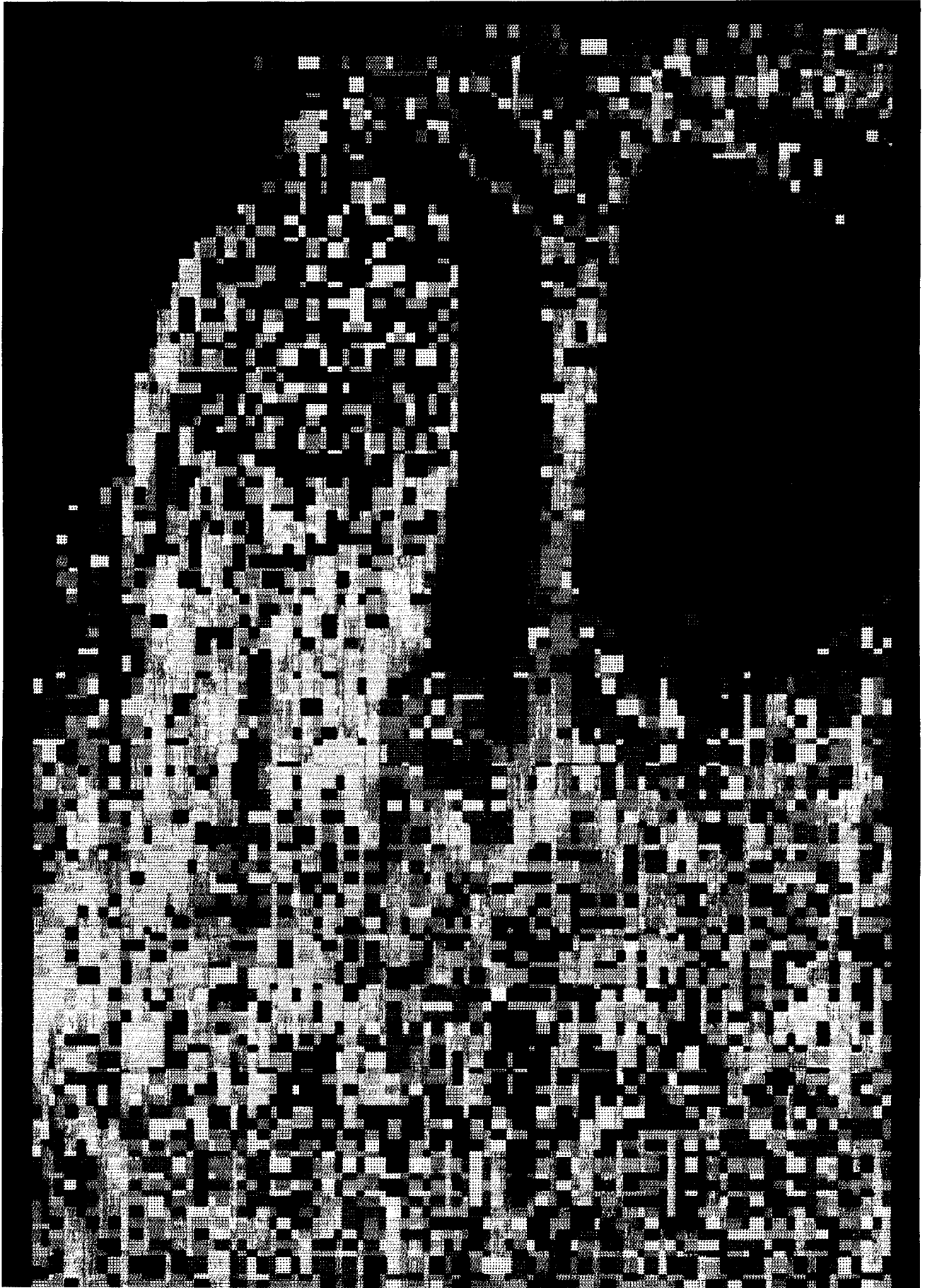


A VIDEO THEATRE WORK BY MIROSLAW ROGALA

# *NATURE IS LEAVING US*





**Mirosław Rogala** (artist, educator)

iEAR Studios/ Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute/ Troy, NY 12180-3590 (518) 276-4774

Outerpretation, Inc./ 1524 South Peoria/ Chicago, IL 60608 (312) 243-2952

**ABSTRACT**

The author explains how his use of the video medium in a multimedia environment leads to the creation of a new contemporary art form called "Video Theatre". This art form combines the properties of Scale, Space, Movement, Sound, Time, and Debate. In this special theatrical environment video is neither background nor setting, but Actor and Content both. The article applies these ideas to the author's major work of Video Theatre, *NATURE IS LEAVING US* (1989).

*To Woody for inspiring  
discussions  
Mike*



## NATURE IS LEAVING US: A VIDEO THEATRE WORK

*Assimilation of information from multiple media simultaneously  
is the experience of life in the 21th Century.*

As an artist who works separately and simultaneously in a wide array of artistic media, I hear the term *multimedia* used to excess. In its simplest context, multimedia merely refers to plural artforms operating in conjunction with one another. This is not new. Music and theatre have combined to give us opera for centuries. A work of cinema or a video piece can routinely incorporate the varied arts of photography, theatre, music, graphic design, painting, and more without seeming extravagant in the least. Any piece that simultaneously incorporates sound and vision is to some extent multimedia. The past few decades have simultaneously seen the rise of several new media---video, performance, installation--each with its own history, aesthetic, and relation to the art world. Increasingly, though, these spheres of influence are converging. The modern audience can easily take such demands upon its attention in its stride. The ability to assimilate information is a skill which grows and increases among members of our Information Society. The current use of the term multimedia seems to infer extreme combinations of media, and thus it is often applied to my work. But I find that the term multimedia confers no intentionality, does not explain why the media have been combined. I have created the term *Video Theatre* to define certain of my multiple media works such as *Nature Is Leaving Us*.

As an artist, my aesthetic has gravitated towards a precise balance of media that is not easily assimilated or taken for granted, and may not soon become familiar. Many artists have reached such a nexus, approaching from distinctly separate mediums. Laurie Anderson proceeded from sculpture into performance; Robert Wilson began in architecture and developed logically into theatre. [1] I began by painting, photographing, writing poetry, and composing music--each a

separate activity. When I started to experiment with video in 1979, I realized I could synthesize my creative endeavors and remain focused upon a single set of ideas. While I have continued to work on single channel videotapes and video installations, [2] I have also begun to push video into new contexts where its conjunction with other media is unique and challenging.

My *idee fixe* of the multimedia artist (of myself) is one who seamlessly *continues* the same ideas and investigations from one medium to another without losing concentration or precision. And one who can present those investigations to an audience without starting over from point zero in each medium. Often I start out exploring an idea in drawing that I might complete in video or music. One must be able to see and hear through to the *essences* of the media in order to see and hear the full expression. [3] This *full expression* may initially seem intimidating to new viewers. That the audience feel a sense of being overwhelmed by the conflicting sensations of competing media is one of the central components of my aesthetic message. I work at the edge of the content curve: what is the minimum amount of time needed to perceive an image, idea, or sequence? The confusion and tension that are experienced in the mind while one's brain attempts to sort out and process information bombarding in from a conflux of sounds, sights, and dimensions is a central facet of the modern age. [4] Because my work is *fast* it compels the audience to examine and identify this process within themselves in a way that more comfortable or conventional multimedia do not. By pushing one to near overload point with information that *should* be processed, I force the viewer to think about their judgments and emotional responses to art in a technological age. [5]

Audiences everyday are presented with multimedia choices far beyond my ability to compete with in terms of complexity. Anyone with a cable television hookup and a remote channel-changer is thrust instantaneously into the most massive multimedia work that man has yet created. But such a chance work brings with it no obligation to *assimilate*, to engage its content in an intellectually



rigorous fashion. Comedy, news, romance, music video, commercials, talk shows, all wash over the viewer in waves without requiring that any of it be understood, emotionally responded to, agreed or disagreed with, or otherwise engaged in a personal manner. All that is required is that the audience process the information and proceed to the next set of images and sounds. Such experiences have taught us to treat our souls like computers: capable of processing great amounts of data. [6] We don't expect our computers to love or hate their data--they are indifferent to it. We should not allow such rote experience to callous us to new sensory input. Unleashed geniuses cannot be put back into bottles, however. If we live in the Information Age and we continue to bombard our senses with data, we must grow capable of assimilating and evaluating on such a scale. [7] In an aesthetic sense, this is what my Video Theatre work strives for: To make coherent and perceptible statements through the combination of varied and disparate media. In order to accomplish this task, I have removed the media from their staid preconceptions and placed them, reborn, into a new arena where I define the context.

