

The Narrator

In her intense personal odyssey into contemporary art, Toronto art collector probes the terrors of the twentieth century

Ydessa Hendeles

It's a Sunday evening in July 1982. A dozen or so people have climbed the grey stairs that lead straight up from the street, off to one side of the Rivoli restaurant's patio, to Ydessa Hendeles' commercial gallery on Toronto's Queen Street West. We are a crowd of professional writers and artists. Jennifer Oille has come from *Vanguard* magazine; John Mays from *The Globe and Mail*; I, for *Parachute* magazine. The rest are Ydessa Gallery artists, including John McEwen, Noel Harding, Sandra Meigs, and Kim Kozzi and Napo B. from Fastwürms. The talk is friendly as the night starts with a general munching on Carr's crackers and Camembert and the uncorking of black bottles of Freixenet. We've shown up because there is to be a slide show. Hendeles has just returned from Germany where she has attended her first *Documenta* exhibition — Rudi Fuchs' *Documenta VII* — and taken pictures of the work she has seen. None of the rest of us have been, so we talk with some anticipation.

by Richard Rhodes

All photos courtesy Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation
Photography: Robert Keziere



Gary Hill
Tall Ships 1992
Video installation
Detail (Anastasia Hill)



Bill Viola
Heaven and Earth 1992
2 channel video installation

Then, somebody points to a stack of carousels at the end of the counter. A half-dozen sit ready for the projector. It dawns on us that we are about to look at four hundred slides.

As I remember, this particular evening went on until morning, and in the end, only John Mays and I were there to watch Hendeles click to her last slide: a picture of Rebecca Horn's mechanical peacock unfurling its tail in a sunlit gazebo in Kassel. It had been a memorable night, not only because of the hours of talk, argument and laughter, but because the slide show itself was spectacular. The photographs that she had taken were very good. Yet it was not just the technical quality of the images, it was the painstaking way in which the images had begun at the beginning and proceeded, almost work by work, through the entire exhibition. She would say things like: "This is the third floor of the Fridericianum and Hermann Nitsch's installation. (Click) This picture is now about fifteen feet further along the corridor. (Click to detail) You can see the way the red has been splashed up and allowed to run down like blood along the walls."

Slide after slide, precise descriptions of objects were linked with precise, almost uncanny descriptions of the spaces they were in. It was easy to forget that one was in a room over Queen Street and not somewhere closer to the exhibition. This was not simply the consequence of the advancing supply of Freixenet. The evening became, in fact, a sort of communal epiphany, a mutual expression of unguarded opinions and spontaneity, and a recognition of the good and interesting company that was close at hand. That we felt this in Toronto, in the glow of German slide light, was, of course, somehow ironic, but without Hendeles' space and hospitality and will to make art come alive in a presentation, it never would have happened.

To see Ydessa Hendeles now, with her collection, her King Street West exhibition space and her widening reputation — *ARTnews* recently listed her as one of the international art world's "50 Most Powerful People," the only Canadian on the list — is to realize that indeed she has come a long way from those early days as an art dealer on Queen Street. She now moves in a larger world, with more resources at her disposal — resources from her late father Jacob's commercial real estate company in downtown Toronto. Her openings now bring people to town from every major art centre. But some things haven't changed, like the drive to make presentations and to do them here.

ARTnews got it exactly wrong if, in saying that Hendeles' Foundation exhibitions define the moment, they meant "moment" in a what's-hot-

to-buy sense. Sure, those monetary considerations are part of putting together a major collection, and most of the artists that Hendeles has shown since 1988 — Christian Boltanski, Jeff Wall, Jenny Holzer, Bruce Nauman, Louise Bourgeois — are names at the centre of the international contemporary art market. But Hendeles has, in fact, put her money and her Foundation behind a different approach, withdrawing art from its commodity context and giving it over, instead, to subjective themes and interpretive narratives.

In Hendeles' exhibitions, meaning, not money, counts. The exhibitions allow the art work maximum permission to have its say. The interior of the Foundation has been built and rebuilt to accommodate the specific needs of the art — her current exhibition, with its myriad technical complications, clocked in at more than five thousand installation manhours over a five-month period — and to offer viewers optimum viewing conditions. This meticulousness is not in aid of some purist conception of art but rather provides a type of transparency that lets the works speak in their own particular voices. What is at stake is the intellectual connective tissue joining work to work, exhibition to exhibition.

