

vis-à-vis

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an interactive monodrama
for voice, electronics & real-time video

music & video by
JOSEPH ROVAN

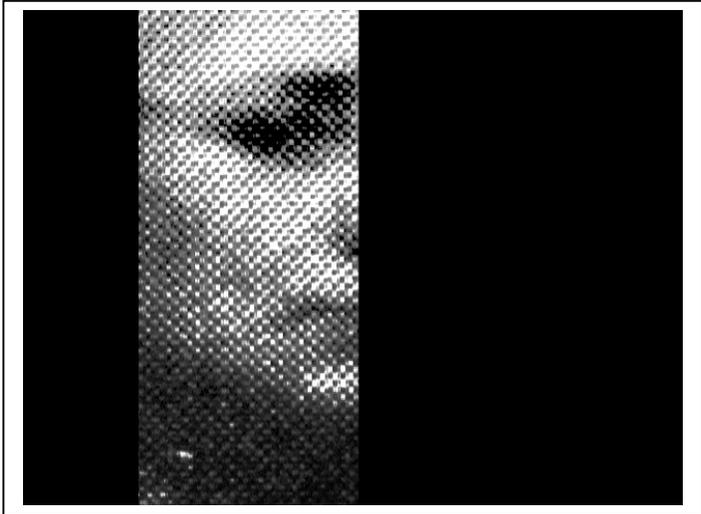
featuring
KATHERINE BERGERON
MEZZO-SOPRANO

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CONTENTS

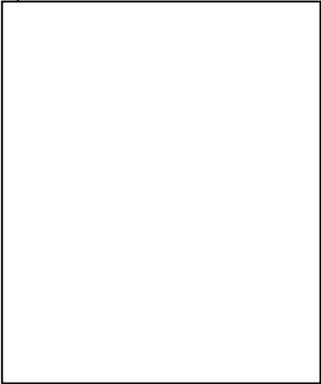
1. PROGRAM NOTE	<i>1</i>
2. LIBRETTO	<i>7</i>
3. DESCRIPTION OF TECHNOLOGY	<i>11</i>
4. ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES	<i>14</i>

