

VISITATIONS

BY STUART BENDER & ANGELO FUNICELLI

In the Roman Catholic calendar, the Visitation commemorates a visit paid by the Virgin Mary to her cousin Elizabeth. According to the story in the Gospel of St. Luke, Mary has just been told by the angel of the Annunciation that, not only is she due to give birth to the Messiah, but her cousin Elizabeth is also pregnant, after a lifetime of barrenness. Elizabeth greets her cousin rapturously, and Mary bursts forth with her own effusive canticle, the *Magnificat*, beginning "My soul doth magnify the Lord" (Luke, 1:46).

As a set piece, born out of such exhilarating circumstances and so exalted and melismatic in its poetry, the *Magnificat* has been a favorite text of composers since the Dark Ages. Most of the settings (all of the most famous ones) grow out of a tradition that interprets Mary as the loving mother, the intercessor, the mystical rose. So encrusted has the text become with the sweet varnish that enabled the worship of Mary to turn Catholicism, as the Durants say, "from a religion of terror... into a religion of mercy and love," that it is easy for the prayer's political message to become transparent. The fact is that far from being the gentle prayer of a humble maiden, the *Magnificat* is a war cry, an exhortation to revolution.

And why shouldn't it be? To believe that Mary gave birth to Christ is to believe that she gave birth to Christianity. And once Christianity got the right political backing, it became one of the most effective revolutions in recorded history, overthrowing innumerable sets of tyrannies, traditions and belief systems.

Viewed from a psychological angle, the incident of the Annunciation itself can be seen as a hallucinatory episode. This link between revolution and hallucination, the power of a vision to direct history, is one of the points examined in *Visitations*. While Christianity was an Old World revolution, *Visitations* examines New World revolutions and revolutionary attempts, using three historical events: the Salem witch hunts of the 1690s, the Haitian revolution of the 1790s, and the Native American Ghost Dance religion of the 1890s. In each of these cases, the link between belief, hallucination and revolution led to major political eruptions.

The Salem witch hunts of 1692 were the result of the practices of a Barbadian slave named Tituba. Her voodoo-tinged games with the girls of Salem, and her amazing confession incorporating all the worst superstitions of her enslavers, paved the way for the Puritans to undermine their own political power through rampant hysteria.

The Haitian revolution of 1791 began at a voodoo ceremony, and resulted in a slave revolt and the expulsion of the colonizers who had possessed Haiti.

The Ghost Dance religion of the 1890s began with the pacifist visions of a Paiute Indian named Wovoka, and was transformed into a ritual



designed to drive out the white visitors. It ended in the massacre of the Sioux at Wounded Knee.

Naturally, the visions at work in these episodes threatened prevailing authority. And so, the control of visions has been, throughout New World history, one of the chief aims of government. Native American religious drugs are illegal, though Communion wine can be bought anywhere. Urinalysis (whose primitive antecedent was a favorite method of witch-hunting Puritan detectives) has become the

Torquemada of American business, visiting job-hunters with ghastly visions of unfillable gaps branded into their resumé.

The current stock of biological and supernatural hallucinations and illusions has been augmented by technological versions. Computer-based Virtual Reality and electronic brain stimulation are being touted by some as the non-chemical LSD of the future. On a more play-along-at-home level, we are visited daily by visions that parallel those of historical mystics. We see a strangely colored bright light; out of this light, figures appear. We recognize them: they are icons with which we have been familiar since childhood. They speak to us, they give us messages and instructions upon which to act. We talk about them the next day, and hear about other people's visions.

We can even rent earlier episodes at the video store.

For us, music video is the most appropriate contemporary medium for examining a subject dealing with hallucination and illusion. Through choir performance and electronics, we can draw upon the musical history of this text, analyzing and reinterpreting its elements of piety and primitivism, sniffing around the edges of the traditions that have grown up around it. The visuals push those traditions further, using the electronically generated illusions and reframed symbols that a visually literate (and obsessed) electronic culture has been conditioned to accept and to expect.

The deliberate fragmentation of much of music video and video art, the mutability of these forms and their elements, are the perfect technological counterparts to the visions recorded by mystics. Video is one of the most deeply rooted elements of our culture. It creates our illusions and was created out of them. The sounds of electricity, whether a simulation of a church organ or the white noise being emitted by our computers, are as common and accepted, and therefore just as "real," as the sounds of our own voices.

Whether visionaries actually saw anything "real" doesn't ultimately matter. If their hallucinations made them laugh, or bleed, or fight, then they were real enough.

Stuart Bender & Angelo Funicelli, August 1991

VISITATIONS

A MUSIC VIDEO PERFORMANCE
CREATED BY STUART BENDER AND ANGELO FUNICELLI

Presented by the Long Beach Museum of Art
as part of the exhibition
Art of Music Video: Ten Years After
August 25, 1991

Michael Nash and Kim Harlan Tassie, Curators

WRITTEN BY ANGELO FUNICELLI AND STUART BENDER
VIDEO BY STUART BENDER
MUSIC BY ANGELO FUNICELLI

SUNG BY EXINDIGO!

Sopranos: Mary Daval, Janet Hook, Tracy Saliefendic

Altos: Moni Berger, Cynthia Crass, Pat Loeb

Tenors: Gregg Bruno, Gregory Koppenhaver

Basses: Geoffrey Alch, Max Mendez

Conductor: Laurie Gurman

with

Nancy Buchanan Mary Burkin

Steve Cook

Loretta Greene Robert Hori

John Serembe Dale Slusser Douglas Wichert

BULL'S HEAD MASK BY CAROLYN POTTER

Music recorded and mixed at
Home Front Studio, Long Beach, California
Audio Engineers: K. Howard, Gary La Duke

Technical support

Alene Richards Kristen Bentz

Gabe Cubos

Mar Elepaño Jill Hopkins

Pat Kelley

Post-production services provided by

LBMA Video Annex

Joe Leonardi, General Manager

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Meet the Composer, California