This arena of engagement is what I call *Video Theatre*. To me, Video Theatre contains many important properties: Environment; Scale; Space; Movement; Sound Environment; Time; and Debate. I will address each of these aspects in turn and show how they effect the interaction of various media within my 1989 work, *Nature Is Leaving Us*. [8]

## ENVIRONMENT

First, Video Theatre means that I must control the circumstances and/or the environment in which my work is viewed. While a certain segment of the art world may respect the imaginary dotted line that separates Video Art from Television, most people would consider the argument specious. [9] A single channel videotape presented in arbitrary circumstances is, to most people, just more television. Video Art may be its category--as opposed to Comedy or Talk Show. As

a subset of television, the work is capable of being ignored, trivialized, or insufficiently processed by an audience that has already preset its notions of how to address television.

In my implicit contract with the audience, I am promising them a vaster canvas than their predetermined notions of television; and I am therefore demanding more from them in terms of their attention and engagement. I consider my works to truly be theatre, a new kind of theatre in which *video is the principal actor*. [10] There will be many actors upon the stage (both human and electronic), but the video displays are a constant factor. The theatrical setting also gives me control over the other conditions of perception, such as lighting and acoustics. The intensity and color of the lighting, in fact, govern the relative contrast of the elements. In my work, the use of color implies an additional level of meaning or intentionality. By setting my work within the context of Theatre--both physically and metaphysically--I code the viewer to the need for a heightened sense of awareness.

## SCALE

The notion of Video Theatre also allows me to set the scale of the work for





the viewer. A single-channel videotape is always delimited by the size of the monitor. [11] The image may be a vast panorama of earth and sky, but the edge of the frame is always drawn by the boundaries of a 25" monitor. While the viewer can easily enter the work, it is hard to be overwhelmed or transcended by it. My work uses large scale videowall displays to fill the stage with images of appropriate monumentality or intimacy. I prefer the Videowall to video projection precisely because it gives me control over the scale and intensity of my work. [12] It allows me to fix precisely the resolution of the video image in relation to the audience. With a videowall, I have the option to show small objects much larger than life or to show iconic images in multiple patterns or to create realistic scale with human-sized video actors interacting with the human actors onstage (quite often, the videotaped performer and the onstage performer are the same person). In *Nature Is Leaving Us*, I used a simple shot of flowers blowing in the wind as the videowall complement to a dance duet. Once the image was writ large across the stage, however, it gained a new dimension as the dancers bowed and swayed in conscious dialogue with the movement of the flowers. Such an image is possible to create on a single videotape by "chromakey" technique. However, the completed process shot would have very little of the dimensional clarity, resonance, or emotional power that live theatre contains. Only in a theatre is the artist free to control both the scale of the work itself and the scale of the work in relation to the audience.

## SPACE

The difference between Video Installation and Video Theatre involves the existence of public space. While an installation may occupy the same space that is granted to the viewer to observe from, Video Theatre keeps the audience at a distance and thus directs its vantage point. The difference in space between a traditional videotape and Video Theatre is obvious: One moves from two-dimensional space to three-dimensional space. Because I can elect to keep the stage bare and present only the videowall display, I have the same options for two-dimensional display that the traditional videotape has--both within the frame and across a panoply of frames/ monitors. With video's ability to combine layers of image and information, I have the

chance to create landscapes that can exist only on video. And with the videowalls, I can display those landscapes on the monumental scale they deserve. I have control over the point of view, or the audience's perspective. The cinematic notations of low angle to eye level to high angle are metamorphosed in the iconography of *Nature Is Leaving Us* into allegories of nature reference (frog-view to human view to bird view). Since the staging is based upon human scale, the eye-level angle or point of view is the starting point. I also use tilting of the camera from an axis parallel to the horizon to create a sense of imbalance. This breaks the laws of perspective, destroying the reference to world. Within the videotape frame, I can simulate three-dimensional space in a two-dimensional plane. However, as soon as I choose to place performers or objects in front of the videowalls, I have broken out of the two-dimensional plane. [13] I like to use the drama of a three-dimensional performer interacting with the video



image to create a tension between the planes of texture and sensation. It is both jarring and emotionally comforting when the space between the video image and the audience is interrupted by new elements that must be perceived and *contextually interpreted*.

## MOVEMENT

Movement in video is perceptual. Video, like film, records a series of still images which, upon playback at the *correct* speed (30 frames per second) provides the illusion of motion. This persistence of vision is at the heart of video consciousness. Since *normal* motion is merely a mental construct, all other movements are equally valid. There are many different types of movement available on videotape or disk. At its most basic, there is the movement of the videotape through the playback machine, which allows for the *distortion* of movement: fast/slow/reverse/freeze-frame/animation. There is the movement of the camera. There is the movement of an object before a static camera. There is the double motion of both camera and object through a landscape. There is the wild energy of the camera and object in opposite or nonsynchronous motion. There is the movement of planes when two or more frames of video are combined through digital special effects. There is the movement of three-dimensional shapes in video effects that transform the two-dimensional plane into 3-D objects. With so many options, my choices are usually dynamic rather than lyrical. I can even create movement on still photographs recorded on video by the use of digital effects and the permutation of planes. In addition to these movements, Video Theatre opens up new options. There is the movement between video channels when multiple channels are jointly shown on adjoining videowalls. And there is the opportunity for movement throughout (across, towards, diagonally) the stage, both in conjunction with and in opposition to the images on the videowalls. Video Theatre allows for a integrated visual counterpoint as the discrete movements and narrative transitions within and between media create an organic rhythm.

## SOUND ENVIRONMENT

The total sound environment incorporates the elements of Language; Music; Natural Sound; Live Processed Sound; Surround Sound; Sound Effects, and Silence. Language is the purest form of communication and expression. By including spoken sentences, monologues, isolated words and sound gestures, I am able to directly represent and document the world "as is," where the sound is synchronous to its image. Music and poetry are among the most abstract of expressions. I use their purity as an almost measurable reference to organize the other media into a hierarchical relationship. Music has the ability to create an additional level of dialogue: it can anticipate and illustrate the content or drama (from violence/chaos to nirvana/peace). The "color" of the chosen sounds (strings, piano, sampled sound, human voice) complements the score as color complements an image. [14] Sound is continuous. The world doesn't fade in and out, it doesn't dissolve between scenes or events. Thus, music can bridge vast or remote time/space environs. By such applications, art defines itself: it exists on its own terms. Just as I can process the image, I have the ability to create, alter, distort, and transform sound. Processed sound is important in my work as an extension of my control over the natural world (or the creation of a digital world). I can control the volume, the tonal qualities, and the acoustic presences of sound. None of these options exist in the real world. Surround sound allows for animation of the sound through the space in an extension of the theatrical gesture. Movements of sound are thus in dialogue with the movements of images.

