

# PROFILE OF STEINA

Steina, born in Iceland in 1940, attended the Music Conservatory in Prague from 1959 to 1963, and joined the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra in 1964. She came to the United States the following year and has participated in the development of the electronic arts since 1970, both as co-founder of The Kitchen, a major exhibition center in New York City, and as a continuing explorer of the possibilities for the generation and manipulation of the electronic image through a broad range of technological tools and aesthetic concerns. Her tapes have been exhibited and broadcast extensively in the United States and Europe. She is a Guggenheim Fellow, and has received numerous other distinctions, including grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Maya Deren Award from the American Film Institute in 1992.

In the late seventies she developed a series of installations on the theme "Machine Vision," which was exhibited at the Albright Knox Gallery in Buffalo, New York. Since moving to Santa Fe, New Mexico in 1980, Steina has produced several synchronous video matrix installations displayed through multi-monitor systems, titled: *The West*, *Geomania*, *Ptolemy*, *Vocalizations*, and *Tokyo Four*. *The West* traveled throughout New York state as a video exhibition organized by the New York Statewide Committee for the Arts. *Tokyo Four* is based on images of Japan from her six-month stay in 1988 on a fellowship commission.

As a violinist, Steina was one of the first to interface video with musical performance, which she continues to develop through her own live interactive performances. In a cycle titled *Violin Power*, she controls the presentation of video laser disk images by playing her MIDI-interfaced violin. She co-curated the exhibition on early video instruments, *Eigenwelt der Apparatewelt: Pioneers of Electronic Art*, for Ars Electronica in Linz, Austria, in 1992. During the same year she was a guest professor at The Institute for New Media in Frankfurt, and at Die Hochschule Fur Angewandte Kunst in Vienna. She also lectured in Berne, Berlin, and at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. This spring Steina exhibited a new work, *Borealis*, for the National Gallery in Reykjavik, Iceland. 1995 will see a major retrospective of the Vasulkas' work at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, published with an expanded catalogue.

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## INSTALLATIONS & MATRIXES

*Steina's recent installations involve landscape — and what it reveals about the passage of time and the action of elemental forces. The installations entice the viewer to move into another space orchestrated musically through multiple monitors or multiple screens, or displayed on multi-channel synchronous video matrixes.*

### ***Borealis***

1993

"Videotaped in Iceland in 1992, *Borealis* is a two-channel installation in which two video projectors, through split beam mirrors, project onto four translucent screens. The images appear, with a left-right mirroring, on both sides of vertically positioned screens, standing four feet high. With these projectors, I was able to set up a magical environment of free-standing self-illuminated moving imagery placed in a space otherwise totally dark. You are immersed in the rhythm of the imagery, surrounded by it as you walk in and around it." — *Steina*

"This is archetypal Nature: the viewer looks down from cliffs onto turbulent waves, is plunged into waterspouts exploding and collapsing in spasmodic motion. Numinous vapor confounds a sense of direction, the obscene volition of plant life forces the strictures of rationality. Roiling ocean waters appear variously as molten metals, fossil patterning, the impulse of emergent crystal growth, the fanning of deluvial plains, the push and strain inside one's own arteries. All this seething and breathing in mindless flux is accompanied by real-time processed natural sound. . . . At first the chaos seems contained, a benign native institution. But soon any notion of permanence has been obliterated. This is primordial Nature with her endless emendations witnessed as beauty, passion, and confusion. Man, with his machines and gods, has come and gone without a trace." — *Melody Sumner*

### ***Tokyo Four***

1991

"No form of moving-image art comes as close to musical composition as multiscreen video, where the different channels of image and sound are equivalent to musical polyphony, each functioning like a voice in a musical ensemble. And no multiscreen work is as spectacularly musical as Steina's. She works as a composer would, playing on the visual equivalents of timbre, texture, and tone. *Tokyo Four* is the audio-visual equivalent of a string quartet. In one compositional strategy, Steina begins by assembling a long single channel segment which represents the 'melody,' or what she calls the 'ground track.' Sometimes one screen is the melody and the others are accompaniment, then another screen takes the lead. A musical syntax emerges from this visual point/counterpoint organized around duration, interval, rhythm, repetition, and series. *Tokyo Four* is organized around categories of imagery: Shinto priests meticulously grooming their Zen garden on New Year's Eve; train conductors monitoring rush hour crowds; elevator girls bringing a superfluous, but charming High Touch to the high tech world of the shopping malls, reminding shoppers to watch their umbrellas and to not forget their children; a segment about food, beginning with the vertiginous fisheye lens in a supermarket; and an emotionally charged meta-choreo-graphy of a dance troupe's performance and curtain call. . . . Her compositional devices include flipping or reversing an image and playing it at imperceptibly different speeds on different screens, which gradually all synchronize at the same speed. These

strategies are especially effective in the final movement when the female dancer is bowing. The Strauss waltz the dancers use would be banal without the manipulations of Steina's spectacular visual matrix, which transforms it into something at once exotic and poignant."

