

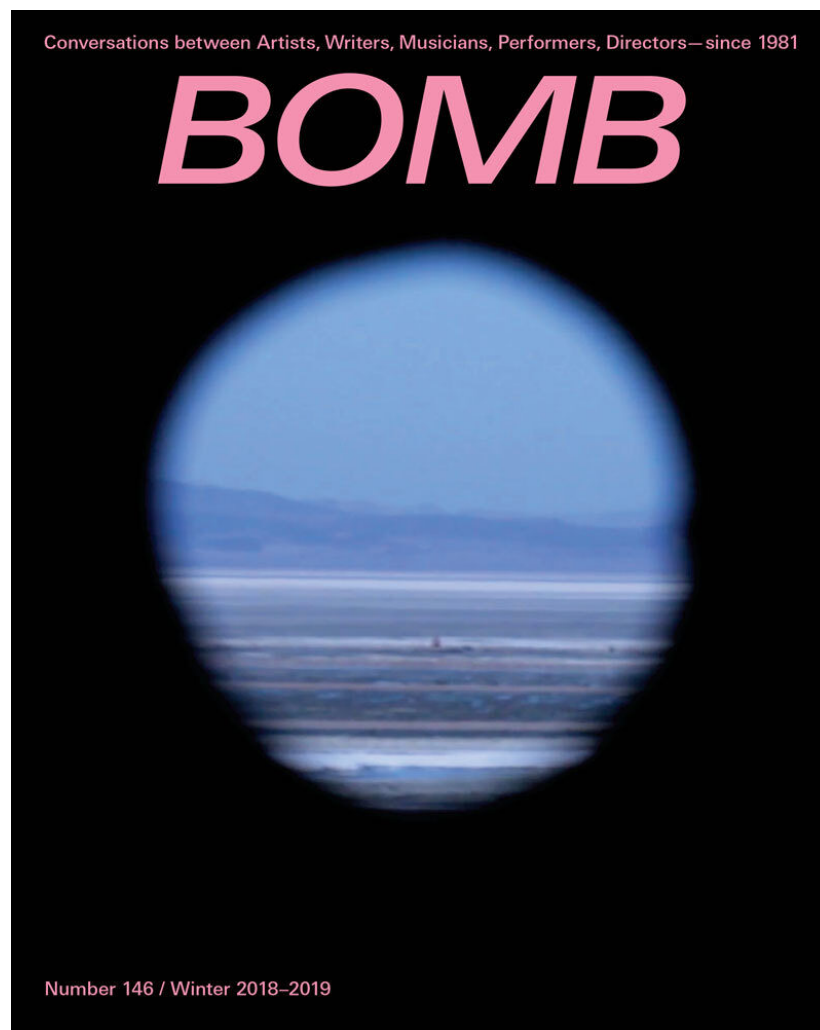
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# ***BOMB***

## **Mary Lucier by Alex Klein**

*Notions of ecological precarity and technological mediation enfold in the degraded landscape; the video artist surveys her decades of prescient and pressing work.*

March 7, 2019



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Still from *Wilderness*, 1986. Image courtesy of the artist.

Regarded as a pioneer of video sculpture and installation, Mary Lucier's work is often concerned with the irreconcilable relationship between humans, their technology, and the natural. In her 1975 video *Dawn Burn*, the artist aims her video camera at the sky at sunrise over the course of several days. Rather than produce a clichéd scene, Lucier documents the sun's effects on the delicate tube of the video camera and the subsequent wound it produces on the screen. Lucier's related artwork, *Equinox* (1979/2016), was recently on view in New York as part of *Before Projection: Video Sculpture 1974–1995* (organized by the MIT List Center). The exhibition provided us with an occasion to sit down together and reflect on her career, from the storied performances of

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the Sonic Arts Union to her continued experimentations with the video medium. We ruminated on her interest in the material conditions of technological reproduction and how her sustained investigation of the landscape—as it relates to trauma, culture, memory, and autobiography—offers a prescient communiqué for our current moment of epochal ecological crisis.

—Alex Klein

**Alex Klein** Can you talk about your early collaborations, notably with the Sonic Arts Union, and how this may have informed your approach to video?