## TIME

Many video artists have solved the problem of distinguishing their work from television through the use of installations. The Video Installation creates its own environment, usually within the context of an art museum or gallery, and is thus easily perceived as something other than television. While I consider Video Installations to be a valuable and useful form to work within, [15] I find that most viewers consider them something akin to sculpture (a perception enhanced by the museum/gallery context). The viewer usually is unwilling to grant to the installation the





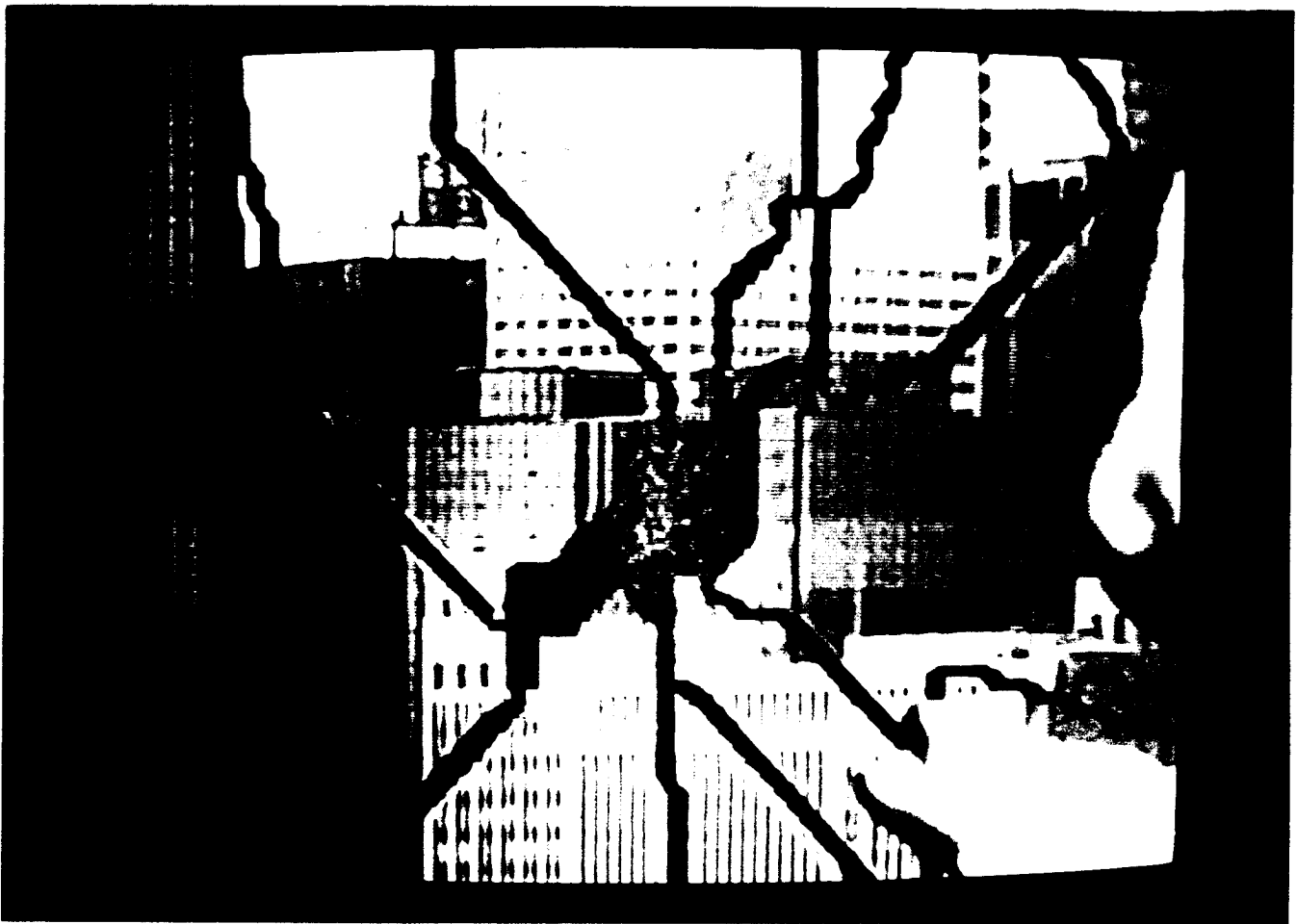
distinction of linear time. One may be willing to stroll about the piece for twenty minutes or so, as he would with any other serious work of art. But the reflex of granting an hour or more of one's attention is a notion that audiences associate with the performing arts. Defining my work as Video Theatre aligns it with audience's expectations of a piece that unfolds in linear time. While not conventionally narrative, my work is structured so as to require "unfolding" in linear time. As with any work of performing art, I also have control over the tempo of the work. The speed and density of the unfolding varies with the content curve, the amount of media employed, and the transition rates. My video editing style also establishes a personal stamp upon my works as identifiable as an author's writing style. The choices of shot lengths, image juxtapositions, repetitions, and transitions all contribute to an overall subjective response with which I associate myself.

### DEBATE

Computer simulations of Virtual Reality can create a nonphysical world that is larger or wider than the viewer's perception. The viewer is forced to "enter" Virtual Reality and make choices about what to perceive. I believe that Video Theatre operates on similar principles. There is too much content and choice of media to instantaneously perceive it all at once. The choices and combinations of perception that my viewers make, I call *debate*. [16] In the same work there may be dancers, performance artists, onstage musicians, mechanical objects, props, projections, digital and analogue displays, electronic and natural sounds, music, poetry, dialogue, spoken words. There are many levels of debate that come to mind as one's eyes and ears race from element to element. While no particular medium is dominant over the others, at times one performs as an organizing force around which adjacent media offer their debate. In "(our) Hands," sound acts as such a force; in "Pain," it is dance; in "Birth," video. Often, the dynamics of one medium resonate or anticipate the actions of a previous or forthcoming event within other media. Take, for instance, the contrast of the slides with the video displays in "Accelerating World." They vary in light intensity, texture, scale, purpose, movement. I want these distinctions to create a conceptual and textural tension as the audience evaluates the properties and strengths of each medium. In addition to these inherent qualities, the slides are a time-disruptive commentary: a symbolic foreshadowing or reminder of images and events that will occur in other media within the work. Debate is thus a global factor, and not dependent on the present moment for its provocation.

### A VIDEO THEATRE WORK

*Nature Is Leaving Us* was conceived of as a whole from the beginning, although each element was built up individually. Nature is abstracted **perceptually** (with the electronic processing of video), **conceptually** (with the editing and restructuring of poetry and texts), **synthetically** (with live singing and vocal improvisation), and



**physically** (with the optical processing of slides). The computer in this work operates both as a tool and as a model, correlating the binary codes of Nature (Day/Night, Light/Dark) and that of the computer itself (On/Off, Open/Closed). The fourteen sections are an organizing device for the vast ground that the opera covers, and are related to a metaphor of seven days and seven nights (The amount of time it takes a Creator to invent the world).

The physical arrangements necessary for performing this piece are an open stage, upon which are placed contiguously three 16-monitor Videowalls. Although each separate Videowall or Channel (a rectangle four monitors high by four monitors wide--this scale is important, for it establishes the height of the video as roughly equal to the height of a man) is capable of playing images to separate monitors or combinations of monitors, *Nature Is Leaving Us* uses each Videowall to display a single full-grid image. The three separate videotapes (or channels) are run in synchronicity with each other. Because each Videowall abuts the other, a single four by twelve rectangle is created, a panorama upon which I sometimes create single image with the three adjoining channels. At other times the center channel might present one set of images, while the two side channels contain a separate synchronized images. At all times, the composite panorama of the three Videowalls in conjunction with each other is the paramount design.

