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Mary Lucier

Schwabsky, Barry. "Mary Lucier, Lennon, Weinberg, Inc." Artforum, February 2001.

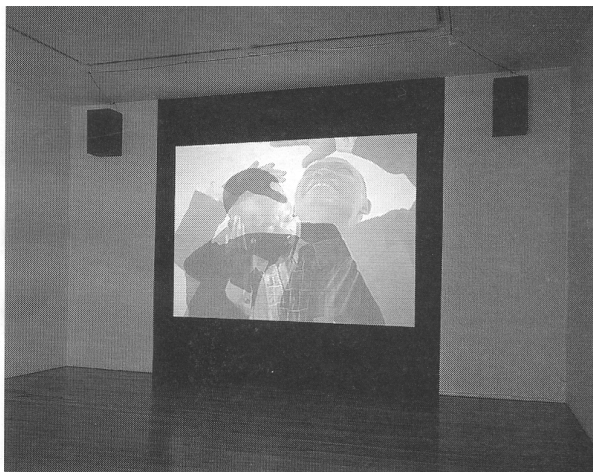
ARTFORUM

MARY LUCIER

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A larger-than-life-size digital projection shows a short-haired black man in a suit and tie sitting against a white backdrop. Obviously deaf, he gesticulates vividly, even urgently, while emitting various grunts, moans, and other nonlinguistic vocalizations. There is such a communicative fervor to his performance that it is easy to forget that one cannot understand him. The camera recording all this is not stationary but moves unobtrusively, as if sensitively following the story; the tape has been subtly processed so that it is slightly jerky. At one point the scene splits into two superimposed images, as though the man were condemned to play the roles of both speaker and listener.

It is impossible not to stand transfixed before this impenetrable tale—a fact that becomes all the more remarkable when one realizes that the teller is not using any known system for deaf communication. My inability to fully understand him is not fortuitous but a case of what he faces every day, no matter where he is or whom he is with. If modernist narrative is about communicating the incapacity to turn reality into narrative—think of not only Beckett and Pynchon but even the opening pages of *The Charterhouse of Parma*, whose hero finds himself caught up in a welter of chaotic events he is unable to identify as the Battle of Waterloo—then its perfect embodiment may be here, in the eloquent yet incomprehensible story of John Lado Keni, the subject of Mary Lucier's video installation *Migration* (all works 2000). What is known about Keni is that he was born deaf in southern Sudan, a country that has been subject to two decades of famine and civil war. He is the only survivor of his family. Having escaped his native land, he lived in a refugee camp in Kenya for six years before coming to the United States. In light of these facts, certain passages in Keni's narration become less opaque. One makes out signs for running, for climbing, for dying. Yet the story



Mary Lucier, *Migration*, 2000, two-projection digital video installation with sound track, dimensions variable. Installation view.

as a whole remains mysterious—though not as mysterious as his startling equanimity in the face of all that has happened or his passion for communication, a passion that must have been one of the keys to his survival.

Although Lucier has been best known for her work involving landscape, themes of personal memory and narrative have recently come to the fore, for instance in *Floodsongs*, 1998, a video installation constructed around the spoken accounts of survivors of a deluge that devastated a small town in North Dakota the previous year. In *Migration*, this concern with the articulation of traumatic memory has become focused on a single figure—become a portrait, in fact, though one that is also a historical narrative of an unusual kind. Lacking *Migration*'s unforgettable urgency, the other two works shown here—*Forge*, a three-channel meditation on ironworking, and *Nesting*, a four-channel piece based on nature imagery—could only seem pale and static. One problem is Lucier's dependence on purely verbal linkages: For instance, *Nesting* documents a beehive, employs a technique of "nested" images framed within repetitions of themselves, and includes nested wooden dolls as part of the installation. And in *Migration* itself, Lucier has set up a counterpoint between Keni and a facing projection of a monarch butterfly, a migratory insect, alighting on a human hand—a lovely but entirely superfluous metaphor.

—Barry Schwabsky