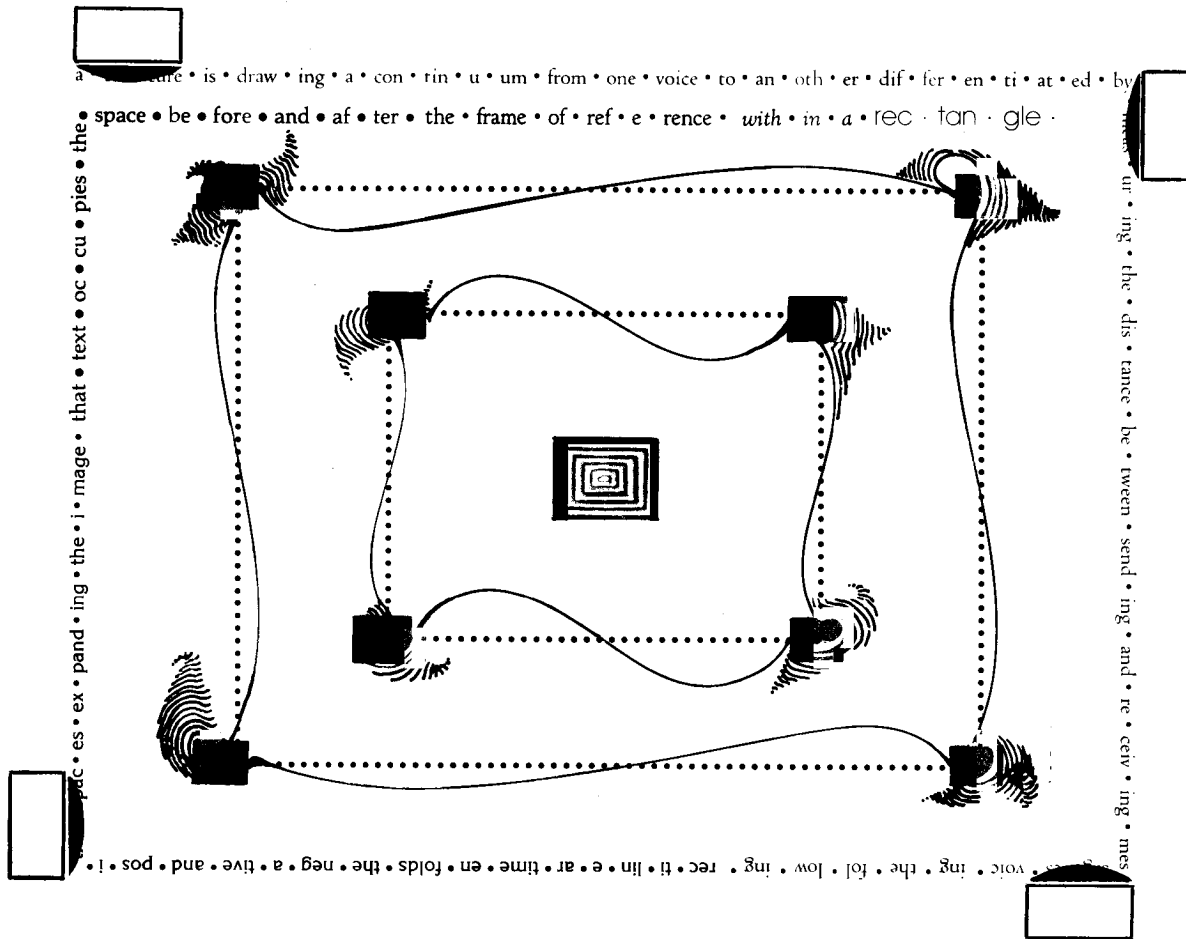# GLASS ONION

GARY HILL

Installation for Video, Sound, & Text: A Topological Mapping

With Notes on the Feedback Horizon by George Quasha

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GLASS ONION Installation for Video, Sound, & Text: A Topological Mapping • January 8-24, 1981 • *and/or* • 1525 10th Ave., Seattle, WA 98122