PROGRAM NOTE



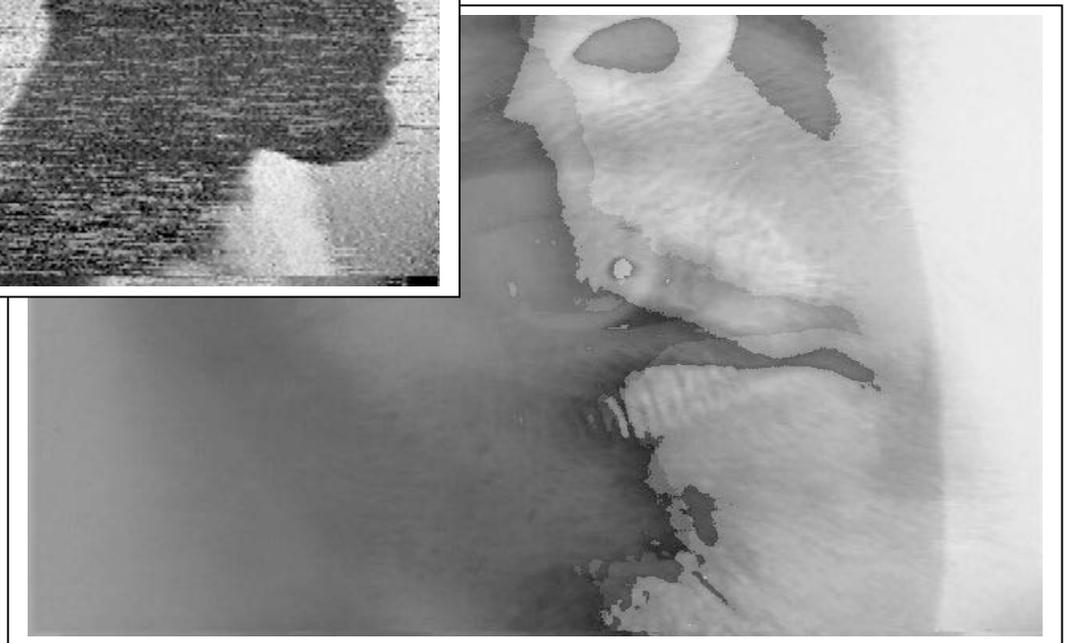
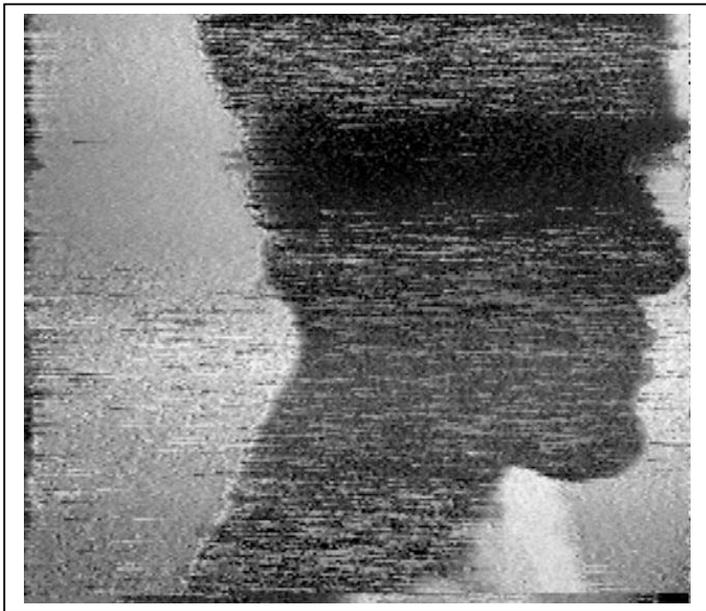
What is the cause, and the cost, of insight?
What does it mean to see the world face to
face? These questions are pondered in
sound and image in a new multi-
media drama for voice, live
electronics, and real-time
video by Joseph Rován.

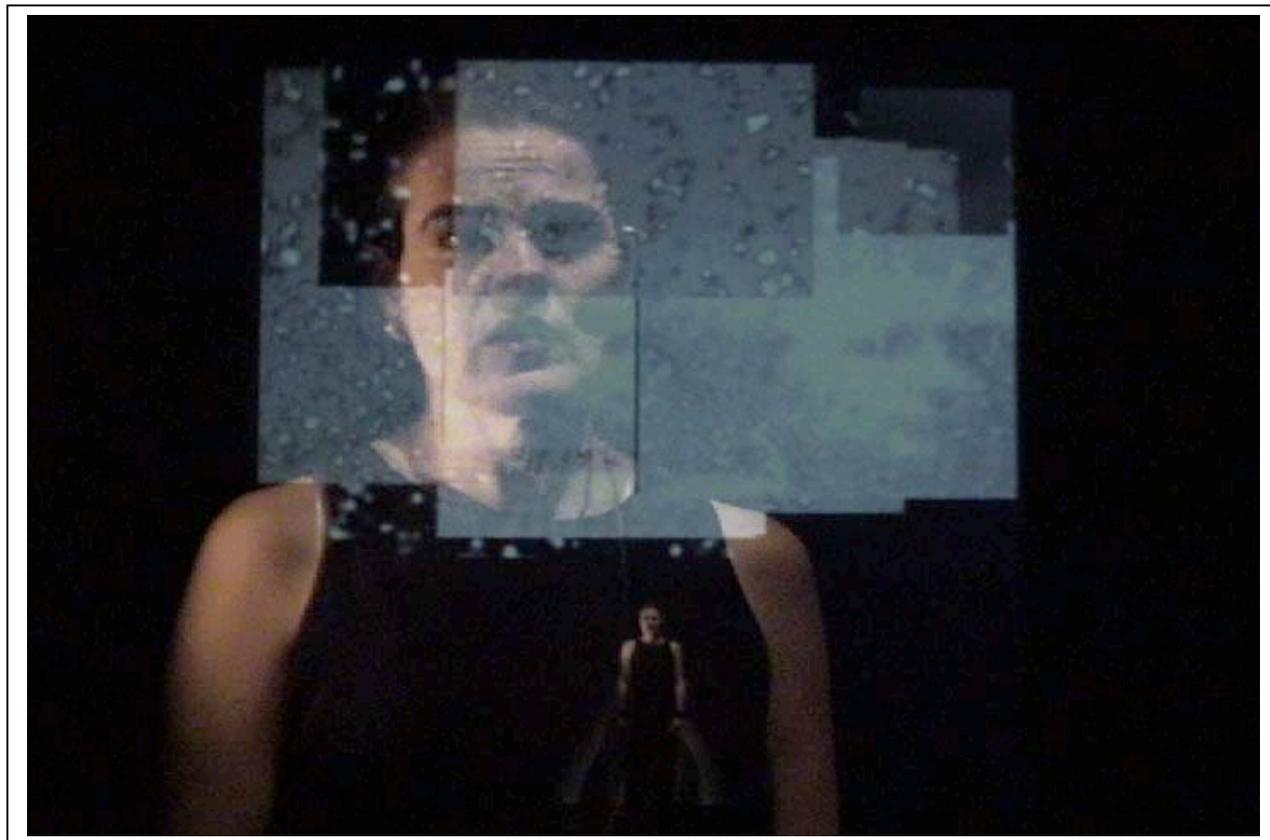
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A prose sketch by the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke serves as text for the
drama. Drawn from notebooks that Rilke
kept in 1904 while living in Paris and
serving as personal secretary to Rodin, the
passage is a tiny meditation on the