The Videowalls are placed approximately twenty feet from the edge of the stage to create a space for up to six performers, who enter from the left or the right. Slides are projected onto a screen above and roughly equal in size to the Videowalls, thus extending the viewing area and adding an additional layer of media. Audio speakers are placed throughout the theatre to create a 360-degree movement/motion of the sound. Various props and instruments will be brought on and off the stage as needed. Each section deals with a specific relationship of man to nature or a specific phase of human development. I wanted to create models of the dynamics of the world. Each section presents a different paradigm for thinking or dreaming about the world.



The thematic structure, audio-visual content, and inter-media debate of each section follows:

### I. *ACCELERATING WORLD*. <06:52>

Analogous to an opera overture, the purpose of this section is to introduce the main themes or characters, Man and Nature, as well as to outline the parameters of the drama. The drama spans the entire locus of Man and Nature: Man as part of Nature; Man manipulating Nature; Man destroying Nature; Man in harmony with Nature; Man replacing Nature with his own environment; Man discovering Nature in himself.

Longshots of oncoming crowds digitally transform into spinning globe shapes and back into full video. Each time the image/time has progressed. Onstage, a lone pianist plays a nostalgic tune against the processed noise of the crowds. The synchronicity of the three video channels is such that a single spinning globe can bounce seamlessly from the left to the middle and right channels and back.

Images progress from order to chaos, from feet to legs to torsos to heads, from negative image to positive image. To show the accelerating world, the video also progresses from slow motion (five frames per second) to normal motion (30 frames per second) to fast motion (86 frames per second). Do we live faster?

### II. *PAIN*. <03:31>

Pain often connects Humanity to changes about to happen. In order for birth (or creativity) to occur, there *must* be pain. This section is structured around a dance. With its visible music score and enhanced gestures, *Pain* is not an attempt to glorify pain. Pain is merely physicalized as a force of Nature, making material an invisible rung on Darwin's ladder of evolution.

A videotaped panorama of the city rises up into the frame. Keyed over this landscape is the real-time computer representation of the music score that is playing (an original piano composition with sampled human voice). The dancer dances pain. She begins on the floor--true pain takes one to the lowest level. As she raises herself to standing, the movements are spastic and twisted. Nothing flows, nothing is harmonious. The energy spent in her feet gradually spirals back down where it is dissipated. Spent, the dancer can only crawl and drag herself offstage.

The drama of the performer plays out against a placid, indifferent landscape. The city is sculpturally marvellous, but it cannot connote or symbolize or transmute Pain. The loss of Nature is a primal longing.

### III. *BIRTH*. <05:37>

Birth is the process of renewal. It is the beginning of life, but also the continuation of a much larger entity. Birth is both a departure from and a connection to those forces. Birth can mean your life starting over, as when you fall in love or move to a new country. Birth plus technology means: drugs, forceps, harsh lights, antinurturing, anti-flesh. The robot arm performs but does not feel. The mother, at birth, *performs* and feels all. Human nature and Technology, an interweaving in transition. What is the birth process if not *transition*?

On the middle video channel: A close-up of a baby's head is keyed over the landscape. The dancer/mother interacts with a robot arm. The baby reaches for the flickering world. On the side channels: A negative image of birds in flight, and bricklayers at work. The natural sound of this video mixes with the breathing and sampled human voice in a plaintive cry. This section also contains a coda called "Picture Start." It begins with a computer graphic sketch of Man.





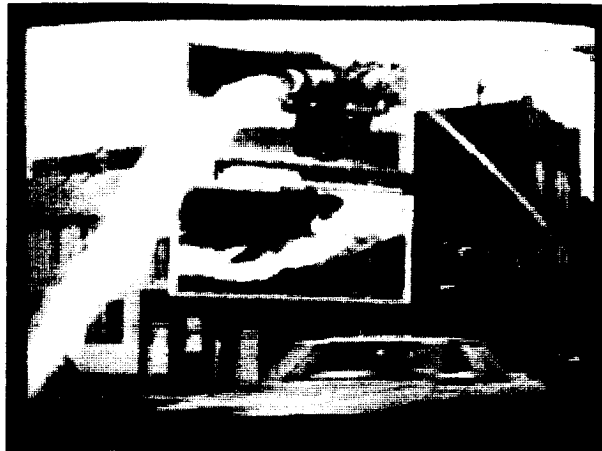
Images of landscape and stages of life crowd in from all sides. These are unframed picture elements that build up but never replace the initial drawing. This fifty-second prevue of future sections is dense: up to seventeen layers of image or information is digitally composited and edited together. [17]

The levels of debate here take place within the video frame between layers of information. The digital domain allows for multiple layers and intense concentration of diverse information without the loss of clarity or resolution. Images ripple like music: the density oscillates, as do the rhythms.

#### IV. *INSTALLING VALUES* . <04:00>

Dancer/Choreographer Amy Osgood performs a dance with her own child, who continuously responds and reacts to the image options presented to him. This piece is about the learning process, about *installing* values in the young. As in life, the choices start out stark and simplistic and become increasingly complex and mysterious. This knowledge, this consciousness, is also the start of a wedge being driven between that which is Nature and that which is Human.

Images of the outside world--of fire, a crashed car, a hydrant, broken tree--slide in and out as information for the baby. The mother *teaches* the images to the young one, yet the child always instigates or leads the action. "A child is not a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be lit." There are also images of Surreal Nature -- images composited through effects to create a dream landscape. Water flows outside the frame of a billboard image of a fire hydrant high above a busy street. The reactions of the child are unpredictable, adding an element of spontaneity and *life* to the piece.



V. *PAIN LEAVING*. <04:10>

*Pain Leaving* is a desire to be united with the flesh and in close, physical contact. It is sexual, sensual; the freedom to be a being with no pain. No pain equals ecstasy/accord. This section is about being in harmony with Nature. Extending a previous metaphor, if Pain is a rung on Darwin's ladder, then this section is about a higher rung on that ladder. It's a condition that in physics is called a "steady state," a continuous interaction and coupling. The appearance of a naked male and female conjures up an image of Adam and Eve, the first to leave the Garden.

This section features the same music as in *Pain*, only with a new orchestration. The time signature is changed and the instruments re-arranged (percussion, flute, vocals) to give an entirely new feel to the composition: it is looser, jazzier, sexier. The Videowalls show macro close-ups of flowers blowing in the breeze.

The human dancers scaled against the macro video flowers push Nature into close focus. Simplicity. Provocation. The three video channels play the same piece of video, albeit each offset in playback by three seconds in real-time destroying any fixed reference. Time is stretched to infinity.

