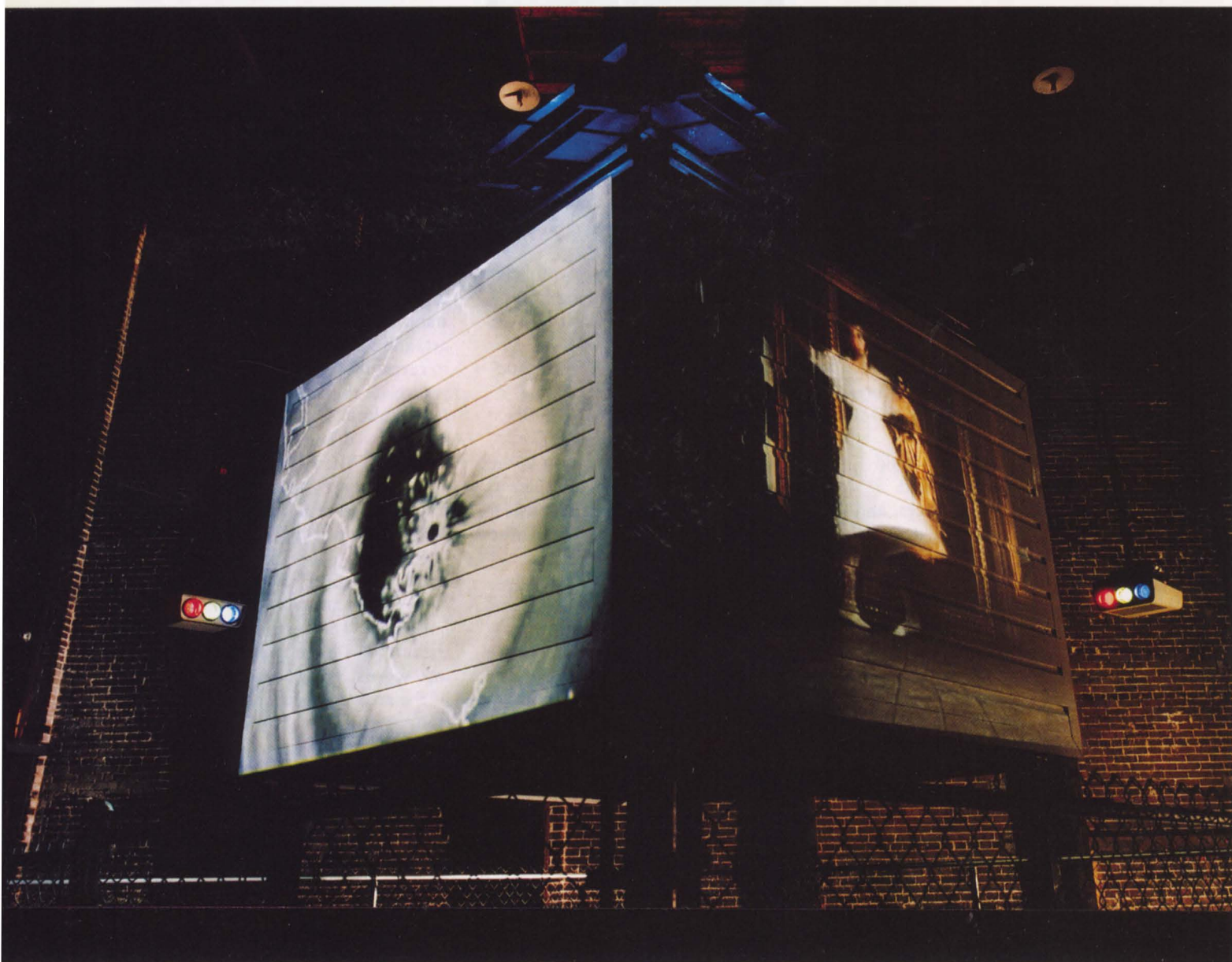


CRISTIN TIERNEY

Texture, *Grace,* and Drama

by Nicholas Drake

An interview with Mary Lucier



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Mary Lucier began her career as a sculptor, but has concentrated on video installation since 1973. Her works in that medium have been exhibited all over the world. For House by the Water, created for the Spoleto Festival U.S.A.'s 1997 site-specific exhibition "Human/Nature: Art and the Low Country," Lucier built a house on stilts, images of South Carolina's nature and history, hurricanes. A book on her work since 1971 is forthcoming

