

# V I D E O NETWORKS

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THE CREDITS ROLL AT BAVC: 1988 IN REVIEW

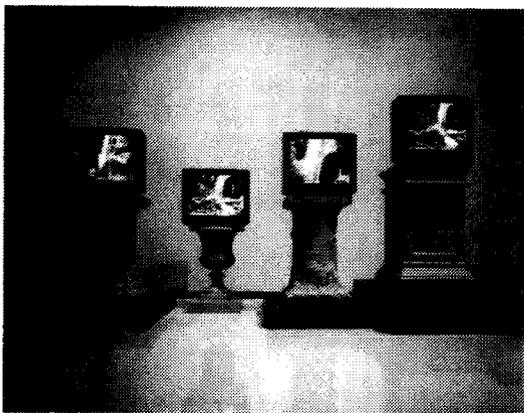
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# REVIEW SHOWS



*Wilderness* (1986) by Mary Lucier

## INTERIORS: A REVIEW OF AMERICAN LANDSCAPE VIDEO

By Margaret Morse

Appreciating a video installation requires not only attention to what is on the video monitor, but to a range of other sculptural elements: there is commonly more than one monitor, and the monitors themselves form a shape in space. In addition, both the viewer and the monitor(s) are enclosed together in another space, which can be created as a kind of set. Within this set, the viewer can be activated to perform certain actions or assume certain roles. Unlike the theater with its proscenium arch or the narrative film with its screen, the viewer is surrounded by a virtual world, enclosed within a fiction. This feature of installation art approximates the situation of the viewer in the outside world, enclosed in man-made fantasies and surrounded by media projections. But, whereas we experience everyday fictions in a state of distraction, in an installation, the viewer is aware he or she is inside a symbolic field created by an artist to make some kind of statement. And whatever else we may know about the museum as an institution and as a repository for valuable objects, it also has an at least nominal existence as a "liminal" realm, i.e. a space exempt from the rules of the everyday world outside, in which "anything" can happen—be it a reflection, a critical view or an alternative to the everyday.

A landmark show of video installation art, *American Landscape Video: The Electronic Grove*, has traveled to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art from its first collective appearance at the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh. The original exhibition, curated by Bill Judson, featured installations by seven artists simultaneously, united by a common theme. The new film/video curator at SFMOMA, Bob Riley, has stuck his neck out to bring this show in the biggest and least commodifiable form of the media arts to the Bay Area. The Museum itself, however, appears to have hedged its bets by shuffling the exhibition in among other kinds of art less risky with the public. In San Francisco the show has been split into two parts of four and then three installations and necessarily put in different serial order. Part One, November 10 through January 1, 1989, consisted of Rita Myer's *The Allure of the Concentric* (1985), Dara Birnbaum's *Will-o'-the-Wisp* (1985), Doug Hall's *The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described* (1987), and Mary Lucier's *Wilderness* (1986). Part Two, January 7 through February 19, 1989, included the oldest piece in either group, Frank Gillette's *Aransas* (1978), as well

as Steina Vasulka's *The West* (1983), and Bill Viola's *Room for St. John of the Cross* (1983). Whatever sense may have been made out of the juxtaposition of the seven different installations, be it historical or thematic, was lost, especially in Part Two, where the Vasulka piece was separated from the other two by a photo gallery.

One is left then to consider what kind of statement each of the installations was making separately qua installation about its subject—the American landscape. Of course, the time has passed when the landscape required no justification for its representation. The meaning of landscape in the 19th century, be it painted on majestic canvasses as the "cataclysmic sublime" or on the beautiful, almost miniature Luminist canvasses of "sublime repose," was once self-evident. Today such scenes are like reserves, special cases conserved to remind us of what was once a distant and external goal—the frontier, threshold to the wilderness beyond. The landscape itself has been irrevocably emptied of its status as a national icon and article of faith in America; representations of the landscape thus have no automatic value or intrinsic meaning to call except as the past. One could even say the landscape has lost its aura, or its unquestioned capacity to point to something ineffable beyond itself. Rather than remind human beings of our smallness in the face of natural forces, we are best reminded of the human need to take responsibility for the prevention of world destruction. A video installation which takes this emptied symbolic world as its theme must somehow address the problem of its change in status in the contemporary world.