**Mary Lucier** Before the Sonic Arts Union, I studied literature and sculpture at Brandeis University, which is also where I met Alvin Lucier, who taught in the music department and directed the chorus during the early '60s. Coincidentally, I had a roommate who was a soprano, a very good one, and she was more or less the star of Alvin's chorus. So that was our introduction. He also formed a chamber chorus out of the larger group to present works by Christian Wolff, John Cage, Earle Brown, Pauline Oliveros, Robert Ashley, Morton Feldman, and others, and in 1967 recorded an album on Odyssey records, called *Extended Voices*, which included some of those compositions as well as his own work. While I was not a member of the chorus—I did not read music—I became a loyal follower. Alvin and I were married in 1964 while I was still an undergraduate at Brandeis.

The Sonic Arts Union formed around 1966 and toured in the US and Europe. In the first tours, four women partners accompanied the men: Shigeko Kubota, Mary Ashley, Barbara Dilley [Lloyd], and me. Later Katherine Morton joined the group when David Behrman and Shigeko divorced, and Mary Ashley left the group when she and Bob Ashley were estranged. We women helped to perform their works and occasionally performed collaborative works or pieces of our own. Alvin and I had two collaborations. The best known of those is *I am sitting in a room* (1969), for which I created a series of Polaroid images that had been transformed and degraded in a process similar to his recorded voice. Transferred to slides, these images were timed to his audio tape and projected along with the sound in a twenty-three-minute presentation. It had its world premiere in its full

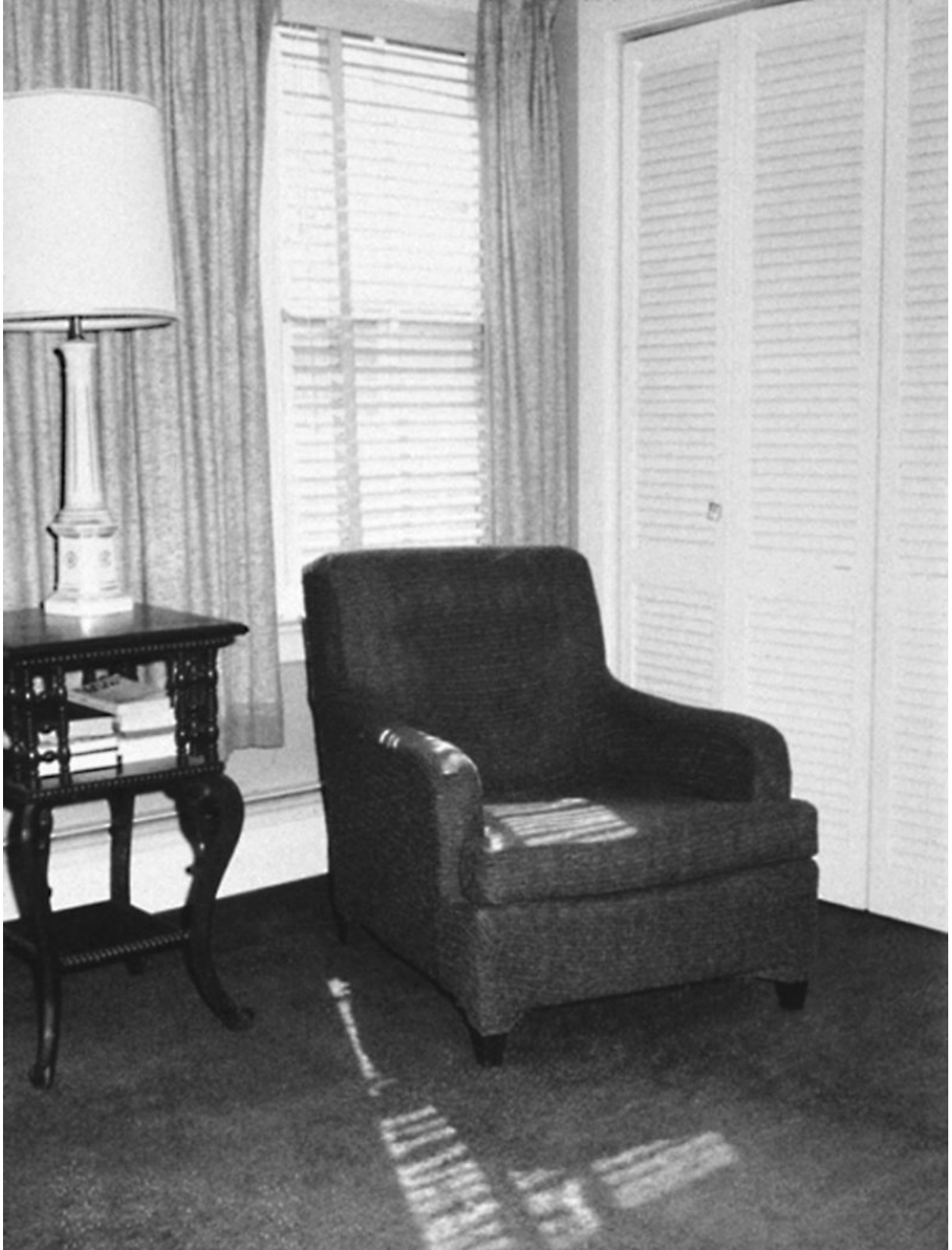
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audio-visual form in a Sonic Arts concert at the Guggenheim Museum in 1970. And I just performed, now almost fifty years later, the original slides and audio again, live at Fridman Gallery's New Ear Festival for an entirely new, younger audience. They loved it.

