

The Narrative Landscape

Margaret Neal, Managing Editor

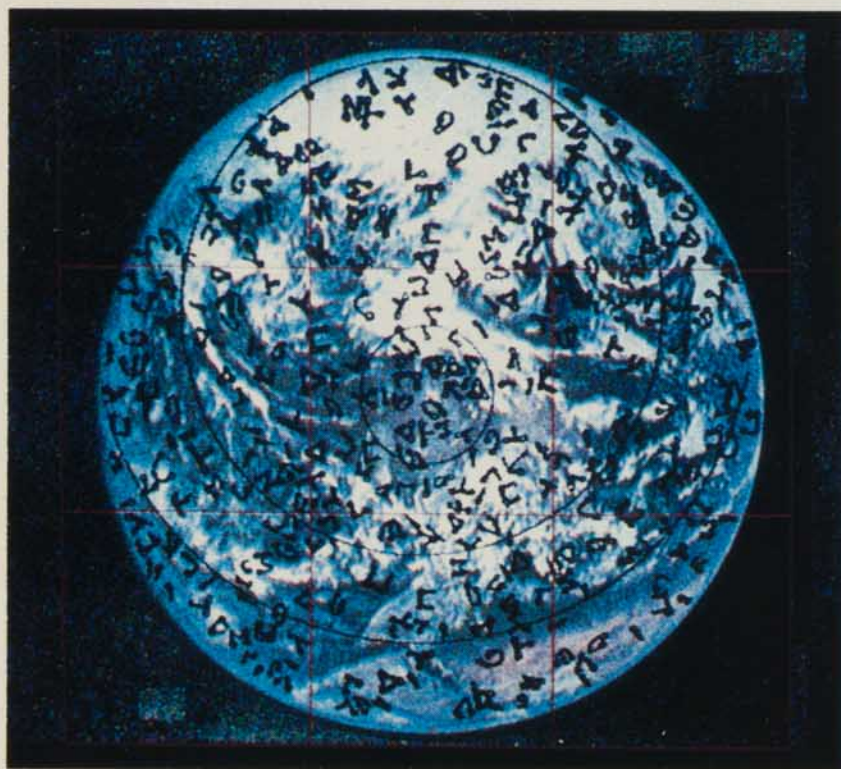


Figure 1. The world at the beginning of *The Narrative Landscape*.

As a viewer you stand on the balcony, peering over the railing at the floor beneath you. There you see a 3m by 4m interactive computer-graphic picture done by Jeffrey Shaw with the Time Arts Lumena system. (For those who don't speak fluent metric, that computer graphic is about 10 feet by 13 feet.) What is in the picture at any given moment is up to you. You control it with a joystick.

You are experiencing *The Narrative Landscape*, an interactive computer-graphic and poetic narrative inspired by Italo Calvino's novel *Invisible Cities*.

If you start at the beginning, you see Jeff Shaw's picture of Earth, based on a satellite photo (see Figure 1). The Earth has two overlays. One is a pattern of astrological characters from the Hebrew Kabala. The other

is a grid of thin red lines, which divides the Earth into nine sectors.

Descend through layers

You can pick any of the nine sectors with the joystick, by panning and zooming into the picture. The one you pick will then take over the entire screen as you descend through it to the picture layers underneath that sector. As you start down through the layers, the image grows into an abstract checkerboard of colors from the palette Shaw has used for that layer. The colored squares of the checkerboard will dissolve in random order to reveal another Jeffrey Shaw original, this time depicting a place, or landscape, which has been digitized (see Figures 2 and 4).

Continue going down through that layer, and you will arrive at another checkerboard, done with a different palette, and this one will randomly dissolve to show a figure or figures from history, which have been digitized from a photo or a painting or sculpture (see Figures 2 and 4).

Stay on that level, and you will dissolve through to the lowest level in that sector, this time a sign or symbol that is the symbolic representation of the place and person you have just seen (see Figures 3 and 5).