While a historical approach to landscape art has value in creating the context for change, the catalog of the exhibition cloaks a contemporary relation to the natural world with old categories. "Transcendental repose" or the "cataclysmic sublime" can't help us much to find our way in "the electronic grove" today, much less serve as terms of a global evaluation. Nor do these historical terms help the visitor to understand whatever it is that an installation can offer that paintings or photographs cannot.<sup>1</sup>

The difference between the painted landscape and any of the *American Landscape Video* works is that a painting of the natural world makes a wall into an

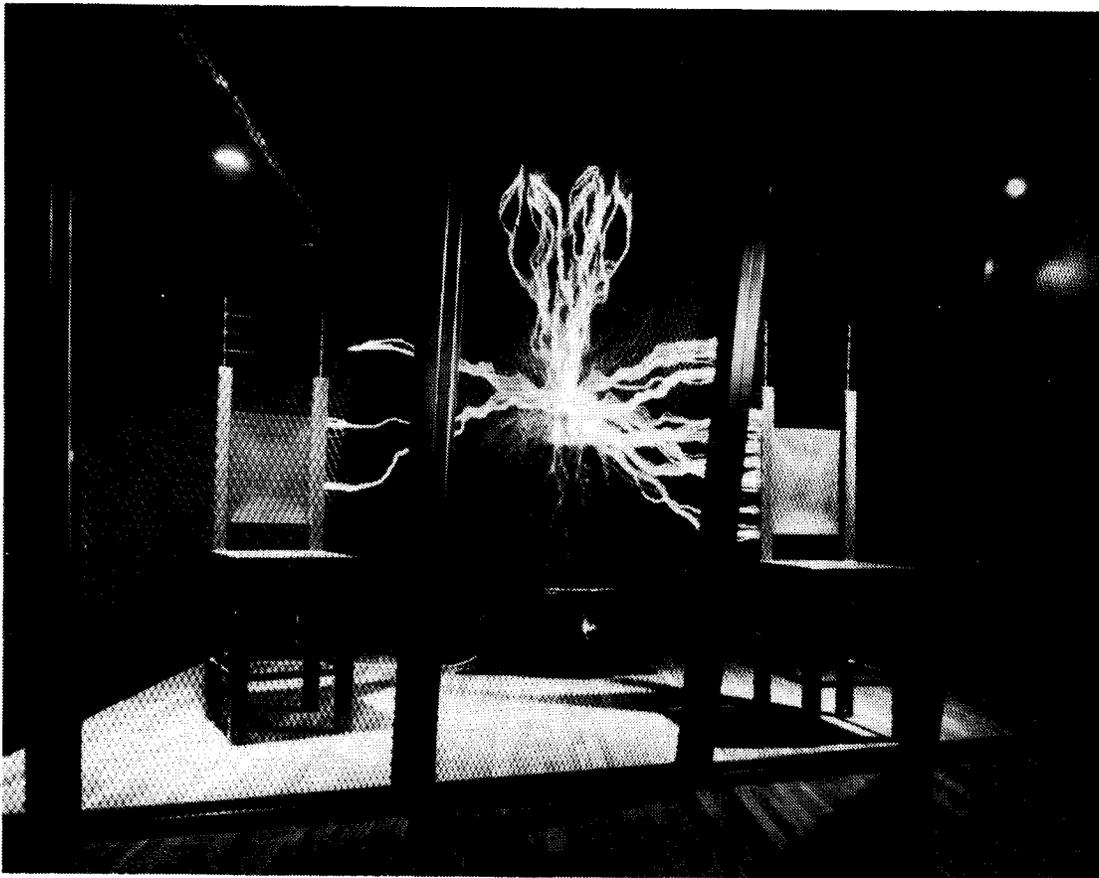
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imaginary window, whereas a video installation makes images of nature into an interior, inhabited space. What was once the outside world is brought triply inside: inside the monitor, inside the installation set, and inside the museum. Nature as the referent of the images on the monitor changes in the process, from the "outside," a future toward which all effort is expended, into an "elsewhere," a place one cannot necessarily visit. (Video is no guarantee of "having been there" or even of "having been" in the external world, considering the contribution a computer can make to every stage of video production.)