I think that what influenced me most was the process of degrading the image. In those days most Polaroid pictures were still black-and-white, as was video. When I was first experimenting with degraded film images, they reminded me of those earlier Polaroids. You can see this look in subsequent video work of mine, such as *Dawn Burn* (1975), as well.



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*Polaroid Image Series (Room) #1 and #12, 1969. Images courtesy of the artist.*

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Polaroid sequences one and twelve from *I am sitting in a room*, 1969. Images courtesy of the artist.

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**AK**It's interesting how that early work with Alvin also connects to the later videos in which you disrupt this experience of seriality. Even though it is one of your earliest videos, *Dawn Burn* synthesizes many of the concerns that I associate with your later work, such as the imbrication of technology and ecology. I'd like to return to this subject, but first I want to continue the thread of how you moved from the space of the stage to staging the screen in space. Often when one thinks of video works of that era, they think of a single-channel display. While you have a robust collection of single-channel works, you have also notably worked with moving image in a sculptural manner, in which multiple displays are physically arranged in an environment.

**ML**The thing that really fascinated me about video was the illuminated box. It was so architectural. You could move it around. You could arrange ten of them to create different shapes; you could create a room; it was a building block. I did worry that showing the full monitor might suggest that the work was somehow related to television, which it wasn't, and so early on I'd make wall cutouts and simply show the screen. However, in the current incarnation of *Equinox* you do see the full boxes, and I think those old Sony cube monitors are rather beautiful. They were not designed to be TVs but rather for point-of-purchase displays in department stores, so they were more anonymous-looking.

I also remember seeing viewers staring at just one screen in a multiple-monitor piece. I like it when people move around, and I wanted to create a setting in which they could do so. When I see installation work, I move all over, looking at everything, even walking right up to the screen to see the resolution and how many dots there are. I'm kind of dismayed when people sit transfixed as they would in a movie theater. This is perhaps why narrative film never interested me much as a medium I could use. But my impulse to build things was there early. At one point in my early childhood, I would make assemblages. I would pile things up against the staircase in our house and give them names.

The idea of turning performance space into installation space was gaining traction in the '70s through artists like Vito Acconci, Dennis Oppenheim, and Joan Jonas. In my work I wanted to merge the temporal and spatial into a shaped,

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single, three-dimensional experience that you could move around in. I was thinking of time being vertical, unravelling in a vertical strip like film, and space being horizontal.

As for the connection between my early and late work, the central experience in *Dawn Burn*—the burning of the camera tube while watching the sun rise—is essentially doing something destructive at the same time as having the amazing experience of the sun rising in front of you. It's that contradiction which came through to me while I was digitizing the old *Equinox* tapes in 2016. My mind focused more on the color, which is gorgeous, rather than the burning. It seemed to be about a kind of beauty and splendor that arrived as a side product of a destructive act. This revelation some thirty-seven years later kind of shocked me.