Finally the whole picture dissolves back to the original Earth picture, and you can go to another sector and descend through the layers, each with different color palettes, but always with a place in the first layer, people in the second layer, and a symbolic construction of the first two layers in

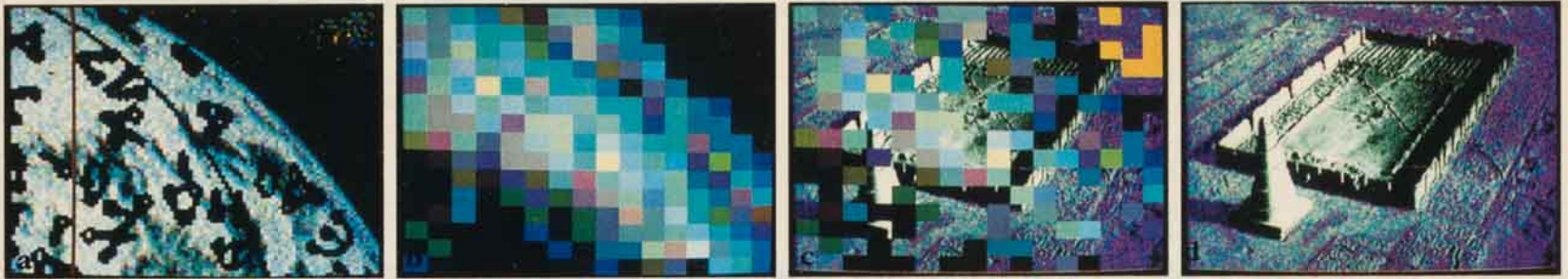


Figure 2. In (a) we are zooming into the fifth sector of the earth. In (b) the checkerboard of the color palette has begun to appear randomly. In (c) the checkerboard begins to disappear, starting to reveal (d) the first layer underneath, which is a the ruin of the



Figure 3. The third layer down in the fifth sector is a collage of an arm and apple from a Cranach painting, wreathed by a serpent biting itself. This fifth-sector series is a comment on the Adam and Eve story embedded in the complexity of the three images.

digital audio techniques chosen by Shaw. The voices were recorded directly onto the hard disc in the computer, and then divided into independent words and phrases. These could be randomly accessed and output by the computer together with the pictures. Each of the pictures has its own specific arrangement of words and phrases.

When viewing the Earth, you hear—through earphones if you wish to cut out extraneous sounds—almost a cacophony of voices, for these are all the voices and words of the lower layers speaking together.

phrase last.

Poetic flow

Both the computer-graphic art and the narrative were carefully constructed so that whatever sequence you choose tells a story, even the phrases done backwards on the lowest layer. If you go down only one layer in each of the nine sectors, you will hear a cohesive narrative. If you go down all three layers in some, but only one or two in others, you will get another cohesive poetic narrative, spoken beautifully. All the pictures

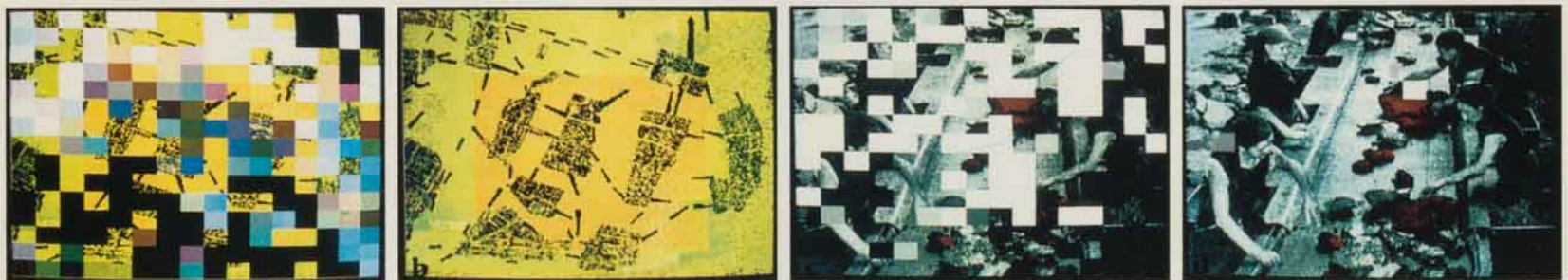


Figure 4. When you zoom into the fourth sector as the checkerboard clears you see (b) a Situationist map of Paris. Zooming further down to the second layer (c) as the checkerboard clears you see (d) Shaw's version of women working at a moving belt carrying rocks out of a mine.

the third. Of course you can stop descending at any point and travel backward or go to another sector of your choice.