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■ *While reading this talking about Gary Hill's* **GLASS ONION** *please notice that you are inside the rectangle of the printed* text. ▢ You can only *imagine* the sound of my voice, implied by the title *Talking* whether, for instance, its dominant timbre resembles the sound of a garbage truck, an alarm clock, a dog barking, a child crying, a lover complaining, or the artist himself in a late night conversation about the intentions of his work (recorded now on tape and playing back in the living room) — or all of these sounds at once (as sometimes happens in life). ▢ What can be said about a topologically self-interfering media installation; or the perception of a field of non-repeating relationships among sounds, images, words, and anyone(s) present; or the "reflexive apperception" of *retangularity* that seems likely to occur in the mind of any alert participant . . . ▢ In what sense can language embody the retangular? ▢ This question comes up in thinking about the verbal text ("representing" video feedback), printed at our left as the outer boundary of the diagram, which, in the installation, crawls horizontally across the bottom of each of the **4** monitors (defining the corners of the largest rectangle) — *the periphery.* ▢ In what sense is language the *periphery* of the event it describes? ▢ You have to be there. ▢ Imagine that you are standing outside the space of the work, faced with the choice of whether to enter (we can take nothing for granted). ▢ Does it matter how you think of the outer skin of the Onion *(it is golden and not edible)*? ▢ If it is a *threshold,* perhaps the "inside" is tabernacle, shrine, ark, bridal chamber . . . ▢ If it is a *horizon,* perhaps a sky into which the sun will soon rise, or else a black hole . . . ▢ If a *fence,* perhaps another person's backyard, pasture, prison, or stockpile of stolen goods . . . ▢ If a *limit,* perhaps the work of art is the space in which we cannot be more wrong (or lose more) than we already have . . . safe at last. ▢ Suppose you were discouraged by this speech from attending the installation, would this be an instance of language as barrier, veil, box? ▢ Would it be more encouraging to have a clear description so that you knew what to think before going in (in which case would language be less of a wall?)? ▢ Let's try. ⊞ *(To protect the unwilling reader we are screening the following technical description; in order to hide behind this screen, avoid the video gray and return to the photo black.)* ■ Physically the installation consists of 4 rectangles: on the "outside," the 4 monitors; next, 4 speakers; next, 4 more speakers; next, in the center, a single monitor. ▢ The central monitor and 8 speakers are on the floor, facing up. ▢ Facing down from the ceiling, a camera with automated zoom ranges from all the way "in" (filling any screen with the image of the central monitor-screen) and all the way "out" (filling any screen with the image of the whole installaton from the "outer" rectangle to the "center.") ▢ The central monitor (upon whose rectangular face you gaze by facing down and whose perfect image you interrupt in the eye of the overhead camera as it communicates with the peripheral monitors) shows successive embeddings and transformations of electronically generated rectangles (a 3 min. loop). ▢ These expanding and shrinking recorded rectangles (like the real time image from the overhead camera, on any one of the 4 monitors) expand and shrink in general sync with the sound tracks. ▢ These tracks are measured according to the slow and deliberate "vocoded" enunciation of the 3 syllables of *rec•tan•gle.* ▢ Is it helpful to know these things in advance and in this way (and, if so, helpful for what)? ▢ The electronically modified voice (via the Vocoder) of the artist (it's not quite human) sets the measure for pulsating changes with the rhythmic pacing of *rec•tan•gle,* and, in each of 5 other tracks, embeds progressively larger phrase units from the verbal text, proceeding backwards from the end-word "rectangle" (in multiples of 3 syllables). ▢ The 6 tracks sound through 2 channels, one on each of the 2 "rectangles" of upward facing speakers, and move, like the monitor images, in a circle around the center, according to the rhythm of the 3 syllables. ▢ Thus Track 1 (on Channel 1) says *rec•tan•gle;* next, Track 2 (on Channel 2) says the next 6 syllables (double of Track 1) from the end *with•in•a•rec•tan•gle* (now Track 1 repeats the 3 syllables of "rectangle" twice to fill the larger measure, but at the same rate of enunciation, so that the last word,

