

Birnbaum

Gillette

Hall

Lucier

Myers

Vasulka

Viola

American Landscape Video

the electronic grove



Dara Birnbaum, *Wall-O'-The-Wisp*, 1985

steina Vasulka

Artist's Statement

I have always seen the video camera as a tool, as an instrument, not so different from a musical instrument. On a violin you have to practice, you have to bow, you have to know how to get musical effects. If I wanted to get a visual effect, and I was using a camera, I needed to practice. . . . It was my rebellion to put motors to the camera, to devise a moving platform, or use a car or any other way to get moving images that were in a continuous motion . . .

For both Woody and me the magic of video was (and still is) the electronic signal. The first video we looked at was a feedback, a phenomenon of the medium itself. Woody has always stayed very close to the signal and the philosophy of the signal, whereas I ventured out into using machines and motors, and then I became very interested in optics . . . My work with optical and motorized devices actually occurred in space. My *Machine Vision* installations were performing systems, and they occur in the studio, or out in the landscape or an exhibition . . .

To me, living in the 20th century, nature not altered by man is romantic. It is mostly romantic in the sense that landscape can never be ugly. I have spent a lot of time thinking about what is beautiful art and what is ugly art, and why people engineer certain ugliness into their images, often very successfully—Picasso probably the most successfully. If you are working with the landscape you basically eliminate ugliness, because there is no such thing as an ugly landscape. That is, in a certain way, intimidating. It is very romantic. It was what a lot of Romantic painters painted. I have no defense, but it is hard to find ugly images through the lens of the camera. The camera does not want to render ugly images the way painters can—by distorting reality . . .

I moved to Santa Fe from Buffalo, New York in 1980 because I wanted to experience what it is to live in the

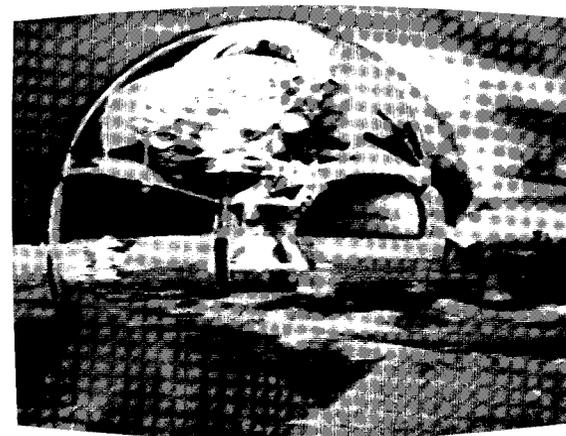
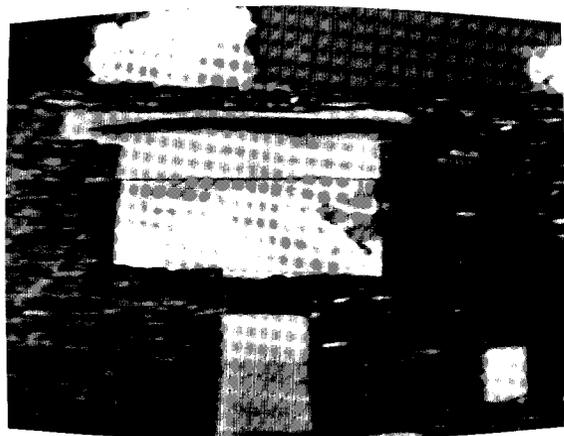
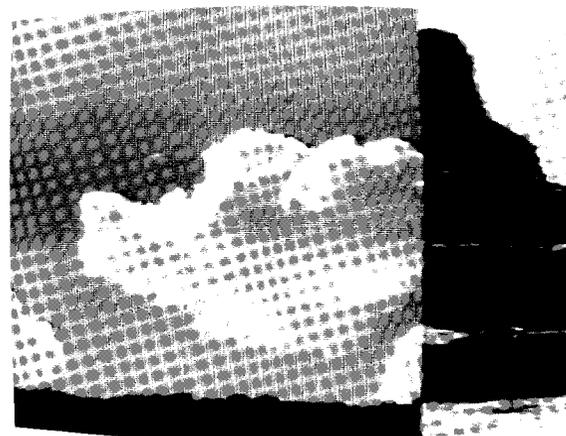
beauty. I did not want to think that it was going to affect my images as much as it did. For the first two years I resisted it, first of all, because the beauty of the West is so seductive. And, secondly, I didn't feel up to it. I mean, are you going to take on God?

