

May 26, 1983

Dear Woody and Steina Vasulka,

My name is Susan Stevenson and I recently graduated from the College of Ceramics at Alfred University. One of my senior advisors, Harland Snodgrass, suggested that I get in touch with you. After seeing my senior exhibition, Harland showed me the tapes that you had kindly allowed him to have a copy of. I was very excited when I saw the work that you have done with reflections and with images on the oscilloscope.

I am involved in an exploration of vision and ways of seeing. I became interested in the way that layers of reflection merge with what can be seen through a pane of glass to form the optical reality of one image. I asked myself a lot of questions about this and decided to do an installation to find out more about it. I chose one of the greenhouse balconies in Harder Hall to work in so that I would have two very distinct layers of reflection, one from outside the building and one from inside the greenhouse space, falling on the pane of glass which looked into the lobby area of Harder Hall. I wanted to be able to affect the image so I made two structures with adjustable mirrors. I imitated the reflection process by casting reflections from the mirrors onto the glass pane. This allowed me to rearrange images and superimpose them on each other. Then I took the installation and translated it into video to find out more about it. The video made some interesting things happen because it allowed me to focus in on particular images and more fully incorporate the movement of people and objects into the images.

I am also fascinated with the way an oscilloscope sees. It intrigues me that it sees in terms of voltage and the result is very different than what I see. I decided that I would like to find out how an oscilloscope sees shadows. I did most of the work live using a black and white camera. I also had a circuit built for me that would expand the raster and give me a more interesting image. I felt the need again to translate the experience in order to find out more about it. I decided to make it two dimensional this time and chose photography to do it. I have enclosed some of the results of this translation.

I, then, took the camera, oscilloscope and circuit and tried to find out how the oscilloscope would see the reflections in that pane of glass mentioned before. The result was incredible.

The oscilloscope made no distinction between what was reflection and what could be seen through the pane of glass.

I would very much like to meet and talk with one or both of you. I feel that in talking with you I might be able to clarify some old questions and raise some new ones. I would also be very interested in seeing what you're working on now. I will be working in the Taos area for the summer so that would be an ~~excellent~~ excellent time for me to get together with you. I'd be most grateful if you could let me know if there is some time this summer that we could get together. My address after June 3rd will be:

Camp Summer Life

Rt. Box 22

Vidato, New Mexico 87579

(505) 587-2259

I should be there until August 12th.

I hope to hear from you.

Sincerely,



P.S. I wasn't sure how to spell your names so if they're wrong please forgive me.

Sept 10  
~~August 6~~, 1984

Dear Woody and Steina,

I know that you wanted to see any new statements that I wrote about my work. This has taken a while to put together, but it's finally finished. Please read it and let me know what you think.

One thing I have discovered about being out of school is that my attitude about how I present myself and my work has changed. I have over the course of the year been showing my work and talking about it to a variety of people. They don't want their time wasted. They're not my teachers. And so, I have evolved, much to my own surprise, a method of presentation that is entirely different than the rather flimsy one I used at Alfred. I realized this the other day when I was showing some of my work to a professor who works with light at a local university. I had expected him to be nice, but somewhat condescending. I quite frankly expected him to treat me as a student. I was very surprised when, after I had set up and was showing him my work, he treated me with respect. He talked with me about his work not as a teacher to a student, but as one artist to another. I realized afterward that this had a great deal to do with the way I had presented myself and my work to him.

I am making quite a few contacts in this area and now I am concentrating on making contact with artists outside this area. I've written to a video center in Atlanta. I made the acquaintance of Kit Fitzgerald, a video artist from Manhattan, while she was in Virginia Beach. She suggested that I write to Electronic Arts Intermix for their catalog. Beyond that I'm keeping my eyes and ears open. There is one light artist in this area who wants to collaborate on an outdoor piece with me, so hopefully, I'll get my act together enough to do that.

I'm also trying to see how I can make a living from what I do without making it commercial. I'm beginning to understand that some of the translations I do (in particular, the two dimensional ones) would be useful to businesses as "attention-getters". I've had some people express interest and now I am investigating what avenues I would have to take to do this and what would happen to the work.

In the meantime, I've been teaching at the Virginia Beach Arts Center. I just finished up some video art workshops for children. It was frustrating, exhausting and a lot of fun. (A lot more fun than teaching arts and crafts at Camp SummerLife!) Now they want me to teach some video art for adults. I'm a little nervous about this. My main credential is that I use video seriously as a main media. I don't dabble. I figure that I'll bring my equipment, myself and the experience I have and we'll go from there. I've also taken the printmaking residence at the Arts Center, so now I have the facilities to develop some of the two dimensional light work that I showed you last summer.

