THE VASULKAS

Steina Vasulka

Steina's highly structured work is also playful and open-ended evidencing a synthesis of control and spontaneity—a fusion of the cerebral and the sensual—in her investigations of space, movement, and point of view.

IN THE LAND OF THE ELEVATOR GIRLS
1989, 4:15 min, color (U.S.A. and Japan)

"In the Land of the Elevator Girls opens with a wipe from the center of the screen. Steina uses this device to simulate the opening doors of an elevator in a department store, attended by an elite mascot of Japanese consumer culture: the elevator girl. Steina becomes our inimical "guide" on a beguiling, forever upward (or is it downward?) ride through the "inscrutable" aspects of vertically structured Japan. The elevator girls in Steina's tape remain astounding anachronisms, though to the foreign observer the things they reveal in the opening and closing of the doors they operate are almost as astounding as the girls themselves. We look on dumbfounded as the doors of Steina's elevator open to reveal not the expected lingerie department but a bubbling volcanic spring. The elevator becomes a vehicle which transports us to the unknown . . . and almost unknowable destinations. The doors open and close in rapid succession on a Shinto ceremony, an apparently manic person with a robot arm and laser beams extruding from his eyes, the lobby of a love hotel, a dingy corridor strewn with rubbish, a puppet performance and so on. Steina does not attempt to explain, only to "reveal" a fraction of a culture which remains almost as opaque today as it was when Commodore Perry forced its doors in the mid-nineteenth century. "— *Peter Callas*

LILITH
1987, 9 min, color (in collaboration with Doris Cross)

Lilith uses focalplane shifts and frame-grabbing to enthrall our gaze, to transfix and hypnotize us; then its protagonist, cobra-like, darts across the paradoxical landscape (which 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.

"In *Lilith*, Steina adds an elusive narrative element to her landscapes, modifying and manipulating the face of painter Doris Cross in an eerie reference to female icons (Lilith, a biblical figure—in some texts she was the first wife of Adam—who represents a witch or a woman with mystical powers). Cross' face is submerged within the landscape, and with her haunting, slowed speech she appears to reach out from the earth in a primordial gesture." — *Marita Sturken*

THE VASULKAS

Steina Vasulka

VOICE WINDOWS
1986, 8 min, color (by Steina in collaboration with Joan La Barbara, and Woody Vasulka)

"*Voice Windows* is an integration of sound and image in which the singing voice of Joan La Barbara producees energetic permutations in a grid of lines (reminiscent of a musical scale) that forms a window onto images of moving landscape. The rifts, chants, and scat singing of La Barbara's voice become a visual dance in this electronic scape." — *Marita Sturken*

    "The collaborative work between [us] began early this year when Steina and her husband and partner, Woody, developed an interactive system that allowed my voice to intercut secondary video images into a primary one. The specific sounds made by my voice affect the shapes and patterns of the bleed-through. This work will eventually be extended and performed in real time, i.e., live." — *Joan La Barbara*

SUMMER SALT
1982, 18 min., color (inclues *Sky High, Low Ride, Somersault, Rest, Photographic Memory*)

"*Summer Salt* is a playful exploration into the phenomenology of the electronic image, one that does not so much examine the constrast of digital and analog, but the basic positions and movements of the video camera. Here, Steina uses Machine Vision to view the landscape from angles unavailable to the human eye: In *Sky High*, she hold the camera with a mirrored lens attachment on the roof of her car for a sky-saturated view; in *Low Ride*, she straps it to the front bumper to give a tactile, low angle view in which the desert floor seems to invade the television screen; in *Somersault*, she performs gymnastics with the camera (with a mirrored lense attachment that gives a fisheye lens effect) in a humorous almost slapstick exercise on the mobility of the video camera . . . decentering the viewer's sense of gravity and inserting her body as an active force within the frame. By transforming the rectangular video frame into a circle, Steina blocks our reflex to read the camera image as a window on the world." — *M.S.*

VIOLIN POWER
1970-1978, 10 min., b & w

"*Violin Power* is Steina's 'demo tape on how to play video on the violin.' The tape begins with a straightforward black-and-white image of Steina playing the violin in conjunction with video tools. Steina's eventual replacement of the violin with the video camera as her primary instrument, results in the violin becoming an image-generating machine. Rigged up to imaging devices, the violin transforms the camera image, rendering it a surface onto which 'music' moves as a kinetic force." — *M.S.*