Nicholas Drake: How is your project for the Spoleto Festival related to earlier installations like *Noah's Raven*?
Mary Lucier: *Noah's Raven* (1993) evolved from a couple of sources. One was that my mother had cancer for over three years. I went through the entire process with her, making this piece for her. The piece is also tied into my way of looking at the relationship between the body and the land. I wanted to look at scarring as a common issue that could be seen as benign or malignant. Some scars are beneficial scars in that a disease has been cured. Other scars are the scars of destruction.

Drake: Are you making a connection between Gaia, the concept that Earth is a living organism, and the human body?

Lucier: Actually the Gaia concept bothers me. I don't feel that you need to create a goddess to have empathy. I had been working with landscape for so many years that I had a natural proclivity for it. After my mother became ill, certain things became explicit. So I carried these ideas about landscape to their ultimate conclusion.

Drake: Can you talk about your background and the kind of work that you've been doing through the years?

Lucier: Back in college I worked in welded sculpture. In 1962, I met the composer Alvin Lucier and became involved with the avant-garde in

music and dance. This had a profound effect on my aesthetic. I became involved with video in 1972. I was a pioneer—well not quite. Nam June Paik really gave birth to it. I had done performance work prior to 1970. This led to an interest in video installations. It pretty much encompassed everything that I was interested in about time and space and sound and light. I think I made my first installation in '73. I have worked with installations ever since.

Drake: Chris Burden is an influential artist in the field.

Lucier: Chris Burden has gone

through some changes. He's a hot seller now and his work is very much a commodity.

Drake: Do you mean that his work has become more conservative?

Lucier: I don't think that he has gotten conservative. Sometimes you explore all that there is to explore in an idea. Then you have to move on to something else. I think that ideas that might seem radical have their limits. There is only so much that you can do to take an idea to the farthest point. I think that is what Burden has done. In the meantime, he has begun to make object art. So has Vito Acconci. So has Dennis Oppenheim and a lot of other people who were considered radical in the '70s. They are now producing objects.

I don't think that calling the work conservative is a fair assessment. Not making a commodity is not so radical anymore. What would be conservative is to still



Right: *Noah's Raven* (detail), 1993.

Laserdiscs, monitors, speakers, forklifts, tree trunks, benches, polyurethaned fossil replica. Opposite: *House By the Water*, 1997. Mixed-media video installation.

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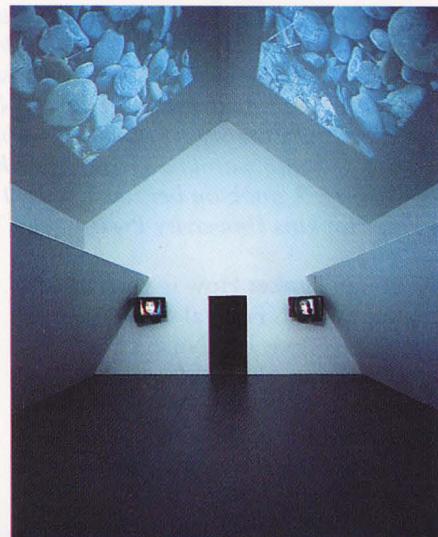
continue the same thing that you were doing 25 years ago. My work has followed a similar path. A good example is a piece that I made in 1975 called *Dawn Burn*. When I first borrowed someone's video camera they said, "Don't ever aim this camera at the sun." So of course that was the first thing I did. I aimed the camera at the sun for seven days at dawn. Those were the days of black and white vidicon tubes that burned easily. So the sun rose each day for 30 minutes and

Below and right: *Oblique House (Valdez)* (exterior and partial interior views), 1993. Mixed-media installation.

burnt a new track on the tube.

Once I discovered burn, I made a series of burn pieces. Now that work—which at the time was anti-object and ephemeral, and pushed the medium beyond its optimum capabilities—is part of the collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. It travels. It has become history. Interestingly, that work was about scarring too—scarring of the video tube.