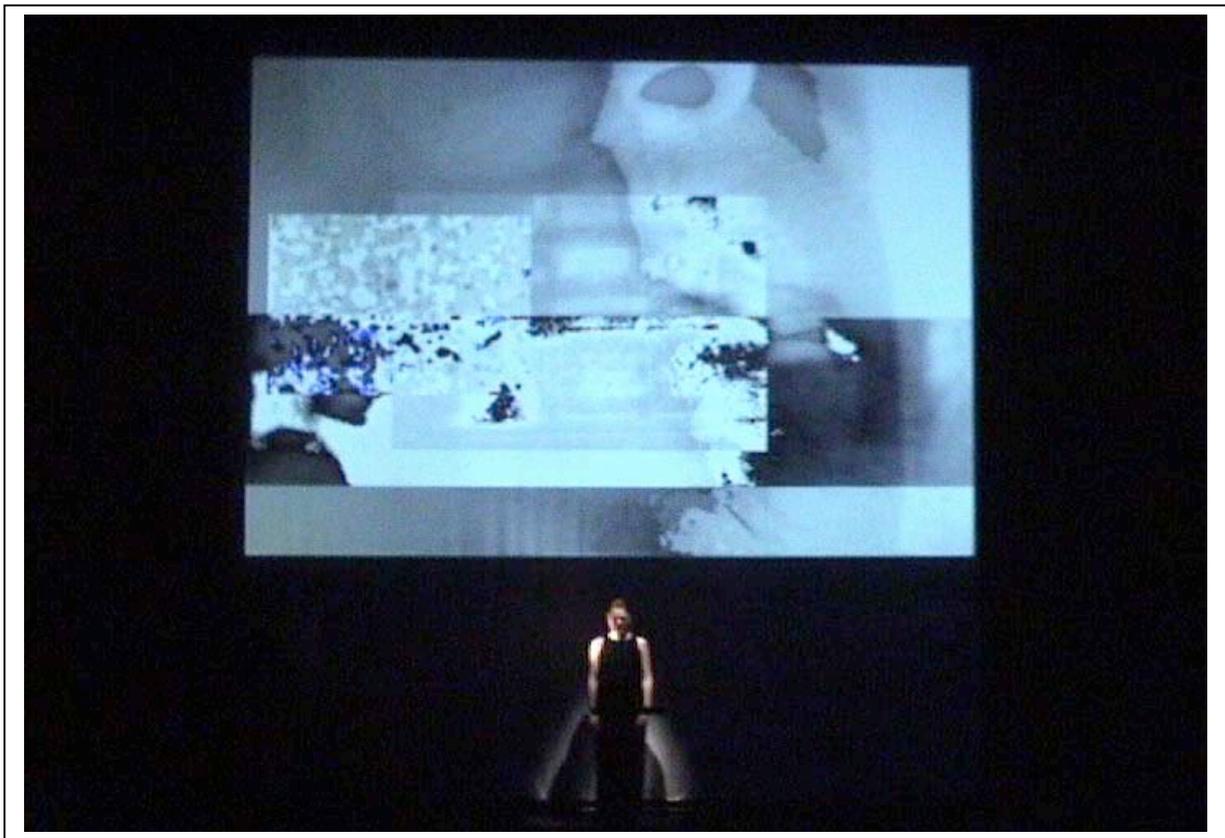
nature of faces. Addressing no one in particular, it begins with an unprepared question (“Habe ich es schon gesagt?”), then takes increasingly unexpected turns as the poet attempts to relate his first true moment of insight: the haunting vision of a homeless woman encountered by chance in the streets of Paris. The vision becomes an occasion for musing not only on the sometimes frightening malleability of faces, but also, even more chillingly, on the inevitable facelessness of the poor.



