

"EVERYTHING YOU ARE ABOUT

TO SEE IS ENTIRELY

SUBJECTIVE" THE SUBJECT

UNDER SCRUTINY, IN TWO

INSTALLATIONS BY JAN PEACOCK

SIRENSONG & THE ROAD RISES

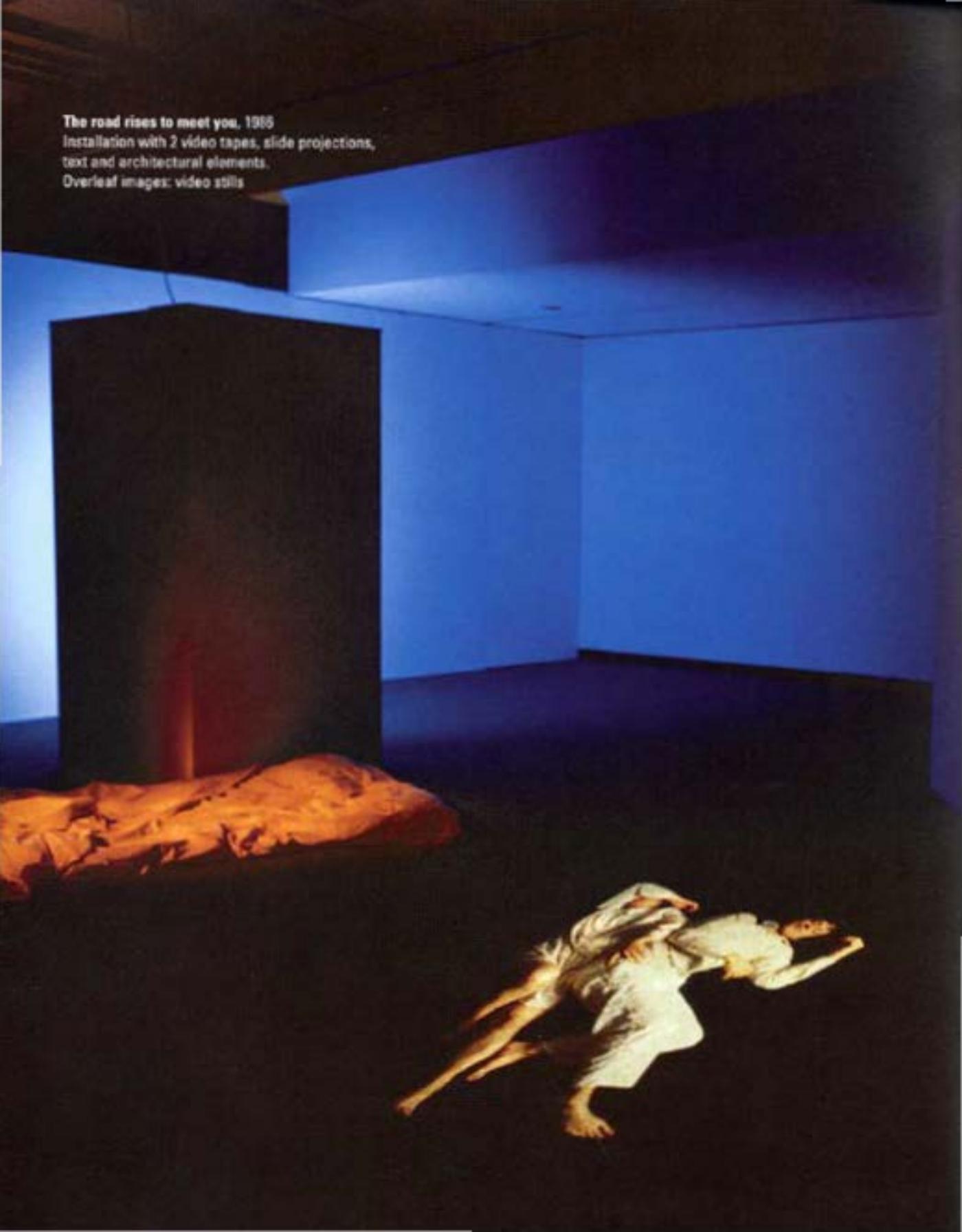
TO MEET YOU PAULA LEVINE

In a world where access to speed is access to transcendence, point of view is particularly a narrative gesture. The point of view of landscape is no longer still, is instead a matter of practice and transformation.

