STEINA

Steina Vasulka was born in Iceland. She has studied at the Music Conservatory in Prague, and been a member of the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra. One of her works, The West, a video environment relating to the Southwest United States where she and Woody now live, was presented in the Rotunda of the Hopkins Center this fall. Steina was a Guggenheim fellow in 1976.

Let’s start with the difference between television and video. Do you think T.V. connotes “communication” and video connotes “art”?

Yeah, it is inherent. I don’t consider them the same medium at all. The public channels were trying to do art on television which is not the same thing; there was a certain sentiment that T.V. should not abandon the arts altogether. Art on television is kind of trying to fit either a theater or a musical performance into a little box and call it art. But what wasn’t known until the late 1960’s was that television had inherent properties for creative expression. It was probably always known to a few engineers, but it wasn’t until it became available to visionary people that “video art” came about.

I’m sort of on a fringe because my idea is to use the television for art expression just like a potter uses clay or a painter uses oil on canvas. I’m using the medium itself to be my medium for expression. Whereas, if you say art on television, you make television subservient to some other kind of vision. There’s a lot of video art that is not primarily concerned with the manipulation of signal itself – it can be expressive camera work or even expressive narrative – but it fits the description of video art because it is an artistic individual’s expression, a vision.

If you think about television, it’s all collaboration, from the engineers to the so-called art director. And usually when you get into a definition of art, you are talking about a single individual’s vision. Commercial television is not done by people with very high aesthetic vision. It is meant as an industry and has a totally different function in this society.

What about the effect of technology on video art?

In a few years we are going to see in video what is currently in audio; that is, popularly used electronic instruments that do fairly shallow but flashy type of stuff. That’s going to happen to video, too. It’s alright. The most important thing is that all those instruments be available. I don’t think the tools have to govern you. Technology challenges the mind. The more technology, the more sophisticated you have to be.

I just think what’s good is good and what is bad is going to persist. It doesn’t matter what it is, you know. A good painting, a primitive good painting, is just as valuable as a sophisticated good painting. The technological tools aren’t going to make it on their own. They have to have a creative impetus behind them.

You were trained as a musician. A violinist. How do you treat the interaction of sound and image?

I am totally preoccupied with it. I would never take just some sound and put it on my video tapes. There are

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WOODY

Woody Vasulka was born in Brno, Czechoslovakia. Currently involved in computer controlled video, he has studied metal technologies, hydraulic mechanics, and film. Together with Steina, Woody founded the Kitchen in New York City, originally designed in 1970 as a theater for electronic art, sound, and image. Woody was a Guggenheim fellow in 1979.

I’d like to talk about your childhood in Brno. What was it really like during World War II?

As a child, you take war as an adventure. Only the burning child being killed actually realizes the horror of it. If you are an observer – as children are acute observers – you see every detail in a non-dramatic way; it’s like a theatre opening in front of your eyes that comes from the tension at your doorstep or from an aerial bombardment, which is the first experience of the war that I had. You see that everything breaks down; the adults break down and they cry, and you as a child look at it with great curiosity, not understanding the physicality — the shaking and the explosions. On the other hand, the behavior of the people is much more bizarre; I was entertained by this behavior of the adults. There are the adults that go out to the danger, playing the role of being fearless. So all the role-playing, stress, and crisis was my first experience. The war still dominates my memory bank, something like from a different world.

Right after the bombardment, the whole family and the neighborhood took a tour and looked at what was done. At some places there were still bombs ticking and a squad trying to defuse them. With the smell of explosives in the air and earth that’s suddenly in front of your home that’s never been there, it becomes like a field trip. Everybody took it that way. We just went sightseeing.

As a child, I recall catching the first bullet I found reflected still spinning on the ground. I grabbed it; it was still hot, so I had to kind of toss it in the air. I looked at it to see how it was shaped, then the adults came along and asked, “what do you have?” and I said, “I have a bullet.” So they cut it open to see what was inside. That spoiled my first relic of the war. It went on. I would collect the weapons and heard them in my basement; eventually the adults threw them out.

I grew up across from the airfield, where there were these enormous amounts of airplanes tossed in a pile. German and later the Russian airplanes. As children we would go and take these things apart; that was our pasttime. We would find everything from objects to human limbs — anything you wanted: old albums of photographs, furniture, metals, war materials, cars, weapons. So as children we just rummaged through this junkyard called Europe and played around with all the remnants of the war and displacement of all the values. That has stayed basically with me up to now.

I still go through surplus, you see. I live close to Los Alamos, and I go there to look through what’s there — atomic junk and encasings of the nuclear weapons that haven’t been used. I like to live from the junk of the world. With electronics, most of the material I use is

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You started out as a photographer. Do you consider photography an art form? To what extent were your photographs influenced by the war?