In this sense Hendeles' exhibitions are like performances. The Foundation she has built is not a study centre. It eschews the conventional museum model that sees objects and exhibitions organized around expository presentations of changing historical and formal types, or topical public themes. Rather, her interests are in a more subjective framework; these exhibitions are not commentaries but records of experience. Asked to account for her approach, she says succinctly: "I try to focus in on what my interests in the work are. I try to make a logical passage to show what I am receiving from it. That is what I do."

This sense of intense personal engagement is at the root of the success of the exhibitions she has mounted over the past five years. A perfect staging is a form of concentration, a way of setting a context where the collector's choices and installation sequencings interact with the content of the art. In this sense, the exhibitions become existential reflections, passionate demonstrations of found meaning.

It is a serious endeavour, but then the circumstances of Hendeles' family history no doubt have contributed to the sense of urgency that underscores her project. The exhibitions seem like arenas where things are being worked out, where there is a taking stock of Polish Jewish parents who lost most of their respective families in Nazi death camps and then emigrated to

Canada with a two-and-a-half year old daughter — a daughter who came to live a very different life as a second-generation survivor. Her insistence that art bear witness to existential meaning seems one way of working through that family history, a way of confronting its horrors and discontinuities. And yet there is a rebellious dimension at work here too, a sense that the choice to live a life in art is not an evasion of history, or an escape into privilege, but a form of testimony and service.

It is worth noting that the first exhibition that took place at the Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation back in 1988 was by French artist Christian Boltanski, an artist whose work often refigures the Holocaust. In *Le Lycée Chases* (1986–87), Boltanski used blurred portraits drawn from the archives of a Jewish high school in Vienna to evoke the sorrowful memory of child victims. Part of the same exhibition was a work, built specifically for the Foundation, that covered the walls of a high, skylit room with hundreds of pieces of old clothing. The work, called *Canada*, referred not to the country but to the name of the room in Auschwitz where the clothes of the prisoners were sorted and kept, a room about which Hendeles' mother, Dorothy, still had vivid memories.

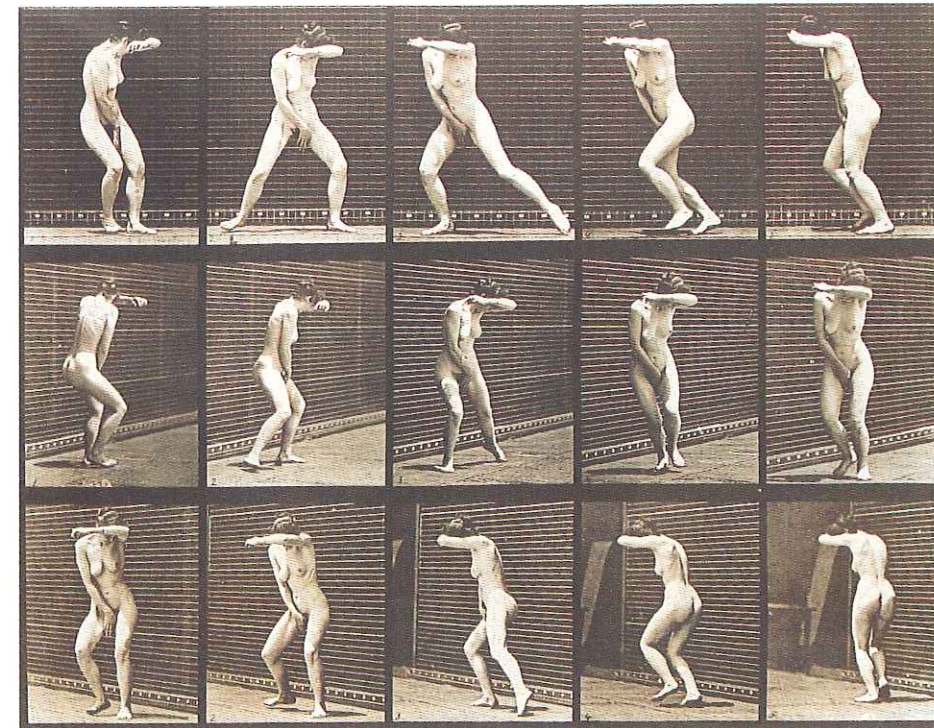
Most of the works chosen for the Foundation collection have this ulterior dimension. They represent means of identification, ways of speaking to the particulars of identity. John Mays once noted this in a review of Hendeles' large 1991 Diane Arbus survey. He read the harsh, intimate disfigurements of Arbus' photographic gaze as a parable of an unrequited emotional dysfunction, suggesting Arbus' portraits were a kind of Hendeles self-portrait. But if the Arbus show was a self-portrait, then so was the exhibition by German artist Hanne Darboven, who showed exquisite systematic grids of diary pages and handwriting. Here a nervous complexity was palpable amidst the strictures of modernist givens and repetitions. For that matter, take last year's Bruce Nauman, Jenny Holzer, Louise Bourgeois exhibition which contained a multi-monitor Nauman video work, *ANTHRO/SOCIO Rind Facing Camera* (1991), where the sound of yelled imperatives — "Feed me. Hurt me. Eat me. Help me" — became a music of contradictory personal needs and expectations. These are stagings that reveal the capacity of contemporary art to speak with an inner voice to the world around it, an inner voice we can recognize as an externalization of our own.

