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Mary Lucier

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No Place Like Home

Long concerned with domestic structures and their loss, Mary Lucier documents the aftermath of the 1997 Red River Flood in her most recent video-and-sound installation. The result: a multimedia oratorio by and for the survivors.

BY MELINDA BARLOW

Walking into Mary Lucier's latest video-and-audio installation, *Floodsongs*, is like suddenly being plunged deep underwater, a sensation here created largely through sound. A densely textured wave of voices, muted, reverberant, barely intelligible, rises and falls throughout the gallery, swelling and breaking to a rhythm all its own. Issuing from loudspeakers placed beneath six monitors displaying video portraits of seven survivors of the Red River Flood of 1997, this hypnotic soundscape weaves together those people's spoken memories of living along the river during and after the disaster. Mixed with a background layer of voices that have been electronically processed so that the intelligibility of individual words is deliberately obscured, this undulating cascade of sound powerfully evokes the feeling of being submerged.

That feeling is intensified by the imagery in the continuous video projection dominating the gallery's far wall. If you happened to enter the installation at the beginning of the 18-minute cycle, you would have seen a lone phantomlike figure disappearing into, then reemerging from, a landscape thick with fog. In a subsequent shot another ghostly figure slips by a window, momentarily reflected in the rain-streaked glass. Perhaps these are the silhouettes of former inhabitants, forced by the river to leave their homes, returning to retrieve what they can of their possessions, wringing out memories from a waterlogged world.

If the images that follow are any indication, not much will be salvageable. In sequence after sequence, the camera obsessively scrutinizes the wreckage as if struggling to comprehend the extent of the damage, room by room, home by home, in a world askew. Overturned sofas, toppled chairs, soggy mattresses, appliances on end—these are the husks of abandoned lives. One can almost smell the mildewed carpets, moldy wallpaper and mud-caked mirrors that the camera inventories. Indeed, Lucier likens these ravaged interiors to the inside of a grave and says that shooting them has permanently altered the way she perceives any domestic scene. For her, rooms are now shadowed always by possible ruin; houses seem less stable than before, more susceptible to loss.

A cluster of real-life household artifacts salvaged from the flood and used in the interviews with the survivors suggests this pared-down vision of domesticity is inseparable from a sense of loss. Along the wall opposite the video projection, suspended from the ceiling at odd angles to one another, are a simple wooden chair, a stool and a bare-bulbed floor lamp—the skeletal remains of a life interrupted by calamity.

In the spring of 1997, the residents of Grand Forks, N.D., all experienced some version of this calamity. After a winter of record snowfall, the Red River, which runs through the city, crested at 54 feet—26 feet above flood stage—rising through storm sewers, pushing through sandbags and causing 52-foot-high dikes to collapse. A famous aerial photograph published in a local newspaper more



Antique with Video Ants and Generations of Dinosaurs, 1973, armoire, cactus garden, mirror, magnifying glass, video monitor, black-and-white photographs; at the Women's InterArt Center, New York.

than a week after the flood reveals a sea of rooftops in strangely glistening waters—a community subsumed by the whelming tide.¹

When the National Guard asked the residents of Grand Forks to evacuate, they left their homes in droves, either wading or paddling to get to higher ground, and in the process turning their city into a veritable ghost town. It is this eerie emptiness that Lucier's camera records. Throughout her video projection, which serves as the shared memory of the survivors shown in closeup on the monitors, human presence is suggested primarily through absence, though it is sometimes replaced by peculiar new inhabitants. Tacked to trees or perched on the steps of abandoned homes, brightly colored stuffed animals become oddly compelling effigies, which transform yards and stoops into personal shrines. In one striking image, a porch is shown elaborately decorated for Christmas with tinsel, stockings, ornaments and toys. An earlier shot shows the adjacent wall, its boarded window displaying a clown's costume, which stands like a sentinel above the scrawled eulogy, "There's no place like home!"