*Equinox (1979–2016)*, 2018, The Sculpture Center, New York, multi-monitor installation. Image courtesy of the artist.



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**AK**This connects to your earlier remarks about the degradation of the image. It reminds me of Goethe's experiments where he would stare into the sun and begin to see different spots and hallucinate strange colors. Staring at the sun is bound up with the limits of vision and perception as well as histories of the sublime—those moments that are ecstatically beautiful and simultaneously terrifying. How did you initially come to make this work?

**ML**It came from experience. First, I borrowed a camera. Everybody said, "Never point it at a bright light and never aim it at the sun." I inadvertently did just that when I was videotaping the Viola Farber Dance Company outdoors in New York one afternoon. There was a dark mark on the image, and I kept looking for a hair on the lens until finally I realized, "Oh no, I must've burned it." I went home and set the camera on a tripod, aimed at a white card lit with bright lights, and tried to reduce the burn, which you could do to some degree. But then I thought, "Hey this burning is an interesting idea. I'll pursue this." The tubes that I intentionally burned were scarred forever. This started my interest in the landscape as it is seen through technology, and our common experience of it—both mediated and unmediated. I devised three versions of *Dawn Burn*. One was the original black-and-white version that I did in 1974 and 1975. Then I was invited to the Paris Biennale in 1977 where I made a version called *Paris Dawn Burn*, which was also shown at the Kitchen in New York in 1978. Fortunately, it got very good attention in *Artforum*. And then this last version I made in 1979 was *Equinox*, the one you just saw, which is the only one in color. At the time it was designed for the CUNY Graduate Center mall as a video form of public sculpture.

I once fantasized that video had been invented to allow one to look at the sun, undamaged. You could actually look at it through the viewfinder because the viewfinder itself is video, not like a single-lens reflex camera system where you see your subject directly through the glass of the lens.

**AK**I have this vision of you in the midst of this exciting milieu in New York, and yet many of your videos are located in the pastoral. One of the things that is striking about your works, such as *Ohio to Giverny* (1983) and *Wilderness* (1986), is the way in which you reflect on the tension between the subjective experience

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of the individual and the institutional domestication of the natural (at the hands of colonization, industry, or art). You point to the ways in which our personal experiences of the environment are often shaped by culture. I'm curious to know how you first engaged with nature in your work, or perhaps it is more accurate to say the *image* of nature?

**ML** Growing up in a small town in Ohio, we didn't have television. I didn't even look at a television until Elvis Presley came along and someone invited me over to watch the Ed Sullivan show, since I was such a big fan. That would have been 1956. I had a life mostly outdoors. I particularly loved being out on summer nights. On Sundays my father used to take us on rides out of town, to a place that we came to call Mary's Woods. I would usually be the one to ask to go there. While we'd walk around in the woods, my father would break off some twigs and leaves and show us how to make a whistle, little things like that. Mary's Woods and my work. I've usually tried not to put those things together, but people always ask.

I was married in 1964. In '72 we took a car trip across the country in our Volkswagen bus, and I was photographing the landscape the whole way. I still treasure all of the photographs from that time: rather austere black-and-white images which I printed in my own darkroom. I was shooting the amazing salt flats around the Great Salt Lake, for instance. And by that time, I knew Robert Smithson's work. He died, of course, not too long after. Unfortunately, I never knew any of the artists who pioneered earth works personally—Smithson, Michael Heizer, and others. It was a different scene, different ages, different era. And except for Nancy Holt, it wasn't a woman's scene.

People who got into video did one of three things in the very beginning. They pointed the camera at themselves, or at a dancer, or out the window at a natural phenomenon. One of the most influential early pieces for me was Davidson Gigliotti's *Hunter Mountain* (1973)—a three-channel video work depicting three black-and-white views of the mountain, and the images would change simultaneously to three different adjacent views. It's one of those pieces where virtually nothing happens yet everything is implied. The changes are momentous.