Voices

All the time you are viewing this computer graphic, you are listening to the poetic narrative done by different voices, both male and female. The narratives were written by Dutch playwright Dirk Groeneveld, and they are spoken in English. The actors were carefully chosen for voice quality. They had to blend well with each other, but they also had to retain good quality with the original

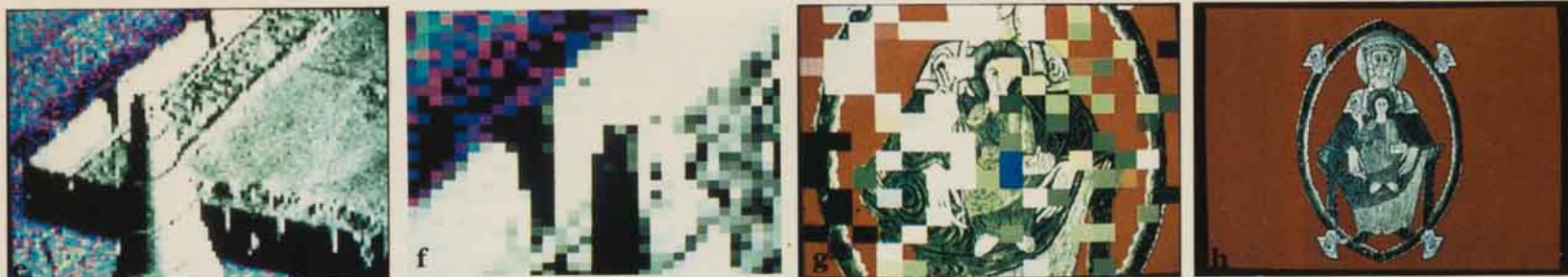
You have almost an eerie sense of your own presence in Babel.

As you descend to the first layer down, the sector you have chosen starts to speak with only one voice, and to tell something about the landscape beginning to appear. If you descend again, arriving at a person or persons, you will hear the voice from the first layer interrupted by voices from neighboring sectors as dialogues and conversations, even arguments, emerge.

Should you stay in that sector long enough to descend to the third layer, you will hear the entire text of the first layer spoken backwards, phrase by phrase. That is to say, the last phrase comes first, and the first



Figure 5. A collage is in level three of the fourth sector. It is part of a Duchamp titled Large Glass, with a figure that is a reference to Appollo and Dionysius. The entire sector-four series is a reference to an old quote that says during night Dionysius tears the human body to pieces, and during the day Appollo puts it back together.



town of Samarra in Iraq. As we zoom in (e) and (f), another checkerboard palette begins to appear, and when it starts to clear in (g) we see (h) a Romanesque Madonna and Child.



Figure 6. The three layers of sector one reveal a theme on the Madonna and Child at an alchemic level. Image (a) shows a souvenir of Pisa, (b) is a detail from a Spanish painting of Madonna and Child with a bird in hand, and (c) is an alchemical flask.

and all the narrative lines can be taken in any order, thus making 27 different stories with art, as chosen by the viewer.

"It is important that people recognize immediately certain aspects of the pictures I have created," says Shaw. "These are related to the history of art. I wanted to make a synthesis of unfamiliar elements with the familiar (see Figure 6).

"Thus I have juxtaposed images from traditional art iconography in the context of this new interactive computer-graphic medium. There are references, for example, to works of Yves Klein, Piero Manzoni, Henri Michaux, Marcel Duchamp, Cranach, Bosch, and Piranesi. There are also references to certain important works of architecture (the Guggenheim Museum) and of photography."

