysis

The central theme underpinning these two works is the human body. Consequently, this analysis initiates with an examination of the body, subsequently progressing to an exploration of its interaction with both the spatial environment and the viewer.

### *4.1. Interrogating the Notion of Body*

In the semiotic analysis of these two works, the application of a semiotic square becomes pertinent, where the terms absence, presence, non-absence, and non-presence are vital components. This framework allows for a comprehensive delineation of the intricate relationship between body and the semiotic elements at play. As such, we arrive at the following semiotic square:

**Table 2:** Semiotic Square for Absence and Presence



In both of these videos, the human body operates within a dynamic interplay of absence and presence. In *Crux*, Hill portrays a subject characterized by fragmentation and decentering. This subject is presented on the screen as a body that simultaneously embodies presence and absence due to the conspicuous absence of its central core. In *Inasmuch As It Is Already Always Taking Place,* a human body is indeed visible, but it is fragmented into sixteen distinct pieces, thereby implying a notable absence of wholeness. From this thematic dichotomy, we can derive four meta-terms:

Term 2 specifying term 1 (truth): pertaining to the fragmented and decentered nature of the subject.

Term 3 and 4 mutually specifying each other (falsehood): referring to the notion of the body in its entirety, as an integrated whole.

Terms 1 and 4 mutually specifying each other (secrecy): relating to the conspicuous absence of the central or holistic aspect.

Term 2 specifying term 4 (deceit) signifying an intensified sense of presence.

In *Crux,* the corporeal presence of the artist serves as a medium facilitation a connection between the human subject and the external world. While this connection manifests in tangible interaction with the material realm, the artist's actions and cognitions remain somewhat detached from the totality of this material universe. As Cooke (2009) notes, the artist who seems to be initiating himself into a primitive/primordial experience is transformed into that of the martyr-pilgrim. Consequently, the artist hovers in a realm between presence and absence, embodying a fragmented and decentered subject.

The absence of the body's core in the *Crux* installation conveys the enigmatic message that the artist imparts: the notion of losing one's center in a world to which one remains an outsider. Conversely, our bodies yearn to establish an intensified presence in an attempt to overcome this sense of alienation, employing bodily elements such as gestures and voice (what one observes and hears through the monitors). However, this endeavor proves futile, a deceit in contrast to the truth signifying the loss of a sense of unity with the physical world. Consequently, it becomes apparent that we cannot speak of a human body in its entirety or as a cohesive whole.

Foucault, in his article *Utopian Body* explains that Greeks did not even have a word for the unity of the body: "Stranger still is the way Homer's Greeks had no word to designate the unity of the body. As paradoxical as it may be, on the walls defended by Hector and his companions, facing Troy, there was no

body. There were raised arms, there were brave chests, there were nimble legs, there were helmets shimmering atop heads – there was no body. The Greek word for body only appears in Homer to designate a corpse" (2006:223).

Regarding the second video, Inasmuch As It Is Always Already Taking Place, each screen simultaneously presents both the entirety of the body and its individual parts. Even though only the body's constituent parts are visible and the complete body as a unified entity remains concealed, a profound sense of presence informed by absence pervades the viewer's experience. This phenomenon constitutes the semiotic meta-term representing truth within our analytical framework. In essence, there exists an acute awareness of the absence of the fully integrated body due to its fragmentation into multiple discrete components. Nonetheless, there is a proclivity to mentally reconstruct the presence of the body as a coherent mental image. This cognitive reconstruction underscores our inherent inclination as a viewer to derive a perception of presence and wholeness from its fragmented constituent parts.

The presence of indecipherable phrases and murmurs coupled with our innate predisposition towards mental reconstruction, contributes to the cultivation of an intensified sense of presence. However, this is a deceit. Consequently, the solitude engendered by the inherently fragmented nature of the body proves insurmountable. The "not presence" of the complete body begets the absence of the body leading to a pronounced detachment and a perceptual distancing from the body's various images. Ultimately this is the "secret" of this work.

