

**Steinunn Vasulka f. 1940**

Nim i t6nfr@i og fi6luleikI Studied music and the violin  
Heistu einkas@ningar sf6ustu drIMain solo exhibitions:

- 1971 *The Vasulkas*, Max's Kansas City, New York  
*Jackie Curtis'First and Second Television Special*, Global Village, New York  
*Continuous Video Environment*, WBAI Free Music Store, New York  
*Continuous Video Environment*, Judson Hall Church, New York  
*Transmitted Environment*, Experimental Television Center, Binghamton, New York  
*Systematic Screenings and Performances*, The Kitchen, New York
- 1973 *Golden Voyage*, The Kitchen, New York
- 1974 *Video Environment*, Norton Hall, State University of New York, Buffalo
- 1975 *Environment*, Cathedral Park, Buffalo, New York  
*Video by the Vasulkas*, The Kitchen, New York
- 1976 *Allvision*, Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center, Buffalo, New York  
*Matrix 1, Electronic Materials*, Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York
- 1978 *Vasulka: Steina-Machine Vision/Woody-Descriptions*, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York  
*Allvision No. 2*, The Kitchen, New York
- 1982 *Allvision*, Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh  
*The West*, C.B. Rein Gallery, Santa Fe
- 1984 *The West*, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris  
*Steina & Woody Vasulka: Viddastes*, MBXA/Cin6doc, Paris
- 1985 *The West*, Long Beach Museum of Art and Exhibit Hall, Long Beach Convention Center, Long Beach, California  
*The West*, Montevideo Gallery, Amsterdam  
*Focus: The Vasulkas*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston  
*Scapes of Paradox.- The Southwest and Iceland*, Jonson Gallery, University Art Museum
- 1988 *Steina & Woody Vasulka*, Hitachi Showroom, Tokyo  
*Geomania*, Vassar College Art Gallery, Poughkeepsie, New York
- 1990 *Geomania*, Rene Coelho Gallery, Amsterdam
- 1992 *Steina & Woody Vasulka*, Denver Art Museum, Denver  
*Tokyo Four*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki
- 1993 *Tokyo Four*, Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center, Buffalo, New York  
*Tokyo Four*, Atlantic Center for the Arts, Smyrna Beach, Florida
- 1994 *Borealis and The Brotherhood Table III*, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), Los Angeles  
*Pyroglyphs*, Arizona State University Computer Commons Gallery Tempe  
*Geomania*, St. Luke Hospital, Amsterdam  
*Pyroglyphs and Borealis*, Rene Coelho Gallery, Amsterdam
- 1995 *Steina Vasulka: Four Video Installations*, Center for Contemporary Art, Santa Fe
- 1996 *Steina and Woody Vasulka: Machine Media*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco  
*Eldriinir*, Kjarvaissta6ir, Listasafn Reykjavfkr, Reykjavik

*Main recent joint exhibitions:*

- 1988 *American Landscape: The Electronic Grove*, Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco  
*Tokyo Film & Video Festival*, Tokyo
- 1989 *Whitney Biennial*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
- 1990 *Ars Electronica*, Linz, Austria
- 1992 *Eigenwelt der Apparate- Welt: Pioneers of Electronic Art*, *Ars Electronica*, Linz, Austria  
*Manifestation for Unstable Media IV*, Hertogenbosch, Holland
- 1993 *Architectural Space*, The Gallery at the Rep, Santa Fe  
*Borealis IV*, Listasafn islands, Reykjavik
- 1994 *Tart Festival*, Enchede, Holland  
*Art and Reality*, Riksstallninger, Stockholm

# STEINA VASULKA

VIDEO INSTALLATIONS

ENVIRONMENTS

& PERFORMANCES

*No form of moving-image art comes as close to musical composition as multiscreen video ... and no multiscreen work is as spectacularly musical as Steina's.* — GENE YOUNGBLOOD

## INSTALLATIONS & ENVIRONMENTS

**ALLVISION** an electro/opto/mechanical installation, 1976  
*Allvision involves exploring a way of seeing that is all-encompassing ...*

**MACHINE VISION** an electro/opto/mechanical environment, 1978  
*Automatic motions simulate all possible camera movements freeing the human eye from being the central point of the universe. Time and motion become the universe with its endless repetitive cycles ...*