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And then there was the whole other side of video art that was concerned with television. Possibly because I grew up without television in my home, that whole area of influence and critique eluded me. Pointing the camera at the landscape seemed such a natural thing to do. The problem was developing a compelling narrative about it—a problem I still wrestle with.

*Ohio to Giverny: Memory of Light*, 1983. Video courtesy of the artist.



Landscapes captured during Lucier's 1972 cross-country road trip. Images courtesy of the artist.

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Landscapes captured during Lucier's 1972 cross-country road trip. Images courtesy of the artist.

**AK** Returning to Smithson and considering his problematic of the site versus the non-site—which I interpret as a question of mediation—do you envision a relationship between the experience of an installation and one’s navigation of the actual landscape you are depicting? I’m also interested if Smithson or other land artists informed the way you thought about video installation and your use of the camera.

**ML** In 1971, before I got into video installation, my husband and I lived in Middletown, Connecticut. I made an outdoor piece there in a large field across the Connecticut River and titled it *SALT* (1971). Years ago in Connecticut, there were vast tobacco fields along the highways. I remember driving down from Boston and hitting a certain stretch near Hartford where you could look out over these fields and see acres of tobacco cloth, which is a very loose-weave cloth that allows a lot of light in. I was fascinated by that material. It looked a bit like snow at a distance; it looked kind of like the Great Salt Lake and the salt flats; it looked

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like a lot of natural phenomena, but it's actually just covering the tobacco which is growing underneath. So I combined a number of elements in a field in Portland, Connecticut, in a certain pattern and made a large installation for viewers to walk through. The sounds of Western bird calls were played through speakers around the field. It used miles of snow fencing to create a wandering back-and-forth path, large piles of white rocks as cairns to mark the route, and a sea of tobacco cloth at the end of the "journey." This was probably my first "dual" landscape, imposing an idea of the West on a Northeastern site.

There's the idea of displacement here, which is related to Smithson's concept of site and non-site. Actually, that's what made it art until it got to be that the actual site could be art, as in *Spiral Jetty* (1970) or *Roden Crater* (1977). In all that was going on in the '60s and '70s, I think that the worlds of music and dance were more in touch with that kind of work than painting, which at the time did not appeal to me because it was such a flat medium. Later I did become interested in Monet's use of impressionism to articulate light in landscape. And then even later I was drawn to Abstract Expressionism because it seemed to be more about movement. [Robert] Rauschenberg was also a major influence in all of this.

**AK** There is a documentary element to some of your works insofar as the footage is a way of recording both people and places. In particular, I am thinking of your ambitious video installation *Noah's Raven* (1992–93) and the way it weaves together footage of resource extraction in the Amazon and a woman's body undergoing invasive surgery. There is a connection made between the trauma induced by the incisions on the trunk of a tree and the torso that is having a cancerous mass removed. There is a parallel in these infractions and the resulting scars that also suggest a process of healing and perhaps hope. I'm interested to hear more about how you came to make this work and, more broadly, the intersection of bodies and landscapes?

**ML** Up until the 1980s I was preoccupied with breaking things down to their essential elements, revealing the tendencies and flaws in the technology. Eventually I began to be more interested in putting things back together— assembling imagery and experience into a single whole rather than reducing it to

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its component parts. That's really when I began the series of large landscape works that were based on journeys: to Giverny in France, to the ice fields off Newfoundland, to Alaska, to the Amazon.

Of course, I'm not really a documentarian. I'm not promoting a cause or trying to teach, so it's easy to miss some of the content in my work. People look at landscape and think it's beautiful, but there's often bitter substance underlying it. Here people are happy, but they are also dying of malaria. Those things often get lost. At the time, making *Noah's Raven* was my biggest awakening to ecological problems in the late '80s and early '90s.

*Noah's Raven* was also about my mother's body, which had been scarred by cancer surgery, and my friend Nancy Fried, who had her breast removed. I'm thinking of the image of the woman laid out on the table, about to have breast reconstruction, with the surgeon's marks of where to cut drawn all over her and the image of the icebergs with all their cracks and lines. Naively, you might think one is natural and "good," and the other is not natural. Is it healing or simply invasive? If you fast-forward to the present moment in 2019 with current knowledge of climate change, the cracks in the icebergs begin to convey a huge sense of doom all their own.

