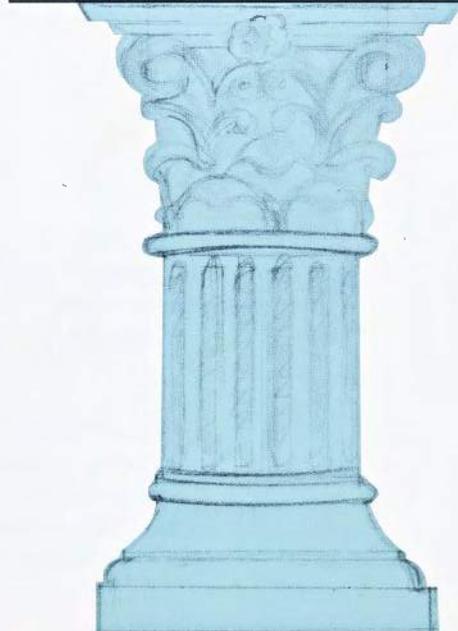
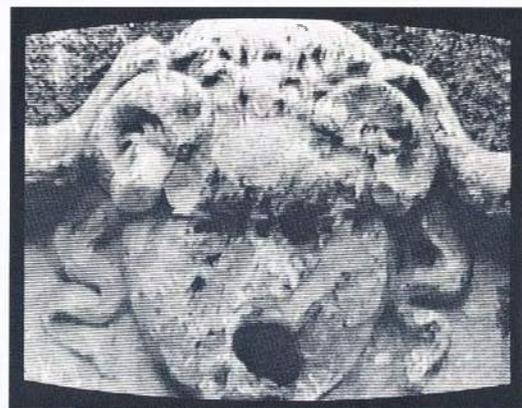
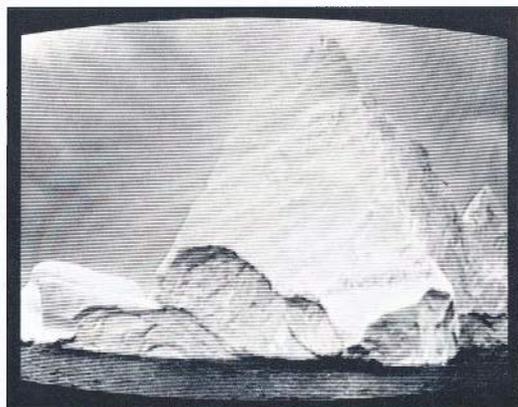


# W I L D E R N E S S

**Mary Lucier**



# W I L D E R N E S S

**A video installation  
by Mary Lucier**

January 12, 1986 - February 16, 1986  
Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University  
Waltham, Massachusetts

Commissioned with the generous support of  
funds from the Massachusetts Council on the  
Arts and Humanities *New Works* program.

April 1986 - March 1988  
National tour by the New England Founda-  
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ance of funds from the Massachusetts Council  
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## **Acknowledgments**

For the presentation and national tour of *Wilderness*, I have collaborated with Mary Lucier as well as Marie Cieri, Director of the Visual Arts/Media Program at the New England Foundation for the Arts. Mary Lucier has given invaluable advice on all aspects of the project. Marie Cieri's enthusiasm for *Wilderness* has not only motivated her to organize its national tour but to oversee many details of the project such as the design and publication of this brochure as well as the accompanying poster. I have very much enjoyed working as a part of this team over the past two years.

I would like to thank Carl Belz, Director of the Rose Art Museum, for permitting me to continue work on this project which I began while at the Rose. When I became Assistant Director at the Neuberger Museum, State University of New York at Purchase, a year and a half ago, I found Suzanne Delehanty, the Director, to be already a supporter of Mary Lucier's art. I am very grateful to Suzanne Delehanty for her helpful comments on the text of this publication and for encouraging me to continue my work with Mary Lucier beyond this project.

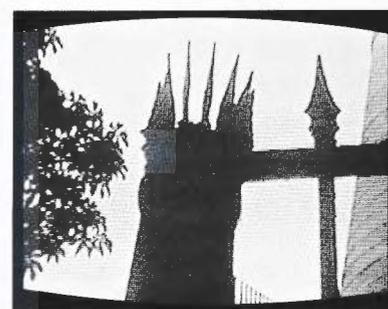
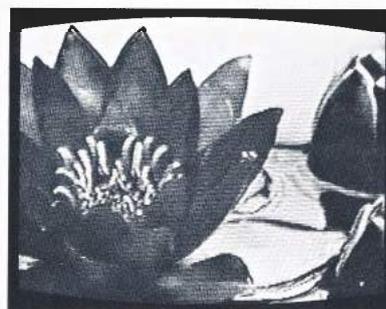
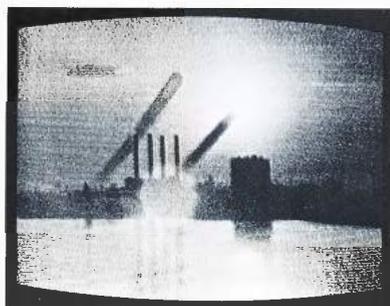
**NM**

## Introduction

*Wilderness*, which this publication celebrates, 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 re-created 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.

