

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.

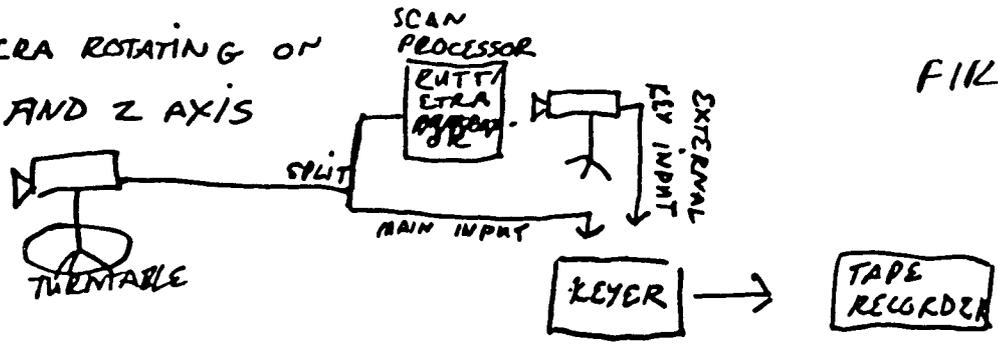
¹Machine Vision is a series of tapes made by Steina between 1975 and 1977, and the 1978 installation Allvision. The five tapes are:

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: NOTES ON SWITCH! MONITOR! DRIFT!

A CAMERA ROTATING ON X, Y, AND Z AXIS

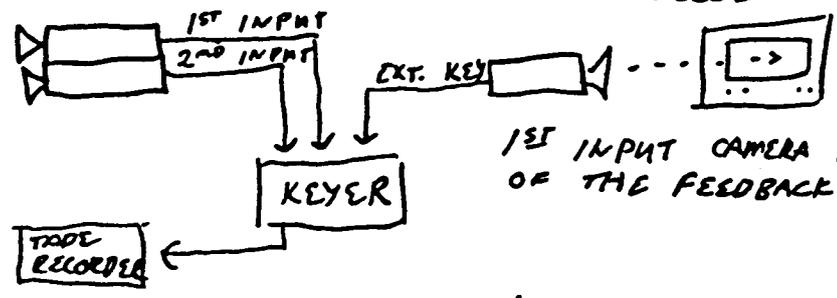
FIRST SCENE



2nd SCENE

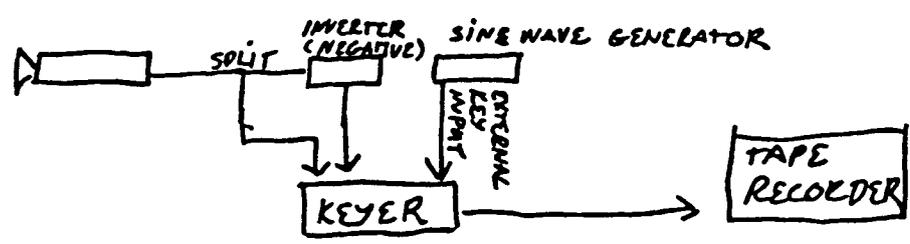
WITH ZOOM LENS
TWO CAMERAS (ON TOP OF EACH OTHER (SIMILAR VIEW))

