

Wadsworth Atheneum
March 27 - June 8, 1986

Mary Lucier
MATRIX 89

Mary Lucier on location for Wilderness, 1985



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Wilderness is the most ambitious and monumental video installation Mary Lucier has undertaken to date. For the commission, Lucier has chosen an epic theme: the effects of the advance of civilization on the natural environment. To present this theme and its implications for man, Lucier uses seven large state-of-the-art monitors mounted on classical pedestals and a garden urn. She has orchestrated three channels of videotape in a pictorial narrative format, using sequences of vast unspoiled land that are interwoven with images of industry and man-made objects. For inspiration, she has reached back to painting and literature of the second-half of the 19th century, a time when the need to maintain a tenuous balance between the advance of civilization and the beauty of the natural land was first perceived. She has accepted the challenge of her theme with a pioneer spirit of adventure and exploration recalling this period.

Lucier first became concerned with the conflict between civilization and nature in 1983 while producing Ohio at Giverny. In the course of exploring the theme of America's relationship to its European heritage, she recreated on videotape Claude Monet's garden at Giverny. While taping, Lucier came to see Monet's garden as a world apart, a world untouched by conflict. She realized that she had to make a substantial effort to screen out the surrounding evidence of the 20th century, such as the sound of airplanes and trucks. What she eliminated became as compelling to her as the beauty of her subject. A desire to address the theme of civilization's impact on nature became the motivation for Wilderness which she began the following year.

Lucier once again turns back

to the 19th century for Wilderness, focusing on this period in her own country's history. Drawn to the paintings of Thomas Cole, John F. Kensett, Fitz Hugh Lane, Sanford Gifford, and Frederic E. Church, as well as George Inness, Winslow Homer, and John Twachtman, Lucier travelled to sites in the Northeast painted by these artists whose careers spanned the second-half of the 19th century. Her travels took her to the Adirondacks, the Hudson River, Long Island, southern Connecticut, Cape Cod, and the coast of Maine. Following the tradition of many of these painters, she even ventured outside the country's territorial limits. To capture spectacular scenes of icebergs, a motif depicted by Frederic E. Church approximately 100 years ago, Lucier undertook an expedition to Newfoundland.

Initially, Lucier began Wilderness with a conceptual or schematic plan that evolved from researching works by these 19th century artists, locating the sites they painted, and placing them in three categories: coastal, inland, and upland scenes. Although she returned to some specific sites and maintained a structure based on three original classifications, in many instances she broke with her original plan and taped scenes only similar in motif to those painted in the late 19th century. The motifs, geographical in character, included coves, mountains, rivers, and marshes.

As Lucier taped scenes for Wilderness, she simultaneously experienced the actual locations and recollected the paintings from her research. She became aware of the way in which the painters she had studied interpreted what they saw; how, in varying degrees, they altered visual reality to reveal their underlying idealism. She observed the artists' unique use



From Wilderness, 1986

of the expressive potential of light at different times of the day and in varying seasons, and she began to realize why they recurrently used panoramic vistas to evoke America's vast open spaces.

She found some sites had remained untouched through the years. However, what she knew of the land through her research served to bring dramatically to her attention changes which had occurred over time: highways that obliterated panoramic vistas popular 100 years ago or graffiti scrawled on rocks once depicted by 19th century artists. In Wilderness, Lucier intermingles images of nature with those of industry and cultural decay, thus venturing further away from her original schematic plan. The images refer to the present as well as the past. They include a Colonial bedroom, still-life arrangements reminiscent of paintings by William Harnett and John Peto, a ruined turn-of-the-century estate, a truck at a strip mine, and a jet stream in

an open sky. In the course of editing each sequence, deciding how long each one should be and where it should be placed, Lucier was forced to come to terms with her own personal views about the incursion of civilization. As Wilderness took shape, Lucier found herself in the process of self-examination and revelation.