Steina Vasulka

FLUX
1977, 9 min., b & w

"In *Flux*, Steina manipulates imagery of flowing water to heighten viewer's sensory experience of the sound textures and dynamic visuals of a rushing stream. With an extreme wide-angle lense, she turns the stream into a radiating globe of undulating water that evokes a revolving earth as a sphere of liquid, and by alternating between images of water flowing in opposite directions, she magnifies the pounding force of the water."
— *Marita Sturken*

"*Flux* is a series of vignettes in which images and sounds of rushing water are continuously switched at different speeds. Steina doesn't merely capture an image of the water, but intensifies our experience of its surging power and movement. At the tape's conclusion, Steina cuts from natural phenomena—the water imagery—to electronic waveform images that resemble water. This juxtaposition of cemera-generated and electronically constructed images—the 'real' versus the artificial—is central to Steina's work in the the 1970s." — *Lucinda Furlong*

BAD
1979, 2 min., color

"BAD is the mnemonic command for the B-Address register of our Buffer Oriented Digital Device. There are several functions in this register, namely: Up/Down, Left/Right, X and Y maps, and 9 variations on resolution, here manifested as stretching or squeezing of the image. The tape starts with the register at Zero and adds One at a pre-programmed speed. For sound, the most active bits are selected, translated through a digital/analog converter to voltage controlled oscillators. Then blue is added on the darkest gray (black) and red on a middle gray, leaving the remaining image Black/White." — *S. V.*

"In *Bad*, [Steina's] sound/image experiments are extended to a digital context. In this work, Steina weaves a rhythmic sound and image to examine the up/down, right/left movement, and squeezing/stretching of the image in digital technology, using her face as the image material." — *M. S.*

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INSTALLATION TAPES
work-in-progress, b & w

This is a demo tape of a work-in-progress involving live performances and installations of Steina's previous video works: specifically, *Tokyo Four* and *Violin Power* in performance.

THE VASULKAS

Woody Vasulka

Issues of memory, history, and narrative, and their
relationship to electronic imaging have been central
concerns of Woody's work.

THE COMMISSION
1983; camera Steina Vasulka; with Robert Ashley and Ernest Gusella; 45 min.; color

"*The Commission* represents Woody's initial foray into narrative structure, and his first experiment with anti-narrative strategies. He chose the story of two romantic and legendary artists—composers Hector Berlioz and Niccolo Paganini—to experiment with the concept of producing imaging effects with specific narrative meaning. The story of this "electronic opera" centers on a commission a patron wanted the violinist Panganini to present to his rival Berlioz. Paganini represents the flamboyant yet eventually destitute artistic genius, rejected by the church and unknown, whereas Berlioz is the pompous, egocentric artist. Woody's central purpose in this tape is to subvert the narrative and produce narrative elements through video effects; in each of the tape's eleven segments a different effect is employed for specific narrative meaning: Paganini's frenzied violin playing is echoed in shadows of image movement; the exchange of the commission is made tense by a constant flip/flop technique between the two men; and Paganini's embalming is given an ethereal and deathlike quality by the characteristic skeletal effect of the scan processor." — *Marita Sturken*

ART OF MEMORY
1987; with Daniel Nagrin; 36 min.; color

"Not only is *Art of Memory* Woody Vasulka's most famous work, but it must be counted among the most acclaimed and widely exhibited works in the history of video art. There were three major sources of inspiration for the tape—Vasulka's childhood memories of newsreels of world conflict; historian Frances Yates's book *The Art of Memory*; and the engravings of the 19th century Romantic illustrator Gustave Doré. Vasullka took from Yates not only the title of his videotape but also one of its two organizing principles, that of 'putting thoughts into a landscape.' The mnemonic architectures in Vasulka's tape are newsreels, photographs, and texts—memories of major conflicts of the 20th century—which are mapped onto shapes or objects that float above the landscape of the American Southwest or are continuations of it. The winged figure could be interpreted as Icarus or an Angel of Death, but for Vasulka he represents the metaphysical world, which must share the burden of responsibility for the violence and cruelty of human nature. Each segment is composed of three elements: the image-object that is to disappear, the image-object that will replace it, and a wipe that performs a syntactical operation of replacement or succession by masking one while revealing the other. The resulting visual drama is one of discontinuity rather than causal linearity. The segments are organized into six major movements: an introduction/European theater, the atomic era, the Spanish civil war, the Russian revolution, the war in the Pacific, and an epilogue which Vasulka calls the 'catharsis.' The movements are demarcated by a sound like the door of a great vault slamming shut . . ."
— *Gene Youngblood*

"*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 Steina's earlier work is still an important aspect of this installation. But *The West* is emphatically a tribute to the grandeur of nature." — *William D. Judson*

