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The Museum of Modern Art

VIDEO PIONEER MARY LUCIER'S NEWEST INSTALLATION, COMMEMORATING RED RIVER FLOOD AND ITS AFTERMATH, PRESENTED AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Mary Lucier: Floodsongs

March 13-June 20, 1999

Garden Hall Video Gallery, third floor

In 1997, the town of Grand Forks, North Dakota, suffered enormous damages as a result of severe flooding. Pioneering video artist Mary Lucier examines the devastation of the flood, its aftermath, and the resiliency of the town's survivors in her latest work, *Floodsongs*. A video and sound installation that incorporates images of homes destroyed by the flood, the testimonies of townspeople who lived through it, and household items left behind by the waters, *Floodsongs* is on view at The Museum of Modern Art from March 13 to June 20 in the Museum's Garden Hall Video Gallery.

During the spring of 1997, the Red River in Grand Forks crested at fifty-four feet--twenty-six feet above flood stage--following a winter of record blizzards and arctic cold. When it became clear that the town's dikes would not hold, thousands of citizens waded, paddled, or were ferried through the rising muddy waters, leaving their homes and lifelong possessions to the river. On April 19, fire broke out in the flooded downtown, destroying eleven city buildings. With no way to fight the fire and no homes left to save, the evacuated population of Grand Forks watched from a distance as their city was consumed by flames and water.

In all, tens of thousands of people were forced to leave their homes, and the town suffered the greatest flood damage per capita in United States history. The flood also dealt a severe blow to the fabric of civic and cultural life. Churches, the only synagogue, both public and private libraries, cultural institutions, and public buildings of all kinds were damaged or destroyed. Several elementary schools, one middle school, numerous daycare centers, and a Catholic high school were condemned after the flood, and have yet to be rebuilt.

Floodsongs investigates the legacy of this destruction with video footage of devastated homes and neighborhoods, and the accounts of survivors. "Throughout her career, Mary Lucier has explored landscape as a visual metaphor for the human spirit," says Sally Berger, Assistant Curator, Department of Film and Video, who co-organized the exhibition with Barbara London, Associate Curator. "With this installation, she examines the emotional turmoil of people who live in a place that they have seen turn against them and considers their efforts to rebound."

Dominating the far wall of the gallery is a large video projection that depicts homes ravaged by the disaster. The camera moves through moldy, mud-caked houses where the detritus of kitchen, bedroom, living room, and bathroom was tossed by the floodwaters. "The fitful rhythm of these images--sometimes eerily serene, at others violently racing by--mimics the flood's ebb and flow," notes Barbara London.

At the near end of the gallery hangs a cluster of domestic artifacts--a

chair, a lamp, and a stool--salvaged from the flood, casting elongated shadows against the blank wall with light from the lamp's single, bare bulb.

On the two walls flanking these backdrops of domestic ruin are six, 32-inch monitors, suspended six feet above the floor, displaying larger-than-life video portraits of seven townspeople--five individuals and a married couple. Young and old, these survivors speak frankly about their lives, the disastrous flood, and the vicissitudes of life in the flood plain. Their voices echo in the cavernous, gutted dance hall where the portraits were recorded, with the space's natural reverberation enhanced by electronic processing.

These personal accounts are also combined and remixed into a low-pitched, accompanying background sound, establishing an underlying musical texture throughout the gallery. The simultaneous telling of the stories and the sound interplay between voices create an audio landscape, suggesting what Lucier calls "a contemporary oratorio." In designing and producing the installation's audio components, Lucier worked with noted composer Earl Howard.

Originally a sculptor, Mary Lucier has also worked in photography and performance. She has been involved with video for more than twenty-five years, creating pieces that range from single-channel tapes to more recent image-and-sound installations that have been described as "immersive environments." She has exhibited in galleries and museums around the country and internationally, including one-person shows at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, The Kitchen in New York, and the University Art Museum in Berkeley, California. Her work is also included in the permanent collections of The Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, and the ZKM Museum of Contemporary Art in Karlsruhe, Germany.

One of the few buildings in Grand Forks undamaged by the flood, the North Dakota Museum of Art initiated several local projects to commemorate the natural disaster and also commissioned seven artists to create works that would place the experience of the community within a larger perspective. *Floodsongs* premiered there in December 1998 and has its first showing outside of North Dakota at MoMA.

The exhibition is made possible by an anonymous donor and The Contemporary Arts Council of The Museum of Modern Art.

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