**THE WEST** a video matrix installation, 1983  
*The West revels in the vastness of western spaces, the primeval quality of the landscape and ancient architecture ... emphatically a tribute to the grandeur of nature ...*

**GEOMANIA** a video matrix installation, 1987  
*There are many paradoxes in this work... the paradox between free-form image gathering and very rigorous presentation requirements ... the paradox between the land and the sea... In a way, this work seems to be a sweet autobiographical romance ...*

**PTOLEMY** a video matrix installation, 1990  
*Ptolemy borrows the cast of characters from the Machine Vision series. The sounds of motors and gears piped through various sound processors adds to the surrealistic quality of this machine performance.*

**VOCALIZATIONS** a projected video environment, 1990  
*The rifts, chants, and scat singing of Joan La Barbara's voice become a visual dance in this electronic scape ...*

**TOKYO FOUR** a video matrix installation, 1991  
*... the different channels of image and sound are equivalent to musical polyphony ... Steina 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 ...*

# STEINA AND PTOLEMY

By Robert Haller

*Switch! Monitor! Drift!* is a videotape Steina made in 1976. It is part of her Machine Vision' series—a group of tapes and installations that questions our assumptions of point of view, “our” visual spectrum, our sense of where we are in terms of what we see. Steina shows the tape rarely, apparently believing it to be too specialized or too long (at fifty minutes it is almost twice as long as any of her other tapes).

In the title of *Switch! Monitor! Drift!* we can see the first clue to her method. Each word has a double aspect: as a noun and as a verb. The exclamation points emphasize the verbal tendency, but also imply, by their profusion, an irony that leads one to question their absolute meaning.

Three sections of the tape exemplify the method that infuses the whole work. Early in the tape, following a mysterious series of 360 degree pans through the Vasulka's equipment cluttered work space, Steina appears with a violin in her hands. She proceeds to play it, and as the tone changes with each different position of the bow, so the video image changes—flip-flopping (to use Steina's words) back and forth between two cameras. Watching the image “played,” we deduce that the bow positions control the image. Yet later in the tape, when the image is again “played,” again with the sound-track changing with each flip-flop, one wonders if the sound is controlling the image, or the reverse. The sound might *be* the image, read on a different kind of machine (an approach already performed by colleague Tony Conrad in his film *Boolian Algebra*). Equally, the sound may be controlling the image, and might even be from the violin: because the image is so slowed that we can see the scans, and the sound is very base, the sound might be a “slowed down” violin.

How the tape was “shot” is another example of Steina's method. Not until the second half of the work do we see the machine that has been used to photograph so much of it. All of the imagery was double-exposed, either two alternating images on a switching device or two images in one frame, with a mat used to obscure one and reveal the other. The relation of the two cameras is not made clear until the moment when we see both, each rotating on its axis, both also atop another rotating platform—and both turning within slotted concave half-mirrors. Accelerating, slowing, then accelerating again, the apparent camera motion suggests the epicyclic movements of the planets in Ptolemy's classical cosmology. The confusion could be impenetrable were it not for Steina's intervention when she thrusts her hand into the frame to throw switches on the mechanism. She does so from the direction of the spectator, but she also does so only moments after we have seen her image *facing* us. It is at this point that the existence of the slotted concave mirrors becomes clear, and soon after that we can deduce the nature of the machine (although we never see it whole).

To so challenge the viewer (to move him from the position of Ptolemy to that of Copernicus!) is remarkable. A more remarkable set of images can be found in the brief sequences when Steina provides us with the only close-up images of her face in the tape. Multiplied and “rippling” across the screen, as if on the surface of an electric liquid, Steina's face appears seen slightly from below. After a few seconds it becomes recognizable, attentively serious, looking out of the screen in our direction. Suddenly from the right edge of the screen a form intrudes, a form that is Steina's silhouette. From the left edge another form appears, a video camera pointed toward the opposite face. The image stands like a kind of signature, and then is transformed by the recognition that in silhouette we can see how the image that is facing us was made; whether the images in silhouette are the source of

the background image is not that important—they could be. What is important is the sense one also gets from looking at Nam June Paik's Video Buddha (who contemplates a video camera pointing at himself): video as a mirror that permits us to better see ourselves.