From *Dawn Burn*,  
1975 installation



From 1983 installation, *Ohio at Giverny*

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.

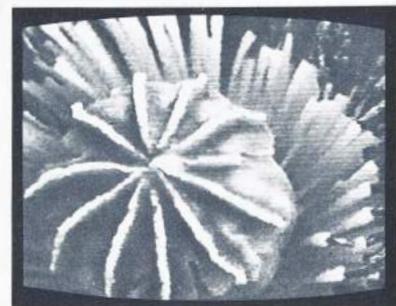
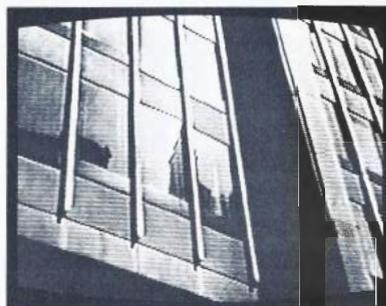
Initially, Lucier began *Wilderness* with a conceptual or schematic plan that evolved from researching works by these 19th century artists, locating the sites they painted, and placing them in three categories: coastal, inland, and upland scenes. Although she returned to some specific sites and maintained a structure based on the 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 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



From *Wintergarden*, 1984

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 reexamine the past, she has become an effective and eloquent voice for her own time.

Nancy Miller  
Guest Curator



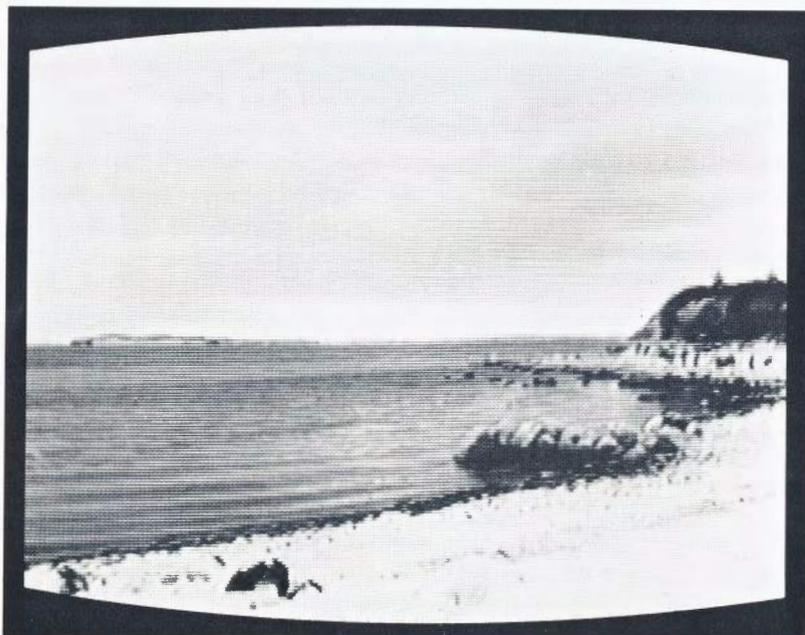
*Wintergarden* installation at One Chase Plaza,  
New York City, 1984