Interactive

How long do people spend with this computer-graphic application? It has been on display in Amsterdam (see Figure 7), at the San Francisco Exploratorium during SIGGRAPH 85, in Cologne, and it will soon open in Rotterdam. Jeff Shaw says people tend to spend an average of 20-30 minutes with it, but some go as long as two hours, trying the various combinations to see how the pictures and

poetry will work out in different sequences.

Shaw has a history of doing art that is interactive with its audience. He says, "As an artist I'm attracted to a certain density and complexity in what I do. I like to create works that when you see them again and again, new information emerges every time. This is consistent with an interactive art situation, because each person can articulate a personal exploration and take out what he or she identifies with in the art."

Shaw says he got part of his inspiration for *The Narrative Landscape* from a childhood memory. In Melbourne, where he grew up, he was once taken to a camera obscura in which a countryside scene was projected, in a dark room, onto a round table. The viewer looked down at the table and could walk around it. Indeed, *The Narrative Landscape* has much the same effect, on a much larger scale. You find yourself in a state of total absorption when viewing it. The very act of looking down through a defined space tends to concentrate the attention, and it is riveted there when the computer-graphic art and poetic narrative prove so compelling.

In the late sixties Shaw was doing audience-participation inflatable structures, and from there he went on to work with computer-controlled

kinetic structures in the mid-seventies. All these works had in common that they were interactive with the spectator.

In this work, he says, "I have been able to realize an important potential of the computer as a medium and catalyst of intelligent discourse between the artwork and the viewer."

Tools

Shaw says he once thought of using a videodisc for this work. But the high cost of videodisc mastering made the job of experimenting and improvising financially impractical. "I wanted a tool that I could also work with quickly and interactively," he says. "And furthermore, I wanted the high visual quality of a direct RGB video output from the computer."

He went looking for a paint system that included real-time panning and zooming. The Time Arts Lumena program running on an IBM PC answered his needs.

Shaw's finished work is sent from the computer directly to the projector in RGB. When he got the script from Groeneveld, he digitized the sound, then recorded it and divided it into phrases and words to go with each picture (much as a telephone company combines separately recorded numbers to give you one complete number when you ask for information). Finally he digitized it onto the hard disk in the computer.

When Shaw got his Time Arts Lumena system, he needed to develop the hardware and software extensions that could realize his interactive audio-visual ideas, including the concept of synchronizing digitized sound with the image. He discussed his needs at some length with Larry Abel of Everett Engineer-