'Machine Vision is a series of tapes made by Steina between 1975 and 1977, and the 1978 installation Allvision. The five tapes are:

*From Cheektowaga to Tonawanda* (1975) 36 minutes, color  
*Signifying Nothing* (1975) 15 minutes, b/w  
*Sound and Fury* (1975) 15 minutes, b/w  
*Switch! Monitor! Drift!* (1975) 50 minutes, b/w  
*Snowed Tapes* (1977) 15 minutes, b/w

## STEINA'S SOMERSAULT

By Amy Greenfield

Steina's *Somersault* is an extension of her Machine Vision tapes, a series which began in 1975, while she was living in Buffalo, N.Y. Her machines extend and activate the video camera so that what the camera sees—the world—becomes reflected, re-activated, re-energized, magically re-designed. What the camera-machine sees becomes its world. And since the material for this world is also her world, her move from Buffalo to New Mexico has very much influenced her machines' vision.

*Somersault* is part of three tapes taken in the immediate environment outside of her house. The visual brightness and colorfulness, the sunlight and the physical freedom possible in the New Mexico outdoors are very much a part of the art of these tapes.

But *Somersault* is singular in this series. It centers around herself. Or rather, her machine image. It centers around the black eye of the camera lens itself, with her image revolving, somersaulting, gyrating, splitting, jumping—around this center. It is also different from the 1970s Machine Vision tapes, because she is controlling the movements of the camera with her own body.

When the tape begins, we see the black eye of the lens, the middle of the screen, pointed directly at us. Around the eye is a circle of light. This light begins to move, and we see a woman behind the lens, in what seems to be a fish-eye or fish-bowl, which distorts her body and motions in extreme ways. Throughout the tape, she moves madly around and behind, over and under the lens, caught and yet freed in this fish-eye world which can be turned topsy-turvy, landing her on her head, feet upward, then turned right-side up with miraculous ease. Or, she steps over the lens and, like a gigantic Jolly Green Giant, jumps/stomps on either side of it. Sometimes, quite often, her image and the lens collide violently. The violence orchestrated by the sound of the collision. At one point, the lens splits her body in two as she disintegrates, to either side, and then slides together again.

All during this mad dance, with her careening in impossible ways, the lens is immobile, staring out at us from the center of the screen. The lens looks at us, but seems to see her (she is behind the lens). We know that the lens can “see” her, because we can see a tiny reflection of the video image moving inside the eye of the lens. The illusion is a mystery. What's really happening? How is it done?

To make *Somersault* Steina attached a glass tube, two inches in diameter, to her video camera's lens, so that it extended straight out from the lens. At the end of the glass tube she attached a convex mirror, shaped like the narrow end of

an egg, the end pointing in toward the lens. Therefore, the lens always looks into the center of the mirror, taping the mirror's reflection—the lens itself and a 360 degree area around the lens. So, essentially, the lens records what the mirror sees, including her, as she wields the camera.

And what is it exactly that she does? Steina carries the camera and moves it upside down, in circular motions, back and forth, over her, under her. Because the lens is always in a fixed relationship to the mirror, it seems as if the lens is fixed. But in actuality, it is the camera/machine's wild motions which give the illusion that her body is accomplishing an acrobatic, often violent, gravity free, omnidirectional dance. In other words, in real space, the machine moves and the "world" is stable, with the video-maker firmly rooted on the ground. But in video space the lens is immobile, inexorably still, while "The World Turns"—human body, grass, house, sky, uprooted from all laws of stability and gravity.

But even if we know the mechanism behind the illusion, even knowing that the machine moves and "world" is "up-right," we are drawn into full participation in the illusion, because its kinetics are so powerful, corresponding to deep fantasies of our minds and bodies. We are placed in a world not unlike the telecasts of the astronauts' space-walks in the 1970s which gave us a revelation of the human being's possible existence in gravity-free space. But instead of the other-world of astronauts in space, we see a woman, a video-maker, in her own yard. Through her own thoughts and motions, and ultimately, through video space, she has freed herself of gravity.

What is contradictory about such an extreme communication of freedom in video is the screen itself, our awareness of the cut-off of the video screen. In video we participate in an intensely visual world, which is within a screen, which is within a box. Outside of this box is the physically less limited but imaginatively more limited world of real surroundings. And there is no connection between them. Television communication of the astronauts' space walks are dramatic because we are always aware of the extreme contrast between the world of outer space within the video screen, and of domestic space outside of the video screen.