The most recent exhibition at the Foundation, which remains on view until next spring, is another exceptional demonstration of this

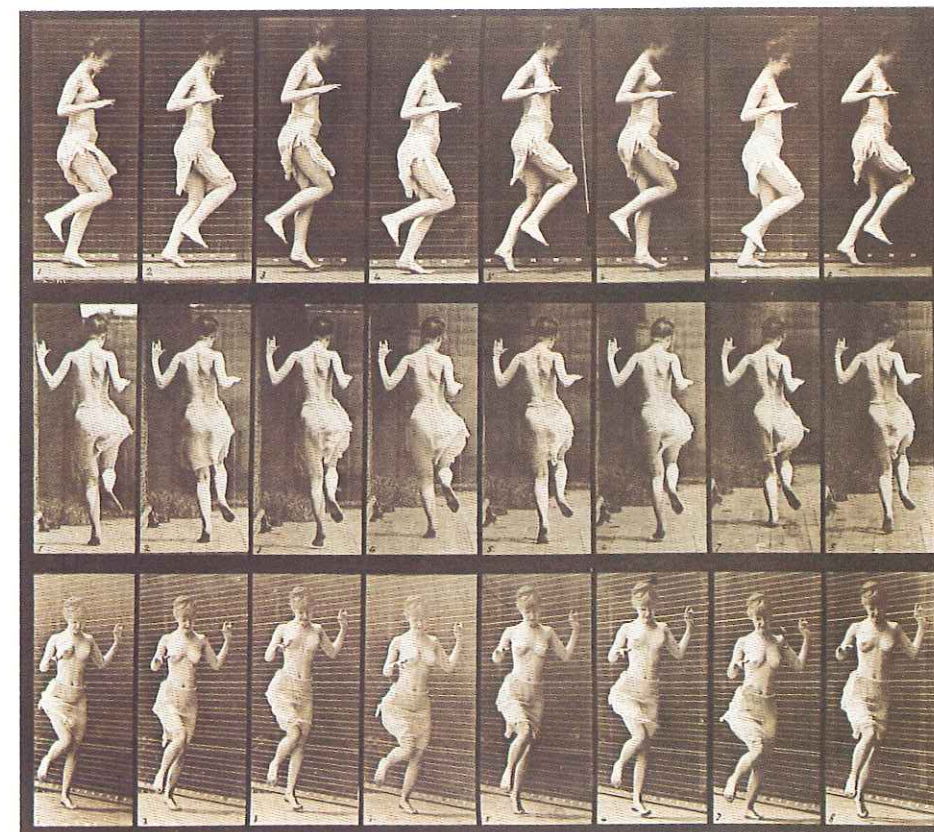
approach. Who would have thought that a reordering of Eadweard Muybridge's collotypes from his *Animal Locomotion* series (1872–1887) would eclipse our scientific understanding of those early freeze-frame images and focus our attention instead on the photographer's relationships with his subjects. Hendeles did, and suddenly what has been considered a study book on the physics of movement (his subjects include walking, wrestling, crawling, jumping and running humans, various domestic and wild animals in motion, crippled children in physiotherapy, and exploding chickens) is reshaped into a knot of gender stereotypes, practical jokes, and other scenarios of domination. Photographs that have been seen as emblems of modernity instead become emblems of a disarming human vulnerability that speak across time as an allegory of the human condition.

