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Robert R. Riley
Curator of Media Arts
FRANK GILLETTE

Named after the coastal region north of Corpus Christi, Texas, where the artist recorded the images and sounds for this installation, Aransas consists of six video monitors facing the center of the gallery, arranged singly or in pairs at the four points of the compass. The images on each monitor are distinct, presenting details or delineating the broader configurations of the terrain. Each record of the environment moves at a reflective, thoughtful tempo and the complete work comprises a carefully composed representation of landscape.

In the sixties, Gillette turned from abstract painting to video with a special interest in taxonomy and ecology. The artist saw ecology as a metaphor of psychological rather than physical survival, and taxonomy provided him a way of classifying objects and ideas by aesthetic rather than scientific association. Aransas, one of the first works to address issues of landscape in video installation, is a multi-channel contemplation invoking nature as the basis for reflection on the individual's place in the world and, at the same time, illustrates a geometric sensibility found in the structural art of the seventies. Aransas is a complex of signs electronically removed from the natural setting to stress that the natural sign is simple, the invented sign compound.

STEINA VASULKA

The West is an electronic landscape based on the American Southwest which plays both harmony and counterpoint to the rich colors and forms of the New Mexican mountains, desert, and architectural remnants. The semi-circular configuration of sixteen video monitors, stacked to emphasize horizon and overlapping movement, envelop the viewer with boundless vistas of western space.

Vasulka recorded the video images in The West with a motor driven camera pointed directly into a spherical mirror. This device allows the artist to record on videotape landscape imagery in front of and behind the lens simultaneously, creating a circular area of optically transformed space centered in the otherwise rectangular shape of the video monitor.

The complete layering of space and the electronic manipulation of image characteristic of Vasulka's work is central to her tribute to the powerful landscape. The elegance and spatial complexities of the video medium are explored in Vasulka's installation structure and double panorama. The West is an electronic expression of mood and place, an eloquent resolution of image and form.

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BILL VIOLA

Room for St. John of the Cross combines two states of mind in a single work of art, one turbulent and one at peace. Viola's title refers to the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic and poet who was imprisoned by the Inquisition. During his incarceration, St. John (1542–91) wrote profoundly spiritual verse that envisioned soaring over confining walls and mountains during moments of ecstatic communion with God. The roaring wind and gyrating images of mountains in the darkened installation evoke not only St. John's anguish, but also the passion in his heart that sustained and inspired him. The cell in which St. John was held for nine months has been recreated to scale for this installation and contains furnishings and a serene view of a mountain in miniature on a small video monitor suggesting the peace the poet found within himself.

Viola's video landscape extends the artist's established concern for intense meditations achieved by the transformation and skillful manipulation of video recording processes, as well as symbolic relationships between form and content. The incantatory whisper of his ecstatic poems (read in Spanish), which speak of love, ecstasy, and passage through a dark night, reminds the viewer of the dichotomy between body and soul and refers to the triumph of the imagination.

Equipment donated by Polaroid Corporation.