Also I lost my studio. I had always had large interiors in which to work. Suddenly, we were restricted to a small house. I just went outside one morning and said, "Well, my studio doesn't have any walls and the ceiling is very high, and it's blue." I just adopted the whole Southwest as my studio. So that's when I made my peace with the idea that the landscape of the Southwest was going to be my image material.¹

Any action of man on land stays recorded for long in the Southwest. In no other region of this country does the presence of the sun play such a significant role in the ecology of land—arid and eroded. The exceptional clarity of the night skies forms notions of extra terrestrial importance in the minds of its inhabitants. The landscape, by its dimension and by its geometric and textural variety, inspires man to create harmonious structures, dwellings and other earth works. Significantly, the Very Large Array (VLA) radio telescope system utilizes these conditions and has also inspired profoundly meditative pieces of land art based upon geo-observations and other events related to the position of stars.

The West is a video environment involving situations where human expression results in the marking of earth by building dwellings and ceremonial structures—creating works of art and developing scientific instruments of landscape proportions.

¹ These remarks are all excerpted from an interview with Steina Vasulka by Malin Wilson on 7 August 1986 and published by The Jonson Gallery, The University Art Museum, Albuquerque, New Mexico.



The West, 1983

Born in Iceland in 1940, Steina Vasulka attended the Music Conservatory in Prague from 1959 to 1963, and joined the Iceland Symphony Orchestra in 1964. The following year she moved to New York to work as a freelance musician, where she was joined by her husband Woody Vasulka, the Czechoslovakian filmmaker whom she had met in 1962 and married in 1964.

In 1969, Steina Vasulka became interested in video, as did Woody. A performing musician, Steina approached video quite differently from Woody, who was trained as an engineer and had worked as a writer and filmmaker. In 1971 the Vasulkas co-founded The Kitchen, still an important center for experimental video, music and the performing arts in New York City, and during the years 1970–74, they collaborated on several video tapes. Since then, they have maintained clearly defined roles in their work, and although one may assist the other on a project, the conception and control remains with one or the other. In 1973 they moved to Buffalo, New York, where they taught at the Center for Media Study at the State University of New York, Buffalo. In 1980 the Vasulkas moved to Sante Fe, where they continue to live and work.

In 1975 Steina Vasulka began a series of tapes and installations based on what she termed “machine vision.” Using a variety of devices to rotate video cameras in front of mirrors, monitors, and other cameras, she began creating tapes and installations that depicted extraordinarily complex spaces. For her *Allvision* installation, exhibited at The Carnegie Museum of Art in 1982, there were no pre-recorded videotape images. Instead two closed circuit cameras were mounted on a machine that rotated them around a spherical mirror; the resulting live images of activities in the gallery were seen on two pairs of monitors. Upon entering the gallery, one encountered three kinds of spaces: the three-dimensional gallery itself, which housed the rotating machine and monitors as sculptural objects; the distorted space seen reflected in the spherical mirror; and the whole space taken in by the cameras and visible on the monitors. Each of the cameras could “see” 180 degrees of the gallery reflected in the spherical mirror; the resulting set of images covering 360 degrees were seen on each of the pair of monitors.

Steina Vasulka’s three versions of space corresponded to three different ways of understanding reality: 1) as a

physical, material presence, with objects verifiable by touch; 2) as a visual perception, in which the material world is rearranged or distorted (as in the curved mirror) but which is nevertheless comprehensible as an optical entity, seen like a painting or a photograph, but not touchable; and 3) as a concept, in which an abstract system, (that is, transmission of the 180-degree images of the three-dimensional space from the cameras to the flat screens of the monitors) must be taken into account, like a mathematical system, before the reality it presents is understood.