### *4.2. Interrogating the Notion of Space*

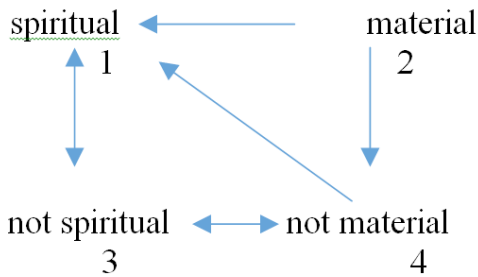
We are in the world; we are in space through our bodies. In other words, the body is the link between us and the world. In *Bemerkungen zu Kunst-Plastik-Raum* (1964) (Remarks on Art-Sculpture, Space), Heidegger offers a historical definition of space:

"In the Greek sense, space is seen from the body, as its place, as the container of place. Every body, however, has its own place, a place that conforms… Kant interprets this space, still and always seen in terms of the physical body, as a mode by which man represents in advance the objects that affect him. Space does not exist in itself, it is a subjective form of the intuition of human subjectivity. Despite all the differences between Greek and modern ways of thinking, space is represented in the same way, starting from the body[1]" (Heidegger, 2009: 19-21)

1 The text is translated from French by the author.

In this context, the body is considered a material entity, navigating the three-dimensional expanse of space. However, it has been previously observed that the body's actions and thoughts exist in a state of detachment from the entirety of the world, imparting upon it an immaterial or intellectual quality. Consequently, in the framework of my analysis, I will employ four distinct terms within the semiotic square: material, spiritual, not material, and not spiritual. This construction results in the following diagram:

**Table 3:** Semiotic Square for Spiritual and Material




The logical operation necessitated for comprehending the relationship between these two artworks and the spatial dimension is that of contradiction. In Crux, the arrangement of five monitors in a cross shape upon the wall is not a coincidence. Furthermore, the site of the exhibition was within a chapel of a medieval church. This ecclesiastical space, marked by the cruciform posture intriguingly amplifies its own negation. Specifically, it effectuates a transformation from a physical or material state into an immaterial or spiritual one, thus transcending the boundaries of mere materiality. Within the analytical context, we can articulate the ensuing meta-terms:

Term 1 specifying term 2 (truth): the spatial context providing the artwork with the capacity to manifest as an object of linguistic expression.

Terms 2 and 4 mutually specifying each other (deceit): the artwork's presentation within the spatial environment as an entity of the physical world.

Terms 1 and 3 mutually specifying each other (secret): The artwork maintains an inherent detachment from its spatial surroundings, even when situated therein.

Terms 3 and 4 mutually specifying each other (falsehood): The artwork establishes no discernable relationship, either material or spiritual, with the spatial milieu.

When scrutinizing *Crux* through the lens of these meta-terms, one may posit that the gray-hued wall of the church, serving as the backdrop of the

installation, invokes associations with the material aspects of the world. The color gray, along with the austere, cold quality of the wall, may be construed as symbols of a distant and unwelcoming physicality. Paradoxically, this accentuation of the material dimension of the artwork suggests it to be a mere object of the worldly realm. However, the presence of distinct religious signifiers – the church and the cross – imbues the artwork with connotations that transcend the material realm. These symbols reinforce the conceptual shift from a primitive experience to that of a martyr-pilgrim. In essence, moving beyond the rudimentary observation that the body experiences life and death akin to a textual narrative, one may discern a profound dimension where the body emerges as an object of language, contingent upon the adept interpretation of its gestures, behaviors, and attitudes.

Similar attributes can also be discerned in *Inasmuch As It Is Always Already Taking Place.* The artwork is ensconced within a niche, resembling a still-life composition. At initial appraisal, one might posit that the installation (along with the fragmented body depicted across the sixteen monitors) pertains to the realm of "thingness" –the material facet of the world. However, this impression is deceitful, for it remains divorced from the corporeal essence of space, engendered by an uncanny disquiet elicited by the monochromatic depictions of a segmented body. This signifies the spiritual and not spiritual dimension of the enigma. As one proceeds deeper into the spatial domain, approaching the monitors, it becomes increasingly evident that the body is imbued with vitality, its constituent parts engaged in kinetic motion. The body appears to communicate through a language of gestures, thereby conveying a profound message. Consequently, the body assumes the mantle of an object of linguistic expression, with the spatial realm serving as the conduit that facilitates such expression. Within this contextual framework, Heidegger's observations are pertinent:

