HIGH PERFORMANCE

VIEWPOINT

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Didn't He Warn You?

GOOD MORNING, MR. ORWELL Conceived and created by Nam June Paik Live Video Program on PBS via satellite transmissions originating in New York, San Francisco and Paris January 1, 1984

Billed as a New Year 1984 greeting from the avant garde, Good Morning, Mr. Orwell was conceived by Nam June Paik and featured (among others) John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Salvador Dali, Allen Ginsberg, Peter Orlovsky, Charlotte Moorman, Joseph Beuys, Laurie Anderson, Peter Gabriel, Leslie Fuller, Mitchell Kriegman, Philip Glass, Yves Montand, Dean Winkler and John Sanborn.

The program, emanating live via satellite from San Francisco, New York and Paris, was hosted by perennial dilletante George Plimpton. Plimpton was probably more at home quarterbacking the Detroit Lions than he looked trying to manage this uneven video collage.

The term "avant garde" must have been for the benefit of the Orange County conservatives in the viewing audience because this collection of late great idea scholars wouldn't have inspired a freshman art student at the University of South Dakota. There were intermittent technical (and conceptual) failures that sent Plimpton to the cue cards, not knowing if he had just seen art or snafu. A trans-atlantic "interactive" juvenile comedy (performance?) sketch called "Cavalcade of Intellectuals" by Leslie Fuller and Mitchell Kriegman must have caused several million viewers to start roam-

ing the dial looking for CHIPS re-runs.

Is art avant or derriere when Laurie Anderson lip-synchs one of her songs? Even if she does it with Peter Gabriel. It was a treat, though, to see her comedic facial expressiveness up close. I haven't been able to see that since she started performing in spaces large enough to hide the sound of the projectors.

Joseph Beuys' cameo consisted of some undetermined activity chromo-keyed underneath a Merce Cunningham dance so all we could see was part of the hat. Allan Ginsberg sang a little ditty called "How to Meditate." The man has no shame. Plimpton tried to help Charlotte Moorman play Paik's TV cello but of course the sound was turned off. He exited when the technicians entered to fix things. Yves Montand (I can only assume he was a French token) tapdanced, superimposed over some graffiti artists!"

Watching John Cage pluck various amplified organic materials with a feather was like watching your grandfather spinning 78s on the Victrola. And Peter Orlovsky played some banio.*

A pearl amongst the pesos was the Philip Glass segment, notable not for Glass's slide show muzak but for the quality video graphics by Dean Winkler and John Sanborn. I mean, if these guys can rid their minds of artthink they're good enough to do television commercials.

And who sponsored this misdemeanor and called it art? Well, it was co-produced by WNET 13, FR3 (French National Television) and the Pompidou Centre and funded by the Massachusetts and New York State Councils for the Arts, the NEA and the Rockefeller Foundation. They're scheduled to be arraigned in the morning.

Interactive worldwide satellite-broadcast bad video—didn't Mr. Orwell warn us about this sort of thing?

Television has seriously wounded literature by supplying canned images that replace those of our imagination. It has launched an assault of a similar nature on popular music with MTV. And now, now they are giving *images* to *conceptual* art.

* Oh, forget it. Steven Durland

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system that didn't work, the seemingly inattentive blocking that kept Allen invisible to part of her audience a great deal of the time, when what one was really feeling was a sense of disappointment that Allen hadn't taken it all the way.

But this is meant as a critique of the performance, not the performer. In a Q & A after the piece, Allen said that she'd done a more believeable Hally Lou in Colorado last summer on the banks of the Aspen River. It has become clear that in performance the setting inevitably includes itself in the piece, so one would definitely like to see Hally Lou go for it again some hot dusty night underneath the full moon. Because it was obvious from the piece that Io Harvey Allen is taking art as the occasion to inspire growth in her life, and one is confident that a failure at the Japan-America Theatre is not going to make her stop. But unfortunately, at the Japan-America Theatre, nothing was as powerful as the snakes.

Lewis MacAdams



LINDA NISHIO

Learning from Experience

GLOBAL APHASIA
Created and performed
by Linda Nishio
Japan America Theatre
Los Angeles
December 8, 1983
Part of the Explorations Series
sponsored by Cal Arts and the Museum
of Contemporary Art (MoCA)

How can a textually dense, tightly scripted, high-tech performance overcome the inevitable technical breakdown? Answer: Appropriate subject matter.