**An Interview with Mary Lucier**  
by Nancy Miller

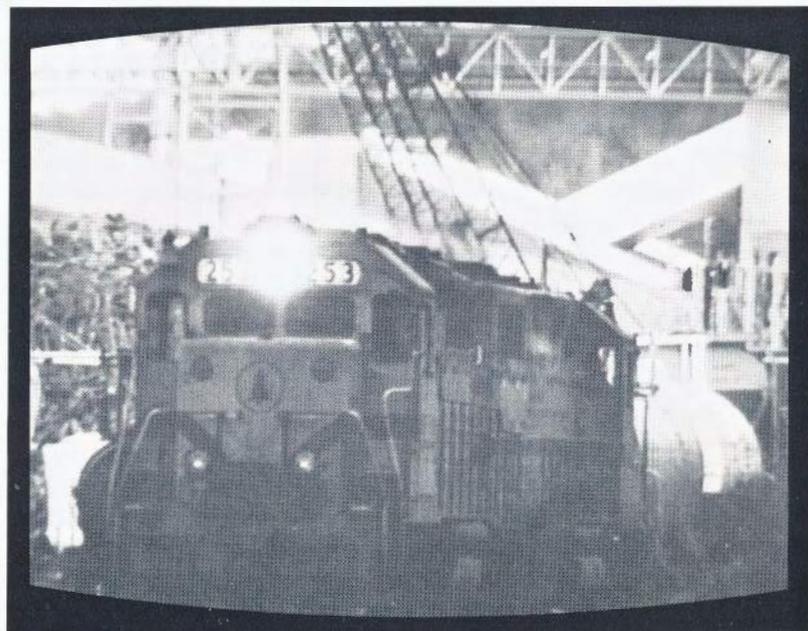
**NM** In *Wilderness* your subject is the American landscape.

**ML** I'm dealing with landscape from various points of view, and I've been dealing with this subject since I began making art. That subject has something to do with national identity and personal identity, increasingly expressed in the investigation of landscape and light in landscape. But it's important to mention that I wanted also to get images not only of pure nature – what you might call wilderness – but cultivated nature and aspects of design or domestic architecture. Also industry. So that the piece is really a mixture throughout, an interweaving of all those kinds of images from all those places. It's not merely a trip into the wilds. The scenes of pure nature are almost always seen in counterpoint to the hand of man and what has been wrought in the environment. The wilderness is a metaphor for what I'm really interested in, which is ultimately the conflict between the wild and the civilized and where that is taking us. I think *Wilderness* has primarily to do with my focusing exclu-

sively now on themes that are indigenous to America; themes that are, in fact, indigenous to American culture and have been from very early times, in literature as well as painting. I'm coming to focus exclusively on what I consider to be the American condition or archetypal American concerns. The piece is about the state of wilderness as a condition of origin for the United States, both as a reality of life and as a projection from the Old Testament for the first settlers, as well as an aspect of assimilated myth for the contemporary American. Wilderness was at first the dark opposite of the Garden of Eden, something to be tamed, cultivated, and purified. As the natural wilds began to disappear, the idea of the wilderness became nostalgic, and the notion of preservation became a cause. Americans began to discover that it was important to retain some concrete aspect of wilderness, in order to preserve the national identity, that of a garden having been rightfully won from the wilds.



Images from *Wilderness*



**NM** Let's talk about the painters you have been researching and your unique use of the sites they painted.

**ML** The painters I've been interested in include Thomas Cole and the Hudson River School, Albert Bierstadt, Frederic Church, and John Kensett. Martin Johnson Heade and Fitz Hugh Lane are also important, as are George Inness, Albert Pinkham Ryder, and Winslow Homer. I did a great deal of research and looked at a lot of paintings at the Metropolitan Museum, The Brooklyn Museum, the High Museum in Atlanta, and others. Nineteenth century paintings became the models for my approach to the subject of American landscape and culture. Initially I thought it would be a very interesting task to go back to the original sites to see how they had changed or how they were the same. Or to see if, in fact, you recognized and felt the presence of the paintings. As to the sites I've taped for *Wilderness*, they almost all derive from paintings. When I returned to the actual locale, sometimes I found I could reconstruct paintings, directly or indirectly. Or, if I didn't actually go to the salt marsh at Newport, where Kensett worked, for instance, I did shoot in a salt marsh near Wellfleet and I've allowed that to be accurate enough. If that genre of painting is one of the motifs I've found repeated throughout the period, and if I felt it fit into the fabric of the piece, then it doesn't actually matter whether I've videotaped the exact location or not. What's remarkable, one way or the other, is this extraordinary sense of connecting to the past through a contemporary technology.

**NM** Why do you feel a connection with the 19th century is of value to you?

**ML** I think there is a parallel between the 19th century and the present time. In the mid-1800s, the onrush of the process of industrialization was possibly the most significant issue of the time. Certainly American writers responded to it in a very particular way, and I think the painters did also. I see a direct parallel between, say, the dilemma of nuclear power that we face now, and what was implied at mid-19th century. The achievements of science and technology are both spectacular and terrifying. The B-1 bomber is gorgeously designed, but it is also an instrument of death. Nuclear power, as the extreme example, has the potential for tremendous usefulness, yet it is ultimately life-destroying.