If you get some time, I'd love to hear what you've been working on. I'd also like to know if any of your work will be on exhibit on the east coast. If you think of anyone that it might be a good idea for me to get in touch with let me know.

Sincerely,

*Susan Stevenson*

4-8-85

DEAR SUSAN

WE SELDOM WRITE LETTERS, BUT WE SHURE  
READ THEM! YOURS ARE VERY DELIGHTFUL,  
SPECIALLY THE "DESCRIPTIONS". WE HAVE A  
GREAT AFFINITY FOR YOUR WORK AND ENJOY  
HEARING OF IT.... WE ARE CONVINCED THAT  
YOU WILL SUCCEED IN YOUR ART, JUST DON'T RUSH..  
YOUTH IS A TIME WHEN IDEAS COME FAST, AND  
OBSCURITY GIVES ONE TIME TO IMPLEMENT THEM.  
OR AS WOODY SAYS: "ART SHOULD NOT BE HAMPERED  
BY TOO MUCH SUCCESS". THE WAY MEDIA PEOPLE  
TRAVEL, I AM SHURE WE WILL MEET NOW AND  
THEN, AND OF COURSE SHOULD YOU COME AGAIN  
THRU SANTA FE .....

MOST CORDIALLY,

STEINA + WOODY

February 10, 1985

Dear Woody and Steina,

I thought that you might want to hear what happened when I launched my second video piece on the Tidewater, Va. area. I had just joined the Tidewater Artists Association, which is the local professional artists organization in this area. I got a notice for their annual juried exhibition. After looking over the rules, I could see no media restrictions. I had been having problems finding places to exhibit my work where it would really be seen. I was also very familiar with the space at the Virginia Beach Arts Center where the show was being held. So I figured, why not? Let's see what they do with a video piece. It was quite a challenge logistically, because I realized that the piece would have to be completely self contained and almost run itself.

Ever since the ArtsFest piece with the the ten foot mirror, I had wanted to do something exploring water as a moving reflective surface. Because of the nature of the exhibition, I decided to do a tape that would be played over the osilloscope and then rescanned onto a monitor. I ended up rescanning with a black and white camera which gave the images the quality of a woodcut. This time I also used sound both to identify and to make the visual images flow. Dad and I fixed up an old oscilloscope for me to use and he made me a device that would automatically stop the tape at the end of the piece and rewind it back to the begining. This device was operated by pushing a single button.

The juried exhibition was pretty conservative last year when I saw it so even though the piece was good, I wasn't too sure they'd choose it. As I brought the piece in I noticed that the majority of work was two dimensional. I also ran into some technical difficulties with the old oscilloscope and spent four hours there trying to fix it before they closed the entries. However the effort was worth it. To my delight they chose the piece to go in the show. When I got to the opening, I discovered that it had won an award of merit from the jurors. But, I was really surprized when I looked in the Sunday paper about two weeks later and read this article. It never ocurred to me that the piece would get a review like this.

The publicity has been good for me though. Yesterday a painter who had seen the piece called me and wanted to get together. She has skills that may help me to do a piece that I've wanted to do for a long time. I also went to see a man at the local PBS station. He has a half hour program on this area and he said that he'd like to do a show on me and my work. I'm in the process of coming up with a piece that can be done in their studio. ( I intend to make full use of their equipment too. )

I finally feel the need to produce tapes and I am very aware of the limitations of my own equipment. I am trying to get an entry level position in one of the commercial stations in this area in production. I also have the possibility of doing freelance work for GE in return for use of their professional 1/2" editing system.

Now for my other pieces of news. My father is leaving video products and returning to Utica, N.Y. to work in radar. After a lot of thinking, I have decided to stay here and continue with what I've started. Dad and I will still be working with each other long distance. ( As he says, it's amazing what you can ship UPS. ) I now own a fair amount of equipment. None of it is professional, but it's enough. Dad says that I need technical training now that he can't give me.

The other reason I've decided to stay is that I've met a certain young man and we've decided to get married. ( Well you did say it could happen to the best of us. ) He's really neat. He's the one who spent the four hours with me while I was trying to fix the oscilloscope. I feel really good about my life and work. There are lots of things I haven't done yet or haven't thought of doing yet, but I view those as challenges still ahead. I haven't given up on anything and I look forward to those challenges. Take care. I'll keep in touch.

Sincerely,

*Susan Stevenson*

Dear Woody and Steina,

I don't know if you remember me, but I was the kid who visited you from Taos. I was working in light perceptions using video and I still am. I was a student of Harland Snodgrass at Alfred University.