But it has become a commodity. I don't have anything against it. It is kind of wonderful to see your old work restored and exhibited. These are pieces I thought at the time were a



When I first borrowed a video camera, they said “Don’t ever point it at the sun.” So it was the first thing I did.

one-shot deal. It’s fascinating. I especially like being involved in the restoration process and making all those choices. Do I dare make a fade here? Or do I have to leave it exactly the way it was in 1975?

Drake: How did your work for the exhibition “Human/Nature” evolve from your previous work?

Lucier: There is a definite step after *Noah’s Raven*. I began to make pieces that were interactive and that involved voices. Instead of just videotaping the landscape and then trying to develop this elaborate metaphor for the human spirit, I did something that was in some ways simpler and in other ways harder. I allowed the people to speak for themselves.

Oblique House (Valdez) (1993) and *Last Rite (Positano)* (1995) involved talking heads and interactive monitors. As you approached the monitor, the faces and their voices were activated. What I wanted to do was to give grace to people who had experienced some kind of trauma. The trauma in *Noah’s Raven* was medical and ecological.

I chose Alaska and the Amazon as two seeming opposites that had an immense amount in common. They are both wildernesses and can defeat you if you are not knowledgeable. You can’t just get in a car and drive to the nearest motel. These are both landscapes that are exploited for their mineral resources. They have native populations that know how to survive in extreme climates—though they are gradually being pushed into small enclaves.

My shift after *Noah’s Raven* was to allow the voices of the people who are experiencing these various traumas to speak for themselves and not only to create a metaphor out of landscape images. At the same time, I was constructing installations that flowed with

the viewer who moved from station to station. My previous work depended on a single or ideal vantage point from which to view a more theatrical presentation.

So now I have taken yet another step, to use people as actors. I videotaped the Aiken-Rhette House, which I think is a phenomenal place, both the main house and the slave quarters. I included empty corridors and textured, crumbling walls. I taped people performing in period costumes to animate the space. This is a completely experimental direction for me. It may sound as though it is getting closer to cinema, but I don’t intend the work to be filmic at all, or

to be explicitly dramatic.

Drake: Before you discuss the video part of the installation, first describe the actual physical structure and why you had it constructed that way.

Lucier: The physical structure is a hybrid house on stilts, set within a brick warehouse space. Several things impressed me about life near the water. I saw the house on stilts as part of the defense against nature. Houses are raised up because of hurricanes and rising tides. It is a common structure in other waterside places I’ve been to, like the Amazon. Houses are built up on stilts because the water may rise and fall 20 feet in the course of a year.

LEHMON WEINBERG, NEW YORK/DAVID ALLISON

Right: *Last Rites (Positano)* (detail), 1995. Mixed-media installation.



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The other form that the house symbolizes is a weather station. When I was here for my very first site tour, we came across a little weather station that was raised up on four steel legs. It had siding all the way around. It had no doors or windows. So the piece becomes like a station that is receiving and reporting data.

The building is sided with shiplap, which presents a flatter surface than conventional clapboard. Yet distortion still occurs when you view the projected images from an angle. The image will not stay straight. It zigzags in and out. When you stand directly in front of it there is a moment when the siding seems to disappear. There are moments when you feel as if you are

looking at the outside of a house. Then there are other moments when you feel as if you are looking through the house. That is intentional, to keep the wall shifting back and forth between being a screen and actually being a surface.

Drake: Who were the two actors that you used in taping the reenactments?
Lucier: They were Linzy and Karen Washington, who are local to Charleston. I had wanted to work with interiors, and chose the Aiken-Rhett House. It had two very delineated spaces. It is traditional plantation style, with the main house and the slave quarters and kitchen house out back. I knew that I wanted to videotape in both those locations. The main

house has this wonderful old decaying quality, revealing layers of history.

I think that members of the family lived there until the late '70s. What they decided to do, instead of restoring it to any one of the previous periods, is to leave it with all the layers of added paint and reconstruction. It is slowly decaying, but they are preserving the infrastructure. So it has a particular texture and beauty to it as all these decades peel away.