Susan Stewart, *On Longing*

The road rises to meet you, 1985

Installation with 2 video tapes, slide projections,
text and architectural elements.
Overleaf images: video stills





The Road Rises to Meet You, 1996 (video stills) left column **Dread**; right column **Bliss**

One observer writes:

"One enters the darkened gallery beneath a small black and white video monitor that shows an endless stream of people passing through a revolving door. Inside, the only light sources are a colour video monitor and one red floodlight aimed at the far wall. Otherwise the room is bare, except for phrases of text printed on the wall and some rocks arranged in small linear piles. The phrases are . . . details from a description of an unseen desert landscape: "sagebrush", "small birds (chirping)", etc. The rocks, intercepting the floodlight, cast low shadows that resemble the buttes of the American Southwest . . .

"It is the video that draws one's attention, that forms the core of *SIRENSONG*, and to which the installation acts as a frame. The motion of the video is circular, going literally from the kitchen sink to outer space and back to the sink again. Its structure is poetic, a stream of consciousness expressed in spoken text and images. The images do not directly illustrate the text but form a complementary structure, a counterpoint to it."³

The video in *SIRENSONG* moves from the intimate and daily images of hands washing dishes, to the more distant and global, ocean waves, views from a plane, scenes through a car window of travel through the American Southwestern desert, images from the 1969 landing on the moon.

It may have been Apollo 11
 Or maybe it was 12
 Or maybe I was twelve
 Or thirteen
 But there was only one TV set in the school
 And we were all of us funneled
 Into one classroom
 Filling it to the walls
 And into the corridor beyond . . .
 Two teachers on springs
 The science teacher
 With sleeves rolled up above his elbows says,
 "You're all very lucky."
 And I think, ". . . luck-y"
 And he says,

Subjective: Belonging to, of, and due to, the consciousness or thinking or perceiving subject or ego as opposed to real or external things. Giving prominence to or depending on personal idiosyncrasy or individual point of view.¹

In a recent conversation about her work, Jan Peacock described her use of the hand as the hand of the witness: an index to the body. The hand, she said, suggested that "everything you are about to see is entirely subjective.

"I start with the presumption that most of our experiences are already co-opted by prescriptive institutions of language and image, and that it's our job as wide awake human beings and poets to pry them open, and re-inscribe them from moment to moment. That's why I'm interested in subjectivity rather than imagination. . . . We accept that we are written and controlled in so many ways, but that's where inscription becomes meaningful – in the act of reinterpreting those institutional roles."

Peacock's comments bring to mind ideas of Jonathan Crary in his book *Techniques of the Observer*, where he writes that the "phenomenon of the observer" emerges in relation to a history of vision . . . partially dependent upon shifts in representational practices, such as the arrangement within a pictorial space, changes in perceptual or mimetic codes or characteristics of a narrative. Crary continues by saying that another part of the phenomenon of the observer lies in the relationship between vision and its inseparable connections to the observing subject, who is both the historical product and the site of certain practices, techniques, institutions and procedures of subjectification.² In other words, the observer is far from a neutral witnessing body, but rather is one who is also caught in, shaped, defined and limited by the very conventions and practices used to exercise subjectivity through voice and presence.

This complex and convoluted situation of enmeshments compose the substance and material for narrative frictions and dilemmas that Jan Peacock presents in her two landscape installations, *SIRENSONG* and *The road rises to meet you*. In both works, the observing subjects are actively struggling to make sense of situations that belie what is known or directly experienced. Using combinations of images, voices, movements and sounds, Jan Peacock constructs landscapes where characters struggle to evoke, construct and maintain a cohesive point of view within a bricolage of past recollections, specious projections of anticipated future events, and conflicts between direct experiences and mediated ones.

