video art

Michael Rush

with 475 illustrations, 372 in color

Thames & Hudson
Joe Rush, father and writer

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ublished in hardcover in the United States of America in 2003 by
es & Hudson Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10110
sandhudsonusa.com

d edition 2007

y of Congress Catalog Card Number 2006908253
13: 978-0-500-28487-2
10: 0-500-28487-3

d and bound in China by C+C Offset Printing Co. Ltd
video artists, including Les Levine (b. 1935, Ireland), Frank Gillette (b. 1941, United States), Ira Schneider (b. 1939, United States), Ant Farm (founded 1968), Raindance (founded 1970), Videofreex (founded 1969), TTVT (Top Value Television, founded 1972) took McLuhan's populist notions to heart.

Though TTVT disbanded in 1979, many new groups have emerged since then to continue the spirit of 'guerilla television.' Many of these collectives have formed around political protests of large meetings of multinational institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund/World Bank. TTVT-inspired groups include Big Noise Productions, Headwaters Action Video Collective, Video Active, and Whispered Media.

Frank Gillette

The American artist Frank Gillette, after studying philosophy at Columbia University and painting at Pratt Institute in New York, became, in his own words, 'obsessed with Marshall McLuhan,' the media guru and author. 'Painting and the anti-war movement weren't reconcilable to me in the late 1960s,' he says. Through his friend Paul Ryan, who was an assistant to McLuhan at the Center for Media Understanding at Fordham University in the Bronx, New York, Gillette gained access to four Sony Portapak video cameras. The president of the Sony Corporation was on McLuhan's Board of Trustees at the Center and gave it the Portapaks which Gillette and Ryan (amongst others) used to make alternative television. For Gillette, personal use of the cameras was his way to 'enter the communication process,' and cease being a passive recipient of commercialized media. 'I was, and am still, interested in intercepting the systems (in this case electronic) and turning them toward artistic use,' he says; 'I wanted to decentralize the power base of broadcast television.'

In 1968 he created Keep, a four-monitor installation featuring tapes he made at home with his friends. Though primitive looking by current standards, Gillette's installation was a very advanced way of exhibiting tapes for the time. He denies, however, that he was interested in the sculptural qualities of the work. 'I was never sculptural,' he insists. 'My idea was never to make a sculptural statement, but to break down the single focus of a viewer on to one television set.'

In 1970 Gillette and his friends in the Video art collective Raindance sat on a beach in Point Reyes, California, turned their portable video camera on and passed it around 'like a joint,' as Gillette remembers. He, Paul Ryan, and Michael Shamberg taped their youthful musings on life, television, and the imposing transmitter jutting up to the sky just across the road. 'We were naively idealistic,' Gillette says. 'We thought we were going to revolutionize television, put it in the hands of artists and radicalize the medium.' The resultant tape, 'The Rays,' was given its name because the nearby transmitter caused 'rays' to distort the video image, a fact that pleased Gillette very much.

Appealing to these artists was the real time immediacy of video tape. Unlike film, whose lush texture required chemical processing, video was instantaneously
viewable on a monitor. The term ‘up close and personal’ soon caught on to describe the intimate feel of the taped interview or news report. Today, with video cameras on every street corner, at every bank machine, and on the tie clips of tabloid TV news investigators, everyone is ‘up close’ and our casual comings and goings are suddenly ‘personal’ to the nameless security experts who scour these tapes watching for ‘false moves.’

Gillette and Schneider made one of the first installations of Video art, Wipe Cycle (1969) – an exceptionally influential work that anticipated the video installations of the 1980s – for the Howard Wise Gallery in New York. The exhibition ‘TV As a Creative Medium’ was the first show in the United States devoted to Video art. Wipe Cycle featured nine video monitors, four of which showed pre-taped material (some taken from television shows) and five of which played live and delayed images of viewers as they entered the gallery. ‘Viewers were mystified,’ Gillette says. ‘They were seeing themselves on television mixed in with all these other images from TV shows and they were shocked as well as delighted.’ Recalling Andy Warhol’s visit to the gallery, he says, ‘Andy, of course, loved seeing himself on television, but even he was a little confused by the multiple images and time delays. He kept shifting his briefcase from hand to hand to see if he was really being filmed live or not.’