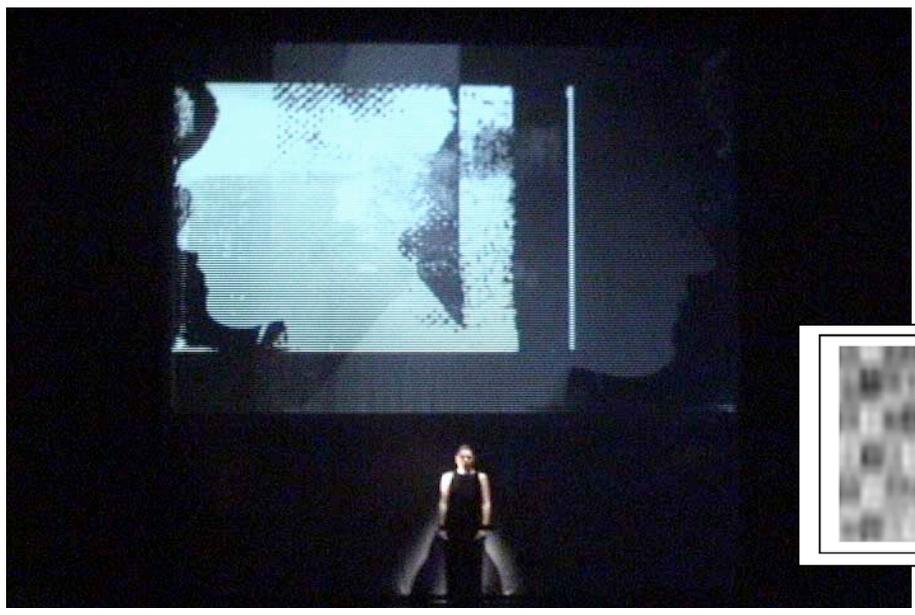
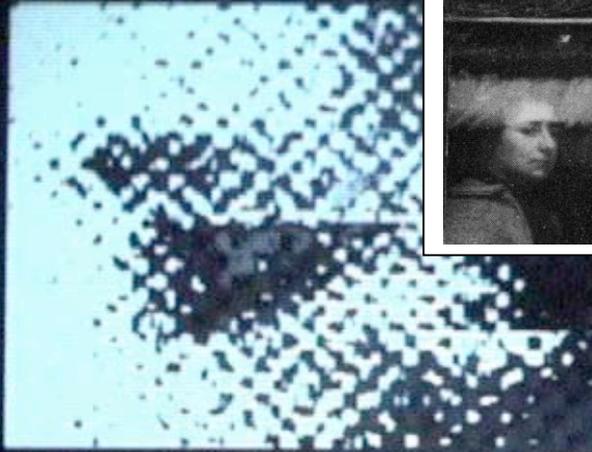


