

SEVEN PROPHECIES

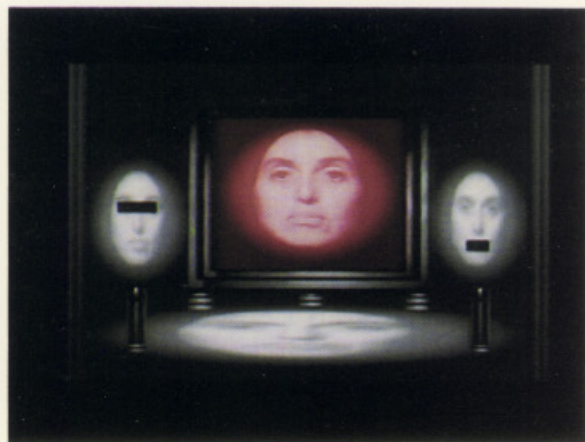
SEVEN PROPHECIES :

A Video Installation by Stuart Bender and Angelo Funicelli



presented and produced by
the Long Beach Museum of Art, Long Beach, California

March 18 - April 29, 1990



"The Might of Nations"



"The Bonds of Kinship"

PROPHECY: the foretelling of the future, the work or revelation of an inspired prophet. Throughout history humankind has sought to know the future. Diverse questions regarding loves, battles, hunts, lives and deaths have been addressed to sibyls, soothsayers, gods and priests in an effort to control the fearsomeness of the unknown by giving it shape, meaning and direction through foreknowledge.

In Seven Prophecies, Stuart Bender and Angelo Funicelli have created a contemporary interactive video/music installation that metaphorically explores this questing process. Their oracular vision of the future is admixed with references to a historically and psychologically remote past. In its poetic simultaneity, Seven Prophecies suggests the interconnectedness of past and present, the interrelatedness of recollection and yearning.

Much of the technical work and all of the videotape post-production for this project were accomplished at the Long Beach Museum of Art's Video Annex. Since 1975, the LBMA has served as a catalyst for the production of new work in the media arts field by making its technical resources and staff available to artists from throughout the region. This project represents a shining example of the extraordinary work that results when artists and arts institutions embark upon creative collaborations.

I would like to thank Stuart Bender and Angelo Funicelli for sharing their visionary new work with the museum. In this, the last decade of the twentieth century, spiritual and metaphorical inquiries such as those posed by Seven Prophecies aid us in addressing the challenges of the unknowable and in contending with our own, often vain, need to control the future.

—Harold B. Nelson, Director

PROPHECY AS VISIONARY NARRATIVE

History was invented around 1300 B.C., when the Mesopotamians first set down successive records of royalty that made reference to predecessors and chronicled important events. Once it became possible to think of a past, thoughts of a future followed by obsession, and a civilization could depict itself as existing "in" a certain time.

This archetypal equation on which collective consciousness is formulated—past "times" future equals present—is elegantly traced in Stuart Bender and Angelo Funicelli's intricately structured video installation *Seven Prophecies*. Narratives based on myth, news accounts, personal reflections and dreams answer prophecies drawn from a range of historical sources starting with the oracles of ancient Egypt and extending to previsions of 19th century Native Americans, all transformed under the spell of the purest temporal art, music. What this "trans-historical" melange illuminates is the essential dynamic whereby narrative structure itself imposes history and futurity, loss and hope.

It is the stories we share about what we have witnessed that shape the futures we can imagine and thus create, and this tension between memory and desire is what "now" feels like. Any valid prophecy is thus universal and self-fulfilling—it is so true of what we know about ourselves that its certainty is a product of its integrality, its quality of being connected to our ideas and lives.

But, as Antonio Porchia writes, "A hundred men together are not the one-hundredth part of a man." Nothing is really "generally" true that is not first and foremost personally manifest. *Seven Prophecies* uses interactive technology and subjective allusions to position each spectator in a highly personal relationship to utterances of collective fate. It is by personalizing prophecy, Bender and Funicelli suggest, that prediction becomes a form of empowerment and gains its highest office as a way of deciding what to do. For them, the visionary is not one who is able to see what will happen, but one who sees what must be done. This is the spiritual inquiry that lies at the heart of their equation of narrative with prophecy.

In an age when the *Book of Revelations* has been cited as a justification for fatalistic nuclear policies by an American President, the moral problem of taking individual responsibility for the influence of oracles and auguries is more pronounced than ever.

—Michael Nash, Media Arts Curator

SEVEN PROPHECIES

Written by Stuart Bender and Angelo Funicelli
Video and Installation Design by Stuart Bender
Music Composition and Performance by Angelo Funicelli
Mary Daval, Soprano
Nancy Buchanan and Douglas Wichert, Narration
Luis Manuel, Dance Performance

Additional Camera, Nancy Buchanan and Joe Leonardi

Music recorded at MAXSOUND, Long Beach California
Max Solomon and Nick Camas, Engineers

Rich Rosensweig, Installation Disc Programming

Martin Betz, LBMA, Head of Exhibitions / Operations
Gary Murphy, LBMA, Installation Construction

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There is no nation, whether the most learned and enlightened or the most grossly barbarous, that does not believe that the future can be revealed and does not recognize in certain people the power of foretelling it.

