

REVIEWS AND COMMENTS ON STEINA VASULKA'S WORKS:

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For Steina, history is inscribed not in cinematic images but within nature. Steina's work is a conscious mapping of the moving camera's relationship to the space and landscape before the lens. In her early series Machine Vision, she constructed mechanical devices with rotating cameras, mirrored spheres, and other optical devices to create a "vision" beyond human vision. Taking her camera throughout the Southwest, and to Iceland and Japan, Steina re-orchestrates landscapes in her tapes, The West, Summer Salt, and Geomania to create terrains that exist only within the realm of the electronic: waves crash in a desert, Native American ruins merge with satellite dishes, viewers see their own image transformed in a rotating electronic space.

\_ Marita Sturken

No form of moving-image art comes as close to musical composition as multicscreen video, where the different channels of image and sound are equivalent to musical polyphony, each functioning like a voice in a musical ensemble. And no multiscreen work is as spectacularly musical as Steina's. She works as a composer would, playing on the visual equivalents of timbre, texture, and tone. Tokyo Four is the audiovisual equivalent of a string quartet.

\_ Gene Youngblood

Steina Vasulka, a pioneer in the use of video synthesizers, uses digital animation in In the Land of the Elevator Girls to capture the motion of a metaphorical elevator door which opens and closes to reveal glimpses of Japan's landscape, architecture and daily life...the elevator reveals an outsider's gaze into contemporary Japanese culture. The continual opening and closing of elevator doors serves as a succinct formal device, as the viewer is offered brief glimpses of a series of landscapes - natural, urban, cultural, and domestic. Doors open onto doors to reveal layers of public and private vision, transporting the viewer from theatrical performances and street scenes to an elevator surveillance camera's recording of everyday life.

\_ Artist's Space catalogue for Japan  
Outside/Inside/Inbetween.

Steina's Lilith uses focalplane shifts and frame-grabbing to enthrall our gaze, to transfix and hypnotize us; then her protagonist, cobra-like, darts across the paradoxical landscape (that has become Steina's signature) with a sibilant and ambiguous voice; her image inscribes, indelibly, the fact of presence, but-ironically and impossibly-without the content or context of presence.

\_ Tony Conrad, Catalogue from Infermental, 1988, Ars Electronica

Steina Vasulka's Geomania juxtaposes the landscapes of her native Iceland with New Mexico's magical terrain. Altogether, these poetical and metaphysical evocations emotionally affirm that life's underpinnings transcend the daily grind.

\_ from the catalogue of the 1987 Phoenix Biennial

Geomania, on display at the Vassar Gallery, is a combination of nature cinematography and video processing.... Steina is an expert at collecting images, synthesizing sounds, creating imaginary landscapes derived from the real world. Cameras is her means of expression, and she uses them to contort the reality we expect from television into a surreal vision that transcends the powers of both human and technological sight. In a recent telephone interview she explained that she created the 16-minute tape (played on six Sony TV sets stacked in a pyramid) to display her understanding of nature and its forms, not to showcase her ability with a video camera.

"My obsession with those landscapes is to show them the way you cannot see them with the human eye," she said. Using a technique known as "keying," Steina Vasulka superimposes films of natural wonders one on top of the other. In a serene blue sky, for instance, she "fills" fluffy clouds with a view of a harsh red desert landscape. In both sequences the camera is moving, creating constant interplay between the one scene and the other contained inside it.

. . . Dusty rocks create mirages on a smooth, dry lake bed. At one point, the Grand Canyon seems to overflow with ocean surf. But Geomania is no simply an exercise in visual tricks. Steina Vasulka is very much aware of the power of television - she will not use it as a painter would a paintbrush or a writer a pen. Instead, she challenges the eye to believe what it sees.

The opening sequence overlaps two shots so that crashing surf appears to wash over a distant, red desert peak. Steina stood below the desert peak, but directly over the water as it washed onto the shore. The result is a constant shift in perspective, a changing image, perpetually elusive. Steina explains that she tries to get inside nature, to analyze its shapes and forms from a new point of view.