This ambitious multimedia work, featuring mezzo-soprano Katherine Bergeron, catches the spirit of Rilke's vision, by presenting the viewer with a similarly arresting aesthetic encounter. Following the exaggerated polyphony of the prose text, *Vis-à-vis* unfolds in a series of discrete scenes whose constantly shifting tonality, like that of the original meditation, is at turns philosophical, poetic, humorous, mysterious. The solo singer takes on the many voices of the poet, declaiming Rilke's words pensively, sarcastically, breathlessly, over a dense sonic landscape that serves as musical commentary.

Indeed, the many recurring musical motifs seem not only to foreshadow but, so to speak, to back-shadow the work's central dramatic event, keeping in view the horrifying encounter that formed the basis of the meditation: the vision of a faceless face. Enfolded within the real-time video is an equally arresting quotation: a single, pensive face photographed unawares by Eugène Atget, the famous French photographer who documented life in the empty streets of Paris around the turn of the century. This nameless woman, seen through a glass darkly, serves as another kind of leitmotif within the work, a figure whose presence, haunting the visual landscape, silently announces



the moral of the unfolding drama.





LIBRETTO

German text from Rilke, *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*
[The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge]
English translation by Stephen Mitchell

PRELUDE

SCENE 1: Ich lerne sehen

Ich lerne sehen. Ja, ich fange an.

Es geht noch schlecht.

Aber ich will meine Zeit ausnutzen.

I'm learning to see. Yes, I'm beginning to.

It's still going badly.

But I intend to make the most of my time.

SCENE 2: Zum Beispiel

For example, it never occurred to
me before how many faces there are.

There are multitudes of people,
but there are many more faces,
because each person has several of them!

Oh, there are people who wear
the same face for years. . . .
naturally, it wears out, gets dirty,
splits at the seams, stretches
like gloves worn during a long.. journey.

They are thrifty, uncomplicated people....
they never change it...
never even have it cleaned....
"Oh, it's good enough!," they say.
And who can convince them
of the contrary?

Of course, since they have several
faces, you might wonder what they
do with the others...

Why, they keep them in storage—
their children will wear them....
But sometimes it also happens
that their dogs go out wearing them!

And why not?
A face is a face.....

SCENE 3: Die Unterlage

*Ich lerne sehen. Ja, ich fange an.
Ja, ich fange an.
Habe ich es schon gesagt?*

*I'm learning to see. Yes, I'm beginning to.
Yes, I'm beginning to.
Have I said it before?*

Other people change their face
incredibly fast.
Put one on after another,
and wear them out!

*Es scheint ihnen zuerst,
sie hätten für immer, aber sie sind
kaum vierzig, da ist schon das letzte!...*

*At first they think they have
an unlimited supply, but when they are
barely forty years old they come to their last one!...*

Das hat natürlich seine Tragik.

There is, to be sure, something tragic about this.

They are not accustomed to taking care
of faces....

*Ihr letztes ist in acht Tagen durch...
hat Löcher...ist an vielen Stellen dünn
wie Papier. Und da kommt dann
nach und nach die Unterlage heraus...*

*Their last one is worn through in a week,
has holes in it...is in many places as thin
as paper. And then, little by little,
the lining shows through...*

das Nichtgesicht...

the non-face.

SCENE 4: Die Frau

Aber die Frau, die Frau.

But the woman, the woman.

She had completely fallen into herself,
forward into her two hands.

It was on the corner of
rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs.

Die Frau....

The woman....

*Ich fing an, leise zu gehen, sowie ich...
sowie ich sie gesehen hatte.*

*I began to walk quietly
as soon as I saw her.*

*Die Frau... vornüber in ihre Hände...
soll man sie nicht stören...*

*The woman....forward into her hands...
they shouldn't be disturbed....*

*Vielleicht, vielleicht fällt es
ihnen doch ein.*

*Perhaps, perhaps they will end up
thinking of it.*

*[Wenn arme Leute nachdenken,
soll man sie nicht stören...]*

*[When homeless people are thinking
They shouldn't be disturbed...]*

SCENE 5: Die Strasse

*Die Strasse war zu leer.
Its emptiness had gotten bored,
pulled my steps out from under my feet
und klappte mit ihm herum...
drüben und da.....
wie mit einem Holzschuh.*

The street was too empty.