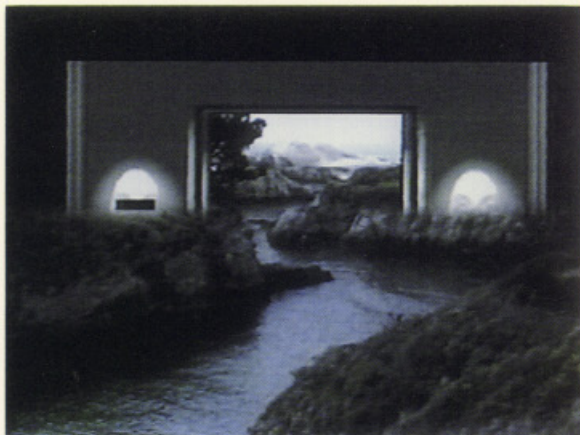
—Cicero, *De Divinatione*



"The Eye of the Storm"



"The Day of Judgement"



"The Balance of Power"

The viewer enters the oracle room. The room is dark, save for a single light that shines down onto a panel of glowing buttons, set into a railing. Each button is labeled with the title of a prophecy. The viewer must activate the installation by pressing any one of the buttons. The selected prophecy is then presented on the monitor and speakers facing the rail. After the prophecy is over, the viewer can choose another.

The interactive video / music installation *Seven Prophecies* began as two separate projects, which we were developing concurrently. One was a cycle for soprano and tape, based on prophecies drawn from sources throughout history—its barren and granitic sonic textures, as well as its lyric content, were suggested by Par Lagerkvist's novel *The Sibyl*, set in ancient Delphi. The other project was a video installation that was initially conceived as presenting images of people narrating past situations that they wish they could change.

As the projects developed in parallel, it struck us that we were both dealing with the same subject—the attempt to direct history. Where the video installation dealt with people's desire to re-create the past, the music cycle dealt with the desire to predict, and thereby control, the future.

The acknowledgement of the vanity of these desires has had no effect on their persistence. From the ancient Sibyls, to the contemporary swamp of guides to spiritual and secular fulfillment, we seek out the knowers of the future, who will tell us what will happen and what we should do when it does happen. The perpetual irony in all this is that, though humanity has endlessly sought out the advice of oracles, the delivered predictions seem to have had little effect on humanity's actions. Rather, people have interpreted the oracles in self-serving ways, using them as justifications for actions which would probably have been taken with or without oracular advice.

Once we merged our two projects, the notions of control, of telling and foretelling, as well as the notion of lingering traces of past events, began to structure the piece. The stories became fragments of chronologically unfixed narratives, drawn from dreams, from ancient and modern history, from overheard conversations. They frame the embedded prophecies, which, like the stories, are drawn from various sources: the Sibylline oracles of the ancient Egyptian Jews, the chronicles of Josephus, the Medieval church, the 16th century physician Paracelsus, the Old Testament, and the 19th century Sioux culture. The prophecies themselves are fragments, as they were when they were first uttered, the enigmatic shrieks of visionaries that were consulted by politi-

cians, by military leaders and by ordinary citizens seeking the answers to personal questions.

Though modern-day fortune tellers, trance channellers and evangelists are still doing a brisk business, much of the role of prophecy has been taken over by science and technology, which present us with what we consider to be hard facts, streams of numbers and data to be interpreted by teams of anonymous experts, who analyze the information mathematically, and then tell us how it affects our futures—economically, politically, socially, physically.

The technological aspect of prophecy in our own time—the trust we put in satellite photographs and computer-generated statistics—gives us a peculiar link with the ancients. Like a computer, the Sibyl did not know what she prophesied. In the trance that gave her these visions of the future, she was unconscious, a medium through which the oracles passed, leaving her, (unlike our more cooperative machines) bewildered and in pain. It remained for the priests, the experts, to translate her oracles and relate them to the situation at hand.

The half-human Sibyl of *Seven Prophecies* floats indifferently in an altar room digitally constructed out of abstracted fragments of her face. She sings to a computer-generated orchestra, her voice a human line that flows along side the machine, entwining it, floating above it, sometimes singing throughout a movement, often only a fragment in the texture.

Like the prophecies, the narratives are lingering, italicized traces of a dead past, shards from the shattered psyche. Like archaeologists, the viewer is provoked to construct worlds from these fragments. Like students, we study them as texts of extermination and of hope.

In their didactic and cognitive modes, science and technology can describe the houses and the furniture, but they cannot explain why the residue of ancient events lingers, why an anecdote told by an ancient stranger still resonates. To recreate a world out of these fragments, to assimilate the traces that are all that remain of these histories, we appropriate technological tools to achieve the disruption of our cognitive habits. Technology then becomes the instrument by which we shape and interpret the Sibyl's predictions.

The ancient Greeks, when they couldn't afford a one-on-one consultation with the Sibyl, would choose a fixed prophecy by lot, and apply it to their own situations. With the help of an obliging technology, we offer this random access concept in *Seven Prophecies*.



"The Ringing of Changes"



"The Race of Men"

STUART BENDER

After formal training in the arts that included experience in ethnic and modern dance, radio broadcasting, painting and drawing, Stuart Bender turned to video art in the early '80s, seeing it as a medium through which he could blend the varied disciplines of his background into one all-encompassing art form.

Bender's videotapes and video installations have been seen at the Bonn Videonale, the Museu de Arte Moderna in Rio de Janeiro, Aarhus Video Festival, the San Francisco International Video Festival, the Atlanta Film and Video Festival, the Fine Arts Museum of Long Island, Intermedia Arts, Minnesota, the PepsiCo Summer Fare, and the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences in Los Angeles.

ANGELO FUNICELLI

A native of New York, where he was trained as a classical musician, Angelo Funicelli began using electronics in the mid '80s, when he started creating electro-acoustic scores both as independent compositions and as integral elements in numerous widely seen videotapes and multimedia performances, including works by Stuart Bender and Nancy Buchanan.

Funicelli's compositions have been heard at New Music America, Miami, the American Film Institute Video Festival, the Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, on Los Angeles radio stations KXLU and KPFK, television stations KCET, Los Angeles and WLRN, Miami, and on Tellus Audio Magazine.

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