I took your advice and visited James Turrell on my way to Utah. I didn't have too much time to talk to him, but they took me out to the site of the Roden Crater for about half a day. I was fascinated with what he was doing and I'm going to do my best to get out there when he's finished.

I took another piece of your advice that I wasn't too sure about at first. I returned to Portsmouth, Va. to work with my father. It's been slow going, but I am building up knowledge and equipment working with him. I feel that I'm learning more than if I went to graduate school, just working and talking with him. We haven't built any special equipment yet, but we're working on a circuit that will not only sync the cathode ray imagery on the oscilloscope so that photos can be taken off of it, but will also feed the signal from the oscilloscope directly to a monitor or a video recorder as close to real time as possible.

I just finished putting up an installation where I rescanned off the oscilloscope onto a 25" monitor. It worked well enough, but I would like to get a sharper image. The installation was based on one of the ones I did for my senior show at Alfred. I put up a semi-reflective piece of mylar in a space so that I could make imagery with layers of reflection and what could be seen through. Then I allowed the oscilloscope to see what was going on in the mylar. I was particularly interested in what would happen if the reflective surface could be adjusted and had a movement of it's own. The frame that held the mylar could be tilted, but the mylar had a rippling and billowing motion of it's own. It produced some fantastic imagery.

The situation I set it up in was interesting too. I was invited to set up at the Virginia Beach ArtsFest. Virginia, in general, is fairly conservative, but Virginia Beach is very conservative. The director of the Virginia Beach Arts Center took a chance on letting me put it up, because he wanted to see how people would react to video art. I think he got more than he bargained for. The nature of the installation was such that it made use of the festival atmosphere. It also involved people both in the imagery and the process of making it. They could make imagery and change it. I was put over with the demonstrating artists so I really stuck out. As one guy put it, everybody else had their Mastercard signs out and I wasn't selling anything. I wasn't too sure it was going to work out at first, but I think it worked very well. I got a lot of very different reactions because there was a wide variety of people there (everything from Navy to art critics to real rednecks). I had a ball! A lot of people asked me, "What's it good for?" and "Is it art?" (Well that's nothing new), but the overall reaction was positive. (which really surprised me) The children had the best time. They didn't need any explanations. They played. In fact I had a couple of people who wanted me to bring some video into the schools for special workshops. I'm probably going to do that this summer since I've always enjoyed working with children during the summer and this would be something I'd really enjoy.

I've managed to borrow quite a bit of equipment from GE's Video Products Division via my father. I'm still working with 1/2" because that's what they have, however I've been making a few contacts in the area and with the tapes from this installation I might be able to get people to let me use some 3/4" equipment. The editing is the worst part. The GE consumer camera is pretty good. It has 280 lines of resolution and very good color, if you have the right amount of light for it. But the video recorder doesn't match up to the camera. I lose a lot between first and second generation. There is a place around here that does broadcast quality 1/2" and I might get back in touch with them. I'm also trying to make contacts at Old Dominion University's television services and at the local public television station. I need to learn more about the equipment. I've realized that I have to do the editing myself. I can't even let someone do it while I'm watching. There is a lot of video in this area, but no one is using it for artistic purposes. I've left a trail of confused video producers in my wake (although no one has thrown me out yet). None of them is about to let me get my hands on their equipment or even train me. So until I can convince someone to train me on 3/4" editing equipment, I'm going to use the 1/2" for all it's worth.

I've got a project I'm thinking of now. I would like to work on an exploration of "What if I make a shadow three dimensional?" I've been thinking about visual three dimensionality. I'd like to use a computer's ability to manipulate time and apply theoretical concepts, to create something that doesn't now exist. There's something else I'd like to try on this kind of installation. I met a guy at GE's place in Bridgeport, Conn. who works with speech commands for computers. He let me play with a drawing program that was speech controlled. I began thinking about my show at Alfred where I ran into a lot of people who were very nervous and uncomfortable about pressing buttons. I began to wonder if a program could be worked up for an installation where there would be a human voice (probably mine) which would interact with the people who walked into the installation. It would take the place of written statements. It would include any instructions or explanations and it would have the ability to interact with people, even if only to record questions or comments they might have. I'm going to write up a proposal for this guy and try and get him interested and then I might try and get GE interested in giving me a grant and taking an installation to a convention or Siggraph.

I am also trying to in touch with some video artists in Atlanta, Ga. I've enclosed some photos of the installation I set up at the Artfest. I'm working on another statement and when I finish it I will send you a copy.

Sincerely,

*Jusan Stevenson*

P.S. I'd be very interested in hearing what you are working on now.

*I'm not going to describe the trip West because the statement will say that better than I can in a letter.*