WORDS ON WORKS

Words on Works *are short statements about new artworks in which art and technology coexist or merge.*
Words on Works *are published regularly on the ISAST online database F.A.S.T. (Fine Art Science and Technology) and in the ISAST online newsletter F.A.S.T. News. In the spirit of* Leonardo, *the information they contain is what the artists themselves have chosen to say about their own work.*

THE ODYSSEY

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The Odyssey is a collaborative computer program written as a Hypercard application for the Apple Macintosh computer (Mac Plus, SE or II). *The Odyssey* will travel for 4 months, 15 March–14 July 1989. During its travels, all who encounter *The Odyssey* are asked to contribute texts, sounds or images to its collection of data. Contributors pass their work on to others so that the journey may continue.

After 14 July 1989, all copies of *The Odyssey* will ask to be returned home. Upon their return, we hope to compile a modern-day Domesday book; an electronic picture of the time from the material we will have received.

SPEAKERS' CORNERS

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Since 1983, I have been creating electronic *Speakers' Corners*. These are outdoor sculptures that people can call up and talk through. The callers, using any ordinary telephone, can dial a special number and be automatically connected to these outdoor sculptures. The sculptures are usually integrated into preexisting structures on site and equipped with a public address system that enables the callers to express themselves directly to the public.

These electronically active sculptures exist in a public space and are accessible to the public on a 24-hour basis. My goal is to create, via telephone, an open forum for spontaneous oral communication.

Section Editor: Judy Malloy

HUGE UTERUS

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Huge Uterus (1989) includes the 6-hour real-time video record of the recent operation on my uterus. During the video/operation, the surgeon writes exploratory notes such as that used here for the title: "Huge uterus . . . with many tumors . . . no cancer . . . the tissue is healthy except for tumors . . . remove tumors . . . the uterus is an organ that heals well naturally".

The other image/narrative component of this installation is a visualization/preparation-for-the-operation sound tape that plays on an autoreverse tape player with detachable remote speakers: "As the anaesthetic begins to make you even more relaxed, external words and sounds simply serve as a background murmur interpreted as signals to relax. They're not recorded. You will not respond to them. You are very relaxed and very calm".

These tapes play on equipment that is configured as body/monitor/hookup. All of the apparatus (monitor, decks, speakers, wires) are visible in the actual installation. The video cassette recorder and audio tape decks are mounted on adjoining walls; their electrical wiring hangs free and visible and is connected to the video monitors and speakers, which are placed on the floor side-by-side in front of their decks. The video monitor lies on its back on the floor.

Huge Uterus was exhibited in the Bay Area Conceptualism exhibition (Hallwalls, Buffalo, NY, Fall 1989), at the Simon Watson Gallery (New York City, Jan–Feb 1990) and at L.A.C.E. (Los Angeles, CA, Feb–Apr 1990).

ELEGBA'S STRATAGEM

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Elegba's Stratagem employs the computer as a tool for the design and presentation of branching narrative ideas and viewer mediation. The basic equipment configuration consists of a personal computer (PC), three videodisc players that are controlled by the computer (via an interface card), a graphics overlay card that allows text and graphics originating from the PC to be combined with motion video from the videodisc players and a speech-recognition card for viewer input. The authoring system used creates the interactive program.

At the heart of this work is the projection of elements from the African orisha tradition—its pantheon of deities and their relationships—onto the story of a contemporary African-American artist who is in search of himself through his artwork. The connection between this tradition and the proposed interactive video is both metaphoric and symbolic.

Systemically, the screenwriter draws parallels between the role and function of Elegba (deity of the crossroads, or of karma in Eastern terms) and that of computer-program intelligence. As Elegba opens and closes doors of human destiny, so the computer governs the travel of data through a design of treelike structures. Factors determining which pathways will be open or closed at any given moment are largely a matter of the interaction between human behavior (viewer input) and the program, which represents the laws of the system—the values system.

Symbolically, the relationship is supported in terms of story, particularly through its major characters. They are seen as archetypal extensions of various important deities, all of whom are well known for their powers, personalities, behavior and domains of responsibility. In effect, these spiritual presences are manifested through their earthly hosts, who themselves are unaware of their possession by the archetypes.

The protagonist, Lazarus Wilder, named after his biblical namesake, en-

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graph paper to make knitting patterns. I knitted the designs by hand and mounted them on padded boards.

After several years of working with computer graphics, I wanted to make something tangible that I could hold in my hands while still working with computers. I also wanted to explore the beauty of fractal designs that had been made visible only after the invention of computers. Knitting with thick wools and light silks gave me the pleasure of touching the material and also reminded me of the textile origins of computers with the Jacquard looms of the nineteenth century. By slowing down my hands, I was able to observe and think about the complexities of fractals and to make comparisons between the building of designs by stitches and of designs by pixels.