\_ Margaret Meserve

Only one work in "American Landscape Video, Part II" might be described as ecstatic. That is Steina Vasulka's The West. It is so good it makes you feel sure that video art has a future, whether or not it can muster art historical credentials. Vasulka's piece plays on 22 monitors. They are stacked two high in semi-circle to get the maximum effect from images of enveloping horizons. The work is on two channels that alternate checkerboard-fashion on the array of monitors. Vasulka shot the landscape of New Mexico in a fairly straightforward way, then tinkered electronically with color and framing to get effects whose beauty and sequence are almost indescribable. A large part of her tape was shot in a spherical mirror. These images combine a fish-eye view of the landscape behind the camera (and the camera itself) and a peripheral view of the landscape beyond the spherical mirror.

Watch a few moments of this double vision played on 22 monitors and you feel like you're hallucinating. When reflected clouds slip over the surface of the mirror, it looks like the Earth itself - with weather boiling over its surface - drifting through a limitless desert . . . .

You start seeing everything in more than one way. There are rock formations that look like brains. A serpentine tree trunk against a boulder looks like an aerial view of a river in a gorge. The editing of the piece is almost as impressive as its light-dazzled imagery. Frames wipe across each other, migrating from one monitor to the next, linking far flung horizons.

\_ Kenneth Baker, San Francisco Chronicle

Steina Vasulka's The West has 22 monitors stacked in two rows of eleven. The two channels were distributed in different alternations above and below, creating a criss-cross pattern of rhymes.

This horizon of monitors was also curved in a bow around a bench. Such a massive display of change and repetition, along with a considerable amount of computer intervention in the video images tended to make whatever was on screen more an abstraction than a realistic landscape... All the overlays tended to move in contrasting directions in the two different channels, making a kind of dance of separation and convergence...the four channel-audio environment seemed electronically generated as well, so that one could say that this installation went the farthest toward producing an "electronic grove." The end result had no pretension to simulate the natural world, rather it marked our greatest distance from it.

\_ Margaret Morse, a review of "American Landscape Video" in Video Networks

The West is an electronic landscape based on the American Southwest which plays both harmony and counterpoint to the rich colors and forms of the New Mexican mountains, desert, and architectural remnants. The semi-circular configuration of sixteen video monitors, stacked to emphasize horizon and overlapping movement, envelop the viewer with boundless vistas of western space.

Vasulka recorded the video images in The West with a motor driven camera pointed directly into a spherical mirror. This device allows the artist to record on videotape landscape imagery in front of and behind the lens simultaneously, creating a circular area of optically transformed space centered in the otherwise rectangular shape of the video monitor.

\_ from the catalogue for "American Landscape Video" from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

The West offers an electronic landscape of the American Southwest: the colors of the two channels of material have been manipulated into an orchestration of video hues which play both harmony and counterpoint to the rich colors of the New Mexican mountains, desert, and architectural remnants. The overlapping movement of the images echoes the circular configuration of the monitors which surround the viewer. Many of the images have been recorded with a motor-driven camera looking directly into a spherical mirror, creating, in the center of the rectangular image, a circular area of optically transformed space. From time to time large radio-telescope dishes, icons of modern technology standing in the ancient desert, cross the image in concert with the circular forms of the spherical mirror. The resulting video landscape is both primeval and futuristic.

\_ from the catalogue for "American Landscape Video" from the Carnegie Museum of Art

Any action of man on land stays recorded for long in the Southwest. In no other region of the country does the presence of the sun play such a significant role in the ecology of land, arid and eroded, with an exceptional clarity of the night skies, forming 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. The Very Large Array (VLA) radio telescope system utilizes these conditions and has also inspired creations of profoundly meditative pieces of land art based upon geo-observations and other events related to the position of the 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. \_ Steina Vasulka

"The West, a six screen video installation, is a 30-minute piece which runs continuously. It employs state-of-the-art video technology yet is lyrical in its imagery. Since its premiere in Albuquerque in May 1984, The West has been seen in New York, Minneapolis, and Los Angeles, and at video centers and festivals in Spain, Switzerland, Iceland, and France.

