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STEINA AND PTOLEMY

By Robert Haller

Switch! Monitor! Drift! is a videotape Steina made in 1976. It is part of her Machine Vision series—a group of tapes and installations that questions our assumptions of point of view, "our" visual spectrum, our sense of where we are in terms of what we see. Steina shows the tape rarely, apparently believing it to be too specialized or too long (at fifty minutes it is almost twice as long as any of her other tapes).

In the title of Switch! Monitor! Drift! we can see the first clue to her method. Each word has a double aspect: as a noun and as a verb. The exclamation points emphasize the verbal tendency, but also imply, by their profusion, an irony that leads one to question their absolute meaning.

Three sections of the tape exemplify the method that infuses the whole work. Early in the tape, following a mysterious series of 360 degree pans through the Vasulka's equipment cluttered work space, Steina appears with a violin in her hands. She proceeds to play it, and as the tone changes with each different position of the bow, so the video image changes—flip-flopping (to use Steina's words) back and forth between two cameras. Watching the image "played," we deduce that the bow positions control the image. Yet later in the tape, when the image is again "played," again with the sound-track changing with each flip-flop, one wonders if the sound is controlling the image, or the reverse. The sound might be the image, read on a different kind of machine (an approach already performed by colleague Tony Conrad in his film Boolean Algebra). Equally, the sound may be controlling the image, and might even be from the violin: because we can see a tiny reflection of the video image moving insidethe eye of the lens. The illusion is a mystery.

By Amy Greenfield

STEINA'S SOMERSAULT

Steina's Somersault is an extension of her Machine Vision tapes, a series which began in 1975, while she was living in Buffalo, N.Y. Her machines extend and activate the video camera so that what the camera sees—the world—becomes reflected, re-activated, re-energized, magically re-designed. What the camera-machine sees becomes its world. And since the material for this world is also her world, her move from Buffalo to New Mexico has very much influenced her machines' vision.

Somersault is part of three tapes taken in the immediate environment outside of her house. The visual brightness and colorfulness, the sunlight and the physical freedom possible in the New Mexico outdoors are very much a part of the art of these tapes.

But Somersault is singular in this series. It centers around herself. Or rather, her machine image. It centers around the black eye of the camera lens itself, with her image revolving, somersaulting, gyrating,splitting, jumping—around this center. It is also different from the 1970s Machine Vision tapes, because she is controlling the movements of the camera with her own body.

When the tape begins, we see the black eye of the lens, the middle of the screen, pointed directly at us. Around the eye is a circle of light. This light begins to move, and we see a woman behind the lens, in what seems to be a fish-eye or fish-bowl, which distorts her body and motions in extreme ways. Throughout the tape, she moves madly around and behind, over and under the lens, caught and yet freed in this fish-eye world which can be turned topsy-turvy, landing her on her head, feet upward, then turned right-side up with miraculous ease. Or, she steps over the lens and, like a gigantic Jolly Green Giant, jumps/stomps on either side of it. Sometimes, quite often, her image and the lens collide violently. The violence orchestrated by the sound of the collision. At one point, the lens splits her body in two as she disintegrates, to either side, and then slides together again.

All during this mad dance, with her careening in impossible ways, the lens is immobile, staring out at us from the center of the screen. The lens looks at us, but seems to see her (she is behind the lens). We know that the lens can "see" her, because we can see a tiny reflection of the video image moving inside the eye of the lens. The illusion is a mystery. What's really happening? How is it done?

To make Somersault Steina attached a glass tube, two inches in diameter, to her video camera's lens, so that it extended straight out from the lens. At the end of the glass tube she attached a convex mirror, shaped like the narrow end of