

The Architecture of Image and Sound

Dwelling in the Work of Mary Lucier

Melinda Barlow

When asked five years ago to describe her early work in the genre of multimedia, Mary Lucier remarked, "I think multimedia was not a genre at all, but was a process of searching, and to be a multimedia artist meant that you were really looking for the medium that would best accommodate the idea."¹ Lucier's process of searching began with sculpture, moved to photography, led to an earthwork, and included performance before arriving, in 1973, at video installation, her primary medium for the next twenty years.

Some of the ideas Lucier has explored in this medium are well known: the limitations of video technology, the relationship between human beings and landscape, the way all three experience scarring, the necessity of memory, the inevitability of decay. Equally important but less well known is an idea expressed in her first installation, *Antique with Video Ants and Generations of Dinosaurs* (fig. 1). Installed in a train at Grand Central Station as part of the Tenth Annual New York Avant-Garde Festival, *Antique* featured a secretary/armoire housing a videotape of an ant farm, a cactus garden, a triptych mirror, a magnifying glass, and a series of dinosaur postcards, also on videotape. In front of the armoire beneath a low-hanging lamp lay two black-and-white photographs embedded in glass, both close-ups of landscape, stamped near the center with the word "INHABIT."

Begun in June 1972 and continuing on and off through April 1975, the *Inhabit* series expressed an idea to which Lucier has returned again and again. A small notebook dating from July 1973 served as a conceptual studio where she crafted the idea of inhabiting, on paper. A late-November entry offers this definition: "inhabit: occupy physical space and time. physical space changes with passing of time and the nature of inhabiting."² Inhabiting is the activity of living in something; it takes place over time and alters the environment in which it occurs. As a concept, inhabiting implies both location and duration; it suggests the possibility, and the process, of experience.

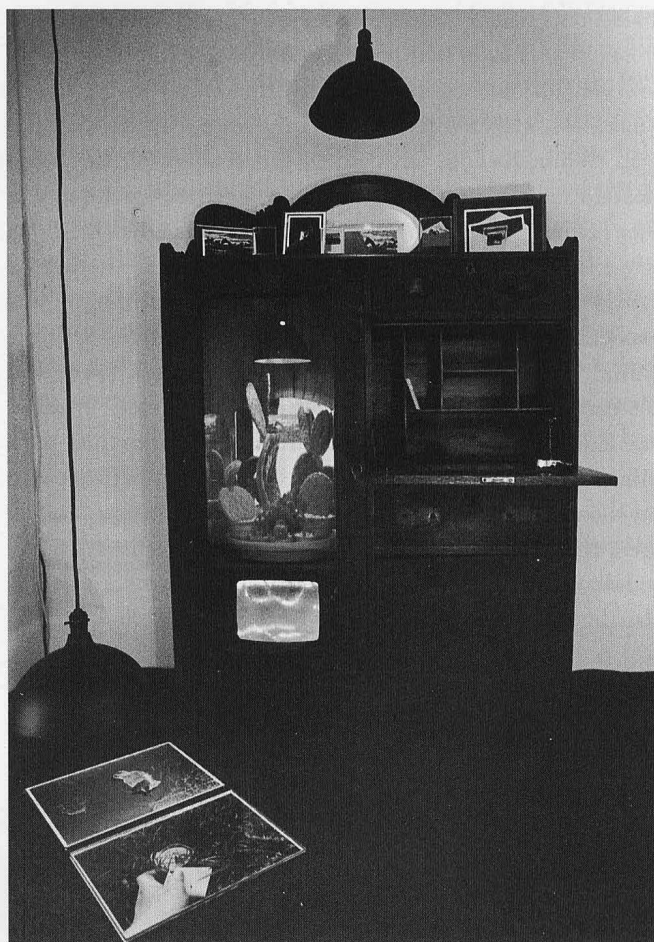


FIG. 1 Mary Lucier, *Antique with Video Ants and Generations of Dinosaurs*, 1973, installation at Women's Interart Center, New York, 1976.