Then, as opposed to the referent time of the scene depicted within a painting or photo, the installation "interior" is a complex mixture of temporal and spatial references which may conflict, constituting a symbolic landscape without necessary equivalent in the exterior world. There are two aspects of time to consider within an installation space: 1) While the time of the video image on the monitor refers to a "once was," or "elsewhen," the installation as a set may itself have a time referent, as for instance, the saint's cell in Bill Viola's *Room for St. John of the Cross*.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, the visitor experiences (pre-recorded) visual and sound events in a here and now. These events usually unfold in cycles, ever-repeating at a certain rate in the expectation that visitors will enter (and leave) at random. In *American Landscape Video*, these cycles varied in length from as little as four and five minutes to as many as forty-five. One can conclude from this cyclic use of repetition that the installation typically depends on all sorts of poetic and sculptural devices to make its points rather than the intrinsic tools of the narrative. Then what is important in such a case isn't the recounting of events that happened somewhere else, but rather the events which occur in the interior to the visitor her- or himself.

In the following remarks, I would like to briefly address in catalog order what each of the seven installations in the show achieves in relation to the possibilities of the installation form as well as what each installation says about landscape become "interior."

1) Rita Myer's installation space, *The Allure of the Concentric* (1985), offers itself as a shadowy garden, all the more ethereal in that it does not pretend to be anything but an interior. The visitor's itinerary is through an open aluminum gate, a more symbolic than effectual threshold. At the other end, the spotlight garden is enclosed by triple aluminum mesh towers so filmy that they are more icons than towers. In the



*The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described* (1987) by Doug Hall

center, over a black pool of water, four dead dogwood trees are eerily suspended, their roots hacked off in mid-air, a visceral statement about the rootlessness of nature in the interior. Four monitors are balanced like cubes on the irregular rocks at the four corners of the room. The glowing monitors and the shadows of the floating trees, along with contemplative music create a ghostly atmosphere. The video monitors act as lures in this concentric arrangement of space, pulling the viewer's orientation away from the center to face outward toward the screens. Once the viewer sits along the pool shelf to see the two monitors visible at any one time, the pool is no longer observable. The cycle of video and music is five minutes, but the viewer will need to change positions and stay several cycles to see all the visuals.

The monitors are each separate channels, displaying four different environments: a mountainous landscape, a meadow with an elk, a swamp, and a desert (with mountains in the distance). The camera work includes close-ups to extreme long-shots, relating large-scale with small-scale patterns. Perhaps these interdependent environments are divided in our attention to make the point that they are just that—arbitrarily divided. In any case, our attention is drawn away from the here and now of the interior and the center of the space, so that we could miss the one drop of water which falls from some invisible source (possibly the outside world) into the pool below, causing a tiny splash and ripples. Indeed, this drop is the only reality in an utterly rootless world of displaced images, a message from the outside world which the rest of the installation seems organized to circumvent from reaching the viewer. This tension between a central event in the interior and orientation on what is apparently exterior seems to be the primary statement about subjectivity, media and the natural world organized in this installation.

2) If there is such a thing as a "minimalist" installation, it is Dara Birnbaum's *Will-o'-the-Wisp* (1985) from her "Damnation of Faust" series of tapes and installations. The piece is more of a video wall relief with sound than it is even a video sculpture—the artist has chosen to realize the fewest possible parameters open to the installation form. This coincides with the primary aesthetic strategy of the piece, a "now you see it, now you don't."

Considering the history of the fan as a tool for seduction, perhaps for this reason the wall relief consists of eight black and white photo panels arrayed in a 36-foot-wide half-circle. At first look the

panels show an image of a woman's face (advertising-like with head back and lips parted), then other blots of black on the fan come into focus as many different images of what is seemingly the same face. Three color monitors jut out from the panels in a horizontal line. On any one screen, leaves change from green to autumnal colors, then the same woman's face comes into focus through leaves and fades away. Later, urban teenagers congregating on the street also appear through the leaves in an overhead shot. Though the monitors appear to play the same or a very similar tape, none of the images match. Rather these images appear to leap in what looks like a successive cycle from one monitor to the next. The disappearing and reappearing visions alternate over four minutes.

Another concealment strategy is the use of strong graphic lines that also appear on a monitor during its cycle. These lines match the lines in the fan-panels behind the monitor at times, as a result flattening the monitor into the background. In addition, a virtually inaudible spoken narrative (I recognized only that there was a speaking voice), electronic sound and melody (in an eight-minute cycle) fill out the otherwise empty space of the installation.

