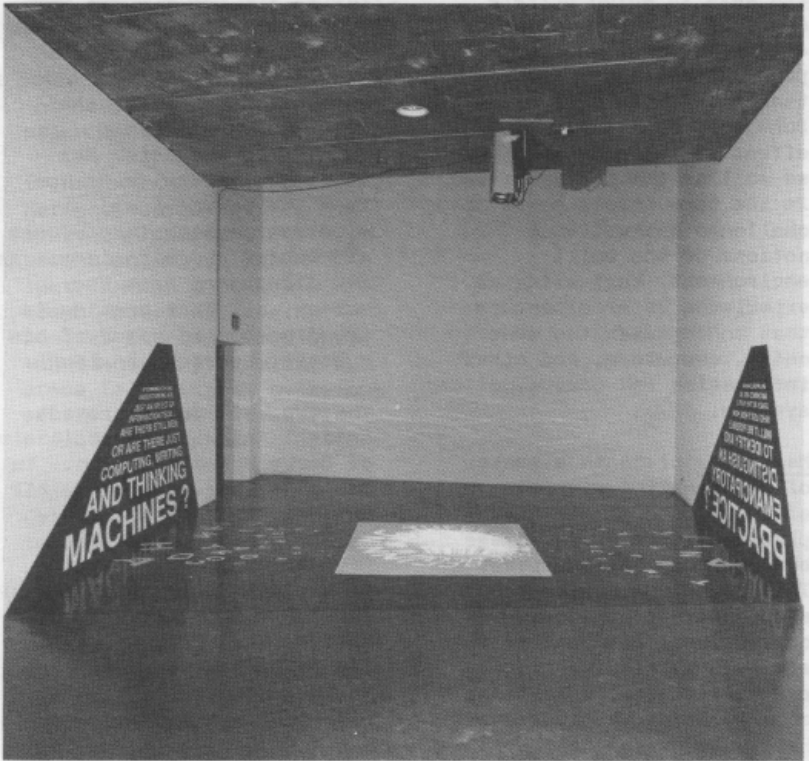


Maelstrom: Max Laughs, 1988



Judith Barry's Maelstrom: Max Laughs is the preliminary segment of a larger installation which will use computer and video technology to simulate an entire architectural space. In Maelstrom, Barry establishes the physical and theoretical foundations for this future installation by projecting onto the gallery floor a video which provides, in her words, "an exploration of information technologies and the ways in which private space has been eroded and altered by real changes produced by these technologies in daily life." Both the unusual visual effect of the projected video as well as the issues raised in the tape itself serve to challenge conventional notions of the built environment, suggesting an experience of architecture that encompasses the mass media, computers, and other information and communications systems.

Maelstrom presents a number of disorienting spatial effects, such as the placement of a moving image beneath the viewer's feet. This technique suggests an alternative to the more conventional perspective achieved by placing images perpendicular to the floor, on a wall facing the viewer. Here, the screen becomes a kind of trap door, seeming to allow one to peer down into the space below the gallery floor. Sharply angled wall texts, foreshortened in a manner recalling the prologue of the movie Star Wars, veer off in opposite directions to contribute to a skewed sense of order in the Museum's architectural space which is already notably lacking in parallel lines.

The video itself, a densely packed two-minute loop, provides an absurdly condensed history of communication and information media. Beginning with an atavistic reference to the Biblical logos, the tape touches on the storage and dissemination of written language, the birth of the novel, the function of computers and their creation of a uniquely technological space ("computers can go places you can't go"), and concludes with a speculation on future cybernetic developments. In the video's culminating segment, the well-known cybernetic television character Max Headroom appears to escape from the physical and electronic restraints of his microchips and circuitry. As Max disappears from the screen, all that remains is the disembodied sound of his robotic, quasi-human laugh.