Linda Nishio's performance, Global Aphasia, a textually dense, tightly scripted,

high tech performance, barely escaped ruin thanks to the subject matter of her piece—adapting to your environment. The ironies of two microphone failures, a movie projector breakdown and an inattentive tech person were not lost on the audience. In fact, the flaws actually articulated the title—aphasia, which is defined as "the loss of the ability to articulate ideas." I hope the further irony in Nishio's commentary on learning from experience is not lost on the sponsors, whose errant sound system has adversely affected most of the pieces thus far in their Explorations series, begun in October.

The Japan America Theatre is a proscenium stage, Laurie Anderson-scale performance space. The challenge it presents to an artist used to working in your average storeroom-cum-art space is apparent. Linda Nishio succeeded wonderfully. She filled the enormous stage with rolls of heavy industrial wire. As she drew each roll from its bundle it became the schematic for a tunnel, creating an ever more complex environment until the stage became a confused doodle of three-dimensional Palmer pen exercises. The environment defined, she proceeded to involve herself-stumbling and crawling through the maze as voices extolled "Adapt/to/your/environment." Offstage live sounds of taut wires being plucked, pounded, strummed and electronically manipulated reinforced Nishio's physical dilemma. The backdrop was filled with two movie projections of tropical fish existing in their artificial ocean. Not content to fill the stage, Nishio filled the walls to the left and right with giant projected images and text that reiterated and expanded on the words of the voices.

Scale was not a problem. Timing was. The second part of the performance involved a monolog to the audience. After each sentence the voice and the slide projectors singled outwords in the sentence for further definition. "I tell the story/He highlights the words/You get the message," the piece explained at one point. Many of the definitions were humorous, Nishio's personal semiotic defining "Here" as "where I wrote what you are reading," and "Everything" as "my life as an artist." But the pauses between sentences, purportedly to allow the audience to read the defining text, were way too long and destroyed any sense of continuity in the speech.

As the monolog progressed communication became more impassioned but more difficult. The voice started defining Nishio's "I mean, I mean," "but, but, but," "ah, ah, ah," stutters until she was left standing under a giant slide that read "Try standing

underneath experience and not these words."

This brought Nishio back into her environment to stand under a giant plastic screen and comment, "I'll stand under this object. Some call this an experience."

The message of Global Aphasia was clear. "Life is a struggle/This is a struggle," Visual tangles and verbal confusion pleading "Change Now." It is seldom I can point out so many flaws and still say I liked a performance. Nishio communicates clearly, understands primal conflicts and has a strong visual sensibility. I hope she gets other opportunities to work on this scale because she appears fully capable of doing it justice.

Steven Durland



JOHN STURGEON AND AYSHA QUINN

TOM VINET

Infinite Transition

NO EARTH/NO EARTH STATION Created and performed by John Sturgeon and Aysha Quinn County Museum of Art Los Angeles July 26, 1983

Preface:

The empty installation is composed of triangles: Three monitors below, three screens above. The mobile unit stands ready to mix three channels of live and recorded video. This will be where No Earth/No Earth Station happens, but it will start late because John Sturgeon and Aysha Quinn needed more than every moment allotted by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art to Prepare the Bing Auditorium as a high-tech environment, and now they're getting unprepared to improvise.

So, we get to read the artist's introductory statement which says this will be, "a metaphor for a state of suspension, global and individual, during extraordinary and trying times. Survival is the concern. Investigation,

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growth, healing, relationship and consciousness are the keys."

But what are the doors? The doors are passages through the v-shaped chroma key blue field sitting at the installation's center, video voodoo that will let the performancists leave anytime, anyplace, for any other.

Performance:

"... are in a holding pattern," is what they are saying in the pre-recorded introduction. There is the phone call to the kids at home. Some mutant woman on the screen really needs help, and the "station keepers" try to breathe for her, but can't communicate this desire. The dry ice "garden" gets fed water. Then there is all this talk about "scale changes" and they chroma key/astralproject into different taped earthspaces. What do the imbalance poses mean? Are they making this up? And why the desert sequences on the monitor off to the side? Onstage, they chase each other in a circle dance while they scream at each other on the screens. They are wearing lab coats. They keep talking to someone through a headset. Is this part of the performance? Is everything under control? "Could we have a better meeting if we had better equipment?" Quinn asks while they talk about setting up a conversation. There is a closeup of something red being sliced open. Then there are rainbows prismed on a back, bowed across the spine. Water sequences run on and on. Ouinn lights a candle at center installation. A neon emblem of the Taurus sign over a triangle is displayed on the video triads. Post hoc:

Is that how it was supposed to end? No, that is how it was supposed to be, made up as they went along, already ended and begun. The implosion of the moment caught between happening and simultaneous playback assumed the continuity of existing, interpretive associations informed by immediacy. When continuance is constantly at stake, there is only one issue: what's next? Sturgeon and Quinn's video performance was an amplified present tense, in infinite transition, survival communicated by surviving. Confusion made sense makes confusion.