Lucier's understanding of 19th century American landscape painting as a response to a demand for views of a new and self-aware nation was sharpened by Barbara Novak's Nature and Culture, published in 1980. Lucier came to the general conclusion that landscape painting mid-century indirectly related to the onrush of industrialization. For example, artists' interest in the pastoral often stemmed from their desire to escape from the pace of civilization. However, the paintings of Thomas Cole particularly fascinated Lucier because they were singularly direct in their confrontation with progress. Furthermore, Lucier examined Cole's

unique use of the landscape as if it were a theater stage on which moral allegories were portrayed. Lucier has also investigated the scholarly debate surrounding George Inness' painting, The Lackawanna Valley (1855). Whether Inness presented the train which moves full-speed through the land as a symbol of devastation of the land or of positive progress is unclear and a topic widely debated.

Throughout her work on Wilderness, Lucier found 19th century writers more direct than painters in their confrontation with the conflict between nature and progress. Whereas the century's painters primarily provided visual insight for Lucier, classics by Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Walt Whitman deepened her understanding of the period's philosophical profile. Furthermore, Leo Marx's literary critique The Machine in the Garden and Roderick Nash's Wilderness and the American Mind placed the viewpoints of these writers in a historical context. The shift from the Calvinist view of nature as a threatening place needing to be tamed by man to the Transcendental view of nature as pure and beautiful occurred mid-century, and although early Americans considered civilization principally desirable, mid-century Americans recognized a need to maintain a harmonious balance between its effects and the natural environment. For Lucier, the recognition of progress as both positive and destructive signaled the beginning of the modern point of view, one which she developed in Wilderness.

By selecting a theme for Wilderness that she perceives to be rooted in American culture, Lucier also defines the role of the artist: an artist carries the responsibility to clarify

major issues. It is from the vantage point of a contemporary American that Lucier is able to illustrate the paradoxical effects of progress. Such issues as ecology and nuclear power add an underlying urgency and relevance to Wilderness - nuclear power, with its potential for producing both positive energy and total annihilation, encompasses the ultimate paradox of civilization. Lucier's ambivalence toward a highly technological society is made no less poignant by her use of video. For Lucier, video is both a useful medium capable of synthesizing literature and painting as well as functioning as a socio-political and economic tool with potential to become a major threat in American life.

In Wilderness, Lucier has allied herself with great 19th century American painters and writers who addressed the epic theme of man caught in a natural environment which is threatened by the very advances he is creating. She has found this theme continues to carry serious implications in the American cultural and social consciousness. Unquestionably, Mary Lucier succeeds in bringing her vision to viewers with originality, beauty, and depth. Turning back to re-examine the past, she has become an effective and eloquent voice for her own time.

Nancy Miller
Assistant Director
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State University of New York at
Purchase, NY

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museum shop.

Mary Lucier was born in Bucyrus, Ohio in 1944. She graduated from Brandeis University in 1965. She has received grants from the New York State Arts Council in 1981 and 1983, from the National Endowment for the Arts individual artist fellowships in 1978, 1980 and 1983, and last year she was the recipient of a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. Lucier is a resident of New York City.

PLEASE NOTE:

Mary Lucier will give an informal MATRIX talk on Wilderness in the gallery at 6 p.m. on Thursday, March 27, 1986. The public is cordially invited.

Work in MATRIX:

Wilderness, 1986, three synchronized videotapes: 3/4", color, sound, 20 minutes. Seven pedestals made of wood, plaster, and high density foam measuring 36" to 48" high. Platforms of birch plywood and plastic laminate. Seven Sony XBR monitors, 25" screen diameter. The artist has dedicated Wilderness to Sam and Roberta Beer.

The national tour of Wilderness (March 1986 - March 1988) has been organized by the New England Foundation for the Arts, a consortium of the six new England state arts agencies, with the assistance of funds from the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities and the Jessie B. Cox Charitable Trust.

Wilderness commissioned with the generous support of funds from the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities New Works program. Additional funding for Wilderness has been provided by the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation.