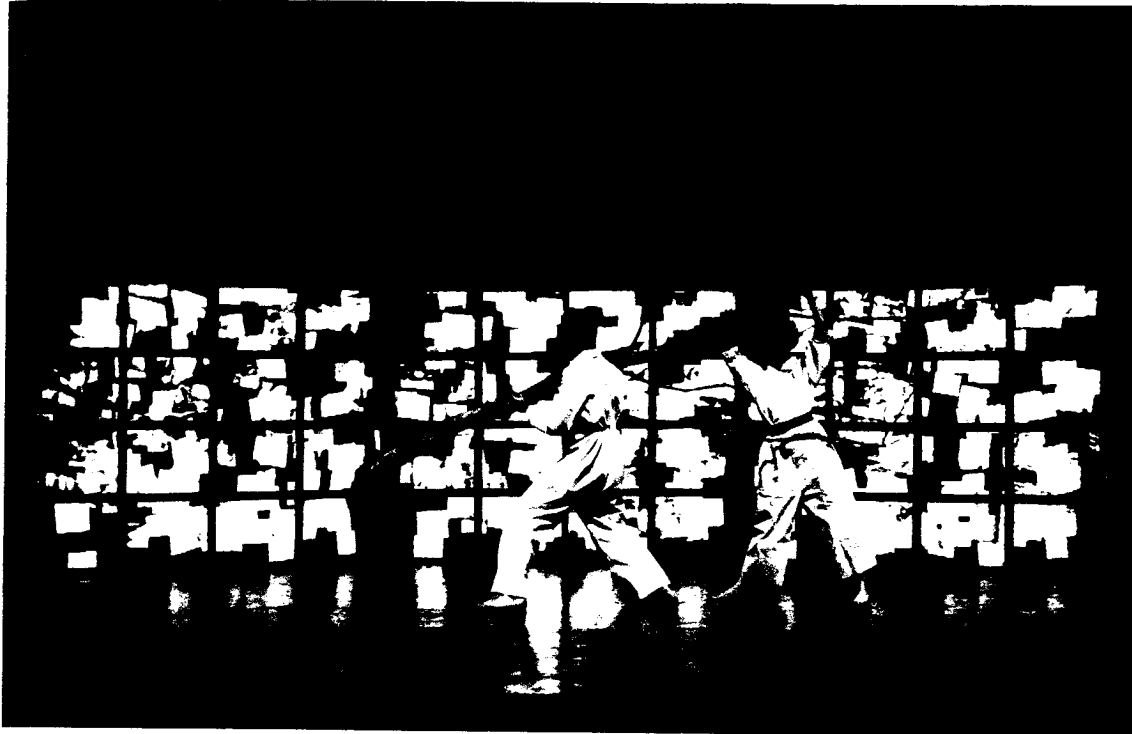
VI. (*our*) *LANDSCAPE*. <03:00>

Here is a new electronic landscape from isolated human gestures and body parts. By enhancing human movements and rescaling objects, the landscape becomes a new world in which a pair of hands looms on the horizon as high as a skyscraper, and a thundercrack causes the dancer to convulse.

While the middle channel plays the new landscape of human gestures, the two side channels play a long, continuous pan of an urban mural. The images -- American Indians, gangs, animals, symbols, words -- pan from left to right in sync as if the center channel were merely obscuring or holding a single wide image. The contemplative sound -- long tones, hushed voices -- expands the space to embrace the cosmic possibilities of an infinite, metaphysical landscape. It must be difficult to live in a landscape void of natural laws: gravity, perspective, motion, dimension.

VII. *LANDSCAPE LEAVING*. <06:08>

Francis Ponge once said that the tree expresses itself by its poses. While man is the only conscious animal, we tend to confer intentionality onto the beasts and plants around us as a



method of understanding the world. *Landscape Leaving* attempts to understand the communications of Nature to us. The curious part of this dialogue is that Nature rarely acknowledges either our efforts or our interpretations.

A male and female attempt to design the perfect tree. The performers, dressed in white uniforms, work/waltz a tree trunk onstage and then deliver monologues while their voices are processed live. The performer speaks to the dichotomy between what is known (in language) and what is felt (through instinct). The three-channel urban still life consists of three adjoining shots of a desolate urban landscape projected onto the separate videowalls. The separate time frames of each shot are thus combined together into one. Each shot has its own activities, its own real time. When combined, the result is a convincing composite image that contains a multiplication of real time: A continuous panorama where time is zig-zagged.

Only in an arena like Video Theatre can time be malleably and visibly manipulated as a sculptor might reform clay. I have created a panorama of forced continuity via discontinuity of time. The dialogue that results between real time and distorted time involves a very high level of dimensional language. [18]

#### VIII. *TREES ARE LEAVING*. <04:51>

The synchronous image and sound of the buzzing, gnawing chainsaw mixes with the vocalizations of the onstage performer into a violent tune. Falling trees dissolve to blocks of wood, which dissolve to wooden figure models.

The harmonies of disharmony. The progress of continuous consumption. Is being in harmony with wood more modern than being in harmony with a tree? The life essence (soul) of a human or an animal is respected and mourned in its loss. Who cries for a tree? Yet, because *Trees Are Leaving*, because Man converts wood to paper, I am able to transcribe these thoughts for the future. The thoughts began on magnetic media (computer disk); but that technology is still inferior to the simple perfection of trees, wood, or paper for longevity.

IX. *HUMAN FACTOR*. <04:00>

A dance of human and mechanical movement. The live dancers imitate the video animation of a wooden figure model and vice versa. Man is now more in harmony with his machines than he is with Nature. Man moves into a new environment, one of his own making. There are surprises, new relationships to new landscapes. It is the modern world.

Artificial landscapes give way to artificial actors. Live actors on the stage learn and perform the gestures, though they cannot match the machinery. The computer music was also written without regard for the limits of human performance. Our live pianist attempts to play the score in a Faustian reinforcement.

The art expression goes beyond human performance, as the live dancers compete with the animated models; the live musician interacts with the computer-driven music. The machines are escaping human velocity. Still, the human efforts are noble and heroic. Will the machines begin to make art without us?

X. *HARVEST*. <01:40>

The Harvest is Nature made over into Man's machine. The regulation of planting, growing, watering, and reaping that is symbolized here by the field of rye shows Man in his attempts to *use* Nature. But of course, farming is not factory. Nature still controls the rain, the sunshine (or lack thereof), the wind, the insects, and a thousandfold other factors. The romance of the Harvest is that Man has gambled (gamboled) with these elements and won.

The phrase, "If I had a spike of rye" (in Polish), is sampled and musically arranged into a rhythmic and upbeat song. The gestural camerawork while walking through the harvest field is enhanced by analogue processing and tinting. Images of infinite multiplication in nature (sand, water, rocks, wheat fields, flower beds) afford great possibilities for combination in separate video channels. When nature offers up such diversity to the human eye, who can notice my *trompe l'oeils*?

Solid fields of color (tinted footage) are in dialogue between video channels, as with the music. This piece emanated from the remembrance of a taste: the bitter, primal experience of a single shaft of wheat or grass between my teeth while walking in the fields. I was attempting in this section to recapture the intoxicating repetitiveness and unification with nature that this early memory recalls.

XI. (*our*) *HANDS*. <02:00>

Basically a percussive music, this is a simple paean to the opposable thumb. The development of manual dexterity--Man's use and mastery of tools--took several dozen millenia. Can we allude to such a span of time in two minutes? Incidentally, all this hammering comes from the addition of a back yard deck. The project was completed in a day.

The shots and sounds of hands hammering are processed into a rhythmic sound and video environment. The sound is stretched and spatially directed to travel in a 360 degree path around the arena. Meanwhile, performers carry logs onto the stage to conduct live manual labor.

The principal debate here is within the realm of sound: The processing changes the natural sound, but also the context changes the sound. The music was *found* within the video and





### XIII. *HIGHWAYS ARE EXPLORING US.* <03:40>

Have highways become the new landscape? Is Man still "Master of all he surveys?" Can he see beyond the car stuck in front of him? Traffic is often referred to in river metaphors, but do the metaphors hold in the context of Man's relation to Nature? In traffic language, does "stop and go" equal "freeze-frame and fast-forward?" That man playing the accordion over the freeway is myself, the artist.

