

Steina Vasulka: From videoinstallation BOREALIS, 1993.

Installations & Matrixes

Melody Sumner

MELODY SUMNER: You use anywhere from 4 to 48 monitors in your installations. How do you decide what number to use?

STEINA VASULKA: I don't think of the installations as being large or small depending on the number of monitors involved, but depending on the number of channels. More channels means a more elaborate piece to work with and edit. I am flexible about the size of the display. However, I do like a big display. The monitors can be arranged in many ways. For example, for *Geomania* (1986) my favourite constellation is a pyramid.

I shoot everything with one camera. My usual way of working is to make a ground image and duplicate it three times. Then I find other images and drop them in variously on those other three copies. The other images are also from the original tape. For me, it is part of the "composing" to find something when I am shooting that I know will go with something else – or contradict it. Very often I know that I have a pair of images or four images that could work well together. I keep adding episodes and sections until the composition is complete. As I add images things begin changing between the channels. Sometimes I work on the four tapes simultaneously scene by scene. But it is usually easier to format one line and then fill in the others.

The aspect of creation I like most is the initial taping, that is, being on location. Whether sleet or snow or howling rain, I love that part, especially if I am alone out in nature. There is often an in-between step before I begin "composing" that I call the "inter-materials". That is where I alter and mix images.

I call what I do composing because it reminds me of composing music: you make a melody and then you start filling in the harmonic lines. As with music, sometimes the melody isn't really in the main instrument after all. Since I do so much on four channels, I like to compare it to playing quartets. If you listen to a quartet, there is either an intricate melodic structure that interweaves for all four instruments, or something started in one instrument is picked up by another in a horizontal composing. The structuring of harmonics is vertical composing. I make use of both phenomena in my video work.

MS: So you can show those four channels on four different monitors or on forty-eight. How does that work?

SV: One of the first things Woody [Vasulka] and I started out with in the early seventies was playing around with the horizontal drift – images drifting from one monitor to the adjacent one. I bridge the four channels so that there can be a bank of monitors playing one image and another bank playing another. I try to throw off the predictability of the images by not setting them up symmetrically.

Right now I am working on display that will not be a stack of monitors or a wall but something more special – two channels projected onto half translucent screens where the image appears both sides.

But for me, the display has always been secondary. My main emphasis and where I spend most of my attention is in the composition of the images. Then for the display, I often decide how it will look based on what is available.

MS: In the original shooting, do you start with an idea or a feeling?
SV: I always start with an idea but I usually abandon it. One does not just go out with a camera and say I am going to shoot this. Because by time one is ready to shoot *this* thing it is really *that* thing that has become interesting. I can never stick to any original idea. In Japan I wasn't particularly interested in elevator girls (in *Elevator Girl* and *Tokyo Four*, 1991) – I was interested in the whole sense of performance in Japan by people in the street, by everybody. People there have social protocol that to us looks like performance but for them is just daily life. The way they bow, the way they make certain things. Like when they want to cut through a crowd because they are in a hurry, they put their hand forward in a chopping gesture. They have signals for "yes" and "no" and "maybe." To me this was fantastic theatre. I found it very strange even the way Japanese dress and how each keeps his body together as a unit. Basically you cannot touch anybody there, it is not part of their social protocol. This was all of intense interest to me and so I considered all of it part of my material. Here in New Mexico my material is rivers, mountains, and trees, but when I found myself smack down in the middle of Tokyo my material becomes people.

Elevator girls are maximally-stylized instant theatre, as are the train conductors, and the taxi drivers wearing their white gloves. Once you have one elevator girl on tape you immediately think "Now I need another!", a matching shot.

MS: What happens in the editing process for you?

SV: All the compromises begin. The footage that I really counted on the footage that was going to be so great isn't there. And then I find some other footage that I hardly noticed and it is really good! Or maybe I walked away from the camera when there was nothing happening but something acted out in front of it that I wasn't aware of, and it is exactly what I need. In the editing, you have to give up your original idea and just go with the material.