The West explores the ancient and contemporary records of mankind's actions on the desert landscape. Steina's camera has recorded the ceremonial sites of Chaco Canyon, home of the ancient Anasazi people, ancestors of today's Pueblo Indians; the ruins of a Spanish church at Quarai; and New Mexico's VLA radio-telescope system. With Steina's mechanized camera and spinning mirrors, and with highly saturated golds and blues, the imagery is in constant, stately motion. Woody created the four-channel audio environment and assisted with production and instrumentation.

In the describing the inspiration for her work Steina says, "In no other region of the country does the presence of the sun play such a significant role in the ecology of the land - arid and eroded, with an exceptional clarity of the bright skies - forming notions of extra-terrestrial importance in the minds of its inhabitants. The land-scape, by its dimension and by its geometric and textural variety, inspires man to create harmonious structures, dwellings, and other earth works."

\_ from the catalogue at the Fine Arts Center, State University of NY at Stony Brook

The West used video and sound to address and replicate the vast, arid, clear Southwestern landscape as a site for the making of signs: ceremonial Indian dwellings, the arrays of scientific instruments New Mexico hosts, even artworks. Austerely minimal in conception, the piece used a circle of six monitors suspended at eye level in a darkened room, thus mitigating all aspects of the standard carpeted museum room but size and emptiness . . . in its representation not just of landscape but of efforts to mark that landscape, to plot points in that landscape against the system of moving space - a process in which the individual is necessarily the focal point - The West served as an uncanny embodiment of Clancy's thesis. It elegantly demonstrated how imagery and sound, pared down to the barest possible elements, could constitute a complex mapping of space and time. \_ Catherine Lord, Afterimage

Steina Vasulka's The West is an exhilarating and visually exciting tour de force which combines sophisticated video technology with the grandeur and stark beauty of the American Southwest. Images collected by the artist from her experiences living in that region are manipulated both in-camera, with dizzying circular pans recorded with a rotating motor-driven camera aimed into a spherical concave mirror, and in post-production, using computer-synched wipes and fades to cross-dissolve between the two channels of the piece. The result is a hypnotic checkerboard, fascinating the viewer with its steady yet constantly altering play of images across the stacked banks of monitors, inducing a sensation of movement and depth in the stationary screens.

\_ Valerie Soe

Steina's conception and design of Allvision, which Woody built, is one of the most engaging examples of her inventive use of video in an installation situation. Allvision as an elegant and deceptively simple machine, with two video cameras rotating around a spherical mirror, and the images from these cameras visible on video monitors. Upon entering the gallery, one is presented with three versions of space: the three-dimensional gallery space which one shares with the machine and monitors as sculptural objects; the space which one sees mirrored in the sphere; and the "whole of space which is taken in by the cameras and presented in flattened version on the monitors. These versions of space correspond to three quite different ways of understanding "reality": as a physical, material presence verifiable by touch; as a visual perception, in which the material world may be rearranged or distorted by which is nevertheless comprehensible as an optical entity, like a painting or photograph; as a concept, in which an abstract system must be taken into account before the reality it presents is understood. Our experience of the interaction between these differing aspects of Allvision is shaped by the particular movement of the machine's rhythmic revolutions. The resulting unity of this work rewards our contemplation with something far more rich and satisfying than its separate ingredients might at first suggest.

\_ William Judson, Curator,  
Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute

## SOME AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

My love affair with art was all-consuming from the time I was eight or nine until my late teens. I lived by it. I went to every concert, theater play, opera and gallery show. Nothing else in life made any sense to me. I never chose to be an artist, I just knew I wouldn't work in a bank or wait on tables. I loved playing my violin, but when faced with the prospect of being a professional musician, I realized I had made a dreadful mistake. I found myself in New York going from gig to gig wondering if there was not more to life than black dress and meager fees. I had met Woody in the early sixties in Prague, where I was studying music at the time, and by mid-sixties we arrived in New York. Woody was a film maker, and through his film contacts he came across video in 1969, and both of our lives were changed forever. Woody introduced me to his new discovery - video. What a rush! It was like falling in love, I never looked back. As soon as I had a video camera in my hand - as soon as I had that majestic flow of time in under control, I knew I had my medium.