"You are going to see history made today."¹

In *SIRENSONG*, Peacock asks: what is our role in authenticating history? How do we relate to events that co-exist with us in time but not in geographical or physical space? What constitutes this 'experience' we witness filtered through media? What is included or omitted when produced by a culturally bound, corporate and solipsistic media system? Is the answer in attempting to differentiate the mediated experience from an unmediated one? Can we create an 'authentic' experience? Does it exist? Did it ever exist?

These questions that Peacock raises in *SIRENSONG* came to life for me in San Francisco during the devastating earthquake in 1989. For hours, I sat glued to the television viewing the horror and destruction; hearing and seeing repetitive descriptions of damage interwoven with individual dramas of survival, conveyed by (and through) the 'eye-witness' news commentators. Finally I asked myself, why am I viewing this on television? I live here and all of this is directly accessible to me. I left my apartment and, with some trepidation, decided to ride my bicycle to the worst earthquake site in the city, the Marina District, where dense residential housing had been developed on landfill.

As I rode through the streets I saw sections of pavement wide open like threatening, hungry mouths. I saw buildings tilting like Pisa, tilting like some kind of strange, frozen rhapsody. I saw sidewalks that had shifted, with sections piling up upon sections, ironically mimicking the plates of the earth. I felt afraid and vulnerable.

In front of the TV set, I felt anxiety, and a growing, overwhelming sense of helplessness. I sat passively absorbing the televised reality, and along with it, the transparency of that structure: what was chosen, how long we viewed each segment, what we looked at next, how cohesion and continuity were simulated through threads of commentary, observations, conclusions, determinations of points of significance. This was TV-time where cuts and intercuts conveyed the existence of an all-seeing eye that directed the viewing and guided the audience safely through catastrophic, simultaneous events.

This armchair witness is like the spectator who Crary refers to as the one who is "a passive onlooker at a spectacle."² The armchair witness/spectator existed in stark contrast to the witness who rode through the streets, where I chose the direction in which to travel and what to view. I chose the duration of the observation. I decided what to interpret or whether to suspend closure.³

The television made me a spectator.

My ride turned me back into an active witnessing observer.⁷

Where were you when Kennedy was shot? When the Gulf War began? When a man landed on the moon? In *SIBENSONG*, Peacock calls into question the transparencies of these seemingly simple acts of recollection and personal histories. She uses images and sounds to locate and situate both media event and personal recollections in time and place, and then, through a kind of paradigmatic shift, she dislodges the viewer into consciousness, instigating an awareness of the viewer's own acts of complicity that are necessary in order to translate and remember televised narratives as personal experience and knowledge.

When asked about 'familiarity', Peacock replied, "familiarity may (merely) inscribe/describe the boundaries of our own experience. The act of naming the familiar at once inscribes a terrain of inclusion and a terrain of exclusion. You have to pry open the culturally familiar that isn't really yours, in the same way you have to pry open the immediate and undigested contact with something When you don't know what you are looking at or to whom it belongs, it's very hard to belong there."

Someone says, a man is going to walk on the
moon, a man is going to walk on the moon and
you don't wait to see it;

You see it right way:
in your head,
like an image projected from a lens:
like the figures on the TV screen,
with only the sound of their own alluring breath,
sirenoiced.

Like the vacation landscape you've seen
a hundred times
on postcards
in western movies
in National Geographic
in TV commercials

You are lured into seeing the place
only it's no longer a place;
it's a scene, a point of interest.

You are in it
and apart from it
inside every image of it.
You imagine your presence here.