The American curator Ben Portis described the impact of the exhibition in this way: ‘Although “TV As a Creative Medium” is renowned as the seminal video art exhibition in the United States, its subject was truly television, and, by “TV” was meant television at its most pervasive. As with other revolutionary exhibitions... “TV As a Creative Medium” was both the grand finale of an idea – the kinetic art movement of the 1960s – and an unresolved indication of the future – the impact of video and television in the hands of artists. It was transitional as well as formative.”

In keeping with the spirit of the times, in which countercultural activities were often accompanied by manifestos, pamphlets, books, and other publications, Raindance published a periodical, Radical Software. From 1970 to 1974 Radical Software was the theoretical voice of the video movement, reaching an audience of 5,000 readers. In their second issue, editors Phyllis Gershuny and Beryl Korot wrote:

In issue one of Radical Software (Summer, 1970) we introduced the hypothesis that people must assert control over the information tools and processes that shape their lives in order to free themselves from the mass manipulation perpetrated by commercial media in this country and state controlled television abroad. By accessing low-cost half-inch portable videotape equipment to produce or create or partake in the information gathering process, we suggested that people would contribute greatly to restructuring their own information environments: YOU ARE
Ant Farm

NEAR RIGHT

25 The American video collective Ant Farm (Chip Lord, Doug Michels, Curtis Schreier) was known for filming simulated enactments of major media events. Their most famous one, The Eternal Frame (1975), made with another video group, T. R. Utzco, re-enacts one chilling scene from the Zapruder video of the Kennedy assassination. The eternal frame of the title suggests the lasting effect of these videotaped images on the world’s psyche.

Bruce and Norman Yonemoto

ABOVE RIGHT

26 Reality and fantasy, the stuff of Hollywood sagas, are, in Made in Hollywood (1990), rendered to the extreme in a comic scenario of different hopeful types who come to Hollywood to seek their fortune on the big screen. Featuring such seasoned Performance artists as Ron Vawter and Rachel Rosenthal, the video artist brothers turn clichés into poignant comments on the endless allure of the Hollywood dream.

THE INFORMATION.... In particular we focused on the increasing number of experiments conducted by people using this half-inch video tool: experiments in producing locally originated programming for closed-circuit and cable TV and for public access cablevision....

As Gillette notes, the cable television movement was an important, if little noted, element of early Video art. Cable television had been introduced in the late 1940s as a service to people living in remote areas of the United States who were unable to have normal signal reception. By the late 1960s cable companies, in an agreement with the federal government, were required to make video equipment and taping facilities available to the community so that individuals and groups from the locality could make their own tapes for broadcast on local cable channels. Though this opportunity was never fully exploited, many artists and groups, in the United States, Canada and Great Britain, did receive their first access to video equipment through cable companies.

A Critique of the Media

Much of the first decade of Video art was preoccupied with critiques of television and other media. As Video art and artists were fashioning a new identity with this medium, many reacted to the pop identities promulgated by television and advertising. Classic examples include Nam June Paik's Global Groove (1973), an hallucinatory barrage of images appropriated from television and magazines that mimics media saturation and The Eternal Frame (1975), a biting commentary on the 1963 Zapruder film of the Kennedy assassination in Dallas, created by the video collectives T. R. Utzco and Ant Farm. The Zapruder film had been played endlessly on televisions throughout the world. In The Eternal Frame the artists re-enact the event in a mock-documentary, which questions the veracity of the memory of the tragic event even as it calls into question the media spectacle it became.

