

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, NY 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 out doors 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. Rather, it centers around the black eye of the camera lens itself, with her image revolving somersaulting, gyrating, spitting, 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 sight 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 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, who 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 inch 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 greater-than-360% area around the lens. So, essentially, the lens records what the mirror sees, including her, as she wields the camera.

And that is exactly what she does. She 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, omni-directional 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 the "world" is "upright," we are drawn into a 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 1970's 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 ultimate through video space, she has freed herself of gravity.

But 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's no connection between them. TV 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 the 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 ruthlessly ????? 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 TV set. So the tape becomes a statement of in-escapability as well as of freedom, of the transformation of laws.

This important 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 Stein'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, though, 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's 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 what 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 ??? ability to incorporate 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 they take on life of their own outside of her creating their own unpredictable images of the World.

In "Somersault" this creates the illusion of materializing the body so that it dissolves (?) around the lens, pulled apart 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 a radical transformation can barely be seen in "Somersault" because of 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 freewheeling, 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 of the relative interactions between lens, mirror and human body, the dance of 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.

End of "Somersault"