Prior to *Noah's Raven*, I had gotten interested in Monet after seeing the show *Monet's Years at Giverny* at the Met. Seeing the later paintings, I thought, Wow, this work is interesting. There's not a lot of paint on some of the canvases, because this guy is losing his eyesight and seems to be in a great hurry. There again is the dissolution of the image. He claimed to stand outdoors facing the sun to paint, which I thought was interesting because I was still burning video tubes at that time, which required me to stand outdoors facing the sun. Except I'm damaging the camera tube, not my own eye.

Somewhat later there was a show at the New York Historical Society—I think it was Frederic Edwin Church—that interested me. Subsequently, I became interested in American nineteenth-century painting *as* subject matter, and I had the idea to go back to their sites and see if I could recapture the original motif.

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That piece led into *Noah's Raven*. I went to the Amazon for a month with one assistant and for another month to Alaska where we drove as far north as we could on the route to Prudhoe Bay in a big old Chevrolet with jugs of drinking water and sleeping bags in the trunk. I was fascinated by the Amazon and Alaska as two entirely opposite but strangely similar landscapes. One obvious similarity is that they were forbidding to the white people who had tried to conquer them. One is a cold wilderness of blinding whiteness, the other a hot wilderness of suffocating darkness. In order to get deep into those sites you have to go by helicopter or boat, by snow machine or dog sled.

I had in mind three sites, the third being the Midwest, specifically that part along the Ohio River, up through the Rust Belt to Toledo and on through almost to Chicago. That whole stretch experienced a terrible economic collapse after the death of the steel industry. I was also reading a lot about the Alaskan pipeline and the burning of the Amazon Forest, as well as the war between farming interests and the rubber tappers there in Brazil.

*Noah's Raven*, 1993. Video courtesy of the artist.



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*Noah's Raven* (1993), installation detail, Toledo Museum of Art. Image courtesy of the artist.

**AK**So you had visions of these places, and you knew you needed to go?

**ML**Apocalyptic places. I read John McPhee and others on Alaska and numerous books about the Amazon and Chico Mendes, the rubber tapper who was assassinated in his hometown of Rio Bronco where I visited. This was the first time that I recall consciousness about the burning of the forest becoming widespread.

**AK**Right, the rainforest was a big issue in the '90s. I remember everyone being especially conscious of it then, whereas now it feels like we are so overwhelmed with the catastrophic totality of climate change that it's harder to focus public attention on singular issues.



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**ML** Well it's still burning. So those issues were on my mind, and I saw the Midwest as a kind of middle ground relating to where I grew up.

**AK** Did you know from the beginning that you wanted to make a connection with the human body?

**ML** Yes, like I said at the beginning, my mother really was the motivation for this; I was thinking of her terrible abdominal scars as rivers or tectonic plates. The earth is scarred in numerous ways, some of which are benign and some of which are not so benign. If you look at the glaciers and ice sheets, you see that they break apart all the time. It's a natural process which has recently become threatening due to global warming. In the Amazon, as soon as the forest is removed the earth begins to crack. There's no such thing as fertile soil once the canopy is gone. And the industrial Midwest resides somewhere in the middle: fertile land that has been abused by industry. My reference of all that to human flesh is perhaps a kind of essentialism, a type of "pathetic fallacy." In the current era of the awareness of climate change it seems to be a more convincing idea.

**AK** Have the recent debates around climate change impacted your thinking about your previous work? Has this affected the way that you think about the role of technology as it relates to ecology? I'd love to know what feels most urgent to you and what you are working on presently.

**ML** In many ways I feel that some of my recent work—*Noah's Raven* in particular—is more relevant now than ever, and yet it has never been shown in New York. I would love to see how it looks through the consciousness of 2019 and our new awareness of the fragility of the land and the people who live on it.

I'm working on a new piece—a kind of homage to my late husband—that has something to do with the environment where we lived in upstate New York—a place that was really our home together and where we both made art out of a common landscape. It will be a "memento mori" of sorts, a meditation on death and dying through images and sounds of the everyday.

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