Muntadas (b. 1942, Spain) has been a thorn in the side of mainstream media for nearly thirty years. An artist with a passionate skepticism of television, newsmedia (including newspapers and magazines), and some government institutions, he creates video and media installations as platforms to expose the hypocrisy of the media. From Media Eyes (1982) to On Subjectivity (About TV) of 1978 and Video Is Television? (1989), he, like the early Nam June Paik, and, later Stan Douglas and Fabrice Hybert, has used video to question the very fabric of what he calls the
Gary Hill has long explored the relationships between the body and language, languages and personal psychologies. This video, Incidence of Catastrophe (1987–88), inspired by Maurice Blanchot’s novel Thomas the Obscure (1950), equates the loss of innocence with the entrance into literacy as Hill records his daughter’s early attempts to speak.

In Site/Recite (A Prologue) (1989) the camera weaves in and out of various objects such as bones, skulls, butterfly wings, comprising what Hill calls ‘little deaths that pile up.’ In the text accompanying the images Hill speaks a long monologue, part of which says: ‘Nothing seems to have ever been moved. There is something of every description which can only be a trap... I must become a warrior of self-consciousness and move my body to move my mind to move the words to move my mouth to spin the spur of the moment. Imagining the brain closer than the eyes.’

personal and autobiographical stories. Though not a ‘narrative’ artist in the sense of the word, Gary Hill (b. 1951, United States) has struggled more than other artist with the difficulties of constructing meaningful narratives, given the limitations language imposes on all of us. Since 1973, Hill has explored the relationship between words and recorded images.

Hill found inspiration for his interests in language, poetry, identity, performance and sculpture in the vibrant artist community of Woodstock, New York, in the 1970s. It was there that he had access to a Portapak camera. His first performative media/sculpture was an action called Hole in the Wall (1973). He filmed himself blasting a hole in the wall the size of a television monitor at the Woodstock Art Association. In the newly carved orifice he placed a monitor which played a loop of the pre-taped action. In this piece, he laid out several issues that have preoccupied him ever since: time and the body as materials in art; the video image as language or text; the image as conduit for ideas.

In the late 1970s he became a journeyman artist-in-residence and instructed various places in upstate New York, including the State University at Buffalo, where he had a lively media program with Woody and Steina Vasulka and an experimental community that included Hollis Frampton and Paul Sharits.

Trained as a sculptor, Hill transferred his interests in the materials of traditional sculpture to the electronic materials of video. In early works such as Bathing (1977), Windows (1978), and Objects with Destinations (1979), he manipulated video images such as bathers and windows into abstract landscapes. These were anticipated the digital alterations that are present everywhere in photography today. From 1987 to 1988 he made one of his most important videos, Incidence of Catastrophe, which was inspired by his own young daughter’s attempts to read language and by Maurice Blanchot’s novel Thomas the Obscure. At the end of a tape the naked, still body of a man lies before a wall of words. Here Hill succeeds in a seamless combination of poetry, theory, electronics, and sound.

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Hill’s enduring interest has been to explore what he calls ‘the never-ending process of attempting to communicate.’ Such an enterprise might suggest tentativeness or stuttering nature, but his video installations are remarkable for their formal beauty and fluidity as well as complexity. In *Why Do Things Get Muddled? (Come on Petunia)* of 1984, Alice in Wonderland jousts with her father at mismeanings or ‘muddles’ in dialogues rehearsed in reverse, then filmed backwards resulting in a mind-boggling linguistic analysis.

By contrast, in the utterly silent, interactive work, *Tall Ships* (1992), viewers walking into a darkened space, are confronted by ghostly images of everyone coming towards them as in a dream. These specters do not speak but seem to want something that viewers cannot provide. Just as they approach, so do they recede into the darkness. Hill creates an ethereal video environment layered with multiple questions about the nature of daily encounters, the often unexpressed mutual needs of relationships, as well as the ersatz intimacy suggested by filmed image. For Whitney curator Chrissie Iles this type of sophisticated tectonic encounter is expressive of Hill’s ‘visceral art...based on the body and sensual.’