Industrialization is both an instrument for beneficial progress and the spoiler of the land. As Leo Marx points out in his book *The Machine in the Garden*, the symbol of the train cutting through the pastoral stillness was a harbinger of what was to come. We can see what has transpired in the past 100 years since the advent of the railroads across the continent and the inexorable encroachment of industry throughout the land. In that time we have grown more cynical as, I think, we have come to face a more apocalyptic condition than they did.

**NM** Could you give an example of how you have used a scene that derives directly from a painting?

**ML** There is a painting called *Lake George* by John Kensett dated 1896 in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum. My assistant and I went to Lake George. Everyone we met offered an opinion as to where the site might be. So we hired a motorboat and went into the lake. Our driver kept the picture right in front of him the whole time, referring to it. We drove up and down the lake five or ten miles in either direction looking for the vantage point Kensett may have had when he made that painting. Well, what I think we found was that he cheated. What we concluded is that the mountain to the right in the painting is Black Mountain, but it doesn't really have such a sharp peak, and the two banks never do appear to converge as much in reality as in his picture. He used poetic license.

**NM** John Kensett's paintings are so extraordinary. The sense of measured space and the quality of light give the paintings a subtly transcendent quality.

**ML** Yes. All his work is like that. It has a quality of the ordinary about it, yet it's very pure and contemplative. I liked *Lake George* a great deal and felt I knew it from the paintings. I recognized the islands, the configurations in the land, the color of it. It really has that yellow-bronzy patina in late summer. I try to see what someone like Kensett wanted to convey. I'm not sure how much he's striving for a kind of ideal reality. He's very close to the truth and has pushed what he has seen only a little bit in one way or another toward the "ideal".



From *Wilderness*

**NM** Did you ever return to a site and find it had changed a great deal?

**ML** Yes. I went back to the Connecticut Valley around New Haven to find the site of Frederic Church's *Haying Near New Haven*, the same painting is sometimes called *West Rock, New Haven*. The rock formation is so distinctive in that part of Connecticut and in the painting, but it's very pastoral in Church's picture; the signs of civilization are just rudimentary. I spent three days there driving around. I found, ultimately, that I couldn't deal with the overwhelming development of the area. I can scarcely describe how it defeated me, how there was no way I could photograph that scene. I decided to drive to the top of West Rock. When I finally got there, I found a cabal of occult teenagers or something. There we were high on this great promontory, where you can see for miles around. There was elaborate graffiti all the way up on the road and over all the rocks. It was after twilight, and I had driven around and around and finally arrived, only to encounter hundreds of people in their

vans and trucks and cars – rock music playing, drinking, getting high. More was going on than just partying. It was as if I'd come upon one of those young Satanic cults you read about in the newspapers. It was really a wild scene. I also noticed that the turnpike was built through the best vantage points and I really searched the New Haven area to try to find some way to record this contemporary view of West Rock. I was unable to commit the scene to videotape.

**NM** If you had been able to get a vantage point, would you have taped it?

**ML** I would have tried. I feel it's my task to cast some new light on an old topic. I think one of the reasons I found that area of New Haven to be such a defeatist situation for me, however, was that, visually, it makes such a loaded statement, that it didn't leave any room to draw independent conclusions. It's so overwhelmingly a contemporary wasteland along the turnpike, in so many ways a contemporary wilderness of technology run amok. My statements, the episodes about technology that occur in my piece, are actually much more extrapolations from reality, more paradigmatic. They emerge suddenly out of the landscape and disappear again. They make a statement but I don't see it as total devastation.

**NM** One of the unforgettable images from *Wilderness*, that of the icebergs, is a motif that appeared in 19th century art. Your expedition to the icebergs reminds me of the way some 19th century landscape painters took grand expeditions to new frontiers outside the country.

**ML** The motif of the iceberg came directly out of paintings by Frederic Church, though I'd been fascinated with the idea of icebergs for a long time. I wanted to make one grand expedition whether it would have been to Peru, the Rockies, or Labrador in addition to the smaller ones. The iceberg is something you wouldn't initially think of as American, but it becomes an American emblem by inclusion in the body of Church's work. And it's part metaphor. An interesting note is that the 19th century American painters very much identified with the pioneer spirit. They went into the wilds, taking certain risks in making their expeditions too. It has long been a part of the American identity that the artist is also an explorer. I've always felt an identifica-

**NM** The designs for the installation of *Wilderness* and the way in which you edit your tapes reveal a systematic way of thinking, a structure based on numbers.

