

9/00

**Videotapes****By Marita Sturken****Violin Power, 1970-78****Steina Vasulka**

Violin Power is Steina's "demo-tape on how to play video on the violin," a serious joke on the relationship of the video camera to musical instrumentation. This videotape operates as both an autobiographical tracing of Steina's replacement of the violin with the video camera as her primary instrument and as a systematic exploration of the relationship of electronic sound and image. The "power" of the violin is its capacity, when electronically wired, to alter and generate video imagery--to cocreate, in effect, Steina's electronic images. Violin Power begins with Steina's well-known, macro view of herself lip-syncing The Beatle's song "Let It Be," a humorous homage to the power of rock music that predates more recent popular forms of lip-sync performance. Steina plays her violin while rewiring it through a series of electronic devices that directly change the video signal through signal disruption, video keying, and the Rutt/Etra Scan Processor. The movement of her violin bow across the strings of the instrument disrupts and transposes the video image, causing the violin bow to squiggle and snake into interlocking forms. The alliance of sound and image in the electronic signal allows the audio vibrations of the violin to create image disruptions. The violin is thus a means through which electronic sound can be spatialized to create an image performance. In the beginning of the tape, in 1970, Steina is experimenting with the new tools of video; by its end, in 1978, she is re-orchestrating the electronic space of sound with kinetic force and exposing the essential materiality of the electronic signal.

**Orbital Obsessions, 1975-77, reedited 1988****Steina**

Steina's Machine Vision project, which she pursued throughout the 1970s, is an investigation into the capacity of electronic machines to re-orchestrate space. In the mid-1970s, she produced a series of videotapes that combine mechanical and electronic elements to rethink the video camera's relationship to space. In these works, her image material is her equipment-filled studio in Buffalo, New York. Orbital Obsessions combines excerpts from Signifying Nothing (1975), Sound and Fury (1975), Switch!Monitor!Drift! (1976), and Snowed Tapes (1977) to present an accelerated view, so to speak, of the development of Machine Vision. The elements of Orbital Obsessions are both self-evident and densely layered, presented in a casual style that almost mask a rigorous refiguring of space. Steina begins by placing the video camera on a turntable and then walks through a series of process each of which take the image further from its original static frame. Several camera scan each other, keying devices layer images, and a Flip/Flop Switcher rapidly switches between two camera views. Throughout these works, Steina places her body as image material within the frame, leaning into the camera, swaying back and forth, and moving in a quasi-choreography of image space. These Machine Vision videotapes thus constitute "acts" in a process to rethink electronic time and space. In each, the real-time aspect of the tape creates an experience for the viewer of phenomenological time--the viewer learns at the same pace as Steina, how each added device will further complicate the image. The obsessions of Orbital Obsessions are its preoccupations with the circularity of the video camera's orbit of vision and the means by which the mechanical can inform and enhance electronic media.

**Artifacts, 1980****Woody Vasulka**

Artifacts is both a document of the capacities of Woody's Digital Image Articulator, a device which he designed in the late 1970s with Jeffrey Schier, and an aesthetic interpretation of the potentials of digital image language. Woody presents the work as evidence of his collaborative relationship with the machine. "By artifacts," he states in the videotape, "I mean that I have to share the creative process with the machine. It is responsible for too many elements in this work. These images come to you as they came to me--in a spirit of exploration." The image forms generated by the Digital Image Articulator are based, like all digital images, on basic algorithmical procedures that transpose visual elements into mathematical components. Woody demonstrates the capacities of digital imaging in an eclectic and informal fashion, using a spherical shape and his hand as basic "artifacts" that the image device converts into compellingly alive digital forms. These transformations are performed in "real time," so that the viewer sees the

image created in a performative mode rather than as the final product of a hidden image process (such as those of commercial computer special effects). This is a primary element in Woody's "dialogue with the machine," that the image itself reveals the process of its construction. *Artifacts* marks the Vasulkas' collective step into digital imaging and examinations of the relationship of the analog and digital image. With the image of Woody's hand as its primary motif, it is a work that reflects on the history of craftsmanship and the human hand a source of creativity, one that moulds, in tandem with the digital machine, the forms of electronic space.

