

The New York Times

Art in Review

Karl Haendel: 'Questions for My Father'

By Roberta Smith

October 28, 2011

Karl Haendel

'Questions for My Father'

Harris-Lieberman

508 West 26th Street, Chelsea
Through Saturday

One of the genuine sleepers among Chelsea's sleepy fall shows is Karl Haendel's third gallery solo in New York. It consists of an 11 minute 17 second film, made with the filmmaker Petter Ringbom, of nothing but close-ups of 16 men in their 30s and early 40s, including the artist and filmmaker. Each man makes repeat appearances, looking directly into the camera and asking a short, pithy question that, it doesn't take long to realize, is intended for the speaker's absent male parent. The questions imply a full spectrum of emotions, from tenderness to curiosity to anger, and speak volumes about one of the most primal of relationships.

"Questions for My Father" evolved from a series of large graphite word-drawings of the same title that Mr. Haendel, working in an anonymous commercial-art style, directed at his own father. Here he extends the formula to friends with questions of their own, creating a kind of abstract documentary that expands in the viewer's mind. The work continues the resonating image-caption hybrid introduced by Conceptual Art.

Sometimes the words have a punch-line humor: "Did you cheat on your wives?" But the longer you watch, the more they hang painfully in the air, stirring up our own unasked questions. "Was I a mistake?" asks one man in a blue T-shirt and sports jacket, whose cumulative questions delineate an especially tortured bond. "Do you want to meet your granddaughter?" "Did you always know you were gay?" "When were you proud of me?" "Do you know how to fold a shirt?" "Did you have any black friends as a kid?"

The high-definition images are both glamorous and intimate. The men wear no makeup. They are not acting, but they are not completely natural, either. Each question is a kind of two-way mirror exposing interrogator and subject while we watch.

ROBERTA SMITH