The point of *Will-o'-the-Wisp* in relation to the "Damnation of Faust" is also difficult to perceive or guess. Familiarity with Faust doesn't seem to provide any clues.<sup>2</sup> The fleeting, soft-focus images of a woman and the more hard-edged overhead view to the street below suggest that perhaps the viewer is in the master position of Faust. The artist's statement in the catalog, however, informs us that the installation is an attempt "to ascertain the possibilities of reclaiming an active voice for Marguerite, both as an individual and as the female character of the Faust legend. For it is this use of the female voice which has been denied through the myth's centuries-long existence." (catalog, p.73) The problem is that the female voice we (barely) hear seems to be embodied by the images of the woman on the wall in the monitor. That is, the voice is not speaking from our, the viewer's position of (frustrated) mastery, but as a will-o'-the-wisp who averts her eyes from our gaze with the distant expression of an advertising model. Though the image apparently has a voice, the image does not adopt the position of a subject who can speak for herself (nor does she speak from "our" side). The female image remains an object, albeit an ephemeral one. Thus there seems to be a conceptual lack of clarity in the piece itself about its objectives, not just a perceptual problem in reading it from the museum floor.

3) Doug Hall's *The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described* (1987) most successfully activates all the spatial realms possible in the installation form. At first, the installation may seem a departure from the themes of power in the media and fascism around which much of Hall's work has developed in the past. Three channels of video images are displayed on six monitors and an immense wall projection. The images seem to reawaken overwhelming forces of the cataclysmic sublime, accompanied by the roar of forest fires, tornados and floods. The sight of men in a tiny boat against an immense ocean swell causes one's own sense of containment and control, of being a subject in the world, to fade in awe.

Actually, though, what we see is the harnessing of these natural forces to power in the man-made world. The tornados that spin to heavenly voices and threaten to blow people, horses, and a small town away are matched by the technological sublime of jet turbines. Hydraulic forces are met by dams and swells by huge steamers. Forests fire industrial flames. The primal images in primary colors as well as the startling roars of natural and industrial processes belie the dichotomy of the technological and the natural world. Indeed, the technological world has copied everything it knows from nature itself—including a majestic scale in the destructive and productive exercise of power. Among these forces, the monitor image itself, especially the immense wall-projection, is another such capture of awe-inspiring powers.

The six monitors build a horizontal series displaying three different channels. There is a poetic element of the installation form in the abstract dance of horizontals and verticals across a series of monitor screens, in succession (as in Birnbaum's piece), repetition, or contrast. Thus, installation monitors can be described as beats and rhyme schemes in a poem. In Hall's *The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described*, monitor images repeat a/b/c/a/b/c, with an additional expansion of one channel into the wall-sized projection.<sup>4</sup> The contrasts within and between Hall's monitors were stark in shape and hue: for example, a vertical dam face contrasts with the horizontal force of water below; the intense reds of a forest fire or a steel cauldron burn brightly against an intense blue. Video "snow" by itself or in a farmyard sky, or a choreography of color bars, remind us in the process that we are being manipulated via video.

Yet the monitor series also left a sense of unease and incompleteness, an open ending which suggested that the events shown could continue to repeat in the real

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space of the viewer. The six monitors stand on very high black pedestals in the darkened room, higher than the viewer, in a decidedly fascist architecture of intimidation. A steel mesh fence running diagonally across the room juts out toward the viewer. In response viewers tend to hug the wall. Few approach the cage formed by the chain link at the far end of the room. The huge monitor is on the side of the wall across from the cage. Within the cage stand two larger-than-life (non-ergonomic) chairs behind which sits a Tesla coil. The fourteen minute cycle of Hall's installation is interrupted by a terrifying blast of lightning—like forks from this machine, "high frequency radio waves and loud sounds which could be harmful to persons with hearing devices and pacemakers." (warning in handout) The chairs behind the mesh are ambiguous: power chairs for supersubjects? The artist's chairs? Electric chairs? In any case, these chairs are seats of power to which the viewer has no access.

Visitors jammed Hall's installation to experience an effective orchestration of terror expanding into their own space. The viewers I talked to felt successfully intimidated by this installation and quite a few came back for more. The installation allows the experience of the mechanisms of overwhelming power—yet in a sanctioned space outside of the political economic world, where the mechanisms are fictions. (I wonder whether it was a kind idea to bring very young children, who haven't a clue about what an installation is vis à vis reality.) In the end, Hall's work evokes less a nostalgic or romantic experience of the sublime than the emancipatory effect of enlightenment. For if our bodies are overwhelmed by our perceptions, these same perceptions offer us the signs of power in operation irrefutably as just that, a manipulation of signs.

