

The Artist Hits Her Own Mark

By [BRUCE BENNETT](#)

On a recent afternoon at her homey TriBeCa loft workshop, multimedia artist Toni Dove stepped through a veritable jungle of wires, power strips, monitors, infrared lights, lasers, a surveillance camera and three table-mounted laptops. "So this is the rig that we use," she said.



Bryan Derballa for The Wall Street Journal
Artist Toni Dove demonstrates the interactive 'Spectropia' experience in her TriBeCa apartment.

Ms. Dove, together with co-performer and software engineer R. Luke DuBois, employs her "rig" to present "Spectropia," an interactive film as immersive for its two real-time performers as it is for the audience. For three nights beginning Wednesday, Ms. Dove's unique fusion of cinematic narrative and live performance spectacle will take over Manhattan's venerable boundary-pushing venue the Kitchen.

"Basically, 'Spectropia' is a time-travel drama," Ms. Dove said. "It takes place in the future and in 1931, right after the stock-market crash."

The digitally photographed film that provides the narrative portion of the "Spectropia" experience stars Aleksa Palladino (Angela Darmody on HBO's "Boardwalk Empire") as the title character, an orphaned survivor of a dystopian future. As she searches for her missing father, Spectropia plunges into the past, where she co-inhabits the body of a private eye (played by multiple "Law & Order" franchise veteran Carolyn McCormick) in depression-era New York. "The piece is a kind of romantic triangle with two women in one body fighting over a man that neither want in the end," Ms. Dove said. "I think it's an experience that most of us have had." The multilayered presentation of "Spectropia" is, however, unlikely to sound or appear familiar to anyone who hasn't already witnessed it—or to anyone unfamiliar with Ms. Dove. Since the early 1990s, the artist has explored the intersection of narrative experience and audience participation through complex, interactive installations aided by advancing technology.

"Spectropia," which has toured a handful of arts venues for the last three years, represents a step forward from gallery installation to staged performance.

"There's a small video camera that sees our motion," Ms. Dove said, pointing to the electric eye facing the "Spectropia" control station. A bank of infrared emitters on the floor makes her and Mr. DuBois visible to the camera even in complete darkness. As they change their body positions and move their hands and arms, computer software written by Mr. DuBois applies the motions to the speed, direction and physical positioning of the projected film, and allows the two performers to juxtapose and manipulate numerous additional video layers projected on three large screens.

"We perform together as VJ's," Ms. Dove said. "We're inhabiting characters and cooperating to navigate up to six different streams of video that we're scrubbing and mixing between in real

time. The motion sensor allows you to connect to the screen in a way that makes you feel your body in the screen. It's like we're haunting the movie."

"Spectropia" also incorporates a musical score composed and conducted by downtown guitar virtuoso Elliott Sharp, synchronized with the 10 film segments making up the central dramatic narrative. Mr. Sharp's accompaniment is also available to Ms. Dove and Mr. DuBois during performance as separate audio tracks or "stems" that can, like the rest of the "Spectropia" experience, be manipulated and interpolated by Ms. Dove and Mr. DuBois along with the visuals and dialogue.

Mr. Sharp was additionally asked to write a vocal composition to cap the performance. Since the finished song, "This Time, That Place," incorporated both "a feeling of longing and also a sardonic quality," as Mr. Sharp described it, his choice of vocalist, Blondie chanteuse Deborah Harry, was obvious. "Debbie wrote the book on that," he said.

Ms. Dove's previous work, 1998's "Artificial Changelings," incorporated many of the same themes, ideas and hardware as "Spectropia," but did not require its creators' real-time participation in front of an audience. As a result, Ms. Dove has had to contend with performance anxiety since "Spectropia" previewed at Lincoln Center's Scanners Video Festival in 2007 and premiered later that year at the Wexner Center at the Ohio State University. "Not that it happened, but there was the visceral, immediate and overwhelming potential for rejection," Ms. Dove said. "I had to find myself in that."

Ms. Dove credits the work of another New York-associated performer with helping her comfortably assume the infrared spotlight. "I was going through some anxiety about going on stage as a performer, and it was right around the time that the Scorsese-Bob Dylan documentary [2005's "No Direction Home"] came out," Ms. Dove said. Seeing Mr. Dylan's no-holds-barred performances at the Newport Jazz Festival and on tour in Britain in 1966 gave Ms. Dove the key to interpreting "Spectropia" live with the passion and confidence with which it was conceived.

"You just have to be doing the thing that you are doing in an unbelievably intense way," she said, describing her epiphany. "You have to be lost in the thing that you're giving your audience."