Reminiscent of his 1992 installation *Cut Pipe*, which featured a tape of an artist running his hands over a speaker, *Language Willing* (2002) shows these same hands roaming over two strips of flowered wallpaper, one white, the other red. Australian poet Chris Mann swiftly recites a barely intelligible poem about language causality, and listening. Hill traces the origins of the piece to a memory of him resting on a bed in a house in Lille, France, in the early 1990s. Next to his bed, some typical floral wallpaper. He started moving his hands over it in what for him became a very disturbing gesture. It has now evolved into a choreographed with his hands ‘interpreting’ in movement the oral flow of the poet’s words.

In the installation *Reflex Chamber* (1999), images are projected in a quiet stack manner from the ceiling on to a tabletop. The viewer looks down at the canvas moving ever closer to a gated window of what may be an abandoned house in woods. Domestic objects (a bicycle, twin beds) come into view as a voice is heard mumbling fragmented phrases: ‘I am going;’ ‘I am watching myself go.’ Here power of metaphor, achieved through image, sound, and clear concept, strongly encourages the reflection that Hill seeks from his viewers.

Hill unearthed the eerie in the everyday in *Still Life* (1999), a multi-screen installation de force that keeps the viewer’s gaze shifting from large screens to small monitors. Computer-generated images (akin to the artist’s ‘liminal objects,’ or other-worldly sculptures) of household goods (beds, tables, vacuum cleaners, televisions, child’s swing set) seem to sprout up in a dull, gray virtual space like weeds in a post-Armageddon garden. Hill records these images slowly from a serene detached distance, thus heightening the terror of proliferating consumer goods stripped of their purpose. Seamlessly does this graveyard of machines and furniture appear and disappear within the installation space. Shadows are cast on to large screens by viewers moving through the space, adding an ominous interactivity to the proceedings.

*Accordions* was filmed in an Algerian Arab neighborhood in July 2001. Consist of five monitors showing ‘portraits’ of the locals filmed at a distance ‘so the ima...
doesn't quite arrive,' Hill acknowledges that this installation will have 'the unintended burden of 9/11.' Up until now his work has never been overtly political, but in this work it is, as cultures, languages, religious systems, television images and whatever else collide to radically alter the experience of this installation for a New York audience. Try as he does to understand and control them, the forces of language are forever subject to change.

**Bill Viola**

Personal narratives are represented in depth by Bill Viola whose substantial body of work from the 1970s to the present day represents a chronicle of personal and spiritual development. Unlike the influential diary-like films and videos of such artists as Jonas Mekas and George Kuchar (b. 1942, United States), Viola has chosen a narrative lyricism that resembles meditation more than personal picture albums.

Viola (b. 1951, United States) was attracted to art and technology from his earliest days as a student at Syracuse University in New York, where he helped found the Synapse Video Group. His first videotape, *Wild Horses*, was made in 1972. He told an interviewer in 1997:

Something that has been apart of me as long as I can remember [is] the excitement of the new technique. I grew up in a postwar generation. A big influence on me was the World’s Fair in New York in 1964–65, which was about as close to industrial Utopia as you can get. For me it was essentially a bunch of dark rooms with images projected in them, a whole series of installations, but cast in ‘technology is good, the future is positive’ kind of modo.¹

Viola’s earliest tapes challenged the notion that technology is necessarily good, but he did so through exploration of the self, an enduring preoccupation in his work to the present day. In *Tape 1* (1972), a monitor contains the live image of a running camera facing a mirror, viewing its own image as it were. A man (Viola himself) enters the room, sits down, faces the camera and begins to stare, then starts to scream before turning the camera off. This Performance activity was characteristic of much of his early work, including *Playing Soul Music to my Freckles* (1975), in which he performed for the camera with a loudspeaker superimposed on his back, and *A Non-Dairy Creamer* (1975). In this tape, his own image, captured in a coffee cup, gradually disappears as he drinks the coffee.

