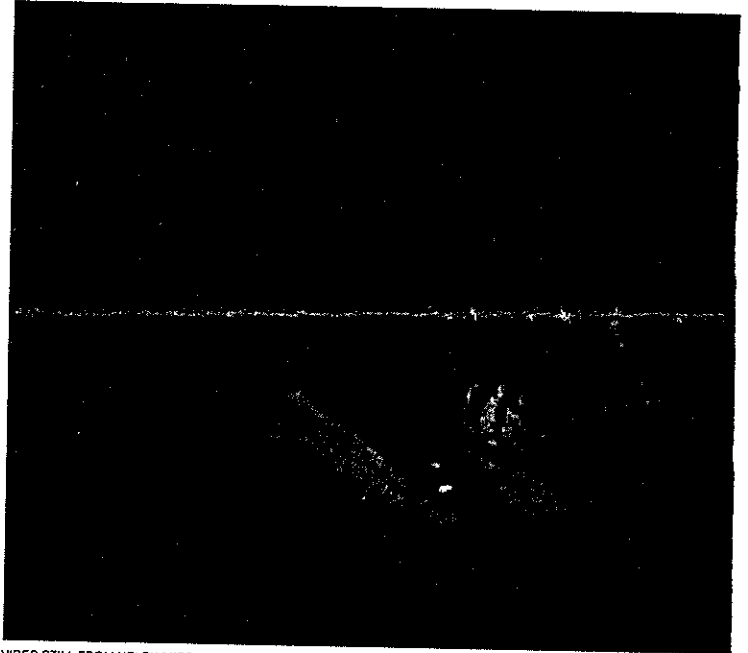


SPACE, TONE AND TEMPERATURE



VIDEO STILL FROM HELEN MIRRA'S *ARROW*

Ernest Hemingway put it best: "Write the story, take out all the good lines, and see if it still works." Simplicity, Hemingway showed, can often belie the great depths of thought and feeling that comprise a narrative's meaning. The idea transfers easily to the work of Helen Mirra, a Chicago-based artist who began experimenting with video as a child in the mid-1970s.

Currently an artist-in-residence at the University of California at Berkeley and a senior lecturer at the University of Chicago, Mirra appropriates footage – often from silent-era films – to create new narratives. Frequently working with just a few seconds from a given film, she produces hypnotic and deceptively simple loops that establish a contemplative realm in which her narratives exist less on the screen than in the subjective imaginations of her viewers.

Mirra's latest work, *Arrow*, uses brief shots from D.W. Griffith's 1916 film *Intolerance* to address the concept of violence. The piece lasts exactly 29 minutes – the average length of a thunderstorm – and mirrors that phenomenon as images from the film depicting violent acts flash on an otherwise black screen, breaking the darkness of the room just as lightning breaks a night sky. A soundtrack of bass and electric guitar – composed by Mirra and her partner Ernest Karel – fill the room and provide an aural analogy to thunder and rain.

"I'm not so interested in the plot but in the stuff around it, like the space, tone and temperature around the plot," Mirra says. But she does not deny the substance of those intangibles, either. "It's not about there being less material and therefore being nothing." Rather, her work exists in the space between the visible and the imagined, and Mirra thrives on that tension. Quoting the German filmmaker Alexander Kluge, she offers what may be a clue to both her process and to reading her work: "If I've understood anything, then something has been emptied out." – David Alm