I would put photography in a separate category — poetic journalism. But I have a very biased view of photography, because it influenced me the most when I grew up. It was the photography of a particular genre, it was the street or the battlefield. My generation went through some sort of social or political urgency looking at photography. Of course there’s the other photography, based on the formal kind of expression, more abstract or compositional, more material or textural. But my generation took it as a social vehicle, or a vehicle for a social truth. I see photography as a reference to what we call reality or what we call representation of reality. It is a system that we compare things to. There are other possibilities. You can compare your visual kind of needs with painting or with drawings, but photography is a very important referential system to me. Other people do photograph and use it as an art form, finding much more interesting and profound ideas about it, but for my generation it was utility. It went beyond just utility as journalism — it was a poetic form. It had and still has its kind of artistic quality, but it’s not the art of painting, or of music, or of theater, and it’s not the art of film. I feel it’s necessary for photography to be looked at as a memory of the past — an educational system of the past.

To what extent do you think art can influence politics or religion?

From a historical standpoint, I think the direct influence between politics and art is not very productive. In some ways, the most powerful art is not directly dealing with politics. In fact, there’s only a few successful political works of art. Others would dispute that, but that’s my opinion, and I think it’s a well-documented opinion. To talk about the relationship between art and politics or religion.

"Art does not have power to change political systems, unless as a vehicle of some other ideology."

You know Trotsky clearly defined what he thought art is. He believed it is a product of and serves the ruling class in a particular area. It seems a priori kind of primitive, but if you look into it, it’s possible — wealth has the ability to manipulate art for its own need. The art process can be subverted, perverted, purchased, and bent towards its sponsors. The fragility of art fascinates me; how the way we call "weak foundation" of art can still produce quality. Art itself is powerful only in a historical sense. When it is being created, it is very, very vulnerable. The whole process of altering, mediating, or shaping of the art by commission can influence the direction in which the art is going. There are self-directed kind of ethical principles in art such as the avant garde of the formalist school, which insisted on expression regardless of social order and commissions.

The bourgeois class, if you look at it politically from the viewpoint of avant garde, was there to be served by art, wanting and longing for something more popular and acceptable. So the avant garde erected these rigid moral codes — very austere rules, minimalism, things that insulted the bourgeois. There are always these moralistic movements, but then they are replaced by something that is in harmony with the mainstream of thought. In the beginning it may be radical, like romanticism was, but later it becomes reserved for the majority. Romanticism and sentiment sometimes link together and become a vehicle for mass culture. There are a lot of imperfections in this, which is the most interesting part of it. But, you know, I think overall art is very fragile and very insecure. It’s quality cannot be fully predicted. It is not something that has strength; strength is assigned to it, eventually. Art does not have power to change political systems, unless as a vehicle of some other ideology.

These are serious questions, sister, what are you gonna do with them?

Harriette Yahr
tracks, but it's still not music. It doesn't have any kind of composition, rhythm, or drumming. It is just long sounds, long electronic sounds.

What interests me is that, although you were trained as a musician, you seem to generally place greater emphasis on image than on text or sound in your pieces.

Yeah, it surprised me more than anybody because I didn't even pay that much attention to sculpture and painting or the visual media before. Before I started video, I wasn't even seeing a person. And it turns out that is what I'm more interested in, ultimately, than sound. But I can't explain that.

“Commercial television is not done by people with very high aesthetic vision.”

What about the performance aspect?

I consider all my video pieces performances. I make a performance — I call it “system performance”. What I'm really interested in is setting something up, pushing the record button, and not interfering with it anymore.

When I rounded the corner, I saw something that caught my eye: it was a doorstep. Concrete steps colored with graffiti: a blue and broken door. And on the steps, a young punk smoking a cigarette. He nodded at me. I reached that old apartment on Avenue B and waited for the stringy coke dealer that I said "What's up?" or "No" to nearly every night to open the street door. He hung out in the white hallway where the bright blue paint once meant for the baseboards, the spotless wall with indelible words or names. I was becoming part of the dream with all its becoming cement steps and crumbling recesses, for its haunting brick and treeless streets. For all its people, nearly everyone, someone I hoped to meet, but feared. As much a nightmare as a wet dream. He let me in. I marched up to the thick cracked wooden door that offered as much protection from the outside world as a beggar's sly and opened it.

I had left my father. I returned to the home area where more fans stood stamping for my demise that for my success. And then it was I who took the light. They were my eyes that saw through experience, who spoke few words, and who owned the apartment. It was my dream. And this house in which I moved was, to me, a house of the holy.

by Andy Festa