4) Mary Lucier's *Wilderness* space invited a subdued contemplation from benches of video images which evoked 19th century Luminist paintings. The seven monitors and three channels made image repeats that build a shape in rhymes like this:

a/      c/  
b/      b/  
a/      c/  
b/

The pedestals on which the monitors sat in one colonnade rhymed likewise with different periods of 19th century garden design. The colors in Lucier's monitors were as subdued as Hall's were brash, as if washed over with mist. Her motion choreography

was restrained within any one screen but high in contrast between screens; for instance, strong verticals on rhyming screens contrasted with strong horizontals on screens above and below them. The music (by Earl Howard) was evocative of the scenes on video—an iceberg, an abandoned mansion, a mountain lake—without matching them.

Lucier's valley of monitors conveys an ending. In this installation space, the viewer is invited to occupy a seat across from a perspectival view of a unified and mastered world, in the garden layout which developed during the Renaissance. Now that perspective is shown to be broken into multiple images which have lost their presence—ghosts condemned to memory. There was a sense of finality at every level of the installation: The rhyme scheme of the monitors offered closure at a poetic level. The monitor images also emphasized their pastness in two ways: peaceful images of the natural world were "busted through" by bulldozers and trains which expanded algorithmically to take over the whole frame. Furthermore, each scene was eventually enclosed in a computer graphic gold-leaf frame restating the referent of the image framed within a frame (within a frame within a frame) as a certain kind of commodity and an art object, not as nature per se.

What seems miraculous is less a view of nature in sublime repose than that these images of the dead could have been captured on video. The garden itself is wholly interior and no longer a bridge to the uncultivated world. *Wilderness* is an elegy to the American landscape.

5) Frank Gillette's *Aransas*, an older work than the others, addresses the different issues of a recent period nonetheless removed from our own. Gillette's piece admirably combines an interest in the variability and beauty of the land with an abstract structuralist aesthetics. The installation space is empty except for an arrangement of monitors on pedestals, one that could perhaps have influenced Rita Myer's video configuration. That is, the visitor must face outward and turn around in a circle in order to eventually see all six monitors with six different channels. The monitors are arranged in ones and twos at the four points of the compass. A varied landscape is presented in many configurations over the forty-five minute cycle, from close-ups to extreme long shots. Water could lap in one direction while two exquisitely contrasting blues (a cloudy landscape, a plant) were displayed next to each other in another.

6) Steina Vasulka's *The West* is listed in the visitor's guide as having 16 monitors, but at SFMOMA there were 22, stacked in two rows of eleven. The two channels were distributed in different alternations above and below, creating a criss-cross pattern of rhymes:

a/b/a/b/a/b/a/b/a/b/a  
b/a/b/a/b/a/b/a/b/a/b

This horizon of monitors was also curved in a bow around a bench. Such a massive display of change and repetition, along with a considerable amount of computer intervention in the video images tended to make whatever was on screen more an abstraction than a realistic landscape. One computer effect was the garish coloring by a paint system which substituted acid blues or oranges for part of an ancient Indian ruin or an eroded valley. Another was the laying of images over each other, either in dissolve fashion, or like a tiny insert. For example, one reduced view of a scene floated across another scene like a tiny cloud. All the overlays tended to move in contrasting directions in the two different channels, making a kind of dance of separation and convergence.

The first part of the 30-minute cycle consisted of these computer-produced abstracts, while the second part made use of images made with a motor-driven camera pointed directly at a spherical mirror, revealing the camera and imagery in front and behind the lens simultaneously. Computer effects were added even to these complex visual distortions; for instance, in a sequence involving a satellite dish on both channels, once directly, once in the spherical mirror, the dish in direct view was matted out to reappear in the spherical mirror view and a spherical landscape appeared in the now empty matte. The four channel-audio environment seemed electronically generated as well, so that one could say that this installation went the farthest toward producing an "electronic grove." The end result had no pretension to simulate the natural world, rather it marked our greatest distance from it.

However, in this display of pyrotechnics, the viewer remains physically passive, invited only to sit and construe the abstract patterns dancing across a bowed shape, perhaps while also enjoying the perversity of their creation out of the monocular perspectives of Renaissance space. For this reason, I think of this piece as somewhere between a massive kinetic painting and a video sculpture, rather than an installation.