**ML** The piece will consist of three channels of videotape, three separate tapes, synchronized in playback and displayed on seven monitors in the sequence A B A B C B C. This patterning of images will serve to extend the landscapes physically into lateral space, intentionally invoking the panoramas that were so popular in the 19th century. These were paintings, immense lengths of canvas, that were slowly unrolled before a paying audience to the accompaniment of music and commentary. The content was usually documentary and scientific, describing a particular geographical site. In one of his essays, Thoreau reports having gone one week to see a panorama of the Rhine and, the next, a panorama of the Missouri and being favorably impressed with the grandeur of the latter. Before movies, the panorama was a way for the public to experience distant lands and unseen areas of their own country.

**NM** You've said you see both the beneficial and destructive aspects of technology. You must be aware of the irony of your use of a technological medium. This should be especially apparent in your use of exposed TV sets on top of classical pedestals.

**ML** Definitely. In *Wilderness*, I'm using modern technology as a bridge to link the past and present. I wouldn't for the life of me take away technology and return to a pre-electronic state of existence. However, I am ambivalent about it, like most Americans. On the one hand, I see television as a tremendous incursive threat in American life. On the most cliché level, it is a kind of Big Brother. It is the epitome of the technology that watches you and controls you, and it can take over your life, becoming your system for relating to the world at the expense of real human contact. Perhaps using television as an art form is a corrective to that.

New York  
October 22, 1985

## Biography

Mary Lucier was born in Bucyrus, Ohio, in 1944. She attended Brandeis University, where she was graduated with honors in English and American literature. Upon completing her senior year, she received the President's Award in Sculpture. Following several years of post-graduate study in sculpture and photography, she created several installations and performances in a diverse range of media including slide projections, found objects, sound, and film. In the early 1970s, these works were presented in locations ranging from The Kitchen and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.

In 1973, Lucier staged a performance in which she utilized not only slides and live audio but also videotape. During the same year, she created her first video installation. In subsequent years she has created many single-channel tapes and multi-channel installations. Organizations which have presented one-person exhibitions of her work include The Kitchen (1975, 1978); the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse (1976); Media Study in Buffalo (1976); The Museum of Modern Art in New York (1979); The Hudson River Museum in Yonkers (1980); the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York (1981); Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, in Pittsburgh (1983); and the Norton Gallery of Art in West Palm Beach (1985). A video-dance collaboration with the choreographer Elizabeth Streb was presented as a part of Harvard University's Summer Dance Program in 1985.

Lucier's work has been seen in group exhibitions at the Rose Art Museum in Waltham, Massachusetts (1974); Musee d'Art Modern in Paris (1977); The Hudson River Museum (1978); Espace Lyonnais d'Art Contemporain in Lyons (1981); The American Film Institute in Los Angeles (1983); the Whitney Museum of American Art (1983); the Stedlijk Museum in Amsterdam (1984); Galerie Joliet in Montreal (1984); The High Museum of Art in Atlanta (1985); and Museum Moderner Kunst in Vienna (1985).

In 1985, Mary Lucier received both a fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation and a grant from The American Film Institute's Independent Filmmaker Program. Over the years, her work has been supported by grants and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, CAPS, the Jerome Foundation, and the Gallery Association of New York State. A major focus of her work since 1979 has been the development of video projects for public sites. She has received commissions from the City University Graduate Center in New York, The Hudson River Museum, and the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council in New York.

Lucier's work is in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Banff Center in Banff, Canada. She has lived and worked in New York City since 1974.



Mary Lucier at work on  
*Wilderness*

# W I L D E R N E S S

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.

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.

The artist has dedicated *Wilderness* to Sam and Roberta Beer.

## **Camera**

Mary Lucier

## **Sound**

Earl Howard, Mary Lucier

## **Original Music**

Earl Howard

## **Videotape Editor**

Gregg Featherman,  
Nexus Productions

## **Camera Assistants**

Lisa Rinzler, Andrea Degette  
Suzanne Nicholas

## **Pedestals and Platforms**

Bruce Porter Bruce Rayvid  
Stage Scenery Inc.

## **Special Assistance**

Port Washington Public Library  
Department of Decorative Arts  
at The Brooklyn Museum  
Nassau County Department of  
Recreation and Parks

Pall Corporation

Smithtown Hunt Club

Ausable Club

Jim Hayes, Howard Runyon

Beverly Hendricks, Marcia Dickerson

Larry Mishkin, Mark Mastroianni

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Cornell University Library of  
Natural Sound

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