It's a landscape of associations
and you map yourself
into them⁸

Having an 'authentic' experience is not an easy task. The spectre of mediated experience haunts, and haunts absolutely. What video teaches, writes Avitol Ronell, is that "every medium is related in some crucial way to spectres. This ghostly relationship that the image produces between phenomenal and referential effects of language and image is what makes ethical phrasing as precarious as it is necessary."⁹

During the San Francisco earthquake, and my own conscious attempt to activate my role as 'witness', I stood watching the evacuation of one building particularly hard hit by the quake where the third floor now touched the street level. A news truck pulled up next to me. Cameramen got out, news commentators, assistants. A man stood before them as the crew gathered their gear and straightened their clothes.

"Ok," he said looking down at a piece of paper in his hand, "we want people carrying belongings out of buildings and shots as they walk down the street; we want dogs, babies, old people . . ."

A priori news framers.

It reminded me of a comment by filmmaker Chantal Akerman who wrote, "When one goes out looking for something, too often one finds it."¹⁰

THE ROAD RISES TO MEET YOU

One observer writes:

A dialogue between a male and a female character is played out against a landscape of familiar desire *Bliss* and nameless fear *Dread*. Together [the male and female] tumble in an embrace whose insular nature is revealed in sharp relief against radio reports on AIDS, cancer, natural and technological disasters.

"*The Road rises to meet you* is composed of video tape, sound and [slide] projections. Two video monitors form the parameters of the installation. The soundtrack of two videotapes . . . is a dialogue between a man and a woman . . . uttered in whispered tones The couple's introspection is regularly interrupted by a crackling radio newscast, an intrusion of a harsher, external reality. *Bliss* is a sensual representation of domestic comfort . . . softly lit details of housework, a table being set, an unmade bed with crumpled sheets . . . quiet time alone in a routine that begets reflection. *Dread* represents the world outside the home, a dampened landscape seen through the window of a car as it travels along a highway on a rainy day: cloudy skies, winding roads and blind curves. Oscillating between these distinct world views are the central figures . . . slides projected of a man and a woman . . . in various [states] of embrace and repose, traverse the floor in the open space between the two video monitors Collectively, the audio-visual components produce an atmosphere saturated with irreconcilable emotional states: security and anxiety; intellectual clarity and hazard".¹¹

Male Voice: Don't think about it.

Female Voice: I try not to think about it.

Male Voice: It'll be okay.

Female Voice: I know, I know. I think why worry, why decide? Aren't you dreaming?

Male Voice: I'm still dreaming.

Female Voice: Are you worried?

Male Voice: I'm worried about what's down the road.¹²

George Bataille described neurosis as "the fearful apprehension of the ultimate impossible".¹³ Could Peacock be suggesting that this is our current state? Witnessing the infathomable gives rise to fear, needs for reassurance, and retreats into memory to have moments of stability and the comfort of standing once again on familiar ground. These are the elements that shape and color the conversation between the man and woman in Peacock's installation as they alternatively voice warnings and manufacture reason in the face of the irrational, and the figures roll between two imaging poles that mark the space between. First the woman speaks, assuring the man. She offers anecdotes and recollections that console and cause fears to dissolve in the face of familiarity. Then they exchange roles. The reassurer becomes the reassured. The man speaks, assuring the woman,

Male Voice: Don't think about it.

Female Voice: I try not to think about it.

As the voices assert, reassert and re-form themselves from moment to moment, their counterpart images embrace and tumble from one end of the room to the other, and back again.

Female Voice: Why worry about that now?

Male Voice: I worry about what's going to happen to us.

Female Voice: It'll be fine. I'm sure it'll be fine. These things feel so familiar, so much the same.

The word 'narrative' is derived from the Latin *gnarus*, meaning knowing, and *narro*, which means relate or tell, from the Sanscrit root *gna*, meaning 'to know.' Narration is the manner by which one translates knowing into telling.¹⁴ The act of narration is inextricably tied to language. It is through language that we attempt to describe our experiences of the world and create a shared reality that can then be transmitted to others. Roland Barthes describes it as our experience of the world on the one hand, and our efforts to describe that experience in language, on the other. The subject exists in language, shaped, described and determined within the text. Yet, at the same time, language is limited and so too is its capacity to adequately reflect all aspects of experience. Much lies outside of language: expression of passions in bliss, for example, and the dread of and from traumas.