"Man does not make space; space is nothing but a subjective mode of intuition; but neither is something objective like an object. On the contrary, space, to space a space, requires a man. This mysterious relationship concern not only man's relation to space and time but the relation of being to man[2]." (Heidegger, 2009: 28-29)

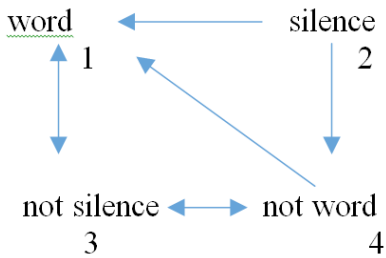
In short, space, through its spiritual and material relationship with man, constitutes the possibility of a transition/relation to the other.

2 The text is translated from French by the author.

### *4.3. Interrogating the Relationship with the Viewer*

The artworks accentuate an interactive relationship with the viewer. It falls upon us to populate the pivotal void within *Crux*, wherein nothing but the wall exists, and to reconstitute the absent image. Similarly, in *Inasmuch As It Is Always Already Taking Place,* we are tasked with reconstructing the entirety of the body from its fragmented parts. Consequently, the viewer assumes an active role, striving to unravel the paradox between sense and nonsense, between the articulated and the spoken. Considering this, we can construct our semiotic square employing the terms word, silence, not word, and not silence.

**Diagram 4:** Semiotic Square for Word and Silence




Term 1 specifying term 2 (truth): a mental or symbolic representation.

Terms 2 and 4 mutually specifying each other (deceit): an absent or incomplete representation.

Term 1 specifying term 3 (secret): a mental representation of the artist's body.

Terms 3 and 4 mutually specifying each other (falsehood): a material representation.

In both works, the viewer is presented with the image of a fragmented or deconstructed body. At this level, due to the absence of a central or unified aspect, the artwork remains incapable of articulate expression. In terms of its interaction with the observer, it remains in a state of silence. However, this situation is illusionary in nature. It falls upon the observer to discern the clues and construct meaning from them. At first glance, it may appear that the observer is compelled to reevaluate the actor's corporeal form. From this perspective, the spectator transitions to an introspective examination of their own physicality. The image of the artist on the monitor triggers in the spectator a mental representation of their own physical being. Through this confrontation with the other, the viewer inevitably questions their own sense of identity. As the spectator assembles the fragments of *Inasmuch As It Is Always Already Taking Place* or mentally

reconstructs the absent core of *Crux*, the artwork gradually initiates a dialogue. These constituent fragments cease to exist solely as symbolic representations; they engender within the observer a fresh mental image contingent upon their method of reassembly.

## 5. Conclusion

It is equally viable to derive numerous narratives from a single image, or in this instance, from a solitary Gary Hill installation. In this investigation, my emphasis has rested upon the principle of contradiction in Hill's oeuvre, aiming to shed light on the phenomena of hybridization, technological integration, and shifts in identity within the art scene of the 1990s.

The utilization of the semiotic square as a methodological framework for semiotic analysis greatly facilitated the interpretation of the intricate codes and signs employed by Hill. Through this analytical approach, I delved into the underlying rationale and methodology that could potentially imbue these two video installations with meaning.

In contemplating future avenues of scholarly exploration, one promising direction is to embark on a comparative study. By examining the works of other artists who similarly grapple with the concept of the particularized body, we can gain deeper insights into the multifaceted dimensions of this artistic discourse. For instance, exploring James Luna's performance *Artifact Piece* (1985-1987) or *Dream Hat Ritual (*1996) or delving into the performances of Ken Stelarc, such as *Split Body* (1997) and *Third Hand (*1980), offers a fertile ground for cross-referencing and juxtaposition. These artistic expressions, much like the works of Gary Hill, provide reach material for an extended exploration of the complexities surrounding the body as a locus of artistic inquiry, technological innovation, and shifting identities, particularly within the context of the 1990s art scene.

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