Although the correspondence of pixel to stitch is not precise in these pieces, the experience of translating the design to knitted fabric gave me an understanding of the construction of computer images, and of the connection between discrete stitches and electric pulses. It also allowed me to ruminate on fractals as boundaries, the infinite self-replications inherent in fractal makeup, and the realization of an order that I originally perceived as chaos or at least as complexity beyond comprehension. The experience made me more visually aware, and I learned how to read fractals and other kinds of complex information-laden, pixel-built images. By knitting computer designs, I enjoyed reconnecting the discoveries of computer sciences with the gentle, ancient world of making cloth.

Invisible Cities

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In 1985, the ballet *Invisible Cities* was realized as a collaboration between myself, choreographer Brenda Way and the Oberland Dance Company (ODC)/San Francisco Dance Company, and designer/engineer Gayle Curtis. Although most of the music is computer synthesized, there are also two live instrumental/electronic performers, including myself. This was a personal challenge, since I had been away from performing for a while. It was also an opportunity to try to raise the technical standards of music in dance performance, which I saw too often neglected. The music was funded by a grant from the (U.S.) National Endowment of the Arts and produced at the Center for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics, Stanford University.

Italo Calvino's novel *Invisible Cities* inspired us with its beauty, its original and concise structure, and its dream-like imagery. It is an allegorical account of a meeting between the Venetian explorer Marco Polo and the Tatar Emperor Kublai Khan. Sensing the decline of his empire, the aged Kublai Khan summons the young foreigner Marco Polo to his garden to reassure him of the greatness of his realm. Marco Polo diverts the great Khan with tales of cities he has seen within the empire. As the barrier of their different languages is overcome, the images of the cities become increasingly vivid. Kublai Khan searches for a pattern among them, concluding finally that each description is of the same place and all are within him.

The music contains both subtle and explicit stylistic elements of various popular and classical world musics, sections of pure musical fantasy, and various musical and digitally processed environmental sounds. In this way it conveys feelings and moods similar to those created by Calvino's weaving of hyper-realistic description and veiled, dreamlike fantasy. Conversely, the literary symbolism, characters and narrative of the book provided much of the inspiration for the choreographer and designers. However, rather than follow the book explicitly, we chose to adopt something of its form, then invented our own 'invisible cities' for each of the five major movements.

At the time, Gayle Curtis was participating in work being done in machine choreography at the Veterans Administration Robotic Aid project. He wanted to see the concept carried further. For *Invisible Cities*, he directed the addition of a large robot arm as a visiting member of the ODC dance company. The powerful robot, transformed by the choreography of Way, Margo Apostolos, and Curtis, performed the role of Kublai Khan. I further enhanced its persona by amplifying the sounds of its motors and digitally processing these sounds into musical material during the performance. We deliberately treated the robotics as a proven rather than as an experimental medium, in order to avoid making any clichéd statements on 'art versus technology'. The presence of the robot garnered us worldwide publicity, often at the expense of the artistic message.

The music for *Invisible Cities* has been released on compact disc on the Wergo label, WER 2015-50, distributed in the United States by Harmonia Mundi, Los Angeles. The work was awarded a mention at the 1989 Ars Electronica. An earlier recording, *Computer Music*, which includes "Dreamsong", "Love in the Asylum" and "Mars Suite", is available on CD from Mobile Fidelity Sound Labs, MFCD-818. The "Mars Suite" formed part of the soundtrack to the NASA stereographic film *Mars in 3D*.

Wringer/Washer TV

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The subject of this project is abortion. Rapid juxtaposition of imagery and arguments from both 'pro' and 'anti' positions are interspersed with a view of a load of wash going through the wash cycle from above. Video segments are approximately 10–20 sec long. An 11-in color monitor is encased in the wash tub of a pink, white and chrome 1950s-style wringer-washer. In order to see the video, a viewer must look down into the machine. A control unit activates the machinery in the presence of a viewer.

The pink and chrome wringer washer represents a 1950s futuristic view of technological progress. The juxtaposition of this outdated technology with the contemporary arguments of the abortion debate reveals the irony of the fact that this issue is just beginning to be publicly addressed.

From Osiris to Sinai

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While working on my project about Ancient Egypt and everlasting life, I came upon an interesting and remarkable chapter in the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. "Spell 120" illustrates the lofty moral and spiritual concepts of the Egyptians in the Eighteenth Dynasty—about 1580 B.C.