A voice screams as the video image breaks apart. As we come to depend upon our machines, video breaks down as often as automobiles do. How many miles warranty does a video image have? The side channels depict the ongoing (oncoming) traffic in negative image. The center channel shows stop and go traffic. The accordion sounds build to a rush hour of traffic jam proportions. A video image of a tree explodes into a myriad of small shards through video effect. The real-time computer painting records my gesture.

Within the electronic landscape, the graphics paintbox gesture is my signature. It is my human mark on a work that can be synthesized, digitized, replicated, fragmented and transmitted. This section ends with a B&W shot of an ant in macro close-up running helter skelter on the gravel. A metaphor, or just Nature running its course oblivious to us?

### XIV. *NATURE IS LEAVING US.* <09:00>

This is the finale. It is a quiet summation of many themes. Perhaps the meaning can be found in the two poems, *Love to Pain* and *Nature Is Leaving Us*, [20] that the performer sings. Framed by technology, the singer's voice lifts us past the melancholy. These two poems were, in many ways, the genesis of this entire piece. The video opera grew as an extension (and completion) of the expression of these ideas.

The bouncing globes are a reprise of previous images, but the movement is more precarious. There are certain key images or elements of landscape that recur throughout the piece (a hydrant pouring water; a man under a blossoming tree; a water pump; a baby's head) under new and varying contexts. When the performer begins to sing "Love to Pain," the landscape turns green (colorized video snow). Isolated bits of bad video signal provide the source, but occasionally recognizable scanlines of video frame bring back the Human Face in a ghostly and poetic gesture. The use of video in each of the last three sections pushes the medium beyond the manufacturer's specifications to search out a wider inherent quality. What is pure video? Perhaps the artistic possibilities of video are only truly apparent when the haze of technical apparatus surrounding it is felled like a tree before the axe.

When the landscape explodes, the lone performer sings "Nature Is Leaving Us." Nature may be leaving us, but there are new worlds to explore.

## OUTERPRETATION

The *raison d'être* of working in multiple media is to bring the strengths of the different media into proximity. The mental divisions, subdivisions, footnotes, and cross-references required to name and catalogue each new overtone and juxtaposition is itself one of my intrinsic concerns. I have been attempting to create an outwardly based system of inputs and influences that simulate the mechanisms of the modern world. I have created the neologism **Outerpretation** to refer to this process of meaning. I define Outerpretation as an antonym of interpretation. To interpret is to define meaning guided by internal inspirations; Outerpretation, then, would define its meaning purely by external forces: social, visual, structural, political. This type of system is antithetical to the many current notions of the artist's expression. [21] But it perfectly mirrors the demands and constraints of a technology-based existence. *Nature Is Leaving Us* is composed of simultaneous provocations of contrasting rhythms, a panoramic polyphony between urbanity and nature; and thus, is a metaphor for the simultaneity of experience that is modern life.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For general assistance and lengthy discussion about the aesthetics of Video Theatre, the author thanks John Cullinan, Lynne Warren, Colin Westerbeck, Dieter Froese, Kay Hines, Amy Osgood, Chris Straayer, Woody Vasulka, Werner Herterich, Michael Maggio, Lanny Silverman, Neil Rolnick, John Sturgeon, Margot Lovejoy, Richard Povall and Joel Botfeld. Much of the innovative work using the newest digital technology in video production and post-production would not have been possible without the generous three-year artistic residency granted by Michael Topel and Swell Pictures, Chicago, Illinois.





## REFERENCES AND NOTES

[1]

John Hanhardt, Ed., *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation* (Rochester, New York: The Visual Studies Workshop, 1986), page 188.



[2]

Over the course of my studies and explorations, I have been influenced and inspired by many sources: Pieter Breughel (duration of Time expressed in paintings); Cricot 2 Theatre director Tadeusz Kantor, and especially his play, "The Dead Class; the early video installation multimedia work of my friends and fellow video artists, Dieter Froese, John Sturgeon and Nam June Paik collaborations with Merce Cunningham and John Cage; Robert Wilson's theoretical ideas and theatre work/collaborations with Philip Glass; ideas and work of Marcel Duchamp; the image layering/collage of Robert Rauschenberg; Peter Kubelka's abstract film work; James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*; Umberto Ecco, Cesare Pavese and Jorge Luis Borges writings and e. e. cummings' poetry. Each medium has its own default language, its own brilliance, density, and surface. The qualities and influences I received from each of these artists are not necessarily inherent within their medium, but within their art.



[3]

Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1970), page 44.

[4]

Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1968), page 112.

[5]

Peter D'Agostino, Ed., *Transmission: Theory and Practice for a New Television Aesthetics* (New York: Tanam, 1985), page 83.



[6]

Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965).

[7]

Stewart Brand, *The Media Lab: Inventing the Future at MIT* (New York: Viking, 1987), page 182.

[8]

*Nature Is Leaving Us: A Video Opera* is an original work of experimental Video Theatre. A live and pre-recorded video/multimedia presentation: 3 Videowalls (6' x 8' each), 48 monitors, 3 video channels, 5 surround-sound audio channels, 15 slide projectors, dance, performance art, original electronic score with live piano and vocal music, interactive remote-controlled devices (car/video camera, car/monitor with video playback), 2 neonsculptures. Length: 65 minutes. Designed, written, composed and directed by Miroslaw Rogala. Additional music, improvisation, and vocals by Urszula Dudziak. Sound design and additional music by Lucien Vector and Richard Woodbury. Synchronized slide projections by John Boesche. Performers include: Urszula Dudziak (live vocals and improvisations); Amy Osgood with sons, Mary Ward, Brian Jeffery (dance); Werner Herterich, Lynn Book (performance); Frank Abbinanti (piano). Produced in cooperation with Swell Pictures, Inc., Chicago. Videowalls and supporting equipment provided by Electrosonic Systems, Inc. Premiere performances at Goodman Theatre Studio, Chicago (October 13 -- 22, 1989).



[Note to Editor: I would be pleased if this credit information were placed in a separate box near the beginning of the essay rather than using the Notes format. -MR.]



[9]

John Hanhardt (Editor), *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation* (Rochester, New York: The Visual Studies Workshop, 1986), page 92-93.

[10]

Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1970), page 76.

[11]

William D. Judson (Editor), *American Video Landscape: the electronic grove* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: The Carnegie Museum of Art, 1988).

[12]

Robert Simpson, *Videowalls* (London: Focal Press, 1991), page 67.

[13]

James Roose-Evans, *Experimental theatre: from Stanislavsky to today* (London: Studio Vista, 1973).

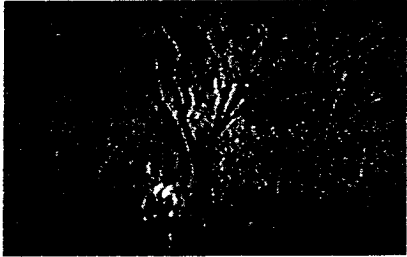
[14]

Having received a traditional music education at PSSM in Cracow, Poland, I wrote all the music for *Nature Is Leaving Us* between 1985 and 1988. All compositions were written by entering one note at a time using an early music notation and sequencer program (Deluxe Music Construction Set) on my Amiga 1000 computer. Further mixing and arranging work was done with Atari C-Lab Notator, Macintosh sequencing software, Akai S-900, Emulator II, and various synthesizers in collaboration with Lucien Vector and Richard Woodbury. Several voice samples by Urszula Dudziak were used as the primary instrument sounds and her unique vocal technique inspired many of the pieces.