Twice during the tape, survivors—first a man, then a woman—seem to be mulling over their losses. Shown in exquisite slow-motion close-ups that let us examine every nuance of their expressions, each looks up, down and then drifts away, lost in a moment of private reflection. On the six video monitors the other survivors do the same, taking stock of their situation, and, as they pause, they appear to be listening to what the others have to say. If their voices, as Lucier suggests, form a contemporary oratorio, then their faces let us see what it means to remember. And as their memories ebb and flow in the space of the installation, words occasionally emerge, barely becoming audible before they are washed away.

Learning to trust these fleeting impressions is the challenge of dwelling in this installation; in *Floodsongs* one must remain open to what drifts into the ear or catches the eye. During a lull in the overall din, for instance, a young girl can be heard saying that she "kind of lost hope" when all her friends left their homes and

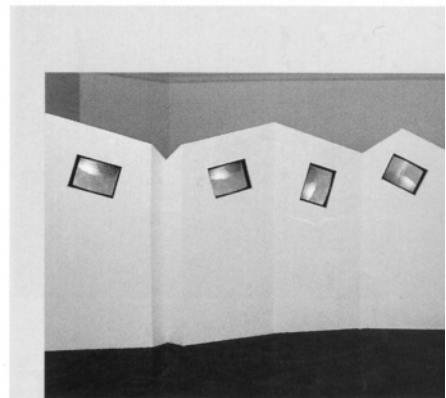
moved away. A similarly arresting moment occurs later in the same interview, when a quick shot shows another girl diving into a pool. Although this is the only image on any of the channels that shows someone fully submerged, it is strongly evocative; both times I saw it, at the North Dakota Museum of Art, Grand Forks, and the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the physicality of the water all at once became startling.

Another particularly resonant moment in the installation occurs when a housewife/artist begins to sing her favorite hymn, her voice ringing out from the swelling waves of sound. The effect is riveting, and viewers are often compelled to turn around and move closer to the monitor as they listen, trying to understand every vibrant word. While this hymn is the most literal "flood song" in Lucier's installation, it is tied to images in the video projection that also link musical and spiritual themes. Perhaps the most succinct of these images, at once mysterious and emblematic, is of a mud-sprayed LP recording, split starkly in two, whose label reads, "Heaven Can Wait."

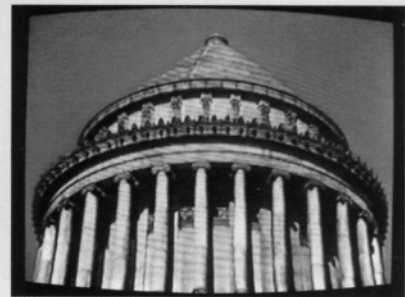
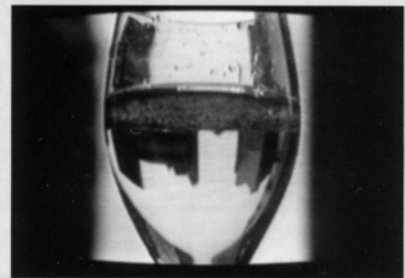
Experiencing *Floodsongs* in Grand Forks was