"Words are clamor-filled shells," writes Gaston Bachelard, "there's many a story in the miniature of a single word."³ The single word "inhabit" rings throughout Lucier's oeuvre, opening onto a cluster of related concepts—abode, shelter, dwelling, home—each of which transforms an architectural structure into an intimate, physical environment. Lucier has been involved with intimate forms of architecture for as long as she

has made video installations, and in the range of locations where her work has been shown, the idea of habitation reverberates further: in a coffin, on the grounds of an estate, at a church, in a loft, on a ferry, on a train, at a stadium, in an auditorium, in a planetarium, in a house.⁴

It is this last location that interests me here, for not only has Lucier built a work in a house, for another she actually constructed a house, and images of houses abound in her work. It is the significance of the house, as idea and experience, as structure and metaphor, as a place where intense habitation occurs, that I would like to explore in four installations: *Antique* (1973), *Asylum* (1986/91), *Oblique House (Valdez)* (1993), and *Last Rites (Positano)* (1995). Within and across these four works, all assembled rather quickly, and each inviting intimate experience, the poetics and dialectics of the house unfold. We find, in this group, houses real and imagined, inhabited and abandoned, torn down, rebuilt, inside out; houses that provide security; houses signaling prosperity; houses that give shape to daily life. Also here, however, are houses in disrepair and torn by family feuds; bleak, lost, and haunted houses, inhabited solely by memory.

While *Antique* articulates the concept of habitation most directly, it refers to the notion of home most obliquely. It does not include an image of a house, nor was it installed in a house. Made from a found object since lost in storage, a hybrid piece of furniture at home in a parlor, *Antique* was remodeled into a "media sculpture" first exhibited inside a train.⁵ With its cabinet closed, its writing desk open, and postcards suggesting travel adorning its "mantel," *Antique* was a whimsical, appealing environment where ants were enlarged, dinosaurs miniaturized, and human beings could envision themselves as Lilliputian. Video in *Antique* was an agent of change, altering the scale of the ants in the ant farm, and decomposing the image on the dinosaur postcard. It was also, however, a technology transformed: freed from its role as commercial television and therefore no longer obliged to entertain, it housed creatures within a monitor placed in an armoire installed for a day inside a train.

In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard describes the appeal of different kinds of furniture and also considers the significance of miniature. He calls his method "topoanalysis [:] the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives." We live most intimately, he suggests, in enclosures, in "felicitous" spaces that make us feel safe. A house is perhaps the most basic enclosure; as our first universe, it is "a real cosmos in every sense of the word." We return to this world whenever we daydream, and in daydreams we invest other spaces with the virtues of home. Shells, nooks, and corners, for example, promise comfort; they are places to curl up, to relax, and to retreat. We treasure them because they seem protective; they remind us of earlier shelters we have known. The experience of intimacy triggers both fantasy and memory, and intimacy, writes Bachelard, "needs the heart of a nest."⁶

Chests, drawers, and wardrobes are sites of intimacy that satisfy our deepest need for secrecy; like houses, they please us because they protect. The miniscule, meanwhile, opens up a whole world; by engaging the imagination, it invites us to dwell. *Antique* encourages imaginative activity and returns us to earlier protective environments stored in our own private wardrobes of memory. It seems hospitable even in photographs and makes one long for a chance to respond and correspond. In situ this longing must have been stronger: perhaps it was the explicit invitation to "INHABIT," perhaps the sight of oneself in a mirror, somehow already living inside, or perhaps the area for reading and writing that felt so familiar, so much like home. Visitors to *Antique* obviously felt welcome: they wrote Lucier notes and left them inside the desk.⁷

In 1978 artist David Ireland transformed a run-down, one-story frame house into a spacious two-story structure in the mixed residential and commercial Mission District of San Francisco. With an exterior made of corrugated sheet metal and a stark interior designed to catch light, the house somewhat resembled a fortress protecting a private refuge within.⁸