We already owned a two-track audio tape recorder, with separate track recording, and access to delays and speed changes. We immediately proceeded to process and manipulate the video along the same principles. In the same period we were also taking the portable video equipment to New York's cultural playgrounds: WBAI Free Music Store, Judson Church, La Mama, Automation House, The Village Vanguard, Fillmore East, Blue Dom, Max's Cansas City Steakhouse...

After those outings, everybody would gather in our loft to look at the instant playback, something most people had never experienced - even the word video was a brand new addition to the vocabulary. Eventually, there was so much traffic in our loft that when in 1971 a friend told us he had found a large space in an abandoned kitchen in the old Broadway Central Hotel, we were ready. The space was to serve the artists, not the audience. We therefore named it The Kitchen - LATL (Live Audience Test Laboratory).

In the early days of video everything was an installation or environment as we used to call it. In the first generation of 1/2" reel to reel video there was no provision for editing. The solution was to cut and glue, like an audio tape. Our environments therefore consisted of either "live", camera or "live" switching of tapes. Woody and I preferred to use multiple screens, typically a stack of monitors and several players. One of our first installation concept was to have images drift horizontally from one monitor to the next. After we started The Kitchen, we had plenty of opportunities to do environments and live video performances. Later, when electronic editing became

technically feasible everybody became infatuated with The Edit and installations disappeared for a while, just later to get re-invented by the Art World. In the seventies I did a series of environments titled Machine Vision and Allvision. In Allvision I put a bar across a turntable with cameras mounted on each end looking into a mirrored globe placed exactly in the middle and a pair of monitors in each corner. As the table slowly turned the cameras captured the entire room with the viewers, the monitors and the turning machinery itself. Another Machine Vision variation had a motorized moving mirror in front of the camera so that depending on the horizontal or vertical positioning of the mirror, the video monitor would display a continuous pan or tilt either back/forth or up/down. A third variation was a continuous rotation through a turning prism, while still another had a zoom lens in constant motion, in/out. These automatic motions simulated all possible camera movements without making the camera and its operator the center of the universe. Time and motion became the universe with its endless repetitive cycles and orbits.

I was a latecomer to this infatuation with machines, but after I moved to New York, I remember vividly going to Canal street, looking at gears and motors as some kind of a miracle, resembling life itself - kind of a mechanistic replication of the biological mystery. I love gizmos, like the ones I find in surplus yards that can be re-fit to my purposes. If I had a lot of money I would spend it on optical gadgets, mechanical toys and state-of-the-art electronics. I would make gigantic environments, like a floor of monitors all showing imagery moving either the same or a contrapuntal direction, or I would build a four-sided corridor, were you look down a long lane of images that keep moving toward and past you. In reality though I am very flexible about the size of the display, since to me the size of an installations is not determined by the number of monitors, but rather the complexity of the composition. I therefore often improvise at the exhibition site how to configure an installation based on what is available. For example, my favorite constellation for Geomania [1986] builds the monitors into a pyramid.

I always intend these environments to be experienced in a quiet dark place. A museum is potentially good but museum people always seem interested in placing video installations in a maximally-visible location. They tell me triumphantly: "we are going to give you the lobby." It is always assumed that video ought to be loud and public but I really want it quiet and private: a thousand monitors and one viewer - not the other way around. I want the viewers to be so absorbed by the work that they experience another level of mind. I expect them to share the kind of strong feeling I have for the material, and to my amazement they sometimes do. As the old man who watched Tokyo Four [1991] over and over explain-



ed to me that it was all about death. At that moment I knew that he had really seen it - even though it isn't all about death.

In Borealis [1993] there are the two video projectors, projecting images through a split beam mirror onto four translucent screens (translucent meaning that the image appears in equal intensity on both sides of the screen). Entering the room, the viewer can watch the work from far away and see all four screens at once, or walk directly up to and around one screen - a much more intense experience. The images are mostly rivers and oceans, steam and sprays.