Out in the slave quarters, I walked upstairs into a long hallway. The vista down the hallway stimulated so many images in my mind of tunnels, of

Below: *Asylum* (detail), 1986–91. Mixed-media installation.



GREENBERG WILSON GALLERY, NEW YORK/DAVID ALLISON

My shift after *Noah's Raven* was to allow the voices of people who are experiencing trauma to speak for themselves.

escape, of entrapment, and of routes to freedom. I stood there for hours with the camera just looking down the tunnel of that hall, videotaping nothing but light in that corridor. In order to make these spaces come alive, I asked people to come into the spaces and perform specific vignettes. In the main house, I used the image of the spinning girl in the white costume.

Drake: Did you use slow-motion special effects on that?

Lucier: The spinning girl is slowed down to about six frames per second, along with a little motion decay which additionally softens her. When she dissolves into the eye of the hurricane, it is as if she becomes the hurricane. It's very gauzy. I normally would not use an effect like that but for her it really worked.

Drake: What I really thought worked was that her dress was white and gauzy, yet the environment that she was in was brown like a Charleston interior—lacquered and varnished wood.

Lucier: There is also that enormous portrait in the background of a very severe-looking woman. It's a floor-to-ceiling painting. There is also an angel—it reminds me of that Walter Benjamin story. Laurie Anderson made a piece out of it, about the angel of history who is being blown backwards into the future because there is a storm blowing out of paradise. The storm is progress. I thought of that when I was making this piece. The young woman who is spinning is my angel.

Drake: What insights did you acquire while working with members of this historically charged community?

Lucier: As a Northerner, I had apprehensions about saying to black

Charlestonians, "Will you come and participate in period costume in a location like this?" However, they were more than willing. As gospel singers, the Washingtons perform in those costumes. They keep that history alive. They have taken control of their history. The Washingtons took charge of being in that space. They did what I asked them to but they also contributed their own ideas. They brought the Bible that was used in the reading sequences. They brought the reed brooms that are accurate to the period. They also wore their own costumes. Everything they did brought us chills because they performed beautifully and with such extraordinary command of the space and the concept.

Drake: Talk about your editing a little.

Lucier: I do my off-line rough-cut at home. Then I go to a professional post-production house to do the final edit.

Drake: What do you use for your rough-cut?

Lucier: I shoot on Betacam and make my window dubs on three-quarter inch. We went from Beta to digital tape (D-2) and then from digital to laserdisc. It all plays back on laserdisc within the installation.

Drake: Talk about what was going through your mind while you were editing the images in the studio.

Lucier: Getting the form of a piece like this is always the hard part. You have a fully fleshed-out concept in advance. But when I get to the site my ideas always shift, whether it is just landscape or a house with human beings. In this case there was an incredibly loaded history. I knew that it was not going to be exactly what I had described in my proposal. I saw that it was not going to be so much

about exterior weather with a suggestion of psychology as it was going to be about interior climate. Weather would be more metaphorical. That was the first main shift. As I was working with the footage, I found that I was not able to put together a coherent narrative or even a subliminal narrative the way I often do.

What I like about these pictures is that they suggest a lot of possibilities. I was also reading Edgar Allan Poe at the time, and I thought that these images suggested stories that have a sense of mystery. So what I ended up doing was not making it coherent. I let it be confounding, suggestive of a multiplicity of narratives. The burden falls on the viewer to put it all together.

In this sense, I feel that the piece is interactive. First, you have to be in motion walking around the house to get a sense of all the images. Secondly, you have to put all those pieces together to come up with whatever story that you can. It's not given to you. Also, in producing the sound, instead of having dramatic peaks and valleys, there is a steady state sound with events that occur. There is something of that in the visual images as well. Though some of the images are on the edge of being dramatic, they don't come off as theatrical. They hold back.

Because there isn't a coherent narrative to support any single meaning, I think people give it various interpretations—whether they are from Charleston, from outside Charleston, or they are Northerners, Southerners, white people, black people, old people, or young people. I think that everybody will look at it differently. I would have liked to have been able to sit on site for the full month and talk to everybody to see how people read it as they came and went. I would really like to know.

Nicholas Drake is an artist and writer living in Charleston, South Carolina.