Actually, the multiscreen thing comes out of a certain problem I have with editing. I find editing excruciating because I don't really



Steina Vasulka on location. (photo: Dan Welsh).

know when one thing is over and another should begin. When I look at other people's work I generally don't like their timing; it is usually too fast for me. But then I realize that I am out of the mainstream. The mainstream wants things fast. I don't like them fast. At a certain point though, I must decide what the piece *is* finally. I would say Woody is much better at that. He knows instantly what is good timing and what is not. I know most clearly about timing when I show my work to an audience. Then I see it their way – it is a very strange phenomenon. I suffer greatly from certain things that don't work. I know immediately how to change it. What started as a beginning might easily become the ending and vice versa. I never do any editing on a tape until I have seen it many times in front of an audience.

MS: Ideally, where would you like the large installations to be experienced – a museum or a shopping mall, in someone's home?
 SV: In my mind they should be shown in a quite dark place. A museum could be a good place. But the museums are always so interested in putting it in a maximally-visible location – they think they are pleasing me when they say, "we are going to give you a big lobby." I find that to be counterproductive because I want people to be able to sit and watch the video quietly. Ideally, my work is not for a thousand monitors and one viewer – not one monitor and a thousand viewers.

MS: What ideally is experienced by the viewer?

SV: I want the viewer to be transfixed. That is my wish: that they be absorbed by the piece so that they forget time and space. It may be a megalomaniacal idea, but that's what I want. I want the viewer to get to the next level of mind (be it up or down), which is what happens if you are jolted by something, if something really touches you. I'm looking for the viewer to share the kind of strong feeling that I have about the material. My dilemma is I feel transfixed by the material and I expect if I just show them everybody else will be as well.

But very few people do get it. They don't see it with my eyes. They have a different background, or they are in a hurry. Maybe they are irritated that they don't see the social agenda that they were expecting or they just don't want to see what I want them to see. Good know why!

MS: You have been called an "ecstatic," is it that state of mind you are after?

SV: No. I just want the viewer to be touched. I can't predict what they will feel. There was a man who watched my Japanese tape, *Tokyo Japan*, and he came up to me after and said that it was all about death. At that moment I knew that he had really *seen* it – even though it isn't about death. That was his interpretation. And it was very flattering for me to get a response like that because I knew that in a way, everything else, it is also about death. This man was old. He was much closer to death. It could have been the Japanese attitude about death that he perceived.

MS: Is there a particular experiencing of art in your past that inspires you to want to give back to the world some of the same?

SV: Music saved my life when I was a kid. I wouldn't otherwise have had any childhood. (Early childhood was fine but later I had a lot of trouble, I was always sick and just basically out of it.) My love of art with art from the beginning was very intense. It was all-consuming.

from the time I was eight or nine until my late teens. I lived by it. I went to all theatre performances, all opera performances, all concerts, all recitals, all gallery shows and openings. I was crazy about it. Nothing else in my life made any sense to me. I never chose to be an artist, I just knew I wouldn't be able to work in a bank or be a waitress or anything else.

Though I never made it through high school. I had a classical education really. My parents, especially my father, took me to concerts. I had an aunt who took me to art events and thought me how to appreciate modern painting. I didn't realize until I came here how few people get that kind of exposure.

MS: You have said that still imagery means nothing to you. It has to be moving.

SV: I was never really interested in photography. Personally, I could find no way *into* still images. I have learned to appreciate paintings and photography and things like that as being noble activities that I cannot participate in. I didn't understand that type of composition. But as soon as I had a camera in my hand – as soon as I had the “majestic flow of time” in my command, I knew I had my medium. The element of time is what makes it like music. I find it strange to be called a visual artist. Though I was never even close to composing music, composing is exactly what I think I am doing now with moving images.