Viola’s interests in video as a personal medium have been intertwined with his spiritual quests, at least since the mid-1970s when he began traveling, first to the Solomon Islands in the South Pacific, then Japan, Java, and Bali. While on a fellowship to Japan in 1980, he met Zen Master Dainen Tanaka, who has remained a teacher for him. The search for unity, common to all mystical traditions, has found expression in Viola’s earliest work, when he himself began uniting his interests in music, sound, and image within the framework
Bill Viola

BELOW
226–34 I Do Not Know What It Is I Am
Like (1966)

OVERLEAF
235 The Stopping Mind (1991)
of video. In two tapes dating from 1975, *A Million Other Things* (2) and *Return*, sound, music, and a natural setting with trees, flowers, and water become the ingredients for meditations on time and memory, other themes that remain pervasive in his work.

Viola has found video the perfect medium for his personal explorations of memory, and the human spirit. It is in Video art, unlike any traditional form, that time can be manipulated, literally slowed down, sped up, erased, thus eliminating the boundaries of past, present, and future. For Viola, who grapples with nothing less than the basic elements of eastern and western spirituality (mystical solitude, a sense of unity with nature, the life cycle), the technology of video is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Viola seeks a painterly sobriety in his work that is more akin to Romanticism than to electronic art.

For more than twenty years he has presented his work in the form of large-scale full-wall installations as well as installations with objects. His *Chott el-Djerid Portrait in Light and Heat* of 1979, filmed in a dry salt lake in the Tunisian desert, is an almost hallucinatory portrait of time passing, complete with mirages and ghostly figures that may, or may not, be passing before the viewer's eyes. In *Reasons to Be in an Empty House* (1983), a dark room contains a videotape of a man staring into the camera and a stark wooden chair that resembles an execution seat. On the monitor the man is struck on the head intermittently by another man who appears from the back. In *The Stopping Mind* (1991), a barely audible voice murmurs sentences about the body and loss of sensation emerges from four screens suspended from the ceiling. Beautifully colorful shots of red flowers in a large field seem to be the narrators' words until these very images explode into images of violence.

In the monumental installations, *The Passing* (1991), *The Messenger* (1996), *The Crossing* (1996), Viola maximizes video's potential to produce emotion-filled images of exquisite beauty and impact in a matter of minutes, while also managing to summarize his explorations of mystical waters. Taken as a trio, these works encompass a single man's struggle with earth, water, and fire as well as birth, death, and memory.

In another installation, *The Sleepers* (1992), seven metal barrels, filled with water, contain submerged monitors showing pictures of sleeping men, women, and children. There is an eerie serenity in these surveillance shots, with the subject matter straddling the moment between life and death that sleep suggests.

Light, so intimate a companion for painters, photographers, filmmakers, and mystics alike, has clearly worked its magic on Viola. Especially in his darker installation rooms, where images of babies sucking can collide with those of women dying, it is light that links the passages in and out of life. Light and darkness compete in *Tiny Deaths* (1993). Human forms, barely silhouetted on the screen and huge negatives, take shape briefly and then, burning with light, disappear, never fully realized, into the dark. So, too, with mystical union, and the not so lofty existence that most people live: we catch glimpses of each other; perhaps we too for a moment, and then we pass on into an unknown infinity that Viola attempts to materialize before our eyes.

To this day, Viola's work continues his life-long exploration of human consciousness and spirituality. *Memoria* (2000) is a single-channel projection on a silk screen.

**Bill Viola**

236 Made after the death of a parent, this black-and-white tape, *The Passing* (1991), is a meditation on Viola's enduring investigations of memory, consciousness, life and death.
Bill Viola

237. Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House (1985)
suspended from the ceiling. Filmed with an old black-and-white surveillance camera in very low light, the pained face of a man appears, then recedes from, the surface of the cloth, which now looks as delicate as a shroud. The face advances as if from the great beyond, the man struggling to communicate something of dire urgency to the viewer. However, just as his features can be made out, his image disappears again into a void, in an echo of Samuel Beckett’s work. Using the silk as a projection surface, Viola grants video technology the same grainy timelessness achieved in such classic 16-millimeter films as those by Ronald Nemeth from the mid-1960s.

