



SCAPES OF PARADOXY: THE SOUTHWEST AND ICELAND BY STEINA
JONSON GALLERY, UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO, NOVEMBER 15 - 30, 1986



Steina was born Steinunn Briem Bjarnadottir January 30, 1940 in Reykjavik, Iceland. She lives in Agua Fria, New Mexico. This interview was conducted by Malin Wilson on Thursday, August 7, 1986.

MW: Months ago, when I asked you for a title for this new piece, *Scapes of Paradoxy: The Southwest and Iceland* seemed to come about by whimsy.

SV: I actually thought to call it *Landscapes of Paradoxy*, but you heard "scape" and I thought it was better because although there is landscape, there is also seascape. And, perhaps, the landscape is not that important: it is a moving image with which I perform the piece. There may be a camera pan, or a camera tilt, but mostly the Southwest landscapes move because I sweep them with water, either the ocean or steam from Icelandic hot springs.

MW: What about paradoxy?

SV: On one level there is a paradox in bringing the North Atlantic Ocean into Arches National Park, poetically—to

flood the desert. . . . On another level I can work with landscapes only when I take them away from nature and bring them home into my studio. They become just image planes there, where rivers flow backwards and the sky appears below the horizon. . . . here, I can have a specific opinion about it all—be respectful, ironic, arrogant—even humble.

MW: Although you say the landscape is rather incidental, you do drive hundreds of miles to Dead Horse Point, Utah.

SV: 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 God on?

Also, I lost my studio. I had always had large interiors in which to work. Suddenly, we were restricted to a small house. I just went outside one morning and said, "Well, my studio doesn't have any walls and the ceiling is very high,

and it's blue." I just adopted the whole Southwest as my studio. So that's when I made my peace with the idea that the landscape of the Southwest was going to be my image material.

MW: Installation video seems to be a continuous trend from your first use of video in 1970 when you bought three monitors. On the other hand, Woody seems to have made many single-channel pieces.

SV: You must remember I came to video from music. I had never expressed anything by images before, and in my orientation it was not natural to speak through an edit. But, fortunately for me, when we started in video, you could not edit—there was no editing equipment. So, typically, you would show it in a parallel installation. One image on one monitor, then another one on another monitor, and you would switch in between because switchers were available, and multiple tape recorders were available. So, it was inherent then in the medium that it would be multichannel installations. This is also when I fell in love with "real time" video of nonstop recording.





As you mentioned, the first pieces of equipment we acquired were three monitors, not one monitor, but three. So, we started looking at everything on a matrix of monitors regardless if it was single, two, or three channels. Also at that time we discovered that we could roll the image horizontally. Very much like the vertical roll, you could induce a horizontal roll. It would give you a suggestion of apparent motion from one monitor to the next. This influenced us greatly. We did a lot of composition for a three-monitor set-up. Of course, that was fifteen years ago, and it was all black and white.

Then the equipment improved and we could do single-channel editing, we could do color. It also became a matter of convenience. We could send tapes everywhere, and that was an impetus for doing a lot of single-channel work. But, my heart is in installation work, in the relationship between monitors and the dynamic relationship of multi-images. Further, it is also the paradox between the images, the critique of one image by the other, the tension between the matrix of images—and, of course, my desperate attempt to find

often improvised process, but I use quite unambiguous ways to compose them into a multichannel piece.

MW: This also relates to your early intention to control the medium completely, not just on the signal and code levels. Two years ago you casually mentioned how you had practiced running along a brick wall with your camera so that you could get a smooth pan.

SV: I have always seen the video camera as a tool, as an instrument, not so different from a musical instrument. On a violin you have to practice, you have to bow, you have to know how to get musical effects. If I wanted to get a visual effect, and I was using a camera, I needed to practice. I think all good cameramen do that. They have to preceive the focus they are going to arrive at after a long zoom into a very close image. They can guess the distance and follow a line. I really was never very good at it, I was rather clumsy (just like I was clumsy with the violin). Because I don't have the dexterity to make the movement as smooth as I wanted, it was my rebellion to put motors to the camera. The way out of it was to devise a moving platform, or use a car or any other way to get moving images that were in a continuous motion.

MW: Obviously there are many paradoxes in this piece, not only what you called free-form image gathering and very rigorous presentation requirements, the land and the sea, but the real obvious one between the emphasis on technology and romantic beauty. In a way this work seems to be too much of a sweet autobiographical romance for you to have made it.

the 20th century, nature not altered by man is romantic. It is scape can never be ugly. I have spent a lot of time thinking ugly art, and why people engineer certain ugliness into their probably the most successfully. If you are working with the

meaning in it all.

MW: So, is the perception erroneous that your work is more installation oriented than Woody's? In Buffalo in 1975 Woody built the computer-based Image Articulator and worked on his didactic series of analog and digital image code, which resulted in single-channel tapes and still photographs. At the same time you were doing many installations of *Machine Vision*, which was about surveilling space via tilt, pan, zoom, and rotation of the camera.