When Ann Hatch bought 65 Capp Street from Ireland in 1982, the spirit of the house inspired a program that gave new meaning to artist-in-residence, because both artist and work inhabited the same space.⁹ Hatch knew the effect of placing art in this architectural context: as an artist's concerns merged with the demands of the site, an evolving meditation on the possibility of dwelling would emerge in the process of reinterpreting the house.¹⁰ When *Asylum (A Romance)* was installed at the Capp Street Project there was an interesting convergence and divergence of concerns: the peaceful hush inside the building was reinforced by the ruminative quality of the piece, yet the subject of that rumination was that secluded retreat is an impossible fiction; in the late twentieth century there is no place to hide.¹¹

Asylum (A Romance) transformed the main floor of Capp Street into a ruined conservatory enclosed in green lattice and filled with wilting plants, old chairs, and broken marble statuary resting on cedar chips, stones, sod, and dead leaves. Weathered planks traced a path past a dry stone fountain and a trelliswork arbor seat to a dimly lit tool shed built into an alcove. Next to the shed in a white-walled room sealed off by blue cage wire was a video monitor on a tall, black pedestal. When installed at the Greenberg Wilson Gallery in New York five years later, *Asylum* assumed a somewhat new form (fig. 2).¹² The garden was reduced to its essential elements, arbor seat, fountain, and much less lattice, and was placed in a tighter, triangular arrangement with the tool shed and video/machine area. The monitor was mounted on a forklift behind a pile of debris gathered nearby on the Bowery.

"The videotape which supplies the pulse of the work," writes Lucier, "is a visual and auditory rumination on energy



FIG. 2 Mary Lucier, *Asylum*, 1986/91, installation at Greenberg Wilson Gallery, New York, 1991.

and entropy.”¹³ Combinations of image and sound stressed the strange co-existence of nature and culture found in our postmodern landscape: a spectral human being rearranged the trash, his body as wrecked as the place where he labored; cows grazed next to power lines and nuclear silos; as the silos roared against a flushed twilight sky, crickets began to chirp. This last shot recalled Chernobyl. Taped immediately after the disaster in the Ukraine, this ominous image of California’s Rancho Seco transformed a historical event into a site-specific element: what happened over there might also happen here.

Antique brought furniture and landscape onto a train; in *Asylum* both garden and shed inhabited a house and were later installed inside a gallery. The shed in both versions inspired speculation: it was part of the original frame house on Capp Street, unaltered by Ireland, entirely intact; it seemed to belong in a movie set of a ghost town; it might be a bomb shelter; it was a makeshift dwelling, a clapboard shack.¹⁴ Filled with worn objects no longer in use—a toolbox, wheelbarrow, lantern, saw, wheelchair, mower, gun—the shed was alluring but also unsettling. Instead of living, laboring human beings, it was inhabited by the decayed stuff of memory.

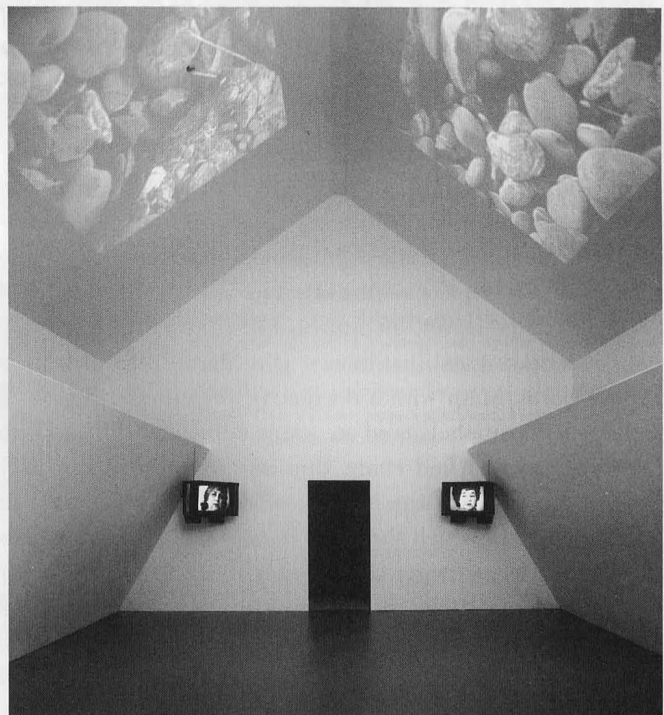
Unlike Bachelard’s solitary hut, that reliable “taproot of the function of inhabiting”¹⁵ offering protection, comfort, and refuge, the shed was part of a complex installation in which urban detritus, a dying garden, and images of nuclear power lived side by side. A rusty structure in a temporary sculpture installed for awhile and then disassembled, the shed suggested not absolute shelter, but the ultimate impermanence of every abode. Houses, like human beings, erode over time. They weather, wither, and slowly grow old.