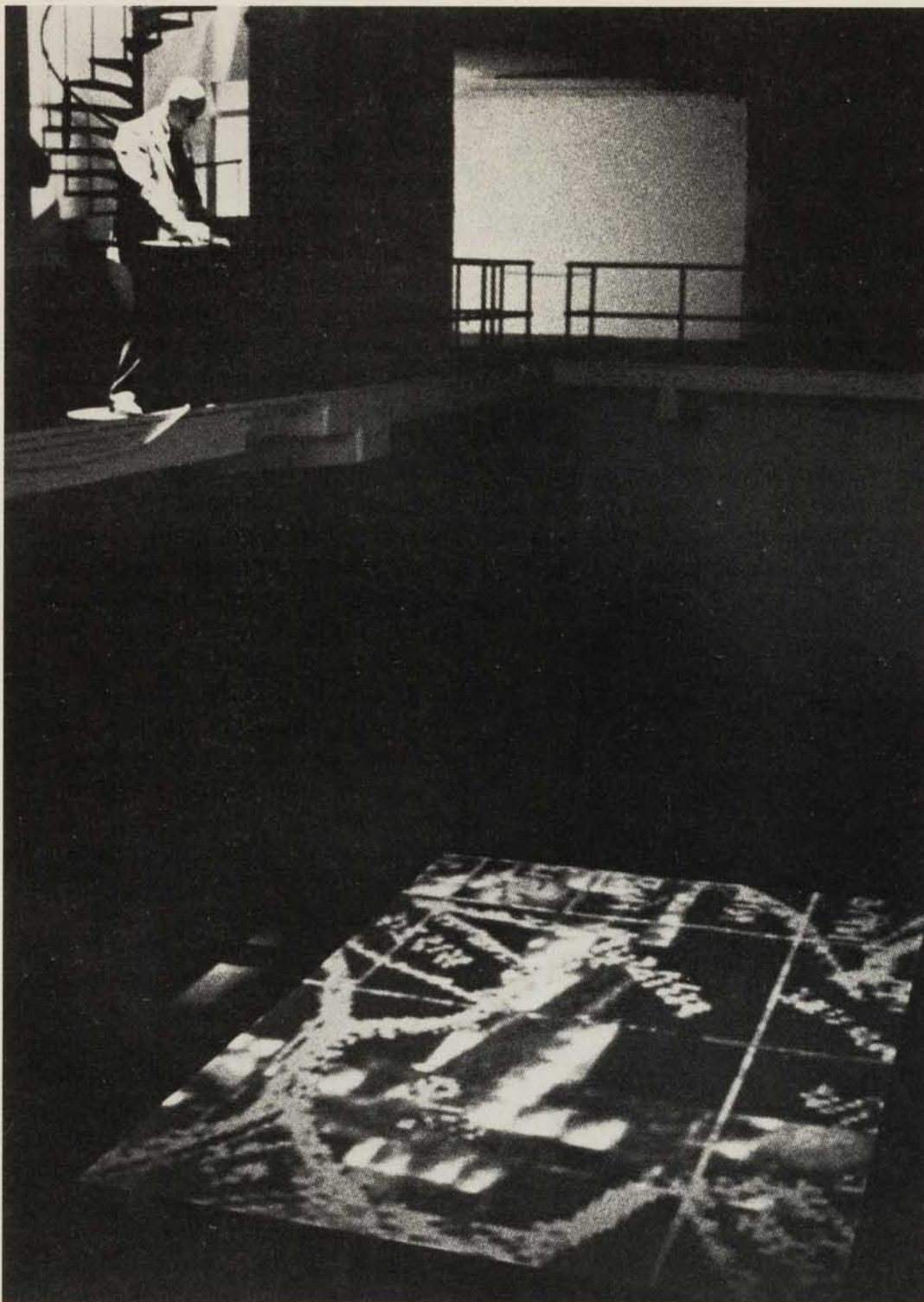


Figure 7. A viewer looking at *The Narrative Landscape* in the Aorta Gallery in Amsterdam.

ing in Fairfax, California. Abel has worked on a number of projects with artists and specializes in their needs. It took him three months to do the software that Shaw needed, and the results have been gratifying to both of them.

This gigantic work can't be shown just anywhere. It must have a surrounding balcony from which the projected picture can be viewed,

which also helps the slight air of mystery Shaw's work creates, and it must be equipped with a high-resolution video camera. The Exploratorium in San Francisco found a place on its raised floor where it could create such a space by removing some bars between the building's basic struts, allowing the audience to look over the railing and see the computer-graphic imagery on the floor below.

Shaw and the computer

Shaw has strong feelings about the computer as an art medium in general. He says, "Despite the initial investment the computer system I have developed has a great economy. With this one tool I am able to create many different artworks and installations. I compare this to the kinetic sculptures I used to make, which only embodied one form—each new sculpture had to be built from zero. Now, with the one machine, I am able to develop many different ideas and forms freely."

Why did he choose Lumena? "It's a powerful, versatile, yet reasonably priced system. As an artist I wanted to be able to concentrate directly on the articulation of my artistic concerns. The hardware and software configuration of Lumena gave me the basic system with which I could do that."



Jeffrey Shaw is an Australian artist, resident in Amsterdam, Holland. *The Narrative Landscape* was made with support from the Dutch Ministry of Culture and IBM Netherlands NV.

Jeffrey Shaw's work has been shown in galleries and at festivals all over Europe, in Tunisia and Australia, and now in the United States.

Shaw studied architecture at the University of Melbourne, sculpture at the Brera Academy, Milano, and at St. Martins School of Art in London. He was a founder-member of the Evenstructure Research Group.

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