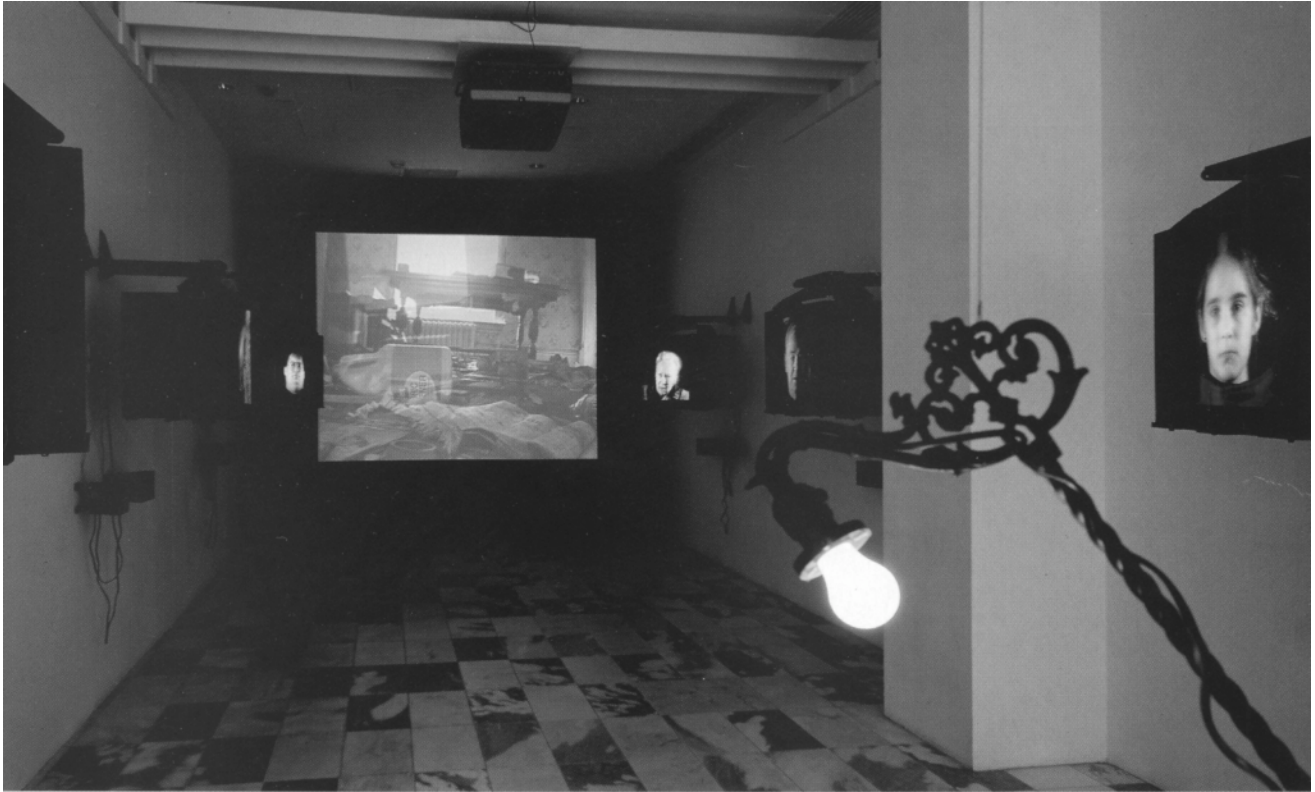
both illuminating and moving. Commissioned by North Dakota Museum of Art director Laurel Reuter as one of several works in a project commemorating the flood, *Floodsongs* was created for a specific community, and when it was exhibited in that community it possessed the restorative power of the best public art. Watching the residents of Grand Forks see their friends or themselves in the work, listening to their survival tales, I felt the installation assume new meaning and an intimate place in the collective life of its intended audience.

Decay, memory, natural catastrophe, what it means to inhabit and then lose a home—the same themes and concerns that animate



Above, Denman's Col (Geometry), 1981, two-channel synchronized video installation; at the Norton Gallery of Art, West Palm Beach, Fla. Below, two stills from the piece.