In *Oblique House (Valdez)* the house becomes even more anthropomorphic. For Lucier, like Bachelard, it is synonymous with soul: “our soul is an abode,” writes Bachelard, and houses suggest “the topography of our intimate being.”¹⁶ The house constructed for this installation was a twenty-

three-foot-high, unfinished plasterboard structure built inside an empty car dealership in Rochester, New York, as part of Montage '93: International Festival of the Image. Inspired by Midwestern slat-wood farm buildings and by simple frame houses found in Alaska, it was an example of a style of American architecture painted many times by Edward Hopper.¹⁷ And like Hopper’s houses, also often anthropomorphic, *Oblique House* served many functions and had many moods:¹⁸ on the one hand a stay against the ferocity of nature, it was also a reminder of the fragility of buildings during natural as well as man-made disasters; a cathedral-like place inspiring rumination, it was also a symbol of all domestic loss.

Oblique House, writes Lucier, is about “the architecture of image and sound”: “outside, the house is blind; inside, television monitors provide windows which look not out to landscape, but further inward to the human soul” (fig. 3).¹⁹ Recessed in each corner of the house, these monitors featured interviews with four longtime residents of Valdez who lived through the earthquake that devoured the town in 1964 as well as the oil spill that blackened its shores in 1989. Shown in tight facial close-ups vastly slowed down, their voices processed to enhance resonance and pitch, these survivors remained silent until visitors approached the motion sensors controlling their speech. Once activated, they shared their personal tales of well-known disasters in an environment reproducing the sudden upheaval characteristic of earthquakes. With the landscape brought indoors and projected overhead and the angled interior walls also closing in, visitors could feel the vertigo described by several speakers, and imagine what it might be like to have a house collapse.

FIG. 3 Mary Lucier, *Oblique House (Valdez)*, 1993, installation in Montage '93: International Festival of the Image, Rochester, N.Y.