Selected bibliography by Lucier: "Organic," art and cinema, vol. 3 nos. 1+2 (December '78), p. 23+.

Statement by the artist. Mary Lucier: Ohio at Giverny, Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute (Pittsburgh) '83 (with essay by William Judson).

Interview with Robert Becker. "Videoview," vol. 15 no. 9 Interview (September '84), p. 189+.

Interview with Nancy Miller. Wilderness. Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University '86 (Waltham, MA).

Selected bibliography about
Lucier:

Schneider, Ira and Beryl
Korot, eds. Video Art.
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich (New
York) '76.

Lorber, Richard. "Mary
Lucier, The Kitchen," Artforum
vol. XVII no. 1 (September '78),
p. 81.

Ancona, Victor. "Mary
Lucier's Art: Light as Visual
Image," Videography vol. 4 no. 7
(July '79), p. 66+.

Gever, Martha and Marita
Sturken. "Mary Lucier's
Elemental Investigations,"
Afterimage vol. 9 no. 7
(February '82), p. 8+.

Wooster, Ann-Sargent. "Mary
Lucier at the Whitney Museum,"
Art in America vol. 70 no. 4
(April '82), p. 138+.

Russell, John. "Why the
Latest Whitney Biennial is More
Satisfying," The New York Times,
March 25, '83, pp. C1+.

Ancona, Victor. "Video Fuses
with Traditional Media at
Whitney Biennial," Videography
vol. 8 no. 5 (May '83), p. 72+.

Volk, Tim and Kathleen Lane.
"Video art: Impressions," Video
Systems January '84, p. 58+.

Wooster, Ann-Sargent. "Pop
Prop Video," East Village Eye
vol. 41 (March '84), p. 47.

Rice, Shelley. "Ohio at
Giverny," in The Luminous Image,
Stedlijk Museum (Amsterdam) '84.

Duguet, Anne-Marie. "The
Luminous Image: Video Installa-
tion," Camera Obscura nos. 13-14
(Spring and Summer '85), p. 29+.

Bonetti, David. "American
beauties: Grafting Masheck onto
the Rose," The Boston Phoenix,
February 4, '86, p. 5+.

Selected one-person exhibitions:
The Kitchen, NYC Air Writing,
Fire Writing '75, Paris Dawn
Burn, Lasering '78; Anthology
Film Archives, NYC Dawn Burn
'76; Museum of Modern Art, NYC
'79; City University Graduate
Center, NYC Equinox '79; The
Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, NY
Planets '80; Museum of Art, Car-
negie Institute, Pittsburgh Ohio
at Giverny '83; Whitney Museum
of Art, NYC Denman's Col (Geom-
etry) '83; One Chase Manhattan
Plaza, NYC Wintergarden '84
(also to Whitney Museum of Am-
erican Art at Philip Morris, NYC
'85); Norton Gallery of Art,
West Palm Beach '85; Rose Art
Museum, Brandeis University,
Waltham, MA Wilderness '86
(travelling).

Selected group exhibitions:
American Cultural Center, Paris
Video Art USA '77; Musee d'Art
Modern de la Ville de Paris, 10^e
Biennale de Paris '77; Women's
Interart Center, NYC The Moving
Image: Film and Video Festival
'80; Espace Lyonnais d'Art Con-
temporain, Lyons Trois Instal-
lations: Trois Visions de la
Video '81; American Film Insti-
tute, Los Angeles National Video
Festival '83 (also to John F.
Kennedy Center for the Perform-
ing Arts, Washington, D. C.);
Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff,
Canada, The Second Link: View-
points on Video in the Eighties
'83 (travelled); Whitney Museum
of American Art, NYC Biennial
'83; Stedlijk Museum, Amsterdam
The Luminous Image: Video In-
stallations '84; The High Museum
of Art, Atlanta Atlanta Video
Festival '85; Independent Curat-
ors Inc., NYC Video Transfor-
mations '86 (travelling).