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Three Video Artists: Robbins, Clarke, Vasulka

Steina Vasulka and Allvision No. 2 at The Kitchen Center in New York

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“Allvision No. 2 [signifies] the awareness of an intelligent, yet not human vision. 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 mechanical performance.”

[Steina Vasulka quoted in a Kitchen press release]

“Two cameras are mounted on the ends of a slowly revolving axis with a perfectly spherical mirror at the center of the axis. On the monitors, viewers see an artificially created 360 degree image. While the viewers are part of the “real” spaces they can at the same time see themselves in the “imaginary” dimension created on the screens.”
[from a Kitchen press release description]

In 1975 Steina Vasulka (with her husband Woody, one of the early pioneers of video art) started to develop her mechanical/electronic remote video machine for transforming the soft “rectangle of the video screen into circular space.” Now, in 1978-79, Allvision No. 2 are elegant and silently eloquent kinetic video sculptures imparting to the eye of the video camera the illusion of omnipotence.

Set on a white cube placed diagonally in the middle of the 27 foot, 7 inch by 24 foot, 6 inch gallery is the machine. The two cameras at either end of a 4-foot motor-powered boom look at, and revolve around, the spherical mirror. What each camera “sees” is the globe and everything reflected in it - the room, everyone in the room, including oneself, and the camera “looking” at itself, plus the real room and the “real” people in the room. What each camera sees is transmitted to each monitor, all moving in dislocated and circularly distorted, 360 degree space.

Therefore the sculptural aspects of Allvision are triple: the mechanical structure of the machine itself, the plasticity of the video image, which gives the illusion of space-in-depth because of its complex organization of circular form and motion and the total configuration of the installation, which includes all the parameters of the room in its sculptural organization. It is this multi-levelness which makes Allvision such a rich piece.

Allvision simultaneously dislocates reality and resynthesizes it into a highly organized harmonious art-reality. This synthesis involves by my count eight different levels of the same reality reorganized and re-transformed mechanically and electronically.

The sculpture was impeccably installed in the small gallery at the Kitchen (from December 15 to January 4) so that the piece seemed designed for the room and the room existing for the piece. Although Allvision must have this effect on many spaces, its “at homeness” at the Kitchen is particularly pertinent, as Steina was one of the founders of the Kitchen.

Hopefully, the words of this piece, meant to describe are actually somewhat hard to decipher; mystifying. Because for all its centered simplicity, the piece is mysterious and takes real concentrated deciphering on the part of the viewer to figure out just what is happening - what the cameras are doing there, what they are seeing, what we see on the monitors, what each monitor is seeing in relation to the cameras, how we seem to get into the picture in different ways, just how many different ways we are being seen, what happens when we move in relation to the whole thing.

Even after I had “figured it out” I still had a sense of mystery and deciphering turned to a kind of philosophical meditation until the piece asked the kind of philosophical questions such as “if a tree falls in a forest and no one is there, does it make a sound?” Since the space-time are the space and time of a compressed infinity organized out of immediate daily realities we are able to relate ideas of infinity, paradox, riddle to ourselves and our surroundings, especially because ourselves and our surroundings are precisely the apparent subject of Allvision's imagery. Allvision is the land of meditative art being cultivated by artists seeking sanity and a profundity in a more-than-often hectic society which mainly cultivates the superficial. The whirl of the machine, the sounds of distant footsteps, doors opening and closing, which accompany Allvision (the actual sounds of the piece and the environment), remind me of Susan Sontag's essay “The Art of Silence,” its language of not-words, not-images, produced for a kind of positive endlessness.

Allvision to me relates to the history of twentieth century sculpture as much as it does to video art. The revolving machine reminds me somewhat of Tinguely's self-destroying machines though Allvision's function is to organize and synthesize rather than disrupt and destroy. And the spherical video image is perhaps in the tradition of Arp sculpture.

It is this writer's opinion that video sculpture such as Allvision is one of the most vital and relevant forms of sculpture in the 1970s, and should be regarded as such by established museums. Video sculpture (all the artists I have written on for Field of Vision - Shigeko Kubota in the last issue, and Robbins, Clarke, and Vasulka here, make video sculptures) distill the positive electronic energy-field and the feedback properties of our twentieth century electronic technology into concentrated, highly charged art of processes structures, and imagery,

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