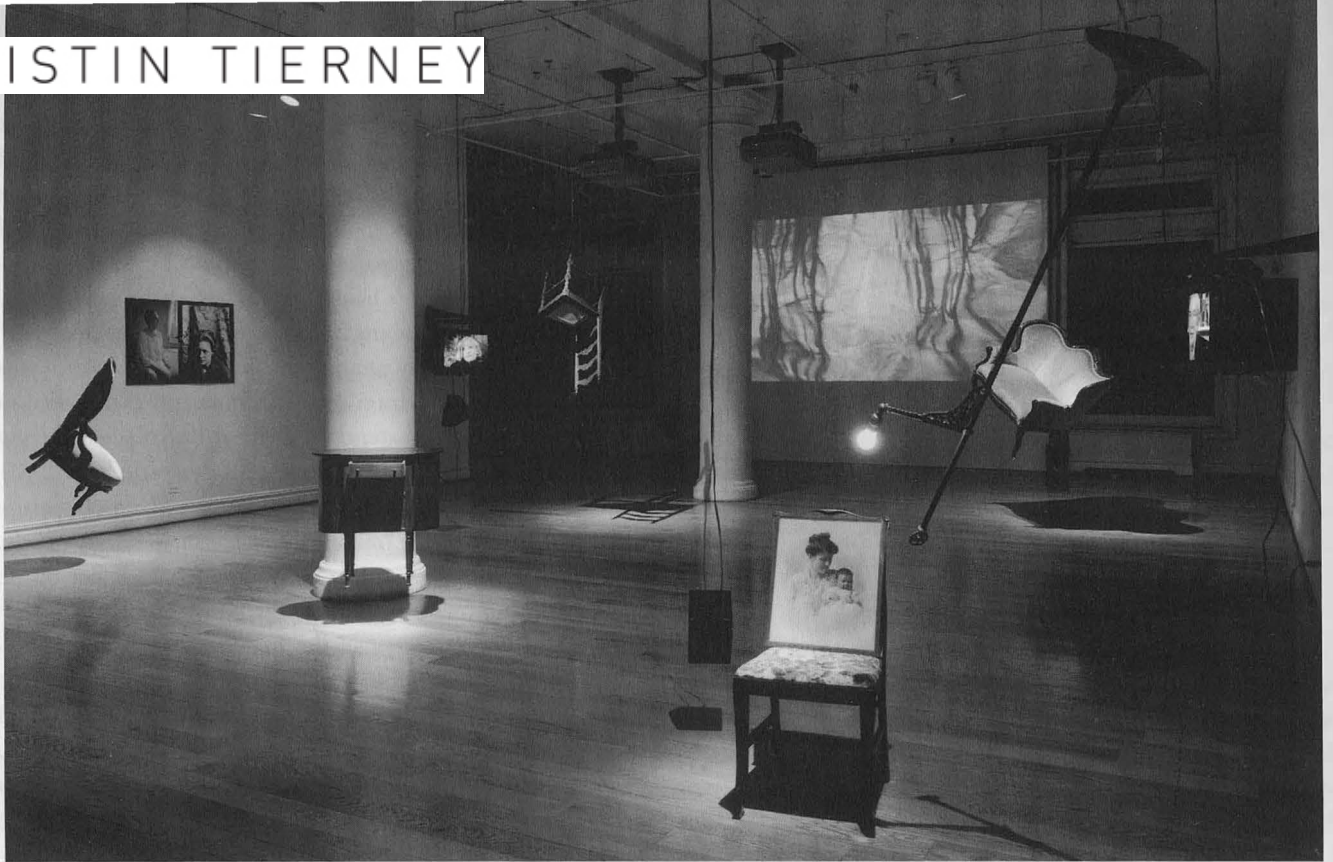


FIG. 4 Mary Lucier, *Last Rites (Positano)*, 1995, installation at Lennon, Weinberg, New York, 1995.

The loss of a house often shatters home and family. The speakers in *Oblique House* mourn slightly different aspects of this destruction: one woman remembers the house where she raised her children, saddened on their behalf that they can't go home again; another woman relives her grief at her son's disappearance, returning to the days after the quake when she thought that he was dead; this same woman, later, speaking as a daughter, relays the difficulty of deciding to put her mother in a home. *Oblique House* restored the homes lost by these survivors by providing an environment where their memories could unwind. As visitors released these memories by approaching each monitor, they remembered and relinquished losses of their own.²⁰

While *Antique* was made from a found piece of furniture and the shed in *Asylum* featured salvage from San Francisco, *Last Rites (Positano)* filled a gallery full of antique furnishings not found but handed down from mother to daughter (fig. 4). Consisting of a Victorian love seat covered in deep orange velvet, an oval-backed chair in the same rich fabric, a sewing cabinet known as a Martha Washington, a wrought-iron lamp with a decorative design of lovebirds, a piano chair reupholstered in warm floral tapestry, and an austere, cane-backed chair, this was furniture that Lucier knew intimately. It was in her mother's living room and in another room in which she died. In *Last Rites (Positano)* this furniture was rearranged in a new room that took in her mother's life and let go of her death. Here, angled and suspended in midair, it was liberated from its traditional function and seemed to dance joyously, thrilled to be free.