### **Summer Salt, 1982**

#### **Steina**

*Summer Salt* marks for Steina a continuing exploration of the phenomenology of space, yet with a shift in image material. Here, Steina transposes her explorations of *Machine Vision* from her studio to the landscape of New Mexico, to her backyard's realm of earth and sky. *Summer Salt* is emblematic of her melding of self-humor and physical jokes with systematic reconfigurings of the physical within the electronic. This work is an exploration of physicality--the body within the camera frame, the actual body of the camera itself, and the physicality of material space within the spheres of electronic space. Each section of the videotape builds upon the previous one to create an increasingly multifaceted sense of spatial dimensions. In *Sky High*, the camera is attached to the roof of a moving car with a mirrored lens that creates a 360-degree "distortion" of the New Mexican sky, curved into a spherical merging of landscape and horizon. *Low Ride* takes the camera to the opposite extreme, with it strapped to the front bumper of the car as it drives through desert bush. The bumping, scraping, and scratching of the camera on the prickly desert plants and sandy dirt exposes the body of the camera itself, with its built-in microphone, banging into its subject matter--an aspect of camera-generated images that is usually hidden from the image. In *Somersault*, Steina playfully does gymnastics with her camera and its mirrored lens attachment as a means of producing a 360-degree image of a torso wrapped around the camera lens. As she spins the camera and bounces off her hips in a humorous joke on the material nature of the camera, a kind of slapstick exercise on the notion of the camera as an extension of the body. *Rest* allows the camera to rest in a hammock, exhausted, in effect, from its physical exertions, as Steina uses digital effects to refigure the surrounding trees. Finally, in *Photographic Memory*, seasonal landscapes are interwoven, shifted, pixilated, and layered in sequences that insist on the tension between moving and still image. *Summer Salt* thus traces Steina's merging of analog and digital tools, and her project to strip the camera down to its essential physical nature.

### **The Commission, 1983**

#### **Woody Vasulka**

A prototype for the new form of "electronic opera," *The Commission* represents the capacity of electronic media to create narrative form through visual codes and digital effects. Woody's purpose in this work is dualistic: to use digital processes to produce a vocabulary of electronic language, and to examine the mythologies that infuse the role of the artist. He chose the rivalrous relationship of two musicians, Hector Berlioz and Niccolò Paganini, as his romantic and tragic subject. The story centers on a commission a patron wanted Paganini to present to his rival Berlioz. Paganini, whose role is interpreted by video artist Ernest Gusella, represents the flamboyant yet destitute artistic genius, a pariah rejected by the church, whereas Berlioz, interpreted by performer/composer Robert Ashley, is pompous and detached, the artist as ego. Yet, Woody's central purpose is not to tell this story but to examine how narrative elements can be visualized through digital media. He wants to subvert narrative into anti-narrative strategies, to expose its framework. In each of the tape's eleven segments a different effect is deployed for specific narrative meaning: the echoes of Paganini's music are depicted in pixilated digital shadowings, a flip/flop device creates tension as Paganini passes the commission to Berlioz by rapidly switching between views of each, and the Rutt/Etra scan processor gives a skeletal effect to Paganini's corpse as it is embalmed. *The Commission* thus provides evidence of a language of electronic image codes, one for which Woody has spent years working to formulate a "vocabulary." The primary story it tells is an image journey, a mapping of the potential of the digital image, through which the ephemeral, the emotional, and the peripheral can be evoked.

### **Voice Windows, 1986**

#### **Steina in collaboration with Joan La Barbara**

*Voice Windows* builds on Steina's earlier works, such as *Violin Power*, as an investigation into the essential relationship of electronic imaging to the space of sound. The voice of avant-garde musician Joan La Barbara forms

the videotape's guiding image device in a work that aims to visualize the physicality of the human voice. Here, La Barbara's voice creates a "window" from one landscape, the open desert, to another, the city of Santa Fe. This process builds throughout the tape, beginning with a simple grid of musical scales that offers glimpses onto a landscape with every note sung by La Barbara and moving into more complex layerings. As La Barbara sings, hums, chirps, chants, and blurts notes in a form of half-song almost-speech, her voice is the device that interfaces landscapes, distorts shapes, and creates new forms. Voice Windows reveals the capacity of sound to reconfigure image and the malleability of the electronic signal as image/sound. This work demonstrates the fundamental alliance of sound and image in electronic media, both derived from the electronic signal and symbiotically each a part of the other. Here, "voice" and its expression of aliveness represents the capacity to reshape geography and to move into new spaces unconfined by material forms.

