

THE VASULKAS

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. Her tapes have been exhibited and broadcast extensively in the United States and Europe. In the late seventies she did a series of installations on the theme of "Machine Vision" which were exhibited on both sides of the Atlantic ocean. She is an NEA, Rockefeller, AFI and Guggenheim fellow, and has received numerous other distinctions and awards.

Since moving to Santa Fe, New Mexico in 1980, she has produced several multi-channel video matrix installations titled: *The West*, *Geomania*, *Vocalizations*, *Ptolemy* and *Tokyo Four*, taped during her six-month fellowship in Japan in 1988. Her latest installation *Borealis* was premiered at the National Gallery of Iceland in May of 1993.

In a cycle titled *Violin Power* she controls the presentation of video laser disc images by playing her midi-interfaced violin.

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-choreography 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

Machine Vision

Cine-MBXA/Cinedoc, Paris France, 1984
Volkwang Museum, Essen, Germany, 1979
Albright Knox Gallery, Buffalo, New York 1978
Hallwalls Gallery, Buffalo, New York 1976
The Kitchen, New York, New York, 1977
Cathedral Park, Buffalo, New York 1975

LIVE VIDEO PERFORMANCES:

Interactive MIDI-violin/laserdisk performances — titled “Violin Power” when performed solo and “Hyena Days” when performed with Michael Saup (guitar)

Violin Power

Telluride Institute, Telluride, Colorado, 1993
National Gallery of Iceland, Reykjavik, Iceland, 1993
Rock Cafe Media Club, Prague, Czechoslovakia, 1992
Brno Polytechnic Institute, Brno, Czechoslovakia, 1992
Center for Contemporary Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1991
Santa Fe, New Mexico/Santa Monica, California, 1991*

**Interactive MIDI-violin / laserdisk performance in which the violin played by Steina in Santa Fe controlled via telephone a video laserdisk in Santa Monica. This event took place during a concert at the Santa Monica Electronic Cafe.*

Hyena Days

Deutsche Welle T.V. Program, Frankfurt, Germany, 1992
S'Hertogenbosch, Holland, 1992
Ars Electronica, Linz, Austria, 1992

HARDWARE REQUIREMENTS FOR INSTALLATIONS, MATRIXES AND PERFORMANCES BY STEINA:

Borealis

2 Video Laser Disk Players with 2 Program Discs
or:
2 Sony 3/4" VCRs with 2 Program Video Tapes

2 Video Projectors
4 Translucent Screens
2 Projector Tables
1 Two Channel Synchronizer
2 Stereo Audio Amplifiers
4 Speakers

AC outlets: 7

Tokyo Four

4 Video Laser Disk Players with 4 Program Discs
or:
4 Sony 3/4" VCRs with 4 Program Video Tapes

1 Four Channel Synchronizer
2 Stereo Audio Amplifiers
4 Speakers
9 to 48 Video Monitors

AC outlets: 7 + 9 to 48

Ptolemy

4 Video Laser Disk Players with 4 Program Discs
or:
4 Sony 3/4" VCRs with 4 Program Video Tapes

1 Four Channel Synchronizer
2 Stereo Audio Amplifiers
4 Speakers
16 Video Monitors

AC outlets: 23

Geomania

2 Video Laser Disk Players with 2 Program Discs
or:
2 Sony 3/4" VCRs with 2 Program Video Tapes

1 two channel Synchronizer
1 Stereo Audio Amplifiers
2 Speakers
9 Video Monitors

AC outlets: 13

Vocalizations

4 Video Laser Disk Players with 4 Program Discs
or:
4 Sony 3/4" VCRs with 4 Program Video Tapes

1 Four Channel Synchronizer
2 Stereo Audio Amplifiers
4 Speakers
8 Video Monitors

AC outlets: 15

The West

2 Video Laser Disk Players with 2 Program Discs
or:
2 Sony 3/4" VCRs with 2 Program Video Tapes

1 Two Channel Synchronizer
2 Stereo Audio Amplifiers
4 Speakers
22 to 44 Video Monitors

AC outlets: 5 + 22 to 44

Allvision

2 Cameras with Camera Mounting Hardware
1 Turntable with a Long Arm
1 DC Powersupply
8 Monitors

AC outlets: 11

Violin Power - A Performance

1 Video Laser Disc Player, Pioneer VL-D 8000
1 Zeta Electric/MIDI Violin
1 IVL Technologies ZETA MIDI Controller
1 IVL Footswitch
1 Toshiba LapTop Computer
1 PC Music Maker Interface to MIDI
1 Digitech Harmony Processor
1 Lexicon DSP Unit with a Footswitch
1 Program Video Laser Disk
1 Video Projector