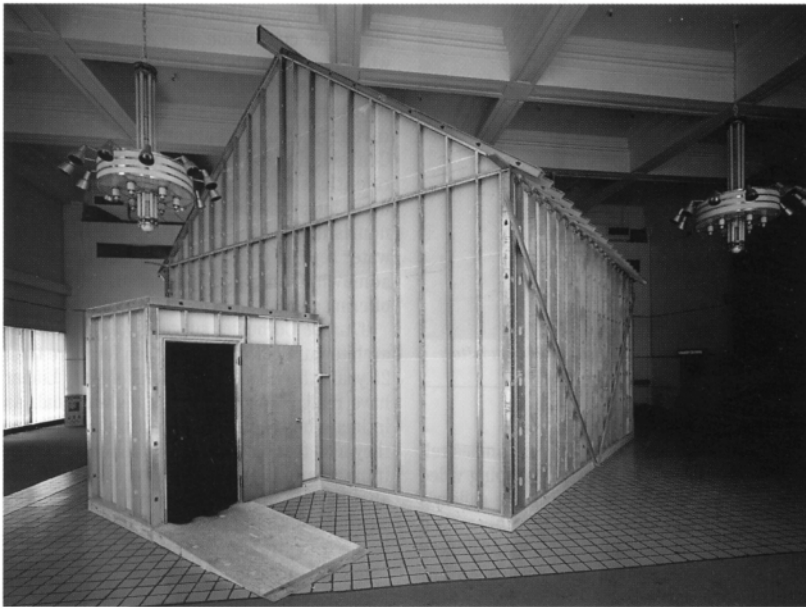


Above and below, views of Mary Lucier's video-and-sound installation Floodsongs, 1998, showing furniture salvaged from floodwaters; at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, originally commissioned by the North Dakota Museum of Art, Grand Forks. Photos David Allison. Right, video stills depicting one flood survivor and various scenes of devastation. Photos this page courtesy Museum of Modern Art.





This page, views of Lucier's Oblique House (Valdez), 1993, wood and Sheetrock structure with video projections and videotapes controlled by motion sensors; installed in an abandoned car dealership in Rochester, N.Y., as part of "Montage '93, International Festival of the Image." Photos James Via.



Floodsongs have preoccupied Lucier from the outset of her career, more than 25 years ago. Originally a sculptor and photographer, Lucier made forays into mixed-medium performance, then, in 1973, began to experiment with video. She created her first video installation the same year. Titled *Antique with Video Ants and Generations of Dinosaurs*, this work consisted of a secretary/armoire housing a cactus garden, a triptych mirror, a magnifying glass and a video monitor; on the latter ran a tape showing an ant farm and a series of dinosaur postcards. On the

floor in front of the armoire, beneath a low-hanging lamp, lay two black-and-white photographs under glass, both close-ups of landscape, stamped near the center with the word "INHABIT."

Inspired in part by the writings of French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, *Antique* invited visitors to inhabit its whimsical environment by envisioning themselves reduced to the Lilliputian scale such a move would necessitate. In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard examines our capacity for just such imaginative projection

Just as "Floodsongs" does, "Oblique House" presented a ruminative environment which transformed spoken memories into music by making some of the words unintelligible.

by exploring the ways we "inhabit" or dwell in protective enclosures like shells, nests, corners, chests, drawers, wardrobes and houses. His insights into how we invest these intimate spaces with our mixed feelings about our homes also pertain to Lucier's installations, where images of houses suggest both the stability of shelter and, as in *Floodsongs*, the possibility of domestic loss.

In *Denman's Col (Geometry)*, created eight years after *Antique*, Lucier continued to explore such Bachelardian themes as how human beings inhabit different forms of architecture, how we daydream and what it means to dwell. Inspired in part by Le Corbusier, this work addressed the way city-dwellers often spend hours gazing out of windows at buildings, which, in the process, become repositories for thought. Two channels of synchronized videotape were displayed on five rotated monitors within a sculptural structure that alluded formally to the city skyline.

Over the last 10 years, three installations have



As intimate but fleeting architectural structures, Lucier's video installations teach us to value impermanence and free ourselves from attachments to physical objects.

transformed traumatic memories into an allusive music by deliberately obscuring the intelligibility of individual words.