Radio: "... the accident could have been prevented All sides still point to the fact that the bus was going too fast. The victim said he feels the driver was speeding."

Male Voice: Don't think about it.

Trauma and Bliss. Trauma lies outside language and our ability to integrate the disruption and resulting rift into our experiences of the everyday. Television, with its repetitive news loops replaying horrific moments of disasters, exacerbates this rift.¹⁵ Similarly, bliss is also unspeakable. It is the 'impossible text'.¹⁶ 'Pleasure', writes Roland Barthes, can be expressed in words, while 'bliss' cannot.

In *The road rises to meet you*, Jan Peacock creates a spatial metaphor that instigates and duplicates the conditions in which we live: a place of moment to moment, characterized by uncertainty, with consequences and implications arising from states of knowing and not knowing. In the installation as in life, we construct a ground cobbled together out of facts and foibles as we assuage and hope, while memory and language act as tools to describe and delimit.

Embarking on life is not like embarking on a novel, writes Michel de Certeau, there is no aerial view or any sort of totalization.¹⁷ The subject is one who must learn to live with contradiction, and at the same time, have the capacity to enjoy evidence of a selfhood when and where it appears, in text for example or in narrative, while knowing that the evidence is temporary, partial and ill-fated to meet an ultimate collapse and fall.¹⁸

Female Voice: I never, well hardly ever, put sharp knives in dishwater. But whenever I put my hands in the dishwater, I get this flash, this clear image of a sharp knife lying at the bottom of the sink, so I always move my hand around very slowly; I take precautions.

Radio: "Do you have that insatiable urge . . . when you get up in the morning, you want a cigarette, when you have your first cup of coffee, when you answer the phone, when you get in the car, . . . when you . . ."²⁰

The compulsion to narrative is a powerful and persuasive force. Hayden White suggests that to narrate is to invite reflection on the very nature of culture and possibly even on the nature of humanity itself.²⁰ Moreover, language ". . . encompasses every discourse, even if human experiences cannot be reduced to what [it] can say about them. In order to constitute themselves, scientific methods allow themselves to forget this fact and philosophers think they dominate it, so that they can authorize themselves to deal with it. In this respect, neither touches the philosophical question endlessly reopened by that 'urge' that pushes man to run up against the limits of language."²¹

The challenge ultimately lies in the act of inscription: opening up what is presented in order to make it habitable. It is an act of force, unraveling, separating, identifying, naming, and claiming, occupying and owning through narration's insertion of both experience and memory.²²

"My work", says Peacock, "is not concerned with a nostalgic re-presentation of memory. It is the mobilization of present experience which incorporates memory. It's a constant attempt to occupy the present fully, and there's always drift In that way, both present experience and memory are porous; they infuse one another."

Characteristically, it seems in these works of Jan Peacock, subjectivity is formed not in the conclusion or resolution of the narrative, but rather in the act of telling and retelling from the position one occupies. "I've never entertained the possibility of beginning and completing a narrative," said Peacock, "I can only offer up a bunch of middles, and the middle is where I am standing."

One observer writes:

"There may be some truth in that story, that tale, that discourse, that narrative, but there is no reliability in the telling of it. It was told you forty years later by the ten year old who heard it along with her great aunt by the campfire, on a dark and starry night in California; and though it is, I believe, a Plains Indian story, she heard it told in English by an anthropologist of German antecedents. But by remembering it, he had made the story his; and insofar as I have remembered it, it is mine; and now, if you like it, it's yours . . . Take the tape

in your teeth, then, and bite till the blood runs hoping it's not poison; and we will all come to the end together, even to the beginning: living, as we do, in the middle."²³

Quotations from the artist are taken from telephone conversations and correspondences in 1998-1999.