**Art of Memory, 1987**  
**Woody Vasulka**

Art of Memory is both a reflection on the discourse of history and the fragmentary experience of memory and an exploration of the potential of the electronic image to become an object and depart from the two-dimensional video screen. This compelling work, which is comprised of image forms that radically redefine the electronic image, is concerned with both historical upheaval and the transposition of the photographic and cinematic into the electronic. The subject of Art of Memory is the catastrophic events through which 20th-century history has been defined--the Spanish Civil War, the Russian Revolution, World War II, the nuclear bomb--and, by extension, the images of those events that have formed a public memory. Woody creates three-dimensional digital forms through which these images of history are transformed until they can only be read as elements in the cacaphony of history and memory, as shredded bits of time. He places these forms within electronic images of Southwestern landscapes, enveloping yet not swallowing the images of the past. Art of Memory reflects on the fragmentary yet powerful capacity of memory to resurge, to present the voices and images of the past in new media with new meanings, and to reconfigure the present. Images of the past haunt this work, speaking to the legacies of these violent and cataclysmic events. Art of Memory foregrounds the role of the camera in creating history and the capacity of electronic media in building upon and finally usurping the phenomenology of the media which preceded it.

**Lilith, 1987**  
**Steina in collaboration with Doris Cross**

The landscape of the human face and the mythical status of earthly forms and their spiritual shadows provides the impetus for Lilith. Here, Steina treats the face of painter Doris Cross as a canvas onto and through which a forested scene is realized. Lilith is a mythical figure, whose many roles and meanings are evoked in Cross's strange gestures and expressions. Lilith is the first wife of Adam, a witch or menacing female figure, and a goddess figure with mythical powers. In Lilith, Steina is clearly paying tribute to the complexity of the aging female face, its lines and expressions indicating experience and knowledge. At the same time, Lilith can be situated within Steina's tradition of rethinking landscape and reconfiguring space. She deploys an array of analog techniques to merge Cross's face with the landscape, to key it into and within its surroundings so that it too is a field onto which image elements are mapped. Cross's haunting, slowed speech, which Steina manipulates into abrupt half-sounds and guttural utterances, evokes a primordial presence of figures through the ages. The Lilith in this work is finally a figure of enigma and wisdom, difficult to read yet commanding attention in her merging of earth and human form.

**In the Land of the Elevator Girls, 1989**  
**Steina**

In the Land of the Elevator Girls is a travelogue through the land of electronic imaging in which geographies can be transcended and the images of electronic media offer glimpses into other, possible worlds. Steina takes as her first level of subject matter the urban scape of Tokyo, where young women, known as "elevator girls," offer introductions to the various floors of elaborate department stores. As they announce polite phrases of greeting and departure, the elevator doors open first upon crowds of shoppers, and then through Steina's imaging upon landscapes of Japan, performance rituals, and urban scenes. Thus, at the moment when an elevator girl announces an arrival and the doors open upon a steaming volcanic landscape, the viewer is unexpectedly transported through the doors into another geographic realm. The elevator doors, in both video image and digital remake, are the means through which the viewer and Steina, as outsiders, are allowed to catch glimpses of the rituals of Japanese culture,

from time-honored traditions, such as sweeping a rock garden, to more recent techno-rituals, such as a virtual reality demonstration. A primary subtext of the tape is the fact that elevators are now automated, hence the elevator girls remain intact not through necessity but as a vestige of cultural norms in which the transition from one space to another is announced and accompanied. This threshold, marked by Steina through the motif of opening and closing doors, represents the movement not only between cultures but from analog to digital space, from inside to outside, and from commercial urban scape to rural landscape. While offering a sense of the role played by the foreigner peering in at Japanese culture, *In the Land of the Elevator Girls* is primarily a visual enactment of the passage from one world to another.

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