All of the work in the exhibition has this thematic scope. Bill Viola's video installation *Heaven and Earth* (1992) is a two-part wooden column inset with facing video monitors separated by several inches. One monitor shows a newborn baby; the other a dying woman, with the idea of a lifespan compressed into the short, dense flickering of light between them. In Viola's other work here, *The Arc of Ascent* (1992), the process is reversed. A four-second clip of a clothed human figure jumping into water is slowed down to nearly twelve minutes, and shown — accompanied by its roaring amplified soundtrack — in an enormous 23-foot-high projection, in a darkened room. Most of the image sequence takes place under water, an immersion (including sound) that is, in a sense, a description of the space of life implied between the two monitors in the other work.

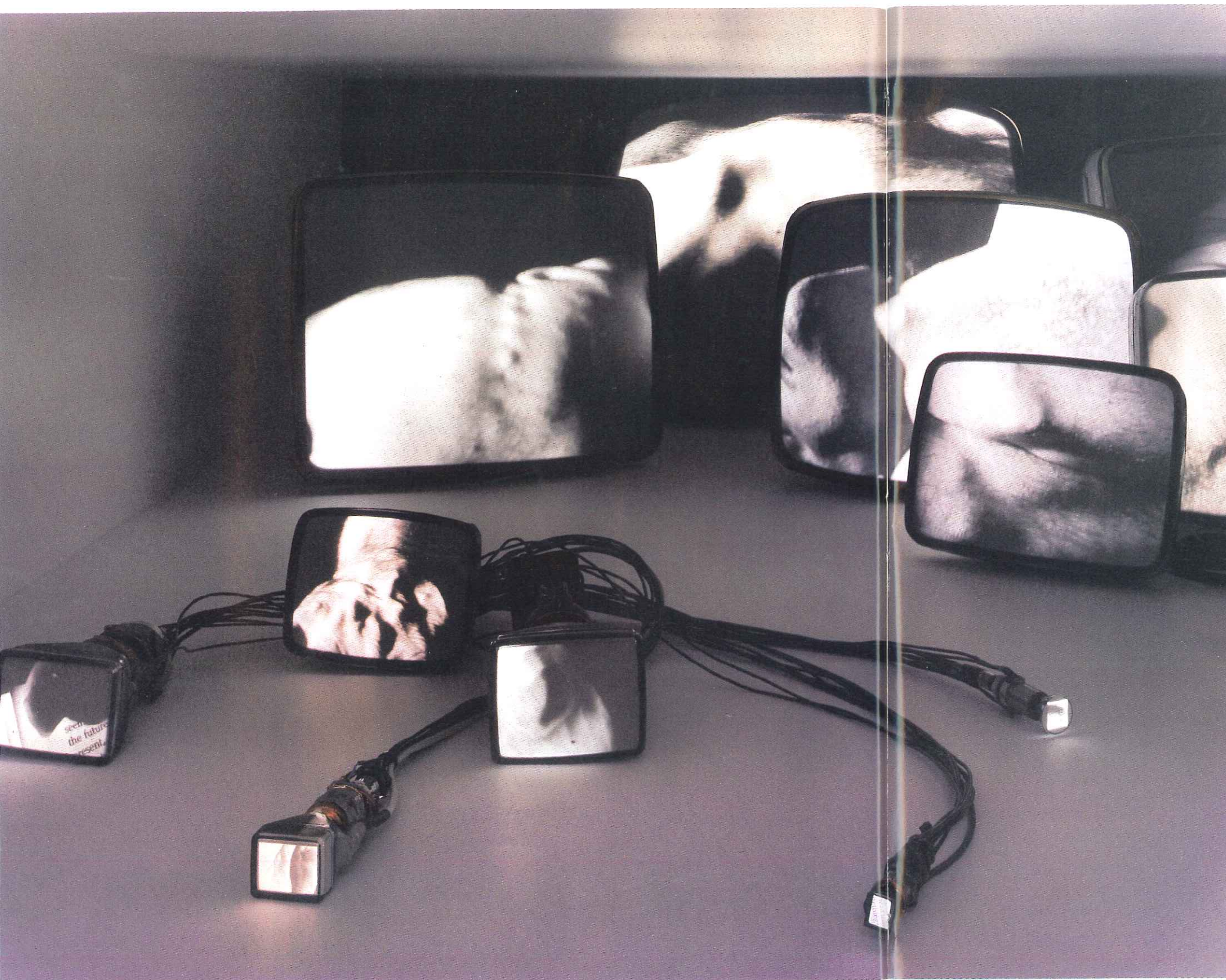
This juxtaposition of Muybridge and Viola, which takes place in the Foundation's downstairs galleries, has a dialectical tension as if, in moving from the work of one artist to another, one crosses the space from history into the present, from the implicit animation of Muybridge's freeze-frames to the alive stillness of Viola's flickering video projections. This sense of a jumpcut between past and present is further augmented by the works selected for the upstairs galleries, beginning with Giulio Paolini's *Intervallio* (wrestlers) (1985), a white, mock-classical plaster sculpture of two wrestlers cut in half, with the front and back parts of the figures pressed into the opposite walls. Their grappling across space becomes not just a grappling for their own reintegration but also, in the context of the exhibition, a grappling across time.