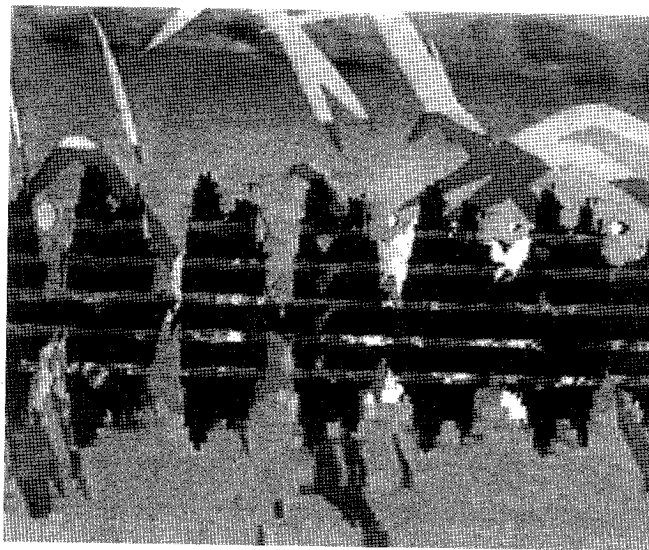
MS: When you teach, as you did recently in Germany, what are you teaching the students? Is it Steina's view of reality?

SV: I go through the theory and the techniques – video is complex technically. I explain the signal with its timing structure, and things like that. I go into history and show a lot of tapes, mine and those of my colleagues, and we discuss them. We look at the students' work, discuss what they are doing. Then I ask them if they believe in UFOs, at which point the whole class gets very upset. Half of them say they do and half of them say they don't.

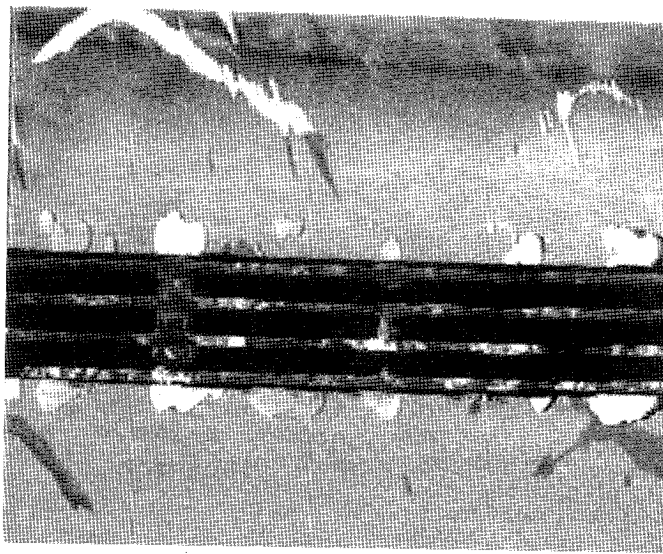
The classes the students seem to appreciate most are the ones in which I present “the world according to Steina.” They sort of like that. We discuss the way the galleries sow up the art scene and make the artists kiss ass and so on. Always, I tell them that they don't have to kiss ass. And they seem greatly relieved. They wouldn't have known that otherwise! I remember overhearing one person say – “But we have to do this kind of intellectual work because this is that kind of a school.” And I turned around and said, “NO YOU DON'T.” And the whole class started laughing because they realized that actually they don't. I tell them that it is every artists duty to be disobedient. Then we discuss what it means to be a mainstream person and to have a comfortable life, and how if you decided to be an artist you are basically deciding to have a materially uncomfortable life, but in another sense possibly a much more rewarding one. They discuss this back and forth for awhile – not that they haven't thought about it a lot already. But they get lonely, they get confused.

For me, there isn't a grander life than the creative artistic life. It is the unknown, the exploration, the fact of being your own person. I am sure a lot of scientists have a similar kind of rewarding life. They may work on their own ideas, call their own shots. In other fields too this may be the case.

The reason I ask my students about UFOs is that after some of them



Steina Vasulka: from the videotape *VOICE WINDOWS*, 1987.