In the case of *Allvision* the esthetic experience of the piece was shaped by the particular movement of the machine’s rhythmic revolutions—a sort of mechanical dance. The sense of the machine itself, and of the video process, was central to this work. *Allvision*, with its emphasis on the material properties of the medium as the subject as well as the vehicle for expression, was characteristic of most of Vasulka’s work prior to *The West*. In *The West* (1983),

Curator’s Statement

Vasulka has once again engaged the complex space of earlier works like *Allvision*, and indeed many of the images

were shot using that piece’s revolving mechanism. However, the pre-recorded, processed and edited imagery of the videotapes so important to *The West* presents a new departure in her work. When landscape had appeared in her earlier work, as in *The Golden Loaves*, a videotape in which the landscape of her native Iceland is discernible beneath the distorting manipulations of the video signal, one’s experience of the work was still very much centered on the video medium. In *The West*, however, attention to the video process has been subsumed by what is represented—panoramas of the New Mexican desert, views of the ancient, earth-colored adobe-brick walls, and vistas dominated by immense telescope dishes which echo the shape of Vasulka’s spherical mirror.

The West revels in the vastness of the western spaces, the primeval quality of the landscape and ancient architecture, the rich colors of the earth and sky, and the all-encompassing light and warmth of the sun. The complex layering of spaces and the electronic manipulation of image, color and form so central in Vasulka’s earlier work is still an important aspect of this installation. But *The West* is emphatically a tribute to the grandeur of nature.

Biography

Steina Vasulka

Born Reykjavik, Iceland, 1940

Resides Santa Fe, New Mexico

Education Music Conservatory, Prague (1959-1963)

Selected Awards

National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, 1983. With Woody Vasulka. Also 1972.

Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the National Endowment for the Arts, 1977. With Woody Vasulka. John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship, 1976.

Selected Solo Exhibitions and Installations

1986
Jonson Gallery, University Art Museum, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque. Installations. Also 1983.
The Kitchen, New York. Installations. Also 1983, 1981, 1979, 1978.

1985
The Athens Center for Film and Video, Ohio. Installation.

1984
Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre National d'Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou, Paris. Installation.

1983
C. G. Rein Gallery, Santa Fe. Installation.

1982
The Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh. Installation.

1981

Minneapolis Institute of Arts. Installation.
Anthology Film Archives, New York. Also 1977, 1976.

1979

Folkwang Museum, Essen, West Germany. Installation.

1978

Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo. Installation. Catalogue.

Selected Group Exhibitions

1986

"1986 Invitational Exhibition," Roswell Museum and Art Center, Roswell, New Mexico. Installation. Catalogue.

"Video: Installed," New Langton Arts, San Francisco. Installation. Catalogue.

1983

"Video as Attitude," University of New Mexico Art Museum, Albuquerque. Installation. Catalogue.

"Electronic Visions," Hudson River Museum, Yonkers. Installation.

1977

"Third Annual Ithaca Video Festival," Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Ithaca, New York. Traveled.

1975

"VIDEO ART," Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. Catalogue.

1973

"Circuit: A Video Invitational," Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York. Installation. Catalogue.

Selected Bibliography

Frampton, Hollis.

"The Withering Away of the State of Art." *Artforum* (December 1974).

Furlong, Lucinda

"Notes Toward a History of Image Processed Video: Steina and Woody Vasulka." *Afterimage* (December 1983).

"Tracking Video Art: Image Processing as a Genre." *Art Journal* (Fall 1986).

Gill, Johanna

"An Introduction to Video Art." Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Brown University, 1976.

Hagan, Charles

"Image/Process 1 and 2." *Artforum* (April 1983).

Haller, Robert

"Camera Eye: The Vasulkas." *American Film* (December 1981).

Stoney, George C.

"The Mirror Machine." *Sight and Sound* (Winter 1971-72).

Sturken, Marita

"Out of Sync." *Afterimage* (November 1983).

Tanney, Kathy

"Steina Vasulka: 'The West.'" *High Performance* (1986).

Vasulka, Woody and Scott Nygren

"Didactic Video Organization and Models of the Electronic Image." *Afterimage* (October 1975).

Zemel, Carol

"Women and Video: An Introduction to the Community of Video." *artscanada* (October 1973).

Zwinger, Susan

"Video as Attitude in New Mexico." *Artweek*, 16 July 1983.