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rectangle, becomes synchronous on 2 tracks); next, Track 3 (back to Channel 1) says the next phrase (doubling the 6 of Track 2) *the•frame•of•ref•e•rence•with•in•a•rec•tan•gle* (now Track 1 repeats the 3 syllables 4 times and Track 2 repeats its phrase twice); and so on until the whole text is distributed into 6 tracks, each one of which both doubles the number of syllables of the previous phrase and repeats itself as the next phrase comes up, filling out the measure. □ The "exact rhyme" of multiple repetitions of the end phrase increases in length and number of *voices*. ■ Is this clear? □ The more I tell you the more confusing it may get. □ The more I try to say the longer my sentences become, as language tries as usual to blurt out the whole truth, only to discover that it has obscured what really matters □ What really matters? □ You have to be there. □ If you have been reading the text on the diagram and glancing at the graphic relationships you have been breaking the rectangle of this text in something like the way that any perception inside the installation is immediately broken by shift in location of the "*text.*" □ What is a text? □ Latin *textus*, meaning Scritural text, says "woven thing." □ Perhaps the whole installation is a single weave, constantly changing (Penelope making and unmaking her design, awaiting her beloved who never arrives). □ Not a "single" but a "poly" sentence: in electronic time-space the syntactic is replaced by the synaptic — leaps, disappearances, and then residua in the mind. □ Not one text, one God, but many texts, many Gods, half-seen, half-felt, impossible to grasp except as the apperception of articulated time-space. □ Rectangles, and there are no rectangles. □ You have to be there. □ You stay inside as long as you do (this is personal), and you are part of the design (you see yourself disrupting the rectangle in which you see yourself seeing yourself). □ Perhaps you are aware that the verbal text (a texture is drawing a continuum from one voice to another differentiated by . . .) is a fairly "literal" description of video feedback. □ But all concepts fade in electronic time-space. □Rectangles disintegrate as consciousness shifts. □ Minute time-delays of the video camera looking at itself on the monitor create feedback. □ As the overhead camera zooms in to the point where its frame approaches synchrony with the frame of the monitor, it arrives at the Feedback Horizon. □ The rectangle is blown away, the image breaks up, is no longer rectangular, the middle comes out (*we have been waiting all our lives for this*), flipflop pulsations, the periphery caves in, englobes, enfolds on itself, gets globular, goes blank . . . residual texture. □ It's as though, staring itself in the eye until all surfaces catastrophize, the image can no longer hold the information of its pure reflection. □ In what sense can the mind monitor its own activity? □ Does it know itself only in bouncing back from an other? □ Can it think itself directly, and what happens when it tries? ▣ *reflection upon reflection* ▣ At the Feedback Horizon it gives in, it gives it up, the mind! □ The camera is like any person who stands long enough before the mirror, eye to eye. □ This electronic phenomenon is not new but is of the nature of video itself. □ Does it mind? □ Reflect upon it. □ I myself am talking to myself but what is that person in the mirror trying to get across? □□ Everything interferes with everything. ■□ Each layer of the onion is reflexively new.□■ John Lennon died while this piece was in the final stages of realization. □□ The phrase "Glass Onion" occurs in one of his songs. □ Now even my own TV set is sometimes a Glass Onion. □ I am writing this speech previous to the installation which you may or may not attend; who am I to talk? □ All the available information cannot be perceived at any one moment, all the thoughts cannot be thought at once, nor all the feelings felt. □ Our representations are generative and incomplete. □ Certain words jog up across the screen, leaving vestiges. □ Brackets and vice versa. □ "It's a mazeless maze." [Patricia Nedds] □ "Amazing maze" without walls. [Susan Quasha] □ A "Klein maze," all enclosing paths continuous with all others, impossible to visualize (the diagram is only a prejudice, mind imprisoned in concept and soon set free). □ If the total configuration of all relationships of sounds, images, and perspectives suddenly repeated, you would never know it. □ If you are inside the piece, wherever you are standing and "apperceiving" is now the outside of the Onion, now a fold within it, now the center, alternately and at once. □ If you are reading this piece you are not there. □ You are here. □ Or there may not be any *where* to be. □ "Language cannot *be* that rectangle." [Gary] □ "There is no rectangle." [George] □ "Right." [Gary] □ Maybe. ■

frame

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