Eadweard Muybridge
Animal Locomotion, Plate 73 1872–1887
Vintage collotype
19 x 24 in.



Eadweard Muybridge
Animal Locomotion, Plate 185 1872–1887
Vintage collotype
19 x 24 in.



Gary Hill
Inasmuch As It Is Always Already Taking Place 1990
 Video installation (detail)

James Coleman's slide installation, *Living and Presumed Dead* (1983-85), in an adjacent gallery, picks up these ideas of multiple selves, and of speaking across history. Here a parade of theatrical stage characters, dressed for the most part in turn-of-the-century clothing, is projected onto the wall of a darkened room fitted with sound-track speakers. In a series of dissolves, the characters shift position, with a small death figure shuffling between them like a marker of fate. A gruff Irish voice tells a complicated murder story revolving around a plot of mistaken identity, but begins with an address that seems directed at both the viewer and at this small death figure, asking "...Eh. Who are you? And where did you come from?" It is a fundamental query, crossing both public and private realms with a directness that is common to all the art in the exhibition. This directness probably never gets plainer than in Coleman's other installation, *Box (Ahhareturn-about)* (1977), that shows short punctuated film glimpses of the Gene Tunney vs. Jack Dempsey rematch of 1927. These fade in and out to black, accompanied by the sound of thudding, 100-decibel punches and the voice-over of a fictionalized Tunney soliloquy — a harrowing account of an embattled consciousness spoken from deep inside.

These figures all have a phantasmic lightness. Every one is fluid and ungraspable, an embodiment not so much of flesh but of the light that passes through a negative, or the flicker of 525 lines on a video screen, or the faint evaporation of a slide dissolve. This is true also of Gary Hill's *Inasmuch As It Is Always Already Taking Place* (1990), where an array of various-sized TV monitors (from the large to the miniscule) show a fragmented living body dispersed into a series of partial body forms, faintly stirring, that read across the surface of the screens. The same is true of Hill's large installation *Tall Ships* (1992), which is in many respects the apotheosis of this uncanny evanescence. A poem to the "lightness" of the human body, the illusory quality of video-projected figures recorded on laserdisk is here transformed into a work that reaches for the other side of mortality. As you enter a darkened corridor, concealed monitors detect your presence and position, signalling the phantom-images nearest you to approach. Curious, beseeching, yearning, inquiring, they loom out of the darkness like ghosts of longing. They prompt a sublime wish that they were capable of contact and speech, filling the room with a sad regret that seems beyond the scope of most contemporary art work. Luckily for us they have Hendeles, who gives them back a voice not many others could. ■