*Ascension* (2000) is a full-wall projection of a man fully clothed jumping feet first into some murky water. In slow motion his body, with arms extended like Christ’s on the Cross, sinks, then rises almost to the top. Never able to breathe, the man sinks back down out of the camera’s view. Viola’s underwater camera deftly records the action as sparkling sunlight from above penetrates the water with a blue glow. As in *The Crossing* and *The Messenger*, Viola here combines greatly amplified sound and lushly filmed images to offer a brief narrative of an Everyman placed in an extreme situation, his body a reminder of the transient state of all our bodies.

In the mid-1990s Viola began attempting to bring to life medieval and early Renaissance paintings via Video art. Displayed as single projections, diptychs, or triptychs and often presented on flat LCD panels, each of these works is characterized by extremely slowed down movements of men and women in modern dress portraying ‘characters’ from the earlier paintings. Eyelids can take several minutes to close, as do arms rising up in supplication or extending in an embrace. One of these, *The Greeting* (1995), inspired by Pontormo’s *Visitation* (1528–29), became the first work of Video art to enter the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York when it was purchased in 2001.

For Viola the camera lens and the pupil of the eye offer means of self-reflection. In 1990 he wrote: ‘Looking closely into the eye, the first thing to be seen, indeed the only thing to be seen, is one’s own self-image. This leads to the awareness of two curious properties of pupil gazing. The first is the condition of infinite reflection, the first visual feedback…. The second is the physical fact that the closer I get to have a better view into the eye, the larger my own image becomes, thus blocking my view within.’ For video artist Bill Viola, the narratives he creates, the camera he uses, the meanings he probes form a continuous loop of investigations into the human spirit and the mysteries of creation.

**Exploring Personal and Cultural Identity**

German artist Marcel Odenbach (b. 1953) shares Viola’s need to probe personal identity in his video work. His interests also extend to problems of vision and perception, using the camera as a metaphor for the human eye on the lookout for clues to self-understanding. His video *Die Distanz zwischen mir und meinen Verlusten* (The Distance Between Myself and My Losses) (1983) is an enigmatic video collage of appropriated images suggesting loss, especially lost innocence. Odenbach employs bands of black tape to mask the viewing image, a device that distances viewers from the footage, while at the same time making them appear to be gazing into private, forbidden territory. Historical references to bourgeois German culture, notions of sexual identity, and political involvement are considered briefly.
Ulrike Rosenbach (b. 1943, Germany), Ilene Segalove (b. 1950, United States), Nell Sobel (b. 1947, United States), Anne Tardos (United States), Ingrid Wiegand (United States) are some women linked with the rapid development of Video art in the 1970s.

In the United States the Los Angeles Woman’s Building, a center for feminist programs, contained one of the earliest production facilities for independent video artists. Some of the above-mentioned artists worked there. As American curator Joel Hanley noted in her 1993 essay in The First Generation: Women and Video, 1970–1980, “Without the burdens of tradition linked with the other media, women video artists were freer to concentrate on process, often using video to explore the body or the self.”

From the 1980s to the present day women artists have made such headway in the field of Video art that their numbers at international exhibitions are virtually indistinguishable from men. Amongst major artists exhibiting internationally at this time are Jane and Louise Wilson, Gillian Wearing, Sam Taylor-Wood, Shirin Neshat, Rosalind Trockel, Pipilotti Rist, Lorna Simpson, Diana Thater and Eija-Liisa Ahtila, some of whom will be discussed in the next chapter.

Remarking on the place of women in the history of Video art, Barbara London, media curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York since the 1970s, commented, “People look at younger work and don’t realize what went before. Recent work is not feminist like Martha Rosler’s or Joan Jonas’s because these women changed the world already. The younger ones are celebrating their womanhood, thanks to the older generation.”