For Lucier this furniture had only one gender. Each piece was somewhat anthropomorphic and suggested her mother's presence: her photograph sat on one of the chairs, her touch was apparent in the careful reupholstery, and her body was recalled by the plush, curvaceous love seat. Near three pieces of furniture, her mother's memories seemed to well up from inside as they were released by visitor movement triggering stereo speakers.

In *Last Rites (Positano)* Lucier explored the first twenty-one years of her mother's life: her childhood in Ohio, her adventure as a young woman in Europe, and her move back to the United States as a divorced parent just prior to the outbreak of World War II. Of primary importance in this personal narrative was the time Margaret Glosser spent with her first husband and their infant daughter, Jessie, in the small Italian town of Positano for several months in 1935–36. Here, after the idyll was over and life with Wolfgang became less than ideal, Glosser left him and moved to a house she adored with Maria di Lucrezia, a Positanesi woman who helped care for the baby. It was in her new home, she recalls, that she began to know who she was and to come into her own.

Glosser's memories of her life are challenged and reiterated by Jessie, Maria, and her brother Samuel Beer, who inhabited video monitors also triggered by motion sensors arranged around the periphery of the room. Two long overlapping video projections of water and two pairs of enlarged photographs were also included in the installation. A metaphor for the reflective surface of memory, and a luminous, moving painting reminiscent of images in *Ohio at Giverny*

(1983), the projections formed a constantly changing backdrop for the stories of the speakers as they unwound in response to visitor movement.²¹ The two pairs of photographs brought together people and places from different moments in time: one compared Glosser as a young woman in Europe and as an elderly cancer patient; the other juxtaposed Positano as it looked in the 1930s with an old family home in Ohio.

The summer shot of the seaside town of Positano, with its charming, boxy houses built into a hill, stands in sharp contrast to the grim image of the Ohio house in the dead of winter, cold, forbidding, and lonely in the snow (fig. 5). As somber as Hopper's *House by the Railroad* (1925), as sinister as Norman Bates's house on the hill, and as mysterious and strangely sentient as the crumbling House of Usher, this house suggests the life that Glosser tried to leave behind but returned to with her child on the eve of World War II. A house with no future, only a past, a house filled with feuding, with creatures, for Glosser, that "galloped up and down the stairs," this house, now torn down, was a living, formidable symbol of family disintegration, isolation, and demise.²²

*The house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind. The binding principle in this integration is the daydream. Past, present, and future give the house different dynamisms, which often interfere, at times opposing, at others, stimulating one another.*²³

For more than twenty years, Mary Lucier has brought furniture and architecture together in structures deeply concerned with the process of habitation. If video installation is the medium that best accommodates this idea, it is because in an installation we learn to inhabit, to live with an experience we must ultimately let go. An installation, like all felicitous, intimate enclosures, is also a "eulogized space," a place, like a house, that integrates experience, where memories and daydreams conflict and cohere. In Lucier's temporary houses

and transfigured rooms, we gain facility in the art of living by remembering what it means to dwell. "And by remembering 'houses' and 'rooms,'" as Bachelard suggests, "we learn to 'abide' within ourselves."²⁴