[15]

*Questions to Another Nation* (16 minutes; 1983) began my departure from the purely personal as source and inspiration, and it also began my evolution into more complex forms. For the first time, I began to work at the threshold of perception, exploring how quickly I could change images and still register in the mind's eye. I began working with the depth of the video camera within shots to define an aesthetic of video apart from cinema. *Questions* is a four-channel work, with four channels of sound as well. The four videotapes are meant to be seen simultaneously, with images, themes, and questions engaged in a provocative debate from monitor to monitor. It was within this piece that I first began to combine images within the frame. I worked with combinations of images to see how much time the viewer needs to recognize/perceive certain images/ certain combinations of images/ and certain incongruities of images. I wanted to explore what some of these shared images/gestures/symbols/pictures could be used for beyond the level of verbal language.

*Remote Faces: Outerpretation* (36 minutes; 1986) took this departure from the single channel videotape even further. A seven-channel video installation with prerecorded and live multichannel sound, it took me from the realm of pure video into performance. With *Remote Faces* I was no longer simply engaged in a self-contained video installation. The live performance extended the simultaneity of contextual information. I question different subjects: How much varied input can one take at once? Can one distinguish between different messages? What is pleasant and what is unpleasant? What is balanced between all these elements? The performers who inhabit the work extend into the outside (interactive) world, giving it additional meanings. "Remotion", the act of controlling remotely, indirectly, or from a distance (or computer operation) is a part of the process that inspired this piece. The original video installation work consists of seven synchronized video monitors simultaneously projecting images





of scenes that generate sensitive interpretations by the artist of the outside world.

[16]

Martin Greenberger, (Editor), Technologies for the 21st Century: On MultiMedia (Santa Monica, California: The Voyager Company, 1990), page 129.



[17]

Stewart Brand, The Media Lab: Inventing the Future at MIT (New York: Viking, 1987), page 144.

[18]

Margaret Lovejoy, Postmodern Currents: Art and Artists in the Age of Electronic Media (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Press, 1989).

[19]

Paul Griffiths, Modern Music (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1975).

[20]

The complete text of these two poems are as follows:



LOVE TO PAIN

We were Outside  
It was raining Inside  
Nobody moved  
The word makes the noise

We were Outside  
It was Empty inside  
The door closed  
The eyes cut the gesture

If we were There  
It was after Explosion  
The Trees to exhibit  
Hands to hold

Because we missed the Start  
It never ends  
It starts every Word  
Every pain to love

(1987)

NATURE IS LEAVING US

Color dissolves to the shadow  
The thoughts are ambiguous  
The wind is Clear  
Our Hands sensitive

Desire dissolves in a Phone Call  
Peace is inspired by War  
The Stereo is on  
Not enough Words

Love dissolves to Love  
Introduction to Outerpretation  
What did he feel?  
What did she wear?

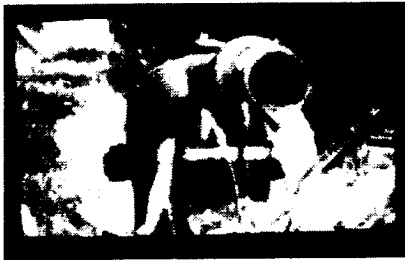
Aging dissolves to childhood  
Nature Is Leaving Us  
The night is Quiet  
You must sing

"To be" dissolves to "they are not"  
Nudity attracts purity  
Eyes don't lie  
They are where they go

(1986)

[21]

Stan Brakhage, Metaphors on Vision, (New York: Film Culture, 1973), page 38.



# Arts & Show

CHICAGO SUN-TIMES, SUNDAY, OCTOBER 8, 1989

4 (E) CHICAGO SUN-TIMES, SUNDAY, OCTOBER 8, 1989

## With 'Nature,' artist creates a new electronic landscape

By Lynn Voedisch

Perched high above an urban landscape littered with rusting car parts, decaying concrete and twisted chain-link fences, video artist Miroslaw Rogala has composed a multimedia ode to nature. Through the eye of a high-tech video camera and aided by the imaging software of a computer, Rogala has fashioned a work of art that examines the delicate ecological balance. His sophisticated and complex study of the dissolving link between humans and the natural world, "Nature Is Leaving Us: A Video Opera," will be performed Friday through Oct. 22 at the Goodman Studio Theatre.

Rogala finds the irony of looking at ecology from the standpoint of a junkyard observer amusing and inspiring.

"I get ideas from this all the time," Rogala said as he swept his hand across the vista of broken glass and shining scrap metal in front of his South Peoria Street loft studio. "I'm seeing things through different glasses. I take an image out of context and discover something for myself."

A freight train that rumbled past Rogala's studio brought back memories of his native Poland.

"It sets me up in another space," Rogala said. "It reminds me of childhood, of traveling."

Childhood memories are particularly important in "Nature Is Leaving Us," which is much more than ecological treatise. A central figure in the video work is a baby, who perceives every image as something new and fresh. As the child moves across a vast cityscape, the image shatters, presumably because the child sees through the artifice of humanity attempting to hide from nature.

Rogala's riveting images of birth, destruction, integration and decay will be projected in several ways on 48 television screens in the Goodman Studio. Sometimes all the screens will be hooked up together to create a wall-size picture. Three banks of 16 screens each will display three large images. Individual scenes also will flicker on each of the small screens.

"Nature Is Leaving Us" isn't a traditional opera—or even a modern one such as "Les Miserables." There is no plot. There are no characters. Instead, singing by Uszula Dudziak and music by Rogala and Frank Abbinanti will accompany the visual material. There will be live dance by Brian Jeffrey, Amy Osgood and Mary Ward, and live performance art by Lynn Book and Warner Herterich. Slide projections by John Boesche also will be featured.

"Opera always has been art that merges several different things," Rogala said. "The libretto [visuals] is set to music. All elements are equally valid."

The piece ends with a poem by Rogala that scrolls slowly over blackness. It functions like a coda, giving a sense of resolution to the images of pain and isolation that are central to "Nature Is Leaving Us." Like the other elements of "Nature Is Leaving Us," the poem doesn't preach. It simply creates a mood.

Rogala dislikes video art that has an obvious political message. "I like to think that every piece of work is a language," he said. "I can do this in Japan, and it would be understood. The trouble with a political message is that it is associated with a certain time. Why separate the political issue? It's all integral. I'm trying to tell a story using a simple situation."

Rogala, who received art degrees in painting and music, has been active in video art since he came to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1979 to work toward a master of fine arts degree. He saw video art and "it naturally happened" that Rogala would use his talents in this new art form.

Most recently, Rogala's work has been seen in the witches' scenes of Piven Theater's production of "Macbeth." The video work, which was crafted to look like a nightmare from some post-apocalyptic world, was a stunning success when it was shown at Video Playhouse, presented by Swell Pictures and the Center for New Television. The video also will be shown at the Los Angeles Film Festival from Oct. 26 to 29.

Rogala also worked with slide projection artist Boesche to create the video presentation in the Goodman Theatre's hit production of "Sunday in the Park With George."

His other video works are available at Facets Multimedia. The "Nature Is Leaving Us" video (not including the live elements) is on display through Oct. 24 at the Museum of Contemporary Art.

Rogala also is working with Dudziak and the Kronos Quartet

to produce "Human Energy: Interpretation, an Interactive Video Symphony." He also has a National Endowment for the Arts American Film Institute grant to create a multimedia/video installation called "Claim Your Power."

Whatever his project, Rogala is dedicated to improving the image of video art, which often is perceived as obscure or didactic. "I call what I do 'interpretation,' as opposed to 'interpretation,'" he said. "That is when I take something from the outside and find a new meaning."