THIRD CAMERA ON FEEDBACK

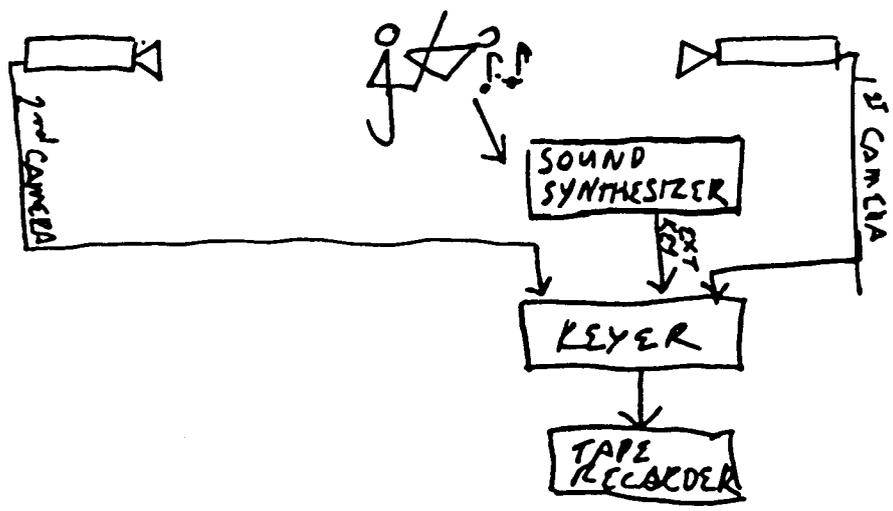


1ST INPUT CAMERA IS DISPLAYED IN THE WHITE PORTION OF THE FEEDBACK, THE 2ND IN THE BLACK

3rd SCENE

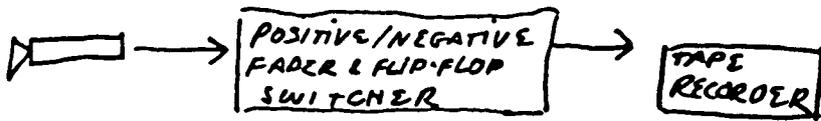


4th SCENE

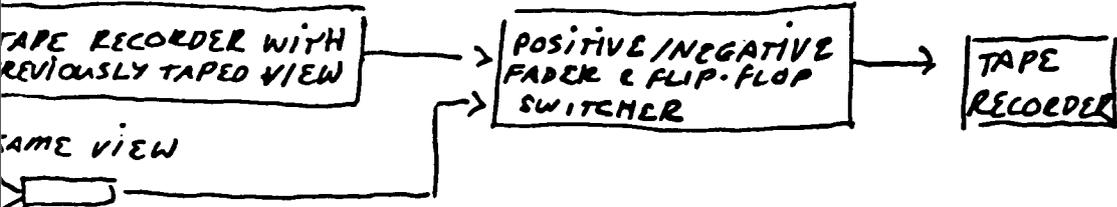


5th SCENE

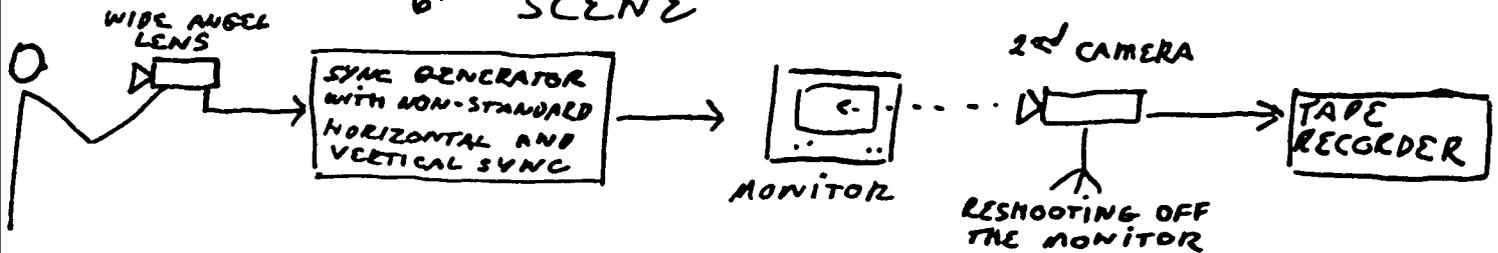
FIRST GENERATION:



2nd GENERATION:

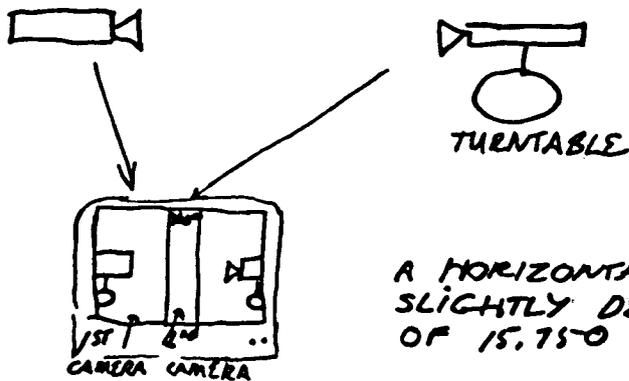


6th SCENE



7th SCENE

CAMERA VIEWS TURNING CAMERA

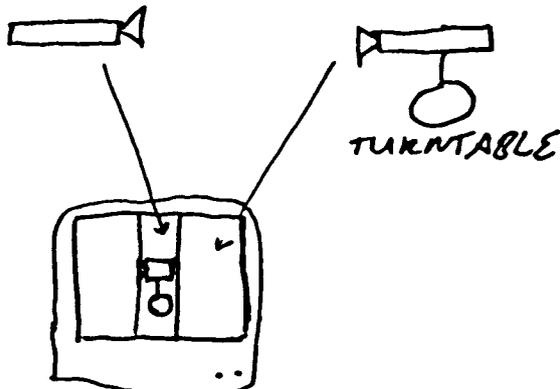


THE 2nd CAMERA SHOWS A SLICE OF THE 360° VIEW THEN THE BLANKING INTERVAL BETWEEN FRAMES.

A HORIZONTAL FRAME DRIFT IS INDUCED BY SLIGHTLY DE-TUNING THE HORIZONTAL FREQUENCY OF 15.750 HZ.

8th SCENE

1st CAMERA



2nd CAMERA IS TURNING AT THE ^{VISUAL} SPEED OF THE HORIZONTAL DRIFT, GIVING THE ILLUSION OF STATIONARY PANELS.

9th SCENE

TWO VIEWS; ROOM AND PROJECTOR (LATER PROJECTOR ONLY) ARE SET TO KEY, DRIFT OR SWITCH. WHEN THE SWITCHING OCCURS AT FASTER THAN FIELD RATE ($1/60^{\text{th}}$ OF A SECOND), THE IMAGE BECOMES A NARROW BAND.

10th SCENE

SETUP LIKE IN SCENE 5.

A PRERECORDED TAPE IS SWITCHED OVER THE SAME CAMERA VIEW OR LATER CAMERA VIEW WITH A REVERSED LEFT/RIGHT SCAN.

11th SCENE

SETUP LIKE IN SCENE 5. SOUND TAPED SIMULTANEOUSLY

12th SCENE

SETUP LIKE IN SCENE 8. A VARIABLE DRIFTING HORIZONTAL FREQUENCY ~~CAUSES~~ ON A SINE WAVE (SOFT EDGED), CAUSES A VERTICAL BAR TO FURTHER FRAGMENT THE IMAGE.

13th SCENE

SETUP LIKE IN SCENE 12, WITH POSITIVE / NEGATIVE ADDED.