Steina Vasulka in Person
Adventures in multitrack video composing

Steina was born Steinunn Briem Bjarnadottir in Reykjavik, Iceland, in 1940. She studied violin and music theory and in 1959 attended the State Music Conservatory in Prague. Woody and Steina married in Prague in 1964, and shortly thereafter she joined the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra. After moving to the United States in 1965 the Vasulkas began working with video in 1969. In 1971, with Andres Mannik, they founded The Kitchen, an electronic media theater. Since 1980 they have lived in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The exhibition of works originally in multiscreen video, an artform Steina pioneered a quarter of a century ago, is informed by her attraction to the fevered landscape, her fascination with the fearsome majesty of fire and water. For Steina, a concert violinist, the images and sounds of a multiscreen composition are equivalent to musical polyphony, functioning like voices and instruments in an ensemble. The multiscreen works are audiovisual equivalents of the trio, the quartet, the sextet. Steina proceeds as would a composer, playing on the visual equivalents of timbre, texture and tone. Her compositional strategies include recording scenes with her camera upside down, slowing their motion, reversing their direction, flipping them right-left, or combinations of these possibilities.

Pyroglyphs (1995) was recorded at the Santa Fe foundry of metalsmith Tom Joyce, with whom Steina shares "a fascination with fire—as phenomenon and as a medium that transforms other materials. Tom and I understand fire in an alchemical way," she told me, "as a medium of transmutation."

Steina has produced many video waterscapes, and Borealis (1994), which means "northern," is one of the most spectacular. Steina defamiliarizes the coastlines and rivers of Iceland through upside-down closeups that are slowed, reversed, flipped, and displayed on upended screens.

Allvision (1974), reflects Steina's interest in robotics, or what she calls Machine Vision. Cameras are mounted on opposite ends of a rotating arm, focused on a mirrored sphere between them. Nearby monitors display what the cameras see. The sphere reflects circumstantial space while each camera surveys a nearly 180-degree field of view.

The images in Matrix drift horizontally, appearing to enter and exit the frames of adjacent monitors arranged in an arch, as though the images are independent of the display devices. This illusion is achieved by altering the built-in control frequency that usually prevents a TV picture from "rolling" horizontally.

Notes written by Genie Youngblood

November 6

Steina Vasulka / November 6

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November 20

In Praise of Light

Star Garden, Stan Brakhage, 1974, color/silent, 22 min., 16mm

The "star," as it is singular, is the sun; and it is metaphorized, at the beginning of this film, by the projector anyone uses to show forth. Then the imaginary sun begins its course throughout whatever darkened room this film is seen within. At "high noon" (of the narrative) it can be imagined as if in back of the screen, and then to shift its imagined light source gradually back through attortones and imaginings of the "stars" of the film till it achieves a one-to-one relationship with the moon again. This "sun" of the mind's eye of every view does not necessarily correspond with the off-screen "picted sun" of the film; but anyone who plays this game of illumination will surely see the film in its most completely conscious light.

Otherwise, it simply depicts (as Brancusi put it) "One of those days I would not trade for anything under heaven."

Imaginary Light, Andrew Noren, black & white, sound, 31 min., 16mm

Imaginary Light is a "documentary" (aren't they all?): my backyard Buddha-impersonation, watching "it" flow...light, both wave and particle, alive and moving, making shadow, and therefore, time. The "trees" and "house," and the "water" behind them, impersonate themselves, actors all, documented by my own impersonation...laborious, frame by frame, by hand.

The sound is the striking of the hallway clock, seen mid-picture, transformed into dirge and then reverse of dirge.

Re: title...we see by imagining that we see, and as a result, we dream of "time."

Lao Tse: "This is called 'practicing eternity.'"