In *Last Rites (Positano)*, 1995, Lucier made use of a similar installation format to plumb the first 21 years of the life of her mother, Margaret Glosser. Lucier's most personal work to date, *Last Rites* consisted of a roomful of her mother's antique furnishings,

Evoking several forms of architecture found in the low-lying land nearby—weather station, slave dwelling, winnowing house—this elevated structure was literally aglow, illuminated on all four sides by video projections one could only see by circling the work. In each of these projections, sequences shot in the decaying interiors of an antebellum mansion alternated with those taped in the sparsely furnished rooms where slaves once dwelled. Anticipating *Floodsongs*, *House by the Water* was also inhabited by phantoms, in this case those of the masters and slaves who continue to haunt much of the Southern landscape. In the mansion, for example, a girl in a white dress spins and spins in front of an ornate, full-length portrait, ultimately to be absorbed by a whirling vortex (a radar image of hurricane Hugo) slowly approaching the Carolina coast.

In another sequence, shot at night in a deep blue corridor, the shadow of an African-American man appears. He starts to run, darts into a room, retrieves his hat, and as he reaches the camera, disappears. His urgency suggests insurrection, or maybe he is meeting his female companion, also African-American, who runs down the same corridor projected on another side of the house.

Other images in each of the projections reveal a world surrounded by water. Ceaselessly lapping off the coast, crashing relentlessly against the shore, drumming down fences during a hurricane, promised as nourishment in a verse from the Bible, the water seen in *House by the Water* becomes a somewhat ambiguous symbol, capable of offering comfort even as it inspires fear.

If, as Le Corbusier suggests, the purpose of architecture is to move us, then for more than 25 years the video installations of Mary Lucier have realized architecture's highest goal. As intimate but fleeting architectural structures, they also teach us to value experience, accept impermanence and free ourselves from attachments to physical objects. As one of the survivors in Grand Forks said upon losing his home and life's possessions to the river, "After all, those are only things." □

1. *Under the Whelming Tide* is the title of a collection of photographs and essays commemorating the Red River Flood of 1997. It was edited by Eric Hylden and Laurel Reuter and published by the North Dakota Museum of Art, Grand Forks, in 1998.

Floodsongs was first seen as part of the exhibition "Mud and Roses: The Aftermath of the 1997 Flood of the Red River of the North," North Dakota Museum of Art, Grand Forks, N.D. [Dec. 5, 1998-Jan. 31, 1999]. Subsequently it appeared solo at the Museum of Modern Art, N.Y. [Mar. 13-June 20, 1999].

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Installation view of *Last Rites (Positano)*, 1995, showing suspended antique furniture, a video monitor, color and black-and-white photographs; at Lennon, Weinberg, New York. Photo David Allison.

more directly expressed the themes found in *Floodsongs*, and in two cases, anticipated its form. *Oblique House (Valdez)*, 1993, was constructed in an abandoned car dealership in Rochester, N.Y., as part of Montage '93, International Festival of the Image. In this work, four individuals who lost their homes to the earthquake that destroyed Valdez, Alaska, in 1964, and who also lived through the *Exxon-Valdez* oil spill of 1989, were shown in tight facial closeups on greatly slowed-down videotape. The monitors on which the tape played were nestled in the corners of a small Sheetrock house. While these survivors remained silent until visitors approached the motion-sensors controlling their speech, once activated, they shared their experiences in voices processed to enhance resonance and pitch, sometimes speaking solo, as visitors' movements created a variable requiem for Valdez. Just as *Floodsongs* does, *Oblique House* presented a ruminative environment which

all suspended in midair at different angles relative to the floor; two large, overlapping video projections of water, dominating the gallery's far wall; three video monitors arranged around the periphery of the room, all running interviews with people who witnessed key events in her mother's life; and an audio interview with Glosser herself. As in *Oblique House*, all four speakers shared their stories in response to visitor movement throughout the gallery, and, as in *Floodsongs*, the theme of water mentioned by the speakers and expressed in the projection became a metaphor for the reflective surface of memory.

Water was important as both image and metaphor in the video installation that immediately preceded *Floodsongs*. Commissioned by Spoleto Festival USA, *House by the Water* (1997) consisted of a small white house on stilts surrounded by a cyclone fence and placed in the middle of a warehouse in Charleston, S.C.