*and clattered around in them,
all over the street...
as if they were wooden clogs.*

*The woman....
die Frau erschrak, und hob sich aus sich ab
zu schnell, zu heftig so dass
das Gesicht.....*

*The woman sat up, frightened,
she pulled out of herself too quickly,
too violently, so that her face.....*

*She pulled out of herself so quickly,
so dass das Gesicht in den
zwei Händen blieb.*

*that her face
was left in her two hands....*

*Zwei Händen....
in den zwei Händen blieb.*

*two hands...
was left in her two hands...*

*I could see it lying there,
seine hohle Form....
seine hohle Form....*

*its hollow form...
its hollow form*

It cost me an indescribable effort
to stay with those two hands
not to look at what had been torn out,
at what had been torn out of them.

*Mir graute ein Gesicht von innen
zu sehen.... von innen zu sehen....*

*I shuddered to see a face from the inside
to see from the inside....*

But I was much more afraid....

afraid of that bare, wounded, head,
waiting there.....
*vor dem blossen, wunden Kopf
ohne Gesicht, Gesicht...*

*of that bare, wounded head,
without a face, a face....*

Ich lerne sehen, ja, ich fange an....

I'm learning to see, yes, I'm beginning to...

ich fange an....

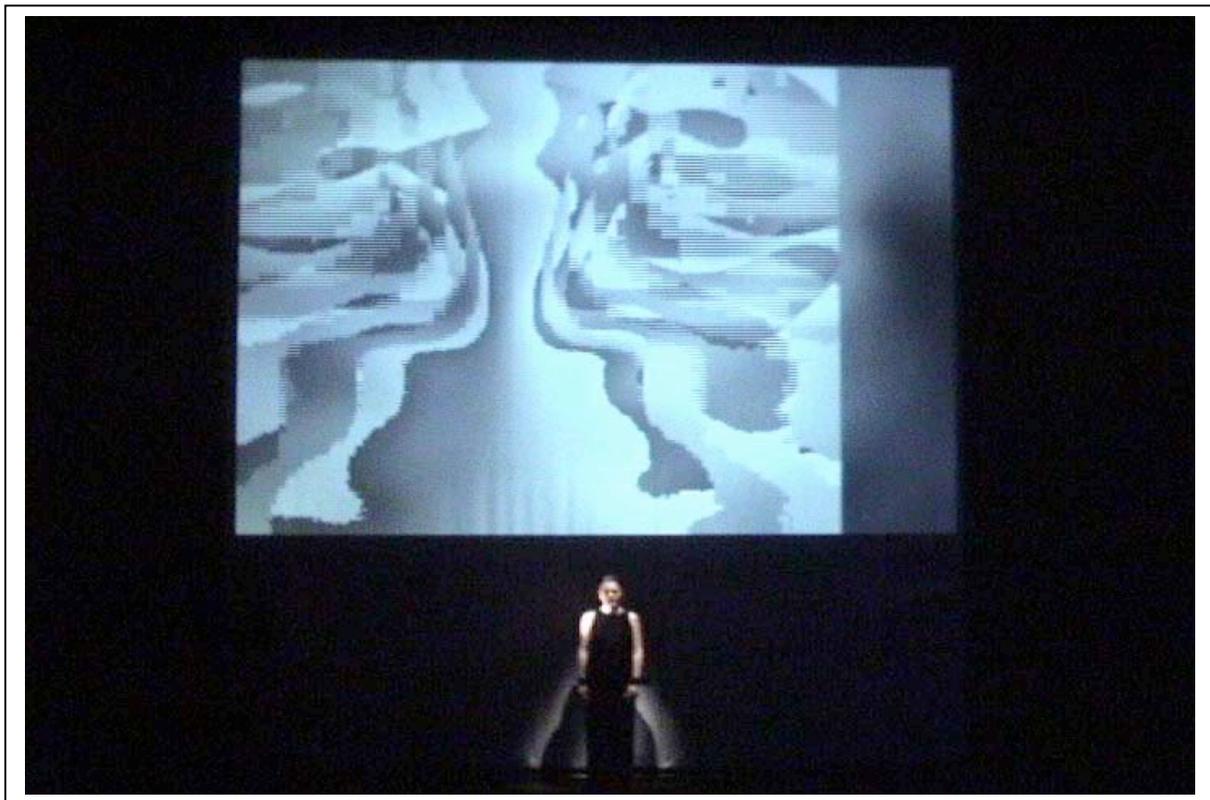
I'm beginning to....

