

ART AND TECHNO-CONSCIOUSNESS

Los Angeles / Jacki Apple

Americans have traditionally been committed to the idea of progress, and in this century progress has become synonymous with technological advancement. Technology will provide a better life—free us from drudgery, increase and improve our leisure, protect our freedom, satisfy our needs and desires, solve all our problems. (Every night I go to bed filled with yearning for my very own up-to-date word-processing computer.) This concept is so deeply embedded in the American psyche that it has come to dominate the entire fabric of our culture, often at the expense of our relationship to nature, each other and ourselves.

These are some of the weighty concerns of, and questions raised by, John Sturgeon and Aysha Quinn in their latest collaborative interactive video-performance work *No Earth / No Earth Station*. Like the film *Koyaanisqatsi*, Sturgeon and Quinn's *No Earth / No Earth Station* is about life out of balance. Both give us views of an endangered planet—an awesome untampered-with Western landscape and a technologically advanced man-made landscape, the schism between the two and the attempt to reconcile them. Sturgeon and Quinn have stated that their performance is meant to function as "a metaphor for a state of suspension, global/individual, and an attempt to balance and maintain the station (individual and relational existence) during extraordinary and trying times," and they attempt to make their interpersonal relationship the central metaphoric representation of their thematic concerns.

No Earth / No Earth Station takes place in an electronic environment of image-making, information-processing communications technology, and it interfaces two predominant contemporary art forms—video and performance. Set up as an imaginary "station," the stage is densely packed with equipment (projection screens, monitors, cameras, microphones, etc.) in the midst of which is a chroma-key electric blue two-wall section of a room with two doors. Sturgeon and Quinn appear in white lab coats and pants and methodically go about their tasks; these include hammering and breaking up pieces of dry ice and putting them in fish tanks, tinkering with and attempting to get all of the equipment to function properly and projecting themselves via video transmission into the Earth landscape on giant screens. These video-projection journeys are their only means of contact with their origins. The often tedious and boringly repetitive work routines necessary for their survival are relieved by these "trips" and punctuated by their determined, if sometimes futile, attempts to communicate. They bicker endlessly and without resolution.

Quinn is concerned with the present, something Sturgeon would like to avoid whenever possible. She toils, and he dreams of past and future. He is preoccupied with transcendence, projecting himself out on his own more and more frequently. He needs a "scale change," he says, as he struggles to reconnect with the sensual physical experience of walking through grass or over a hill, climbing a tree and hearing the sound of birds singing; at

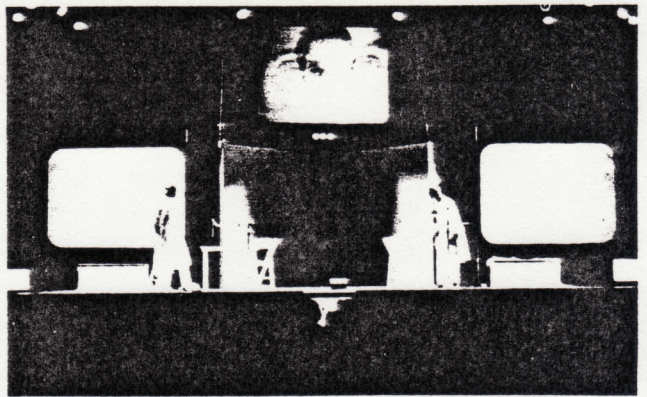
the same time, he cannot recall those sensations or identify the origin of the sound.

Quinn and Sturgeon play stereotypical roles in a pedestrian domestic TV scenario, as if they were participants in a behavioral experiment. They are prisoners in a world in which all their experiences and interactions, including their memories, are mediated by a technological environment presided over by the omnipresent video images.