*Somersault* stimulates such thoughts partly because we see the physical laws of our real world suspended and transformed so dramatically. We see the earth become a donut, with the sky in the middle; we see disembodied legs walking completely around the edges of the video screen; or a human body lying on the grass, dissolving into strands of color. But no matter how free-wheeling the world of earth, sky and human become in *Somersault*, the human body and its surroundings are always within a triple boundary: the edges of the circular mirror are butted against the edges of the video screen, which is butted against the black box of the T.V. set. So the tape becomes a statement of inescapability as well as of freedom, of the transformation of laws.

This contradictory quality of the tape is also orchestrated through the theme of violence which punctuates and punctures the rhythm of the tape. This theme (quite literally) hits upon the human fantasy and wish (desire) of being able to release violent aggression against an object without doing harm to either self or object. Many of Steina's "somersaults" end in a violent impact of her body against the edges of the bounded video screen, or more often against the camera itself in the center of the screen. Her body seems to expand as it approaches dead center, hitting the camera lens and rebounding off to another acrobatic flight. This violence is not gratuitous. It is, in aesthetic terms, a very purposeful deliberate act. This act of bumping is shocking, coming so suddenly and loudly in contrast to the free acrobatics. But since no one, nothing gets hurt from the impact, the sudden act of violence is not perceived visually. Our entire sense of the impact is intuited from the loudness of the sound, exaggerated by the closeness of the mike placed on the camera.

The image itself shows no jarring movements at all. We can't even tell the exact physical location of what Steina is hitting; and she immediately bounces back to her "acrobatics," as if the impact acted like a trampoline, energizing rather than crippling action. Even in its deliberate aggressiveness and shock value, visually the impact has a playful and humorous effect: an unreal effect like butting a balloon as well as a very real effect like butting a wall.

*Somersault* has "sex" as well as "violence." At one point, Steina sits down, with the big black lens (eye) protruding right out from between her legs. Then her face and upper body seem to flail back and forth, caught in an emotional intensity with sexual implications because of the positioning of the lens between her legs. What she is really doing (in real, not video space), is switching the camera from side to side with the motion of her hands only, while her upper body is still and in control, so that the communication is produced entirely by the machine's motion. But the truth of the matter is the illusion that the viewer sees and feels a highly charged video-dance, coming directly from a personal, almost involuntary, emotional and physical source within a human being.

Then Steina lies down and the positioning of the lens between her legs becomes an even more direct sexual allusion. But the lens is pointing out from her, not into her. This highly displaced lens-as-sexual-organ could be read as a metaphor for the artist's incorporation of the opposites of sexuality into the process of working and the products of work. She conceives of, makes, and sets her machine in motion. Then these works take on lives of their own outside of her—creating their own unpredictable images of the world.

In *Somersault* this creates the illusion of dematerializing the body, so that it breaks apart around the lens, as if pulled into strands of brightly colored taffy, then becoming whole again, behind the camera. This illusion touches on the human fear and desire of disintegrating and coming together again, of losing and regaining identity. The vision of the body being pulled apart to near nothingness is, in poet Adrienne Rich's words, "as modern as annihilation." But the sensuousness of such radical transformation can barely be seen in *Somersault* because the ease with which electronics can transform the physical world makes such an extreme state seem natural within video space. Also, the tone of *Somersault* is so free-wheeling, sunny, off hand, that the sensuousness underneath could go right by the viewers. At several points, Steina looks out of the screen, casually hitting the lens or glass tube with gigantic, fin-like hands—and she is chewing gum. We don't think of a "serious artist" or "serious subject" as chewing gum.

Yet the importance of this short tape is that it contains many levels in its flamboyant imagery. The "seriousness" is there. *Somersault* is like a video poem in this respect, though by its nature, video imagery is less specific than literary imagery. But perhaps *Somersault* is in the end a dance—a dance of video, a dance of video camera-generated imagery concerning the human body, the dance an optical transformation: near annihilation and reconstruction of the human body, the dance of standing the world on its head and back again many times in many ways, without knowing quite where it will all come out.