AC outlets: 7

My love affair with art was all-consuming from the time I was eight or nine until my late teens. I lived by it. I went to every concert, theater play, opera and gallery show. Nothing else in life made any sense to me. I never *chose* to be an artist, I just knew I wouldn't work in a bank or wait on tables. I loved playing my violin, but when faced with the prospect of being a professional musician, I realized I had made a dreadful mistake. I found myself in New York going from gig to gig wondering if there was not more to life than black dress and meager fees. This is when Woody introduced me to his new discovery - *video*. What a rush! It was like falling in love, I never looked back. As soon as I had a video camera in my hand - as soon as I had that *majestic flow of time* in under control, I knew I had my medium.

In the early days of video everything was an installation or *environment* as we used to call it. In the first generation of 1/2" reel to reel video there was no provision for editing. The solution was to cut and glue, like an audio tape. Our *environments* therefore consisted of either "live", camera or "live" switching of tapes. Woody and I preferred to use multiple screens, typically a stack of monitors and several players. One of our first installation concept was to have images drift horizontally from one monitor to the next. After we started *The Kitchen*, we had plenty of opportunities to do *environments* and live video performances. Later, when electronic editing became technically feasible everybody became infatuated with *the edit* and installations disappeared for a while, just later to get re-invented by the *Art World*.

In the seventies I did a series of *environments* titled *Machine Vision* and *Allvision*. In *Allvision* I put a bar across a turntable with cameras mounted on each end looking into a mirrored globe placed exactly in the middle and a pair of monitors in each corner. As the table slowly turned the cameras captured the entire room with the viewers, the monitors and the turning machinery itself. Another *Machine Vision* variation had a motorized moving mirror in front of the camera so that depending on the horizontal or vertical positioning of the mirror, the video monitor would display a continuous pan or tilt either back/forth or up/down. A third variation was a continuous rotation through a turning prism, while still another had a zoom lens in constant motion, in/out. These automatic motions simulated all possible camera movements without making the camera and its operator the center of the universe. Time and motion became the universe with its endless repetitive cycles and orbits.

I was a latecomer to this infatuation with machines, but after I moved to New York, I remember vividly going to Canal street, looking at gears and motors as some kind of a miracle, resembling life itself - kind of a mechanistic replication of the biological mystery. I love gizmos, like the ones I find in surplus yards that can be re-fit to my purposes. If I had a lot of money I would spend it on optical gadgets, mechanical toys and state-of-the-art electronics. I would make gigantic environments, like a floor of monitors all showing imagery moving either the same or a contrapuntal direction, or I would build a four-sided corridor, were you look down a long lane of images that keep moving toward and past you. In reality though I am very flexible about the size of the display, since to me the size of an installations is not determined by the number of monitors, but rather the complexity of the composition. I therefore often improvise at the exhibition site how to configure an installation based on what is available. For example, my favorite constellation for *Geomania* [1986] builds the monitors into a pyramid.

I always intend these environments to be experienced in a quiet dark place. A museum is potentially good but museum people always seem interested in placing video installations in a maximally-visible location. They tell me triumphantly: "we are going to give you the lobby." It is always assumed that video ought to be loud and public but I really want it quiet and private: a thousand monitors and one viewer - not the other way around. I want the viewers to be so absorbed by the work that they experience another level of mind. I expect them to share the kind of strong feeling I have for the material, and to my amazement they sometimes do. As the old man who watched *Tokyo Four* [1991] over and over explained to me that it was all about death. At that moment I knew that he had really seen it - even though it isn't all about death.

In *Borealis* [1993] there are the two video projectors, which project through a split beam mirror onto four translucent screens (translucent meaning that the image appears in equal intensity on both sides of the screen). Entering the room, the viewer can watch the work from far away and see all four screens at once, or walk directly up to and around one screen - a much more intense experience. The images are mostly rivers and oceans, steam and sprays.