The two wall texts provide insight into the didactic aim of Barry's installation. On one side, the text asks, "IF COMMUNICATION AND UNDERSTANDING ARE JUST AN EFFECT OF INFORMATION TECH...ARE THERE STILL MEN OR ARE THERE JUST COMPUTING, WRITING, AND THINKING MACHINES?" While referring to the potential for self-governing machines such as Max Headroom, this question might also be taken to imply that it has become difficult to discern whether humanity itself remains distinct from the all-encompassing electronic media. Maelstrom may provide one answer to this question in its juxtaposition of the sheer corporeality of the viewer's body with the ethereal lights of the video projection that play across his or her skin and clothing.

The other text, written in mirror image, asks, "IN A WORLD WHERE MACHINES ARE AS CRAZY AS THE PEOPLE WHO USE THEM, HOW WILL IT BE POSSIBLE TO DISTINGUISH AN EMANCIPATORY PRACTICE?" Here, Barry alludes to the social dilemma underlying the fact that while computers often make a corporation more efficient and profitable they may accomplish this, in part, by enslaving workers to built-in surveillance systems that monitor and report their work-station behaviors. Thus, Barry suggests that information technologies are only as liberating as the means by which they are used.

In Maelstrom: Max Laughs, Barry seeks to develop new audiences and uses for high-tech machinery. Her installation presents computerized effects as wonders in themselves while simultaneously creating an arena for critical awareness of the possible deleterious effects of such technologies.

Judith Barry was born in Columbus, Ohio. She attended the University of California at Berkeley, and the San Francisco Art Institute, and holds degrees from the University of Florida (B.S.) and the New York Institute of Technology (M.A.). Among the awards she has received are fellowships from the New York Foundation for the Arts and the New York State Council on the Arts, both in 1986.

Lawrence Rinder

Work in MATRIX:

Maelstrom: Max Laughs, 1989,
mixed media installation.
Lent by the artist.

Selected one-person
exhibitions:

San Francisco Museum of
Modern Art, Kaleidoscope
(performance) '78; Whitney
Museum, NYC, Ideology/Praxis
(screening) '82; Museum of
Modern Art, NYC, Echo
(installation) '86; Seattle,
WA, COCA Natural Foods
Pavilion (public sculpture)
'87; Douglas Hyde Gallery,
Dublin, Ireland, Echo/In the
shadow of the city...vampy
(installation) '88.

Selected group exhibitions:

Artists Space, NYC, Dark
Rooms (installation) '85; The
New Museum, NYC, Damaged
Goods (installation) '86;
Galleria Pieroni/American
Academy, Rome, Italy, Non in
Codice (installation) '87;
Whitney Biennale, NYC, First
and Third (installation) '87;
Riverside Studios, London,
G.B., Between Echo and
Silence (installation) '87;
Venice Biennale, Italy,
Aperto (installation) '88;
Whitney Museum at Equitable,
NYC, Expanded Forms
(installation) '88; Museum of
Contemporary Art, L.A.,
A Forest of Signs
(installation) '89.

Selected bibliography by the
artist:

"Casual Imagination,"
Blasted Allegories (New York:
The New Museum '87).
"Willful Amnesia," Video
by Artists 1 (Toronto: Art
Metropole '86).
"Space Invaders,"
Un/Necessary Image
(Cambridge: MIT Press '83).

Selected bibliography about
the artist:

Fisher, Jean. "The
Vampiric Text," Parkett 13,
Fall '87.
"Through the Mirror of
Seduction," exhibition
catalogue (San Francisco:
Douglas Hyde Gallery '88).
Morse, Margaret. "The
Architecture of
Representation," Afterimage,
Oct. '87.
Wallis, Brian.
"Revising Documentary,"
Aperture, Fall '88.

MATRIX is supported in part
by grants from the Paul L.
and Phyllis Wattis
Foundation, the California
Tamarack Foundation, Art
Matters Inc., and the
Alameda County Art Commission
County Supervisors' Art
Support Program.