Michael Nash

Passionate Plea For Earth's Fate

GAIA, MON AMOUR

Created and performed by Rachel Rosenthal The House



RACHEL ROSENTHAL

BASIA

Santa Monica, California September 22-25, September 29-October 2, 1983

Gaia, Mon Amour, Rachel Rosenthal's newest performance work (presented at The House, Santa Monica, September 1983), is a passionate plea for the "fate of the Earth" and a new consciousness. It is also powerful and effective political "theater," a new direction in Rosenthal's work begun last year with Traps. Utilizing her exceptional skills as an actress and a writer, she not only continues to mine her own rich life experiences and personal history but draws upon her impressive intellectual resources. Her scholarship is meticulous. She boldly and masterfully intercuts mythology, anthropology, history, biology, evolutionary theory, Freudian analysis, Zen philosophy and concepts presented in Jonathan Schell's Fate of the Earth which inspired her to do this work. When the mass media so rapidly consumes and trivializes the most profound issues of our times—the survival of our planet and our species—it is extremely difficult for an artist to effectively deal with such weightly material without it seeming pretentious, naive, cliched or overly didactic. Rosenthal's success is the result of her ability to transform her material through the use of metaphor, as well as her brilliance as a performer.

Gaia is the Earth Goddess in ancient Greece, the deity Mother of our planet and one of the four personae portrayed by Rosenthal in this solo tour de force that encompasses a condensed history of human evolution and consciousness from the "Age of the Gods to the Age of the Heroes to the Age of Men to the Age of Chaos" in which we are now living. The other characters in

clude a mythological Year-King who describes the Fall (the discovery of the individual ego as a separate and supreme entity), Rosenthal herself, and finally an old woman who is part shopping bag lady, part Jewish grandmother with an opinion on everything and a street-wise, self-mocking humor that's just a bit raunchy.

Gaia, Mon Amour is based on a comparative analysis using Mother as the metaphor First there are our own love-hate relationships with our mothers (".... They are DF-VOUR-ING. Right? They just don't know when to quit that nurturing shit. Or else they don't nurture enough. Too much tit. Not enought tit. Mothers are always wrong. . . . ") thus projecting our relationship to a society with women and to the feminine principle. Then there is our relationship as a species to the Earth-Mother Earth-of which we are all a part, dependent on for our sustenance and survival, yet hell-bent on conquering, abusing and destroying. Rosenthal looks to mythology for clues to the fear and hatred of female power. Speaking through both the goddess Gaia and the old lady, she gives us a socio-anthropological and political history of the relationship between the sexes. The piece opens with a male voice seething with hatred as he describes in sexual and militaristic language all the ways he can mutilate, subjugate, violate, destroy and ultimately separate himself from Mother, the Female, the Earth. He rants and raves like a defiant child, accompanied by alternating images of man's brutality to the environment and all its living creatures, and a display of toy models of the latest in weaponry with which he can wreak havoc on and annihilate the rest of humanity. "A successful parasite," Rosenthal tells us somewhat ironically, "never kills its host."

The old lady in black rimmed glasses and big rubber nose emerges from a heap of garbage, mostly various kinds of food packaging, brushes herself off, puts a wreath of dead flowers on a black shrouded body-like mound, and addressing the audience and the sick "mother" under the shroud with familiarity, she engages in several monolog "conversations" about death, mothers, women, men, sex and how we got into this mess. Contrasting with the weight and drama of Gaia the omnipotent goddess, the outraged Mother, and the wounded one, this character provides the dialectical tension and comic relief that sustains the piece. Rosenthal displays a satirical and engaging sense of humor and a gift for comedy new to her work. The piece comes to a climactic and deeply moving ending in which Rosenthal's Gaia beseeches us to love her, to save