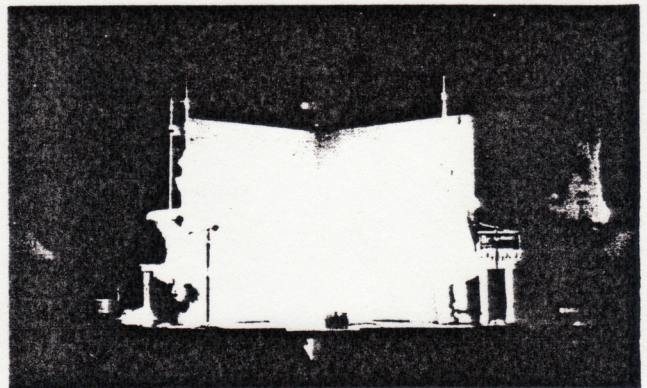
Far more fascinating than the performance itself, recently presented at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, is the fact that it was consumed, like a snake eating its own tail, by the very technology employed to convey its message. Having chosen to work with a highly sophisticated, multi-camera, multi-screen, interactive video system combining live and prerecorded imagery through a mobile television studio setup, Sturgeon and Quinn placed themselves in the most vulnerable of situations. Fraught with technical problems inherent in the medium (something always breaks down!), the situation became beyond their control. The boundaries between life and art collapsed as the enactment of a "fictionalized" narrative became real. The circumstances of the story were replaced and overpowered by the circumstances of the performance situation itself. The activity of checking and testing the equipment and not getting the desired response, in full view of the audience, was no scripted simulation. When Sturgeon and Quinn threw up their hands or shook their heads in frustration and said that things didn't work, they meant it! Thus *No Earth / No Earth Station* became a demonstration of its own subject matter or thesis.

This raises an important issue that merits an article of its own and can only be briefly touched on here—that of the relationship of contemporary artists and arts institutions to the image-making, information-processing communications technology that is shaping and controlling our present and future reality. If artists are to use it effectively, they must have access to it and be able to work with it in the same manner as artists employing more traditional media. Through no fault of either the artists or the sponsoring institution, Sturgeon and Quinn did not have that kind of access. This is purely a matter of economics. They did not have several weeks in a fully equipped, state-of-the-art television studio and their own team of people with whom to collaborate. The museum does not have such equipment, facilities and personnel; nor does it have ongoing program funding specifically allocated for that purpose. Thus, Sturgeon and Quinn were unable to develop and perfect the interactive relationship between live performance and video or the nuances of creative dialog between their crew, their media and their artistic vision. In the few days they had to set up and become acquainted with their rented equipment and technicians, they were so preoccupied with getting things to function and trying to communicate that they never got beyond that. The result was an unresolved work in progress and in process, not a fully realized manifestation of their concepts.

The Los Angeles County Museum of Art



John Sturgeon and Aysha Quinn, *No Earth / No Earth Station*, video-performance work, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.



John Sturgeon and Aysha Quinn, *No Earth / No Earth Station*, video-performance work, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

embarked on this venture with the best of intentions and is to be commended for recognizing the significance of this kind of work and supporting it. Credit goes to the assistant curator of twentieth-century art, Anne Edgerton, for her foresight in initiating this project in conjunction with the *Young Talent Awards* show. (ARTWEEK, 9/10/83) and to the associate museum educator, Lori Starr, for her untiring efforts in coordinating it. Few museums today are adequately prepared for the realities of such an undertaking, but the first steps must be taken. If art is to occupy a place of meaning and relevance in our changing

culture, it must come to grips with the technology that so powerfully influences that culture in order to communicate a vision of reality other than that of the commercial mass media and the interests it serves.

Although it just scratched the surface, *No Earth / No Earth Station* attempted to explore profound issues. Despite its problems, it left an imprint on the memory and made one think. Sturgeon and Quinn are two intelligent and accomplished artists among many who have made a valiant beginning in, as they have said, extraordinary and trying times. □

Louise Bourgeois: Blending Emotive Dualities, continued

and I was initially a bit disturbed to see pieces cast in the "dead" medium of bronze rather than in a more "friendly," organic substance. But to the artist, the material is unimportant, "just a means to an end." Her struggle is "not with the

material, it's with my inner abilities." And it's precisely this personal dialog, this need to reach for the deepest level of experience and obsession, that makes her sculpture a landmark in twentieth-century art. □



Louise Bourgeois, 77s, 1982-82. (L) lapis lazuli and (R) pink marble, at Daniel Weinberg Gallery, San Francisco. Photo: Roger Gass.