fange an....

beginning to....

Habe ich es schon gesagt?

Have I said it before?



DESCRIPTION OF TECHNOLOGY

Vis-à-vis is called an “interactive monodrama” because it employs technology that enables close communication between the singer, the electronic score and the computer-generated video. The computer acts like a virtual performer, as in a chamber ensemble, listening to the changing musical events—the phrasing, dynamics, register—and responding accordingly, in its own terms. The point is to capture, in this electronic work, something of the improvisatory spirit that is part of any live performance.

The electronic score of *Vis-à-vis* was created using a programming language called MAX/MSP, a language especially designed for interactive performance. The program I wrote in MAX produces an audio landscape whose sounds are exclusively derived from the live singing voice. A Macintosh computer, running the program, receives audio from a headset microphone worn by the singer. A variety of real-time processes are used on the voice, shifting from scene to scene, as you will hear, according to the tone of the text. Among the real-time processes used are spectral analysis/resynthesis (analyzing and recreating the overtone series of the voice), granular sampling (fragmenting the voice), harmonization (creating vocal polyphony), frequency shifting (shifting the overtone series of the voice), and envelope tracking (responding to the

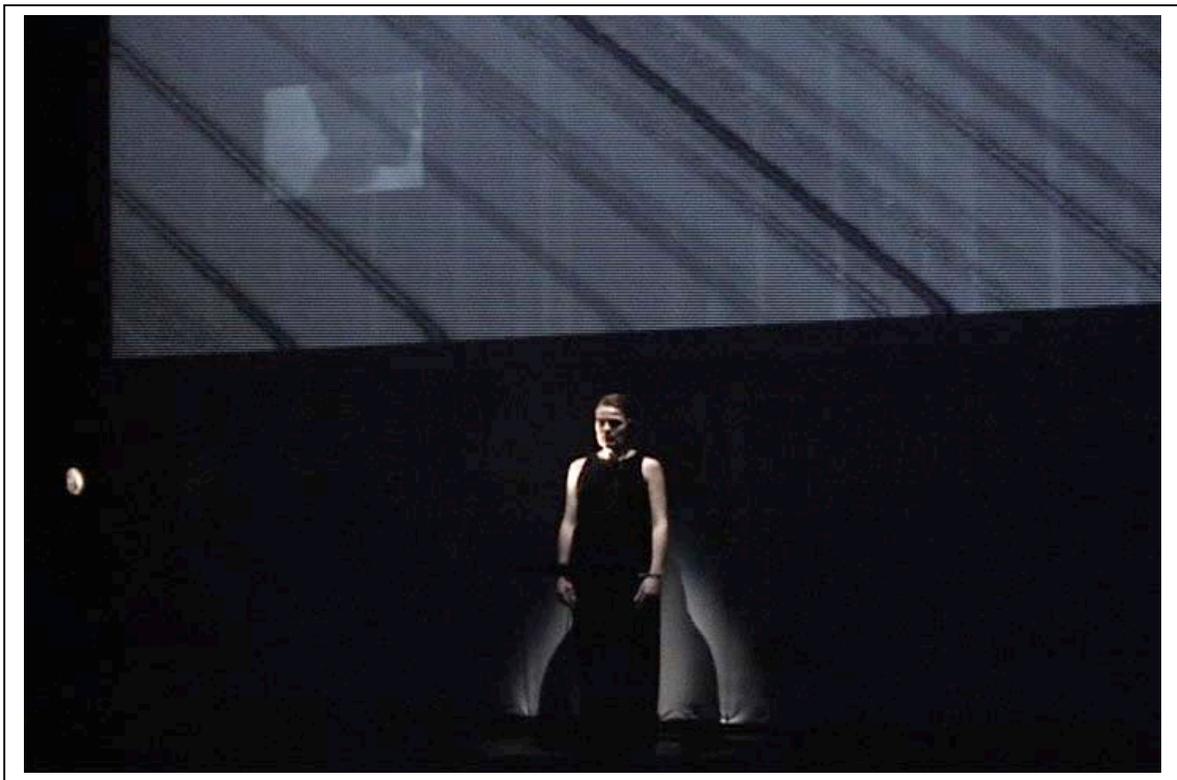
loudness of the voice).