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say that they do believe and some of them say they don't. I say we are not going to talk about UFOs anyway but how you have to stick to your beliefs. If you believe in UFOs you should raise your hand whether or not you think the other half of the class is going to sneer. You should stick to your beliefs. We went through this discussion about intimidation: How people will lie about what they believe in 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 in a sense, I believe it is the artist's duty to stay on the fringe.

MS: If you had all the money and funding in the world for your next project what would you do that you cannot do now?

SV: A lot. I do all kinds of compromises because I don't have the equipment. Modern equipment speeds up the process and makes it easier to edit. I would like to have the optical gismos, editing gismos, state of the art electronics. As a fantasy, I would make larger installations. In one, the whole floor would be made of monitors and they would all be filled with moving imagery. There would also be four-sided corridors. You look down a long lane of images that keep moving towards you, and past you. A higher priority would be to have a better means of production. But for me to buy those things, I would have to sell myself or work for someone or something unacceptable to me. So, my life is as compromised as anybody's. But I have never seen anybody who got all their wishes fulfilled become a better artist because of it.

MS: Your images changed when you moved to the West you have said. Did your reason for making art change?

SV: No. I look at my old tapes and see I am still doing the same thing. I think most artists are like that. The motivation is the same. It keeps driving you, you don't know what it is. I am very intrigued by that motivation. It is a phenomenon. Sometimes you ask yourself: Why bother? What makes you think anybody else on earth is interested in this stuff? But even then, you keep doing it. I don't know why.

There are the two ideas about why people make art: to communicate, or as a sort of spiritual exercise. I am much closer to Cage's idea ("to prepare the mind for divine influences") but essentially the notions

are true. The motivation comes from a deep desire to communicate and for some artists, to communicate on a quite massive level something I have never really been interested in. I see no qualitative difference in more people versus one person if I am communicating. But the primary motivation for all art, I believe, is to communicate yourself to yourself – which *is* a spiritual idea. Every person's life about communication, is filled with communication.

MS: Do you think about communicating with the future?

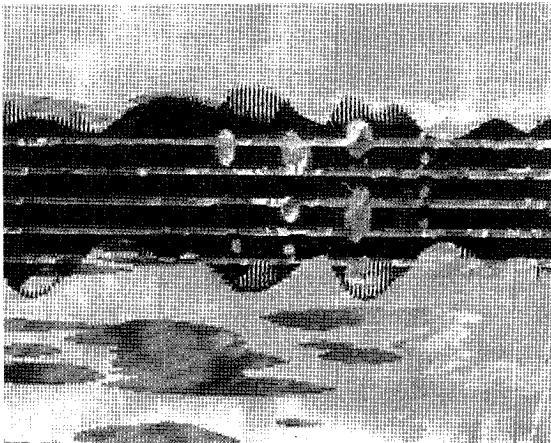
SV: Yes I think about it because I communicate so exquisitely with people from the past. Some of my best friends have been dead for hundreds of years. Like Beethoven. It is not flippant to think that I can communicate through time. But then you also must think about the futility – such as making these elaborate works like I am doing which have never been shown and maybe they never will be shown. It would take just one A-bomb to irradiate the tapes and to irradiate the flesh and I would not have communicated a thing to anybody.

There have been lucky coincidences where artists and their audiences are 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.

MS: Tell us more about what you did for the event in Iceland in Spring?

SV: There are the two projectors projecting down onto four screens which are translucent. As the audience, as a viewer, you can watch the work from far away and see all four screens at once, or, you can be on the inside, which is much more intense, but then you can't see the picture behind you.

The subject material is dedicated to Icelandic images – landscapes of Iceland. It is all about lava flows and water, steam and sprays. In many years I have been going to Iceland with my video camera, and I have been using images from those visits in my work. Always, I have the feeling that one day I'd be able to show these images in Iceland. When the request came from Halldor Björn Runolfsson, the curator of *Borealis VI*, which opened in May in Reykjavik, I was really stopped by Iceland twice last summer to gather materials. My project is titled *Borealis*, it means "of the north."



Steina Vasulka: from the videotape *VOICE WINDOWS*, 1987.