7) Bill Viola's *Room for St. John of the Cross* builds a stark contrast between parts of its installation space/monitor set-up into the representation of two states of mind. A tiny shelter stands in the midst of the large room, representing the cell where the 16th century mystic, St. John, was incarcerated by the Inquisition. A visitor can peer through a cut-away portion of the wall to see white walls, a dirt floor, and a wooden table with a pewter pitcher and glass and a video monitor. On the monitor is a still color-video image of a snow-capped mountain. The interior conveys both a sense of enclosure and utter peace—in contrast to the sound of a voice murmuring in Spanish feverishly, which seems to emanate from the hut as well.

Meanwhile, in the "outside" interior world constructed by the installation set, the visitor is exposed to loud wind-like roaring. A huge black-and-white video projection covers the entire wall beyond the shelter, conveying a shaky subjective view of a flight through a jagged mountain landscape. The flight echoes St. John's poetic vision of communion with God; yet it is this terrifying vision to which the visitor is invited, even compelled by the space to share. The sight makes many visitors queasy (museum personnel warned as much), but the experience is stunning, even overwhelming. The sublime terror once situated in the "American landscape" is relocated as a mental landscape in the imagination.

The installation offers a visceral experience of two different kinds of space and two different ways of experiencing them both: the confined or shelter space is experienced from outside, at a distance, as at peace. The voice from the interior suggests another invisible interiority in turmoil. Within the "outside" of the interior space, the visitor is unprotected, exposed as a virtual subject to the dangers of free flight. However, despite the furious noise and motion within the outer installation space, in another way, the installation is absolutely still. That is, "nothing happens" so to speak, for there is no unfolding or cycle, just one continuous event: once the visitor has experienced the two spatial constructions, he or she has exhausted the installation itself.

These installations we see in the museum are not the same as the installation video that evolved from conceptual art as non or anti-commodity form. The installation began as an ephemeral arrangement unique to a particular situation, and one place and

time. The *American Landscape Video* show represents a new stage, not only in the validation of the art form as museum-worthy in a massive way, but in the substance of installation video as an art form—from impermanence of a true will-o'-the-wisp to the traveling show that can be erected anywhere with the space and the money for its expensive electronics. The video installation thus promises, provided it can attract the visitors to justify the commitment of space and money, to move from a marginal and alternative existence into the force field of another kind of commodity, the exhibition. Some may view this with regret; yet others may have to regret that the move did not succeed.

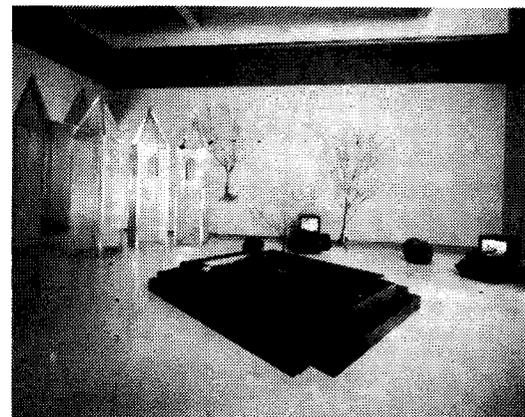
Because installation videos may be more poetic than narrative, and bring theatrical and sculptural elements into a common space with a kinetically involved spectator, they demand unaccustomed kinds of attention. Rather than a passive spectator in a darkened theater, the viewer can be active, one who can experience the ruse in a monocular perspective, changing positions literally and figuratively, one who, though enclosed in a setting for an imaginary world, is primarily aware of its symbolic nature. The very reasons the transfer of video installations to the museum would indeed be desirable suggests potential obstacles to its acceptance as a mass commodity in the new mode of the big museum exhibition.

The catalog *American Landscape Video: The Electronic Grove*, William D. Judson, Curator, The Carnegie Museum of Art, is available through the San Francisco Museum of Art Bookshop.

1. David Ross, in "Postmodern Station Break: A Provisional (Historic) Overview of Video Installation," does conclude that video is transparent, as opposed to painterly and photographic artifice. p. 60. The argument here is, to the contrary, that video is not a window, rather an opaque part of a symbolic interior.

2. The theme of Goethe's *Faust* is the seduction and betrayal of an innocent woman along with the mastery and destruction of the natural and social world. But Goethe's *Faust* is saved, while the opera *Faust* based on it ends at an ambiguous point. The referent must be Marlowe's *Faust* because he is damned. But he seduces or is seduced by Helen, a product of the imagination, not Marguerite, who is expressly the heroine mentioned in the artist's notes in the catalog. ■

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*The Allure of the Concentric* (1985) by Rita Myers