The aspect of creation I like the most is the initial recording. Sleet or snow or howling rain, I love that part, especially if I am alone out in nature. In New Mexico where I live, my images are rivers, mountains, and arroyos, but finding myself in a big metropolis like Tokyo, my material

became the people. The Japanese have a social protocol where their daily routine looks to us like a fabulous theater - the way they bow, the way they make certain signs. Like when they want to cut through a crowd in a hurry, they put their hand forward in a chopping gesture and a magical corridor appears in this ocean of humanity. They have hand signals for *yes* and *maybe*, where the *maybe* usually means the unutterable *no*. They seem to wear an invisible armour, a no man's land around their body. The elevator girls are in a perpetual state of performance, as are the train conductors, the taxi drivers in their white gloves or the shinto priests ritualistically pruning their arena.

Between taping and editing there is usually an intermediary step where I alter and mix the images, change color or run things upside down or backwards. This is where the particular uniqueness of working with electronic image comes into play. It is somewhat akin to photographic darkroom techniques but really reminds me of playing an instrument. You change style, timbre, dynamics and key in an improvisational and spontaneous way.

In multi-channel video compositions I often make a ground image of a certain duration which I then duplicate as tape two, three, etc. I then drop different but complementary images in on those copies, and a similar phenomenon to musical composition starts occurring. Starting with a melody/theme, you add in the harmonic lines and discover that the melody is far less interesting than the counterpoint. Sometimes there is an emergent melodic structure that interweaves through the instruments, or in my case the video screens.

Late 20th century art is fast, too fast for me. But then I realize that I am out of the mainstream - the mainstream wants things fast. In multi-channel compositions I feel liberated from this concerns, since they rely on very different time principles, more like music.

I do not like teaching - just as I did not like going to school. It is an absurd theater, the teacher supposedly all knowing and the students posing as eager minds waiting for the illumination. So I go through the theory and the techniques - video is rather complex technically, and I explain the signal with its timing structure, the frequencies, the voltages. I go into history, show a lot of tapes, mine and those of colleagues, and we discuss them. Then I ask them if they believe in UFOs, at which point the whole class gets very uneasy. Half of them say they do, half say they don't. The classes the students seem to appreciate most are the ones in which I present "the world according to

Steina." They sort of like that. We discuss the way the galleries sew up the art scene and make the artists kiss ass. Always, I tell them that they don't have to kiss ass. And they seem greatly relieved, almost as if they did not know. I remember overhearing a student say - "But we must do this kind of conceptual/intellectual work because this is that kind of a school." And I turned around and said, "NO YOU DON'T." And the whole class laughed because they realized that they really don't. I tell them that it is every artist's duty to be disobedient. We discuss what it means to be a mainstream person and to have a comfortable life, and how, if you decide to be an artist, you are basically deciding to live a materially uneasy but a more rewarding life. They discuss this back and forth for awhile, not that they haven't thought about it a lot, but they get lonely, they get confused. So I reassure them that there is no grander life than the creative artistic life. It is the unknown, the exploration, the fact of being your own person on your own time. The reason I ask my students about UFOs is that, after some of them say that they do believe and others that they don't, I tell them we are not going to talk about UFOs anyway but about how you must stick to your beliefs. If you believe in UFOs you should raise your hand whether or not the other half of the class is going to sneer. The discussion turns to intimidation and how people will lie about their beliefs just to get along. It is too emotionally stressful to admit to having an independent mind. You don't have to be an artist to experience this dilemma, but I believe it is the artist's duty to stay on the fringe.

The creative process for me is a tremendous pleasure, even when it is painful, like when I feel inadequate to the task. People perceive this pleasure in my work and often object: "But you are just playing" - a comment that in turn gives me a tremendous pleasure!

The motivation to make art seems to come from a deep desire to communicate, and for some artists to communicate on a massive scale - something that does not particularly interest me. I see no qualitative difference in more people versus one person if I am communicating. Our whole existence seems to be about communication. It cuts through cultures, languages, continents. It also cuts through time. We spend so much time with people we have never met, often long dead. But the primary motivation for all art, is to communicate yourself to yourself - which is a spiritual idea. It has been the sad lot of many artists to communicate only to future audiences, but there have been lucky communication coincidences where artists and their audiences were in the same place at the same time. Paris in the twenties was like that. New York in the late sixties was like that for us. It was a luxury.