

Traversals: Instructions to the Double



LONG BEACH MUSEUM OF ART

In the Land of the Elevator Girls

by Steina, 1989 4:15

U.S.A. / JAPAN



Steina's *In the Land of the Elevator Girls* opens with a wipe from the center of the screen. It is a common visual device used to produce transitions from one scene to another. Steina uses it to simulate the opening doors of an elevator in a department store, attended by an elite mascot of Japanese consumer culture: the elevator girl. Steina becomes our inimical "guide" on a beguiling, forever upward (or is it downward?) ride through the "inscrutable" aspects of vertically structured Japan.

The elevator girls in Steina's tape are to foreign eyes an anachronism. They are superfluous in heaping spurious import on the opening and closing of fully automatic doors, and out of date—a throwback to the time when doors weren't automatic and when elevator drivers were a complimentary and somewhat elegant part of Western consumer culture. They are also the most visible emblems of a patronizing and hierarchical patriarchal culture. The fact that they are considered to be elite and *do* aspire to do this job (their selection into this job endorses their beauty and they remain aloof, a class apart from the other department store employees) does not enter into, or even begin to equalize, the equation in Western eyes. They remain astounding anachronisms, though to the foreign observer the things they reveal in the opening and closing of the doors they operate are almost as astounding as the girls themselves. We look on dumfounded as the doors of Steina's elevator open to reveal not the expected lingerie department but a bubbling volcanic spring.

The elevator becomes a vehicle which transports us to the unknown, and to the foreigner, almost unknowable destinations. The doors open and close in rapid succession on a Shinto ceremony, an apparently manic person with a robot arm and laser beams extruding from his eyes (performance artist Stelarc), the lobby of a love hotel, a dingy corridor strewn with rubbish, a puppet performance...and so on. Like the videotapes of Edin Velez and Tony Conrad, *In the Land of the Elevator Girls* deals with incongruous and multi-faceted aspects of contemporary Japanese culture in a highly inventive way. Steina does not pretend to explain, only to "reveal" a fraction of a culture which remains almost opaque today as it was when Commodore Perry forced its doors open after more than 250 years of seclusion in the mid nineteenth century.

A Presentation of the Long Beach Museum of Art
August 26 - September 30, 1990

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Peter Callas, Guest Curator

Faraway, Part 1, From Occupied Japan, by Geoff Weary, 1990

Meaning of the Interval, by Edin Velez, 1987

Hong Kong Song, by Robert Cahen, 1989

Rangitoto, by Ko Nakajima, 1988

That Far Away Look, by Tony Conrad, 1988

The Palm, by Naoko Kurotsuka, 1985

In the Land of the Elevator Girls, by Steina, 1989

Kappa, by Bruce and Norman Yonemoto, 1986

Neo Geo: An American Purchase, by Peter Callas, 1989

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Cover: Peter Callas, *Neo Geo: An American Purchase*

Long Beach Museum of Art
2300 East Ocean Boulevard
Long Beach, California 90803
(213) 439-2119

The Fujiyama Pyramid Project
A Video Installation by Peter Callas, 1990

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