Notes

1. Mary Lucier, interview by Cynthia Nadelman, typescript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., April 18, 1990, 122.
2. Mary Lucier, notebook in the artist's possession, July 1973.
3. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 179.
4. I am referring, respectively, to *Color Phantoms* (1971), *Journal of Private Lives* (1972), *Word Fragments and Recycled Images 1* (1974), *Second Journal (Miniature)* (1972), *Antique with Video Ants and Generations of Dinosaurs* (1973), *Chalk Writing with Air Writing/Video* (1974), *Dawn Burn* (1975–76), *Planet* (1980), and *Asylum (A Romance)* (1986). For descriptions and specific locations of works, see Melinda Barlow, "Mary Lucier: Biographical Notes," in Sandra E. Knudsen, ed., *Noah's Raven: A Video Installation by Mary Lucier*, exh. cat. (Toledo Museum of Art, 1993), 41–48.
5. This is the term first used by Lucier to describe her work. Mary Lucier, interview by the author, New York, June 22, 1992.
6. Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, xxxi, 4, 8, 65.
7. Lucier, interview, Archives of American Art, 149.
8. See Sally Woodbridge, "Light Metal," *Progressive Architecture* 63, no. 8 (August 1982): 72–75; and Ann Hatch, introduction to Kathryn Brew, ed., *Capp Street Project 1985–1986*, exh. cat. (San Francisco: Capp Street Project, 1987), 6.
9. For a three-month period, an artist granted a residency at Capp Street at this time lived and worked in the same space where, and when, the work was exhibited.
10. See Ann Hatch, introduction, and Leah Leavy, "Capp Street Project Inaugural Exhibition and 1984 Residencies," in *Capp Street Project 1984*, exh. cat. (San Francisco: Capp Street Project, 1984), 5, 7–13.
11. Critics of both the Capp Street and Greenberg Wilson versions of *Asylum* commented upon this phenomenon. See Christine Tamblyn, "Asylum (A Romance)," *High Performance* 35 (1986): 98. Arlene Raven, "Refugee Refuge," *Village Voice*, January 15, 1991, 83, remarked that the work suggests that "there is no asylum from the facts of energy and entropy."
12. Another version of *Asylum (A Romance)* was included in *Earthly Delights: Garden Imagery in Contemporary Art* at the Fort Wayne Museum of Art, Fort Wayne, Ind., September 10–November 6, 1988.
13. Mary Lucier, "Asylum (1986/91)," artist's statement, 1991.
14. See Lucier, interview, Archives of American Art, 452; Peggy Cyphers, "Mary Lucier," *Arts Magazine* 65, no. 8 (April 1991): 96; Jude Schwendenwien, "Mary Lucier: Asylum," *High Performance* 54 (Summer 1991): 52.
15. Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 31.
16. *Ibid.*, xxxii, xxxiii.
17. I am thinking especially of the single roadside frame house depicted in Edward Hopper, *Solitude* (1944).
18. Gail Levin remarks upon the anthropomorphic quality of Hopper's houses in *Edward Hopper: The Art and the Artist* (New York: W. W. Norton with the Whitney Museum of American Art, 1980), 44–45. Describing another painting of simple frame houses, she continues: "In *Two Puritans* (1945) the houses seem strangely animated, as if they had personalities all their own. The windows, shutters, and doors read almost like facial features, elements of personalities that make their presence felt."
19. Mary Lucier, talk given at Montage '93: International Festival of the Image, Rochester, N. Y., July 28, 1993, 8.
20. For more on the experience of *Oblique House* and the way in which it serves as a companion piece to *Noah's Raven* (1993), see Melinda Barlow, "Personal History, Cultural Memory: Mary Lucier's Ruminations on Body and Land," *Afterimage* 21, no. 4 (November 1993): 8–12.
21. *Ohio at Giverny* is Lucier's meditation on Monet dedicated to the memory of her American uncle and his French wife. In her statement about the installation, Lucier writes: "The work is an investigation of light in landscape and its function as an agent of memory, both personal and mythic. . . . References to the motifs of Monet function throughout as the 'art historical' memory, underlying the more personal evocation of French and American personae"; Mary Lucier, artist's statement, February 14, 1983.
22. Margaret Glosser, interviewed by Mary Lucier, included in *Last Rites (Positano)*.
23. Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 6.
24. *Ibid.*, xxxi, xxxiii.



FIG. 5 Mary Lucier, *Last Rites (Positano)*, 1995, installation at Lennon, Weinberg, New York, 1995.

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