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## **STEINA VASULKA**

### **Personalized Chronology 1940-78**

Steina prefers a personalized chronology which refers to her ideas rather than to specific events in her life. The dated entries are written by her. The italicized remarks are taken from an unpublished, taped interview with Linda Cathcart on August 20, 1978 in Buffalo, New York.

#### **1940-57**

I was born Steinuun Briem Bjarnadottir on January 20, 1940 in Reykjavik, Iceland. My father, Bjarni Gundmundsson, was a Foreign Ministry Officer; my mother, Gunnlang Briem, was a bank officer.

*I started going to school when I was six and didn't do so well. Nobody knew what was wrong with me but I found out later that I was somewhat dyslexic.*

*I had this aunt who couldn't stand that I was so dumb, because she was teaching in the same school I was going to. She took me every morning and read with me for half an hour and my grandfather - he taught me mathematics. I was also sick a lot as a kid, so I did not go much to school.*

*I learned to do everything by myself. When I was thirteen, I was really way behind and I realized that all the other kids were now studying Danish and English and algebra and no one had told me about it. I got very mad and I just sat down and studied like crazy.*

*I studied violin, harmony and music theory.*

*Because I didn't want to go to school, I could go to all the rehearsals of the Symphony Orchestra. I went to all theater and dance performances, all concerts, everything that happened in this little town and that was a lot, because there was a cultural war going on between the USSR and the USA. I also went to a lot of art exhibitions- I had this aunt who was a painter.*

#### **1957**

In 1957, my parents sent me to a boarding school in Denmark.

*It was a family tradition. You were then supposed to return and say "Home is the best!" That part of the tradition I broke.*

#### **1958**

After I came home from Denmark, I spoke Danish. I decided German was the next language I wanted to speak, so I went to Germany.

#### **1959 - 62**

I received a full scholarship from the Czechoslovakian Ministry of Culture to attend the Music Conservatory in Prague. This grant was renewed for four years.

*I was behind the Iron Curtain, on my own, in a strange culture - new language. I was delighted, it was a totally different kind of life. I was growing up. I was extremely interested in philosophy, psychology, and all those things. I wanted to be a private scholar. The idea was not to be a concert violinist. I wanted to have music as something I could do to support myself so I could do something else. But I was so wrong because once you are a musician you have to practice all the time and you are so tired after a rehearsal that you go off and do nothing for hours.*

#### **1962**

I met Woody in 1962.

*I asked him if he could fix my motorcycle - that is how we became friends.*

**1964**

We got married and shortly thereafter I joined The Icelandic Symphony Orchestra. For three months that summer we traveled all over Iceland.

*We made two films, I was some kind of producer.*

**1965 - 66**

In 1965 I left for America.

*I became a free-lance musician in New York City and I knew by then that I didn't want to do that ... it dawned on me that I was making music only for the money and that wasn't right because music should be done for the passion and the fun.*

**1969**

I was introduced that year to video in the place where Woody was working at the time.

*We would come in and just sit for hours and watch feedbacks - it's a self-made process. It's something that just goes on. You point the camera at the monitor, set it into motion and then you can sit and watch it and talk, and after a while you look at it and it has changed. Then we started to figure out how to interfere with it, how to control it, what to do to change it - to find out the laws, if there were any - why it happened in the first place, what was the reason for it, and why the hell I was staring at it.*

*One of the first things we did was images generated by sound and vice versa. We were interested in the absolute interface of sound and image. That's when we realized that there didn't have to be a camera - a voltage, a frequency could create an image.*

**1970**

Then we did these kind of jokes - kind of performances. Those tapes were called sketches. We still use them as is. They are all three to five minutes long. Woody was also going to the Fillmore East taping Jethro Tull, Jimi Hendrix and so on. We had a steady stream of people coming to watch those tapes.

*I stayed home and experimented when I wasn't playing and when Woody came home at five o'clock from work I would say, "Hey look, I have a new tape to show you!" He got envious, so one day he came home and said, "I'm not going to go out and work anymore."*

My parents decided to help us. I consider it our first and best grant ever. We needed a lot. We understood that we had to have our own equipment.

*The first thing we ever bought was a portapac. The next thing was a sound synthesizer and the third thing were three identical monitors which we configured in a row. That influenced very much what we did thereafter.*

**1971**

Encouraged by Eric Siegel, we formed a group called "Perception" and received a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts, through Howard Wise's Electronic Arts Intermix.

*Wise had put together the first exhibition of video in 1969 in his gallery on 57th Street ["Television as a Creative Medium"]. He did this unheard of thing - he made a video exhibition, which by now is legendary. We saw it then and were pretty impressed. It helped us decide that there was nothing illegitimate about what we were doing. A lot of people were influenced by that exhibit. We used the grant money partially to found an electronic arts action center; we named it The Kitchen.*

**1972**

In the summer we went west to San Francisco.

*On the way back, we traveled more south-north than east - between Utah and New Mexico and Arizona and we taped a lot. We had this large battery that we would recharge in a motel overnight. It powered three cameras, two keyers, a mixer and a tape recorder. Instead of gathering images outside through a single camera and a mix key and editing it later at home we could do it all on the spot.*

**1973**

In the spring, we were invited to work at the T.V. lab at Channel 13 in New York City.

*We figured it would be some kind of lab where we could experiment, but broadcast doesn't really give that kind of leeway.*

*By the fall, we were ready to move. We had given The Kitchen away. Our loft had become too small. We wanted to go out to Long Island but wound up instead in Buffalo.*

**1974**

This was a good time. We had a grant and a lot of time. Most of the tapes we distribute were made this year. It also became the last year of collaboration with Woody.

**1975**

I went back into black and white tapes. What I was interested in those tapes was space and time.

*There are two ways to induce movement to a still image; to move the camera or to have something moving in front of the camera. By mounting a camera on a motor driven device (a car, a turntable), I could make timeless cyclical programs of zooms and turns. Then I would point another camera to observe that camera, and so on. The results of these experiments were sometimes tapes, sometimes installations, and they became my fascination for the next couple of years.*

*The machines I used in the Machine Vision came out of Woody's background; he was the machine maker and he constructed them mostly for his work in film. I play them my own way as I used to play my music. I also engage my violin for image control.*

**1976**

I got a Guggenheim Fellowship and was invited to partake in the Berlin Film Festival.

*I was by now showing my own material a lot; these tapes were not "The Vasulkas" any more, so I credited them "by Steina."*

*Besides the mostly black and white Machine Vision tapes, I was making color tapes, usually without a camera, generating color drifts and flickers over solid fields or video snow.*

**1977**

Then I got my hands on a color camera.

*It was like rediscovering video all over again. I was also becoming more and more drawn into computer generated and computer-controlled video - a difficult task that I still cannot master.*

**1978**

This year I am teaching more than all other years combined. I enjoy it, although I doubt its usefulness. I am working again with Woody on two projects, six shows for WNED-Channel 17 in Buffalo and an exhibition at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery.

*I am interested in involving people into this magic.*

*End*