"Metaphors are engaged in *The West* that do not simply rest on obvious or singular interpretations. Surely one could read it as a poetic indictment of the contemporary reconstruction of this space for industrial and military purposes, or conversely, as a fascination with the forms that obliterate such a reading by an equally poetic vision of both."
— *Maureen Turim and Scott Nygren*

Machine Vision
1976
"*Machine Vision* is a series of installations with a mirror sphere, two cameras and two monitors, signifying the awareness of an intelligent, yet not human vision. *Machine Vision* does not involve video tape, but rather uses real-time space surveillance. My *Machine Vision* installations are performing systems, they occur in the studio, out in the landscape, or in an exhibition. The act of seeing, the image source and the kinetic resources come from the installation itself, choreographed and programmed by the cyclical nature of its mechanized performance." — *Steina*

"*Machine Vision* is a group of videotapes and installations concerned with creating a camera view that moves beyond the restrictions of the human eye. One of the first works of Steina's *Machine Vision* project, and central to it, *Allvision* is a rotating spherical device that mediates the viewer's experience of the viewing space. Steina's concept of 'allvision' involves exploring a way of seeing that is an all-encompassing, machine-derived vision. In *Allvision*, the all-seeing mirror sphere transcends spatial limits such as up/down, and inner/outer by situating the viewer within abstract electronic space. *Allvision* restructures the space of a room so that the viewer's position within that space is always mediated through the machine. Through the reflective sphere, the cameras scan the space and re-map it. The image of the viewer entering the space of the installation is thus transposed via the mirrored sphere into the abstract image space of the monitors, a space in which they are seen in a rotating cycle by the camera mechanism."
— *Marita Sturken*

SELECTED INSTALLATIONS:

Borealis

National Gallery of Iceland, Reykjavik Iceland, 1993

Tokyo Four

Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center, Buffalo, New York, 1993
Atlantic Center for the Arts, Smyrna Beach, Florida, 1993
The Gallery at the Rep, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1993
Manifestation for the Unstable Media, S'Hertogenbosch, Holland, 1992
Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, Finland, 1992
Denver Art Museum, Denver Colorado, 1992
L'immagine Elettronica, Festival, Ferrara, Italy, 1991

Ptolemy

L'immagine Elettronica Festival, Ferrara, Italy, 1991
Ars Electronica, Linz, Austria, 1990

Vocalizations

Manifestation for the Unstable Media, S'Hertogenbosch, Holland, 1992
Ohio University, Bowling Green, Ohio, 1990

Geomania

Montevideo Gallery, Amsterdam, Holland, 1990
Arizona Art Museum, Phoenix, Arizona, 1987
Jonson Gallery, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1986

The West

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, California, 1988
Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1988
International Video Festival, Locarno, Switzerland, 1986
Montevideo Gallery, Amsterdam, Holland, 1985
Museum of the 20th Century, Vienna, Austria, 1985
Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France, 1985
State University of New York campuses, sponsored by SUNY Statewide Committee on the
    Arts with grants from the NEA and the Rockefeller Foundation, 1984-85.
Cine-MBXA/Cinedoc, Paris France, 1984
Museo des Belas Artes, Madrid, Spain, 1984
Montbeliard Video Festival, Montbeliard, France 1984
University Art Museum, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1983
C. G. Rein Gallery, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1983
The Kitchen, New York City, 1983

Machine Vision

Cine-MBXA/Cinedoc, Paris France, 1984
Volkwang Museum, Essen, Germany, 1979
Albright Knox Gallery, Buffalo, New York 1978
Hallwalls Gallery, Buffalo, New York 1976
The Kitchen, New York, New York, 1977
Cathedral Park, Buffalo, New York 1975

LIVE VIDEO PERFORMANCES:

Interactive MIDI-violin/laserdisk performances — titled "Violin Power" when performed solo and "Hyena Days" when performed with Michael Saup (guitar)

Violin Power

Telluride Institute, Telluride, Colorado, 1993
National Gallery of Iceland, Reykjavik, Iceland, 1993
Rock Cafe Media Club, Prague, Czechoslovakia, 1992
Brno Polytechnic Institute, Brno, Czechoslovakia, 1992
Center for Contemporary Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1991
Santa Fe, New Mexico/Santa Monica, California, 1991*

> *Interactive MIDI-violin / laserdisk performance in which the violin played by Steina in Santa Fe controlled via telephone a video laserdisk in Santa Monica. This event took place during a concert at the Santa Monica *Electronic Cafe.*

Hyena Days

Deutsche Welle T.V. Program, Frankfurt, Germany, 1992
S'Hertogenbosch, Holland, 1992
Ars Electronica, Linz, Austria, 1992