The aspect of creation I like the most is the initial recording. Sleet or snow or howling rain, I love that part, especially if I am alone out in nature. In New Mexico where I live, my images are rivers, mountains, and arroyos, but finding myself in a big metropolis like Tokyo, my material became the people. The Japanese have a social protocol where their daily routine looks to us like a fabulous theater - the way they bow, the way they make certain signs. Like when they want to cut through a crowd in a hurry, they put their hand forward in a chopping gesture and a magical corridor appears in this ocean of humanity. They have hand signals for yes and maybe, where the maybe usually means the unutterable no. They seem to wear an invisible armour, a no man's land around their body. The elevator girls are in a perpetual state of performance, as are the train conductors, the taxi drivers in their white gloves or the shinto priests ritualistically pruning their arena.

Between taping and editing there is usually an intermediary step where I alter and mix the images, change color or run things upside down or backwards. This is where the particular uniqueness of working with electronic image comes into play. It is somewhat akin to photographic darkroom techniques but really reminds me of playing an instrument. You change style, timbre, dynamics and key in an improvisational and spontaneous way.

In multi-channel video compositions I often make a ground image of a certain duration which I then duplicate as tape two, three, etc. I then drop different but complementary images in on those copies, and a similar phenomenon to musical composition starts occurring. Beginning with a melody/theme, you add in the harmonic lines and discover that the melody is far less interesting than the counterpoint. Sometimes there is an emergent melodic structure that interweaves through the instruments, or in my case the video screens.

Late 20th century art is fast, too fast for me. But then I realize that I am out of the mainstream - the mainstream wants things fast. In multi-channel compositions I feel liberated from this concerns, since they rely on very different time principles, more like music.

I do not like teaching - just as I did not like going to school. It is an absurd theater, the teacher supposedly all knowing and the students posing as eager minds waiting for the illumination. So I go through the theory and the techniques - video is rather complex technically, and I explain the signal with its timing structure, the frequencies, the voltages. I go into history, show a lot of tapes, mine and those of colleagues, and we discuss them. Then I ask them if they believe in UFOs, at which point the whole class gets very uneasy. Half of them say they do, half say they don't. The classes the students seem to appreciate most are the ones in which I present "the world according to Steina." They sort of like that. We discuss the way the galleries sew up the art scene and make the artists kiss ass. Always, I tell them that they don't have to kiss ass. And they seem greatly relieved, almost as if they did not know. I remember overhearing a student say - "But we must do this kind of conceptual/intellectual work because this is that kind of a school." And I turned around and said, "NO YOU DON'T." And the whole class laughed because they realized that they really don't. I tell them that it is every artist's duty to be disobedient. We discuss what it means to be a mainstream person and to have a comfortable life, and how, if you decide to be an artist, you are basically deciding to live a materially uneasy but a more rewarding life. They discuss this back and forth for awhile, not that they haven't thought about it a lot, but they get lonely, they get confused. So I reassure them that there is no grander life than the creative artistic life. It is the unknown, the exploration, the fact of being your own person on your own time. The reason I ask my students about UFOs is that, after some of them say that they do believe and others that they don't, I tell them we are not going to talk about UFOs anyway but about how you must stick to your beliefs. If you believe in UFOs you should raise your hand whether or not the other half of the class is going to sneer. The discussion turns to intimidation and how people will lie about their beliefs just to get along. It is too emotionally stressful to admit to having an independent mind. You don't have to be an artist to experience this dilemma, but I believe it is the artist's duty to stay on the fringe.

The creative process for me is a tremendous pleasure, even when it is painful, like when I feel inadequate to the task. People perceive this pleasure in my work and often object: "But you are just playing" - a comment that in turn gives me a tremendous pleasure!

The motivation to make art seems to come from a deep desire to communicate, and for some artists to communicate on a massive scale - something that does not particularly interest me. I see no qualitative difference in more people versus one person if I am communicating. Our whole existence seems to be about communication. It cuts through cultures, languages, continents. It also cuts through time. We spend so much time with people we have never met, often long dead. But the primary motivation for all art, is to communicate yourself to yourself - which is a spiritual idea. It has been the sad lot of many artists to communicate only to future audiences, but there have been lucky communication coincidences where artists and their audiences were in the same place at the same time. Paris in the twenties was like that. New York in the late sixties was like that for us. It was a luxury.