SV: Well, not exactly. For both Woody and me the magic of video was (and still is) the electronic signal. The first video we looked at was feedback, a phenomenon of the medium itself. Woody has always stayed very close to the signal, and the philosophy of the signal. Whereas, I ventured out into using machines and motors, and then I became very interested in optics. Since Woody had already played with all of that in the film world, it didn't hold the same kind of interest to him.

My work with optical and motorized devices actually occurred in space. My *Machine Vision* installations were performing systems, and they occur in the studio, or out in the landscape, or on exhibition.

MW: Would it be accurate to say that Woody's work took place in the circuitry of the equipment and computer and his single-channel tapes were records of that performance, while your work of that time was in the movement and performance of the machines?

SV: Yes, simplified, you may say he was looking inside electronic phenomenology, whereas, I was looking out at the world around me. But then at times, we reverse these roles. Some installations, like my *Machine Vision*, do not involve video tape. Now, however, I do use tape, and I use it rigorously. Two or more channels must run in precise synchronization. I consider the image acquisition a very free and



ness, because there is no such thing as an ugly landscape. That is, in a certain way, intimidating. It is very romantic as you say. It was what a lot of romantic painters painted. I have no defense, but it is hard to find ugly images through the lens of the camera. The camera does not want to render ugly images the way painters can—by distorting reality.

MW: This brings up your color sensibility, which looks like it relates to the painterly tradition. Your tapes seem to have a highly developed personal palette.

SV: That is completely by default. I don't really understand colors. I mean that I don't understand them the way painters do. I do, however, have a camera where I can alter the color. I always dial toward blue, and I also did boost the color from the standard chroma that the camera has when it comes from the manufacturer. So, I do have some control over a palette, although nothing like a painter.

Also for me, unlike a painter, the image only exists in the movement, and that is because I was a musician. . . . I still am a musician. Just as music doesn't exist as a still, so images do not make sense to me as still images. I can enjoy other people making still images, but it is not something that I can



SV: So, it is very romantic. To me living in mostly romantic in the sense that land-about what is beautiful art and what is images, often very successfully—Picasso landscape you basically eliminate ugly-

master. It is not my medium.

MW: Your previous installation work *The West* had a soundtrack by Woody, and *Paradoxy* is wholly yours, sound and image.



SV: When I started working on *The West* I knew I was going to snatch as a sound track Woody's sound environment composed some 10 years earlier titled "The West." In this new piece the situation is different, the initial premise of the work was that I was going to record sound first and images as a secondary track. So, I went to the bubbling hot springs of Iceland, which are to me very musical. I miked them very carefully and listened on my earphones. When I was satisfied with the sound I got, I set up the camera and pointed it at the hot springs. So, the images are visual references to an audio event in nature. It doesn't always work. It doesn't work with the lava, it doesn't work with the stones of the Southwest. So, I had to add some sound tracks, partially artificial but derived from nature—wind sounds, water sounds.

MW: Your and Woody's interest in the electronic sig-

nal and its basic syntax have put you in a rather unpopulated field of video art.

SV: It is a nice place to be in, to have a special branch that we seem to be investigating. We always thought because we were Europeans in America there was a lot of stuff that we had to bypass or was not of interest to us. Now, we have traveled so much in Europe, and in Europe we are considered very much American artists with American concerns that the Europeans do not have. So, we are out of the mainstream in both places. But, the main reason for being out of the mainstream, especially in my case, is that I am not interested in the narrative, or in anything that reflects upon theater, actors, story, or anything like that. That *a priori* puts you out of the mainstream the way video has been going.

MW: How do you manage to work in such a technologically dependent art and live in Agua Fria, New Mexico?

SV: In that sense I think Woody and I are fairly unique. Most artists who use video—at least as technologically as we do—live in the big cities—L.A., San Francisco, New

York—because of the proximity to services. I cannot explain to you how and why we are surviving here, but we are and, actually, quite well. It is, maybe, to a large degree luck. Because if our equipment was breaking down every week I don't think we would be able to take it. Also, we are very well connected to other places. And, then, of course, there is Los Alamos, which is a minor gold mine of surplus property. Almost every week there is something up there that we can use to our advantage.



MW: You also know how to service your own equipment.

SV: That's Woody, not me. That's not so much luck as skill.



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.

Installation Software:

2 30-minute videotapes played in Auto-repeating synchronous/play/rewind/mode

Installation Hardware:

1 two-channel Synchronizer, custom designed and built by Woody Vasulka
9 (or 19, 29, or more) color monitors
2 VTRs (remote controlled, capstan servo lock)
4 audio speakers

The Jonson Gallery

The University Art Museum
1909 Las Lomas NE
Albuquerque, NM 87131
(505) 277-4967

Gallery hours

Tuesday - Friday, 10 am - 5 pm
Saturday & Sunday, 1 - 5 pm
Free parking north of Gallery



Gallery talk followed by a reception for the artist
3:30 pm, Tuesday, November 18, 1986

U.S. Postage

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