The video for *Vis-à-vis*, like the audio score, is generated in real-time, in response to the events of the different audio “scenes.” This visual score was realized using a second custom program, which I also wrote, in a video programming environment called Onadime. As in the audio score, all the material for the video is derived from raw footage I captured, mostly of the singer, sometimes speaking, sometimes thinking. The only exception is a single visual “quotation”—a lonely woman looking through a windowpane—from an image by the turn-of-the-century Parisian photographer Eugène Atget. During performance, the video program controls the choice of visual material, their varied combinations (cutting and cross-fading) and their processing. But there is, in effect, no video “track” for the piece: in each performance the visual score is created anew. The attempt was to suggest the shifting psychological relationship between the woman who sings (the “I” who narrates the story) and this nameless woman who is ultimately the subject of the narration.

In concert performance, *Vis-à-vis* requires two Macintosh computers: the first runs the real-time audio program; the second, the real-time video program. A projector is connected to the second computer, and the real-time video is projected on a large screen (approximately 20 feet square), positioned above the singer. The other essential pieces of equipment for a live performance are, of course, a mixing console and at minimum a stereo sound system.

The video included with this package (in both VHS-NTSC and DVD-NTSC formats) is a recording of a live performance made with three cameras. Two

cameras were largely trained on the singer; the third featured a long-view that captured the image on wide screen. The video you see moves freely between these different vantage points in an effort to capture the feeling of the live performance. Audio was recorded to a multi-track recorder, and then synchronized with the digital video footage. No audio was added post-filming. The document you see is, in essence, a “live” recording.



Artist Biographies



JOSEPH ROVAN is an internationally known composer and performer who currently serves as co-director of meme (Multimedia and Electronic Music Experiments) at Brown University, where he teaches composition and computer music. From 1997-98 he held the post of “compositeur en recherche” at the Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique Musique (IRCAM) in Paris. His compositions have been featured in numerous concerts and festivals in the U.S., as well as in Paris, Reims, Monaco, Pisa, Genoa, Munich, Nuremburg, Berlin, Buenos Aires and Beijing. He has twice won honors in the prestigious International Electroacoustic Music Competition in Bourges, France. In 2002 his piece *Seine hohle Form* for dancers, interactive electronics and video-tracking system won first prize in the Berlin Transmediale competition. His music has been recorded on Wergo.



A musicologist and a singer of eclectic tastes, **KATHERINE BERGERON** has performed Gregorian chant and the blues, the court music of central Java and contemporary pop music, as well as the experimental vocal idioms associated with the 20th century avant-garde. Currently chair of the Department of Music and a professor of music history at Brown, she has specialized in the vocal repertoires of turn-of-the-century France. Her first book, *Decadent Enchantments* (University of California Press, 1998), was a study of the 19th-century revival of plainchant by French Benedictine monks, and won the Deems-Taylor Award from ASCAP in 1999. She has recently completed *Voice Lessons*, a history of the French *mélodie* in the years around 1900. She has been making music with Joseph Rován since 1995.