In "Nature Is Leaving Us," Rogala uses his technical skill to break up, speed up, slow down and integrate images to create an altered vision. It's as if he is jarring his audience into perceiving common scenes the same way his baby observer views the world.

"[With technology], I can create a new landscape," Rogala said. "It's a new nature."

## Tempo Arts

## Video opus stars 48 TV sets

By Richard Christiansen  
Entertainment editor

**T**here doesn't appear to be any video technology that has not been attempted and achieved in "Nature Is Leaving Us," the "video opera" now installed in the Goodman Theatre Studio through this weekend.

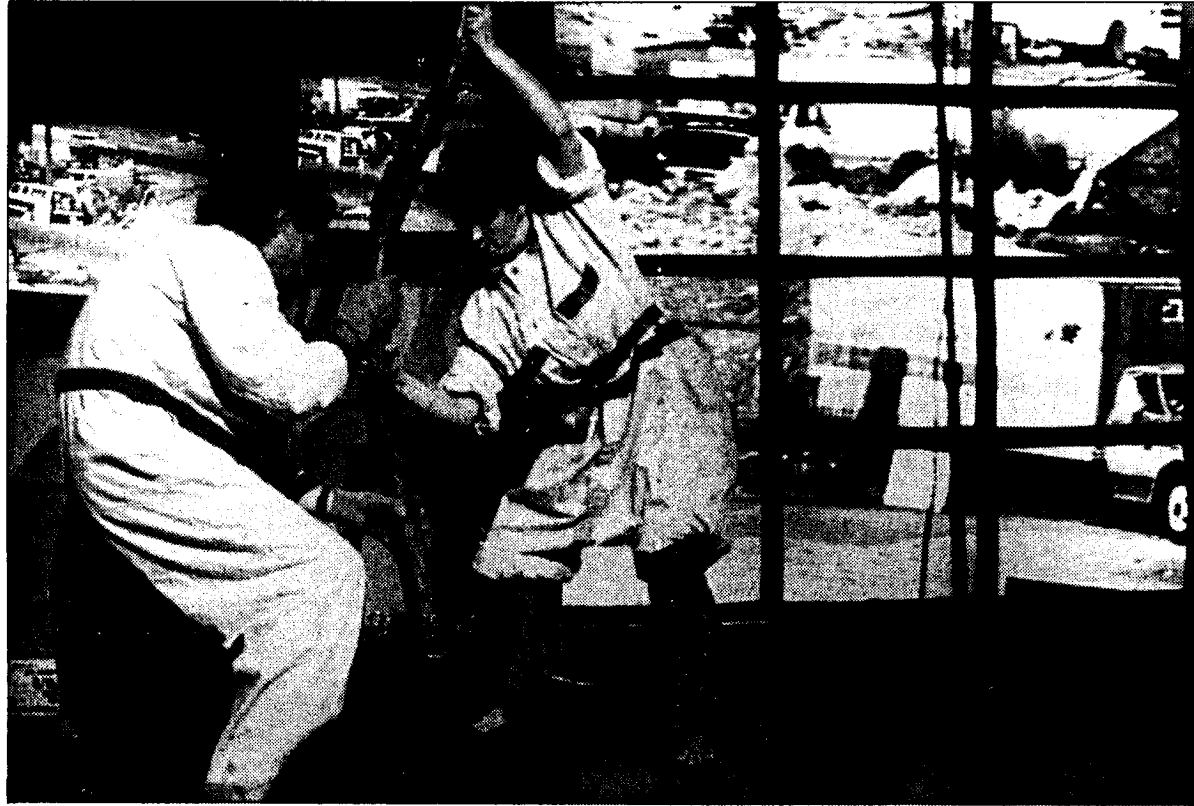
The performance, lasting a little more than an hour, includes live dance, piano music and vocalizing, as well as background slide projections and neon sculpture; but the

### 'Nature Is Leaving Us'

A video opera in 14 sections by Miroslaw Rogala, with vocals by Urszula Dudziak, dance by Amy Osgood, Mary Ward and Brian Jeffrey, piano improvisations by Frank Abbinanti, performance by Werner Herterich and Lynn Book, music by Rogala, Dudziak, Richard Woodbury and Lucien Vector, slide projections by John Boesche, slide programming by Walt Meyers, neon sculptures by Mark Brieahan. Opened Oct. 15 in the Goodman Theatre Studio, 200 S. Columbus Dr., and plays again at 8 p.m. Thursday and Friday and 5 and 8 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. Running time: 1:05. Tickets are \$12.50, or \$8 for students. Phone 443-3800.

core of the presentation is a wall of 48 television monitors, lined up four deep in 12 rows on the Studio stage and facing the audience.

On this giant video canvas, director Miroslaw Rogala has composed urban and rural images that rise up, fade out, dissolve, fragment, reduce, blow up, and spin



Werner Herterich and Lynn Book design the perfect tree in "Nature Is Leaving Us."

like a top in an ever-changing mirage of computerized artistry.

In front of the video wall, spaced throughout the work's 14 sections, humans come and go. Amy Osgood and her infant son perform a charming mother-and-child duet, with the little boy delightedly running around the stage. Pianist Frank Abbinanti plays a series of dissonant variations on a small piano that is wheeled on

stage. The near-nude dancers Mary Ward and Brian Jeffery unite in a pas de deux. Performance artists Werner Herterich and Lynn Book laboriously drag out a tree limb, trying to plant it in front of the images of urban devastation. And vocalist Urszula Dudziak, in a virtuoso display of electronically enhanced avant-garde scat singing that soon outlives its novelty, sighs, wheezes,

whines and screeches out "Nature Is Leaving Us."

The overall impression left by these many performance factors is meant to be that of a declining world, in which man is being removed from nature.

This is not always evident in the opera's content, but the form, and the gathering of the various human and technological forces to create it, is undeniably awesome.

**O**ne of the paradoxes of contemporary video is that works by a number of artists in this high-tech field seem to yearn for nature in an almost romantic way. Mirosław Rogala's *Nature Is Leaving Us* and Woody Vasulka's *The Art of Memory* might each be used as examples of this somewhat unexpected theme.

Rogala's title has about it a certain ambiguity that its author cannot resist. On the one hand, it suggests a naturalist's protest against human destruction of the environment. On the other hand, it is a recognition that electronic imagery, rather than nature, has become the environment in which we live.

If there is a single image that is emblematic of Rogala's piece (an image that seems, indeed, to aspire to the status of icon), it is the one of an infant staring in its lunging, wobbly way into a green background. That background is pure media, an electronic optical effect generated wholly from the video equipment itself. We have come to recognize such intense color as something unique to the television screen. Or is it? The one point of reference this garish green might have would be to a grass stain. It is the color of chlorophyll, the substance in plants essential to photosynthesis--that is, to growth in nature. Rogala's baby appears to be gazing into its future, and whether that future represents the artificial blankness of pure video or the promise of a return to nature is a question *Nature Is Leaving Us* leaves open.

Vasulka's *The Art of Memory* also seems to contain an essential, core image around which the rest of the piece revolves. This is an image not of innocence and newness, like Rogala's baby, but of accumulated guilt. The setting of Vasulka's piece is the American Southwest. On this primordial stage, all of modern history is, almost literally, superimposed. History passes across the incredibly colored landscape, like a shadow across a beautiful face, in the form of old black-and-white newsreels of war and decimation that Vasulka electronically distorts into the shapes of three-dimensional graphs, complex representations of mathematical formulae. Against the background of timeless nature, human history becomes a mere abstraction. This is an image of extraordinary mythic power, and one that, like Rogala's baby, leaves unanswered the question of man's place in nature in the future.