- 1 Concise Oxford Dictionary.
- 2 Jonathan Crary makes a distinction between the 'spectator' and 'observer'. He chooses to use the word observer because of its root definition meaning "to conform one's action, to comply with", as in observing rules, codes, regulations and practices. The observer sees within a prescribed set of possibilities and is embedded in a system of conventions and limitations. On the other hand, the word 'spectator' comes from a Latin root *spectare*, which means "to look at". For Crary, the word 'spectator' is linked to the connotation from 19th century culture that suggests one who is "a passive onlooker at a spectacle". Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1990, pp. 5-6.
- 3 Robin Metcalfe, "Jan Peacock: *SIRENSONG*, Centre for Art Tapes, Halifax", *ArtsAtlantic* 30, Halifax: Nova Scotia, volume 8, number 2, 1988.
- 4 Text from *SIRENSONG*, by Jan Peacock.
- 5 Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, pp. 5-5.
- 6 The damage I saw was significant, but different from televised images in one way that became obvious. While some buildings bore cracks and shifts, others stood untouched. These contrasts were not visible on the television. "We are scientific because we lack subtlety." Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, New York, New York: Hill and Wang, 1975, p. 61.
- 7 Paula Levine, *Quake Diary: Observations on the San Francisco Earthquake*, unpublished, 1989.
- 8 Text from *SIRENSONG*.
- 9 Avital Ronell, "Video/Television/Rodney King: Twelve Steps Beyond The Pleasure Principal," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, Providence, Rhode Island: Brown University, Volume 4, Summer, 1992, p. 9.
- 10 Chantal Akerman, *Bordering on Fiction: Chantal Akerman's D'Est*, Minneapolis: Walker Art Centre, 1995, p. 12 (monograph from installation *East/West*).
- 11 Donna McAlear, *Interior Presence: Projecting Situations*, Calgary, Alberta: The Nickle Arts Museum, 1989 (catalogue).
- 12 Text from *The road rises to meet you*, by Jan Peacock.
- 13 Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, p. 5.
- 14 Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *On Narrativity*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell, Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1981.

- 15 In her essay "Video/Television/Rodney King: Twelve Steps Beyond The Pleasure Principal", Avital Ronell writes: "One problem with television is that it exists in trauma, or rather trauma is on television. This presents us with considerable technical difficulty, to the extent that trauma can be experienced in at least two ways: as a memory that one cannot integrate into one's own experience, and as a catastrophic knowledge that one cannot communicate to others. If television cannot be hooked up to what we commonly understand by experience, and if it cannot communicate, even telecommunicate, a catastrophic knowledge but can only - perhaps - signal the transmission of a gap (at times a yawn), a dark abyss, or the black box of talking survival - then what is it doing? Also, why does it at once induce the response of non-response and get strapped with charges of violent inducement?" pp.9-10.
- 16 Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, p. 22.
- 17 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1984, p. 11.
- 18 Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, p. 21.
- 19 Text from *The road rises to meet you*.
- 20 Hayden White, *On Narrativity*, p.1.
- 21 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 11.
- 22 Martin Heidegger writes that memory initially did not mean the power to recall. The word invokes "the sense of a steadfast intimate concentration upon the things that essentially speak to us in every thoughtful meditation. Originally, memory means as much as devotion: a constant concentrated abiding with something - not just with something that has passed, but in the same way with what is present and with what may come, an unrelinquishing and unrelenting retention." Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, New York, New York: Harper & Row, 1954, p. 140.
- 23 Ursula K. Le Guin, "It was a Dark and Stormy Night; or, Why Are We Huddling about the Campfire?," *On Narrativity*, p. 195.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My great thanks to all whose ideas and thoughts have helped to shape this essay. In particular, my thanks to Jan Peacock for the many marvelous exchanges on, and sojourns through her video landscapes; conversations that took place always in some e-phemeral third space, between 'here' and 'there'. Karen Love's meticulous and constructive editorial contributions clarified and strengthened the essay. My thanks to Karen also for her inspired and continued dedication and commitment to the arts. To both Karen and Jan, my thanks for the opportunity to become immersed in work by an artist I have admired for years and explore this relationship in writing.



Sirensong, 1987 (stills), video tape (8:30 min.)