— Gene Youngblood

### **Ptolemy**

1990

"In *Ptolemy*, Steina circles inside a space, delineating its boundaries with a mechanized choreography of camera movement. This is a world of circular movements, a vertiginous dance of machine and ordinary objects. The installation of *Ptolemy*, a four-channel piece in a multi-monitor matrix, further compounds the action; a disjunctive world circles to sudden but inevitable conjunctions. Light and shadow, reflections in a mirror ball and the camera lens itself trace an optical trajectory to a sound track of machine music. This installation premiered at *Ars Electronica* (Linz, Austria) in 1990." — Woody Vasulka

### **Vocalizations**

(with Joan La Barbara)

1990

"*Vocalizations* comes from a series of live performances for video images and voice. Vocalist Joan La Barbara's voice patterns are visualized here as video and provide an active syntactic element, combining a foreground/background of moving video images. Additional strategies are brought into this process including forward/reverse motion and speed changes in tape transport and digital sound processing. The final work plays together on four separate video channels." — Woody Vasulka

"There is an integration of sound and image in which the singing voice of Joan La Barbara produces energetic permutations in a grid of lines reminiscent of the musical staff of traditional music notation, forming a window onto images of a moving landscape. The rifts, chants and scat singing of La Barbara's voice become a visual dance in this electronic scape." — Marita Sturken

### **Geomania**

1986

"*Geomania* is a continuous two-channel sound and video environment presented on a circle of monitors. Site recorded images and sounds are electronically layered so that the North Atlantic surf washes through Arches National Park, and a bubbling Icelandic hot spring percolates through the desert clouds—a sensuous display of electronically generated color and texture. There are many paradoxes in this piece, not only the paradox between free-form image gathering and very rigorous presentation requirements, and the paradox between the land and the sea, but the real obvious one between an emphasis on technology and romantic beauty. In a way, this work seems to be a sweet autobiographical romance." — MaLin Wilson

"To me, living in the 20th century, nature not altered by man is romantic. Landscape can never be ugly. I have spent a lot of time thinking about what is beautiful art and what is ugly art, and why people engineer certain ugliness into their images, often very successfully. If you are working with the landscape you basically eliminate ugliness, which is, in a certain way, intimidating. . . . I moved here in 1980 from Buffalo, New York because I wanted to experience what it is to

live in the beauty. I did not want to think that it was going to affect my images as much as it did. For the first two years I resisted it. First of all because the beauty of the West is so seductive. And, secondly, I didn't feel up to it. I mean, are you going to take on God?" — *Steina*

"In *Geomania*, images wash through the dry desert in waves, the steam and gases of the volatile Icelandic landscape and viscous lava rock unfold on the screen. Steina sets up dichotomies and then dismisses them. One is encouraged to see the global interplay of the earth. The ancient land of the Southwest represents the accumulated time of the earth—a slowly eroding land, etched with the refuse of time; the bubbling energy of the Icelandic terrain is the formation of solid from liquid, the birth of the land from sea and the beginning of the earth . . . both are fused to present the earth as a regenerating force, as a living organism. Here, the landscape is not rooted in gravity, it is amorphous, malleable, and changeable. Embedded with layers of geological time, it is simultaneously death and birth; it transcends time."

— *Marita Sturken*

### **The West**

(audio by Woody Vasulka)

1983

"*The West* is a two-channel, multi-monitor study (on a 30 minute cycle) of the marking of the landscape of the American Southwest. This work traces the efforts of humankind to alter and map the land, from the ancient cliff dwellings of the Anasazi Indians to the more recent Very Large Array (VLA) radio-telescope systems that eerily rotate toward the sky. The desert landscape, in which human imprints become etched into the earth for eternity, is woven into complex movement across multiple screens and symbolizes the spectrum of human technologies. For Steina, history is inscribed not in fragments of archival footage but within nature; it is not the history of human beings, but the history of the land, of geological processes, of fire, water, and earth." — *Marita Sturken*

"*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