Lorna Simpson (b. 1960, United States) has created a compelling body of work and moving image work since the mid-1980s. Her characters are often placed in situations where communication is thwarted or impossible. Fragmented and jarring, whether spoken or written on the image, echo the artist’s emphasis on the impossibility of attempting communication, even if we fail. Her black-and-white films include Recollection (1998), in which memories are re-interpreted and misinterpreted, Call Waiting (1997), in which two women attempt to communicate despite a series of ultimately very disruptive interruptions. Interior/Exterior, Full/Empty (1998) is a seven-screen film projection in which people may or may not be communicating with one another.

Mary Lucier

Video as a personal medium lends itself to not only narrative investigations of identity, but also lyrical narratives like those of Mary Lucier (b. 1944, United States). Emerging in the late 1960s and early 1970s with Conceptual performances and photographic works, Lucier has developed over the years a lush photographic stye that she employs to explore memories, the natural world, and the struggle of human beings in the natural as well as unnatural, war-driven world.

Her career extends back to the late 1960s, when she began collaborating with her then-husband, musician Alvin Lucier. Though best known now for her lyrical multichannel installations, Lucier concentrated in her early work on conceptual based sound and photographic projections. In her Polaroid Image Series #1: Rose (1969) Lucier, reflecting Alvin’s technique of rerecording a text in a room and playing it until the words became unintelligible, rephotographed Polaroid photos until i
images became indecipherable. These images were projected as an accomplishment to Alvin’s thirteen-minute recording of his garbled text. Her projections took on the life of their own, looking in some cases like the Abstract Expressionist canvases of Robert Motherwell.

Lucier’s experiments with Performance and technology soon became conceptually sophisticated and linked with her interest in natural environment and ecology. Her *Salt* (1971), constructed in Portland, Connecticut, was a large Multimedia ‘installation’ (at that time the word had not been adopted) that incorporated snow fencing, tobacco cloth, marble chips and amplified bird calls. The following year in Brooklyn she made a performance named *Journal of Private Lives*, which featured film and slide projections and writing on three large screens. By 1975 she was creating installations with live laser writing, video cameras, prerecorded text, and multiple monitors, as in *Fire Writing*.

In common with several other video artists of her generation, Lucier spent formative years working in Performance, sculpture and intermedia, elements that endure in her work today. She also retains her commitment to portraying the delicate balance between human beings and their habitats. For her, the personal, the political and the poetic are one. Light and landscape (both internal and external) are metaphors of the essential connection between humans and their environments. They are also fragile components in cautionary narratives that reveal the destructive underbelly of both nature and the creatures who inhabit this earth.

*Floodsongs* (1998) was a multiscreen installation that investigated the town of Grand Forks, North Dakota, virtually destroyed by floods and fire in 1997. Included in the installation was a full-wall projection of a house’s interior: Lucier’s camera moved slowly through the drenched rooms, focusing on the discarded toys, upturned furniture, and personal effects that remained as silent reminders of a life once lived there. Attached to another wall were a chair, a stool, and a lit floor lamp whose single, exposed bulb created shadows on the floor of the darkened room. As she has done with objects from her own relative’s homes in installations such as *Last Rites* (*Positano*) (1995), Lucier sculpted an architectural environment with these objects highlighting them as monuments to a time that had passed, either violently or simply in the course of things. Bolted to the side walls were six large television monitors, each showing the talking head of one of the flood’s victims: a priest, a singer, a married couple, etc. They spoke of watching their town burning on a television in the motel room where they had sought shelter, or of rebuilding their lives, or of moving on altogether. Their stories, issuing from speakers placed on the wall below the monitors, were amplified, running together in the small space like a discordant symphony, reminiscent of her very first piece, *Polaroid Image Series #1: Room*. Each element – the large central video, the monitors, the ‘floating’ furniture, and the sound – together encompassed the viewer in a high-pitched, sensual environment.

Unlike the passive experience of watching a film or a television news show, viewers could walk through this setting, approach the images that appeared and disappeared on the large and small screens and run their hands through the light of the lamp, joining their own shadows with those of the furniture. It is almost as if the viewers entered the homes of these mournful people, paying respects and offering understanding.